Behind the Scenes: How the Study Was Done and Who Participated in It

A Brief and Nontechnical Lesson in Sampling Theory for Nonacademic Readers

Chapters 4, 5, and 7 will present the findings of research in which I explored lesbian and bisexual women's opinions on the topic of bisexuality. But before I present the findings it is important for you to know something about the women who participated in the study. The odds are that you and your friends were not among the women who participated, so you might be wondering how the findings could possibly be relevant to you, much less reflect your own opinions. This chapter will answer that question, and it will give you information that you need in order to draw your own conclusions about the findings. Readers who are familiar with scientific sampling methods might want to skip to the subheading “How Lesbian and Bisexual Women Were Recruited to Participate in the Study.”

It would have been impossible, for many practical reasons, to survey all lesbians and bisexual women in the U.S. Instead of surveying an entire population, social scientists usually select particular members of the population as representatives of the population and survey these people. In other words, we take a sample of the population and then we
use the information these people give us to draw informed conclusions about the population as a whole. In this way, scientists use limited financial resources to focus on getting the most accurate information possible from the people they have selected, instead of obtaining poor quality information from a larger number of people.

It may seem risky to draw conclusions about a whole population based on information from just a sample, and it can be if it is not done properly. How do scientists know that the people who are sampled really represent everyone else fairly? We do, if we have drawn the sample using methods that guarantee that each member of a population has an equal chance\(^1\) of being selected for inclusion in the sample. When these methods are used, we can be reasonably certain that various segments of the population, and their opinions, are represented in the sample in the same proportion in which they appear in the population as a whole. Therefore, the sample should provide an accurate micropicture of the whole population. There is always a possibility that this will not be the case, but even the magnitude of this possibility is known if scientific sampling methods have been used. Social scientists generally do not report findings from a sample unless they are at least 95% certain that the findings are an accurate reflection of the whole population. Readers who are unfamiliar with scientific sampling procedures can consult any textbook on social scientific research methods.

But lesbian and bisexual women cannot be sampled using representative sampling methods. In order to draw a representative sample a researcher must begin with a complete listing of all members of the population. It would be impossible to make a list of all lesbian and bisexual women because many of us are isolated or closeted. Therefore, lesbian and bisexual women have to be sampled by methods that are designed to maximize the diversity of the sample, rather than its representativeness. In other words, participants need to be recruited in ways that guarantee that women of different socioeconomic classes, racial/ethnic groups, educational levels, incomes, ages, political orientations, etc., are included in the sample. Their number in the sample will probably not be proportionate to their number in the whole population, but they will be represented.

When samples are recruited by methods that emphasize diversity rather than representativeness, findings have to be interpreted with special care. For example, if I had been able to draw a representative sample
of lesbians and I found that 15% had children, then I would be able to say, with a known degree of certainty, that 15% of all lesbians have children. But, since the lesbians who participated in my study are not a representative sample, I do not know how accurate it would be to conclude that 15% of all lesbians have children. I can, however, look at differences between groups of study participants with some confidence. For example, later in this chapter I will report that 15% of lesbian-identified women in the study had children, whereas 25% of bisexual-identified women in the study had children. On the basis of these results, I have reason to believe that in the population at large bisexual-identified women are indeed more likely to have children than lesbian-identified women. Neither the 15% nor the 25% might be accurate; both of these figures might be inflated or deflated. But, unless I have some reason to believe that there were factors in my sampling methods that affected lesbian-identified mothers’ participation rate differently than bisexual-identified mothers’ participation rate, I can cautiously assume that both figures are equally inflated or deflated and that the difference between them reflects a real difference between the rates of motherhood among bisexual and lesbian-identified women in general.

In chapters 5 and 7, the findings will sometimes be presented in terms of differences between lesbian and bisexual women, or between women of different ages, racial/ethnic groups, classes, etc. Most findings will not be presented in terms of percentages or other numbers; most will be anecdotal or narrative descriptions of the different opinions that were expressed by women who participated in the study. However, when findings are expressed in terms of numbers, they will sometimes be accompanied by a “test of statistical significance.” There are many different kinds of statistical significance tests, and each is appropriate under particular circumstances, but all significance tests produce a “p-value.” Above, I mentioned that social scientists do not usually report findings from samples unless they are at least 95% certain that the finding is an accurate reflection of the whole population. The degree of uncertainty is measured by the p-value. The lower the p-value, the more certain the researcher can be that a finding in the sample is also true for the whole population. For example, if the p-value for a finding of difference between two groups in the sample is .05, then there is a 95% chance that these two groups really are different in the whole population. A p-value of .01 indicates 99% certainty, and so on. Significance tests were designed for use on representative samples, and they are
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accurate for these types of samples. Because the sample on which this study is based is not a representative sample, the significance tests are only guidelines to the certainty of the findings.

HOW LESBIAN AND BISEXUAL WOMEN WERE RECRUITED TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

In order to obtain as diverse a sample as possible, I used sampling methods designed to ensure the inclusion of women who were most likely to be undersampled. Women at risk of being undersampled included closeted women, geographically isolated women, and women who were not socially or politically active in lesbian or bisexual community organizations and events. Because of their social and physical isolation, these women would be less likely to hear about the survey and because of their closedness or exclusiveness they would be less likely to participate even if they did hear about it. Older women, poor women, and nonstudents were also at risk of underrepresentation because they are less likely to be socially and politically active. Bisexual-identified women were more difficult to reach than lesbian-identified women because there are comparatively few organizations for bisexual women; most bisexual women had to be recruited through primarily lesbian networks. Finally, Women of Color have been underrepresented in previous research on lesbians. This is partly because most researchers are White Euro-Americans themselves, and therefore tend to focus on issues that are of interest to White Euro-Americans or fail to publicize their research in a way that welcomes participation from Women of Color as well as White women.

To overcome the bias against closeted women, geographically isolated women, and women who were not actively involved in lesbian/bisexual community events, I used a self-administered questionnaire instead of the face-to-face interview or ethnographic methods that have usually been used to study lesbian and bisexual women. The questionnaire was distributed with postage-paid return envelopes so that respondents could return their completed questionnaires anonymously and at no financial cost to themselves. The goals of the survey were described on the cover of the questionnaire and the instructions inside the front cover and throughout the questionnaire were self-explanatory, thus eliminating the need for potential respondents to speak directly to a
member of the survey staff before participating in the study. This enabled the questionnaire to be passed from one woman to another until it reached an eligible respondent, and allowed the questionnaire to reach socially peripheral lesbian and bisexual women and women whose fear of discovery might otherwise have prevented them from participating in the study. The success of these efforts to maximize the mobility of the questionnaire is evident in the fact that, although the target geographic area was a single midwestern state and 98% of the questionnaires were initially distributed in that state, completed questionnaires were returned from respondents in 24 states and Canada.

Six assistants who had conducted interviews in earlier stages of the study helped distribute the questionnaire. These assistants varied in age, political orientation, and sexual identity. They therefore had access to different segments of the lesbian and bisexual population, and were able to recruit a more diverse sample than I could have alone. Questionnaires were distributed by several methods, including booths at gay, lesbian, and women's conferences and through gay, bisexual, and lesbian social and political organizations, friendship networks, and newsletter advertisements. Particular efforts were made to contact bisexual organizations and organizations for lesbian and bisexual Women of Color, and to recruit Women of Color who belonged to predominantly White Euro-American organizations. Potential respondents were encouraged to take multiple copies of the questionnaire to distribute among their own friends and the members of other organizations to which they belonged. Calculation of an accurate response rate is impossible because some questionnaires probably never reached eligible respondents and some probably passed through the hands of eligible nonrespondents before reaching a respondent. However, 427 usable questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of approximately 45% based on the number of questionnaires that left my hands.

THE WOMEN WHO PARTICIPATED—WHO WERE THEY?

The cover of the questionnaire explained to potential respondents that the following people were eligible to participate in the study: “women
who consider themselves to be lesbian or bisexual, or who choose not to label their sexual orientation, or who are not sure what their sexual orientation is.” This definition was intentionally broad, in order to encourage a wide range of women—including women who might not consider themselves members of The Lesbian Community—to participate. Inside the questionnaire, respondents were asked “When you think about your sexual orientation, what word do you use most often to describe yourself?” a question designed to elicit expressions of sexual self-identity rather than presented or perceived identity. Respondents chose from among the following responses: lesbian; gay; dyke; homosexual; bisexual; mainly straight or heterosexual but with some bisexual tendencies; I am not sure what my orientation is (I do not know, I haven’t decided, or I am still wondering); I prefer not to label myself. Respondents who answered that they preferred not to label themselves were directed to the follow-up question, “If you had to choose one term to describe your orientation, which would come closest to the way you feel?” and offered the following responses: lesbian/gay/homosexual, bisexual, I really can’t choose. Each response to the initial and the follow-up questions was followed by instructions to skip certain subsequent questions. A small number of respondents failed to check a response to the questions about sexual self-identity; the sexual identities of these respondents were inferred from the instructions they chose to follow.

Seventy-eight percent, or 323, of the respondents unhesitatingly identified themselves as Lesbians, Dykes, or Gay or Homosexual women (figure 3.1). An additional 9 respondents failed to answer the question about sexual self-identity but followed the instructions for lesbians throughout the rest of the questionnaire, and they were assumed to have lesbian identities also. Altogether, these 332 women will henceforth be referred to as “lesbians.” Whenever these women are discussed as individuals, the terms they used to describe themselves will be capitalized. That is, if I refer to a respondent as a “lesbian,” this means that she belongs to the lesbian subsample and might have called herself by any of the above terms. But if I refer to her as a Lesbian, then this is the specific term that she chose to describe herself. Likewise, if I refer to her as a Dyke, then this is the term she chose.

Ten percent, or 42, of the respondents identified themselves as Bisexual. Three women failed to answer the question about sexual self-iden-
tity but followed the instructions for bisexual women throughout the questionnaire and were assumed to identify themselves as bisexual. Altogether, these 45 women will be referred to as “bisexuals.”

Finally, 7 women (2%) said that they were Heterosexual with Bisexual Tendencies, 14 women (3%) indicated that they were not sure what their sexual orientation was, and 25 women (6%) said that they preferred not to label themselves. In answer to the follow-up question, 8 of the women who preferred not to label themselves chose the label “bisexual,” 14 chose “lesbian/gay/homosexual,” and 3 refused to label themselves. Although some women did choose lesbian or bisexual identities when pressed, they preferred not to label themselves, and they are not considered part of the lesbian or bisexual subsamples in this study.

Most of the women who responded, regardless of their sexual self-identities, are well-educated Euro-American women. At the time of the study, three out of four were college graduates, and only 7% had no schooling beyond high school. Ninety-two percent are White, 3.4% are Black or African-American, 2% are Indian, and the rest belong to other racial groups. Although 24 states and Canada are represented in the sample, 93% of the women lived in the Midwestern United States. Since the population in the Midwestern states is 87.2% White, if we assume that women of different racial groups are equally likely to be lesbian or bisexual, then the sample underrepresents Women of Color.

Most women were employed, as figure 3.2 shows. Despite their high levels of education and employment, however, participants in the study had low to moderate incomes. Almost a quarter lived in households with total annual incomes of less than $10,000 (figure 3.3). One-third lived in households with incomes of over $30,000, but only 19% of these women lived alone; the other 81% shared this income with at least one other person.

Participants ranged in age from 16 to 67. There were some differences among women of different ages in the terms they chose to describe their sexual self-identities (figure 3.4). At all ages, approximately three out of four women described themselves as lesbians. Among women who did not call themselves lesbians, however, older women were more likely to call themselves Bisexual than younger women. In fact, women aged 35 or older were eight times more likely than women in their teens or early twenties to call themselves Bisexual. Younger women, on the other hand, were more likely to say that they were “heterosexuals with
bisexual tendencies” or to say that they did not know what their orientation was or that they preferred not to label themselves. Approximately one out of five women under 25 could not, would not, or preferred not to label her sexuality.

One out of five lesbian and bisexual women was not romantically involved with anyone at the time she participated in the study. Among lesbians, over half (55%) were involved in serious, committed relationships with other women, and 4 were involved with men. Bisexual women, on the other hand, were almost equally likely to be involved with women and men. But only 7 (16%) bisexual women were simultaneously involved with both women and men; 17 were involved in relationships with women only, and 12 were involved in relationships with men only. Most bisexual women described their relationships as serious relationships or marriages. Women who were unable or unwilling to label their sexuality were more likely than either lesbian or bisexual women to be single; one out of four was not involved with anyone. This was probably due to their young age. Those who were involved were twice as likely to be involved with women than with men, and just as likely as bisexuals to be involved in serious relationships with women.

Not surprisingly, bisexual women were more likely than lesbians to have been married to men in the past and they were more likely to have children. But a large number of lesbians had also had serious relationships with men. Four out of five bisexual women, and two out of five lesbians, had been seriously involved with or married to men (figure 3.5). Many lesbians who had not had serious heterosexual relationships had had casual heterosexual relationships or dated men; only 10% of lesbians had never had any type of heterosexual relationship at all. Twenty-five percent of bisexual women and 15% of lesbians had children.

Sexuality is not merely a matter of with whom a woman sleeps or with whom she slept in the past. Sexuality is also a matter of to whom she is sexually attracted and other factors. In general, one might expect that lesbians would be attracted to women and bisexual women would be attracted to both women and men. But feelings of sexual attraction are not that clear-cut, and neither are women’s choices about how to identify themselves sexually. In fact, lesbian and bisexual women who participated in this study had almost as much in common as not with respect to their feelings of sexual attraction. Figure 3.6 illustrates the
range of sexual feelings toward women and men that were reported by lesbian and bisexual women, and by women who could not, would not, or preferred not to label their sexuality.\(^6\)

Only one-third of lesbians (36%) said that their feelings of sexual attraction were exclusively toward women; two out of three reported that they had some heterosexual feelings. For most, these heterosexual feelings comprised only 10% of their total sexual feelings but some lesbians reported that up to 50% of their feelings of sexual attraction were toward men.\(^7\) Bisexual women, on the other hand, reported feelings that ranged from 80% heterosexual to 90% homosexual. In other words, all bisexual women were attracted to both women and men, but so were most lesbians. Very few bisexual women reported that they were equally attracted to women and men (16%), and they were more likely to express a preference for women than a preference for men. Women who were not sure what their orientation was or who preferred not to label themselves covered as wide a range as bisexual women, from nearly exclusive heterosexual feelings to nearly exclusive homosexual feelings. For detailed information about the feelings of sexual attraction and relational histories of the women in this sample, see Rust (1992b).

As I explained above, I refer to the women who participated in this study as “lesbians,” “bisexuals,” etc., on the basis of their sexual self-identities at the time of the study. But many of these women have not had the same sexual identities throughout their lives. Some lesbians used to call themselves bisexual, some bisexuals used to call themselves lesbian, and some women who preferred not to label their sexuality had tried calling themselves both lesbian and bisexual in the past before they gave up labeling themselves. Among lesbians, 39% at one time called themselves bisexual.\(^8\) Bisexual identity is often considered a stepping stone on the way to coming out as a lesbian. Slightly more than half of these lesbians called themselves bisexual before they came out as lesbians; in hindsight, these women might well see their earlier bisexual identity as a transitional stage. The other half, 17% of all lesbians, called themselves bisexual after they came out as lesbians. For these women, bisexual identity was not merely a stepping stone. Although they had returned to a lesbian identity by the time they participated in this study, they had considered themselves bisexual after, not before, coming out as lesbians.

Among bisexuals, 84% had called themselves lesbian in the past.
For these women also, bisexuality was not merely a stepping stone on the way to coming out as a lesbian; they had already tried to identify themselves as lesbian and decided to identify as bisexual instead at the time of the study. But bisexual identity had not been permanent for most of these women, either; three out of four had changed identities more than twice.

Likewise, most of the women who said that they were not sure what their sexual orientation was, or who preferred not to label themselves, were not merely in such an early stage of coming out that they had not yet taken on a sexual identity. Three-quarters of these women had identified as either lesbian or bisexual in the past, and most had identified both ways at different times in their lives.

In summary, the women who participated in this study overrepresent highly educated White Euro-American women, although women who did not attend college and Women of Color are represented. In terms of social class, income, age, sexual identity, sexual history, and sexual experiences, the participants are a diverse group. We can learn a great deal from the women who participated in this study, if we keep these facts in mind. Now, it's time to find out what they had to say.