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THE CORRELATION OF SEXUAL FREQUENCY AND
RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION AMONG LESBIANS

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BY

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DISSERTATION APPROVAL

This dissertation submitted by Michele K. O'Mara has been read and approved by three faculty members of the American Academy of Clinical Sexologists.

The final copies have been examined by the Dissertation Committee, and the signatures which appear here verify the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given the final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

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VITA

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ABSTRACT

Limited research has been conducted on the sexual behavior of lesbians since the work of Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz. In the 1980s, when their research was published in *American Couples*, the disparaging phrase *lesbian bed death* surfaced as a defining image of lesbian sexuality. In comparison to heterosexual and gay male sexuality, lesbians have consistently ranked lowest on the sexual frequency scale, with the fastest rates of decline in sexual frequency among the couple pairs. Unfortunately, this data has been used to suggest that lesbian sexuality is defective. The assumption has been that sexual frequency correlates with relationship health and satisfaction. The study reported in this paper hypothesizes the opposite, that there is no correlation between sexual frequency and relationship satisfaction among lesbians.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Does sexual frequency correlate with satisfaction among lesbians? The research involved in this paper is designed to determine the correlation between the frequency with which lesbians are having sex and their relationship satisfaction. This researcher hypothesizes that there is not a strong correlation between sexual frequency and relationship satisfaction. In order to determine this, several questions must be answered.

The areas of inquiry in this study include the following: the sexual frequency of lesbian couples in the twenty-first century, a contemporary definition of lesbian sex according to lesbians themselves, identification of the sexual behaviors in which lesbians regularly engage, and relationship satisfaction as it relates to sexual frequency.

Research on lesbian sexuality is outdated. The most commonly cited references to lesbian sexual frequency are from research conducted in 1983 by Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz and, authors of *American Couples*. In their research, lesbians are compared to other couple dyads (heterosexual married couples, unmarried cohabitating heterosexuals, and gay males), and the sexual frequencies of all four different couple pairings were conflated. Lesbians were identified as the least sexually active dyad, and they were highlighted as the couple pair that experienced the most dramatic decline in sexual frequency over the course of their relationship.

Shortly after the research from *American Couples* was made public, the phrase *lesbian bed death* was born. In three short words, this phrase summed up the research in *American Couples* that described lesbians as non-sexual. A negative connotation accompanied this status,

suggesting that lesbian sexuality was somehow defective or, as the phrase suggested, even *dead*. This study will include an exploration of the etymology of lesbian bed death, and explore the history of the cultural phenomenon surrounding this phrase.

To say that lesbian sexuality is misunderstood is an understatement. Lesbians are consistently examined through the lens of heterosexuality and compared to other couple pairs (gay male couples and heterosexual dyads). This comparison is unhelpful because there are significant differences between the cultural and biological influences on male and female sexuality. Unlike the other couple pairs (gay male and heterosexual dyads), lesbian sex does not include a male influence. Thus the comparison of male-inclusive couple dyads to lesbian couples is ineffective in creating an understanding of lesbian sexuality.

The goal of this research is to shine a light on the truth about lesbian sexuality as it really exists, without the filter of relational paradigms that include males. Lesbian sexuality will be examined as an experience in and of itself, as it is defined and experienced by lesbians. The norm for lesbian sexuality in this research will be established based solely on the behaviors of lesbians.

The purpose of this study is to reveal the sexual frequency of lesbian couples, assess the relationship satisfaction reported by lesbian couples, and identify the correlation between these variables. The questions to be answered by this research are the following: “How do lesbians define sex?”; “What are contemporary lesbians doing sexually?”; “How frequently are lesbians actually having sex?”, and “How satisfied are lesbians with their relationships?”

This research primarily benefits lesbians, and it also offers helpful insights about

what is going on in relationships between women. The scarcity of information available to lesbians about their sexual health and relationships creates uncertainty for lesbians about what is normal or typical in lesbian sexual behavior. The results of this study will provide an updated picture of lesbian sexuality, and this research will also offer lesbians greater understanding and clarity about their own sexuality. Sex and relationship therapists who provide relationship and sexual counseling for lesbians will also benefit from this research.

Another benefit of this research is that it has potential to highlight the uniquely female aspects of sexuality without the influence of a male's sexual identity, needs, or behaviors. To study lesbian sexuality is to study purely female sexuality. In many ways, it is possible to learn more about female, not just lesbian, sexuality through the study of lesbians than through the study of heterosexual women alone. Therefore, this research stands to offer new discoveries about female sexuality.

Lastly, this researcher hopes to reclaim a healthy, positive perspective on lesbian sexuality as it naturally exists. Among the few studies which have included lesbian sexuality, many have highlighted the infrequency of sexual activity as a problematic or dysfunctional aspect of lesbian relationships. The negative images of lesbian sexuality have also been perpetuated through the widespread use of the disparaging idea of lesbian bed death. Lesbian sexuality has been viewed through the lens of heterosexual standards for sexual activity, causing a distorted and inaccurate understanding of sex between women. The only way to find out what is healthy sexuality for lesbians is to find out what satisfied lesbians are thinking, feeling, and doing in their sexual relationships. That is the goal of this paper.

CHAPTER TWO

A BRIEF LOOK AT LESBIAN HISTORY

Today we understand a lesbian to be a woman whose primary emotional and sexual attractions are toward other women. However, if you rewind history by one century, the word lesbian slowly disappears from the American vocabulary. Does this mean that lesbian behavior did not exist before this noun was first recorded in 1925? This chapter will explore the history of lesbians in America. A solid understanding of the history of lesbians and the various stages of visibility, invisibility, oppression, and expression over the last two centuries enriches the understanding of this study's research results.

The word lesbian is derived from the home of Sappho, a historically notable resident of the Greek isle Lesbos in the 6th century BC. Sappho was a “great lyric poet whose erotic and romantic verse embraced women as well as men” (Harper 2001, 1). However, it is unlikely that women would have thought of themselves as lesbians in the way lesbians are understood today, as they predated the term itself. There was no social context or prescribed meaning for these behaviors and for this type of sexual identity, thus the women experiencing these feelings were left to define what it meant for themselves.

The first notable appearance of lesbians in American culture appears to coincide with the development of all-women's colleges in 1837. These schools offered freedom and opportunity for lesbians who could afford an education. Wealthy young women could now go to school and leave behind the pressures associated with marriage and reproduction. According to Lillian Faderman, “while only ten percent of American women in general

remained single between 1880 and 1900...fifty-seven percent of the Smith graduating class of 1884 never married” (1991, 14-15). Some went unwed because their education was viewed as a threat to men, while others never married because they preferred to maintain their school relationships with *kindred spirits* (Faderman 1991, 14-15).

The types of relationships that developed between women in these early years were considered to be romantic friendships. As Teresa Theophano notes, “women were often considered not to have strong sex drives—sex for them was supposedly a duty, and intended for procreation only—nothing was deemed wrong with women's public displays of affection. Neither were their sharing households and even beds considered suspicious” (2004, 1).

When two women created a home together, without a male presence, their living arrangement was referred to as a Boston marriage. Though most historians have opted to exclude the romantic nature of these cohabiting friendships, it is unknown if, or how many of, these women were sexual with one another. Theophano states that “it is very likely that some, if not all, of marriage couples were physically as well as emotionally involved.” She goes on to say that “Their love letters to each other often indicate a passion that could hardly be considered platonic” (2004, 1).

Boston marriages were an outgrowth of the romantic friendships, and “for the career woman of the late 19th century, a time when female same sex relationships were not yet widely stigmatized as ‘lesbian,’ such ‘marriages’ made sense” (Rothblum and Brehony 1993, 30). The women commonly found in Boston marriages were career women, independent and self-sufficient; it made sense that they would live together, share meals, vacations, and all of their free time.

These relationships were viewed as acceptable by the mainstream society because it was assumed that women are sexually oriented to men only. Furthermore, a woman's sexuality was viewed as a means for procreation, as well as an accessory to the needs of men. The notion that a woman would pursue sexual pleasure for the sake of personal pleasure was unheard of, let alone that they would set about this pursuit with another woman. Furthermore, there was no backdrop of homosexuality to which their behaviors could be compared. Homosexuality as it is understood today did not exist during this era of Boston marriages.

Not only was there a lack of vocabulary to describe lesbians, but there was also no classification system for their sexual behavior and attractions, either. Without relevant language or a cultural context to codify these desires, it is difficult to know how the women in these relationships viewed their feelings and attractions for one another.

Love letters between women in these relationships “often indicate a passion that could hardly be considered platonic, and modern lesbian historians and writers have speculated that if members of Boston marriages were alive today, they would openly identify as lesbian” (Theophano 2004, 1). However, what might be viewed as lesbian behavior when observed through a 21st century lens could not have been viewed in the same way through a 19th century lens. Even if the behaviors are similar, the perspective through which they were regarded is not.

Romantic friendships and Boston marriages lost their innocuousness in the late 19th century when Havelock Ellis, a British physician and psychiatrist, and the German sexologist named Magnus Hirschfeld began publishing works that categorized lesbian behaviors. Unfortunately, these early pioneers of sexuality identified lesbian behaviors as a

medical illness, and ultimately lesbians were thought to be exhibiting a form of insanity (Faderman 1991). Women who were romantically involved with one another during this time came to be known as sexual inverts. This term reflects the belief that same-sex attractions indicated a defect, or deviance, and also implies a gender role reversal. According to the German sexologist, Richard Von Krafft-Ebing, female inverts were inclined to dress in more masculine attire and engage in more traditional male pursuits (Doan 2001). Sexual inversion was considered a class issue and the result of poor genetic breeding and poverty.

Particular emphasis was placed on the masculinity of these women, as well as on their rejection of the submissive role women were expected to play. This led to a perception that inverts were akin to a man trapped in a woman's body, or as a third sex. According to Lisa Dugan, a lesbian was "a woman whose sexual deviance was marked primarily by feelings that distinguished her from the prostitute, criminal, primitive, or degraded female. Her difference was not sited in her sexual actions... but in her being, located in both body and psyche from which the telltale feelings arose" (Duggan 2000, 169).

The term *third sex* was used by various authors in the twentieth century, but its popularity was primarily due to Hirschfeld despite the fact that he never used this concept in his scientific publications. Bauer states that, "for Hirschfeld a third sexual alternative implied, in the last resort, the addition of a further 'fiction' to already fictitious categories, [but] its postulation never led him to revoke his fundamental insight that all human beings are intersexual variants" (2004, 2). Hirschfeld believed that all men and women are created on a continuum of inherently masculine and feminine characteristics, and that the categories of male and female contrived by society were fictitious. Thus his

intention in creating the concept of a third sex was to extend the absurdity of classifying gender at all, according to the idea that humans were created with the capacity to express either or both aspects of gender.

While the term sexual invert was certainly a repressive label, the unintended outcome of this classification system for sexual identity ultimately benefited gay men and lesbians. This label served as a basis for a shared identity, offering women the awareness that there were others—that she was not alone. Writings during this time, such as Krafft-Ebbing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*, clearly produced the notion that people could and did have sexual identities. Some men and women began to interpret their homosexual desires as a characteristic that distinguished them from the majority (D'Emilio and Freedman 1997). Two things happened as a consequence. Sexual identity became more visible to both the general population and to individuals with same-sex attractions, and gays and lesbians were stigmatized as deviant individuals.

Radclyffe Hall, an independently wealthy female who self-identified as an invert, wrote *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928. *The Well of Loneliness* is a lesbian novel that details the life of a lesbian, highlighting the belief that homosexuality is congenital. Her novel portrays lesbians as persecuted and unfairly treated by society. With direct references to sexual intimacy between women, including lines such as, “that night they were not divided,” the book was met with resistance despite the fact that the initial sales and reviews were successful (Hall 2005, 284). Hall blazed new and uncharted paths for other female writers of this era to treat sexuality in more vivid terms.

According to Joanne Glasgow (2002), Hall lived her lesbianism openly and proudly. She was convinced that her inversion was congenital, a concept she absorbed

from the work of Havelock Ellis. In her forties, she began to dress in a style appropriate to her self-identification with the concept of the third sex, and she preferred to be called John. Her hair was close-cropped; she wore tailored jackets as well as flamboyant shirts. She also wore wide-brimmed hats and ties (Glasgow 2002).

The next major development in the history of lesbians came with World War I (WWI) which took place from 1914 to 1918. The increase of women in the workforce during WWI led to a small, working class lesbian subculture. When young women would leave their families and move to cities for work, they could pair up with other women to save money on housing, and they would often remain paired for long periods of time. This was the moment that a more social, more public lesbian subculture began to sprout.

When women would go out to socialize, one would commonly dress in men's clothes and take the male role, emulating heterosexual couples. This led to the development of butch-femme roles. It is arguable that “during the period of the 1940s through the early 1960s, butches and femmes were easiest to recognize and characterize: butches with their men's clothing, DA haircuts, and suave manners often found their more traditionally styled femme counterparts, wearing dresses, high heels, and makeup, in the gay bars” (Theophano 2004, 1).

Class differences were closely associated with gender role differences at the time. The more butch lesbians, or those who passed as males, were typically socially and economically lower class women. The romantic friendships between women that were not marked by butch-femme roles, however, were predominately found among upper class, white women (Vicus 1993).

WWII took enormous amounts of women out of homes, into the workforce, and

into the service. This brought new freedom to women who were previously tethered to their hometowns and domestic responsibilities that centered on the needs of men and children. It also provided greater access to large groups of women in the workplace. Unlike during WWI, these women entering the workforce and the service were not sheltered by the innocence of romantic friendships. Terms like romantic friendship and Boston marriage were no longer used.

Following WWII, the military became less lenient in their policies toward homosexuals, and as Faderman shares, “thousands of homosexual personnel were loaded on ‘queer ships’ and sent with ‘undesirable’ discharges to the nearest U.S. port such as New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Boston” (1991, 126). Ironically, the government helped facilitate the creation of a gay community. Once these men and women were dishonorably discharged to cities; they simply set up their lives in the larger cities rather than returning home with the stigma of a dishonorable discharge for homosexuality. The concentration of larger groups of gays and lesbians in these cities then led to the development of gay bars.

The development of gay bars served to further define gender roles of butch and femme among lesbians. This provided cover to women who could pass as male, leading others to believe they were heterosexual couples. It also clarified roles about who would lead when dancing, which translated into other roles related to gender that were commonplace at the time.

Eventually the mental health field inserted itself, offering up an image of lesbians as *sicko's* (Faderman 1991, 130). Frank Caprio, described by Faderman in quotes as a *lesbian expert*, asserted that lesbians were unable to attain true happiness, and were not

only a menace to society, but a harm to themselves as well. Sadly, the definition of lesbianism was sourced primarily from the records of patients in need of mental health care, which Faderman compares to “defining heterosexuality through divorce court records” (1991, 132).

According to Faderman, in the years between 1947 and 1950, “4,954 men and women were dismissed from the armed forces and civilian cities for being homosexual” (1991, 140). This was followed by a witch hunt instigated under the leadership of Senator Joseph McCarthy, who sought to root out all of the lesbians and gay men in the American Armed Forces. In turn, this encouraged gay men and lesbians to pair up and present themselves as heterosexual couples, and hide the truth from their parents (1991). Similar to the introduction of classifications by early sexologists, this persecution of gays and lesbians inadvertently assisted gays and lesbians in creating an identity and increased self-awareness about their sexual identity.

The 1950s and 60s were marked by various subcultures of lesbians that were distinguished primarily by class and age. Unlike other minorities, lesbians did not have a shared history or geography. Without these, it was a struggle to find communities of like women. Then came softball. Working class lesbians in the 50s and 60s developed softball teams, some of which were all-lesbian, others of which were predominantly heterosexual with a few lesbians. Many lesbians formed teams and also attended the games that were forming all over the country. Gay bars were still a key part of the subculture, though these were frequently visited by undercover agents seeking to support a “vigorous new campaign against bars catering to homosexuals” (Faderman 1991, 164).

Without models to fashion their relationships after, lesbians were left to mirror

what they saw transpiring between heterosexuals. This further reinforced butch and femme roles within lesbian relationships. These roles eventually developed into a social structure for lesbians and, similar to the heterosexual structure, butches found an affinity with other butches and the femmes with femmes. According to Faderman, in some parts of the country butches and femmes were called *masons* and *orders* or *butch* and *Marge*. Their paths would only cross for romantic purposes, much like the paths of heterosexual males and females during that generation.

Wealthy lesbians did not tend to adopt the same butch and femme roles in public, and were also less likely to follow this pattern in their love lives. In fact, Faderman reports that these women “seem sometimes to have found butch/femme roles and dress aesthetically repulsive” (1991, 175). Eventually a clash between these groups formed, as “a good deal of hostility developed between those who did and did not conform to roles.” In fact, Faderman explains, “Butches and femmes laughed at middle-class ‘kiki’ women for their ‘wishy-washy’ self-preservation” (1991, 179). *Kiki* was the name used to describe the gender pairings of two femme partners or two butch partners.

In this fractious atmosphere, the first all-lesbian organization was founded in the early 1950s by a lesbian couple, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, called the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB). The aim of this San Francisco based club was to fill the role of a social club outside of the gay bar setting. Shortly after developing, the club expanded its interests to include righting the wrongs of their persecution and oppression. This was the start of political and social organizing for lesbians, and the DOB expanded to include chapters in other cities. Ultimately the DOB dissolved in the 70s as the feminist movement gained momentum. Leaders and members of the DOB felt equally conflicted

about whether they should maintain a lesbian focus or expand the group's function to include women's issues.

Entertainment during this era included such lesbian themed movies as *Lilith* in 1964. The movie relates the story of a lesbian affair between two patients of a mental institution, which ends after one of the partners is rescued from her lesbianism by a man, played by Warren Beatty, with whom she also has sex. This was followed in 1968 by *The Fox*, a movie chronicling another doomed lesbian couple. *The Fox*, however, drew more explicit attention to the sexual nature of the lesbian couple's relationship. Also during this time, Jane Rule wrote the book *Desert of the Heart*, which later provided loose inspiration for the popular lesbian film, *Desert Hearts*.

During the transitional time between the 1960s and 70s, America entered an age of sexual experimentation and openness that contributed to greater activism among gays and lesbians. In 1969, the Stonewall Riot erupted between patrons and police when a gay bar in Greenwich Village, called the Stonewall Inn, was raided. This era of sexual experimentation and openness also precipitated an increase in feminist activism and the creation of organizations such as the National Organization of Women (NOW). This brought lesbians further into public awareness, but the focus on feminism drove a wedge between gay men and lesbians. Women of all sexual orientations joined together in opposition of the oppressive nature of gender roles, expressed in part by their judgment of the "violent, self-destructive world of the gay bars," and the "imitation role stereotypes of a 'butch' and 'femme'" in the gay community (Faderman 1991, 212).

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). From the inception of the

DSM in 1952, homosexuality topped the list of *deviant sexuality* which included behaviors such as pedophilia, sexual assault, and mutilation. The removal of homosexuality from the DSM liberated gay men and lesbians from the threat of being institutionalized for their same-sex attractions and relationships.

This same year, the women's music label Olivia Records came onto the scene, and lesbian author Rita Mae Brown published her semi-autobiographical book titled *Rubyfruit Jungle*. Then came women's music festivals, which were laced with political overtones, and women's presses with newspapers, magazines, and lesbian-feminist book publishing houses designed to speak to lesbians. Chenier sums it up well with, "Lesbian feminism had a tremendous impact on the personal and political experiences of more than one generation of women. In 1972 a woman could be institutionalized for having sex with another woman; by 1973 she could buy lesbian records, read lesbian books, and attend women-only lesbian events" (2004, 3).

The 70's also included the development of grassroots advocacy organizations such as the Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Lambda Legal, and the National Center for Lesbian Rights. These organizations are still going strong today, and along with many others, they began laying the groundwork for change long before the results of their efforts were as obvious as they are today.

Cultural feminists entered the stage in the 80s with a growing awareness of lower sex drives between women that were broadcast in the book *American Couples*. Research by Blumstein and Schwartz regarding the sexual frequency of four main couple dyads (married heterosexuals, cohabitating heterosexuals, gay male couples, and lesbians) was published in 1983, revealing that lesbians have the least amount of sex of any of the four

couple dyads. This news was coming at a time that cultural feminists believed “lesbians should permit themselves only sexual interests that reflect superior female ideas” (Faderman 1991, 250). This meant the rejection of any images of domination, control, and violence, as these were viewed as sexual stimuli for men. Meanwhile, as feminists were downplaying the role of sexuality, a group of sexual radicals were “encouraging lesbian interest in pornography and even strip shows and certain forms of violent (albeit consensual) sex, [as] cultural feminists felt betrayed and furious” (Faderman 1991, 255).

On the other hand, the lesbian sexual radicals “criticized the cultural feminists for reinforcing traditional concepts of gender instead of encouraging women to try to gain new access to what has historically been a main bastion of male privilege—freewheeling sexuality” (Faderman 1991, 252). The period of time between 1980 and 1990 is often characterized as a “battle between ‘pro-sex’ and ‘anti-sex’ forces, but arguments over how to address problems of sexual violence and oppression, while at the same time giving consideration to female sexual pleasure and autonomy, were much more complex than such labels suggest” (Chenier 2004, 1).

New behaviors around sadomasochism (s/m) were adopted from gay men, one of which was wearing a handkerchief to signify dominance or submissiveness, as well as wearing leather to signify a preference for s/m. Casual sex, lesbian strip shows, lesbian sex films, burlesque shows, porno magazines, and lesbian personal ads were all influenced in the 80s by lesbian sexual radicals. Unfortunately, just as the cultural feminists were making progress toward liberating the sexuality of women, AIDS was introduced to the United States, and served to change the entire culture’s view of sexual freedom and experimentation.

The 80s introduced musicians Melissa Etheridge and K.D. Lang with their androgynous look to the popular music scene, though neither came out publically during this time. In 1983 *Personal Best*, a lesbian-themed love story starring Mariel Hemingway, hit the theaters, offering audiences a front row view of lesbian love.

With the divorce rate increasing in the 70s, single parent homes became more commonplace in the 80s. This opened a door for lesbians to entertain thoughts of parenthood. While this was unthinkable to generations before, the numerous sperm banks created in the 80s for heterosexual couples created a new pathway for lesbians to create families without involving a man. With increasing numbers of lesbians giving birth to or adopting children, the image of lesbians as moms added a newer, more relatable dimension to lesbians. To mainstream society, what it meant to be a lesbian was unknown. What it meant to be a mom was familiar. Even though lesbian parenting was, and in many cases still is, discouraged by the general public, the additional mom role allowed more non-gay people to get to know more lesbians, unifying the two groups through the shared language of parenthood.

Though the first same-sex marriage case was filed in 1970 shortly after the Stonewall riots, it was denied, detouring future effort for same sex marriage for another twenty years. The 90s are marked by a new focus on gay marriage, with both supporters and oppositional forces dedicating much energy to the issue. In 1996 the US Congress preemptively passed a law that defined marriage as a union between one man and one woman. This was titled the Defense of Marriage Act, and is commonly known as DOMA. While progress toward marriage equality was delayed by this act, it did not prevent movement toward the protection of lesbian relationships.

The 90s was a decade of unprecedented visibility for gays and lesbians. Athletes like tennis star Martina Navratilova and diver Greg Louganis joined musicians like K. D. Lang, George Michael, and Melissa Etheridge in the risk to go public about their sexual orientation. The risk proved worthwhile for some, as “Etheridge's spontaneous decision to come out publicly received press coverage but had no adverse effect on her career. Two months after the announcement she won her first Grammy” (Rapp 2002, 2). The big screen presented audiences with gay characters on a regular basis throughout the 90s, too. Most of the characters were male, and conformed to exaggerated stereotypes of gay men in films such as *Philadelphia*, *Birdcage*, *In and Out*, and *My Best Friend's Wedding*.

Television was another source of increasing visibility for lesbians in the 90s. In 1997 Ellen DeGeneres came out on her sitcom *Ellen*, and then *Will & Grace*, premiered in 1998, running for a total of eight seasons. The increasing visibility of gays and lesbians was difficult for some to tolerate. Even children's shows were the target of criticism. In 1999 Rev. Jerry Falwell cautioned parents that the purple Teletubby named Tinky Winky was gay, and that this could be damaging to their children's moral lives (Rapp 2002).

Currently, twenty-one states plus the District of Columbia offer some level of rights to same sex couples, with nearly half of these providing state-issued marriage licenses. However, the struggle for relationship equality is still far from the finish line. Just recently, President Barack Obama reversed his position on same-sex marriage, stating he is now supportive. This endorsement is progress. However, lesbian couples are still without federal benefits, some of the most important benefits available. These include social security benefits for surviving partners and other tax benefits available to heterosexual spouses.

Progress in the 21st century for lesbians seems to be building on the momentum of this growing visibility. According to a CBS News Poll analysis, in 2010 seventy-seven percent of people knew someone gay or lesbian. In 1992, just twenty years ago, only forty-two percent of people knew someone gay. People fear what they do not know. The greater the visibility is for lesbians, the greater acceptance lesbians experience.

While lesbians are still struggling for equality, both as women and as lovers of women, it is fair to say that today's lesbian has privileges and protections that extend leaps and bounds beyond those of her 19th and 20th century sisters. This is not to suggest that homophobia, or the fear of homosexuality, is not still alive in the United States. Current signs of homophobia are visible in conservative politics that reject homosexuality as a viable relationship option and oppose marriage equality as well as other important legislation in favor of gays and lesbians. There are religions that espouse the dangers of homosexuality as sin and seek to repair these character flaws through prayer and behavior change programs called reparative therapy. Reparative therapy is a strongly debated form of therapy used to convert self-identified homosexuals to heterosexuals. This type of therapy is not supported by most major counseling associations such as the American Counseling Association, the American Psychological Association, and the American Psychiatric Association. Some families reject their lesbian daughters and sisters, and there have been cases of teenaged bullies driving their gay and lesbian peers to take their own lives.

There is hope with every new generation of young people that times are changing. The majority of prime time television shows now have a gay or lesbian character whose sexual orientation is nothing more than a backdrop to the story, rather than the story

itself. Women are now openly lesbian in various public capacities as politicians, executives, doctors, entertainers, athletes, musicians, lawyers, teachers, moms, neighbors, friends, and even strangers. Laws exist to protect same-sex parents in some states with second-parent adoptions, and it is legal to get married in other states. Rather than risking admission to a mental institution, many lesbians are now employed by such institutions.

With an expanded understanding of lesbian history in America, it is easy to understand how the sexuality of lesbians might come with some baggage. It is clear that each era brought important, new developments for the growth of lesbians in our culture. Through the romantic friendships and the Boston marriage, early lesbians unknowingly set the stage for what would soon become the modern lesbian relationship. Ironically, they experienced more acceptance than any generation to follow, yet it appears they may not have experienced the inclusion of a sexual relationship, or if they did, they kept it hidden.

In conclusion, the post-WWII era introduced lesbians to one another and gave rise to shared lesbian communities, organizations, and politics. Lesbians were learning how to establish lives together, socialize, and gather, thanks to gay bars. While this era was not marked by a strong focus on sexuality, it, too, was an important part of lesbian history.

Finally, the 70s was the era during which lesbian sexuality slowly grew into the collective consciousness of lesbianism. At last came an era where sexual experimentation and exploration was encouraged. Then, once lesbian sex became a hotly debated topic among pro-sex and anti-sex feminists, AIDS arrived on the scene, dampening the emphasis on sexual freedom and experimentation. Around the same time, researchers Blumstein and Schwartz drew attention to the paucity of sex between lesbians in their book *American Couples*, and the world was introduced to the notion that lesbian

relationships were devoid of sex.

While research about lesbian sexuality suggests that lesbians have not gained much ground in their sexual relationships over the last decade as it relates to perceptions of sexual frequency, this author believes that lesbian sexuality is in its infancy when considered as part of the larger history of lesbians and women's sexuality in general. For centuries men have not only been expected to be sexual, they have been encouraged and applauded for their sexual prowess. Conversely, women have been sheltered from talk of sex and taught that it's not a ladylike topic of discussion. Women have been shamed for experimenting sexually and labeled as promiscuous rather than applauded for their conquests. Though much progress has been made for women's sexuality, it is important to keep the whole picture in perspective by grounding it in its history.

With a sufficient introduction to the American lesbian and her roots, it is time to consider the research on which this paper is based. The next chapter will introduce the research study and describe the survey, the population studied, and the demographics of study participants.

CHAPTER THREE

INTRODUCTION TO STUDY

Sex between women has not been well researched, and consequently it has not been well understood. This study represents a very narrow examination of one aspect of lesbian sexuality, that of sexual frequency. Does sexual frequency correlate with relationship satisfaction? That is the question this research is designed to answer. This chapter will discuss the research method, participant recruitment strategies, and an overview of the collected sample.

Research Method

The research method used in this study was an online survey. The survey was designed with internet-based software available at surveygizmo.com, and is titled *Lesbian Sex: Frequency vs. Satisfaction*. Twenty-five questions were included in the survey. The survey software estimated this task would take roughly nine minutes to complete. Twenty of the questions were multiple choice answers, and four of these multiple choice questions allowed participants to type in their own answer when they chose “other.” Two questions were fill-in-the-blank, and three were matrix questions that utilized a rating scale for different variables.

While there is only one survey, there are two versions of this survey that depend on how participants answer question number three. This question asks, “What is the length of your current or most recent relationship?” If women report that they have never had a relationship, the survey automatically jumps from question three to question

thirteen. These nine questions are skipped because they are all related to intimate partnerships with women, and as such are not applicable to women who have never had an intimate partnership.

The survey begins with an inquiry about how lesbians define sex. This question was placed first in an attempt to pique the interest of the survey participant, creating curiosity about what else the survey will ask. Question one lists the most commonly reported sexually related practices among lesbians, and asks the survey participant to select all of the behaviors on the list that she considers to be sex. The development of this question was based on two contemporary books about lesbian sex. The first book is Felice Newman's *The Whole Lesbian Sex Book: A Passionate Guide for All of Us*, which details a long list of what she refers to as *erotic play*. The second book is *The New Lesbian Sex Book* by Wendy Caster, which is another extensive overview of the sexual activity of contemporary lesbians.

The next three questions cover sexual orientation, length of relationship, and whether or not the relationship is open to outside partners. Strategically placed to instill confidence that the survey will be easy and quick to complete, these questions require little thought, and can be quickly answered. The survey starts to get more personal with questions five and six. Question five asks the participant how she characterizes her need, or lack thereof, to have sex with her partner. Question six inquires about the perceived pleasure associated with sex with her partner. These questions will likely cause the survey participant some pause as she evaluates her feelings.

The survey's most time consuming question is question number seven, which is designed to reveal the specific sexual behaviors of lesbians, as well as the frequency with

which they engage in these behaviors. Like question number one, this question was developed by reading contemporary books on lesbian sex. Fourteen different behaviors were assessed to determine how regularly, if ever, lesbians engage in these behaviors. Included in the options are kissing, finger sex, foreplay, oral sex, penetration/vibrator use, humping or tribadism, multiple orgasms, mutual masturbation, use of erotica or porn, anal sex, fisting, phone or internet sex, adding a third person, and sadomasochism (S & M)/ bondage.

Questions eight through twelve are all about sexual frequency. Questions eight and nine are fill-in-the-blank questions. A fill-in-the-blank question encourages participants to reflect more diligently before they answer. In question eight, the participant provides the number of times she had sex with her partner in the last six months. In question nine, she enters the number of times she desired to have sex with her partner in the last six months. This allowed for a very thorough comparison between how much sex each woman is having and how much sex she would like to be having. Also related to sexual frequency is question nine, which targets the frequency of sex with people outside of her relationship. Completing the inquiry regarding sexual frequency are questions eleven and twelve, which address changes in sexual frequency over the course of the relationship.

Attention turns to the characteristics of a relationship that lesbians consider important. Question thirteen is presented in a matrix format, and asks participants to rate the importance of eight key relationship components which include physical/sexual connection, emotional connection, intellectual compatibility, spiritual connection, social compatibility, sexual frequency, physical pleasure during sex, time spent during sexual encounters, and overall relationship satisfaction.

The next six questions address a variety of issues. Fourteen through sixteen gather

facts about masturbation, orgasms, and the length of time spent engaged in sexual activity with one's partner. Question seventeen inquires about relationship satisfaction, using the same ratings and categories of satisfaction that were used when rating the *importance* of these relationship characteristics in question thirteen. Question eighteen inquires about the perception of importance in sexual frequency to lesbians in general, asking if participants think that most lesbians view sexual frequency as an important part of a satisfying relationship. This question is designed to assess the cultural imprint among women as it relates to what they think is going on with other lesbians when it comes to the importance of sexual frequency. Number nineteen asks whether one of her relationships has ever ended because of sexual issues. This was designed to gain insight about whether or not sexual conflicts cause a significant portion of lesbian relationships to end.

The survey winds down with questions twenty through twenty-five. All of these questions are demographic in nature, asking about each woman's living situation, home country, home state, age, race, and how she heard about the survey. All of these are quick and easy multiple choice questions.

Recruitment

The survey was made available for public view on September 26, 2011. This researcher used three key sources to recruit lesbians to take the survey. The sources used for outreach were email, Facebook, and word of mouth. A deadline of one month was established to gather all survey responses.

On September 26th, this researcher composed an email (see appendix A) to be sent to roughly 3,000 of her professional contacts, which included followers of her blog,

clients, friends of clients, and anyone else who registered to receive her free monthly newsletter. The email started with the question, “Are lesbian couples who have frequent sex more satisfied with their relationship than those who have sex less often, or never?” This question was followed by a brief explanation that this researcher was conducting a study on this topic and a request for women to participate. Women were also encouraged to share information about this survey with other women that identify as lesbian. The email included a link to the internet address which allowed readers to go directly to the online survey. The survey was available online twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week for one month between September 26 and October 26, 2011.

After launching the email, recruitment efforts were directed to Facebook, a popular social networking site online, to spread the word even further. On the same day the email went out, this researcher posted information to her own Facebook page which had the potential to reach 500+ people known as “friends” on Facebook. The post read:

Do you think sexual frequency correlates with relationship satisfaction for lesbians? That's my dissertation question, and I would love to have your voice in my research. This 25 question anonymous survey takes approximately 9 minutes. Will you complete this and pass the link along to your lesbian friends? I hope so!
Thank you ...
<http://edu.surveymoz.com/s3/591169/b5e2bf0027a4>

All of the members of Facebook who saw this post were then able to follow a link directly to the survey, or to share the post with others via their own Facebook page by reposting the link, which would lengthen the survey’s reach to include a whole new set of people. Facebook was instrumental in extending the survey to the friends of friends, widening the geographic reach.

The final recruitment method was word of mouth. This researcher requested the help of others, including professionals in the field such as sexologist and committee chair Dr. Charlayne Grenci and committee members Dr. Joe Kort and Dr. Claudia Rieman. Word of mouth also included outreach to classmates from the American Academy of Clinical Sexologists who lived in other states as well as personal contacts and friends that were asked directly to help spread the word about the survey.

Initially, the goal was set to get a minimum of 300 completed survey responses. Upon further study, this researcher discovered that there is an error rate involved in survey validity that decreases with each survey accumulated. For example, if 300 respondents completed the survey, there is an error rate of 5.8 percent (Dominowski and Bartholet 1997). This means that the conclusions drawn from the survey may be off by 5.8 percent in either direction the question swings. Consequently, the more surveys collected, the lower the rate of error. To reach an error rate of no more than five percent, this researcher adjusted the survey response goal to a minimum of 400 surveys, and set an ideal goal of 500 surveys.

The Sample

Word about the survey spread quickly. By day five (September 30, 2011) a total of 281 surveys were completed. On October 26, the survey closed with 498 completed responses. The deadline was established to ensure adequate time to complete the study and analyze the results.

The age of participants ranges from age eighteen to sixty years and beyond. The majority of women who responded to the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey are between

the ages of thirty-one and fifty. The sample is not racially diverse, as ninety percent of participants are Caucasian. The sample includes women whose current or most recent relationship length ranges from never having been in a relationship to partnerships lasting twenty-one years or more. The majority of women, sixty-four percent, have been in their current or most recent relationship between one and ten years. Sixty-seven percent of survey responses came from women who live with their partner, and roughly forty percent of these women also have children in the home.

Only fourteen, or three percent, of the 476 survey respondents who answered question twenty-one were from outside of the U.S. Of these fourteen, four were from the United Kingdom, three from Canada, two each from Australia and Brazil, and one each from Spain, France, and Afghanistan. Because this researcher is Indiana-based, and many of her contacts were local, the majority of survey responses came from Indiana residents. Interestingly, of the fifty states (plus the District of Columbia), only nine are not represented by a survey. The states with no representation in this research are: Alaska, Delaware, Hawaii, Kansas, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Oklahoma, and Virginia.

This means that forty-one percent of the remaining surveys were scattered among forty-one additional states. Only six of the forty-one states had ten or more survey responses, and these states are Florida (nineteen responses), Illinois (sixteen), District of Columbia (eleven), Kentucky (eleven), Pennsylvania (eleven), and Ohio (ten). Indiana is clearly over-represented; however, the remaining forty-percent of the responses offer significant geographic diversity.

Table 1. Demographics of Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey Respondents

		Number of Women	Percentage of Women
Age	Between 18-21 Years	7	2%
	Between 21-30	56	12%
	Between 31-40	131	28%
	Between 41-50	182	39%
	Between 51-60	77	16%
	Over 60	18	4%
Race	Caucasian	428	90%
	Black/African-American	23	5%
	Declined to Respond	13	3%
	Other/Multi-Racial	7	2%
	Hispanic	6	1%
	Asian/Pacific Islander	1	< 1%
Length of Relationship	Never Had Relationship with Woman	4	1%
	Less than Six Months	47	10%
	Six to Eleven Months	97	10%
	One to Two Years	89	18%
	Three to Five Years	126	26%
	Six to Ten Years	51	20%
	Eleven to Twenty Years	61	12%
	Twenty One Years or More	18	4%
Living Status	Live with Partner, No Kids	177	37%
	Live with Partner and Kids	104	22%
	Have Own Place, Spend a Few Nights Per Week with Partner	55	12%
	Long-Distance Relationship	32	7%
	Have Own Place, Spend Most Nights Per Week with Partner	24	5%
	Live with Ex-Girlfriend	4	1%
	Do Not Have a Partner	79	17%

Table 2. Countries Represented by a Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey

Country	Number of Surveys	Percentage of Surveys
United States	462	97%
United Kingdom	4	1%
Canada	3	< 1%
Australia	2	< 1%
Brazil	2	< 1%
Spain	1	< 1%
France	1	< 1%
Afghanistan	1	< 1%

Table 3. Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey Responses by State

State	Number of Surveys	Percentage of Surveys	State	Number of Surveys	Percentage of Surveys
Indiana	271	61%	Nebraska	3	1%
Florida	19	4%	Oregon	3	1%
Illinois	16	4%	Utah	3	1%
District of Columbia	11	2%	Washington	3	1%
Pennsylvania	11	2%	Wisconsin	3	1%
Ohio	10	2%	Alabama	2	0%
Michigan	9	2%	Arizona	2	0%
California	8	2%	Georgia	2	0%
Massachusetts	7	2%	Missouri	2	0%
South Carolina	7	2%	New Mexico	2	0%
Texas	6	1%	Rhode Island	2	0%
Maryland	5	1%	Vermont	2	0%
New York	5	1%	Wyoming	2	0%
North Carolina	5	1%	Idaho	1	0%
Tennessee	5	1%	Maine	1	0%
Colorado	4	1%	New Hampshire	1	0%
Louisiana	4	1%	New Jersey	1	0%
Minnesota	4	1%	South Dakota	1	0%
Connecticut	3	1%	West Virginia	1	0%

Once the surveys were complete, the responses were run through a statistical analysis program called SPSS. With the assistance of Jennifer Bouchard, who holds a master's degree in research methodology, numerous reports were generated for analysis. The results of this analysis were divided into six sections, with one chapter dedicated to each of the six areas of concern for this study. The first area of concern is how lesbian sex is defined. This will be the focus of the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

DEFINING LESBIAN SEX

“I did not have sexual relations with that woman” is a well-known phrase coined by former president Bill Clinton when he was accused of having sex with his intern, Monica Lewinsky. The American people eventually learned that his denial of sex was based on the fact that it was a cigar, not his penis, which he inserted in Miss Lewinsky’s vagina. Apparently, defining sex between a man and a woman is no easy task. Defining lesbian sex is more complicated. Logic suggests that it is best explained by those having it; therefore, the research participants in this study were asked to identify what they consider to be sex. This chapter provides an overview of select publications that influenced the definition of lesbian sex in the last half century, and establishes the definition of lesbian sex according to the participants who took this survey.

Influential Books About Lesbian Sex

Books that have been published over the last sixty years provide a glimpse at how lesbian sex was initially defined, and of how it has evolved over time. Some of the books that influenced the definition of sex are publications of large scale research, such as Alfred Kinsey et al.’s famous studies. Some of the books are how-to books that provide instruction for a woman seeking to have sex with another woman. Other books that have influenced the definition of lesbian sex approach the topic from a place of self-help, and emphasize sexual problems among lesbians. One of the books is a lesbian sex photo book by an artist who has greatly influenced the definition of sex through her illustrations.

The most influential book among these books is *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* by Kinsey et al. This is the first serious inquiry into lesbian sexual behavior on a large scale basis, and was published in 1953. Kinsey et al.'s research is described as a fifteen-year study that "has been a fact-finding survey in which an attempt has been made to discover what people do sexually" (Kinsey et al. 1953, 3). The majority of the research in his book is based on the case studies of 5,940 white females. Chapter eleven is titled "Homosexual Responses and Contacts," and it offers an objective presentation of the facts as gathered from extensive, in-depth interviews of women about their sexual behavior. This resource is not a useful how-to book, or one that a curious lesbian would likely turn to as a resource for greater understanding about her own sexuality. It is an 842 page academic report that covers, in detail, a fifteen year study of women's sexuality.

In addition to establishing that lesbians do have sex, Kinsey et al. presents a non-pathologizing perspective on lesbian sexual behaviors, particularly for a period of time that was not accepting of same-sex relationships. Kinsey et al. provides affirming observations about same-sex activity, as he states that "Homosexual contacts between females have been observed in such widely separated species as rats, mice, hamsters, guinea pigs, rabbits, porcupines, marten, cattle, antelope, goats, horses, pigs, lions, sheep, monkeys and chimpanzees" (Kinsey et al. 1953, 449).

Kinsey et al. further validates the experience of lesbian sex by pointing out that "Psychologists and psychiatrists, reflecting the mores of the culture in which they have been raised, have spent a good deal of time trying to explain the origins of homosexual activity; but considering the physiology of sexual response and the mammalian backgrounds of human behavior, it is not so difficult to explain why a human animal does

a particular thing sexually. It is more difficult to explain why each and every individual is not involved in every type of sexual activity” (1953, 451).

In 1975, the first self-published lesbian sex guide by and for lesbians was produced by a group of four women who identified themselves as the Nomadic Sisters. The book is forty-five pages, includes illustrations and how-to information, and is titled *Loving Women*. This book was the first lesbian sex guide published in the United States, and it is not surprising that it coincided with a time when the feminist movement was gaining momentum. This era was marked by the actions of courageous women who were willing to take greater risks to further the social acceptance of lesbians. The Nomadic Sisters were on the cutting edge in 1975, and with this publication, they successfully paved a new path for other authors to begin publishing about lesbian sex.

Maggie Jochild explains that there were hundreds of publications during this era thanks to newly-developed offset presses. The offset presses were a more affordable printing option, and gave lesbians access to printing without censorship from the male dominated presses. This, in turn, provided lesbian consumers greater access to books and journals. Many of these publications were personally handed from one woman to the next, creating unprecedented outreach of these written words (2008).

In the next relevant, large-scale, published study, Shere Hite reveals the results of original research she conducted in the early 70s on the self-report of 3,019 women who completed her questionnaire on female sexuality. The results were published as *The Hite Report on Female Sexuality* in 1976. Hite’s research was instrumental in changing cultural attitudes about women’s sexuality in general, and her book has had popular appeal with “more than 48 million copies sold worldwide,” according to the cover of her

2004 edition. In Hite's updated version of the book, she states in her introduction that this report "was the first to state the case for a fundamental redefinition of sex, based on equality" (2004, 11).

Lesbians were one of many voices represented in this survey, yet Hite dedicated an entire section of her book to the topic of lesbianism that spanned twenty-one pages. More important is Hite's perspective on homosexual behavior, which states that "Homosexuality, or the desire to be physically intimate with someone of one's own sex at some time, or always, during one's life, can be considered a natural and 'normal' variety of life experience. It is 'abnormal' only when you posit as 'normal' and 'healthy' only an interest in reproductive sex. Discussions of why one becomes heterosexual would come to the same non-conclusions. To consider all non-reproductive sexual contact 'an error of nature' is a very narrow view" (2004, 313).

The Joy of Lesbian Sex by authors Bertha Harris and Emily Sisley was published in 1977. Groundbreaking for its time, this how-to guide for lesbian sex included graphic illustrations of and instruction for lesbian sex. *The Joy of Lesbian Sex* placed a strong emphasis on the achievement of orgasm. This book is no longer in print, and cannot be easily accessed by women in search of a useful sex manual.

In 1980 a book titled *Sapphistry: The Book of Lesbian Sexuality* by Pat Califia was published. This marks the inception of the lesbian self-help sex book. With chapters titled The Erotic Imagination, Self-Loving, Partners, Communication, Common Sexual Concerns, Youth, Age and Sex, Disabled Lesbians, Sexually Transmitted Diseases, and more, this book covers a lot of ground. The author states, "Nobody assumes you should 'intuitively' know how to cook or 'automatically' know how to build a shelter. Sex is the

only skill we are expected to possess without receiving any instruction” (Califia 1993, 45). Rather than giving readers instruction, Califia provides a general overview of a variety of issues, including specific sexual behaviors.

The first edition of Califia’s book contained artwork by Tee Corinne, a lesbian artist who is credited with being “interested in loving, beautiful, sexy images” (Wilton 2002, 1). Corinne explains about her photos, “I also want the images to be a turn on, create an adrenaline high, a rush of desire so intense that the act of looking is sexual” (Wilton 2002, 1). Corinne also illustrated the first book of lesbian erotic photographs ever published in *Yantras of Womanlove* (1982).

Corinne was considered one of the most visible and accessible lesbian artists in the world, according to the *Completely Queer: The Gay and Lesbian Encyclopedia*. The website 5magzxine.wordpress.com refers to her as the “shy superstar of erotica.” Through art, not words, Corinne made a significant contribution to the emerging understanding of lesbian sex by giving lesbians a visual language that celebrates lesbian sexuality.

The 80s served as a pivotal turning point for lesbians, affecting how their sex lives are viewed both publicly and privately. This cultural shift in perception of lesbian sexuality was based on the work of Blumstein and Schwartz, who co-authored an extensive, large-scale study of four types of couple dyads: heterosexual married couples, heterosexual cohabitating couples, gay male couples, and lesbian couples. Their research was initiated in 1975, and involved the analysis of thousands of questionnaires collected from men and women. They also selected 300 couples for intensive interviewing, of which ninety were lesbian couples.

This research reported that lesbians are the least sexually active of the four couple dyads, and that lesbians experience the greatest decline in sexual activity over the course of their relationships. From this research came the cultural stigma of *lesbian bed death*, a phrase used to describe the low frequency of sexual activity between women. This is a concept that will be further expanded upon in later chapters.

Another well-known book of lesbian import was written during the 80s by Joann Loulan. Her book, *Lesbian Sex*, is a great primer on the topic of lesbian sexuality and intimacy, and it functions as a useful reference book for lesbians seeking understanding for a variety of sexual concerns. Only one chapter in her book is dedicated to the actual sexual activities between women, and is titled “What We Do in Bed.” This fourteen page chapter highlights the sexual behaviors in which lesbians engage without going into much detail about any one of the behaviors.

Loulan’s book reads like a trouble-shooting sex manual for lesbians, and is classified by this researcher as self-help. If a lesbian is non-orgasmic, struggling with coming out, concerned about aging, addiction, or losing desire, there are chapters included to address these and other concerns. Loulan includes numerous exercises to help women relax, increase their enjoyment, and address specific concerns such as vaginismus.

By the 90s the AIDS epidemic was in full swing, casting a sobering effect on how people think about sex in general. This contributed to the decline in new lesbian sex books during the 90s, as there were only two noteworthy books on lesbian sex published during this decade. Caster published *The Lesbian Sex Book* in 1993, which, unlike some of the earlier sex books, was later updated in 2004 and is still in print. It reads very much

like a reference book, and is alphabetically arranged by topics ranging from *afterplay* to *weight* with a wide variety of topics in between.

In 1997, Jeannie Shaw and Virginia Erhardt published a self-help book designed to help couples deepen their sexual connection through various guided exercises, including an assessment of their sexual attitudes, comfort zones, and other topics that allow couples to begin repairing their sexual connection. In 1998, the same book titled *Journey Toward Intimacy: A Handbook for Lesbian Couples* came out under the sole name of Jeannie Shaw.

The turn of the century brought new and more graphic attention to sexual behaviors between women. In 2004, Newman published *The Whole Lesbian Sex Book: A Passionate Guide for All of Us*, and Diana Cage edited a book titled *On Our Backs Guide to Lesbian Sex*. These books are focused specifically on the physical component of sexual relationships, and they are inclusive of sexual behaviors that were not considered acceptable in earlier publications. For example, chapter five in Cage's book is titled "Dyke Dick: Strapping, Packing, Sucking, Fucking" (2004). This is in contrast to Califia's comment in the 80s that "Dildos are probably the most taboo sex toys a lesbian could consider using. Relatively few lesbians have even seen a dildo" (Califia 1988, 51).

Women Loving Women: Appreciating and Exploring the Beauty of Erotic Female Encounters by Jayme Waxman is another lesbian sex book with how-to visuals that came out in 2007. Though it appears at first glance to be a photo book, it does offer suggestions and strategies for women loving women. The author includes heterosexual women in her audience, as well. Three women are photographed in various sexual situations. Sometimes two women are pictured at a time, and sometimes all three.

Though the women are nude throughout most of the book, the photos do not include graphic genital exposure. This book offers a sensual journey through the erotic exploration of loving women, and balances art with instruction. This book would be of help to a novice lesbian seeking guidance for the topic of lesbian sex.

Lesbian Sex: 101 Lovemaking Positions is another lesbian-specific sex book. It was published in 2008 by Jude Schell, and its title explains well what you might expect to find in this resource. It is a photo book that offers a pictorial and written explanation for the various lovemaking positions. Interestingly, if you search “lesbian sex positions” on amazon.com, the largest current online bookseller, the results list shows eighty-six titles, though most of them are unrelated to the actual topic of lesbian sex positions. It appears that only two of the listed books include various lesbian sex positions. If you do the same search for simply *sex positions* without including the word *lesbian*, there are 7, 149 titles returned. When it comes to a query for titles on *lesbian erotica*, however, close to 5,000 options are available. This suggests to this researcher that the market for lesbian erotica is greater than the market for concrete information about lesbian sex. What is unclear, however, is whether or not the audience for this erotica is primarily men, heterosexual women, lesbians, or a combination of all of three.

In 2010, Dr. Glenda Corwin wrote *Sexual Intimacy for Women: A Guide for Same-Sex Couples*. As stated on the back cover, this book helps “female couples examine the emotional, physical, and psychological aspects of their relationships with the goal of creating more intimacy” (Corwin 2010). Like Loulan, Corwin is a therapist, and her book serves to similarly offer solutions and new perspectives on commonly cited issues such as desire discrepancy, body image and weight concerns, sexual abuse and trauma histories, the

impact of age and hormonal changes, issues with fidelity, and the pressures of parenthood.

Sexual intimacy for women is broken into three sections. A quick page count of the three different sections reveals that six percent of the book is related to “just the facts: women, sex, and desire” (Corwin 2010, 6). Forty-three percent of the book involves discussion of “common stumbling blocks to intimacy.” Twenty-four percent of the book is dedicated to “secrets to long lasting intimacy.” It is interesting to note the disproportionate emphasis on obstacles and issues when it comes to lesbian sex in this and other self-help lesbian sex books, such as those of Loulan (1984), Califia (1988), and Shaw (1998).

Most recently, Schell published a third book on lesbian sex titled *Her Sweet Spot*. This sex guide was published in 2011, and is designed to help lovers explore one another sexually with particular attention to the senses. The author encourages and guides the reader to actively engage in a whole-body exploration of the senses in search of her partner’s erogenous zones. This is meant to help lesbian partners achieve greater pleasure and understanding in matters of sex.

In summary, there are very few written resources that support lesbians’ understanding of lesbian sexuality. While there are numerous books on lesbian erotica, and a growing catalogue of videos that include lesbian-themed sexual relationships, the availability of practical, useful, and non-sensationalized or dramatized information about lesbian sex did not begin to gain momentum until the turn of the century.

An accounting of books that influenced the definition of lesbian sex underscores the paucity of information that is available to lesbians about sex. It stands to reason that a definition for lesbian sex would be equally lacking, and that lesbians may not share the

same definition of lesbian sex. Despite the slight increase in attention given to lesbian sex in the last ten years, as of yet there has been no unified, contemporary definition put forth to describe lesbian sex. Perhaps it is not necessary or beneficial to define lesbian sex. Heterosexuals have suffered from an overly restrictive vision of sex, namely that sex must involve penile penetration of the vagina while assuming missionary position. This narrow definition of sex has led a significant population of heterosexuals to lament the lack of diversity in their sex lives. For the purposes of this study, developing a definition of lesbian sex is necessary in order to understand what women are reporting when they answer questions that refer to sex.

Defining Lesbian Sex

As Califia points out in *Saphistry*, “sex is a learned process, not something that just comes naturally” (1988, ix). It makes sense that the generation in which a lesbian is born will influence how she defines sex. The changing definition of lesbian sex is demonstrated by an evolution of how the topic has been addressed in books throughout the years. According to Kinsey et al., the “Techniques in Homosexual Contacts” as he referred to lesbian sex, “often depended on little more than simple lip kissing and generalized body contacts” (1953, 466).

Table 4. List of Books about Lesbian Sex

1st Edition (Latest Edition)	Title	Author	Type
1953	Sexual Behavior in the Human Female	Alfred Kinsey, et al.	Research
1972	Loving Women	Nomadic Sisters	Sex Guide
1976	The Joy of Lesbian Sex	Bertha Harris and Emily Sisley	Sex Guide
1976 (2004)	The Hite Report on Female Sexuality	Shere Hite	Research
1980 (1988)	Sapphisty : The Book of Lesbian Sexuality	Pat Califa	Self-Help
1982	Yantras of Womanlove	Tee Corinne	Photobook
1983	American Couples	Phillip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz	Research
1984	Lesbian Sex	Joann Loulan	Self-Help
1993 (2003)	The Lesbian Sex Book	Wendy Caster	Sex Guide
1997 (1998)	Journey Toward Intimacy: A Handbook for Lesbian Couples	Virginia Erhardt Ph.D. and (Jeanne Shaw only author in 1998)	Self-Help
2002	Lesbian Sex Tips: A Guide for Anyone Who Wants to Bring Pleasure to the Woman She (or He) Loves	Tracey Stevens / Katherine Wunder	Sex Guide
2003	True Secrets of Lesbian Desire: Keeping Sex Alive in Long-Term Relationships	Renate Stendhal	Self-Help
2004	Tantric Sex for Women: A Guide for Lesbian, Bi, Hetero, and Solo Lovers	Christa Schulte	Sex Guide
2004	The Whole Lesbian Sex Book: A Passionate Guide for All of Us	Felice Newman	Sex Guide
2004	On Our Backs Guide to Lesbian Sex	Diana Cage, Editor	Sex Guide
2005 (2008)	Lesbian Sex: 101 Lovemaking Positions	Jude Schell	Sex Guide
2007	Women Loving Women: Appreciating and Exploring the Beauty of Erotic Female Encounters	Jamye Waxman	Sex Guide
2010	Sexual Intimacy for Women: A Guide for Same-Sex Couples	Glenda Corwin	Self-Help
2011	Her Sweet Spot	Jude Schell	Sex Guide

In their book *Lesbian Women*, Martin and Lyon state, “The three most common techniques used in lesbian lovemaking are mutual masturbation, cunnilingus and tribadism” (1972, 54). They also provide a general description of what these behaviors include. For example, mutual masturbation is described by them as “manipulation of the clitoris, caressing the labia, and/or penetration of the vagina by the fingers until sexual excitation or orgasm occurs” (Martin and Lyon 1972, 54). Consistent with much of the writing about sex during this generation, there is an emphasis on orgasm as the end goal.

As the voice of lesbian sex for the 80s, Loulan states that “lesbian sex is anything two lesbians do together” (1984, 47). Loulan shares the belief that lesbians tended to limit their definitions of sex to finger-vagina, or tongue-clitoris, interaction, and even then it only qualifies if accompanied by an orgasm. She states that lesbian sex has been too narrowly defined, and that behaviors as simple as hugging, kissing, caressing, holding hands, or putting arms around each other can also be very sexual (1984).

In 2010, The Kinsey Institute conducted a study to determine how 204 male and 282 female adults conceptualize having had sex. What they discovered is that forty-five percent of their sample classified manual-genital stimulation (finger sex) to be having sex. They also discovered that seventy-one percent of their sample considered oral sex to be sex. Lastly, eighty percent of their sample confirmed that anal-genital intercourse is included in their definition of sex (Sanders et al. 2010). There was no distinction made for the sexual orientation of their survey respondents.

For the purposes of this research, it has been important to establish how the survey respondents define sex in order to establish a shared language about what is being discussed when the concept, word, or behavior called *lesbian sex* is mentioned

throughout this paper. A review of survey responses to question number one will provide the necessary insight about how contemporary lesbians define sex.

Question one on the survey is “I believe I am having lesbian sex if I engage in the following behaviors with another woman...” followed by a series of sexual activities from which to choose. The survey participants were allowed to check all of the following options they considered to be sex: hugging/kissing, sensual body massage (non-genital), humping/ tribadism (moving your body against hers, with or without clothes on, for sexual pleasure), breast stimulation, vaginal penetration (finger, fist, dildo, vibrator, etc.), clitoral stimulation, oral sex, anal sex, S/M or bondage, only activities which result in an orgasm, and any activity that produces sexual pleasure, with or without orgasm.

Based on the survey results of this study, eighty-five percent or more of all lesbians surveyed believe lesbian sex includes one of the following: oral sex, vaginal penetration, or clitoral stimulation. An orgasm is not necessary for the majority of respondents to qualify a behavior as sex. Only eleven percent of survey participants indicate that it is necessary to have an orgasm for a behavior to be considered sex.

When the age of survey participants (see table 5) is compared to how they define sex, the results are very similar. Eighty-percent or more of all ages represented in the survey believe oral, vaginal, or clitoral stimulation is lesbian sex. This is also true when the length of relationship (see table 6) is compared to how they define sex. Therefore, age and length of relationship do not materially affect how lesbians define the top three behaviors considered to be sex.

There is a slight gap between the perceptions of younger survey participants (ages eighteen to twenty) and older participants (over sixty) about clitoral stimulation. Only

eighty percent of the younger participants perceive clitoral stimulation to be sex and 100 percent of the women over sixty perceive it as sex. This supports the idea that the definition of lesbian sex is influenced by the generation in which a lesbian is born. The small sample size for these age groups affects the validity of these findings. There are only seven lesbians in the survey who are eighteen to twenty, and only eighteen lesbians who are over sixty years old.

There is a similar gap in perceptions of lesbian sex among women with varying lengths of relationship. Ninety-four percent of women who have been in their relationship eleven months or less, as well as those in their relationships twenty-one or more years, believe vaginal penetration is sex. Only eighty-percent of women who have been partnered between eleven and twenty years consider vaginal penetration to be lesbian sex. Though these are not wide margins of difference, they do provide insight about how age and length of relationship have a subtle influence on perceptions of sex.

Sixty to sixty-five percent of women taking the survey also expanded the definition of lesbian sex to include anything that produces sexual pleasure, humping (also known as tribadism), and anal sex. In the 70s, tribadism was one of the top three sexual behaviors of lesbians as noted by authors Martin and Lyon (1972). Today only sixty-one percent of lesbians consider this to be sex.

According to the Frequency vs. Satisfaction survey, there has been a dramatic change in the last few decades in how lesbians perceive sex. In 1987, Loulan's research on this topic concluded that over ninety percent of lesbians in her sample included hugging, cuddling, and kissing as sexual activities (1987). Today only twenty-one percent of survey respondents in this research consider kissing and hugging to be sex. This

change can be observed by the differences in responses by younger survey participants and older survey participants. None of the women aged eighteen to twenty perceive breast stimulation, sensual massage, or hugging and kissing to be sex. Forty-four percent of women over sixty consider both sensual massage and hugging and kissing to be sex. Sixty-seven percent of women over sixty consider breast stimulation to be sex.

A look at how lesbians view breast stimulation (see table 9) offers a good perspective on how age impacts the definition of sex. As mentioned above, none of the seven women aged eighteen to twenty years old consider breast stimulation to be sex. Increasing the age range by one decade at a time significantly increases the percentage of women who consider breast stimulation to be sex. For example, twenty-three percent of twenty-one to thirty year olds believe breast stimulation is sex. Sixty-seven percent of women over sixty believe that breast stimulation is sex. This is a sixty-seven percent increase in the definition of breast stimulation as sex between the eighteen year old respondents and the over sixty year old respondents. The older the lesbian, the more comprehensive her definition of sex, with the exception of anal stimulation and SM/bondage. The number of older women in the survey who consider anal sex and SM/bondage to be sex drops significantly.

In summary, lesbian sex for the purposes of this research is primarily considered to be one of three behaviors between women: oral sex, vaginal penetration, or clitoral stimulation. The older the respondent is, the more likely she is to include non-genitally focused activities in her definition of sex, and the younger the respondent is, the more likely she is to include anal stimulation in her definition of sex. The majority of lesbians of every age also agree that an orgasm is not a requirement when defining lesbian sex.

With a better understanding of the historical and current definition of lesbian sex by lesbians, it is time to look at the sexual behaviors in which lesbians are currently participating. Included in the next chapter are the following topics: an exploration of the regularly used sexual techniques of lesbians, a closer look at masturbation among lesbians, the frequency and quantity of orgasms, the time spent engaged in sexual encounters between women, and the frequency with which lesbians are engaging in sex outside of their relationship.

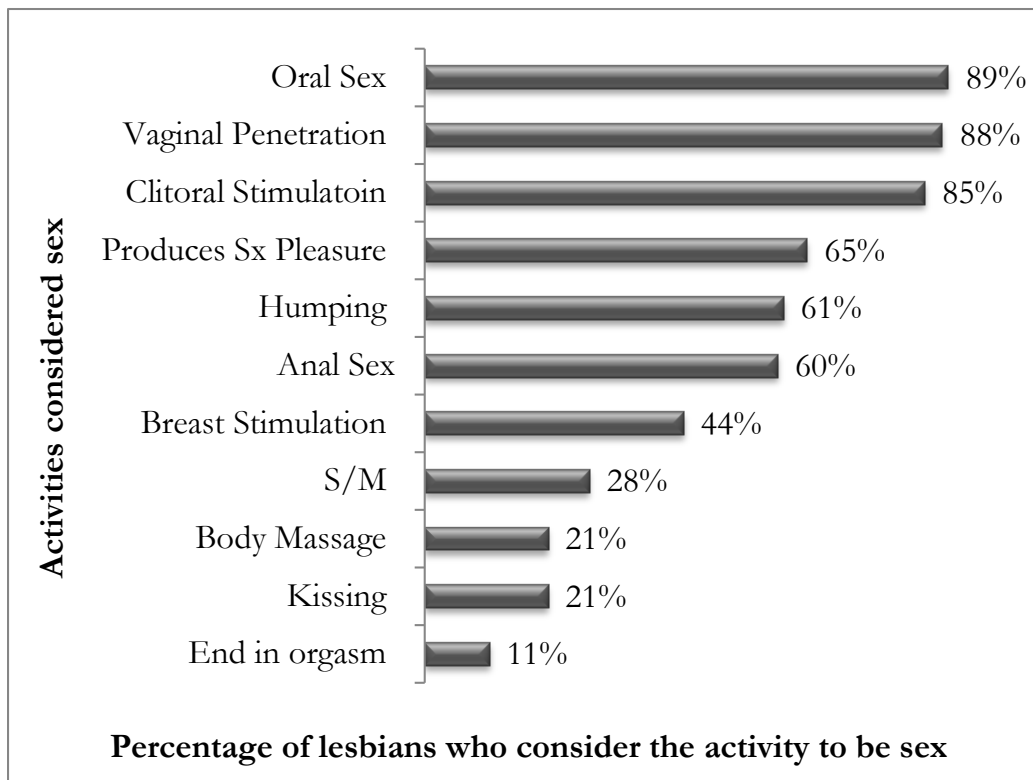


Figure 1. Defining Lesbian Sex

Table 5. Lesbian Sex Defined According to Age of Lesbian

Activities Considered Sex	18-20 n=7	21-30 n=56	31-40 n=131	41-50 n=182	51-60 n=77	Over 60 n=18	Average Perceptions of Lesbian Sex
Oral stimulation	100%	89%	88%	91%	87%	94%	92%
Vaginal penetration	86%	89%	89%	91%	86%	94%	89%
Clitoral stimulation	86%	80%	82%	89%	86%	100%	87%
Anal stimulation	86%	57%	61%	63%	57%	44%	61%
Tribadism / humping	57%	54%	60%	65%	62%	67%	61%
Causes sexual pleasure	29%	63%	60%	69%	74%	61%	59%
Breast stimulation	0%	23%	31%	52%	64%	67%	40%
S/M	43%	29%	26%	30%	34%	11%	29%
Massage	0%	9%	14%	23%	34%	44%	21%
Hug or kiss	0%	7%	15%	22%	36%	44%	21%
Ends in orgasm	0%	20%	11%	9%	10%	6%	9%

*Percentage within age group that considers this activity to be sex
n=number of women responding to question per age group*

Table 6. Lesbian Sex Defined According to Length of Relationship

Length of Relationship	Vaginal Penetration	Oral Stimulation	Clitoris Stimulation	Tribadism/Humping	Produces Sexual Pleasure	Anal Sex	Breast Stimulation	Hug/Kiss	Massage	S/M or Bondage	Ends in Orgasm
Less than 6 months (n=47)	94%	92%	94%	72%	66%	57%	49%	23%	30%	23%	9%
6 to 11 months (n=51)	94%	92%	90%	73%	65%	65%	55%	20%	22%	29%	8%
1 to 2 years (n=89)	89%	90%	82%	52%	72%	64%	36%	17%	16%	32%	7%
3 to 5 years (n=126)	87%	87%	83%	56%	60%	60%	37%	14%	18%	31%	15%
6 to 10 years (n=97)	91%	91%	91%	63%	62%	61%	47%	22%	21%	22%	10%
11 to 20 years (n=61)	80%	85%	75%	64%	79%	51%	51%	31%	30%	30%	13%
21 or more years (n=18)	94%	94%	100%	67%	61%	61%	56%	44%	33%	22%	6%
Average perceptions of lesbian sex	90%	90%	88%	64%	66%	60%	47%	24%	24%	27%	10%

Percentage of women who perceive these activities to be sex

CHAPTER FIVE

SEXUAL BEHAVIORS OF LESBIANS

This chapter will explore the sexual behaviors of lesbians. Included in this chapter is an introduction of the sexual response cycle and the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey results for the following: the rate of masturbation, the frequency and quantity of orgasms, the time spent engaged in sexual encounters between women, and the specific sexual behaviors in which lesbians most commonly engage. Lastly, this chapter will take a more detailed look at lesbians who are engaging in sex outside of their relationship.

Human Sexual Response Cycle

According to Hite, “Sex is intimate physical contact for pleasure, to share pleasure with another person (or just alone). You can have sex to orgasm, or not to orgasm, genital sex, or just physical intimacy—whatever seems right to you. There is never any reason to think the ‘goal’ must be intercourse, and to try to make what you feel fit into that context. There is no standard of sexual performance ‘out there’ against which you must measure yourself; you aren’t ruled by ‘hormones’ or ‘biology.’ You are free to explore and discover your own sexuality, to learn or unlearn anything you want, and to make physical relations with other people, of either sex, anything you like” (2004, 417).

The one thing sexual activity has in common, regardless of the gender of participants or the sexual behaviors of choice, is the physiological reaction to effective sexual stimulation. In a scientific study based primarily on direct observation and physical measurement of sexual arousal, William Masters and Virginia Johnson created

the Human Sexual Response Cycle in 1966. The sexual response cycle is a series of stages used to describe the physiological reaction to sexual stimuli for both males and females. For the purposes of this paper, the discussion will be limited to women only. The sexual response cycle is divided into four distinct phases, which are the excitement phase, the plateau phase, the orgasmic phase, and the resolution phase (Masters and Johnson 1966).

During the excitement phase, the body begins to react to erotic stimuli that arouse the senses. This can be a scent, a visual impression, physical contact, a fantasy, or a sound. For women, the first evidence of response to sexual tension in the breast is nipple erection. The vagina begins to secrete fluid, and blood flow increases in the vagina, causing the genital tissue to become engorged. This is called vasocongestion. Once engorged, the clitoris becomes very sensitive and retracts underneath the clitoral hood (Masters and Johnson 1966).

The second stage is the plateau stage. This stage is marked by a period of increased sexual excitement. All of the symptoms present in stage one are now intensified. Heart rate increases, muscle tension multiplies, muscle spasms may occur, blood pressure rises, and breathing becomes heavier. The first third of the vagina may tighten and vaginal lubrication increases. This stage brings a woman to the brink of an orgasm.

The third stage of the cycle is the orgasm. This is when a woman experiences a single orgasm or multiple orgasms. The authors reported that there is a wide variety in both the intensity and duration of the female orgasmic experience (Masters and Johnson

1966). This stage is marked by a spasmodic response to the extreme engorgement of the genitals. According to Loulan, "From three to fifteen contractions occur, 4/5 of a second apart, releasing the fluid and blood from the engorged tissues" (1984, 40). The contractions are involuntary and rhythmic. The muscles involved in these contractions extend well beyond the visible areas of the genitals, which creates an internalized feeling of pleasure that is not limited to the areas of the vulva or vagina. These contractions, combined with the sudden release of sexual tension, produce the pleasure commonly associated with having an orgasm.

According to Masters and Johnson, resolution is the final stage. This is the body's effort to return to its pre-aroused state. The blood and fluids are redistributed throughout the body, and the affected nerves and muscles relax.

The Human Sexual Response Cycle is not without its critics. Sex educator Beverly Whipple states that women do not necessarily move from one phase of the cycle to the next in a linear fashion as indicated by Masters and Johnson. For example, women can experience orgasm in the absence of desire, or they can experience desire without orgasm (Whipple 2002). Rosemary Basson also rejected the linear focus. She reports that female sexual desire is more responsive than spontaneous. Basson believes that a woman is most likely to respond to sexual stimuli in her environment, rather than to experience a spontaneous stirring of her own libido (Basson 2001).

According to Linda Ohl, "There is variation in an individual's sexual response cycle. Some women do not feel fully satisfied if all phases of sexual response are not experienced, while others may typically bypass phases" (Ohl 2007, 57). She explained

that in some cases, women may not have adequate lubrication but they “may be able to proceed to orgasm without notable physical changes of the excitement and plateau phases.” Ohl also pointed out that many women do not reach the orgasm phase, such as those who experience anorgasmia. Yet these women may still be satisfied. “Sexual satisfaction is a subjective term and is solely determined by each individual. For many, feelings of closeness, bonding, touching, and intimacy are enough” (Ohl 2007, 57).

One of the most notable critics of the human sexual response cycle is Dr. Helen Singer Kaplan. Trained as a psychiatrist and neurologist, Dr. Kaplan rejected its characteristically exclusive focus on physiology. Accordingly, Kaplan revised Masters and Johnson’s sexual response cycle to include the psychology of sex. Kaplan’s triphasic model of the sexual response cycle includes the following stages: desire, excitement, and orgasm.

In Kaplan’s model, the first stage is desire. This idea added a whole new dimension to the study of sexuality. Suddenly sex was about more than just the body, it was also about the mind. Kaplan explained that by “examining the current sexual experiences of 2,109 patients and couples with chief complaints of deficient sexual desire [she] came to the conclusion that the pathological decrease of these patients’ libido is essentially an expression of the normal regulation of sexual motivation gone awry” (Kaplan 1995, 3-4). Kaplan proposed the idea that, much like hunger or thirst, our sexual desire “is regulated by CNS [central nervous system] control mechanisms” (1995, 4). Kaplan viewed desire as the intersection between a woman’s environmental stimulus and her brain’s interpretations of this stimulus. She believed that how a woman interprets her environmental stimulus will

lead to either the initiation of desire or the inhibition of desire.

The second stage in Kaplan's model is excitement, and is similar to the corresponding stage created by Master and Johnson. The emphasis in the excitement stage is on the body's physical process of arousal, and describes the same characteristics laid out in the Master's and Johnson's vision of excitement and plateau phases.

The last stage in Kaplan's triphasic model is orgasm. This reflects the same characteristics as outlined in the Master and Johnson model for both the orgasm and the resolution phases, though Kaplan did not believe an orgasm needs to happen in every sexual interaction.

Loulan also participated in the discussion about the Human Sexual Response Cycle. She criticized Kaplan for "making anti-lesbian and anti-homosexual remarks," but she did agree that Kaplan "has made an important contribution to the sex research field" (Loulan 1984, 40). Loulan was not content with the sexual response cycle despite the improvements made by Kaplan. After working for years with many lesbians, Loulan devised her own sexual response cycle.

There are five stages to Loulan's cycle with two possible outcomes: pleasure or shutdown. The first stage in Loulan's model is willingness. This is what separates Loulan's cycle from Kaplan and Masters and Johnson. Loulan believed that "You do not have to feel desire or be excited to have sex." She states that "You only have to have the willingness to have sex" (1984, 42). Ultimately, Loulan believed that the goal of any sexual experience is pleasure, and that the only requirement for pleasure is willingness.

Stage two of her model is desire. This is defined by Loulan as "wanting to have

sex because it feels good and you are attracted to someone” (1984, 43). She further separated desire into three categories: intellectual, emotional, and physical.

Stage three is excitement. This stage is similar to the Masters and Johnson or Kaplan models, and involves the physical changes associated with physiological arousal. Stage three may also include an emotional component. Loulan stated that “the emotional part of this stage is that of feeling more and more overwhelmed, and connecting deeply to this other person” (1984, 44). The emotional component of this stage is a variation that occurs for some, but not all, women.

Stage four is engorgement. This is described as a process similar to the plateau phase of Masters and Johnson. Stage five is orgasm, which is also defined similarly to Masters and Johnson’s and Kaplan’s orgasm stage. Loulan stated, “This is not the only reason to have sex.” Adding to this she stated, “Neither of you could have an orgasm and both could experience extreme pleasure from the experience” (1984, 45).

The final stage is pleasure, which Loulan said “is the purpose of sexuality” (1984, 44). The stages in Loulan’s cycle are all interchangeable, circular, avoidable and repeatable. There is no linear progression through the cycle, and there are no assumptions that all of the stages will be experienced. At any stage in this process a woman can terminate the cycle, in which case she will experience a shutdown of pleasure. Beyond these experiences, she will ultimately return to a resting state, which completes Loulan’s Sexual Response Cycle.

LOULAN'S SEXUAL RESPONSE CYCLE

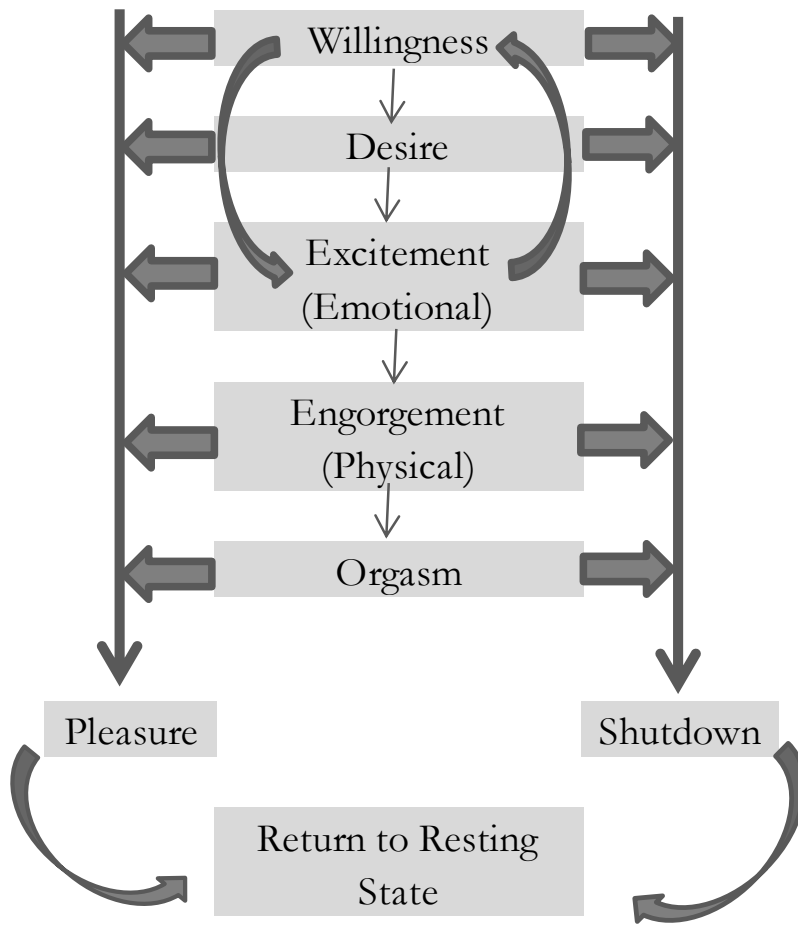


Figure 2. Loulan's Sexual Response Cycle

The Sexual Behavior of Lesbians

Question number seven on the Lesbian Sex: Frequency vs. Satisfaction survey (also referred to as Frequency vs. Satisfaction survey) asks, "How common are the following sexual behaviors with your current or most recent female partner?" The list of behaviors to choose from was compiled from reading lesbian sex books, particularly

focusing on contemporary books by Felice Newman, Wendy Caster, and Jayme Waxman. From these books, the following behaviors were presented as choices for question number seven: kissing, finger sex, foreplay, oral sex, penetration/vibrator, humping, multiple orgasms, mutual masturbation, use of erotica/porn, anal sex, fisting, phone/internet sex, adding a third person, and S&M/bondage. Women were asked to identify whether or not they engaged in each behavior. The options were, “I do this regularly when I have sex,” “I do this sometimes when I have sex,” “I do this rarely when I have sex,” “I have done this at least once before,” and “I have never done this.”

In the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey, the most common sexual behaviors reported were kissing, finger sex, and foreplay. Eighty-two percent or more of all lesbians responded with "I do this regularly when I have sex" (see figure 3). Among the top three behaviors identified by lesbians as sex, clitoral stimulation / finger penetration (finger sex) is the most commonly utilized sexual technique among lesbians. Participant responses also revealed that the majority of lesbians engage in foreplay, and they also kiss while having sex.

Loulan reported similar findings in research she published in 1987. Loulan surveyed 1,566 lesbians between 1985 and 1987. She reported that ninety-one percent of lesbians include kissing in their usual, frequent, or constant sexual practices (Loulan 1987). According to Blumstein and Schwartz, “Kissing occurs usually, though not always, when couples have sex. It is most consistently present among lesbians and least present among gay men” (1983, 225). The statistics on lesbians kissing in *American Couples* reported that ninety-five percent of the time lesbians have sex also involves

kissing. This is nearly identical to the findings in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction study where ninety-three percent of participants reported kissing during sex.

Loulan's survey separated responses by receptive behaviors (behaviors performed on her) and expressive behaviors (behaviors directed to her partner). The findings between the receptive and expressive behaviors in her study were similar. With a few exceptions, the averages of these behaviors closely related to the findings in the current research. Loulan's study reported finger sex occurring eighty-three percent of the time, and the current research reported this eighty-four percent of the time. Ninety-three percent of respondents in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey reported kissing regularly, and Loulan found that ninety-one percent engaged in kissing as a usual sexual practice.

Penetrative sex with a vibrator or dildo has increased in popularity among lesbians over the last thirty years. Sixty-three percent of lesbians surveyed in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey reported having regular penetrative sex (which is a category separate from "finger sex" and infers the use of a dildo or vibrator). Loulan's survey separated vibrator use from dildo use. Fifteen to sixteen percent of lesbians reported using a vibrator regularly, but only nine to ten percent of women inserted a dildo in her partner's vagina during sex. Combined, this is a total of twenty-five percent, which falls significantly short of the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey findings, which indicate that sixty-three percent of lesbians engage in penetrative sex.

In 1995 a survey of 13,000 lesbians was conducted by the Janet Lever and published in the gay and lesbian magazine *The Advocate*. Forty-three percent of the

lesbians that completed the questionnaire reported the use of a handheld dildo during sex with a partner within five years previous (Advocate 1995). This is higher than was reported in 1987 and lower than the sixty-three percent of lesbians who currently report the use of penetration and use of vibrator. This information supports the idea that penetrative sex for lesbians has become more widely practiced over the last few decades.

According to Harris and Sisely, "For most women foreplay is not just something you do before 'really' making love, it is a major part of really making love. All the caressing, whispering, stroking, kissing, undressing, close embraces, fingers-through-hair, breast stimulation, and what-you-will form more than a prelude to genital contact. They combine to orchestrate a series of climaxes that are totally enjoyable in and of themselves" (1976, 100). Based on the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey findings, it appears that foreplay continues to play a significant role in lesbian sex. Eighty-two percent of lesbians surveyed reported that foreplay is a consistent part of their sexual activity.

According to Martin and Lyon, in 1972 the three most common techniques used in lesbian lovemaking were mutual masturbation, cunnilingus, and tribadism. In the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey, oral sex occurred *regularly* when having sex for fifty-eight percent of survey respondents, and *sometimes* for twenty-eight percent of survey participants. This compares to Loulan's study which showed an average of sixty-nine percent of women having engaged in oral sex within five years at the time of the survey. This does not indicate the regularity of this activity, however. Ninety-eight percent of the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey respondents report having engaged in oral sex at least

once in their history of sexual activity. This is a more accurate comparison to Loulan's study and suggests there has been a significant increase in oral sex among lesbians since 1987.

Blumstein and Schwartz inquired about the frequency of oral sex among lesbians in their research, as well. Their studies revealed that twelve percent of the time, lesbians reported having oral sex *always*. Twenty-seven percent of the time, they reported having oral sex *usually* (1983, 236). This suggests that in the 1980s, lesbians were commonly engaging in oral sex about forty-percent of the time. Today lesbians report having oral sex regularly fifty-eight percent of the time, which suggests an increase in the incidence of oral sex among lesbians over the last three decades.

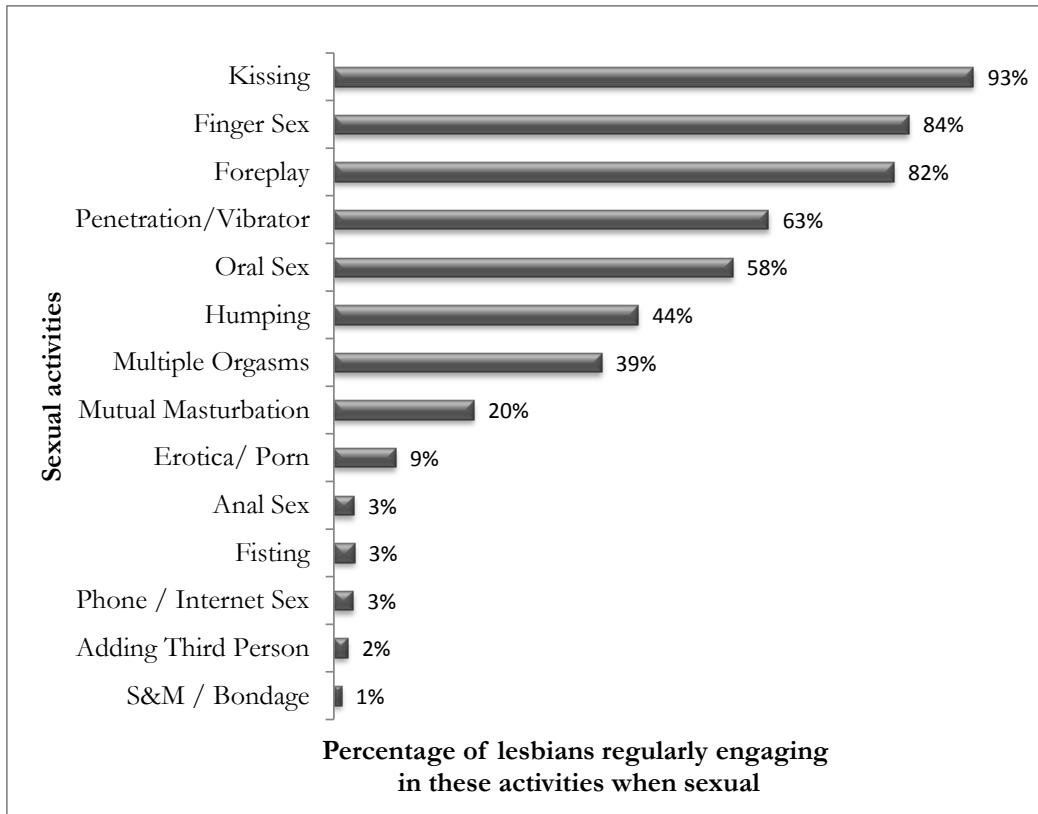


Figure 3. Common Sexual Activities Among Lesbians

Percentage of lesbians regularly engaging in these activities when sexual

Frequency	Kissing	Finger Sex	Foreplay	Oral Sex	Penetration /Vibrator	Humping	Multiple Orgasms	Mutual Masturbation	Erotica/ Porn	Anal Sex	Fisting	Phone / Internet Sex	Adding Third Person	S&M / Bondage
Regularly	93%	84%	82%	58%	63%	44%	39%	20%	9%	3%	3%	3%	2%	1%
Sometimes	4%	12%	14%	28%	27%	40%	30%	30%	12%	13%	6%	11%	9%	7%
Rarely	2%	3%	2%	9%	4%	7%	11%	17%	23%	10%	5%	13%	2%	6%
At least once	9%	7%	1%	3%	3%	5%	10%	14%	31%	25%	11%	30%	13%	19%
Never	0%	1%	1%	2%	3%	4%	9%	19%	33%	50%	75%	43%	84%	67%

Percentage that lesbians engage in these sexual activities at the frequency noted

Table 7. Frequency of Sexual Activities of Lesbians

Masturbation

Kinsey et al. defined masturbation as “deliberate self-stimulation which effects sexual arousal” (Kinsey et al. 1953, 133). Betty Dodson, the author of *Liberating Masturbation*, has been credited for encouraging women to take sexual pleasure into their own hands, so to speak. She developed a slide show called “Creating an Aesthetic for the Female Genitals,” a traveling show displaying the beauty of women’s genitals for women’s enjoyment. According to Dodson, “Masturbation is our primary sex life. It is the sexual base. Everything we do beyond that is simply how we choose to socialize our sex life” (Dodson 1972, 8). Equally enthusiastic about masturbation is Waxman, who said, “Masturbation is like breakfast for your body, an essential component for a balanced and satisfied life” (2007, 11).

There are no strong trends among lesbians who masturbate, except for the fact that most do engage in this behavior. Only seven out of 478 (1.5 percent) women surveyed have never masturbated. There is a fairly even distribution of lesbians who masturbate at a frequency between multiple times a week to once a month. A minority of lesbians masturbate daily or multiple times per day. Seventy-six percent of all lesbians surveyed masturbate at least once per month.

Masturbation rates reported in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction survey are slightly lower than those from the *Advocate’s* 1995 study. *The Advocate* reported that lesbians masturbate an average of five times within a thirty-day period. The average rate of masturbation among participants in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey is three to four times a month. *The Advocate’s* rate for those who do not masturbate was slightly higher (twenty percent) than those in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey (fourteen percent).

In 1987, Loulan’s research revealed that the majority of lesbians (sixty percent) were masturbating two to ten times per month (1987). This is an average of once weekly, which is also slightly higher than the findings in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction study. The research conducted by Hite simply reported that eighty-two percent of women, not specifically lesbians, masturbated. Eighty-nine percent of the women in Loulan’s survey reported masturbating. Study findings by this researcher revealed that eighty-five percent of the lesbians in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction study reported masturbating.

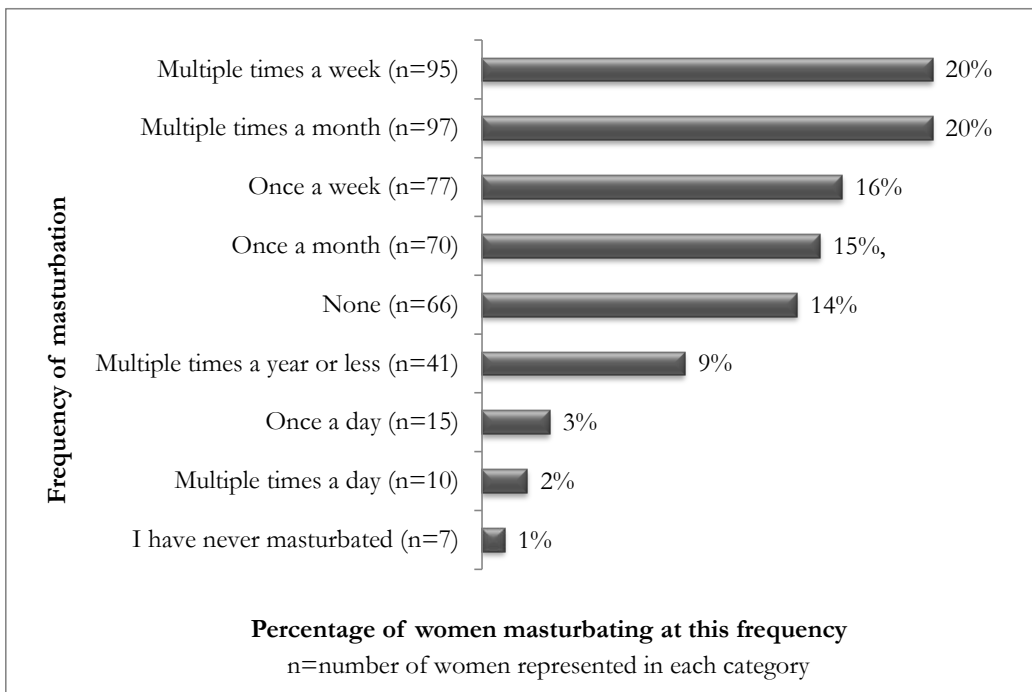


Figure 4. Frequency of Masturbation Among Lesbians

Orgasms

According to Dorian Solot and Marshall Miller, authors of *I (Heart) Female Orgasm*, “a female orgasm is just a series of involuntary muscular contractions. You

can't control how an orgasm feels, just as you can't exactly control the sensation of a sneeze. During an orgasm, women can often feel the muscles contract in their vagina, uterus, and anus and sometimes in other parts of their body, like their hands and feet” (2007, 14).

The female orgasm has been widely misunderstood for quite some time. Sigmund Freud, the creator of psychoanalysis, is responsible for much of the confusion about female orgasms. In 1905, Freud stated that a clitoral orgasm was purely an adolescent phenomenon that evolves into a vaginal orgasm upon the proper maturity of a woman. This belief was perpetuated for many years, leading women to believe that an orgasm would naturally occur through vaginal penetration without any clitoral stimulation (Orgasm 2012). Fortunately, Kinsey et al. discovered the errors of Freud's ways through scientific inquiry. Namely, Kinsey et al. discovered that there is no such thing as a vaginal orgasm. In fact, the second two-thirds of the vagina is so absent of sensation, it can be operated on without any anesthesia. While there are nerve endings at the entrance of the vagina that are capable of creating feelings of pleasure, the orgasmic credit now goes where it rightfully belongs, which is to the clitoris.

Eighty-four percent of the women in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction survey reported having at least one orgasm during their last sexual encounter with another woman. Half of these women had more than one orgasm. In the 1950s Kinsey et al. reported that orgasm occurred among women at a rate between seventy and seventy-seven percent of the time during marital sex. Rates of orgasm for lesbians are not delineated. Kinsey et al. does report, however, that only fourteen percent of the females in his sample regularly responded with multiple orgasm (Kinsey et al. 1953).

Table 8. Lesbian Orgasms

Orgasm at last sexual encounter	Percentage of Women
Multiple Orgasms	44%
Single Orgasm	40%
No Orgasm, Previous Orgasm Though	11%
Never Had Orgasm With Her	3%
Unsure If Ever Had Orgasm	1%
Never Had Sex With Woman	1%

Orgasms during last sexual encounter with another woman

Open Relationships Among Lesbians

An open relationship is defined as an agreement between both partners that sex outside of the relationship is acceptable according to the terms they set forth. This is not a form of infidelity or cheating. When a partner cheats or is unfaithful, she is disregarding a partnership agreement. An open relationship is not immune from infidelity, however. Most open relationships involve stated agreements about the terms or rules, so infidelity can occur if these rules are violated.

The guidelines for an open relationship are established by each couple and vary from relationship to relationship. Some partners prefer that non-partner sex occurs only when one or the other is out of town. Some couples agree that mutual friends are off limits for non-partner sex. Other couples request that non-partner play is limited to one or two episodes with the same person to avoid fostering a deeper emotional attachment with the non-partner. There are many transmutations of the open relationship. The agreements established in an open relationship are as important to uphold as the agreement to be faithful is in a closed relationship.

Open relationships are not common among lesbians. According to Betty Berzon, author of *Permanent Partners*, “women are programmed to prefer a loving context for their sexual expression.” She added, “It’s likely that the sex will not be casual and that there will be emotional involvement because that’s the way women usually function” (Berzon 1990, 210-211).

A search for resources on the topic of open relationships for lesbians reveals only two books that are accessible to interested couples. The first is *Lesbian Polyfidelity: A Pleasure Guide for the Woman Whose Heart Is Open to Multiple, Concurrent Sexualloves, or How to Keep Non-Monogamy Safe, Sane* by Celeste West. Clearly an advocate of multiple partner relationships, West offers advice on how to address common pitfalls of open relationships, such as jealousy. The other book is *The Lesbian Polyamory Reader: Open Relationships, Non-Monogamy, and Casual Sex*, published by Marcia Munson and Judith Stelboum in 1999. This is a series of short articles and essays written by or about lesbians in open relationships. Common issues that surface for couples who engage in open relationships are discussed in this book, such as jealousy, living arrangements, boundaries, and relational agreements. It is surprising to find that there are two books specific to lesbians in open relationships. This is a sparsely-addressed topic, and few lesbians report involvement in open relationships.

In the Frequency vs. Satisfaction survey, five percent of the participants had a stated agreement to open their relationship to outside parties. Six percent had not discussed the topic at all, and seventy-four percent had explicit agreements to not have sex with others.

In 1988, Steve Bryant and Demian conducted a large survey of gay men and

lesbians with the intent to develop an accurate portrait of gay men and lesbians in America. The survey responses included 706 lesbian couples (fifty-six percent) and 560 male couples (forty-four percent). The sexual agreements between lesbian couples revealed that ninety-one percent of women reported a closed relationship, compared to sixty-three percent of gay men. Seven percent of lesbians indicated they had agreed on some exceptions to monogamy, and three percent reported having an open relationship (Bryant and Demian 1988).

On the topic of open relationships, Dodson said, “Very few couples will ever consider abandoning monogamy and dealing with the emotional chaos that results from feelings of jealousy. However, I’d like to remind women that monogamy was invented to ensure a man’s paternity by sexually controlling our behavior” (1974, 58). Findings by Blumstein and Schwartz support Dodson’s theory about married women and monogamy. Of all partner types (husbands, wives, male cohabitators, female cohabitators, gay men, and lesbians), wives are the least likely to engage in any instance(s) of non-monogamy. Lesbians are the second least likely to engage in non-monogamy.

In general, “fewer women have sex outside their relationships than men do” (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983, 272). Blumstein and Schwartz sum this up well when they talk about how lesbians “still find it hard to get over traditional inhibitions about female sexuality and to revise customary sexual values.” Plus, “it’s difficult to find partners who feel the same way, and the desire to free themselves from past roles does not necessarily imply emotional readiness for the actual event” (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983, 305).

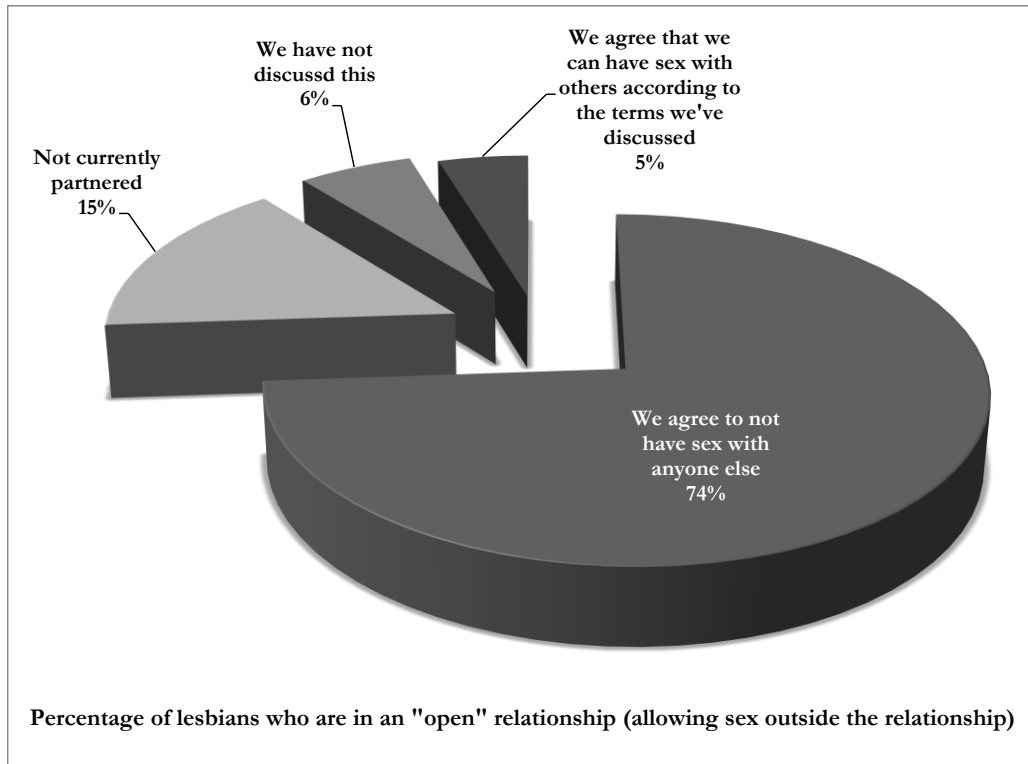


Figure 5. Open Relationships Among Lesbians

In summary, this chapter offers updated insights about the sexual behaviors of lesbians. Foreplay and kissing during sex continue to be the staples in the sexual diet of lesbians. Penetrative sex with a vibrator/dildo and oral sex, however, have increased in popularity over the last three decades. The rate of masturbation among lesbians allows for roughly three to four instances of this activity per month, which is slightly lower than rates found in earlier studies. The majority of lesbians (eighty-four percent) are experiencing orgasms when they have sex. The most common technique used by lesbians that is defined as sex is clitoral stimulation (finger sex), followed by penetrative sex, and oral sex is the third most common. Having established what lesbians are doing sexually, Chapter Six will turn its focus to the frequency with which lesbians are having sex.

CHAPTER SIX

SEXUAL FREQUENCY AMONG LESBIANS

In order to assess the influence of sexual frequency on lesbian relationship satisfaction, it is essential to establish the frequency with which lesbians are actually having sex. This chapter will introduce the concept of lesbian bed death, and will also explore the roots of this phrase. This chapter will reveal how often lesbians are having sex, paying special attention to how the age of the individuals and the length of the relationship affect the frequency of sex within a relationship. Lastly, the frequency of sex outside of the relationship will be explored in greater detail.

Lesbian Bed Death

In 1983, when Blumstein and Schwartz revealed to the world that lesbians were the least sexual couple of all couple pairings, a vision of lesbians as non-sexual started to emerge in our culture. This research led to more research (Loulan 1984) which further confirmed that not only were lesbians having less sex than other couples, but they were also experiencing a more rapid and dramatic drop in frequency as their relationships continued. Ultimately, a powerfully descriptive and derogatory three-letter phrase emerged to describe the sexuality of lesbians. That phrase was lesbian bed death (LBD).

Lesbian bed death grabbed the attention of the media, researchers, and comedians, and before long, this three letter phrase was regularly associated with the sex lives of lesbians. The origin of this phrase has been attributed to three different women. In researching the etiology of LBD, it became apparent to this researcher that no one had

investigated the roots of this term. The three women most commonly cited for coining the phrase are: author of the book *Lesbian Sex* Joann Loulan; famous lesbian comedian Kate Clinton; and researcher and co-author of the book *American Couples*, Pepper Schwartz.

In a search for the original creator of the phrase lesbian bed death, this researcher inquired into all three credited sources. First, this researcher inquired with Schwartz, co-author of *American Couples*. Schwartz responded to this researcher's inquiry in an email saying, "It is attributed to me—people I know say I said it—but I never wrote it. Sadly, I have no memory about it—so I can't deny or confirm!" (Schwartz 2011) Unsatisfied, this researcher decided to inquire with the other two sources.

In an email exchange with the author of *Lesbian Sex*, Loulan stated, "I did not coin the phrase Lesbian Bed Death." She admitted, "I used it frequently, but of course my life was (and is) trying to make that change within the lesbian community and make sex sexy again" (Loulan 2011).

Finally, this researcher contacted Kate Clinton, who also denied coining the term. Always the comedian, she shared a phrase that she used in her comedy, and she expressed much pride in it. Rather than a same-sex relationship, Clinton jokes that lesbians have a "some-sex relationship." Clinton suggested contacting Sue Hyde, the Director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Creating Change Conference. Clinton recalled that Hyde's partner, Jade McGleughlin, may have been responsible for the phrase lesbian bed death (LBD).

In an email response to this researcher's inquiry, Sue Hyde wrote, "Jade McGleughlin coined the phrase 'lesbian bed death' in about 1985 or so. She will need to

relate to you the particulars of how her brilliant mind compressed into a three-word unforgettable phrase the entire phenomenon of decreasing lesbian sex activity in long term couples.” She stated, “I believe she used the term in a paper she wrote while at Smith School of Social Work, where she was proceeding towards her LICSW” (Hyde 2011).

In a phone conversation, McGleughlin stated that she did not know exactly how LBD came into being, but she thought that it “coalesced spontaneously among a group of lesbians for whom it captured an experience particular to that moment.” McGleughlin said that she and the other lesbians in her community, whom she described as sex positive feminist queers, “wanted the sexiness of talking about sex, and to have butch-femme power be translated into hot sex” (McGleughlin 2012). McGleughlin reported that the term does not have concrete, traceable roots. Rather, it is something best credited to a group of women at a specific point in history. While she denied credit for coining the phrase, McGleughlin identified herself as the messenger.

She thought she popularized the phrase during the 1987 March on Washington, where she gave a speech during the Sex and Politics Forum, and she also wrote about LBD in her master's thesis around the same time. Confirming this was Sue Moir, another lesbian whose name surfaced during the search for the roots of LBD. Moir was a friend of McGleughlin's, and also a part of the group of women discussing this topic. Moir explained to this researcher that she heard this phrase lesbian bed death “at a dyke gabfest in Newton,” and that McGleughlin got it from her. What Moir reported is consistent with what McGleughlin recalled. McGleughlin does not take ownership for creating the phrase, and she speculated that the phrase surfaced within lesbian group discussions.

Thus, two separate people, neither of whom claims credit for the phrase, corroborate that the idea of LBD evolved through lesbian group conversations.

Moir also stated that she was present when McGleughlin first used the phrase publicly, saying, “I can tell you it was the first time that audience had heard it” (Moir 2011). McGleughlin stated there was a synergistic effect between the talk of sex within a community of feminist women, and the positive influence this talk had on the sex lives of lesbians engaged in these conversations. McGleughlin’s perception was that LBD included more than the diminishing sex in a lesbian’s personal relationship at the time. She felt it also captured the larger loss of a sexual community where women had grown accustomed to having a public space for sexual discussions, and the excitement of the sexually charged women's movement.

Lesbian bed death was about more than sex. McGleughlin recalled that at the tail end of the sex wars, the whole experience “seemed to collapse into this phrase—kind of like a screen memory.” There was a real phenomenon of waning sex within lesbian relationships, and lesbians further lost connection to the sexual community once the sex wars ended. McGleughlin stated a few times, “sex couldn't keep pace with rhetoric—but rhetoric was dying and rhetoric in part produced sex.” This was something of a dialectic, she said, that “The theory and the practice were held in tension and [were] constructing and deconstructing each other” (McGleughlin 2012).

McGleughlin stated that LBD “captured a historical moment” during the waning of the sex wars. By giving a name to this moment, she sparked a notion that eventually spread across the United States like wildfire. The message traveled far and wide, and it

stuck.

The timing of McGleughlin's speech also coincided with the lesbian sexuality research (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Loulan 1984, 1987) at the time, which became an accelerant for the spread of the LBD message. Ultimately, LBD took on a new and unintended meaning that gave shape to lesbian sexuality as inferior, and in some ways, doomed. McGleughlin expressed regret about the impact of this phrase. In her opinion, the phrase collapsed the complexity of lesbian sexuality, and what might otherwise have been a historical phenomenon "became a condensation and condemnation" of lesbian sexuality (McGleughlin 2012).

The search for understanding of how LBD influenced lesbian sexuality over the last three decades left this researcher with more questions than answers. There is great curiosity about how the topic of lesbian sex, and the phrase LBD, were carried from the east coast to the west coast so swiftly and effectively during an era when the internet was not available to spread information at viral rates. Though it is interesting to uncover the roots of this phrase, the ultimate goal of this research is to gain a better understanding of how this phrase assumed enough power in our culture to influence the perceptions of lesbians as sexually inferior. How did this message spread so quickly, and then remain so active in the cultural consciousness?

The label of LBD devalues lesbian relationships by suggesting that lesbians are inadequate, or worse yet, sexually broken. When the measurement is frequency, lesbians lose the race against heterosexual or gay pairings when it comes to sex. Who benefits if lesbian sex is viewed as inadequate, or inferior to the sex had by heterosexuals?

One theory is that lesbians pose a threat to social order. Historically, men have held the power in our culture, and women have been raised to depend on them, primarily financially, for survival. This pattern has broken down over the years, thanks to the women's liberation movement and the increase of women in the workforce. However, women still struggle to find equal footing with men in most areas of life. In South Africa, raping a lesbian can make a man a township hero. "Attackers boast publicly of their crimes and declare to their victims: 'We'll show you you're a woman,' the report said. Such attacks are often referred to as 'corrective rapes' in South Africa" (Guardian 2011, 1). A woman without a man in South Africa is not considered a woman at all. As archaic as this perspective seems in 21st century America, it is not unreasonable to think that we are a culture that is not yet finished moving slowly out of one view (women are defined by men) and into a new perspective (women are defined by themselves). As we have learned from many other oppressed groups, such as Blacks in America, cultural change is slow, regardless of what is true and right.

Another curiosity that surfaced during this research concerns the momentum required to get the message of LBD off the ground. Groups of women were reportedly having regular chats about sex, which served to simultaneously enhance their own sex lives and fulfill an important need for a sense of belonging. The participants of these chats percolated the unifying concept of lesbian bed death. From these chats what rose to the surface was the message of lesbian bed death. If McGleughlin's perception of this phrase is true, it expresses a dual message about loss of sex and loss of community. In that case, the message itself has somehow changed over time, losing the emphasis once

placed on the *death* of the community of lesbians who talk about sex.

An alternate theory about the spread of this message is the possibility that it was true, and lesbians themselves were seeking personal validation for their own experience. It is possible that the continued discussions, which also kept LBD alive and spreading, provided an outlet for lesbians to validate their experience. Although there has not been much research about lesbian sexuality over the last three decades, the existing research consistently reported low rates of sexual activity for lesbians, with few exceptions (Mathews et al. 2003; Peplau et al. 1997). Research has also consistently shown a quick decline in frequency over the course of lesbian relationships. The research reveals that lesbians had, and still have, less sex. This researcher keeps returning to one question. Who cared, and why was this a problem?

Was this a problem for lesbians? Coming out in the 70s and 80s was avant garde behavior. Lesbians were not previously visible to the general public. The best way to establish a sense of belonging is to identify the ways in which you are similar to those with whom you wish to join. If research revealed that lesbians are sexually inadequate during the same time that lesbians were seeking approval for their identity, it is possible that lesbians themselves would have difficulty accepting this information.

Instead of embracing what is, advocates of lesbians sought, and still seek, to disprove the amount of sexual activity that occurs between women, as if to say, “We are like you.” Presumably, the assumption is that being like heterosexuals will allow lesbians to be seen as *normal*. This researcher believes that the greatest power is sourced from the truth. It is not important how much sex lesbians are having, or how often lesbians are

having sex. What is important is whether or not lesbians are satisfied with their intimate relationships and whether or not they feel empowered to create these relationships according to their own truth, and not a social standard randomly transferred from other couple pairings.

Gay men are reported to be the most sexual of all pairings. If the frequency or amount of sex determines health, then why are gay men not considered the healthiest of all couples? What would have happened if Blumstein and Schwartz discovered that heterosexuals were having the least amount of sex, and that their sexual activity declined more rapidly than the other couple pairs? It is likely that this paper would be evaluating the concern with sexually overactive lesbians, even if their sexual behaviors were exactly as they are now.

Another question that evolved from this research is this. How far did the phrase lesbian bed death travel? This researcher briefly explored perceptions of lesbian sexuality in other countries. A cursory look for information about sexual frequency among lesbians in other countries did not reveal much. There was one report on lesbians in The Netherlands/Holland by Karin Van Rosmalen-Nooijens, et al. which was conducted in 2008. This study indicated that seventy-six percent of lesbians of all ages experienced a decline in sexual activity. It appears that the phrase lesbian bed death did not spread far beyond the borders of the United States, but perhaps the phenomena of lower sexual frequency is a shared experience regardless of the country in question.

What is consistent is that how lesbians are viewed within a culture is rooted in how women are viewed within that culture. The attitude towards lesbian behavior is

directly affected by the role a woman is expected to play in her culture. For example, in Asia a woman's role is primarily concerned with reproduction. The concept of sexual orientation is irrelevant because sex for women is not about sex, it is about having babies. In Asia any sexual behavior that doesn't have the goal of procreation is considered an aberration. Thus, homosexuality is not acceptable behavior because it is by its very nature about pleasure, not procreation.

LBD stereotyped the sex lives of lesbians as defective, inadequate, and inferior to others. This label added another layer of oppression very similarly to the way *sexual inverts* did in the early 20th century. It is useful to consider the history of the term sexual invert, and the influence this term had on cultural perceptions of lesbians. From the mid 1920s to the mid 1970s, lesbians were considered *sick*, *disturbed*, and *deviant*. It took a half-century to transcend the damaging perceptions of lesbians as mentally ill.

History, it is said, often repeats itself. Given this, it is likely that lesbian bed death, much like sexual inversion, will cycle out of the collective consciousness and be replaced by a new, improved perception of lesbians. If lesbian bed death is a concept that evolved in the mid 1980s, history would indicate that by the year 2030, LBD should be nearly erased from the collective consciousness. This does not, of course, mean that lesbians will be having more sex, but the absence of the label will clarify cultural perceptions about lesbian sexuality, and how those perception play out in the sex lives of lesbians.

What makes the most sense to this researcher when assessing the history and influence of the phrase lesbian bed death is that a melting pot of motivations led to a

conversion of agendas that served multiple purposes simultaneously. Whether it was used as a form of oppression, a way to keep women in their place in society, or whether it was because it is true and lesbians needed validation for their truth, the side-effects of this phrase on the sex lives of lesbians has proved unhelpful.

This researcher has concluded that lesbian bed death is a disparaging phrase used to criticize the sexual realities of lesbians in comparison to heterosexuals. It is not the behavior of lesbians that is the problem, it is the grossly inaccurate and irresponsible categorization of these behaviors as inadequate or dysfunctional that is the problem. Debating lesbian bed death validates its merit. This researcher's conclusion is that lesbians have a bed (a sex life), and it is different than that of other couple pairs. That difference does not make it dead, it makes it different.

To defend LBD suggests that there is something legitimate to argue against. This researcher does not believe in the legitimacy of LBD. It is a misunderstood concept that filled a void of understanding during a time that lesbians were stepping out and exploring the uncharted territory of a visible life among the heterosexual population. The mistake was to believe that a lesbian relationship should mirror that of a heterosexual relationship in order to be successful.

As it turns out, in the limited research conducted about the difference between gay and heterosexual relationships, authors such as John Gottman have concluded that gays and lesbians are more inclined to fight fairly, are not as belligerent with one another as heterosexuals are, and are less domineering and not as fearful with each other. He also discovered that lesbians and gay men make better use of humor when they argue than do

their heterosexual counterparts (John Gottman et al. 2003). Is frequent sex more important to a relationship than fair fighting and being kind?

Sexual Frequency of Lesbians

What is the current sexual frequency of lesbians? Question number eight in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction survey asked, “In the last six months, how many times have you had sex (intimate contact intended to create sexual pleasure) with your partner?” Respondents were prompted to fill in the number of times they had sex in the last six months. Four separate categories of frequency were created to quantify the amount of sex that lesbians were having. Women who reported having sex zero to nine times were placed in the category labeled “once monthly or less.” Women who reported having sex between ten and twenty-one times in the last six months were assigned to the category of “two to three times per month.” Women who reported having sex twenty-two to eighty-three times in the last six months were categorized as having sex “one to three times a week.” The final category of “four or more times per week” included women who reported eighty-four or more episodes of sexual activity in the last six months.

The reported sexual frequencies were then rounded to the nearest category. For example, if a woman reported she had sex nine times in the last six months she would be assigned to the category of “once monthly or less.” Nine times in the last six months is obviously more than once monthly, however, it is closer to this category than it is to the next category of “two to three times a month,” and thus the best fit.

Question eight was completed by 416 women. Twelve percent (fifty lesbians) of the sample reported having no sex in the last six months. Thirty-seven percent (154

lesbians) of the sample reported having sex once monthly or less. Combined, these groups represent almost half of the sample population, thus the majority of lesbians are having sex once monthly or less. Twenty percent of lesbians reported having sex two to three times a month. Twenty-seven percent of lesbians reported having sex one to three times weekly. Only five percent reported having sex five or more times weekly.

Few studies have been conducted on the sexual frequency of lesbians. One of the most recent studies was published in 2003 by Alicia Matthews, Tonda Tartaro, and Jessica Hughes. In a comparative study of lesbian and heterosexual women in committed relationships, Matthews et al. found that sixty-nine percent of lesbians and seventy-six percent of heterosexual women reported having sex at least once weekly. These findings are significantly higher than those of this study. Only thirty-four percent of the women in Frequency vs. Satisfaction sample reported having sex at least weekly, as seen in figure seven. It is important to note, however, that the sample size for the Matthews et al. study was based on thirty-six lesbians. The small sample size raises questions about the validity of these findings, and the authors acknowledge that the small sample limits their ability to make any generalizations about lesbian sexuality.

Another study done in 1997 by Letitia Peplau et al. also revealed higher rates of sexual frequency among lesbians. This particular study focused on the sexual behaviors of 398 Black lesbians (Peplau et al. 1997). The findings showed that eleven percent of the Black lesbians reported having sex more than three times a week. This is slightly higher than the eight-percent in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction study. Forty-seven percent of lesbians in Peplau et al.'s study reported having sex one to three times per week, which is

significantly higher than the twenty-nine percent in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey. Forty-one percent of the Black lesbians reported having sex less than once a week, which is significantly lower than the sixty-five percent in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey.

Peplau et al. acknowledges that the sample is non-representative; however, it does offer insight into the variability of lesbian sexuality. What accounts for the higher rate of sexual frequency among Black women? This is valuable information, given that most of the studies conducted on lesbian sexuality are based on the histories of Caucasian women, including the Frequency vs. Satisfaction sample. While this question is outside the scope of this paper, it is nonetheless a valuable question to note.

The most commonly cited source about lesbian sexual frequency is still Blumstein and Schwartz (1983). The frequency of lesbian sex is presented in the context of length of relationship and the rating of one's quality of sex life. For the *American Couples* study, it appears these statistics were based on a total of 768 lesbians. Of these lesbians, 195 report having sex once a month or less, which equals twenty-five percent of the sample. This is significantly lower than the findings in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey in which forty-eight percent of all lesbians sampled (forty-four percent of lesbian couples) are having sex once monthly or less.

The same calculation process reveals that twenty-seven percent of the *American Couples* sample have "sex between once a month and once a week" This compares to sixty-eight percent of the women in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction sample who have sex between once a month and once a week. The third category offered is "sex between one

and three times a week.” This includes 274 lesbians, or thirty-six percent of the American Couple’s sample. This finding does not differ much from the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey, which reveal that twenty-nine percent of lesbians are having sex one to three times per week. The final category of frequency, “Sex three times a week or more,” comprised nineteen percent of the sample. The Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey reported eight percent of women at this level of sexual frequency, which is less than half of the findings by Blumstein and Schwartz (1983, 27).

Loulan’s 1987 study revealed findings that were remarkably similar to those of the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey. Twelve percent of women in both samples report having no sex. Loulan categorized sexual frequency as “once or fewer times” (presumably per month) and “two to five times a month,” which compare closely to the fifty-three percent of lesbians in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey who reported having sex up to one or two times per month (see figure 7). Twenty percent of lesbians reported having sex six to ten times a month in Loulan’s survey, compared to twenty-six percent of lesbians in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction study who reported having sex one to two times weekly. Those reporting sexual activity three or more times a week in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey comprise eight percent of the sample, and for Loulan’s study, fourteen percent reported having sex “eleven or more times in a month.” The similarity in these findings is striking.

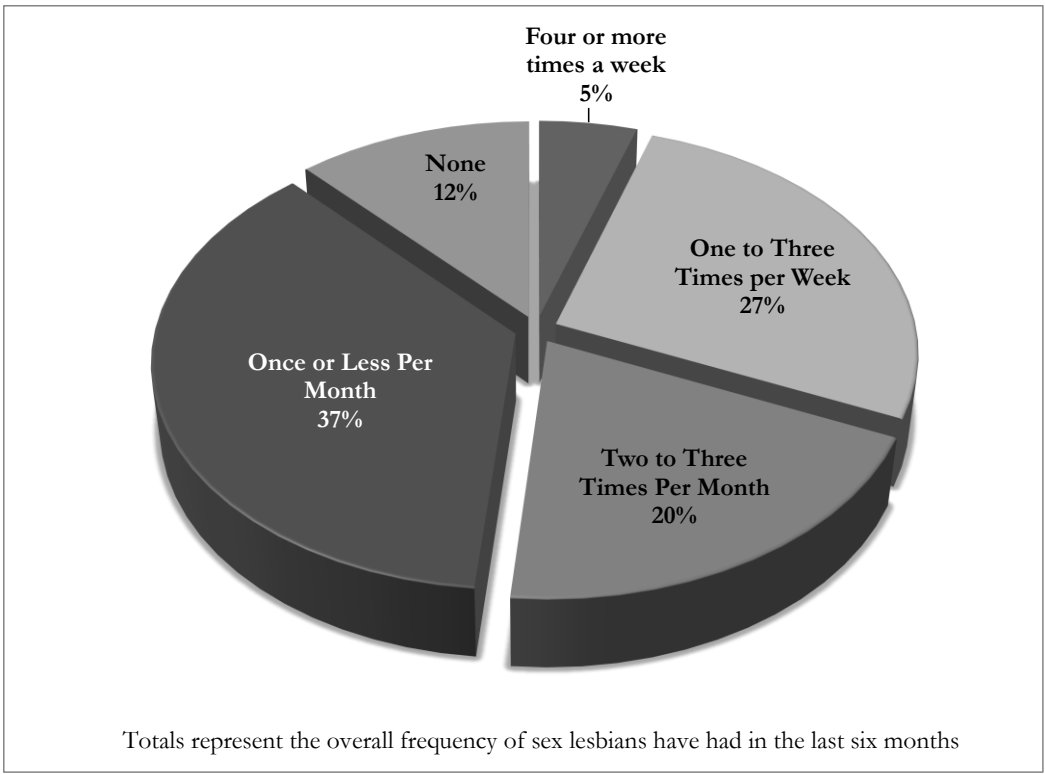


Figure 6. General Overview of Lesbian Sexual Frequency

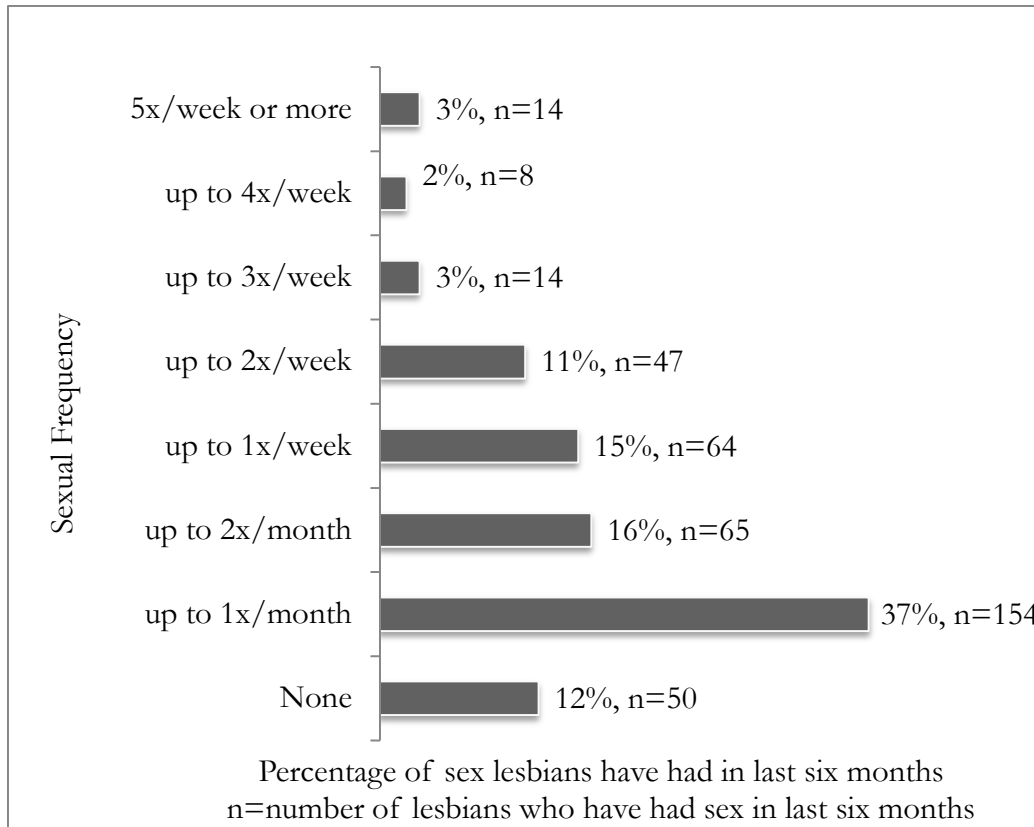


Figure 7. Detailed Lesbian Sexual Frequency

Women aged twenty-one to thirty are the most sexually active of the lesbians in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction study, with forty-eight percent having sex once weekly or more (see table 9). A noticeable drop in sexual frequency does not begin until after age fifty. At fifty-one, there is a ten percent drop in weekly sexual frequency. Thirty-one percent of forty-one to fifty year olds report having weekly sex. This drops to twenty-one percent at age fifty-one and to fourteen percent at age sixty-one. According to the National Institute on Aging, the average age of menopause is fifty-one, which is the strongest explanation for this drop. One of the common side effects reported about menopause is a decrease in libido. The Frequency vs. Satisfaction findings are also

similar to the findings of Loulan (1987), where she reports a general decline in sexual frequency as women age, with the most notable drop in frequency occurring between the age groups forty to forty-nine, and fifty to fifty-nine.

Table 9. Sexual Frequency Based on Age of Lesbians

Age	Four or More Times Per Week	One to Three Times Per Week	Two to Three Times Per Month	Once Monthly or Less	Once weekly or more
< 21 Years (n=6)	17%	17%	33%	33%	34%
21-30 Years (n=50)	10%	38%	18%	34%	48%
31-40 Years (n=127)	6%	28%	20%	47%	34%
41-50 Years (n=169)	4%	27%	24%	44%	31%
51-60 Years (n=72)	6%	15%	17%	63%	21%
60 + Years (n=15)	7%	7%	13%	73%	14%

*Percentages reflect sexual frequencies per age group
n=lesbians per age*

To explore the desire for sex as thoroughly as possible, the Frequency vs. Satisfaction survey inquired with participants about the frequency of non-partner sex in the last six months. Question ten asks, “In the last six months, how many times did you have sex with someone other than your partner?” Of the 498 respondents, only forty-two (twelve percent) reported having non-partner sex. The most non-partner sex occurs with couples who have been partnered between six and ten years, followed by women who are newly partnered up to six months (twenty-one percent).

Of the forty-two women who report non-partner sex, thirty-nine responded to the question about whether or not their relationship is open or closed to outside sex. Of these thirty-nine who reported having sex outside their relationship in the last six months, thirteen are not currently partnered. This suggests that thirteen (three percent) of women

pursued another relationship, or at least sex, and it may or may not have been the cause of their relationship break-up. Eight (two percent) of the women who had non-partner sex report that they have agreements with their partner to engage in sex outside the relationship. Eighteen of the women (four percent) reported no such agreement, so were likely engaged in acts of infidelity.

The incidence of non-partner sex with or without partner approval is nominal. These findings are lower than the incidence of non-partner sex found in 1983 by Blumstein and Schwartz. Ten percent of their sample of lesbians reported infidelity, compared to four percent of the Frequency vs. Satisfaction sample. Of those with an agreement about non-partner sex, twenty-five percent engaged in sex outside of their relationship.

There are two possibilities that might account for this decline in non-partner sex. One, the onset of AIDS occurred around the time Blumstein and Schwartz reported their findings, which would place participants of their survey at the tail end of the sexual liberation movement where sex was viewed less restrictively in our culture. This era put a damper on the sex lives of all couple pairs.

Another possibility is that during the 70s and 80s, lesbians were less visible than they are in today's culture. With this visibility comes an increased level of validation and accountability. A client who was in her prime dating years during the years of Blumstein and Schwartz's study explained to this researcher that she had been unfaithful in every relationship from around age twenty to age forty. She stated that now that she is approaching sixty years old, she has come to see that she never valued her relationships,

that she did not see lesbian relationships as important as heterosexual relationships. She shared that she had trouble conceiving that they would last in the same way that married couples believed their relationships would last. She explained that she feels differently now, that she has come to see her relationship as something that has meaning, and she experienced this only after coming out and having others (particularly heterosexuals) know about her relationship.

Once lesbians became more visible, it is likely that they began to take their own relationships more seriously, which would contribute to the decline in non-partner sex among those without agreements.

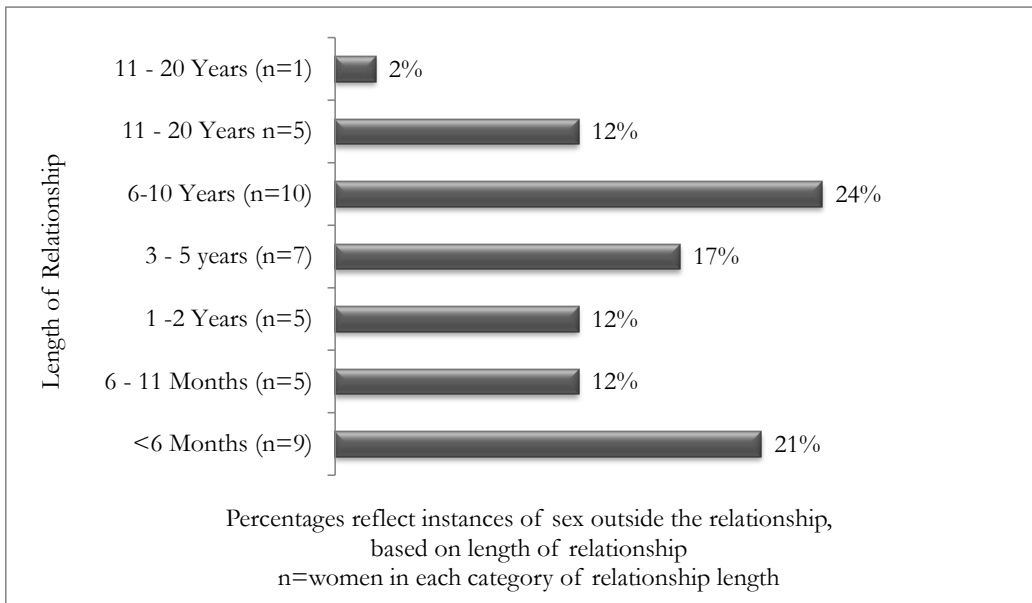


Figure 8. Instances of Sex Outside the Relationship Among Lesbians

In summary, research does support the fact that lesbians are less sexual than other couple pairings. However, there is no evidence to support the belief that this translates

into a deficiency, or that a lower frequency is unhealthy. The assumption that heterosexuals are the healthy standard by which lesbians must be compared is a paradigm this researcher rejects. Some lesbians have a lot of sex. Some lesbians have none. Lesbians of all ages are sexual, and most are disinclined to stray sexually from their primary relationship. The Frequency vs. Satisfaction study reveals that lesbian sex continues to occur at a rate similar to that found in 1987 by Loulan, though fewer lesbians appear to engage in non-partner sex than in previous years. Chapter Seven will shift attention to what is important to lesbians when it comes to their intimate relationships.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHARACTERISTICS MOST VALUED IN LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS

The frequency with which any couple has sex is one of many aspects of the relationship. Other components of a relationship include the following: social compatibility, intellectual connections, spiritual compatibility, sexual aspects (chemistry, time spent having sex, and pleasure), and emotional connection. This chapter will explore how lesbians rank the importance of these relational characteristics. Once establishing what lesbians value most in their relationships, attention will turn to the importance of sex and sexual frequency to lesbians. This researcher will analyze how the length of a lesbian relationship, as well as a lesbian's age, influence what she most values in relationships.

Overview of Relationship Characteristics and Their Importance to Lesbians

When studying sexuality, there are two ways to examine what is important to lesbians. The first option is to analyze the sexual behaviors of lesbians, as was discussed in the previous chapter. However, in looking at lesbian behavior alone, it would have been plausible to conclude that most lesbians did not value sex, given that two-thirds of lesbians in this sample have sex two times a month or less. The second method used to identify what is important to lesbians is to ask them what they think. This was the intent of question thirteen on the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey, and was the method used to understand the subjective importance of sex to lesbians.

Question thirteen asked respondents to rate the importance of nine characteristics of a lesbian relationship, including the following: emotional connectedness, sexual

chemistry, intellectual connection, spiritual connection, social compatibility, frequency of sex, physical pleasure during sex, amount of time spent during a sexual encounter, and the overall relationship satisfaction. The ratings for each characteristic included the following: extremely important, very important, moderately important, slightly important, and not at all important.

The characteristic identified as most important by the majority of lesbians in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction sample was emotional connectedness. Ninety-seven percent of lesbians reported that this was either “extremely important” or “very important.” Similarly to love, emotional connection is a subjective experience. Emotional connection occurs when partners experience a deep, mutual sense of knowing one another. This results when partners share their thoughts, feelings, fears, and dreams. Intimacy is another word used to describe an emotional connection. Intimacy is a feeling of closeness or familiarity, and it conveys warmth, affection, vulnerability, and trust.

The characteristic rated second most important to lesbians in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey is the importance of overall relationship satisfaction (ninety-six percent). This was rated almost as high as emotional connection. The overall relationship satisfaction can be described as a sense of satisfaction with the sum of all parts of the relationship, or an overall sense of relationship balance.

The third most important aspect of a relationship is an intellectual connection. Ninety-two percent of the sample indicated that this is “extremely important” or “very important.” An intellectual connection requires that lesbian partners are able to relate thoughts and information to each other in a ways that are stimulating and engaging. An

intellectual connection occurs when lesbian couples can voice their beliefs, share new information, and in some cases, respectfully debate differences of opinions.

Four of the relationship characteristics explored in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey relate to the sex life of lesbians. These characteristics are sexual chemistry, sexual pleasure, time spent engaged in sexual episodes, and sexual frequency. Sexual chemistry refers to the feeling of attraction that generates sexual energy between couples. This also involves a feeling of sexual desire toward one's partner. Eighty-seven percent of lesbians in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey rated sexual chemistry "extremely important" or "very important."

Sexual pleasure speaks to the amount of enjoyment derived from the sexual interactions that occur with one's partner. This characteristic evaluated how crucial it is for lesbians to have partner sex that feels pleasurable and satisfying. This was rated the fifth most important relationship characteristic on the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey. Seventy-eight percent of lesbians indicated that sexual pleasure was "extremely important" or "very important."

Sexual frequency refers to the amount of sex that a couple has on a regular basis. When asked about the importance of sexual frequency, only fifty-three percent of lesbians reported that it was "extremely important" or "very important." This was rated the second least esteemed relationship variable by lesbians on the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey. The only characteristic rated less valuable was "time spent on the sexual encounter," which was rated "extremely important" or "very important" by only thirty-two percent of the sample.

It is relevant to note that most lesbians did not report that the length of time spent during a sexual episode was important, yet, the majority of lesbians reported that they had engaged in lengthy sexual sessions with one another (see table 10). Question number sixteen on the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey inquired about the length of time spent during a sexual episode. The majority of lesbians (seventy-nine percent) spent at least thirty minutes when they had sex, and thirty-six percent of these women spent over an hour when they had sex. The responses revealed that forty-three percent of lesbians spent between thirty minutes to an hour when engaged in sexual activity. Only twenty percent of women spent less than thirty minutes during sexual sessions with their partner. An additional two percent spent less than fifteen minutes in a sexual encounter with their partners. This researcher believes that the time spent during sex might be more valued than their responses indicated, based solely on this insight into their behavior.

The average length of heterosexual sex is generally determined by the length of time between penile entry and the man's orgasm. A commonly cited source for sexual duration among heterosexuals is a study conducted by fifty members of the Society for Sex Therapy and Research in the U.S. and Canada, in which they concluded that the ideal length of time for sexual intercourse was three to thirteen minutes. The way this research was presented in the media inaccurately suggests that three to thirteen minutes is sufficient time to please a woman.

USA Today included an article titled, "Sex therapists: A few minutes is best." The article started with, "Maybe men had it right all along: It doesn't take long to satisfy a woman in bed." Dr. Irwin Goldstein reported that based on a sample of 1,500 couples

whom he studied in 2005, 7.3 minutes is the median time for sexual intercourse (Scott, 2008). This is a discouraging conclusion for the media to be promoting, given that research suggests that partners of women who spend “twenty-one minutes or longer on foreplay” have a 92.3 percent likelihood of bringing her to orgasm (Kerner 2004, 19). Solot and Miller also state that “On average, it takes a woman twenty minutes of direct clitoral stimulation to have an orgasm” (2007, 20). Perhaps that is why seventy-nine percent of lesbians in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey have sex that lasts thirty minutes or longer, and only two percent have sex in less than fifteen minutes.

Table 10. Time Length of Sexual Experience for Lesbians

Length of Sexual Encounter	Percentage of Women
Thirty minutes to an hour	43%
One to two hours	26%
Over fifteen minutes, under thirty minutes	18%
Two or more hours	10%
Under fifteen minutes	2%
Never had sex with a woman	1%

Of the four relationship characteristics that were sexually-related on the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey, sexual chemistry was reported the most important, and was also the fourth most valued overall relationship characteristic. Sexual chemistry describes a feeling of attraction and desire that is sexually charged. This chemistry does not require a relationship or physical contact; in fact, it does not even require knowing the person with whom you feel sexual chemistry. This is a felt experience that may or may not be acted upon.

Of the four components of a relationship that relate directly to sex (sexual chemistry, sexual pleasure, sexual frequency, and time spent on sexual encounter), sexual chemistry is rated the most significant of the four on the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey. Eighty-seven percent of respondents reported sexual chemistry is “very important,” or “extremely important.” Sexual pleasure is valued by seventy-eight percent of lesbians, followed by sexual frequency with fifty-three percent, and least significant is the amount of time spent on the sexual encounter (thirty-two percent).

When evaluating what was most important, respondents rated each relationship characteristic independently, and they were not required to prioritize the nine relationship characteristics. Therefore, it is conceivable that some lesbians could have indicated that all nine characteristics were “extremely important.” However, nearly half of the lesbians in this survey indicated that sexual frequency was not important. Conversely, almost every woman (ninety-seven percent) in the survey reported emotional connection as paramount. Sexual frequency proved nearly half as necessary to lesbians as emotional connection in a survey where both could have been rated equally.

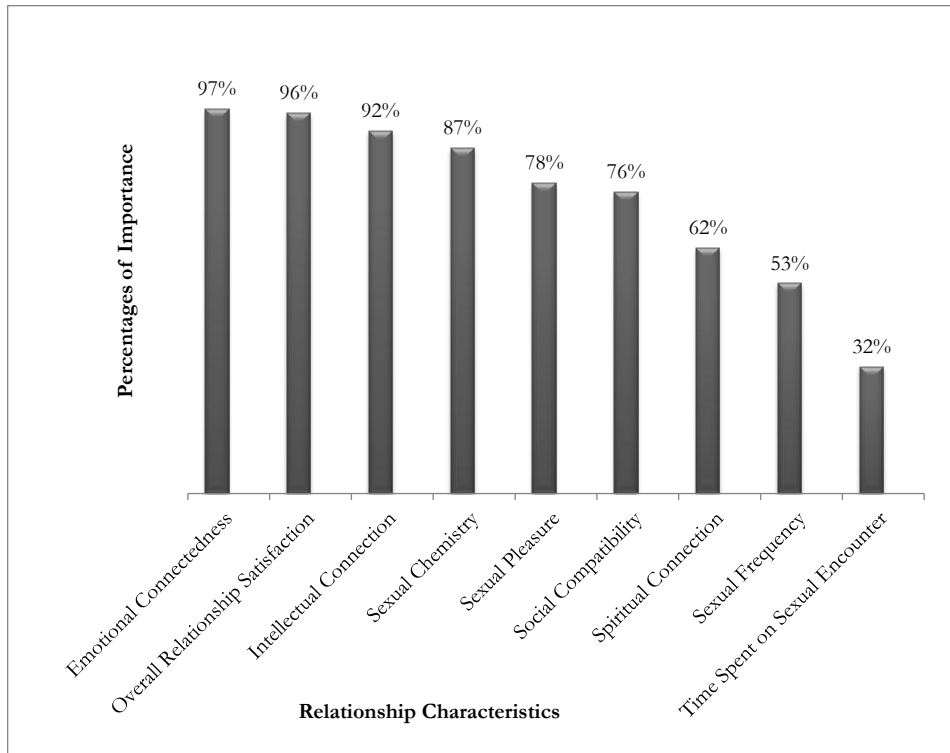


Figure 9. Importance of Relationship Characteristics to Lesbians

When the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey results are cross examined for age and the importance of relationship characteristics, emotional connection remains the most valued characteristic regardless of a lesbian's age (see table 11). The correlation between the age of lesbians and what is most important to them also reveals that sexual chemistry is noticeably less important among older lesbians. Once lesbians reach age sixty, the importance of sexual frequency drops significantly. The Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey results showed that frequency is most important to lesbians ages fifty-one to sixty years old (fifty-seven percent), and least valuable to lesbians ages sixty-one years and older (twenty-eight percent).

Table 11. Importance of Relationship Characteristics to Lesbians According to Age

Age	Emotional Connection	Intellectual Connection	Overall Relationship Satisfaction	Sexual Chemistry	Sexual Pleasure	Social Compatibility	Spiritual Connection	Sexual Frequency	Time Spent on Sexual Encounter
21-30	98%	94%	93%	92%	82%	74%	65%	51%	40%
31-40	99%	94%	93%	90%	74%	79%	58%	53%	31%
41-50	99%	91%	90%	88%	82%	59%	63%	56%	32%
51-60	91%	87%	87%	85%	76%	78%	70%	57%	27%
61+	100%	94%	88%	72%	78%	83%	67%	28%	39%

Percentage of lesbians who view relationship characteristics as important

The Importance of Sex to Lesbians

Question five on the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey asked, “Which statement most accurately describes how you feel about having sex with your current or most recent partner?” Respondents had five responses from which to choose, including the following: “I want to have sex with my partner;” “I need to have sex with my partner;” “I enjoy and want sex, but have lost the desire to have it with my partner;” “I could take it or leave it;” and “I could easily go the rest of my life without sex with anyone.”

Of the 473 lesbians who responded to this question, sixty-percent reported that they *wanted* to have sex with their partner (see figure 10). This was followed by twenty-two percent of lesbians who stated they *needed* to have sex with their partner. The next largest category (ten percent) was women who reported that they had a desire for sex, but they had no desire for sex with their current partner. Therefore, only eight percent of the sample reported limited interest in sex.

In Loulan’s 1987 study, she asked lesbians how they felt about sex. While not the

same question, it is close enough to draw parallels to the responses of women in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey. Loulan’s study reported that eighty-seven percent “love it,” four percent “hate it,” and nine percent “didn’t respond” (1987, 212). When combined, eighty-two percent of women in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey reported that they either “wanted” or “needed” sex, which is similar to Loulan’s eighty-seven percent who “love it.”

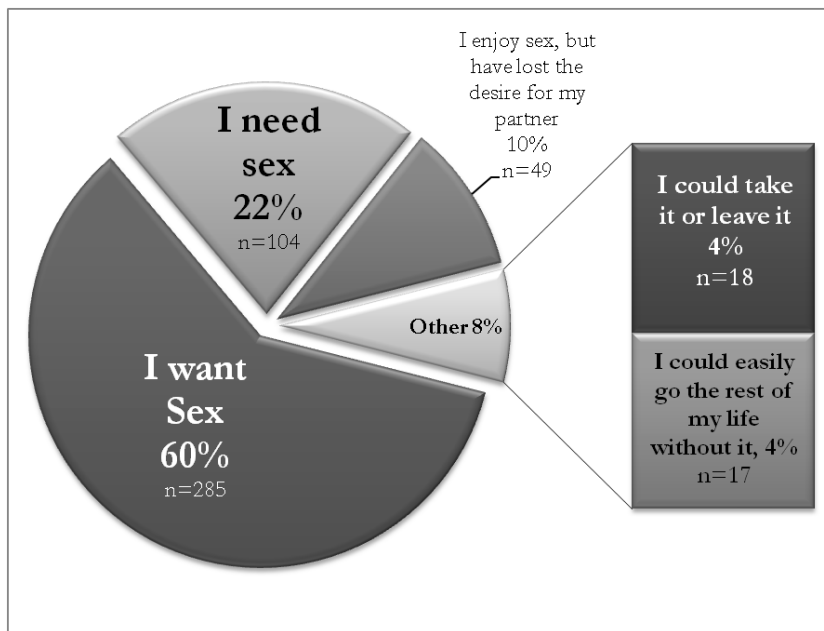


Figure 10. Importance of Sex to Lesbians

Percentages reflect the importance of sex to lesbians in relationships

Based on the length of relationship, lesbians in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey who were partnered for three to five years placed the greatest value on sexual frequency. Lesbian couples who were partnered twenty-one years or more placed the least importance (two percent) on sexual frequency. The remaining categories of relationship lengths (zero to six months, six to eleven months, one to two years, six to ten

years, and eleven to twelve years) rated the importance of sexual frequency between eleven and eighteen percent (see figure 11).

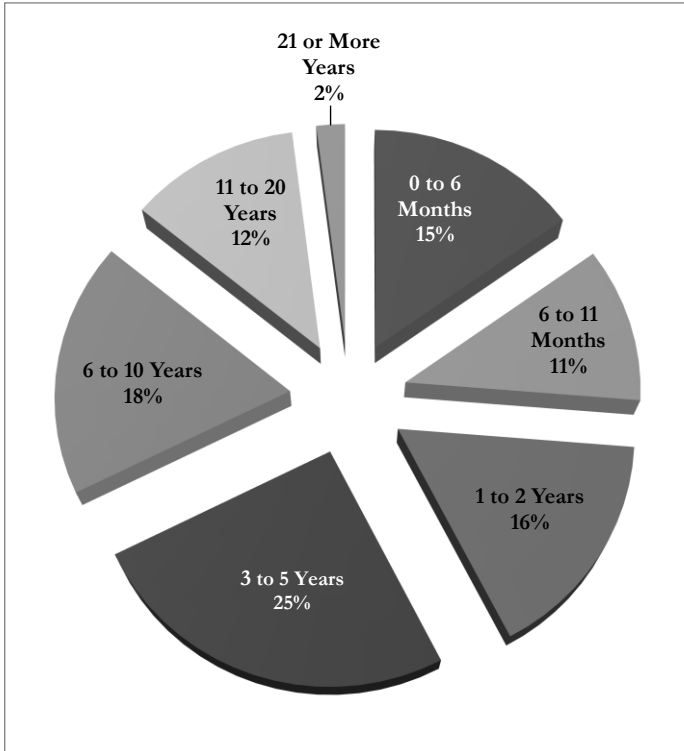


Figure 11. Correlation of Length of Relationship and Lesbians Who Rated Sexual Frequency “Very” or “Extremely” Important

Percentages are calculated on survey respondents who identified sexual frequency as either “Extremely Important” or “Very Important”

Of the fifty-three percent of lesbians in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey who reported that sexual frequency was “extremely important” or “very important,” the majority of these women (fifty-nine percent) lived with a partner and did not have children (see figure 12). Sexual frequency was also important to lesbians who lived with a partner and had children (forty-six percent). Slightly lower was the percentage of lesbians who had their own place and spent a few nights together (thirty-three percent). The importance of

sexual frequency drops further for lesbians who do not cohabit with their partner. The lowest values placed on sexual frequency were by lesbians in long-distance relationships (seventeen percent), lesbians who had their own place but spent most nights together (fourteen percent), and those who lived with an ex-girlfriend (one percent).

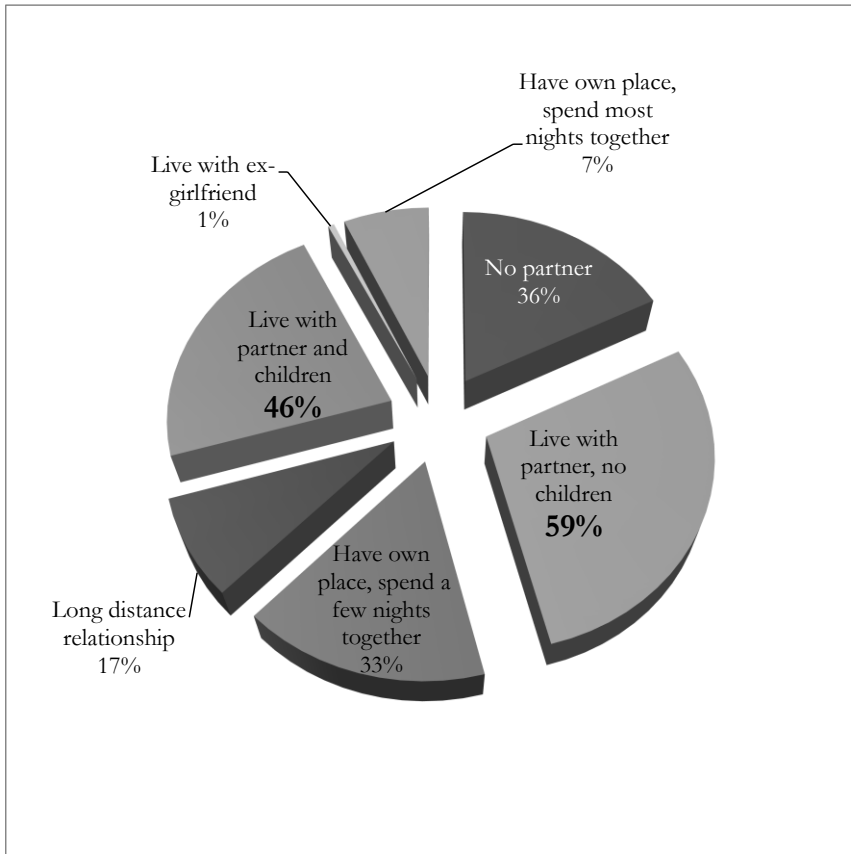


Figure 12. Correlation of Living Arrangement and Lesbian Couples Who Rated Sexual Frequency “Very” or “Extremely” Important

Percentages are calculated on survey respondents who identified sexual frequency as either “Extremely Important” or “Very Important”

How often is Sex the Cause for Leaving a Relationship?

Question number nineteen on the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey asked respondents, “Have you ever had a relationship end because of issues with sex?” The

options from which respondents could choose were the following: “yes,” “no,” “I’m not sure,” and “Does not apply.” Respondents were also given the option to explain their response. The majority of responses show that most relationships (fifty-five percent) did not end because of sex-related issues.

This researcher analyzed the explanations provided by lesbians who reported that sex was a cause for ending their relationship. Of the 481 lesbians that answered question nineteen, 144 (thirty percent) responded “yes,” issues with sex caused the relationship to end (see figure 13). Only 101 lesbians offered an explanation about how sex caused problems for them personally, and of the 101 explanations, the largest percentage of lesbians (twenty-eight percent) involved lesbians that reported a discrepancy in the desired frequency of sex.

Of the forty-six lesbians who responded with “I don’t know,” twenty six provided explanations. While a handful of these lesbians reported that sex was an issue, most of the lesbians reported that sexual concerns were either secondary to another issue or a result of other issues. Sex was considered a secondary cause to issues such as the following: communication, control, abuse, and not feeling validated.

The second reason most commonly cited to explain how sex contributed to the demise of a relationship was the cessation of sex in their relationship. Twenty-one percent of the sample who endorsed sex as a cause for their relationship ending reported that the sex in their relationship stopped all together. The type of comments provided by respondents included statements such as, “five years later, the sex died, and we were too young to know how to fix it,” and, “[my] partner indicated a complete cessation of

interest in sex, so the relationship ended.”

Additional explanations for how sex contributed to the demise of their relationship included the following: infidelity (seventeen percent), sexual incompatibility (fifteen percent), loss of attraction (eleven percent), and a history of sexual abuse that affected the sexual relationship (five percent). Two respondents cited homophobia (two percent), and two cited a desire to be with a man (two percent) as the cause of their relationship ending.

Some of the respondents in the sample offered uncommonly thorough explanations which provided additional insights. One of the most interesting responses was from a woman who desired more frequent sexual activity, and she had already had four relationships end because of this issue. Here is her response to question number nineteen:

In each of the 4 significant relationships I have been involved in, including my current one; all have had a lack of sexual intimacy. I don't consider myself a 'sex addict,' but I also don't think having sex 2-3 times a week is unreasonable. In each of these relationships, the sex started out with good frequency and satisfaction apparently on both sides. Within a very short period, say a couple of months, if that long, things seemed to have dried up either completely, or to where there would be several weeks of no sex or intimacy at all, until I would say something, they would 'perform' and then things returned to no sex again. Not believing in 'running' at the first signs of trouble, I would try open and honest communication, and try to work on the relationship. As mentioned above, 'if things aren't working inside the bedroom, then they aren't working outside the bedroom'. I have cared deeply for, and loved each one of those partners, but without that important component, the relationship is not complete for me. I kind of view it as having the perfect old classic car....it's sweet, and after a lot of work, in almost mint condition...only thing is, it only has three wheels!!! If you're OK to just sit behind the wheel and enjoy the view from there, then you're good, stay in the relationship...however...if you ever want to take it out on the road for a drive, then you're sunk, and eventually, unhappy. (Author unknown 2011)

The remaining survey respondents (fifty-five percent) reported that sex has not been a contributor to their relationship ending.

Though the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey does not examine the reasons for terminating a relationship, it is interesting to note that, “lesbians had the highest breakup rate of all [their] couples” (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983, 207). Blumstein and Schwartz observed that when lesbian couples do not pool their finances, it “often indicates that couples have not given up their independence,” and consequently “may never have visualized the relationship lasting into the indefinite future” (1983, 309). They also noticed, “Among the lesbian couples, the person more likely to leave is the more powerful partner...the person who does less housework.” They also suggest that lesbians do not like having too much control, and “women in general do not like to feel superior to their partners” (1983, 316).

The only significant mention made by Blumstein and Schwartz about sex as a cause for relationships ending is related to lesbians in open relationships who engage in sex outside of their relationship. They reported that lesbians were not comfortable with casual sex, and when they had sex outside of their relationship, they risked falling in love. They also stated, “the woman who has had the outside sex is more likely to choose to terminate the relationship.” Ultimately, they concluded, “People who have sex infrequently are just as likely to have a long-lasting relationship as those who have sex often” (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983, 312). This is consistent with the findings in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey. While sex is relevant in lesbian relationships, the lack of sexual frequency is not a significant contributor to lesbian relationships ending.

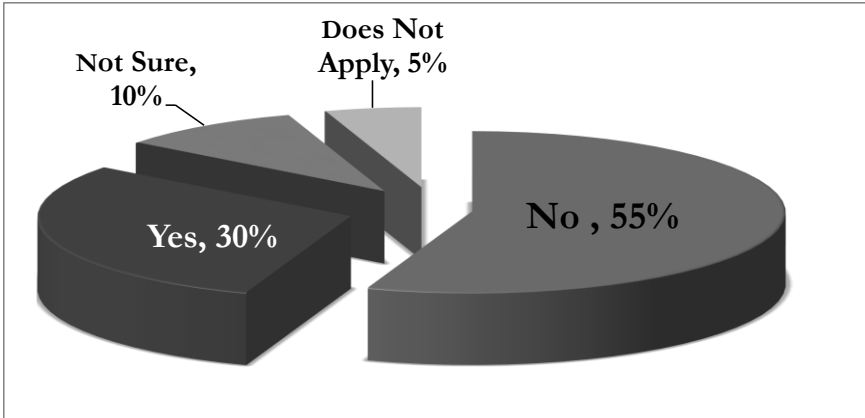


Figure 13. Sex as the Cause for Lesbian Relationships Ending
Percentage of lesbians who have had a relationship end because of issues with sex

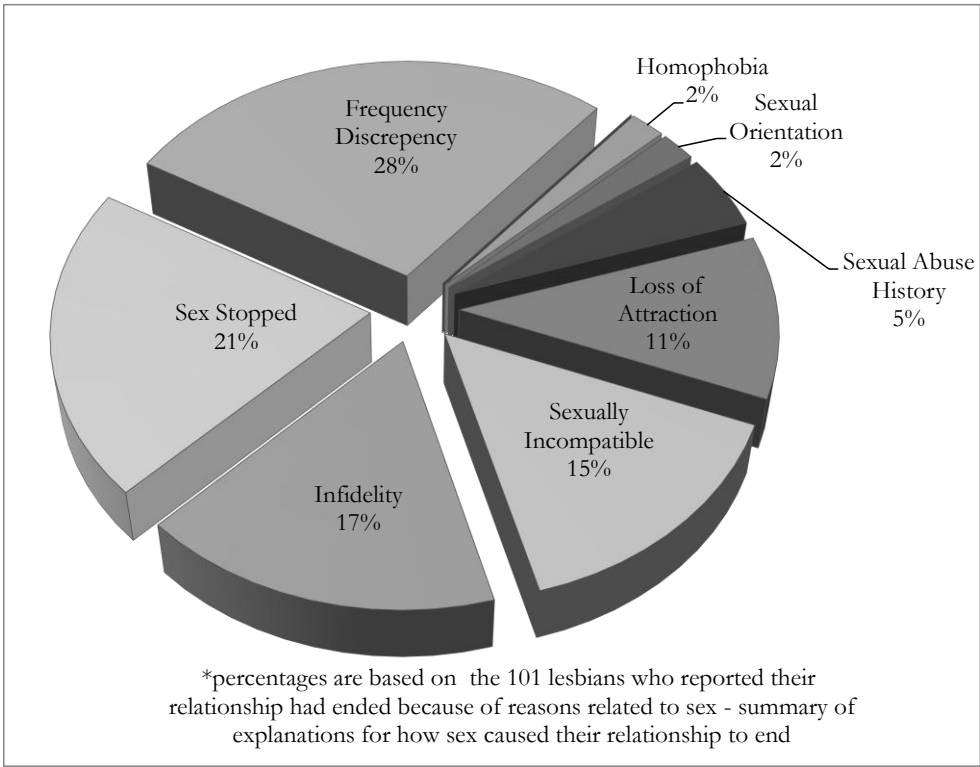


Figure 14. Explanation for How Sex Caused the Relationship to End for Lesbians

Question number eight on the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey asked, “In the last six months, how many times have you had sex (intimate contact intended to create sexual pleasure) with your partner?” Respondents were offered an open-ended field to provide the exact number. Question nine on the survey asked, “In the last six months, how many times would you have liked to have sex with your partner?” Respondents were offered another open-ended field for their responses. The difference between the amount of sex reported and the amount of sex desired was calculated to determine how many women in the sample want more, less, or the same amount of sex than was occurring in their current relationship (see figure 15).

Based on the information provided by respondents of the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey regarding the importance of sexual frequency (of which only fifty-three percent rated as important), this researcher was surprised to learn that seventy-four percent of lesbians in this sample desired more sex. This finding resulted in a significant discrepancy between the reported lack of importance placed on sexual frequency and the large number of lesbians who indicated a desire for more sex. What motivates a woman to state that sexual frequency is not important, and then to state that she wants more sex? This researcher has three theories that address this phenomenon.

The first theory is that lesbians do value greater sexual frequency in their relationship, but when compared to the emotional and intellectual connection, the lack of sexual frequency is forgiven. Thus, they may have concluded something that might have sounded like this: “Yes, I want more sex, but no, it’s not *that* important when compared to the other characteristics listed.” Consequently, if a lesbian is in a relationship that is

meeting her emotional and intellectual needs, she is likely more forgiving of lower rates of sexual frequency.

The second theory is that lesbians view sexual frequency as an indicator of a strong emotional connection. If the most prized commodity in a lesbian relationship is an emotional connection, perhaps lesbians perceive infrequent sexual activity as a sign of trouble, or fear that this means there is something wrong. It is interesting to note that lesbians do not identify sexual frequency as important when asked directly on the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey. However, when sexual frequency is low, lesbians from the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey indicate that this is a problem. Is the problem that they desire more sex, or is the problem that they desire the emotional connection and relationship security that they believe accompanies more frequent sex?

This researcher theorizes that lesbians view an increase in sexual activity as an indication of greater emotional connection, and therefore of greater relationship health. Accordingly, this could explain why a lesbian would respond to one question saying, "sexual frequency is not important," and respond to another question with "I want sex more frequently." Perhaps both are true, that there is a cognitive wish for more sex in an effort to maintain or improve emotional connection, but that this impulse may not stem from her physical desire for more sex.

According to Lisa Diamond, author of *Sexual Fluidity*, "Many women report feeling emotionally attracted to other women before being physically attracted to them" (2008, 50). Diamond also discusses the discrepancy between a woman's sexual arousal and her awareness of this arousal, stating "sometimes women are physically aroused

without knowing it, and sometimes their subjective feelings of desire are not matched by genital arousal” (2008, 102). This indicates that lesbians experience inconsistencies in their ability to decode their own arousal and attraction, sometimes feeling attracted but not aroused, or being aroused but not desirous. Given the inconsistencies surrounding female sexuality and the apparent disconnection between cognitive and physical arousal for women in general, it is plausible that lesbians could cognitively want greater sexual frequency to gain the unconscious desire for greater emotional connection.

It is a common experience for this researcher to work with lesbian couples who present in counseling because of concerns they have about infrequent sex in their relationship. Upon further examination, often what these women desire is a return to the way they felt during the early months of their relationship when they were first getting to know one another, which happens to coincide with more frequent sex for most couples of all pairings.

This researcher hypothesizes that what lesbians want more of is the exciting, feel-good experience that accompanies the early stage of their relationship, when their attraction is new and novel. This early feel-good experience, which is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Nine, also happens to coincide with more frequent sex. Thus, when lesbians think about the comparative euphoria of their early relationship, it makes sense that they try to recapture those positive feelings by having more sex, especially if, like all couple pairings, they were significantly more sexually active at the start of their relationship. Consequently, the desire for more sex reported by lesbians in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey may not accurately address the desire for more sex, but instead

targets the desire for a stronger emotional connection and greater relationship security. Perhaps lesbians perceive they will experience greater emotional satisfaction through an increase in sexual frequency, whether their body desires the physical contact or not.

The third theory is that lesbians may believe that a “healthy” woman should want more sex because of messages such as lesbian bed death, which result in lesbians feeling damaged or somehow sexually inadequate. Suppose the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey had asked respondents how many minutes per day she exercised. Imagine that the response was “an average of five minutes of exercise per day.” Most people know that experts recommend greater amounts of daily exercise for optimal health. Then when asked how many minutes per day she *wants* to exercise, what if seventy-four percent stated that they wanted to exercise thirty minutes per day?

Does this mean that they genuinely *want* to exercise thirty minutes per day, or does it mean that they have provided what they thought was the “right” or “healthy” answer? Or maybe, as suggested in the second theory, they are interested in the benefits of exercise (fitness, prevention of ill-health), or the benefits of sex (emotional connection, closeness, pleasure, and relationship security), but the desire to engage in either is just not strong enough to motivate action. Perhaps she feels *fit enough* already, or adequately *emotionally close* already, and does not feel the need to expend the extra energy.

This researcher had a therapy client who reported she had not had sex with her partner of three years for over a year. The client admitted that she was the one rejecting advances by her partner, and she was also resisting interacting with her partner in a more sensual way. Though their interactions were loving and playful, they were not sensual or

sexual, which my client admitted was in an effort to avoid sex. When asked what her ideal sex life looked like, this client stated that she would like to have sex once or twice per week. Surprised by the obvious discrepancy between what her behavior suggested that she wanted and what her stated goal was, this researcher asked her to explain. She indicated that she felt that weekly sex was *normal*, and that for their sex life to be healthy, it seemed as if they should have sex at least weekly.

This researcher is inclined to think that a combination of the above theories helps explain the discrepancy between the high level of desire for sex and the low value placed on sexual frequency. It is logical that if emotional connection is the most highly esteemed characteristic of a lesbian relationship, that women who associate an emotional connection with sex will desire greater levels of sex. It is also logical that women may not desire greater levels of sex, because if the majority of lesbians (seventy-four percent) reported wanting more sex, then why are they not having more? Do they want more, or do they think they *should* want more, or is it a combination of both? More research is needed on this topic.

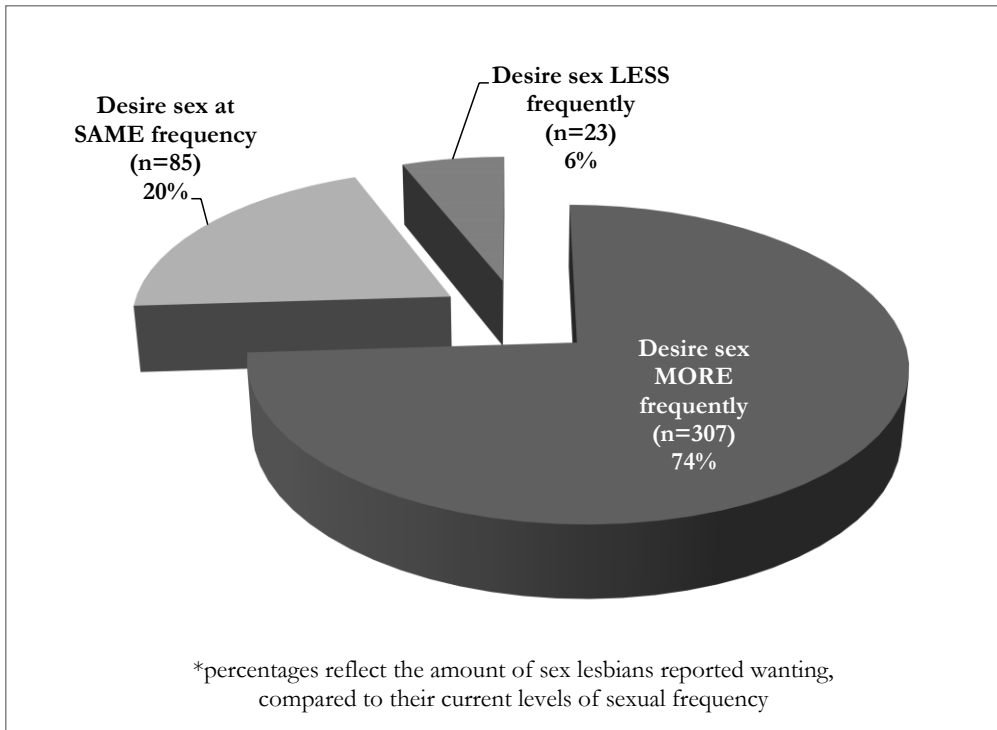


Figure 15. Desired Change in Sexual Frequency Among Lesbians

In summary, based on what lesbians *think* (rather than what they *do*), a balanced relationship with a strong emotional and intellectual connection is most important. In the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey, sexual frequency was most valued by lesbians who were partnered for three to five years, and we have learned that lesbians spend a more than average length of time when they have sex. Seventy-nine percent of lesbians engaged in sexual sessions that lasted thirty minutes or longer. Childless lesbians who live together placed the greatest importance on sexual frequency (fifty-nine percent). Less than a third of the lesbians in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey reported that sex was the cause of their relationships ending. Of those who did attribute sex as the cause for their relationships ending, only twenty-eight percent indicated that it was due to

discrepancies in desired sexual frequency. In an effort to explore the relationship between sexual frequency and relationship satisfaction in greater detail, the next chapter will explore the actual changes in sexual frequency over the course of lesbian relationships.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHANGES IN SEXUAL FREQUENCY OVER TIME

Changes in sexual frequency affect all couple pairs. However, in the *American Couples* study, Blumstein and Schwartz discovered that not only are lesbians less sexual than other couples, they also experience a faster and steeper decline in sexual frequency than other couple dyads. This chapter will provide an updated view of sexual frequency among lesbians. Attention will also be given to the reasons used to explain the decline in sexual frequency among lesbian couples.

Changes in Sexual Frequency

Prior to 1978, “Virtually no empirical research exist[ed] concerning the romantic and sexual relationships of lesbians” (Peplau et al. 1978, 7). Thirty-four years later, there is still limited research on the topic of lesbian sexuality. Of the studies that have been conducted, most reached the same two conclusions. Lesbians have less sex than other couple pairings, and they also experience a rapid decline in sexual frequency (Peplau et al. 1978 ; Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Loulan 1987).

Only three studies that were conducted with large sample sizes (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Loulan 1987; Lever 1995) offer information that correlates sexual frequency with the length of the relationship. These studies will serve as a point of comparison for the findings in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction study.

In her survey of 2,525 lesbians from the gay and lesbian magazine *The Advocate*, Lever reported that in the first year of their relationship, thirty-three percent of lesbians

had sex three or more times per week. The Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey reported seven percent of lesbian couples had sex four times a week or more during the first six months of relationship, twenty-one percent during the second six months, and six percent during years one and two (see table 12).

Lever's sample also reported that only twenty-percent of lesbians had sex three or more times per week in the second year of their relationship, which compared to six percent of lesbians in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey who had sex four or more times per week during their first and second year, and thirty-seven percent who had sex one to three times a week during the same time frame. There were no additional comparisons for couples beyond year two in Lever's article. These comparisons suggest a slightly higher frequency of sexual activity among Lever's sample than found in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey.

The 1983 findings by Blumstein and Schwartz represent even higher levels of sexual frequency compared to those reported in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey. In both studies, there is a steady decline in sexual frequency, though the decline is more severe in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction sample than in the *American Couples* study. In the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey, twenty-six percent of lesbians who were partnered two years or less reported they had sex four or more times per week, compared to seventy-six percent of lesbians in *American Couples*.

Twenty-two percent of couples in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Study who were together between three and ten years (compared thirty-seven percent with *American Couples* who were together two to ten years), reported a sexual frequency of one or more

times per week. In the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey, only one lesbian out of seventy-six who were partnered for eleven or more years reported having sex four or more times weekly, compared to the one percent of sixty-one lesbians who were partnered for ten or more years in the *American Couples* study. This is an increase in sexual frequency for couples who were partnered ten or more years.

It is interesting to note that in general, sexual frequency among lesbian couples is lower in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey than the frequencies reported in the *American Couples* study. In this researcher's study, however, lesbians demonstrated increasingly stronger staying power in their relationships. One of the most noticeable differences among the various surveys conducted over the last thirty years is the increase in the length of time that lesbians are in their relationship.

Couples in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction study had been partnered longer than those represented in the *American Couples* study. Forty-six percent of the lesbians in the *American Couples* study were partnered two years or less, compared to thirty-five percent in this researcher's study. Forty-six percent of lesbians in the *American Couples* study were partnered between two and ten years. This is similar to the forty-eight percent of lesbians partnered the same length of time in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey. The two samples differ, however, with lesbians who have been together over ten years. Only eight-percent of the lesbians in the *American Couples* study had been partnered over ten years, compared to seventeen percent in this researcher's study. The average length of relationship among the lesbians in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey was between three and five years.

Table 12. Sexual Frequency Based on Length of Relationship for Lesbian Couples

Length of Relationship	Once Monthly or Less	Two to Three Times Monthly	One to Three Times Weekly	4+ Week
< 6 months (n=41)	29%	27%	37%	7%
6-11 months (n=47)	28%	6%	45%	21%
1-2 years (n=82)	29%	28%	37%	6%
3-5 years (n=122)	51%	22%	22%	5%
6-10 years (n=93)	67%	17%	15%	1%
11-20 years (n=59)	75%	14%	10%	2%
21+ years (n=17)	76%	18%	6%	0%

Consistent with prior research, the trend among lesbian couples in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey revealed that lesbian couples experienced a decline in sexual frequency the longer they were partnered (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Loulan 1987; Lever 1995). Lesbians in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey reached their peak sexual frequency during months six through eleven, after which there is a steady decline in sexual frequency as the relationship continues. Figure sixteen displays the percentage of lesbians who had sex once weekly or more during the last six months. After couples reach their peak sexual frequency during the second six months of their relationship, there is a noticeable and steady decline in the percentage of women who reported having sex once weekly or more as the length of relationship increases.

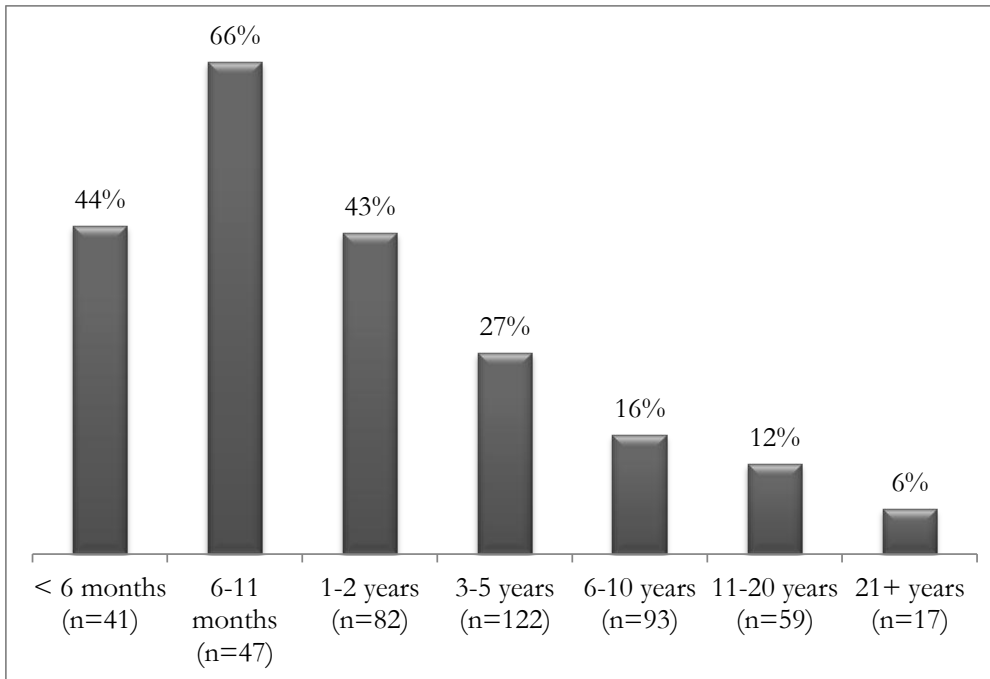


Figure 16. Sexual Frequency of Lesbians According to Length of Relationship.

The percentages reflect the number of lesbians who report having sex once or more per week.

The most significant drop in activity experienced by respondents in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey occurred early in the relationship. Twenty-seven percent of lesbian couples partnered less than six months reported decreased sexual frequency. However, in the next six months of their relationship, fifty-eight percent of lesbians experienced a decrease in sexual frequency.

Eighty-two percent of lesbians who were partnered three to five years reported a decline in sexual frequency. After year five, the frequency changes were less significant. Of lesbians partnered five to twenty-one or more years, eleven percent reported decreased sexual activity. Thus, the sexual activity declined most dramatically (thirty-one percent) for lesbians between their first and second six months of a relationship.

The findings in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey are consistent with those found in Loulan’s study of 1,566 lesbians (1987). Loulan used a graph which compared the number of times lesbians had sex in the last month with the length of their relationship (1987, 215). She reported that lesbians engaged in sex between ten and eleven times a month (two to three times per week) throughout the first year of their relationship. Then following their one year anniversary, lesbian couples in her sample experienced a fifty percent decline in sexual frequency. This is a lower decline than the seventy-nine percent of lesbians in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey, who reported a decline in sexual activity after being partnered one to two years.

Table 13. Changes in Sexual Frequency According to Length of Relationship for Lesbians

Length of Relationship	No Change	Slight Increase	Moderate Increase	Significant Increase	Slight Decrease	Moderate Decrease	Significant Decrease	Stopped		
								Having Sex	Total Decrease	Total Increase
< 6 months	47%	4%	9%	13%	16%	9%	0%	2%	27%	27%
6-11 months	15%	13%	10%	4%	29%	13%	10%	6%	58%	27%
1-2 years	8%	2%	6%	5%	27%	25%	23%	4%	79%	13%
3-5 years	6%	3%	4%	5%	21%	25%	30%	7%	82%	12%
6-10 years	6%	1%	2%	1%	10%	18%	53%	10%	90%	4%
11-20 years	5%	0%	5%	4%	4%	13%	48%	21%	85%	9%
21+ years	0%	0%	0%	7%	13%	20%	53%	7%	94%	7%

Age also impacts the changes in the sexual frequency for lesbians in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey. The age group least likely to experience a significant decline in frequency is lesbians between eighteen and twenty-one years old. This makes sense, given that many lesbians are coming out and entering relationships during these years, and their

sex lives are just getting started. The accumulative decrease in sexual frequency among each age group is the sum of lesbians who identified a “slight,” “moderate,” “or “significant” decrease, along with those who “stopped having sex” entirely.

The largest accumulative decrease in sexual frequency occurs with lesbians between the ages of fifty-one and sixty years old. Eighty-three percent of lesbians in this age group reported some level of decline in their sexual frequency. This also makes sense given that this is the decade in which most women enter menopause, which is a well-established period of sexual decline for most women. Interestingly, is not a strong pattern of decline among the remaining age groups. Seventy-nine percent of lesbians who are between the ages thirty-one and forty and seventy-six percent of lesbians over the age of sixty reported a decrease in sexual frequency.

Table 14. Changes in Sexual Frequency According to Age of Lesbian

Age	No Change	Slight Increase	Moderate Increase	Significant Increase	Slight Decrease	Moderate Decrease	Significant Decrease	Stopped Having Sex	Total Decrease	Total Increase
Under 21	33%	0%	33%	17%	17%	0%	0%	0%	17%	50%
Between 21-30	14%	4%	15%	6%	21%	19%	21%	0%	62%	25%
Between 31-40	14%	2%	3%	2%	16%	21%	37%	6%	79%	7%
Between 41-50	9%	6%	3%	6%	20%	20%	27%	10%	76%	15%
Between 51-60	8%	1%	5%	3%	13%	20%	40%	9%	83%	9%
Over 60	13%	0%	6%	6%	13%	0%	44%	19%	75%	12%

The most significant decrease in sexual frequency reported in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey is found among lesbians who live together, with or without children. Forty-one percent of couples who lived together and had children reported a “significant

decrease” in sexual frequency, and six percent reported that they had no sex at all. Thirty-nine percent of lesbians who lived together without children reported a “significant decrease” in sexual frequency, and nine percent stopped having sex altogether. The greatest accumulative decrease (ninety-one percent) in sexual frequency occurred with women who lived with their partner and no children.

Lesbians who do not live together experience the least amount of decline in their sexual frequency. Those who live separately but spend most nights together experience the least disruption in their sex lives, with only twenty-nine percent having a decrease in sexual frequency. Forty-five percent of lesbians in long-distance relationships and fifty-seven percent of lesbians who live separately but spend a few nights together per week experience a decline in sexual frequency.

Not only is the average length of lesbian relationships longer than it used to be, more couples are also raising children. Twenty-six percent of the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey included lesbian moms who live with their children. Because respondents were not asked if they had children, this figure does not include the lesbians who had adult children who no longer lived at home. It is likely that the actual number of lesbian parents in the survey is greater than twenty-six percent. However, this low estimate of parents in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction sample is still an increase (six percent) over the twenty-two percent of lesbians in the 1994 Bryant and Demian survey who had children. This is also a slight increase (two percent) over the twenty-two percent of the lesbians with children in the 1995 Lever study.

Table 15. Changes in Sexual Frequency for Lesbian Couples, According to Living Situation

Living Situation	No Change	Slight Change	Moderate Increase	Significant Increase	Slight Decrease	Moderate Decrease	Significant Decrease	Stopped Having Sex	Total Decrease	Total Increase
Own Place, Most Nights Together	4%	4%	21%	8%	4%	4%	21%	0%	29%	33%
Long Distance Relationship	17%	14%	21%	3%	17%	14%	7%	7%	45%	38%
Own Place, Few Nights Together	19%	6%	4%	15%	17%	23%	15%	2%	57%	25%
With Partner and Kids	9%	0%	3%	1%	16%	25%	41%	6%	88%	4%
With Partner, No Kids	2%	2%	1%	3%	22%	21%	39%	9%	91%	7%

Table 16. Sexual Frequency of Lesbian Couples, Based on Living Situation

Living Situation	Number of Women	Percent of Sample	Average Sexual Frequency
I have my own place, but my partner and I spend a few nights together	55	14%	1x/Week
I have my own place, but my partner and I spend most nights together	23	6%	1x/Week
My partner and I have a long-distance relationship	31	8%	2-3x/Month
I live with my partner and children	101	26%	1x/Month or less
I live with my partner, no children	172	45%	2-3x/Month
Average sexual frequency among lesbian couples	382	100%	2-3x/Month

Causes for Decline in Sexual Frequency

Most couples report a decline in sexual frequency over the course of their

relationship. Lesbians, however, declined at a rate faster than any other couple dyads and to a frequency lower than any other couple pairs (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983). In the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey, only twenty-one (five percent) of the lesbians in a relationship reported having sex four or more times per week (see figure 16). Only two of the twenty-one women who had sex a minimum of four times per week had been in a relationship for longer than five years. None of the women having sex this frequently had been in a relationship longer than twenty-one years.

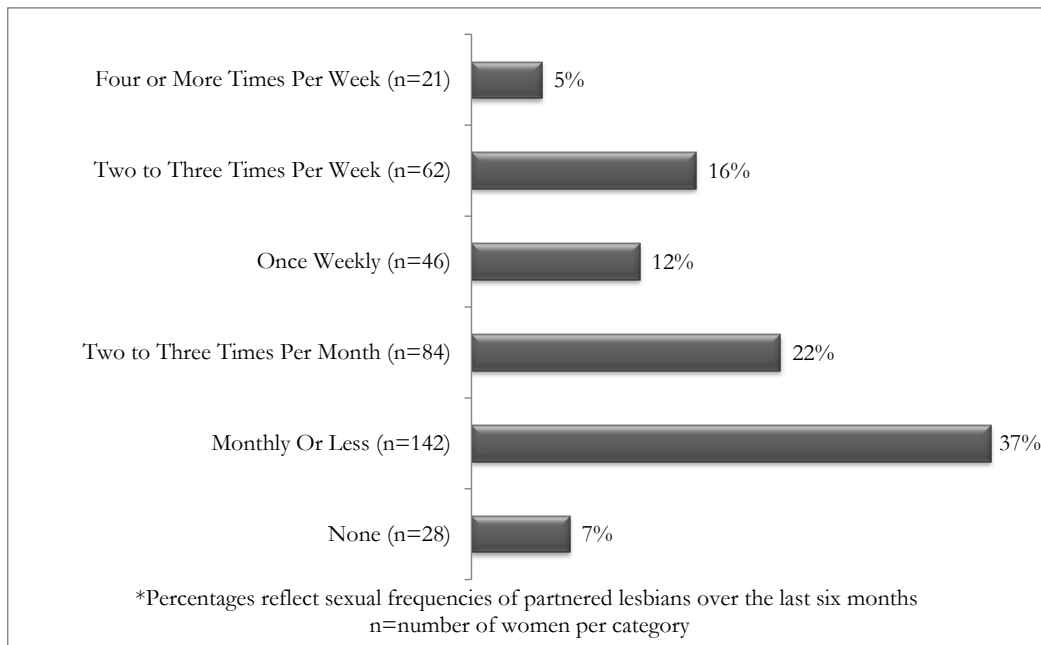


Figure 17. Frequency of Sex for Lesbians Couples

Many reasons are offered by various theorists to explain the reduction in sexual activity among lesbian couples. For a long time, lesbians have been accused of merging their relationships too quickly and too intensely, as expressed in Beverly Burch's 1987 introduction of the concept of "the urge to merge" (Burch 1982, 201). This concept refers

to the speed with which lesbians move toward commitment and intensity as an expression of their desire to be close and connected. The result, it is suggested, causes lesbians to create a connection so emotionally close that it undermines, and ultimately replaces, sexual desire. Data in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey supports the idea that the more committed a couple is, which this researcher based solely on their living situation, the less sex the couple tends to have. It was established earlier in this chapter that couples who do not cohabitate maintained stronger rates of sexual frequency than couples who do cohabitate. This applies equally to couples with and without children.

An entertaining blogger from lesbilicious.co.uk provides anecdotal advice for lesbians who have succumbed to the “urge to merge.” With humor, the post says, “lesbians do make a lot of mistakes that lead to ‘bed death.’ Like sharing too much. Don’t share your shampoo and soap. It will make you smell alike, and that’s weird. Don’t share your clothes... and for god sake don’t share your underwear. Don’t be in the bathroom together unless you’re having shower sex. What I mean is, don’t go use the toilet while your girlfriend is brushing her teeth. Don’t sleep together naked unless you’re going to actually do something. All this stuff kills the mystery that caused the initial attraction” (Michelle, 2009).

Theorists like Fisher agree with this blogger and the power of novelty. Novelty, which is anything unexpected or never before experienced, is known to “elevate levels of dopamine—the chemical associated with romantic love” (2004, 194). This theory is helpful in understanding the dramatic decline in sexual frequency that occurs with lesbians in the first year of their relationship. The rapid pace with which lesbians

familiarize themselves with one another can diminish the novelty involved in initial courtship, thus decreasing sexual desire more quickly than in other couple dyads.

One of the explanations for the rapid decline in sexual frequency among lesbians relates to the difficulty that lesbians (and women in general) have initiating sex. The idea is that when a couple is comprised of two women, neither partner feels like they should be the one to initiate sex because initiating sex has traditionally been a masculine role in our culture (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Peplau et al. 2004).

Adding her thoughts on the topic, Nichols wrote about women being socialized to repress sexual feelings, leading to difficulty recognizing feelings of desire, and ultimately reducing the amount of sex that is initiated by lesbians in relationships (1987). Blumstein and Schwartz also offered their opinion that "lesbians are not comfortable in the role of sexual aggressor and it is a major reason why they have sex less often than other kinds of couples" (1983, 214).

It is this researcher's clinical experience that some lesbians are comfortable initiating sex. Typically, lesbian couples present in counseling with differing libidos, and the partner who has a higher sex drive will usually be the primary initiator of sex. However, when the initiator experiences too much rejection, she stops asking, and at this point sex may cease altogether for the couple. This dynamic is different from that found in heterosexual relationships, where men are known to pursue sex with their wives regardless of countless experiences with rejection.

Another explanation of lower sexual frequency among lesbians points to the fact that men have higher sex drives and are more interested in sex than women. Therefore,

the suggestion is that when there is not a male in the relationship to maintain the frequency, sexual frequency naturally declines due to the lower levels of sexual interest experienced by women (Nichols 2005).

Internalized homophobia has been cited as another obstacle for lesbians who wish to have more frequent sex (Nichols 1988, 1990). Internalized homophobia results when a lesbian internalizes the negative judgments of society at large. When a lesbian adopts these negative beliefs about herself, this leads to feelings of shame and self-disgust. A negative self-perception results in a reduction of her desire to be sexual.

Other theorists conclude that low frequency is not a problem. Fassinger and Morrow asked, "Is lack of sexual desire or genital activity a 'problem' in a loving and romantic woman-to-woman relationship? From whose point of view... Who determines what is sexually normative for lesbians?" (1995, 200). The conversation about lesbian sex, including discussions within its scientific study, tends to minimize lesbian sexuality, reducing the entire experience to a numbers game. How many times are you *doing it*? The irony is that if lesbians want to enter a contest for sexual frequency, they can outlast any other couple dyad because of their anatomical advantage.

Women are physically well equipped for endless amounts of sexual pleasure. In fact, a woman's clitoris serves no other purpose than that of pleasure. For a male, the penis has multiple functions, including urination. A woman can have multiple orgasms without interruption, and unlike men, there is often no need for a recovery period. In the event that a woman wants to have sex multiple times per day, and orgasm multiple times per sexual session, her body could support this desire. The irony of lower sexual

frequency for lesbians is that if lesbians desired to do so, they could outperform (if measured by orgasm) any other couple dyad because of the necessary refractory period for men, and the male's inability to experience multiple orgasms.

Is it possible that sexual decline is a normative state for the majority of women, regardless of her sexual orientation? In a study of 2,400 multi-ethnic women from six U.S. cities, forty percent of women reported that they never, or infrequently, experienced sexual desire. Of these women, only thirteen percent indicated concerns about their sexual experiences, which would suggest that despite how pleasurable sex is, it is not something she desires frequently (Basson 2006).

This researcher proposes another variable that contributes to reduced sexual frequency among lesbian couples. This variable is partner selection. One of the most common concerns expressed by single lesbians in this researcher's private counseling practice has been the question, "How am I going to meet someone?" The fear that she will not meet someone, or that there are not many lesbians from which to choose, creates a scarcity perspective when it comes to dating prospects. In turn, this can lead lesbians to settle into relationships with women who are "good enough," even when this new partner does not elicit a strong physical or sexual attraction.

It has not been uncommon throughout this researcher's counseling career (since 1997) to work with lesbians who report a limited attraction to their partner in the beginning of the relationship. Among the clients with whom this researcher has worked, it has been the case that couples rarely, if ever, resume a sexual attraction that supersedes the sexual feelings they experienced when they first partnered. Therefore, poor partner

selection is another possible contributor to the low levels of sexual frequency.

After reflecting on the multiple theories put forth by various researchers over the last few decades about the causes of rapid decline of sexual frequency, this researcher has concluded that decline in sexual frequency is explained by multiple variables. What makes sense to this researcher is that women, not just lesbians, have a complicated process of sexual development which starts with early messages that discourage healthy sexual development, regardless of sexual orientation. The gist of these messages is, *guys just want one thing (sex)*, and that gals should be *good (not sexual)*. These early messages received by young women in our society create a double-edged sword. The message is that sex is for men, and that *good girls* don't participate.

Then lesbians develop into young women, and they begin to identify feelings of attraction for other women. With this comes self-judgment that results from the internalization of negative societal beliefs. These internalized, negative messages lead to self-doubt and cause lesbians to question their sexual feelings. Once a lesbian is able to move through these obstacles, she is faced with the prospect of actually finding a potential mate, which, despite the proliferation of dating sites in the last decade, can be a daunting task for many lesbians.

With the knowledge that lesbians are inclined to pursue emotional connection as a primary source of comfort and satisfaction, it is likely that the declining sexual frequency among lesbians is intensified by a scarcity perspective during the partner selection process. When there is a scarcity mentality about the availability of lesbians, a woman is more inclined to settle for a partner to whom she is not sufficiently attracted in the first

place.

In the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey, question twelve asked respondents to identify the statement that best describes the reason sexual frequency in their current or most recent relationship declined, if applicable. The choices for question twelve were the following: “one or both of us has recently experienced a major life stressor,” “our frequency did not decline, my desire/libido declined,” “I do not feel connected/attuned to my partner,” “I find my partner to be too dependent on me/needy in our relationship,” and the last option was a fill-in-the-blank, free response space.

The most commonly reported (twenty-nine percent) reason for the sexual decline was “one (or both) of us has recently experienced a major life stressor” (see figure 18). Stressors were broadly defined in the survey description as “death of a loved one, job change, coming out, legal issues, financial stresses, job loss, etc.”

According to a 2010 study published in the *Journal of Sexual Medicine*, lesbians were not alone in their experience of stress and sexual frequency. After looking at 400 premenopausal women with low sexual desire, sixty percent of the study participants attributed low desire to stress or fatigue (Zerbe 2011). In fact, stress is a rising concern for forty-eight percent of Americans, according to a study conducted by the American Psychological Association (Mintz 2010).

Only twenty percent of the sample indicated that they did not experience a decline in their sexual activity. Of the twenty percent that reported no decline in sexual frequency, seventy-two percent were in their relationship five years or less, and forty percent of this group were together less than six months. Eighteen percent of the

participants that reported a decline in frequency were in their relationship between six and twenty years, and none were in a relationship over twenty years.

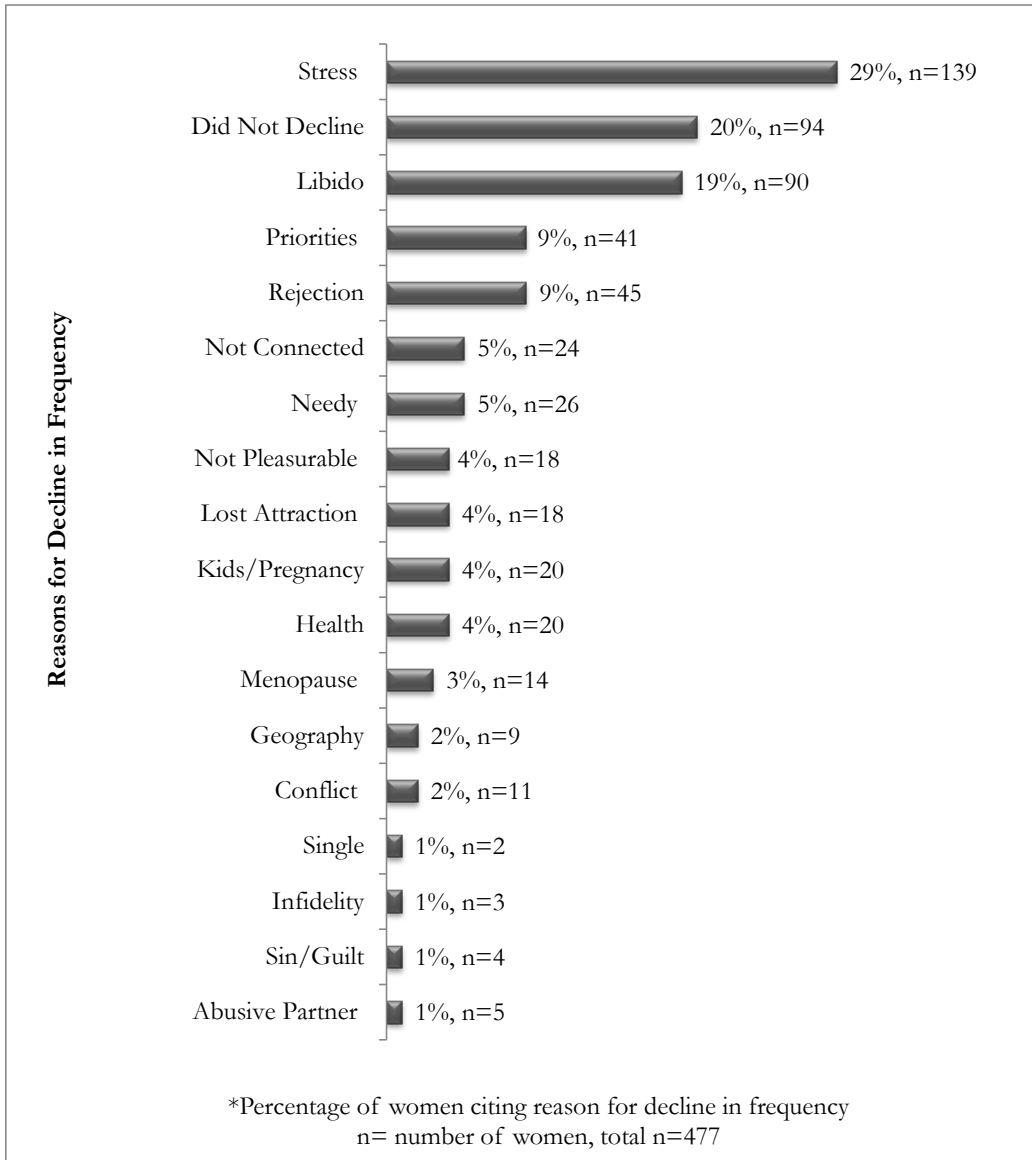


Figure 18. Reasons for Decline in Sexual Frequency Among Lesbians

In summary, lesbian sexual activity declines most dramatically after couples have been partnered only a year. The most significant decrease in sexual frequency is found

among lesbians who live together, regardless of whether or not children are living with them. Lesbians between the ages of twenty-one and thirty years old report the lowest rates of decline in their sexual frequency. The highest drop in frequency occurs with lesbians who are fifty-one to sixty years old. The most commonly reported reason for a decline in sexual frequency is stress, and only twenty percent of the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey sample reported no loss of sexual frequency. The next chapter will discuss how satisfied lesbians are with their relationships and with their sexual frequency. Conclusions will also be drawn about the correlation between sexual frequency and relationship satisfaction.

CHAPTER NINE

LESBIAN RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

In order to correlate sexual frequency with relationship satisfaction, a clear understanding of lesbian relationship satisfaction must be established. This chapter explores the key areas of lesbian relationships and the corresponding levels of satisfaction that lesbians experience. Included in this discussion will be satisfaction levels associated with social compatibility, intellectual connections, spiritual compatibility, sexual aspects (chemistry, pleasure, and frequency), and emotional connection. The connection between relationship satisfaction and sexual frequency among lesbians is also examined.

Overall Relationship Satisfaction Levels

The curiosity about lesbian sexuality grew after Blumstein and Schwartz reported that lesbians were having less sex than any other couple pair. In the same publication, they noted that lesbians “do not feel less satisfied with their relationships when sex occurs infrequently” (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983, 201). Since then, much of the research that has been conducted on lesbian relationship satisfaction focused on proving the viability of lesbian relationships, which was usually achieved by comparing them to heterosexual relationships (Peplau and Cochran 1980; Testa et al. 1987; Crawford and Solliday 1996; Kurdek 1998). For example, Peplau and Ghavami confirmed that “same-sex couples do not differ significantly from heterosexual couples” (2009, 1). This means there is equal opportunity for both good and bad relationships regardless of the sexual orientation of the partners.

Once researchers established that lesbian relationships are as satisfying as heterosexual relationships, a few researchers expanded their scope of inquiry to include the variables that contribute to lesbian relationship satisfaction. Schreurs and Buunk were among these researchers, and they found that lesbian relationship satisfaction increases along with the increase in a lesbian's perception of equity in her relationship (1996). Similarly, Peplau and Spalding discovered that when lesbians believe they have relatively equal levels of power and decision-making in their relationship, their satisfaction rates are higher (2000). Other researchers discovered that sexual satisfaction in women is linked most strongly with emotional variables, especially the quality of relationship rather than physical or sexual characteristics of a relationship (Keith Hawton, et al. 1994; Herbert 1996; Hurlbert and Apt 1993).

Among the few studies conducted on lesbian relationships, sexual frequency has received more focus than many topics. However, the studies most often addressed the question, "Why are lesbians having sex less frequently than other couple pairs?" This researcher, however, observed the current state of sexual frequency among lesbians and identified the influence sexual frequency has had on lesbian relationship satisfaction.

Respondents in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey were asked in question seventeen, "How would you rate your satisfaction with the following aspects of your current or most recent relationship?" The aspects listed included the following: "emotional connectedness," "sexual chemistry," "intellectual connection," "spiritual connection," "social compatibility," "frequency of sex with my partner," "physical pleasure experienced during sex with my partner," "amount of time spent during each

sexual encounter,” and her “overall relationship satisfaction.” The response options included: “extremely satisfying,” “very satisfying,” “moderately satisfying,” “slightly satisfying,” and “not at all satisfying.” The responses to these questions are detailed in Table 17.

Table 17. Satisfaction Ratings of Relationship Characteristics for Lesbians

Satisfaction Rating	Extremely Satisfied	Very Satisfied	Moderately Satisfied	Slightly Satisfied	Not at All Satisfied
Intellectual Connection	51%	11%	28%	5%	5%
Physical Pleasure with Sex	45%	29%	16%	5%	4%
Emotional Connection	40%	27%	20%	7%	6%
Sexual Chemistry	39%	27%	23%	11%	7%
Overall Relationship Satisfaction	34%	34%	17%	9%	6%
Social Compatibility	31%	35%	23%	8%	4%
Time Spent on Sex	30%	37%	19%	7%	6%
Spiritual Connection	28%	28%	23%	14%	8%
Sexual Frequency	17%	22%	25%	16%	21%

To analyze these responses, this researcher combined the number of women who responded “extremely satisfying” with those who responded “very satisfying” and created a new category to describe this group as “Fully Satisfied.” The women who responded with “slightly satisfying” or “not at all satisfying” are placed in a newly created category, “Not Fully Satisfied.” The remaining group of responses is categorized as “moderately satisfied,” which will remain its own neutral category of neither fully satisfied nor under satisfied.

Analysis of lesbians in the fully satisfied and the not fully satisfied categories reveals that of all the relationship characteristics assessed, women were most satisfied

with the physical pleasure they experienced with sex (seventy-four percent). The second most highly rated characteristic by lesbians is their overall relationship satisfaction. This was considered fully satisfied by the majority (sixty-eight percent) of the sample, and only fifteen percent of the sample considered their relationship not fully satisfying. Thus, most lesbians are very satisfied with their relationships.

Lesbians in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey were least satisfied with their sexual frequency (thirty-nine percent). This finding suggests that despite the fact that lesbians endorse high levels of pleasure associated with sex, they are largely disappointed by their sexual infrequency. The second least satisfying characteristic reported by lesbians is their spiritual connection. Roughly half of the sample (fifty-six percent) reported they were fully satisfied, and twenty-two percent reported they were not fully satisfied with their spiritual connection.

The remaining five characteristics were all similarly rated and included the following: “time spent on sex” (sixty-seven percent), “emotional connection” (sixty-seven percent), “sexual chemistry” (sixty-six percent), “social compatibility” (sixty-six percent), and “intellectual connection” (sixty-two percent). These same characteristics were rated not fully satisfied by ten to eighteen percent of the sample, with sexual chemistry being the least satisfying (eighteen percent) of all the traits.

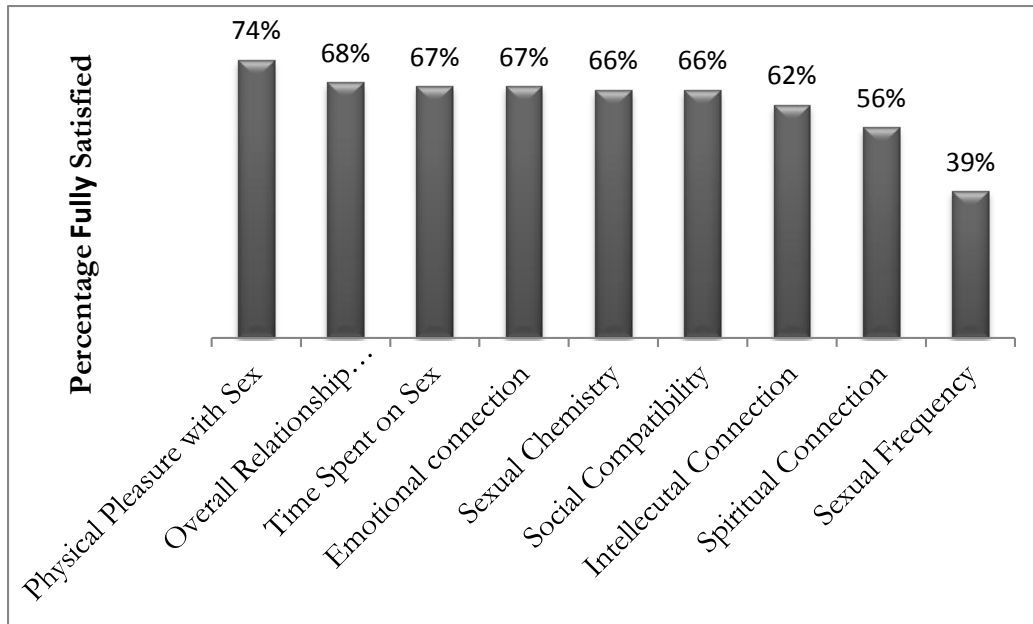


Figure 19. Lesbians Fully Satisfied with Relationship Characteristics

Table 18. Satisfaction Ratings for Lesbians, Based on Fully Satisfied and Not Fully Satisfied

Satisfaction Rating	Fully Satisfied (FS)	Not Fully Satisfied (NFS)
Physical Pleasure with Sex	74%	9%
Overall Relationship Satisfaction	68%	15%
Time Spent on Sex	67%	13%
Emotional Connection	67%	13%
Sexual Chemistry	66%	18%
Social Compatibility	66%	12%
Intellectual Connection	62%	10%
Spiritual Connection	56%	22%
Sexual Frequency	39%	37%

Sexual Frequency and Relationship Satisfaction

Further analysis indicates that a slight increase or a slight decrease in sexual frequency does not negatively affect relationship satisfaction for lesbians. Couples who experienced a slight decrease in sexual frequency were still fully satisfied ninety-percent of the time, and couples who experienced a slight increase in sexual frequency were also fully satisfied ninety-percent of the time (see table 19). The groups who most frequently reported that their relationship was not satisfying were those who stopped having sex (twenty-four percent), followed by lesbians who reported they had a significant increase in their sexual frequency (thirteen percent).

Lesbians who ceased all sexual activity had relationship satisfaction ratings that were distributed fairly evenly among the three levels of satisfaction. Thirty-four percent were fully satisfied, forty-two percent were moderately satisfied, and the lowest group was twenty-four percent, who were not fully satisfied. Of the lesbians who reported a significant decrease in sexual frequency, fifty-three percent indicated they were very satisfied with their overall relationship, forty-one percent reported they were moderately satisfied, and only six percent reported they were not satisfied.

There is no discernible pattern to these satisfaction ratings that indicates a strong correlation between sexual frequency and overall relationship satisfaction. Moderate changes in sexual frequency (slight increase, slight decrease, moderate increase, no changes, and significant increase) do not greatly impact the overall relationship satisfaction of lesbians.

The sexual frequency changes associated with the lowest satisfaction ratings

(significant decrease and stopping altogether) do not draw strong negative responses from lesbians when correlated with their overall relationship satisfaction. Interestingly, the two categories that draw the strongest negative ratings for overall relationship satisfaction are women with a significant increase in sexual frequency (thirteen percent) and women who have stopped having sex all together (twenty-four percent).

A slight change in sexual frequency in either direction has no serious consequences for lesbians. While not as helpful as a slight increase or decrease is in the overall relationship satisfaction, a moderate increase in sexual frequency also does not pose serious harm to relationship satisfaction. Ultimately, any amount of sex is important to lesbians, and even though lesbians generally want more sex than they are having, the absence of sex does not decisively detract from relationship satisfaction.

Table 19. Satisfaction Ratings for Lesbians Based on Changes in Sexual Frequency Listed from Most Satisfying to Least Satisfying

Changes in Sexual Frequency	Fully Satisfied	Moderately Satisfied	Not Fully Satisfied
Slight Increase	90%	11%	0%
Slight Decrease	90%	9%	1%
Moderate Increase	88%	12%	0%
No Changes	79%	17%	4%
Significant Increase	78%	13%	13%
Moderate Decrease	70%	26%	3%
Significant Decrease	53%	41%	6%
Stopped	34%	42%	24%

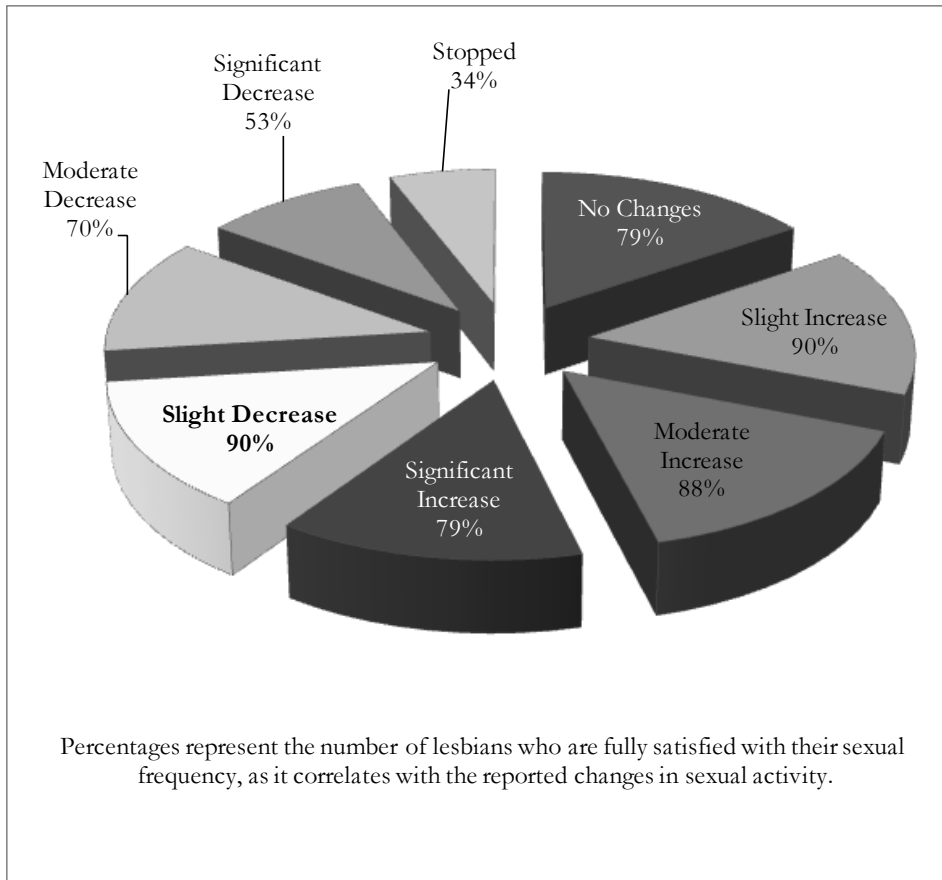


Figure 20. Lesbians Fully Satisfied with Sexual Frequency as it Relates to Sexual Frequency Changes

Does sexual frequency influence satisfaction with the overall relationship for lesbians? The answer is not as simple as yes or no. When lesbians in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction survey were asked about their satisfaction with sexual frequency, 165 respondents (thirty-seven percent of the sample) reported they were not fully satisfied. There were 174 respondents who reported they were fully satisfied with their sexual frequency (thirty-nine percent of the sample), and the remaining 111 reported moderate satisfaction with their sexual frequency.

Ninety percent of lesbians who are fully satisfied with their sexual frequency are also fully satisfied with their overall relationship. This suggests that when sexual frequency is satisfying, there is a strong possibility that the relationship in general will be satisfying. However, when looked at from the opposite perspective, lesbians who report that they are not fully satisfied with their sexual frequency still state they are fully satisfied with their overall relationship thirty-nine percent of the time and moderately satisfied thirty-three percent of the time, which means the majority of lesbians (seventy-two percent) do not identify their overall relationship as not fully satisfied, regardless of how infrequently they are having sex.

Only twenty-eight percent of lesbians with an unsatisfactory sexual frequency report they are not fully satisfied with their overall relationship. When sexual frequency is not fully satisfying, the negative impact on the overall relationship satisfaction is not as great as the positive impact when sexual frequency is fully satisfying. Therefore, the comparative benefit of fully satisfying sexual frequency contributes much more to a lesbian relationship than the disappointment of unsatisfying sexual frequency takes away from lesbian relationships.

Table 20. Correlation of Sexual Frequency Satisfaction and Overall Relationship Satisfaction for Lesbians

Overall Relationship Satisfaction	FS with Sexual Frequency n=174 39% of Sample	Moderately Satisfied with Sexual Frequency n=111 25% of Sample	NFS with Sexual Frequency n= 165 37% of Sample
FS with Overall Relationship	90%	76%	39%
Moderately Satisfied with Overall Relationship	7%	12%	33%
NFS with Overall Relationship	3%	13%	28%

According to the respondents in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction survey, the most important aspect of a lesbian relationship is consistent with findings by other researchers, including Diamond, who stated that “women generally place less emphasis on the sexual component of their lesbian or bisexual identification” (2008, 50). There is little disagreement about the differences between what men value most and what women value most in a relationship. In the words of Peplau and Fingerhut, “Men, regardless of sexual orientation, are more likely to emphasize a partner’s physical attractiveness; women, regardless of sexual orientation, give greater emphasis to personality characteristics” (2007, 407).

As Ossana stated, “Lesbians may place primary value on emotional relatedness when choosing a partner, which may subsequently lead to problems with boundary maintenance and sexual desire. Gay men, on the other hand, may emphasize sexual attractiveness when choosing a partner, which may subsequently contribute to problems with emotional intimacy” (2000, 283).

In order to test the validity of the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey findings regarding sexual frequency and overall relationship satisfaction, this researcher also examined the correlation between emotional connection and overall relationship satisfaction. In table twenty-one it is apparent that, unlike the sexual frequency variable, emotional connection has an equally strong positive and negative impact on lesbian relationships depending on the satisfaction with one’s emotional connection. The majority of the sample (sixty-four percent) reported a strong emotional connection, which correlates with ninety-one percent of these women reporting a fully satisfying

relationship.

Conversely, eighteen percent of the sample reported that their emotional connection was not fully satisfied. This correlates with eighty-four percent of these women reporting that their overall relationship was also not fully satisfied. Thirty-nine percent of lesbians who were not fully satisfied with their sexual frequency reported that they were fully satisfied with their overall relationship, whereas only seven percent of women who reported they were not fully satisfied with their emotional connection were fully satisfied with their relationship. This table reveals that emotional connection has a much stronger impact on lesbian relationships both positively and negatively than does sexual frequency.

Table 21. Correlation of Emotional Satisfaction and Overall Relationship Satisfaction for Lesbians

Overall Relationship Satisfaction	FS with Sexual Frequency n=305 63% of Sample	Moderately Satisfied with Sexual Frequency n=91 19% of Sample	NFS with Sexual Frequency n= 87 18% of Sample
FS with Overall Relationship	91%	22%	7%
Moderately Satisfied with Overall Relationship	10%	33%	5%
NFS with Overall Relationship	<.01%	1%	84%

Another way to examine the importance of sexual frequency for lesbians is to inquire about their desired sexual frequency. This was the purpose of question number nine, which asked, “In the last six months, how many times would you have liked to have sex with your partner?” Similar to the findings by Lever in her 1995 survey, “No matter how much sex women are getting, most want more” (Lever 1995, 24). Though Lever’s

report did not detail the rates of desired sexual frequency, she was clear that at every level of sexual frequency, lesbians desired more sex than they were having.

Figure twenty-one reveals the desired sexual frequency for lesbians in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey. Forty-three percent of lesbians desired to have sex one to three times per week, and only twenty-seven percent of the sample reported having sex this frequently. The most prevalent rate of sexual frequency among lesbians in the sample is once a month or less (thirty-seven percent), which is the desired frequency for only nineteen percent of the sample.

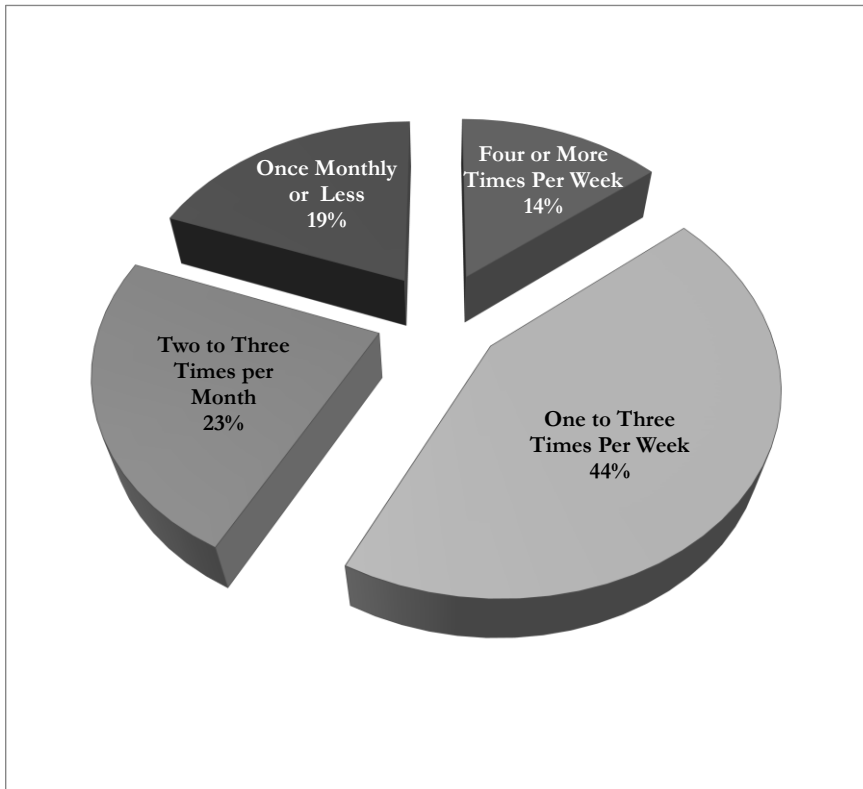


Figure 21. Desired Sexual Frequency of Lesbians

Overall frequency of sex desired in the last six months for lesbians

How do these rates of desired frequency compare to the actual amount of sex lesbians are having? For every level of sexual frequency, the number of lesbians having sex at that level is less than the number of lesbians who desire it, except for those wanting sex once monthly or less. In this case, there are more lesbians having sex at this frequency than is desired. Lesbians having sex once monthly or less are the least satisfied. Though fifty percent of the lesbians in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey were having sex once monthly or less, only nineteen percent were satisfied with this frequency. The most desired sexual frequency is one to three times per week; however, only twenty five percent of lesbians are actually having sex at that frequency.

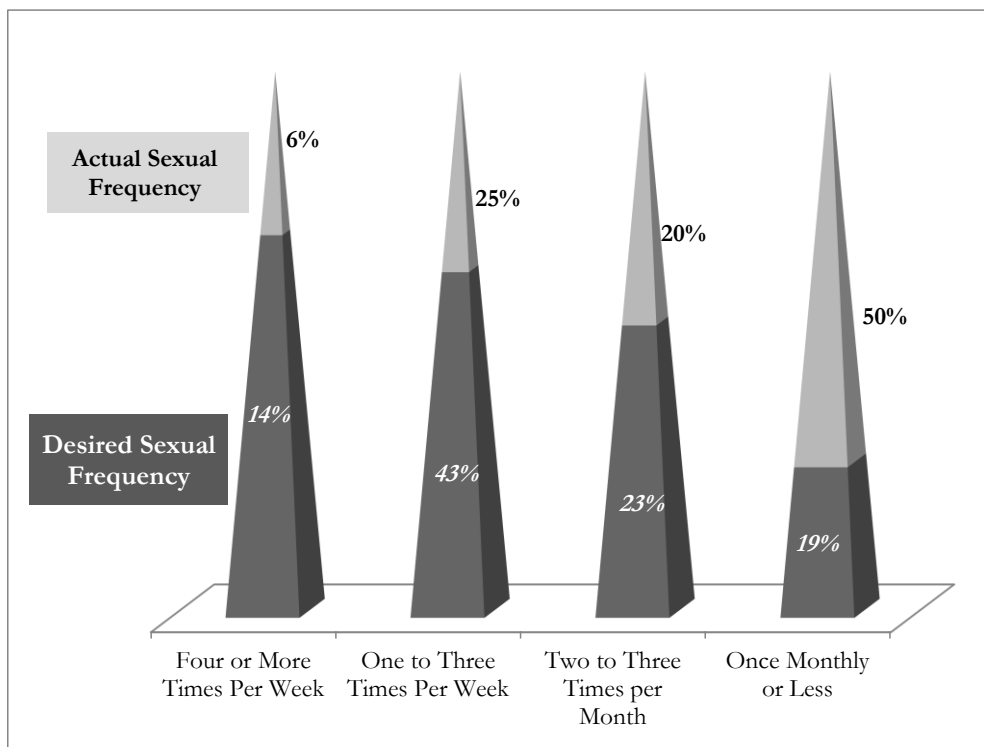


Figure 22. Comparison of Actual and Desired Sexual Frequency Among Lesbians

Because the majority of lesbians (sixty-eight percent) surveyed in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey reported they were fully satisfied with their relationship, it is difficult to identify the variables that contribute to this satisfaction. The most compelling variable that correlates with relationship satisfaction is a strong emotional connection. The other significant correlation that surfaced among respondents is that higher rates of sexual frequency were most prevalent among lesbians who were partnered between six and eleven months.

When correlating length of relationship with overall relationship satisfaction, it is interesting to note that the most satisfied couples have been partnered between six and eleven months, followed by couples who have been partnered between one and two years. Only fifty-eight percent of lesbians who have been partnered between six and ten years report they are fully satisfied with their relationship. This group of couples is the least satisfied based on the length of relationship. Satisfaction rates begin to improve for lesbians once they are together for eleven to twenty years, with sixty-four percent reporting they are fully satisfied. For lesbians who celebrate twenty-one or more years together, the satisfaction rates are even better, with seventy percent reporting they are fully satisfied.

The patterns of satisfaction rates in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Study make the most sense when viewed through the stages of relationship development created by Harville and Helen Hendrix and described in their book, *Getting the Love You Want* (1988). The initial phase is the Romantic Stage, and it is the beginning period of attraction that brings two people together long enough to create a commitment. This stage

involves the release of feel-good chemicals, which improves mood, energy, and overall positive feelings about oneself, one's partner, and life. The focus of this stage is on the similarities between partners, with the goal of securing a relationship commitment. This blissfully euphoric state is also referred to as limerence, and the pleasing effects of this stage can last up to one or two years. Once a commitment is made, which often coincides with living together, the limerence begins to fade.

The second stage of the relationship development in the Imago Theory is the Power Struggle. This stage is the least enjoyable of the three, and it is often the one which lasts the longest. As time progresses and the feel-good chemicals fade, Hendrix suggests that couples switch their focus from how they are alike, and the primary focus of attention turns to how they are different. This researcher agrees with Hendrix's theory that when couples make a commitment, they feel secure enough to disagree. Prior to the commitment, couples are too busy cementing the relationship to concern themselves with their differences. The research findings in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey also support this idea. Satisfaction rates are strongest before year three, and sexual frequency is also more frequent before year three. Couples also report higher rates of relationship satisfaction when they do not cohabitate. These findings support the idea that satisfaction rates are greater the less committed couples are.

According to Hendrix, some couples never exit the power struggle. It makes sense to this researcher that during the years typically associated with the Power Struggle Stage (year two and beyond), couples would experience a decline in relationship satisfaction that would continue to drop until they moved into stage three, Real Love. This is

consistent with the findings in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey. Relationship satisfaction rates start to decline during the third year of the relationship, and they drop even further when couples enter years six through ten. However, as couples progress through their relationship, and likely through their power struggles, their satisfaction rates improve with every year they are together after year ten.

The final stage in the Imago Theory is Real Love. This is the stage most commonly associated with unconditional love. Real love is present when partners begin to fully accept one another and their differences. There is no longer a desire to change certain aspects about each other, and with this comes a sense of freedom to be more spontaneous and joyful. When couples enter this phase of their relationship, it makes sense that they would experience an increase in their relationship satisfaction, just as the women did in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey. The longer lesbians stay together, the higher their satisfaction rates climb.

Table 22. Correlation of Length of Relationship and Relationship Satisfaction for Lesbians

Overall Relationship Satisfaction	FS with Overall Relationship	Moderately Satisfied with Overall Relationship	NFS with Overall Relationship
< 6 Months	72%	17%	11%
6-11 Months	76%	12%	12%
1-2 Years	73%	12%	15%
3-5 Years	68%	23%	10%
6-10 Years	58%	22%	21%
11-20 Years	64%	14%	21%
21 + Years	70%	5%	25%

In summary, lesbians are on average most satisfied with the physical pleasure they experience during sex (seventy-four percent), and they are least satisfied with their sexual frequency (thirty-nine percent). Lesbians identify the second least satisfying characteristic of relationships as spiritual connection. A slight change in sexual frequency in either direction has no serious consequences for their relationship satisfaction. When sexual frequency is not fully satisfying, the negative impact on the overall relationship satisfaction does not outweigh the positive impact when sexual frequency is fully satisfying. In a lesbian relationship, the emotional connection of the partners has a much stronger influence than does sexual frequency. Lastly, relationship satisfaction rates mirror the stages of relationship development in the Imago Theory, with couples experiencing strong satisfaction in the early years, a dip in the middle years, with stronger rates of satisfaction in the later years of their relationship.

CHAPTER TEN

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey was to determine the correlation between sexual frequency and relationship satisfaction among lesbians. This researcher was successful in achieving this goal, and also revealed the following information in the process: the sexual frequency of lesbian couples in the twenty-first century, a contemporary definition of lesbian sex according to lesbians themselves, the sexual behaviors in which lesbians regularly engage, and the satisfaction levels with sex as it relates to sexual frequency.

This researcher hypothesized that there is not a strong correlation between sexual frequency and relationship satisfaction among lesbians. Based on findings from the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey, this researcher concludes that while there is a correlation between sexual frequency and relationship satisfaction, the correlation is not strong. To determine the correlation between sexual frequency and relationship satisfaction for lesbians, four key questions had to be answered. These questions were the following: “How do lesbians define sex?”, “What are contemporary lesbians doing sexually?”, “How frequently lesbians are lesbians actually having sex?”, and, “How satisfied are lesbians with their relationships?”

The first question answered in this research was, “How do lesbians define sex?” The results of the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey revealed that how lesbians define sex has become more inclusive over the last thirty years. Lesbian sex was most commonly defined by the respondents in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction study as one of

three behaviors between women: oral sex, vaginal penetration, or clitoral stimulation. The older the respondent, the more likely she was to include non-genitally focused activities in her definition of sex. The younger the respondent, the more likely she was to include anal stimulation in her definition of sex. The majority of contemporary lesbians also agree that an orgasm is not a requirement when defining lesbian sex.

Next, this researcher answered the question, “What are contemporary lesbians doing sexually?” Not only has the definition of sex expanded to include more activities, but the actual sexual behaviors of lesbians also bring more diverse experiences to the 21st century lesbian than the 20th century lesbian. While foreplay and kissing during sex continue to be the most consistent ingredients in the sexual repertoire of lesbians, penetrative sex with a vibrator/dildo and oral sex have increased in popularity over the last three decades.

Masturbation rates have remained stable over the past few decades; lesbians masturbate roughly three to four times per month. The majority of lesbians (eighty-four percent) experience orgasms when they have sex. The research also revealed that the most common technique used by lesbians during sex is clitoral stimulation (finger sex), followed by penetrative sex. Oral sex is the least common of the top three behaviors considered *having sex* by lesbians. Lesbians also reported that they like to take their time when they have sex, with seventy-nine percent having engaged in sexual sessions that characteristically lasted thirty minutes or longer.

With answers to how lesbians define and practice sex, this researcher next answered the question, “What is most important in a relationship for lesbians?” The most important aspects of a relationship for lesbians are a strong emotional connection and a strong

intellectual connection. Among the various relationship characteristics evaluated in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey, sexual frequency surfaced as least important to lesbians.

Lesbians who placed the greatest value on sexual frequency were those partnered for three to five years, and those who lived together with no children. The majority of women (fifty-five percent) reported that sex was not the issue that caused their relationships to end, and of those who cited sexual issues as the motivation for their relationship's demise, twenty-eight percent indicated that it was caused by a difference in desired sexual frequency.

The next question this researcher answered was, "How frequently are lesbians having sex?" When compared to research dating back to the 1980s, the findings in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey reveal that the frequency of lesbian sex has not increased. In fact, when compared to some studies, the rates of lesbian sexual frequency have experienced a slight decline.

Finally, this researcher then answered the question, "How satisfied are lesbians with their relationships?" In lesbian relationships, the least satisfied couples were those who were partnered between six and ten years. This is valuable information for the clinician who strives to normalize the various phases of relationship development, offering clients affirmation that they are not alone in their relationship struggles. This information is also useful in promoting the importance of greater attention to lesbian relationships during these years, as the lower satisfaction rates will contribute to more breakups if appropriate interventions are not made during these years.

Unlike heterosexuals, lesbians do not have clear roadmaps to guide the development of their relationships. Even if heterosexuals reject the traditional paths that

are socially prescribed for relationship development (dating, engagement, marriage, children, etc.), there is, at least, a point from which to consciously deviate. Lesbians, however, are left to trial and error. There is limited information available to guide lesbians as they seek to understand the dynamics of their own relationships.

While analyzing the data provided in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey, it became apparent that the number of lesbians who are raising children together is increasing, and that the average length of a lesbian relationship is longer than it was decades ago. This makes sense in the context of increasing societal acceptance of lesbian relationships. With acceptance comes a higher level of family support, which is important for creating lasting partnerships and families, regardless of sexual orientation. Another benefit of social acceptance for lesbians is the likelihood that lesbians will have a greater respect for their own relationship.

Prior research has emphasized the comparison of sexual frequency between the various couple dyads, inferring that lesbian sexuality is somehow impaired because of the consistently lower rates of frequency that result from this comparison. This researcher believes there is no need to compare frequency rates between couple dyads, and that the rate of sexual frequency is not central to the health or success of lesbian relationships. This researcher rejects the assumption that heterosexuals represent the healthy standard by which lesbians must be compared. By rejecting this comparison, it is easier to see relationships created between women as a unique and separate experience, and this allows for the comparison of apples to apples, rather than apples (lesbians) to oranges (heterosexuals).

According to the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey, lesbian couples experience a

relatively dramatic decline in sexual frequency after they have been partnered for only one year. The most significant decrease in sexual frequency is found among lesbians who live together, regardless of whether or not children are living with them. Lesbians between the ages of twenty-one and thirty years report the lowest rates of decline in their sexual frequency. This is also the most sexually active group of lesbians in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey based on age. The highest drop in frequency occurs with lesbians who are fifty-one to sixty years old. The most commonly reported reason for a decline in sexual frequency is stress, and only twenty percent of the Frequency vs. Satisfaction sample denied a loss of sexual frequency in their relationships.

This leads to the big question on which this research is based. Do the lower rates of sexual frequency and the rapid declines in sexual frequency impact the overall relationship satisfaction for lesbians? Ironically, lesbians in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey rated sexual frequency among the least important variable of their relationships, yet they report this is also what they are least satisfied with in their relationship.

The Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey suggests that a slight change in sexual frequency in either direction does not have any serious consequences on lesbian relationship satisfaction. However, when sexual frequency is not fully satisfying, the negative impact on overall relationship satisfaction is not as great as the positive impact of a fully satisfying rate of sexual frequency. In a lesbian relationship, an emotional connection has a much stronger impact than sexual frequency does. This applies equally to negative and positive changes in the emotional connection that lesbians share.

After analyzing the data of the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey, this researcher reached several conclusions. First, lesbian relationship development follows a strong,

consistent pattern for the majority of lesbian couples. The pattern starts when lesbian couples partner with a particular emphasis on the emotional attraction, which is prized more highly than any other aspect of the relationship throughout the course of their relationship, no matter how long their relationship lasts. Sexual connection between lesbians is strongest at the start of the relationship, and dramatically declines after the first year lesbian couples are partnered. Lesbians experience the greatest decline in relationship satisfaction between years six and ten, and lesbian couples who make it to their eleventh anniversary begin to experience incremental improvements in relationship satisfaction as their relationship continues.

Another conclusion this researcher reached is that sexual frequency does influence relationship satisfaction; however, the power of its influence is unidirectional. Higher sexual frequency correlates with higher relationship satisfaction. Though, the reverse is not true. Lower sexual frequency does not correlate with lower relationship satisfaction.

Couples who experienced a slight decrease in sexual frequency were still fully satisfied ninety percent of the time, and couples who experienced a slight increase in sexual frequency were also fully satisfied ninety percent of the time. The groups who most frequently reported that their relationship was not satisfying were comprised of the following: those who stopped having sex (twenty-four percent) and lesbians who reported a significant increase in their sexual frequency (thirteen percent).

Lesbians who ceased all sexual activity had relationship satisfaction ratings that were distributed fairly evenly among the three levels of satisfaction. Thirty-four percent were fully satisfied, forty-two percent were moderately satisfied, and the lowest group

was twenty-four percent who were not fully satisfied. Of the lesbians who reported a significant decrease in sexual frequency, fifty-three percent indicated they were very satisfied with their overall relationship, forty-one percent reported they were moderately satisfied, and only six percent reported they were not satisfied.

There is no discernible pattern in satisfaction ratings that indicates a strong correlation between sexual frequency and overall relationship satisfaction. Many of the reported changes in sexual frequency (slight increase, slight decrease, moderate increase, no changes, and significant increase) do not greatly impact the overall relationship satisfaction of lesbians.

The changes in sexual frequency that are associated with the lowest satisfaction ratings (significant decrease and stopping all together) do not elicit strong negative responses from lesbians in terms of their overall relationship satisfaction. Interestingly, the two categories that draw the strongest negative ratings for overall relationship satisfaction are women with a significant increase in sexual frequency (thirteen percent) and women who have stopped having sex all together (twenty-four percent).

A moderate increase in sexual frequency does not pose any harm to relationship satisfaction. Ultimately, it appears that any amount of sex is important to lesbians, and even though lesbians generally want more sex than they are having, the absence of sex does not decisively detract from relationship satisfaction.

Ninety percent of lesbians who are fully satisfied with their sexual frequency are also fully satisfied with their overall relationship. This suggests that when sexual frequency is satisfying, there is a strong possibility that the relationship in general will be satisfying. However, when looked at from the opposite perspective, lesbians who report

that they are not fully satisfied with their sexual frequency still state they are fully satisfied with their overall relationship thirty-nine percent of the time, and moderately satisfied thirty-three percent of the time. This means the majority of lesbians (seventy-two percent) do not identify their overall relationship as not fully satisfied regardless of how infrequently they are having sex.

Only twenty-eight percent of lesbians with unsatisfactory sexual frequency report they are not fully satisfied with their overall relationship. When sexual frequency is not fully satisfying, the negative impact on overall relationship satisfaction is not as great as the positive impact when sexual frequency is fully satisfying. Therefore, the positive impact of satisfying rates of sexual frequency is greater than the negative impact of unsatisfying rates of sexual frequency for lesbian couples.

In conclusion, sexual frequency bears more relevance to relationship satisfaction than this researcher anticipated. However, the data analyzed in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Study does not support a relationship between sexual frequency and relationship satisfaction that is strong enough to assert that there is a correlation. Thus, the formal conclusion of this research is that while sexual frequency has the power to positively impact a lesbian relationship, infrequent sexual activity among lesbians does not necessitate the likelihood of lower levels of relationship satisfaction.

Challenges with the Study

There were some challenges with the Frequency vs. Satisfaction study. The sample from which the data were drawn included primarily white lesbians (seventy-seven percent), resulting in a racially homogenous pool of survey respondents. Another concern

with the sample was the disproportionate geographic representation. Although eighty-four percent of the U.S. cities are represented in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey with at least one respondent from each state, the majority of the sample (sixty-one percent) is from the researcher's home state, Indiana. The imbalance in geographic representation may overemphasize the attitudes, beliefs, and feelings of lesbians in the Midwest, which is commonly believed to be more conservative. This geographic bias has potential to skew the survey results.

Another concern about the sampling process results from the outreach method used. Because the research was conducted by a psychotherapist who specializes in the care of lesbian individuals and couples, the survey outreach could have included a disproportionate number of lesbians who are in therapy. This also has the potential to bias the survey outcomes, assuming that lesbians in therapy present with more concerns about their relationship than lesbians not in counseling.

A third concern with the study relates to the use of self-report to gather data. In some cases, lesbians were asked to rely on their memory of a relationship that was terminated up to six months ago. The greater amount of recall that is required, the greater margin of error there is in the ultimate findings. Additionally, lesbians who were recounting their experiences of a prior relationship are at risk of having a biased perception of that relationship depending on how it ended. If the relationship ended poorly, they may experience negative recall, which could influence their thoughts about relationship satisfaction, and their feelings about the frequency of sex and other variables explored in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey.

Areas Identified for Future Research

Several additional questions surfaced while researching the topic of sexual frequency as it correlates with relationship satisfaction. One of the findings in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey, as well as Lever's Survey (1995), shows that no matter how much sex lesbians are having, they generally report the desire for more. This particular dichotomy of infrequent sex by lesbians who state a wish for more is at the heart of the lesbian sexual dilemma. Further research will prove helpful in answering this question: What is preventing lesbians who report a desire for more frequent sex from having more sex?

Another unanswered question that surfaced during this study is, "How does perceived relationship security influence sexual frequency in lesbian relationships?" This is not a topic that was addressed in the Frequency vs. Satisfaction Survey, nor is it a topic that this researcher came across in her research. However, relationship security, or more specifically, the feeling of safety that one's relationship is strong and stable, is a valuable characteristic to lesbians, and one that is facilitated by a strong emotional connection. This researcher theorizes that the greater the perceived relationship security for a lesbian couple, the lower the rate of sexual frequency.

Other areas of interest for further research relate to the universality of lesbian sexual frequency. How do rates of lesbian sexual frequency in the United States compare to other countries, particularly in more progressive countries that provide rights and protections for lesbian relationships? Is there a cultural influence, or even a geographical influence, on sexual frequency among lesbians? Perhaps a study comparing lesbians from selected larger cities such as New York City, New York and Los Angeles, California

could be compared to lesbians from smaller cities in the Midwest such as Indianapolis, Indiana and Columbus, Ohio. The correlation of race and sexual frequency among lesbians is also a valuable topic to explore.

This researcher concludes that the next step in the quest for greater understanding about lesbian sexuality will be best achieved through qualitative research. The most accurate picture of lesbian sexuality will likely require a detailed, longitudinal, qualitative study that tracks the nuances and dynamics of a lesbian couple's relationship from the initial stages of courtship throughout the course of their relationship. This would allow for new information to surface that has not yet been hypothesized, and for lesbians to give voice to their experiences as they are happening, rather than relying on the subjective nature involved in recalling the events of one's relationship.

What is most clear to this researcher is that sex between women is uniquely lesbian and without comparison. When juxtaposed with heterosexual or gay male relationships, lesbian sexuality is out of focus, blurred by what is perceived to be *normal* when, in fact, lesbian sexuality has no established baseline behavior of its own. As research continues on lesbian sexuality without preconceived notions about how it *should* look or what it *should* entail, interesting and important discoveries will likely be made. Ultimately, lesbian sexuality is already valuable in its own right for its own nuances. Unfortunately, it is not yet well understood. In time, lesbians will be equipped to define their own sexual health through greater understanding of lesbian sexuality as a whole, and when that happens, needed progress will have been made.

APPENDIX A

EMAIL OUTREACH FOR SURVEY PROMOTION

Greetings!

Are lesbian couples who have frequent sex more satisfied with their relationship than those who have sex less often, or never?

Last year I returned to school to pursue a PhD in Clinical Sexology. After doing coursework and learning about all things related to sexual behavior and sexual interests, it is time to conduct my own research. This is the question I seek to answer: "Does sexual frequency correlate with relationship satisfaction among lesbian couples?"

If you are a lesbian, I am very interested to know what your thoughts are on this topic.

I have two important questions for you:

- Will you take my anonymous survey now? (If yes, here is the [LINK](#)). The survey is 25 questions and takes approximately 9 minutes to complete. All responses are 100% anonymous.
- Will you share this email with all of your lesbian friends and ask them to do the same? [Forward This Survey to Other Lesbians Now](#)

In addition to completing my dissertation, I plan to write articles and share information on my website and in my newsletters about what I am learning about this topic.

I hope you will add your voice to this important question, and check back to my website to learn with me about the role of sexual frequency in lesbian relationship satisfaction.

Thank you for helping me with this important research.

Warmly,

Michele O'Mara, LCSW
www.micheleomara.com

P.S. If you received this email from a friend and you are not on my mailing list, you can join here to stay current on what I learn from this research!

APPENDIX B

FREQUENCY VS. SATISFACTION SURVEY

How important is sex to lesbians? This survey is designed to reveal whether or not sexual frequency influences relationship satisfaction for lesbian couples. *The survey is twenty-five questions and takes approximately four to nine minutes to complete. If you have never partnered with a woman, there are only fourteen questions. Your identity and responses are anonymous.* Please send the survey link to other lesbians you know!

1. I believe I am having *lesbian sex* if I engage in the following behaviors with another woman: (check all that apply)

- Hugging/kissing
- Sensual body massages (non-genital)
- Humping / tribadism (moving your body against hers, with or without clothes on, for sexual pleasure)
- Breast stimulation
- Vaginal penetration (finger, fist, dildo, vibrator, etc)
- Clitoral stimulation
- Oral sex
- Anal sex
- S/M or bondage
- Only activities which result in an orgasm
- Any activity that produces sexual pleasure, with or without orgasm

2. Which of these statements best describe you?

I have felt sexually attracted to...

- Only to females, never to males
- More often to females, and at least once to a male
- About equally often to females and to males
- More often to males, and at least once to a female
- To no one at all

3. What is the length of your current or most recent relationship?

- I have never had a relationship with a woman
- Less than six months
- Six to eleven months
- One to two years
- Three to five years
- Six to ten years
- Eleven to twenty years
- Twenty-one years or more

4. Is your relationship open to outside sexual partners?

- Not currently partnered
- We agree to not have sex with anyone else
- We agree that we can have sex with others according to terms we've discussed
- We have not discussed this

5. Which statement most accurately describes how you feel about having sex with your current or most recent partner?

- I need to have sex with my partner
- I want to have sex with my partner
- I could take it or leave it
- I enjoy and want sex, but have lost desire to have it with my partner
- I could easily go the rest of my life without sex with anyone

6. Thinking now about your current, or most recent relationship with a woman, how physically pleasurable do you find sex with her?

Is it –?

- Extremely pleasurable
- Very pleasurable
- Moderately pleasurable
- Slightly pleasurable
- Not at all pleasurable
- We are not sexual

7. How common are the following sexual behaviors with your current, or most recent female partner?

How common are the following sexual behaviors with your current, or most recent female partner?	I do this regularly when I have sex	I do this sometimes when I have sex	I do this rarely when I have sex	I have done this at least once before	I have never done this
Anal sex	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Cunnilingus / oral sex	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Use of erotica / porn	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Finger sex (stimulate partner with your fingers/hand)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fisting (penetrative sex with your fist)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Foreplay	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Adding a third person (or more) to join you and your partner in sexual play	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Humping / tribadism (rubbing yourself against her)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Kissing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Multiple orgasms (yours)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mutual masturbation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Penetration (vibrator, dildo, finger or other)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Phone / internet sex (long distance couples)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
S / M / bondage	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

8. **In the last six months, how many times have you had sex (intimate contact intended to create sexual pleasure) with your partner? (Enter the number in the blank)**

9. **In the last six months, how many times would you have liked to have sex with your partner?**

10. **In the last six months, how many times did you have sex with someone other than your partner?**

- None
- One
- Two to five
- Six to ten
- Eleven to twenty
- Twenty-one to thirty
- More than thirty times

11. **Which of these statements best describe the frequency of sex over the course of your current or most recent relationship?**

- No changes in sexual frequency over the course of the relationship
- Slight increase in sexual frequency since the beginning of the relationship
- Moderate increase in sexual frequency since the beginning of the relationship
- Significant increase in sexual frequency since the beginning of the relationship
- Slight decreases in sexual frequency since the beginning of the relationship
- Moderate decrease in sexual frequency since the beginning of the relationship
- Significant decrease in sexual frequency since the beginning of the relationship
- We stopped having sex completely

12. Which statements best describe you? (Check all that apply)

The frequency of sex in my current (or most recent) relationship declined because...

- Our frequency did not decline
- My sexual desire/libido declined after the initial romantic phase of our relationship
- I find my partner to be too controlling, possessive, or jealous, and this is a turn off
- I find my partner to be too dependent on me / needy in our relationship, and this is a turn off
- I do not find my partner sexually attractive
- Sex with my partner is not pleasurable or satisfying
- I do not feel connected / attuned to my partner
- I feel sinful or experience guilt about having sex with a woman
- One (or both) of us has recently experienced a major life stressor (death of a loved one, job change, coming out, legal issues, financial stressors, job loss, etc)...
- My partner's sexual behavior became verbally and/or physically abusive
- Other: Please explain

13. How important to you are the following characteristics of a lesbian relationship?

How important to you are the following characteristics of a lesbian relationship?	Extremely important	Very important	Moderately important	Slightly important	Not at all important
Emotional connectedness	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sexual chemistry	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Intellectual connection	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Spiritual connection	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social compatibility	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Frequency of sex with my partner	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Physical pleasure experienced during sex with my partner	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Amount of time spent during each sexual encounter	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Overall relationship satisfaction	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

14. Over the last six months, how often have you masturbated?

- Once a day
- Multiple times a day
- Once a week
- Multiple times a week
- Once a month
- Multiple times a month
- Multiple times a year or less
- None
- I have never masturbated

15. The last time you had sex with a female partner, did you have an orgasm?

- Yes, one
- Yes, more than one
- No, but I have previously
- I have never had an orgasm with her
- I don't know if I've had an orgasm
- I have never had sex with a woman
- I have never had an orgasm

16. When you have sex with a woman, what is the typical length of time you spend during a sexual encounter?

- I have never had sex with a woman
- Fifteen minutes or less
- More than fifteen minutes, but less than thirty
- More than thirty minutes, but less than one hour
- More than one hour, but less than two hours
- Two hours or longer

17. How would you rate your satisfaction with the following aspects of your current or most recent relationship?

How would you rate your satisfaction with the following aspects of your current or most recent relationship?	Extremely satisfying	Very satisfying	Moderately satisfying	Slightly satisfying	Not at all satisfying
Emotional connectedness	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sexual chemistry	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Intellectual connection	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Spiritual connection	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social compatibility	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Frequency of sex with my partner	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Physical pleasure experienced during sex with my partner	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Amount of time spent during each sexual encounter	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Overall relationship satisfaction	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

18. Based on your own experiences, as well as conversations with lesbian friends, do you think most lesbians consider frequent sex an important part of a satisfying lesbian relationship?


- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Please explain.

19. Have you ever had a lesbian relationship end because of issues with sex?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure
- Does not apply

Please explain.



20. Which statement best reflects your living situation?

- I do not have a partner
- I live with my partner and children
- I live with my partner, no children
- I have my own place, but my partner and I spend a few nights together
- I have my own place, but my partner and I spend most nights together
- My partner and I have a long-distance relationship
- I live with my ex-girlfriend

21. In which country do you live? [Pull-Down Menu of Countries]

22. Which state do you consider your primary residence? [Pull-Down Menu of States]

23. Your Age? [Pull-Down Menu of Age Ranges]

24. Your Race [Pull-Down Menu of Race]

- Asian/Pacific Islander
- Black/African-American
- Caucasian
- Hispanic
- Native American/Alaska Native
- Other/Multi-Racial
- Decline to Respond

25. How did you hear about this survey?

- Michele O'Mara
- Friend
- Internet Search
- Blog
- Other Please enter an 'other' value for this selection.

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