

## Lesbians in Academia

ESTHER D. ROTHBLUM

University of Vermont

But for job security ...  
I must pretend to be  
One of the enemy

-R. Romanovsky and P. Phillips

This article will describe the experiences of lesbians in academia. It focuses on issues facing lesbians in their occupational roles, including research and teaching, and will discuss issues concerning lesbian faculty in social and sexual roles. The examples and anecdotes I will be using are derived from the personal experiences of lesbian graduate students and faculty at several academic institutions. In each case, I asked students and faculty colleagues to give me examples of what it meant to be a lesbian in academia.

### in the Closet or Out

Being closeted or open about one's sexual orientation is a complex issue, and one that may or may not be in one's control. Academic settings differ with regard to their level of heterosexism, and consequently lesbian faculty differ in how open they are about their sexual orientation. On the one hand, female faculty who are not legally married may be suspected of being lesbians even if they, are heterosexual. On the other hand, many lesbian faculty who are fairly out still find themselves in situations in which they are presumed to be heterosexual. Some lesbian faculty are hired when heterosexual and come out later.

There are several advantages to being out of the closet. Lesbians who are out as faculty members will not have to pretend to be heterosexual. They can answer openly when asked about their personal lives, including their sexual lives. As professionals, they serve as role models for gay and lesbian as well as heterosexual students and colleagues.

As one graduate student stated,

I couldn't help thinking about the impact on students of knowing a faculty member is *gay* or lesbian but also knowing it is not okay to talk about it—that the man/woman is not "out." Raises ambivalent feelings—wanting to respect the personal choice but also feeling very much that it symbolizes a not so positive future for the student. Makes it hard to feel like there's a place for us when we finish graduate school.

Openly lesbian faculty will also find it easier to connect with other lesbians and gay men in the academic community.

There can also be disadvantages to being out, however. Many people have biased attitudes toward or are misinformed about lesbians. As J. B. Rohrbaugh has stated,

It is no longer fashionable to persecute lesbians, at least not in liberal academic communities.... Despite this "instant" cure, however, things have not changed dramatically.... Some of our colleagues now profess to "know a nice lesbian" or, even more likely, "a nice gay couple." This does not prevent them from discriminating against us, however. (115)

In the face of lingering discrimination against lesbians in academia, being closeted is one way to avoid contending directly with heterosexism.

Sometimes lesbians are closeted, yet people seem to know about their sexual orientation anyway. For example, I was told of two lesbian faculty members in separate departments at the same college, who had been lovers for over twenty years. They lived together, came to college social functions together, and collaborated on research and writing. However, they never came out to anyone on campus. No one had ever heard either of them use the word "lesbian" in conversation. In this example, people knew that the two women were lesbians because of their behavior, even though they did not speak about it.

It is important to point out that there are varying degrees of being out. At one extreme, no one knows or even guesses that the faculty member in question is a lesbian. At the other extreme, she is known all over campus and in the community as a lesbian. Most faculty are somewhere in between these extremes. They may be out to just a few friends or relatives but not to anyone on campus. They may be out in the campus lesbian and gay community. They may or may not attend lesbian and gay events.

The facts of one's sexual orientation may or may not correspond to what others perceive. Some lesbians are seen to be straight. One faculty woman in my survey had been married for over twenty years. She was currently divorced from her husband and was living with a woman in a lesbian relationship. She and her lover did not attend campus gay or lesbian events and were out only to a few friends. No one on campus knew she was a lesbian. Sometimes, by contrast, straight women are viewed as being lesbians: A faculty woman at a state university was a nun in a religious

order. She decided to inform only the colleagues in her department about her religious affiliation. A number of colleagues in other departments assumed that she was a lesbian because she was not in a relationship with a man.

For decades, the lesbian and gay male communities have protected the confidentiality of their members. Coming out to other lesbians and gay men, even if these are other faculty or students, or even if complete strangers, has usually not resulted in violation of this confidence. Knowing the risks that disclosure of sexual orientation could mean for people's jobs and lives, lesbians and *gay* men have kept this information from the heterosexual community. Similarly, many heterosexual women and men are sensitive about keeping their lesbian and gay friends' and colleagues' sexual orientation confidential. Nevertheless, lesbians and gay men in academia have experienced times when heterosexual colleagues have failed to observe the rule of confidentiality. For example, a graduate student stated:

It became known to a professor of mine that I was a lesbian (not sure exactly how); he let it be known he knew and accepted it which was nice. However, later that week in a public setting with others around, he specifically asked me what I thought about the gay community in this city compared to another city in which I had lived.

The difficulties related to coming out may be compounded by many factors. Some lesbians may choose to be closeted when newly hired and be more out after some time has gone by, or after tenure. Others may become more closeted over time due to changes in their lives, such as the wish to adopt children, a new relationship with a more closeted partner, or reactions to homophobia on campus. Bisexual women' may find that they are more accepted than are lesbians and gay men in some situations and less accepted in others. Their level of "acceptability" may also depend on whether they are currently in a relationship with a person of the same or of the opposite gender. Faculty who are hired when heterosexual and who come out later, as well as faculty who are hired when lesbian and who are later in heterosexual relationships, will experience considerable stress with the new role and its concomitant expectations.

### Research and Scholarship on Lesbian Issues

Whether to conduct research and scholarship on lesbian issues is the most frequent question asked by lesbian graduate students. There is a

common belief that female faculty and graduate students who conduct research on lesbian and gay issues are themselves lesbian. Not all research on lesbian and gay issues is conducted by lesbians and gay men; there are some prominent heterosexual researchers in this field. Nevertheless, people tend to conduct research on topic areas with which they have some personal connections. Thus this belief has a great deal of truth to it.

The political climate in a research or scholarly institute may or may not be conducive to lesbian and gay research. In very conservative institutions (e.g., religious schools or military academies) women who conduct research on women's issues may be viewed as lesbian, since feminism may be equated with lesbianism. Graduate students (and junior faculty) looking for faculty supervisors may be told not to conduct research on gay or lesbian issues. At other institutions a number of faculty may be supportive of gay and lesbian issues and collaborate on this research. Gay or lesbian graduate students and faculty gravitate to gay-affirmative institutions, so that some universities may become known for having a core of researchers on lesbian and gay issues. For example, the Committee on Lesbian and Gay Concerns of the American Psychological Association (APA) periodically conducts surveys of faculty about research on gay and lesbian issues. The results, which are published by APA, publicize which institutions have gay-affirmative researchers and research supervisors.

Conducting research and scholarship on lesbian issues may present difficulties outside the home institution or department. Journal reviewers and editors may decide that the research is inappropriate for publication, or in many disciplines there may not be journals available that focus on lesbian research and theory. Survey research on lesbians rarely uses a random sample, since so few lesbians are out. Thus reviewers and tenure committees may criticize such research as biased in its sampling procedure. Lesbian faculty who conduct research in lesbian and gay topic areas may be considered biased, since they are a member of the group they are studying (this concern is not raised, by contrast, when heterosexual researchers study heterosexual topics such as birth control, abortion, or divorce).

Closeted graduate students and faculty may fear that doing research on lesbian and gay issues will break their "cover." Graduate students and junior faculty may be concerned that publications and conference presentations on lesbian or gay topics may not be considered serious scholarship or may negatively affect their applications for jobs or their chances for tenure. Senior faculty may have enough publications to their credit to be able to select which ones appear on their vitae, but their reputations as lesbians may precede them nevertheless.

There are a number of ways in which researchers in the area of lesbian issues have dealt with these concerns. Some have decided not to conduct

research in this area, feeling that they do not want to risk the possible negative impact on their careers. Some scholars conduct research in which lesbian and gay issues are only a small component unreflected in their publication titles. Other scholars conduct research and publish on lesbian and gay issues openly. They may be at gay-affirmative institutions or consider this research more important than advancing their careers. Some graduate students and faculty have stated that they list lesbian and gay publications on their vitae because they would want not to be hired by homophobic institutions. Being open about their research is one way to ensure that they are hired by a gay-affirmative employer.

It should be noted that these strategies are not unlike those used by researchers on feminist issues a decade ago. At that time many institutions would not hire graduate students and faculty who had conducted research on women's issues. Some faculty chose not to do such research, fearing for their jobs, tenure, or promotion. Others conducted research on women but did not admit this to superiors or on their vitae. Still others openly conducted research on women, adding significantly to this body of research. Today many universities encourage research and scholarship on women's issues. In many institutions scholarship on women has become fairly mainstream.

If everyone routinely surveyed lesbians and gay men in their research and analyzed data by sexual orientation, lesbian and gay research would be less stigmatized and become more commonplace. We would also have a much greater knowledge of issues affecting lesbians and gay men, since this knowledge is currently still very limited. An APA task force has recently completed guidelines for conducting nonheterosexist research (Herek et al.). Faculty at gay-affirmative institutions, those in positions of power and seniority, and those who are conducting research even at the risks of their own jobs or tenure are adding significantly to this body of research. Their efforts will also pave the way for future generations of scholars to conduct lesbian and gay research with greater ease and acceptability.

### Teaching and Speaking about Lesbian and Gay Issues

Whether or not lesbians are out in their departments, they may or may not choose to be out in their classes. At large universities, undergraduates may not have close contact with all faculty and will thus be unaware of their professors' sexual orientation.

Faculty may choose to be closeted in their classes because they feel that it is not appropriate to discuss their personal life in the classroom. Other

faculty come out in their classes because they feel that the nature of the course material (e.g., human sexuality, women in cross-cultural society) is enriched by such disclosure. Still others feel that students need a positive lesbian role model.

It should be pointed out that many heterosexual faculty, particularly if they are married, "come out" in their classes. Faculty who wear a wedding ring or who mention their spouse in their lectures are announcing their heterosexuality. In fact, some faculty who caution lesbians not to be "blatant" about their sexual orientation are themselves "blatantly" heterosexual in their own classes.

Faculty who teach women's studies courses are sometimes assumed to be lesbian. For example, one person surveyed related that a student asked his instructor, during a lecture on women's history, whether she was a lesbian. The instructor, a heterosexual woman, responded that his question had nothing to do with the history of women. A lesbian instructor had never come out to her students. One day, a student in her psychology of women course left a message on her telephone answering machine, accusing her of being a lesbian.

M. A. Barale has described the lesbian instructor as both sexualized and exotic in the eyes of her students. As she states in "The Lesbian Academic,"

(An instructor's) lesbianism is often perceived as an act of intimate self-disclosure by both lesbian and nonlesbian students. While heterosexual instructors are certainly known as such, although their husbands/lovers and families maybe the subject of classroom anecdote, these instructors' sexuality, because it is the norm, tends to fade into the background. (185-86)

Lesbian teachers will need to decide on their boundaries of personal self-disclosure in the classroom in case personal questions arise. In contrast, heterosexual faculty are rarely asked, for example, to explain what heterosexual relationships are like.

Lesbian instructors, as well as those who are presumed to be lesbians by their students, may find that they are the subject of curiosity and rumor on campus. Gay and lesbian students will seek them out as role models or come to their offices to discuss personal issues and dilemmas. Some students will feel threatened or alarmed in their presence. A thirty-year-old lesbian faculty member was closeted in her classes, but came out to gay and lesbian undergraduate students. One day, she was summoned to see the dean of students. The dean had received a call from his former college roommate, now the father of one of the students who the faculty member had come out to. She was asked to stop "converting" students to become lesbians.

Lesbian faculty, as well as heterosexual faculty who are gay-affirmative, can provide a model for classroom teaching by using gay-affirmative language. Faculty should not indicate by their use of examples that all people are heterosexual. They can use gender-neutral pronouns when referring to lovers or partners (e.g., "the men's partners" rather than "the men's girlfriends" or "the men's wives"). They can avoid humor that assumes heterosexuality. Or they can refer specifically to heterosexuals when the occasion so warrants (e.g., "partners of heterosexual women should use condoms" rather than "women's partners should use condoms").

Whether or not lesbian faculty are out to students, they may be asked by lesbian and gay students to become faculty advisers or sponsors of campus gay organizations. They may be asked by other faculty to give guest lectures on lesbian and gay topics. They may be sought out by graduate students as advisers of theses on lesbian or gay topics. They will need to think about these eventualities and determine what role they want to play in lesbian and gay student-related activities.

One advantage of being a lesbian in most parts of the United States is that the new faculty member will quickly be networked into a supportive lesbian and gay community. In fact, female heterosexual faculty have remarked that they do not have as easy a time becoming acquainted with their peers as do lesbian faculty, who have an immediate connection with other lesbians and gay men on campus. Thus lesbian instructors may meet faculty from other departments as well as senior professors and administrators, who serve an important mentoring function as academic peers and superiors.

Ironically, some lesbians and gay men may be accused of belonging to a "clique" from which heterosexual faculty are excluded. This illustrates that being lesbian or gay is becoming accepted in some parts of the country, with the result that heterosexuals are beginning to feel left out? Heterosexual graduate and undergraduate students may also feel that lesbian and gay students have something special in common with lesbian and gay faculty, causing them to feel similarly left out. Lesbian faculty may be accused of being antimen (gay men, by contrast, are rarely accused of being antiwomen). Thus lesbians in academic settings face issues that involve both professional and personal identities. It is important to acknowledge the significant improvements that have occurred on campuses for lesbians while not losing sight of the salience of heterosexism.

*Correspondence should be sent to Esther D. Rothblum, Dept. of Psychology, John Dewey Hall, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT 05405. A version of this paper was presented at the annual convention of the*

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## Notes

1. This article focuses specifically on lesbians; bisexual women may have *very* different experiences depending on such factors as the degree of acceptance of bisexuality by lesbians or heterosexuals, their marital or relationship status, etc

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