
Coming Home to Self, Going Home to Parents: Lesbian Identity Disclosure

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About the Author

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Abstract

Lesbian women are an invisible and misunderstood minority who are stigmatized as people with moral failings. Hence, women who identify themselves as lesbian must face the dilemma of whether or not to disclose their lesbian identity, especially to their parents. Disclosure is an ongoing process that forces a woman to struggle to balance her needs in developing her lesbian identity with the needs of the other people for whom she cares. If she keeps her lesbian identity secret to preserve a relationship, she will dilute intimacy and put a barrier between herself and the other person. If she discloses her lesbian identity, she may cause conflict with others. In fact, among lesbian women who choose to come out to their parents, the foremost reason is a desire to share their lives and their identity with their parents and hence to feel better connected to them. These women demonstrate most prominently the process of integrating the responsibility to self and to others. In the disclosure process, women can show great care for their parents, while remaining true to their authentic lesbian identity.

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I'd like to begin by reading to you a poem by Minnie Bruce Pratt.

My Mother Loves Women Minnie Bruce Pratt

My mother loves women.

She sent me gold and silver earrings for Valentine's.
She sent a dozen red roses to Ruby Lemley
when she was sick and took her eight quarts
of purplehull peas, shelled and ready to cook.
She walks every evening down our hill and around
with Margaret Hallman. They pick up loose hub caps
and talk
about hysterectomies and cataracts.
At the slippery spots they go arm in arm.

She has three sisters, Lethean, Evie, and Ora Gilder.
When they aggravate her she wants to pinch
their habits off like potatobugs off the leaf.
But she meets them each weekend for cards and jokes
while months go by without her speaking to her
brother
who plays dominoes at the bus stop with the men.
I don't think she's known a man except this brother
and my father who for the last twenty years has been
waiting
for death in his rocking chair in front of the TV set.

During that time my mother was seeing women
every day at work in her office. She knit them
intricate afghans and told me proudly
that Anne Fenton could not go to sleep without hers.

My mother loves women but she's afraid
to ask about my life. She thinks that
I might love women too.

For lesbian women the process of coming out to self and parents is one of the most critical events of their lives. In disclosing, lesbian women are proclaiming their lesbian identity and developing an authentic sense of self. Simultaneously, they are seeking to reaffirm their relationships and care for their parents. Disclosure is laden both with the risk of loss and with potential conflict. This presentation seeks to illustrate two salient themes. First, the act of disclosure of sexual identity is a rite of passage into adulthood for lesbian women. In this process, these women are proclaiming and reclaiming their authentic sense of self. Heterosexual women do not go through this rite of passage because they don't need to differentiate themselves in this way. Second, in the process of disclosure, lesbian women are balancing their needs of attending to themselves and to others.

Factors affecting disclosure

Before discussing the disclosure of lesbian identity in depth, I would like to comment on several factors that may affect both the woman's decision to disclose and others' reactions to her disclosure. It's important to note that these factors are not necessarily the same for lesbian women as they are for gay men. Gender differences that exist in a heterosexual population do not disappear in homosexual populations. Therefore, literature that attempts to model the development of lesbian women upon that of gay men fails in the same way that psychological models based solely upon studies of men have failed accurately to describe female development.

One factor that affects disclosure is that the population of lesbian women is largely invisible. Yet at least 10% of women are lesbians, according to conservative and often inadequate estimates. These approximately 11.5 million lesbians are a stigmatized minority whose lesbianism, or discredited identity, cannot be seen. Lesbian women and gay men are therefore not stigmatized for physical features, but are seen as people with "moral failings." Like many stigmatized groups, lesbians are considered a menace to the status quo. As Rich (1980) writes:

Not surprisingly, lesbians are seen as a direct threat to the institution of compulsory heterosexuality. Lesbian women are women who, in their selection of other women as lovers, partners or companions, make a clear statement of resistance to economic, emotional and sexual dependence on men. The price of this resistance to compulsory heterosexuality has been enormous. Lesbians have been burned as

witches, sentenced to prisons and concentration camps, and more recently, kidnapped and deprogrammed by gang rape. Lesbianism has been called sinful, evil, perverted, deviant and antisocial. It has also been defined as a psychiatric illness requiring treatment and institutionalization, drugs and sometimes lobotomy. Documents such as letters, poetry, books and journals written by lesbians have been destroyed or reinterpreted heterosexually.

Thus, in order to survive, lesbians have often chosen to remain invisible, that is, to avoid disclosing their lesbian identity. Even today, lesbians must fight for custody of their own children and for the right to be foster parents, as well as for other civil rights such as job security and fair housing.

Another barrier to disclosure is the widespread misconception that lesbianism is primarily a matter of sexuality. This belief contributes to the notion that lesbians suffer from "moral failings" and further complicates a woman's decision about whether to disclose her lesbian identity to others. But lesbianism is not simply a matter of sexuality. It is at heart a matter of emotional and spiritual connectedness and bonding. For most lesbians, sexual commitment and closeness follow emotional closeness. I cannot stress this point strongly enough, because this misunderstanding of lesbianism is one of the many factors that make disclosure such a potentially risk-laden process.

Yet despite the problems of invisibility, stigma, and misunderstanding, lesbian women do choose to disclose. For as Ponse (1976) notes, keeping one's lesbian identity hidden is a double-edged sword; while "secrecy maintenance avoids the problem of stigma and discredibility, it simultaneously, however, prevents truly intimate interactions with those unaware of the passer's secret."

Disclosure to self

No discussion of lesbian identity would be complete without considering the process of self-disclosure or "coming out" to oneself. This process, like that of disclosure to others, takes place over time. A woman does not get up one morning, look in the mirror and say, "OK, today I'm a lesbian women." It just doesn't work that way. And yet I often see women who wish coming out were that quick and neat because it can be hard to struggle with their emerging identity almost every day.

What does the coming out process involve? Researchers have posited both linear and nonlinear