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Article 72

An Exploratory Study: Lesbian Identity Development and Attachment Style

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Mental health practitioners often encounter adult clients who have problems in their relationships. A large number of theories and models are used to conceptualize, and thus, understand, relationship dynamics (Franiuk, Cohen, & Pomerantz, 2002; Levine, Sato, Hashimoto, & Verma, 1995; Sternberg, Hojjat, & Barnes, 2001). This understanding forms the basis for clients to unravel, define, and resolve interpersonal problems.

According to Hazan and Shaver (1987), adult romantic love is conceptualized as an attachment process. Attachment Theory, as proposed by John Bowlby (1969), describes a bond that develops between a child and caregiver that forms the foundation for later relationships. Building upon Bowlby's work, Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall (1978) identified three attachment styles in infants: secure, anxious-ambivalent, and anxious-avoidant. Bowlby (1973) also theorized that attachment provides individuals with mental representations of self and others, called working models. This led investigators to examine adults' perceptions of self and others and identified attachment groups corresponding to those of Ainsworth (Crowell & Feldman, 1991). Studies such as these paved the way for therapists to easily use Attachment Theory in their work with clients dealing with relationship issues.

Another important aspect of resolving relationship issues is identity formation. Stage theories of identity formation have proved particularly useful in helping therapists assess clients' development, predict and describe normative changes, and assist clients to normalize their own experiences. Theorists since Freud and Erikson posited developmental stages, usually (ideally) culminating in a strong heterosexual identity

(Hoare, 2005). However, for gay or lesbian clients, these models are surely inadequate, even, perhaps, offensive. Over the past few decades several models of homosexual identity formation have been posited, critiqued, and researched (Cass, 1979; Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Coleman, 1982; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Troiden, 1989). Most of these theorists speculated that achieving a strong identity is dependent upon accepting one's own sexual identity/orientation. Acceptance is often defined as *coming out* to self and others.

Attachment Theory

The types of relationships formed between infants and caregivers are believed to impact development throughout the lifespan. First coined "Attachment Theory" by John Bowlby (1969), these early bonds are believed to create lasting psychological connections that determine how one will form relationships as adolescents and adults. He believed that attachment in children shared four basic characteristics. The first characteristic, *proximity maintenance*, is the desire to be near attachment figures. *Safe haven* describes a returning to attachment figures in times of trouble, while *secure base* refers to the safe place provided by attachment figures, which allows for environmental exploration. Lastly, *separation distress* is the anxiety that can be experienced when attachment figures are not present.

Ainsworth et al. (1978) expanded the work of Bowlby by identifying three attachment styles: *secure attachment*, *anxious-ambivalent attachment*, and *anxious-avoidant attachment*. The latter two styles, *ambivalent* and *avoidant* are often combined into one category labeled *insecure*. In 1986, Main and Solomon added *disorganized-insecure* as a fourth attachment style. Ongoing research has consistently shown that attachment styles developed in childhood can impact later relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; McCarthy, 1999).

Using the language of infant attachment theory, Hazan and Shaver (1987) studied the attachment styles of romantic couples. *Secure* adults were found to have positive expectations and beliefs about romantic love, whereas *avoidant* partners doubted the longevity of the relationship and, therefore, avoided becoming overly vested, emotionally, in the relationship. *Ambivalent* adults also desired closeness, but fearing their partners would be unresponsive, became very clingy and needy. Ambivalently attached adults tended to want to merge completely with their partners, whereas securely attached adults merged with their partners without losing their personal identities. The partners of those with avoidant attachments often desired more closeness than their partners were willing to experience.

To further examine the attachment styles of adults, Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) outlined a four-category model of adult attachment based upon one's view of self and others. Those labeled *secure* have a positive view of self and others and are typically comfortable with intimate relationships. *Preoccupied* individuals have a negative view of self, but a positive view of others, which causes them to look to the people they value for validation and a sense of self-worth. Those in the *fearful* category have a negative view of self and others, which often causes them to isolate, or evade intimate relationships, due to their fears of rejection. Those who have a positive view of self, but a negative view of

others, fall into the *dismissing* category. They often appear self-reliant and independent, which protects them from the pain that often accompanies intimate relationships.

Homosexual Identity Formation

Interest in homosexual identity formation began in the 1970's with the publication of several developmental stage theories (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Lee, 1977; Plummer, 1975). Because developmental theories afford both the counselor and client a framework for conceptualizing life issues, they can facilitate resolution of both internal and external conflicts. These models are similar in that they all posit a progression through increasing complexities of acceptance of one's own homosexuality, ideally culminating in identity integration. Acceptance and internalization are common to all theories; however, researchers differ in the number of stages in the progression from awareness to acceptance. Based on existing models of development, these theories contribute an important aspect to understanding the process of homosexual identity formation.

In 1975, Plummer described the process of acquiring sexual identity from a social interactionist perspective. His is a 4-stage model that begins with a sensitization and ends with stabilization of homosexual identity. In Plummer's model, the process of coming out depends upon a retrospective construction of childhood same-sex fantasies or experiences. He attributed problems related to achieving a stable identity to sociological and psychological issues of secrecy, isolation, and poor self-esteem.

Lee (1977) viewed the acquisition of a homosexual identity as a 3-stage process which he called signification, coming out, and going public. He defined sub-steps in each stage, and discussed how issues related to identity development influence the process of reaching the third stage. Lee's research concluded that most people did not reach the stage of going public, although he validated his theory using 24 subjects who had reached this third stage.

Probably, the most widely accepted theory of gay and lesbian identity formation was proposed by Cass (1979). She included cognitive, affective, and behavioral components in her 6-stage model. Derived from a psychosocial perspective, the developmental stages are these: Identity Confusion, which is characterized by confusion and bewilderment over one's own actions, feelings, or thoughts about being homosexual; Identity Comparison, in which the potentiality of being a homosexual brings about feelings of alienation from non-homosexual others; Identity Tolerance, wherein although there is an increasing commitment to a homosexual identity, the individual feels a tolerance, rather than an acceptance of this sexuality; Identity Acceptance, in which there is an increased, but selective, coming out to others; Identity Pride, exemplified by anger toward society's non-acceptance of homosexuality; and Identity Synthesis, in which homosexual identity is not hidden, and disclosure is no longer an issue.

In 1984, Cass sought to empirically validate this 6-stage model of homosexual identity formation. Participants in the study were 103 men and 69 women who identified themselves as being in 1 of the 6 stages. Cass developed a questionnaire, the *Stage Allocation Measure* in which one-paragraph descriptions described each developmental phase. The participants read each description and self-allocated themselves to one of the stages. Another measure, the *Homosexual Identity Questionnaire* was constructed by

Cass to glean a more precise picture of the cognitive, behavioral, and affective dimensions of the 6 stages. Results indicated support for the 6-stage model; however, there was some indistinction between stages 1 and 2 and stages 5 and 6, suggesting that identity formation may proceed in 4 stages, rather than 6 (Cass, 1984).

Brady and Busse (1994) sought to empirically verify Cass's model and adapt it to gay men. They constructed and tested an assessment instrument, the Gay Identity Questionnaire (GIQ), to identify the stages of male homosexual identity formation. Following two pilot studies, the researchers administered the GIQ to 225 males who self-reported that they had same-sex fantasies or engaged in homosexual behavior. The researchers concluded that the GIQ is a valid and reliable measure to identify stages of sexual identity formation in homosexual males. However, the findings suggest that gay identity formation may be a 2-stage process, rather than the 6-stage process proposed by Cass (1979).

Cass's (1979) theory of homosexual identity development was also tested by Degges-White, Rice, and Myers (2000). They proposed that Cass's model might be outdated given the changes in the social perceptions of homosexuality in the 20 years since her theory was introduced. Degges-White, Rice, and Myers also questioned the linear nature of homosexual identity development, arguing that the progression through stages may not follow the predictable path suggested by Cass. Using a small sample (12), researchers interviewed participants using a structured interview with questions that corresponded to each stage of the 6-stage model. The results of the study suggested limited support for Cass's model. The authors believed that these findings highlight a need to expand the model because the actual process of sexual identity formation appears to be less linear than posited by Cass. This study had limitations such as small sample size and the nonrandom selection of participants; however, it did lend confirmation to the possibility that lesbians may experience stages of development that fit Cass's model.

A dual process of sexual identity formation was developed by McCarn and Fassinger (1996). Rather than following linear stages, this model describes phases of development that are progressive, continuous, and circular. In addition, there are parallel processes of individual sexual identity and group membership identity that occur separately and reciprocally, but not (necessarily) simultaneously. Both branches of this model (individual and group) begin with non-awareness and proceed through these phases, albeit with wide variations. The phases are Phase I—Awareness, Phase II—Exploration, Phase III—Deepening/Commitment, and Phase IV—Internalization/Synthesis.

The journey of lesbian women throughout the lifespan has received little attention in the professional literature. Initially faced with identity conflicts and role confusion, some lesbians emerge confident and self-assured, while others face depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. This study explored the relationship between attachment styles and identity formation in lesbians with the goal of better understanding what impacts the adult development of lesbians and their ability to sustain social and intimate relationships.

Lesbians Identity Development and Attachment Styles

While an abundance of literature exists regarding Attachment Theory and models of attachment, few studies have applied these concepts to lesbian identity development. One such study by Wells (2003), examined the relationship between attachment style and internalized shame. Participants were chosen because they self-identified themselves as lesbians, and were confirmed by an assessment instrument to be in the highest (6th) stage of Cass's developmental model. Confirming the hypothesis that secure attachment is related to a decrease in internalized shame, Wells suggested that long-term interpersonal therapy with lesbians should address attachment style.

Likewise, another study (Holtzen, Kenny, & Mahalik, 1995) examined the relationships among parental attachment, self-disclosure of sexual orientation, and levels of dysfunctional cognitions. These researchers found that lesbians with secure attachments were more likely to disclose their sexual identity to their parents and experience less dysfunctional cognitions. Because self-disclosure is viewed as a necessary step to a healthy identity formation (Cass, 1984), they suggested that a secure attachment style may be viewed as an important characteristic in the identity development of lesbians.

Methods

Although some literature is available regarding lesbian identity development and some literature exists on lesbian attachment style, the literature is scarce regarding the correlation between these two variables. Based on the studies that do exist, it appears that it may be helpful for counselors who work with lesbians to be able to ascertain where a client is in relation to identity development and which attachment style she exhibits. Therefore, this inquiry sought to focus on the following research questions: (1) Is there a relationship between lesbian identity as measured by the Lesbian Identity Questionnaire (LIQ; Swann & Spivey, 2004) and attachment style as measured by the Self-Report Attachment Scale: The Four Category Model (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991)? and (2) Is there a relationship between attachment style and number of years since participant's realization of lesbian identity?

Participants

Lesbian adults (N=114) were recruited for the present study using a snowball sampling technique. The ages of the women ranged from 18 to 55 ($M = 26$; $SD = 9.41$). Approximately 38% of the women reported that they came to the realization that they were gay either 14 or 15 years ago ($M = 14.95$; $SD = 8.28$). An overwhelming majority of participants were white (78.1%) followed by African American (8.9%), Latina (8.0%), and Asian American (3.6%). Most of the participants described themselves as not being affiliated with any religion (61.6%) and not at all religious (62.5%). Overall, the sample was well educated. Thirty-eight percent of the sample reported graduating from high school while 32% attended some college or trade school. Additionally, 18% of the participants graduated with a bachelor's degree and 12% reported having graduate level education.

In terms of connectedness to others, the majority of women in this study did cohabit with a romantic partner (71.4%). However, the overwhelming majority of participants were not connected with a local (84.8%) or a national (89.3%) gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender organization.

Data Collection

Participants were given a cover letter explaining the procedures to access the questionnaire via the Internet. The questionnaire contained demographic information such as age, race, living arrangements, education level, religiosity and affiliation, sexual identity realization/milestones, use of counseling related to sexual identity issues, and participation in gay, lesbian, bisexual transgender organizations. Additionally, the questionnaire contained two self-report items; the Self-Report Attachment Style Scale (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) and the Lesbian Identity Questionnaire (LIQ; Swann & Spivey, 2004).

Measures

Self-Report Attachment Scale: The Four Category Model. The Self-Report Attachment Scale: The Four Category Model is based on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = disagree strongly to 7 = agree strongly; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). The statements (e.g., It is easy for me to become emotionally close to others, I am comfortable depending on others and having others depend on me, I don't worry about being alone or having others not accept me, etc.) are geared toward eliciting particular attachment style prototypes within the 4-category model. Prototypes identified by this scale include secure, dismissing, preoccupied, and fearful. According to Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) secure attachments characterize a sense of being comfortable with both intimacy and autonomy. Dismissing attachments feature counter-dependency and lack intimacy. Preoccupied attachments are those which demonstrate a preoccupation with relationships. Fearful attachments typify a fear of intimacy and socially avoidant behavior. For the purposes of data analysis the attachment style prototype secure attachment = 1, dismissive = 2, preoccupied = 3, and fearful = 4.

Lesbian Identity Questionnaire (LIQ). The LIQ is also a self-report measure utilizing a 7-point Likert scale (1 = disagree strongly to 7 = agree strongly; Swann & Spivey, 2004). The self-report scale serves to identify a participant's beliefs/feelings about her sexual identity. The items included on the measure examine 4 phases that are correlated with individual identity development and another 4 phases that are correlated with group membership identity development. The 4 phases identified by the scale are: (1) awareness, (2) exploration, (3) deepening/commitment, and (4) internalization/synthesis (Swann & Spivey, 2004). The phase of awareness is typified by a sense of "being different" (individual sexual identity) and becoming aware that there are different sexual orientations than heterosexual (group membership identity). Exploration is characterized by strong erotic feelings for other women (individual sexual identity) and a desire to meet other gay/lesbian people (group membership identity). The phase, deepening/commitment, is demonstrated by a women feeling more intimate sexually and emotionally with other women than with men (individual sexual identity). It is also demonstrated by the increasing awareness of oppression (e.g., homophobia) and consequences of choices (group membership identity). The last phase,

internalization/synthesis, is distinguished by a woman internalizing her sense of fulfillment with her relationships with other women (individual sexual identity) and the sense that she is comfortable with her lesbianism in all contexts of her life. The phases were coded for analysis by the following numerical sequence; awareness = 1, exploration = 2, deepening/commitment = 3, and synthesis/internalization = 4.

Results

To test whether phase of lesbian identity on either dimension (individual or group) related to attachment style and/or to the number of years since realization of sexual identity, correlation analyses were performed. The analyses boasted significant moderate to strong correlations.

In terms of the first phase, awareness, it was found that individual awareness was positively correlated with group awareness ($r = .85, p < .001$). This indicated that the women in the study reported they not only felt a sense of being different within themselves (individual dimension), they also felt as though they were different than others in relation to sexual orientation (group dimension).

The relationship between individual exploration and group exploration demonstrated similar results in that a positive correlation was also found ($r = .87, p < .01$). It appeared the more an individual explored her erotic feelings for other women the more she tended to explore people within her group (e.g., the lesbian community).

The third phase, deepening, produced another positive correlation ($r = .46, p < .01$). According to this finding, women who tended to find self-fulfillment in their lesbianism (preference in being with other women) also tended to identify with lesbians as a group (e.g., identifying with those who have been discriminated against due to homophobic attitudes).

The last phase examined, synthesis, resulted in yet another positive correlation ($r = .84, p < .01$). This finding suggests those women who were fulfilled with their sexual choice, being sexually intimate with women, were also comfortable in identifying as a lesbian “no matter where she was or who she was with” (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996, p. 521).

When the dimensions (individual and group) were correlated with scores regarding attachment styles, negative correlations resulted. In relation to the individual dimension and attachment style, the more synthesized the participant’s lesbian identity was, the more secure she was in her attachment style ($r = -.51, p < .01$). Similarly, the relationship between the group dimension and attachment style demonstrated that those women who were more comfortable with their lesbianism (no matter where they went or who they were with) were also secure in their attachment style ($r = -.60, p < .01$).

Attachment style was also negatively associated with years since realization of lesbian identity ($r = -.26, p < .01$). This finding suggests the greater the number of years since realization of sexual identity, the more the attachment style was typified by the scores indicative for the secure attachment style prototype.

Table 1 outlines the correlational findings between lesbian identity development (individual and group), dimensions of attachment style (individual and group), and number of years since realization of lesbian identity.

Table 1
Correlations Between Lesbian Identity Development-Phase (Individual and Group Dimensions), Attachment Style, and Years Since Realization of Sexual Identity

	r
<i>Individual and Group:</i>	
Awareness	.85**
Exploration	.87**
Deepening	.46**
Synthesis	.84**
<i>Dimensions and Attachment Style:</i>	
Individual	-.51**
Group	-.60**
<i>Number of Years and Attachment Style</i>	-.26**

** $p < .01$, two-tailed.

Discussion and Recommendations for Mental Health Practitioners

The results of this study point to a relationship between the attachment style of lesbians and their identity development. Lesbians with secure attachments know how to balance their intimate relationships with a healthy sense of autonomy. They can become involved in intimate relationships without losing their sense of independence. Therefore, a fear of intimacy, socially avoidant behavior, a preoccupation with relationships, and counter-dependency are all absent in the adults that are securely attached.

The study also confirms previous research suggesting that those who are more securely attached are also more comfortable with their own sexual identity (Elizur & Mintzer, 2003; Ridge & Feeney, 2001). The LIQ measured the lesbian's individual identity development, as well as her group membership identity. The study demonstrated that securely attached lesbians appeared to be well adjusted on both measures, meaning that they are comfortable with their intimate relationships and the relationships they share with the lesbian community. They also exhibited an internalized sense of fulfillment regarding their intimate relationships with women, as well as a comfort level in expressing their homosexuality in all other areas of their life. Clearly, a securely attached lesbian will develop a stronger identity and sense-of-self than her peers with less secure attachments.

The findings of this study that relate attachment style of lesbians to their successful identity development should be of particular interest to counselors working with this population, especially those who present with issues related to identity development or role confusion. By establishing the client's attachment style and phase of identity development through inventories designed for these purposes, the counselor may be better equipped to understand her presenting problem and facilitate an appropriate treatment plan. Because we now suspect that a less secure attachment style may give way to poor identity development, the counselor may gain insight into the need for

interventions that would deal with attachment issues as a means of addressing identity issues. Helping the client become more aware of her own attachment style may facilitate a counseling relationship in which the client can work toward building a more positive self-concept, thus strengthening her identity development (Jongsma & Peterson, 2003).

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study adds to the current knowledge base there are several limitations. This study used a non-random sampling technique which limits the generalizability of the findings, and the majority of the participants were white and well educated. Additionally, participation in the study required access to a computer and the Internet.

It may be that a larger more diverse sample would generate different results. Future studies need to engender larger ethnically, racially, and socioeconomically diverse samples. Also, much of the literature focuses on the use of quantitative techniques to describe and analyze attachment and/or identity development in lesbians. Future studies should incorporate the use of mixed methods or qualitative data gathering for a more in-depth exploration of how identity development affects attachment and vice versa. The findings in this study serve as a starting point paving the path for future studies to be based. It is our hope that more research soon becomes available on and about this population of females so that mental health practitioners will have greater and more useful intervention strategies at their fingertips; thereby, better serving their lesbian clients.

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