

Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Sexual Well-Being Summary of Results

Thank you for participating in the Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Sexual Well-Being Study. The objectives of the study were to (a) develop a more complete picture of the sexual functioning of sexual-minority (i.e., non-heterosexual) women, and (b) examine how some of the stresses unique to sexual-minority women – stresses associated with homophobia, heterosexism, and sexism – affect their sexual well-being. Participants completed measures of sexual functioning, minority stress (internalized heterosexism, experiences of sexual violence and prejudice-based events) and resilience (feminist identity and relationship satisfaction).

Participant characteristics

The participants were 586 women who lived in Canada or the United States and had been in a same-sex relationship for at least 12 months. They ranged in age from 18 to 72, with an average age of 35. The group was well educated in that 70% had an undergraduate or graduate degree. The majority of the participants (79%) were married, in a common-law relationship, or living with their partner. Relationship duration ranged from 1 to 36 years, with an average relationship length of 5 years. In terms of sexual identity, 69% identified as lesbian, 11% as bisexual, and 15% as queer. With respect to sexual attraction, 49% of the participants indicated that they were attracted to women only, 46% indicated they were more attracted to women than to men, and 5% reported being equally attracted to women and men.

What were their experiences of minority stress and resilience?

In terms of sexual victimization, 21% had experienced sexual abuse involving attempted and/or completed sexual intercourse before the age of 14; 36% had experienced sexual victimization in adulthood (i.e., since age 14). With respect to prejudice events, 18% reported having experienced at least one prejudice event related to their sexual identity. In general, the participants reported low internalized heterosexism (meaning that they had positive feelings about their sexual identity), high feminist identity, and high relationship satisfaction.

How did they describe their sexual functioning? Beyond “lesbian bed death.”

The participants were asked about a number of aspects of their sexual functioning. In general, they indicated high sexual satisfaction, high sexual esteem, low anxiety during sexual interactions, a low frequency of negative thoughts and images during sexual activity, and a moderate desire for sexual interactions with their partner.

The participants reported engaging in some form of (non-genital) affectionate behaviour more than once a day and some form of sexual behaviour including genital contact between one and three times a week. Interestingly, the participants did not experience the marked decline in sexual frequency over the course of the relationship that has been described in earlier research. Our results suggest that “bed death” (the idea that lesbians have sex less frequently than other couple types and that sexual frequency declines especially rapidly in lesbian relationships) does not characterize women's same-sex relationships more than it does any other relationship type

Minority stress and sexual well-being

When we tested the minority stress hypothesis, the relational context emerged as the most significant predictor of sexual-minority women's sexual well-being. There was little evidence to suggest that a history of sexual victimization or having experienced a prejudice event had a negative effect on sexual functioning. Although internalized heterosexism was not associated

with overall sexual functioning, it was related to some aspects of sexual well-being. The results did not support our hypotheses that internalized heterosexism would exacerbate the effects of sexual victimization and prejudice events on sexual well-being or that feminism and relationship satisfaction (our hypothesized resilience factors) would mitigate their effects.

As indicated above, the women evaluated their relationships very positively. Further, relationship satisfaction was related to the women's overall sexual well-being and uniquely predicted each aspect of their sexual functioning. This was the case despite the fact that many of the women in the current study had experienced prejudice events and sexual victimization. These results speak to the salience of the relational context to the sexual well-being of sexual-minority women, even in the context of a history of very stressful events.

What do the results tell us?

Despite high rates of sexual victimization and prejudice events, as a group, the women who participated in this study described very good sexual functioning across a range of dimensions. This suggests that the discrimination and prejudice that sexual-minority women experience in their day-to-day lives does not translate into poor sexual functioning, providing an optimistic view of lesbian and bisexual women's sexual well-being. Given that we corrected for many of the theoretical and methodological issues inherent in earlier studies, these results allow us to state with greater confidence that most sexual-minority women enjoy pleasurable and satisfying sexual relationships.

Thank you

We appreciate the time you spent completing this survey. The information you provided has helped us better understand the sexual functioning of lesbian and bisexual women and conceptualize the effects of minority stress on sexual-minority women's sexual well-being. We are currently writing up the results for publication.

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