

Relationship Intimacy and Commitment in Lesbian Women: The Role of Gender Identity

¹J. A. Shukusky, M.A. ¹G. M. Bowler, ¹Dr. C. N. Markey & ²Dr. P. M. Markey ¹Rutgers University, ²Villanova University

Abstract

In lesbian couples, attachment, self-esteem and life satisfaction are highly correlated with relationship satisfaction. To further explore factors contributing to relationship quality, in the current study, we explored the relationship between women's comfort with their sexuality (i.e., "outness"), self-esteem, and gender identity as predictors of relationship intimacy and commitment. Seventy-two lesbian couples (M=33.4 years of age, SD=10.2 years), were recruited to complete several personality and relationship measures. Gender identity, specifically femininity, consistently and uniquely predicted women's intimacy and commitment in their relationships.

Introduction

Attachment, self-esteem, and life satisfaction have been found to be predictors of relationship satisfaction in lesbian relationships (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990). In a study across relationship types, including gay and lesbian couples (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986), liking one's partner, having few alternatives to the relationship, high dyadic attachment, and high shared decision making were all linked to relationship quality. Furthermore, attraction and having few disagreements on beliefs were linked to relationship satisfaction. Dyadic attachment was associated with a measure of love in the relationship. Degree of outness has been associated with self-identification as a lesbian and is inversely related to psychological distress (i.e., lower suicidality). Measures of "outness" and gender identity have not yet been correlated with relationship measures in lesbian couples. The current study examines couples, not individuals.

Acknowledgments: This research was supported by a grant from the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association awarded to Dr. Charlotte N. Markey. Contact Email: chmarkey@camden.rutgers.edu

Poster presented at the Society of Personality and Social Psychology Conference in New Orleans, LA (January, 2013).

Aims

In the current study, we aim to further previous research on romantic relationships by identifying and exploring factors that relate to positive romantic relationship experiences in lesbian partnerships.

We hypothesized that:

- 1) Greater levels of "outness" will predict stronger (higher) relationship commitment and intimacy.
- 2) Sex-consistent gender identity (femininity in women) will predict positive relationship commitment and intimacy.

Measures

Women were given questionnaires to complete during a lab visit. Measures examined for the purpose of this study were:

- BEM Sex Role Inventory Scale (1974), assessing levels of masculinity and femininity
- Sexual Satisfaction Scale (Hudson, et al. 1981)
- Commitment Scale (Kurdek, 1995)
- Sexual Attitudes Scale (Hendrick & Hedrick, 1987)
- The Outness Inventory (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000)

Results

Simultaneous regression analyses were used to determine predictors of positive sexual and romantic relationships factors (commitment, sexual attitudes, sexual satisfaction) in lesbian women. Masculinity, femininity, and the outness of the women were examined as possible predictors.

Masculinity and outness was not related to any of these measures.

Femininity was found to be a significant indicator of positive sexual attitudes ($\beta=.207$, $p=.016$), sexual satisfaction ($\beta=.169$, $p=.050$) and relationship commitment ($\beta=.296$, $p<.001$).

Discussion

Despite expectations that women's comfort with their sexuality would be essential to their experience of positive relationships, results revealed that gender identity was the strongest and only predictor of women's intimacy and commitment in lesbian relationships. In particular, women who identified as more feminine were more likely to report more positive romantic relationship experiences. Further research is needed to better understand positive romantic and sexual relationships among lesbian women.

Participants

144 women in relationships with women; 72 couples
Women's Mean Age = 33.4 years, SD = 10.2
Average Relationship Length = 4.68 years;
83% were cohabitating
Predominantly (69%) European-American
Diverse Socioeconomic backgrounds
Recruited from a Northeastern University Campus and surrounding area

