

Original Research

How Did You Hear About the Study? Or, How to Reach Lesbian and Bisexual Women of Diverse Ages, Ethnicity, and Educational Attainment for Research Projects

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Lesbians and bisexual women are often recruited for research via convenience sampling, but there has been little focus on the sources through which these women are recruited. This article focuses on two research projects that successfully recruited large samples of lesbian and bisexual women. The first, on lesbians and their bisexual and heterosexual sisters, contacted all lesbian periodicals, religious organizations, bars, bookstores, campus groups, and ethnic/multicultural groups listed in the *Gayellow Pages*. Different fictional P.O. box numbers appeared in the return address in each case, allowing us to see exactly where lesbians and bisexual women (and also older women and women of color) heard about the study. The second study, on health status of sexual minority women living in the greater Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, area, formed a community advisory board to reach all segments of the community. Questionnaires were sent to individuals on lesbian/gay mailing lists and social organizations; the research team also attended lesbian events and used a snowball distribution method. The results show the relative response rate of women reached through mailing lists, organizations, events, and networks, respectively. The results of both studies indicate that multiple sources of recruitment are ideal in order to reach a diverse sample of lesbian and bisexual women.

KEY WORDS: Lesbians; bisexual women; recruitment; research methods; convenience sampling.

These days, it is not difficult to find hundreds of participants for research just by distributing questionnaires at a gay pride march or placing ads in lesbian periodicals. Much current research on lesbians and gay men obtained research participants from lesbian and gay community groups. Other researchers collected data at regional or national gay or lesbian events that drew people from a large region (1). The National Lesbian Health Care Survey (2) networked to lesbians through a number of women's centers, lesbian and gay organizations, feminist bookstores, women's

organizations, and gay periodicals. This method resulted in 1,917 completed questionnaires. Morris and Rothblum (3) recruited 2,393 lesbians and bisexual women via advertisements in lesbian and feminist periodicals, women's bookstores, community centers, lesbian and gay social or political organizations, and national mailing lists compiled by lesbian and gay direct mail marketing firms. Aaron and colleagues (4) recruited 1,158 lesbians and bisexual women in the Pittsburgh area by using existing mailing lists, community networking, and targeting community events and social organizations.

Such "convenience" samples are often criticized for being nonrandom or nonrepresentative because participants are open enough about their sexual orientation to attend community events or subscribe to lesbian periodicals. Nevertheless, there are advantages to studying the lesbian communities [see Rothblum (5) for further discussion]. These communities are

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cohesive (if regionally diverse) minority cultures. For the general public, they are visible reminders of a lesbian presence, and as such affect the dominant culture's attitudes about lesbians. The lesbian communities thus influence not only the heterosexual mainstream, but also self-identified lesbians who do not participate in lesbian community events as well as women who have sex with women but who do not identify as lesbians. In addition, social learning theory postulates that an individual's health behavior is influenced by the interaction among the characteristics of the person, environment, and the behavior itself (6). Perhaps many of the observed differences in the health behaviors between lesbian and heterosexual women are due in part to the shared "environment" of the lesbian and bisexual community. Hertzman *et al.* (7) defined special populations as those having shared characteristics and as such, the social environment within the population may condition certain health habits producing a pattern of negative or positive behaviors, which ultimately influence health. Thus, in order to understand the complexity of health behaviors within the lesbian and bisexual populations, it is necessary to study the community.

The purpose of this report is to describe the methodology used in two research projects that successfully recruited large samples of lesbian and bisexual women participants. The target population for the first study was a national sample of women recruited for a study of lesbians and their sisters, whereas the target population for the second study was a community sample of lesbians and bisexual women.

STUDY OF LESBIANS AND THEIR SISTERS

The main purpose of this study was to compare lesbians to their heterosexual sisters as a demographic control group (8). In fact, some lesbian respondents had lesbian and/or bisexual sisters instead of or in addition to heterosexual sisters. Furthermore, some original respondents were bisexual, even though the study was not publicized in any explicitly bisexual sources. In total, we had 314 lesbians, 133 bisexual women, and 315 heterosexual women. This study will report on the how the total sample of 762 women was recruited.

We contacted lesbian and lesbian/gay sources listed in the most recent edition of the *Gayyellow Pages* (9). This included 200 magazines, newspapers, and periodicals focusing on lesbians or on lesbians and gay men at the national, state, and local levels; 614 lesbian/gay religious organizations; 105 lesbian

bars; 54 women's bookstores; 346 campus lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) groups; and 83 groups listed as "ethnic/multicultural."

Each source was sent a letter asking it to publicize our study (the study was described as one that investigated how "the lives of adult sisters are similar or different"). Only four periodicals (three of them national in scope) charged a fee to run the announcement. In addition, we paid 11 state/local periodicals to run the ad at a larger size than the size they would have used to run it for free. The other national, state, and local periodicals ran the research announcement at no cost, sometimes in large format and for many months after the period we had specified. Organizations (bars, bookstores, churches/synagogues, and ethnic/multicultural groups) and campus LGBT groups were asked to either post the announcement or place it in an organizational newsletter. No organization, campus group, or periodical refused to run the announcement. On the contrary, we received several requests for questionnaire packets to be sent directly to churches or campus groups. All letters to periodicals and organizations were sent via first class mail so that they would be returned if the address was incorrect or if the addressee had moved.

In each case, the contact address was changed to include a fictional P.O. box number (in fact, our university address does not have any P.O. box number). Thus, the ad in the *San Francisco Bay Times* had the address listed as P.O. Box 144, whereas it was listed as P.O. Box 251 in the *Gaily Oklahoman* and P.O. Box 709 for Breaking the Silence Church in Florida. When respondents wrote to the first author requesting questionnaires, the address on the envelope indicated where they had seen the ad. Respondents who e-mailed received an e-mail back asking where they had seen the announcement, and those who telephoned heard a voice mail message that asked them to leave their address and where they saw the announcement (some respondents did not call or e-mail back with the name of the periodical or organization where they saw the announcement, resulting in completed questionnaires from sources we considered "unknown").

When respondents requested questionnaires, they were sent two copies that included a respondent number (e.g., 249A for the original respondent and 249B for her sister), along with stamped envelopes for each survey. Respondents who indicated that they had more than one sister were sent additional questionnaires (e.g., 249C, 249D, etc.). The P.O. box number for all sisters was identical, indicating where the

Table I. Accuracy of Sources for the Study of Lesbians and Their Sisters listed in the Gayellow Pages, Which Had Just Appeared in Print

Source	Wrong			Percent listed in accurately
	address	Moved	Ceased	
Periodicals	22	13	12	23
Religious organizations	58	36	0	15
Bars	16	5	0	22
Bookstores	6	6	0	22
Campus groups	16	2	0	5
Ethnic/multicultural groups	18	1	0	23

original respondent had seen the source (thus, if a lesbian with three sisters, two of them heterosexual and one bisexual, responded to an ad she saw in *The Advocate*, and three of the four sisters sent back completed questionnaires, then all the three completed questionnaires were listed as having originated from that source).

Accuracy of Sources Listed in Gay/Lesbian Resource Guides

The *Gayellow Pages* had just appeared in print when this study began (in fact, we were asked to wait 2 months so that the editors could send us the updated version). Nevertheless, a large percentage of sources listed were incorrect. As Table I indicates, about one fifth of periodicals were listed with incorrect addresses, had changed addresses, or ceased publication. A similar percentage of lesbian bars, women’s bookstores, and groups listed as ethnic/multicultural were listed with incorrect addresses or new addresses. This was also true for

15% of religious organizations. In contrast, most campus groups had correct addresses (or else the campus post office knew where to forward the mail).

It is likely that resource guides such as the *Gayellow Pages* are quickly out of date. Lesbian (as well as gay male and bisexual) community organizations may cease functioning or change location. Periodicals may change their addresses as editors step down or subscriptions wane. This has implications for researchers, especially for students and junior investigators who may not have the funds to contact hundreds of organizations and periodicals. Thus, we were interested in those sources that *did* result in completed questionnaires from lesbian and bisexual respondents.

Sources That Yield Respondents

Table II indicates the sources that yielded the highest response rates (to be included, respondents had to not only request a questionnaire or have one requested by their sister, but return it completed). The 762 respondents include 314 lesbians, 133 bisexual women, and 315 heterosexual sisters.

About one third of respondents originated from lesbian periodicals. Contrary to prediction, it is not just national magazines with large subscriber bases that yield the most respondents. It was much more likely that respondents originated from announcements in state and local periodicals in various U.S. states and regions. This is important, because these local and regional periodicals (unlike several national magazines) were willing to run the announcement free of charge (contact the first author for addresses and other information of specific periodicals that had the highest response rates).

Table II. Sources of Recruitment, Study of Lesbians and Their Sisters, by Ethnicity, Age, and Education Level (*N* = 762)

	Proportion from each source (%)					Overall <i>p</i> value
	Organizations	College LGBT group	National periodicals	Local/state periodicals	Unknown	
Overall	9.1	13.0	10.6	30.7	36.6	
Ethnicity						
White	9.3	12.5	10.5	31.1	36.7	NS
Minority	5.4	21.4	14.3	23.2	35.7	
Age, years						
18-29	4.4	25.3	17.0	24.7	28.6	Invalid test
30-39	8.5	8.9	7.2	35.2	40.3	
40-49	12.1	10.9	11.7	28.0	37.2	
≥50	10.5	3.2	5.3	37.9	43.2	
Education, years of college						
<4	9.2	12.7	15.9	31.1	31.1	<.05
≥4	9.0	13.2	8.1	30.5	39.3	

College LGBT groups were a source for 13% of respondents (although they are listed together, it was also possible to ascertain which colleges had the greatest response rates). With the exception of a few churches, religious organizations (as well as bars and bookstores) did not yield many respondents.

Sources That Yield Respondents of Color

Table II depicts sources of respondents who were members of ethnic minority groups (56 respondents in all, or 7% of the total sample). About 20% of respondents who were members of ethnic minority groups had originated from announcement in college LGBT groups, compared with only 12% of White respondents. There was a trend for respondents who were members of ethnic minority groups to have originated from ads in national periodicals and for White respondents to have originated from ads in state and local periodicals. The chi-square analysis, however, was not significant between groups by source of recruitment.

Sources That Yield Respondents by Age

Table II indicates sources of respondents for each decade of age. Not surprisingly, about one fourth of respondents aged 18–29 year were contacted via campus LGBT groups. This age group also had the highest proportion of respondents who originated from ads in national magazines. The results indicate that to reach respondents at higher ages (including those over age 50 years), ads in state and local lesbian periodicals yield the best results. A chi-square test was performed for each decade of age on the various sources, but some of the resulting cell sizes were too small to yield a valid test.

Sources That Yield Respondents by Level of Education

Finally, Table II portrays sources by level of education (less than 4 years of college versus more than 4 years of college), and the chi-square analysis for this factor was significant. The major difference seems to be the higher percentage of respondents with less education who originated from ads placed in national periodicals.

In sum, using fictional P.O. boxes in order to determine the exact source in which respondents saw a research announcement indicates that state and local lesbian periodicals are by far the most useful ways of recruiting respondents. Furthermore, national periodicals were an important source for recruiting respondents of color and respondents with less education. Even women who are not active in lesbian community events and/or those who live far from cities with lesbian organizations may subscribe to or obtain such national, state, and local periodicals.

Campus LGBT groups also yielded respondents, including respondents of color. These organizations often have a mailing list and/or use e-mail lists to publicize events, so that news of the research went out to student members (as well as some faculty and staff at these colleges). Furthermore, campus groups had by far the lowest rate of wrong addresses, so that our announcement tended to reach these groups.

With the exception of a few churches, most other organizations yielded few respondents. It is not clear whether gay/lesbian religious organizations, ethnic/multicultural groups, lesbian bars, or women's bookstores posted the announcement, or whether it was displayed in a prominent way. In our experience, the bulletin boards of women's bookstores (and, perhaps, churches and synagogues as well) are full of announcements, so that ours may have been hard to see. Women attending a lesbian bar or gay synagogue, for example, may not come with writing materials to copy down the information.

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH STUDY

The Epidemiologic Study of Health Risk in Lesbians (ESTHER) was designed to describe the current health status of sexual minority women living in the greater Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, area. Over an 8-month period, February 1998–September 1998, a total of 3,960 surveys were distributed through a variety of methods, which were selected to target various demographic, social, political, and religious subgroups of the population. An integral part of the success of this project was the formation of a Community Advisory Board (CAB). Thirteen individuals from various backgrounds and demographic groups, including men, made up the CAB. The CAB met on a bimonthly basis during the data collection period. The primary function of the CAB was to provide guidance to the

researchers in ways to reach out to the community as a whole and to particular segments of the community that were not being reached.

The four primary methods of survey distribution included (a) mailing lists maintained by general organizations within the Pittsburgh-area gay and lesbian community, (b) specific social organizations representing different subgroups of the population, (c) attendance by the researchers at various social and community-wide events, and (d) a snowball networking technique to develop diverse personal networks using volunteers to distribute surveys to women within particular social groups. From these sources, 1,158 surveys were completed and returned for an overall response rate of 29%. It is likely that potential subjects received more than one survey due to duplication of names from the various sources. Thus, the response rate is most likely higher but cannot be quantified. Our response rate is comparable to other studies that used similar recruitment strategies (10).

Mailing Lists

A total of 2,309 surveys were sent to women appearing on the mailing lists of three community-wide organizations. All survey packets were sent via first class mail so they would be returned if the address was incorrect or if the addressee had moved. The packet included a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study, the survey, and a postage-page return envelope. Through anecdotal evidence we know that many women received at least two surveys via the mailings and some received three.

Social Organizations

A total of 713 surveys were distributed through various social organizations representing diverse segments of the Pittsburgh lesbian and bisexual women's community. These included organizations geared toward women over 50 years of age, African American women, professional women, lesbian parents, and couples, as well as sporting and recreational organizations and other special interest groups. The majority of these surveys were also sent via mail. The organization was provided stamped survey packets and then members of the organization inserted a letter to the membership, addressed the envelope, and mailed the packet. This method ensured the

confidentiality of the individual mailing lists. Again, anecdotal evidence indicated that many women received multiple survey packets due to belonging to more than one organization and/or their name appearing on the general mailing lists described above.

Community Events

During the 8-month period of data collection we attended nine community events and distributed 497 survey packets. These events included community picnics, concerts, bingo games, and fundraisers. For the majority of these events, the women completed the survey on site. However, a number of women chose to complete the survey later and were given a survey packet with a stamped return envelope. Of the four methods utilized in the study, attending community events yielded the highest response rate (48%), attesting to the importance of face-to-face contact when conducting research in the gay and lesbian community.

Networking

A total of 791 survey packets were distributed to 24 individuals in the community. These individuals were then instructed to pass the surveys along to their friends, who in turn could pass surveys along to their friends. Surprisingly, this method only yielded 123 completed surveys (16%). However, we have no way of knowing how many of the surveys were actually distributed.

Recruitment Sources by Ethnicity, Age, and Education Level

Overall, 49% of the completed surveys were obtained from the mailing lists, 15% from the organizations, 21% from community events, and 15% from the personal networks. When these data were examined by ethnicity, age, and education level several important findings were noted (Table III). As shown in Fig. 1, minority women were more likely to be recruited at community events, whereas the majority of the White women were recruited through the mailing lists ($p < .01$). Similar percentages were noted for the organization and networking sources between White and minority women. The mailing lists yielded the

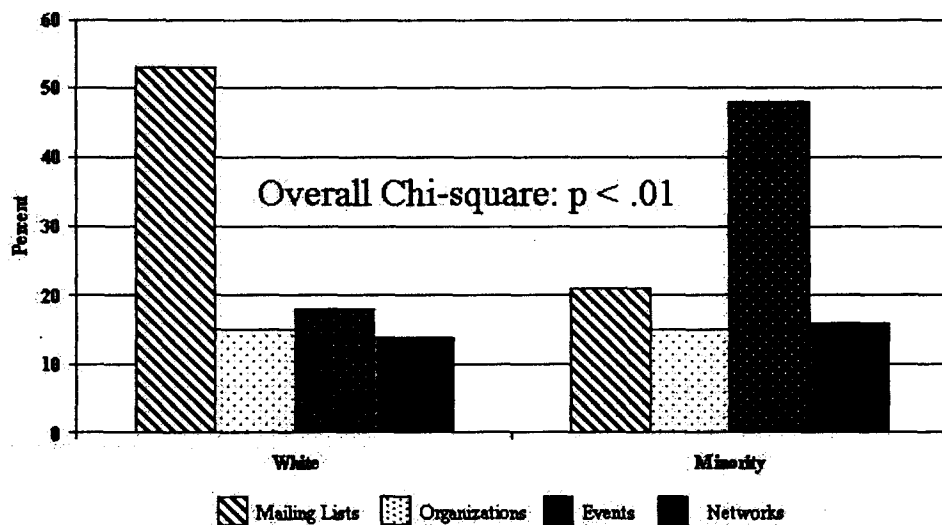
Table III. Sources of Recruitment, ESTHER Project, by Ethnicity, Age, and Education Level ($N = 1,158$)

	Proportion from each source (%)				Overall p value
	Mailing lists	Organizations	Events	Networking	
Overall	49	15	21	15	
Ethnicity					
White	53	15	17	15	<.01
Minority	22	15	48	16	
Age, years					
18-29	46	7	35	12	<.01
30-39	48	16	20	16	
40-49	52	16	17	15	
≥ 50	49	23	15	13	
Education, years of college					
<4	42	18	28	12	<.01
≥ 4	53	14	17	16	

highest recruitment percentages across all age groups, similar to the overall percentage for this source. However, differences were found in the second highest recruitment source ($p < .01$). Women between the ages of 18 and 29 years were more likely to be recruited at community events (36%) compared to the other three age groups (20%, 17%, and 15%). The recruitment percentage from social organizations increased with increasing age, 7% (18-29 years), 16% (30-49 years), and 23% (≥ 50 years). Differences were also noted in the recruitment sources by education level ($p < .01$). Women with ≥ 4 years of college were more likely to be recruited from mailing lists compared to women without a 4-year college degree, 53% versus 42%, respectively, whereas women without a 4-year

college degree were more likely to be recruited from community events (28%) compared to women with a 4-year college degree (17%).

These data indicate that in order to obtain a diverse sample of lesbian women multiple sources of recruitment should be employed. Differences in the percentages of women recruited by the different methods suggest the following. Minority lesbian and bisexual women are more likely to be recruited at community events rather than through mailing lists. Community events are also a good recruitment source for younger lesbian and bisexual women and women without a 4-year college degree. In older women, social organizations appear to be a better recruitment strategy than the community events.

**Fig. 1.** Sources of subject recruitment by ethnicity.

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