

## Factors influencing lesbians' direct disclosure of their sexual orientation

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Radonsky, V. E., & Borders, L. D. (1996). Factors influencing lesbians' direct disclosure of their sexual orientation. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Psychotherapy*, 2(3), 17-37.  
[https://doi.org/10.1300/J236v02n03\\_02](https://doi.org/10.1300/J236v02n03_02)

**This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis (The Haworth Press) in *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Psychotherapy* on 01 January 1996, available online: [http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1300/J236v02n03\\_02](http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1300/J236v02n03_02)**

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### **Abstract:**

The major purpose of this study was to investigate premises regarding self-disclosure as proposed in theories of homosexual development while gathering baseline empirical data on the coming-out process. Several variables that theoretically influence coming-out, such as, persons to whom a lesbian has self-disclosed, in what order she has chosen to do this, how her internalized homophobia has influenced her behavior and how her coming-out behavior is related to level of sexual identity development, were investigated. Participants were volunteers responding to advertisements (N = 407, 64% return rate). The sample was a diverse group, with no all respondents labeling themselves lesbian. Age of coming-out to themselves ranged from 3 to 63 years; coming-out to another, age 7 to 63; coming-out to another after coming-out to herself, less than one year to 33 years. After coming-out to themselves, respondents tended to come-out to other lesbians next. Despite the theoretical premise that coming-out to family is the most difficult, there was not specific pattern to indicate the respondents came-out to family last or to siblings before parents. Respondents with higher levels of homophobia tended to come-out to fewer groups of people, but their general predisposition to disclose was not related to coming-out behavior. Women at later stages of identity formation has come-out to more groups of people.

**Keywords:** lesbians | coming out | self-disclosure | homosexuality | sexuality identity development

### **Article:**

*Self-disclosure, letting another person know what you think, feel, believe, or want, is the most direct means, although not the only means, by which an individual can make himself known to another. (Jourard, 1959, p. 502)*

In the late 1950s, Jourard and his colleagues (Jourard, 1958a, 1958b; Jourard & Lasakow, 1958) began a scholarly exploration of the term "self-disclosure," focusing on Jourard's belief that there is an alignment between verbal self-disclosure and symptoms of "personality health." Jourard asserted that in order to work toward personal health an individual must self-disclose to at least one significant other. He found that alienation from one's real self—or non-disclosure—not only arrests one's growth as a person, but also tends to make a farce out of one's relationship with people. Jourard concluded that a self-alienated (non-disclosing) person can never love another person nor receive love from another person.

Perhaps one of the most difficult decisions we lesbians face is to determine in which areas of our lives we can be ourselves, and in which areas we must wear a mask (Todar, 1979, p. 41-42).

For a lesbian, Jourard's view of self-disclosure presents quite a conflict. On the one hand, self-disclosure of her sexual orientation is necessary for emotional health, and also provides an opportunity to develop more honest relationships (Gartrell, 1981). The same action, however, also can negatively affect her relationships. As a result, lesbians often must make tough choices among unsatisfactory options.

In the lesbian community, self-disclosure, more commonly referred to as "coming-out," is a frequently discussed and controversial topic (Zitter, 1987, p. 177-194). Coming-out is a complex process involving the adoption of "a non-traditional identity [and] involves restructuring one's self concept, reorganizing one's sense of history, and altering one's relations with others and with society" (deMonteflores & Schultz, 1978, p. 61). The term "coming-out" can refer to both internal and external changes (Baetz, 1984, p. 45-50), as seeing oneself as different from heterosexual peers (internal) or joining a lesbian social group (external). It also can refer to direct or indirect self-disclosure of one's sexual orientation and lifestyle (Ponse, 1976), as in verbally acknowledging to a co-worker one's being gay (direct) or dressing in a particular way which makes a statement of one's sexuality (indirect). Finally, "coming-out" can refer to the process of self-awareness and self-labeling in relation to one's own sexuality, as in deciding to call oneself lesbian.

There is probably no experience more horrifying and terrifying than that of self-disclosure to significant others whose probable reactions are assumed but not known (Jourard, 1959, p. 502). Direct or indirect self-disclosure of one's sexual orientation is not always physically, economically, or emotionally safe for a lesbian to do. Documentation of discrimination and harassment of lesbians and gay men can be found daily in newspapers, magazines, and professional journals (Herek, 1989). Homophobia in the general population has been well documented (Millham, San Miguel, & Kellogg, 1976) and persists today (Biemiller, 1982; Newton, 1987; Yeskel, 1985). In addition lesbian and gay men endure their own internalized homophobia (Zitter, 1987, p. 177-194).

Counselors working regularly with lesbian and gay clients have been confronted with the "insidious and limiting effects internalized homophobia has on their [client's] lives" (Margolies, Becker, & Jackson-Brewer, 1987, p. 229). There are women, for example, who live in committed, long-term, intimate relationships with another woman, but who socially isolate themselves from women like themselves and do not consider themselves lesbian. In fact, Cohen

and Stein (1986) concluded that the "centrality of homophobia as a psychological and cultural phenomenon suggests that it may play a crucial role in the development of identity in gay men and lesbians" (pp. 35-36). A counseling goal is to help the lesbian believe that being lesbian is a positive element in her life, so that self-disclosing of her sexual orientation becomes a way of counteracting her internalized homophobia and developing an identity which integrates her sense of self (Kleinberg, 1986).

Coming-out to friends and family is an important step in the process of claiming a positive and integrated identity, in addition to being crucial for self-acceptance and self-esteem (Murphy, 1989). Clearly then, the development of a positive sexual identity for a lesbian is complicated by her understandable reluctance to self-disclose.

Several theories of homosexual identity development have been proposed, including those of Cass (1979, 1983/4, 1984), Chapman and Brannock (1987), Coleman (1982), McDonald (1982), Plummer (1975), Raphael (1974), Sophie (1985/6) and Spaulding (1981). Several themes are consistent across these theories. Women at lower levels of development are characterized by having a less formed sexual identity, while those at higher levels of development are characterized as being more accepting of their sexual orientation. Self-disclosure is viewed as an essential and transformational element in each of these theories and as playing a key role in healthy development. In fact, Nemeyer (1980) stated that self-disclosure is a critical element in self growth and is "fundamental to a congruent, accepted lesbian identity" (p. 118).

Also according to these theories, self-disclosure of one's sexual orientation typically occurs in stages, beginning with disclosure to the self, then to "like" others, and finally to non-gay individuals. These self-disclosure behaviors are seen as being influenced by one's level of internalized homophobia (Cohen & Stein, 1986) or rejection of heterosexist norms. To date, these theories and stages have had much intuitive appeal, but empirical support for them is almost nonexistent. Only one of these writers, Cass (1984), has developed a formalized instrument to assess proposed stages of sexual identity in the model.

Cass (1979) proposed a six stage developmental process with affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions. In her model, the individual's self-perceptions and behaviors evolve from non-homosexual to a definition as homosexual where incongruence of affect (I feel I am lesbian.), cognition (I like being lesbian and want to act on my feelings.), and behavior (I like being with women.) is minimized. Total congruence between the various parts is seen as impossible, given Western attitudes toward homosexuality (Cass, 1979). Cass perceived the identity process as moving from a negative, stigmatized conception of homosexuality toward acknowledging one's sexual orientation in a positive light (Cass, 1984). However, at any point in the developmental process, "foreclosure may result in a cessation of continued homosexual identity" (Cass, 1984). Cass's model has intuitive appeal even though the empirical support for the stages is limited. Further exploration of her theory is needed because it would be useful to have a framework from which to observe, even to facilitate, lesbian identity development.

Thus, the major purposes of this study were to investigate the premises regarding self-disclosure as proposed in Cass's (1979) theory of homosexual development and to generate information

about the practical value of the theory for counseling lesbians. Specifically, this study was focused on the following research questions:

1. To whom and in what order do lesbians self-disclose their sexual orientation as indicated by self report?
2. Do lesbians' general predisposition to self-disclosure influence their "coming-out" behavior?
3. Is the level of internalized homophobia negatively related to coming-out behavior of lesbian women?
4. Does the stage of lesbians' identity formation relate to coming-out behavior?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

Participants were 407 non-heterosexual women who volunteered to participate. There was no limitation on age, since sexual orientation self-disclosure is not age related (Charbonneau & Lander, 1991, p. 29-43; Sang, 1992, p. 35-48), or marital status, since married women also are known to be lesbians (Loulou, 1986, p. 181-208). Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 70 ( $M = 36.5$ ,  $SD = 8.88$ ). A majority (81%) were white-European, with 5% African-American, 1% Asian-American, 2% Latina, 3% Native American, and 7% defining themselves as "other." Respondents resided in all regions of the United States although most (65%) were living in the Southeast, and a majority (60%) said they lived in "urban" areas. Most of the women had college degrees, with a mean of 16 years in school, and most worked in the fields of social services, management, and education. Their yearly incomes ranged from \$1000 to over \$99,000 (median = \$23,000).

### **Instruments**

Participants completed a questionnaire that contained demographic items (*e.g.*, age, ethnic/racial background, where they lived, education, income, occupation, terms they used to define themselves) and measures for each independent variable described below, in the order they appeared.

*Self-disclosive style.* The General Disclosiveness Scales (GDS; Wheelless, 1978; Wheelless & Grotz, 1976, 1977) are used to describe a person's disclosive style of behavior. Wheelless and Grotz (1976) defined self-disclosiveness as a multi-dimensional construct representing a person's predisposition to disclose to other people. This instrument was chosen because (a) it is semantic-based (*i.e.*, respondents are asked to describe their behavior or personality with terms synonymous with self-disclosure) and (b) it breaks down self-disclosure into specific dimensions of the concept (*i.e.*, intent, amount, positiveness, depth, honesty/accuracy).

Criterion-related validity studies (Wheelless & Grotz; 1977) indicated that the GDS taps diverse aspects of the general trust domain. Investigations of construct validity revealed a relationship between disclosiveness and locus of control, communication apprehension, and loneliness. Tardy (1988) found concurrent validity had been demonstrated in several studies (Wheelless, 1978;

Wheeless & Grotz, 1977), but noted that no studies had investigated the GDS 's correspondence with other measures of self-disclosure.

Wheeless (1978) reported a split-half reliability of .70. Three studies (Wheeless, 1978; Wheeless, Nesser, & McCrosky, 1986; Wheeless, Frickson, & Behren, 1986) yielded internal consistency data for each factor, with the range for each subscale being intent (.64 - .65), amount (.69 - .82), positiveness (.80 - .90), depth (.78), and honesty (.77 - .84). In a review of semantic-based scales of self-disclosure not limited to topic (*e.g.*, type of disclosure), Tardy (1988) concluded that factor analysis and reliability coefficients have confirmed the internal stability of the GDS.

*Coming-out behavior.* Based on the coming-out literature, we created several items asking the participant to recall her coming-out behavior to herself and with various populations. Information from this section was used to test several assumptions in Cass's (1984) theory of sexual identity development. First, a participant identified when she "first thought of herself as non-heterosexual," in line with Cass's (1979) observation that an awareness of being different occurs prior to self-disclosure to others. Then, to gather overall information on the coming-out process, the participant was asked about which specific groups she had come out to and in what order (*i.e.*, other lesbians, gay men, non-gay women, non-gay men) and family members. A last question addressed the order of coming-out behavior within family-of-origin (*i.e.*, parents before siblings).

*Homophobia attitudes.* The Nungesser Homosexual Attitudes Inventory (NHAI; Nungesser, 1983) was used to measure homophobic attitudes, or internalized homophobia. This was the only such instrument found for which the population of interest is non-heterosexuals. Initially developed to measure homophobic prejudice in homosexual males, it was adapted for lesbians by Sablosky (1987). The NHAI reflects an extensive attempt to directly explore internalized homophobia in the lesbian and gay population and is clearly described in Nungesser's (1983) book, *Homosexual Acts, Actors, and Identities*.

Following typical test development procedures, Nungesser's initial list of 84 items was reduced to 34. These 34 make up three subscales measuring attitudes toward one's homosexuality (Self), toward other lesbians and gay men (Others), and toward disclosure (Disclosure). In a study with 50 homosexual men, the reliability coefficient for the full NHAI was .94; for the subscales, Self, .89, Other, .68, and Disclosure, .93. In an investigation of concurrent and construct validity, Alexander (1986) reported a significant correlation ( $r = .702, p < .001$ ) with a similar instrument.

Sablosky's (1987) revised scale for lesbians also is comprised of 34 items divided into three subscales: (a) attitudes toward homosexuality as an aspect of one's self; (b) general attitudes about homosexuality and other female homosexuals; and (c) attitudes about self-disclosure and overtness of one's own homosexual orientation. High scores on this scale represent positive feelings about one's own homosexuality and about other female homosexuals and a high comfort level with self-disclosure of homosexual identity or one's homosexuality being known. Sablosky reported no additional psychometric data for her sample. In pilot work for this study, an acceptable measure of internal consistency was found (Cronbach-alpha = .78).

*Cass Stage Allocation Measure.* The Cass Stage Allocation Measure (SAM; Cass, 1984) was used to assess participants' subjective level of homosexual identity development. The six levels on the SAM are:

1. Identity Confusion
2. Identity Comparison
3. Identity Tolerance
4. Identity Acceptance
5. Identity Pride
6. Identity Synthesis

Each respondent is asked to read seven one-paragraph descriptors and to identify the one which best describes her.

In Cass's (1984) study of the SAM's validity, she found that the SAM self-definition of 178 subjects were congruent with predicted responses to specific aspects of the 16 dimensions of the model. Concurrent and content validity also is suggested by correlations found in several other studies. Mack (1986) found the willingness to be "out" to others was best predicted by the stage of identity development and the anticipated reaction of others. Ort (1987) found that as women move through the stages of identity development they are less likely to be affected by external forces to self-disclose. Kahn's (1988) results supported that self-disclosure represents an external declaration of an internal process (*i.e.*, sexual identity formation).

In addition, Cass developed a Homosexual Identity Questionnaire along with the SAM. A discriminant analysis was performed using both instruments; 97% of the cases were correctly classified by the analysis. Cass concluded that differences found between subject groups were not a result of researcher's bias in constructing the questionnaire and scoring keys. These results suggested that it is possible to distinguish among the six groups, although Cass (1984) found some blurring between Stages 1 and 2 and between Stages 5 and 6. Discriminant analysis indicated six stages can be distinguished and the ordering is accurate.

## **Procedures**

Participants in this study were identified through a friendship and snowball sampling technique. This method, described by McCall and Simmons (1966), is used to gather subjects in loosely structured populations that are difficult to contact for purposes of research. Since lesbians are generally perceived as invisible (Barrett, 1989), this form of sampling was deemed most appropriate despite its inherent lack of randomization. It has been used successfully in other studies about lesbians (Blacher, 1977; Oberstone, 1974; Weston, 1978).

To identify contact people who could facilitate distribution, several procedures were used during winter 1992-93. First, an advertisement was placed in a national newsletter for lesbians asking for names and addresses of women who were interested in participating in the study. Second, women known by the researcher were contacted directly and asked if they would be willing to participate in the study. Each woman also was asked if she knew one or more other women who would like to participate. Third, social organizations, support groups, and political organizations

in three southeastern states were asked to place an advertisement in their newsletters or asked whether the researcher could come to a meeting to talk about the survey and request participation. Fourth, proprietors of four bookstores were asked to display a letter requesting participation. Those women who identified themselves through phone calls or through the mail as willing to participate were sent a packet of information containing a cover letter, questionnaire, a post card requesting results, a self-stamped return envelope, and a letter and post card to be given to a woman who they thought might be interested in participating in the study. Of the 635 questionnaire packets distributed in this manner, 407 were returned for a return rate of 64%.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Results

Respondents were asked to select from a list of words those which they used to describe themselves; more than one response was allowed. The words most frequently chosen were "lesbian" (85%), "gay" (70%), "feminist" (60%), "homosexual" (42%), and "woman-identified" (35%). The words most frequently added to the list were dyke (15%), queer (3%), amazon (2%), and human (1%).

The minimum age at which respondents acknowledged that they were "different," that the respondents came-out to themselves or acknowledged they were not heterosexual to themselves, was 3 years; the maximum age was 63 years.

The earliest age at which a respondent stated that she first came-out to another was seven years and the oldest 51 years. The difference in the number of years between when respondents first came-out to themselves as non-heterosexual and when they first self-disclosed to another ranged from 0 to 33 years. The largest percentage (43%) acknowledged their "difference" to another person within the same year of their coming-out.

GDS subscale scores provided a measure of respondents' general predisposition to self-disclose. Respondents indicated that they were rather intentional about what they disclose about themselves (intent  $M = 22.4$ ,  $SD = 3.98$ ), and they tended to disclose a medium amount of information (amount  $M = 19.25$ ,  $SD = 4.74$ ). Respondents indicated they talked about themselves with affirming information (positiveness  $M = 24.03$ ,  $SD = 3.44$ ), but shared little intimate information about themselves (depth  $M = 15.67$ ,  $SD = 6.08$ ). Finally, respondents indicated a degree of self-awareness and confidence in being sincere and reliable in self-disclosures (honesty/accuracy  $M = 28.53$ ,  $SD = 4.08$ ).

NHAI subscales scores indicated that respondents had a positive attitude toward homosexuality as an aspect of one's self (*attitudes about self*,  $M = 18.75$ ,  $SD = 4.15$ ). They reported neither strongly negative or positive attitudes toward homosexuality and other female homosexuals (*general attitudes toward homosexuality*,  $M = 25.18$ ,  $SD = 3.11$ ), and a tendency toward a positive attitude about self-disclosure and overtness of homosexual orientation (*self-disclosure*,  $M = 31.76$ ,  $SD = 8.34$ ).

On the SAM, a few (5%) of the respondents said that they were in the first three stages of the Cass model. Most stated they were in the Identity Acceptance (45%), Identity Pride (20%), or Identity Synthesis (30%) stages.

## Research Questions

Based on Cass's model it was hypothesized that a lesbian's self-disclosure would occur first with like others and last with family members (siblings before parents). Fifty-four percent ( $n = 221$ ) of the respondents indicated that they came-out first to other lesbians. After coming-out to other lesbians, the next largest group to whom lesbians came-out was heterosexuals, non-gay women and non-gay men ( $n = 131$ , 32%), followed closely by gay males. Seventy-two percent ( $n = 316$ ) of the total number of respondents had come-out to at least one family member, and this disclosure was not consistently last. At least 35% of the time respondents had told parents prior to siblings (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Order of Coming-out By Identified Categories

Category	First	Second	Third	Fourth	Fifth
Lesbians	221 (54.3)	43 (10.6)	19 (4.7)	8 (2.0)	1 (0.2)
Gay - Men	52 (12.8)	122 (30.0)	60 (14.7)	45 (11.1)	28 (6.9)
Non-Gay Women	62 (15.2)	89 (21.9)	90 (22.1)	49 (12.0)	4 (1.0)
Non-Gay Men	29 (7.1)	42 (10.3)	65 (16.0)	93 (22.9)	53 (13.0)
Family	32 (7.9)	80 (19.7)	98 (24.1)	57 (14.0)	55 (13.5)
None	11 (2.7)	31 (7.6)	75 (18.4)	155 (38.1)	266 (65.4)

Note:  $N = 406$ . Columns include  $n$  for each category followed by percentage of respondents.

To determine whether a lesbian's general style of self-disclosure influenced her coming-out behavior, two analyses were conducted. First, we examined differences in GDS scores in relation to number of years between self-acknowledgment of not being heterosexual and coming-out to another. For a large percentage of respondents, acknowledging non-heterosexual status and coming-out occurred within a short period of time. Thus, we divided subjects into "high" (more than 7 years) and "low" (0 - 7 years) general self-disclosure groups (these groupings were based on study of the skewed data and similar data reported by Cronin (1977, p. 268-277) [ $M = 7$  years] and Obear and Reynolds [1988] [ $M = 10$  years]). A multivariate analysis of variance indicated there were no significant differences among the two groups' scores on any of the GDS subscales, (Wilks' Lambda)  $F(5) = 1.796, p = .11$ ). These results suggested that the lesbians' general predisposition to self-disclose was not related to her coming-out behavior.

Second, a Pearson correlation was computed between GDS subscale scores and the number of groups to whom the respondents had come-out. A significant correlation was found for the positiveness scale only ( $r = .188, p < .01$ , family wise alpha rate) indicating that the more groups to whom lesbians had come-out, the more positive the information they disclosed. Despite the statistical significance, however, the one  $r$  coefficient was small in a practical sense. Thus, we concluded that lesbians' predisposition to self-disclose was not related to the number of groups of people to whom they have come-out.

To address the research question regarding the relationship of internalized homophobia and coming-out behavior, a frequency table was constructed (see Table 2). Then, the number of groups of people to whom the women had come-out was compared with their scores on the

NHAI (Nungesser, 1983). Following the scoring instructions that accompany the NHAI, a median split scoring criteria was used, with those at the mean being placed with the "high" homophobia group. The "high" group denoted low internalized homophobia and high attitudes toward homosexuality. The "low" group denoted high internalized homophobia and low attitudes toward homosexuality. A chi-square analysis indicated that lesbians who displayed low internalized homophobia came out to more groups than those with high internalized homophobia ( $\chi^2 (5, n = 407) = 26.528, p < .001$ ). Results also indicated, however, that women in both groups (high and low homophobia) had been inclusive about the identified categories to whom they had come-out; in other words, those with high internalized homophobia had not limited their self-disclosure only to other lesbians and non-gay women.

**Table 2.** Internalized Homophobia and Coming Out Behavior

<b>A. Number of Groups to Whom Respondents had Come-Out and Sum of Scores on NHAI</b>			
<b>Number of groups</b>	<b>High<sup>a</sup> (%)</b>	<b>Low<sup>b</sup> (%)</b>	<b>Sum (%)</b>
0	7 (1.7)	3 (1.7)	10 (2.5)
1	3 (.7)	4 (1.0)	7 (1.7)
2	18 (4.4)	5 (1.2)	23 (5.7)
3	26 (6.4)	12 (3.0)	38 (9.3)
4	45 (11.1)	20 (4.9)	65 (16.0)
5	116 (28.5)	148 (36.4)	264 (65.0)
Total	215 (52.8)	192 (47.2)	407 (100.0)

$\chi^2 (5, n = 407) = 26.528, p = < .001$

<b>B. Identified Categories to Whom Respondents had Come-Out and Sum of Scores on NHAI</b>		
<b>Identified Categories</b>	<b>High<sup>a</sup> (%)</b>	<b>Low<sup>b</sup> (%)</b>
Lesbian	188 (98%)	206 (96%)
Gay Men	172 (94%)	185 (86%)
Non-Gay Women	180 (94%)	184 (86%)
Non-Gay Men	166 (86%)	143 (67%)
Family	164 (85%)	159 (74%)

<sup>a</sup> High denotes LOW internalized homophobia and High attitude toward homosexuality, scores > 135

<sup>b</sup> Low denotes HIGH internalized homophobia and Low attitude toward homosexuality, scores < 135

**Table 3.** Stages of Sexual Identity Formation and Identified Categories to Whom Respondents Had Come-out

<b>Stage<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>Category<sup>a</sup></b>				
	<b>L</b>	<b>GM</b>	<b>N-GW</b>	<b>NG-M</b>	<b>F</b>
1	2 (100)	1 (50)	1 (100)	2 (200)	1 (50)
2	2 (100)	1 (80)	1 (50)	1 (50)	1 (50)
3	5 (83)	4 (67)	1 (17)	0 (0)	0 (0)
4	180 (47)	159 (45)	157 (85)	118 (64)	131 (71)
5	77 (95)	72 (21)	77 (95)	70 (86)	72 (89)
6	120 (97)	114 (32)	119 (97)	112 (37)	112 (91)

Note: First set of numbers is *n* and second set is percentage (%).

**<sup>a</sup> Identified Categories:**

- L = Lesbian
- G-M = Gay-Men
- N-G-E = Non-Gay Women
- N-G-M = Non-Gay Men
- F = Family

**<sup>b</sup> Stages of Identity Formation:**

- Stage 1 = Identity Confusion
- Stage 2 = Identity Comparison
- Stage 3 = Identity Tolerance
- Stage 4 = Identity Acceptance
- Stage 5 = Identity Pride
- Stage 6 = Identity Synthesis

To determine whether the phase of lesbians' identity formation, as measured by the Cass Stage Allocation Measure (Cass, 1984), related to coming-out behavior, specific categories of people (*i.e.*, lesbians, gay men, non-gay women, non-gay men, family) to whom the woman had come-out, regardless of order, were compared with scores on the Stage Allocation Measure (SAM) (see Table 3). There were insufficient data in stages one, two, or three to form any conclusions about these stages. There was a trend for a larger percentage of those at higher stages to come-out to each group, particularly non-gay women and family members.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was twofold. One intention was to investigate the theoretical premises regarding self-disclosure as proposed in Cass's (1979) model of homosexual development. The second objective was to investigate the practical value of the model for counseling practice. In general, results only partially supported Cass's theory, suggesting its usefulness to conceptualize lesbian identity development within the counseling context may be somewhat limited. Specific results are discussed below.

Results supporting Cass's (1979) model might be described as "trends" rather than unqualified affirmations. First, only about half of the respondents had disclosed to lesbians first; the other half had first disclosed to a variety of other groups (*i.e.*, gay men, non-gay women and men) including family members who theoretically should have been the last persons to be told. Second, there was a less than perfect match between identity stage and number of groups to which a lesbian had disclosed. Data supporting Cass's hypothesized positive correlation were clearest for family members and non-gay women. We have no indication of how or why these women made disclosure choices they did. Since Cass's model seems to best describe freely chosen disclosure, information regarding a lesbians' motivation (*e.g.*, forced or non-forced) to disclose would be a fruitful area for future research.

We also investigated two variables hypothesized to influence coming-out behavior. First, lesbians' general predisposition to disclose appeared to have no effect. This result suggests that self-disclosure of one's sexual orientation is a unique behavior that transcends general personality traits, perhaps because of the fears associated with this disclosure. Results for internalized homophobia were mixed: there was a significant association between levels of internalized homophobia and the number of groups to whom one had come-out, but no apparent relationship with categories of persons to whom one had come-out. Both low and high homophobia groups indicated they had disclosed to lesbians, gay men, non-gay women and men, and family members. The lack of variance in categories may have influenced this result, as a large majority in both groups had disclosed to a wide variety of people (see Table 3). This trend also may have been due to the sampling method.

Several aspects of Cass's (1979) model may be relevant to our limited findings supporting that model. For example, Cass developed the model based on her research with lesbian women and gay men. It may be that an identity measure based on lesbians only would yield different results, although no such measure exists. Also, a cohort effect may be relevant, since Cass's theory and model were based on gays' perceptions which are at least eight years old. Finally, it may be that, as Sophie (1985/86), Lewis (1984), and Green and Clunis (1989, p. 41-49) found, sexual identity

development is non-linear rather than uni-directional as described by Cass (1984). Clearly, much additional work is needed if we are to achieve a valid theory and reliable measure of lesbian identity development.

The demographic data collected on age, age at coming-out, ethnic or racial background (somewhat), occupations, education, and annual income indicated that the women who participated in this study were a diverse group. In fact, not all women in this study referred to the term lesbian to define themselves, a result that has been previously reported by Darty and Potter (1984) and Ettore (1978, p. 70-95). Counselors and researchers, then, need to realize that not all women in same-sex relationships necessarily call themselves lesbians.

Also similar to previous reports (*e.g.*, Charbonneau & Lander, 1991 ), there was a wide range (3-63 years of age) of coming-out to themselves, or noticing one's differences in reference to heterosexuality, and age of coming-out to another (7-51 years). Clearly, self-disclosure of sexual orientation is not age related.

The largest portion of the sample came-out to themselves and another within the same year, a much smaller time frame than previously reported (*e.g.*, means of eight years, Cronin [1974] and ten years, Obear and Reynolds's [1985]). The historical context within which a woman identifies herself as lesbian may be relevant here. Sophie (1987) and Faderman (1984) both indicated that the present time is more supportive of a women's exploration of alternative life styles due to the women's movement of the last twenty years. Therefore, a contemporary woman's path to coming-out may be "easier" than that for women in earlier times, which may have influenced the coming-out behavior of women in this study.

Nevertheless, scores on the General Disclosive Scales revealed that the respondents tended to be intentional and superficial in their disclosure. In discussing this scale, Wheelless and Grotz (1977) stated that trust is related strongly to control of depth and intent to disclose. Thus, lesbians in this study may have been reflecting a lack of trust via their GDS responses. Since lesbians are at risk for being stigmatized because of their sexual orientation (Morin, 1991; Slater, 1988), it makes sense that lesbians would be more cautious in talking about personal information.

Finally, scores on the Nungesser Homosexuality Attitudes Inventory indicated that respondents varied greatly in their attitudes toward homosexuality. As Margolies, *et al.* (1987) concluded, it appears that internalized homophobia is prevalent and insidious, even among lesbians themselves.

The sensitive nature of this research topic and the "invisibility" of the population necessarily precede several limitations. The use of volunteers and data collection strategies relying on anonymous self-report required a convenience sample, generating a sampling bias. And, despite the first author's attempt, the sample lacked ethnic and racial diversity. In addition, only three respondents described themselves as being in Cass's first three stages of identity development. Such a limited range of stages is common in research on lesbian women. It appears that women who are new in identifying their feelings toward other women are highly reluctant to volunteer for research on lesbians; they may not even consider themselves appropriate subjects. Much

concerted effort will be needed if future researchers are to create a truly representative sample of lesbians. Additionally, results are limited by the use of measures that were designed on groups other than lesbians. If research is to progress, attention first must be given to creating and/or refining instruments that are specifically designed for this population.

For the counselor, the most significant findings of this study may be the heterogeneity of the lesbian respondents. The within-group diversity in terms of demographics defies many stereotypes of lesbians (Obear, 1991, p. 39-66) that, hopefully, counselors can work to counteract. In addition, counselors need to be aware that lesbians vary greatly in the time between self-acknowledgment and coming-out to another. Thus, a lesbian client needs gentle support rather than a push, help to find her own timing rather than being rushed. Finally, counselors must recognize that many lesbians experience a high degree of internalized homophobia; such self-defeating behaviors must be identified and addressed before a lesbian can progress toward the goal of positive integrated identity.

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