

**We May Be Your Worst Nightmare, but We Are also
Your Future: The Role of a Psychology of Lesbianism
Section in the British Psychological Society**

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Several years ago, I joined a women's science fiction reading group. All of us were feminists; I was the only lesbian. The next year, a second member of the group came out as a lesbian. Shortly thereafter, two of the heterosexual women said they wanted to leave and the group disbanded.

Dale Spender (1989) describes a phenomenon that I label the '20 percent rule'. It refers to the fact that whenever the contribution of a minority group begins to constitute more than 20 percent of an organization's membership or actions, the organization is viewed as being 'overrun' by that minority group. Spender uses the example of book review space devoted to books by female authors in mainstream newspapers. When this space approaches 20 percent, book review editors estimate that more space is devoted to women than to men (that is, they erroneously assume that over 50 percent of space is devoted to female authors), and that men are being denied their fair share of reviews.

I argue here that a separate section or organization on lesbian issues is necessary in order to avoid the '20 percent rule'; that lesbian issues will not be addressed more than occasionally by women's groups. My argument addresses three themes: (1) parallels between the psychology of lesbians today and the psychology of women in the recent past; (2) the American Psychological Association's (APA) focus on lesbian issues; (3) the role of lesbians as leaders in women's organizations.

**PARALLELS BETWEEN THE PSYCHOLOGY OF WOMEN AND THE
PSYCHOLOGY OF LESBIANS**

Not too long ago, research on women, even research that examined gender differences, was not considered true scholarship. I was told by a female mentor that if I continued to conduct research on women and depression, I would not obtain an academic job. A friend of mine was told not to study women because that was 'too narrow'. Fortunately, my cohort of graduate students and university faculty persisted in their research on women, adding significantly to this body of knowledge. Today, for example, there are hundreds of research studies on women and depression. Psychology of women has expanded so much that it is possible to stay current on only a few content areas because of the large volume of available literature. Feminist scholars have also won professional recognition within their national psychological organizations. The British Psychological Society's Psychology of Women Section, the APA's Division on the Psychology of Women, the APA's Committee on Women, the US Association for Women in Psychology, the

Australian Psychological Society's Women and Psychology Interest Group and the Canadian Psychological Association's Section on Women and Psychology are examples of such professional groups.

In the 1980s, research on women became fairly 'mainstream'. Universities encouraged research and scholarship about women for tenure and promotion. Some journal editors even rejected manuscripts that failed to specify or analyze gender of research participants or that were biased against women. The Committee on Women's annual research awards became one of the most prestigious and sought-after marks of distinction in the APA.

The current situation facing lesbian research in psychology bears marked similarity to the scenario for the psychology of women in past decades. Fifteen years ago, the APA urged psychologists to take the lead in removing the stigma of homosexuality by advancing knowledge about lesbians and gay men (see Morin and Rothblum, 1991, for a review). Nonetheless, although a significant proportion of women (at least 10 percent) define themselves as lesbian, research on lesbians is still considered a 'narrow' field. Psychological research, including research on women, often includes sources of heterosexual bias (see Herek et al., 1991, for a review) so that the lesbian experience remains invisible. Graduate students and junior faculty are discouraged from conducting research on lesbian issues in case it might adversely affect their academic careers. Professional organizations have been reluctant to devote more than token coverage to lesbian issues, even when there is clear interest in this topic and even when a large proportion of the members are themselves lesbians and/or attend conference presentations on lesbian issues in record numbers. For all these reasons, there is need for specific organizational structures to promote lesbian research and writing.

THE APA EXPERIENCE

The APA governance structure has committees on women; lesbians and gay men; ethnic minorities; people with disabilities; and children, youth and families. A common goal of these committees is understanding the experience of members of oppressed groups and changing such oppression — they are united in this pursuit. The fact that six committees have similar interests in this regard increases the amount of energy and visibility of these groups, and committees have worked together on projects. For example, the committees on women and on lesbians and gay men have collaborated on a lesbian child custody research bibliography; the committees on lesbians and gay men and on children, youth and families are collaborating on a project on lesbian and gay youth. Similarly, the separate APA divisions on women, on lesbians and gay men and on ethnic minorities, all increase the number of convention proposals on these topic areas and allow these divisions more votes on the APA Council of Representatives.

The APA committees and divisions concerned with members of oppressed groups have resulted in *increased*, not decreased attention to members of all oppressed groups within each committee and division. Thus, for example, the Committee on Women has specified in its by-laws that one of its six member slots be reserved for an openly identified lesbian. Similarly, the six-person Committee on Lesbian and Gay Concerns will have three people who are members of ethnic minority groups

in 1992. Thus, the formation of groups on lesbian issues has not resulted in the groups on women either ignoring or decreasing their focus on lesbian issues. Nor have these issues become marginalized; if anything, they have received more prominence due to the presence of APA-sanctioned groups specifically on lesbians and gay men. In recognizing and incorporating diversity into the APA structure, there have been benefits to all groups and to the academic dialogue in general.

THE ROLE OF LESBIAN LEADERSHIP IN WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS

Committees on women may be concerned that when a committee on lesbian psychology is formed, their own membership will decrease. This concern reflects the large amount of energy and time invested by lesbians in any women's organization.

It seems that whenever women organize anywhere in the world, a significant portion of the leadership is provided by lesbians. Lesbians, just by virtue of coming to terms with their own sexual orientation, have to break the expectations of society. They may therefore be more likely to take risks, even when the outcome of these risks primarily benefits heterosexual women. Thus, it was lesbians who were at the forefront of demanding child care for women in the worksite, who founded battered women's shelters and who advocated for legal abortion. As these child-care centers, battered-women's shelters and women's health centers became relatively mainstream, lesbians were often asked to keep quiet about their sexual orientation. Once the grassroots organizing phase is over, lesbians are often fired or pressured to quit, or else they leave in protest. The first paid director is often a heterosexual woman and lesbian issues are omitted from the organization's publicity in order not to offend the media or potential granting agencies. When lesbians have stayed in these organizations, they have kept quiet about their own needs so as not to offend the membership or else because they believe that the organization's goals are more pressing or legitimate than those of lesbians (see Minkowitz, 1991, for a review of this topic). The recent media focus on the US National Organization of Women's 'problems' with its president, Patricia Ireland, who disclosed a lesbian lover, illustrates both the heterosexism within feminist organizations and the fear among heterosexual women that feminism will be equated with lesbianism in the eyes of the general public.

Similarly, lesbians were part of the early leadership in both research and professional organizing on the psychology of women internationally. Now that the psychology of women is more acceptable within mainstream psychology, lesbian issues are downplayed in order to keep heterosexual women from leaving these organizations. Consequently, lesbians are faced with the choice of either staying within the bounds of the '20 percent rule' or forming a separate organization.

In conclusion, remaining within women's organizations means continuing marginalization of lesbian concerns; organizing autonomously means that lesbians will have a stronger and more effective voice and will challenge other sections and organizations to confront their own heterosexual bias and to incorporate lesbian issues.

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NOTE

1. The quote is from a letter to *MS* magazine by Arianne Haley (October 1987: 10).

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