Background

- There is a long supported link between loneliness and poor mental health.
- Research on sexuality and loneliness has tended to under-represent midlife lesbian women and privilege gay men (Chaney & Burns-Wortham, 2015).
- Studies that have included lesbian women have concentrated on those in adolescence or older age, despite loneliness being prevalent across the lifespan (Wilkens, 2015).
- Existing research indicates that the changing circumstances characteristic of midlife effect the way in which one experiences challenges such as loneliness (Rokach, 2000).
- With lesbian women utilising mental health services more frequently than heterosexual women, the intersection between loneliness, sexuality and lifespan is an important area of focus for counselling psychology.

Research Question

“What meanings do midlife lesbian women construe from their experience of loneliness?”

Aims

- inform practitioners of ways in which discrimination and evolving perceptions of lesbian identity have affected the self-concepts of midlife lesbians and shaped their experiences of loneliness (Whitman, 2009).
- Provide a foundation from which to advance and evaluate interventions aimed at reducing the distress associated with loneliness.
- Assist clients in developing a meaningful understanding of the presence of loneliness.
- Help practitioners understand and normalize the unique developmental milestones of midlife lesbian women.

Method

Participants: seven women between the ages of 40-55, who identified as lesbian and had experienced loneliness during this time.

Data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Larkin & Flowers, 2009), an idiographic approach which utilises semi-structured interviews.

Results

Superordinate and subordinate themes

The lesbian self as a target of rejection

Rejection of the lesbian self by others

Rejection of others to protect the lesbian self

Rejection of the lesbian self

The effort of forming a lesbian identity

Challenges to self-concept

Seeking validation in others

The struggle for authenticity

Belonging to a different sexual world

The lesbian self as different

The alienation of being misunderstood

Longing to belong in a heteronormative world

Conclusions & Application to Counselling Psychology

- Previous experiences of homophobic attitudes can lead to expectations of residual discriminatory attitudes and in turn social withdrawal and avoidance. Socio-historical training/knowledge is therefore paramount for CoPs if clients’ anticipation of homophobia & heterosexism is to be countered rather than reinforced in therapy.
- Longings to find an intimate partner are often exacerbated by limited opportunities to connect with other single midlife lesbians, highlighting the need for more social provision for this demographic.
- Failure to meet heteronormative developmental milestones alienates midlife lesbians and calls for developmental models specific to sexual minority women.
- Pathologising loneliness results in midlife lesbians feeling doubly stigmatised. Rethinking the current discourse around the phenomenon would help to reconceptualise it as a shared struggle rather than a source of further alienation.

References


Further Information

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