

## Original Article

### The Impact of Prior Heterosexual Experiences on Homosexuality in Women

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**Abstract:** An abundance of unwanted sexual opportunities perpetrated by insensitive, physically and sexually abusive men may be a factor in the expression of homosexuality in some women. In the present study, we examined self-reports of dating histories, sexual experiences, and physical and sexual abuse among lesbians and heterosexual women. Lesbians with prior heterosexual experience reported more severe and more frequent physical abuse by men. Lesbians also reported more instances of forced, unwanted sexual contact perpetrated by men, and this sexual abuse occurred at a significantly earlier age. These data show that adverse experiences with the opposite sex are more common in lesbians than heterosexual women, and therefore negative heterosexual experiences may be a factor in the expression of a same-sex sexual orientation in women. We propose an evolutionary psychological interpretation of this phenomenon based on the cardinally different mating strategies of women and men that have evolved for maximizing the likelihood of reproduction.

**Keywords:** homosexuality, lesbian, heterosexual women, sexual experience, physical abuse, sexual abuse, mating strategies.

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## Introduction

The existence of fundamental biological differences between men and women has given rise to competing physical and emotional heterosexual mating strategies (Symons, 1979). Women are born with a finite supply of eggs, and their reproductive potential is extremely limited compared to men. Moreover, the parental investment required by

women to endure pregnancy, childbirth, and rear offspring is considerable. Because of these reproductive constraints, evolutionary psychological theory posits that women have been selected to put a premium on quality mate choice. Thus, a female can maximize the chance of passing on her genes by seeking a high quality, long-term, committed mate who is willing to provide protection and resources to support her offspring and her. Moreover, a woman should be inclined to postpone sexual intercourse with a man until she can assess these qualities in her potential mate. In contrast, for men, sperm are plentiful, and men do not have to contend with pregnancy, childbearing, and lactation. Thus, men can maximize their genetic legacy by pursuing opportunistic encounters with a number of female sexual partners and by engaging in frequent sex.

The mating strategies of men and women are so different that aversive experiences and frustration with the opposite sex may be inevitable (Gallup and Suarez, 1983). Since male peak sexual desire occurs in the teenage years and female peak sexual desire does not occur until the thirties; i.e., highest frequency of orgasm and masturbation (Barr, Bryan, and Kenrick, 2002; Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, and Gebhard, 1953; Schmitt et al., 2002), adolescent women are often confronted with a bewildering array of heterosexual opportunities. They often get the impression that men want nothing but sex, and find themselves lied to, deceived, taken advantage of, and coerced into a myriad of sexual encounters that they would just as soon avoid (see Gallup and Suarez, 1983). As a result, some women may experience a growing disillusionment with if not an outright aversion to men that could interfere with the development of a heterosexual orientation. It is therefore possible that past negative experiences with men are more prevalent in the histories of women who report a non-heterosexual orientation.

The present study examines whether women who prefer non-heterosexual romantic and sexual relationships profess to a greater history of negative interactions with male suitors than do heterosexual women. We examined histories of sexual abuse, physical abuse, and opposite-sex relations by using a comparable self-report measure for both lesbians and heterosexual women. To date, direct comparisons of these two groups utilizing a single, common instrument/questionnaire are relatively rare. In this study, we investigated incidences of abuse, perpetrators of abuse, heterosexual dating experiences, and attitudes toward men in both lesbians and heterosexual women to determine whether or not aversive heterosexual experiences are more often present in the histories of lesbian women.

## **Materials and Methods**

A total of 131 participants were recruited from psychology classes at the University at Albany, as well as from a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender alliance conference held at the same university. Each participant was asked to complete an anonymous, 33-item questionnaire regarding their family dynamics, heterosexual dating experiences, and sexual history. Further, participants were asked to indicate their sexual orientation via a checkmark as either “Homosexual,” “Heterosexual,” “Bisexual,” or “Other, please specify”. Three respondents returned questionnaires in which they did not indicate their sexual orientation and were therefore excluded from the analysis. Additionally, 21 self-

reported bisexual and transgender individuals were excluded for the purpose of this study. The collection of completed questionnaires yielded a sample of 42 lesbians (Mean age = 21.7,  $SD = 3.7$ ) and 65 heterosexual women (Mean age = 21.8,  $SD = 4.7$ ) with an age range of 18 to 44 years. The difference in age between these two groups was not significant,  $t(105) = .081, p = .94$ .

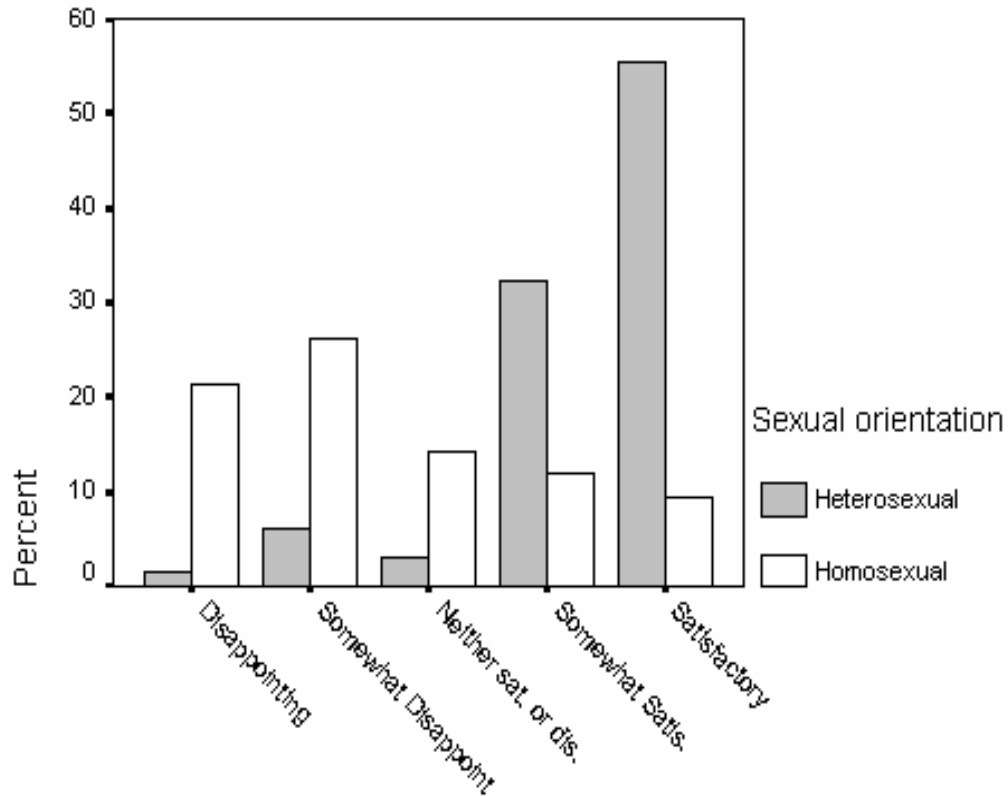
## **Results**

### *Sexuality and Dating*

Women were asked, “At what age did you gain a clear sense of your sexual orientation?” Lesbians reported achieving a clear sense at a mean age of 16.9 years ( $SD = 3.6$ ). In contrast, heterosexual women reported getting a clear sense of their orientation by the mean age of 11.6 ( $SD = 5.4$ ), and this difference was significant,  $t(88) = 5.235, p = .001$ .

To assess possible differences in dating satisfaction, participants were asked, “Overall, how would you characterize your relationships with members of the opposite sex you have dated?” Choices ranged on a five-point Likert scale from -2 = “Disappointing” to +2 = “Satisfactory”. As anticipated, lesbian ratings were significantly more negative ( $M = -0.5, SD = 1.3$ ) than those of heterosexual women ( $M = 1.4, SD = 0.9$ ),  $t(97) = 7.921, p = .000$ , and the proportion of lesbians who characterized their relationship with members of the opposite sex as “disappointing” exceeded that of heterosexual respondents by a factor of over twenty to one (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Characterizing relationships with members of the opposite sex. Women rated their dating experiences with the opposite sex on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “disappointing” to “satisfactory”.



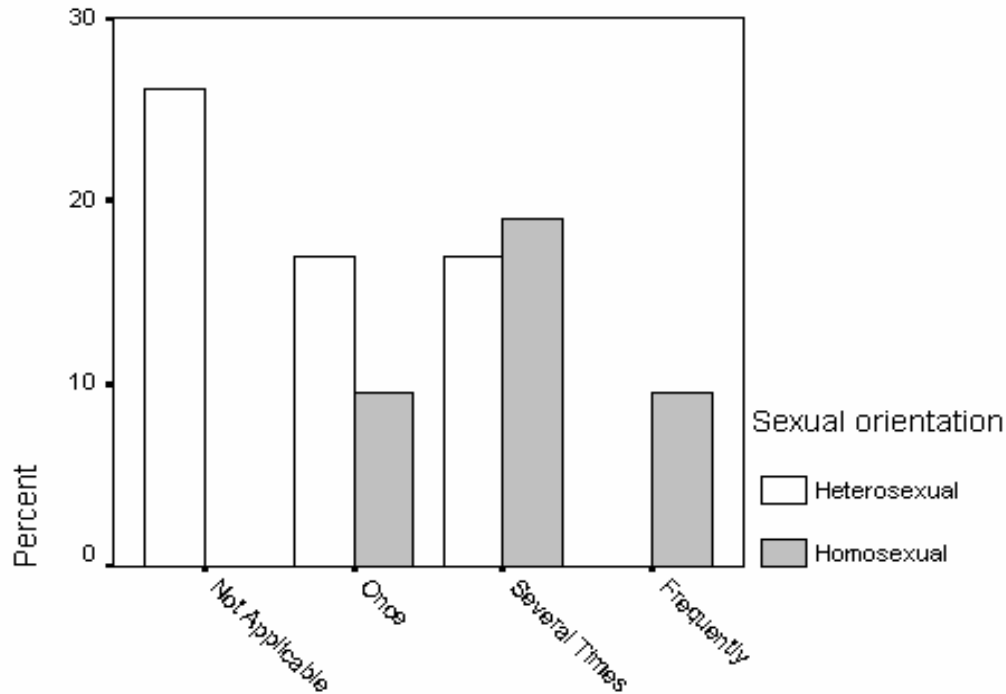
How would you characterize your relationships with members of the opposite sex you have dated?

### Abuse

Participants were asked if they had ever been physically abused (i.e., slapped, shoved, hit, etc.) by a member of the opposite sex, and if so, to rate the severity and the frequency of this abuse on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the most severe/frequent. The proportion of respondents reporting physical abuse by the opposite sex was not significantly different between lesbians (40.5%) and heterosexual women (38.5%), [ $\chi^2(1, N = 107) = .043, p = .84, ns$ ]. Among those who reported being abused, the severity of the

abuse between lesbians ( $M = 3.30, SD = 1.44$ ) and heterosexual women ( $M = 2.4, SD = 1.3$ ) was not significantly different,  $t(36) = 1.93, p = .062$ . However, as shown in Figure 2, lesbians experienced a significantly higher frequency of abuse ( $M = 2.0, SD = 0.7$ ) than heterosexual women ( $M = 1.4, SD = .59$ ),  $t(37) = 2.70, p = .011$ .

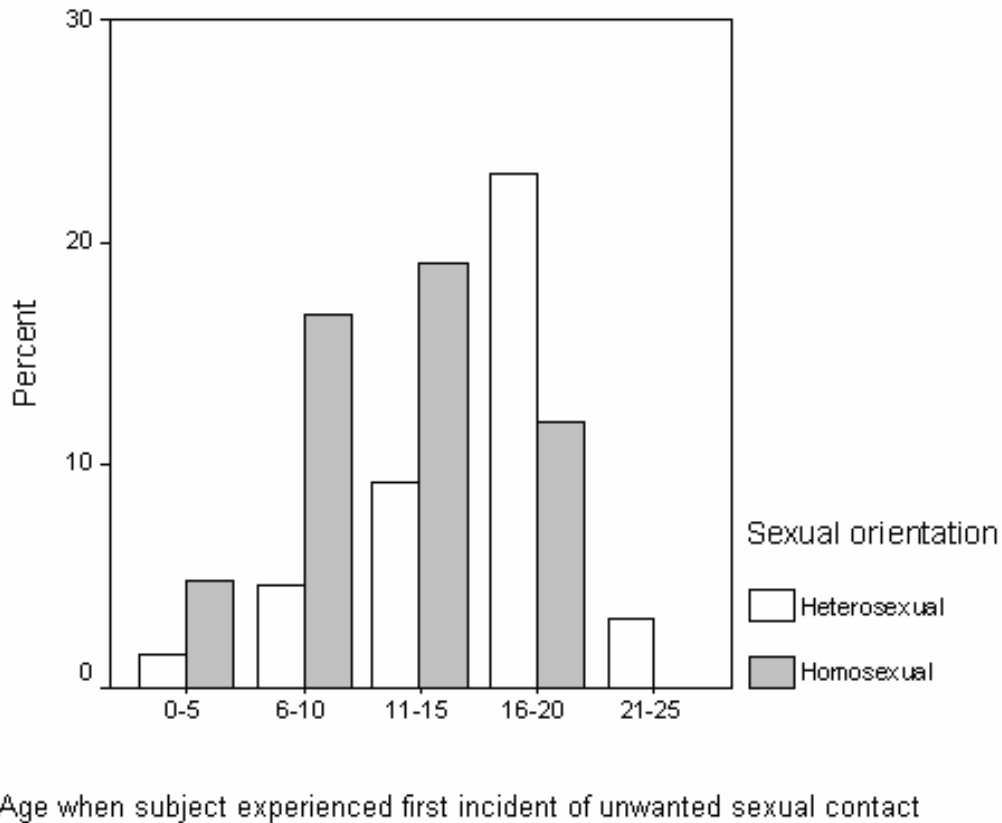
**Figure 2.** Frequency of physical abuse by the opposite sex. Women who reported physical abuse by a member of the opposite sex were asked to estimate the frequency of that abuse.



How often have you been physically abused by a member of the opposite sex?

Rather than rely on labels of “rape or forced sex”, we chose to focus on whether or not women *consider* themselves victims of any unwanted sexual contact. Participants were asked, “Have you ever been forced to have any kind of unwanted sexual contact?” Choices ranged from 0 (“Never”) to 3 (“Many Times”). Lesbians reported significantly more ( $M = 0.95, SD = 1.1$ ) instances of unwanted sexual contact than heterosexual women ( $M = 0.5, SD = 0.7$ ),  $t(104) = -2.517, p = .013$ . All women in the sample who reported experiencing unwanted sexual contact reported being victimized by a male perpetrator. Two women reported being victimized by two males and a female perpetrator. In terms of the age victims were when they suffered this abuse, as shown in Figure 3, heterosexual women reported initial unwanted sexual contact at a mean age of 15.8 ( $SD = 4.5$ ), whereas lesbians reported unwanted sexual contact at a mean age of 11.3 ( $SD = 4.5$ ). An independent samples t-test showed this difference was significant,  $t(47) = 2.482, p = .001$ .

**Figure 3.** Age at first unwanted sexual contact. Heterosexually experienced lesbians and sexually experienced heterosexual women who reported unwanted sexual contact reported at what age the contact occurred.



### *The Role of Heterosexual Experience*

We compared lesbians who had prior heterosexual experience, defined for participants as “sex with a member of the opposite sex,” ( $n = 29$ ; 69.0%) (Mean age = 22.3,  $SD = 4.3$ ) with heterosexual women ( $n = 60$ ; 92.3%) (Mean age = 21.7,  $SD = 4.8$ ) (we excluded from further analyses any women who reported she had “0” sexual partners of the opposite sex). The age difference between these two groups was not significant,  $t(87) = .51$ ,  $p = .61$ . Further, the difference in mean number of lifetime opposite-sex sexual partners between lesbians ( $M = 4.3$ ,  $SD = 4.3$ ) and heterosexuals ( $M = 5.8$ ,  $SD = 6.7$ ) was not significant,  $t(87) = 1.17$ ,  $p = .268$ , but lesbians reported having their first opposite-sex sexual experience at a significantly earlier age ( $M = 14.7$ ,  $SD = 3.0$ ) than heterosexual women ( $M = 16.2$ ,  $SD = 2.0$ ),  $t(85) = 2.74$ ,  $p = .008$ .

In addition, satisfaction with dating members of the opposite sex was examined. On a five-point scale ranging from “Disappointing” to “Satisfactory”, heterosexually experienced lesbians characterized their relationship with members of the opposite sex as less satisfactory ( $M = 2.43$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ) than did their heterosexual counterparts ( $M = 4.4$ ,

$SD = .90$ ),  $t(86) = 8.04$ ,  $p < .000$ . Although these findings that self-identified lesbians would report lower relationship satisfaction with members of the opposite-sex are hardly surprising, it raises the important question of whether this may be due to past negative experiences with men or simply the fact that lesbians are not sexually interested in men.

Further, women's reports of physical abuse by members of the opposite sex were considered. On a five-point scale with 5 being "most severe", heterosexually experienced lesbians characterized the lifetime physical abuse they sustained from men as more severe ( $M = 3.5$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ) than did sexually-experienced heterosexual women ( $M = 2.4$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ),  $t(33) = 2.28$ ,  $p = .029$ , and lesbians reported that such abuse occurred more frequently ( $M = 2.1$ ,  $SD = 0.7$ ) than heterosexual women ( $M = 1.5$ ,  $SD = 0.5$ ),  $t(33) = 2.84$ ,  $p = .008$ .

Heterosexually experienced lesbians reported more instances of enduring forced unwanted heterosexual contact ( $M = 1.1$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ ) than did heterosexual women ( $M = 0.5$ ,  $SD = .68$ ),  $t(86) = 3.03$ ,  $p = .003$ . Heterosexually experienced lesbians also reported that this forced unwanted sexual contact occurred at an earlier age ( $M = 12.1$ ,  $SD = 4.3$ ) than heterosexuals ( $M = 15.7$ ,  $SD = 4.5$ ),  $t(42) = 2.65$ ,  $p = .011$ . All those who reported forced unwanted sexual contact indicated that at least one male was involved each incident.

### *Family Dynamics*

We asked participants to assess the quality of their relationships with their parents. Women were asked on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "very poor (-2)" to "very good (+2)", "How would you describe your relationship with family members of the opposite sex?" Among heterosexually experienced women, lesbians ( $M = 1.3$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ) and heterosexuals ( $M = 1.4$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ) did not significantly differ in their ratings,  $t(87) = .538$ ,  $p = .592$ . Similarly, lesbians ( $M = .74$ ,  $SD = 1.6$ ) and heterosexuals ( $M = 1.1$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ) did not significantly differ in assessments of relationships with their fathers,  $t(83) = 1.22$ ,  $p = .228$ , or mothers (lesbians  $M = 1.0$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ; heterosexuals  $M = 1.4$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ ).  $t(87) = 1.58$ ,  $p = .118$ . Further, there were no significant difference in women's assessments of their relationships with their fathers and mothers; lesbians:  $t(26) = 1.07$ ,  $p = .294$ ; heterosexuals:  $t(57) = 1.54$ ,  $p = .130$ . Because only two heterosexual women without opposite-sex sexual experiences answered these questions, statistical analysis of non-sexually experienced women was not possible.

## **Discussion**

Over seven out of every ten lesbians in our study had experienced heterosexual intercourse. Comparisons of the histories of heterosexually experienced lesbians and heterosexual women yielded clear differences between these groups in their experiences with men, and a picture of lesbian victimization by men emerged. Although there were no differences in the proportion of lesbians and heterosexual women who reported physical abuse by men, among lesbians the perceived frequency and the severity of abuse was greater.

In addition, our data show that lesbians experienced more instances of forced unwanted sexual contact, and this happened at a younger age (11.3 years) than heterosexuals (15.3 years). Other studies have also shown that sexual abuse, incest, and

rape are more prevalent among young lesbian women than their heterosexual counterparts (Gundlach and Reiss, 1967; Simari and Baskin, 1982). For instance, Balsam, Rothblum, and Beauchaine (2005) showed that 43.6% of lesbians from a large community sample reported being victims of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) versus 30.4% of heterosexual women. Likewise, Ross and Durkin (2005) noted that 100% of lesbians from a chemically dependent sample reported being victims of childhood sexual and physical abuse as compared to 58% of heterosexual women from a comparable chemically dependent sample. Sheer et al. (2003) surveyed women from a low-income population and found that 55% of self-identified lesbian and bisexual women reported having been “threatened with force” to engage in sexual activity, versus 27% of heterosexual women, and twice as many lesbians reported having been “forced to have sex”. Furthermore, Hughes, Johnson, and Wilsnack (2001) reported that 68% of lesbians as compared to 47% heterosexuals were victimized by childhood sexual abuse, and significantly more lesbians (37%) than heterosexual women (19%) had been sexually abused as children. Moreover, Saewyc, Bearinger, Blum, and Resnick (1999) also noted that lesbians were more likely than heterosexual women to report a history of physical abuse as well as sexual abuse.

Several studies have confirmed the prevalence of prepubertal unwanted sexual experiences by lesbians. Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels (1994) found that 63% of lesbians indicated that they had been touched sexually before puberty. Likewise, Hall (1996) found that almost half of the lesbians in a chemically-dependent sample reported they had been victims of childhood sexual abuse, and Weingourt (1998) found that 55% of lesbians reported they had been victims of childhood sexual abuse. Since lesbians report sexual abuse at earlier ages, and the average age of such abuse is before many women experience menarche (age 11-15) (Malina, 1990), it is possible that unwanted sexual attention and aversive experiences with men during a critical period of sexual development lead to the development of a sexual aversion to the opposite sex. When Gundlach (1977) found that 16 out of 17 (94%) girls under the age of 16 who were sexually abused by older men (relatives and/or friends) were homosexual, he characterized these women as “having their trust, respect, and any sexual interest in men destroyed” (p. 250).

Our data also show that the development of a clear sense of one’s sexual orientation in lesbians is delayed relative to the onset of puberty by as much as five years or more. This was true of both heterosexually experienced and non-heterosexually experienced lesbians. Lesbians also reported having their first opposite-sex sexual experience sooner than heterosexuals, and long before developing a clear sense of their sexual orientation. Our findings are consistent with other studies showing women usually do not identify themselves as lesbian until late adolescence or their early twenties (Henderson, 1984; Sanford, 1989), although lesbians and heterosexual women do not differ in age of pubertal onset (Bogaert, 1998; Tenhula and Bailey, 1998; Triodan, 1989).

It is also interesting to note that heterosexual women report having a clear sense of their sexual orientation at about the same age that lesbians have their first instance of unwanted sexual contact, suggesting that their aversive experiences with men may have impacted their ability to express a heterosexual orientation.

Our findings are also consistent with those of Saewyc, Bearinger, Blum, and Resnick (1995) who showed that lesbians were more likely to experience sexual intercourse

at an earlier age, and lesbians were more likely to report engaging in frequent sexual intercourse. In addition, as adolescents, lesbians were almost twice as likely to have been pregnant (Saewyc, Bearinger, Blum, and Resnick, 1999). Among respondents who reported at least one pregnancy, 44% of lesbians had engaged in prostitution in the past 12 months, compared with only 5-6% of heterosexuals.

Surprisingly few empirical studies have been conducted on the attitudes of lesbians toward members of the opposite sex, although anecdotal accounts exist in the popular media (Vincent, 1998; Asanti, 1997). In one study, Iazzo (1983) constructed a 32-item Attitudes Toward Men Scale (AMS) to assess women's attitudes regarding men in marriage and parenthood, sexuality, work, and physical and personality attributes. Subjects were asked to agree or disagree with such items as "Men are generally faithful to their wives", "A man's independence is to be admired", and "Male sex organs are attractive". Lesbians expressed significantly less positive attitudes (AMS mean total score of 70.9%) than controls (89.9%), and reported fewer positive attitudes on the AMS than feminists, battered wives, and even rape victims. Consistent with our findings, lesbians also characterized their relationships with members of the opposite sex more negatively, and reported significantly more unsatisfactory opposite-sex relationships than did heterosexual women.

Aversive experiences with men may lead women to become disillusioned and disenchanted with the opposite sex, thereby generating resentment and/or avoidance of men. It may be that fundamentally negative attitudes toward males enhance the perceived severity of negative interactions with the opposite sex, and lower the threshold for perceiving an incident as physically abusive. In other words, it may be that lesbians' negative attitudes toward men contribute to their perception of opposite-sex relations or vice versa.

Although our data do not address whether lesbians incurred more physical or emotional abuse from their fathers, our data do show that lesbians and heterosexuals have had similarly positive relationships with their fathers. However, other research has shown that lesbians may have more negative attitudes towards their fathers than heterosexual women. Bell, Weinberg, and Hammersmith (1981) found that 45% of lesbians reported fear, anger, and resentment toward their fathers, compared to 23% of heterosexual women. Bell et al. also found that over one in three lesbians reported having detached and hostile fathers, as compared to fewer than one in five heterosexual women. Thus, the role of relatedness to male perpetrators of physical abuse remained unclear.

### *Limitations*

By using a self-report measure, we were able to assess the perceptions and attitudes of abuse experienced among lesbians and heterosexual women that have gone unnoticed in previous studies. While self-reports may not always yield accurate portrayals of reality, they can shed light on an individual's subjective reality. We found that lesbians, particularly heterosexually experienced lesbians, have an overall more profoundly negative recollection of the severity of abuse and a more negative attitude toward their relations with the opposite sex. Further, our data show that lesbians report more instances of forced unwanted sexual contact than heterosexual women. We acknowledge that individuals can interpret what constitutes sexual assault in many different ways, making comparisons of the

prevalence of sexual assault difficult (Laumann et al., 1994; Koss, Dinero, and Cox, 1988; Finkelhor, 1981). However, our data are consistent with those of other studies in implicating lesbians' loss of trust in men and the possible development of an aversion to heterosexuality.

It might be argued that lesbians who attend a Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender Alliance conference may do so motivated by a desire to seek comfort or camaraderie in the wake of similar, negative life experiences. As such, our lesbian sample may not be comparable to the heterosexual sample chosen randomly from university courses. However, our results are consistent with other studies that examine lesbian experiences. For example, 40.5% of lesbians in our study indicated being physically abused by a member of the opposite sex. Bradford, Ryan, and Rothblum (1994) reported that 37% of lesbians indicate they had been physically abused, with the perpetrator being male 97% of the time.

Consistent with other studies, our results show that there may be developmental or experiential factors that distinguish lesbians from heterosexual women, and it is plausible that aversive experiences with men may contribute to lesbians' non-heterosexual development. Lesbians reported earlier sexual experiences, more forced experiences of unwanted sexual contact by members of the opposite sex, and more severe physical abuse by members of the opposite sex. Lesbians also characterized their dating experiences with men as more negative than did heterosexual women. Thus, our findings suggest that considerable disappointment and disenchantment with members of the opposite sex may be a factor in prompting the expression of a homosexual orientation in women. These negative sexual experiences with men may be a byproduct of evolved, opportunistic male mating strategies (Trivers, 1972).

It is important to stress that the data presented in this study are correlational, not causal. These data, therefore, do not provide definitive evidence that abuse by men leads to non-heterosexual expression in women, nor does this research speak to other factors that may lead to lesbian's avoidance of men. Although our data show that this abuse is more common in lesbians' histories, other research suggests that an interaction of biological and sociocultural forces may shape sexual orientation (see Baumeister, 2000; Diamond, 2008), and alternate explanations for non-heterosexual expression are possible.

Homosexuality is of particular interest to evolutionary psychologists, because any non-heterosexual mating preference would decrease one's likelihood of reproduction (Bowbrow and Bailey, 2001). The authors acknowledge the importance of freedom of choice and personal expression and are not suggesting that it is fundamentally "bad" or "incorrect" to be homosexual. Rather, because the behavior may decrease fecundity by limiting heterosexual mating, homosexuality is a behavior that has profound evolutionary implications. Further, it is important to acknowledge that this research aims to understand and clarify factors that may contribute to the development of a same-sex sexual orientation among women, and it does not attempt to excuse egregious victimization of women.

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