Working Lesbians: Role Conflicts and Coping Strategies

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This study investigated areas of interrole and intrarole conflict reported by 79 lesbian working women and factors influencing the types of coping strategies these women used. The three coping strategies identified by Hall (1972) were used to code responses to a questionnaire sent to women on the mailing list of a local lesbian newsletter. The most frequently reported interrole conflicts were between the work and lover roles, and the most frequently reported intrarole conflicts involved the work and daughter roles. Subjects viewed being lesbian as contributing little to their interrole conflicts and, as hypothesized, used predominantly role restructuring strategies (Types I and II) to deal with the conflicts. Also, as hypothesized, higher self-esteem was reported by individuals using restructuring strategies than by those using reactant strategies (Type III). In contrast, subjects viewed being lesbian as highly related to their intrarole conflicts, and, contrary to predictions, used reactive strategies almost as frequently as role restructuring strategies. Moreover, self-esteem did not differ among subjects using the three strategy types. The unexpected findings for intrarole conflict are discussed in terms of the potential benefits of reactant-avoidant strategies in work situations.

Being heterosexual typically is not considered relevant to career competency and qualifications. Being homosexual, on the other hand, can become an issue, whether covert or overt, once it is known. Thus,

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although working lesbians engage in the same roles as heterosexual women, because of the negative social status ascribed to homosexuality, they may face unique conflict situations in the work environment (Abbott & Love, 1972; Martin & Lyon, 1972).

Research on the conflicts women experience in fulfilling their work role has focused on the experiences of heterosexual women (Gilbert & Holahan, Note 1; Holahan & Gilbert, 1979; Nevill & Damico, 1975). A major purpose of the present study was to identify salient areas of role conflict reported by a sample of working women who are lesbian. In contrast to previous studies in which conflicts between roles (e.g., Goode, 1960; Hall, 1972) were explored, this study investigated both interrole and intrarole conflicts (i.e., conflict within a particular role). Of particular interest was whether subjects perceived that their lesbianism influenced their experience of interrole and intrarole conflicts. A second purpose was to compare the strategies used in coping with the identified areas of role conflict. Finally, we investigated the influence of self-esteem on the experience of role conflict and the strategies employed to deal with the role conflict.

The model of conflict resolution employed was initially developed by Hall (1972). He identified three basic coping mechanisms in dealing with interrole conflict: Structural Role Redefinition, Personal Role Redefinition, and Reactive Behavior. These strategies are each designed to alter one of the three role components defined by Levinson (1959): structurally given demands, personal conceptions of roles, and role performance or behavior. In Structural Role Redefinition (Type I coping), the individual deals directly with those communicating demands or expectations for the role (role senders) to negotiate a mutually satisfying set of role expectations. Personal Role Redefinition (Type II coping) involves changing one's own perceptions of roles and role demands rather than changing the external environment or role context. The individual using Reactive Behavior (Type III coping) assumes that role demands are unchangeable and admits, denies, or tries to meet all role demands.

Hall (1972), in a study of college-educated women, found that women choosing either a Type I or Type II strategy generally reported greater satisfaction with their role performance than those choosing a Type III strategy. Gilbert and Holahan (Note 1) applied Hall's typology in analyzing the strategies for dealing with conflict between professional and parental roles reported by female university professors in dual-career marriages. Their results are generally consistent with the prediction that Type I and II strategies would result in less stress and greater satisfaction with coping than would Type III.
Although Hall (1972) proposes that Type I is the most adaptive of the three strategies because it involves direct negotiation with role senders, subsequent studies do not support this view (e.g., Harrison & Minor, 1978). It seems likely that both Type II and Type I strategies would result in greater coping satisfaction and lower stress than would a strategy which assumed that all role demands had to be admitted, met, or denied (Type III). Lesbians, for example, whose personal identity may be in conflict with role demands, may find a strategy which redefines their internal perceptions of a role (Type II) to be as functional a strategy as one which restructures the external role demands (Type I).

Certain personality variables may be related to the experience of role conflict and to the strategies employed in coping with role conflict. Rogers' self theory provides a framework for clarification of the influence of lesbianism on the experience of role conflict. According to self theory, the accurate perception and subsequent integration of social expectations with personal values are essential to adaptive development (Rogers, 1961). The social expectations for sex-appropriate sexual preference may conflict with lesbians' personal values. That is, if society's and important role senders' beliefs about sexual preference do not correspond with what individuals want for themselves or with how they think others want them to be, then, according to Rogerian theory, psychological conflict results.

Individuals who have achieved a congruence between their personal values and social expectations feel a greater sense of self-acceptance and self-competence than those who have not (Rogers, 1961) and thus may experience less conflict in their interactions with various role senders. In addition, because of their stronger sense of self, they may be more apt to use strategies which involve active negotiation with role senders (Type I) and/or strategies that focus on personal redefinition. To test this possibility, self-esteem was used as a personality variable in the present study.

In the study, a sample of lesbians completed a questionnaire describing important areas of interrole and intrarole conflict, indicated the degree to which their lesbianism contributed to their conflicts, and described their characteristic coping strategies. A measure of self-esteem was also completed. The following hypotheses were advanced for both interrole and intrarole conflict: (a) subjects using strategy Types I and II would report less stress due to role conflict and greater satisfaction with coping than would subjects using Type III, and (b) subjects using strategy Types I and II would report higher self-esteem than would subjects using Type III. No hypotheses were made about how the perceived
degree of lesbianism contribution might be related to the kind of role conflict or type of coping strategy.

**METHOD**

*Subjects and Procedure*

A research questionnaire with explanatory cover letters was mailed to all 220 women on the mailing list of a local lesbian newsletter by the newsletter staff. The friendship network of one investigator also was utilized to distribute an additional 43 questionnaires. Both newsletter and friendship network participants were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses, which were to be returned by mail in the stamped, addressed envelope provided.

A total of 79 questionnaires (30%) were returned. Of these, nine questionnaires were not used because the subjects classified themselves as heterosexual or bisexual on the Kinsey Scale of Sexual Orientation (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin & Gebhard, 1953). The remaining 70 subjects (53 from the newsletter, and 17 from the friendship network) classified themselves on the seven-point Kinsey Scale as Exclusively or Predominantly Lesbian. Three-fourths of the participants were currently in lesbian primary relationships, and of these 82% lived with their lover. Over half (56.5%) had been in heterosexual marriages or primary relationships, but only 10% of the sample had children. Subjects ranged in age from 21 to 58, with a median age of 28.3; they were primarily Anglo (92.6%) and well educated, with 94% having at least a college degree; and 91.4% were presently working (defined as paid employment or full-time student enrollment). Further information on subjects' characteristics is available from the authors.

*Measures*

Three kinds of data were collected: (a) ratings on aspects of the role conflict experienced, hereafter referred to as “role-conflict related variables” (stress, coping satisfaction, and degree of lesbian contribution), (b) self-esteem scores, and (c) strategies for dealing with role conflict.

*Role-conflict related variables.* Participants were provided with definitions of role, role senders, and interrole and intrarole conflict. Interrole conflict was described as the felt difficulty in meeting the perceived demands for two or more roles; intrarole conflict as the felt difficulty in meeting perceived demands or expectations from others regarding behavior within a particular role.

Subjects were then asked, “What do you consider to be the most important
pair of roles for which you have in the past or currently experience conflict?" After identifying these roles, subjects described the conflict and rated the three role-conflict related items on a six-point scale ranging from one (not at all) to six (very). Most subjects (90.7%) said the conflict described was current.

The role-conflict items were: "How stressful is (or was) this conflict for you?"; "How satisfied are you with the way you dealt with this conflict?"; "How much do you feel being lesbian contributes to this conflict?" A parallel set of questions was used for intrarole conflict.

Of the 70 respondents, 86% described an area of intrarole conflict, 78% an area of interrole conflict, and 70% both areas. All subjects reported conflict in one area or the other.

Self-esteem. A 16-item, short form of the Texas Social Behavior Inventory (TSBI) was used to measure self-esteem (Helmreich & Stapp, 1974). This instrument is designed to determine individuals' self-confidence and competence in interpersonal situations and is generally considered to be a measure of social self-esteem. Coefficient alphas typically range from .87 to .92. Each item is scored from zero to four and total scores range from zero to 64. Lower scores are associated with lower self-esteem.

Coping strategies. Subjects were asked to respond to the open-ended question, "How would you describe how you have dealt with this conflict?" Responses were coded independently by three raters trained in Hall's (1972) classification system for coping strategies. Subjects who used multiple coping styles were coded according to the predominant type of coping strategy used. The rate of agreement between the first two raters was 74% for interrole conflict, and 71% for intrarole conflict. The third rater independently coded responses on which the first two raters did not agree. The third rater invariably agreed with one of the other two raters.

Examples of responses coded in each strategy type are as follows:

1. For conflict within the daughter role, subject "told my father I am a lesbian two-and-one-half years ago. He knows by now that I am not just going through a 'phase'.'"

This strategy was called Type I—Self-disclosure to change role sender's expectations.

2. For conflict between lover and work roles, subject "tried to look at my image at work as acting a role while not losing myself to it."

This strategy was coded Type II—Changed attitudes toward roles.

3. For conflict between lover and work roles, subject "tries not to bring up the conflict at all."

This strategy was coded Type III—Avoids conflict.
RESULTS

Analyses

Directional hypotheses were tested by one-tailed t-tests. Because 70% of the respondents reported both kinds of conflict, comparisons between responses for interrole conflict and intrarole conflict were made by t-tests for correlated means. Intercorrelations of subjects' responses among the three role-conflict related items and self-esteem scores were typically low (absolute median \( r = .16 \)). Thus, each was treated as a separate dependent variable. Finally, comparisons of responses from subjects obtained from the newsletter and the friendship network indicated no differences between these two groups on the various dependent measures. Thus, the groups were combined.

Descriptions of Role Conflicts

Interrole conflict. The most frequent interrole conflict reported was between the lover and work roles (40.8%). Other areas of interrole conflict mentioned less frequently were between work and political activist (12.9%), lover and daughter (7.4%), and lover and political activist (5.5%) roles. Of the remaining role conflicts identified by subjects (e.g., lover vs. mother), none was reported by more than one respondent.

Conflicts between lover and work roles generally concerned allocation of time and energy to the two roles and conflict between the needs or interests of the role senders (lovers and employers). Examples are:

The relationship between myself and my employer is that I would rearrange my schedule if I'm needed to work any overtime and my lover cannot cope with the conflict of my work and time I spend with her.

My lover wants the security of staying in one area and spending much time with me; I am very busy with my career . . . and I must move frequently to gain experience/opportunities.

In general subjects viewed their interrole conflicts as quite stressful \( (M = 4.52) \) and their lesbianism as contributing only moderately to the
conflict \((M = 3.26)\). Satisfaction with coping was moderate \((M = 3.11)\).

*Intrarole conflict.* For intrarole conflict, the work role was mentioned most often \((n = 20, 32.8\%)\), followed in order by the daughter \((n = 18, 29.5\%)\) and lover \((n = 10, 16.4\%)\) roles. Subjects identifying these three areas of intrarole conflict did not differ in self-esteem or in their ratings of the role conflict experience. Of the remaining roles identified by subjects (e.g., mother, friend), none was selected by more than three respondents.

Conflicts within the role of work typically involved feeling socially unacceptable in a heterosexual, male-dominated work environment. For example,

> Expectations of co-workers and boss (all male) that I be heterosexual (dress, act, and have evidence of so being) when I really wish I could just be who I am at work. I cannot, usually, because I am afraid of what'd result.

> I would like to be completely myself at work. I enjoy my job, however, I can never discuss my home or personal life.

Intrarole conflict in the daughter role typically involved expectations of parents which subjects could not or did not wish to meet. Examples include:

> My father would prefer that I were heterosexual and that I marry and produce grandchildren.

> I want to be a loving daughter but cannot always meet my mother's demands, i.e., that I visit her often, etc.

In general, subjects viewed their intrarole conflict as quite stressful \((M = 4.61)\) and their lesbianism as contributing substantially to the conflict \((M = 4.61)\). Satisfaction with coping was moderate \((M = 3.56)\).

*Comparisons of Two Kinds of Role Conflicts*

Subjects reported that their lesbianism contributed more to intrarole conflict \((4.61)\) than to interrole conflict \((3.26)\), \(F(1,113) = 3.67, p\)
< .001. The two kinds of conflict, however, were rated as equally high in stress (interrole, 4.52; intrarole, 4.61). Ratings of the degree of satisfaction in coping with each kind of conflict also were similar (interrole, 3.11; intrarole 3.56).

Coping strategies employed for conflicts in each area are summarized in Table 1. A Type III strategy was used more frequently for intrarole conflicts than for interrole conflicts and a Type I strategy more frequently for interrole conflicts than for intrarole conflicts, $\chi^2(2) = 6.43, p < .05$.

**Comparisons of Types of Coping Strategies Employed**

It should be noted that only 25% of the subjects employed the same strategy for both their interrole and intrarole conflict.

**Interrole conflicts.** As predicted, subjects using Type III strategies reported lower self-esteem than those using Type II strategies, but not Type I, $t(23) = 1.95, p < .05$, and $t(37) = 1.39, p > .05$, respectively. Contrary to our hypothesis, no differences were found among the strategy types on stress due to role conflict or on satisfaction with coping. The degree to which lesbianism contributed to role conflict also did not differ among strategy types. The mean values are summarized in Table 2.

**Intrarole conflicts.** As predicted, subjects using Type III strategies reported significantly less satisfaction with coping than those using Type I and Type II strategies $t(37) = 4.33, p < .001$, and $t(23) = 3.33, p < .001$, respectively. Contrary to expectations, however, no differences in self-esteem and in stress due to role conflict were reported. As with

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kind of Conflict</th>
<th>Coping Strategy</th>
<th>Frequency Interrole (n = 54)</th>
<th>Frequency Intrarole (n = 61)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type I</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>(29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type II</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>(16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type III</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>(10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2
Summary of Mean Item Ratings and Scale Scores for Subjects Using the Three Types of Coping Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Coping Styles</th>
<th>Type I</th>
<th>Type II</th>
<th>Type III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n (S.D.)</td>
<td>n (S.D.)</td>
<td>n (S.D.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interoles Conflict</td>
<td>(n = 29)</td>
<td>(n = 15)</td>
<td>(n = 10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress of conflict</td>
<td>4.52 (1.18)</td>
<td>4.33 (1.45)</td>
<td>4.80 (1.48)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping satisfaction</td>
<td>3.66 (1.34)</td>
<td>4.07 (1.39)</td>
<td>4.30 (1.77)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of lesbian contribution</td>
<td>2.89 (2.04)</td>
<td>3.93 (2.05)</td>
<td>3.30 (2.06)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>46.24 (11.49)</td>
<td>47.73 (8.35)</td>
<td>40.60 (9.80)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interoles Conflict</td>
<td>(n = 28)</td>
<td>(n = 9)</td>
<td>(n = 23)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress of conflict</td>
<td>4.68 (1.25)</td>
<td>4.67 (1.20)</td>
<td>4.43 (1.20)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping satisfaction</td>
<td>4.07 (1.33)</td>
<td>4.11 (1.17)</td>
<td>2.48 (1.27)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of lesbian contribution</td>
<td>4.57 (1.33)</td>
<td>4.44 (1.94)</td>
<td>4.87 (1.94)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>45.93 (10.58)</td>
<td>41.89 (12.06)</td>
<td>43.87 (8.73)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Higher scores are associated with a greater endorsement of the variable.

*Ratings were made on a 6-point scale.

interrole conflict, no differences were found on the degree to which lesbianism contributed to the role conflict.

DISCUSSION

Interrole Conflict

The most frequently reported interrole conflict was between the work and lover roles. Subjects' written descriptions of their work-lover conflict and their response that lesbianism contributed little to the conflict suggest that this kind of interrole conflict occurs independently of one's sexual orientation. Rather, these findings, like those reported for heterosexual women in the workforce (Holahan & Gilbert, 1979), underscore the difficulties of meeting the multiple demands of work and primary relationships.

Different coping strategies typically were used for dealing with in-
terrole and intrarole conflict. For interrole conflict, the Type I strategies clearly predominated (54%), with 28% of respondents using Type II and only 18% using Type III. Thus, most respondents used the coping strategies typically viewed as the more effective (i.e., Types I and II). As anticipated, higher self-esteem was reported by individuals using these strategies than those using Type III. Thus, individuals who have higher self-esteem and confidence appear more likely to use restructuring strategies for interrole conflict than do persons with lower self-esteem and confidence. (Using Type I and II strategies may also enhance self-esteem.) Contrary to expectations, however, using strategy Types I and II as opposed to Type III did not result in significantly lower stress due to interrole conflict or to higher satisfaction with coping.

This similarity among the stress and satisfaction variables associated with the different strategies is perplexing. The diversity of interrole conflicts identified by subjects may have produced too much variability in subjects’ responses to detect differences among those using the three strategies. Harrison and Minor (1978), for example, found that the type of coping strategy used by black working mothers was influenced by the kind of interrole conflict being assessed. Degree of conflict and ratings of effectiveness may also be influenced by kind of interrole conflict. Unfortunately, our sample was too small to allow comparisons of self-esteem, stress, and effectiveness across the three coping styles within a specific area of interrole conflict (e.g., lover-work).

**Intrarole Conflict**

In contrast to interrole conflicts, subjects viewed being lesbian as highly related to their intrarole conflicts. Conflicts within the most frequently mentioned roles of work and daughter concerned expectations or demands from role senders which subjects could not or did not want to meet because of their sexual preference. These situations, then, involve the struggles with integration of social expectations and personal values described in Rogers’ self theory. Subjects identifying work as their most important intrarole conflict area, for example, may be working in an environment in which being known as lesbian would jeopardize one's job security and career development. Similarly, relationships with parents are important in our society and the inability or unwillingness to meet parents’ expectations can cause problems. Furthermore, if subjects have internalized parents’ (and society’s) definitions of the daughter role (e.g., the importance of marriage or of a child), their role situation may be even more stressful.
Regarding coping, for intrarole conflict, the Type III strategies were used almost as frequently as Type I. This more frequent use of Type III for intrarole than for interrole conflicts may be related to the finding that subjects described their lesbianism as contributing more to intrarole conflicts than to interrole conflicts.

Of the respondents choosing a Type III strategy for intrarole conflict, 95% said they either could not "see any way to deal with it" or avoided the conflict. Thus, a lesbian may find herself in a no-win situation with regard to parents' or employers' expectations. If she chooses a Type I strategy, she may disclose her lesbianism and risk loss of affection or employment. If she chooses a Type II strategy by attempting to change her perception of the role rather than the actual situation, she may increase the personal strain of maintaining a heterosexual image. Thus, "I can't see any way to deal with it" may be the result of careful deliberation about the risks and benefits of confrontation, as well as of an awareness of societal factors. Similarly, avoidance could be a very effective strategy for certain conflicts. Lazarus (Note 2) distinguishes between denial of conflict and actual avoidance. Whereas the former represents efforts to negate a problem, the latter represents efforts not to think about or act upon a problem once one is aware of the social or personal reality surrounding the problem. Such effective avoidance could occur in cases where a lesbian deals with an antihomosexual employer by not mentioning her personal life at work.

The much lower satisfaction with coping reported by individuals using Type III strategies rather than Type I and II for intrarole conflict is consistent with this explanation. That is, Type III strategies may be the most effective politically although not very satisfying personally. Also, in contrast to interrole conflicts, subjects using the various coping strategies did not differ in self-esteem, again suggesting that environmental reality dictates choice of coping style for intrarole conflict more than for interrole conflict.

As with interrole conflict, comparisons of strategies within specific areas of intrarole conflict are needed. Although our sample size was too small to detect statistically significant differences, our data suggest that Type III strategies were used most frequently within the work role whereas Type I strategies were used most frequently in conflicts with the daughter or lover roles.

These suggestive findings together with the difference in strategies employed for intrarole and interrole conflicts indicate that people, by and large, may not use the same strategy for different role conflicts. Moreover, the strategy type used for a particular interrole conflict may change with time and circumstances. For example, a lesbian may wisely
use a Type III strategy in an antigay work situation as long as the environmental constraints do not cause undue stress and job dissatisfaction. Should the latter occur, however, a restructuring type strategy would be in order.

Generalizations from our findings are limited by the small sample size, the use of self-report, the nature of the sample, and the data collection procedure. Lesbians who subscribe to a lesbian newsletter in the southwest are not representative of all lesbians. Also, the low return rate may reflect a self-selection bias. One could also argue that those subjects who did respond may have tried to present themselves, or lesbians as a group, in a favorable light. The high stress reported by respondents, however, indicates otherwise. Finally, respondents were not asked to rate the effectiveness of their coping strategies. As was noted in the discussion of intrarole conflicts, effectiveness and satisfaction with coping may represent separate dimensions.

This study provides some clarification on the kinds of role conflicts experienced by working lesbians and the factors influencing the types of coping strategies used. Additional research is needed to identify variables relevant to strategies for coping with specific role conflicts. Further evaluation of coping effectiveness is also important. Lazarus (Note 2) points out that coping effectiveness has several dimensions (i.e., social functioning, morale, and somatic health). Thus, while one strategy may enhance social functioning (choosing not to disclose one's lesbianism), it may simultaneously decrease morale.

REFERENCE NOTES


REFERENCES


