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AMERICA'S SHIFTING OF PERSPECTIVES ON FEMALE HOMOSEXUALITY: 1970S TO THE PRESENT

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ABSTRACT

Homosexuality has been a subject of controversy since before it was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) in 1973 as a mental disease. Female homosexuality holds special significance because women have generally been victims of sexism, both subtle and blatant, which has led to harmful effects, whether through individual or interpersonal discrimination (Angela R. Gillem et al, 2000). These issues began to be recognized when the second wave of feminism came into play, also known as the Women's Movement (Biaggio, 2000). There have been few investigative studies focusing on attitudes toward homosexual individuals, and fewer that look into gender differences in terms of how people perceive homosexuals. There are extremely few studies focused specifically on Lesbianism. This literature review will look at published research that focuses on female homosexuality and will examine shifts in perspectives that have occurred over the past thirty years. It will also provide suggestions for the next steps needed to increase acceptance of female homosexuality in American culture.

INTRODUCTION

Homosexuality is a concept debated by many people. Homosexuality, when not understood, is usually feared or persecuted. At one time, homosexuals were rated the third most dangerous people in the United States (Aguero, Bloch, & Byrne 1984). Prior to 1973, being gay was seen as a mental illness. Therapies were used to "cure the disease" of homosexuality, including conversion therapy and reparative therapy. These methods allegedly served to change homosexuals' orientation to heterosexual (Steigerwald & Janson, 2003).

Issues surrounding female homosexuality are important to identify and address. Increased awareness and understanding can lead to acceptance. Addressing perceived differences regarding sexual

orientation between men and women may be a productive beginning. Research suggests that sexual orientation in men is derived from how they become aroused. Women, however, do not have a set arousal pattern, and this allows for their sexual behavior to be seen as more fluid (Bailey, 2009). This literature review examines the history of changes in scientific investigations surrounding factors of female homosexuality, and discusses how shifts in societal perspectives affect homosexual women's behaviors.

Women have historically been caregivers and nurturers, while men assumed the role of the financial caretakers. When men are no longer available, the woman's ability to support herself becomes questionable. Morgan and Brown (1993) argue that employment patterns for women show 91% of lesbians work outside the home. Because gay women are not dependent on men, they are more likely to work to support themselves. Although more than 50% of women work outside the home, the notion that marriage to a man will provide financial security for those who are heterosexual persists (Morgan & Brown, 1993). A lesbian couple must assume that because women make less than men on average, it is not likely one woman in the relationship will earn enough to support both women (Morgan & Brown, 1993).

Another issue for lesbian couples is having and raising children. Green (1982) argues that one primary concern is the well being of the children and whether having a lesbian mother would make the child want to experiment with "alternative lifestyles." Green (1982) conducted interviews with children with lesbian mothers and attempted to discover any sexual identity conflict. The results showed that five of the 21 children ages 5-14, identified as heterosexual and the children who were too young to distinctly assess sexual orientations showed no sexual identity conflict (Green 1982).

Perspectives of Women's Sexuality

When children are very young, they begin to develop ideas about gender. When children display characteristics of being gender atypical, which is acting in ways distinctly normative for the opposite gender, they receive negative reactions from their peers (Lee & Troop-Gordon, 2011). Lee and Troop-Gordon distributed questionnaire packets to students and teachers at various American elementary

schools. They evaluated negative peer treatment and friendships of the children. Teachers were then asked to fill out surveys regarding the children's gender atypicality; they found evidence for dichotomies that support traditional stereotypes. They also noted that in childhood we begin to formulate beliefs about what is "normal" and what is not. We continue to hold these beliefs into adulthood. Such dichotomous views may be found in perceptions of sexual orientation, as well as gender roles. Stefurak, Mehta, & Taylor (2010) contend that men hold more negative beliefs about homosexuality in general than women. However, according to Wilkinson (2008), women who hold traditional beliefs about femininity have increasingly more negative attitudes toward lesbians than those with less traditional beliefs about femininity.

Baber (2000) argues that one problem with looking at "women's sexuality" is that the research populations are typically homogeneous. Much of the research on women's sexuality has been drawn from samples that focus on white, middle-class women. Very few investigations include diversity of factors such as age, race, class, and experience. Studies have also claimed that women may not have a specific sexual orientation because women focus more on the emotional aspects of relationships, as opposed to actual sexual experiences (Bailey, 2009). Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1995) interviewed women who identified originally as heterosexual and now identify as homosexual; they also interviewed women who originally identified as homosexual and now identify as heterosexual. They found that women have a tendency toward fluidity in their sexual orientation. This fluidity is also noted in terms of sexual arousal.

Chivers *et al.* (2002) show gender differences in arousal by observing the sexual patterns of homosexual men, heterosexual men, heterosexual women, and homosexual women. In this observation, men were very specific in their sexual arousal patterns. Gay men were aroused when shown homosexual erotica and straight men responded to heterosexual erotica films. Women, both lesbian and straight, were aroused equally by both videos. These results suggest that objects of arousal influence men's sexual orientation and women's sexual orientation appears to be more flexible (Chivers *et al.*, 2002).

Because of the lack of research on lesbian women exclusively, it is not known how sexual identity influences attraction and arousal in homosexual women. Laura Brown (1995) notes that a lesbian

identity may be attributed to a woman if she behaves in a way characteristically and culturally defined as lesbian, such as being aggressive or masculine. Baber (2000) discusses instances in which women may feel attracted to members of the same sex but still identify as heterosexual. Also, she notes how two women may cohabitate and share an emotionally close relationship without identifying as lesbians.

Nichols (2004) claims that sexual orientation takes on different meanings for women than for men. For women, romantic love and sexual desire are distinct from each other, and less linked to the gender of a particular person. She notes that women are more bisexual in nature, and, because of that, can fall in love with people to whom they are not strongly attracted. Because bisexuality is more accepted among women, especially younger women, fluidity has become more visible. The phenomenon has become so common, it has been given the name of LUGS on college campuses, “Lesbian Until Graduation” (Nichols, 2004).

According to Goldstein and Horowitz (2003), theories such as Ego Psychology and American Object-Relations Theory reflected a pathological perspective of lesbianism. Charles Socarides (1988), an influential force in supporting the American Psychiatric Association’s classification of homosexuality as a mental illness before it was removed from the DSM in 1973, became the primary spokesperson for post-Freudian antigay theorists. He viewed lesbianism as reflecting a pathological sexual object choice, having a disturbance of gender identity, and developmental stagnation.

Holding the same position as Socarides, Elaine Siegel (1998) viewed lesbianism as a “serious disturbance that originates from early failures in the differentiation and practicing subphases of separation-individuation” (p.3). Siegel argues that her lesbian patients suffered from incomplete separation from the mother and deep feelings of “castration and genital loss.” While anecdotally studying women diagnosed with either narcissistic or borderline personality disorders, Siegel claimed, “insufficient doll play and other imitative games foreshadowed adult female behavior and were the cause of female homosexuality” (Siegel, 1998, p.4). Initially, McDougall (1979, 1980) viewed lesbianism as a developmental failure, a “fictitious sexual identity” that maintains “psychic survival” through a girl’s

unconscious identification with her father. McDougall later differentiated between pathology in homosexuals and those who were creative and functional (1995).

Recently, much research has focused on “Lesbian Gender”. This term refers to the desire of lesbians to identify as either “butch” or “femme” (Rifkin, 2002). Butch lesbians are more masculine and have traits characteristically linked to being male. Femme lesbians are more feminine and exhibit traits linked to heterosexual women. According to Levitt and Hiestand (2004), the core finding in the experiences of butch women is that their gender identity results from a desire to remain genuine to an internal sense of self while dealing with social pressures to be feminine. In a similar study by Levitt *et al.* (2003), femme women’s core value is their personal integrity as they try to be acknowledged as real lesbians by the lesbian community.

According to Levitt and Hiestand (2004), when the Women’s Liberation Movement started to gain momentum in the late 1960s, it rejected butch and femme roles. These concepts were viewed as mimicking the patriarchal relationships feminists were trying to replace. Levitt and Hiestand state that “Butch women were seen as being the same as men and femmes were accused of objectifying themselves”. Because of this, most butch and femme lesbians began to consider themselves an androgynous part of feminist culture, as that label was preferable to being excluded from the movement (Levitt & Hiestand, 2004).

Lesbian Relationships

Gordon (2006) discusses how lesbian women during the lesbian feminist movement (late 60s early 70s) attempted to resist normative heterosexual roles. These women fell into two groups when pondering the roles of men and women. One group felt men were seen as more sexual than women, and because of that, asked women out on dates and paid for dates; men also determined the context and form of sexual practices. The other group felt those norms were more prevalent in the 50’s and 60’s, and are now changing, so there are no set roles women follow, thus allowing them more freedom. After interviewing lesbian women, Gordon found they also have no set rules for dating, and lack clearly defined

behavioral roles in the gay community. Sexual behavior in the lesbian community has also been a focus of recent research.

Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found that lesbian couples experienced fewer sexual encounters than couples of other sexual orientations. By the 1990s, the term “lesbian bed death” had become well known in the gay community as a source of jokes, consternation, and intense debate (Nichols, 2004). One explanation for “lesbian bed death” is inhibited sexual desire resulting from internalized homophobia, meaning that lesbians believe their feelings and behaviors to be inappropriate. This leads to decreased desire for sex with their partners. Another possibility is that lesbians share an emotional connection and are so close that sex is not as important (Nichols, 2004). In contrast, Iasenza (2002) notes that lesbians spend, on average, more time on the actual sexual encounter than heterosexuals.

Within the Lesbian community, Levitt and Hiestand (2004) found that lesbian gender identities such as “butch” and “femme” helped their respondents structure romantic and interpersonal interactions. They found that most femmes preferred to be with women who were butch and butch women, although they appreciated the look of other women who looked like them, had romantic attractions for women who were femme. Femmes had a hard time convincing the gay community they were, in fact, “real lesbians” and that their attraction to “butches” did not mean they were really attracted to men. On the contrary, lesbians who were femme were well aware of the pressures on butch women to betray what they felt was their internal gender and, with all the dangers of homophobia and harassment, femme women admired butch women’s courage and were upset when their butch partners bowed to the pressures of displaying a feminine aesthetic (Levitt and Hiestand, 2004).

CAREER AND FAMILY LIFE

Career

According to Morgan and Brown (1993), most lesbians work outside the home, likely driven by the need to survive. As stated earlier, heterosexual women have the option for dependency on a man whereas lesbians do not. Morgan and Brown (1993) note that women earn less money than men.

Therefore, it would be difficult for one woman in a lesbian relationship to earn enough to support her and her partner. Bradford and Ryan (1987) suggest most lesbians earn considerably less for their level of education and work experience than some groups of heterosexual women, thus making homosexual women an underemployed and underpaid population regardless of the norms for women's wages in the United States (Bradford & Ryan, 1987).

Brown and Morgan (1993) go on to compare lesbian and heterosexual women's attitudes towards traditional and nontraditional employment for women. They suggest that, because of economic reality, lesbians may consider fields aimed more toward men. Jobs traditionally done by men serve as one of the ways for homosexual women to bridge gender wage gaps and diminish effects of not having a man's higher wages and "better economic opportunity" (Brown & Laura, 1993).

To understand lesbian career development, we must also examine how homosexual women mitigate the stressors that being in the workplace produce. According to Fassinger (1996), lesbian women must deal with discrimination that heterosexual women do not, because of their sexual orientation. Aside from the sexism women deal with in the workplace, lesbians must also navigate interactions with coworkers and administrators who may display homophobia and heterosexism. Homosexual women often do not have role models in their career fields because women stay "closeted" to avoid discrimination at work; this phenomenon has been noted as having a "negative impact on career development" (Fassinger, 1991, 1996; Kimmel & Garnets, 1991).

Levine and Leonard (1984) note that women will "pass" as heterosexual in order to escape discrimination in the workplace. They use the terms "formal" and "informal" to describe the kinds of discrimination lesbians face. "Formal" discrimination utilizes "institutionalized procedures to restrict officially conferred work rewards, such as promotions, salary increases, or increased job responsibilities". A significant problem identified by lesbians in the workplace is having been fired because of their sexual orientation (Levine & Leonard, 1984).

"Informal" discrimination is the lack of policies that prohibit harassment by co-workers or supervisors. Verbal harassment was the leading form of this kind of discrimination. Many women

described being the victims of “gossip, taunting, and ridicule.” The second leading form of informal discrimination was nonverbal harassment, such as stares and damages to personal belongings. About one-tenth of the women reported being physically harassed because of their sexual orientation (Levine & Leonard, 1984).

Family Life

Discrimination has also plays a role in Lesbian family life. Patterson (2009) notes “for many years, the family relationships of lesbian and gay parents and their children were not legally recognized in most parts of the United States, or in most countries of the world.” Patterson considers three “interrelated areas of law” that pertain to the legal status of lesbian parents. These three areas are: 1) legal recognition of same-sex couples, 2) status of parental sexual orientation involving child custody and visitation, and 3) the status of parental sexual orientation involving adoption and foster care (Patterson, 2009).

According to Riley (1975), “until recently the existence of lesbian mothers was almost unrecognized in American society, for most people believe that homosexuality is inconsistent with the ability or desire to procreate.” Falk (1993) notes that in the last ten years, lesbianism and motherhood gained acknowledgment from both legal and scientific communities as “not being mutually exclusive” (Falk, 1993). Falk recognizes ways in which lesbians can become mothers, including adoption, artificial insemination, heterosexual intercourse through marriage, or having intercourse with a man for the purpose of getting pregnant (Falk, 1993). It is estimated that, in 1979, lesbian mothers who lived with their children ranged from 1.5 million to 5 million in the United States (Davies, 1979; Rivera, 1979).

Herman (1996) notes that 10% of all women are lesbians and, of that 10 %, 20-30% have children. The recent wave of lesbian motherhood is creating what Herman calls the “lesbian baby boom.” Herman questions if this increase indicates success of the gay liberation movement, or “surrenders to the rules and regulations of femininity, maternity being first among them” (p. 84).

The ability of lesbian women to raise children has long been a subject of controversy. In terms of custody battles from previous relationships, unsupported assumptions about lesbian women suggest they

are “less maternal than heterosexual counterparts and thus are poor mothers” (Miller, Jacobson, and Bigner 1981; Moses and Hawkins 1982; Mucklow and Phelan 1979), or that children are more likely to be sexually abused by the biological lesbian mother, her partner, or one of her acquaintances (Davies 1979; Hall 1978; Harris 1977).

Another unsupported assumption about lesbian women, used in the argument to deny them custody, is the notion that homosexual mothers are mentally ill (Falk, 1993). However, research by Thompson, McCandles, and Strickland (1971) suggest that lesbians are more self-confident, independent, composed, and self-sufficient than heterosexual women. Siegelman (1972) argued that lesbian women score higher on tender-mindedness and lower on depression, anxiety and submission than their heterosexual counterparts.

Caution needs to be exerted when reviewing the literature in this area. Weeks, Derdeyn, and Langmon (1975) observed children raised by homosexual parents and found evidence of sexual and emotional difficulties. Results of this study, however, could have been affected by the difficulties caused by the divorce of the participants’ parents, as opposed to parental homosexuality. Green (1982) found that divorce influenced the mental health of children, when evaluating children with lesbian mothers. Patterson (2009) found that a child’s adjustment was related to “family process variables such as parental relationship satisfaction,” and families that provide supportive environments helped their children to grow and develop (p.158).

CONCLUSION

This literature review has examined changes in the way female homosexuality has been perceived over the past thirty years. Before homosexuality was taken out of the DSM in 1973, it was seen a mental disorder and treated as such. Over the past few decades, more research has shown no significant differences between heterosexual women and homosexual women. There has also been no significant difference found in how lesbian women and heterosexual women handle relationships. Some theorists, such as Socarides and Siegel (1988, 1998), believed homosexuality among men and women was due to

problems with their identity as well as suffering from a developmental hold (1998). Siegel argued that the women she counseled were homosexual due to ineffective play in their younger years (1986).

Studies have shown that women's sexuality has been seen as more fluid and changeable than men's and conclude that women focus more on emotional aspects of relationships as opposed to the physical (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). With intimacy, heterosexual couples and lesbian women have been compared attempting to understand the notion of "lesbian bed death". Lesbian women may experience less frequent sexual encounters, but spend more time on the sex acts and more of their encounters lead to orgasms than with heterosexual couples (Nichols, 2004).

The careers of lesbians, according to the researchers, are focused on survival. Evidence suggests that because lesbian women don't have the option to marry a man and depend on his income, they are more likely to seek "nontraditional" jobs. Homosexual women have also had to handle being victims of "informal" and "formal" discrimination by supervisors or co-workers. The family life of lesbian women, researchers find, ranges from not thinking it possible to desire a family to trying to discover if the parents' lifestyle has negative effects on the children (Marilyn Riley, 1975; Charlotte Patterson, 2009).

From research over the past forty years, it is clear that the shift in perspectives in America concerning female homosexuality has been a productive one. One problem with much of the published research is that few studies have been conducted on minority women. Samples observed have usually been middle-class, white lesbians. Future research on gender development, relationship development, sexual behavior and family life from minority women could enrich the literature and our understanding of female homosexuality.

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