

Unique study examines feelings of love tied to sex between gay and bisexual men

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Debby Herbenick. Credit: Indiana University

(Medical Xpress)—A first-of-its-kind study by researchers at George Mason University and Indiana University Bloomington draws some conclusions to an age-old question: What does love have to do with sex, in particular, among gay and bisexual men in the United States?

While most research about love has been conducted among heterosexual-identified individuals or opposite-sex couples, the focus of this study on same-sex couples suggests experiences of love are far more similar than different regardless of [sexual orientation](#).

The study, published in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, finds nearly all (92.6 percent) men whose most recent sexual event occurred with a relationship partner indicated being in love with the partner at the time they had sex.

"This study is important because of myths and misunderstandings that separate men from love, even though the capacity to love and to want to be loved in return is a human capacity and is not limited by gender or sexual orientation," said Debby Herbenick, co-director of the Center for Sexual Health Promotion at the IU School of Public Health-Bloomington.

This is the first time a study has described sexual behaviors engaged in by those men who report being in love, or not, during a given sexual event with a same-sex partner.

"Given the recent political shifts around the Defense of Marriage Act and same-sex marriage in the United States, these findings highlight the prevalence and value of loving feelings within same-sex relationships," said lead investigator Joshua G. Rosenberger, professor at George Mason University's Department of Global and Community Health.

Researchers collected data from an Internet-based survey of almost 25,000 gay and [bisexual men](#) residing in the U.S. who were members of online websites facilitating social or sexual interactions with other men.

"Given the extent to which so much research is focused on the negative aspects of [sexual behavior](#) among gay men, particularly as it relates to

HIV infection, we were interested in exploring the role of positive affect (in this case, love) during a specific sexual event," Rosenberger said.

Additional key findings include:

- Nearly all men in the study, 91.2 percent, were "matched" when it came to their feelings of love and their perceptions of their partner's feelings of love.
- With regard to age, having been in love with their [sexual partner](#) during their sexual event was experienced most commonly by men age 30 to 39 years. Uncertainty of love for a sexual partner was less frequent in older cohorts, with a greater proportion of young men reporting that they were unsure if they loved their sexual partner or if their sexual partner loved them.
- Men in love with their partner were significantly more likely to endorse the experience as being extremely or quite a bit pleasurable compared to sexual events in which the participant was not in love.

"We found it particularly interesting that the vast majority of men reported sex with someone they felt 'matched' with in terms of love, meaning that most people who were in love had sex with the person they loved, but that there were also a number of [men](#) who had sex in the absence of love," Herbenick said. "Very few people had sex with someone they loved if that person didn't love them back." This "matching" aspect of [love](#), she said, has not been well explored in previous research, regardless of sexual orientation.

Provided by Indiana University

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