Bisexuality and the Challenge to Lesbian Politics

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One thing is clear: lesbians have a variety of attitudes, beliefs, and opinions about bisexuality. This variety is interesting in and of itself because it shows how diverse lesbians are and how many different ways there are to understand sexuality. Merely describing this diversity—which I did in chapter 4—provides insight into the controversy over bisexuality within the lesbian community because it shows the exact points of agreement and disagreement. If we can isolate these points, we can begin to understand each others' points of view.

But understanding each others' points of view also means that we must understand why we each hold the attitudes we do. For example, why do some lesbians believe that bisexuality doesn't exist while others believe that it is an ideal form of sexuality? Who among us is most likely to believe that women who identify as bisexual are really closeted lesbians, and who is most likely to chastise her lesbian sisters for invalidating bisexual identity in this way? What distinguishes the majority of lesbians, who prefer to maintain some social and political distance from bisexual women, from the handful of lesbians who don't care if their
WHO BELIEVES WHAT?

dates, friends, and comrades are bisexual? Are there racial or generational differences in lesbians' attitudes toward bisexual women? Political differences? Do lesbians' experiences of their own sexuality influence their beliefs and feelings about bisexual women? Or, do lesbians' attitudes toward bisexual women crosscut demographic, political, and personal differences? If we discover who among us holds which attitudes, we can gain some insight into why we hold the attitudes we do, and then we can begin to understand the roots of the controversy over bisexuality in the lesbian community.

RACE, EDUCATION, CLASS, AND OTHER DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES

Because the women who participated in this study are predominantly White and well-educated, it is important to look closely at the opinions of Women of Color and women with less education to see if their beliefs and feelings differ from those of White and/or well-educated lesbians. If they do, then the opinions expressed by the majority of lesbians in this survey are really the opinions of the majority of White, well-educated lesbians, not the opinions of the majority of lesbians. For similar reasons, it is also important to see if there are differences in the opinions of lesbians of different social classes, incomes, employment statuses, and ages.

Although there are some scattered differences in the opinions of the African-American and White lesbians who participated in this study, the attitudes of these two racial groups resemble each other much more than they differ. For example, on the issue of whether bisexuality exists, two out of ten Whites and three out of ten African-Americans indicated that they believe it does not exist. One out of ten in each group explicitly stated that it exists, and four out of ten implied that it exists without saying so explicitly. According to these results, the entire range of opinions on this question is present within both racial groups, and no opinion appears to be more popular in one racial group than the other. Quotes from African-American lesbians, other lesbians of Color, and White lesbians show more similarity than difference. Compare, for ex-
ample, these three quotes from lesbians who do not believe that bisexuality exists as a legitimate form of sexuality:

I feel that bisexuals are very confused people, and will probably become lesbians. It's just that they are still on phase one. (Monifa) (African-American)

I feel people who think they are bisexual are confused about it, or in transition. (Isabelle) (Euro-American)

Usually it means a transition or a confusing part of life. It really doesn't exist. (Kamala) (Indian-American)

There are also no apparent differences between the definitions of bisexuality used by lesbians of Color and White lesbians, nor in the ways different racial groups conceptualize sexuality. Approximately equal percentages of lesbians in each racial group define bisexuality in terms of behavior, approximately equal percentages define bisexuality in terms of feelings of attraction, and the majority of every racial group conceptualizes sexuality dichotomously.

Comparisons between the images of bisexuality and feelings about bisexual women held by lesbians of different racial groups gave mixed results. For example, on average, African-American lesbians believe more strongly than White and Indian-American lesbians that bisexuals are really closeted lesbians, but there are no racial differences in the belief that bisexuality is a transitional stage that some women go through before they come out as lesbians. On the other hand, African-American lesbians and Indian-American lesbians believe more strongly than White lesbians that bisexuals lack commitment and that they are more likely than lesbians to want to pass as heterosexual, but there are no racial differences in lesbians' assessments of bisexuals' trustworthiness or of the relative ease with which bisexuals could pass compared to lesbians. Findings about racial differences in lesbians' willingness to associate socially and politically with bisexual women are equally mixed. None of the differences between African-American, Indian-American, and Euro-American lesbians are statistically significant, and it is very possible that they reflect random variations in individuals' beliefs rather than true racial differences. To impute great importance to these findings or to try to use them to argue that there are racial differences in lesbians' attitudes about bisexuality would be to overstate them, and perhaps to engage in racial stereotyping.
There are no educational and few social class differences in lesbians’ attitudes toward bisexuality. Lesbians who dropped out of high school hold the same variety of beliefs about bisexuality and feelings about bisexual women as lesbians with college degrees or postgraduate educations. Working-class, middle-class, and upper-class lesbians also hold a variety of attitudes about bisexuality, with only one statistically significant difference between the classes. Specifically, working- and middle-class lesbians were more likely (21%) than upper-class lesbians (7%) to state explicitly that bisexuality exists as a valid sexual orientation, although upper-class lesbians were not more likely to say that bisexuality does not exist. This class difference cannot be accounted for by differences in education—for example, upper-class lesbians did not learn to think differently about sexuality in college—because lesbians with different levels of education do not have different attitudes toward bisexuality. Nor can the class difference be accounted for by differences in income or employment status, because lesbians with different incomes and employment statuses do not have different attitudes toward bisexuality. Whatever the explanation, the finding that there is a statistically significant class difference in lesbians’ beliefs about bisexual existence must be placed in perspective; there are no class differences in any of lesbians’ other beliefs about or feelings toward bisexuality. It is, therefore, likely that the one class difference found in the sample is a “false positive” that does not accurately reflect lesbians in general.

Lesbians of different ages and lesbians who came out in different decades experienced different social and political circumstances and might be expected to have different attitudes about sexuality and bisexuality. For example, the 1970s were the heyday of the feminist sexuality debates. The debates over the relationship between lesbianism and feminism, the merits of lesbian separatism, and the question of who is a lesbian—debates I will explore in chapter 6—raged more fiercely in the 1970s than ever before or after. During the 1970s, lesbian feminists were building Lesbian Nation and guarding its borders. Women who were involved in this struggle were deeply affected by it. Those who came out during this period learned to think about their sexuality in the context of these debates and formed sexual attitudes and sexual identities that reflected the issues of the day.

Women who came out before or after the 1970s experienced very different historical circumstances. Lesbians who came out before Stone-
wall did not have the luxury of debating the relative political merits of lesbianism and bisexuality or the relationship between lesbianism and feminism. Relationships with men were often a necessary cover, and support for one’s relationships with women was too rare and precious to be compromised by quibbles over the meanings of these heterosexual relationships. For younger lesbians who came out in the 1980s, lesbian feminism was an established order against which to rebel. The time for separatism had passed, they said; the wave of the future is the destruction of gender and sexual categories, and the elimination of all boundaries between people. Lesbian feminist rules of political correctness were remnants of a political defense that was no longer necessary. Lesbian Nation was replaced by Queer Nation.

Do the attitudes of different generations of lesbians reflect these historical changes? Is the Lesbian Nation generation more critical of bisexuality than the pre-Stonewall and the Queer Nation generations? Among the lesbians in this study, women aged 30 to 34—who were college-aged in the early and mid 1970s—were indeed most skeptical about bisexual existence; over one-quarter of women in this age group either did not believe that bisexuality exists, or had serious doubts about its existence. Lesbians aged 25 to 29 or 35 to 39 were nearly as skeptical, and older and younger lesbians were less skeptical; less than one-fifth of lesbians under 24 or over 40 doubted or disbelieved the existence of bisexuality. But lesbians aged 25 to 39 were also most likely to explicitly validate the existence of bisexuality. Older and younger lesbians were less likely to raise the issue at all, reflecting the fact that bisexuality was not as important an issue for these women as it was for the generation that came out largely in the 1970s. Although these findings suggest that lesbians of different ages have different beliefs about bisexuality, none of the differences are statistically significant; therefore, they cannot be taken as conclusive evidence of generational differences between lesbians in their attitudes toward bisexuality. At most, these findings suggest that generational differences might exist and should be explored further in future research.

Aside from the suggestion that there might be differences in the salience of the question of bisexual existence to lesbians of different generations, there are no meaningful age-related differences in lesbians’ attitudes toward bisexuality. Perhaps there used to be differences that have been extinguished over time as lesbians of different ages and lesbi-
ans who came out at different stages of their lives mingle in the community and share their opinions with each other.

**POLITICAL DIFFERENCES: DO POLITICAL LESBIANS SPEAK FOR US ALL?**

In the late 1970s, Blumstein and Schwartz reported that antagonism toward bisexuality was particularly prevalent among lesbian feminists. Lesbian feminists in the current study also linked their own attitudes about bisexuality to their lesbian feminist political beliefs. For example, Chava wrote:

> I can understand bisexuality in an ideal society, but not under the patriarchy. I don't see how a woman could turn from a woman to a man if she had high standards and a desire for mutuality. I think bisexual women are more likely to give up on a relationship that needs work than lesbians are. (Chava)

If lesbian feminists’ objections to bisexuality are based on political concerns, then it is tautological to conclude that lesbian feminists are more critical of bisexuality than other lesbians, because other lesbians would not have the same political objections to bisexuality that lesbian feminists do. Or is it? There are two flaws in this line of reasoning. First, the fact that other lesbians do not share lesbian feminists’ political objections to bisexuality does not necessarily mean that they find bisexuality less objectionable. They might find bisexuality equally objectionable, but for other reasons.

Second, people often provide explanations for their opinions that do not reflect the original bases of those opinions. Because our culture values rationality we often underemphasize the emotional bases of our opinions and overemphasize the intellectual bases. We construct rationales that make our opinions appear to have grown logically out of our overall values and philosophies even if they did not. Sometimes we ourselves are unaware of the emotional motivations we have for our opinions, because we have learned to devalue—and hence discredit and ignore—our gut feelings. While it is quite possible that lesbian feminists’ objections to bisexuality are in fact fundamentally based on political
concerns, it would be naive to assume that this is true simply because lesbian feminists say that it is. This explanation for lesbian feminists' antipathy toward bisexuality is a hypothesis like any other, and must be tested before we accept it.

Politics and the Issue of Bisexual Existence

Before we can test whether lesbian feminists have different attitudes toward bisexuality than lesbians of other political orientations do, we have to find out whether they are more or less likely to believe that bisexuality exists at all. To identify respondents' political orientations, I asked them to list all political and social issues in which they are interested and to indicate whether they are actively involved in each issue. They listed a great variety of issues ranging from the environment, to homelessness, to U.S. intervention in Central America. Nearly half mentioned a concern about "gay rights" in general, and one-third wrote that they were concerned about "lesbian rights" in general or about particular lesbian issues, such as job discrimination, the rights to marry and maintain child custody, media images of lesbians, social attitudes, and lesbian health issues, including alcoholism. Seventy percent mentioned a concern about women's issues, including women's rights in general, ERA, reproduction rights and abortion, equal pay and occupational opportunity, discrimination, economic inequality, lack of political representation, violence (including rape and domestic abuse), pornography, sexual harassment, and health issues. In terms of active involvement in these issues, respondents range from those who are not politically involved at all, to those who donate money or confine their activism to personal talks with friends and coworkers, to those who give over ten hours a week to organizing and running meetings, protests, and other political action projects.

Neither the types of issues lesbians are concerned about nor the degree to which they are actively involved in these issues is related to whether they believe that bisexuality exists. Lesbians who indicated a concern about lesbian, feminist, or gay issues are no more skeptical than lesbians who did not. Among those who are concerned about lesbian issues, the degree of their active involvement in these issues is not related to their beliefs about bisexual existence; lesbian activists are no more likely than nonactivists and pocketbook or armchair activists to believe
that bisexuality does not exist. Nor is the degree to which lesbians are actively involved in feminist issues significantly related to their beliefs about bisexual existence. Overall, there is no convincing evidence that politically active lesbian feminists—or politically active lesbians—have substantially different opinions on the question of bisexual existence than other lesbians do.

Politics and Sexual Conceptualizations, Beliefs, and Feelings about Bisexuality

Is the same true of lesbians' opinions on other matters? That is, do politically active lesbians' definitions of bisexuality, beliefs about bisexual women, and feelings about bisexual women also resemble the definitions, beliefs, and feelings of less active, less vocal lesbians? The findings of this study indicate that, for the most part, politically active lesbians' attitudes do reflect the attitudes of lesbians in general. Lesbian respondents of all political bends share the same variety of definitions of bisexuality and many of the same beliefs and feelings about bisexuality. For example, by all measures of political interest and activity, politically active and nonactive lesbians are equally likely to believe that bisexuality is transitional, that bisexuals are closeted lesbians, and that bisexuals are more able and willing to pass as heterosexual, and they are equally likely to prefer not to date bisexual women.

Although politically active lesbians generally do not have different feelings or beliefs than nonactive lesbians, they are more likely to express these feelings and beliefs, and they are more enthusiastic about doing so. In particular, they are more distrustful of bisexual women and less willing to associate with them as friends or in political situations than nonactive lesbians are. Lesbians who listed lesbian issues among the social and political issues they are concerned about tend to distrust bisexual women more than lesbians who did not mention lesbian issues; they agreed more strongly that bisexual women are likely to desert their woman friends, and that bisexuals can't be trusted to "stick around" when "the going gets rough" (figure 5.1). The difference is not so much a matter of the prevalence of doubt among those who mentioned lesbian issues and those who did not as it is a matter of the depth of their doubt. Sixty-seven percent of the former and 58% of the latter agreed that bisexual women lack commitment to their woman friends—a very small
difference—but the former were more than twice as likely as the latter (25% versus 11%) to agree “very strongly.”

In contrast, lesbians who mentioned “gay” issues are less likely to doubt bisexual women’s commitment and trustworthiness. In fact, even among lesbians who listed lesbian issues, those who also listed gay issues expressed little more doubt about bisexual women than lesbians who did not list lesbian issues at all. Apparently, it is not concern for lesbian issues per se that is associated with the strength of lesbians’ doubts about bisexual women; instead, it is the exclusivity of concern about lesbian issues that is associated with doubts about bisexual women. Similarly, lesbians who mentioned a concern about “women’s” issues are no more likely to doubt bisexual women than lesbians who did not mention women’s issues are. These findings indicate that strong doubts about bisexual women characterize lesbians whose political concerns are limited to lesbian issues, not those with broader political concerns that include both lesbian and gay issues or women’s issues in general. This finding makes sense in light of the history of lesbian feminism. Early lesbian feminists took care to distinguish themselves from both women’s liberationists and gay liberationists. They argued that lesbians have particular interests that arise out of their dual status as women and homosexuals, and that these interests differ from those of heterosexual feminists who are not lesbians as well as those of gay men who are as sexist as heterosexual men. Lesbians who carry on this lesbian feminist tradition are concerned about lesbian issues specifically; they are not concerned about gay rights or women’s rights more generally. It is these women who expressed the strongest doubts about bisexual women’s commitment and trustworthiness in this study.

Similar patterns exist in lesbians’ feelings about bisexual women (figure 5.2). Lesbians who are exclusively concerned about lesbian issues care more strongly about the sexual identities of their friends and political coworkers than lesbians who did not mention lesbian issues or who mentioned both lesbian and gay issues. Differences were found in both the percentage of lesbians who preferred to associate with other lesbians, and in the strength of their preferences. For example, 92% of lesbians who mentioned a concern about exclusively lesbian issues would prefer their friends to be lesbian and not bisexual, whereas “only” 69% of those who did not mention lesbian or gay issues, and 73% of those who mentioned gay issues would prefer their friends to be lesbians. Lesbians who mentioned lesbian issues were also more than twice as likely as
other lesbians to indicate that their preferences for lesbian friends were very strong. Similarly, 96% of lesbians who mentioned a concern about exclusively lesbian issues would prefer to be represented by a lesbian lobbyist compared to 82% of all other lesbians, and the former were over three times more likely than the latter to indicate that their preferences are very strong. In other words, most lesbians prefer other lesbians over bisexual women in both social and political situations, but lesbians who are exclusively concerned about lesbian issues have particularly widespread and strong preferences in these areas.

Politically active lesbians are more vocal than most lesbians and their opinions are therefore more likely to be heard by both lesbians and non-lesbians than the opinions of closeted or nonactive lesbians are. If politically active lesbians had very different attitudes from those of the majority of lesbians whose voices are rarely heard, the effect of their outspokenness would be to create an inaccurate impression of the attitudes of lesbians in general. This does not appear to be the case, however. Politically active lesbians have more extreme attitudes than other lesbians, but in substance their beliefs and feelings are similar to the beliefs and feelings of lesbians at large. As representatives of the lesbian community, they might be overstating the general attitude toward bisexuality, but they are expressing beliefs and feelings that are shared by a great majority of lesbians.

**PERSONAL EXPERIENCES—THE ROLE OF EMPATHY**

If lesbians of different races, ages, social classes, and political orientations share a similar variety of attitudes toward bisexual women, what does account for the differences among lesbians in their attitudes toward bisexual women? Of all the possibilities examined, lesbians' personal experiences of bisexuality in their own lives were found to be the most important factors distinguishing lesbians who accept bisexual women from those who want nothing to do with them. Many lesbians identified themselves as bisexual before coming out as lesbian, and many lesbians reported that they feel sexually attracted to men; these women's attitudes about bisexuality are different from those of lesbians who have no personal history of bisexuality.

When I began exploring the relationship between lesbians’ personal
experiences and their attitudes about bisexuality, I expected to find that lesbians whose own lives include a history of bisexuality would be the least tolerant of other women who call themselves bisexual. I had hypothesized that one reason lesbians discredit bisexuality in others is because, for women whose own histories include bisexual identities and feelings, discounting bisexuality is necessary to maintain their own lesbian identities. For example, imagine a woman who calls herself a lesbian although she feels attracted to both women and men and has had romantic or sexual relations with both women and men—a description that fits more than half of the lesbians who participated in this study. To avoid hypocrisy, she has to define lesbianism in a way that includes herself. In other words, her definition of lesbianism has to include women who feel attracted to men and who have had heterosexual relationships. She might, for example, define a lesbian as a woman whose feelings of attraction for women are stronger than her feelings of attraction for men—a broad definition that is as legitimate as any other definition of lesbianism, and that is consistent with her own lesbian identity. If she believes bisexuality exists at all, she has to define it very narrowly to avoid defining herself as a bisexual. If she then applies her definitions of lesbianism and bisexuality to other women, she will conclude that many women who call themselves bisexual are actually, by her definition, lesbian. In order to maintain her identity as a lesbian without being hypocritical, she must reject others' bisexual identities. In contrast, a lesbian who has never had a heterosexual relationship and whose sexual feelings are exclusively for other women can afford to believe that bisexuality exists, and she can afford to define it broadly. She can afford to agree with women who have feelings of attraction for both women and men—no matter what the ratio—who call themselves bisexual, because accepting these women's definitions of themselves as bisexual does not threaten her own definition of herself as a lesbian. But such pure lesbians are rare; most of us cannot afford the luxury of allowing any woman who has the slightest history of bisexuality or heterosexuality in her past to define herself as bisexual, because most of us have the same experiences she does.

What I found among the lesbians who participated in this study does not support the argument that lesbians who have a history of bisexuality will be less tolerant of bisexualy identified women than women with purely lesbian experiences, a hypothesis that I will call the "Identity Defense" hypothesis. In fact, I found quite the opposite to be
true. Lesbians who reported that they feel some sexual attraction toward men are more, not less, likely to believe that bisexuality exists and more willing to associate with bisexual women. They also perceive greater similarity between bisexual women and lesbians than lesbians who are not attracted to men at all. Also, lesbians who have identified themselves as bisexual in the past tend to be more, not less, tolerant of bisexuality, unless they identified themselves as bisexual only before they came out as lesbians.

Why would women who call themselves lesbian in spite of their own heterosexual feelings be more, rather than less, tolerant of bisexuality than lesbians who are exclusively attracted to women? To understand the role of heterosexual attraction in lesbians’ attitudes about bisexuality, we have to examine the actual differences between the attitudes of lesbians who had varying degrees of attraction to men. First, although lesbians who have some heterosexual feelings are as likely to be skeptical about the existence of bisexuality as lesbians who are exclusively attracted to women (40% versus 38%), they are twice as likely to be equivocal about their skepticism. Lesbians whose feelings are exclusively toward women are more certain in their belief that bisexuality does not exist.

The most likely explanation for this finding is that lesbians who have heterosexual feelings themselves are more sympathetic to the idea that attractions to women and attractions to men can coexist within a single person, an explanation I will call the “Bisexual Empathy” hypothesis. They experience both attractions themselves, they readily acknowledge that they feel both attractions and, although they choose to call themselves lesbians, they can believe therefore that people who choose to call themselves bisexual do, in fact, experience real attractions to both women and men. Lesbians who are exclusively attracted to women, on the other hand, have no reason to believe that other people could be truly attracted to both women and men. Heterosexual society and lesbian subcultural ideology teach that attractions to women and men are distinct, if not mutually exclusive, feelings, and nothing in the personal experience of lesbians who are exclusively attracted to women contradicts this cultural wisdom. One woman made exactly this point:

I find it hard to understand being attracted to both men and women since I am so totally attracted to women, I have an easier time understanding heterosexuality in the sense that it is a total attraction.

(Ginny)
Because Ginny is totally attracted to women, she can understand heterosexuality as a total attraction to men. But bisexuality is less comprehensible because her own experience as a lesbian who is exclusively attracted to women gives her no basis for identifying with bisexuals or understanding their bisexuality. It is not surprising, therefore, that lesbians who are exclusively attracted to women disbelieve other women who claim to be bisexual; nothing in their own experience gives them reason to believe otherwise.

Second, lesbians who are attracted exclusively to women and lesbians who are attracted to both women and men have different beliefs about the differences between lesbian and bisexual women. This is not because they have different images of bisexual women—in fact, their images of bisexual women are strikingly similar—rather, it is because they have different images of lesbians. In general, lesbians who are exclusively attracted to women have images of lesbians that differ sharply from their images of bisexual women, whereas lesbians who have heterosexual feelings have images of lesbians that resemble their images of bisexual women more closely.

For example, most lesbians, regardless of whether and to what degree they are attracted to men, agreed that “Society makes it difficult to be a lesbian, so some women claim to be bisexual when they are really lesbians who are afraid to admit it” (table 5.1). But lesbians who have heterosexual feelings were much more likely than lesbians who are exclusively attracted to women to agree that “some lesbians are really attracted to men, but they are afraid to express these feelings because other lesbians would not approve of them” (75% versus 56%). In other words, lesbians who have heterosexual feelings tend to believe that lesbians, like bisexual women, have heterosexual feelings and that, like bisexual women, they hesitate to express their true sexuality for fear of others’ reactions. Lesbians who are exclusively attracted to women see a greater difference between lesbians and bisexual women; they tend to believe that lesbian identity, unlike bisexual identity, is an expression of true sexuality (figure 5.3).

Probably, many of the lesbians who have heterosexual feelings agreed with the statement that “some lesbians are really attracted to men . . .” because their own personal experience told them it is true; they themselves have heterosexual feelings they are afraid to express. If not for this fear, these lesbian respondents might call themselves bisex-
ual. To the extent that this is the case, their interest lies not in defending a broad definition of lesbianism that would permit them to continue identifying as lesbians without hypocrisy—as I assumed in my original Identity Defense hypothesis—but in fostering acceptance of heterosexual feelings, or bisexuality, among lesbians so that they would no longer have to hide their heterosexual feelings.

Lesbians who have heterosexual feelings also perceive less difference between bisexuals' and lesbians' loyalties than lesbians who are exclusively attracted to women do (figure 5.4). When asked to agree or disagree with the statement “It can be dangerous for lesbians to trust bisexuals too much, because when the going really gets rough, they are not as likely to stick around and fight it out,” lesbians with heterosexual feelings were more likely to disagree, and less likely to agree strongly, than lesbians who are exclusively attracted to women were. Furthermore, among lesbians with heterosexual feelings, the strength of these feelings is correlated with their perceptions of bisexuals' trustworthiness; the stronger their heterosexual feelings, the more willing they are to trust bisexual women.

Finally, lesbians who have heterosexual feelings are much more willing than lesbians who are exclusively attracted to women to associate with bisexual women socially and politically, and the stronger a lesbians' heterosexual feelings are, the more willing she is to associate with bisexual women (figure 5.5). For example, among lesbians who feel no attraction toward men whatsoever, 84% prefer that their friends be lesbian, not bisexual. Among lesbians who reported that one-tenth of their feelings are heterosexual, 75% prefer to associate with other lesbians. Among lesbians whose feelings are two-tenths heterosexual, the percentage decreases to 67%, and among lesbians whose feelings are three-tenths or more heterosexual, just over half (58%) care whether their friends are lesbian or bisexual.

If lesbians who have heterosexual feelings are more tolerant of bisexual women, then what about lesbians who have had actual heterosexual relationships? One would expect that, if heterosexual feelings predispose a lesbian to empathize with bisexual women, having had a heterosexual relationship would have an even greater effect on her feelings toward bisexual women. But the results of this study show that this is not the case at all. There are no differences whatsoever in the attitudes toward bisexuality of lesbians who have and have not had heterosexual
relationships; they are equally likely to believe that bisexuality exists, equally likely to believe that bisexual women are really lesbians or in transition to lesbianism, equally likely to doubt bisexual women’s political and personal loyalties, and equally unwilling to associate with bisexual women socially and politically. Moreover, among those who have had heterosexual relationships, the seriousness of those relationships does not matter; lesbians who have been heterosexually married or involved in serious, committed heterosexual relationships have the same thoughts and feelings about bisexuality as lesbians who have only dated men.

Given that the experience of heterosexual feelings apparently has such an influence on lesbians’ thoughts and feelings about bisexuality, why would actual heterosexual relationships have no effect whatsoever? The explanation probably lies at least partially in the ubiquitousness of past heterosexual relationships among lesbians. As I reported in chapter 3, 91% of the lesbians who participated in this study have had heterosexual relationships. Because of their prevalence, lesbians have developed subcultural explanations for these relationships; for example, that they are a result of socialization, a response to social pressure, or a test of one’s lesbianism. Whether or not these explanations are true—they are probably true in some cases and not in others—they effectively discredit past heterosexual relationships as reflections of one’s true sexuality. Heterosexual relationships that are “explained away” in this fashion can no longer serve as the basis for empathy with bisexual women. For example, a lesbian who dated heterosexually as a teenager because of social pressure has little basis for empathy with someone who identifies herself as bisexual and dates men because she wants to.

Heterosexual feelings are much more difficult to explain away for several reasons. First of all, feelings, unlike behavior, emanate from one’s internal self; whereas it is relatively easy to distance oneself from one’s behavior, e.g., “I wasn’t myself when I did that,” it is much more difficult to distance oneself from one’s feelings; claiming that one’s feelings are not one’s own seems to border on psychosis. Second, the heterosexual relationships of the lesbians in this study occurred in the past. Only 5 lesbian respondents were involved in heterosexual relationships at the time of the study, and the average lesbian had not been heterosexually involved for 7.2 years. But the heterosexual feelings reported by women in this study were feelings they had at the time of the
study, not feelings they had had in the past. The passage of time creates a psychological distance; it is easier to distance one’s self from past experiences than from current experiences. Third, even though heterosexual feelings are common among lesbians according to the results of this study, lesbians are afraid to reveal their heterosexual feelings to other lesbians for fear of their reactions. Therefore, subcultural explanations have not been developed for heterosexual feelings as they have been developed for heterosexual relationships. The individual lesbian is left to her own devices to decide the implications of her heterosexual feelings and, apparently, many lesbians find in their heterosexual feelings a basis for empathy with bisexual women that they do not find in their heterosexual relationships.

What about the role of bisexual identity in lesbians’ lives? Many lesbians identified themselves as bisexual at some point in their lives. For some, this identity preceded their identity as lesbians and, in hindsight, appears to have been a stepping stone toward lesbian identity, i.e., a transitional identity. Others came out as lesbians and later temporarily adopted a bisexual identity. Some of these women switched back and forth between lesbian and bisexual identities numerous times. If having heterosexual feelings leads lesbians to empathize with bisexual women, then what effect does previously identifying oneself as bisexual have on lesbians’ thoughts and feelings about bisexual women? Does it also lead to empathy or is it dismissed as a historical occurrence without current implications, as past heterosexual relationships are dismissed?

Having a history of bisexual identification is not as closely associated with lesbians’ attitudes about bisexuality as heterosexual feelings are, but there are some connections. In general, lesbians who once identified themselves as bisexual see less difference between lesbians and bisexuals and are more tolerant of bisexuality than lesbians who never identified themselves as bisexual. Closer analysis reveals, however, that the role played by bisexual identity in a lesbian’s past is very important. Specifically, lesbians who identified themselves as bisexual since coming out as lesbians see less difference between lesbians and bisexuals and are more tolerant of bisexuality than those for whom bisexual identity played a transitional role.

For example, lesbians who identified themselves as bisexual in the past are more willing to trust bisexual women’s political loyalties than lesbians who never identified themselves as bisexual (figure 5.6). Thirty-
seven percent of lesbians who previously identified as bisexual, compared to 28% of lesbians who did not, disagreed with the assertion that it is “dangerous for lesbians to trust bisexual women too much.” But among those who previously identified as bisexual, those for whom bisexual identity was a transitional stage were just as likely as those who never identified as bisexual to agree that bisexual women should not be trusted. Only lesbians who interrupted their careers as lesbians with an interval of bisexual identification expressed an elevated degree of trust in bisexual women; nearly half of them (45%) disagreed with the idea that it is dangerous for lesbians to trust bisexual women too much, and an additional 14% remained neutral on the issue.

The same pattern is found with regard to lesbians’ beliefs that some lesbians have heterosexual feelings that they are afraid to reveal. Lesbians who previously identified themselves as bisexual are more likely to believe that some lesbians have heterosexual feelings than lesbians who never considered themselves bisexual are (table 5.2). But among lesbians who previously identified themselves as bisexual, those who identified themselves as bisexual since coming out as lesbians see the least difference between lesbians and bisexuals; in fact, as a group they believe that lesbians are as likely to have concealed heterosexual feelings as bisexuals are to be closeted lesbians (figure 5.7).

There is also a general tendency for lesbians with a history of bisexual identification to be more willing to associate with bisexual women socially and politically, but this tendency is only statistically significant in the areas of friendship and dating, and in one of the three political contexts (figure 5.8). Lesbians who never identified themselves as bisexual or who did so only during a transitional period are more likely to care whether their friends are lesbian or bisexual than lesbians who identified themselves as bisexual since coming out as lesbians (79% and 85% versus 59%) and, among those who care, more likely to be adamant about their desire to avoid having bisexuals as friends. Those for whom bisexual identity was transitional are particularly adamant, even more so than lesbians who never identified as bisexual; nearly half of them expressed their preference for having lesbian, not bisexual, friends in the strongest terms possible. All three groups of lesbians have strong preferences when it comes to dating. Even lesbians who identified themselves as bisexual since coming out as lesbians are extremely unwilling to date bisexual women: 90% prefer to date lesbians, and 65% have
very strong preferences in this area. But the desire to avoid dating bisexual women is even more prevalent and strong among lesbians who never identified as bisexual (95%, 82%) and lesbians for whom bisexual identity was transitional (98%, 76%). The only political situation in which lesbians’ identity histories are significantly related to their willingness to work with bisexual women is the situation in which respondents were asked whether they would prefer a lesbian or bisexual woman to speak to a community group about alternative lifestyles. Again, lesbians who identified themselves as bisexual since coming out as lesbians are less likely to care whether the speaker is lesbian or bisexual, and less likely to care strongly, than lesbians who never identified as bisexual or lesbians for whom bisexual identity was transitional.

Identifying oneself as bisexual apparently has an effect on lesbians’ attitudes toward bisexuality that is similar to the effect of having heterosexual feelings—like lesbians who have some heterosexual feelings, lesbians who previously identified themselves as bisexual perceive less difference between lesbians and bisexual women and are more tolerant of bisexuality than lesbians who did not. It seems that a history of bisexual identification leaves lesbians with an enduring empathy with bisexual women that enhances their sense of similarity to bisexual women and decreases their distrust of them. Lesbians who never identified themselves as bisexual, like lesbians who do not have any heterosexual feelings, lack this sense of similarity or connection to bisexual women and, therefore, perceive greater differences between bisexual women and themselves and have greater distrust of bisexual women. However, the usual moderating effect of a bisexual identity history is absent among lesbians who identified as bisexual only before they came out as lesbians. This is probably because, in hindsight, these women perceive their bisexual identities not as reflections of their true sexuality, but merely as a way of easing the transition to lesbian identity. Lesbian subcultural ideology encourages lesbians to dismiss bisexual identity as a transitional stage, as it encourages them to dismiss past heterosexual behavior as a response to social pressure. Dismissed, previous bisexual identity does not provide a basis for empathy or connection with bisexual women. In fact, it provides a basis for dismissing bisexual women themselves. Hence, the attitudes of lesbians for whom bisexual identity preceded lesbian identity resemble those of lesbians who never identified themselves as bisexual and, in some cases, are even more extreme.
Some readers might wonder whether the effects of heterosexual feelings and bisexual identity history might be one and the same effect. After all, lesbians who have heterosexual feelings are much more likely than lesbians who do not to have identified themselves as bisexual; 19% of lesbian respondents who are exclusively attracted to women, compared to 51% of those with heterosexual feelings, have at some time in their lives identified themselves as bisexual. Perhaps it is not a history of bisexual identification, but rather the heterosexual feelings that many lesbians who used to identify as bisexual still have, that produces their increased empathy and tolerance for bisexual women. Statistical analysis shows that this is not the case. But the effects of the two factors are not entirely independent of one another, either. The results suggest that each enhances the other. For example, among lesbians who are exclusively attracted to women, a history of bisexual identification has virtually no impact on their attitudes toward bisexual women, whereas among lesbians who have heterosexual feelings, the stronger these feelings are the greater the impact of bisexual identification is on their attitudes toward bisexual women. Conversely, among lesbians who never identified as bisexual, having heterosexual feelings is only slightly associated with increased tolerance for bisexual women, whereas among lesbians who identified as bisexual since coming out as lesbian, those with heterosexual feelings are substantially more tolerant of bisexual women than those who are exclusively attracted to women.

The explanation for the finding that each experience enhances the other might be that each experience is “necessary but not sufficient” to increase lesbians’ tolerance for bisexual women. For example, a lesbians’ heterosexual feelings might have no impact on her attitudes toward bisexual women unless, at some point in her life, she has interpreted these feelings as bisexual. Having had a bisexual identity indicates that she has interpreted these feelings as bisexual, and suggests that she still sees in them a basis for empathy with bisexual women even though she now calls herself lesbian. If she has heterosexual feelings but has never entertained the thought of herself as bisexual, then she probably does not make a connection between her own heterosexual feelings and the experience of being bisexual; she is a lesbian who happens to have some heterosexual feelings, not a bisexual. Conversely, having had a bisexual identity might have no impact on a lesbians’ attitudes toward bisexual women unless she currently feels some attraction to men. If she does not,
then she is either no longer bisexual or she never was, and again she sees little resemblance between herself and bisexual women.

**Summary**

Lesbians of different races, educational levels, and social classes appear to share the same range of attitudes toward bisexual women. There is no evidence to suggest that there are any substantial demographic differences in the ways in which lesbians define bisexuality, or in their beliefs about and feelings toward bisexual women. Instead, the findings suggest that a great variety of attitudes are found among lesbians of all races, educational levels, and social classes.

Lesbians who are politically active tend to be more vocal about their attitudes toward bisexuality and, sometimes, more extreme in their opinions. For example, lesbians whose political concerns focus on lesbian issues in particular rather than on general gay or women's issues are less willing to trust or associate with bisexual women. On the whole, however, politically active lesbians have attitudes that resemble the attitudes of nonactive lesbians. The findings of previous researchers that lesbian feminists are more antagonistic toward bisexual women than other lesbians appear to be the result of lesbian feminists' greater outspokenness and strength of conviction, not an indication that lesbian feminists have substantively different attitudes about bisexuality than other lesbians do.

The most important factor in lesbians' attitudes toward bisexuality is whether or not their own experiences give them a basis for understanding the sexual experiences of bisexual women. Lesbians who have heterosexual feelings themselves or who identified themselves as bisexual in the past are more empathic and tolerant toward bisexual women than lesbians who are either exclusively attracted to women or never identified themselves as bisexual. The former are more likely to believe that bisexuality exists and are more willing to associate socially and politically with bisexual women. They also have images of lesbians that closely resemble their images of bisexual women, and are more willing to trust bisexual women. The latter are more skeptical about bisexuality, prefer more strongly to confine their social and political interactions to
other lesbians, and believe that lesbians are very different from bisexual women.

The impact of previous bisexual identification on a lesbian’s attitudes toward bisexuals is lost, however, if it occurred before she came out as a lesbian. Women who identified themselves as bisexual before they came out as lesbian can look back on their own histories and perceive their period of bisexual identification as a transitional phase. As a transitional phase, it has no lasting implications for their own sexuality and provides no basis for empathy with bisexual women. In fact, it tends to make these lesbians even less willing to interact socially with bisexual women, whom they probably expect are going through a transitional phase as they themselves have done.

Unlike heterosexual feelings and a history of bisexual identification, having had actual heterosexual relationships does not lead lesbians to empathize with bisexual women. This is probably because heterosexual experience is ubiquitous among lesbians. Subcultural explanations have developed that eliminate the implications of heterosexual experience for lesbians’ own sexuality, thus neutralizing it as a basis for empathizing with bisexual women. In contrast, feelings of sexual attraction and a history of bisexual identification subsequent to coming out as a lesbian are difficult to explain away, leaving the lesbian who feels attracted to men or who has identified as bisexual with an enduring empathy for bisexual women.

The fact that lesbians’ experiences of their own sexuality are closely related to their attitudes toward bisexual women suggests that the controversy over bisexuality among lesbians is intimately related to controversies over what it means to be a lesbian. Particularly noteworthy is the finding that lesbians who are attracted to men or who have identified themselves as bisexual in the past differ from other lesbians not in their definitions of bisexuality and their images of bisexuals, but in their definitions of lesbianism and their images of lesbians. In other words, lesbianism, not bisexuality, is the real issue.