

WHO FILLS OUT A “LESBIAN” QUESTIONNAIRE?

The Interrelationship of Sexual Orientation, Years “Out,” Disclosure of Sexual Orientation, Sexual Experience with Women, and Participation in the Lesbian Community

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Most research on lesbians has used self-report questionnaires, and assumed that respondents who complete a “lesbian” questionnaire self-identify as lesbians and engage in sexual relationships with women. The present study examined the degree to which 2,393 women who answered a “Lesbian Wellness Survey” are distributed on five aspects of lesbian sexuality and the coming-out process. The five aspects were: (a) Sexual Orientation (numerical rating of sexual identity from exclusively lesbian/gay to exclusively heterosexual); (b) Years Out (length of time of self-identity as lesbian/gay/bisexual); (c) Outness/Disclosure (amount of disclosure of sexual orientation to others); (d) Sexual Experience (proportion of sexual relationships with women); and (e) Lesbian Activities (extent of participation in lesbian community events). Mild but significant correlations were found among these dimensions, indicating that being lesbian is not a homogeneous experience. Closer examination by the demographic characteristics of race/ethnicity and age revealed a diversity of experience. African American, Native American, and Latina respondents had moderate correlations among these aspects of lesbian experience, whereas White and Asian American respondents evidenced

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only mild or nonsignificant correlations. The results indicate that researchers who are studying one aspect of the lesbian experience (e.g., openness to others) need to ensure that they are not assuming such behavior based on other dimensions (such as frequent participation in lesbian community activities or years of being out), especially among White and Asian American lesbians.

Research methodology on lesbians has come a long way in the past decades. In the 1970s, right after "homosexuality" was removed as a diagnostic category from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 1968), the first wave of studies that focused on lesbians from an affirmative perspective often had very small samples. Diamond and Wilsnack (1978), for example, interviewed 10 lesbians about alcohol use. Early studies often used friendship networks, either lesbians known personally to the researcher or the network groups of the participants themselves.

In the 1980s and 1990s, studies on lesbians often had dozens, if not hundreds, of respondents with one of the largest published surveys, the National Lesbian Health Care Survey (NLHCS; Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum, 1994), having 1,917 participants. By this time, the proliferation of lesbian and gay periodicals, events, and places to meet allowed for the distribution of surveys to participants unknown to the research team. Participants had less to fear (such as hostile comments or loss of jobs) if they were seen picking up a questionnaire. Researchers today are generally assumed to be lesbian themselves or lesbian-affirmative; this is often indicated on the survey. Lesbians are anything but reluctant participants; they volunteer for research studies (and may put their name on national mailing lists compiled for this purpose) and are educated consumers of published data.¹

Yet who *are* the participants who complete "lesbian" questionnaires? Most of the psychological studies of lesbians have recruited survey participants by placing announcements in lesbian or gay newsletters, distributing surveys at lesbian organizations or events, or leaving questionnaires at gay bars, feminist bookstores, gay or lesbian churches, or lesbian restaurants (see Rothblum, 1994, for a review of methodology). The assumption underlying such recruitment methods has been that women who fill out surveys asking about lesbian issues are lesbians.

There has been some discussion (though little research) about the heterogeneity of women's sexual orientation. Golden (1987) was the first to propose a multidimensional model of sexual orientation. She argues that sexual identity (I am a lesbian), sexual behavior (I have sex with women), and community participation (I am a member of the lesbian community) are orthogonal dimensions that may be congruent or incongruent. Thus women who self-identify as lesbians may be currently celibate or may never have had a genital sexual relationship with another woman. Women who self-identify as bisexual or even heterosexual may be active in lesbian community activities. In addition to Golden's dimensions of sexual orientation, two other dimensions seem relevant: extent of disclosure of sexual orientation to others and length of time of self-identity as a lesbian (see Morris, 1997, for a review). Some self-identified lesbians have disclosed their sexual orientation to few other people, so that they are assumed to be heterosexual. Finding lesbians who are

“closeted” is often a challenge of research studies, as these participants may not be part of lesbian networks or subscribe to lesbian newspapers, and thus may not find out about the survey. The length of time that a lesbian has been aware of her sexual orientation may affect these other dimensions, such as degree of outness to other people or participation in lesbian community events. The present study focused on where participants who fill out a survey identified as a “lesbian” questionnaire fall on these five dimensions of the lesbian experience (Golden’s three dimensions plus the other two dimensions mentioned in this paragraph), and these will be discussed briefly.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Should sexual orientation be viewed as a continuum (from completely heterosexual to completely lesbian) or should heterosexual, bisexual, and lesbian women be studied as discrete cultures or groups? Almost overwhelmingly, psychological research has assessed sexual orientation as falling on a continuum, most often by using the one-item Kinsey Scale (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953). In most studies, distribution on this Likert-type scale item is reported, usually to demonstrate that most of the respondents leaned predominantly toward the “lesbian” continuum of the item and/or that those who reported being exclusively heterosexual were omitted from the data analyses. Although members of the lesbian communities do not view their sexual orientation as falling somewhere on a numerical continuum, this is in fact how most research has defined lesbians (e.g., NLHCS; Bradford et al., 1994).

LENGTH OF TIME OF SELF-IDENTITY AS A LESBIAN

In a society in which heterosexuality is assumed, people who are not heterosexual need to construct their own sexuality and find language for this difference. A number of theories have been developed about the coming-out process, and most assume that individuals move through stages starting when newly “out” and passing through others over time. Cass’ (1979) early and influential model focuses on an initial stage of identity confusion to later stages of identity acceptance and identity synthesis. Coleman (1981) describes the coming-out process as beginning with feelings of difference and moving on to self-acknowledgment, before individuals enter their first same-gender sexual relationships. Stage models such as these have been criticized for a number of reasons. Morris, Ojerholm, Brooks, Osowiecki, and Rothblum (1995) conducted a content analysis of lesbian coming-out stories in 10 books to identify their themes, and found coming-out experiences could not be contained within stages. Identity development occurred in multiple ways (feeling different did not necessarily precede a same-gender sexual experience) and the stories indicated that coming out is a lifelong process. Not only do self-identified lesbians need to decide whether or not to come out as they meet new people, but their own self-definitions of identity, community, and politics may be in flux.

Rust (1993) surveyed 346 self-identified lesbians, 60 self-identified bisexual women, and 21 women who did not label themselves. This sample of mostly young,

White women indicated—opposite to what is proposed in the stage theories—that sexual attraction to another woman preceded questioning of heterosexual identity. Furthermore, the women in this sample had used different labels to identify their sexual orientation over the years, with 41% of the lesbians identifying as bisexual at some point in the past, 60% of the lesbians wondering whether they were bisexual, and 76% of the bisexual women wondering whether they were lesbian. Thus, the categories “lesbian” and “bisexual” are more fluid and continuous than is usually assumed in the lesbian communities.

DISCLOSURE OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Unless women who are not heterosexual inform other people about their sexual orientation, they often “pass” as heterosexual. Even lesbians who are “out” to most people still have to disclose this information as they meet new people. There is considerable variation in how long lesbians wait to tell others after developing a lesbian self-identity. The National Lesbian Health Care Survey asked about outness to family members, lesbian and gay friends, straight friends, and coworkers (Bradford et al., 1994). Respondents were most out to lesbian and gay friends (88%). In contrast, only 28% of respondents were out to all straight friends, 27% were out to all family members, and 17% were out to all coworkers. A poll by *Newsweek* of 504 members of a lesbian and gay mailing list asked “in general are you open about your sexual preferences with each of the following” and 70% reported “yes” for family members, 51% said “yes” for neighbors, and 49% said “yes” for their boss (“Fireworks and Freedom,” 1994, p. 48).

SEXUAL EXPERIENCE WITH WOMEN

The general public often defines lesbians (as well as gay men and bisexual people) according to their sexual behavior, and so lesbians are considered to be women who have sexual relationships with women. Among lesbians, too, sexual orientation may be defined in sexual terms. In the research by Kennedy and Davis (1993) of lesbians in the 1930s to the 1950s, “coming out” referred specifically to having a first sexual experience with another woman.

On the other hand, the commonly used term “affectional/sexual preference” (e.g., Committee on Lesbian and Gay Concerns, 1991) implies that some lesbians have erotic feelings and fantasies for women, but are not sexually active with women. Both Golden (1987) and Rothblum and Brehony (1993) have written about lesbians who are currently (or always have been) asexual. Research by Silber (1990) and Rust (1992) indicates that there are women who self-define as lesbian and are in fact currently sexually involved with men. Thus, sexual orientation and sexual activity may or may not be congruent. The present study focused on the ratio of female to male partners that participants have had.

PARTICIPATION IN THE LESBIAN COMMUNITIES

In addition to self-awareness and sexual relationships, part of becoming a lesbian involves finding a lesbian community. As we approach the 21st century, most women in the United States do not live far from lesbian and gay bars, bookstores, religious organizations, support groups, or political groups. In addition, women can subscribe to lesbian newsletters or magazines, visit cities known for their lesbian communities, have access to lesbian information or social contact through computers and the Internet, or participate in national lesbian events (such as women's music festivals). In the National Lesbian Health Care Survey (Bradford et al., 1994), over half the sample lived in communities with lesbian social clubs, a lesbian hotline, a lesbian or feminist bookstore, lesbian or gay religious groups, lesbian sports teams, cultural events, bars, or religious organizations. Only 18% of this U.S. sample lived in communities in which there were no available lesbian activities, but, of these, 50% lived within 50 miles and 22% lived within 100 miles of communities with lesbian activities.

Women who participate in lesbian community activities and subscribe to lesbian newsletters are often most overrepresented in research studies about lesbians (see Rothblum, 1994, for a review). It is not known how representative these women are of lesbians in general, or whether they consist of only the most out lesbians. On the other hand, some heterosexual feminists also participate in lesbian events and organizations, so that participation in the lesbian community does not necessarily represent only lesbians.

In sum, sexual orientation, length of time of self-identity as a lesbian, disclosure of sexual orientation, sexual experience with women, and participation in lesbian communities are separate aspects of the lesbian experience. There has been no prior research that has examined the interrelationships of all these dimensions, and this was the purpose of the present study.

Our method for examining these dimensions was the "lesbian questionnaire" or the survey announced in lesbian periodicals and distributed at lesbian venues. This is the means by which most researchers have recruited samples when conducting research on lesbians. We were interested in determining just how women who complete such questionnaires fall on the dimensions listed. If researchers are assuming that women who complete questionnaires self-identify as predominantly lesbian on a numerical scale, to what extent is that the case? For researchers studying same-gender sexual behavior, what has been the ratio of participants' female to male sexual partners? The results of this study would begin to determine the degree to which these aspects of the lesbian experience are present among participants in lesbian research surveys, where homogeneity on these constructs has been assumed.

Furthermore, much prior research on lesbians has used samples that were predominantly young and White (e.g., Albro & Tully, 1979; Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Rust, 1993). This is because surveys were often distributed at venues (e.g., college campuses) that consisted of young, White, middle-class women. Yet dimensions of the lesbian experience may differ quite substantially for lesbians of different ages and for those who are members of different ethnic groups. For example, are

older women more closeted, given that they have lived through times when being a lesbian was stigmatized? How does the dual oppression of homophobia and racism affect *outness among women of color*? In the 1990s, the diversity of the lesbian communities makes it possible to locate organizations, events, and newsletters for African American, Latina, Native American, Asian American, and/or older lesbians. Thus, the present study also examined the five dimensions of the lesbian sexual experience by the demographic factors of age and race/ethnicity, and it is the first study to do so.

METHOD

Participants

The total sample consisted of 2,393 women from every state in the United States. Particular attention was paid to two demographic characteristics in the recruitment process. First, *women of color* were targeted as they have been underrepresented in past research. Second, it was important to find participants who represented a wide range of levels of outness, so extra effort was placed on accessing women who might be closeted in some area of their lives.

Approximately 10,000 surveys were distributed using the following sources: (a) advertisements in lesbian and women's magazines, newspapers, and newsletters; (b) women's, and gay and lesbian bookstores and community centers; (c) lesbian and gay social or political organizations; (d) national mailing lists compiled by lesbian and gay direct-mail marketing firms; and (e) friendship networks.

The initial item on the survey asked participants to indicate from what source they had received the survey. The majority of participants (54%, $n = 1,293$) reported getting the survey in the mail—this includes those who were mailed the survey after responding to an advertisement. About one fifth (18%, $n = 430$) indicated that they were given the survey by a friend. Approximately the same number of women (16%, $n = 383$) reported receiving the survey from a source other than the ones listed (e.g., at a large lesbian/gay gathering, at a church or synagogue). Smaller portions of participants reported picking up the survey at a bookstore (11%, $n = 271$) or at a bar (less than 1%, $n = 10$).

The 2,393 participants that resulted from distribution of almost 10,000 surveys suggest a response rate of approximately 25%. However, the actual response rate may be higher as it is unknown how many surveys never reached participants. In comparison, the NLHCS had a response rate of 42% (Bradford & Ryan, 1988). However, in that study, the principal investigators were able to travel throughout the country to recruit volunteer distributors, and a number of organizations donated financial assistance and staff support. No other large-scale, national studies of lesbians have been published, so comparisons of response rates are difficult. McKirnan and Peterson (1989) conducted a large study of substance use in the lesbian and gay community in Chicago and their 3,400 respondents represent a 16% response rate—of whom 748 (22%) were women. They used a multimodal method of survey advertisement and collection similar to that used in the present study; however, they concentrated on one metropolitan area. The present study had a

response rate somewhat less than that of the NLHCS and slightly higher than that of McKirnan and Peterson.

Procedure

The survey was titled "Lesbian Wellness Survey" in large letters and subtitled "a survey by lesbians for any woman who has loved other women." Part of the introduction stated:

Lesbian, bisexual, and gay women are so often overlooked when information is gathered about people's experiences. We want to change that! The purpose of this survey is to get an idea of what lives are like for lesbian and bisexual women in the U.S.

We have made a great effort to get this survey to you. There is a rich diversity in lesbian lives, and we have tried to reach out to lesbian and bisexual women of all races, ethnicities, incomes, ages, and backgrounds. Because we are interested in the experiences of all lesbian and bisexual women we have worked hard. We hope that we have asked questions in a way that is clear and easy to answer. Unfortunately our languages often fail us especially when it comes to describing lesbian lives.

Participants completed the Lesbian Wellness Survey and returned it in a prepaid, preaddressed envelope, which was attached to each survey. The return envelope had the business reply information on the front, and on the back was the title of the survey and a request to fill it out or pass it along to a friend. When surveys were sent out, however, no reference to lesbians was visible. All participants were guaranteed anonymity and were advised that participation was voluntary and that they were free to refrain from answering any questions.

Measures

Questions about sexual orientation and aspects of the lesbian experience were included in the Lesbian Wellness Survey. In addition, there were general demographic questions about age, race/ethnicity, income, education, religion, employment, current residence, and relationship status.

Sexual Orientation

It has been common practice to inquire about sexual orientation through having respondents mark a location on a continuum, usually labeled from "exclusively homosexual" (or "gay" or "lesbian" or a combination thereof) to "exclusively heterosexual," usually with a mid-range label of "bisexual." Use of this item is based on Kinsey and colleagues' (1948, 1953) pioneering work on sexuality. Consequently the present study included a continuum item that inquired about how the respondent identified herself from "exclusively lesbian/gay" to "exclusively heterosexual," with a mid-range label of "bisexual." These three labels were marked on a straight line (with no numbers appearing on it) that had quadrants marked off at 25% intervals, with the label of "bisexual" appearing halfway down the line. Respondents placed a mark anywhere on the continuum, and this mark was scored from 0 to 100 by

the first author by use of a template. This question was used for the Sexual Orientation Score, with a range from 0 to 100 with lower scores indicating lesbian identity.

Years Out

This variable referred to the number of years that a respondent had regarded herself as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. The Years Out variable was calculated from subtracting the age when a respondent reported first considering herself a lesbian/bisexual from her current age. Years Out ranged from 0 to a top range that was dependent on the characteristics of the sample. Higher numbers represented a greater number of years as a lesbian or bisexual woman. In addition, the survey also asked when respondents first "questioned" that they might be lesbian, gay, or bisexual, in order to determine the earliest questioning of sexual orientation.

Outness/Disclosure

The Outness/Disclosure variable consisted of the percentage of lesbian/gay friends, straight friends, family, and coworkers, respectively, who know the respondent's sexual orientation. Respondents were asked to indicate the percentage with a mark on a line ranging from 0% to 100%. The mean of these four scores was computed, or if one was missing (as in the case of coworkers for a respondent who is retired) the mean of three scores was computed. This resulted in a range of 0 to 100 with 0 representing that no one knows of the respondents' sexual orientation and 100 representing everyone knowing. This subscale was adapted from the National Lesbian Health Care Survey (Bradford & Ryan, 1988). Three additional questions assessed participants' attitudes about outness.

Sexual Experience

Sexual Experience referred to the proportion of sexual experience with women versus men. This variable was comprised of responses to a question inquiring about the respondent's consensual sexual behavior since becoming sexually active, where a mark was made on a continuum that ranged from "only women" to "equally both sexes" to "only men." These marks were scored by using a template on a 100-point scale with 0 representing exclusively same gender and 100 representing exclusively opposite gender. The question asked about sexual behavior, not number of sexual partners. Those women who are not yet sexually active ($n = 45$) did not respond to this question and therefore are considered missing on this variable. Some women indicated, with an explanation, more than one mark on the continuum (e.g., 100 while in a heterosexual marriage and 0 since coming out). In these cases the numerical values of the two marks, as determined by the template, were averaged to provide the final score for sexual behavior.

Lesbian Activities

The Lesbian Activities variable refers to the frequency of participation in community or social activities for lesbians (or nonparticipation if they are not available in the respondent's area) and information was gathered about participation in 12 specific types of lesbian/bisexual/gay events or groups (lesbian-only community or social activity, lesbian/bisexual/gay rights group, lesbian social club or group, lesbian/feminist/women's bookstore, lesbian softball or other team, lesbian/gay bar or nightclub, lesbian support or discussion group, lesbian concert or cultural event, lesbian hotline or information center, lesbian health care services, lesbian/gay

religious group, lesbian/bisexuality/gay community center). For each of these 12 items, the frequency of attendance was indicated on a 6-point scale with 6 representing not available in the respondents' area, 5 representing never, and 1 representing every day. The range was from 1 to 6 with lower scores representing higher frequencies.

RESULTS

Returned surveys were inspected for completeness of information and sexual orientation of participants. A total of 2,481 surveys were returned and 88 were not included in the sample, either because the respondents reported exclusive heterosexuality in both sexual orientation and sexual behavior ($n = 5$) or because a portion of the survey was not completed ($n = 83$).

Demographic Information

The 2,393 participants in this study were a large and diverse group; the average age was 36 with a range from 15 to 83 ($n = 2,388$). Participants were 76% ($n = 1,821$) White/Caucasian, 9% ($n = 219$) African American/Black, 7% ($n = 169$) Latina, 3% ($n = 82$) Native American/American Indian, 3% ($n = 62$) Asian American/Pacific Islander, and 2% ($n = 40$) indicated "other" or did not respond.

Overall, participants reported a high level of education; approximately three fourths had a college degree or higher. Most participants (70%) reported being employed full time, 17% part time, 7% unemployed, and 23% were students (the categories are not mutually exclusive). The participants reported a low range of yearly incomes, with 37% earning under \$20,000 per year, and 51% earning between \$20,000 and \$49,000. The majority of participants (65%) reported that they are in a primary relationship with a woman, and 26% reported being single. Smaller portions of participants reported dating women casually (11%), dating both women and men (2%), dating men casually (1%), and being in a primary relationship with a man (5%). Participants' living situations reflected this: 48% lived with their female partner/lover, 28% lived alone, and the rest lived in a variety of other situations such as with housemates, children, or parents.

Participants were from every state in the United States, and were equally distributed throughout the regions of the United States. Approximately one quarter are from each region—Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, and West. In terms of the type of geographic location, the majority were from urban areas—28% large city, 29% medium city, 24% small city or town, 10% suburb, 8% rural, and 1% did not respond or indicated "other" (such as in prison).

Descriptive Information About Aspects of the Lesbian Experience

Sexual Orientation was measured on a continuous line that was measured via a template from 0 to 100. Forty-four percent of participants rated themselves as exclusively lesbian, placing the mark at the very left end of the line (scored as 0).

An additional 18% marked Sexual Orientation in the range from 1 to 10, and 28% of participants placed the mark between 11 and 40. There were fewer participants (11%) who labeled themselves in a range closer to bisexual; 8% were in the range of 41 to 60, and the remaining 3% of participants rated themselves as 60 to 100. On average, participants reported a sexual orientation mark that was scored at 13.

Scores on the Years Out variable indicated that the participants had been out for an average of about 14 years and the range varied from 0 to 66 years. The Outness/Disclosure variable ranged from 0 to 100 with a mean overall score of 71.44, indicating the sample is out to roughly three quarters of family, friends, and coworkers. Sexual experience also ranged from 0 to 100 (0 = only women, 100 = only men), with a mean of 24.51, indicating that most of the respondents' relationships were and had been with women. Lesbian Activities ranged from 1 to 6 with a mean of 3.81, indicating that lesbian community activities were generally available in the respondents' communities and that they attended between once a month (score of 3) and several times a year (score of 4).

Outness, however, has been measured in a number of ways by different researchers and the current study did include some alternative measures of outness. Harry (1993), in a study of 1,556 gay men in the Chicago area, used zip code as one indication of outness—missing data were taken as an indication of being less out. In the current study, 95% gave their zip codes; thus presence of zip codes may not be a sensitive measure of outness. Nevertheless, those few participants (5%) who did not provide zip codes had a significantly lower level of outness, $F(1, 2391) = 25.44, p < .0001$. Harry also asked about the importance of being out to straight people and this attitudinal measurement of outness was found to be inversely related to participants' income (Harry, 1993). The current study included this question and approximately 30% of participants strongly agreed on the importance of being out to the straight people they knew: 22% agreed somewhat, 27% were neutral, 13% disagreed somewhat, and 9% strongly disagreed. There was a significant yet moderate correlation of $r = .55$ between attitude and percentage of people who knew of participants' sexual orientation (the Outness/Disclosure measure used in subsequent analyses). However, attitude may not be an adequate measure because a person's attitude about being out to heterosexuals is not the same as her actual outness.

Perhaps the other side of Harry's operational definition for outness—feeling it is important to be out—is fear of being out. The current study asked: "Are you worried, concerned, or afraid that people will find out you are lesbian/gay/bisexual?" Overall, participants were not too worried: 45% are not at all, 35% are a little, 13% are moderately, 5% are a lot, 2% are extremely. The question "How accepting is your family that you are lesbian/gay/bisexual?" was also asked: 11% report not at all, 15% a little, 19% moderately, 26% a lot, and 23% extremely (6% were missing).

Correlations Among the Aspects of the Lesbian Experience

Correlations were conducted among the five aspects of the lesbian experience, and the results are presented in Table 1. There are significant positive correlations among Sexual Orientation, Years Out, Outness/Disclosure, Sexual Experience, and Lesbian Activities, with the exception of Years Out with Lesbian Activities, which

Table 1

Correlations Among the Five Aspects of the Lesbian Experience for the Total Sample and By Race/Ethnicity

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Sexual Orientation</i>	<i>Outness/ Disclosure</i>	<i>Sexual Experience</i>	<i>Lesbian Activities</i>
Total (<i>N</i> = 2,393)				
Years Out	+19°	+10°	+29°	+02
Sexual Orientation		+32°	+57°	+20°
Outness/Disclosure			+22°	+25°
Sexual Experience				+13°
African American/Black (<i>n</i> = 219)				
Years Out	+25°	+23°	+23°	+06
Sexual Orientation		+49°	+67°	+35°
Outness/Disclosure			+37°	+40°
Sexual Experience				+19°
Native American/American Indian (<i>n</i> = 82)				
Years Out	+39°	+31°	+34°	+08
Sexual Orientation		+40°	+62°	+22
Outness/Disclosure			+31°	+17
Sexual Experience				+10
Latina (<i>n</i> = 169)				
Years Out	+15	+12	+33°	+05
Sexual Orientation		+50°	+63°	+24°
Outness/Disclosure			+36°	+23°
Sexual Experience				+19°
White/Caucasian (<i>n</i> = 1,821)				
Years Out	+18°	+08°	+30°	+03
Sexual Orientation		+27°	+55°	+17°
Outness/Disclosure			+19°	+23°
Sexual Experience				+11°
Asian American/Pacific Islander (<i>n</i> = 62)				
Years Out	+08	+13	+05	+04
Sexual Orientation		+32°	+56°	+30°
Outness/Disclosure			+02	+33°
Sexual Experience				+14

Note: Numbers given are correlations among variables and all asterisked are significant at $p < .0001$.

is not significantly correlated. The direction of the correlations indicates that the more years one is out, the more one is out to a larger percentage of people, the more one's sexual experiences are proportionally with women, the more often one attends lesbian-only events, and the more one self-identifies as exclusively lesbian.

No variables are correlated strongly, and only one correlation—Sexual Experience with Sexual Orientation—is moderate; the rest of the correlations are mild. Because of the large sample size, correlations that are only mild in strength are statistically significant. Familywise error rates were contained because the significance level for pairs of correlation was set at $p < .001$. Nevertheless, a mild yet significant relationship among the aspects of the lesbian experience was established.

Race/Ethnicity and Aspects of the Lesbian Experience

Because of the large sample size and its diversity, it is possible to examine the five aspects of the lesbian experience separately for each racial/ethnic group, and these are presented in Table 1. As was the case for the total sample, Years Out was not significantly correlated with Lesbian Activities for any ethnic group.

In general, aspects of the lesbian experience were the most highly intercorrelated for African American/Black women, compared with all other ethnic groups and with the total sample. African American women had the highest correlations of Sexual Orientation and Sexual Experience ($r = .67$). Correlations between Outness/Disclosure and Lesbian Activities (at $r = .40$, the highest of all ethnic groups) and between Outness/Disclosure and Sexual Orientation (at $r = .49$, the second highest) were moderate, compared with only mild correlations for the sample as a whole. Similarly, the correlation between Sexual Orientation and Lesbian Activities ($r = .35$) was considerably higher than all other groups.

Native American/American Indian women were next in the total strength of intercorrelations of aspects of the lesbian experience, although generally these correlations were visibly lower than those of African American women. Native American women had a correlation between Sexual Orientation and Years Out ($r = .39$) that was considerably higher than all other groups. Their correlations between Outness/Disclosure and Years Out ($r = .31$) and between Sexual Experience and Years Out ($r = .34$) were higher than for any other group. However, Lesbian Activities was not significantly correlated with any other variable for Native American women.

Latinas were comparable to African American and Native American women in correlations between Sexual Experience with Years Out ($r = .33$) and Outness/Disclosure ($r = .36$), respectively. Unlike African American and Native American women, Latinas had a nonsignificant correlation between Years Out and Outness/Disclosure. But Latinas had the highest correlation of any group ($r = .50$) between Sexual Orientation and Years Out.

In contrast, White/Caucasian and Asian American women had the lowest intercorrelations among the aspects of the lesbian experience. White women had the lowest correlations of any group between Years Out and Outness/Disclosure ($r = .08$), Sexual Orientation and Outness/Disclosure ($r = .27$), Sexual Orientation and Sexual Experience ($r = .55$), and Sexual Orientation and Lesbian Activities ($r = .17$). Over half of all correlations of White women were under $.20$, compared with only two for African American women.

Asian American/Pacific Islander women had the lowest intercorrelations, with most of the correlations nonsignificant. Except for the correlation between Sexual Orientation and Sexual Experience, no other correlations with Sexual Experience were significant, and nor was Sexual Orientation with Years Out.

Table 2
Sexual Orientation and the Five Aspects of the
Lesbian Experience by Race/Ethnicity and Age

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Sexual Orientation</i>	<i>Years Out</i>	<i>Outness/ Disclosure</i>	<i>Sexual Experience</i>	<i>Lesbian Activities</i>
Race					
White	12.41	13.60	72.23	25.36	3.80
Black	13.72	15.65	64.85	19.22	3.81
Latina	13.78	13.67	72.14	21.74	3.78
Native	15.55	15.23	71.58	26.86	3.93
Asian	16.68	11.27	68.04	23.90	3.73
Age					
to 20	19.56	3.04	63.17	28.82	3.83
21–25	15.51	4.71	67.42	32.58	3.74
26–30	14.63	8.23	74.61	26.93	3.76
31–35	13.00	12.53	73.31	20.78	3.92
36–40	11.26	15.89	73.70	22.14	3.87
41–45	12.18	18.08	70.99	24.34	3.80
46–50	10.58	20.08	69.53	22.60	3.81
51–55	10.68	22.12	66.33	24.17	3.64
56 and up	11.20	29.04	64.89	24.72	3.63

Note: Years out is measured in years; Outness/Disclosure is a percentage with 100 representing out to all; Sexual Experience and Sexual Orientation are measured on a scale from 0 to 100 with 0 representing only women or exclusively lesbian; Lesbian Activities is on a scale where 3 = monthly attendance, 4 = several times yearly, and 5 = never. Race/ethnicity categories are listed in order of descending number of participants in each subgroup.

In addition to examining these aspects of the lesbian experience for each ethnic/racial group separately, we analyzed group differences in these five variables. The results are presented in Table 2. There are significant differences by race/ethnicity in Years Out, $F(4, 2314) = 3.97, p < .005$, and Outness/Disclosure, $F(4, 2348) = 4.77, p < .001$. The African American/Black and Native American/American Indian participants reported being out about 2 years longer than the White/Caucasian and Latina participants. The Asian American/Pacific Islander participants reported being out the fewest number of years. White/Caucasian, Latina, and Native American/American Indian participants were out to a larger percentage of people than the other two subgroups. The variables of Sexual Experience, participation in Lesbian Activities, and Sexual Orientation were each similar across all race/ethnicity subgroups, and were not significant.

Age and Aspects of the Lesbian Experience

Table 2 also presents the results of the five aspects of the lesbian experience by age. Age was divided into nine groups spanning 5 years each, in order to examine

effects of age in half-decade increments. In general, older participants reported a Sexual Orientation somewhat more exclusively lesbian than younger participants, $F(8, 2373) = 3.20, p < .002$. For the variable Years Out, the number of years participants reported being out followed from their age. The youngest participants had been out the fewest years and the oldest had been out the longest, $F(8, 2349) = 205.08, p < .0001$. Examining Outness/Disclosure reveals that participants in their mid-20s through 30s are out to a larger percentage of people than the younger and older participants, $F(8, 2379) = 4.60, p < .0001$. Sexual Experience across age groups shows that younger participants report somewhat more sexual experiences with men than do older participants, $F(8, 2357) = 4.89, p < .0001$. However, all age groups reported that their sexual relationships were mostly with women. Participation in Lesbian Activities was similar for all age groups, and was not significant.

Milestones in the Coming-out Process

Because the survey asked respondents for the age at which they first participated in each aspect of the lesbian experience, we were able to determine a general sequence of "milestones" in the lesbian experience. The participants began their coming-out process by first questioning that they might be lesbian/gay/bisexual at an average age of 18. On average it was 5 years later, at age 23, that the participants ended questioning and first thought of themselves as lesbian/gay/bisexual. One year before, however, at age 22 on average, the participants reported engaging in their first sexual experience with another woman; 2% said they have never done this. After having gone through the coming-out process internally, the participants reported beginning to tell others of their sexual orientation. On average, participants first told someone of their sexual orientation at the age of 24. Participants also indicated disclosing sexual orientation to mothers at 25, fathers at 25, and siblings at 26, on average. However, 34% have never told their mothers, 55% have never told their fathers, and 28% have never told a sibling. When asked to whom they first disclosed their sexual orientation, the majority of participants first told a female friend: 41% told a lesbian friend and 24% told a heterosexual female friend. Less than 10% of the participants reported that they first told each of the following people: gay male friend, heterosexual male friend, mother, father, sibling, other family member, coworker, therapist, boyfriend, or husband.

The milestones in the coming-out process were also examined for the different racial/ethnic groups and these results are presented in Figure 1. Overall the pattern for the chronological order of becoming lesbian/gay/bisexual (LGB) found for the total participants is also found to hold true for the subgroups. Differences by race/ethnicity were found for some of the milestones: first questioned that they might be LGB [$F(4, 2311) = 5.31, p < .0005$], sexual experience with another woman [$F(4, 2289) = 2.56, p < .05$], thought of self as LGB [$F(4, 2318) = 5.30, p < .0005$], told someone of sexual orientation [$F(4, 2297) = 3.81, p < .005$], told mother [$F(4, 1537) = 2.44, p < .05$], told father (n.s.), told sibling [$F(4, 1679) = 4.31, p < .002$]. One notable deviation from the overall pattern was for Asian American/Pacific Islander participants who reported first telling a sibling approximately 2 years before telling either parent. These milestones are not examined by age as the

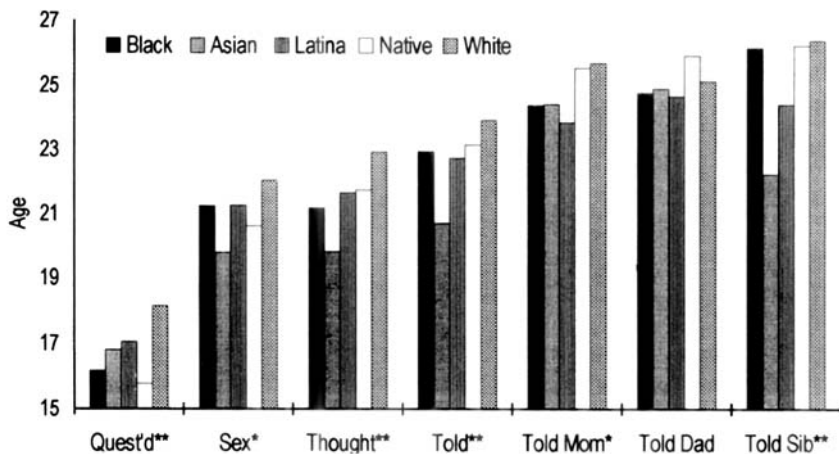


FIGURE 1. Milestones in the coming-out process by race/ethnicity: ages at which participants first reported questioning that they might be lesbian/gay/bisexual (LGB), first had sex with a woman, first thought of themselves as LGB, first told someone else that they were LGB, first told mother, first told father, and first told a sibling (** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$).

variables are given in ages and the current age of the participants would supersede the importance of individual milestones.

The questions that look at attitudes about coming out have been examined by age and race/ethnicity as well. No significant differences were found either by age or race/ethnicity for fear of people knowing one is LGB, nor for acceptance by one’s family. However, for the question about the importance of being out to heterosexuals, there is a significant difference by age [$F(8, 2363) = 9.39, p < .0001$], with feeling that it is important to be out generally increasing with age. Further, race/ethnicity was significant [$F(4, 2334) = 4.82, p < .001$], with African American/Black participants reporting feeling that it was more important to be out than the other subgroups.

DISCUSSION

With a sample of approximately 2,400, this research is one of the largest studies of participants completing a “lesbian” questionnaire ever conducted. Further, it has more demographic diversity than any other studies focusing on the lesbian experience (e.g., the size of the Asian American/Pacific Islander and Native American/American Indian samples, at 62 and 82, respectively, are larger than the total sample size of most published studies about self-identified lesbians). The method of recruiting participants was similar to other large-scale questionnaire studies, as the purpose of this study was to examine aspects of the lesbian experience that make up survey respondents. Thus, this study has similar limitations to questionnaire studies in general, and those using self-identified lesbian participants in particular.

The participants were a convenience, not random, sample and therefore the results cannot be generalized to all lesbians in the United States. As with all self-report survey data, these data need to be interpreted carefully. Nonparticipants may be different from participants in some systematic way and such differences would not be reflected in the data. Second, those who participate may not disclose full information or may misrepresent themselves in some way. This is true of all self-report data and is not specific to the current study. Nevertheless, self-identified lesbians and/or women who have had sexual relationships with women but who have no contact with lesbian communities and have no lesbian friends may have been inaccessible and the results may not be applicable to them. However, it has been suggested that women who answer surveys about lesbian and bisexual issues may be representative of those whom psychologists (and other mental health or medical professionals) are most likely to encounter as clients, patients, or research participants (Rothblum, 1994). Thus it may be possible to generalize from these self-report survey findings of lesbian and bisexual women to those U.S. lesbian and bisexual women that psychologists encounter.

The Multidimensionality of the Lesbian Experience

In the present survey of well over 2,000 respondents, prominently labeled a "Lesbian Wellness Survey," only 5 respondents self-identified as heterosexual in terms of exclusively heterosexual identity and sexual experience (and were not included in the analyses). An additional 11% of respondents identified as bisexual. This indicates that a research study aimed at lesbians in fact was completed predominantly by women who self-identified as lesbians and have had most of their sexual experiences with other women. Consistently, Sexual Orientation was the most highly correlated with Sexual Experiences with women, and this finding was true across all ethnic/racial groups. But even this correlation was only moderate, at .57 for the total sample. Thus, self-identity and sexual behavior (ratio of female to male partners) are related, but not as strongly as one may have predicted.

However, women who complete a questionnaire about lesbian issues are not highly homogeneous on other aspects of the lesbian experience. Lesbian Sexual Orientation was correlated only moderately with Outness/Disclosure ($r = .32$). All other correlations among the aspects of the lesbian experience, though significant because of the large sample size, were mild in strength ($r < .30$) with the exception of Years Out and Lesbian Activities, which was not significant. These results indicate that women who self-identify as lesbian are likely to have had a high proportion of sexual experiences with women, and also to be more out to other people. But the results also indicate that, in general, sexual orientation, length of time of self-identity as a lesbian, disclosure of sexual orientation, sexual experience with women, and participation in the lesbian communities, are not strongly linked.

These results confirm Golden's multidimensional model, in which she views sexual orientation, sexual behavior, and participation in the lesbian communities as separate dimensions. Presumably, women can fit into any combination of these orthogonal dimensions, and the results of our study show that this is the case. These results also confirm the multiplicity of identities and experiences of the

lesbian communities of the 1990s, as portrayed by the lesbian/gay media. In many ways, research on the lesbian experience has not kept pace with the changing facets of being lesbian in U.S. society.

The Importance of Race/Ethnicity in the Lesbian Experience

This is also the first study with large enough samples of lesbians of color to examine results separately by race/ethnicity. The results indicate that the lesbian experience is most interrelated for African American/Black women, and to a large extent also for Latinas and Native American/American Indian women. The correlations between sexual orientation and sexual behavior, which are moderate for all ethnic/racial groups, are most strongly correlated for these groups, and so are selected other variables for each group.

Greene (1994) has described the "triple jeopardy" of being a member of a gender, racial, and sexual minority. Thus, it is possible that women of color who identify as lesbian or bisexual are quick to search for a supportive lesbian community, and our results support this for African American/Black and Asian American women, where community activity is most strongly correlated with sexual orientation, and with outness/disclosure. It is also important to point out that African American lesbian communities in earlier parts of the century (e.g., the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s) were havens for White lesbians and served as models for the modern U.S. lesbian communities (see Faderman, 1991 for a review). Greene (1994) has also described the religiosity of African American communities, and thus African American women who identify as lesbian or bisexual may choose lesbian activities (e.g., lesbian churches) that are more affirmative of their sexual orientation.

Historically, many Native American communities have had more fluid conceptualizations of gender and sexual orientation than have Western societies (see Tafoya, 1992), and Allen (1986) lists 22 tribes that have specific names for lesbians. Greene (1994) describes how colonization and Christianity negatively affected Native American traditions, so that homophobia is part of acculturated Native American communities today. The relative acceptability of same-gender identity in Native American tribal communities may explain why in the present study, Native American respondents constituted 3% of the total sample, which is five times higher than the population of Native American females in the U.S. population (0.6%; U.S. Census data, U.S. Department of Commerce, 1984). This supports data from a large-scale study of interracial same-gender couples (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983, cited in Greene, 1994) in which Native American respondents had the highest rates of bisexual behavior of any other ethnic group. Native American women in the present study had the highest rates of lesbian community participation, but this activity was not significantly correlated with any other aspect of the lesbian experience (e.g., sexual behavior, sexual orientation). Perhaps this indicates again the fluidity of the lesbian experience for Native American women.

Espin (1984) has described gender roles in Latino communities as traditional, with women socialized to be submissive to men. At the same time, close friendships between women are tolerated (Espin, 1993). In a culture in which women are

expected to be virginal, same-gender sexual behavior, rather than lesbian community participation, may be the riskier act. This may explain why, in the present study, it was sexual behavior that was strongly correlated with years out and with outness/disclosure among Latinas.

Among the Asian American participants, it was notable that women had come out to a sibling on average 2 years before coming out to parents, whereas the reverse was the case for other ethnic groups. Chan (1993) found similar results in her study of identity development among Asian American lesbians. In that sample of 35 Asian American lesbians and gay men, three quarters of her respondents had come out to someone in their family, most frequently a sister, but only one quarter had come out to a parent. Chan has also written about the fact that some Asian cultures consider sex a private, rather than public, affair, and this may explain why the sexual-behavior variable in our study was not significantly correlated with any other variable among Asian American women.

Finally, there has been little focus, if any, on White lesbians as a cultural group. Why are aspects of the lesbian experience less interrelated among White/Caucasian women than any other ethnic/racial group except for Asian American women? Does White privilege allow White lesbians to try out new roles (e.g., same-gender sexual relationships) without necessarily disclosing this to other people or needing to find a supportive community?

Just as survey research is limited by the representativeness of the participants, we cannot tell how representative members of each ethnic/racial group are for lesbians of color in the general U.S. population. The current study indicates that race/ethnicity is an important demographic variable in the lesbian experience. More research is needed that relates culture to aspects of lesbian life, including White culture.

The present study lends some support to theories of lesbian identity formation. Participants do follow a sequence of milestones in the coming-out process and these results mirror what has been found in many previous studies (see Garnets & Kimmel, 1993, for a review). However, the sequence found does not follow some of the theorized models of the coming-out process. Whereas our participants questioned their sexual orientation early on (age 18 on average), they typically had a first sexual experience with a woman before (not after) self-identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. On average, our participants did not tell other people about their sexual orientation until after their first same-gender sexual experience. These results indicate that researchers who want to focus on the early stages of the coming-out process cannot rely on friendship networks or distribution of surveys at lesbian community events. Nevertheless, the range of ages at which participants reached the various milestones was considerable, indicating a large diversity in how women negotiate the coming-out process.

The Effect of Age on Aspects of the Lesbian Experience

In most of the previous research on lesbians, participants were almost exclusively young. Diversity in the present study allowed examination of results by age. As would be expected of any variable derived from age, the older the participant, the longer she reported being out. Older participants also reported more sexual

experiences with women and a sexual orientation somewhat more exclusively lesbian than younger participants. A number of factors may account for these differences. First, younger participants, who were out for fewer years, are earlier in the sexual identity formation process and may still be exploring their sexual orientation and engaging in sexual experiences with both women and men as they negotiate this process. Second, they may still be exploring how they choose to label themselves.

However, an alternative explanation is that sexual identity and the lesbian community have changed in recent times. Lesbians who came out in the 1960s and 1970s were often strongly identified with the feminist movement, so that the "women's community" included both lesbian and feminist events and organizations. Thus, having sex with women and using the label of "lesbian" may have different meanings for older and younger lesbians, because of the cultural and political generational differences. A number of historical and sociological studies of U.S. lesbian communities throughout the 20th century have been written and these give a flavor of the impact of gender roles, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic class, geographic region, and historic events in shaping modern-day lesbian communities (see, for example, Beemyn, 1997; Faderman, 1991; Krieger, 1983). Finally, younger participants may feel more comfortable with being bisexual, both in terms of how they label themselves and in their sexual behavior, because bisexuality is increasingly being seen as a legitimate sexual orientation rather than a passing phase (Rust, 1993).

It is important to keep in mind that age and length of time being out are related, but not synonymous. Some women come out in midlife or later; others in early adolescence or before. Thus, age may be a less salient factor for self-identified lesbians than length of time being out, and friendship networks may be diverse in age but compatible on variables such as degree of outness.

In conclusion, the present study examined the degree to which women who complete a "lesbian" questionnaire are in fact endorsing aspects of the lesbian experience, and the degree to which these aspects overlap. The five intertwined yet distinct aspects of the lesbian experience included: (a) sexual orientation, (b) length of time of self-identity as a lesbian, (c) disclosure of sexual orientation to other people, (d) sexual experience with women, and (e) participation in lesbian community events. Significant, yet mild, correlations were found among these dimensions, indicating that aspects of the lesbian experience vary from one woman to another. These findings are only a first step toward understanding the process of becoming and identifying as a lesbian in a way that reflects its complexity. Future research recruiting "lesbians," without further description, needs to be aware of the diversity and complexity of this term. We also refer the reader to an article on conducting research that is free from heterosexual bias (Herek, Kimmel, Amaro, & Melton, 1991).

These results have important implications for research that relies on questionnaire responses. Investigators cannot assume that self-identified lesbians behave in predictable ways across all aspects of lesbian experience. Thus, researchers who are studying one dimension of the lesbian experience (e.g., outness to others) need to be sure they are not assuming such behavior based on other dimensions (such as frequent participation in lesbian activities or years of being out). Nor should any assumptions be made about sexual experience with women and men based on a woman's self-label or outness. Presumably, the intercorrelations of dimensions of sexual orientation will differ for gay and bisexual men, and such research is needed.

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NOTE

1. When a member of the National Lesbian Health Care Survey came to our university to give a talk, several members of the audience were lesbians from the local community. They came because they remembered filling out the questionnaire—ten years ago—and were eager to hear the results. Recalling a quantitative survey from a decade ago indicates the level of interest by lesbians in lesbian research.

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