

Leisure in the Lives of Old Lesbians: Experiences with and Responses to Discrimination

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Contemporary leisure theorists have emphasized ways that leisure can enhance or reaffirm one's sense of self, but they have not effectively acknowledged that leisure can be a context for negative messages about self. The ways that stigma and discrimination influence the leisure of one disempowered group, old lesbians, is the focus of this study. Sixteen lesbians over the age of 60 wrote responses discussing aspects of their leisure; eight of these women provided additional insights during a series of in-depth interviews. Their awareness of discrimination and their responses to it, with particular focus upon responses within their leisure, are discussed in this paper. Use of an ecological perspective provided a framework for understanding the sources of stigma and discrimination. These women's stories suggested that discrimination was most evident at the macrosystem level but most painful at the exo- and mesosystem levels. The mesosystem and microsystem provided active, viable resources through which these women were able to resist discrimination and establish a supportive community. Leisure played a significant role in this resistance.

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Introduction

In recent years, leisure researchers have given much attention to positive aspects of leisure and the benefits that people might experience through their leisure (cf. Driver, Brown, & Peterson, 1991). One popular view is that leisure is a context for self expression or self validation. Samdahl (1986) suggested, "Leisure has the potential for the holistic experiencing of one's self in ways not always possible within other contexts" (p. 149). The rationale for the continued study of leisure, according to Samdahl, "may lie in this dimension of self-expression" (1988, p. 38).

Theorists exploring the relationship between leisure and self have focused primarily on the ways that leisure can enhance and strengthen one's sense of self. Early discussions proposed this relationship (cf. Martin, 1975; Wilson, 1981) and recent empirical research has supported that view with

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evidence of an association between leisure and self-determination, self-affirmation, or self-efficacy (cf. Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993; Kelly, 1983; Searle, Mahon, Iso-Ahola, Sdrolas, & van Dyck, 1995; Shamir, 1992).

A few leisure theorists, however, have suggested that leisure might have a negative side as well. Curtis (1979) proposed the term "purple recreation" to refer to recreational activities that challenge societal norms and expectations. Robertson (1993) and Sato (1988) reported that people who participate in negatively sanctioned activities achieve the same positive feelings and benefits, including self validation, typically associated with more acceptable recreation activities.

As the above studies attest, leisure researchers have looked for and found evidence that participation in leisure can produce positive benefits such as enhanced self esteem or a stronger sense of self. These benefits apparently occur whether people engage in socially approved activities or negatively sanctioned activities. However, our *a priori* belief in the goodness of leisure has prevented us from exploring the opposite side of this relationship. If leisure is indeed a context in which the self becomes exposed (cf. Samdahl, 1988), are there times when leisure can be detrimental by having a negative impact on self-esteem or self image?

The possibility that leisure might be a context for negative messages about one's self has not been adequately explored. This possibility becomes particularly germane for individuals who are subject to stigma and negative sanctions in other domains of their lives. Becker and Arnold (1986) suggested that any person or group may experience stigma based on an ascribed attribute that society views as important (such as age, gender or ethnicity). Individuals who do not have the "correct" attributes may be, or perceive themselves to be, stigmatized and the target of negative social sanctions. Discriminatory practices and oppressive ideologies typically result in reduced opportunities (Becker & Arnold, 1986) and restricted or blocked access to resources, activities and other opportunities (Germain, 1992). If these reactions occur in other parts of the lives of people who are "different," it is feasible to assume that they will occur in leisure as well. Thus, there appears to be a strong possibility that leisure might serve as a context that reinforces stigma or has a detrimental impact on some people's sense of self.

Goffman (1963) suggested that there are three sources for stigma: physical deformities, blemishes of individual character, and demographic characteristics such as race, nationality, or religion. A person who is stigmatized in this manner "by definition . . . is not quite human" (Goffman, 1963, p. 5). The sanctions taken against stigmatized individuals can range from deprecating humor, put-downs and acts of avoidance to harassment, intimidation, attack and murder (Allport, 1954; Lott, 1995).

Although dated, Goffman's (1963) and Allport's (1954) discussions of discriminatory behavior and the impact of stigma on one's identity are still useful today in understanding the lives of people who are members of disempowered populations. One such group, old lesbians, is often considered

to be a "social embarrassment to the wider community" (Kehoe, 1986, p. 139) because of their age, gender and sexual orientation. In this manuscript, the term "old" is used intentionally in congruence with the wishes of a national organization of old lesbians. Their objection to the more common term "older" is that it implies a normative comparison to young or middle aged adults, establishing old people as different rather than merely describing their age.

Old lesbians have survived in an environment where the dominant ideologies give power to people who are young, white, male (Bodily, 1991; Healey, 1994; Palmore, 1990) and heterosexual (Rich, 1980). Women in this cohort of lesbians have spent much of their lives being invisible, often due to fear of losing their jobs, families, friends, and freedom if their sexual identity was revealed (Dunker, 1987). The cohort of old lesbians alive today survived some very difficult times, growing up in the depression and living through the "queer-baiting" of the McCarthy era. They learned to cope with non-supportive peers and within a generally homophobic environment (Kehoe, 1988). To survive, they had to manage the stigma attached to the images of 'pervert' and 'sexual deviant' prevalent in a heterosexist culture. Dunker (1987, p. 75) explained, "The persecution of homosexuals frightened many into keeping their private lives private." Healey (1994, p. 111-112) suggested, "The real miracle is that most lesbians found the strength, bravery, and the courage not just to survive but to grow and love as well." However, not all lesbians emerged from this battle unscathed and full of courage. Many survived by retreating within themselves and away from others, often creating lives characterized by segmentation (Friend, 1990).

There is a dearth of information about the lives of old lesbian women. Traditional gerontologists, feminist researchers, and lesbian theorists have overlooked or neglected consideration of this population. Yet by the very nature of their differences, old lesbians may provide a rich source of understanding about the potential for leisure to reinforce stigma. It is important to study disempowered groups such as old lesbians to examine, and perhaps challenge, our *a priori* beliefs about the goodness of leisure. The purpose of this study was to understand whether stigma and discrimination influenced the leisure of old lesbians.

Importance of the Social Context

Ingham (1987) argued that traditional theories of leisure rely too heavily upon social psychological theory to the exclusion of the social context. Dominant approaches that are individualistic and behavioral in nature have constrained the study of leisure (Ingham, 1987). Theorists such as Kaplan (1974), Kelly (1989), and Stockdale (1989) proposed more expansive ways of conceptualizing leisure. Kaplan (1974) emphasized the need to understand and study leisure as embedded within human experience. Kelly (1989) and Stockdale (1989) also argued that leisure cannot be studied apart from

other dimensions of human life. If leisure indeed is a reflection of one's life and the communal contexts in which one exists (Kelly, 1989), then we must base our understanding of leisure in broader social processes.

In spite of the more inclusive approaches proposed by Kaplan (1974), Kelly (1989), and Stockdale (1989), contemporary leisure researchers have typically studied leisure in isolation from other life events. Ingham (1987) argued that this perspective is at best limited. For people who have experienced discrimination and stigmatization and who have spent a considerable amount of time negotiating a relationship with their environment, it may be even more critical to embed our understanding of leisure within the broader social contexts of their lives.

Much of our contemporary leisure theory is built upon social psychology; however, it may be helpful to look elsewhere for a framework that better incorporates the social environment into our understanding of leisure behavior. One framework that incorporates the social context is an ecological perspective. This framework has been used by other disciplines to study populations that have been marginalized and devalued. The ecological perspective is an important theoretical foundation for this study because it helps link peoples' experience to aspects of their social environment.

Ecological Perspective

An ecological perspective requires that people and their environment be studied as a whole (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Germain, 1992). The social environment can be viewed as a series of systems (microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems) nested within one another, suggesting that the social environment extends outward and encompasses sequentially larger social systems and cultural traditions. In one way or another, people must accommodate their social environments and find a place for themselves in their social world. A basic concept of this perspective is that of a "balanced fit," suggesting that humans strive to maintain a balance between themselves and their social environment (Germain, 1994). Changes within people or their environment can create an imbalance that affects people's ability to fulfill their needs. Balance can be restored through "biological, social, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and cultural adaptations" (Germain, 1994, p. 43) to either the person, the environment, or both the person and their environment.

The ecological perspective calls attention to the interactions between people and their environment, providing insight into how individuals and their environment shape the development of each other. Garbarino (1986, p. 24) stated, "[The ecological perspective] emphasizes development in context. It constantly reminds us that human development results from interplay of biology and society." Garbarino suggested that this interplay generates both opportunities and risks for individual development. Opportunities are those "relationships in which [individuals] find material, emotional, and social encouragement compatible with their needs and capacities as they exist

at a specific point in their developing lives" and risks "come from both direct threats and from the absence of normal, expectable opportunities" (1986, p. 24). Opportunities and risks, according to Garbarino, are present at the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem levels of the environment.

Acknowledging the inextricable relationship between people and their environment is particularly important for understanding the leisure of disempowered populations. Life in a society where the dominant ideologies empower people who are young, male, and heterosexual certainly has affected the opportunities and risks that old lesbians experience on a daily basis. The growing body of research on women's leisure has pointed out the ways that patriarchal systems restrict and limit women's access to leisure. For lesbians, this is exacerbated by risks arising from a number of sources including the necessity for constant monitoring of public reaction, threats to human and civil rights, and fear of losing jobs, friends, family, or housing.

In addition to being at risk, communities of vulnerable people are apt to have invisible infrastructures that provide a safe communal refuge to members (Germain, 1992). Wearing (1990, 1991) and Wearing and Wearing (1988) have suggested that women find ways to resist dominant ideologies that are oppressive to them, and that leisure is a practical realm for such resistance to occur.

Little is known about marginalized or stigmatized groups and the ways they respond to stigma and discrimination. However, use of an ecological perspective might provide additional insights into the systematic ways that leisure serves to reinforce dominant ideologies as well as how it might become a context for responding to abuses of power.

An ecological framework guided the design of this study. The analyses presented below emphasize the interactions between people and their social environment, and this relationship will remain salient throughout the discussion.

Methods

Ingham (1987) suggested that we need to use alternative methods in addition to alternative theoretical frameworks as we break away from limitations in our traditional understandings of people's lives and their leisure. This is particularly true for studying old lesbians. Traditional approaches to research on old lesbians have been fairly unsuccessful, in part because the researchers have not been effective in gaining the cooperation and support of old lesbians. Copper (1988) reported, "There is a basic contradiction between the interests of old women and . . . gerontologists who earn their livings working for agencies that study or serve the old" (p. 95). Healey (1994, p.115) pointed out that many researchers structure their interactions as "experts rather than equals, they diminish rather than empower." Traditional approaches to research have left old lesbians feeling disrespected. A national organization for old lesbians encouraged their members to refuse

participation in research that used them merely as subject matter, claiming "Nothing about us without us" (a phrase that Old Lesbians Organizing for Change borrowed from an unidentified source within the disability rights movement).

In response to these concerns, this study was conducted in the spirit of *participatory inquiry*. Participatory inquiry provides an alternative way of viewing the research process, starting from the premise that the researcher and the research participants are equal partners and each makes an important contribution to the research. The information contributed by the participants is viewed as an affirmation of their knowledge and experience. Participatory inquiry requires a recognition and understanding that the knowledge belongs to the participants and their reality is being discussed (Reason, 1994a, 1994b).

In this study, the researcher worked in collaboration with an advisory panel of three lesbians who were all over the age of 60. Although they were not participants in the study, these women helped conceptualize the research issues, assisted in the design of the study, gave insight into the interpretation of the data, and provided feedback about the emergent themes and associated discussion. They also assisted with the dissemination of study results. In addition to the advisory panel, each participant had a measure of control over topics discussed in the interviews. Participants also gave input into the profile drawn from their interviews and had an opportunity to read and react to the study results.

Data were collected in two phases. Phase One entailed a mail-back questionnaire with ten broad questions to which respondents were to respond. These questions were written to elicit identification and discussion of issues pertinent to the leisure of old lesbians. Seventy copies of the questionnaire were distributed to regional lesbian organizations and networks; no records were maintained about how many of these questionnaires were actually distributed to individuals. In addition, six copies of the questionnaire were mailed directly to individuals who expressed interest in the study. Sixteen lesbians, all over the age of 60, returned questionnaires through the mail.

Data collected during Phase One were analyzed with three goals in mind. First, the women's answers were used to identify additional aspects of leisure that had not already been included in the research questions. Second, their comments helped the researcher identify potential personal biases and take steps to reduce their effect. Finally, data from Phase One were used to develop standards of diversity by which the volunteers for Phase Two were selected.

Although the volunteers in Phase One remained anonymous, they had the option of revealing a name (true or pseudonym) and phone number or address if they wished to volunteer for Phase Two. The second phase of the study involved a series of interviews exploring each woman's answers to the questionnaire items and related aspects of her leisure. In order to obtain the most diverse sample for Phase Two, a strategy called maximum variety sampling was used. This form of sampling produces a heterogeneous sample

from which to observe possible "commonalties in their experiences" (Morse, 1994, p. 229) and is recommended when studying concepts that are considered to be abstract. Patton (1990) argued that this form of sampling provides quality information about both unique and shared experiences.

To establish this maximum variety sample, data from all participants in Phase One were analyzed to establish parameters of diversity. A subset of women was then selected to best represent the breadth of topics and experiences reported in Phase One. Actual inclusion in Phase Two, however, was limited to women in that subset who had indicated a willingness to be interviewed. Of the 16 women in Phase One, five did not volunteer to be interviewed. Of the remaining 11 women, eight were chosen because they best represented the diversity of responses. All of the women selected for Phase Two agreed to continue with the study.

Phase Two consisted of two in-depth interviews plus additional informal discussions with each participant. The first in-depth interviews were conducted during July 1995 and ranged in length from 45 minutes to three hours. Four of the eight initial interviews were conducted in the homes of these women. The remaining four interviews were conducted over the phone either at the woman's request or because that woman lived too far away. All interviews were tape recorded with consent of the participant, and later transcribed for analysis.

The second round of interviews was conducted during the last two weeks of October and the first three weeks of November. Only seven of the eight women were available for this second interview; the eighth woman had become homeless and could not be located. The second interviews ranged in length from one hour to three and a half hours. One interview was conducted in the home of the researcher, one interview occurred in the home of a participant, and another interview began over lunch at a restaurant and was later completed in that woman's home. Telephone interviews were conducted with the same four women whose initial interview had been on the phone. As with the initial interviews, all follow-up interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.

The researcher used a semi-structured approach during both interviews to allow for a natural sharing of information. The interviews addressed many aspects of these women's lives and leisure. Questions were asked to gain insight into the historic, social, physical, psychological, and cultural aspects of their current leisure. The first interviews often drew upon information that had been shared in the mail-back questionnaires. The follow-up interviews were used to clarify or confirm points from the first interview, to ask about related issues that emerged in the interviews with other participants, and to provide each woman with an opportunity to discuss other issues that she felt were relevant for understanding her leisure.

The interviews were transcribed by the researcher and analyzed using Hycner's (1985) guidelines for phenomenological analysis. Initially, the interviews from each woman were studied individually in order to understand important factors in her story; then, the profiles of the eight women were

analyzed together to seek commonalities and/or unique experiences. In this way, the broader understandings were based upon a solid understanding of each participant in the study.

Phenomenological analysis involves a number of steps beginning with identification of preconceived ideas or suppositions that were held about each individual and the themes or ideas that the researcher expected to emerge from the analysis. Identification of these issues helped reduce their influence in subsequent data analyses. The transcripts were then coded to divide them into segments of text that "express a unique and coherent meaning clearly differentiated from that which precedes and follows" (Hycner, 1985, p. 282). These segments were reviewed to determine if they provided insight into the research questions; sections of text unrelated to the research questions were dropped from analysis. Relevant segments were organized into clusters that shared a common focus, and from this an individual profile was created for each woman.

The researcher then looked for similar patterns between the profiles of these women, identifying general themes that were common to all or most participants and unique themes that applied to only one or a few participants. It is important to note that the presence of a general theme does not signify an absence of variation. Instead, the variation itself "may indicate the significance of the theme" (Hycner, 1985, p. 293).

A series of steps was taken to help establish the trustworthiness of the findings in this study. The credibility or "truth value" of the findings was enhanced through the use of triangulation between the questionnaires, interviews, and field notes; member checks with each woman; and peer examination by other old lesbians. In addition, emerging understandings were shared with the participants and with the advisory panel, and their reactions were used to modify interpretation of the data. In general, member checks and peer examination confirmed the analyses or added depth to the understandings that had been reached by the researchers.

The transferability of the findings (i.e., the degree to which the findings from this sample are applicable to others; see Merriam, 1988) was addressed by recording sufficient rich, thick data to allow others to make decisions about the relevance of these findings to other individuals (see Jacobson, 1996). Dependability, or the notion that a similar investigation conducted with similar participants and similar processes would result in similar findings, was addressed by maintaining a methodological appendix that documented the research processes (see Jacobson, 1996). Member checks with each of the women, peer examination with members of the advisory panel, and debriefing sessions between the authors were used to enhance the confirmability of these findings.

Participants

Each woman in this study was over the age of 60 and willing to self identify as a lesbian. The eight women who were interviewed in Phase Two

reported diverse life experiences. The median age of these women was 70 years with a range from 60 to 78 years (see Table 1). Three of the women were currently working at or had retired from careers in health related professions and one other woman was training for a career in health. Of these remaining four participants, two women had been educators, one woman was an artist, and one was an office worker. Four of these women had earned doctoral degrees. Of the others, one was completing her Master's degree, one had obtained her Baccalaureate degree, and two had completed high school.

Four of the eight women had previously been married to a man; three of these women had had children. At the time of the initial interview, five of the eight women were involved in lesbian relationships; four of these five were co-habiting with their partners (see Table 1). These women had been with their current partner a median of 20 years, ranging from three to 36 years. The three women who were not in a lesbian relationship at the time of the initial interview had been in previous long-term relationships with women. Between the time of the first and second interviews, one of these women began to date a man. It is important to note that this particular woman identified herself as a lesbian at the onset of this study and chose not to label herself as heterosexual or bisexual after initiating a new relationship with a man.

Each of these women had disclosed her lesbian orientation to at least one other lesbian, but only two of the women had disclosed to a family member. Some of these women felt that other people suspected they were lesbian, but those suspicions had been neither confirmed nor denied in open discussion. Most often they suspected that people knew they were lesbians because of their open relationships with a woman partner.

The women in this study have had very diverse life experiences but they do not represent the lives of all old lesbians. All of these women were Cau-

TABLE 1
Demographic Information on Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Single / Partnered	Work Status	Was Ever Married to a Man	Has Children
Ciel	65	single	unemployed	yes	yes
Marti	67	partner	self-employed	no	no
Anna	77	single	retired	yes	yes
Barb	60	partner	employed	yes	yes
Simone	70	single	retired	no	no
Pansy	78	partner	retired	no	no
Diana	65	partner	employed	no	no
Rebecca	71	partner	retired	yes	no

Note: Pseudonyms were used to protect each woman's identity.

casian; visibly absent from this study are women of varying ethnic and racial backgrounds. Most of these women were highly educated and have held professional jobs. Only one woman was living below the poverty level and relying entirely upon social security benefits; the others had pensions or supplemental income. Some of these women have been open about their lesbian identity but others have worked very hard to construct a public image as heterosexual; however, the lives of women who are deeply closeted are not represented here. Yet the rich and varied stories these women relayed exposed many similar life experiences and give insight into the influence of stigma and discrimination on leisure.

Results

For the purpose of this paper, we have extracted those issues that helped us understand how the experience of discrimination or stigma influenced these women's leisure. It is not the purpose of this paper to identify the reason(s) these women were, or perceived themselves to be, the targets of discriminatory behavior. Rather, it is our intent to illustrate the various ways these women experienced discrimination and how they responded to those experiences. Pseudonyms have been used in the discussion below and basic information has been altered to protect the identity of these women.

Experiencing stigma and discrimination. The women in this study had four things in common: age, gender, race, and sexual orientation. In general, they were aware of how they were stigmatized in society and could easily identify examples of discrimination. For most of these women, daily life provided ongoing reminders that they did not fit in or that there was something "wrong" with them. Simone said she felt "out of step with a world that was functioning very nicely." Pansy felt that she had lived most of her life "on the fringe." Anna referred to herself as being "like a round peg in a square hole." Experiences of stigma and discrimination were common and salient in these women's discussions.

At times this sense of not fitting in was perceived as due to being old, female, or lesbian. Respondents identified one or a combination of these factors as the source of discrimination. In addition, other characteristics magnified this sense of isolation. Marti said she felt different because of regional politics and religion. She explained, "As an outspoken Liberal Democrat in right wing country where you spell Christian with a capital K, part of me is being disapproved of." For Rebecca, being extremely overweight heightened her awareness of not fitting in. She said, "It is obvious that the world was not made for people like us." Factors of age, gender and sexual orientation, combined with other attributes such as politics, religion, and weight, served as on-going reminders to these women that they were essentially foreigners in their own country.

Awareness of negative sanctions had influenced these women in a variety of ways across their life course. In their younger years, especially during the period 1940 to 1960, strict regulations about behavior and dress had an

impact on what these women could wear or do during their leisure. Simone described decisions associated with dressing to go out to a bar, explaining, "You know, women could wear women's slacks. You know what they call slacks, with a side zipper, but if she wore a front zipper the police would bust her, or at least give her a hard time." Other women spoke about the negative social sanctions they faced when they went into restaurants without a male escort. Rebecca explained, "It wasn't common to see either women alone or together in major restaurants. . . . You could go with women into restaurants and have the waiters not too eager to serve you, this kind of thing."

Even today, these women continue to confront negative social sanctioning. Sometimes this discrimination was subtle, such as being provided with curt or short service which they attributed, at different times, to the fact that they were female, lesbian or old. Other times, though, the discrimination was much more blatant and offensive. Barb related one experience that occurred while on vacation with her partner. Barb's car had visible signs of her sexual identity (i.e. bumper stickers, a rainbow flag). While driving down a highway, a truck pulled up beside her and the male driver made "obscene gestures with his hands and it absolutely shocked me. . . and he just hung there and he kept blowing his horn and making these gestures and remarks." As a result of the fear Barb and her partner felt from this situation, Barb removed all stickers from her vehicle and installed a cellular phone.

The tendency for neighbors and other people in the community to distance themselves from these women was a more subtle form of discrimination, and these women felt excluded from social events to which others were invited. Pansy reported how her neighbors would socialize with her in passing but never invited her and her partner over to share a backyard barbecue. She said: "They are not accepting and they don't reach out, and I have. . . . Never does one get invited to their homes when one is having one of those great big beautiful barbecues for friends or family and here we are sitting here."

Other women experienced varying degrees and types of distancing from their family members. For Ciel, the distancing was both physical as well as emotional. She was completely estranged from her brothers and sisters, and her son had disowned her. In speaking of her relationship with her son Ciel said, "We never talked about this [the fact that I'm lesbian] because he can't talk about it with me. So I have never known why. But I know that he loves me and that this hurts him." While Rebecca had regular contact with her siblings, her sister's discomfort with the topic of homosexuality contributed to an emotional distancing between them.

This awareness of societal devaluation was magnified for these women as they aged. Anna said, "As you get wrinkles society tends to devalue old women. . . . It doesn't make you less, but the world perceives you as less as you get older." Marti suggested that, as women age, society no longer sees them or the way they dress and behave. "[Society] forgives us a lot when we are old. Old women are allowed to be eccentric. We can dress in strange ways. We are asexual as far as the world sees us."

Even within the lesbian community, which had been a safe haven, these women often confronted discrimination associated with age. From their perspective, the majority of lesbian programs, facilities, and groups have been designed and marketed to meet the needs of younger women in the lesbian community, and little attention has been paid to the needs of older lesbian women. Diana said, "When I see the [lesbian] newsletters, whether it's the Lambda newsletter or the local Stonewall newsletter, you seldom see anything about older women. The lesbian community doesn't believe we even exist. . . . The issues that are discussed focus upon diseases that are specific to younger people." Facing this invisibility within the lesbian community was particularly painful because it came from a source where they expected to find acceptance.

Attempts to interact socially with young lesbians reinforced their perceptions of ageism in the lesbian community. Ciel spoke about one incident at a lesbian bar with friends. "I was shocked and hurt when one of them [a young lesbian] who considers herself quite liberated didn't want to dance with me at a local lesbian bar, but she did dance with others." Ciel attributed this rejection to the fact that she was older than most of the other women at the bar.

While opportunities were readily available to socialize and interact with heterosexual peers or young lesbians, the absence of other old lesbians often made these women feel isolated. This feeling of isolation was enhanced for Rebecca when she moved to a new community where she did not have connections with other old lesbians. "I fretted a little bit about that. I didn't feel comfortable and I did feel isolated, more than lonely." Rebecca lived with this feeling of isolation for several years until she was able to form connections and create a circle of friends with other old lesbians.

Responses to discrimination. During their youth and working years, the risks associated with being identified as a lesbian caused many of these women to create a public image of being heterosexual that was segmented from their private lives as lesbians. Talking about maintaining this segmented image during her adolescence, Simone said, "I think I went out with guys in high school mostly to keep my mother's mouth shut because she would have been extremely critical." Even today many of these women have separate social support systems defined by who is aware of their sexual identity and who is not. Rebecca explained, "I have two circles of friends that are separate and distinct: my heterosexual friends, family members, and groups; and my lesbian friends and social groups."

The implicit threat of negative social sanctions caused many of these women to hide their lesbian relationships when they were in public. Rebecca explained, "There were times, such as professional dinners, that at the time I thought that I needed a male escort. There was no way I was going to take my lover to these meetings as an escort." For Marti, the implicit threat of negative social sanctions had broader implications than the immediate social context. She explained, "Throughout the time I was working full time, I was responsible to other people for what my reputation might do to the repu-

tation of their hospital or their treatment center or whatever. I didn't feel free to be who I was."

Each woman had made her own choices about how visible or invisible to make her sexual identity. Simone had chosen to stay in the closet for most of her life. For her, this decision meant sacrificing her happiness, ("I am a survivor but I have not enjoyed my life") and contributed to her low self esteem ("I do not feel good about myself"). Even those women who disclosed their sexual identity to others felt the need to maintain a certain level of secrecy. Marti said, "If I were completely open I might come home to find my animals throttled or my house burned down."

Another response to discrimination came through intentional isolation from the outside world. To some extent, hiding their lesbian identities created a private life that was concealed from public view; there was a safety in this which allowed the women to relax without fear of censure. Diana and Anna isolated themselves from others because of differences in religious and political beliefs. Simone avoids anyone who she feels will disapprove of her. "[You] don't hang around people who criticize you." Other responses were more overt, such as creating social networks that included mostly other old lesbians. Pansy was just one of the women who preferred to spend time with old lesbians. She explained, "The young lesbians are attractive and fun and hang around and hero worship and stuff, but that's a bore and a drag."

Each woman in this study demonstrated different degrees of comfort with her identity as an old lesbian. Some women, such as Marti and Rebecca, were comfortable with themselves and, with age, became increasingly willing to self-disclose their sexual identity to others. Marti said, "As I age I find myself being outter and outter." Simone, on the other hand, had self identified as a lesbian but was not willing to disclose to her heterosexual friends or family, nor was she comfortable in her role as an old woman. She said, "I have not learned to be gracious about my identity as an old woman. I still see myself as the one who holds open the door rather than the one who gets the door held open for them." It was clear, though, that gender, age and sexual orientation were important components in how each woman viewed herself, and each struggled (with varying degrees of success) with the social stigma attached to being an old lesbian.

Responses within leisure. As noted, these women often lived segmented lives, putting forward a public image that disowned their private identities as lesbian. Much of the time, this public image was called forth while at work or in visibly public social contexts. This segmentation made their private leisure all that much more meaningful. In fact, although they lamented the ways in which they felt invisible or ignored in mainstream society, they also nurtured that isolation because of the sense of security it provided them.

Unable to find public spaces that were safe and free from harassment, these women created private spaces for social interaction. They did not frequent public recreation locations; most of their leisure occurred around their homes or in other "safe" environments. This was even true in their younger years, where dances and parties were central to their lives. Rather

than going out publicly, Rebecca said, "We went to one another's homes for dinner and had parties with a dozen people." These women had actively created spaces and communities involving other lesbians; within these contexts they found companionship and acceptance.

The spaces that these women created were not always understandable or visible. Ciel's space was the metaphysical universe through which she was able to communicate telepathically with people who were no longer physically present including her father and others who had died, as well as entities she had not met in this physical world. Ciel, who defined leisure as a dance, stated that, "Even though physically you may be alone in your dance, then metaphysically you are not alone." The metaphysical nature of this response was fueled, in part, by the necessity to create a place safe from negative social sanctioning.

One important way these women controlled the spaces they created was through the exclusion of men. For many women, the presence of men in leisure settings was viewed as intrusive and disruptive, and it brought about a cautious control of their behaviors. For example, Rebecca rejected invitations from a friend to go to the straight bars for free hors d'oeuvres or to attend a mixed-sex group at the Jewish community center because she did not want to socialize with men. Other women said it was not men in general but the presence of specific types of men that made them uncomfortable or tense in a communal setting. Marti said, "I am not comfortable in restaurants where there are crowds of drunk loud men making noise." Pansy disliked being around gay men, especially those who she described as "flamboyant."

The presence of men reportedly brought about changes in body postures as well as the nature of conversations. Talking about one incident when men came into a women's bar, Barb said, "And then some men came in and it was the attitude, everything changed. I could see the women look and suddenly they were adjusting the way they were sitting. They were no longer comfortable, sprawled out, and relaxed."

Several of the women noted a clear difference in the environment when men were not present. Barb enjoyed some visits to a women's bar, explaining, "There was such a delightful, delightful feeling there. I mean just all women up there visiting, socializing, and a woman singing." Anna made similar remarks about a women's music festival she had attended, saying, "There is a real difference. It is almost like you are in a different country. You feel the absence of male testosterone which is rather pleasant."

These women also noted a clear preference for interactions with other old lesbians, finding a sense of affirmation among that group. Initially, Pansy was reluctant to join a group specifically for old lesbians. She said, "I just couldn't think of anything worse to identify with." However, after attending a couple of gatherings she realized that "I am old and I am a lesbian. Who the hell am I talking about. I am talking about myself. . . . I have to admit it was very mind boggling and very consciousness raising." Anna said, "When you go to a meeting and you see these old women and they are full of life and their eyes sparkle, you come to forget the wrinkles. You get a different point of view."

In their leisure these women did much more than build community or seek self acceptance; many of them were politically very active. Anna explained, "[Leisure] is not necessarily used for frivolous activities. Leisure time can also be used for things that are meaningful to you." Marti viewed leisure as the ability to do whatever you want to do, and what she wanted to do is "leave the world a little bit better than it was when I entered it." These women were involved in community events, animal rescue, AIDS education, civil rights, and many other causes. While a number of factors may have influenced their involvement in activist efforts, their own experiences of discrimination were partially responsible for motivating them towards social action. Rebecca explained, "For a great deal of my life like there was something hidden or something that I should not talk about or something that makes me less than the norm. And some of the things that I have accomplished have been in rebellion against the feeling that I am inferior in some way."

Summary. From these interviews, it was apparent that these women did confront stigma and discrimination in many facets of their lives, and that they attributed this in part to being a woman, lesbian and old. One central feature of this discrimination was a sense of invisibility and isolation, feeling separate from the rest of society. However, they nurtured this isolation and used it to create safe spaces for their own private community. In particular, they sought out other lesbian women and offered companionship and validation for one another. In addition, they were very active in social and political organizations and viewed these activities as part of their leisure.

These findings are somewhat more complex than we had initially proposed. We sought to determine whether stigma and discrimination were evident in these women's leisure, with the expectation that these experiences would provoke negative messages about self. We expected to contrast these experiences of discrimination and stigma with the more validating type of self affirmation that is so often associated with leisure. We did find examples of open discrimination and negative validation of self; for example, Barb was harassed on the highway and other women felt disappointment about being ignored within the lesbian community. However, each woman had actively constructed an alternative community that served to provide the support and validation that was lacking in her public networks.

From An Ecological Perspective

Before discussing this further, it is helpful to examine these findings from within the ecological perspective. The ecological perspective requires that people and their environment be studied as a whole (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Germain, 1992). The environment can be viewed as several concentric layers extending from the microsystem (an individual's activities, patterns, and roles) to the macrosystem (overarching cultural and societal attitudes and values) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Each layer of the environment has the power to influence and be influenced by the other layers. By adopting an ecological perspective, we were able to examine the various ways these

women experienced and responded to stigma and discrimination in their daily lives at each layer of the environment (see Figure 1).

Much of the stigma that these women felt was due to influences at the macrosystem level of their environment. Bronfenbrenner (1989, p.228) defined the macrosystem as "the overarching pattern of micro-, meso-, and exosystems characteristic of a given culture, subculture, or other broader social context. . . . The macrosystem may be thought of as a societal blueprint for a particular culture, subculture, or other broader social context."

The women who were a part of this study have always lived in a culture that views lesbians as deviant; this culture devalues women in general and both men and women as they age. The fact that these women felt out of place and were aware of their deviance was an outcome of the values and attitudes inherent in the macrosystems in which they existed. The macrosys-

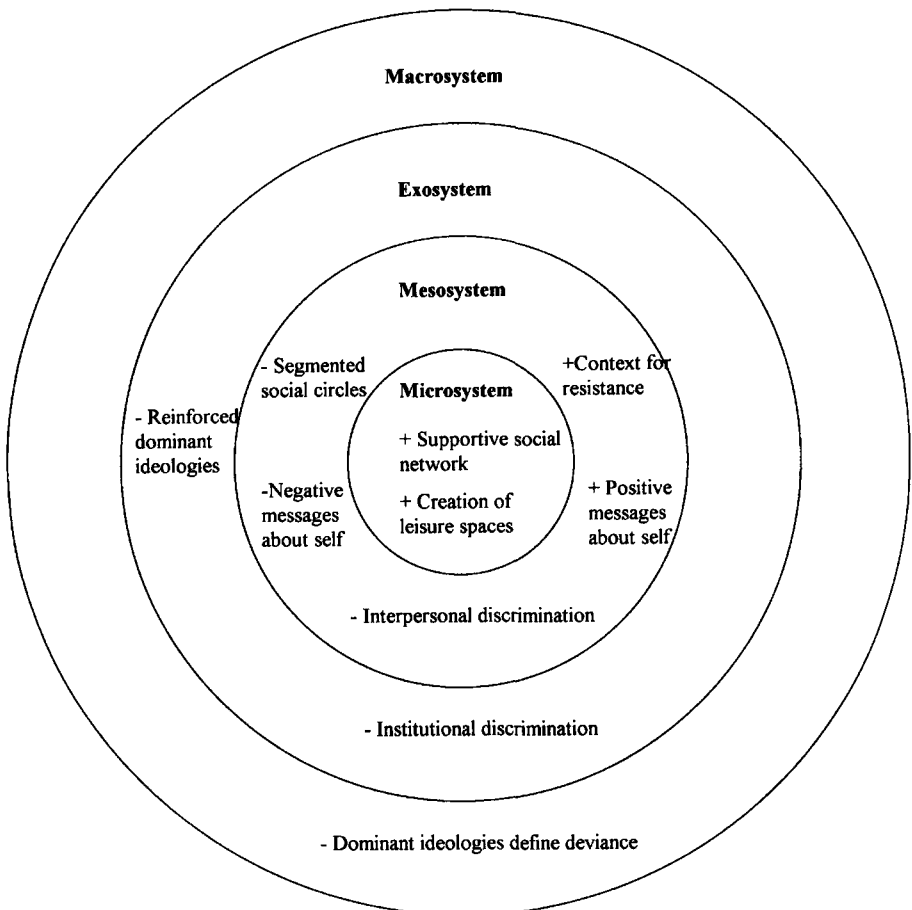


Figure 1. Impact of the experiences and responses to discrimination.

tem was the source of much of the discrimination that these women encountered, and was the reason that they often felt isolated or chose to isolate themselves from that broader community.

Bronfenbrenner (1989, p. 227) conceptualized the exosystem as the "linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings, at least one of which does not ordinarily contain the developing person, but in which events occur that influence processes within the immediate setting that does contain that person." The exosystems discussed by the women in this study included interactions with judicial, political, and religious groups and interactions with employers, institutions and businesses within the local community and neighborhood. In general, the exosystem served to reinforce the prevailing societal attitudes about age, gender, and sexual orientation through explicit and implicit interactions. We see this in these women's stories about their younger years. For example, Simone discussed police harassment at lesbian bars and Rebecca commented that waiters would ignore women alone in a restaurant. More recent examples included Marti's remarks about the controlling nature of religious and political organizations and Diana's comments about the failure of the lesbian community to recognize the existence of old lesbians.

The discrimination these women experienced at the exosystem level contributed to their need to segment their lives, presenting public images as heterosexual women while hiding their private lives as lesbians. Marti's comments about the need to protect the reputation of her employer and Rebecca's acknowledgment that she could not bring her partner to social functions illustrated the various ways these women experienced and adapted to the dominant ideologies at the exosystem level.

Bronfenbrenner (1989, p. 227) defined the mesosystem as "the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person. . . . In other words, a mesosystem is a system of microsystems." The mesosystems these women described included their homes, family, neighborhoods, peer groups, and organizations in which they were actively involved. The interactions these women experienced at the mesosystem level illustrated their segmented social circles, provided them with both negative and positive messages about self, and served as a context where they could demonstrate their resiliency.

For several of the women, the risks associated with being identified as a lesbian had resulted in the creation and maintenance of two mesosystems. One mesosystem consisted of work and other public settings where they interacted as presumably heterosexual women. The second mesosystem consisted of the home, created families, peer groups and organizations with whom the women interacted as lesbians. Rebecca's comment about keeping two separate sets of friends (those who knew of her sexual identity and those who did not) speaks to the complexity of social networks and the difficulty of managing identity at the mesosystem level.

The impact of the broader social attitudes at the mesosystem level was seen in negative messages these women received through their social interactions with others. These messages came in the form of rejection, distanc-

ing, and isolation. Ciel's loss of relationship with her son, the emotional distancing between Rebecca and her sister, and Pansy's exclusion from neighborhood barbecues illustrate some of the negative interactions that these women experienced. However, it was the discrimination that they experienced from their interaction with other lesbians, such as Ciel's rejection by a younger woman at a lesbian bar, that was the most painful for them because they had looked to these women for affirmation and support.

The mesosystem also served as a context where these women received positive messages about self. These positive messages came primarily from people who these women claimed as their extended family including partners, past partners, close friends and (for Ciel) discarnate entities. In the context of these relationships, the women found companionship, acceptance, and security. In addition, being with other old lesbians allowed Pansy and Anna to appreciate the vitality and energy within each of them—and allowed them to see beyond the wrinkles.

The mesosystem also illustrates ways that these women resisted the stigma and discrimination that confronted them from other levels of their environment. Working in collaboration with others, they responded to discrimination by creating, or contributing to the creation of, settings that affirmed attributes associated with their age, gender, and sexual orientation. Marti's comment about wanting to "leave the world a little bit better than it was when I entered it" speaks to the desire of these women to attempt to change the societal blueprints by which future generations would be socialized.

The microsystem represents the innermost layer of the environment. "A microsystem is a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relationships" (Bronfenbrenner, 1989, p. 226). It represents the ways that the individual interprets and responds to the environment. Each woman in this study found her own way of managing her identity as a lesbian and created her own meaning for being old. Ciel and Simone demonstrated the most extreme patterns of response. Ciel, feeling rejected by a physical world, found comfort, companionship, and guidance through her relationships in the metaphysical world. Simone sacrificed her happiness and self-esteem by internalizing a dominant heterosexist ideology which made it impossible to manage the stigma and fear she associated with being a lesbian.

It is at the microsystem level that we see the most evidence of the ways these women responded to the stigma and discrimination they experienced in daily life. For the most part these women had successfully managed to find and retain partners and friends in a supportive network that provided some level of acceptance and validation. Some women reported feeling isolated when they experienced periods of time without a supportive network. For example, Rebecca spent several years feeling isolated after moving into a new community before she was able to create a circle of new friends. However, once established these networks were a source of strength, vitality, and re-affirmation.

These women sought out spaces where they would be comfortable and free from harassment, and for several of them, this meant seeking spaces

that restricted interaction with men. Pansy and Marti avoided interactions with specific types of men while Rebecca avoided situations where any men would be present. Anna and Barb discussed participating in events that were for women only. Other women created private spaces when they were unable to find public spaces that were safe and free from harassment. Resisting pressure to be a part of situations where they felt uncomfortable, these women retreated into their homes as safe havens that remained pleasant, comfortable environments for interacting with friends.

Discussion

The premise behind this study was that contemporary leisure theory did not account for the possibility that leisure could be a context for negative messages about self. In particular, we felt that stigma and discrimination that occurred in a leisure context might lead to negative messages about self, contrary to the way that leisure is more typically portrayed in the literature. Because old lesbians have faced many forms of discrimination in their lives, it seemed plausible that their experiences might add new insight into the relationship between leisure and self.

The discussions above offer tentative support for our views, but in a much more interesting and dynamic manner than we had anticipated. These women were cognizant of the ways that they were marginalized in society, and easily offered examples of overt discrimination or prejudice. They felt that they did not fit in, and they maintained lifestyles that created varying degrees of invisibility for their private lives. This was not without consequence and the women shared differing levels of discomfort because of the ensuing isolation.

In many ways these women's lives were impacted by negative sanctions and discrimination. It would be difficult to understand their leisure, especially the importance of privacy and of maintaining selective friendships, without understanding the environment of stigma and discrimination in which these women have lived. An ecological perspective that emphasizes the interactions between these women and their environment provided an important framework for beginning to understand their lives and their leisure.

Living in a society that discriminates against them, these women received messages throughout their lives that served as daily reminders that they are on the fringe of society. As with other people who are old, these women were "immigrants in time" (Dowd, 1984). But in addition to being old, these women were outsiders from the dominant society because of their sexual identity and outsiders from the lesbian community because of their age. This feeling of being an outsider was also described by Bialeschki and Pierce (1995) who reported on younger lesbian mothers. Similar to the old lesbians in this study, the young lesbian mothers in that study were distanced from the lesbian community because they presumably had accepted a heterosexist ideology. The significance of rejection for these women (old lesbians and younger lesbian mothers) becomes even greater once one under-

stands the importance of the lesbian community as a sanctuary against the daily barrage of discriminatory messages that otherwise confronts these women.

The discrimination that the women in this study experienced was at times overt and at other times quite subtle. They were not always clear on the reasoning behind the discrimination that they perceived. However, it was hardest for them to identify times when they felt they had been discriminated against because of their age. Pasupathi, Carstensen, and Tsai (1995) suggested that ageist behaviors are often difficult to identify because they are viewed as helpful and the harm related to them is often invisible. While age discrimination occurs in both formal and informal settings, it is much harder to identify in informal settings (Pasupathi, Carstensen, & Tsai, 1995).

By adopting an ecological perspective, what was learned from these women was not limited to one aspect of their lives. Their stories were strongly influenced by the socio-historical context in which they have lived their lives. Within this broader social context, leisure served as a mechanism that perpetuated their disempowered status while also providing a means for resisting societal attempts to disempower them.

The ecological perspective helped us distinguish between the different types of interactions these women had with their environment. The stigma and discrimination that we had expected to see was apparent. It occurred primarily in the macrosystem and exosystem levels of the environment which were the primary sources of the institutionalized discrimination these women experienced. However, at the mesosystem level they confronted acts of interpersonal discrimination including personal distancing, isolation, invisibility, and exclusion. The mesosystem offered conflicting support, being the source of both painful rejection and positive affirmation. The meso- and microsystem levels were where the positive actions of these women were most visible. At these levels, we saw women working to create and maintain infrastructures that would provide them with the acceptance and affirmation they desired. The ecological perspective helped us understand not only the ways in which these women experienced and responded to discrimination, but also the dynamic nature of these women's reaction to stigma and discrimination.

It had been our premise that discrimination would be dis-affirming, eroding a woman's sense of confidence and fostering negative messages about self. To some extent this was true, for these women were painfully aware that they did not fit in to "normal" society. However, the consequences of discrimination were not as straightforward as anticipated. Their experiences with discrimination produced painful feelings of rejection and isolation, but they also contributed to their attraction to and involvement in activist organizations. Anna, Marti, and Rebecca each related their involvement in social or political organizations (which they viewed as leisure) to their experiences with discrimination.

Unable to find public spaces that were safe and free from harassment, these women created private spaces that served as a buffer to the discrimination they experienced in daily life. These spaces took varying forms in-

cluding metaphysical spaces and informal organizations. Within these spaces these women had control, "both in respect of what to do and where to go, as well as who should be included or excluded from such space" (Wearing, 1990, p. 44). Deem (1986) and Wearing (1990) suggested that the creation of spaces like these serves to resist the oppressive traditions of the dominant culture. For these women, the security of private spaces served to resist ageist and heterosexist traditions.

It is important that leisure researchers understand how societal values are enacted and reinforced through leisure contexts. People who are devalued in other aspects of their lives may feel devalued in their leisure as well. However, leisure can provide the positive affirmations and validations that we traditionally attribute to it, even for stigmatized and marginalized populations, if those people are successful in finding or creating an alternative supportive community. Leisure does not operate in isolation from one's environment and we cannot continue to study leisure as if it does. To continue to do so will limit our ability to understand leisure in the lives of all people, including those who live their lives on the fringes of society.

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