

Invisible Lesbians:
Latina Immigrant Lesbian Coming Out Experiences

By

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the influence of religion, culture and migration on the coming out process of Latina immigrant lesbians. The participants' stories intimate the difficulty Latina lesbians face escaping the silence imposed by a culture that overlays a cloak of invisibility on women in general and lesbians in particular. Subsumed herein is a challenge to lesbians in Miami-Dade County and elsewhere to visibly infiltrate the larger community, create programs and organizations to support lesbians of all ages and thereby end the enduring isolation experienced by Latina lesbians. The visibility of positive, successful lesbians holds a promise of role models for adolescents who consider suicide to escape familial and societal rejection.

This dissertation advocates the inclusion of lesbians, especially Latina lesbians, in research studies and literature with hopes that the information gathered will overcome disinformation and ignorance about homosexuality and assist in the development of psychological treatment alternatives to assist this underserved population.

Clinicians and practitioners are encouraged to appreciate that Latino lesbians manage multiple issues including homosexuality, bilingualism, and multiculturalism, in addition to individual dynamics. Conceivably this study can also foster an interest in cultivation of cultural sensitivity through examination of biases, homophobic attitudes and personal attitudes toward religions and cultures.

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INTRODUCTION

Acceptance of homosexuality is understandably difficult within a homoerophobic society. Self-acceptance arises as a major issue and coming out compounds an incredibly difficult acceptance process. “No matter how much fun we have, no matter how proud we feel, no matter how in love we may be, we all internalize the homophobia that surrounds us” (Loulan, 1987).

A literature review reveals that the studies and research considering homosexuality focuses almost exclusively on males. Lesbians represent a small fraction of units of analysis; and of those, a smaller percentage includes lesbians of Latin American decent, and less considers Latin American immigrants.

A study, reported by the American Journal of Orthopsychiatry (Vol. 71, No. 1) tested a structural equation model related to *outness* on 2,401 lesbian and bisexual women. Researchers reported that the more *out* lesbians were, the less psychological distress they reported. Awareness of other successful, safe, and positive lesbians is helpful for many lesbians, particularly Latinas, to garner support for breaking the silence, and being and expressing whom they are without fear.

This dissertation considers the coming out stories of sixteen Latina women who migrated to the United States from Argentina, Colombia, Chile, Cuba, Peru and Puerto Rico, seeking either a less judgmental society, or economic or political freedom, unaware that life in the United States would alter their perception of their sexual orientation.

As used in this dissertation, the terms Latin American and Hispanic indicate a person of Latin American descent, from the Spanish-speaking nations, either native-born or immigrant. The subjects frequently used the term Latina to refer to themselves as

women of Latin American descent. The term Latino, indicates either a male of Latin American descent or Latin Americans as a group.

There is a silence surrounding the achievements of Latina lesbians outside their own social circles. Regardless of demographics or nationality, this protective barrier of silence impedes awareness and utilization of the immense diversity, vitality and power within the immigrant lesbian community. These stories indicate the difficulty Latina lesbians face escaping the silence imposed by a culture that subscribes a cloak of invisibility to women in general and lesbians in particular.

In 1989, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) issued its *Report on the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide*, which found that "A majority of suicide attempts by homosexuals occur during their youth, and gay youth are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than other young people. [Gay youth] may comprise up to 30% of (the estimated 5,000) completed youth suicides annually."

Due to the lack of adult lesbian visibility, adolescent lesbians cannot identify with homosexual diversity and power. This connection is necessary for positive integration of self-identity, without which suicide becomes an option for some adolescents bombarded by the negative influences of a homophobic environment, family and culture.

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore three influences – religion, culture and migration – in the coming out process of Latina immigrant lesbians, and to assess the impact of these influences. This dissertation is also an attempt to overcome the lack of information and the silence surrounding the lives of Latin American immigrant lesbians.

This is a challenge to lesbians in Miami-Dade County and nationwide to visibly infiltrate the larger community, create programs and organizations to support lesbians of all ages and end the enduring isolation. This dissertation also advocates the inclusion of lesbians, especially the Latina lesbian, in research studies and literature, with hopes that

the information gathered will help in the development of psychological treatment alternatives to assist this underserved population.

CHAPTER 1: DEFINING THE PROBLEM

“Lesbians simply do not exist in society” (Swigonski, 1995). Within the Latin American *machista* culture, womens’ identities evolve within the framework of subordination to men, the dominant members of society. Hoagland (1988) theorized that all forms of oppression, internalized racism, internalized sexism, internalized heterosexism, and internalized homophobia, are defined in terms of a relationship to the dominant culture. However, lesbians are oppressed via erasure and denial of their experience by the dominant male culture.

According to Hoagland, lesbians are described as women who hate men, as a phase in a heterosexual woman’s life, as women who cannot get men, or as a man in a woman’s body. He concludes that lesbians are perceived as a deviant form of something else. The idea of a woman simply loving a woman is inconceivable within the dominant social construction, as it threatens the social order. The idea of a woman being loved by another woman, and capable of surviving without a man, usurps men’s access to women. Lesbians’ lives deny men access to certain females, which diminishes the flow of benefits (female care-giving) to them. Lesbianism is an assumption of power (Hoagland, 1988; Swigonski, 1995).

Lesbianism, as defined by Anzaldua (1987), is “an orientation of a woman’s life around women, women identification and a commitment to women as a political force capable of changing society. Lesbianism, as a sexual orientation, invites the redefinition of relationship between women. Lesbianism is a cognitive posture, invites divergent thinking, the movement away from set patterns and goals, toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes” (p. 79).

Heterosexism is a political force as well as a sexual preference (Bunch, 1978).
“Heterosexism is the institutionalized and ideological domination of heterosexuality.
Heterosexism requires a pattern of relationships in which men dominate women.
Heterosexism conditions cognition based on either/or dualities that support patterns of
domination and subordination” (Swigonski, 1995). Lesbianism is also a political force.

Coming out is defined in the Encyclopedia of Homosexuality as “the cultural and
psychological process by which persons relate to a particular model of homosexuality by
internalizing a sense of identity as homosexual or lesbian” (Dynes 1990, p. 251).

Possibly the most complete description of this process is one by Gary J.
McDonald (1982), “...as a development process through which gay persons become
aware of their affection and sexual preferences, and choose to integrate this knowledge
into their personal and social lives, coming out involves adopting a non-traditional
identity, restructuring one’s self concept, reorganizing one’s personal sense of history,
and altering one’s relation with others and with society...all of which reflects a complex
series of cognitive and affective transformations as well as changes in behavior” (p. 48).

The mere existence of a coming out process is usually attributed to a homophobic
environment in which one must take a stance against the perceived social consensus in
order to assert one’s own preferences, attractions, feelings and inclinations (Troiden,
1979). It follows that full social acceptance of homosexuality as a natural variation of a
sexual theme would end the tremendous emotional difficulties, as well as the sense of
fateful significance that coming out engenders.

Coming out is a life-long process of accepting and affirming a lesbian identity and
choosing how open to be about it. Cass (1979) concluded that “individuals who are
homosexual or lesbians, to varying degrees and in various ways, share similar stages of
identity development” (p. 223). Most coming out models propose a linear series of

developmental stages based on a particular theoretical perspective. Similar to the structure of Erickson, Sullivan and Piaget regarding the psychosocial stages of development, coming out theorists suggest stages of development in the coming out process of homosexuals.

These theorists agree that each stage of development must be completed or resolved before subsequent stages can be completed. Cass (1979) proposes six stages: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride and identity synthesis (p. 222); Troiden (1979) proposes four stages: sensitization, signification-disorientation/dissociation, coming out and commitment (p. 366); and Coleman (1982) proposes five stages: pre coming out, coming out, exploration, first relationship, integration (p. 31). These theorists generally characterize the coming out process as a series of milestone events whereby a person moves from a point of complete concealment of homosexuality to one of self-recognition or external proclamation of a homosexual identity.

According to Cass (1979), individuals disclose their homosexuality according to a hierarchical pattern of stages or milestones. Individuals tend to come out to (1) themselves (2) other lesbians, (3) gay men, (4) non-gay men, (5) other friends, (6) siblings, (7) parents, (8) extended family, (9) co-workers, and finally (10) the community.

The milestones are of great significance to each individual. Many have vivid memories of events surrounding their coming out. Many books, movies and documentaries considering the stages of coming out clearly demonstrate the pain, indecision, violence, isolation and alienation that often accompany the process of coming out (Carl, 1990).

For many however, the coming out process is not painful. Education, supportive friends and family, youth and an exclusively same-sex sexual history have been cited as

facilitating factors in a positive coming out process. Unfortunately, few if any of these experiences have been systematically investigated (Hoagland, 1992).

In addition to coming out, the Latin American family structure acts as an additional impediment to Latino homosexuals' self-acceptance. Traditionally, the Latino family is viewed as an economic unit and is the insurance against disability due to illness or injury of any of its members (Murray, 1987). *La familia* is the primary economic and psychological support, thus it becomes difficult for any member to leave before marriage. This family dynamic embraces Roman Catholic doctrines encouraging procreation and strongly opposing homosexuality. These factors combine to create a situation where revelations of one's homosexuality can be the basis for expulsion from the home and family. Therefore, for Latina lesbians, coming out becomes an act of extreme courage in the face of potential isolation.

CHAPTER 2: HISTORICAL PERCEPTION AND LEGAL TREATMENT OF HOMOSEXUALITY

Historically homosexual legal restrictions have been extremely punitive. From the beginnings of our Judeo-Christian civilization, the antipathy of the heterosexual majority toward homosexual behavior has manifested and been rationalized in countless ways.

Early History:

Early Jews were preoccupied with their survival, determined to procreate as a means of ethnic survival, leading them to denounce homosexuality in the most severe terms (McNeill, 1976). Their attitudes were reflected in Leviticus 20:13, which states, “If a man also lies with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.”

The story of Lot also reveals the attitude of Judaism toward homosexuality. Lot, who lived near the gate of Sodom, provided a night’s shelter to two male angels. Citizens of Sodom, who wanted to have homosexual relations with the visitors, came to Lot’s house and asked for the guests. This request was so abhorrent, and women so degraded, that Lot offered his virgin daughters to the Sodomites rather than hand over the two male visitors. When the Sodomites tried to break down Lot’s door, the angels blinded them. The next day the angels let Lot leave the city with his family. “Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven and he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground” (Genesis 19:24,25).

The Jewish prohibition against homosexuality was introduced into Christianity by Saint Paul in his *Epistle to the Romans*, and Saint Thomas in *The Summa Theologica*. These prohibitions have come down to us through both Roman law and English

ecclesiastical and civil law. The early Christian church was convinced that individuals engaging in homosexual acts would bring about divine retribution against the whole society. Such acts were believed to be “against nature” and considered mortal sins for which the only remedy was confession, penance, and sometimes a sentence of death (Bell, 1978).

England and the Colonies:

In the late thirteenth-century, *Fleta*, a manual of law was published along with a condemnation of dealings with Jews. This is the first known legal writing in England regarding sodomy. *Fleta* recommended that sodomites be buried alive, burned alive or otherwise put to death, but apparently was never enforced. Instead, ecclesiastical courts prosecuted the crime. Charges of homosexuality were part of the general smear campaign employed by the Inquisition against its enemies and the term buggery, later considered sodomy, originated from the word for Bulgaria, where targeted heretical groups resided.

Originally, sodomy referred to anal intercourse between same-sex or opposite sex humans, or sexual intercourse between a human and an animal of the opposite sex. Biological ignorance during medieval times led to the supposition that bestiality would lead to conception of half-human/half-beast. Additionally, human sodomy was thought to be a pleasure of the Devil with witches (Evans, 1978). In this atmosphere of ignorance and fear of the supernatural, harsh sentencing was deemed necessary for human survival.

In 1534, during the reign of Henry VIII, church laws were absorbed into English Civil law, creating a felony punishable by death for “[commission of] the detestable and abominable vice of buggery with mankind or beast.” In 1861, this death penalty was reduced to a maximum sentence of life imprisonment.

The American colonies of England were created more than four decades after the Elizabethan statute reestablishing buggery as a temporal crime. Virginia had the first written prohibition against sodomy, enacted in 1610. It is noteworthy that this law was repealed after only eight years and no other colony had a written law against sodomy until Plymouth in 1636. With the Puritans came both English law and biblical precepts to America. In the famous *Body of Liberties* (1641), the words of Leviticus 20:13 were incorporated, thus making homosexuality a capital offense. Over the next hundred years, the mandate of execution very slowly disappeared from colony laws.

The only statute specifically addressing sexual relations between women was one from New Haven Colony, adopted in 1656, mandating a death sentence for violators. However, there is no known prosecution under this law.

This punitive view of homosexuality persisted for more than nineteen centuries until it was replaced, at least in some quarters, by medical authorities that equated homosexuality with disease. This more humane view contended that punishment of homosexual behavior should be supplanted by medical treatment, that homosexuals would be cured of their aberration and find their place among the normal heterosexual majority. In this evolution, homosexuality was viewed as pathological behavior (Bell, 1978).

Social Activism and Mental Health:

Beginning in the later half of the Nineteenth Century, medical literature began reporting loneliness or depression in individuals experiencing feelings or attraction for members of the same sex. In that unenlightened era, medical science concluded that same-sex attraction was *erotomania*, a form of mental illness. Although some doctors criticized criminalization of consensual sodomy, members of the legislature did not agree. These doctors argued that mental illness should be treated, not criminalized (Shaw, 1883); Kiernan, (1884); Lydston, (1889); Hughes, (1893).

In reaction to the diminished legal and social status of homosexuals and the mental health perception of homosexuality as pathological, a militant and radical sociopolitical movement developed; seeking recognition of homosexuality as normal and proclaiming that “gay is good.”

The origins of lesbian political history are inextricably intertwined with those of the modern “gay rights movement.” In 1969 outside Stonewall, a gay bar in Greenwich Village, New York, homosexuals rioted in the streets, protesting police harassment of gays. Many view this as the explosive origin of gay liberation, however, prior events had set a course to inevitable public revolt.

According to several authors, this movement originated with the birth of the Mattachine Society, founded in Los Angeles, California in 1950 by former Communist party member, Harry Hay. The Society was named for the Mattachines, a French medieval musical masque troupe who traveled from village to village, advocating social justice in ballads and dramas. *Matachin* or *matachine*, is derived from the Arabic, *mutawajjihin*, which relates to masking oneself. The name symbolizes that gays were a masked people, unknown and anonymous.

In 1951 the Mattachine Society began sponsoring discussion groups to provide lesbians and gay men an opportunity to share openly, for the first time, their feelings and experiences. These meetings between 1950 and 1953 were emotional and cathartic. Attendance snowballed and soon discussion groups were meeting throughout California. Mattachine groups began to sponsor social events, fundraisers, newsletters, and publications and, in April 1951, adopted a Statement of Missions and Purposes. This encompassing vision of gay liberation called for 1) a grassroots movement of gay people to challenge anti-gay discrimination and 2) building a positive homosexual community and culture. “Mattachine holds it possible and desirable that a highly ethical homosexual culture emerge, as a consequence of its work, paralleling the emerging cultures of our fellow-minorities . . . the Negro, Mexican, and Jewish peoples.” (Meeker, 2001; Duberman, 1993; D’Emilio, 1983).

This burgeoning gay liberation movement formed alliances with other oppressed groups to support humanitarian and political causes. The principal focus was the rights of individuals to conduct their lives without interference, provided there is no infringement on the rights of others.

As a part of this effort, gay liberation advocates lent significant support to a drive to omit homosexuality from the Diagnostic System Manual-II (DSM-II), and thereby formally recognize homosexuality as a “normal variant” of sexual behavior rather than a disorder or illness. On February 8, 1973, a hearing was held before the Nomenclature Committee of the American Psychiatric Association. Despite vehement protests by renowned psychiatrists who viewed homosexuality as pathological, by 1974 homosexuality had been dropped from the DSM-II. Other professional groups, including the American Psychological Association and the Association of Advancement of Behavior Therapy have since moved in similar directions.

Civil libertarians had altered the legal status of homosexuals prior to the gay liberation movement gaining momentum or the medical community's acknowledgment of their normalcy. Acting on the premise that the state has no right to legislate the private sexual activities of consenting adults, in 1954 the House of Lords in England commissioned a study of homosexuality. The outcome, known as the *Wolfenden Report*, strongly favored repealing England's prohibitions against homosexual acts. In 1967, more than ten years later, those recommendations resulted in parliamentary repeal of century old statutes. In 1955 the American Law Institute made recommendations similar to the *Wolfenden Report*. In 1961 Illinois became the first state to abolish laws against sodomy.

Currently four states have criminal laws targeting same-sex acts and nine states have laws prohibiting sodomy between either same-sex or opposite-sex partners. In three other states (Massachusetts, Michigan and Missouri) the status of existing sodomy statutes is unclear. In Florida, sodomy is currently punishable by sixty-day incarceration and a \$500 fine.

Latin America:

Specifically regarding Latin Americans, the northwest coast of South America was notorious for "shameless and open sodomy" according to the chronicles of the Inca and Spanish conquests of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth centuries, respectively (Cieza, 1959). In addition to the chronicles, archeological excavations have produced evidence of male and female homosexuality, particularly Mochicha ceramics in Peru (Zarate, 1968). South of what was the end of the Incan empire, social third gender, gender-crossing homosexual shamans have been reported among the Araucarias. But, according to Cieza de Leon (1959), General Auqui Taut, burned alive any person against whom

there was even circumstantial evidence of sodomy, and threatened to burn down entire towns if any citizen engaged in sodomy.

Overall, very little data exists about other Latin American culture's views of homosexuality because these societies did not survive for Twentieth century fieldwork. None of the available literature discusses lesbianism. The multicultural history of abuse of women, validation of that abuse, coupled with the fact that lesbianism is rarely acknowledged in Hispanic society (Crapotta, 1998), makes it extremely difficult for Hispanic lesbians to proudly embrace their history and emerge from their silence.

Legal Treatment of Lesbianism:

The development of laws specifically regarding sexual relations between two women has an interesting history.

The 1974 *Journal of Homosexuality* reports that, unlike anal intercourse, interfemoral intercourse, mutual masturbation and fellatio were not punishable by death in the English Navy. There are only four reported legal cases involving fellatio in the United States prior to 1900, but none involving cunnilingus. In each case the conviction was overturned because the crime alleged did not fit the historical definition of sodomy (Prindle v. State, 21 S.W. 360 (Texas, 1893); People v. Boyle, 48 P. 800 (California, 1897); Commonwealth v. Smith, 14 Luz.L.R. 362 (1885); Honselman v. People, 48 N.E. 304 (Illinois, 1897).

In Plymouth Colony, two women were convicted of unspecified "lewd behavior upon a bed." One was required to make a public acknowledgment of her "unchaste behavior" but the other received no penalty. In Massachusetts Bay Colony a maid was flogged, in part because of "unseemly practices betwixt her and another maid." In 1656, a statute was adopted specifically addressing sexual relations between women, and mandating a death sentence for violations. However, there is no known prosecution

under this law. Largely, sex between women has been viewed as an oxymoron. In a Scottish case from 1811, the House of Lords found that as to the charge of cunnilingus between two women, “the crime alleged has no existence” (Katz, 1975).

Similarly, U.S. courts have ruled that without a penis, sodomy is impossible (Foster, et al. v. State, 1 Ohio C.C. 467 (Ohio, 1996); Ex Parte Benites, 140 P. 636 (Nevada, 1914), thereby precluding criminal penalties for lesbians. These laws were repeatedly deemed applicable only to two men or a man and a woman.

No published cunnilingus cases appeared until a 1913 case, decided almost thirty years after the first reported fellatio case. Interestingly, Illinois was the site of both initial judicial considerations of fellatio and cunnilingus as sodomy. In the later case, the Illinois court determined that cunnilingus did not constitute a crime against nature. During the same year, Supreme Courts in Missouri and Louisiana also overturned lower court rulings that cunnilingus violated the States’ sodomy laws. The Missouri court found that sexual activity required a penis and sexual intercourse could not be accomplished orally.

The first successful cunnilingus conviction was in a 1917 North Dakota case. In that state the sodomy law had been expanded to include any person who “carnally knows” another person “by or with the mouth.” Without this specific statutory language, Courts have been unwilling to uphold sodomy convictions based on cunnilingus.

In 1921, English Parliament refused to enact a law prohibiting “gross indecency between females” on the grounds that “hardly any women knew of such a thing” (Weeks, 1977).

In the 1920s, lesbianism gained public awareness via a series of novels and plays. The New York legislature reacted by banning plays containing sex perversion themes.

Similarly, Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* was prosecuted for obscenity in England and New York (Foster, 1956).

In the first published case after this increase in public awareness of lesbianism, the courts decided very differently. In 1935 the Oklahoma Supreme Court became the first U.S. Court to rule that cunnilingus was a "crime against nature," without providing any legal analysis for this conclusion. Before widespread public knowledge of lesbianism, cunnilingus had never been considered within the category of crimes against nature.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE SUMMARY

As previously discussed, homosexual males have been the main focus of literature and research considering homosexuality. Lately some attention has been directed toward lesbians, thanks to the activism of heterosexual women and lesbians seeking to challenge a fundamental societal doctrine; that women exist to serve men. From this viewpoint, lesbian existence is a sacrilege (Johnson, 1991).

A significant number of studies exist regarding issues of identity development in ethnic minority gays and lesbians; or Asian American gay men and lesbians (Chan, 1989; Liu & Chang; Wooden, Kawasaki & Mayeda, 1983); for African-American gay men (Icard, 1986, Loiacano, 1989); for Latina lesbians (Espin, 1987); and for gay Latinos/Latinas (Morales, 1992; Rodriguez, 1996). The common theme in these studies is the choice a gay/lesbian person feels he/she must make of one aspect of identity over another, resulting in significant levels of confusion, anxiety and depression.

As outlined previously, theorists have developed a body of research regarding identity formation. Cass (1979) proposes six stages: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis (p. 222). Cass's has also identified that lesbians in Australia come out to (1) themselves, (2) to other lesbians, (3) to gay men, (4) to non-gay men, (5) to other friends, (6) to their parents, (7) to siblings, (8) to extended family, (9) to co-workers and lastly (10) to the community (pp. 230). Troiden (1979) proposes four stages: sensitization, signification-disorientation/dissociation, coming out and commitment (p. 366); and Coleman (1982) proposes five stages: pre coming out, coming out, exploration, first relationship, integration (p. 31). Similarly Morales (1990) presented five "states" experienced by gays/lesbians of color: denial of conflicts, bisexual versus gay/lesbian, conflicts in

allegiances, establishing priorities in allegiances, and integrating the various communities.

Literature regarding cultural prescribed gender roles revealed that gender roles are inextricably intertwined with sexuality. Boyking (1996) refers to what he calls the “anti-lesbian strand of homophobia.” Lesbians threaten the social structure of the family because they are not serving in traditional procreative roles. Studies have exposed the direct relationship between gender roles and cultural identification (Greene, 1994; Morales 1996). Therefore, coming out is viewed as a rejection of the culture. The homophobic notion that gays/lesbians are inferior and alien is the end result of these conflicts (Rodriguez, 1998).

It is important to assess the degree to which religious/spiritual upbringing has affected sense of identity. After reviewing the literature, it is obvious that Catholicism remains a strong influence within the Latino culture (Rodriguez, 1998). The literature also indicates that religion is a major influence in homophobic feelings. Lesbian and gay people of color reported “spirituality-faith in god, Goddess, Higher power – is what buoyed them through the hardships of life” (Boykin, 1996; Green, 1994; Rodriguez, 1996).

Reporting on previous research, Rodriguez noted, “socializing in the gay Latino community was one of the main support systems that helped participants deal with the “missing” or overlooked cultural parts of themselves” (1996). Morales (1996) documented the existence of local, state and national Latino gay men’s organizations “which foster further social connections and thus reduce isolation and alienation associated with homosexuality” (Rodriguez, 1998).

Adrienne Rich in her 1980 article, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” identifies “the Great Silence...in history and culture” that surrounds “women

and particularly lesbian existence.” Both lesbians and the larger society suffer due to this silence. Although much has been accomplished over the years and lesbians today have more resources and support, there is much to be done nationally, as well as internationally, for homosexuals and lesbians around the world. Until lesbians are empowered by virtue of being who they are, there will not be a true sense of freedom and equality. This premise informed and inspired the researcher in pursuing this topic.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY/DESIGN

A non-experimental survey research design was used in this study. The following steps were followed: (1) a four-section questionnaire was constructed; (2) the sample selection was made through the snowball non-probability sampling technique. This sampling technique was chosen due to the difficulty in locating members of the immigrant Latina lesbian population; (3) data was collected through interviewing and posing survey questions to ascertain if religion, culture and migration to the U.S. had influenced the coming out experience. Some qualitative analysis was drawn from the responses given.

Instrumentation:

The research instrument was a four-part questionnaire. The first part captured demographic data. Respondents were asked to identify their country of origin, age, age of arrival in the U.S., level of education, current profession, income level, present and past religious affiliation.

The second part of the questionnaire related to the subjects disclosure of their homosexuality, and was based on Cass' hierarchical stages or milestones in the coming out process. According to Cass (1979) individuals disclose their homosexuality according to a predictable pattern. Individuals tend to self-identify as homosexual or come out to themselves and other homosexuals first, then to their immediate and extended families, and finally to the workplace and the community at large. In this section of the survey, subjects were asked to identify groups of people to whom they have come out or identified themselves as homosexual.

The third section asks subjects to rate the influences of religion, culture and living in the U.S. on their coming out experiences.

The fourth section captures the respondents' personal coming out stories (see Appendix A).

Sample:

Due to the difficulty in locating Latin American immigrant lesbians, the snowball sampling technique was used. This procedure was implemented by collecting data from one Latina immigrant lesbian and asking that person to identify other members of this group whom she knew. The term snowball refers to the process of accumulation as each located subject suggests other subjects (Rubbin & Babbie, 1997). The participants in this study consisted of a convenience sample of sixteen non-heterosexual women who identified themselves as lesbians. All of the participants were Latin American immigrant residents of Miami-Dade County. Ten percent were born in Argentina, 10% were born in Peru, 30% were born in Colombia, and 50% in Cuba. Marital status was not measured since some married women are also lesbians (Loulan, 1986). Age was not limited in this study since sexual orientation and self-disclosure is generally considered age related. The respondents' ages ranged between 32 and 49.

Data Collection Method:

Data was collected from Latin American lesbians utilizing the snowball technique. The interviewer administered the questionnaire in face-to-face individual encounters, reading the items to respondents and recording the answers. Subjects were met individually in a mutually convenient and comfortable setting. The role of the interviewer was to be a neutral medium through which questions and answers were transmitted. The interviewer followed the general rules for interviewing (Rubin, 1997) which require familiarity with the questionnaire, following the question wording and order exactly in each interview and recording responses precisely as given (p. 369). The approximate amount of time needed to complete the first three sections was five to ten

minutes. Responses to the fourth section required thirty minutes to one hour. The respondents placed the completed survey in a large envelope with other completed surveys to ensure anonymity.

Although the survey was anonymous, curiously some subjects insisted on providing their names. Forty percent found it important to disclose their name as part of their coming out process, while 30% preferred not to give their names. Ten percent refused to give their names and 20% did not find either giving or withholding their name important.

Several steps were taken to enhance cultural sensitivity in the interviewing process. The interviewer was of the same ethnicity as the respondents and also bilingual. The surveys were conducted in Spanish or English, depending upon the subjects' preference. The importance and power of words and language were considered in administering the survey. Several authors have noted that frequently bilingual clients will split-off verbalized experiences from emotional experiences depending upon which language is used. Bilingual people may spontaneously switch to their primary language to better express an experience. Sometimes they choose to speak in the secondary language to avoid the stress provoked by communicating emotionally charged material (Atkinson, Morten, and Sue, 1989; Falicov, 1982; Pares-Avila and Montano-Lopez, 1994). It was noted that subjects used the word gay instead of lesbiana (lesbian), or switched to English (the second language) when speaking about their sexuality. This is consistent with Espin's (1994) research with Latina lesbian immigrants and Chan's (1996) research with East Asian lesbians and gay men. Chan noted that English provides a safe, emotional distance when discussing issues of sexuality that are not culturally sanctioned.

Lastly, questions were formulated in a vocabulary that all respondents were able to understand and the same questionnaire was used with all respondents.

CHAPTER 5: DATA/SUMMARY/FINDINGS

Section One:

The first section of the questionnaire solicits geographic information. The charts below provide information for all sixteen subjects. As shown on Figure 1, all participants come from Spanish-speaking Countries. Seven percent hail from Argentina, 7% from Peru, 7% from Puerto Rico, 14% from Chile, 26% from Colombia and 39% from Cuba.

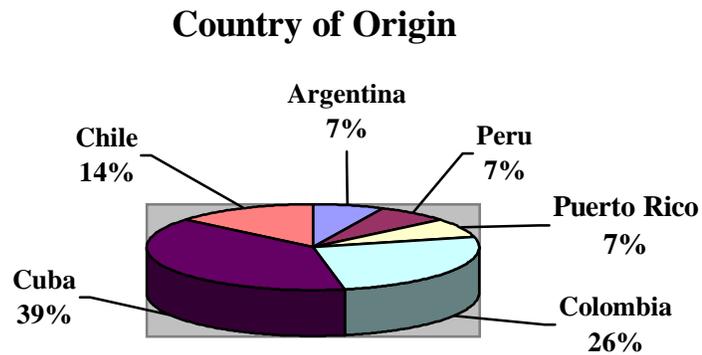


Fig. 1

Figure 2 presents the age of the participants at the time of the interview. A small number of participants (8%) were between the ages of 21-30. The remaining subjects were equally divided, forty-six percent each, between the ages of 31-40, and 41-50.

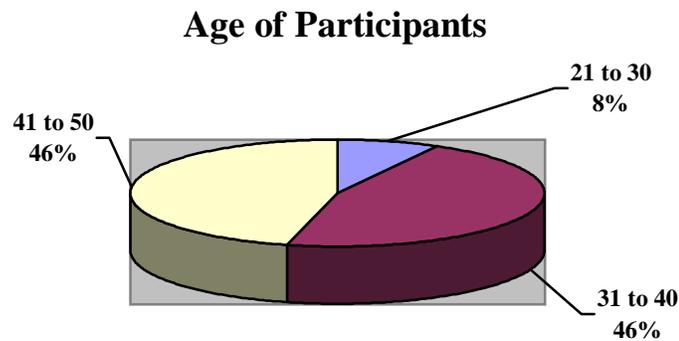


Fig. 2

Figure 3 illustrates that a majority of the women (53%) migrated between the ages of 11 and 20, during their adolescence. A small number (7%), migrated between the ages of 31 and 40, during their middle adulthood, while 14% migrated during childhood. The remaining participants (26%) migrated during their early adulthood, between the ages of 21 and 30.

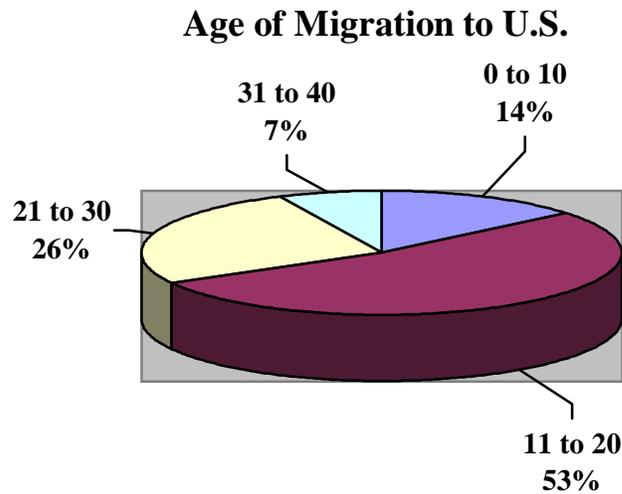


Fig. 3

Figure 4 presents the education levels of the participants. Two thirds of the participants hold a college degree or have completed a postgraduate education. Forty-six percent have a Bachelor's degree, 7% received a Master's degree and 14% hold a Doctorate degree. The remainder (14%) had completed only high school, while 19% have some college education or vocational training.

Education Levels

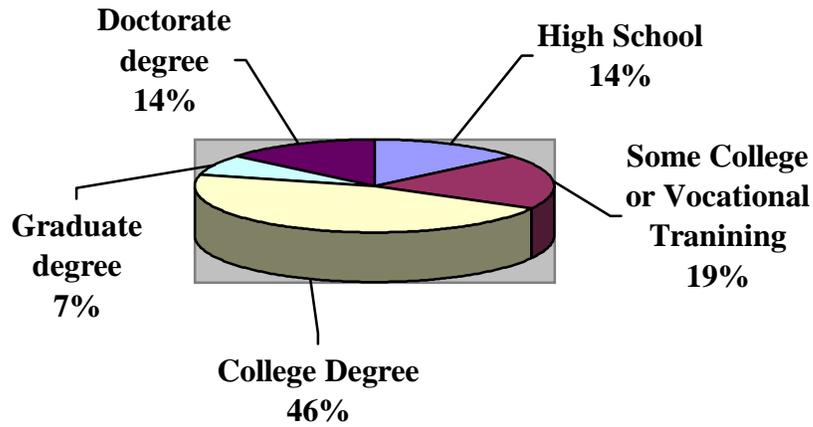


Fig. 4

Figure 5 shows the income levels of the participants. Sixty percent of the participants fall within the \$41,000 to \$60,000 income bracket. Twenty-six percent earn between \$21,000 and \$40,000 per year. The remaining interviewees (14%) earn more than \$60,000 per year.

Income Levels

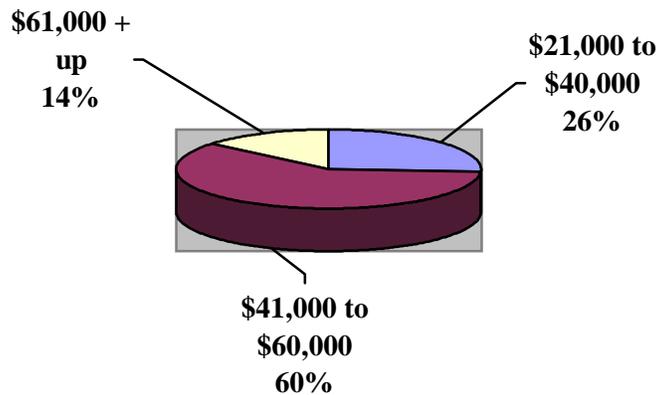


Fig. 5

All of the respondents were raised Roman Catholic, but, as illustrated in Figure 6, this religious affiliation changed for an overwhelming majority of the women (87%).

However, 13% of the participants continue to practice Catholicism. This indicates that, regardless of the influence of religion on coming out, presently it is not possible for a significant majority of the participants to reconcile Roman Catholicism and lesbianism. Of those who altered their religious practices, 33% identify themselves as non-denominational; 20% as “being spiritual, having a connection with God without any intermediates;” 7% are “modified Catholics;” 14% consider themselves non-denominational Christians; and the remaining 13% profess no religious affiliation.

Religious Affiliation

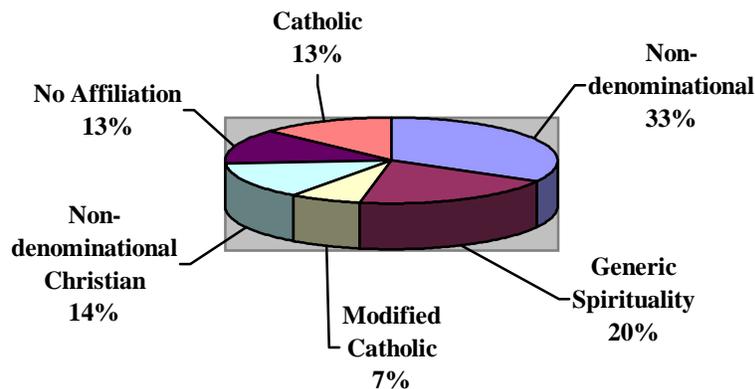


Fig. 6

Section Two:

Cass’ ten-step hierarchical milestones of coming out were utilized in this section of the questionnaire. As suggested by Cass’ model, all of the respondents came out to themselves first and 80% came out to other lesbians second. However, only these portions of the results mirror Cass’ initial hierarchical stages of coming out (1979).

In the Cass model, lesbianism was disclosed in the following order: 1st – self, 2nd other lesbians, 3rd - gay men, 4th - non-gay men, 5th - other friends, 6th - siblings, 7th - parents, 8th - extended family, 9th - co-workers, and finally, 10th - the community. Our findings differed significantly from this model.

Although 86% of the participants came out to gay men, only 40% did so as the third group, after coming out to other lesbians. Only 20% of the women disclosed their sexuality to non-gay men as the fourth group. However, 67% reported coming out to a non-gay man at some point. Seventy-three percent (73%) of the participants came out to other friends, however, of that group only 40% reported doing so fifth, after coming out to non-gay men.

Interestingly, the participants came out to their parents much earlier than the sixth group outlined in Cass' model. A large percentage (74%) of the participants came out to their parents after themselves (2nd) and before other friends. In this group, only 23% have not yet come out to their parents. This indicates the enduring importance of *la familia* after migration.

Seventy-three percent (73%) of the participants have come out to their siblings. However, only 7% did so 7th, after their parents, while 53% came out to siblings after other lesbians, and before their parents. Extended family represented the 8th group for 14% of the participants. Sixty-seven percent (67%) have come out to their extended families at some point in the process.

Eighty percent (80%) of the participants have come out to their co-workers, yet only 7% of the participants did so as the 9th group. As to the community, 80% of the respondents have come out to some of members of the community, but only 7% did so 10th, after they came out to co-workers.

It is important to note that 80% of the respondents claimed it was not important for them to come out. This could be attributed to the fact that “the United States does not provide a warm welcome for lesbian and gay men” (Espin, 1999), or that many lesbians “...are frequently involved in services and advocacy for their communities...[and] feel constrained [to come out] for fear of being ‘discovered’ and rejected (Espin, 1999).

Section Three:

Sixty-seven percent (67%) of the respondents felt that their religious upbringing influenced their coming out process. Twenty percent (20%) said that their religion made them feel guilty, 47% felt not accepted or loved by God, 27% thought they were living in a sin punishable by God and 34% felt unworthy, ostracized and invisible. Thirteen percent (13%) of the respondents still do not feel at peace with God.

One of the respondents chose to become a rebel as a way of overcoming the guilt that the religion imposed on her for having feelings for another woman. This supports Rodriguez' (1997) findings that Catholicism remains a strong influence within the Latino culture and a major influence in homophobic feelings.

Eighty percent (80%) of the participants felt that their Latin American culture has influenced their coming out process. Fifty-five percent (55%) said that the Latino culture is homophobic, judgmental of homosexuals and fails to acknowledge lesbianism. All of the respondents declared that coming out in the Latino culture is very difficult. Twenty – three percent (23%) said that lesbians are usually viewed as “two friends living together.” Twenty-seven percent (27%) of the respondents also consider the Latin American culture “heterosexist” and “machista,” agreeing that sex in the Latin American culture is considered a taboo and sexual orientation is not a usual topic of conversation. One of the respondents observed that in her country of origin, homosexuals are persecuted by the government and when identified, are blackmailed; therefore, homosexuals protect their liberty by hiding from the government and forming very covert social groups. Many respondents reported hearing abusive or degrading comments from family members and peers about homosexuals at different stages of their lives. Respondents consistently observed that Latin American cultures embody gender roles.

Eighty seven percent (87%) of the participants stated that living in the U.S. influenced their coming out. All of the respondents acknowledged having more rights and ability to experience their lesbianism in a more liberated environment within the United States. Twenty-seven percent (27%) of the respondents came to the U.S. specifically because they were unable to cohabitate with their partners in their country of origin. Sixty percent (60%) reported that living in the U.S., away from their families, allowed them to make contact with other gays, thereby easing their coming out process.

Section Three:

All of the participants provided a personal coming out story. Each revealed memorable events associated with the ongoing coming out process. Every respondent acknowledged having difficulty coming out at various points in their lives.

It became apparent during the interview process that 80% of the participants had never asked these questions of themselves, nor discussed the topics with anyone. These observations support the notion that Latina lesbians live in silence. It is evident that this silence is due to some form of oppression, internalized homophobia, or internalized sexism, derived from the dominant male culture.

Interestingly, 67% of the participants had not considered lesbianism until their first sexual encounter with another woman and did not come out as lesbians until after this experience. Moreover, they did not question their newly discovered sexual orientation and decided not to pursue heterosexual relationships in the future.

Our respondents coming out stories paralleled Espin's findings, wherein a predictable pattern of contradictions and paradoxes in the process of acculturation and coming-out was found. Initially, self-definition is not conscious, and awareness of ethnicity and sexual orientation progresses as growth and development continue. Latina immigrant lesbians tend to pass through a period in which they internalize society's

views of ethnic groups and sexual orientation. Later, some become active in political and community activities and may go through a militant phase in which they come to understand the nature of racism, heterosexism, and oppression more deeply. Eventually, if identity development proceeds positively, they are able to appreciate and critically analyze their cultural heritage, American society, and the lesbian communities in which they are immersed (Espin 1999, pp. 158-159).

Chapter 6: Practice Implications and Conclusions

Further research is needed to address the issues that surfaced during the interviews and discussion around the lack of importance given to disclosure of sexual orientation. So long as Latina lesbians do not value themselves and their families of choice and integrate awareness that it is natural to be lesbian, internalization and self-perpetuation of homophobic feelings, attitudes and behaviors from society will persist.

The social work profession has always defined its basic role as a mediator and defender of the oppressed, the poor, the racially abused, and also as a protector against the exploitation of children, workers and women (Goodman, 1977). It is pivotal for Latino immigrant gays and lesbians to be considered a segment of the population who suffer both self imposed and societal discrimination and need guidance.

It is important for private practitioners and clinicians to understand the unique characteristics of the Latino population so that they may provide services and treatment sensitive to and appropriate for this minority group. To be effective clinicians, practitioners can cultivate cultural sensitivity by thoroughly examining their own biases regarding homophobic attitudes, and their own behaviors and attitudes regarding religion and culture. They should also understand that even though there are similar patterns in the coming out process of lesbians, the coming out process is different for each woman.

The interviewees have demonstrated resiliency despite the intense racism, discrimination and homophobia within the Latin American culture. As a group they have managed to raise and nurture gifted and productive children, succeed in the pursuit of higher education and within the economic marketplace. They have a highly developed sense of community, and care deeply for the very same community that rejects and discriminates against them.

It is important in this moment in human history, that all human beings assist each other to achieve their highest potential. In this advanced, technological society, differences can be celebrated and utilized, rather than employed as agents of discrimination and isolation.

“Our refusal to recognize, accept, and celebrate our differences keeps us apart” (Molina, 1990). “We have started to recognize our differences. We have named them. We have analyzed their constructions. However, we have a harder time accepting and celebrating them. We live in a society where sameness is venerated as the most desirable quality” (Molina, 1990, pp. 333).

With the assistance of the psychological community, society at large can begin to focus on the humanity within each of us, finding comfort in that *sameness*, while recognizing and accepting that there are also differences that serve to enhance the experience we share.

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