THEORY AND RESEARCH ON LESBIAN IDENTITY FORMATION

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ABSTRACT

The lesbian identity formation process is examined. Lesbian identity is differentiated from lesbian erotic interests, lesbian behaviour and emotional attachments to women. Lesbian identity is defined phenomenologically. Acceptance of such an identity involves a number of changes in the ways that a woman comes to perceive, define, and evaluate both her "self" and society. Contributors to these changes are outlined. It is suggested that although the processes of lesbian identity formation and gay male identity formation might involve similar events, that their relative importance might show some female/male differences. The writer derives her ideas from empirical investigations of the coming out process in both women and men and on theoretical papers written on this issue. The process is seen as developmental in nature. The importance of the lesbian's interactions with her society is stressed. Recommendations for further research are made.

The purposes of this paper are three in number: To discuss the meaning of the term "lesbian identity" and outline factors which contribute to its formation; to discuss the process of lesbian identity formation; and, finally, to indicate areas of deficiency and strength in the theories and research pertaining to the topic. The major focus of the paper is on the actual process of identity formation and on the manner in which women are likely to evaluate themselves and/or their changing identities at various points in that process.

Lesbian behaviour and erotic interests have been studied for some time. The focus of early studies was primarily on the aetiology of lesbianism and its presumably pathological implications. The emphasis on identity formation is relatively recent. Perhaps this change is related to a less negative view of lesbianism, one which has received support from the women's movement, from scientific studies (summarized in Mannion, 1976) indicating that lesbians might be somewhat healthier than their heterosexual counterparts, and from the gay liberation movement. Some studies on homosexual identity formation based on gay males have been useful in providing a framework and/or rationale for similar studies with lesbians. Consequently, this paper will include a survey of some of those contributions.

Since the term "lesbian identity" is fairly new to psychology, perhaps it is worthwhile to differentiate such an identity from lesbian behaviour and homoerotic tendencies, interests, and attachments. The following section of the paper will consist of a discussion of such terms and their relationship to each other.

THE NATURE OF LESBIAN IDENTITY

Abbott and Love (1972) quote a psychiatrist as saying, "A lesbian is a woman who says she is". As Mannion (1976) states, such a definition leaves much to be desired in terms of understanding motivational variables. There are any number of reasons (e.g., attraction to women, feminist political beliefs) why a woman might define herself in such a way and perhaps many differences in the personalities of women falling into various motivational categories. In other words, "lesbian" might not be a unitary construct. Despite the fact that there might be many reasons for saying, "I am a lesbian", it is precisely this statement of belief that serves as a definition of the word "lesbian" in this paper. This phenomenological approach attaches ultimate importance to the perceptions and cognitions of the individual as she examines and defines her "self".

Some researchers focus attention on other factors when talking about lesbians. Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin and Gebhard (1953), for example, were interested in actual sexual behaviour. They found that most women who have lesbian encounters do not consider themselves to be lesbians. Storms (1980) was more interested in erotic fantasies. He discovered that the presence of homoerotic fantasies was not a
a sufficient condition to lead women to attach lesbian labels to themselves; nor, incidentally, were substantially heteroerotic fantasies in lesbians sufficient reason for them to reconsider defining themselves as "straight".

Affectional attachment to women does not necessarily lead a woman to define herself as lesbian. Feminist theorist Adrienne Rich (1980) maintains that many, if not most, women go through life receiving most of their love and emotional support from other women; despite this, they do not consider labelling themselves as lesbian. She suggests that this lack of labelling is related to "compulsory heterosexuality" in our culture, that women are carefully trained to think of themselves as heterosexual and to ignore cues (e.g., emotional attachments to women) which might lead them to seek women as sexual partners and/or to redefine themselves as lesbians.

Whether or not Rich is accurate in her theorizing, it is certainly true that there have been documented cases in which affectional-emotional attachments to women do not lead to a lesbian self-definition. Sometimes lesbian labelling does not occur even when such attachment is combined with intense, long-term sexual involvement with the loved person. Both Cass (1979) and Ponse (1978) describe situations in which such relationships are seen as special, as involvement with a particular individual and not as indicative of attraction to members of one's own sex in general. In fact, de Monteflores and Schultz (1978), in describing differences between lesbians and gay men, suggest that, for women but not for men, the emphasis on romantic feeling might be used as a strategy to avoid self-labelling as lesbian. In such cases sex becomes secondary in importance to the emotional attachment, the romantic friendship. Again, the implication is that the involvement is of a "special" nature.

Political belief is often cited as a factor related to lesbian self-labelling. Some feminists define themselves as lesbian in order to make a statement against society's sexist oppression of women. While other self-defined lesbians might question their authenticity (e.g., Abbott & Love, 1972), and some scientists the relationship of their identity or their life style (Ponse, 1978), it seems clear that from a phenomenological perspective (i.e., considering a woman's self-definition as of essential importance) that this group cannot be ignored. Ponse points out that the stability of the "political lesbian's" identity has been questioned. If she has maintained heterosexual ties or heteroerotic interests she might find it easy to switch back to a heterosexual identity, should the effects of stigmatization become too unpleasant. The suggestion is that political beliefs might be sufficient to help someone establish a lesbian identity but not necessarily to maintain it.

THE PROCESS OF LESBIAN IDENTITY FORMATION

Contributions from Studies of Gay Males

As stated previously there is no reason to assume that the identity processes are identical for lesbians and gay men. It is possible, however, that the data on males might provide some useful clues for understanding the lesbian identity formation process. Since the majority of the research to date has dealt with gay males it seems inadvisable to ignore it, at least as a source of hypotheses. Such hypotheses must, of course, be examined by independent investigations of identity formation processes in men and women.

Dank (1971) was one of the first researchers to focus on transition to a homosexual identity rather than on homosexual behaviour. He stressed social context, particularly the gay sub-culture. The role of other gays is to provide the individual with a new vocabulary with which he can describe his experience. Of central importance in this respect is a change in the meaning of the cognitive category "homosexual". One must feel it is divested of its stereotypically negative attributes before one places oneself in it. A gay support group is helpful in the devestment process. Being labelled by others in the absence of such a support group could, according to Dank, inhibit the identity formation process, especially if those others (e.g., friends, psychiatrists) derogate the category. Should self-labelling as homosexual occur under these circumstances, low self-regard is predicted.

Plummer (1975) employs a symbolic interactionist perspective to account for the developmental process of homosexual identity formation. In such an approach, meanings ascribed to acts and
emotions are important. Since such meanings are learned in a social context, it is important to examine social feedback related to any given behaviour, for it will determine, to a large extent, whether or not the individual defines the self as homosexual and how the person feels about the chosen identity. Homosexual experience, then, is seen as a creation of the culture in which it is found.

While this point of view is basically the same as Dank's, Plummer's extensive elaboration of the "stages" through which the individual passes adds another dimension to understanding the process. Plummer emphasizes the notion of choices within these stages. He also suggests that any total understanding of the process would involve a life-span approach, since modifications to the experience are likely to continue into old age. His stages are as follows: 1) Sensitization—perception of being different in some way, that difference having, for whatever reasons, potential homosexual connotations, (e.g., having interests not seen as appropriate for one's gender). 2) Signification—"the process of heightened self-awareness and meaning about the experience of homosexuality" (p. 141). Confusion, anxiety, and alienation are common in this age; 3) Coming out—association with the homosexual subculture, self-identification as homosexual; 4) Stabilization—settling down into a homosexual life-style. Plummer cautions that these stages need not be so clearly differentiated as his definitions might suggest. Both he and Dank are optimistic that society will become more accepting, and Plummer says that changes in society's attitudes towards homosexuality could lead to changes in the process by which one establishes one's identity.

Lee (1977) is similar to Plummer in his perspective and his perception of stages. He adds, however, another dimension of interest: extent of disclosure with regard to sexual identity. Lee is particularly interested in those individuals who "go public", that is, become known as homosexuals to the media. His investigation of such people revealed, incidentally, that they formed their identity prior to an extended association with gay sub-culture, a reversal of Plummer's prediction. Also, he noted that all subjects had first disclosed themselves to people associated with gay liberation ideology.

Lee's discussion of "going public" is useful in that he stresses the need for investigating the motives of those who reach this stage. He also documents some of the difficulties encountered by such individuals, such as hostility from friends who are threatened through labelling by association, or the public's evaluation of one's gayness, to a position of exaggerated centrality in perception of one's personality. Whereas Dank (1971) and Plummer (1973) emphasize a liberated society's effect on homosexual identification processes in the future, Lee puts somewhat more emphasis on how publicly identified homosexuals can, through their interaction with society, help to encourage development of those liberal attitudes.

CONTRIBUTIONS FROM STUDIES OF LESBIANS

"Average age" data have been utilized by some researchers in examining the identity formation process. Working with data from lesbian psychologists, Riddle and Morin (1977) report the mean ages at which women reached various points in the process: awareness of homosexual feelings, 13.8; understanding of word "homosexual", 15.6; first same-sex experience, 19.9; first homosexual relationship, 22.8, considered self "homosexual", 23.2; acquired positive "gay" identity, 29.7. Such "averages", of course, do not necessarily tell us anything about the idiosyncratic experience of any given individual, and we should not be surprised to find a substantial proportion of the lesbian population who do not follow the described pattern (McDonald, 1982).

Schaefer (1976) reports median ages of some similar events in the lives of West German lesbians. Although the "averages" reported are very slightly at variance, the observed progression is more or less the same: awareness of erotic interest in or attraction to women; suspicion of lesbianism (reported only by Schaefer, not investigated by Riddle and Morin); sexual relations with a woman or women; and perception of self as lesbian. Both Schaefer and Riddle and Morin refer to the entire chain of events as "coming out". Despite terminology differences, the sequence appears to be much the same as that observed by Plummer (1973) and Lee (1977). Whereas Plummer believed homosexual identity was formed within the context of a homosexual sub-culture, Schaefer indicated that her subjects formed
their identity prior to entering the lesbian community. In this respect, they were more like the individuals described by Lee. Riddle and Morin did not examine this phenomenon.

Schaefer notes an interesting discrepancy between her subjects’ evaluation of lesbian activity and of being lesbian. Eighty percent of the women had had sexual encounters with men. In comparing lesbian and heterosexual sex, most of them described the lesbian experience in relatively glowing terms. In spite of their happiness with lesbian sex, a large percentage were unhappy with considering themselves to be lesbians. Schaefer suggests that this fact was related to the negative evaluation of lesbianism in society. She also suggests that most of the heterosexual activity took place, not because of genuine heterosexual desires, but because the lesbian was trying to escape being labelled deviant by that society.

Schaefer does not explain how some of her subjects were able to avoid unhappiness associated with a lesbian identity. The study by Riddle and Morin gives some clues as to the source of variance. Their subjects, as well as Schaefer, formed lesbian identities in their early twenties. Whereas Schaefer asked her subjects how they felt about themselves and their lives, Riddle and Morin included another age-related question: At what time did the subject acquire a positive gay identity? The average age was almost thirty. It took, then, approximately six and one-half years after the identity was established for the women to be able to feel good about it. Perhaps consideration of such a time factor would have been useful in accounting for some of the relative happiness differences in the German sample.

One might speculate that involvement with the lesbian sub-culture might be another factor accounting for variance in happiness or satisfaction with identity. According to Plummer, such a hypothesis is tenable, since association with other persons of similar erotic tastes should serve to legitimate the homosexual experience and enhance self-regard. There is no way of testing this hypothesis by examining the data presented by Riddle and Morin or by Schaefer. The presence of such blind spots in the studies is unfortunate and, perhaps, avoidable. Such inadequacies could, to some extent, be remedied by deriving questions from a useful mode such as Plummer’s. Not only should such theory-related research be more complete but it would also provide a test of the feasibility of the model from which it was derived.

Lee (1977), Plummer (1975), Riddle and Morin (1977), and Schaefer (1976) all suggest a more or less linear progression in establishing a lesbian identity. A somewhat different perspective is found in the writings of the sociologist Pone (1978). Like Lee and Plummer, she takes the symbolic interactionist approach to the subject. Unlike the other researchers, she places more emphasis on consistency (of feelings, behaviour, cognition) than she does on sequence.

In her interviews with 75 women, ranging in age from 16 to 76 years, she was aware of some variability in the process of lesbian identity formation. It seemed to her and to her subjects that the path towards a lesbian identity could start at any number of points: A subjective sense of being different and identification of the difference as sexual-emotional attraction to her own sex, an understanding of the “lesbian significance” of these kinds of feelings, acceptance of such feelings and their implication for identity, search for a community of like persons, and involvement in a sexual-emotional lesbian relationship. These five events she terms the “gay trajectory”. As mentioned, the chronological order of these events varied; however, her subjects generally thought that the first three elements were primary and, once realized, would exert a strain toward the remaining two. In other words, over a period of time all of the components of a lesbian identity will develop, regardless of the starting point. Behaviour (e.g., associating with other lesbians), emotions (e.g., attachment to other women), and cognition (e.g., thinking of the self as lesbian) should eventually be consistent with each other.

Pone notes that even when all the elements of this “gay trajectory” are present, there is still a possibility that a woman might not regard herself as lesbian. There are always other ways that she can label herself, such as bisexual, sexual, or heterosexual with lesbian involvements. By the same token, a woman might decide to adopt a lesbian self-definition prior to or in the absence of the usual processes. The “political lesbian” is a case in point.

Pone, as a sociologist, is particularly interested in the effect of society on self-definition. Like the other writers discussed, mentions the values of the homosexual sub-culture in providing support for the individual whose self-esteem is suffering due to the opprobrium of the larger heterosexual
society. Ponse emphasizes that the lesbian community does more than support lesbian identity formation, it in fact exerts considerable pressure toward such a redefinition. Once a woman begins, for whatever reason, to associate with the sub-culture, she is often influenced to "come out of the closet", to come down on the lesbian side of the fence. Even Ponse was told to face up to her "true" self. Apparently her subjects had trouble believing that her interest in lesbians was entirely academic. She maintains that the heterosexual world, too, will sometimes try to force a lesbian identity on those who are not consistently heterosexual.

In spite of the strain toward consistency and the pressures exerted by both the heterosexual and lesbian communities, there remain women with idiosyncratic resolutions to the identity problem. Ponse does not feel that the sociological approach is entirely adequate in explaining the existing variation in sexual identities. She maintains that:

The analysis of identities in the lesbian world must necessarily take into account the social context of those identities but must focus as well on the perspectives of the individuals in that world who select, reject, refine, and change the meanings of identity, of themselves, and of the world (p. 196).

Somewhat beyond the issue of identity is the issue of its centrality or, in Ponse's terms, its "essentiality". She believes that both heterosexual and homosexual societies over-emphasize the importance and influence of lesbianism in the personality. As an example of straight-world belief in essences, she points out that psychiatric circles have maintained until recently that homosexuals were sick, immature, etc. Thus, by knowing one isolated fact about a woman (i.e., she is a lesbian), anyone versed in the psychiatric classification system could predict (however incorrectly) a number of attributes associated with the individual concerned. The focus, then, in the heterosexual model, is on sexuality, per se.

The lesbian model of essentiality, according to Ponse, is different in that the emphasis is on an essential lesbian self of which sexuality is merely one part. Lesbianism becomes, then, more a way of life and being. Ponse maintains that both worlds base their ideas on a principle of consistency, a belief that in both cases requires some rationalization for maintenance when confronted with evidence of variance. One major difference between the two beliefs, of course, is related to evolution, the heterosexual world often emphasizing negative stereotypes and the lesbian world usually stressing the positive side of lesbianism.

Ponse is not the only writer to point out that belief in essences can be limiting or not totally realistic. Recall the complaints that Lee's subjects had with regard to having the importance of their gyneness exaggerated. There is some evidence that establishing an "essential identity" need not be the end of the line in lesbian identity formation. Cass (1979) deals with this issue and with another one which Ponse sees as problematic—the role of particular individual reactions within a social context.

AN EMPIRICALLY BASED THEORY

Cass' writings are theoretical. Her model is derived from a clinical sample of Australians who were dealing with problems in establishing a homosexual identity. Cass writes from the framework of "interpersonal congruency theory". This perspective is interactionist in that it assumes that stability and change depend on congruence or incongruence within the interpersonal environment. The emphasis is on perception; no incongruence is of importance unless it is perceived as such. Cass assumes a developmental process in homosexual identity formation with growth occurring when a person attempts to resolve inconsistencies in perception.

In order to understand Cass' model, it is necessary to be aware of the way in which incongruence can occur. There are three elements to be considered: A person's (P) perception of some characteristic P attributes to the self (S); P's perception of P's own behaviour directly (B) as the result of that
characteristic (B); and P’s perception of another person’s view of that characteristic (O). Each element involves a cognition and a positive or negative evaluation of the cognition. A state of congruence exists when the person sees that her behaviour (B) and her perception of other people’s opinion (O) of that behaviour are in accord with her views of her self (S); any other state constitutes a variety of incongruence. In any given situation, then, cognitions of S, B, or O and/or feelings about S, B, or O can be modified to produce congruence. Different stages in the identity formation process have different sources and/or degrees of incongruence.

The concept of identity “foreclosure” is also essential to an understanding of Cass’ model. Basically, foreclosure involves premature stabilization of the process of identity formation. As Cass describes it, it always seems to involve denial of some aspect of the intrapersonal or social reality or of its importance to the individual. Cass presents her model as occurring in stages, and foreclosure can occur in all stages except the final one.

According to Cass, the identity formation progression is as follows:

1) Identity confusion—perception of behaviour is inconsistent with perception of self, similar to Plummer’s sensitization.
2) Identity comparison—the self and behaviour might be congruous, but the opinion of others is regarded as unaccepting, similar to Plummer’s signification.
3) Identity tolerance—association with lesbians helps to decrease importance of the larger society, to create more overall feeling of congruity.
4) Identity acceptance—increased contacts with sub-culture and decreased contacts with heterosexual society make incongruity even less problematic, similar to Plummer’s stabilization.
5) Identity pride—total acceptance of self compared to society’s perceived rejection; incongruity of self and behaviour with others’ opinions accentuated; beginnings of pride, anger, confrontation with parts of society; similar to Lee’s “going public”.
6) Identity synthesis—lesbianism becomes only one aspect of the self if society not as rejecting as predicted; self, behaviour and opinion of others are now congruent.

Cass points out that it is quite unlikely that individuals in present society would reach this last stage. If society were more accepting it might be possible; however, as Plummer indicated, an accepting society would probably change the entire process of homosexual identity formation. Some of Lee’s subjects provide an interesting example of people who long for such a stage. In a sense, many of them might have reached it in that they reported having some of the characteristics of such people, for example, wanting to be considered a person, not simply a homosexual. Society, however, continued to see their homosexuality as of central importance and, in a way, forced them to function at a level beneath their psychological potential. One might speculate about the long-term results of such treatment and wonder if there are resolutions to the developmental problem which are not so dependent on idealistic social outcomes.

Cass’ model seems to have a number of advantages over the other process models. First, it is considerably more detailed and, thus, could generate more specific hypotheses and predictions. Second, while other theorists acknowledge variation, Cass’ model provides means to explain it. Third, it does this by placing homosexual identity formation within the framework of interpersonal congruence theory, thus allowing us to consider the relevance of homosexuality to other aspects of the self-system as well as the external environment. Other approaches to this phenomenon seem to have underemphasized, if not neglected, one or another of these variables. Cass model does not particularly contradict other models; it is just somewhat more complex and complete.

On the negative side, Cass gives the impression that once an individual suspects lesbian tendencies in herself, any step short of identity synthesis represents a partial failure. Ponce indicates that there are other idiosyncratic ways to establish a sexual identity and that some women maintain unusual identities over long periods of time. The outside observer might speculate that such people are in some way
THEORIES AND HYPOTHESES: A MORE SPECULATIVE APPROACH

Several theorists mention positive contributions which the homosexual sub-culture can make to the dominant heterosexual society. Hencken and O'Dowd (1976) suggest, for example, that liberated gays could serve as valuable role models for other oppressed minorities. De Monteflores and Schultz (1978) describe a feedback-loop model between the developing individual and society such that each affects the other. They maintain that as people "come out" the resultant over-all change in society will be adaptive. Underlying this belief is the view that pluralism in life-styles is valuable and that social change is as necessary as social stability.

De Monteflores and Schultz suggest that as individuals come to accept and value their homosexual identity they are apt to go one step further and consider themselves "gay" rather than "homosexual". By doing so they reject the negative stereotypes that have accrued to the latter word. This transformation is accomplished partially by "teasing the past". Neglected or denied parts of the self must be owned and integrated into the personality. In a sense, one re-examines and re-interprets one's personal history in a more positive light.

The writers maintain that the gay community must perform a similar task. They must examine their past in a socio-historical context if they are to develop knowledge of who and what they are. Just as individuals must look at their own lives to regain a sense of perspective and pride, the gay community must see itself in a broader context to acquire a sense of its own worth.

Minton (1980) is one theorist who emphasizes the socio-historical context of identity formation. Writing from a dialectical perspective he makes use of neo-Marxist critical theory to describe the relationship between the individual and society with regard to the homosexual identity formation process. The essence of the theory is as follows. Embedded in a given society are a number of uncritical assumptions or conventional belief systems; the North American assumption relevant to this paper being that heterosexuality is good, desirable, and to be enforced whenever possible. As long as the dominant group can do so, it will maintain the status quo. Forming a homosexual identity is discouraged. If, however, a minority (e.g., gay individuals, the gay sub-culture) does not subscribe to such beliefs, it can exert pressure on the dominant group to change (e.g., become more liberal in their attitudes toward sexual preference). Whenever conflict occurs and is resolved in such a manner the minority benefits by gaining some leeway for its individuals to express their human potential. Society does not lose; like the minority in question, it becomes more liberated. They can question assumptions which they had not considered or been allowed to question earlier, they can learn from the experiences of the previously oppressed, and through learning and increased openness they can be freer to express their own diverse human potential.

Conflict resolution is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon. Each time society changes, there is a reciprocal change in individuals growing up within it. The effect is somewhat like a spiral in nature. Conflict and crisis breed development and change, which in turn allow for a different sort of conflict.

Minton's model has important implications for further development in method of data collection and interpretation. If the socio-historical context of identity formation is important, then it becomes necessary to search for cohort differences, to examine cross-cultural differences, to be alert to differences between developmental patterns in lesbians vs. gay males, etc. This model might be useful in examining, for example, the current phenomenon of the political lesbian, an issue which is somewhat difficult to address through the use of other models.
SUMMARY AND SUGGESTIONS

It is important to distinguish among lesbian erotic interests, lesbian behaviour, emotional attachments to women, and lesbian identification. Although there appear to be relationships among all of these variables, the presence of one does not necessarily lead to the others; awareness of lesbian erotic preferences, however, does seem to exert a strong influence in forcing a woman at least to consider defining herself as lesbian.

Perhaps it might be useful to think of lesbian identity formation in terms of a regression equation which lists the types of events and their importance ($\beta$-weights) in establishing such an identity (Sprague, 1980). Such an equation would also be useful for examining homosexual identity formation in men. The major difference would seem to be in the $\beta$-weights, since similar events sometimes have different significance for men and women. Thus, for example, awareness of erotic preferences would be weighted heavily for both sexes, awareness of same-sex emotional-affectional attachments weighted more heavily for men, and political considerations more heavily for women.

Whatever the combination of events might be which leads to formation of a lesbian identity, writers agree that a developmental process is involved and that the time required to complete the process varies greatly. They agree also on the importance of social interaction (both heterosexual and homosexual) and on the difficulty of resolving the identity problem to the mutual satisfaction of society and the individual.

Theory and research in lesbian identity formation have been provocative. Further research is needed to shed light on a number of issues: maintenance requirements for keeping a lesbian identity; factors contributing to a positive evaluation of a lesbian identity; factors contributing to disclosure, especially in “going public”; and dynamics and stabilization factors in the political lesbian; and changes in the identity of the aging lesbian. Lesbian-centred research has been neglected compared to research focused on gay men. It is important to acknowledge differences as well as similarities and to conduct investigations accordingly.

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