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4

Sexual Pride and Shame in Lesbians

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The euphoric views of lesbian sexuality accompanying 1970s feminism recently have been tempered by concerns about lesbians' sexual functioning. As a result, two contradictory attitudes concerning lesbian sexuality prevail currently. One celebrates lesbian sexuality as being highly physically and emotionally gratifying; the second holds that low sexual desire is often a problem in lesbian relationships. Both views have support. Findings that lesbians are more orgasmic in their relationships than heterosexual women confirm the idea that lesbian sex tends to be very satisfying (Masters & Johnson, 1979; Peplau & Amaro, 1982). In contrast, the low rate of sexual contact among lesbian couples compared with heterosexual and gay male couples (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983) has caused alarm about "lesbian bed death," or the loss of passion in long-term relationships (McLaughlin, 1987). Proponents of the first view have countered by pointing out that what heterosexuals are counting as sexual relations are more likely to involve male orgasm than female; thus heterosexual sex may be more frequent but is not necessarily more fulfilling for women than lesbian sex (Frye, 1990). Those focusing on the lack of passion have emphasized the clinical evidence that identifies lack of sexual contact as a common problem among lesbians seeking couple therapy (Clunis & Green, 1988; Nichols, 1987; Rothblum & Brehony, 1993).

These two attitudes can be viewed as reflecting issues of sexual pride and shame, respectively, in lesbian relationships. Sexual pride results from a combination of feelings of joy and expressions of personal adequacy (Nathanson, 1987). In contrast, sexual shame underlies many of the psychological factors believed to inhibit desire, including intrapsychic conflicts, internalized homophobia, fear of failure, and responses to traumatic sexual experiences. Shame and the associated emotions of embarrassment and humiliation occur when perceived defects in the self are exposed (Kohut, 1971, 1977). Thus the issue of how sexual pride and shame develop and are expressed is important for understanding lesbian sexuality.

Self-psychology provides a useful starting point for exploring sexual pride and shame in more depth from a feminist perspective (Gardiner, 1987; Kohut, 1977). This framework, in turn, may be used to organize and examine current research on lesbian sexuality to determine the circumstances under which the two emotions are demonstrated.

Self-Psychology and Sexuality

Self-psychology posits that the development of the self involves two central psychological structures: (a) the grandiose self and (b) the idealized other (idealized parental imago) (Kohut, 1971). Each structure, in turn, may be linked hypothetically to specific areas of sexual expression. Extending self-psychology theory according to the following reasoning, the development of the grandiose self is predicted to affect bodily pride or shame; processes associated with the idealized other will affect interpersonal aspects of sexuality, such as feelings of entitlement to sexual pleasure and sexual self-confidence.

The grandiose self refers to the infant and young child's perception of himself or herself as the center of the universe and as all powerful. The responsiveness of parents and other self-objects (those who provide the psychological and material nurturant supplies the child needs for survival) to the child serves to shape the self. If parents are able to reflect, echo, approve, confirm, and admire the greatness and perfection of the child's grandiose self in an age-appropriate way, the child will develop a sense of pride and a mature, cohesive self. However, shame arises when the boundless exhibitionism of the grandiose self is not mirrored and approved by the self-objects.

In terms of sexuality, the theory can be extended to predict that bodily pride or shame will depend on how the self-objects respond to the child's physical and sexual self. If adults confirm the child's sense of physical perfection and competence and respond empathically to his or her natural exhibitionism and sexual curiosity, it is likely that bodily pride will result. In adulthood, bodily pride may be expressed in sexual terms via a positive body image and sexual curiosity. On the other hand, if children are deprived of adequate mirroring in the physical realm or are responded to inappropriately, as in the case of sexual abuse, bodily shame will develop.

In a separate but parallel process, the idealized other also affects the development of the self. As the child begins to confront his or her own vulnerability, the child will seek an idealized other who can make him or her feel safe and calm. If an adequate idealized other is available, the child will eventually be able to internalize parental soothing and regulating functions and so construct an internal emotional thermostat that provides stability. If the child is deprived of an idealized other by traumatic loss or disappointment, these characteristics would be weak or absent. The failures or inadequacies of self-objects will be attributed to perceived defects in the self, producing a sense of shame.

In terms of sexuality, it may be conjectured from theory that an internal emotional thermostat, if developed, would enable the individual to determine whether sexual problems originated in the self, partner, or other sources and to maintain a sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure independent of a partner's response. Sexual entitlement may be expressed in adulthood in terms of sexual self-confidence and positive attitudes toward initiating and receiving sexual pleasure. In contrast, deficits in the idealized other function might be expressed through self-blame for sexual problems or by adjusting sexual needs to suit the partner's level of interest.

Lesbian Sexuality

The question to be addressed here concerns to what extent sexual pride and shame are revealed by current research on lesbian sexuality. A self-psychology approach has been used above to identify two major areas in which these emotions are likely to be expressed and that provide a convenient way to organize specific findings. Although it is not possible

from the available research to determine whether behaviors are linked to the developmental processes proposed, the framework provides insight as to what variables might be explored in future research.

Bodily Pride or Shame

The first area of sexual expression believed to result from the development of the grandiose self is bodily pride or shame. Specific sexual behaviors that could be classified as manifesting this aspect of sexuality include masturbation, oral sex practices, sexual curiosity, and body image. Each aspect will be discussed to determine whether pride or shame is associated with it.

One index of lesbians' bodily pride or shame may be reflected by masturbation practices. Most lesbians appear to engage in masturbation, suggesting that more pride than shame is associated with this act. Loulan (1987) reported that 89% of lesbians masturbate and that 86% usually experience orgasm through masturbation. These findings do not prove conclusively that lesbians are at ease with masturbation, however, because neither survey explored lesbians' attitudes toward the behavior.

Willingness to engage in oral sex is a second indicator of lesbians' attitudes about their bodies. Research indicates that a majority of lesbians are comfortable about performing or receiving oral sex, suggesting acceptance of or lack of shame about their genitalia. However, there is still a large percentage of lesbians who report being embarrassed by oral sex and seldom or never engage in it. Bell and Weinberg (1978) reported that 38% of the 228 white and 34% of the 64 black middle-class lesbians they surveyed had oral sex only a few times or not at all within the previous year. About 44% of the approximately 1,000 middle-class lesbians surveyed by Jay and Young (1979) had oral sex infrequently. Almost 33% of the 1,566 lesbians in Loulan's (1987) study did not ever receive oral sex from their partners. Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) reported that oral sex was not a usual sexual behavior for the majority of the 772 predominantly white middle-class lesbians they studied, although lesbians were more at ease about oral sex than heterosexual women. About 57% of lesbian couples had oral sex infrequently, and 4% never had oral sex. In addition, infrequent oral sex was associated with a less happy sex life and more arguments about sex (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). Thus a slim majority of lesbians appear to express sexual pride as evidenced

by oral sex practices, but shame-related emotions such as embarrassment accompany the act for a large minority.

Sexual curiosity is a third behavior that might reflect bodily pride or shame. One rough measure of sexual curiosity about which there is some information on lesbians concerns the breadth of their sexual techniques. The evidence available suggests that many lesbians have a limited sexual repertoire. As stated earlier, a large number of lesbians infrequently or never engage in oral sex. Jay and Young (1979) also indicated that most lesbians had never engaged in "talking dirty" (64%), used a vibrator (75%), looked at pornography (71%), used a dildo (82% to 93%), or engaged in anilingus (68%), to name a few options. Loulan (1987) found that less than 10% of the lesbians she sampled had ever acted out a sexual fantasy with their partners, engaged in manual vaginal or anal penetration, or used a vibrator; only 55% had masturbated their partners.

The narrow sexual repertoire of many lesbians implies that discomfort or shame may be associated with trying new techniques. Despite an increase in the availability of sex toys and erotic lesbian magazines and videotapes, sexual experimentation does not appear to be widely practiced even among the white, middle-class, urban lesbians that typically have been studied. Indeed, many of these behaviors are viewed as politically incorrect within the lesbian feminist community. For example, a majority of lesbians (59% to 67%) have negative attitudes about using dildos (Jay & Young, 1979). Consequently, it may be embarrassing for many lesbians to express an interest in such behaviors.

The question of how sexually curious lesbians are remains to be answered more fully, however. What is known is limited by what has been asked. Jay and Young (1979) included the most comprehensive list of sexual behaviors studied to date, but other research has not been as thorough. For instance, Loulan (1987) did not include tribadism (i.e., grinding, or clitoral stimulation obtained by pressing against a partner's body) in her list of sexual behaviors, even though it is the third most common sex technique used among lesbians as reported by Jay and Young (1979). Approximately 28% very frequently or always have orgasm by this means. Incidence of multiple orgasm also was not investigated. Bell and Weinberg (1978) and Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) either did not ask or did not report prevalence of anal stimulation among lesbians, although they did ask gay men. Duration of sex and types of sexual positions also have not been evaluated. Nor has research focused

on lesbians' attitudes toward trying new behaviors, which might more accurately tap sexual curiosity than behavioral measures. Nevertheless, based on current research, the range of sexual techniques used by lesbians implies that more shame than pride is present.

A last indicator of bodily pride or shame concerns lesbians' body image. Little is known about this dimension of sexuality, but positive attitudes have been indicated more often than negative ones. Lesbians (83%) tend to be positive about their general physical appearance; only 38% report being negative about their weight (Jay & Young, 1979). Perceived attractiveness to others also appears to be high. Approximately 50% of white and 62% of black lesbians rated themselves as having above average homosexual sex appeal (Bell & Weinberg, 1978). Furthermore, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found that lesbians' happiness and satisfaction with their relationships were unaffected by their partners' physical beauty.

Other sources demonstrate that lesbians' body image is not uniformly positive. For instance, very few of the lesbians among thousands Loulan (1987) has addressed "absolutely loves her body" (p. 41). The androgynous lesbian sexual ideal, which deemphasizes noticeable breasts and hips, also hints at some rejection of female sex characteristics. For instance, although 68% of white and 52% of black lesbians emphasize body type and frame as important in selecting a partner, only 3% and 13%, respectively, preferred a partner with distinguishable hips (Jay & Young, 1979). Noticeable breasts were somewhat more acceptable to a minority; about 29% of white and 45% of black lesbians preferred partners with this attribute. Although there is clearly more to be learned about how lesbians feel about their own and their partner's sexual appearance, the research indicates that most lesbians, if not proud, are at least fairly comfortable with their body image.

Overall, in terms of the indications of bodily pride and shame explored here, lesbians exhibit pride. Most appear to be comfortable with masturbation, oral sex, and body image. Even so, a large minority report discomfort with these practices and a majority do not appear to express sexual curiosity by trying new techniques.

Entitlement to Sexual Pleasure

The second area of sexual expression believed to result from the development of the idealized other concerns feelings of entitlement (pride)

or lack of entitlement (shame) to sexual pleasure. These feelings are likely to arise in an interpersonal context. An internal sense of sexual competence or a lack of confidence in the face of relationship problems also is hypothesized to originate from the idealized other structure. Specific behaviors that might tap this area include expectations about sexual satisfaction and orgasm, the ability to initiate and receive sex, and the ability to attend to a partner's needs.

Evidence concerning the importance of sexual satisfaction and orgasm in lesbian relationships is contradictory, implying that conflict along the pride-shame continuum exists. Unlike other couple types, low rates of sex did not affect overall satisfaction with the relationship among lesbians in the Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) study. Other research confirms the finding that sexual satisfaction is unrelated to relationship satisfaction among lesbians (Duffy & Rusbult, 1985-1986; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986). On the other hand, sexual dissatisfaction and conflict over sex were more highly related to breakups among lesbians together more than 2 years than other couple types (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). The ambivalence about the role of sexuality in relationships implies that lesbians may feel shame about overtly and consciously valuing it.

Lesbian attitudes about orgasm appear to be somewhat more prideful. Of those surveyed by Jay and Young (1979), 49% said it was very important and 42% rated it somewhat important to achieve an orgasm during sex. Most appeared to be successful at reaching that goal: 89% frequently or always had an orgasm and 46% were frequently or always multi-orgasmic. Almost 94% of Loulan's (1987) respondents were orgasmic with a partner. Other views of orgasm are less positive. Some lesbians think that having an orgasm as a goal of sex is male identified or too goal oriented. Loulan (1984) claimed orgasm was overrated and chastised lesbians for their "preoccupation with this particular muscle spasm" in a chapter called "The Tyranny of the Orgasm" (p. 71). In addition, most lesbians interviewed by Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) preferred nongenital physical contact such as hugging and cuddling to genital sex.

In terms of initiating sex, strong feelings of entitlement do not typify lesbians. A reluctance to initiate sex appears to be a major cause of the low rate of sexual contact among lesbians (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). Shame is not necessarily solely responsible for an unwillingness to take the lead, but it may be implicated partially. Some lesbians equate simply wanting or asking for sex with being sexually coercive or aggressive

(Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Nichols, 1987); others may have learned to ignore their sexual desires. For example, Nichols (1987) documented a case of a lesbian couple in sex therapy who had not had sex for the past 7 of their 10 years together. Although one woman was upset about the lack of sex, the couple had never fought about it. Her unwillingness to raise her concerns out of consideration for her partner or fear of conflict suggests a discomfort with meeting her own sexual needs. A more complete investigation would be needed to clarify motives, but the findings suggest that some lesbians view pursuing their own sexual satisfaction as inappropriate behavior.

The ability to attend to a partner's sexual needs seems to be a major area of pride among lesbians. They are much more concerned that their partner have an orgasm than that they have one themselves (Jay & Young, 1979). The stone-butcht role, in which self-worth is derived from pleasing the partner, not the self, exemplifies this pattern. Although the stone-butcht role appears to be on the decline, it still occurs among working-class lesbians (Nichols, 1987). Placing a partner's needs first may have some positive effects on a relationship, but it is likely that a woman who will not allow her partner to make love or touch her has feelings of shame concerning her sexuality that may have a detrimental effect as well.

Not all lesbians perceive their partners to be as responsive to them as the above research suggests. About 18% of white and 19% of black lesbians reported that their partners' failure to respond to their sexual requests was a serious sexual problem (Bell & Weinberg, 1978). About 17% of both groups also reported having difficulty responding to their partners' sexual requests. These results might indicate shame.

In sum, pride is more strongly revealed in lesbians' desire to please a partner than in the other three behaviors associated with feelings of entitlement to sexual pleasure. Ambivalence is more often associated with the importance of sexual satisfaction, orgasm, and initiating sex.

Developmental Issues

The self-psychology framework used here to examine lesbian sexuality revealed that bodily pride was more strongly in evidence than feelings of entitlement to sexual pleasure. This suggests that the development of the grandiose self is more secure than the idealized other

function for many lesbians. Moreover, sexual shame across all behaviors was found for a large proportion of lesbians, indicating ruptures in both areas of the self. Whether the specific developmental processes proposed by self-psychology are implicated in pride or shame for the behaviors discussed is open to question. However, it is possible to speculate about how lesbians' development of self is affected by gender role socialization and how it may differ from that of other women as well as to suggest directions for future research based on the theory.

It is perhaps not surprising that shame in both areas of the sexual self was found for lesbians. What is of more interest is why lesbians appear to exhibit more pride in some areas than heterosexual women, even though they presumably share the same socialization. The gender socialization of girls and women virtually guarantees that outcomes connected to the grandiose self and idealized other are more likely to cause shame, regardless of a woman's sexual orientation. Girls and women are taught to be ashamed of their bodies and sexuality (Resneck-Sannes, 1991). Exhibitionistic strivings in females are usually severely and narrowly restricted to sexual attractiveness and caring for others (Boden, Hunt, & Kassoff, 1987).

The emphasis on sexual attractiveness is believed to distort girls' body image by failing to confirm their full physical grandiosity. Girls' physical competency is less encouraged than boys. As early in life as 24 hours postpartum, parents are significantly more likely to describe daughters as little, beautiful, pretty, and cute than sons, even when the infants do not differ in birth weight, length, or other measures of physical health (Rubin, Provenzano, & Luria, 1974). Parents are more likely to play vigorously with sons' arms and legs than daughters' and to treat girls as if they were more fragile (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). Boys are encouraged to engage in large motor activities, whereas parents are likely to criticize girls for running, jumping, and climbing (Fagot, 1978). Parents also give preschool- and elementary-school-age boys more freedom to roam in the physical environment than they do girls of the same age (Saegert & Hart quoted in Russo, 1985). In addition, adults, in general, are more likely to encourage large muscle activity in a child they believe to be male, rather than female (Saegert & Hart quoted in Russo, 1985). Shame concerning body weight also has been well-documented in girls and women (Silberstein, Striegel-Moore, & Rodin, 1987). Furthermore, inappropriate adult responses to girls' bodies are frequent. An estimated 31% of girls have been sexually abused by the age of 18 (Russell, 1984).

Girls' sexual curiosity and voyeuristic tendencies—aspects of the grandiose self—are curtailed strongly as well. Galenson and Roiphe (1980) reported an increase in girls' sexual curiosity by the age of 16 months; all 70 girls had expressed curiosity about mothers' bodies and somehow managed to see fathers' genitals by the age of three, even in modest families. Thereafter, however, girls usually confront a blockade of silence about female sexuality. The author reviewed 15 sex education books for young children available in public libraries and noted that none identified the clitoris on anatomical diagrams or discussed female orgasm. Few parents provide this information, leaving girls to learn about orgasm primarily through self-discovery, usually long past the age they are capable of it physically (Laws & Schwartz, 1977). Only 33% have masturbated by age 13 (Hunt, 1975), and some women never realize their capacity for orgasm.

The distorted mirroring girls receive for caring for others affects different aspects of sexuality. Girls learn that physically self-affirming behaviors are likely to embarrass their parents and that sexual needs conflict with parents' wishes. Thus girls learn that having sex without marriage or without love will disappoint parents. Because girls are primarily reinforced for caring for parents and, later on, partners, they learn to suppress their physical and sexual grandiosity and expect other girls and women to do so as well (Resneck-Sannes, 1991).

Women are also more likely to experience shame than men due to the lack of or disappointments in an idealizable other (Boden et al., 1987). Women generally are limited in the amount of safety and calm they can provide to a child, because women lack power as a group. However, if girls turn to the father as an idealized self-object, they usually are not supported in identifying with masculine values or goals. Deprived of an adequate idealized self-object and encouraged to care for others, girls will tend to attribute the inadequacies of the self-objects to perceived defects in the self. For instance, sexually abused girls often assume the blame for their abuse, thereby retaining what little attention is offered by parents as well as preserving the image of the idealized other (Miller, 1984). As adults, then, women have been groomed to place their partner's sexual needs above their own and to conform to the partner's sexual ideal rather than an internally produced one.

Although all women share many sexually shame-producing experiences, the degree to which lesbian sexuality conforms to the pattern de-

scribed above has not yet been determined. Empirical evidence indicates that lesbians are more likely to be orgasmic than heterosexual women (Masters & Johnson, 1979; Peplau & Amaro, 1982). Other research has found that the use of large muscle groups is a correlate of sexual satisfaction in women (Fischer & Osofsky, 1967). Does this imply that lesbians develop more physical competency as children than heterosexual women? Obviously, more research would need to be done to establish a connection between sexual shame, orgasmic potential, and the antecedents of sexuality elaborated here. Questions about lesbians' sexual histories that need to be asked include parental responses to physical attributes and activities in childhood, sources of sex education and sexual values, incidence of sexual abuse, attributions about parental attitudes about sex and sexual abuse, and characteristics of idealized sexual images.

The extent to which shame or pride originates in lesbians' early developmental histories, as predicted by self-psychology, or is modified by self-objects later in life, is not possible to determine from existing sources. The interplay of personal and cultural influences also is difficult to sort out. The self-psychology framework used here is not intended to imply that pride or shame originates independent of cultural forces. These, too, would need to be more fully investigated.

In addition to possible differences in lesbians' and heterosexual women's developmental histories, pride-shame outcomes may be affected by at least four other cultural influences. First, heterosexual women enjoy heterosexual privilege, which ensures that their choice of partner and sexual behaviors are celebrated, whereas lesbians experience the shame or denial of such privileges. Second, lesbians have partners who have had similar gender-based shame-producing experiences regarding sex; heterosexual women do not. Third, lesbians do not have a power difference based on gender built into their relationships, which might reduce shame about some aspects of sexuality. Fourth, lesbian culture, as well as childhood development, may play a role in the observed differences. For instance, lesbians who are willing to participate in research are likely to be feminists. They may be more likely to have been affected by the freeing influence feminism has had on women's sexuality via the positive sexual images promoted by Dodson's celebration of masturbation and vulvas, Chicago's *Dinner Party*, and recent discoveries about the anatomy of the clitoris (Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centers, 1981), to name a few.

Conclusions

This self-psychology analysis reveals that sexual pride in lesbians is more likely to be expressed in terms of self-image than in the interpersonal realm, although many lesbians are inhibited in both areas. Difficulties in saying "I want, I need, I require, I deserve" sexual pleasure are hypothesized to stem from the failure of self-objects (parents and lovers) to affirm the exhibitionistic strivings of the grandiose self (Boden et al., 1987). Attributing blame for self-object failures to the self and wishing to please the partner more than the self are believed to result from deficiencies in the idealizing function. Thus exploring the origins of pride and shame has been shown to be a useful approach for understanding lesbian sexuality, particularly in terms of classifying behaviors, making predictions, and developing avenues for future research.

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