
Middle Age and the Lesbian Experience

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As a psychotherapist I have noticed an impressive increase in articles and presentations on middle age, adult development, or life-span issues in recent years. As an aging woman, I too, have grown more aware of the problems of middle age, my own and those of my friends and patients. Inevitably many factors influence how one ages, physically and psychologically, and how one manages the benefits and losses of this period in life. This article attempts to consider the interaction of middle age and lesbianism from several perspectives, and to consider the problems and benefits of lesbian middle age as compared to those of the middle age of heterosexual women.

Motherhood at Midlife

Lesbians, like heterosexual women, are a diverse group. We might assume the effect of middle age on most lesbians to be different from that on most heterosexual women because reproduction and child rearing have not structured the phases of their adult lives. However, studies of the lesbian population reveal that twenty-five to thirty-five percent have been married and at least half of these have children (Saghir and Robins, 1973; Bell and Weinberg, 1978). For those women, as for most heterosexual women, the phases of adult life have been organized largely around their children's needs.

Middle-aged lesbian mothers with adolescent children suffer the burdens and fears common to all parents at that time. They are additionally burdened by the fear that their children will turn against them because of their sexual orientation. The adolescents' need to conform to peer attitudes, their fear of embarrassment or ridicule, as well as their concern over their own sexuality, make lesbian mothers an easy target for hostility and devaluation, especially by sons. The need of adolescents to devalue parents in the struggle to consolidate a separate self is familiar to us all. Ethnic origin, foreign accent, age, physical disabilities, or of features aging,

such as hair style or taste in music or clothes, all are evidence to our children of our defective natures. If society's ongoing devaluation and discrimination against lesbians have undermined the lesbian mother's self-esteem, this period may be especially frightening and painful for her.

Discovering Lesbianism in Middle Age

A different group of lesbians who are mothers may be found in a seemingly new segment of the older lesbian population. These are women who, after twenty to thirty years of marriage and with child raising completed, leave their husbands and establish enduring lesbian partnerships. Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz engagingly describe one such couple in their large study, *The American Couple* (1983). Two women in their mid-fifties, both grandmothers with long marriages, met through a personal ad one woman had placed in a women's magazine. Both described long years of loneliness and emptiness in their marriages. Both felt they had paid their dues to society and now longed for an intimacy they had not found in their marriages. For these women the new experience of being touched lovingly by another woman was deeply gratifying, but a new or better sexual experience was neither the motivating force nor the binding experience. To quote from the Blumstein and Schwartz interview: "The thing that is important is the togetherness of our heads and the side-by-sideness of our bodies; the sex is just a side issue . . . an outgrowth of tenderness" (453). Christenson and Johnson (1973) surveyed seventy-one never-married women over fifty. Eleven percent were lesbians and most of these had had lesbian experiences in their youth, had adopted heterosexual behavior, and then returned to lesbian relationships. That women might lead long, apparently successful heterosexual lives and then turn to homosexuality in midlife seems hard to explain by current theories of adult development.

For the couple described above, it was the courageous fulfillment of a life-long dream, a different childhood dream than their lives had enacted. Barbara Ponce (1980) in her study of lesbian identity found married women without any homosexual experience identifying themselves as lesbians because of their fantasies and their recognized but inhibited longings. Some of these women may choose to act on their desires as part of the re-evaluation process of middle age; they establish lesbian relationships despite the loss of the heterosexual support system and the incredulity and/or disapproval of families and friends. The costs and benefits of such a

decision cannot be known in advance. As with many behavioral changes, this one might represent a healthy effort to integrate a valuable but previously abandoned part of the self, or it could represent the loss of ego integration and a retreat to a limited and child-like relationship.

I was recently consulted by a dentist in her mid-fifties. She had always been shy, slow to make friends, and slow to complain or demand anything of those she made. She had married shortly after college with the hope of establishing a family. Three children were born during the first seven years of the marriage. She found herself inexplicably depressed when her youngest child was two, and entered a five-year analysis with an experienced female analyst. She reported being terrified throughout the analysis of revealing something which would be used to point out how bad she really was. The source of this expectation was never uncovered, though she found great comfort in what she perceived as the analyst's genuine interest in her and patience with her inhibitions. She felt deeply grateful and experienced a sense of great love for the analyst, which she carefully concealed. The analysis terminated and life went on in its shy and lonely way.

During the children's late adolescence, she underwent a mastectomy. Faced with morbidity and mortality and the realization that her husband's presence did not comfort her, she separated from him. She cared for her children until they left for college and discovered pride in her competence to manage her own life for the first time. Four years after the mastectomy and separation she began planning breast reconstruction, largely because she found herself in love with another woman, a colleague older than herself, a revival of her secret feelings for her analyst. She believed for a while that her sexual longing was reciprocated and this gave her a new sense of worthiness and lovability. She got contact lenses and a permanent and began dressing in a more stylish and attractive fashion. Her new image of herself as a lovable and feminine woman led to the breast reconstruction. She subsequently realized that her affection was not returned but despite the sadness this caused, she maintained her pride in her reconstructed self. She is much less shy and has enlarged her circle of friends with a new hope that she may yet experience an intimate loving relationship.

Thus, middle age for some heterosexual women opens the possibility of finding a new intimacy with a woman, an important option considering the diminished availability of male partners at later ages. For other lesbians it may be the time to find or return to

heterosexual relationships. One such story is reported in Blumstein and Schwartz. In my clinical experience this wish to become comfortably heterosexual is experienced more regularly by young lesbian women, frightened about their future as lesbians, unsure of the cost of social stigma, and faced with the potential loss of motherhood. This provides a motivation not commonly found in middle-aged lesbians. In actuality, the midlife lesbian may have little reason to envy her heterosexual sister's life.

Less Dread of Aging for Lesbians

A number of features of life-long lesbian orientation may contribute to the more sanguine approach to aging of many lesbians. While women have lower incomes than men, and lesbians have not shared in a husband's income, surveys usually find lesbians better educated and in higher paid jobs than heterosexual women (Bell and Weinberg, 1978). If they have no children, their time and energy have been directed toward building careers, and the money they have made has been used to enhance their own lives. Furthermore, it is expected in lesbian relationships that each partner works. Supporting one's self and managing one's own affairs are not new nor to be feared if one is left alone in later middle age. The stigma of middle age also has less sting for those who have coped with stigma throughout life. They have learned that a satisfying life is possible without society's approval. Saghir and Robins's (1973) study found lesbians to be more involved in leisure time activities, artistic pursuits, and individual sports than heterosexual women, and thus connected to more sources of personal satisfaction. Lesbians tend to have close networks of friends that may substitute for estranged family members. These networks do not depend on couple status. Raphael and Robinson's (1984) survey of twenty lesbians over fifty found no evidence for the myth of lonely isolated lives of older lesbians. Strong friendship ties provided support and correlated positively with high self-esteem. Bell and Weinberg's (1978) survey of 385 lesbians, for example, showed that the stereotype of the lonely, isolated, bitter homosexual fits only a small group of homosexuals whose personality structure impairs their capacity for social and intimate connections. It was this personality problem and not homosexuality that led to isolation and suffering. In fact, coupled lesbians were very like coupled heterosexual women, except that the lesbians had fewer complaints of loneliness.

Like her heterosexual counterpart, most lesbians at middle age have a partner and expect to grow old together (Saghir and Robins,

1973: 311-12). Heterosexual women are often younger than their husbands. With a longer life expectancy than their mates, these women may be widows for a considerable period of their lives. Heterosexual remarriage or sexual partnership are often hard to find for older women. On the other hand, lesbian couples are on the same life-expectancy curve and if a partner is lost the pool of same-age mates remains. Since the greatest motivator for a man to begin a new relationship is the physical appearance of the woman, middle-aged women face the future with a fear of losing the ability to attract (or maintain) a heterosexual partnership. Lesbians, like other women, place less emphasis on youth and/or beauty in their partners, and thus they are generally less threatened by the changes age brings in their own appearance. A curious study of personal ads undertaken by Mary Riege Laner (1978) found that ninety-eight percent of lesbian advertisers stated their age compared to seventy-six of heterosexual women. Also, far fewer lesbians restricted the age for the respondent than did heterosexual women. Raphael and Robinson (1984) found that lesbians over fifty preferred partners of the same age.

Differences between Older Lesbian and Heterosexual Couples Sexuality. Lillian Rubin's sensitive book, *Women of a Certain Age* (1979), tells us that the sexual lives of many married women become freer, more flexible, and more satisfying at middle age. With the children gone, mother is less tired, there may be no fear of unwanted pregnancy, and the capacity to respond increases. Midlife releases possibilities for new forms of creativity, as well as making old forms more pleasurable as fears and superego rigidities give way against increased desires for personal gratification. At the same time in life the male partner is likely to be less interested sexually, especially if he is worried about possible erectile failures. This imbalance in sexual response does not weigh on lesbian couples. Raphael and Robinson (1984) discovered that many of their sample of lesbians over fifty had a continuing interest in a sexual life and, unlike heterosexual older women, they looked forward to having sexual partners in their later years. While many lesbian couples remain sexually active into old age, Blumstein and Schwartz and others have found the frequency of sexual relations to be less in lesbian couples than in any other couples, even at young ages. However, physical affection and nongenital contact are highly prized and in later years physical intimacy continues to be sought and expressed independent of a need for genital experience. The qual-

ities of mutual understanding, expression of feelings, sensitivity toward others, and mutual nurturing are rated by lesbians as more important to a relationship than sexual excitement. Furthermore, despite a lower frequency of sexual relations, lesbians report greater satisfaction with the sexual aspect of their relationship than other couples, according to Blumstein and Schwartz.

Termination of the Couple Relationship. Nevertheless, lesbian couples, like heterosexual couples, may break up in middle age with the approach of life's end, the fear of missing something more exciting, and the desire for a last chance for the fulfillment of great expectations. In my experience as a psychotherapist trying to help individual women, some heterosexual and some lesbians, going through separations in middle age, I have noticed both similarities of loss, pain, and anger, and differences in the problems faced by lesbians and heterosexual women. These differences lie in each group's relationship to the larger community, to their social network, and in the experience of being coupled.

The lesbian couple's relationship to both the lesbian group and the mainstream community is a complicated one. The relationship to the larger community provides none of the supportive rituals or rules that surround and sustain heterosexual marriages. The couple may keep their relationship a secret for fear of job loss or censure by coworkers. Colleagues may neither acknowledge the couple as a unit nor provide comfort if the relationship is severed. For some lesbians, retirement age may remove the strain of leading a double life; middle age may provide relief from the social pressure to date men, but the larger community still may oppose the couple's bond and applaud a breakup. The lesbian community on the other hand, while acknowledging the couple, poses a threat as well. Susan Krieger, in the excellent article "Lesbian Identity and Community" (1982), states: "The lesbian community, like many stigmatized minority groups, offers the individual lesbian a sense of self, especially in that it commands recognition of a distinctly lesbian sensibility, unusual in the value it places on intimacy between women, but it also conflicts with efforts to enhance individuality and to recognize and benefit from internal deviance." The lesbian community demands loyalty and conformity to group standards. For women who are enmeshed in this community there may be serious tension between the demands of the community and the demands of the couple relationship. Unlike heterosexual separations, lesbian ex-lovers tend to remain friends; thus the community stays intact. Blumstein

and Schwartz report that lesbian couples who were actively engaged in the lesbian community were more likely to break up than those who were not. In the heterosexual woman's world the breakup of a marriage, especially in middle age, means not only a sixty-eight percent lowering of her standard of living, frequently the loss of the family home, loss of credit, loss of membership in social organizations, such as a country club or faculty club, and loss of a sexual partner, but also the loss of the supportive network of married women friends. This comes as a shock and deep disappointment to many women who find themselves isolated and ignored when they most need comfort and support. The world of married couples is elite, chauvinistic, and has no room for dropouts. The profound sense of betrayal by old and trusted friends is often the most painful loss for divorced women. The lesbian community responds very differently to the breakup of a couple. While some choosing of sides may result in lessening the closeness of some friendships, the community tends to rush to the aid of the separated members and provide comfort and participation in the search for new relationships.

Special Problems of Lesbian Partnerships

The search for intimacy is a major theme in many, if not most, women's lives. In fact, I think of intimacy as the major organizer of women's identity. This search for intimacy seems to be an even greater imperative in the lives of lesbians. The importance of intimacy is shared by both partners in a lesbian relationship and by others in the lesbian community. This fuels and helps maintain the supportive network of friendships enjoyed by many older lesbians (Wolf, 1978).

Lesbian and heterosexual relationships present distinctly different shortcomings. While complaints of loneliness, emotional distance, and lack of communication and understanding are frequent in heterosexual women's history, lesbian couples suffer from excessive intensity, lack of privacy, and a strong tendency for psychological fusion with concomitant loss of the sense of one's separate feelings and an inability to express or tolerate differences. The requirement of sensitive mutual understanding may inhibit healthy aggression and tend toward a suffocating exclusivity. It is clear that similar characteristics in heterosexual couples might be described in admiring rather than perjorative terms: "They are so close . . . they've never been apart in thirty years of marriage . . . the perfect helpmate, my better half." Consider, for example, the closing lines

of a Victorian poem quoted by Ehrenreich and English in their book, *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women*. Extolling the ideal woman's development the poem terminates with:

There's nothing left of what she was;
Back to the babe the woman dies,
And all the wisdom that she has
Is to love him for being wise.

This idealization of merger, with its loss of boundaries between self and partner (not less of ego boundaries between ego, id, and super ego), continues to be a millstone around women's necks, lesbian or heterosexual, interfering with individualization. Despite the fact that they have survived without men and that they value women, lesbians are not protected from merger in their relationships. For some women an intense identification with their fathers, or with male values of independence, competence, and courage, may have arisen partly to protect them against a pull toward merger with their mothers. In many lesbian relationships similarities are over-valued and differences diminished and often feared as divisive. The lack of differentiation in socialization for sex roles as well as the actual role expectations of compliance and nurturance make the struggle toward individuation conflicted and guilt ridden. Two women moving urgently toward each other for intimacy, with their nesting "instincts" outstretched, can create a mutual prison. Occasionally such merger is patently obvious, as when the women dress alike, have the same hair style, finish each other's sentences, and share experience. Personal space or differences are feared and experienced as abandonment or hostility. To want privacy suggests to such women a lack of love and is a source of guilt.

The Impact of Childlessness

Homosexual women were once thought to be uninterested in motherhood. We know now that the desire for children has many roots and does not originate in the resolution of the oedipal configuration. It is not the desire for a baby, but the discovery and wish for the father's participation that originates during that process. The longing of lesbians for children has been made manifest in recent years now that "single" motherhood is more acceptable and available through artificial insemination. Older lesbians for whom motherhood was not a possibility, like other women who elected to be childless or were infertile, usually come to terms with this issue

before middle age. Curiously enough, depression following hysterectomy or the onset of menopause is less likely to occur in childless women than in mothers. Having invested much of her energy in motherhood seems to make a woman more vulnerable to a pathological experience of loss at this time.

Illness and Life Expectancy

Medical problems, particularly gynecological problems, however, may be ignored by middle-aged lesbians due to apprehension about revealing their sexual preference or being embarrassed by questions about birth control or intercourse. Lesbians in this age group are also at a disadvantage in tending to the health needs of their partners. "Family only" visiting rules prevent them and their partners from caring for each other and taking responsibility for necessary decisions. Estate planning is fraught with uncertainties that a lover can receive what her partner wishes to give without legal barriers (Adelman, 1986: 219-56). The support of a nonjudgmental therapist may assist in reaching creative solutions to these middle age problems.

As women's life expectancy increases, middle age occupies a greater percentage of our lives and more of our investigative energy. Being there, I'm glad it does. For lesbian women as for others, it can be a time of discovery of new creative potential, especially if the sense of having weathered life's slings and arrows supports one's adult confidence and the integration of adult understanding and promises to enrich the future. Neither homosexuality nor heterosexuality can guarantee a positive middle age experience, but it seems clear that lesbians have some advantages in dealing with the problems of middle age.

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