

## health services

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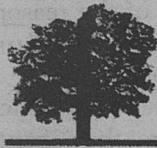
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ESTHER ROTHBLUM

## DYKE PSYCHE: What is lesbian sex?

sexual and the lesbian/bisexual versions, focus on genital activity and thus ignore other, nongenital, sexual experiences that women may have had. We have no terminology for the early sexual crushes on other people, usually a female friend or female teacher. We have no language for the sexual feelings that arise between adult friends, even when both friends are in sexual relationships with other people. In contrast, if the friends engage in genital sexual activity with each other, we immediately have language; they are having an affair. Situations in which one woman has sexual feelings for another, but these feelings are not reciprocated, are not viewed as "real" sex; in fact, the term "unrequited love" reflects the lack of legitimacy of these feelings. In the lesbian communities, ex-lovers often remain friends and friends often become lovers; closeted lesbians may introduce their lover to their family or co-worker as their "friend."

This sex-focused definition of a relationship has a number of implications for lesbians and bisexual women in female-female relationships. It overemphasizes sexual activity when this may not be what is important to lesbians in a relationship. Lesbians may feel pressure to have genital sex in order to provide a definition for their romantic feelings for another woman. They may feel pressure to continue having sex in order to view themselves as still being partners. If genital sex ceases, and if one or both partners tells close friends about this, the lesbian community may view the couple as having ended their relationship, and the members of the couple may be considered sexually available by other women. Lack of sexual activity may be interpreted (by the couple, the lesbian community, and their therapist) as a sign

that something is seriously wrong with the relationship, even if all other aspects of the relationship are satisfying.

What is a feminist vision of the future of women's sexuality? What would be some components of a lesbian sexual revolution? Throughout much of women's history, women's sexuality was tied to reproduction, and thus to men. Women's sexuality was linked to pregnancy and motherhood. Lesbians can serve as models for sexual activity free from reproduction. Sexual activity free from reproduction also implies that sexual activity can be independent of genital activity, so that "sex" can truly encompass all aspects of women's bodies, spirituality, love, and passion.

Sexual relationships are so influenced by patriarchal definitions that we cannot truly conceive of women relating in ways that feel authentic to us. This is an area of tremendous power, and one in which we do not even know what our questions are, let alone our solutions.

Esther Rothblum is Professor of Psychology at the University of Vermont and Editor of the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*. DYKE PSYCHE is a monthly column.

This piece was excerpted from the article by Esther Rothblum entitled "Transforming Lesbian Sexuality" that appeared in the journal *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 1994, Volume 18, pp. 627-641. For a copy of this article, write to Esther Rothblum, Dept. Psychology, John Dewey Hall, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT 05405 e\_rothbl@dewey.uvm.edu.

### OITM Wish List: Color Computer Monitor

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What is sex? In our society, "sex" is commonly defined as heterosexual intercourse. JoAnn Loulan (author of the books *Lesbian Sex* and *Lesbian Passion*) has described how adolescents who have engaged in a number and variety of sexual activities but have not had intercourse will say that they haven't "gone all the way." The first time women "go all the way" has a powerful definitional value; it is the time they will remember as their first sexual experience. This first experience of intercourse will "count" even if they didn't find it particularly sexual, even if they didn't have an orgasm, even if they had hundreds of prior sexual encounters without intercourse, and even if these prior sexual encounters were extremely arousing and/or resulted in orgasms. Women may recall their first experience of intercourse as somewhat disappointing, but they knew that the "realness" of the experience from the point of view of society's definition of sex meant that they would never forget the experience.

What is lesbian sex? Sexual activity, as defined by lesbians, is greatly affected by heterosexual definitions of sexual activity. Two women are considered to have engaged in sex if they performed mutual genital stimulation. A lesbian who has never engaged in this activity will probably not believe that she has had sex with another woman. A lesbian who had an orgasm while watching or kissing another woman, for example, has not "gone all the way."

These definitions of sexual activity, both the hetero-

## Dykes To Watch Out For by Alison Bechdel

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