

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Aging

Research and Clinical Perspectives

**Douglas Kimmel, Tara Rose, and
Steven David, Editors**

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Sexuality in the Lives of Aging Lesbian and Bisexual Women

Linda Garnets and Letitia Anne Peplau

This chapter considers sexuality in the lives of aging lesbian and bisexual women. Current scientific knowledge about sexuality in aging lesbian and bisexual women is very limited. Middle-aged and older lesbians are not included in general studies of aging, which focus on heterosexuals, nor are they typically included in studies of lesbian issues, which focus on younger sexual minority women (Peplau, Fingerhut, & Beals, 2004). Available studies on lesbian aging are descriptive, cross-sectional surveys (e.g., Almvig, 1982; Bradford & Ryan, 1991; Deevey, 1990; Kehoe, 1988; Raphael & Robinson, 1980; Sang, 1991). Convenience samples are the norm and underrepresent many segments of the lesbian and bisexual population. Existing studies tend to sample middle- and upper-middle-class, well-educated white women from urban areas. Women who are not open about their sexual orientation or connected to lesbian organizations are largely absent from available research.

Two perspectives provide a useful background for understanding lesbian sexuality. The first is a gender perspective that emphasizes commonalities in the experiences of women regardless of sexual orientation and differences between the sexualities of women and men. There is growing evidence that human sexuality takes somewhat different forms in women and men (Peplau, 2003). Increasingly, researchers with diverse theoretical orientations have shown that women's sexuality tends to be relationship-focused, with love and intimacy typically playing a more prominent role in sexuality for women than for men (Golden, 1996). Consider, for example, how two participants in Sears's (1989, p. 425) study defined a homosexual. A lesbian explained that this is a person who "has intimate love for a person of the same sex." A gay man, in contrast, defined a homosexual as "someone who has sex with the same sex." What these comments illustrate is that men are more likely to sexualize and women to romanticize their sexual orientation. Analyses that consider men and women

together run the risk of taking men's experience as the standard and missing important aspects of women's sexuality. Consequently, we have proposed a new paradigm for understanding women's sexualities and sexual orientation that acknowledges women's distinctive life experiences (Peplau & Garnets, 2000). One implication is that older lesbian and bisexual women's sexuality may more closely resemble the pattern of adult development of women in general rather than the pattern of gay or heterosexual men (Kertzner & Sved, 1996).

A second perspective relevant to understanding women's sexual lives concerns historical and cultural change. Lesbians from different generations have grown, developed, lived, and worked in differing social environments. Each generation of lesbians is influenced by different political and historical forces and a distinctive set of social attitudes and opportunities (Parks, 1999). Older lesbians today reached adulthood prior to the 1960s, before the gay rights movement. World War II brought many lesbians together for the first time in the armed forces. In urban centers, gay and lesbian bars provided a place to meet others and socialize, but they were raided repeatedly, and patrons were arrested. In sharp contrast, the generation of women entering midlife today has lived in a world of greater tolerance for homosexuality. Political and social efforts by gay rights groups have increased public awareness of lesbian and bisexual communities, expanded civil rights protection, and lessened social constraints on the lives of lesbian, gay men, and bisexuals (Boxer, 1997). Lesbians are openly becoming mothers, positive models of lesbians exist in the media, there are many well-developed lesbian communities, and same-sex marriage has become a reality in some parts of the country. Unfortunately, we know little about how these major social shifts have affected the sexual lives of lesbian and bisexual women.

This chapter reviews available research on the sexuality of aging lesbian and bisexual women. We begin by considering how sexuality is conceptualized and presenting research on general characteristics of lesbian sexuality. Next we review empirical studies on sexuality, first in lesbian relationships and then for single lesbians. Available scientific information about life span issues and about the sexuality of bisexual women is presented. We conclude with a discussion of sexual health and problems among lesbians.

Conceptualizations of Sexuality

How should lesbian and bisexual sexuality be conceptualized? Many have argued that conventional definitions of sex, based largely on the experiences of heterosexual men, are problematic (McCormick, 1994). In Western cultural

traditions, sex is what you do with your genitals, and real sex means heterosexual intercourse. Some sexual acts are labeled foreplay, suggesting that they don't count as real sex. Critics argue that using a male norm of penile penetration as the standard for sex creates problems for understanding women's sexuality, particularly for women who are intimate with other women. In addition, a focus on genital sex carries an age bias because it is more likely to apply to younger than to midlife or older people, who engage in more varied nongenital sexual behavior (Robinson, 1983).

How might researchers more fruitfully conceptualize women's sexuality? A study that allowed lesbian participants to define sexual activity as they wanted suggests that a broader conceptualization might be useful (Loulan, 1987). More than 90% of lesbians in this sample included hugging, cuddling, and kissing as sexual activities. More than 80% listed touching and kissing breasts and holding body to body. Similarly, in a survey of 2,525 lesbian and bisexual readers of the *Advocate* (Lever, 1995), many women were enthusiastic about nongenital activities. On a five-point scale from "I love it" to "I don't like it and won't do it," 91% of lesbians said they love hugging, caressing, and cuddling, 82% love French kissing, and 74% love just holding hands. Reflecting on this issue, Rothblum (1994b, p. 634) asked whether lesbians "can reclaim erotic, non-genital experiences as real sex." Future research should examine more closely what lesbian women consider sex and then, using women's own definitions, determine the frequency of sexual behavior over the course of lesbian lives.

Lesbian Sexuality

What are some of the general characteristics of lesbian sexuality identified in empirical studies? The majority of lesbians have had sex with fewer than 10 female partners during their lifetime (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Lever, 1995). The frequency of sexual activity for lesbians diminishes with increasing age, as it does for heterosexual women (Herbert, 1996; Loulan, 1987). Nonetheless, many lesbians are sexually active in midlife, and sex continues to be an important part in the lives of older women (Deevey, 1990; Raphael & Robinson, 1980). The majority of midlife lesbians reported being sexually active with a partner (71% in the Cole & Rothblum 1991 study and 74% in the Sang 1993 study). Bell and Weinberg (1978) found that although older lesbians were less sexually active than younger lesbians, the majority were still sexually active, primarily with age-peer partners.

Lesbian sex can include a range of activities (Bell & Weinberg, 1978). More than 50% of lesbians in Loulan's (1987) study reported giving and receiving the following activities with their partner: touch breasts, kiss breasts, lick breasts, put fingers in vagina, have oral sex, put tongue in vagina, and masturbate partner. The most commonly reported sexual activities are manual-genital contact and oral-genital stimulation (Hurlbert & Apt, 1993; Lever, 1995). In a few older studies approximately one-third of lesbian women used tribadism, or body contact, as a means of achieving orgasm (Jay & Young, 1977; Saghir & Robins, 1973). In the survey of *Advocate* readers (Lever, 1995), women in their teens and 20s and some in their 30s were more experimental with adventurous sex practices (e.g., group sex, strap-on dildos, or bondage) than older women.

Lesbian sexual expression typically is partner focused. Research suggests that, compared with heterosexuals, lesbian partners share more equally in the initiation of sex (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Lever, 1995). Leigh (1989) found that the most important predictor of sexual frequency for coupled lesbians was a desire to please the partner. This is consistent with Lever's (1995) finding that lesbians enjoy caressing a partner's breasts and sucking her nipples more than receiving such attention themselves. In a study of lesbians who had had sex with both men and women (Schaefer, 1977), lesbians reported that sex with women was more tender, considerate, partner related, and excitingly diversified and less aggressive.

Many lesbians have had substantial heterosexual arousal and experience. More than three-quarters of lesbians report having had heterosexual intercourse at some point in their lives (Herbert, 1996). Almost half the older lesbians who have been studied have been married sometime during their lives (Beeler et al., 1999; Bradford & Ryan, 1991; Deevey, 1990).

There appear to be some differences between the sexual experiences of lesbian and heterosexual women. Masturbation occurs more frequently among lesbians than among heterosexual women (Hurlbert & Apt, 1993; Kinsey et al., 1953; Laumann et al., 1994). Moreover, when compared with heterosexual women, lesbians were found to be more sexually arousable (Coleman, Hoon, & Hoon, 1983) and more comfortable using erotic language with a partner (Wells, 1990). Lesbians appear to spend more time with whole-body stimulation (kissing, hugging, touching, and holding) than do heterosexuals, who may be more focused on genital contact and orgasm (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Masters & Johnson, 1979).

Comparative studies also suggest that lesbians have orgasms more often during sexual interactions than do heterosexual women. Kinsey et al. (1953)

compared heterosexual women who had been married for 5 years with lesbians who had been sexually active for 5 years. Among these women, 17% of the heterosexuals compared with only 7% of the lesbians never had an orgasm. Only 40% of the heterosexual women had orgasm easily (i.e., 90-100% of the time they had sex), compared with 68% of the lesbians. As Kinsey suggested, these findings may reflect differences in the knowledge and sexual techniques of women's partners. But differences in the emotional quality of sexual experiences may be equally important. Other studies also reported high rates of orgasm among lesbians (Coleman, Hoon, & Hoon, 1983; Lever, 1995; Loulan, 1987; Matthews, Tartaro, & Hughes, 2003).

There appears to be a paradox in lesbian relationships. On one hand, lesbian relationships may increase the likelihood of orgasm. On the other hand, many lesbians emphasize their enjoyment of nongenital kissing and cuddling, activities that are not necessarily associated with orgasm. A better understanding of these issues is needed.

Sexuality in Adult Lesbian Couples

Research indicates that personal relationships constitute an important context for sexual expression for many lesbians. A substantial proportion of lesbian women are currently in a romantic relationship (see review in Peplau & Beals, 2004). For example, in a large-scale survey of lesbians, 65% of women reported being in a same-sex primary relationship (Morris, Waldo, & Rothblum, 2001). A recent survey of more than 2,600 African American lesbians found that 41% of women were in a committed relationship (Battle et al, 2002). Most research on sexuality among lesbians has studied partner relationships. This section reviews these empirical findings about sexuality in the relationships of adult lesbians, focusing on sexual satisfaction and its correlates, sexual frequency, the controversy surrounding the meaning of *sex* for lesbians, and sexual exclusivity in lesbian relationships.

Sexual Satisfaction and Its Correlates

Most lesbians report being highly satisfied with the sexual aspects of their current relationships (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Peplau, Cochran, & Mays, 1997; Peplau et al., 1978). Comparative studies find much similarity between the sexual satisfaction of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples. Illustrative find-

ings come from the American Couples Study, which surveyed several thousand lesbian, gay, married, and cohabiting heterosexual couples (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). Roughly two-thirds of lesbians, gay men, wives, and husbands were classified as satisfied with their sex life. In another comparative study, Kurdek (1991) found no differences in sexual satisfaction scores between lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples.

Greater sexual satisfaction is associated with greater sexual frequency (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Peplau et al., 1978). However, sexual satisfaction in women has been found to be more strongly associated with emotional factors, particularly the quality of the relationship, rather than with physical sexual variables, such as frequency of sexual interactions or orgasm (Hawton, Gath, & Day, 1994; Herbert, 1996; Hurlbert & Apt, 1993). Closeness appears to be an important motive for sex among lesbians. Leigh (1989) asked homosexuals and heterosexuals to rate reasons for having sex. Results indicated that women (both lesbian and heterosexual) attached greater importance to expressing emotional closeness than did men. A sample of Dutch lesbian couples responded to a list of possible reasons for cuddling and having sex (Schreurs, 1993). The motives for having sex could not be distinguished from motives for cuddling. Moreover, sexual interaction and cuddling were rated more highly when they were aimed at feeling physically and emotionally close rather than sexual arousal or the wish for an orgasm.

Finally, research has consistently demonstrated that couples who are happy with their sex life have happier relationships in general (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Kurdek, 1991; Peplau, Cochran, & Mays, 1997).

Sexual Frequency

How sexually active are lesbians, in general, and how important is sexuality in their lives? Several studies have assessed the frequency of sexual behavior among lesbian women in a current relationship (e.g., Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Bryant & Demian, 1994; Lever, 1995; Loulan, 1987). In an early study, Jay and Young (1977) asked lesbians how often they "have sex" in their relationship. There was wide variation in sexual frequency in this sample. One percent of women reported having sex more than once a day, 4% once a day, and the majority, 57%, had sex several times a week. Twenty-five percent of women had sex once a week and 8% less often. For 5% of women, sex was not currently a part of their relationship. A national study of 398 black lesbian women in committed relationships also asked about sexual frequency during the past month (Peplau, Cochran, &

Mays, 1997)- In this sample, 11% of women indicated having sex more than three times a week, 47% indicated one to three times per week, and 41% of women reported having sex less than once a week. These data are useful in illustrating the variability in sexual frequency among lesbian couples but cannot be seen as general base rates because all studies use unrepresentative samples.

Sexual frequency declines over time in lesbian relationships (Loulan, 1987; Peplau et al., 1978). Data from the American Couples Study are illustrative. Among women who had been together 2 years or less, 76% had sex one to three times a week or more than three times a week. Among couples together for 2-10 years, the comparable figure was 37%, and among couples together more than 10 years, only 27% had sex one to three times a week or more than three times a week. Both the partners' age and the duration of the relationship contributed to this pattern, but relationship length was a stronger factor than age for lesbians. Lever's (1995) survey of *Advocate* readers also found that sexual frequency was negatively associated with the length of time that a lesbian couple had been together. In the first year of a relationship, a third of couples had sex three or more times a week, in the second year this declined to 20%, and after the second year it was 10%.

Lesbian couples report having sex less often than either heterosexual or gay male couples. (For a recent exception, see Matthews, Tartaro, & Hughes, 2003, who found no differences in sexual frequency in a demographically matched sample of lesbian and heterosexual women.) The American Couples study compared sexual frequency among lesbian, gay male, and heterosexual couples who had been together less than 2 years, 2-10 years, or more than 10 years. At each stage, lesbians reported having sex less often. More recently, Lever (1995, p. 25) compared responses from lesbians who participated in the *Advocate* survey with national data on heterosexuals. She concluded that "after only two years together, lesbians have sex less frequently than married heterosexual couples do after ten years."

The Controversy over Lesbian Sexuality

The empirical finding that lesbian couples have sex less frequently than other couples and that sexual frequency declines rapidly in lesbian relationships is sometimes called "lesbian bed death." The interpretation of this pattern is controversial (see review by Fassinger & Morrow, 1995). A common suggestion has been that gender socialization leads women to repress and ignore sexual feelings and that the impact of this socialization is magnified in a relationship with two

female partners (Nichols, 1987). Another view has been that women have difficulty being sexually assertive or taking the lead in initiating sexual activities with a partner, leading to low levels of sexual activity. Blumstein and Schwartz (1983, p. 214) suggested that "lesbians are not comfortable in the role of sexual aggressor and it is a major reason why they have sex less often than other kinds of couples." A third possibility is based on the presumption that men are generally more interested in sex than women. In this view, both lesbian and heterosexual women may experience low sexual desire because of work pressures, the demands of raising children, health issues, and so on. In heterosexual couples, the male partner's greater level of desire and willingness to take the initiative in sex encourage women to engage in sexual activity. This does not occur in lesbian couples. Efforts to test these possibilities systematically would be useful.

A further issue concerns whether low sexual frequency should be considered a problem, as is suggested by the term "lesbian bed death." Fassinger and Morrow (1995, p. 200) challenged this view: "Is lack of sexual desire or genital activity a 'problem' in a loving and romantic woman-to-woman relationship? From whose point of view?... Who determines what is sexually normative for lesbians?" Indeed, both historical analyses of 19th-century American women (e.g., Faderman, 1981) and contemporary accounts of lesbians highlight the existence of passionate and enduring relationships between women that do not involve genital sexuality. Rothblum and Brehony (1993) have reclaimed the 19th-century term "Boston marriage" to describe romantic but asexual relationships between lesbians today. Such relationships call into question the assumption that an absence of genital sex is necessarily a sign of a dysfunctional relationship.

Sexual Exclusivity and Sexual Openness

Among contemporary lesbian couples, sexual exclusivity appears to be the norm (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Peplau et al., 1978). The most common relationship pattern among lesbians is serial monogamy (Kehoe, 1988). In a survey by Bryant and Demian (1994), 91% of lesbians said their current relationship was sexually exclusive, and 90% said they had never broken their agreement about being monogamous. In a recent study of 160 lesbians from Vermont who obtained civil union status for their relationships (Campbell, 2002), 92% of women reported that their relationship (mean length of 9 years) was sexually exclusive both in principle and in practice. Only 4% indicated that they had had sex with another person since their relationship began. K-urdek (1991) found that sexual fidelity was positively related to relationship satisfaction for lesbians.

Most research on lesbian sexuality has studied white women. In an investigation of 398 black lesbians in relationships (mean length of just over 2 years), more variation was found in sexual exclusivity (Peplau, Cochran, & Mays, 1997). Most women (54%) said they had not had sex with someone else since their current relationship began, but a significant minority (46%) had had extradyadic sex, usually with only one person. Similarly, most lesbians (57%) said that they and their partner had an agreement that did not permit sex with others, but again, a sizable minority did not have an exclusivity agreement.

Sex and the Single Lesbian

The precise percentage of midlife lesbians who are single is unknown, and estimates range from 33% to 43% (Bradford & Ryan, 1991, 40%; Fertitta, 1984, 43%; Sang, 1991, 33%). Midlife lesbians who define themselves as single may be seeing one woman, many women, or no one. Some lesbians are single by choice. Other lesbians, like many heterosexuals, change partners during their lifetime and may have periods when they are single. Available research provides little information about lesbians' reasons for being single, the myriad ways in which lesbian singles construct their lives, or how relationship status affects women's quality of life (Kimmel & Sang, 1995).

Obviously, lack of a suitable sex partner can affect how often midlife adults have sex (Levy, 1994). Compared with their heterosexual counterparts, middle-aged and older lesbians may actually have advantages in finding new romantic or sexual partners. Given women's greater longevity than men, the pool of eligible female partners is greater than the pool of male partners in midlife and beyond. Unlike midlife men, who often seek younger sex partners, adult lesbians tend to be attracted to women in their own age group (Kehoe, 1986; Raphael & Robinson, 1980). Furthermore, youth is less important as a standard of partner desirability among lesbians than among heterosexual or gay men (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). Consequently, we can speculate that lesbians may have a somewhat better chance of finding a new partner than do their heterosexual counterparts. Research on this point would be valuable.

In a study of midlife lesbians, Raphael and Robinson (1980) found that single lesbians had more lesbian friends than coupled lesbians of the same age. Similarly, Beeler et al. (1999) found that lesbians without partners were more likely to be highly involved with the gay community and more likely to spend social evenings with close friends. In a small sample, of single midlife lesbians (Coss,

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1991), women reported that having a relationship would be welcome, but only if it "fit in" and was not disruptive to the satisfying balance they had achieved in their work and social lives.

Single lesbians range from women who are sexually active to those who are celibate. The *Advocate* survey (Lever, 1995) compared lesbians who were dating with those who had a steady partner. In both groups, about a third of women rated their current sex life as "great." Lever (1995, p. 27) noted that, in comparison to women with partners, single lesbians may have a "feast-or-famine mentality" about sex. Masturbation may also be a source of sexual pleasure for single lesbians. In Loulan's (1987) study, 26% of the lesbians were single and 12% were casually involved. In both groups of women, 92% reported masturbating, and most of these women (75%) reported masturbation frequencies of 2 to 20 times per month.

Celibacy (with or without masturbation) also may be part of many lesbians' life experience. In the survey of *Advocate* readers, 4 in 10 women reported a period of 1 year or longer within the past 5 when they had gone without sex with another woman (Lever, 1995). One in 20 had gone without sex for 5 years. In Loulan's (1987) study, the majority of lesbians (78%) had been celibate at some point, with 38% celibate for periods from 1 to 5 years and 8% celibate for 6 years or more. Most lesbians (84%) described their celibacy as self-chosen to some degree.

Life Span Issues

A comprehensive analysis of sexuality in the lives of lesbian women would consider how various developmental milestones affect women's sexuality. Each stage of development is associated with distinctive biological changes, social influences, and coping tasks. Unfortunately, researchers have yet to address life span issues among sexual minority women, and so we are able merely to sketch some of the relevant topics.

Coming Out in Midlife and Later Life

There is growing evidence that women's sexual orientation can change over time. Young women who marry men and lead heterosexual lives may change course in midlife and identify as lesbians (Deevey, 1990; Herdt, Beeler, & Rawls, 1997; Kertzner & Sved, 1996; Raphael & Robinson, 1980). For example, in Sang's

(1991) study of no lesbians between the ages of 40 and 59, 25% of the women identified as lesbian for the first time in midlife. Of the women who came out in midlife, 39% had their first same-sex sexual experience before midlife but had not labeled themselves lesbian until midlife. Charbonneau and Lander (1991) studied 30 midlife women ranging in age from the mid-30s to the mid-50s. With few exceptions, these women had never considered the possibility that they could be lesbians and were initially very surprised to find out at midlife that they had fallen in love with a woman.

Bisexual Women's Life Course

Almost no research has been conducted on aging among bisexual women (see chapter 3, this volume). The best available source of information is a longitudinal study by Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor (2001). Self-identified bisexual women recruited from the Bisexual Center in San Francisco were interviewed in 1983, 1988, and 1996. In 1996, women ranged in age from 35 to 67, with an average age of 50 years. Over time, women reported a decrease in involvement with sex. About three-fifths of the women described their sex lives as becoming worse—as less active, less meaningful, or less fulfilling. Sexual interests competed with life course responsibilities such as work and family roles for a constant or declining amount of energy. Some women attributed their lack of interest in sex to the onset of menopause, and women were more likely than men to attribute a perceived decrease in sexual attractiveness to aging.

When first studied in 1983, most women were engaging in sex with both men and women. By 1996, one-third of the women were having sex exclusively with men. Their reasons for this change included a move toward monogamy, a desire for a simpler life, decreased opportunities for same-sex partners, and pressure from life course expectations to fit into the heterosexual culture. In addition, by 1996, one-fifth of the women were having sex with women only, explaining this change as resulting from a move toward monogamy, past difficulties finding satisfactory same-sex partners, and concern about AIDS.

During the course of this longitudinal study, four-fifths of the women who identified as bisexual in 1988 continued to self-define as bisexual in 1996. Continuation of dual attractions and positive feelings about them resulted in increased certainty and positivity about their bisexual identity. As bisexuals aged, they relied on their history of sexual feelings and attractions to determine their sexual identity, not their current sexual behavior or relationships. So even some women who were in a monogamous relationship with a man continued to view

themselves as bisexual. In contrast, some women decreased their involvement in the bisexual community over time, in some cases because they had entered a different phase of the life course in which commitment to work or a partner took most of their energy.

Role Changes: Work and Relationships

Throughout their adult lives lesbians derive meaning, satisfaction, and identity from both work and relationships. Lesbians are more likely than traditional heterosexual women to be employed full time, and evidence suggests that work has greater salience and significance for lesbians (Kimmel & Sang, 1995; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2004). For midlife lesbians, a major challenge is finding a balance between work and relationships (Fertitta, 1984; Sang, 1991). Hall and Gregory (1991) found that lesbians between 35 and 50 years old reported that work demands contributed to a decline in their eroticism. All but one of the 18 women in this sample reported infrequent sex as a problem and linked it to demanding work schedules and a lack of time together.

An important topic for future research concerns the impact of children on sexuality in lesbian relationships. It has been estimated that as many as 25% of lesbians may be raising children (Peplau & Beals, 2004). For lesbian and heterosexual mothers alike, having young children may be associated with decreases in sexual frequency, especially when the children are young (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983).

Menopause and Sexuality

Among the most significant biological changes that women deal with as they age is menopause (Leiblum, 1990). Menopausal heterosexual women report concerns with sexual functioning, arousal time, and vaginal dryness. They may also worry about their decreasing sexual desire and desirability and may fear disappointing their male partner (Leiblum, 1990; Morokoff, 1988). Available research suggests that menopause may affect lesbian women somewhat differently. For example, Winterich (2003) found that some heterosexual women got complaints from their husbands about menopausal symptoms, but lesbians did not report complaints from their partners.

Two studies have examined lesbians' experience of menopause. Cole and Rothblum (1991) administered a questionnaire to 41 women, ages 43 to 68 years, recruited through local and national lesbian newspapers and conferences. Seventy-

five percent of these lesbians reported that their sex lives were as good or more enjoyable after menopause. Some of the positive sexual changes in their lives since menopause included increased orgasm, increased sexual frequency, greater self-acceptance, and greater freedom. Forty-six percent stated that the frequency of sex had remained the same since the onset of menopause. Most women reported little change in the types of sexual activities they enjoyed.

Sang (1993) reported similar findings from a questionnaire study of no lesbians between the ages of 40 and 59. She used an open-ended questionnaire that asked about various issues concerning midlife, including sexuality and menopause. Fifty percent reported that their sex life was more open and exciting than in the past. Better sex was attributed to being able to be more open and vulnerable, to enhanced communication, to less pressure about orgasms, and to the greater importance of touching, loving, and sharing. More research is needed to shed light on lesbians' experience of sex at and after menopause.

Sex After Age 60

Only two studies, both by Kehoe (1986, 1988), have examined sexual issues for lesbians over age 60. A total of 150 women ranging in age from 60 to 86 were recruited from lesbian and feminist publications and organizations and through personal contacts. Nearly half of the women in each study had previously been in heterosexual marriages. Most lesbians who had had sex with both men and women viewed lesbian relationships as less sexually demanding and more sexually gratifying, emotional, affectionate, and sharing than heterosexual ones (Kehoe, 1986). In both samples, a majority of women characterized sex as an important part of a lesbian relationship.

At the time of the studies, some of the older women were in lesbian couples (20% in the 1986 sample and 43% in the 1988 sample). However, a majority of the women (68% in 1986 and 53% in 1988) were celibate and had had no sexual experience with a woman in the past year. Most celibacy was caused by lack of opportunity and was not by choice. Perhaps because of the high rates of celibacy, only 33% of lesbians in the 1988 sample reported that they were somewhat to very satisfied with their sex life during the last year. When asked how their relationships with women after age 60 differed from those when they were younger, most lesbians in the 1988 sample reported that commitment and compatibility were more important than sex. What these women wanted in their relationship was companionship, affection, and enduring tenderness.

Sexual Health

In this section we consider several aspects of sexual well-being, including physical changes of aging, body image, sexual coercion, sexually transmitted diseases, and HIV and AIDS.

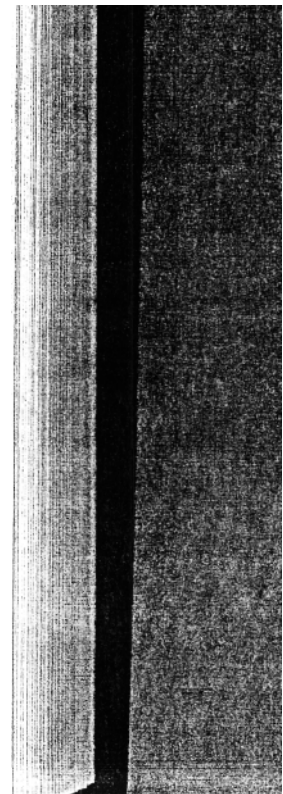
Physical Changes of Aging

In midlife, health problems increasingly intrude in women's lives. No research has examined the impact of bodily changes, illness, or disability on the sex lives of lesbians. Findings for heterosexual women may be relevant to lesbians. For example, arthritis and back pain are fairly common in older women and may affect physical mobility and sexual comfort (Levy, 1994). Hysterectomy, which is more common among midlife women, may lead to decreased sexual desire and reduced sexual sensations among some heterosexual women (Leiblum, 1990). Whether hysterectomies have similar consequences for lesbians is unknown. More research is needed to explore how sex is affected by the physical changes of aging for lesbians.

Body Image

Lesbians may be less vulnerable than their heterosexual peers to cultural attitudes that only youthful, thin bodies are beautiful and sexually attractive (Krakauer & Rose, 2002). Because lesbians are not in sexual relationships with men, the importance of standard norms about physical appearance maybe lessened (Rothblum, 1994a). Lesbians' conception of physical attractiveness tends to emphasize such functional qualities as agility, stamina, and strength rather than characteristics conventionally valued in women by heterosexual men (Cogan, 1999; Deaux & Hanna, 1984; Heffernan, 1999). Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found that lesbians were less "looks-ist" than gay men or heterosexual women and men. In their large sample, whether a lesbian rated her partner as physically beautiful or not did not affect her own sexual fulfillment, her happiness, or her belief that the relationship will last.

Although many women are concerned about dieting and being fat, there is evidence that lesbians are less likely than heterosexual women to be preoccupied with weight and body image (Siever, 1994). Krakauer and Rose (2002) found that lesbians had fewer body weight concerns after coming out than before coming out. Compared with heterosexual women, lesbians generally report



fewer worries about appearance and weight (Herzog et al., 1992), higher ideal weights for themselves (Brand, Rothblum, & Solomon, 1992), less concern with dieting (Gettleman & Thompson, 1994), less concern about a partner's appearance (Siever, 1994), and fewer negative feelings about their bodies (Bergeron & Senn, 1998).

Krakauer and Rose (2002) found that women made changes in their appearance after coming out as lesbian in the direction of becoming more butch or androgynous in appearance, or at least less feminine. For example, a majority reported cutting their hair shorter and wearing more comfortable shoes. The desire to convey group membership and to signal prospective partners were primary reasons for changes in appearance. Similarly, Cogan's (1999) study of 181 women ranging in age from 17 to 58 also found that lesbians changed their appearance after coming out. These women indicated that these changes were influenced by a desire to be identified as lesbians and to feel a sense of belonging within the lesbian and bisexual community. These results suggest that one purpose of lesbian beauty standards is functional: to allow lesbians to identify each other and to provide a group identity that is distinct from that of women in the dominant culture (Rothblum, 1994*)-

Sexual Coercion

Lesbians, like all other women, are vulnerable to sexual victimization throughout the life course. Little is known about how early experiences of sexual abuse, usually by men, affect the sexual lives of lesbians in adulthood. A few studies have addressed the sexual coercion or violence that can occur between partners in lesbian relationships. Estimates of the incidence of sexual coercion by another woman vary widely, from 2% to more than 50% (Duncan, 1990; Rose, 2003; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; Waldner-Haugrud & Gratch, 1997; Waterman, Dawson, & Bologna, 1989). These experiences represent a broad range, from unwanted kissing or being pressured to have sex to unwanted penetration and threats of physical violence. We need to know more about the prevalence and features of same-sex partner violence among lesbian couples.

Sexually Transmitted Diseases

Sexually transmitted disease (STD) appears to be less common in women who identify as lesbian or who are sexually active only with women than in bisexual or heterosexual women or gay men (GLMA, 2000; Solarz, 1999)- This may re-

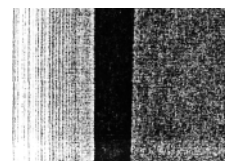
suit, in part, from lower rates of STD transmission through vaginal, oral, or anal penile contact. STDs appear to be transmissible between women and have been reported among lesbians. These include human papillomavirus, bacterial vaginosis, candidiasis, and trichomonas vaginalis (GLMA, 2000).

HIV and AIDS

The impact of HIV and AIDS on the lesbian community and the risks of female-female HIV transmission remain underresearched (GLMA, 2000). Woman-to-woman HIV transmission is low (Solarz, 1999). A small study among serodiscordant lesbians (i.e., pairs in which one partner is HIV positive and the other HIV negative) found significant rates of high-risk sexual activities (e.g., having sex during menses, mutually masturbating with shared sexual toys), but there was no evidence of female-to-female HIV transmission (Raiteri et al., 1994). When women who identify as lesbian or who have sex with women contract HIV, it is usually because they have had unprotected sex with men or used intravenous drugs (Solarz, 1999).

Conclusion

A growing body of scientific evidence provides the ingredients for a new paradigm for understanding lesbian sexuality that captures the uniqueness, diversity, and complexity of lesbian experiences (Fassinger & Morrow, 1995). A woman-defined sexuality would conceptualize "a whole-body/whole person sexuality, one that encompasses the use of a variety of sensual/sexual activities, physical sensations, emotional meanings, interpersonal pleasurings, and satisfactions" (Iasenza, 2002, p. 118). As one lesbian put it, "Physicality is now a creative non-institutionalized experience. It is touching and rubbing and cuddling and fondness... Its only goal is closeness and pleasure. It does not exist for the Big Orgasm... Our sexuality may or may not include genital experience" (Echols, 1989, p. 218). Such an approach would rely on women's own definitions of what is pleasurable, integrate nongenital activities into definitions of sex, include the subjective dimension of sex, examine the context in which sexuality takes place and the mutuality of the interaction, examine dimensions of sexuality (e.g., behavior, cognition, emotions, sociocultural factors), and articulate the complexity of lesbian sexual and emotional experiences. This paradigm bodes well for aging lesbians and bisexual women who have intimate relationships with



women because the ability to enjoy touching, cuddling, rubbing, and fondness does not decline with age. The key may be to have continued opportunities for these physical aspects of intimacy despite bereavements, mobility limitations, or chronic diseases.

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