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Suzanne Degges-White

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Lesbian Friendships: An Exploration of Lesbian Social Support Networks

Suzanne Degges-White

Lesbians may face unique challenges when building friendships. The intersection of culturally sanctioned discrimination and familial rejection may intensify the role friendships play for lesbians and the development of social support networks. The author discusses existing research and qualitative findings and provides suggestions for counselors working with their lesbian clients.

Keywords: lesbians, social support, friendship development, social relationships

Throughout the literature addressing overall wellness and optimal functioning, strong social support networks are consistently noted as protective and productive of both psychological and physiological well-being (see Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2011, for a review). In studies specifically addressing the well-being of sexual minority individuals, the presence of a strong social support network is frequently underscored as one of the most essential components of healthy adjustment (Badgette, 2001; Kurdek, 1988, 2003; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987; Solomon, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2005; Witte, 2003). It is clear that everyone needs a little help from friends to survive and thrive, to paraphrase the Beatles. However, the development of same-sex friendships for lesbians may present unique challenges and provide unique benefits for these women.

The value and need for social support and human connection have been validated through empirical studies in both the hard sciences and the social sciences. Perhaps the most widely researched theory developed to explain the formation and deepening of relationships is Altman and Taylor's (1973) social penetration theory, which has been used to explain both platonic and romantic relationships. Invoking the metaphor of an onion, Altman and Taylor observed that everyone of us has defensive layers that are peeled away one by one as we allow others to become emotionally closer to us. As we get to know potential friends, we give them deeper access into our lives and our inner selves. As we grow more deeply connected with new friends, additional layers of our defenses and protection are

Suzanne Degges-White, Leadership and Counselor Education, University of Mississippi. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Suzanne Degges-White, Leadership and Counselor Education, University of Mississippi, 142 Guyton Hall, PO Box 1848, University, MS 38677-1848 (e-mail: sdegges@olemiss.edu).

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peeled away just as the layers of an onion might be. We are able to shed layers of self-protection and expose our authentic selves so long as our trust in others grows as we reveal ourselves. Generally contingent on mutual self-disclosure and honesty, both parties must be willing to be open and vulnerable for genuine friendship to develop. For many lesbians, however, the freedom to engage in this process with either lesbian or heterosexual women is not always guaranteed.

The need for circumspection and guarded self-disclosure may affect the willingness of lesbians to attempt to develop deep friendships with new acquaintances. This may lead lesbians to lean heavily on the members of their existing social support systems, which, in turn, may lead to strained relationships and further narrowing of their social circle. Although the cultural stigma of being an “out lesbian” appears to be lessening, many women may still be hesitant to invest significant energy into potentially tenuous platonic relationships that may not last past a certain level of self-disclosure. Galupo (2007) found that the historical pattern of lesbians’ preference for other sexual minority women as friends continues today. Whereas some women may seek to surround themselves with a support network consisting solely of other lesbians, other women may prefer to cultivate heterosexual women as friends to avoid their lesbian identities.

Just as there is a wide range of individual and societal acceptance of sexual minority individuals, there is a wide range of lesbian relationship types that may be influenced by the environment in which lesbian women develop. In this article, the topic of lesbian friendship is addressed. Following a review of the literature addressing lesbian friendships, a discussion of findings from qualitative interviews with 31 lesbian women who ranged in age from 19 to 73 years will be presented. Relevant implications for practitioners will be presented based on the literature and research findings.

HISTORICAL LESBIAN FRIENDSHIP CONSTRUCT

Lesbian history is often traced back to the period in which the early Greek poet, Sappho, wrote of passionate love between women around the 7th-century BC. Historians debate whether or not it was sexual love or deep platonic bonds that inspired Sappho’s poetry, but the intensity of the love that can exist between women was clearly celebrated, whether it referenced platonic or romantic affection. Much more recently, scholars have examined the life and poetry of Emily Dickinson and have compared portions of her body of work with that of Sappho and deemed it to be the expressions of lesbian romantic love (Zimmerman, 2009). It was suggested that the original editors of Dickinson’s work carefully revised some of the more clearly lesbian-themed poems after her death to alter pronouns in order to hide the true meaning of the verse. Similar to beliefs regarding Sappho, whether Dickinson harbored a romantic desire or deep friendship for the women to whom she addressed her letters and poetry, her work signifies passionate female friendship.

Half a century after Dickinson's death and during the turn of the 19th century, a new female friendship construct developed, referred to as "Boston marriages." This term was coined to describe the deep, intimate friendship, or social marriage, of two single women during the late 1800s and early 1900s (Broido, 2002). Originally, it was a nonsexualized descriptor because women were not considered sexual beings during Victorian times (Faderman, 1981). This changed when psychologists of that era (e.g., Freud) began treating female patients and, through their writings, revealed the true sexual nature of women. Boston marriages were then perceived much differently and were considered aberrations to be condemned. This morality-based rejection of a committed friendship, or romantic relationship, typified the experiences of lesbians throughout most of the 20th century. For some women, this has encouraged isolation with their partners away from mainstream pursuits. For others, it has meant double identities to avoid suspicion or questions from family, coworkers, or straight acquaintances and friends.

Although the purpose of this article is not to detail the historical treatment of lesbians by mainstream society, it is relevant to acknowledge that the recent repeal of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy is an antithesis to the culturally supported prejudice and the pervasive sense of shame that have been imposed on lesbians throughout much of their lives. From active oppression, including the extreme of physical violence by law officers against women who dared to dress in masculine clothing in the mid-1900s, to persistent economic oppression due to women's efforts to financially thrive on a single income in underpaid "traditional women's work," lesbians have faced challenges that have effectively segregated them from general society and isolated them from typical social or intimate support systems, such as coworkers, neighbors, and, often, their families. Thus, the historical value of social relationships and strong friendships between lesbians and their gay and bisexual counterparts cannot be overemphasized.

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND FRIENDSHIPS

Contemporary literature, both academic and popular, uses the term *families of choice* to describe the social networks developed by sexual minority individuals (Dahlheimer & Feigal, 1994; Laird, 1996). Colloquially, this term has been used to assert that the old adage, "you can't choose your family," is untrue for sexual minority individuals, who have often been cut off from their families of origin. The term and its use, however, have received some criticism (e.g., Weinstock, 2004). It has been suggested that this term negates the validity of the support networks developed by sexual minority individuals by measuring them against the traditional biological family. Thus, using this term about one's social network may express a self-owned feeling of being engaged in relationships that are "less than" their heterosexual counterparts. However, other researchers report that sexual minority individuals claim the term *families of choice* with

pride to describe their close-knit friendship and fictive kin networks (see Degges-White & Marszalek, 2006/2007). Masini and Barrett (2008) found that sexual minority individuals received more support from their friends than from their families of origin. This finding supported existing research that found aging lesbians were more reliant on friends and partners for support than heterosexuals typically were (Beeler, Rawls, Herdt, & Cohler, 1999; Dorfman et al., 1995). It is apparent that lesbians experience and define support networks differently from their heterosexual family members.

Vetere's (1982) study revealed that lesbians often had a difficult time trying to define the difference in the relationship between a friend and a lover; this offers further testament to the mutability of the relationships between lesbians. In Degges-White and Marszalek (2006/2007), lesbians expressed the same sense of complexity in their relationships with both friends and lovers, because often these two groups are populated by many of the same individuals. Friendship, within the construct of lesbian culture, can reflect multiple dimensions of connection and interaction.

LESBIAN FRIENDSHIPS

The impetus for this analysis of social relationships arose from findings of prior qualitative studies of lesbian relationships and friendships (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2011; Degges-White & Marszalek, 2006/2007). Participants in both studies were convenience samples of adult women who self-identified as lesbian and were willing to create written accounts of their experiences in social and romantic relationships. Several distinct themes were evident in the stories across the groups, including (a) the perceived unparalleled depth of the connection between two women, (b) the transition of friends to lovers and lovers to friends, (c) feelings of isolation and friendship deprivation even when in a romantic relationship, (d) the challenges unique to lesbian friendship formation, and (e) the increasing diversity of their friendship circles.

Sense of Uniquely Deep Emotional Connections

Many lesbians believe that because both they and their partners are women, as well as lovers and friends, they share a uniquely deep emotional connection that surpasses what they believe a woman can experience with a man. Research has shown that women are physiologically predisposed to develop their powers of empathy earlier and more effectively than men (Hall, 1984; Rosenthal, Hall, DiMatteo, Rogers, & Archer, 1979), so there may indeed be truth to this claim. In fact, research addressing the sexual initiation of lesbians and gay men revealed that it is experienced very differently for both genders (Schneider, 2001; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001). Young lesbians' first sexual experiences typically occur within emotional or relationship-oriented dyads, such as close friendships. Young gay men, however, typically experience their first sexual contact within an expressly sexually oriented encounter.

The blurring of friendship/romantic boundaries for lesbians today is similar to the construct of passionate friendships discussed previously within a historical context. Many young girls develop deep crushes on other girls or women, but not all of these young girls will develop a lesbian identity; however, it does serve as additional evidence of the deep platonic or erotic passion that women can experience for other women. Many of the women interviewed professed that their current relationships were better than heterosexual relationships in that they were “friends first” and that this respect for each other set the tone for a naturally egalitarian relationship. The connection of friendship prior to romantic coupling was echoed throughout the interviews underscoring the emphasis on the depth of lesbian relationships.

Going From Friends to Lovers and Then Back to Friends

The women interviewed frequently shared that the freedom to be “friends first” before becoming lovers with a partner was one of the perks of lesbian circles. When asked what made her relationship with her partner different from a heterosexual relationship, one woman rhetorically questioned, “How many straight men can honestly say that they cherished their current sexual partner as a best friend before he slept with her?” Another woman described the difference as “knowing that I am married to my best friend. Friendship pulls us through the hard times.” Lesbians of all ages valued the depth of the friendship component of their romantic partnership. One woman summed up the best thing about her relationship with her partner as “being best friends without limits. Intimacy both sexual and nonsexual.” Many women also acknowledged that the limited number of lesbians within a community often predicted that current friends might become new romantic partners and, upon relationship dissolution, future friends again.

Weinstock (2004) noted that heterosexual individuals may have difficulty comprehending the desire for lesbians to part friends when a romantic relationship comes to an end. She related the story of a heterosexual counselor who refused to accept that the couple desiring breakup counseling was truly ready to terminate their romantic relationship. The heterosexist biases toward expecting ugly breakups or hidden relationship agendas can limit the appreciation for the continuity of a transforming relationship. However, as another woman interviewed described it, “We’d be friends even if we weren’t lovers.” Lesbian relationships are complex in that the women are choosing lovers from their “friend pool” and, with the scarcity of potential lesbian friends in a community, are much more willing to maintain a friendship with an ex-partner.

Isolation and Friendship Deprivation

Although the traditional shunning of sexual minority individuals seems to be ebbing in the United States, too many lesbians still face individual rejection from their close family members. They may feel the need to keep parts of their life

hidden from public display and live double lives in which they appear straight to one set of acquaintances and lesbian to another. One woman admitted that although she had yet to find her first girlfriend or sexual partner, she maintained a straight identity with her family and coworkers. She added,

I thought I knew what lonely was before I came out to myself, but it's nothing like being a lonely lesbian. I'm too afraid to come out to straight friends, but too afraid to develop lesbian friendships in case I get "outed" if someone sees me with a group of lesbians in public.

For many lesbians, internalized homophobia can be a bigger threat to developing a support network than external homophobia. This may be true even for women who are engaged in romantic partnerships, as one woman so aptly stated, "We share an oppression that bonds us." This double life can create isolation both for lesbians who are afraid to risk losing straight friends and for "out lesbians" who have partners who are not fully open about their own sexual identity. For members of lesbian couples, the isolation may also create significant problems in their relationship. One woman shared that she and her partner seldom actually argued because they believe that "friends don't fight"; however, she acknowledged that this led to periods of communication shutdown and emotional coldness as she and her partner were unable to take their grievances to each other or to other friends for fear of indicating that their relationship was less than idyllic.

Another isolating factor for lesbians involved in relationships is the perceived risk of infidelity. One woman wished she was more free to interact with friends but noted this could create problems in her relationship. She explained, "Say I am hanging with my girlfriends who are lesbian and single, there is potential for attraction, for issues with your partner, etc." Friendships can represent infidelity risks for partnered lesbians and "outing" risks for single lesbians.

Challenges to Friendship Development

Social penetration theory, the previously referenced relationship development theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), is organized into several separate stages of relationship growth that reflect the level of self-disclosure that individuals allow. Casual conversations about the weather and the local sports teams may eventually lead to sharing one's innermost thoughts and feelings. This is how emergent friends are allowed to move more closely into people's lives. Authentic communication is built on honest self-disclosure, and this often requires a substantial leap of faith as lesbians open up about their sexual identities. As Altman and Taylor (1973) noted, both the breadth (the variety of topics discussed) and the depth (the personal significance of the topics discussed) of self-disclosure play a role in the level of commitment to the relationship. Getting beyond superficial conversation can pose challenges depending on the setting and the group.

The role of trust is significant when lesbians open up to potential heterosexual friends. When the women were asked to describe their social network, one lesbian interviewee responded with two questions, “Which one? The straight group or the lesbian group?” She further explained that she did not feel a deep enough trust in her straight friends to come out to them and risk losing her work-based friends or the friends she had known since childhood. One woman described the decision to peel away that layer of protection regarding her sexual orientation in the following manner: “There’s always that moment of truth . . . when I make the decision to expose myself. I may slip in a ‘tell-tale’ pronoun or casually say, ‘my girlfriend and I,’ or something. And then I wait . . .” Although most of the women shared that they could pretty well anticipate how an acquaintance might respond, the uncertainty can cause hesitancy in their efforts to bridge a relationship from acquaintance to friend. One woman confirmed that “even some of the most liberal women I know began to distance themselves from me once I confirmed my orientation. I began to feel like they were afraid of either ‘catching gayness’ or being seduced.” However, not every effort to cross orientation lines in friendships is met with rejection, and many lesbians have noted the increasing diversity among their friends.

Growing Diversity in Lesbian Friendship Networks

Although the literature clearly shows that historically, the social support systems of lesbians were populated by other lesbians (Galupo, 2007; Grossman, D’Augelli, & Hershberger, 2000; O’Boyle & Thomas, 1996; Rubin, 1985; Stanley, 1996), many lesbians interviewed commented on the increasingly “straight” network of friends they had created. A college-age woman noted that she really was not “positive” about the sexual orientations of all of her friends and acknowledged that unless she became attracted to one of the women, she could not see how it would matter. An older woman noted that she missed the intensely intimate friendships she had shared with lesbians in the early days when she first came out. She noted that she had been a member of several lesbian-specific women’s groups and that the depth of the friendships that had grown out of the sense of group marginalization had never been replicated in her later life.

As the United States bends toward greater acceptance and protection of sexual minorities, it seems only natural that the opportunities for cross-orientation friendships will grow. In a study of lesbians and bisexual women, Galupo (2007) found that bisexual women were more likely to have more cross-sexual orientation friends than lesbians, but many of the lesbians from the current group noted that as they matured, shared interests and mutual enjoyment in the company of potential friends mattered more than a shared sexual identity. One woman shared that once she passed through her teenage years when she had “come out with pride” over 30 years ago, it was the last time she had ever considered her sexual identity as a big deal. She noted that even though she

shared more interests with the heterosexual men she knew, she shared deeper connections with the heterosexual and lesbian women she counted as friends. Whereas some lesbians may continue to maintain predominantly lesbian networks of support, others are choosing to forge relationships with heterosexual women and couples; it is the quality of the relationship that they believe is most important.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELORS

As the cultural stigma associated with lesbian identity diminishes in tandem with the stigma associated with seeking mental health care, increasing numbers of counselors will be working with “out” lesbian clients. Glasser (1998) noted that there are only two reasons that clients seek counseling: poor, unsatisfying relationships or no relationships. Being ready to assist lesbian clients with these two presenting concerns can be a significant contribution to therapeutic progress. Implications given here address both working with individuals and working with lesbian couples.

Working With Individuals

If a lesbian client is seeking counseling to address social support network concerns, it is important for counselors to recognize the interaction between the client’s comfort with her sexual identity level and her relationships. The client may be wrestling with internalized homophobia that is limiting her willingness or ability to develop meaningful relationships. The counselor may encourage the client to develop a pictorial image of her social support network to illustrate her current challenges. As the client engages in the process of detailing her current relationships, she can be invited to explore the qualities of her existing relationships, to process past relationships, and to describe the types of relationships she would like to pursue. The client can be encouraged to develop possible plans for locating potential friends and developing friendships.

Lesbians who function within heterosexist settings, whether familial or workplace, can benefit through finding ways to connect with other lesbians in support groups, professional organizations, or advocacy institutions. Practitioners should have a reference guide to local resources as well as information about national organizations such as PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) or GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network). Encouraging connections within the lesbian community can help build a healthy self-identity for newly out lesbians as well as help build social support for newly relocated or newly single lesbians.

Additionally, it can be helpful to encourage lesbian clients to seek out both sexual minority and heterosexual friendships. By opening up the group of potential connections, these women will have a greater variety of individuals from whom to choose for pursuing friendships. The risks involved in crossing

sexual orientation lines can be well worth the payback that a strong friendship can bring.

Working With Lesbian Couples

Lesbian couples seeking counseling may be motivated by a variety of concerns related to friendships and social support. Problems may arise when couples are facing the reappearance or reintegration of ex-partners into their friendship networks. When working with partners who are wrestling with jealousy or insecurity, counselors can help reaffirm what brought them into their current relationship, what they appreciate about their partners, and how they can proactively protect the relationship from external challenges in the form of friendships with ex-partners.

Many lesbian couples admit having difficulty in finding productive ways of handling disagreements and can benefit from education on communication skills. Some lesbians may feel that they must maintain the image of best friends while working under the erroneous assumption that “friends don’t fight.” Other lesbian couples may have limited external support networks, which can result in a tendency to overwhelm each other with all of the negative feelings built up from their external interactions. Counselors can provide training in fair fighting and negotiating skills for either type of couple. It can be important to encourage lesbian couples to develop friendships outside of the partnership. Counselors can encourage lesbian couples to develop shared friendships with other couples, including both sexual minority couples and heterosexual couples. This provides social support as well as social outlets, which can take away some of the strain of trying to be everything to one’s partner.

If a lesbian couple seeks counseling as they move from being coupled to being single, it may be helpful to explore and validate the fluidity of their relationship history. Invite the couple to talk about early connections, the way the friendship began, and the shared activities they enjoyed. Ask them to verbalize the value they found in maintaining the friendship and what they had learned about themselves through their involvement in their relationship. According to Surrey (1991), when individuals are able to explore and discuss their relationship development and progress, they may be able to gain greater understanding of themselves in relation to others. This can direct self-growth and the enhancement of current and future friendships and romantic relationships.

CONCLUSION

As there is a new cultural shift in tolerance and institutional acceptance of lesbian women from the local stage to the military stage, a greater lifting of individual oppression and discrimination may follow. This may transform the ways in which lesbians create their support networks and how they choose candidates for intimate friendships. Thus, all areas of research that focus on

the lived experience of sexual minority women within the contemporary period are important to follow.

As many lesbians shared through this study, the social webs in which they move have changed over the past decade as public acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals has increased. Just as interethnic marriages have moved from criminal status to cultural nonevent for much of the United States, the barriers met by lesbian couples at the church or justice-of-the-peace's office may also evaporate with time. However, so long as lesbians face personal, often familial, threats to psychological or physical well-being, there is a call to better understand and find ways to facilitate the social connections and ties that keep them emotionally—and, at times, physically—safe.

It has been made clear through the research of the past few decades that social support is key to optimal well-being and adaptation over the life course. Although women may rely on their friends for support more than men do, it is especially true that lesbians rely on their close friends and their partners more than heterosexuals do. Thus, counselors will benefit from understanding and being prepared to help their lesbian clients maintain and enhance their friendship networks. It is important to remember the words that one woman shared, "Friendship . . . it's what stands when the rest goes bad."

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