This book is on lesbian and gay adult couples. The purpose is to describe for readers the basic issues these couples deal with, their differences from and similarities to heterosexual couples, and how they deal with heterosexism and the marriage issue. In addition, there are several chapters on practice with these couples for practitioners. What are the issues these couples bring to a practitioner, and what interventions might help them? This introduction presents demographics of lesbian and gay couples, research history, the constant backdrop of heterosexism in the lives of gay and lesbian couples, and postmodern and queer theory.

In this book, I use lesbian and gay communities in the plural form because there are a variety of lesbian and gay communities across the country and around the world. No monolithic lesbian or gay community exists. In addition, gay refers to men and lesbian to women, even though some women refer to themselves as gay instead of lesbian, and some gay men and lesbians use no labels at all.

Demographics of Lesbian and Gay Couples

Approximately 601,000 same-sex couples live together according to the 2000 U.S. census (Gates & Ost, 2004). Other estimates are that of 5.5 million unmarried couples living together, about one in nine are same-sex couples. Of those couples, 301,026 are male couples and 293,365 are female couples (Simmons & O’Connell, 2003).

These population data are estimates. Some couples may be reluctant to reveal their sexual identity or the nature of their romantic attachments to the government on census forms. Also, many same-sex couples do not live together (Cahill, South, & Spade, 2000). In addition, hardly any legal marriage or divorce records exist on lesbian and gay couples. Marriage is so infrequent that the data on same-sex marriage are not significant. Nor are there data on how many
Lesbian and gay couples live all over the United States, in 99.3 percent of all counties (Smith & Gates, 2001), though they are most likely to live in urban areas (Gates & Ost, 2004). An analysis of data from several large studies, including the General Social Survey and the National Health and Social Life Survey, showed that 60 percent of partnered lesbians and gay men live in only twenty cities. Partnered gay men are more concentrated in those twenty cities than are partnered lesbians (Black, Gates, Sanders, & Taylor, 2000).

Lesbian and gay couples represent every ethnic, racial, income, and adolescent and adult age group. This book addresses adults because of the many unique issues adolescents deal with (for reviews of lesbian and gay adolescents, see Hunter, 1998; Hunter & Hickerson, 2003). Same-sex couples are two times more likely than heterosexual married couples to be of mixed race or ethnicity (Simmons & O’Connell, 2003). For example, approximately 16 percent of same-sex couples include a Hispanic partner, and 14 percent include an African American partner (Black et al., 2000). The number of interracial lesbian and gay couples may partly reflect the fact that fewer opportunities exist for racial and ethnic minority lesbians and gay men to find same-race or same-ethnicity partners in their communities of origin. Also, by migrating to more cosmopolitan, urban settings, lesbians and gay men intermingle with diverse cultural groups, thus increasing their possibilities for dating outside of their race or ethnicity (Peplau, Cochran, & Mays, 1997).

Research to Date on Lesbian and Gay Couples

Although a long history of research exists on lesbians and gay men, the literature on couples is modest. Research on same-sex couples began slowly in the 1970s and grew in the 1980s. It diminished as the AIDS epidemic in the gay community in the 1980s began to receive more attention. In recent years, however, research on same-sex couples has drawn more interest. That research, however, has been problematic. Many research projects have relied on questionnaires, and different researchers have used incomparable questions. This, along with use of different samples (mostly unrepresentative), has resulted in some of the contradictory findings mentioned in this text. Most of the studies have been small scale; only a few major research studies have been done. Most respondents have volunteered
to participate, and usually they are young, well educated, white, and middle class. In addition, many research projects obtained reports from only one partner in a couple (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007).

The literature that provides direct comparisons of same- and different-sex couples is small. Nonetheless, since the 1980s, a few researchers, including Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) and Kurdek (e.g., 1988a, 1988b, 1995a, 1998a, 1998b, 2004, 2008), have conducted comparative studies focused on lesbian, gay, and heterosexual romantic relationships.

**Heterosexism and Its Effects on Lesbian and Gay Couples**

All lesbian and gay individuals and couples contend with the oppression of stigma and discrimination that results from heterosexism. Defined by Herek (1995), heterosexism is “the ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community” (p. 321). It operates at both cultural and individual levels. An example of how heterosexism manifests itself at the cultural level is the way that the media portrays, or does not portray, lesbians and gay men. For example, the media does not often highlight happy, satisfied, and successful same-sex couples (Ossana, 2000). Another example of cultural heterosexism is the widespread belief that the only acceptable affectional and sexual expression is that which occurs between women and men. This reflects belief in the inherent superiority of one form of loving over all others (Sanders & Kroll, 2000). We take this belief for granted, and it is reinforced through social customs and institutions (Herek, 1995). This belief and other heterosexist beliefs are acquired and reinforced by society over the life span (Bigner, 2000). We barely acknowledge beliefs such as the inherent superiority of heterosexual love until something brings the issue to the surface. For example, when lesbians and gay men want to legally marry, then there are calls for laws to prevent this—many state laws state that legal marriage exists only between a woman and a man (see chapter 9).

Cultural heterosexism is also seen in the lack of legal recognition and protection for lesbian and gay couples, including child custody rights (Ossana, 2000; Shernoff, 1995; Slater, 1995), medical decision-making power for the nonlegal parent (Ossana, 2000), employment (Slater, 1995), shelter (Slater, 1995), and social services (Granvold & Martin, 1999). More than 50 percent of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) participants in a study by Mays and Cochran (2001) reported
lifetime experiences of discrimination such as being fired from a job or being prevented from renting or buying a home. These couples’ civil rights are regularly challenged through court cases, ballot initiatives, and legislative proposals.

Individual heterosexism includes people’s own negative feelings about lesbians and gay men, such as disgust and indignation. Examples of individual behaviors are jokes and derogatory terms that make fun of lesbians and gay men or put them down (Berrill, 1990; Herek, 1993, 1995). A study by Swim, Pearson, and Johnson (2007) used daily experience accounts to assess lesbians’ and gay men’s encounters with everyday hassles. Over one week, participants reported experiencing an average of two hassles focused on their sexual identity. Two-thirds of the hassles were verbal, including jokes, comments based on stereotypes, hostile or threatening comments, and comments expressing general dislike of lesbians and gay men.

In most circumstances in the United States and around the world, lesbian and gay couples still risk being gawked at if they hold hands in public. Stress can result from other hassles, such as when same-sex couples request a shared bed in a hotel room. In an experimental study, Jones (1996) found that same-sex couples requesting that hotel arrangement were denied a room significantly more often than were heterosexual couples making the same request. In addition, stress can result from rejection of the couple or their children by family, neighbors, or peers at work or school (Todosijevic, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2005). In a national survey (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001), 34 percent of lesbians and gay men reported that their family or a family member had refused to accept them because of their sexual identity. Families of origin might also ignore their family member’s sexual identity (Lewis, Derlega, Berndt, Morris, & Rose, 2001).

Hate crimes, also called bias crimes, are influenced by both cultural and individual heterosexism and mostly target men because of their sexual identity. Extreme forms of physical attacks can result in serious injuries or death (McDouggall, 1993; Neisen, 1990). Most lesbian and gay research respondents (95 percent) report having experienced some degree of violence (Dean, Wu, & Martin, 1992; Von Schulthess, 1992). Berrill (1992) reported from twenty-four local, regional, and national samples of gay and bisexual men the proportion of different types of harassment and violence that they experienced: assault with weapons (9 percent), physical assault (17 percent), vandalism of property (19 percent), threats of violence (44 percent), and having objects thrown at them (25 percent). In addition, they were spit at (13 percent) and experienced verbal harassment (80 percent).
Balsam, Rothblum, and Beauchaine (2005) reported findings from one of the largest studies of victimization among LGB women and men, covering the life span. The study compared the violence experienced by 557 LGB and 525 heterosexual adults. The LGB respondents experienced more of every type of violence than heterosexual respondents in childhood and adulthood, including psychological, physical, and sexual violence. Within the same family, an LGB sibling or siblings were at greater risk for victimization by their parents. In another large-scale study, approximately 20 percent of sexual minority women reported being the victim of a sexual identity–based crime or attempted crime (e.g., physical assault, sexual assault, robbery, vandalism; Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999).

Roberts, Austin, Corliss, Vandermorris, and Koenen (2010) found that lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and heterosexuals who were ever in a same-sex relationship are between two and two and a half times more likely than the general population to experience violence especially in childhood. They have double the risk of experiencing posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of the violence. The authors suggested five ways that sexual minorities are at risk for victimization and PTSD: hate crimes, gender nonconforming behavior in childhood, social isolation and discrimination, elevated risk-taking behavior due to social isolation and stigma, and limited access to mental health care.

In 2002, a lesbian couple and their infant son barely escaped with their lives after arsonists set their home on fire. This happened a few days after the women had filed suit against the University of Montana for not providing domestic partner benefits. In 1999, two brothers claiming to be carrying out “God’s will” brutally murdered gay partners, forty and fifty years old, while they were asleep in their bed (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001). These are only a few examples of life-threatening or murderous episodes against lesbians and gay men. Lesbian and gay couples can also experience stress from the fear aroused when violence happens to others. Vulnerability to these dangers requires lesbian and gay individuals and couples to be vigilant, especially in unfamiliar surroundings.

Using minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) as an interpretive framework, Rostosky, Riggle, Gray, and Hatton (2007) conducted a qualitative analysis of forty lesbian and gay couples (twenty female and twenty male). The analysis was based on the couples’ conversations about their committed partnerships. Of the participants, 85 percent were white, 6 percent identified as African American, and 8 percent identified as other nonwhite and non–African American racial or ethnic identities. The mean age of the couple members was 34.5 years. The mean
length of relationship was 5.33 years; 35 percent had been in a relationship between six months and two years, 31 percent had been together between two and five years, and 34 percent had been together more than five years (up to twenty-three years). The majority of the couples lived together (89.5 percent). The study defined minority stress as the chronic social stress that results from belonging to a stigmatized social category and is over and above the general stressors of daily life. Minority stress was composed of five factors: (1) experiences of discrimination, (2) anticipated rejection, (3) hiding and concealing of identities, (4) dealing with internalized homonegativity, and (5) development of coping strategies (Meyer, 2003).

Most of the couple members (94 percent) were out to their families of origin, but only 34 percent believed that their family was supportive or accepting of their sexual identity. Only 36 percent reported that their family accepted their partner into their lives. They experienced their families as expressing discomfort with the couple relationship, refusing to acknowledge their partner or their relationship (e.g., by not sending invitations or holiday cards to the partner), and attempting to cause dissolution of the relationship. Confrontations or verbal attacks came from family members, as well as from friends, coworkers, and strangers (Rostosky, Riggle, Gray, et al., 2007).

Most of the participants reported being verbally harassed at some point in their life because of their sexual identity. Almost half (46 percent) reported that they had been verbally harassed five or more times. Fewer (19 percent) reported having been physically assaulted at least once (Rostosky, Riggle, Gray, et al., 2007).

Of the forty couples, thirty-three discussed their stigmatized status in the larger culture or society. More than half of the couples discussed discrimination by institutions, most commonly religious and legal institutions. Couples discussed their lack of legal rights, such as civil marriage, and the lack of legal protections for their partners. More than half of the sample mentioned society’s negative stereotypes and attitudes, such as the common stereotype that same-sex relationships are fleeting and impermanent. Another stereotype assumes that lesbians and gay men are promiscuous, predatory, immoral, and therefore incapable of stable couple relationships. Another stereotype is that same-sex couples play out gender roles (one partner is the “man,” and the other is the “woman”). The couples often expressed their perception that society disapproved of and devalued their committed relationships. They also lamented the lack of visible, positive role models for same-sex couples (Rostosky, Riggle, Gray, et al., 2007).
It is reasonable to assume that discrimination based on sexual identity places strains on lesbian and gay couples (Mays, Cochran, & Rhue, 1993). Researchers have consistently shown that lesbians and gay men who experience discrimination are at greater risk of poor psychological adjustment and stress-related psychological disorders (e.g., Mays & Cochran 2001; Meyer, 1995, 2003). Ultimately, the various stressors that lesbian and gay couples experience can affect mental well-being (Otis & Skinner, 1996) and perceptions of relationship quality for couple members, as well as diminish the self-esteem or mental health of the partners or their ability to function effectively in a relationship. In a study of same-sex couples in civil unions, Todosijevic et al. (2005) found a significant association between reports of gay-specific stressors and lower relationship satisfaction for lesbian couples, though not for gay couples.

Another study (Balsam & Szymanski, 2005) has examined the role of minority stress in lesbian and bisexual women’s same-sex relationships. Participants were 272 women age 18–66, with a mean age of 34.75 years (standard deviation = 10.27). The sample comprised 85 percent European American, 6 percent African American/black, 2 percent Hispanic/Latina, 1 percent Asian American/Pacific Islander, 1 percent Native American, and 4 percent biracial women. Consistent with DiPlacido’s (1998) theoretical model, the study operationalized minority stress to include both internalized heterosexism and external experiences of heterosexist discrimination. Consistent with clinical and theoretical reports, internalized heterosexism was negatively associated with relationship quality. Contrary to expectations, however, recent and lifetime heterosexist discrimination was not related to relationship quality. It may be that same-sex couples can cope better with experiences that happen outside of their relationship than with internal beliefs that may be more hidden. It is important to consider that when studies measure only the occurrence of discriminatory events, they miss the perceived impact of those events. It is possible that the extent of discriminatory events that gay and lesbian couple members experience as stressful may play a more important role in relationship functioning.

Despite the stigma and stressors experienced by lesbians and gay men, most of them function well. Like members of other stigmatized groups, they develop strategies to cope with their status. In the Rostosky, Riggle, Gray, et al. (2007) study, in response to stressors, couples used coping strategies that included reframing negative experiences, concealing their relationship, creating social support, and affirming themselves and their partnership. Balsam and Szymanski
(2005) suggested that it is also possible that the couple relationship can serve as a safe haven that buffers couple members from the effects of discrimination. Nevertheless, assault and other victimization can create considerable distress. Attacks directed toward lesbians and gay men because of their sexual identity have a more powerful negative impact than other crimes against them. Even a minor incident of harassment can be frightening, because one never knows what it will lead to. Sexual identity–based crimes also have consequences for lesbian and gay communities, as they give a message that lesbians and gay men are not safe (Herek, Cogan, & Gillis, 2002).

The Postmodern and Queer Theory Challenge
This book is traditional in that it uses binary categories of “lesbian” and “gay.” But there are other ways to view lesbians and gay men, as well as gender and sex. Starting with gender and sex, in standard usage, sex distinguishes males and females mostly on the basis of biological characteristics (Rutter & Schwartz, 2000). A person is assigned to categories of “male” or “female” because of characteristics of genitalia, chromosomes, reproductive organs, gametes, and hormones. Gender is what society expects persons to be on the basis of their sex (Maurer, 1999). This includes roles and stereotypes (Stein, 1999). Gender, however, can be projected onto experiences that may have no relation to the sex of a person (Bohan & Russell, 1999; McKenna & Kessler, 2000).

Many of the biological factors used to classify persons as male or female do not easily divide persons into two distinct groups (Coombs, 1998), such as for persons who are born with different combinations of genitals, chromosomes, and secondary-sex characteristics such as body hair or breasts not classifiable as male or female (Stein, 1999). Transgender persons also defy “male” and “female” categories. Some cultures recognize more than two sexes (Blackwood, 1984). Our current views about what biological features distinguish males from females may be inaccurate.

McPhail (2004) also questioned gender and sexuality binaries. Such categories for classifying people as “gender” and “sexual orientation” can be limiting and harmful, as well as inaccurate. McPhail’s view of postmodern and queer theory brings new ways of conceptualizing people and social movements. We usually classify people by membership in groups. Group status is often divided into binary categorizations: male-female, white-nonwhite, heterosexual-nonheterosexual, wealthy-poor, and able-disabled. The first group has power; the second group
does not. These groups are also divided into categories of “valued or privileged” or “devalued or marginalized.” But people in the same groups often have considerable differences rather than commonalities. And some people do not fit into binary categories, such as those who are bisexual, intersex, and transgender. Queer spirituality also adds to this discussion. It opposes dominant religious worldviews that favor a heterosexual perspective. It also rejects heterosexual privilege, patriarchy, and male hegemony (Bosivert, 2007; Jordan, 2007).

The most common criticisms of gender and sexuality conclude that there is no objective truth. Instead, truth and realities are multiple, subjective, and socially constructed, and often they serve those in power. Queer theory separates gender from sexuality and from the continuities between anatomical sex, social gender, gender identity, sexual identity, sexual object choice, and sexual practice. For example, the labeling of a person who is not heterosexual in a category distinct from “heterosexual” helps the medical and scientific communities label the person “abnormal.” Once those communities create the “abnormal” category, then the people in it are regulated and policed. But research shows that gender and sexual orientation may be socially constructed, dynamic, and multivariate over time (Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolf, 1985). Many lesbians and gay men believe that they were born as lesbian or gay. Some believe that they chose their same-sex identity. Women have a more fluid sexuality than do men, and there is considerable variation in their same-sex and other-sex attractions (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000). Women’s identity can be altered by cultural, social, and situational factors. Women are also more likely to adapt multiple identities (Rust, 2000).

McPhail (2004) pointed out that two of social work’s core values are self-determination and the dignity and worth of each person (National Association of Social Workers, 1996). Much of the postmodern critique is to allow people to define themselves rather than to be defined and categorized by others. McPhail recommended that social workers use continua of gender and sexualities instead of discrete categories; they should hesitate to speak of categorizations of people. “Sexual identity” may be more preferable than “sexual orientation” or “sexual preference.” Nothing is as simple as being born gay or heterosexual or choosing what one will be.

McPhail’s (2004) suggestions for social workers include the following: Ask questions such as, Who do these categories serve? Who do they include or exclude? Who has power to define these categories? How do categories change...
over time and across cultures? She recommends that social workers question gender and sexuality binaries, and that social work curricula include postmodern and queer theories as another view along a continuum of views.

When working with persons around issues of gender and sexuality, we should not make assumptions about anything on the basis of a category. As practitioners, we should ask a lesbian or gay couple to tell us their own narrative about themselves and their being in a couple. I suggest that readers keep these ideas in mind in the chapters to come. I challenge us to go beyond categories.

Chapters and Audience

This book has three parts: “Life Span of Couples,” “Micro-Level Practice with Lesbian and Gay Couples,” and “Other Issues That Affect Lesbian and Gay Couples.” The chapters in these parts address the major themes of how lesbian and gay couples meet (chapter 1); couples who have or want children (chapter 2); relationship satisfaction, benefits, and maintenance (chapter 3); relationship dissatisfaction and breakup (chapter 4); micro-level practice with lesbian and gay couples (chapters 5–7), heterosexism and coping strategies (chapter 8), and the marriage issue (chapter 9).

In summary, the purpose of this book is to address adult lesbians and gay men in couples with empirical evidence. The book does not present practice models. Instead, practitioners can adapt their preferred models to the issues and suggested practice ideas presented here.

This book is intended to be a supplemental textbook (rather than the main text) for a course on lesbians and gay men, lesbian and gay couples, or for a course on couples generally. It is also a guide to practice for practitioners. The primary audiences include undergraduate and graduate students in courses on diversity, adult development, and marriage and family. It can be used in the fields of social work, counseling, mental health, nursing, psychology, sociology, and education. Lesbians and gay men themselves can also benefit from reading this book: they will learn about the experiences of others in couples and how to handle difficulties and maintain relationships.