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LONELINESS, SOCIAL SUPPORT AND LIFESTYLES
IN
GAY AND HETEROSEXUAL WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Lifestyle, social support and loneliness in gay women have been poorly documented. Further to this no comparisons have been made with heterosexual women in these areas. The present investigation assessed lifestyle, social support and loneliness and involved two samples, 87 heterosexual women and 63 homosexual women. Of particular interest in the area of social support was support offered by family and friends, as perceived by the respondents. Lifestyle variables were studied to possibly offer an explanation if any differences were found between the two groups. Loneliness was assessed as a multidimensional construct involving four types of relational deficits. Finally variables predicting loneliness were explored. Results indicated that the gay women suffer relationship deficits in the areas of family and community. They also perceived less support from the family than the heterosexual women, and had less kin in their support network, relying on friends more in times of need. This may be because friends of the gay women, both heterosexual and homosexual, tended to react more positively than parents, to finding out about their lesbianism. The variables of perceived support were the main predictors of family and friends loneliness in heterosexual women. These and variables associated with lesbianism, such as feelings of isolation and who was first told, were found to be the best predictors of the different areas of loneliness in gay women. The results suggest that gay women have become alienated from their families and society in general.

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CHAPTER 1

LIFESTYLE

Differences in patterns of lifestyle originated as far back as 1867, when lifestyle was viewed as economically determined. Many people studied the use of the term "lifestyle" but it was not until 1972 that "Index Medicus" began indexing articles under lifestyle. However Coreil, Levin and Jacobs (1985) reviewed the articles in the "Index Medicus" from 1972 - 1983 and discovered that a majority of these articles referred to lifestyle in the sense of specific behaviours identified as risk factors for disease and accidental death.

In the context of health, lifestyle has been defined as "all those behaviours over which a person has control; including actions that affect a person's health risks, and activities that have an impact on health status that are a regular part of one's daily living pattern" (Walker et al, 1986).

Kamler in 1984, quoted by Coreil, Levin and Jacobs (1985) defined lifestyle as behaviours and attitudes which are adopted in order to fit in with one's social groups, a notion he contrasted with "life philosophy", the personal identity which one nourishes regardless of how others think or act. The notion of social conformity is fundamental to this view of lifestyle.

Lifestyle, simply stated, is an individual's unique living habits. Living habits or lifestyle can be divided into three areas, namely, attitudes, relationships, and living arrangements.

Because of the health view, the majority of existing lifestyle assessment measures are health hazard/health risk appraisal tools that focus primarily on health-protecting or preventive behaviours. These are based on a risk-reduction model rather than on a health enhancement model.

However, none of the scales or approaches looked at general differences between two groups. Although Kamler's (1984) definition comes close to looking at differences between two groups, no scale or lifestyle measurement was mentioned.

This study is interested in comparing two groups in lifestyle, as well as social support and loneliness. Using Kamler's lifestyle definition of "behaviour and attitudes adopted to fit one's social group the personal identity which one nourishes regardless of how others think or act", two groups in which we could expect

a difference in lifestyle would be heterosexual and homosexual women.

Looking at the first subdivision of lifestyle, that of attitudes, O'Connell (1980) states indications are that women's lifestyles may be related to attitudes towards career, marriage, personality and the concept of the women's role. The gay women's attitudes are different to heterosexual women regarding marriage and the traditional women's role, as they choose/prefer the close company, friendship and intimacy of another woman.

A study that looked at personality of homosexual and heterosexual women, is that of Adelman, 1977. Adelman compared professionally employed lesbian and heterosexual women, on the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI). With the exception of the Schizophrenia (Sc) scale, no difference was found on the clinical scales. There was a significantly higher elevation on the Masculinity/femininity (Mf) scale for lesbians. A further analysis on the data of the Sc scale showed that the difference was due to a difference in degree of social alienation. Item content of this scale deals with poor family relationships and a more general withdrawal of interest from other people and relationships.

Adelman (1977) also analyzed the data to a second variable - living status, and again found significant differences. Single lesbians scored lowest on the F scale while lesbian couples scored the highest, with heterosexual women falling in between. The F scale consists of items that are answered almost always in the same direction by the normal standardized group. The high score may be explained by lesbian couples having a higher degree of nonconformity and unconventionality.

The biggest difference between lesbians and heterosexual women, in lifestyle, is their sexual orientation. Most research on homosexuals has typically concentrated on men. It has only been recently that research on gay women has begun. Few studies have been done on lesbian relationships with a comparison to heterosexual relationships.

Peplau et al (1978) looked solely at lesbian relationships. They suggest that two distinct value orientations may influence gay women's relationships. Firstly, dyadic attachment, which is concerned with emphasis on establishing emotionally close and relatively secure love relationships. The second, personal autonomy, emphasises independence and self-actualization that may lead to a questioning of traditional patterns of love relationships. It seems likely that all close relationships require a balancing of the desire for intimacy and independence, that is not just inherent for gay women. However it has been found that gay women tend

to emphasize the emotional quality of a love relationship and tend to develop more meaningful emotional attachments to other females than males, and find it easier to achieve open communication and emotional expression in same sex relationships. (Peplau et al, 1978).

Peplau et al (1978), quote Abbott and Love, in suggesting that gay women, unlike heterosexual women, are not afraid to develop qualities of independence, self-actualization, strength and intelligence, and that in preferring a same sex partner, gay women choose personal autonomy over culturally prescribed female roles. However emphasis on autonomy may lead women to prefer relationships that are less exclusive and last only so long as they remain personally satisfying. This may be reflected by the number of relationships they have been in or by feelings of loneliness.

Peplau et al's study found that most gay women in the sample reported high degrees of closeness and satisfaction in their current relationships, and a majority of them also indicated they and their partner shared equally in power. These two divisions were found not to be mutually exclusive with individual differences in the importance given to attachment and autonomy. Gay women's social characteristics, including attitudes, socioeconomic status and memberships in various groups may also have important effects on relationship values.

Kurdek and Schmitt (1986) looked at relationship quality of partners in heterosexual married and cohabiting partners and gay men and lesbian relationships. They looked at three dimensions of relationship quality, these being love for ones partner, liking of ones partner and general relationship satisfaction.

Kurdek and Schmitt (1986) found that the four types of partners differed in both relationship quality and variables predictive of relationship quality. The four partner types did not differ in liking of partner, and cohabiting partners had the lowest love for partner and relationship satisfaction scores relative to the other three partner types. Gay men, lesbian and heterosexual married partners were indistinguishable from one another on these scores.

As predicted married partners reported the most barriers to leaving the relationship. Gay women expressed a strong preference for reciprocal dyadic dependency. They also found that lesbian partners were more masculine than married women. Because lesbian partners have been found to be unconventional in their sex role behaviour, Kurdek and Schmitt state their high masculinity scores were not surprising.

Kurdek and Schmitt (1986) predicted that the heterosexual

and homosexual cohabitants would report more shared decision making than the married partners would. This prediction was only partially confirmed in that reciprocal dependency and equality of power were particularly important for the relationship quality of lesbian couples. Kurdek and Schmitt only used childless couples as children affect relationship qualities, and only monogamous couples since "open" relationships also affect quality.

Research on heterosexuals frequently notes the tendency for the man to assume the responsibility for decision-making on certain tasks and for the woman to be responsible for only traditional feminine tasks. In woman to woman units, economic independence, greater productivity, personal autonomy and responsibility for one's own life, makes the relationship inherently different in structure from traditional heterosexual partnerships. In addition, gay women relationships tend to exhibit a high degree of understanding between partners as well as less restrictive role playing and a degree of autonomy and attachment which may be less available in heterosexual relationships. Most researchers have noted that butch-femme role playing does not characterize lesbian partnerships either in sexual interactions or in general (Lynch & Reilly, 1986).

Lynch and Reilly (1986) researched lesbian relationships to look at the extent of equality and role-playing. They found that 40% of the individuals in the study reported an equal sharing of responsibility for chores. The majority of relationships were characterized by financial sharing and equality, and equality in decision making. Unlike heterosexual relationships in which the woman is rarely perceived either by her partner or in particular by others, as an equal bread winner, both partners in a lesbian relationship assume an instrumental role in their financial contributions (Lynch & Reilly, 1986).

Martin and Lyon (1983), state that some couples have a relationship like a marriage where assets are mutually owned, whereas others do not like to pool their resources and so put up half the rent, food money, and maintain separate bank accounts. Assets remain owned by whoever bought them so that there are no hassles about property should they break up.

Albro and Tulley (1979) surveyed gay women in an effort to determine how they functioned within the heterosexual macroculture and homosexual microculture. They acknowledged the fact that the lesbian remains hidden in society due to general societal attitudes against homosexuality. In order to cope with society's condemnations, gay women tend to unite with each other in lesbian subcultures which coexist within the larger society (Albro & Tulley, 1979).

In their study half of the women had no jointly held property, bank accounts, loans, stocks or motor vehicle. Albro and Tulley's study suggested that if a woman is involved in what she considers a permanent gay relationship, she is willing to support her partner financially.

Part of Albro and Tulley's survey was designed for women who regarded themselves as involved in a lesbian relationship. These women did most or all of their socializing together and saw their relationship as being a permanent commitment. Lesbians who wished to marry gave similar reasons as the heterosexual person - romance, financial and legal advantages, security and the desire to make a public commitment. Those who did not wish to marry already felt secure in their relationship or they objected to the institution of marriage. It seems that regardless of the absence of legal commitment, the reactions of gay women to sexual relations outside of the primary relationship are similar to the reactions of heterosexual women.

Kurdek and Schmitt (1986) also looked at social support of couples because of the finding that social support buffers stress experience of both individuals and couples. Another reason for this area of interest was due to findings that heterosexual and homosexual couples may rely on different types of social support systems.

Homosexual couples may be selective about whom they disclose the nature of their relationship, therefore their social support system may be more restricted than those of heterosexual couples. Also, because homosexual couples may disclose themselves more to friends than family, friends may function as a stronger social support system than family.

Kurdek and Schmitt (1986) found that gay and lesbian partners perceived less social support from family than did married partners. Because married and cohabiting partners did not differ in social support from family, the social stigma associated with homosexuality may be greater than that associated with cohabiting without marriage.

Albro and Tulley (1979) examined sources of support and strain on gay women. Results showed they felt strained when dealing with heterosexual people, and that economic institutions were seen as not being supportive of lesbian lifestyles. Most of the women felt that they had to "act" like heterosexual women on the job, with their family or at social events. Support systems seemed to come from the homosexual subcultures and friendship circles, not from the larger society.

Albro and Tulley (1979) enquired into familial and general social relationships. Only 28.4% reported telling their mother of their lesbianism and even fewer chose to tell their father. Reasons given for not telling family members were fears of misunderstanding and rejection. Respondents had revealed their lesbianism to a variety of individuals outside of the family. All had told other gay women and 94.2% had told other heterosexual women. They rarely told employers, work acquaintances, teachers, school friends and neighbors. They were more likely to look to women for support and the response was usually positive and totally accepting which suggests the respondents had carefully selected the individual to whom they could confide (Albro & Tulley, 1979).

Albro and Tulley (1979) stated that it was difficult to know whether an untapped source of emotional support for the gay woman exists within the family. Since so few had been willing to look to family members, especially parents, for support, it is possible that the family is indeed a potential source of support for the gay woman.

In general there is a small amount of comparative research done in the area of relationships for heterosexual and homosexual women. What has been completed however suggests a number of points. Firstly that gay women have meaningful emotional attachments in their relationships making it easier to achieve open communication and emotional expression. Particularly important to the lesbian is the equality of power and sharing of chores and bills in the relationship. This does not necessarily carry over to the ownership of assets however. Reports show less mutually owned assets such as bank accounts, cars, and property in gay relationships.

Secondly, gay women are more likely to look to women for support, with couples tending to perceive less support from the family. The one thing that gay women missed the most was a family home with their children.

In the area of living arrangements little has been written about lesbian lifestyles and as West (1977) points out, little could be discovered about their lifestyles, because gay women kept quietly and unobtrusively to themselves. To date a great majority of lesbians still prefer to lead a secret, double life, being open among other lesbians, but silent to family and work mates. Fear of exposure to employers or colleagues at work worries gay women, for fear of damaging their career prospects, if not dismissal. The necessity for constant vigilance in keeping up a facade of heterosexuality produces in some gay women, a feeling of almost unbearable strain, which can lead to depression. Those too afraid or isolated to discover and visit gay

meeting places, or join gay organizations are subject to great loneliness (West, 1977).

Albro and Tulley (1979) asked gay women whether they felt constrained to present themselves as heterosexual in a number of settings. Most felt constrained with their family, while half reported attempting to present themselves as heterosexual at work and in the public. Half feared losing their jobs if their lesbianism were to become known to their employer, others stated that their jobs would be made more difficult if their sexual orientation were discovered. Some individuals believed they had already lost their jobs due to their lesbianism.

Over 73% of the respondents felt very much or somewhat isolated from society as a result of their sexual orientation, with many of them considering society's acceptance of them as important. Although they feel isolated and desire social acceptance, the respondents were unwilling to make an active effort to appear heterosexual in order to enhance their acceptance. Because of this lack of acceptance by the heterosexual macroculture, gay women turn to the homosexual microculture for their social life and social systems (Albro & Tulley, 1979).

There is a relatively high proportion of latecomers to homosexuality among females. Many of them are women in retreat from unsuccessful marriages and unhappy relationships with men, and some may already have children. Sometimes the situation arises where a gay woman still feels the need to try marriage as a possible solution to the problem. In other cases, the woman only realises the nature of the problem after years of marriage. When a marriage breaks up due to a wife's attachment to another man, she doesn't necessarily lose the custody of her children. If she leaves the marriage to set up with another women, her fitness to keep the children may be vigorously contested. One deprivation felt more often and accurately by gay women was the absence of a family home with children (West, 1977).

Like West, Martin and Lyon (1983) point out that most gay women keep their private lives separate from their work and also from some friends. In their experience when guests enter the house they become "unmarried women friends" although it wasn't always easy to make the sudden switch in roles.

They do point out that a vast majority of gay American women lead quiet lives, much akin to the lives of most other Americans, with most opting for a one-to-one longterm relationship as an ideal. Being a lesbian does not mean that they automatically reject all the values they have been taught.

Martin and Lyon (1983) feel that living arrangements of lesbian couples are influenced by professional careers - again it relates to the fear of losing a job and hanging on to what they have worked for and achieved. One example is two women pretending to be room mates, taking an apartment with two rooms, the second being a spare that is easily converted when people come to visit.

The tendency was for the gay women in Albro and Tulley's study (1979) to live in households without men. Those who lived alone or with persons who were not their spouse or lover, tended to want to change their living arrangements; but of those living with their partners, they hoped to maintain their living situation indefinitely. Two major reasons given for why the women did not wish to maintain their present living situation were loneliness and lack of independence.

In the area of living arrangements very little has been written on lesbian lifestyles due to the gay women remaining hidden from society and no comparative research has been done at all. Of the few studies that have been done we can see that the gay woman may lead a double life, switching roles between the lesbian and heterosexual society in which she may interact. Some reasons for why a gay woman may remain hidden are the fear of exposure and the effect on her career prospects and reaction of friends and work mates.

Other points of interest to come out of the studies are firstly, the a large number of gay women feel isolated from society while others feel that society's acceptance of them is important. Secondly there is a high proportion of late comers to homosexuality. Many of the late comers feel the need to try and live successfully in relationships with a man, so as to be more acceptable to society. Finally gay women tend to live in households where there are no men.

We can see from the limited research that is available that there have been differences found between heterosexual and homosexual women in some of the areas of lifestyle. Because no comparison to heterosexual women has been made at all in the area of living arrangements, a lifestyle measure is needed to see if differences in lifestyle between two groups can be recorded. In this study there were two sets of lifestyle questions. The first set was for women with and without partners, regardless of their sexual orientation. These questions dealt with two areas of lifestyle, namely relationships and attitudes. Relationship questions looked at how long the respondent had been in or out of the relationship, how many relationships they had been in, major reasons for the relationship to break up, sharing of power and bills, joint accounts, and how they met. Questions on attitude asked what the respondent's concept of the

woman's role was, how important their independence was, if they believed in sexual relations outside of a relationship. All questions were based on the findings of Albro and Tulley's study (1979).

The second set of questions were for lesbians only, and they dealt with aspects of openness, isolation from society, how they presented themselves in public, and the responses of people knowing about their lesbianism. The openness and isolation question came from Albro and Tulley's study (1979). The rest of the questions came from the Jay and Young Gay Report (1979).

The two sets of questions can be seen in Appendix 2.

The relationship between social structure and lifestyle remains unclear. However it would appear that social network and lifestyle are related. Both are a part of one's daily living habits and have a positive and negative effect on the individual. The next section looks at the aspect of social support and differences between the two groups of women.