

THE PROCESS OF LESBIAN IDENTIFICATION

Sherry L. Corbett and Karla D. Morgan, Miami University, Ohio

INTRODUCTION

Lesbianism "is a way of life, encompassing the whole personality, one facet of which, of course, is sexuality. For her it is the expression of a way of feeling, of loving, of responding to people." (Martin & Lyon 1972)

When is a woman a lesbian? On the basis of a single sexual act with another woman? On the basis of an emotional preference for another woman with or without sexual involvement? On the basis of self definition? Identity as "lesbian" can be a complex issue.

DATA BASE

Our observations are based on a total sample of one hundred forty-four gay women. The respondents were members of a Gay Alliance organization at a midwestern university. The Gay Alliance, established in 1971, represents about 7000 gay men and women on the campus. The faculty adviser for the Gay Alliance distributed 150 questionnaires to active members, 94 of which were returned. The faculty adviser also provided a sign up sheet for members willing to be interviewed. The possibility existed that an individual might have filled out a questionnaire and been interviewed based on the same questionnaire. Therefore, the findings presented here are confined to the 94 questionnaires. Interviews were used to provide the more elaborate descriptions and examples. Respondents represented many areas of the United States but were primarily from the states of Ohio, Indiana, and Pennsylvania. Varied economic and social backgrounds were represented. All respondents were students, with nearly equal numbers of undergraduate and graduate students.

FORMATION OF LESBIAN IDENTITY

A social/sexual identity as gay involves a developmental process. Troiden (1977) suggests that the acquisition of a gay identity occurs in four stages: sensitization, dissociation and signification, coming out, and commitment. During the first stage, sensitization, the individual has genital, and emotional childhood experiences which later provide a basis for interpretation as homosexual. In the second stage, the individual begins to suspect that

he or she might be homosexual. During the third stage, coming out, the individual arrives at a self definition as gay and begins to interact with the gay community. In the final stage, the individual expresses future commitment to a gay identity as a valued, meaningful way of life. Troiden applied this model to a sample of homosexual males. We have replicated this model with a sample of homosexual females.

Before a woman can internalize the role/identity of lesbian, she must first "conceive" of lesbian — she must discover that such an identity exists and come to understand what this means in terms of both behavior and attitudes (Smith, 1980). The process of internalization of identity involves a change in emphasis from what one does to what one is. As in any lifestyle, the development of private (personal) and public (social) homosexual identities are separate processes. However, with increasing identity development there is a growing consistency between the two separate processes, from which eventually comes a commitment to a socio-sexual gay identity as a way of life.

Prior to giving personal meaning to homosexuality the individual has an image of herself as being heterosexual and non-homosexual (Rosen, 1974). She has been socialized into the anti-homosexual and functionally heterosexual role. Most of our respondents reported that they initially viewed heterosexuality and, in certain circumstances, asexuality as the only acceptable outlets for sexual expression. Most of the women reported that their first contact with homosexuality was an overt interest in information about homosexuality. The interest was attributed to a conscious awareness that a gay identity had relevance to themselves and their behavior.

"All these were thoughts," said a 24 year-old woman, "but I was trying to decide if my thoughts could be called homosexual. There was such a conflict with society's expectations and how I was feeling toward a very close friend of mine. The more I realized what might be going on in my head, the more confused I was."

Usually the woman was asking herself, "If my feelings could be labeled homosexual,

does that mean I am homosexual?"

Seventy-nine percent of the respondents said they used excuses for experimenting with homosexuality. "A favor for a friend," "An accident," "Being taken advantage of," and "Going along with everyone else" were the types of justifications used.

A tentative commitment (Rosen, 1974) to homosexuality may be forming at this phase. All of a sudden there is an awareness of differences between perception of her behavior and herself and how people perceive her behavior and her.

"I guess I was pretty upset when I first tried to admit it (possible gay orientation) to myself," said a 23 year-old woman. "I came out when I was eleven and one half year old for three years and then I got scared and closeted myself for four year before coming out for good at eighteen and one half years. I felt like I didn't fit in. I didn't think there was anyone else like me."

"Accepting the self as gay means that all guidelines for behavior, ideals and expectations for the future that will accompany a heterosexual identity are no longer relevant to her life," a 26 year-old woman said. Initially, many gays will try to "pass" as heterosexual to reduce feelings of incongruity. Many women will go to great pains to present an image of conformity in order to appear more acceptable to the public at large and their family and friends. Ninety-eight percent of our sample reported imitating the heterosexual role even after recognizing their gay identity. The two percent who felt no need to fake heterosexuality had a strong support group of lesbian friends which may have provided role models with whom they could conform. The realization age for lesbians surveyed ranged from 11 to 21, with the median age at 18 years.

Contact with other gays and the gay subculture seems to be necessary for women to accept their sexual identity rather than merely tolerating it. Gay bars are often significant places for the woman in the process of coming out. First, they are sexually and socially defining spaces. Anyone inside a gay bar is presumed to be gay, and, probably a legitimate object for social or sexual advance. Of the respondents, 76 percent go exclusively to gay bars; 21 percent go to gay and other bars; and 3 percent never enter bars. Of the 97 percent who go to bars, 53 percent go at least one time each

week; 20 percent go once each month; and 34 percent go less than five times a year.

For these women who want social contact with other gay women, but dislike the pressure to drink which may accompany attendance at gay bars, they may become more actively involved in community support groups and activist groups which allow for interaction with other gays and the development of new friendship ties.

As the contact with other gay men and women continues, the woman is able to validate or "normalize" homosexuality as an identity and way of life (Rosen, 1974). The woman begins to devalue the importance of heterosexual others to herself and revalues homosexuals more positively. Sometimes the woman will dichotomize the world, creating an exclusively gay world for herself, while shutting out all heterosexual acquaintances and involvements. The individual develops a concept of "us" and "them". This stage is typically short lived. Soon the lesbian realizes that there are heterosexuals who accept the gay lifestyle. The gay woman no longer perceives a clear dichotomy between the heterosexual and homosexual worlds. As she becomes fully comfortable with herself as gay, lesbianism is no longer seen as the primary identity, but as merely one aspect of herself. In response to the question, "First and foremost, do you consider yourself a woman or a lesbian," 82 percent of the respondents said they consider themselves women first and lesbians second.

The length of time involved in moving through the gay identity stages of sensitization, dissociation and signification, coming out, and commitment varied greatly. Some respondents reported a time span of only six months during which they grappled with their homosexuality and finally made a serious commitment to a gay life style. Other respondents reported a time span of seven and one half years before they became fully committed to a gay identity. Several women, while considering themselves lesbians, felt that they had not completed the entire developmental process required to make a comfortable lifelong commitment.

REVELATION TO FAMILY

The response of family members is often a matter of great concern to gays. Many respon-

dents report an open life style with friends and associates, evidence of a comfortable personal and social identity. However, family members may never be included in this open life style or circle of awareness.

Eighty-nine percent of the respondents told a close friend about their gay identity within a few months of a personal acknowledgement. After a while other gay acquaintances were told, with parents ranking last on the list of letting people know. Sixty-two percent of the parents were believed to be unaware of their daughter's lesbian identity; 13 percent of the parents were told by third parties; and 25 percent of the respondents told their parents themselves.

Eleven percent of the respondents believed that no one in their family knew of their sexual identity. Some respondents felt that such information could be extremely painful to parents and family, especially if they felt that parents would blame themselves for the failure of their child to become a "normal heterosexual".

Many of the respondents reported a desire to tell someone in their family. Fifty-two percent of the women had already told one member of their family. Thirty-seven percent reported that someone else had informed a member of their family. A family member who was aware was an older brother in 78 percent of the cases. The role of older brother is often one of protector, confidant, and substitute father figure for their younger sister. Due to their age and greater experience, they may be viewed as a source of wise counsel. There may be reasons why older brothers are expected to respond in a tolerant way. Siblings may expect more understanding and tolerance from each other, being members of the same generation, whereas parents may be viewed as less tolerant and more conservative. Older brothers often find it difficult to accept their sisters as sexually active and attempt to protect them from "badly intentioned" men. It may be easier to accept them as gay, since lesbian activity is often viewed as passive.

LESBIAN RELATIONSHIP

Since lesbians are first socialized to be women, it is hypothesized that gay women, like many of their heterosexual counterparts, prefer emotional attachments before sexual

contact. Ninety-three percent of the respondents reported that their first homosexual experience was emotional; the physical relationship came later. Eighty-three percent of the women reported that emotional involvement is a necessary quality in a lesbian relationship. Some lesbians say they can enter physical relations without emotional involvement, but sexual partners were expected to be intelligent, self confident and active in the feminist movement.

Most homosexual couples reject husband/wife roles as a basis for a love relationship. Only 12 percent of the respondents reported being in a butch-femme relationship currently, and 14 percent had been involved in a butch-femme relationship in the past. Thus three fourths of the women had never been involved in a butch-femme relationship. Gay relationships resemble "best friendships" with the added component of romantic attachment and sexual involvement. Sexual stimulation without emotional contacts however tend to be somewhat higher for lesbians than for heterosexual women.

CONCLUSION

Since an individual is assumed to be heterosexual, becoming lesbian involves a struggle with one's self, family, friends, and significant others in order to "come out". After she does, she wants to be able to share her lifestyle with those close to her. But the woman will only be able to do that after she comes to terms with her identity and defines her interpersonal needs.

The acquisition of a gay identity involves a developmental process, including elements of personality identity and social identity. The sequential pattern includes: (1) an interest in information about homosexuality with a growing awareness that a gay identity had relevance for themselves, (2) experimentation with homosexuality, (3) an awareness of differences between perception of her behavior and herself and how people perceive her behavior and her, (4) sharing the emerging identity with others (usually gays), (5) coming out of the closet with others — perhaps including straight friends and their family members, (6) a firm commitment to homosexuality as a meaningful life style.

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were related to sex role orientation. That is, traditionalists perceive husbands and nontraditionalists perceive wives to be dominant in these two friendship areas. The importance of sex role orientation in explaining responses on these items most clearly demonstrates the male and female dominance themes. Traditional males and females support the male dominance theme. Whereas nontraditional males and females lean toward the female dominance theme. It is notable that such clear sex role orientation effects occurred in the two areas which seem to suggest "individual" rather than "joint" activities.

Sex role orientation affects the roles husbands and wives play in friendship formation and maintenance. While past research did not differentiate between the initiation of friendships with "individuals" and "couples", our results differed in these two areas. Perhaps, sex role orientation only affects areas of individual activity rather than joint activities such as "couple" friendships because those friendships are more firmly entrenched in traditional marital roles.

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This study suggests that gay women and their beliefs are as varied and unique as any other woman's beliefs. Lesbians consider themselves to be women, and that being lesbian is not a replacement of femininity, but merely an elaboration of it.

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