





**Love
Politics
and "Rescue"**
In Lesbian Relationships

an essay by
Diana Rabenold






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In Love, Politics, and "Rescue" in Lesbian Relationships, Diana Rabenold offers Lesbians a particularly effective set of tools for identifying and resolving relationship problems on our own. One of these tools, a concept known as "Rescue," demystifies and suggests solutions for such problems as "fusion" or "merging," loss of sexual expression, violence and breakdown in couple communications. She reveals the effects internalized sexism and heterosexism have on the personal dynamics of Lesbian relationships. This approach gives additional meaning to the feminist dictum "the personal is political."

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For Mary Austin

Over the past few years I have sensed a growing climate of disappointment and even cynicism in the Lesbian community regarding the viability of our sexual relationships. I have heard certain despairing comments more and more frequently—particularly from Lesbians in their late 30's or early 40's who have been through at least one and often several serious, long-term relationships—comments which run something like this: Lesbian relationships just don't work; they don't last; we're too emotional, too unstable; it's too painful to break up; it's just not worth all the trouble and grief; we "merge" together, sex dies out; we run off with our friends, etc. In short, some Lesbians seem to have concluded, in their more bitter and self-deprecating moments, that Lesbians just can't have good relationships, and stop just short of expressing the underlying homophobic thought, "Maybe it's just not natural, and we're really all sick after all."

In the wake of this concern and disillusionment, many Lesbians have turned to therapy for help with their romantic partnerships. However I am concerned that many therapists—even so called "Lesbian-Feminist" therapists are continuing to emphasize family backgrounds and "damaged" personal histories as the major culprits in troubled Lesbian relationships, at the expense of examining the political nature of their clients' problems. In my experience, insights which are restricted to one's personal past are limited in their ability to help clients make major positive changes in their personal relationships. This is because psychodynamic therapy—the kind of therapy I am describing and which is still the prevailing therapy model taught in American universities—lacks a cohesive analysis of power, a theory of internalized oppression, or a set of concrete tools with which to fight internalized sexism and homophobia. In short, the revolutionary insight of the women's movement, "The personal is political," has been sorely neglected of late in psychotherapeutic circles, where the emphasis seems to have returned—even among Lesbian-feminist counselors—to a largely "the personal is personal" approach, with but a few crumbs of the political realities of women's and gay oppression tossed out from time to time.

The cost of ignoring the deeper psychological implications of economic and political oppression is great. This approach not only deprives Lesbian clients of valuable political insights into

their behavior, but fails to develop useful tools for personal growth and change which emerge from such an understanding. Finally, an approach which over-emphasizes past and personal history often overlooks the ways in which behavior patterns which the client wishes to change are being reinforced in the present by factors in her social and economic environment.

In this article I would like to first go over some of the general ways in which sexism and heterosexism affect Lesbian relationships, then illustrate how this external climate of oppression can appear within the personal dynamics of the Lesbian couple. In particular, I will discuss a concept known as "Rescue" and how an understanding of this concept can be used as a tool to help lovers become aware of ways in which they may be contributing to unhealthy patterns within their relationships, as well as provide specific means of changing such dynamics.

Lesbians of course are not alone in questioning relationships and feeling discouraged about them: heterosexuals are in the same boat. Marriages are breaking up in greater and greater numbers, and women's magazines are filled with the despairing voices of heterosexual women who have serious questions about the possibility of having good, long-term relationships with men. There are significant socio-economic reasons for this, having to do with the changing political and economic role of women and the family in our society over the past few decades. The family in industrialized Western society has now shrunk to its smallest size in the history of that institution, and places an unrealistic burden on the sexual couple to fulfill all our human requirements for community in an increasingly alienated and individualistic culture.

Economic Oppression of Lesbians

Apart from general problems facing the sexual couple in society, women as a group are economically disadvantaged in relation to men, earning 63 cents to the dollar that men do. For the Lesbian couple, in which both partners are targets of sex and heterosexist discrimination, the economic burden is doubled. In short, Lesbians as a socio-economic group tend to be poor, struggling, or marginal. Lesbians share the same economic lot (and often the same run-down neighborhoods, low-paying jobs, and other poverty stresses) as other disadvantaged groups

in our society. These economic realities impact heavily on the majority of Lesbian couples. Most studies of sexual relationships show economic stress to be a major factor in couple instability.¹

Heterosexual couples (or at least those legally married) in similar struggling circumstances frequently receive economic support from their respective families: bridal showers, wedding gifts, "hope chests," family heirlooms passed down at the time of marriage, cash gifts, help with buying a first home, help with starting a business, and help with the care and education of the couple's children. By contrast, most Lesbian couples are not helped economically by their families; indeed, many risk being completely cut off financially should their sexual orientation become known.

Psychological Oppression

Every Lesbian couple, whether economically secure or not, faces stresses involving the families' attitude toward the relationship, which more often than not is one of rejection and disapproval. At best the relationship is tolerated but rendered invisible: the couple is treated as two "roommates" devoid of sexuality or long-term commitment. Few Lesbian couples receive the kind of emotional support which heterosexual couples can expect: the recognition and good wishes of their family and community; emotional counseling and support from older, wiser family members to get them over the "rough spots"; positive reinforcements from role models provided by art, literature, and the public media; and an accessible historical tradition buttressed by customs and ceremonies designed to strengthen relationship ties.

Finally, perhaps the most psychically damaging consequence of Lesbian oppression is the revulsion with which our love-life is greeted by mainstream society. It is particularly hurtful and damaging to women, conditioned as most of us are to seek and receive approval from others, to have the most intimate and generally most important aspect of our lives treated with contempt, derision, or complete silence. It is

¹ Cf. *American Couples*, Blumenstein and Schwartz, Morrow & Co. (New York, 1983).

nearly impossible not to internalize at least some portion of this climate of rejection and hatred into our psyches and self-images from time to time.

In sum, the Lesbian couple wends its way in the world without mainstream support or approval, validation, visibility, role models, or even a visible historical context. It is no wonder—as Marny Hall, a Bay Area Lesbian therapist has pointed out—that Lesbian relationships often become "havens": enclaves forming a protective barrier to shield the couple from a "hostile world."² Just as there are forces in the culture constantly attempting to pull Lesbian relationships apart, there exists a counter-pressure within the Lesbian couple to maintain the relationship at all cost, as a crucial source of nurturance, self-definition, and mutual protection—even when threatened by internal conflict.

Internalized Oppression

For most of us, our families served as the means through which we first learned about and acculturated ourselves to the dominant gender, class, race, and able-bodied culture in which we grew up. The attitudes and inequalities of the dominant culture therefore become internalized at a very early age, and continue to be taught and reinforced within us, both at home and in society at large, unless we make a concerted effort to counter these internal messages in an on-going process of "consciousness-raising" and political action.

One of the results of male dominance is that the desires and needs of women are constantly being denied and discounted. In place of pursuing our own feelings and ambitions, we are taught to substitute the needs of others, most appropriately the men we are intended to marry and the children we are supposed to bear. Thus are set in motion attempts to disempower us from the moment we are born.

The *fact* of women's subordination as a group becomes internalized in individual women as a belief that their personal needs are not important: that to ask for what they

² Hall, Marny, "Lesbians, Limerance, and Long-term Relationships," in *Lesbian Sex*, by JoAnn Loulan, Spinsters Ink (San Francisco, 1984), p. 143.

want or to get their needs met is selfish, that they are only good and OK if they always put the needs of others first. Indeed, the accusation of "selfishness"—however subtly communicated—has ironically been perhaps the greatest barrier to women's development of a strong sense of Self with which to *be* "Self-ish!"

The Concept of "Rescue"

In Transactional Analysis, a school of psychology developed in the 1960's which focused on the nature of interactions between people, a concept known as "Rescue" was developed. "Rescue" can be defined in several different ways, none of them to be confused with the ordinary meaning of rescue—that is, coming to the aid of someone who genuinely needs our emergency intervention, such as a drowning child. The most common definition of Rescue as I will be using it (with a capital "R") is the act of doing something you really don't want to do or of doing more than your share of something. Simply doing a favor or a service for someone should not be confused with Rescue. After all, everyone enjoys doing a good turn or needs to perform her share of a task she doesn't necessarily like because that task just has to be done. But agreeing to do something which, without the internalized feelings of guilt and the need to please which the request aroused, you would otherwise have said no to, constitutes a Rescue. Two other helpful ways of defining Rescues are (1) doing more for someone than she is doing for herself and (2) not asking for what you want.

The "Rescue Triangle"

The act of Rescuing is one of the behaviors which gives rise to the dynamic of the "Rescue Triangle." The "triangle" consists of three positions one can "play" in an interaction with someone else. These positions are "Rescuer," "Victim," and "Persecutor." Here's how it works: if someone repeatedly performs actions for another which she doesn't really want to do or which are in excess of what she receives in return, for whatever reasons (I will discuss some of these reasons in a later section of this article), she is playing out the role of Rescuer. After a time she will begin to feel drained and victimized by her Rescues and come to feel sorry for herself for always putting herself out and

being so self-sacrificing. In short, she will begin to feel and perceive herself as a Victim of all the Rescues she has been performing. Once she feels victimized long enough, she will then begin to feel angry and rebellious, moving to the third position on the triangle, the Persecutor. In this role, she will fight back to "get even" with the person she has Rescued and persecute her in any number of ways: such as starting a big fight, withdrawing emotionally, or behaving in another way designed to hurt and get back at her lover.

When one person is busy playing the Rescue Triangle game, her partner is generally involved in playing a complementary role. For example, while one is playing Rescuer, the other is playing willing Victim—that is, appearing to be helpless or needy in some way that triggers her partner to go into Rescue mode.

In Radical Therapy, the concept of Rescue has been developed further and used in a more politically conscious way than simply as a description of role behavior learned through early family influences. For it is difficult not to draw a parallel between the role of Rescuer and the prevailing conditioning and expectations of women and other oppressed groups in our society.

For women, the various internalized messages of sexist conditioning become the psychological motivations for Rescue, particularly within their love relationships, where such feelings become intensified. Many of these internalized messages consist of lies our society has told us concerning our own weakness, worthlessness, and powerlessness, or the powerlessness and weakness of others, who therefore need us to "save" them.

For many women love and Rescue often become confused with one another. "Taking care of" someone else often becomes equated with "caring" and love itself. It is for this reason, as Lesbian therapist Barbara Sang has pointed out, that "one of the most salient issues that emerges in working with Lesbians in therapy is one's feelings that the other doesn't care enough."³ Both partners will have a tendency to feel under

³ Sang, Barbara, "Lesbian Relationships: A Struggle Toward Partner Equality," in *Women-Identified Women*, ed. Darty and Potter, Mayfield Publishing Company (Palo Alto, 1984) p. 56.

injunction to be "on call" for each others' needs while at the same time not bringing up their own needs. This silence about their needs is prompted by having learned early on that good girls do not ask for what they want (this is known as "selfish" and "demanding"). This leaves a woman with either of several options, none of which is satisfactory. She can simply give up her own needs altogether, which leads to an increasing loss of self-awareness and self-esteem; or she can seek to meet her needs by indirect means, a strategy which often leads to accusations that she is "manipulative"; or she can become dependent on her lover to intuit her needs and meet them without being asked outright.

Frequently a Lesbian relationship which has begun with Rescue behavior will come to rely on the Rescue dynamic as the chief way of doing business. In such a relationship, there is often one partner who feels most at home and familiar with the role of Rescuer, and therefore tends to be the more giving, nurturing, and self-sacrificing of the two. Her Rescues may be prompted by a pattern of behavior formed within her own family environment which then becomes "triggered" in a relationship. The profile of the type of person who most frequently sets off her internalized Rescue Reflex is typically someone who has experienced particular hardship and oppression in her life, whether due to class or racial oppression, family violence or poverty, or any number of other factors. By constantly behaving as though her lover does not have the resources on her own with which to solve problems and meet her own needs, the Rescuer will unwittingly help to perpetuate the Victim's innate sense of powerlessness. In all of these attitudes and actions, the Rescuer's role will be reinforced by the prevailing codes of behavior for females in our society.

Her partner, on the other hand, may feel more comfortable at first as a Victim and then as a Persecutor when she has been Rescued beyond her tolerance. The Victim role will feel most comfortable because she has come to believe the lies which her family and society have passed on to her about her own lack of worth and powerlessness. She also often lacks the emotional skill with which to bring up her own hurts and resentments, and depends on the rescuer to give voice to her inner feelings.

In such a relationship, it will be the mission of the Rescuer to heal and save the Victim from her own self-destructiveness and self-hatred. In pursuit of her goal, the Rescuer will herself

tolerate much ill-treatment. And the Victim will come to feel increasingly "suffocated" and angry. Although each may have her own favorite position on the "triangle," both will go around and around in this game, occupying each position in turn, although with different degrees of intensity.

Playing Rescuer and Victim reflects the ways in which we often unintentionally collude with society's view of ourselves as powerless victims. Becoming aware of this collusion—that is, of the ways in which we agree with the lies told to us about ourselves and of how the world works—is the first step toward breaking free of old habits of powerlessness.

It is at this juncture that we can see how the dynamics in a Lesbian couple can differ from the heterosexual model. While most men are conditioned to *expect* to be the center of their female lover's attention and nurturing, and to feel comfortable in the one-up power position in which that places them, women are not. In addition, many men have careers and work lives that are not only their central focus, but which offer them real power and privilege in the world. Most women do not. But, while a man in a heterosexual relationship might not take notice of the Rescues his lover is performing, a woman in that position often feels increasingly guilty and uncomfortable. And whereas the economic arrangements and expectations between men and women are usually quite well understood (even if unequal), in Lesbian couples financial issues and responsibilities can become obscured. In my experience Lesbians frequently have quite a few issues concerning money which they do not make explicit in the relationship, often because they have a "romantic" or "politically correct" bias against bringing up such mundane matters. I will discuss the problem of romanticism in relationships in more detail later on.

In the above example, if the dynamics described were to continue unchecked, one could expect that the person who most frequently plays Victim would eventually move into a role of Persecutor. She would do something to hurt her Rescuer; subsequently, she would feel guilty over her bad behavior ("How could I treat her so badly—she's so good to me") and would rescue her in turn: promise to alter her behavior or do something else in order to make up. Guilt is the one agent which propels players back into the Rescue Triangle game! One day, after repeated go-arounds of this kind by both parties, the Persecutor might suddenly announce her intention to "take some

space" in the relationship or to "open the relationship up" to other lovers or—in the worst case scenario—to conduct a secret love affair that eventually ruptures the relationship.

"Rescue Run-a-mok": Chronic Fighting and Battering

As mentioned before, it makes sense that in a relationship between two women, the level of Rescue can be particularly high. In addition, the Rescue level can reach new heights because a woman lover often gives back more emotionally than men do. Indeed, the major complaint many heterosexual women have about men in relationships is that they don't "open up," are "afraid of intimacy," and are emotionally illiterate. Between women lovers, however, there is frequently a very high intensity of emotional sharing, intimacy, and nurturance, which can feel wonderfully exciting and satisfying. However, the down side is that at times the emotional heights of the relationship are gained at the cost of completely abandoning the analytical and problem-solving abilities of the participants, who as women have often had this side of their development discounted or discouraged altogether. In this whirlwind of emotions, real issues and concrete problems are never directly and cooperatively addressed. It is a relationship "culture" which one Radical Therapist has described as "Rescue Run-a-mok."⁴ This particularly high level of Rescue can eventually result in almost continuous and sometimes abusive fighting (the Persecution phase), followed by guilty, emotional "make-up" scenes (Rescue), and back to fighting again.

The fighting often takes the form of a series of escalating power plays. A power play is something one does in order to get her partner to do something that her partner doesn't really want to do. One example of a power play is that of a woman screaming at her lover in a public place, knowing full well that her lover hates "public" scenes and will act complacently and submissively in order to keep the scene from continuing. In a bad fight, these power plays can escalate to the point of violence: either actual physical battering or "psychological battering"—

⁴ Coined by Becky Jenkins.

yelling loudly, screaming hateful things to one another, making threats, and so on.

While occasional fights and power plays are common enough in any relationship, their habitual occurrence becomes exhausting, frightening, and symptomatic of problems in the relationship which are not being solved. As for actual violence, it has no place in a cooperative relationship. A cooperative relationship is one in which both partners have a tacit agreement and a commitment to work toward equality of power within the relationship. In a couple dynamic which is characterized by escalating power plays, and particularly where threats of force and acts of violence are frequent, it is fair to say that either one or both of the partners is not really interested in sharing power, but is engaged in a struggle for power over the control of the relationship.

"Rescue Run-a-mok": Problems of "Fusion" or "Merging"

Another form of "Rescue Run-a-mok" encountered frequently in Lesbian relationships is one in which the identities of both partners have become "merged" or "fused" with one another. In such a relationship, both partners are Rescuing in such a way as to suppress conflict over differences or individual needs they might have. Although they typically share a great deal of time together, are mutually supportive, and generally content in their domestic "nest," such couples have suppressed a lot of their resentments and individual needs. They have done so for all the reasons that women and Lesbians are propelled to Rescue in our society, and particularly out of a concern that they might hurt the other's feelings, or that what they want is "selfish."

In such couples, I have often observed an accompanying loss of sexual activity. Sexual expression begins to feel "incestuous" and inappropriate and eventually dies out altogether. I believe that in Lesbian couples this is a phenomenon with complex roots (including women's socialization around sex, and internalized homophobia) and don't wish to over-generalize as to its causes, but I believe its frequency in Lesbian couples lends yet more evidence to my thesis that the dynamics of Rescue—compounded in Lesbian relationships by the similar

conditioning and cultural status of both partners—play a significant part.

A number of therapists have written about many of the behavior patterns and dynamics I have discussed above in terms other than Rescue or the Rescue Triangle. And in the examples I have given in this article, I do not mean to imply that the dynamic I call Rescue is all that is going on. However, I do believe that the simplicity of its language, the neatness of the model, and its particular relevance to women's social conditioning make the concept of Rescue especially useful in helping women with problems in relationships. I have yet to define these concepts to a woman client who has not immediately understood and identified with the behavior they describe. This makes it an especially accessible tool which women can use in solving certain relationship problems for themselves. In addition, identifying Rescues often helps to expose some of the more deeply-held negative beliefs and behavior patterns which lie underneath. Given that women in general experience pressures to Rescue both from within and without, and that a Lesbian couple consists of two people with such conditioning, my experience has been that the Rescue model can be of particular help to the Lesbian couple.

How To Stop Rescuing

The way to stop the Rescues and begin to equalize power in a relationship is to ask for *100% of what we want 100% of the time*. As simple as this formula sounds, it can be an extremely difficult task for most women. Indeed, often my work with a client begins with helping her to get in touch with what she feels and wants, so conditioned has she been to put that aside.

In asking for what she wants, it is important that she ask for the whole 100%, and not whittle it down before she even gives it voice. As women we are often in the habit of editing what we ask for according to what we think others will agree to, or what we think we "ought" to ask for. So we wind up asking for 75% or perhaps even half of what we want. The problem with asking for less than what we want is that, apart from thereby depriving our lovers of valuable information about ourselves and our needs, it leaves us in a poor position from which to negotiate workable compromises. After all, if you ask for only 50% of what you want, and then work out a compromise that

gives you half of that, you have wound up with only 25% and a Rescue situation.

A cooperative negotiation begins with each partner expressing 100% of what she wants regarding any range of issues she is having a problem with in the relationship—time alone, lovemaking, visits with their respective families, money, communication, household chores—and negotiating each of these with her partner. The goal of cooperative negotiation is for both partners to get as much of what they want as is possible, rather than for one to give up her needs for the other or for each to argue over which is the "right" thing for them to be doing. It is in each partner's asking for what she wants that greater and greater equality is achieved in a relationship. Of course, by "equality" I do not mean "sameness"—most often each woman will bring very different qualities, skills, and areas of interest to the relationship—but rather a balance of power, an alliance between two whole persons who are equally invested in and equally benefitted by the relationship.

Certainly some of the cynicism I have observed creeping into the community regarding Lesbian relationships has to do with a sense of let-down and disillusionment, now that a decade has gone by since the exuberant and idealistic 1970's. Those of us who were coming out in the women's movement at that time had some pretty rosy ideas and unrealistic expectations about the glories of women loving women. As liberated women, we thought that our new-found relationships with each other would *by definition* be equal and devoid of sexism. After a few hard knocks in the romantic department, we are coming to realize that as women and lesbians we are still the products and carriers of sexist and heterosexist conditioning. It took several thousand years for the institution of heterosexuality—epitomized by marriage and its associated meanings and rituals—to perfect itself. It will surely take Lesbians and gays some time to rebuild our own relationship models and traditions.

Romantic Mythology

One of the reinforcing ideologies which the institution of heterosexuality has developed over time is the myth of romantic love. Women in Western European culture have been

conditioned to accept romantic mythology through countless novels, films, bed-time stories, television, and family expectations which have usually spared us the boring details of reality.

The components of the myth are as follows: Love Is All, True Love Is Constant Bliss, True Love Lasts Forever; don't look too closely at romance or the "magic" will disappear, the spell will be broken. In the Lesbian community romantic mythology has sometimes been elevated into a quasi-political position, in which the idea of applying one's mind to problems of the heart is viewed almost as counter-revolutionary. I have heard this position articulated somewhat like this: to "analyze" romance is cold, unfeeling, and "male." This attitude includes the idea that feelings are of paramount importance, taking precedence over mind and experience. Yet it is essential to the health of our relationships that our minds and hearts work together to develop "realistic romance"⁵ rather than the Hollywood script we've been handed. The uncritical acceptance of this romantic myth by heterosexual women has been very convenient for men for a very long time: after all, if heterosexual women really looked that closely at the institution of marriage, they might perceive its institutionalized inequality. By the same token, if a Lesbian uncritically adheres to the kind of romantic ideology described above in the conduct of her relationships, she may be unwittingly perpetuating these same internalized values and ideals.

"Realistic romance," on the other hand, draws upon a woman's deepest intuitions, life experiences, and mental abilities in deciding what kind of person she can entrust with her love and emotions. It is one which combines passion and excitement with an honest exchange of criticism, cooperative problem-solving, and realistic expectations of what a relationship can or cannot be.

I began this article with a report on negative assessments about Lesbian relationships which I had been hearing from Lesbians themselves. It has been my purpose to address some

⁵ This felicitous phrase comes from Hogie Wyckoff in personal conversation.

genuine areas of concern reflected in these comments, and to discuss some approaches and tools which I hope will prove useful. However, I want to underscore my belief that the single greatest obstacle to the health of Lesbian relationships as a group is the societal oppression of Lesbians and the ways in which our exposure to that oppression can turn us against ourselves.

Lesbian writer Jane Rule once observed that

[a]s Lesbians who have until recently had no community, whose relationships have been themselves considered immoral if not criminal, we are for the first time in a position of declared responsibility, able to join together, able to describe for ourselves what the nature and value of our relationships are. We should not be suprised at how raggedly we have begun that process.⁶

The on-going task of defining the "nature and value of our relationships" is not only of crucial importance for the Lesbian community, but also one with profound implications for all women and society as a whole. While our only guideposts in the past have been our own often limited and isolated experiences and a model of heterosexual coupling that is less than ideal for women loving women, we are now engaged in the great work of rediscovering the long history of Lesbian existence, rebuilding its rich traditions, and helping to restore the powerful community of women which became fragmented and suppressed so long ago. It is in such a community and in such fertile ground that the full flowering of women's love for each other can take place. During this time of change and growth, it is my hope that we do not succumb to ways of looking at ourselves that perpetuate any of the internalized attitudes of shame, disapproval, and self-negation which we have fought so long to leave behind. As we work on these intensely personal issues of love and relationship, we should not lose sight of their profound connections with the politics of this society and these times.

⁶ Rule, Jane, "Rule Making," in *Lesbian Ethics*, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 65.

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