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Nancy C. Larson

*Affilia* 2006; 21; 296

DOI: 10.1177/0886109906288911

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# Becoming “One of the Girls”

## The Transition to Lesbian in Midlife

Nancy C. Larson

*Arizona State University, Tempe*

In the lesbian community, there are many women who entered same-sex relationships in midlife after previously identifying as heterosexual. This article reviews the state of knowledge regarding this unique group of women. Attention is given to the impact of this life-changing event on the woman; her relationships with family members and friends; her awareness of status-related oppression; and the process of becoming a cultural insider given her new identity. Suggestions are included for providing support to women who are undergoing the transition and for future research with this understudied population.

**Keywords:** *lesbian; mid-life; identity; homosexuality; queer*

Four years ago, at age 42 and after 19 years of marriage, I realized that I was a lesbian. This was shocking news to me. I had not grown up secretly harboring thoughts about women. Over the years, I had many friends who were gay but never once considered myself to be gay. I had been happily married so long that living without my husband, much less having a female partner, never even crossed my mind. Yet here I was, facing a totally unanticipated rethinking of my core identity.

As a scholar, my first inclination was to search the research literature and learn more about my own life by what I found there. I discovered that approximately 25% to 30% (although, as always with such a hidden population, true estimates are hard to determine) of lesbians have been in heterosexual marriages and first identify as lesbian only in midlife (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). Even so, information on this select group of women is limited.

After searching *Social Work Abstracts*, *PsycINFO*, and *Sociological Abstracts* from 1990 to the present, I identified just six studies that focused specifically on this population (Charbonneau & Lander, 1991; Jensen, 1999; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; O’Leary, 1997; Strock, 1998; Wolfe, 1998). One of these six studies (Charbonneau & Lander, 1991) used data that were collected in 1981 through 1984, and given the changing social norms with regard to sexual orientation in the past 20 years, the relevance of this study may be limited today. The findings of a similar, more recent study (Johnston & Jenkins, 2004) were based on interviews with 30 adults who came out in mid-adulthood. Unfortunately, just 7 of the 30 participants were women, and the results were not differentiated by gender; an additional limitation of this study was that the sample was drawn from two Christian congregations. Many larger studies of lesbians, including a number of studies that have focused on the role of lesbians as mothers (see, e.g., Tully, 1995), have included women who came out in later life, but it is impossible to separate out information that is specific to their experience.

The formal research literature is enhanced by two anthologies of women’s stories (Abbott & Farmer, 1995; Cassingham & O’Neil, 1999) and at least one Web site that serves

as a place for women to gather resources and share their stories (“Stories of Latebloomers,” n.d.). The dearth of information is so great that even a brief description of my review of this literature, posted on my university’s Web site, resulted in women from across the country contacting me by e-mail in search of resources.

In addition to the women themselves, friends, family members, and coworkers may all face issues related to women identifying as lesbian in midlife. It is likely, therefore, that either in practice or in everyday life, social workers will come in contact with women who are dealing with the ramifications of this life change. Knowledge of the unique characteristics of this transition is important for providing appropriate support for lesbians and members of their life communities.

The following is a summary of what is known to date about this select group of women. I do not attempt in this review to take an objective stance, because understanding this phenomenon clearly has significance for my own life journey. I begin by describing the current social context regarding sexual orientation and human development. I then delineate common themes that were derived from the literature on women’s lived experience of first identifying as lesbian in midlife. Following the discussion of the literature, I provide some thoughts on issues that social workers should consider when they work with members of this population based on the professional literature, anecdotal sources, and my own lived experience. Finally, I highlight some of the limitations of the current knowledge base and suggest directions for future research.

## Current Social Context

### Claiming an Outlaw Identity

To understand the life experience of this group of women, it is imperative to describe the social context in which the transformation takes place. Thirty-three years ago, within the lifetime of women who are now identifying as lesbian in midlife, homosexuality was classified as a mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association (APA). It no longer appeared in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* as of *DSM III* (APA, 1980). However, public sentiment and policy regarding homosexuality continue to be oppressive. For example, a recent study of college students found higher levels of discomfort with and more negative attitudes toward gays, lesbians, or bisexuals than toward members of a variety of ethnic groups (Holley, Larson, Adelman, & Trevino, in press). The authors of the study concluded that it is still socially acceptable, perhaps even desirable, to hold discriminatory attitudes toward members of this population. A second study with only social work students found evidence of misinformation and heterosexist beliefs (Holley & Segal, 2005).

*Heterosexism* has been defined as “a form of social control in which values, expectations, role, and institutions normalize heterosexuality, which, in turn, is promoted and enforced formally and informally by structures in which men are dominant, that is, the patriarchy” (Spaulding, 1999, p. 13). As a result of heterosexism, heterosexuality is assumed to be the norm, and everything else is perceived to be deviant. Swigonski (1995) argued that because of compulsive heterosexuality, lesbians are not even perceived as deviant; rather, they are “socially constructed as nonexistent” (p. 417).

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer/questioning (GLBTQ) individuals have become somewhat more visible in recent years through television shows (e.g., *Will and*

*Grace*) and movies (e.g., *Boys Don't Cry*). Celebrities like Ellen Degeneres and Rosie O'Donnell, as well as a few noted politicians, have made their affectional orientation public. At the same time, opposition to gay marriage was a campaign platform in the 2004 national election (Bush, 2004) and continues to be at the forefront of public debate (United Press International, 2005). An animated children's program, developed by the Public Broadcasting System to teach children tolerance of diversity, was denounced as inappropriate content for children by U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings (2005) on her first day of duty because it depicted a family with two mothers. Reparative therapy is still promoted by conservative Christians and members of the "ex-gay" movement as a way to "heal from the sin of homosexuality" even though there is no evidence of its effectiveness (Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, n.d.). Employers in many states are still allowed to engage in discriminatory hiring practices, and health benefits for members of GLBTQ families are rarely available.

A national public opinion survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation (2001) found that half the general public believes that homosexual behavior is morally wrong, fewer than half support adoption rights for gay and lesbian couples, and 39% do not believe that GLBTQ individuals could be just as good parents as heterosexual men and women. The number of hate crimes perpetuated against GLBTQ individuals rose by 8% between 2002 and 2004, according to the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (2004).

Identifying as lesbian in midlife, therefore, is an act of great courage, as it involves claiming a stigmatized or "outlaw" identity, one that could put a woman in danger of both physical violence and social prejudice or discrimination. As Swigonski (1995) noted,

To claim a lesbian identity is to confront and challenge oppression . . . by virtue of their independence from men, lesbians call into question society's definition of women at the most profound level. Their independence stands as a significant challenge to existing patterns of power, control, and sexuality. (pp. 423-424)

## Normative Beliefs About Human Sexuality and Development

The dominant cultural belief regarding sexual orientation is that there are two distinct groups—heterosexual and homosexual, gay and straight—even though research and people's lived experiences have indicated that there is much greater variation (Appleby & Anastas, 1998). This belief can lead to an interpretation of the experience of women who identify as lesbian in midlife as having been "in denial" about their true sexual orientation or, conversely, as not being "real" lesbians.

In addition, most developmental theory suggests that issues related to sexual identity are a normative task of adolescence or early adulthood (McCarter, 2003). As a result, women who do not identify as lesbian until midlife are perceived to be abnormal or developmentally delayed, rather than experiencing a different developmental life pathway. My sister, for example, said that it would be much easier for my family to accept the fact that I was a lesbian if I told them when I was 17, rather than at 42 after many years of marriage. Therefore, normative beliefs about sexuality suggest that women who first identify as lesbian in midlife have either been lying to themselves and their families for a long time or have been in the deficit psychological state of denial. Both assertions are based on the premise that sexual orientation is confined to distinct categories, fixed and unchanging across the life course.

## Review of the Literature

The majority of the studies of women who first identify as lesbian in midlife have focused primarily on the impact of this life transition on a woman's self and identity. Additional themes have included the impact of this transition on relationships with family members, friends, and coworkers; a new awareness of oppression in the lives of GLBTQ individuals; and changes in culture and community.

### Self and Identity

The transition to lesbian in midlife appears to be a dramatic change for the majority of women who undergo it (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). Most women did not experience same-sex attraction in earlier life stages (Charbonneau & Lander, 1991; Jensen, 1999; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; O'Leary, 1997). Of those who did, most had blocked memories of these experiences until this point in time. Thus, for the vast majority of women, the need to reassess their identity at midlife came as a surprise. As Chabonneau and Lander (1991) pointed out, this life transition was a "radical reorientation and redirection" (pp. 36-37). This view differs from those in studies from the 1980s that noted that many women chose a lesbian identity for political purposes (Nichols & Leiblum, 1986).

Reflection on one's life path is a normative developmental task of middle adulthood (Hutchison, 2003). At least two studies, however, suggested that other significant life events were precipitating or coinciding factors for some of the women in their samples (Charbonneau & Lander, 1991; O'Leary, 1997). These events, or turning points, included such things as the death of a parent, divorce, a serious health problem, or overcoming depression.

The women often realized their same-sex attraction in the context of an intimate friendship. When they first acknowledged these feelings, they attempted to justify them as being a passing phase, perhaps related to menopause, or stated that they "fell in love with a person who just happens to be a woman" (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995, p. 99). More than 75% of the women in one study suggested that recognition that they had fallen in love and the passion that ensued or having sex with a woman was the marker for an internal shift in identity (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995).

Few women regretted the shift of their identity to lesbian at this point in life, even given the major disruption to primary relationships and their life plans. Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1995) reported that only 2 or 3 of the 80 women they interviewed indicated any level of regret; other studies indicated that none of the women studied expressed regret (see, e.g., Cassingham & O'Neil, 1999). Self-selection into these studies may play a part in this finding because women who felt regret may have been less likely to want to discuss their experiences.

The women in these studies consistently reported feeling more integrated and whole after they experienced this transition (Charbonneau & Lander, 1991; Jensen, 1999; O'Leary, 1997). They noted a greater sense of independence and excitement about the future, even given their fears about the possible negative outcomes related to this life change. Most women also reported new self-awareness and comfort within their own bodies.

The women reported that when they were growing up, there was no language to talk about human sexuality, particularly desire (Jensen, 1999; O'Leary, 1997). Marriage was seen as the only alternative, an indication of the compulsive heterosexuality that was the norm in this segment of our cultural history. The women indicated that there were few role

models that gave them a vision of an alternative life when they were adolescents. It remains to be seen whether this continues to be the case with future generations of lesbians given the current social context.

Some women reported that their age actually helped them in the coming-out process, even though it was perceived as out of the normal range for the development of a sexual identity (O'Leary, 1997). Although they would have had fewer long-term relationships that could be affected or less chance of having children in earlier life stages, at this point, they were less concerned about their parents' reactions and more confident about their own efficacy in taking on a stigmatized identity.

### **Impact on Relationships With Others**

There was little actual documentation of changes in relationships or related outcomes in the studies I reviewed. A number of studies, however, highlighted women's fears about the impact of disclosure on their families, friends, and coworkers (Jensen, 1999; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). The women in these studies reported that it was impossible to predict how any person would react to this new information about them. As one woman noted,

Whatever relationship I might have had with this person was completely eclipsed by the fact that I came out as a lesbian. And I began to realize that I never could predict who would be okay and who wouldn't. . . . I never knew in advance. So I just danced into a field full of land mines. (O'Leary, 1997, p. 107)

Losing custody or access to children was a primary concern in the coming-out process (Jensen, 1999; Johnston & Jenkins, 2004; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995) with good cause, given the experience of women in previous decades (Benkov, 1994). Other potential material costs included the loss of jobs and, if married, the loss of their homes and their spouses' incomes and retirement benefits. The women also reported their fear of not receiving child support if they disclosed their lesbian identity.

Even though the women felt a new sense of wholeness within themselves, they also experienced considerable grief and loss in the coming-out process (Jensen, 1999; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). They reported "grieving for the old familiar world left behind—grief for the loss of relationships with a husband or boyfriend, grief for the pain caused to parents, and often the loss of those relationships, too" (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995, p. 101), and even loss of the person they once knew themselves to be. Because the coming-out process for women in midlife is often tied to other major life events, this grieving may be added to grief surrounding the death of a parent or the loss of health.

Women grieve the loss of their social circle because it is often deeply embedded within the heterosexual community. Support from that community is likely to be directed first or solely to the husband and family, especially given normative beliefs regarding women's responsibility to put the needs of others before her own. The loss of faith or a faith community may be experienced by some, as previously held beliefs may no longer be supportive of their new identity. As O'Leary (1997) noted,

Overall, there were few aspects of the women's lives not affected by their decision to come out . . . they passed through a portal which required them to reconstruct their entire life, beginning with new assumptions about the way the world is. (p. 212)

## **New Awareness of Oppression**

Many women reported being surprised at the impact of oppression in their lives with the shift in their identities, even with prior knowledge about the GLBTQ community (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; O'Leary, 1997). The loss of heterosexual privilege, of being able to kiss your lover good-bye at the airport or to talk freely with coworkers about family members, was significant for their everyday lives. This loss of status may not be well understood by members of either the heterosexual community or those who have always identified as GLBTQ.

## **Becoming Culturally Competent in a New Community**

More than just a shift in identity, becoming lesbian in midlife requires a change in culture. Women who have not had previous experience in the GLBTQ community may experience culture shock or, at the least, confusion about appropriate rules of behavior and anxiety about fitting in (Wolfe, 1998). They may ask GLBTQ friends questions (e.g., "Just what is the difference between 'seeing' someone and 'dating' anyway?"), seek periodicals or other information that is targeted to the GLBTQ community, change their appearance, or develop an interest in new activities. Learning the meaning of symbols, such as rainbow flags and pink triangles, may be part of the process of transformation. The women's language may change as new meanings of insider code words, such as "gay-dar" and "one of the girls," become part of the everyday lexicon.

The underground nature of the GLBTQ community, especially in small towns and rural areas, and the mixed reaction these women may receive from women who have been out since adolescence (Wolfe, 1998) present significant barriers to acculturation. In recent years, the Internet has become a way for women to explore the lesbian culture safely without making a commitment to that identity (Finlon, 2002; Munt, Bassett, & O'Riordan, 2002).

## **Suggestions for Friends, Allies, and Social Workers**

Although this section of an article usually discusses implications for practice, I believe that the implications are more for living than confined to social work practice alone. Your friend or your neighbor, the clerk at your grocery store, the woman who delivers your mail, your pastor or your pastor's wife, your colleague, your boss, or even you may be experiencing this life-changing event. Members of this population are found in many settings and communities. Recognizing the unique sources of strain in this transition, coupled with the potentially positive outcomes, will allow you to be a source of support to any woman you may encounter along life's path.

Given this fact, I have outlined a list of points to ponder in providing support to women who first identify as lesbian in midlife.

- Recognize the enormity of this change in a woman's life and the courage it takes to follow through in claiming a lesbian identity. Many things may shape how life altering it will be for any one woman, such as the consistency of prior intimate relationships, connectedness within the heterosexual community, being a mother as well as a woman, and religious beliefs and practices. Regardless of how these factors shape individual situations, however, shifting from a position of status to one that is oppressed, in conjunction with learning how to function in a whole new cultural context, is not an easy task.

- Make sure that you deal with your own feelings or issues related to both homosexuality and the coming-out process for this individual woman apart from your provision of support for her. She is likely already to be dealing with many conflicting emotions and needs the time and space to address her own needs without your issues intervening. Validate her feelings of excitement, newness, wholeness, and especially desire even if you do not understand it and believe that there are other, more important, issues to be dealt with.
- If the woman's coming-out process happens in the context of a heterosexual marriage, acknowledge the conflicting feelings—the guilt and grief, peacefulness and joy—she may be feeling simultaneously and the difficult decisions she will need to make. Do not make the mistake of directing her attention to how everyone else is doing in the process, such as her husband, her children, and her extended family, without expressing empathy for her own inner turmoil and strain.
- Let the woman know that it is OK if she does not have a label to describe her new identity. She does not have to try and fit in a box labeled “straight” or “gay” or even “bisexual.” Allow her own process of self-identification to emerge.
- Let the woman know that you do not think that she is stupid for not figuring this out a long time ago or is not “really gay” because she is coming out at this point in her life. She may or may not have any memory or reconstructed memory of indications earlier in life that this would happen. It is possible that she did not identify as lesbian earlier in life, although she does now, without it being relegated to a “choice” about her affectional orientation.
- Help the woman think carefully about if, when, and how to come out to family, friends, and colleagues. Her excitement in discovering this new self may spill over and lead to impulsive choices that she will regret later. Encourage her to think through the potential ramifications of her decisions. If she has not experienced status-related oppression, she may not be prepared for the impact it has on her life. At the same time, if she chooses to be “totally out,” support her decision and help her determine action plans for potentially divergent outcomes.
- Help the woman understand how difficult it may be to predict people's reactions to her news, that she may be “dancing through a field of land mines,” as O'Leary (1997, p. 107) noted. Friends' and colleagues' responses may also indicate heterosexism and homophobia that she did not previously recognize.
- Recognize the woman's need to grieve the loss of her old identity and community, the loss of the familiar and known, and the loss of the privilege of heterosexuality. Grieving the old does not mean that the new identity is not valued, so if you are GLBTQ, remember the context of her life transition. Help the woman deal with her feelings about becoming a member of this oppressed group, even if she has experienced oppression because of other identities, such as ethnicity, religion, or disability.
- Realize the impact that this life change may have on the woman's faith or her ability to be an accepted member of a faith community that supported her in the past. Help direct her to resources within her faith community that may support her new identity.
- Help the woman understand the impact of multiple losses experienced in a short time. For me, losing my mother to cancer, ending a 19-year marriage, recognizing my identity as a lesbian for the first time, and coming out to my grief-stricken Christian family (as well as in nearly every life setting) occurred within a period of 6 months while I was a new assistant professor at a university far from home. If a woman has experienced these kinds of multiple losses or changes, she needs to know that it is likely to affect her concentration and ability to function on an everyday basis. Providing resources or helping her find ongoing support through counseling or group activities may be critical.
- Become a cultural guide or help direct the woman to people and resources who can help her along the way. Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (n.d.), for example, is an excellent national network that can provide support for the woman, her spouse, her children, and her other family members.

- Help the woman gain legal support if she needs help with a divorce or custody arrangements. Make sure that her legal advocate is not only familiar with gay and lesbian families and state law in this area but also fully supportive of her identity. Recognize how this life change may precipitate other changes, such as the loss of employment and her spouse's income, insurance, and retirement benefits.
- Let the woman know that many women report feeling a "second adolescence," with many of the associated feelings and behaviors. She is not crazy if she suddenly has sex on the brain all the time! Help her find positive coping mechanisms to make this transition into unknown territory.
- Recognize that the woman may feel empowered through her new awareness of self and the honoring of her identity. She may need support in maintaining her determination as sexist beliefs arise regarding her own needs versus those of her husband and children.
- Help the woman understand the reason why she may get mixed messages or a cool reception from members of the GLBTQ community. This kind of reaction can be painful and easily misunderstood.
- If you are GLBTQ yourself and have recognized it since childhood, realize that you may have as much trouble understanding the full complexity of this life transition as someone who is straight, only from a different vantage point.

## Where to Go From Here

There is a significant gap in knowledge about the lives of women who first identify as lesbian in midlife. More research is clearly needed to understand every aspect of this life transition for these women as well as for their families and members of their life communities. Both large-scale, systemic surveys and smaller, more intense, studies focusing on particular aspects of this transition will enhance our understanding and provide necessary information for the development of policy and practice strategies.

Even though any future research is likely to make a contribution to the limited knowledge in this area, some priorities seem clear. Little is known about how many women today lose custody of their children or settle for custody arrangements not of their choosing because they fear what may happen in court. Other material losses, such as jobs, homes, possessions, and entitlement to insurance or pension plans, have been raised as issues, but there are no data to determine to what extent these factors shape women's lives. Future research should address these issues to get a clearer picture of the impact of this life transition on women and their families.

Factors that may help or hinder women in the transformative process have not been identified. At the least, the length of marriage, reaction of a spouse and other family members, and cultural beliefs regarding gender roles and sexual orientation must be explored. Perhaps we can learn more about the empowerment and resilience of women by studying the lives of women such as these, who have undergone major life changes at a time when expectations are for stability in relationships and daily life. We also need more information on the impact of this transition on coping strategies. For example, alcohol use may increase significantly if women experience a perceived "second adolescence" or if their primary source for meeting women is lesbian bars. At the same time, alcohol use may decrease if women had been using alcohol to numb their feelings or deal with depression before they came out.

Sexuality is tied to beliefs about morality in the United States. Many religions have strong prescriptions against any same-sex intimacy. It is not clear how religious beliefs and faith-based communities shape the experience of women who identify as lesbian in midlife.

The increasing emphasis on a conservative moral position as righteous for the nation begs further questions about the experience of women who claim a lesbian identity. These are but a few of the many directions for future research.

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**Nancy C. Larson**, PhD, is an assistant professor in the School of Social Work, Arizona State University, P.O. Box 871802, Tempe, AZ 85287-1802; e-mail: [nancy.larson@asu.edu](mailto:nancy.larson@asu.edu).