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Separate and Equal: Power Dynamics Between Women Sleeping with Women
Partners

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of
Science at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

POWER DYNAMICS BETWEEN WSW PARTNERS

By Helen Virginia Mays, Master of Science

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2017.

Major Director: Dr. Meredith Katz, Instructor, Department of Sociology

The purpose of this study was to explore the power dynamics in relationships between women who sleep with women (WSW). Using private, semi-structured interviews, the areas of financial and sexual power were explored. A total of 10 participants were interviewed individually using a snowball sample. Previous literature has shown that WSW partners are egalitarian, meaning both partners share in the decision making, with respect to household chores and other decisions in the home (Blumstein & Shwartz, 1984; Kurdeck, 2006). Instead of WSW following gender scripts like some heterosexual partners, WSW couples decide roles by preference, choice and after discussing what each woman needs to feel comfortable, safe, respected (Schwartz, 2013). Additional findings from this study reveal that it is the fluid nature, active caring, the ability to communicate and continuous checking in that leads to an equitable relationship. Strategies WSW partners in this study employ provide tools to inform and impact other couples to rethink how they navigate power dynamics in their relationships.

Introduction

Intimacy is a key aspect in long-term, committed relationships (Umberson et al, 2015). Intimacy is defined as a sense of mutual closeness, connection and an overall sense of openness with one's partner (Umberson et al, 2015). Closely related to intimacy is the emotional work or skills partners use to empathize, adapt, connect with and relate to her partner's emotional experience (Cordova et al, 2005; Umberson et al, 2015).

Regardless of sexual orientation, all long-term partners use these skills to some degree in order to maintain healthy relationships (Umberson et al, 2015). However, women who are in romantic relationships with other women (WSW) practice emotional work at a higher rate than heterosexual couples (Umberson et al, 2015). This could be one of the key reasons for why WSW have higher rates of egalitarian power dynamics than heterosexual relationships (Kurdeck, 2006). Additionally, WSW partners place a higher value on openness and connection, which could help maintain an egalitarian power dynamic (Umberson et al, 2015). Unfortunately, these bonds of intimacy can be broken, as one woman can say or do things that are harmful to her partner. Research indicates that one quarter to one half of same-sex relationships demonstrate abusive dynamics in their relationships, but more specifically, WSW partners experience emotional or verbal abuse at higher rates than heterosexual partners (Lewis et al, 2014; Murray & Mobley, 2009). The power dynamics between WSW partners, like any couple, can be complicated and messy. The dynamics can be equal and respectful or hurtful and neglectful and everything in-between.

Literature Review

Gender

In the United States, there is a cultural expectation of how men and women are socialized to act (Umberson et al, 2015). For example, women are socialized to be more emotional, open and act as caregivers, while men are socialized to be more independent, less emotional, and financially provide for their families (Umberson et al, 2015). The social expectations created around each gender impact the way individuals behave and perform the gender assigned to them (West & Zimmerman, 2009). These behaviors also impact how each person behaves and acts in their intimate relationships (Umberson et al, 2015). However, unlike heterosexual partners who are socialized into a gender dichotomy, same-sex partners can display their gender given the situation and how they internalize societal gender expectations. For example, WSW partners divide housework on preference rather than gender expectation and will do more traditionally masculine or feminine chores regardless of her gender expression (Kurdeck, 2006; Matos, 2015; Rose & Eaton, 2013; Vicinus, 2012). Additionally, being in a relationship with a person of the same gender can allow the partners to create different experiences, meanings and behaviors of the gender, while also reinforcing certain behaviors of the larger socialization process of being a woman including communicating with and nurturing one's partner (Umberson et al, 2015).

Egalitarian Dynamics

Past research indicates WSW partners develop and continually strive for an egalitarian dynamic based on shared resources and power (Brewster, 2017;

Kurdeck, 2006; Rose & Eaton, 2013; Vicinus, 2015). Typically, this can be achieved more easily than cross-sex couples, since WSW partners are the same gender, which allows them to construct daily interactions outside the gender dichotomy (Risman, 1998). For example, WSW partners decide together how childcare, housework and finances will be divided, rather than one-person taking control because of gendered roles and expectations (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Schwartz, 2013).

Matos (2015) describes that same-sex partners share in decision-making 74 percent of the time, while cross-sex couples only share in decision-making 38 percent. The WSW egalitarian dynamic can be seen in many aspects of daily interaction. For example, same-sex partners frequently divide housework based on individual's preferences, rather than gendered expectations (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Gotta et al. 2011). Additionally, same-sex partners are more likely than heterosexual couples to have similar income and education levels, as well as accessibility to material resources (Rose & Eaton, 2013). While WSW couples are more egalitarian than heterosexual couples, power imbalances still occur.

Emotional Skills

Gender differences impact how partners relate, communicate and experience intimacy with one another (Cordova et al, 2005; Umberson et al, 2015). For example, Umberson et al. (2015) found heterosexual couples practice emotional skills differently than WSW partners; heterosexual women valued and pushed for communication and intimacy more than their husbands, while WSW partners equally valued openness and communication. Emotional skills include the ability of a partner to identify emotions, express the emotions, empathize, adapt and

healthfully manage any negative emotions (Cordova et al, 2005). Closely related to this is the notion of affective resonance, which is the ability of a person to empathize and resonate their partner's emotional experience (Tomkins, 1984). Similarly, emotional engagement occurs, the process of checking in and communicating with one's partner (Johnson & Greenberg, 1995). Both of these skills stem from affect theory or emotion theory, both of which aim to understand the emotional experiences of a person and how that person adapts, responds and communicates with others, and more specifically, how the individual responds to a significant other (Tomkins, 1984).

Affect theory, first developed by Silvan Tomkins, is intended to identify basic emotions including happy, sad, anger or disgust and to understand how partner's read these emotions on their partner's facial expressions (Tomkins, 1984). In affect or emotion theory, the focus is on how partner's express, communicate and then adapt to a partner's emotional experience. The processes of affective resonance and emotional engagement are used in couple's therapy to help partner's identify, communicate and adapt to both parties' emotional experience (Johnson & Greenberg, 1995; Tomkins, 1984). These emotional skills, the ability to identify, express, empathize and adapt, are vital for long term relationship success and satisfaction (Cordova et al, 2005). Similar to cross-gender partners, WSW partners also need these skills to maintain a healthy, equal relationship (Umberson et al, 2015).

The way in which a person responds, communicates and adapts to her partner's emotional experience sets the foundation for the dynamic of the couple in

every sphere (Cordova et al, 2005; Tomkins, 1984). For example, if one's partner only expresses negative emotions (hate, resentment) and rarely acknowledges her partner's expressed emotions, the result could be an unbalanced and unhappy relationship. Alternatively, if a partner continually adapts, hears and responds to her partner's emotional state, while both individual's express positive emotions (love) and vulnerable emotions (sadness) then the result could be a relationship that is more equal and satisfactory for both partners (Cordova et al, 2005; Tomkins, 1984).

WSW partners are more equal than heterosexual partners, in how daily and financial decision making, navigation of sex and childcare is navigated (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1984; Kurdeck, 2006; Schwartz, 2013). This could be due to numerous factors including the socialization of women in the United States, as women are taught to effectively identify and communicate their emotional experiences to others (Umberson et al, 2015). Additionally, the fact that WSW are in same-sex relationships removes, creates a unique space and allows for these partners to create new negotiations in their relationships that may deviate from accepted norms (Kurdeck, 2006; Umberson et al, 2015).

Intimate Partner Violence

Over 44 percent of WSW partners will experience intimate partner violence at some point during their lives (Lewis et al, 2014). Psychological or emotional aggression is particularly common in WSW relationships and is defined as verbal and mental methods designed to emotionally wound, coerce, control or harm another person (Lewis et al, 2014). Recent studies indicate WSW partners

experience psychological aggression or emotional abuse at a rate of 83 percent, while heterosexual women experience this at a rate of 48 percent (Turell, 2000). However, it can be difficult to find exact rates of psychological violence or physical violence, as different studies have used different methods of operationalizing and measuring this construct (Lewis et al, 2014).

For the purposes of this study, the two spheres of power within relationships that were explored were financial and sexual power dynamics. This is not to say that any type of financial or sexual power will result in physical, emotional or psychological abuse. However, this is to say that power imbalances do occur in WSW relationships, as with any other couple, and in some of these relationships the power imbalance can result in abuse to one of the partners.

Financial Power Dynamics

Power is the ability to influence another person's attitude, behavior, or actions (Simpson et al, 2014). One of the main factors in determining who has greater power in a relationship is based on financial dependency, with the individual earning a higher income making the majority of financial decisions, hence gaining greater financial power (Patterson & Schwartz, 1994; Schwartz, 2013). However, studies have not shown conclusive evidence on the impact financial power has on WSW relationships as studies have produced varying results (Blumstein & Schwartz, 2013).

For example, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) concluded financial power is complicated in WSW relationships as some power is swayed by income and other financial decision making, such as small purchases, bill paying and daily financial

managing. However, other researchers found WSW who were financially dependent on their partners held less power in the relationship, which could be seen by the less influential partner doing more housework and childcare, and having less say in decision making (Brewster, 2017; Caldwell & Paplau, 1984). Same-gender partners in which one partner is more financially reliant upon the other mirror traditional cross-sex couples more closely, as the lower earner will do more housework and childcare than the higher income earner (Sarantakos, 1998; Solomon et al, 2005). Matos (2015) found amongst same- sex couples that the more financially dependent partner does 41 percent of the cleaning and 26 percent of errands, while the more financially secure partner does 35 percent of cleaning and 11 percent of errands.

Sexual Power Dynamics

Sexual power is the ability to influence or coerce one's partner into sexual acts (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997). Determining who has more or less sexual power is difficult and different factors have been theorized, such as gender and finances (Van de Rijt & Macy, 2006). For example, one partner might have bought an expensive meal and felt entitled to sex, which the other partner obliges to engage in sex out of desire, obligation or both (Simpson et al, 2015). Budge (2015) found in a WSW sample, the female partner who earned a higher income demonstrated more proactive power, initiating sex, which resulted in consistent sexual pressure toward her partner. The sexual pressure demonstrated by the more powerful partner could be seen as bullying or manipulation, one tactic of psychological abuse (Simpson et al, 2015). It is important to note this pressure could be enacted without intent to harm, but it can be used as a method used to coerce the less powerful partner into

doing something she does not wish to do, thus shattering the egalitarian ideal in lesbian relationships (Ribera et al, 2016). Out of any type of intimate partner violence, lesbians experience psychological aggression the most (Ribera et al, 2016).

Tactics of threats, reward systems, manipulation and bargaining have all been used in WSW relationships in an attempt to influence the behaviors and actions of one's partner (Ribera et al, 2016; Simpson et al, 2015). These strategies can be direct (overt), indirect (covert) or both, and can consist of positive rewards, negative punishments or both (Simpson et al, 2015). All of these tactics can be used in WSW relationships for the more powerful partner to "flex her will" (Ribera et al, 2016).

Even the definition of sex between same-gender women has been shown to change. For example, if a partner were sexually pressured, she might alternate her definition of sex to fit the person initiating to please her and end the advancement (VanderLean & Vasey, 2009). The definition of sex among WSW partners is more malleable as no one definition of sex between WSW partners has been agreed upon (Rose & Eaton, 2013). The person pressuring or initiating sex, using proactive power, commonly earns a higher income, makes more decisions or has greater financial power (Budge et al, 2015; VanderLean & Vasey, 2009). The tactic of pressuring one's partner sexually is one potential avenue for psychological abuse against a partner (Simpson et al, 2015).

In WSW partnerships, other factors, including relationship maintenance could have a greater impact, rather than gender, in determining sexual power (Simpson et al, 2015). A recent study showed WSW partners to have the highest

ratings of sexual satisfaction, but the lowest sexual frequency (Rose & Eaton, 2013). However, sexual needs and frustration are two potential factors in how a lesbian partner could use sexual pressure against her partner. One of the main reasons for sexual compliance is that the partner being pressured wants to use sex for relationship maintenance, such as meeting the other person's needs, even though she might not have the desire (Budge et al, 2015; Impett & Peplau, 2003). Similar to cross-sex partners, same-sex couples experience lower relationship satisfaction when one partner is consistently pressuring the other to have sex, regardless of the reason (Budge et al, 2015).

Power is a vital element to how and when sex occurs, and is influenced by a variety of outside factors. The person with less sexual power can sexually comply or reject the initiation; however, there could be the potential of not gaining the material resources. These situations can also be described as sexual reciprocity, as both partners could be seen as having gifts that can be exchanged for the others (VanderLean & Vayes, 2009). The impact of these exchanges can be negative or neutral and can go uncalculated, happening frequently in all relationships (Van de Rijt & Macy, 2006). However, there is the potential for these moments to be harmful and fall under psychological violence if a partner feels that she is being emotionally or psychologically intruded upon by her partner (Ribera et al, 2015). WSW partners, in an attempt to maintain an egalitarian dynamic, often discuss sexual situations, which can help partners feel their needs are being met (Budge et al, 2015). This high level of communication can help to neutralize power imbalances.

If power imbalances do occur, often it is done without calculation or rules, and both partners are not entirely aware of the exchange taking place (VanderLean & Vasey, 2009). Regardless, consequences exist for experiencing sexual pressure and sexual compliance. For example, WSW partners who consistently feel pressured to have sex have lower relationship satisfaction than other couples, all of which are signs of psychological violence (Ribera et al, 2015). The consequences of consistent sexual power can be anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem for the partner being pressured or coerced into sexual intercourse. In more extreme cases, there can also be fear of physical or emotional abuse if the partner with lower power does not comply with the pressure (Budge et al, 2015). However, WSW partners have often been overlooked in the area of sexual power and psychological violence, which could be due to their low sexual frequency, assumption of constant egalitarianism and that women do not harm one another or initiate sex (Rose & Eaton, 2013). Although WSW partners largely display egalitarian dynamics, studies have shown that WSW also have power imbalances (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1984; Budge, 2015; Kurdeck, 2006; Rose & Eaton, 2013). The impact or intensity of these imbalances vary, but have been shown to revolve around finances and sex, which is why this study explores these two areas of power. The unique space created by these relationships comprised of two women allows for fluidity and flexibility in how they navigate their daily lives (Rose & Eaton, 2013), but could also contribute to a certain level of denial to not want to see any potential inequalities. For the reason, both sides of the relationship need to be explored, as well as understand the micro complexities that impact how WSW navigate power dynamics in their relationships.

Methods

Purpose

The purpose of this research project was to explore the power dynamics between romantic female partners. Specifically, the purpose was to understand how same-sex female partners navigate financial and sexual power in their relationships. This study explores this by interviewing WSW partners in order to see if equal power dynamics exist as previous research has shown that both are a possibility in same-sex female relationships (Ali & Nalor, 2013; Caldwell & Peplau, 1984).

The individual experience of each partner in 5 relationships (n=10) was accounted in for in regards to how these women navigate finances and sex in their intimate relationships. Semi-structured interviews were used to account for the individual experiences of each partner in the relationship. Cohen (2006) explains the benefits of semi-structured interviews as questions being prepared prior to the interview, allows the interviewee to express opinions, feelings or thoughts and also allows the interviewer to adapt to the context of the conversation.

Procedure

Participants were gathered using a snowball sample, which is a recruitment methodology that allows the researcher to gain access to the social networks for participants. Snowball sampling has been shown specifically useful for accessing minority populations like same-sex women, which can be more difficult to find and access Snowball sampling has been found useful for research projects that are interviewing individuals and couples (Brown, 2002). For this project, snowballing

sampling allowed me to enter the social networks of same-sex women in the greater Virginia area.

Flyers were printed and posted in different locations at Virginia Commonwealth University's Monroe Park campus, such as the University Commons, as well as the African American, Sociology and Psychology department buildings. Additionally, from November 16, 2016 to January 18, 2017 flyers were posted on Facebook, which is how the 4 of the participants were recruited. Friends of friends would post the flyer on their Facebook page resulting in 4 of the participants seeing the flyer and then contacting me. Friends of friends telling women who met the criteria about the study recruited the other 2 of the participants. Current participants provided their friends with my contact information, which is how the final 4 participants were recruited. If interested, the women would contact me through email or text messaging, but no full name was ever revealed to me.

At the time of initial contact a time and place was scheduled for the interview to take place. I met each couple at a location of their choice, which were coffee shops around the Richmond area. Times varied, but we met predominantly on the weekends in the late afternoon in order to minimize excess chatter at busy coffee shops.. Prior to each interview, I would purchase the couple a drink of their choice and then sit down with one partner, while the other person sat far away as to not hear the conversation take place. The reason semi-structured interviews were chosen was to allow participants the chance to express opinions, thoughts and feelings in more depth than a survey would allow (Cohen, 2006). Both partners in the couple were interviewed to gain the perspective of both individuals, but

interviews were done separately to allow for each participant the freedom to express her thoughts, opinions and feelings without having being anxious about her partner's reaction to what she said. On average, each interview lasted 25 minutes.

After the interview was completed, partners would switch and the other interview would take place. The purpose of interviewing the partners back to back was due to time availability for the partners and it seemed to provide comfort to the women not going alone. I made certain that the partners could not hear any of the conversations by saying something to the woman across the room and seeing if she responded. The sounds of other people's conversations and the noises of the coffee shops helped the conversation not to be heard by others.

All interviews were recorded using an app called Dictate2Us, which allowed me to audio record each interview. Two of the interviews were held over the phone, but were recorded using an app called TapeACall. The reason these interviews were conducted over the phone was due to the partner living in Washington D.C. and it was the most convenient for the partners to do a phone interview. After the interview was completed participants were asked to tell friends, which is how 4 of the participants were recruited.

At the start of each private interview participants were given a list of definitions and given a moment to look it over and ask any questions, comments or concerns they might have, which can be seen in figure three (see below). Participants were then given a list of demographic questions and were asked to answer the questions for both themselves and their partners, which can be seen in figure one (see below). The purpose of this was to understand how each participant

viewed her partner and see if the partners matched on their perceptions of one another. Once this was completed participants were given a brief history of myself. I told participants that I was a graduate student at Virginia Commonwealth University, that this work is for my master's thesis, and the purpose of this study was to understand power dynamics in their relationships. Additionally, I said that I am not anti-LGBTQ, since many of the participants seemed concerned about my intentions in interviewing this community. After this I told the participants that this is a private confidential interview and that it can be stopped at any point.

Additionally, participants were told they could refuse to answer any question that they were not comfortable with answering; only one participant did this as she said she did not feel comfortable providing me the frequency of sexual encounters between her and her partner. Participants were then told that we would begin and that this conversation would be recorded, but their actual names would not be used in order to protect their identity. Each participant provided a pseudonym, while answering the demographic questions and was provided with a consent form to ensure they understood their identity would be protected.

Immediately after the interviews were completed I would transcribe them in order to be able to remember the nuances of the conversation and to make the process of transcribing easier. After all of the interviews were transcribed I read through each interview and compared it with her partner. The purpose of this was to see how the partners perceived one another and to see if the partners had accurate understanding of their partner. For example, do both partners actually know how much the other one makes or her gender expression or just think she does. After

comparing each partner together the interviews were analyzed and compared among all the couples to understand the larger patterns.

Demographic and Interview Questions and Definitions used in Interviews

Figure 1. Demographic Questions

Participant's Partner:	Participant:
Age:	Age:
Gender:	Gender:
Race:	Race:
Pronoun of choice:	Pronoun of choice:
Sexual orientation:	Sexual orientation:
Gender Expression (feminine, butch, androgynous, etc):	Gender Expression (feminine, butch, androgynous, etc):
Occupation:	Occupation:
Income:	Income

Figure 2. Interview Questions

- 1) How long have you and your partner been together? How long have you all lived together?
- 2) What is the status of your relationship (Married, engaged, partners, or girlfriends)?
 - 2.1) Do you and your partner have any children?
- 3) Do you and your partner have any children?
 - 3.1) If there are children, did you give birth, did your partner give birth or did you all go through other means to have a child (i.e adoption, surrogate)?
- 4) How do you feel about your dynamic with your partner overall?
 - 4.1) Do you feel that you and your partner are equal?
- 5) In your relationship, who has a higher income? Do you combine your income?

- 6) Who would you say makes the majority of everyday decisions? For example childcare, family events, groceries, chores?
- 7) In your relationship, who makes the majority of the decisions regarding finances?
- 8) Would you say you and your partner are emotionally intimate? Meaning do you all go on dates, enjoy each other's company, do activities together?
- 9) What do you consider to be a sexually satisfying relationship? Would you say your current relationship is that?
- 10) How often are you and your partner sexually intimate?
- 11) Do you enjoy taking more control during sex or having your partner take more control?
- 11.1) And in what ways do you or your partner take control?
- 11.2) Do you like you initiate sex more or wait to be initiated upon?
- 11.3) Is there anything you would change about this?
- 12) During sexual intimacy do you take more control during intercourse, does your partner or is it more fluid?
- 12.1) How do you feel about this aspect of your relationship?
- 13) Are there times when you have sex even if you are not particularly "in the mood"?
- 13.1) Have you ever participated in sex when you are upset, in a fight or not feeling particularly close with your partner? If so could you please explain?
- 13.2) If yes, why did you choose to have sex in these moments?
- 14) If the scenario mention above did happen did your partner do anything to make you decide to have sex in that moment?
- 14.1) Or is there anything you might do to try to initiate when your partner is not in the mood?
- 15) Overall, do you feel respected and feel that you have an equal voice in your relationship?
- 15.1) Are there times that you do not feel this way?

16) In your past relationships did any of these themes that we spoke about previously present themselves?

16.1) If yes, could you please explain?

17) Do you feel respected and heard in your relationship?

18) Do you think or feel that financial power is related to sexual power at all in your relationship and in general?

19) What do you think are key characteristics for an equal relationship? And do you feel that you and your partner have these characteristics? What are the characteristics to an unequal relationship?

20) Is there anything else you would like to share?

Figure 3. Definitions used in Interview

Egalitarian – sharing or dividing resources in the household equally between both partners in the relationship

Gender expression – how a person presents his/her/their gender to the outside public

Sexual orientation – gender(s) someone is sexually and/or romantically attracted to and want to have an intimate relationship with

Sexual intimacy – becoming physically intimate through sensual touching like hugging, kissing, caressing and other sexual activity

Emotional intimacy – being close to one’s partner and sharing personal thoughts and feelings related to that person or in general

Sexually satisfied – feeling content, happy or pleased with the frequency of sex and/or the quality of sex when it does occur

Sexually frequency – how often sexual intercourse/activity occurs between partners in their intimate relationship

Sexual frequency and sexual satisfaction are not the same and can be measured outside of one another. For example, high sexual frequency does not have to mean high sexual satisfaction

Initiation of sex – demonstrating actions toward one’s partner like caressing or kissing with the intention of starting sexual intercourse/activity

“In the mood” – feeling the desire or emotions that might make a person want to initiate or participate in sexual intercourse/activity with one’s partner

Participants were provided a written copy of the demographic questions and were asked to answer each set for both herself and her partner. The purpose of having each participant fill out the demographic questions for both herself and her partner was to understand how she perceived her partner. Additionally, this method allowed me to compare and see how accurate each partner’s perception was of what her partner wrote. Questions such as gender, age, race and occupation were to gain a basic understanding of the participant. Asking about income was to understand which partner made a higher income and additionally to see if each individual knew her partner’s income accurately.

Asking participants about gender expression was to understand how she might identify such as more masculine, feminine or non-binary. Sexual orientation provided the information of how the woman identifies and if she identifies with a term other than lesbian, such as queer or gay. Finally, pronoun of choice was asked to ensure that each person was referred to with the pronoun the participant identified with; all participants indicated she/her as preferred pronouns.

Interview questions one through three were to gain a basic understanding of partners, as well as to see if both partners had matching perceptions of their relationship. The fourth question was to gain an overall understanding of the dynamic between the partners without narrowing down the participant’s answer to a specific area in the relationship. Questions five through seven are to gain insight into the financial and everyday decision making in the home. I wanted to

understand if one person earns a higher income does that person also decide everyday decision making and overall financial decision making.

The eighth question was a transition from financial to sexual questions, but also intended to explore if each individual felt connected and intimate with her partner. Questions nine and ten were to gain a basic understanding of the sexual dynamic and frequency of the couple, while questions 11 and 12 were to understand who might take control during sex if anyone does. Questions 13 through 15 were asked to understand if participants at times felt pressured or obligated to have sex when she was not in the mood, which might be the result of an unequal power dynamic. Additionally the questions served to understand that if moments of sexual compromise occurred that the participant still felt respected, heard and that no moment of emotional or physical harm would occur.

The final few questions were to understand previous relationship dynamics and to understand if there was a history of abuse, which could account for how the participant acts in her current relationship (questions 16 and 17). Question 18 was asked to explicitly understand how or if there is a link between sex and finances in the participant's relationship. The final two questions were asked to understand what the participant thought was needed for an equal relationship and to understand if she thought her current relationship had these qualities and to just provide a last moment for final thoughts on the interview.

Participants

The requirements to be a participant in the study were to identify as a woman, be in a monogamous relationship of at least 6 months, be 18 years or older,

currently cohabitating and whose partner is another woman; all participants met this criterion. The sample size was 10 self-identifying women, 5 couples. The reason for this sample size was that saturation had been reached.

Partners varied in how long they had been together with the shortest relationship being 2 years and the longest 12 years; average 2.85 years. 6 out of 10 of the participants identified as lesbian, while 2 out of 10 identified as queer and the remaining 2 identified as gay. All women identified as the same sexual orientation as her partner. The average age was 36 years old with the youngest being 21 and the oldest was 40 years old. The average income for the participants was \$43,504 with occupations varying from home assistant to defense contractor. All participants lived in Richmond, VA except for one couple who lived in Washington D.C. and another who lived in northern Virginia. 7 out of 10 of the participants identified as white, while except for 3 of the participants who identified as either Hispanic, Asian American or mixed race. However, in the interviews race was not of focus and did not seem to be a key factor in the everyday dynamics with their partner. The participants who did not identify as white were each with a partner who did identify as being white. 5 out of 10 of the participants identified as feminine in her gender expression. The remaining participants identified as either butch (2 participants), non-binary (1 participant), boyish (1 participant) or androgynous (1 participant). In each couple the partners were coupled with a person of the opposite gender expression, such as one woman identifying as feminine and the other butch. Table 1 provides basic information of all 10 participants.

	Henri	Beth	A	Erin	Sam	Crix	Parker	Brooke	N.R.	Riley
Partner	Beth	Henri	Erin	A	Crix	Sam	Brooke	Parker	Riley	N.R.
Age	26	25	32	40	26	26	21	21	23	32
Sexual Orientation	Gay	Gay	Lesbian	Lesbian	Queer	Queer	Lesbian	Lesbian	Lesbian	Lesbian
Race	Asian American	White	White	White	White	Mixed	White	White	Hispanic	White
Gender Expression	Non-binary	Fem	Fem	Andro.	Fem	Butch	Boyish	Fem	Fem	Butch
Perceived Equality	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Introvert vs. Extrovert	Extro	Intro	Extro	Intro	Extro	Intro	Intro	Extro	Extro	Intro
Income/ Earns < or >	\$42,000 >	\$23,000 <	\$150,000 >	\$80,000 <	\$30,000 <	\$34,000 >	\$18/hr >	\$17/hr <	\$46,000 >	\$30,000 <
Sexual Frequency	2-3/wk	1-2/wk	Once/wk	Not Given	4/month	4/month	3-4/wk	2-3/wk	2-3/month	2-3/month
Length	5 yrs	5 yrs	12 yrs	12 yrs	3 yrs	3 yrs	5.5 yrs	5.5 yrs	2 yrs	2 yrs
Happy Satisfied	Very	Very	Yes C.R.P*	Yes C.R.P*	Yes W.O.R.P*	Yes W.O.R.P*	Very C.I.*	Very C.I.*	Yes C.R.P*	Yes C.R.P*

Table 1.
Basic Information of Participants

*C.R.P = Current Rough Patch * W.O.R.P = Working Out of Rough Patch *C.I = Comm. Issues

Results

The findings of the interviews are organized around the emergent themes from all 10 interviews. These themes include: communication, checking in, gender expression, finances and sex. Additional patterns, which combined the demographic and interview questions to understand how or if gender expression has an impact on the relationship, are also explored. Responses from certain questions will also be summarized, as these were questions key to understanding the power dynamic between the partners.

Finances

All participants stated their finances were separate from their partner's, and that this separation was important for both individuals in the relationship. Participants felt that keeping the finances separate allowed for a more equal dynamic for the couple. For example Henry and Brooke said this in regards to financial equality in their relationships:

Henry: "Yeah we keep everything separate; it just makes it easy and works for us. We talk about everything for like a month before we buy anything and it just works for us."

Brooke: "She pays the rent in full and I pay for everything else; it balances out. Everything is separate and I feel like it makes things more equal. Like I know with heterosexual couples the husband makes more usually and can dictate stuff, but with us it is equal I feel like."

All partners found a way to equally divide paying for expenses that both individuals were comfortable with, such as one partner paying the rent and the other partner paying for food and daily goods. All participants described an ongoing conversation to develop a system that worked for both partners. The income of all

participants varied, as well as in-between partners in relationships as seen in the table below (Table 2).

Table 2.
Income of Participants

Higher Income	Lower Income
Henry (\$42,000)	Nor (\$23,000)
Morgan (\$34,000)	Crix (\$34,000)
A (\$150,000)	Erin (\$80,000)
N.R. (\$50,000)	Cin (\$30,000)
Parker (\$18 per hour)	Brooke (\$17 per hour)

Although all participants expressed equally sharing in financial decisions there was one partner in each couple who was in charge of managing the money and paying bills. However, no participant said that their partner would make a major financial decision without the other's thoughts and opinions. The participant who handled the money did so out of preference, interest or were more knowledgeable in regards of finances. For example, Nor and Henry share their feelings about handling or not handling finances:

Nor: "Math makes me cry so she does the bills. We talk about it so I know what's going on, but she does the actual bills. We are totally reinforcing gender norms, because I like to clean and she likes fixing things. It just kind of naturally fell into place like that and it's what we both like."

Henry: "We discuss everything, but I handle the money and keeping track of it and paying the bills. She hates doing the bills."

Additionally, these two partners, as well as others, spoke of taking care of the finances because of having more knowledge of finances or simply because one person did not enjoy handling the money. All partners expressed an ongoing and equal discussion of finances so that no one did not know what the financial situation

was in the relationship. The participants who did not manage the finances expressed no concern and showed total trust for the partner’s ability; no one expressed feeling unequal in regards to finances.

Even though no large financial decision was made without both partners having equal say, one partner was typically the main initiator on deciding daily decisions, social planning and small financial decisions. This was described by A as “having a more dominant personality” and was shared by Henry who said that she “enjoyed being the person taking the lead on stuff”. In fact, all couples seemed to have an extrovert/introvert dichotomy that had to be navigated, which is displayed in table three.

Table 3.
Personality Types

Dominant/Extroverted Personality	Passive/Introverted Personality
Henry	Nor
A	Erin
Morgan	Crix
N.R.	Cin
Brooke	Parker

By comparing tables two and three, we see the more extroverted partner was also the higher income earner. This is not to imply causality, but to simply show a pattern that emerged between relationships. It was determined if the participant was more extroverted or introverted by whether or not the participant scheduled social events, vocalized that they were more extroverted/introverted, or were more in charge of the daily running and social dynamics of the family. Additionally, the partner who earned a higher income was also in charge of handling the day-to-day financial tasks, such as paying the bills. However, this seemed to be due to

preference or being comfortable with making financial decisions rather than being due to earning a higher income.

A few participants clearly articulated this extroverted – introverted dichotomy in their relationships. For example, A said, “I am a really dominating personality. I just enjoy taking control and being in charge, while my wife is more quiet or submissive.” Participants also spoke of having to balance this dichotomy when it came being social events like hanging out with friends. For example, Morgan said, “I have more social energy than she does. Like we have a lot of the same friends, but sometimes she doesn’t have the energy for them. We just have to balance it out.” Partners who spoke about this personality dichotomy said that mostly social events “happened organically” (Morgan) and partners would discuss then end up watching a movie, going out to dinner or hanging out with friends. However, there were some participants who had slightly more say in what the couple did socially who were also the more extroverted personality. For example, N.R. said, “I do more of the hanging out with kids and figuring out what we will do as a family. She just doesn’t like that stuff as much.” It is important to note, though, that even when one person decides what the couple will do, it is after a discussion takes place and because one person enjoys or feels more natural in this role than her partner.

Sex and Gender Expression

All of the participants expressed sex being an important part of their relationship. Couples varied in sexual frequency, but the average was once to twice per week. Different factors influenced the sexual frequency such as stress from

work, school, exhaustion, depression and financial concerns, but all participants expressed being sexually satisfied and said they would not change the sexual dynamic. For example, Henry said, “I am totally good with the way it is. Life gets in the way and we would love to have more, but the sex we are having is great.” There was no pattern of the higher income earner being the person who initiated sex; in fact the results were almost the opposite of each other, as the lower income earner was to be the sexual initiator.

All of the participants identified as being a woman, but varied in their gender expression which included masculine, boyish, androgynous or feminine. All of the couples expressed a gender dichotomy in their gender expression. For example, Crix identified as butch, but her partner, Morgan, identified as feminine. The participants who identified as being more masculine in their gender expression were also the sexual initiators, which can be seen in the tables below (Table 4).

Table 4.
Gender Expression and Sexual Dynamics of PS

Masculine/Androgynous	Feminine	Sexual Initiator	Sexual Waiter
Henry	Nor	Henry	Nor
Erin	A	Erin	A
Crix	Morgan	Crix	Morgan
Parker	Brooke	Parker	Brooke
Cin	N.R.	Cin	N.R.

In WSW relationships there is no traditional script on how two women have sex or initiate sex. For this reason, partners might defer to more traditional gender

scripts in regards to sexual initiation. This is not due to the more feminine partner being incapable or unwilling to initiate, all participants said there were times when the rolls were flipped; this is the dominant dynamic found in partners. However, even if these partners did fall back to a traditional script to initiate sex, 8 out of 10 participants described actual intercourse as fluid; no one person was in control of sexual actions, but rather altered between both partners. This fluidity carried into other areas such as household chores, which was divided on time and preference between partners. For example Morgan said, "I developed a schedule for us to stick when it came to chores and stuff. She doesn't like doing stuff so I do what she doesn't like to do like dishes and she does things like the litter box, which is also better for her schedule."

Communication and Checking In

The ability for partners to communicate with one another was of vital importance for each couple. Specifically, 8 out of 10 of the women articulated clearly the importance of communicating was for her and her partner. For many of the women it seemed that communication was a way to keep in touch with their partner (both emotionally and daily activities), prevent fighting and maintaining a feeling of equality.

Brooke: "Communication allows us to feel respected and heard. We're just always talking and communicating with one another."

Crix: "Anything that involves us we talk about it – we figure it out"

Participants expressed communicating about finances, sex, daily life and emotional experiences. However, communication seemed to be used as a tool by participants in order to convey her emotional experience to her partner and for her

partner to express hers. Closely related to communicating is a constant “checking in” that 8 out of 10 participants described. The process of checking in involved texting, messaging or talking on the phone throughout the day between partners in order to know what was happening moment to moment with one’s partner, which could be daily events or emotional experiences. One participant described this process as “always being up each other’s butts, but in the best way”. The participants who expressed partaking in this did so with enjoyment and seemed to view it as a necessity. The two participants who did not clearly express a need to communicate or check in were in a relationship with each other and expressed a firm belief in independent separate lives, which both women vocalized as enjoying and needing.

The checking in process continued once participants were home, with a continuous conversation of asking questions and understanding in more detail of their partner’s day and current emotional experience. The intent of the checking in process is not to control and is not a result of lack of trust, but rather, to understand their partner’s experience and how to make their partner happy. For example, Parker said, “If she tells me she has a hard day, I make sure to do something so she knows that I heard her”. This continuous communicating and checking in occurred regardless of gender expression and just seemed to be a natural, effortless process for partners.

Brooke: “We are always talking and communicating with one another.”

Morgan: “Everything is an ongoing conversation.”

The reasons for such effortless communication and checking in was attributed to openness and honesty. However, the socialization process of women

being able to identify and communicate emotions could be another contributor to why these processes are so natural for these partners (Umberson, 2015).

Additionally, three out of five of the couples interviewed contributed these skills to starting as an open or polyamorous relationship. For example, Henry explained that she and her partner started as an open relationship, which allowed both women to date other women freely, but also demanded them to communicate and check in with one another about their emotions and experiences with outside partners.

The process of continuous checking in and communication is also a key result in all women expressing feeling respected and heard in their relationships, which can be seen in the quotes below:

Erin: "I always feel respected and heard."

A: "I always feel respected and heard. I really can't think of any area where I don't feel that way."

Nor: "Yeah she is definitely very considerate of my opinions. I always feel respected and heard."

Morgan: "We have always been on the same page, which helps us to always be equal. I definitely feel respected and heard."

All of these expressions of being respected and heard all attributed to the communication that is practiced by these partners. Additionally, it attributed to checking in and being aware of partner's feelings. For example, Nor said, "She is very considerate of my opinion and stuff. Like I usually feel really anxious with the person I'm with, but that never happens with her. She never yells when we argue, because that really freaks me out. We just talk and figure it out." Additionally,

Brooke said, “We are always talking and communicating with one another. I think communicating and talking is what makes us stay equal.”

Active Caring

All participants expressed a desire and need to communicate and connect with their partners, which participants stated as the reason for why the dynamic was equal and all partners expressed feeling heard and respected in their relationships. All partners used emotional skills and practiced emotional management to understand their partner’s emotional experience. However, this was not practiced a moment each day, but an ongoing practice that was simply the way of life for these women. As Crix said, “It is an ongoing conversation. We are actively working on us. I don’t think any relationship can go without active work from both people.” This is the definition of active caring, which is what these participants are practicing in their daily life. It is more than identifying emotions and expressing; it is the ability to identify, communicate, empathize and adapt to both oneself and one’s emotional experience. Active caring are partners trying to understand and connect in the deepest way and make the other person happy, as Parker explains: “If she tells me she has a hard day I make sure to do something so she knows that I heard her. I want her to be happy so I’m going to do whatever I can to make sure that is what happens.”

Areas of having sex, navigating finances and chores were all areas where active caring was present. For example, if one partner did the chores or finances it was due to not wanting their partner do it, because they had strong negative feelings about the activity. For example, N.R. said, “She does more behind the scene

stuff cause she is more comfortable with that. And me, I like to cuddle with the kids and do that stuff; just what we like I guess.” Additionally Henry said, “The money just really freaks her out so I do it. She is more capable than she thinks, but I do it so she doesn’t have to. I don’t mind doing it, though.” Both of these quotes are examples of small compromises and adaptations made by these partners in order to ensure their partner’s happiness. For example, Brooke said, “I know that she always works for me to feel respected and heard and I do the same for her. I just want her to be happy and I think she wants the same.”

Active caring is the choice of partners to make small sacrifices to make their partner happy or satisfied. For example, 8 out of 10 participants said they would have sex when not in a sexual mood. However, no one expressed any harm or discomfort from this, but did it to protect their partner’s feelings. For example, Cin explained: “I don’t ever want her to think that I don’t want her or think she is unattractive. Being rejected sucks no matter how long you have been with someone.” Another participant, Parker, suffers from depression and will choose to engage in sex in order to protect her partner’s feelings as she says: “She shouldn’t suffer because of my depression. I will just go through the motions with it. I don’t mind, though, because I love her. I just want her to be happy and know I love her.”

Moments like this are continuous, as partners navigate daily life to ensure both partners’ happiness. Participants expressed an awareness of heterosexual norms and stereotypes, such as women doing the majority of chores and the man making a higher income or lesbians not having as much sex as other partner types. However, the ability of active caring seemed to be a way to counter these norms and

create a new script that worked for both partners. The key to this ability to adapt and create is the tool of active caring, which can be understood in what Crix says: “Sharing things with your partner, finding out where they are and telling them where you are. I think a lot of partners lack that communication and checking in. It is emotional. It is making decisions together, even small things. It is choosing to constantly work and want to be here.” The result of this constant practice of active caring is 5 relationships where all the women expressed being heard, respected and equal even though each relationship has faced unique challenges.

Trigger Moments

Four out of ten participants discussed a moment or situation in their relationships when the partners had to decide to fight for the relationship or leave. These moments, which I term trigger moments, as these seemed to trigger a sort of fight or flight response in the relationship for the partners. For example, N.R. and Cin both experienced sexual trauma in their life. A few months ago, this couple had a more significantly intense argument than their normal and Cin called the police. Although Cin did not feel that she was in danger, she called because she “just wanted to run away.” Both Cin and N.R. have histories of sexual trauma in their lives and for Cin this argument was “after months of trying to deal, I was just like I am not going to be taken advantage of anymore.” Cin seemed to call the cops as an act of fleeing or gaining space, but at no point was her intention to get her partner arrested, which she says, “I didn’t know at all that someone would be leaving in handcuffs. If I could go back, I wouldn’t have called.” For N.R. the situation was “a bad fight” and she decided to take the fall “because of the kids.”

Although at first N.R. says “the trust is gone”, and Cin shared similar feelings, both decided to stay and work on the relationship rather than parting ways. Cin says, “Now instead of fighting we take breaks. Our communication is getting better.” Although trust is still a serious issue, it seems that both are continually working on the relationship and in fact the argument “in a way” (Cin) made the couple stronger. N.R. says, “It’s complicated, but we are trying to make it work; things are starting to calm down.” Instead of leaving, both women have decided to stay and fight and now seem to continually practice active caring, which was calloused by this trigger moment. And now Cin says, “Right now I am very happy and looking forward to the future.”

The other couple, Morgan and Crix, experienced a trigger moment as well when the couple had an intense argument after Crix moved out of Richmond for four months for an internship. After Crix returned Morgan says, “We were fighting all the time. Then we decided that we were fighting for the same things and we should stop fighting against each other.” Morgan attributes this series of arguments, because of “no communication.” Crix says that occasionally the couple will fight, but “eventually we always end up talking, and then when we do, we talk through a lot of problems.” Crix continues this by saying, “We are actively trying to find solutions. Sometimes we do and sometimes we don’t, but it’s like hey let’s keep going.”

This continuous choice by both partners to keep fighting is what Crix, Morgan, N.R. and Cin, as well as all the other participants, choose to constantly stay and fight for their relationship. Although all participants might not have experienced a clear trigger moment, each couple expressed some stressor in their lives, such as

loss of a loved one, school, depression or family issues. Each couple has to navigate daily life struggles, which impacts their relationships like any couple. However, it seems that by these women practicing active caring and choosing to daily engage, care, adapt and love their partner, they are able to battle together rather against one another resulting in a stronger relationship.

Sex and Money – Combined or Separate

Table 5.
Sex and Money

Sex and Money Separate	Sex and Money Combined
Henry	A
Nor	Morgan
Erin	Crix
N.R.	Parker
Cin	Brooke

One of the key questions asked participants if they believed sex and finances were related at all or if they are just separate spheres that partners have to navigate. The results are illustrated in table 5 (see above). The results from this question did not match with who earned a higher or lower income or who identified as more masculine or feminine or who acted as the sexual initiator. However, four out of five couples provided matching responses to this question. Additionally, the two couples who believed that sex and money are separate had the greatest financial differences. For example, Henry and Nor are in a relationship and both felt these spheres are separate and have an earning difference of \$20,000. Cin and N.R. follow in the same pattern as Henry and Nor. The only couple that did not match this pattern was Erin

and A. However, Erin who earns less than A by \$70,000 was the person who believed money and sex were separate, which could perhaps be denial. Erin's partner A, vocalized "I am a really dominant personality. I just enjoy taking control and being in charge, while my wife is more quite and submissive." Even Henry/Nor and N.R./Cin expressed one partner being a more dominant or extroverted personality resulting in Henry and N.R. making the financial, social and daily decisions of the couples' lives. Henry and N.R., who are the higher earners and more extroverted, might be in denial of having more control than believed, while Nor and Cin are in denial of having little control.

The partners who believed money and sex were combined earn similar incomes, felt all areas were equal, and did not shy away from being aware of slight power imbalances or issues in the relationship. Whereas the partners who believed money and sex were separate seemed to be more hesitant to express relationship flaws. However, even though denial might be the cause, there was no expression of harm, discomfort or fear by any participants.

The participants in the study expressed overall feelings of being safe, heard and respected, which was added by the practice of active caring. Although small power imbalances occurred, no participant expressed feeling unsafe, manipulated or coerced in any area of their relationship. In fact, the theme of being equal was the dominant theme in all 10 interviews, as well as the ability to be fluid in areas of gender roles, expression, sex and decision-making, which set the path for the equal dynamics expressed by the participants.

Limitations

The limitations for this study are numerous. Each interview was approximately 25 minutes, which resulted in a focused, but short interview. More time with the participants and couples would have helped create a more in-depth understanding of how the participants acted both individually and as a couple. The sample size of this study was very small (n=10). The small sample size and snowball sampling methodology, mean the results described below cannot be generalized to the larger community. Additionally, due to the use of snowball sampling, the participants were limited to the state of Virginia, specifically the greater Richmond area.

The culture of Richmond and Virginia could be drastically different than partners who live in other areas of the country. Another limitation is the age of the participants, which was mid-twenties. The younger age of the participants interviewed could impact how they navigate their relationships, as well as the stage of the relationship. For example, participants did not have to navigate childcare (except for N.R. and Cin), which could be due to participants being younger. The race of the participants was predominantly white (7 out of 10), which is a severe limitation as other ethnicity and races could vary in the navigation of their relationships. Additionally, the interview questions asked could have overlooked key areas that impact how WSW partners navigate financial and sexual power, such as buying large property (cars, houses), definition of sex and acquiring an in depth history of participants, which would have provided better insight into why the

participant acted the way she did; intersectionality could be used to help account for other contributing factors that impact the power dynamics in WSW partners.

Future research should attempt to gain larger samples that is both racially and geographically diverse. The gaining of personal histories of participants, as well as a more in depth current understanding of current situations of participants, would also be beneficial as the slightest factor can impact how a person acts in their relationship.

Discussion

The discussion section will mirror the results section by going in the same themes. For example, the themes of sex, gender, communicating, checking in, active caring and finances will be sections in this section. However, some sections have been combined since the themes are so intertwined. For example, the themes of communicating, checking in and active caring are all together in a single section to demonstrate how all three work seamlessly together to help create and maintain the egalitarian dynamic demonstrated by the participants.

Finances

Similar to findings provided by Brewster (2016), Kurdeck (2004), Rose & Eaton (2013) and Vicinus (2015) the WSW partners in this study divided finances equally. Additionally, all WSW partners kept their money separate, which contributed to an equal financial power dynamic between partners. Only two out of five couples in this study had an earnings gap of \$20,000 or more, which helped prevent falling into traditional heterosexual power dynamics, such as one person being more dependent on their partner for financial resources (Solomon et al, 2005). However, the two couples (A and Erin, N.R. and Cin) with large earnings gaps did not express inequality, as all five couples spoke of being heard, respected, and an important decision maker in financial decisions.

Although all 10 participants expressed financial equality, the more extroverted partner who either made a higher income, was in charge of finances and/or made the majority of daily decisions for the family. This finding could be attributed to more extroverted individuals seeking higher paying jobs and being

able to achieve job mobility due to their sociability (Cain, 2013). However, the extroverts in this study said this dynamic was reached in their relationships due to preference and enjoying taking charge or being more in control than their partner. For example, A expressed “enjoyed being the person taking the lead on stuff” and Henry spoke of saving her partner from having to do finances which she hates doing; both A and Henry are higher earners and expressed being more extroverted. This pattern of dividing chores, including paying bills and assigning tasks based on preference rather than gender roles, is similar to the findings provided by Kurdeck (2006), Matos (2015), Rose & Eaton (2013) and Vicinus (2015). Although extroverted partners like A and Henry took care of day-to-day finances, no one, regardless of personality type, made a large financial decision without the opinion and thoughts of her partner. Partners in this study always had conversations with one other so that everyone was on the same page, which is another example of active caring.

Chores were not divided completely equally as all participants worked and did other activities that prevented them from being home to divide chores exactly down the middle. However, what is key is that the participants had a voice in how decisions and chores were made, which resulted in perceiving equality. This finding is similar to Brewster (2016), which shows that this perception is what is key in relationship satisfaction and feeling equal in the relationship. Additionally, all participants were employed, which meant that no partner was financially dependent on her partner and no partner had to exchange chores, childcare or even sex in order to access financial resources

In accordance with the findings provided by Cain (2013), I attribute the more extroverted partner earning a higher income since most work environments are suited for this personality type. For example, participants held jobs including defense contractor, nurse, marketing strategist and childcare taker, all of which require more social, more extroverted personalities. These occupations were also higher income. This is not to say that all extroverted partners are with and earn more than introverted partners; but for this sample of 10 women, this was the case.

One of the key themes present from the interviews were that of separate and equal. It seemed that all participants believed that if money was combined that could open the box for one person to take control of finances. I think the theme of equality, particularly financial equality, is important for these women because they do not want to fight follow heteronormative dynamics, such as one partner being financially dependent on the other as Rose and Eaton (2013) describe. Additionally, I think these participants were aware of WSW stereotypes, value an egalitarian relationship, and wanted to fulfill that social expectation, which they did with pride.

Sex and Gender Expression

The participants in this study all expressed high sexual satisfaction with their partners, which are similar to the findings by Vicinus (2015). The average times couples were sexually intimate was one to two times per week. This finding is similar to other findings that indicate WSW partners having sex at a similar sexual frequency (Cohen & Byers, 2014; Nichols, 2004). In spite of the myth of lesbian bed death, where WSW partner stop having sex after cohabitating (Vicinus, 2015), participants in this study expressed wanting to have more sex and having a high

rate of sexual satisfaction, which was similar to the findings of Cohen and Byers (2014). The reason for not having sex as frequently was due to stress or exhaustion from work, family or other life events. However, participants expressed a desire to “stay in the habit of sex”, as A said, in order to avoid the myth of lesbian bed death and also because participants simply loved sex or as Crix said, “I’m always ready to hookup.” Perhaps the myth of lesbian bed death encourages higher sexual frequency, but additionally, I think WSW relationships are more sexual than previously is believed. I think the narrative that women are not as sexual as men is another example of gender scripts and heteronormative narratives. Although literature shows WSW partners are sexual (Cohen & Byers, 2014; Vicinus, 2015), the dominant narrative of lesbian bed death remains.

The partner who initiated sex did not necessarily have higher income, which is in contrast to Budge’s (2015) findings. However, the person with a more masculine gender expression was the sexual initiator in this study, which was consistent throughout all five relationships in this study. This is the one area that participants demonstrated more traditional gender roles. Few partners spoke of an awareness of heterosexual norms and actively working to not fall into these trends, such as dividing chores by gender norms rather than preference. The finding of the more masculine woman being the sexual initiator may be attributed to how women and men are socialized to have sex differently. For example, men are largely taught to be the sexual initiator, while the woman is expected to wait (Umberson et al, 2015). However, this dynamic did not continue once partners were having sex, as no one person acted as a “top” or “bottom”, but instead demonstrated a fluid dynamic,

similar to the findings of Nichols (2004). This is one example of how WSW partners can create queer spaces in their relationship, and could be attributed to such high sexual satisfaction even though the frequency is less than other types of couples (Umberson et al, 2015; Vicinus, 2015). This type of fluidity demonstrated by these participants, as well as other WSW partners, is one area that could be adapted by heterosexual partners as a way to increase sexual and partner satisfaction. For example, Blumstein and Schwartz (2013) found heterosexual couples that had a peer relationship rather than a traditional one was more equal, which resulted higher couple satisfaction and more sex; fluidity of sexual positions could be another factor to increase their happiness.

The finding of the more masculine woman being the sexual initiator rather than income being the determinant was a surprising discovery. In fact, from the interviews conducted money did not seem to impact sexual dynamics in any way, which is different from the findings found by Budge (2015). I speculate one of the reasons for the finding of who acted as the sexual initiator was due to the women falling back on gender and sexual scripts. All partners were in a gender complimentary relationship, where one partner identified as masculine and the other more feminine. This mirror of traditional gender scripts carried into sexual initiation, which I think is due to socialization, but more particularly I think the more masculine partner is more comfortable with demonstrating an assertive sexual energy that is then noticed by her partner. Again, this is not to say this is for all WSW partners or happened every single moment for the women in this study, but this was the overarching theme. Although it may appear on the surface that

these women are following heteronormative trends, I think it ends there as these women queer this dynamic by being fluid once sexual intercourse begins. I think this fluidity occurs to ensure pleasure for both women and to maintain equality, which results in very high sexual satisfaction.

As stated previously, the higher income earner was not the sexual initiator, but also the more extroverted partner was not the sexual initiator. Again, the only consistent pattern found among all 5 couples was the masculine identifying woman being the initiator. Another reason for this finding could be the chance for a partner to take control of an area. For example, both Erin and Cin earned less than her partner and were described as being more introverted. However, both Erin and Cin were the sexual initiators in their relationship. Erin's partner, A explained, "sex is her domain." Both Cin and Erin identify as more masculine than their partners. From the roles practiced and acted by Cin, Erin, as well as all the other participants, it could provide a way for partners to learn where and how they find their individual sense of power, which is then carried into their relationships. For example, Erin could not find empowerment from doing bills, but does from initiating sex, which sex is her area, whereas Parker found a sense of control and security from managing the bills in her relationship with Brooke.

Once this self-empowerment is discovered, it can carry into their relationships where the fluidity seems to grow. For example, instead of participants becoming rigid in their roles, they adapted to the needs and desires of their partner and what their partner needs to feel powerful and in control. This could be an unspoken way for WSW partners to maintain an overall equal power dynamic so

that no one person is more in control of every area of the relationship. Instead, resembling the sexual intercourse between these partners, the power dynamics is fluid. Although it may appear these women are following traditional scripts, they queer it by constantly keeping fluidity. I think this fluidity is a vital aspect to WSW relationships and is a main way these women maintain an equal dynamic. Even when these partners appear to be following heteronormative patterns, at the end of the day, WSW partners will not because it is two women, which automatically creates a unique space for altering and adapting scripts that benefit their relationships (Nichols, 2004).

Communicating, Checking In and Active Caring

The process of communicating and checking in by participants in this study was used as a tool to maintain equality and to understand one's partner's emotional experience. The ease at which these women were able to practice these emotional skills could be attributed to the fact that they were socialized as women in the United States (Umberson et al, 2015). Another reason behind this constant concern for one's partner could also be that the participants expressed an awareness of certain heterosexual dynamics and did not want to have a relationship similar to those. For example, in heterosexual relationships Umberson and colleagues (2015) showed women expressed emotions more than men. The partners in this study could be trying to avoid one partner being emotional open, while the other is emotionally shut down. The couples in this study could be actively working against patterns like the ones found in heterosexual relationships to form and to maintain an open and equal dynamic.

Another unexpected finding attributed to three out of five partners (Henry/Nor, Parker/Brooke and Crix/Morgan) having excellent communication was due to the relationships beginning as open or polyamorous ones; at the time of the interview, all partners were monogamous. The process of having to navigate multiple romantic partners' emotional experiences at once could have helped make these women become masters of these emotional skills. For example, Henry said, "there is nothing we can't say to one another. I think that puts us in a new realm of communication." Additionally, starting a long-term relationship in this fashion could have helped the women feel that they could be more honest, open and free to explore sexually. For example, Crix said, "Because of how we started, we check out chicks together all the time and no one gets weird or jealous. It's just fun." The partners who began as polyamorous seemed to have a certain type of bond resulting in openness, honesty, closeness and a certain aura of confidence about their relationship. This is a key example of how WSW partners can show heterosexual partners how to queer their relationships and the positive benefits of not following the traditional path.

Closely related to the practice of communicating and checking in is the tool of active caring, which all 10 participants demonstrated. Similar to active caring are the tools of emotional engagement and affective resonance, which both account for understanding, empathizing, checking in and communicating emotions with one's partner (Johnson & Greenberg, 1995; Tomkins, 1984). Although active caring does accounts for the similar practices that emotional engagement and affective resonance does, these other terms do not account for the micro-adaptions and

compromises, displayed in active caring, which is made by participants to maintain happiness and satisfaction in their relationships. For example, eight out of 10 participants described having sex with her partner even though she was not in a sexual mood. The reason for this compromise was to consider her partner's emotional experience, as well as her desires. Another example is Cin who described herself as "top" during sex, but is not with her partner N.R. The reason for this sacrifice or adaptation on the part of Cin was due to N.R. being sexually assaulted and needing to feel in control during sex. Similar to other participants this did not seem to bother Cin in the slightest, but was just something that needed to be done for her partner. None of the participants who described having sex when not in the mood said it was not harmful to them, but instead was a small sacrifice made for her partner's happiness. Although at the surface this could be seen as damaging, moments such as these are just one example revealing the complexities and subtleties of couple dynamics in these relationships.

Another benefit of active caring is the theme of being respected, heard and feeling equal that all participants expressed. Even if partners had moments of miscommunication or arguments, the overall feeling and experience described was that of being heard and respected. This could be directly linked to the process of active caring, which entails not only being aware of a partner's emotional experience, but also then adapting and creating a space to provide whatever she needs. The high levels of happiness and satisfaction expressed by participants are likely linked to the practice of active caring not as a random event, but a daily tool used between partners as they navigate daily life together. Yes, this could be helped

by the fact that these are women and the way they were socialized, but this is also an example of how queer couples create positive, safe spaces for the people they love.

The ultimate example of active caring is when participants experienced trigger moments, defined as monumental negative moments experienced between partners that could result in the relationship ending. One example of a trigger moment is when Cin called the police during a fight with her partner, N.R., who was then arrested. No one was hit during the argument, but Cin described feeling overwhelmed as past traumas resurfaced and a “refusal to be taken advantage of by anyone”, which is why she called the police. For many couples, this moment would result in the termination of the relationship. However, Cin and N.R. both made active choices to stay and fight for the relationship, which resulted in better communication and “looking forward to the future” as Cin said. Although trust is still an ongoing struggle, this trigger moment triggered Cin and N.R. to fight for the relationship, to practice better communication, empathize with one another and adapt to what each partner needs - to practice active caring.

I think the findings of communication, adaption and active caring all fall under the arc of fluidity, which is an emergent theme from these interviews. Equality cannot occur unless the partners are willing to care, communicate and adapt, which demands both partners to be fluid in every aspect of their relationships. I think fluidity in the context of these relationships is an ability to alter to any situation and to continually do so as the relationship needs. This finding is one example of how WSW partners can impact non-WSW couples demonstrating

how to have a more equal, healthy relationship rather than blindly follow social constructions of how a relationship ought to be.

Sex and Money Intertwined

Baumeister and Vohs (2004) provide an economic analysis of the bargaining and exchange of sex for resources. This exchange occurs when one partner is more dependent on the other and needs to exchange childcare, housework or sex to access financial resources. Although a limited perspective, it does provide a glimpse into how some partners might navigate and exchange their resources. One of the key questions asked during the interview was if participants thought sexual and financial power overlapped and impacted the overall power dynamics in the relationships. The answer was split, five out of ten between participants. Although five out of 10 participants said these spheres were separate, this could be do to partners not wanting to acknowledge that subtle exchanges like this might occur, which Baumeister and Vohs (2004) theorized as happening. For example, the partners who felt sex and money were combined expressed the highest rates of overall equality. The partners who said these two spheres were separate could be in denial of one person having slightly more control in regards to sex and money. For example, Henry and N.R. both are more extroverted, earn more money and make more decisions day -to- day than their partners. Although their partners expressed feeling equal, Henry and N.R. could not want to admit to having more power and their partners could be in denial.

Sarantakos (1988) and Solomon and colleagues (2005) both found the more financially dependent partner to do more housework or childcare, aligning with

research and roles of heterosexual partners. Additionally, no participants expressed exchanging housework, childcare or sex in order to access financial resources.

Although Cin did express awareness of this trend in some relationships when she said, “I think for us they (money and sex) are completely separate and that is how it should be, but unfortunately for a lot of people it isn’t. I mean we joke saying hey I paid for this so when are you going to put out but it is strictly joking.” At no point did anyone feel that money was a way to coerce or subdue a partner into having sex, which has been found in some heterosexual relationships (Vanderlean & Vasey, 2009). Again, the theme of separate and equal was apparent in these relationships, as it has been shown in other WSW relationships, which was key in equal decision-making and equal resources (Rose & Eaton, 2013).

Parker said, “I mean we split money equally, but I mean we have sex equally too. I guess it is because if one area is equal then it would kind of carry over.” This description of power dynamics is an example of how power transfers from one person to the next in varying situations, rather than becoming rigid and cemented. Each participant explained different areas that provided security, was a comfort zone or was enjoyed by her, such as making decisions, handling finances or initiating sex; this was then complimented by the participant’s partner who filled in the gaps and carried out her own needs. However, this dynamic never becomes rigid, but instead is an active conversation and constant adaption; it is active caring. Although both can exist as separate spheres, they are forever intertwined, as sex and money are two spheres where power is taken, flexed and negotiated between partners.

The constant communication and checking in described by participants allowed for the couple to maintain high levels of fluidity, resulting in perceptions of an equitable relationship. I think that this fluidity is the heart of the findings of this study, as it is at the center of all the themes. I think that sexual and financial power are linked, because these are two spaces that the participants can actively care and let their partner take control, be empowered, in the areas that do provide this sensation. For example, Cin used to be a “top” during sex, but her partner N.R. needs to be in more control during sexual intercourse so Cin allows her to do so. A always gives Erin the space to initiate sex, because that is where Erin takes control. Henry takes care of finances, because Nor experiences extreme anxiety when she has to handle money. Parker finds security in handling money, so Brooke allows her the space to do so. Morgan and Crix both identify as “tops” during sex, so the couple alternates who is acting this way so both women are satisfied. All of these examples demonstrate how the participants endlessly created spaces for power to be fluid rather than rigid, which I think is how equality is created and maintained; if one area is fluid than the other areas will be fluid as well. I think the high levels of fluidity is how the participants queered their relationships, which means that they did not restrict themselves to scripts, but played with scripts, adapted scripts to find ways that empowered both women and allowed for fluidity to constantly transfer between the couple, which occurred by participants practicing active caring.

Conclusion

Similar to prior research, the 10 participants in this sample demonstrated equality and following preferences for chores and decision-making, rather than traditional gendered scripts (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1984; Kurdeck, 2006; Umberson et al, 2015). This may occur as a result of participants practicing active caring, which requires ongoing communication, checking in, adaption and a deep level of caring for their partners. Although previous literature as found significant power imbalances in WSW relationships in regards to finances and sex, no large inequalities were found in this study (Budge, 2015; Patterson & Schwartz, 1994; Lewis et al, 2014). The continual practice of emotional skills results in a highly fluid dynamic, which creates a space for power to transfer between partners in varying situations like finances and sex. It is this on-going transfer that links sex and money together and allows for a more equal dynamic that previous studies have found (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1984; Kurdeck, 2006; Gotta et al, 2011).

Cvetkovich (2003) illustrates the subtle complexities, care and empowerment, as Cvetkovich explains sexual dynamics between butch/femme partners. In this work, the fluid and active caring dynamics are revealed as these partners embrace the unique space their queer relationships created, rather than subscribing to heteronormative expectations. Similarly, the participants in this study demonstrate this embrace of queerness as they resist heteronormative trends by creating, adapting roles that are based on love for their partner. Perhaps social narratives surrounding gender and relationship expectations could embrace this queerness and practice active caring.

Future Research

Future studies could explore active caring as a tool used by couples to navigate their relationships in order to increase equality and relationship satisfaction. Additionally, the finding of open relationship or being polyamorous is another area that future research could study more deeply. In this study, open relationships were attributed to being vital in developing communication skills, but perhaps there are other benefits from this type of relationship. Polyamorous relationships also continue the theme of fluidity and reject traditional norms, which are additional areas that could be studied in the future.

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