

*This article presents recommendations for counselors working with clients who present issues concerning feelings, thoughts, or behavior related to lesbianism. Recent research on lesbians is presented which shows them to be a highly diverse group with respect to sexual/affective history, life-style, and personal identity. The process of developing a lesbian self-identity is described, and two factors that facilitate adaptation during this process are specified: (a) social support, and (b) acquiring a positive philosophy. Information on community resources that can be important to lesbians is also provided.*

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## Counseling Lesbians

Spurred by the women's and gay liberation movements, the volume of literature on lesbians—both research and theory—has increased dramatically in recent years. The many studies comparing the psychological adjustment and personality of lesbians and heterosexual women have shown little difference between these groups (Adelman, 1977; Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Crouch, 1977; Hopkins, 1969; Nyberg, 1973; Saghir, Robins, Welbran, & Gentry, 1970; Siegelman, 1972). Even among lesbians, many recent studies have demonstrated great diversity in life-style, personality, adjustment, and philosophy; accordingly, many researchers have focused on the within-group differences (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Ferguson & Finkler, 1978; Greene, 1976; Ponse, 1978; Raphael, 1974; Tanner, 1978; Wolf, 1977). There is very little in the literature, however, on counseling lesbians, although some recent articles have advocated

the desirability of lesbian counselors for lesbians and the importance for counselors in general to understand the lesbian experience (Hidalgo & Christensen, 1977; Sang, 1974; Smith, 1975).

This article will provide some suggestions and information drawn from the recent literature on lesbians to help counselors working with clients with lesbian concerns. The focus will be on issues specific to lesbians or those considering a lesbian life-style, concentrating on the effects of heterosexual bias on the individual and the process of coping with and overcoming such bias, a process that is viewed in the context of the literature on coping with stressful life events. The successful coping mechanisms used by most lesbians will serve as a model for helping less successful individuals. The emphasis will be on the process involved in moving from heterosexual socialization to a comfortable self-concept as a lesbian. Accordingly, the material is divided into three sections: the first focuses on recognizing and accepting lesbian feelings, the second and third sections focus on two dimensions of developing a lesbian identity—coming out to self, and coming out to others.

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## RECOGNIZING AND ACCEPTING LESBIAN FEELINGS

Some women who identify themselves as lesbian report being aware of lesbian feelings very early in childhood, while others first recognize feelings for other women and become involved in lesbian relationships much later in life—sometimes after years of heterosexual marriage. There is no consistent pattern among individuals with both heterosexual and homosexual experiences; some become exclusively homosexual after years of being exclusively heterosexual, others change back and forth at different periods of their lives, while some maintain relationships with both a man and a woman at the same time (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1976). In recent years many women who had been exclusively heterosexual have begun to experience lesbian relationships, their change in attitude influenced by either the women's liberation movement or sexual libertarian philosophy (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1976). As can be seen, these diverse patterns demonstrate a flexibility in sexual orientation not usually recognized.

Whatever the age or circumstances of the individual who is first exploring lesbianism, her need in counseling is to become free to get in touch with her feelings without labeling or evaluation (Sang, 1974). The counselor must be able to recognize and accept the client's lesbian feelings. This requires comfort with one's own sexuality (Landis & Miller, 1975) and freedom from inaccurate theories and assumptions about lesbianism. Many lesbians who have sought professional help at this stage in their development have reported detrimental experiences. Often their lesbian feelings and relationships were minimized or ignored, viewed as a phase or as narcissistic and immature, while their heterosexual feelings and relationships were exaggerated and made the focus of attention (for examples of such experiences, see Galana & Covina, 1977, pp. 83, 158; Greene, 1976, pp. 53, 103; Schafer, 1976, p. 66; Smith, 1975, p. 8; Vida, 1978, pp. 91-93). It is important for counselors not to minimize lesbian relations or feelings at this stage, even if the counselor's experience with a given client suggests that she is not likely to adopt a lesbian life-style in the long run. By accepting all of the client's feelings and experiences as equally valid, the counselor can help her to discover her own inclinations and make her own decisions; in contrast, nonacceptance would tend to remove responsibility for this decision from the client and may impel her toward acting out of rebellion rather than from more thoughtful consideration of her options.

Recognition of lesbian feelings and behavior and the possibility of lesbian identity for oneself is likely to be extremely stressful. Coyne and Lazarus (in press) report that defensive functioning—for instance, denial—is useful in coping with high stress situations, allowing the individual time to come to terms with the stressful event before he or she takes it fully into awareness. Similarly, Cass (1979) found that many individuals prefer not to label themselves as homosexual at this stage, seeing their behavior instead as pansexual or viewing a particular relationship as an exception. In working with a client who is exploring lesbian feelings, the counselor should discourage her from premature self-labeling as lesbian. As long as the woman believes in the negative stereotype of lesbians, labeling herself lesbian entails diminished self-esteem. Those lesbians who feel best about themselves usually do not identify themselves as lesbian, regardless of the extent of their lesbian experience, until they have begun to revise their image of lesbians to one that is positive or at least neutral (Greene, 1976; Raphael, 1974; Wolf, 1977). A woman with a strong self-concept may be able to revise her negative stereotype of lesbians simply on the basis of her own experience; for example, the happiest woman studied by Greene (1976) decided that lesbians must be all right when she discovered her own attraction for another woman. However, those who are already low in self-esteem are more likely to identify themselves as lesbians

prematurely, thus further diminishing their self-esteem (Greene, 1976). If they are seen in counseling before identifying themselves as lesbians, the counselor can help them by discouraging premature self-labeling while working to remove their negative evaluations of lesbians in general and of themselves as lesbians. If seen in counseling after identifying with the negative stereotype of lesbians, the counselor will have the harder job of helping the client change her negative perception of lesbians and of herself after her self-esteem is already diminished.

The women's and gay liberation movements have facilitated the process of exploration of lesbianism in two ways: through their philosophies and social analyses and through the development of resources. The former includes analyses of existing sex roles historically and cross-culturally, challenging institutionalized heterosexuality, and distinguishing among the sex-related identities. These include gender identity (one's sense of being female or male), sex role orientation (femininity or masculinity), and sexual preference (for same or opposite sex partners). Both the general public and the scientific community have tended to blur this distinction with the assumption of consistency among these identities (Ponse, 1978). Confusion about sex role or the assumption of consistency between sex role and sexual preference makes the process of recognizing and accepting lesbian feelings much more difficult (Greene, 1976). Feminist philosophy can be useful to both counselor and client in making these distinctions clear and in providing support for challenging traditional sex roles and exclusive heterosexuality.

Although some women can develop positive beliefs about lesbians based only on their own feelings, most require contact with other lesbians and/or with other sources of positive information in order to develop such beliefs (Raphael, 1974; Wolf, 1977). The resources developed by the women's and gay liberation movements are very useful for this purpose. These resources include women's centers, lesbian/feminist/gay organizations, literature, bookstores, hot lines, referral sources, counseling centers, lesbian mother organizations, and gay religious groups. The availability of these resources has made this seeking stage much easier; in the past it was extremely difficult due to the inaccessibility of the lesbian community (Abbott & Love, 1973; Galana & Covina, 1977; Martin & Lyon, 1972; Raphael, 1974; Wolf, 1977). In addition to providing positive information and role models of lesbians, these resources also supply a source of new friends from which the individual can create a more supportive social network. Such social support has been found to be very important in coping with stressful life events (Colten & Kulka, 1979; Erickson, 1975; Hirsch, 1979; Leavy, 1979; Richardson & Kagan, 1979; Tolsdorf, 1976). Lack of exposure to a lesbian subculture may account in part for the greater difficulty experienced by women who begin to recognize lesbian feelings in their teens, when they are not likely to have the benefit of a supportive community or of positive lesbian role models (Greene, 1976; Schafer, 1976), although confusion of sex role and sexual preference is also an important factor among adolescents. The counselor can help at this stage by becoming aware of the available resources in the community and encouraging the client to take advantage of these resources.

Having recognized and begun to accept lesbian feelings, the client may then begin the process of developing a lesbian identity. This process and its implications for counselors will be discussed below. It is important to remember that not all women who explore lesbian feelings will develop a lesbian identity. Some may decide against any further involvement in lesbianism, in which case they then fall outside the purview of this paper; others may continue their involvement with women but may not develop a lesbian identity (Ponse, 1978).

## DEVELOPING A LESBIAN IDENTITY: COMING OUT TO SELF

The process of developing a gay identity is referred to by gays as "coming out." The term is actually used in two different ways: to refer to one's self-recognition as a lesbian or gay man, and to indicate the act of revealing one's homosexuality to others. A counselor who understands this process can help her or his client through it by offering support, assuring the client that it's normal to feel "crazy" during this process, and referring her to lesbian resources. Thus understanding this process as it is experienced by lesbians in general can be helpful to both counselor and client.

Although premature self-labeling as a lesbian is detrimental, failure to develop a lesbian identity can also be problematic, since such a failure is usually the result of and further results in isolation or self-denial and suppression of lesbian feelings. In comparing happy and unhappy lesbians, Greene (1976) found that one of the most striking differences was the interval between first recognition of lesbian feelings and acting on these feelings. During this lapse of time many of the unhappy women were working to suppress their lesbian feelings and to develop a heterosexual identity, sometimes with the help of therapy. The happy women reacted to their lesbian feelings much more positively and moved much more rapidly through the process of coming out.

Other women remain isolated within a lesbian couple. Women in such relationships often view themselves as in exceptional situations; they then may not identify themselves as lesbian and may retain their belief in the negative stereotype of lesbians (Cass, 1979). Even those who see themselves as lesbian in this situation but remain isolated do not fully accept themselves as lesbian (Raphael, 1974). Isolation deprives the couple of the validation and support for the relationship that is available in the lesbian community (Tanner, 1978) and puts extra stress on the relationship. This stress can cause the couple to stay together too long or to break up too soon (Smith, 1975)—too long, because of lack of alternatives and fear of losing one's only support or of denying support to the partner—and too short, because lack of external validation may reduce commitment or seriousness. When such a relationship breaks up, the women are confronted with the identity issue without the support of a partner or a community. Some enter counseling at this time because of the crisis caused by the breakup and the associated identity problem (Sang, 1974); this may represent their first effort to break out of isolation. Although there is no way of estimating the extent of this population, the number of formerly isolated women who find their way to lesbian organizations suggests that it is probably substantial.

The process of developing a lesbian identity is often described in terms of developmental stages (Cass, 1979; Raphael, 1974; Wolf, 1977). For example, basing her theory on clinical experience with homosexuals in Australia, Cass (1979) identified six stages: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. Conditions that facilitate and inhibit movement through these stages, and the possible alternate courses the client may take, are well described in Cass's article, which is recommended reading for counselors working with a lesbian or homosexual male population. Two major requirements for successful lesbian identity development can be identified from the work of Cass and others: the first is social support from both homosexuals and heterosexuals, and the second is incorporation of a positive philosophy or ideology pertaining to lesbianism, usually accomplished within a particular lesbian subculture (Cass, 1979; Dank, 1971; Greene, 1976; Hedblom, 1972; Raphael, 1974; Tanner, 1978; Wolf, 1977).

## DEVELOPING A LESBIAN IDENTITY: COMING OUT TO OTHERS

Coming out to a fairly wide variety of others is very important for self-acceptance (Smith, 1975); especially for the newly emerging lesbian, positive reactions from important others can play a major role (Greene, 1976; Raphael, 1974). Revealing one's lesbianism to the counselor is itself an act of coming out to others, and if the response is positive this act can contribute to self-acceptance. This may be one of the most important functions the counselor can serve. Hiding, in extreme form, is tremendously costly; it requires great effort and constant vigilance and greatly restricts what one can do. A woman afraid to reveal her lesbianism must endure and tacitly agree to antigay remarks. She is likely to become enmeshed in a web of lies; for example, changing the sex of her lover in discussions with fellow workers, then making excuses for not bringing her boyfriend to company functions. Even contact with other lesbians can be risky for a woman who is very concerned about secrecy; the other lesbians may, purposely or inadvertently, reveal her secret to others, or she may be observed in the company of "obvious" lesbians or in a lesbian setting and her identity inferred (Ponse, 1978; for a general description of the process of managing a stigmatized identity, see Goffman, 1963). Learning to conceal a major part of oneself can lead to a general loss of spontaneity; hiding her feelings from others much of the time, the client may lose touch with her own feelings (Sang, 1974). Although there are probably very few lesbians who are "out" with everyone they encounter, hiding in major areas of one's life implies some acceptance of the devaluation of lesbians, and, therefore, of oneself.

Despite the advantages of coming out, each decision to reveal one's identity must be weighed against the negative consequences that may ensue (Smith, 1975). Most lesbians are not out to their employers because of fear of being fired, losing promotions, or not being taken seriously (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Tanner, 1978). Parental reactions have included expelling their daughter from their home, committing her to a mental hospital, taking her to a therapist or religious figure, or putting her in a new school in an effort to change her. Lesbian daughters have also been beaten, prayed for, excommunicated, or declared dead by their parents. Even less extreme negative reactions from parents—such as denying their daughter's lesbianism, calling it a phase, or forbidding her from seeing her lover—can be extremely painful for the young lesbian (for descriptions of such parental reactions, see Galana & Covina, 1977, p. 207; Greene, 1976, pp. 114–115; Raphael, 1974, pp. 95–96; Wolf, 1977, p. 54). Fear of negative reactions from parents is a problem for many women, and most experience some measure of alienation from their parents (Greene, 1976).

Although more women are open with their mothers and siblings than with their fathers (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Schafer, 1976), often the pattern with both parents is one of "counterfeit secrecy" (Ponse, 1978); that is, although the parents know and their daughter is aware of their knowledge, they conspire to deny this knowledge and to act as if the daughter is heterosexual. Parental demands for counterfeit secrecy are often experienced as the price of acceptance by parents. Under conditions of secrecy, whether real or counterfeit, major parts of a lesbian's life are excluded in her relationship with her parents; visits to her parents may have to be made without her lover and holidays may have to be spent separately, or if the couple visits the parents together, they must maintain the pretense that they are only friends (Ponse, 1978; Tanner, 1978). Although the picture described above sounds bleak, open and positive relationships with parents do occur, especially if the parents are allowed time to come to terms with their daughter's lesbianism. Groups of parents of gays have been formed in many cities by parents who wanted

to work to overcome their negative feelings about a lesbian daughter or gay son. Counselors may wish to inform lesbian clients of such groups or to refer interested parents to them.

For the approximately 17% to 25% of lesbians who have children (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Gundlach & Reiss, 1968), coming out to others is more complex. Coming out to the children requires understanding of the needs and maturity level of the children. It generally takes time for the children to understand their mother's lesbianism, and they need help in dealing with the prejudices of others (Wolf, 1977). However Bell and Weinberg (1978) found that most of the children over twelve who knew of their mother's lesbianism had little trouble accepting it. If the children's father doesn't know, the mother often has to prepare the children to keep this information from him (Wolf, 1977). Lesbian mothers also faced added dangers in coming out to others outside the family; these include removal of the child from the mother (Wolf, 1977). Custody fights are the major legal problem faced by lesbians. In addition to custody challenges from the child's father, the lesbian may encounter such challenges from social agencies, social workers, teachers, case workers, physicians (Wolf, 1977), or the child's grandparents. Recently groups of lesbian mothers, their lovers, and other interested lesbians have been formed that can serve as an important resource for the counselor working with lesbian mothers. These groups provide social occasions for the families of lesbians and work to ameliorate conditions for lesbian mothers through projects such as creating positive publicity and raising funds for custody cases (for a description of such a group in San Francisco, see Wolf, 1977, pp. 159-171).

One of the most important functions of the counselor in working with a lesbian client is to assist the client in deciding whom to tell about her lesbianism and how to do it. Even the most understanding person may react negatively if informed either in an angry, rebellious way or in an apologetic way, but many a young lesbian has used these approaches in informing her parents or friends. Such tactics usually arise out of the expectation of rejection or opposition, and the tactics pretty well ensure that the expectations will be met. Practice giving such information in role plays with the counselor can help to prevent such catastrophic approaches and can also lead to greater understanding of one's hopes and expectations. In addition, the counselor can help the client identify friends and family members who are likely to react well. The decision of whom to tell often reflects the client's feelings about herself; if she feels good about herself, she tends to choose people who are likely to respond favorably, but if she feels bad about herself, she is likely to choose those who will respond negatively, thus confirming her negative self-concept. Exploration of these issues after the fact can also be very helpful for the client who has already informed others and received negative reactions.

If the woman enters the stage of identity synthesis (Cass, 1979), she will probably come out to most of the people with whom she interacts. In this way she can integrate the parts of her life. At this stage Raphael (1974) describes two trends, integration and separation, that pull the individual in opposite directions; each trend provides some advantages, but each has a cost. Separation (confining one's activities to the lesbian community as exclusively as possible) ensures acceptance as a lesbian and a body of shared experience and, to some extent, common values. But the cost is a constriction of activities and contacts that may be valuable to the individual, especially in terms of career development. The other alternative, integration (interacting in both the lesbian and nonlesbian worlds as an open lesbian), allows much greater latitude for career development and the pursuit of interests outside the lesbian community, but the cost here is frequent lack of support from others and the need to deal often with negative reactions and

ignorance. It is important for the counselor to be aware of this unresolvable conflict between integration and separation in order to understand the client's experience. Through this understanding, the counselor can help the client learn to accept herself and the compromises she must make in order to come to some workable resolution of this conflict.

#### SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS TO COUNSELORS

The most important recommendation for counselors working with clients with lesbian concerns is both the most obvious and the most difficult to achieve: that is, to express complete acceptance of the client and all her feelings, including her lesbian feelings as well as her doubts and worries about these feelings. Awareness of the recent literature on lesbians can help the counselor achieve this goal. Literature on the process of lesbian identity formation and the diversity among lesbians is particularly recommended. Additional recommendations made in this paper are listed below.

- 1 Help the client explore her feelings free from evaluation or labeling. Avoid minimizing such feelings and relationships in order that the client can freely discover her own inclinations and values and take full responsibility for her own decisions.
- 2 Help the client avoid premature self-labeling. Self-labeling as lesbian is premature whenever such a self-label has negative meaning for the client, regardless of her actual behavior.
- 3 Challenge the client's assumptions about sex roles and about the relation between sexual orientation and sex roles.
- 4 Become familiar with the women's and gay resources in your area and encourage the client to take advantage of these resources. Especially important in this regard is the client's development of a supportive social network that includes other lesbians.
- 5 Recognize and help the client accept the turmoil associated with the process of developing a lesbian self-identity.
- 6 Explore with the client the advantages and disadvantages of "coming out" to each individual of concern to her.
- 7 Help the client prepare for "coming out" to significant people in her life through role plays and discussion of her hopes and expectations.

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