Lesbian Narratives: An Investigation of Identity and Expression

Tamara J. Hinojosa[1]
Texas A&M University, San Antonio, Texas, United States

Carlos Medina V
The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania, United States

The authors utilized narrative inquiry to explore the social and cultural contexts that influenced sexual identity development and expression of 10 lesbian women. The research design incorporated a three-phase data analysis: (1) core story analysis, (2) turning point analysis, and (3) emplotment analysis. Findings demonstrate that a multifaceted coming-out process and romantic relationships with both women and men were critical to participants' sexual identity. Other social and cultural factors that impacted participants' sexual identity included selection of sexual identity labels (e.g., lesbian, gay, queer, or no label), religion/spirituality, ethnicity, and appearance (e.g., clothing, hairstyles). Implications for counselors include awareness of factors that may influence the coming out process, willingness to discuss sexual identity labels, and facilitating discussions about same- and opposite-sex relationships.

Keywords: sexual identity, lesbians, coming out, narrative inquiry

Early research about sexuality incorporated sequential stage models of sexual identity thought to apply to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) individuals. For example, Cass (1979) developed a six-stage sexual identity development model for gay men and women. The stages included: (1) identity confusion, (2) identity comparison, (3) identity tolerance, (4) identity acceptance, (5) identity pride, and (6) identity synthesis. In Cass' (1979) model, individuals progress from questioning of deviant sexual urges (identity confusion), slowly accepting a non-straight sexual identity (identity tolerance), to integration of sexual identity (identity synthesis). McCarn and Fassinger (1996) elaborated on this linear sexual identity model by including an external domain (i.e., group membership within LGBTQ community) along with internal

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[1] Address correspondence to Tamara J. Hinojosa, Texas A&M University San Antonio, One University Way, San Antonio, TX 78224. Email: Tamara.hinojosa@tamusa.tamus.edu

awareness. Similar to Cass' (1979) model, McCarn and Fassinger's (1996) model ended on a stage of "internalization/synthesis" (p. 521) for both internal and external domains. These models, however, are focused on linear identity development, rather than the broader experiences of LGBTQ identity and expression.

Socio-cultural components of identity were not considered within the aforementioned sexual identity models (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004). However, recent studies have broadened their investigations and revealed the complex relationships between LGBTQ sexual identity development and socio-cultural factors (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004; Shapiro, Rios, & Stewart, 2011). Shapiro et al. (2011) found that participants' sexual identity development occurred simultaneously with cultural and racial development. Rosario et al. (2004) found that Latino youth disclosed their sexuality to fewer individuals, while Black youth were less involved in gay-related social activities as compared to their racial counterparts. These studies expand awareness of LGBTQ identity, but do not investigate issues particular to lesbians. In fact, although there is a lack of qualitative research focusing on the LGBTQ community within the counseling and psychology literature (Singh & Shelton, 2011), there is even less research on lesbian women in particular (Lee & Crawford, 2012).

Researchers that have focused specifically on lesbians have also incorporated socio-cultural factors into their investigations of lesbian identity. For example, in a longitudinal study by Diamond (2005), many participants changed their identity labels (e.g., lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual, and unlabeled) over an eight-year timespan. Participants discussed selecting identity labels based on the psychological characteristics within their same- and opposite-sex attractions. Other researchers have focused on lesbian appearance, gender, and sexuality. Huxley, Clarke, and Halliwell (2013) explored lesbian appearance norms and found that participants wanted to adopt lesbian appearance norms while trying to maintain their individuality. Walker, Golub, Bimbi, and Parsons (2012) explored lesbian gender labels and sexual behaviors and found there is fluidity of sexual behaviors across varying gender identities. Furthermore, the research participants in these studies used varying labels, appearance norms, and gender identities, underlining the importance of continued investigation into lesbian identity expression.

As noted, there is a dearth of qualitative research exploring LGBTQ issues within the counseling literature (Singh & Shelton, 2011). Although the studies listed above used qualitative methods to explore lesbian identity, there was an emphasis on thematic analysis or grounded theory, which aligns with findings from a 10-year content analysis of counseling journals in which only 12 LGBTQ qualitative studies were published (Singh & Shelton, 2011). Diversification of qualitative research methods is needed to highlight the distinctive characteristics of lesbian identity and lesbian identity expression.

The Current Study

The purpose of this study was to fill a gap in the research by using narrative inquiry to focus specifically on lesbian sexual identity and expression. We incorporated social and cultural factors into our understanding of lesbian identity and as concepts that guided

our research questions. To diversify the use of qualitative research methods, we used narrative inquiry, which is helpful when exploring the social and cultural contexts that impact identity and identity expression (Riessman, 2003). Research questions included: (1) How do lesbians foster understanding about their sexual identity? and (2) How do social and cultural contexts influence lesbian identity and expression?

Method

Participants

We used purposeful criterion sampling to recruit participants (Patton, 2002). Criteria for inclusion was as follows: (1) self-identification as lesbian and (2) aged between 18 and 65 years. After the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study, we distributed flyers at different local LGBTQ community events in order to recruit participants.

The sample included 10 women, ranging in age from 21 to 45. Participants used different racial and ethnic terms. Four women identified as Hispanic, one identified as Mexican American, one identified as Native American and White, and four identified as White. One participant was earning her associate's degree, two earned associates degrees, three earned their bachelor's degrees, one was earning her master's degree, and one earned a master's degree. All participants were in relationships with women. Four women had children. One participant identified as a little person. All participants identified as having same-sex attractions, however, they used varying identity labels. One participant identified as gay, one identified as queer or gay, two did not identify with a label, and six identified as lesbian. Eight participants resided in Texas, one in Louisiana, and one in Oregon. See Table 1 for participant profiles.

TABLE 1

Study Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Education	Ethnicity	Sexual Identity
Christy	35	Bachelor's degree	White	Queer/Gay
Sonya	21	2nd year college student	Hispanic	Lesbian
Maria	26	Associates degree	Hispanic[a]	Gay
Lisa	41	Master's degree	White	Lesbian
Ana	34	Bachelor's degree	Caucasian/Native American	Lesbian
Ruth	24	Associates degree	Mexican-American	Gay
Laura	34	Bachelor's degree	Hispanic/Mexican-American	Lesbian
Mel	36	Bachelor's degree	Cajun; Caucasian	No label
Kim	45	Master's degree	White	Lesbian
Nyla	27	Earning Master's degree	White	No Label

Note. Pseudonyms were used in order to protect the identity of participants. Names were distributed at random.

[a]Maria identified her race as White in addition to her ethnicity.

Narrative Inquiry

In narrative inquiry, narrative is both the method and phenomena of study (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). For the purpose of our study, we viewed the telling of narratives as a process that helps individuals reflect on the meaning of past experiences and then decide if and how they want to integrate these meanings into their current self-perceptions. In addition to acknowledging narrative content, exploring the structure of narratives demonstrates how individuals create a sense of self (Polkinghorne, 1988). To focus on narrative structure, we examined turning points, plots, and sub-plots of participants' stories.

We also implemented critical theory in our research design, which is founded on the tenant that traditional research paradigms often contribute to the maintenance of skewed power dynamics (Ponterotto, 2005). Therefore, we used interview protocol and trustworthiness methods that enabled participants to have control over how their voices were represented.

Data Collection

As narrative researchers, we invited stories from participants to gain insight about their identities and identity expression. We conducted 60-90 minute semi-structured, individual interviews (Miller &Crabtree, 1999) in-person and in locations selected by participants (e.g., coffee shops, private library rooms). We started the individual interviews with a broad open-ended generative narrative question that solicited narratives from participants (Flick, 2009). Additionally, our interview guide contained prompts used if participants needed help expanding their stories. Prompts included: "How have your family/caregivers shaped your sexual orientation identity develop-ment?", "How has your identity expression been received?", and "Have you made any adaptations or modifications to your identity expression?" Prior to interviews, all participants were e-mailed approved IRB informed consent forms, which were then reviewed, signed, and collected prior to conducting the interviews. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Trustworthiness

To enhance credibility and trustworthiness of researchers, two primary methods were used. Firstly, researcher journals were kept to monitor researcher objectivity (Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano, & Morales, 2007). Secondly, respondent validation was used, which entailed sharing individual interview transcripts with respective participants and asking for feedback (Polkinghorne, 2007). Specifically, the first author emailed partici-pants with their individual transcribed narrative and invited them to provide feedback on the accuracy of the interview transcript. One participant requested that several words be replaced with different words to clarify her narrative. Three participants indicated that their narratives were accurate representations of their experiences. The remaining

six participants did not provide feedback on their narratives.

  Researcher lens. The first author is a counselor educator with experience counseling LGBTQ clients, working with LGBTQ college students, and presenting on the topic of LGBTQ identity. The second author is a counselor education and supervision doctoral student and is involved with the LGBTQA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and ally) resourse center at his current university. He has presented on the topic of LGBTQ identity and is interested in increasing access to mental health services for individuals who do not identify as heterosexual. Our research lens was influenced by our personal and professional experiences, therefore discussing our experiences with each other throughout the research process helped us increase our awareness of potential biases. Additionally, using research journals helped us bracket biases that could influence the research process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Data Analysis

We conducted a three-phase data analysis that contained the following components: (1) core story analysis, (2) turning point analysis, and (3) emplotment analysis. In the first phase, participants' narratives were translated into core stories. This is the only phase of analysis that was solely conducted on individual participant narratives. These core stories were then used for the second (i.e., turning point) and third (i.e., emplotment) phases of analysis, which were conducted to explore the commonalities and differences among all participant transcripts.

  Phase one: Core story analysis. Creating core stories is a process that fosters narrative analysis by shortening longer narratives without losing their primary meaning. To translate each participant's full narrative transcript into a core story, we used Emden's (1998) eight step core-story process. The first five steps address core story creation and the last three steps incorporate rearranging text to increase coherency. We used the first five steps of Emden's core story process, but due to our use of critical theory, we wanted to preserve participants' voices and therefore did not use the last three steps of Emden's core story process to change story sequence.

  The first five steps included: (1) reading through each narrative over a few weeks to fully grasp narrative meanings, (2) deleting all interview questions and comments, (3) deleting all words or phrases that distract from the main meaning of each sentence or story, (4) reading through the remaining text to check for accuracy and understanding, and (5) repeating steps three and four to ensure that the primary meaning of each narrative has been preserved and returning to the full narrative as needed (Emden, 1998). This core story process was conducted on each individual narrative transcript so that each participant's full narrative was translated into a core story. These core stories were then used for the second and third phases of analysis.

Phase two: Turning point analysis. Turning points are when participants identify a radical shift in their life (Riessman, 2003). We did not ask participants about turning points during interviews because we wanted to see if turning points naturally emerged. During turning point analysis, we identified turning points within each individual core story and then compared the turning points across all core stories. To promote trustworthiness, each researcher independently identified turning points. We then met and reviewed the data and notes until we reached full consensus.

Phase three: Emplotment analysis. In this phase of analysis, plots and sub-plots within all participant's core stories were examined. Plots were defined as organizing themes that connected events within participants' core stories (Polkinghorne, 1988). Within these overarching plots, were sub-plots, which were defined as smaller components of the larger plot (Emden, 1998). To conduct emplotment analysis, we first divided each participant's core story into sub-plots. We deciphered sub-plots by reading through each participant's larger core story several times and noticing when important events within the story emerged. Each researcher separately identified sub-plots and then we met to compare notes and redefine sub-plots. We then searched back and forth among all participant's core stories to examine which sub-plots re-appeared across core stories. We eliminated sub-plots that were not integral to the overarching plot of each core story (Emden, 1998).

Findings

In the following section participant quotes are used to demonstrate key points within turning points, plots, and sub-plots. We kept participants' speech intact by spelling words phonetically and using ellipses to represent pauses. We also used brackets to indicate when we altered words to increase clarity or protect identities.

Turning Points

Coming-out to parents. Turning points that occurred with parents revolved primarily around the coming out process. Coming-out will also be addressed in the emplotment phase of analysis. However, what differentiates coming-out in this phase of analysis was that participants identified the point when they first told parents about their sexual orientation as a significant moment that altered relationships with their parents while enhancing their own self-awareness.

Unlike most participants, Mel and Christy identified coming-out as valuable in their relationships with their parents. For example, Mel was dedicated to maintaining communication and respect with her parents – even when they struggled to accept her:

> Whenever this whole process started and I came out to my parents, there were two things that were very important for me. One is that we didn't stop talking to each other – even if we hung up

and screamed and cried, that's fine. Next week we're gonna talk
again. And we're gonna keep trying.…..my philosophy was, if I'm
asking for tolerance and respect, I need to give tolerance and re-
spect.

Like Mel, Christy also discussed having a very challenging, yet meaningful coming out experience with her parents; especially her father:

Coming out to him, I was really letting go of that control I imag-
ined I had over how he saw me and just like giving it up to him
and to the universe…..this is who I am and we're either going to
move forward in an authentic way or we're not, but I won't pre-
tend about it anymore. That was so freeing.

Mel and Christy both struggled when coming out to parents, but these experiences seemed to represent important turning points that shifted how they related to their parents in a positive way.

For Mel and Christy, in addition to enhancing the relationships they had with their parents, this turning point fostered their self-awareness. For example, Christy explained, "It ended up that my relationship with my dad was the one that benefited the most out of all of this.……I feel like he really recognized the courage that it took for me to be honest with him." However, they were the only two participants to identify coming-out as a positive experience.

Seven out of the 10 participants discussed their parents' negative reactions when they came-out, but also highlighted the self-awareness they gained. Ana explained her family's reactions, "My family just told me, 'Don't worry about coming back around, we just don't want you around.'" Ana had come out two years prior to our research interview and was still struggling with family. However, Ana explained, "It's the first time in my life I've been this happy, in the right place at the right time, and confident enough with myself that I could do whatever I want." Ana felt frustrated with her parents, but confident with herself. In describing her experience, another participant, Ruth explained:

[My parents and I] were just sitting at the table and I'm just like,
"I'm gay!" I felt so bad. It was kind of like a bomb. …. It was very
hard for my mom. She cried and I cried, but my dad was the one
that was like, "We love you no matter what."

Although Ruth was worried about coming-out to her parents, she viewed it as a crucial first-step before coming-out to others.

Sonya, whose mother passed away during childhood, was the only participant who chose to come-out to a non-family member first, her high school librarian who she viewed as a "mother figure." Eventually, however, her father saw her profile on

MySpace, a social networking site, that indicated her sexual orientation. Sonya explained, "So now we established this nice mutual ground where we don't talk about it." In Sonya's case it was not coming-out to her parent, but to a trusted school staff member that helped her grow more self-accepting.

   Identity labels. Selecting identity labels seemed to expand participants' awareness of societal perceptions, while also expanding their own self-awareness about how they wanted to represent themselves. The majority of participants identified as lesbian, but not all of them preferred this label. Nyla explained her perceptions when she began dating her current girlfriend:

> It was a very weird time for me because I was having to explain to everyone that I was straight. Being labeled as a lesbian is offensive to me, 'This is who I am. Don't put me in that category.' All of a sudden it felt like the 21 years of straightness were taken away from me. …..I'm trying to figure out who I am too so don't label me just yet.

This quote demonstrates Nyla's frustration with a label that did not seem to encompass both her past and present self. She also expressed frustration with society categorizing her experiences while she struggled to find a label for herself. Ultimately, Nyla did not identify with any label.

   Christy and Ruth also mentioned societal perceptions about sexual orientation labels and how these perceptions influenced how they chose to identify. Christy stated, "I can identify as a lesbian and I feel that's a term that society's…more comfortable with… But how I really identify, I usually say queer or gay because those words just feel better for me." Similarly, Ruth explained, "I prefer the word gay. Lesbian has too many stereotypes in it. I [don't call] myself lesbian, but I would tell you that I like women and that I'm gay."

   Relationships with men. Eight participants had relationships with men prior to dating women. Specifically, four participants had dated men and four participants had been married to men. Of the four who were married to men, two participants had open marriages and pursued relationships with women while married. For Christy, after her first relationship with a woman, she reconsidered being married to a man, which marked a significant turning point for her:

> All of a sudden everything was different. [My husband] and I tried to stay really connected in terms of discussing what this meant for us and whether we could still be together in some way. It just became clear really quickly that I didn't want to be in that relationship in that way at all….like not sexually and not committed in this love relationship way. And pretty quickly I was like, "I don't think

I ever wanna be in a relationship like that with a man again.

During this study, all participants were in relationships with women, but this finding indicates that previous relationships with men had significant impacts on their sexual identities.

Plots and Sub-Plots

Emplotment analysis revealed three major plots: (1) coming-out, (2) self-understanding through relationships with women, and (3) other salient identities. Additionally, the first plot, coming-out, had two sub-plots: (1) to self and (2) to others. The third plot, other salient identities, included three sub-plots: (1) religious/spiritual beliefs, (2) ethnicity, and (3) appearance.

Plot one: Coming out. In a previous phase of analysis, coming-out to parents represented a turning point. However, in this phase of analysis, participants identified coming out as an experience that incorporated self-understanding before coming out to others. The first sub-plot incorporated coming-out to self and the second sub-plot incorporated coming out to others.

Sub-plot: To self. Many participants began their narratives by identifying when they first realized they were attracted to women. Three participants realized between the ages of 10 and 13, two participants realized between the ages of 14 and 19, and five realized in their early 20s. As they gained this awareness, they took their time reflecting. For example, Ana stated, "I think I knew probably…as a third grader, I knew that something was different about the way I was oriented. I was attracted to different things." Ana knew she felt different, but did not realize her attraction to women was at the core of this self-understanding. Christy also had many questions:

> I guess probably in high school I started being interested in my girlfriends and just feeling really curious, I guess, sexually about them, but I was always really into boys ….. So, when that started happening, it was like, this is weird, I want to kiss my girl-friends…. And then in college, it started getting really loud. Like there was probably a year or two, it was all I could think about. Am I gay?

These excerpts demonstrate the ample time that Ana and Christy dedicated to reflect on their identities. In fact, Ana and Christy started questioning their sexual orientation in childhood and adolescence, respectively, but they did not come-out to anyone until their early thirties.

Sub-plot: To others. After coming-out to self and parents, participants discussed coming-out to others. Ruth explained, "I think I have [come out] to others and it wasn't just, 'Oh look everybody, I'm gay.' It was slow and [only] to certain people. Then it became

whoever knows, knows." For Ruth it was a gradual process, but other participants were more cautious.

Kim and Maria appeared more protective about who they came-out to. Kim stated that when she lived outside of her home state, she felt more comfortable coming-out to others. However, now that she was living in her home state again, she was more cautious:

> [In the past] the anticipation and anxiety of telling people, was horrible! And there are still people to this day that don't have any idea. You know, my partner and I work at the same place and there are people who have known us for 20 plus years and have no idea!

Similarly, Maria explained that unless directly confronted about her sexual orientation, she will not openly discuss it until she feels comfortable, "I'm not gonna lie to your face [about my sexual orientation], but….it's my stuff. I don't need to talk about that with you." Both Kim and Maria were protective about who they came-out to, but other participants were more open.

Ana and her partner were both teachers employed at different locations. Her partner kept her sexual identity confidential at work, but Ana came-out to her co-workers, "My community of fellow teachers…..they've been amazing. [Coming-out to them] didn't change who I was, but it allowed me to …. be the person I was supposed to be." Similarly, Laura reported that once she came-out to more people, she gained new friendships that helped her grow, "I was getting to know more about myself by engaging in friendships with…. this group of lesbian women that identified as lesbian women, not bi." Laura initially identified as bisexual, but then came-out as lesbian. Connecting with other lesbians helped her learn more about herself.

Plot two: Self-understanding through relationships with women. For some participants, relationships with women did not lead to understanding of their sexual orientation. Ruth explained: "I had…one relationship with a woman before, in high school. It was actually my first relationship. I didn't identify it [as being lesbian] and it never clicked for me. It was strange." In fact, Maria and Laura also had sexual experiences with women in middle school and high school, but did not self-identify as lesbian until their early 20's and 30's, respectively.

Serious relationships provoked participants to explore their sexuality. Nyla explained: "I felt strongly for [my partner]... I knew there was something there worth figuring out and I wanted to pursue it…I realized more people were meeting [my partner and I] together and that [my sexual orientation] was part of me." Similarly, Mel described meeting her first girlfriend, "I could make a choice to ignore that attraction or I could make a choice to act on that attraction to her. You don't pick how you feel, you only get to pick how you act about that feeling." These relationships helped Nyla and Mel better understand their sexuality.

Plot three: Other salient identities. The final sub-plot included participants' sexual orientation identity in relation to religious/spiritual beliefs, ethnicity, and their appearance.

Sub-plot: Religion/Spirituality. Religion/spirituality seemed to impact the majority of participants. Three participants mentioned that they were active in affirming spiritual communities. Two participants identified as Catholic, one Christian, one atheist, and three did not affiliate with any religion/spirituality. For some participants, they internally struggled to infuse their own religious/spiritual beliefs with their sexual identities. For other participants, their parents' religious/spiritual beliefs made it difficult to accept their daughter's sexual orientation.

Ana had been raised Christian and Ruth and Sonya had been raised as Catholic. They each believed religion impeded their sexual identity development and/or made it challenging to stay involved in their religion. Ana explained:

> [However] with my attraction to females, I was always self-conscious and unsure about myself because of that religious stifling. [I thought], "This is wrong, this is wrong, this is wrong." [Otherwise], I would have expressed it and explored quite a bit more growing up.

Ana stated that prior to meeting her partner, she had disclosed feeling attracted to women to her religious group. She described their reactions stating, "[They said], 'You can't do that. You're wrong. We're gonna pray for you.' Ok these people say they accept me for who I am…. this level of restriction…. I hadn't experienced from people that really claimed to appreciate me." After her religious community told her it was wrong, Ana avoided telling anyone else about her sexual orientation. Once she met her partner, they chose to join an affirming spiritual community.

Ruth also noted that some of the religious values she had been raised with seemed to impede her sexual identity development: "Because I also identify as Catholic, it's been hard. I guess that regressed that coming out part. Maybe it hasn't shaped my sexual orientation, but it has prevented me from being more in tune with it…." Finally, Sonya, who also identified as Catholic, explained that she was interviewed for a college newspaper article in which she disclosed her sexual orientation. Members of her church read the article and confronted her about it. Sonya had been teaching confirmation classes at her church, but stopped following the confrontation. She stated, "I was afraid that if I went back, they'd tell me to leave." Sonya further shared that she hoped to return one day.

Several participants encountered challenges from parents that were based on their parents' religious values. Nyla's parents initiated numerous tactics to try to convince her that she was, "born straight." For example, they had priests visit her several times and consistently mailed Bible scripture to her. Similarly, Mel explained her mother's reaction

to her coming-out: "I remember her saying one time, 'Satan's gone and opened a door in your heart and walked in.'" Kim described her mom, "[My mom] has issues with Catholicism because it says one thing and she really wants to believe that Bible, but she really wants to like my partner. So, there are conflicts that she just can't help herself." These findings highlight how religion/spirituality can influence parents understanding of their daughters' sexuality.

Sub-plot: Ethnicity. Mexican American or Hispanic participants indicated that Mexican culture influenced how they and their families understood sexual identity. Laura stated:

> It was when I moved [out of state] that not only did I realize that my attraction for women was not going to go away, but I also realized I was a different ethnicity than everyone else. So, it was dealing with two things at once.

Laura's experience demonstrated her attempt to understand her sexual and her ethnic identities.

The other Mexican American and/or Hispanic participants described their ethnicity in relation to how it influenced their family's perceptions about sexual identity – both negatively and positively. Ruth clarified why she hid her sexual orientation from her extended family:

> You have the Mexican culture that doesn't see the gay community as such a positive thing. In a way I felt like I was sheltering my parents from what my [extended family] would think. Because I'm gay, my [extended family would think my parents] did a bad job parenting.

Similarly, Sonya explained that due to her father's Mexican values, she avoided expressing her sexuality because she feared he would kick her out of the house. Conversely, Nyla explained, "My dad was a little more supportive...he's Mexican, he's not gonna stop paying for his daughter to go to college." These excerpts demonstrate how families of Hispanic and Mexican lesbians attempt to understand their daughters' sexuality while balancing their own ethnic identities.

Sub-plot: Appearance. Several participants discussed their appearances in relation to their sexual identity and expression. When discussing their appearances, they focused on clothing and hairstyle. For example, Mel described herself as a "perfumey, high-heeled girl" and stated, "But what happens to me in the lesbian community is people go, 'Who brought the straight girl here?' …..I hate that." During our interview Christy wore loose clothing and had short hair. She stated, "I stopped feeling right in women's clothes. But people at work, like there was this one guy tripped out about it. 'Wow you're still so pretty, but your hair's really short!'" Both Mel and Christy's experiences highlight the important role that societal expectations play in how lesbians should appear.

Conversely, Kim and Sonya discussed restricting their appearances based on location. Kim stated, "I was…more butchy… when I was further up in northern [United States]. I was more liberal with who I was and learning to deal with my identity. So, I think when I came here I boxed myself in." Similarly, Sonya explained that when attending out-of-state LGBTQ conferences, she wore suits and ties, but when back home, she was less "butchy." She stated, "I guess I'm trying to please people….. I don't want to make anyone uncomfortable."

Lisa discussed her appearance in relation to being a little person. She explained, "I identify more being a little person than a lesbian… It's not by choice, but that's just…what you see." This also influenced Lisa's participation in gay events. As a little person, she worried that she was easier to identify and therefore did not attend them to avoid being outed to her employer.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to focus on turning points and emplotment analysis (i.e., narrative plots and subplots) to gain insight about lesbian identity and expression. Turning points that emerged included coming out to parents, identity labels, and relationships with men. Emplotment analysis incorporated the following plots: (1) coming-out, (2) self-understanding through relationships with women, and (3) other salient identities. Additionally, the first plot, coming-out, had two sub-plots: (1) to self and (2) to others. The third plot, other salient identities, included three sub-plots: (1) religious/spiritual beliefs, (2) ethnicity, and (3) appearance. Our findings aligned with current studies (Diamond, 2005, 2008; Shapiro et al., 2010) that highlight factors that impact sexual identity. Specifically, participants in our study did not develop static conclusions about their sexual identities, but rather discussed experiences that have and will continue impacting their sexual identities and identity expression.

Navigating Lesbian Identity

Numerous researchers have investigated the coming-out process (Denes & Afifi, 2014; Ryan, Legate, & Weinstein, 2015), but what makes our findings unique is that the majority of participants placed significant importance on telling their parents first before telling others. This finding is contrary to Rossi's (2010) finding that gay and lesbian young adults often came out to their friends first.

Additionally, the majority of participants' parents reacted negatively when their daughters came-out to them. This is an important finding because research suggests that negative reactions to coming-out have a lasting impact on LGBTQ individuals as compared to positive reactions (Ryan et al., 2015). Although the majority of participants had come-out to their parents years before this study, many parents were still struggling to accept their daughter's sexual identities. Participants noted reoccurring conversations in which they confirmed their sexual identities to parents, which emphasizes the fluidity of the coming-out process and builds on research in which LGBTQ individuals chose

to come-out a second time to reaffirm their sexuality and/or to prompt parents' acceptance (Denes & Afifi, 2014).

It is also important to note that the majority of participants had previous romantic relationships with men. Our findings indicated that both same- and opposite-sex romantic relationships were equally important to participants' sexual identity development as well. For example, in emplotment analysis the sub-plot, coming-out to self, demonstrated that even when participants began dating women, they did not automatically align with a lesbian identity. In fact, several participants fluctuated between dating men and women before accepting a lesbian sexual identity. For some participants, these relationships helped them realize they felt more attracted to women; while for others, they realized that although they no longer wanted to date men, their attractions to men were important parts of their identities. This finding demonstrated a non-linear experience, as opposed to previous sequential sexual orientation stage models (Cass, 1979; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996), and supports current research that highlights a fluid lesbian identity process (Diamond 2005, 2008).

Selection of sexual identity labels also emerged as an important finding. Participants dedicated ample time reflecting on their attractions before fully identifying their sexuality, which aligns with previous research in which lesbian women weighed the psychological and emotional factors inherent in their attractions as a way of selecting sexual identity labels (Diamond, 2005, 2008). However, our findings also indicated that several participants considered societal perceptions when selecting labels, which highlights the complexity of this process.

Social and Cultural Factors that Impact Lesbian Identity and Expression

The final sub-plot in emplotment analysis, other salient identities, revealed the complex nature of social and cultural factors on identity. Specific social and cultural factors that impacted participants included religion/spirituality, ethnicity, appearance, and generation.

Religion/Spirituality. Previous research has highlighted the significant of religion/spirituality for lesbian sexual identity development (Hagen, Arczynski, Morrow, & Hawxhurst, 2011), but our findings emphasized the dual role that religion/spirituality can play for lesbians. Six participants reflected on their own religious/spiritual beliefs and that of their parents. Firstly, several participants left unsupportive religious/spiritual organizations and joined affirming ones. One participant left her church parish, but did not join any other type of religion or spirituality. Other participants indicated that they were still exploring how their religious/spiritual beliefs shaped their sexual identities (e.g., attending different religious/spiritual services, reading various spiritual texts).

Additionally, participants described their parents' religious/spiritual values and how these values hindered their ability to accept their daughter's sexuality. Several participants were empathic toward their parents' attempts at reconciling their conflicting religious beliefs with their daughter's sexual identities. However, Nyla, whose parents

had a strong belief about communicating their religious values against same-sex attraction, expressed needing help to deal with their disapproval. These findings suggest that lesbians are aware of their parents' religious/spiritual beliefs and how they impact the parent–daughter relationship, but are struggling to find ways to cope with their parents' reactions.

Ethnicity. The five Hispanic and Mexican American participants placed great value on how their ethnic cultures impacted their families understanding of their sexual identities. This emphasis on family is also noted in other studies about Hispanic LGBTQ individuals (Rosario et al., 2004). However, in a longitudinal study investigating racial/ethnic differences in the coming-out process, Latina lesbians were found to be the least likely, as compared to their racial counterparts, to come-out to family members (Aranda et al., 2015). In our study, however, all Hispanic and Mexican American participants were out to their parents.

Appearance. Walker, Golub, Bimbi, and Parsons (2012) highlight lesbian appearance in relation to sexual orientation and/or gender identity, which emerged in our study as well. Participants noted clothing and hair style as ways they expressed their sexual identities and used words, such as "butchy," when discussing gender identity. Several participants indicated that they did not challenge traditional gender norms when in certain geographic locations because they did not want to make others feel "uncomfortable."

Generation. Finally, there was a noted age division among participants. Out of the 10 participants, only two had not been involved in romantic relationships with men. These two participants were under the age of 27 and the women who had previous relationships with men were 34 and older. This finding builds on previous studies about LGBTQ individuals from different generations, or the "queer generation gap" (Garner, 2004, p. 181).

Limitations and Considerations for Future Research

There were several limitations in this study. Firstly, the qualitative nature of this study limits generalizability to the overall LGBTQ community. Therefore, we remain specific about extrapolations that can be drawn (Patton, 2002). Moreover, participants rarely fit into research criteria in regards to sexual orientation (Diamond, 2005). We focused our research on women who self-identified as lesbian, but there were several participants who identified as gay, queer, or no label. All participants identified as non-heterosexual, however, and were able to contribute to our study. Finally, data triangulation was not conducted, but would be extremely beneficial in future research.

Future studies may incorporate exploration into coming-out to parents because this seemed to be an important, and often negative experience for participants in our study and in other research (Aranda et al., 2015; Denes & Afifi, 2014). Additionally, although

our participants identified as Hispanic and Mexican American, our findings suggest that further research is needed in order to explore broader Latina cultural values and how they may influence lesbian women specifically (Espín, 2012). With more specific research, counseling strategies that honor the unique experiences of Latina lesbian women can be developed.

Implications for Counselors

Coming out. Due to the complex and continual nature of the coming-out process noted by participants in our study, counseling services and research in this area are needed. Counselors should be aware of how they may or may not be creating a safe space for clients to discuss their coming-out experiences. Counselors can create a safe environment by using language that affirms lesbian identity, rather than heteronormative language (e.g., husband and wife, mom and dad, etc.). While this language may help clients feel safe discussing same-sex attractions, some lesbian clients may not be ready to discuss their sexual orientation. For those who are ready to discuss their sexual orientation, our findings indicate that it may be critical to discuss their coming-out process in relation to how they first became aware of their sexual orientation, how they came out to parents/caregivers, how they came out to others, and how the coming-out process has impacted their self-awareness.

Identity labels and romantic relationships. Findings from our study and from previous research indicate that many women have had same- and opposite-sex relationships. However, these different relationships do not always indicate their sexual identity (Diamond, 2008; Mock & Eibach, 2012). Findings from our study indicated that participants preferred selecting identity labels, rather than having labels imposed upon them. Therefore, counselors should not assume that clients identify as lesbian because they have had, or are currently in, sexual relationships with women. Discussion about lesbian clients' preferred labels or their choice not to align with any label can be integral. Furthermore, to promote identity exploration, counselors can help clients reflect on how attractions may or may not have changed over time and the emotional factors of these attractions (Diamond, 2005).

Social and cultural factors. A vital facet of this study was the key roles that religion/spirituality, ethnicity, appearance, and generation played in participants' identity development and expression. Researchers have increased awareness about the complexity among these various identities by using an intersectionality framework, which recognizes the interactive relationships between sexuality and other marginalized identities (Collins, 2000; Shapiro et al., 2010). In fact, Cole (2009) recommended that psychological researchers use intersectionality in their research designs to expand awareness of multiple identities. Our findings support the need for studies about lesbians that incorporate an intersectionality framework as well.

Religion/spirituality. To provide supportive services for lesbian clients, we suggest that counselors be aware of affirming religious/spiritual resources. This incorporates being aware of affirming community resources and being aware of counseling models that facilitate dialogue about sexuality and religion (Hagen et al., 2011).

Ethnicity. In our study Hispanic and Mexican American participants discussed both positive and challenging aspects of Mexican culture in relation to lesbian sexual identity. These conflicting findings emphasize the need for counselors to avoid making assumptions about lesbian clients ethnic cultures and sexual identities. Rather, counselors should be open to letting clients take the lead in discussing, or not discussing, their ethnic cultures and the impact this may have had on their lesbian identities and identity expressions.

Appearance. Our findings emphasized that social (e.g., religion/spirituality, ethnicity) and cultural factors (e.g., geographic location) influenced how lesbians expressed their sexual and gender identities. Findings from our study also indicated that participants were concerned about making others uncomfortable and/or felt confined by society's expectations of appearance. As a result, we suggest that counselors are open to discussing sexual and gender identity expressions in counseling sessions and to helping lesbian clients process the various emotions related to their appearance.

Generation. Finally, as noted in this study and in other research, the "queer generation gap" (Garner, 2004, p. 181) highlights the unique experiences of LGBTQ individuals who were raised in varying cultural and political times. We recommend that counselors be aware of age specific resources, and also resources that facilitate cross-generational communication and support as a way of creating multifaceted mental health services for lesbian clients.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to fill a gap in the research through the use of narrative inquiry and the focus of identity and identity expression of lesbians, who are often neglected in research (Lee & Crawford, 2012). Study findings indicate that the coming-out process is extremely complex and incorporates self-acceptance of sexual orientation, coming-out to family, and increased self-awareness. Relationships with both men and women were important to participants' identities. Finally, religion/spirituality, ethnicity, and appearance emerged as critical factors that impacted lesbian identity and identity expression. This study has important implications for counselors who are seeking to gain insight about lesbian identity and expression and to provide affirming counseling services.

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