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How Lesbian Relationships Are Similar to and Different from Heterosexual Relationships:

Lived Experience of Lesbian Women Who Were Previously Married to Men

CAAP Final Project Letter of Intent

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Submitted to Dr. Kevin Alderson

How Lesbian Relationships Are Similar to and Different from Heterosexual Relationships:

Lived Experience of Lesbian Women Who Were Previously Married to Men

Problem Statement

This letter of intent proposes a phenomenological study to clarify the similarities and differences between heterosexual and lesbian relationships. The perspective of lesbian women who have been married to men will be represented using interviews with lesbian women who have experienced both types of primary relationships.

Introduction

Since 1973, when homosexuality was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychological Association, there has been an increase in literature related to gay and lesbian issues (Burckell, Eubanks-Carter, & Goldfried, 2005; McNair & Spitalnick, 2005). Early studies focused on the etiology of homosexuality or on conversion therapies, each contributing to the pathologizing of gay men and lesbian women. However, recent research focus is constructive and affirming of gays and lesbians. For example, some current research topics include development of a healthy and positive gay or lesbian identity or resilience in gay men and lesbian women.

While these changes are promising, research on gays and lesbians is still in its infancy, and the issues specific to lesbians and lesbian couples (i.e., lesbian bed death and fusion) require further illumination. Researchers consistently report that there is paucity of research on lesbian couples (Goldfried, 2001; Goldfried & Pachankis, 2004). Furthermore, lesbian relationships have been explored from a heterocentric point of view (Iasenza, 2000). That is, lesbian relationships have traditionally not been explored from the point of view of lesbian experience. Some current research refutes myths about lesbian relationships, such as the concepts of fusion in lesbian

relationships and lesbian bed death. Fusion refers to the idea that because women are relational and expressive, that they “merge” emotionally in their relationships (Gaines & Henderson, 2002; Iasenza, 2000; McNair & Spitalnick, 2005).

Iasenza (2000) writes that lesbian bed death, or hypoactive sexual desire, supposedly occurs in “long-term lesbian couples and characterized by a dramatic, sustained drop-off in sexual frequency” (p. 59). Both of these concepts have been repetitive themes in the literature on lesbian couples (McNair & Spitalnick, 2005). However, as Iasenza points out, these concepts are rooted in heterocentric definitions of healthy sexual and emotional intimacy in primary relationships. For instance, consider that although lesbian couples report less genital sex than heterosexual couples, they report more kissing, cuddling, and holding than do heterosexual couples (McNair & Spitalnick, 2005; Rothblum, 1994). Lesbian couples also report higher relationship satisfaction than gay or heterosexual couples (Beals & Peplau, 2001; Cardell, Finn, & Marecek, 1981; Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987; McNair & Spitalnick, 2005; Metz, Rosser, & Strapko, 1994). This discrepancy may indicate that the current standards by which we are examining lesbian relationships are incompatible with lesbian experience.

It has also been suggested that theories and techniques for intervention with heterosexual couples have been applied to gay and lesbian couples. There is no empirical support for the efficacy of applying traditional marital and relationship-counselling interventions with lesbian couples. In addition, studies of gay male relationships have been indiscriminately generalized to lesbian relationships (Rivett, 2001). Meanwhile, lesbian women may have more in common with heterosexual women than with gay men concerning relationship issues. Although it may seem reasonable to assume that there are areas of commonality between heterosexual, lesbian, and gay relationships, more support for this hypothesis is required. The aforementioned data suggest that

there is a need for illumination of lesbian relationship issues to inform practice with this population. Specific identification of the commonalities and differences from the point of view of lesbians would be informative.

Other issues that the literature highlights include homophobia, heterocentrism, and the effects of these on lesbian couples. Homophobia and heterocentrism in the counselling relationship is also explored in some recent studies. Barrett and McWhirter (2002) define homophobia as an individual's responses of fear, discomfort, anger, disgust, or aversion toward gay men and lesbians. Homophobia may involve discrimination, harassment, assault, oppression, rejection, or various forms of abuse towards gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. Heterosexual bias refers to the tendency to value heterosexual relationships more highly than homosexual relationships, to believe that somehow homosexual love is not as valid as heterosexual love, or that same-sex relationships cannot be as satisfying as heterosexual relationships (Burckell, Eubanks-Carter, & Goldfried, 2005; Goldfried, 2001; Goldfried & Pachankis, 2004; Ironson, Kinder, & Testa, 1987; Palma & Stanley; 2002; Rivett, 2001). Studies on homophobia and heterocentrism in the counselling field suggest that in addition to the direct risks of homophobia and heterosexual bias, professionals are at risk to minimize or inflate the differences between same-sex and heterosexual couples. The APA (2000) guidelines for working with gay and lesbian clients states that therapists are encouraged to increase their knowledge, understanding, and competence in working with issues of homosexuality and bisexuality (Appendix E).

Sociopolitical changes in Canada and the advent of same-sex marriage will increase the visibility of gay and lesbian relationships. Also, consider that gays and lesbians are up to four times more likely to seek counselling (Burckell et al., 2005; Goldfried, 2001; Mackey, Mackey, & O'Brien, 1997). One author reports that 42% of therapists in North America report that they

deal with gay and lesbian issues (Burckell et al., 2005). Yet, according to other research, therapists and student therapists report feeling unprepared to deal with gay and lesbian issues (Annesley & Coyle, 1995). Thus, this study could meet several goals. It may help to explore lesbian relationship issues from the point of view of a traditionally marginalized and voiceless population. It may contribute to the body of knowledge about lesbian relationships. Furthermore, this research study may refute myths, and clarify what the similarities and differences between lesbian and heterosexual relationships are.

Methods and Procedures

This letter of intent proposes a qualitative study to explore the differences and similarities between lesbian and heterosexual relationships from the point of view of women who have experienced both types of relationships. A phenomenological study including interviews with six to eight women who are in lesbian relationships, but have been married to men in the past, will be the primary source of data. The interviews will give voice to the lived experiences of the lesbian women who have been in both lesbian partnerships and heterosexual marriages. The primary researcher and supervisor will act as collaborators and interpreters in the interactive research process.

Participants

Participants in this study will be women who are partnered with or married to other women, but who have been previously married to men. These women will be recruited in the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD). To qualify for this study, participants must have been married to a man for at least one year at some point in their past. In addition, they must be in a partnered, married, or cohabitating lesbian relationship of at least one year in duration.

Participants will be treated in accordance with the Tri-Cities Research Ethics Board ethical guidelines (Athabasca, 2003).

Design

Non-probability, or snowball sampling, will be used to recruit participants for this phenomenological study (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000). Sampling will be purposeful, and participants will be recruited through friendship and professional networks of the student researcher. Through email, telephone, and face-to-face conversation, the student researcher will ask her lesbian friends and colleagues to pass her contact information on to women who they think may qualify for this study (Appendix D). Women who are willing volunteer for this study will contact the student researcher. If both women in a lesbian relationship meet the requirements for participation, and they are both willing to participate, they will be given the option of being interviewed separately or together. Before their involvement in this study, all participants will complete a *Written Informed Consent Form* (Appendix A) and a *Demographic Sheet* (Appendix B), which will be collected by the student researcher at the time of the interview. Semi-structured interviews will include open-ended questions with the objective of exploring the participants' experiences of lesbian and heterosexual relationships (Appendix C). Other open-ended questions may be utilized as appropriate during the interview to clarify the participants' responses.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews, which will range from one to two hours in duration, will be audio taped and transcribed by the student researcher. Credibility will be established in several ways. Analysis of the data will proceed directly from the data. The research supervisor, who is knowledgeable and experienced in both gay and lesbian issues and phenomenological research, will co-analyze the transcripts to identify themes and patterns in the transcripts. In addition, the student researcher

will engage in peer debriefing, progressive subjectivity, and member checks to help ensure credibility. Dependability will be established through use of an audit trail. The audit will specifically include verbatim transcripts of the interviews, researcher journal notes, and notes on the transcripts. All data and forms will be kept in a locked file cabinet or a password protected computer.

Potential Implications

This examination may provide illumination of the differences and similarities between lesbian and heterosexual relationships from the point of view of lesbian women with experience in both types of pairings. The research results may help to dispel myths about the similarities and differences in lesbian and heterosexual relationships. Furthermore, these findings may serve to inform future research and practice with lesbian couples. It will also give voice to a minority population who has hitherto been inadequately represented in the literature on lesbian relationships.

Potential Limitations of the Study and Implications for Future Research

The lesbian population is diverse, and this small sample may not reflect the diversity of this population. Specifically, perspectives of elderly, non-Caucasian, poor, or lesbians who are closeted (i.e., those who do not disclose their sexuality to others) may not be represented. The women recruited for this study are predominantly from the GRVD, which is a liberal, urban area. Lesbians in rural settings may not be represented, and they may face different issues. In addition, women who are having difficulty in their relationship may be less likely to volunteer for a study in which they will be discussing their relationship, thereby creating a degree of sampling bias.

This study will focus on women who define as lesbians as opposed to those who define as bisexual. Future research might involve applying the same research protocol with women who

identify as bisexual and who have been partnered at some point with both men and women. An alternative approach may involve interviewing women who are partnered with men, but have been in a lesbian partnership in the past. Other future research directions might include the perspectives of elderly, poor, non-white, lesbians who live in rural areas, or closeted lesbians.

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Appendix A
Informed Consent & Information Sheet
A PHENOMONOLOGICAL STUDY OF LESBIAN RELATIONSHIP ISSUES

RESEARCHER:

Stacey Boon

Phone: (604) 992-0078

Email: sboon@shaw.ca

SUPERVISOR:

Dr. Kevin Alderson, Division of Applied Psychology, University of Calgary,

Phone: (403)-220-6758

Email: alderson@ucalgary.ca

SPONSOR/FUNDING:

None

This research is part of a thesis requirement for the graduate program in counselling psychology at University of Calgary/Athabasca University/University of Lethbridge, in Alberta, Canada, where the researcher is currently enrolled.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

The purpose of this study is to learn about the differences between lesbian and heterosexual partnerships from the perspective of women who have experience in both types of relationships. Understanding the experiences of these women may help to inform counselors or other professionals about the specific needs and issues of lesbian couples who seek counselling. Indirectly, this knowledge may help improve the quality of counselling work being done with lesbian couples.

WHO WILL PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

Six (6) to eight (8) women who are in relationships with women, but who have previously been married to men will take part in this study.

REQUIREMENTS OF INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY

Participation in this study will require you to fill out a demographic sheet and engage in a one-time interview with the researcher. This one-to-one interview can vary in length from one to two hours. During this session, the conversation will be audio taped, and the questions will pertain to your experiences of heterosexual and homosexual partnerships. You will be provided with a choice of options for the location of this interview whether it be in the privacy and convenience of your own home, or in a private office.

LENGTH OF YOUR INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY

This study requires a one-time interview session that can range in length from one to two hours long.

RISKS OF PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY

There is no specific risk to participating in this study. The degree of risk is about the same as having a discussion with someone about what you are thinking and feeling.

BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY

There may not be any direct benefits to you through your participation in the study. On the other hand, however, some people do benefit from having an opportunity to express their views about important life experiences.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Your name will not appear on the transcripts, reports, or published papers. Any information that could lead to the identification of the participants will not be included. Direct quotes from the interviews may be used in published reports for the purposes of teaching and learning.

COST TO PARTICIPANTS

Other than your time, there is no cost to you.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS

Your participation is voluntary. You are free to refuse to answer any question and the researcher will not probe for answers. If you wish to withdraw from this study at any time, the researcher will fully support you in your decision.

CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS

For any questions about this study, contact the researcher Stacey Boon at (604) 992-0078, or Dr. Kevin Alderson at (403) 220-6758.

For any questions about your rights as a research participant, contact the Athabasca University's Research Ethics Board (REB). The REB is a group of people who review the research to protect research participants' rights. The contact information for the REB is: (xxx) xxx-xxxx.

If you are in distress because of participating in this interview, please contact the student researcher. If you require more support, the following local agencies provide low cost or free counselling services.

1. UBC Women's Resource Centre,
800 Robson Street, Vancouver, BC, V6Z 3B7, Phone: 604-822-3415, Email:
wrc@csstudies.ubc.ca, Web: www.wrc.ubc.ca
2. Family Services of Greater Vancouver
1616 West 7th Ave. Vancouver, BC, V6J 1S5, Phone: 604 -731-4951

MORE INFORMATION

You will get a copy of this form to keep. You may also request a copy of the full study plan.

SIGNATURES

I agree to take part in this study.

Participant Name: _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Witness Name: _____

Witness Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher Name: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____ Date: _____

Appendix B

Demographic Sheet

1. Participant Name: _____ Age: _____

2. Address: _____

3. Phone: _____

4. I identify as ☐ lesbian ☐ heterosexual ☐ bisexual ☐ I choose not to label myself

Other (please specify) : _____

5. Ethnicity:

_____ Anglo-Saxon Canadian

_____ French Canadian

_____ First Nations Canadian or Metis

_____ African Canadian

_____ Asian Canadian

_____ Other, please specify: _____

6. Highest education level completed: _____

7. Employment type: _____

8. Household income level:

☐ up to 20 000/year

☐ up to 30 000/year

☐ up to 40 000/year

☐ up to 50 000/year

☐ up to 60 000/year

☐ up to 80 000/year

☐ over 80 000/year

Appendix C

Part I

Before beginning, I would like to thank you for deciding to participate in this study. The purpose of this study is to help gain a clearer understanding of the similarities and differences between heterosexual and lesbian relationships.

To begin with, I would like you think about your primary relationships and what they have been like for you.

Part II

1. What do you perceive as the similarities between lesbian and heterosexual relationships?
2. What do you perceive to be differences between lesbian and heterosexual relationships?
3. How would describe the nature of intimacy in heterosexual marriage?
4. How would you describe the nature of intimacy in a lesbian relationship?
5. What factors are related to relationship satisfaction in a lesbian relationship?
6. What factors are related to relationship satisfaction in a heterosexual relationship?
7. What are the challenges that heterosexual couples face?
8. What are the challenges that lesbian couples face?
9. What are the positive aspects or benefits of being in a heterosexual relationship?
10. What are the positive aspects or benefits of being in a lesbian relationship?
11. Is there anything else that you would like to mention that I did not ask about?

Appendix D

Recruitment Invitation

Dear _____,

As part of my Master's thesis, I am completing a study on lesbian relationships. I am in search of women who are currently in committed lesbian relationships, but who have been married to men in the past. Participation in this study will involve a confidential interview ranging from 60 to 120 minutes in duration. The purpose of this study is to learn more about the differences and similarities of lesbian and heterosexual relationships from the perspective of lesbians. Participant confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study. If you know any women who might qualify and who you think may be interested in participating, please forward my contact information.

If you are interested in participating in this study or have any questions about it, please contact Stacey Boon at her e-mail address (sboon@shaw.ca) or phone (604-992-0078) by June 30, 2005.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Stacey Boon". The signature is written in dark ink and includes a long, horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Appendix E

Definition of Terms

Homosexuality

Homosexuality refers to an affectional and sexual interest towards individuals of the same gender (Palma & Stanley, 2002).

Bisexuality

Bisexuality refers to an affectional and sexual interest towards individuals of both genders (Palma & Stanley, 2002).

Homophobia

Barrett and McWhirter (2002) define homophobia as an individual's responses of fear, discomfort, anger, disgust, or aversion toward gay men and lesbians. Homophobia may involve discrimination, harassment, assault, oppression, rejection, or various forms of abuse towards gays, lesbians, and bisexuals.

Heterosexism

Heterosexism refers to "an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes" forms of identity, behaviour, relationship, and community that are not heterosexual (Rose, 2000).

Heterocentrism

Heterosexual bias refers to the tendency to value heterosexual relationships more highly than homosexual relationships, to believe that somehow homosexual love is not as valid as heterosexual love, or that same-sex relationships cannot be as satisfying as heterosexual relationships (Burckell, Eubanks-Carter, & Goldfried, 2005; Goldfried, 2001; Goldfried & Pachankis, 2004; Ironson, Kinder, & Testa, 1987; Palma & Stanley, 2002; Rivett, 2001).