

I. 'Out' standing in Her Field: Looking Back at
Celia Kitzinger's *The Social Construction of Lesbianism*

Esther D. ROTHBLUM

It is always a pleasure reading *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* (1987), though each time I need several strong cups of tea before I can concentrate on Q-methodology. Perhaps it is the letter Q, which so shortly thereafter symbolized the new Queer Theory, that makes me queasy.

This book was written after the mental health professions had mostly de-pathologized homosexuality, including lesbianism. *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* was published during a time when psychology texts emphasized that lesbians and gay men were 'just like everyone else', a concept that Kitzinger described as 'gay affirmative'. I can remember when a popular US psychology-of-women textbook depicted a young Caucasian woman with long, brown hair, and the caption 'Lesbians too, like heterosexual women, can have meaningful relationships'. I used to rephrase this as 'Lesbians too, like heterosexual women, can have long hair', because at that time most lesbians I knew had cut their hair very short. In an attempt to make lesbianism palatable to US university students, this textbook had created a fictional lesbian who was not representative of the lesbian communities of the time. In her book, Kitzinger argued that the gay affirmative view of lesbianism was a liberal development just as socially constructed as the previous pathological perspective.

Kitzinger then proceeded to do what served as a model for later lesbian researchers. She talked with lesbians about what it meant to be a lesbian, and presented the resulting themes in their own words. The research participants expressed delight in being able to talk about their lives, foreshadowing the enormous interest there has been in the lesbian communities about research conducted by lesbians about our unique lives. She then utilized Q-methodology (I'll spare you the technical description), which essentially creates themes within each

woman rather than within topic areas. Rather than lose the voices of individual women among the data, as is the case in most quantitative methods used by social scientists, in Q-methodology 'a factor defined by only one person may, therefore, be sufficiently distinctive to be interpretable by the researcher' (p. 86). Kitzinger interviewed 120 lesbians, using friends of friends, and found seven themes or factors. For example, Factor I emphasized the personal fulfillment of being a lesbian. Women who endorsed Factor II felt that being lesbian was mostly a matter of whom one fell in love with. The third group thought that being lesbian was only a small part of their identity, and wanted to be sure that the world knew them in terms of their other identities. The fourth group had a radical feminist perspective, viewing their lesbianism as originating via feminism and as a political choice. And so on. Kitzinger conducted a similar Q-methodology for lesbian politics, and one for attitudes held about lesbians by lesbians and non-lesbians.

Kitzinger's work heralded in an era of research about lesbians by lesbian researchers. At first, these were mostly lesbian graduate students or lesbian clinicians conducting research on a shoestring, given the lack of tenured positions or grant funding for openly identified lesbians. Where once researchers had focused on whether lesbian mothers were 'normal' and whether their children grew up playing with toys appropriate for their gender, now lesbians studied lesbian mothers with a focus on when and how lesbians should come out to children, or what it meant to be a lesbian step-parent. Instead of regarding lesbianism as an immature stage in adult development, lesbian researchers looked at developmental milestones in the coming out process. Lesbians were surveyed in bars, at gay pride marches, or picked up questionnaires left in women's bookstores. The samples were often small, Caucasian, young, and middle-class. Yet for many lesbians, even some of those not fitting the demographic profile of the research participants, they offered a glimpse into the real world of lesbianism. When university presses faced budget cuts, they found to their surprise that the books that sold were those about lesbians and gay men. Lesbians wanted to read about themselves, even in scholarly publications not intended for the general population. This, in my opinion, was the peak era of knowledge of lesbians – books about lesbian nuns (Curb and Manahan, 1985), lesbian anthropologists conducting research about lesbians across cultures (Lewin and Leap, 1996), immigrant lesbians (Espin, 1997), lesbians getting together and breaking up (Hall, 1998), to mention just a few of the ground-breaking texts on topics about lesbians.

Unfortunately, this era is ending. First, when it comes to lesbians, the mainstream research community has always been suspicious of 'convenience samples'. No matter what the sample size, critics point out that no one knows how representative the participants are of lesbians in general, or of more closeted, or rural, or hard-to-find lesbians. Surely researchers studying other minority groups, such as the Jewish or Vietnamese communities, are not expected to conduct a national survey when there are known pockets of these communities in certain urban areas or via organizations or networks?

Second, nationally representative health surveys are beginning to include an

item or two about sexual orientation. Mostly as the result of the AIDS epidemic, this item is often about same-sex sexual behavior, and the results indicate that women who have sex with women are different in many ways from self-identified lesbians. Research has since shown that women who have sex with women do not overlap well with self-identified lesbians (Morris and Rothblum, 1999). It also turns out that very few women in the general population endorse items about same-sex behavior, same-sex fantasies, or self-identity as lesbian or bisexual. This has resulted in the ironic fact that a lesbian convenience sample (Bradford and Ryan, 1988) drew over 1900 lesbians whereas a nationally representative study (Laumann et al., 1994) randomly selected 1749 women and found only 24 who identified as 'non-heterosexual'. Consequently, any participant in such national surveys endorsing even one of these items on same-sex behavior, fantasies, or identity, is grouped together, with the result that such surveys combine self-identified lesbians and bisexual women, as well as women who have had sex with women but identify as heterosexual. Their results are representative of something, but not of the lesbians in our communities.

In her concluding chapter, Kitzinger states (p. 178):

The central argument of this book has been that recent liberal humanistic so-called 'gay affirmative' research, far from being a liberating force, represents a new development in the oppression of lesbians . . . Liberalism has taken the form of 'gay affirmative' psychology, proclaimed that the lesbian is amenable to rational and impartial scientific enquiry, only to discover the 'true nature' of the lesbian to be in exact conformity with the needs of a patriarchal social order. Gay affirmative research is, I have argued, intimately connected with the needs of a liberal patriarchal order to contain and control the political challenge of lesbianism.

This summary is as true today as it was in the mid-1980s when Kitzinger began writing her book. We must continue to ask ourselves what it means to be a lesbian, and not dilute our research by combining lesbians with the experiences of individuals with other sexual orientations, behaviors, and gender identities. We must promote lesbianism when it is clearly protective for women, such as the concept of women living in communities with other women, or having women-only space. Most of all, we need to listen to and publicize the voices of lesbians themselves, to keep a perspective on the unique and changing lives of women in our lesbian communities.

REFERENCES

- Bradford, J.B. and Ryan, C. (1988) *The National Lesbian Health Care Survey: Final Report*. Washington, DC: National Lesbian and Gay Health Foundation.
- Curb, R. and Manahan, N. (1985) *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence*. Tallahassee, FL: Naiad Press.
- Espin, O.M. (1997) *Latina Realities: Essays on Healing, Migration, and Sexuality*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

- Hall, M. (1998) *The Lesbian Love Companion: How to Survive Everything from Heart-throb to Heartbreak*. San Francisco, CA: Harper.
- Kitzinger, C. (1987) *The Social Construction of Lesbianism*. London: Sage.
- Laumann, E.O., Gagnon, J.H., Michael, R.T. and Michaels, S. (1994) *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lewin, E. and Leap, W.L. (1996) *Out in the Field: Reflections of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Morris, J.M. and Rothblum, E.D. (1999) 'Who Fills Out a "Lesbian" Questionnaire? The Interrelationship of Sexual Orientation, Years Out, Disclosure of Sexual Orientation, Sexual Experience with Women, and Participation in the Lesbian Community', *Psychology Of Women Quarterly* 33(3): 537-57.

Esther ROTHBLUM is Professor of Psychology at the University of Vermont and editor of the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*. Her research and writing have focused on lesbian relationships and lesbian mental health.
ADDRESS: Department of Psychology, John Dewey Hall, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT 05405, USA.
[email: esther.rothblum@uvm.edu]