

Where is the ‘Women’s Community?’ Voices of Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer Women and Heterosexual Sisters

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Abstract

Sixty women (28 lesbian, 19 bisexual, three queer, and 10 heterosexual) were interviewed about their definition of and connection to ‘community’. Women across sexual identities defined community according to support, similarity to others, physical proximity, and interlocking circles of closeness from family, friends, and lovers outwards to acquaintances and organizations. Regarding women’s connection to community, founders started their own groups and organizations. The majority of lesbian and bisexual women were founders who joined organizations and identified community. Yet bisexual women often felt marginalized within lesbian organizations. Heterosexual women were more connected to family and religious organizations but also more likely to be flounders, those who felt isolated or marginalized from community. Whereas there are now extensive organizations and activities in the USA for women who identify as lesbian, bisexual, or queer, many women were also part of ‘mainstream’ organizations. Nevertheless, a number of women feel excluded or isolated from community, and this has implications for their needs for connectedness.

Keywords

bisexual community, lesbian community, social networks, women’s connection to community

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The Importance of Community

My interest in lesbian and bisexual women's communities arose from a contradiction. On the one hand, there are now extensive organizations and activities in the USA for women who identify as lesbian, bisexual, or queer (LBQ). The internet lists over 400 million sites for 'lesbian community' and over 100 million for 'bisexual community.' Most of these sites focus on resources for LBQ women in specific cities and towns; others on internet listservs. The book *Gayellow Pages* (Green, 2007) contains over 500 pages of bars, bookstores, clubs, community centers, religious groups, medical and dental services, inns, and youth groups for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in the USA and Canada.

Yet many of my acquaintances express disappointment with the lesbian and bisexual women's communities. They feel isolated and lonely. They tell me that their home town does not have places for LBQ women to meet each other. They complain that the LBQ organizations and activities are for women who are younger, or single, or for those who can afford high admission prices. Berberet (2005) conducted an informal and unpublished needs assessment to understand how an LGBT community center in a large USA city could better serve the health and community needs of women. Her results indicated that women felt that they did not fit into the women's community or that it was fragmented or rejecting in some way. They felt the women's community was 'cliquish' as the result of money, power, prestige, and age. She concluded that the women were sad, disappointed, and angry, and felt unimportant, neglected, and invisible.

Is there a thriving LBQ community out there? Was there ever one? Is the memory of a thriving lesbian community 'back then' a myth? The purpose of the present project was to make sense of this discrepancy between the abundance of LBQ resources advertised in print and online, and the experiences of LBQ women about their own communities. Thus my first goal was to understand what LBQ women mean by 'community', and which people and organizations are part of their communities. I was interested in how connected LBQ women are to various communities, including both the LBQ and 'mainstream' communities. I wanted to know how many women felt at the margins versus the center of groups and organizations.

My prior research has used heterosexual siblings as comparison groups for lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, given that siblings are often similar in race, ethnicity, age cohort, parental socio-economic status, and religion in childhood. These studies found that lesbians and bisexual women are more geographically mobile, less connected with religious organizations, less likely to be in partnered relationships, and less close to family of origin than heterosexual women (Rothblum et al., 2004; Rothblum and Factor, 2001). For all these reasons, ability to find and connect with a community (lesbian/bisexual or otherwise) would seem very important.

In this study, I wanted to compare LBQ women with their heterosexual sisters, for two reasons. First, if disappointment with community was found, I wanted to

be able to determine whether it applies to women in general, or is specific to LBQ women. Second, one could argue that heterosexuals are the 'default' category, so the vast majority of events and organizations in any locality are aimed at them. Yet this very ubiquity might make it harder for heterosexual women to find a community tailored to their needs. In that regard, LBQ women might have an easier time finding a community. For example, being the 'new lesbian in town' may provide an entree into LBQ social events that has no parallel for heterosexual women.

Prior Research on Community

There has been extensive psychological research about community and social networks. As Fischer (1982: 2) observed:

Individuals' bonds to one another are the essence of society. Our day-to-day lives are preoccupied with people, with seeking approval, providing affection, exchanging gossip, falling in love, soliciting advice, giving opinions, soothing anger, teaching manners, providing aid, making impressions, keeping in touch - or worrying why we are not doing these things.

Society is organized according to personal relationships, and individual people have many roles within these interpersonal networks. Psychologists have investigated various aspects of community connection, network size, perceptions of support, etc. and also examined the relationship between community participation and mental health (c.f., Folkman and Lazarus, 1980; Idler and Benyamini, 1997; Leavy 2006). The American Psychological Association even has a Division of Community Psychology.

The term 'lesbian community' has been a familiar one to lesbians for several decades. As early as 1975, Elizabeth Barnhart identified that:

among women advocating the beliefs and values of the counterculture, there is a small minority who, in addition, share a commitment to a lesbian sexual orientation. In Portland, Oregon, some of these counterculture lesbian women have formed groups which band together and call themselves the 'Community.' (p. 90)

When social scientists describe results of research on lesbians, it is not uncommon for them to conclude with implications for 'the lesbian community.' Nevertheless, there has been very little research on what exactly is meant by this term. In the late 1970s Susan Krieger (1983) interviewed 78 lesbians in a US Midwestern community. She found that women viewed the community as encouraging their common identity, politics, intimacy, and solidarity. At the same time it was difficult for women to express their individuality, so that some women felt marginalized, suffocated, or rejected.

Lesbian identity and consequently community have changed substantially since the 1970s and 1980s. Stein (1992) has written about the 'de-centering' of feminism in lesbian communities. Fingerhut, Peplau and Ghavami (2005) examined how US lesbians simultaneously connect with the mainstream communities and lesbian communities. Burke (2000) investigated the role of the internet in providing a sense of lesbian community. She focused on online personal ads, and found that lesbians tended to seek friends who might then evolve into lovers and ideally into life partners. Dolance (2005) examined how lesbian fans at US Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) games view themselves as a type of community. And Ellis (2007) described how the mainstreaming and commercialization of lesbian and gay venues has resulted in the disappearance of many lesbian and gay social activities in the United Kingdom.

There has been virtually no research about bisexual women's communities. Paula Rust (2003) described how bisexual women feel marginalized within mainstream society as well as within lesbian communities. Rust's (1995) research found that 75% of lesbians viewed bisexuality as a transitional identity, 60% thought that bisexual women were less committed to other women than lesbians are, and most lesbians stated that they avoided dating bisexual women. The bisexual communities themselves are much smaller and less politically powerful than lesbian and gay communities, and so bisexual women in smaller cities and rural areas may need to rely on the internet for community support (Rust, 2003). This lack of organized bisexual communities may be why studies have found bisexuals to be at higher risk for mental health problems than lesbians and gay men (Jorm et al., 2001; Rothblum and Factor, 2001).

I predicted that the communities of lesbians and bisexual women would focus more on friendship networks and social/political organizations, whereas those of heterosexual women would focus heavily on immediate and extended family and religious institutions. Furthermore, I predicted that bisexual women, like lesbians, would be involved in lesbian organizations and activities (given the scarcity of specifically bisexual groups in most US cities) but bisexual women would be less satisfied with these organizations for meeting their needs. I was also interested in the role of the internet in providing community for isolated and closeted women.

Procedure

Announcements were placed on internet listservs seeking women for interviews about the role of community in their lives. The text indicated that I was looking for lesbians and bisexual women, as well as their heterosexual sisters. Respondents did not need to have a sister in order to participate in this project, but if they did have one, they needed to be 'out' to her. I was able to offer compensation to participants of US\$25 (for interviews under one hour) or US\$50 (for those up to two hours), and this was mentioned in the announcements. As I received more than twice as many requests for participation as funds allowed, I scheduled interviews with the first 60 women who emailed me back expressing interest in the project,

unless they were too similar to women I had already interviewed (e.g., from the same university). I also limited interviews to women living in the USA. Of the 60 interviews I conducted, most were under one hour in length, and nearly all were over the telephone.

Of the total sample, 28 participants identified as lesbian or gay, 19 as bisexual, three as queer, and 10 as heterosexual. One-third (20 participants) were women of color (African American, Asian American, Latina, Middle Eastern, Native American, and biracial); ages ranged from 18 to 75. Not all lesbian and bisexual participants had sisters, and others were not close to, or out to, their sisters; in two cases I interviewed sisters who were both lesbian. The participants represented an extremely diverse set of communities, including the pagan, college student, retirement, dance, polyamorous, elite athletic, butch/femme, dog lovers, music, and S/M communities, among others. A few women had serious physical or mental health problems, which impeded their ability to work. Some women were living or had lived in feminist, hippie, or Buddhist communal houses. Some worked for LGBT centers or organizations; others were extremely closeted or just beginning to come out. A few were immigrants from other countries or had lived abroad. Some had been raised in fundamentalist religious families; others were currently part of religious communities. Some women had no community; some were living in extremely rural settings far from other people. Some had few contacts outside of their partner, children and/or family of origin; others relied on the internet for their social supports. Some bisexual women were currently involved with men and others with women.

Semi-structured interviews consisted of a number of open-ended questions including: (1) How do participants understand the concept of 'community'? (2) What is the composition of their communities? (3) In the case of lesbians and bisexual women, how connected are they with the lesbian/bisexual communities, how 'out' are they? (4) What are sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with various aspects of the communities? and (5) When they last moved, how did they enter/meet their community?

All interviews were taped and transcribed, and all names cited below are pseudonyms. Tapes were sent back to participants for them to keep, and transcribed interviews were emailed to participants for their comments. Only a few women had comments (usually providing more detail, or asking me to change identifying information such as their country of origin), and these changes were incorporated into the transcripts.

The results were interpreted using thematic analysis, and aimed to provide a descriptive account of participants' experiences around community. As Braun and Clarke (2006) have indicated, thematic analysis is used to search for themes or patterns within an entire data set, and can be used within most theoretical frameworks. The general questions of the semi-structured interview (listed above) were chosen to form predetermined themes but also to allow for the emergence of new categories and subcategories from the participants' interviews. I describe results in two parts: (1) women's conceptions of community, and (2) given these conceptions

of community, how well women are connecting with community. For each section, I end with a discussion of how the themes intersect with sexual identity (women who identify as lesbian, bisexual, queer, or heterosexual). My focus is on LBQ women, though I compare them with heterosexual sisters at the end.

What is community?

There were nearly as many definitions of community as there were participants. Lavinya (African American lesbian) described 'people I am connected with through birth, blood, time, and choice.' Ciska (white lesbian) reflected on that question: 'I knew that would be the first question, the hardest one of them all. I think community is a very elusive concept, and yet when I came out as a lesbian I knew I joined the lesbian community, whatever it might be.' Robin (white bisexual woman) said:

Women I think have this idea that there is some really tight-knit community somewhere that is going on and having secret meetings without them. . . but from my perspective now it's so much more clear that the idea of a community is just a total myth. . . There isn't one community. There are all these different groups of women doing different things based on shared interests.

Yet despite this diversity, women's definitions of community fell into a number of themes. These themes, described below, did not differ markedly across sexual identity.

People versus Organizations

Bella (white queer woman) differentiated between political groups versus personal relationships: 'I would say I have two definitions for community. One comes out of a political background and then one comes from experiential background.' As participants defined their communities, there were those who began by listing lovers, ex-lovers, children, parents, in-laws, relatives, housemates, co-workers, neighbors, pets, therapists, and many, many friends. And others described organizations, dozens in all. Women mentioned organizations for various types of music, theatre, different types of dance, various sports, wilderness activities, yoga, and martial arts. They often included religious organizations - Mormon, Catholic, Fundamentalist Christian, Quaker, Syrian Orthodox, Zen Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu, pagan, Wiccan. A number of women listed twelve-step programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous and ALANON. Support groups were mentioned by women with health concerns, mental health concerns, and disabilities. Other organizations included political groups, reproductive rights groups, and groups for women interested in S/M, butch/femme, and polyamory. A big change from the 1970s (e.g., Krieger, 1983) was that LBQ women belonged to 'mainstream' organizations as well as those specifically for LGBTs.

Support

A number of participants emphasized the role of support; the actual word 'support' appeared in many definitions. For example: 'I consider community a group of people who get together to support each other' (Alice, white lesbian); 'community for me is just having support. A community is there for you, just kind of a permanent base, someone to turn to' (Carmencita, Asian American lesbian).

As stated earlier, my interest in studying communities arose from the apparent contradiction between the multitude of LBQ resources and women's disappointment with these resources. If community is defined as *support*, then presumably what these women are yearning for is help during times of hardship - money, child-care, advice, information, transportation, loan of a car, etc. This is in marked contrast to what many LBQ resources are offering - *a good time*. For example, the vast majority of organizations listed in the *Gayellow Pages* (Green, 2007) are bars and clubs, and many events listed on internet sites are social events (e.g., LezDyke.com). Entertaining social events may satisfy women looking for sex and relationships, or those who want to go on hikes, watch movies, or go dancing, but not those with pressing needs for assistance. Additionally, a number of events and organizations are for women *and* men (e.g., gay bars that have a women's night, or LGBT pride marches) and so there may be fewer women present at these events than men.

Similarity

Another common theme about community was similarity with others. Participants emphasized having something in common: 'I think of my community being people that are part of my life and who have something in common with me' (Anna, Latina lesbian), and 'well, community can mean a lot of different things. For me, community, it's my connections and networks that I've made through time, and people who I have things in common, those who share my experiences, who are part of me' (Violetta, Latina lesbian). In contrast, for some, similarity was not enough. As Sarah (white lesbian) stated: 'Well, I think one of the biggest questions truly is: is the fact of being a lesbian enough of a basis for a community? I haven't found it to be in my life.'

Why do lesbians and bisexual women choose a community that is similar to them? Lynne (white bisexual woman) gave one explanation: 'I think a community is mostly like a place where you know that other people are in a similar situation to you so you don't have to be afraid of what their reaction is going to be.' The theme of *similarity* implies a norm, and that LBQ women who are different from the norm may feel left out. But what is the norm in LBQ communities, and who feels different? In small towns or rural areas, just being non-heterosexual may suffice for a bond, but in large US cities, LBQs may expect more similar shared demographics or interests of some kind (see Nichols, 2005).

Physical Proximity

Lesbian and bisexual media such as the television show *The L Word* (<http://www.sho.com/site/lword/home.do>) and the comic strip *Dykes To Watch Out For* (Bechdel, 2008) depict a neighborhood where lesbian and bisexual women run into their friends and co-workers while out walking on the streets. Some participants defined community in terms of physical proximity in this way. For example, Elise (Native American and white lesbian) said 'sometimes I think of community as a place where you live.' Sarah (white lesbian) described her past experiences living in close proximity to others:

I mean, even when I was an undergrad in college in the early '70s I always envisioned a neat idea of living on a big tract of land, each person having their own home and having a community hall or something that you got together to do things and stuff. . . I would say the Army was the last time that I had such a really good experience of community with lesbians. And you know, most of us lived in the barracks and the community was easy to fall into. I guess part of it was the proximity.

The internet could be envisioned as the very opposite of a community of physical closeness, but some women, especially those in rural areas, relied on the internet for community while feeling that it was not the same as physical closeness. For instance, Carmencita (Asian American lesbian) felt physical proximity added depth to relationships: 'I think online interaction is just a very shallow way to interact with people when there's geographical distance. For me in order to feel that somebody is being in my company, I feel they have to be near me.'

How many LBQ women live in physical proximity to their community? On the one hand, there are gay neighborhoods in large US cities and many university towns (e.g., Laumann et al., 1994). On the other hand, Hochschild's (1997) research shows how the location of the workplace has replaced the location of home environment as the site where many people in the US do their shopping, exercising, and socializing. Similarly, Schor (1998) describes how few people in current US cities and towns know their neighbors. So, if physical proximity is important for community, many LBQ women will need to seek out LGBT localities or find organizations and events to share interests other than sexuality.

How Do Women Find Community: Founders, Finders, and Flounders

Given these various themes in how community was defined, how did participants describe themselves in relation to community? After conducting the interviews and reading the transcripts, I found that most women could be loosely divided into three groups. I chose to call those women *founders* who, in the absence of community, started their own groups and organizations. Women who joined organizations and found community I termed *finders*. Those who could not find, or become part

of, communities I termed *flounders*. A few women defied easy categorization, so I placed them in between categories (for example, founders/finders or finders/flounders, or one woman who did not need community). I now describe each group and then describe how women's sexuality - identifying as lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual, or gender queer - intersected with these categories.

Founders

Founders are women who noticed a lack of community and started one up. Tee is a 22-year-old white, bisexual college student who founded the gay straight alliance at her community college. She is a member of many communities in her area, including a church, her family, and her sister's wrestling community. She described her methods:

I would try to get people to sign up for our email group. I have a very huge email group for our club, and I would sit out there (on campus) and I would introduce myself to people and I'd say, 'Hi, I'm the president of the College Gay Straight Alliance.' I would just meet tons of people that way and some of my very closest friends came from that. . . And I was also the Inter Club Council rep that distributes money, which meant that I met other people through those clubs. And actually the college put on a leadership weekend for all the clubs and I actually met people through their clubs through that leadership weekend.

Leah sent a long email describing herself as a 60-year-old white, Jewish lesbian who has been part of an S/M group of eight to 10 women for 27 years, a group that she originally started. This group of women is no longer actively doing S/M, but has provided intimate support for each other. She said 'I feel very padded.'

Dorothea is a white, 71-year-old lesbian who told me:

I feel like I'm always making community, or trying to make community, always trying to figure out how to do that. I don't always put a lot of effort into it because I get sidetracked, but it's behind me as a very valuable thing. And I'm always talking about creating, about making a living community.

Not every founder was an extrovert. Tee, who founded the gay straight alliance at her college, actually described herself as very shy, and added, 'as a woman you're not supposed to go up to a person, a guy, and say, "Hi, how ya doin'?" You're supposed to wait, but I just couldn't wait for that anymore because obviously it wasn't working.'

All LGBT organizations and events were started by someone, and many of those founders have been women. Given women's wish for similarity, what better way to find a group of like-minded others than to start it oneself? That way one has control over the organization's mission and membership. When LBQ women

yearned for support, they often focused on receiving support, not providing it (Rothblum, 2008). Founders, in contrast, were willing to take on the role of providers. What this study cannot tell us is what characterizes women who create community, and this remains an important question.

Finders

Not everyone has to be a founder; in fact, organizations would have few members if everyone started their own. In my research, nearly half the women were characterized as 'finders.' These women established community in three ways: through joining organizations, through creating diverse social networks, and through friends, co-workers, or lovers. Most women discovered their community by joining organizations, even if the organizations themselves were not always a great fit in other ways. For instance, Angelica (white lesbian) came to the US from the Czech Republic, and joined a women's surfing group despite her lack of interest in surfing. She joined because she liked the part about hanging around a bonfire at the beach. She said: 'so I disregard the surfing part. . . I just like the sense of being in the loop because they might do something someday that I will be interested in. It will be worth belonging.' Other women stayed with organizations only as long as it took them to meet friends. Anna (Latina lesbian) volunteered for many lesbian organizations until she began to see which people she wanted to be friends with, and then she left, but maintained those friendships. She has about 15 individuals that she sees for coffee and social activities. As these examples show, some women's use of organizations to gain community could be seen as quite strategic.

Not everyone found community via organizations. If we picture social networks as a wheel with a hub in the middle and spokes radiating outwards, then some women are hubs. I wanted to interview Dawn (white bisexual woman) because she represented the ideal of someone surrounded by community. She had lived in her current city most of her life, came out in college, then was out in graduate school, and now is a lesbian therapist. She is surrounded by supportive family and friends, including old friends from her childhood and new lesbian friends. Camilla (Latina lesbian), who viewed herself as a social person, described an active process of making many friends:

Well, what I did honestly was a few days after I got here, I actually started working immediately, and I scoped out the people that I thought were gay or bisexual at my workplace [laughs]. I became friends with them and through them it was just a constant of always being in touch, at one point feeling confident enough or trustworthy enough that I could share my personal lifestyle with them. . . They showed me around the gay community and that's actually how I made some of my friends. Others I made just honestly, through just chit chats. I'm a pretty social person so in cafes or just through volunteer opportunities, I've managed to just hit it off with people, ask for their info in a non-threatening way [laughs] and just managed to stay in touch with some people.

Finders realized that in order to meet new friends, they needed to take an active approach to making community. They searched for places where people congregated. Thanks to the internet, which all had access to, this was quite easy. But finders also had good social skills. Just attending a dance or political rally was not a guarantee to meet people; finders knew how to connect, or they sought out friends or lovers who had those connections. They made finding community a priority, not just something to do when they were looking for a new lover.

Flounders

Isolation was a major theme for flounders, and this isolation occurred in a range of ways. For many of these women, it related to being closeted. For example, Wendy (white bisexual woman) lived in a rural area that was predominantly Christian Baptist. Ashton (white queer woman) had a lover who is closeted, which limited her own ability to connect with the community. Nicole (Native American bisexual woman) lived with her husband and children, and was very closeted, even to her family.

There are other ways that women felt isolated. Lavinya, an African American lesbian, felt excluded by a community that was racist. She was in an inter-racial relationship and experienced stares and rude comments when she was with her lover in public or brought her to lesbian events. Ashton (white queer woman), who was thrown off a university athletic team for her sexuality, lost the contact with her fellow teammates (even those who were also lesbian), who formed a strong community which she had not replaced. For Emily (white queer woman), out to her co-workers, a lover with chronic health problems limited her ability to socialize.

Finally, some women lost community when relationships ended or organizations disbanded. Bella (white queer woman) wrote in her email that her community had 'imploded.' This referred to a political fund she had founded and was part of; it included as members her lover and her close friends. Some women in the group (one a close friend she lived with) began to be involved in a power struggle. This meant her former community was now gone; she mostly connected with her lover and a few friends.

It was not always clear why flounders did not rely more on the internet, or even on 'mainstream' community events and organizations in their town. Some were truly puzzled by their inability to find community; some even lived in urban hubs with large LGBT communities. Some expected support from the LGBT communities to come to them; they stated that they had lived in their town for several years yet no one had come by to welcome them. Elana Dykewomon (2005) has described ways in which caretaking was traditionally performed by women, yet lesbians have not wanted to assume traditional roles of nurturers. This becomes problematic for women who need assistance with finances, health care, or daily life. Finally, there are many reasons why some LBQ women keep

their sexual identity secret, but closeted women bear the burden of extreme isolation. This isolation extends to lovers and family members of closeted women, who are also limited in their ability to socialize. So when 'out' lesbian and bisexual women enter into relationships with closeted lovers, their own needs for community become invisible.

The Intersection of Sexual Identity and Community

Was there a difference in how women related to community based on their sexual identity? First, although the sample size of 60 women was very large for a qualitative study, it is in no way representative of all women in the USA. Furthermore, participants were not evenly distributed within sexualities; there were only ten women who identified as heterosexual and three as queer. Finally, based on reading the transcripts, I had little difficulty assigning the majority of women to the categories of founders, finders, and flounders, but others were more challenging. Some women, for example, had both joined organizations and founded their own; I categorized them as founders/finders. One woman could be categorized as a finder but was also floundering. And one woman was not so much a flounderer as someone who was comfortable in her isolation as a loner. Table 1 depicts my own decisions about women's roles in communities as founders, finders, and flounderers.

As Table 1 shows, the majority of lesbian and bisexual women were finders. They came out, or moved to a new geographic area, and managed to find organizations and groups to join. These organizations in turn often became vehicles for making close friendships or finding lovers. A number of women were founders, and these were evenly distributed among lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual women. If anything, the difference was in the group of flounderers. Heterosexual women were more likely to be in this category and so were the women who identified as queer.

Table 1. Relationship to community, by sexual identity

Category	Lesbian (<i>n</i> = 28)	Bisexual (<i>n</i> = 19)	Heterosexual (<i>n</i> = 10)	Queer (<i>n</i> = 3)
Founder	5 (18%)	4 (21%)	2 (20%)	0
Founder/finder	4 (14%)	0	1 (10%)	0
Finder	15 (54%)	12 (63%)	2 (20%)	0
Finder/flounderer	0	1 (5%)	0	0
Flounderer	4 (14%)	2 (10%)	4 (40%)	3 (100%)
Loner	0	0	1 (10%)	0

Unique Issues Facing Bisexual Women

I anticipated that there would be few existing organizations for bisexual women and also that bisexual women would feel marginalized by lesbian communities. This prediction was supported by bisexual women in the study.

Numerous bisexual women identified a lack of bisexual organizations. For instance, Jamie (white) said:

I do have several friends that are bisexual, but it's not like a community. . . It's more like there's a strong homosexual population here and a strong lesbian population. They advertise that but I don't see a lot of advertisement of bisexuality in my community. Actually in all communities I've lived in I've not seen a lot that identify themselves as bisexual. You don't see, 'Hey, we're having a bisexual BBQ this weekend,' but you'll see a gay BBQ, a lesbian BBQ, and a church BBQ. I think a lot of people are bisexual and just don't act on it.

This links to a more general lack of bisexual 'community' identified by some women. Veronica, a Latina, observed:

I would say that there's no bisexual community that I have heard of, or know of, and that the notion of a bisexual community would be weird because we're kind of shunned by everyone. And there are some places I go, like I told you, with my friends and everything, where there's a lot of lesbians, and I'll let them assume that I'm a lesbian, I won't, I won't say I'm bisexual, I won't correct them. . . So we don't fit in anywhere. . . And it's funny because there's a similar thing because of my skin color. So people think I'm white, in the white community. And sometimes I'm not [seen as white], depending on where I am, and who's there. And so in that sense, I'm always feeling like in some kind of weird middle area.

However, this was not the case for all bisexual women. A few, even in small towns, had found bi groups. Cybele is a 44-year-old white, bisexual, Jewish woman married to a man. She left the medical profession when she had back pain, and in the last year has come out as disabled. Her list of bi resources is extensive. She met many bisexual women in a cafe in a large city, and stayed in touch with them when she left town. She is part of regional and national bisexual listservs, helps plan the bisexual contingent for the LGBT Pride Parade, and is part of a bisexual writers group.

A very common theme among bisexual women was that they felt excluded from lesbian communities. Lynne, a white woman, told me:

There's a fairly large portion of the lesbian community just doesn't like bisexual women at all. And my partner has a few times had friends of hers come up to her and say, 'Are you sure you want to be with this bisexual girl? Because, you know, she'll just leave you for a man later.'

This view was echoed by Robin, a white woman who explicitly named it as 'biphobia':

There is a lot of biphobia in the lesbian community, and it's actually been really shocking to me... I've gotten to really realize that it's a lot more prevalent than I thought it was. A lot of women will comment that they would never want to date a bisexual woman... The other day somebody that I worked with said 'bisexuals and agnostics are the same thing,' that they have the same problem.

When I asked bisexual women why they didn't become part of the *bisexual* community, the answers were mixed. For some, this sense of being unwelcome in lesbian communities was a factor. Robin answered:

I don't know. [The LGBT Center in my city] actually has a bisexual advisory committee, and I'm on that with a couple of other women, and we've been trying to find other members... It's really difficult to just find people who will openly identify as bi, and I don't know if it is again because people worry that if they are out and bi that they won't be welcome, you know, as a part of the lesbian community.

Bisexual women who were closeted, or were seen as heterosexual due to their relationships with men, had difficulty finding community. For instance, Jean is a 55-year-old white woman. She had been part of a lesbian commune, Buddhist commune, and hippie commune in the 1970s but was now married to a male pastor who knows Jean is bisexual. She received lots of general social support from her church, but when she was recently involved with a woman, she could only talk about her with her husband and a few friends from graduate school to whom she was out.

Despite challenges facing bisexual women, and despite their experience of their marginalization within lesbian communities, few bisexual women could be characterized as floundering. They seemed to be finding community at the same rates as lesbians, as Table 1 shows. I did not ask women to rate the amount of perceived support or feeling of inclusiveness they got from each community resource, and so it is possible that quality or amount of support varies greatly among women. Given the paucity of specifically bisexual organizations, however, it is interesting that more bisexual women didn't start their own groups, internet sites, or other activities specifically for bisexual community, as demonstrated by Cybele above.

Heterosexual Women

Unlike lesbians and bisexual women, heterosexual women were much more likely to mention their immediate family, extended family, and husband's extended family as making up their communities, and they were connected in these ways. For instance, Zewa is a 26-year-old woman of Middle Eastern descent who still lives at home with her parents and brother. She has a boyfriend who lives

out of state. Her community is very small - family, boyfriend, and one heterosexual couple she talks with once a month. In contrast, Zewa's bisexual sister has moved to a different part of the country and is involved with a number of organizations. Joanne is a 21-year-old white heterosexual woman who left secondary school early and without qualifications to get married and have a baby. Her parents still have not accepted this decision, yet she still listed them, her husband, baby, and sister as her community. Joanne left work and misses the work and her co-workers. Her bisexual sister has moved out of state, is part of the Buddhist and dance communities, and is not close to Joanne or their parents. Asmira is a 33-year-old white woman who lives with five housemates. She is very close to her family, and felt she played a leadership role in keeping them together:

I think I'm different from some adult children in that my needs for family - of being with them, of communicating with them, seem to be stronger than a lot of people's [laughs]. I think it in part may be that other people may feel a sense of guilt or a sense of obligation within their own family.

I had also predicted that heterosexual women in the USA would be connected to a mainstream religion, and this seemed to be the case. For example, Gloria, a white woman, mentioned her church as her major community; she actually divided her year between two locations with two different church denominations. Chelsea, an African American woman, defined community as 'people that you work, live, go to church with.' She recently found a new church but had not met many people there yet.

Three heterosexual women, all white, had strong networks outside their family. For instance, although Wiley left her Mormon family and lived in an isolated, rural area, she used the internet to stay in touch with people. Liz lived across the street from her yoga center and was very involved in that community. Madeleine was involved in the pagan, music, and political communities.

In sum, heterosexual women tended to be more connected to families and religious organizations, and thus have less need to form 'families of choice' (Dahlheimer and Feigal, 1994). The heterosexual sample was small, yet it was striking that nearly half were flounders. It is possible that family and religious organizations may not be ideally suited in the 21st century to meet the community needs of some heterosexual women. At the same time, heterosexual women may not have much experience in seeking community outside these institutions. To answer these questions, a much larger study focusing on heterosexual women's community ties would be important.

Conclusion: Women in Relationship To Community

It has been over thirty years since Barnhart (1975) described the lesbian community as a strategy by which women invested their energy and time in other women. To what extent does the spirit of 'sisterhood' exist in the USA in the 21st century?

The present study found that, overall, lesbians and bisexual women are finding, and sometimes founding, communities of friends and organizations. The internet and greater societal acceptance of lesbians and bisexual women in recent years has made it possible for participants to locate groups and activities.

However, in contrast to Krieger's (1983) research on the lesbian community in the late 1970s, these communities are no longer limited to specifically lesbian events and organizations. The lesbians and bisexual women in this study were part of 'mainstream' organizations (e.g., sports, churches, Alcoholics Anonymous) as well as counterculture activities that were not specifically focused on lesbian or bisexual identity (e.g., meditation retreats, pagan rituals, polyamorous communities). Just as Stein (1992) described the 'de-centering' of feminism in lesbian communities, it is possible to conceptualize present-day lesbian communities as having 'de-centered' lesbianism. In other words, it does not seem to matter if lesbians and bisexual women are part of groups where sexuality is central versus incidental, as long as the women feel supported. Similarity to others was part of the definition of community, but this similarity can be based on shared hobbies or politics, not necessarily shared sexuality. This is a major change from the 1970s when shared sexuality was a prime connecting factor in the 'women's communities' (Krieger, 1983).

Yet based on the women's stories here, it seems that bisexual women in particular would benefit from forming new activities, groups, and internet sites based around shared sexuality, so that they do not have to negotiate potentially marginalized roles within lesbian communities, or in the heterosexual mainstream. Lesbians and bisexual women who were flounders were often aware that communities existed somewhere, yet did not feel welcomed, or were too isolated or closeted to fit in. Similarly, all three women who identified as queer were floundering, demonstrating the challenges of finding community when one's own identity is radical and conformity to standard identities of lesbian or bisexual is problematic. Despite the abundance of LGBT community resources, numerous women were feeling left out.

Conversely, if lesbian and bisexual women are becoming more accepted in USA society, then it is possible that specifically LGBT organizations and activities may diminish or disappear. In a recent article in the San Francisco *Bay Times* entitled 'Do We Still Need a Gay Community?', author Vollmer (2007: 3) states: 'conditions for gays have gotten so good - think domestic partnership rights, successful gay sitcoms, and the outcry over the recent use of 'faggot' by celebrities - that gays no longer have to live apart and huddle for protection.'

When Amy Hoffman (2007: 53) was researching the rise and demise of the USA newspaper *Gay Community News*, she wrote:

Many of us - or at least I - believed that our institutions were not so much 'alternative' or 'underground' as harbingers of a great cultural shift, and would eventually replace the old, outmoded symphonies, bookstores, newspapers, and so forth. But even in their heyday, they never had enough money or volunteers, and there were constant

internal squabbles, and then some new lesbians coming up muttered that women's folk music was boring, and they didn't see the point of a women's restaurant especially if the food wasn't all that great. . . Our community institutions contained the seeds of their own destructions even as they blossomed.'

In this respect, women will always be trying to improve their communities, and this is probably a good aspect, even when it causes nostalgia among those who liked things as they were. But community change will also make some women feel uncomfortable and unwelcome. As the stories of many of the women here indicate, more awareness of what constitutes community and how we can feel more like insiders rather than outsiders may help our needs for connectedness to be met.

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