On the Integration of Sexuality: Lesbians and Their Mothers

Wendy B. Rosen, Ph.D., LICSW

About the Author
Wendy B. Rosen, Ph.D., LICSW is a member of the teaching faculty at Smith College School for Social Work and a supervisor on the Attending Staff of McLean Hospital, Belmont, MA. She maintains a private psychotherapy practice in Cambridge, MA.

Abstract
The articulation and integration of women’s sexuality is an aspect of development that is strongly influenced by its cultural context. Western culture, with its patriarchal underpinnings, is grounded in a system of values and beliefs dictated by both sexism and heterosexism; thus, the development of lesbian sexuality is prone to strong countervailing forces. This paper examines the lesbian daughter’s relationship with her mother in the context of the lesbian’s evolving sexuality and suggests that some form of mutual empathic rupture is practically an inevitable occurrence in a cultural context dictated by sexism and heterosexism. The implications for relational development and women’s sexuality in general are addressed.

This paper was originally presented at a Stone Center Colloquium on December 4, 1991.

In both my personal experience as a lesbian and my professional experience as a therapist working with lesbians, I have been privy to countless coming out stories and have been struck by the centrality of concern regarding the impact of the disclosure on the mother-daughter relationship. “What did your mother say?” is a commonly asked question that can easily spark a string of responses among a group of lesbians, ranging from hilarity to tears. Neutrality is virtually absent in the repertoire of possible reactions to this issue. While there are certainly lesbians who deem their experiences in disclosing their sexual identity to their mothers as positive and productive, more often this is the exception, rather than the rule, especially in the initial stages of the disclosure.

What is there about the particular nature of the negotiation between the lesbian and her mother, and why is this issue so profoundly charged and the impact potentially so damaging to their relationship? In an effort to answer these questions, I have chosen to retrospectively explore the lesbian’s relationship with her mother and her evolving experience of herself over the course of several years prior to, during, and following her disclosure of her lesbian sexuality to her mother. This is not to suggest that all lesbians do come out to their mothers, but rather that with or without disclosure, it is a preoccupying theme in the lives of most lesbians.

The ideas in this paper are based on some of the findings from a recent exploratory study I conducted as part of my doctoral dissertation, in which I focused on the normal developmental experiences of lesbians. It is a well-known fact that the bulk of the clinical literature on homosexuality is couched in heterosexist and homophobic assumptions, and thus, inevitably casts lesbianism in a pathological light. Secondly, most of the literature, whether biased or gay-affirmative, is focused on gay men. That lesbians are underrepresented in the literature has obvious
parallels to the literature on women’s developmental experience, in general. Just as women’s psychology simply cannot be extrapolated from male-based theoretical constructions, so the developmental experiences of lesbians cannot be understood by studying gay men. Both cases are as clearly off base as is the assumption of a uniform similarity of developmental process between heterosexuals and homosexuals. Heterosexist assumptions in the realm of sexuality present ramifications as dangerous and damaging as sexist assumptions with regard to gender. Such biases, nevertheless, are rampant and ubiquitous in this culture. It should be noted that all the women who volunteered as subjects, and who are represented in this study, are white.

An Illustration

As a way of illustrating the lesbian’s experience of disclosure to her mother, I will sketch a not-so-brief, but highly elaborate vignette. Barbara is a thirty-two year old, white lesbian, who is currently enrolled in a doctoral program. She has been in a relationship with the same woman for seven years, and they have been sharing a home together for five of those years. Barbara is the second of four children and grew up in an Italian Catholic, middle-class family. Her father is an engineer, and her mother, who completed secretarial school, devoted her earlier married years to raising a family. When the youngest child was in high school, her mother began to work part-time. All of Barbara’s siblings, consisting of an older, married brother and a younger brother and sister, are heterosexual. Her sister, one and one-half years younger, is currently engaged to be married.

Barbara described her childhood as relatively uneventful, except that she never felt very close to her mother. She had no concrete explanation for this, only that she always perceived herself as somewhat “different” within the family context. Barbara characterized herself as a strong-willed, active and independent child, bright and athletic.” One thing she recalled that really set her apart from her Italian Catholic family was that she, unlike her siblings, never entertained a fantasy of or desire to get married. This was a serious family departure, since talk often focused on family, marriage, and weddings. She recalled:

I never thought about marriage ever! I remember, in my family, you learned as a girl to make tomato sauce, so as a woman, when you get married, you would have that important skill. But I learned it, because I was growing up, and I thought it was just part of that. It was different . . . for me, it felt different. I felt like a different person.

The perceived estrangement from her mother was quite painful for Barbara, and she often suffered confusing bouts of sadness and loneliness. She recalled making extra efforts at being a “good girl” by working excessively at her schoolwork, excelling at sports, and trying to entertain her mother, getting her to smile or laugh. On the whole, however, she felt quite alienated and sensed that she somehow must be a fundamentally bad or defective kid.

During adolescence, Barbara had several close girlfriends and periodically dated boys, which involved some heterosexual sexual experimentation. Her strained relationship with her mother continued during this period, and Barbara remembers that her mother was particularly interested in the quality of her daughter’s social life, especially regarding boyfriends. This was disturbing to Barbara, since it never felt central to her, especially in contrast to her friendships, academic work, and athletics. Once again, then, she felt out of sync with her mother. Often, she would get drunk in order to endure going out on dates and “getting with the program.” It’s not that she disliked boys, but rather that she often felt as if she was “going through the motions” of dating them without ever feeling any appreciable intensity of emotion or sexual desire for them. As Barbara put it:

I really just wanted to chum around with them. I thought there must have been something wrong with me. I remember saying to someone that I just didn’t get it, the whole world of dating and attraction. Some people are born blind. Some are born not being able to hear, and I was born without this . . . whatever the “this” is.

The relationship with her mother was particularly strained, since Barbara felt compelled to date boys, like other girls, in order to please her. But she could not find a way to tell her mother about her conflict, and she began to hate herself for not being like other girls. Her mother was in the dark about Barbara’s pain and saw her daughter as willful and withholding. The tension between them continued. Barbara recalls that her sister and mother grew quite close during this time, and that they would often have conversations about marriage, children, and so on. She described her sister as “kind of boy crazy.” Barbara, on the other hand, had very intense attachments with her girlfriends, and, overall, preferred their company to that of boys. Since this was not a popular position to acknowledge openly,