

Self-Identified Heterosexual Women Who Engage in Same-Sex Sexual Behavior: A Thematic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The allomothing hypothesis maintains that allomothing is a survival strategy that women use to pair bond with other women, a strategy that is used to help women and their offspring survive under certain conditions in the Environment of Evolutionary Adaptedness (EEA). A thematic analysis was used to examine any potential commonalities among responses to a question asking self-identified heterosexual and mostly straight women about their same-sex sexual behavior experiences and why they engaged in the behavior. The analysis found five dominant themes, which will be described in relation to the allomothing hypothesis.

KEYWORDS

Heterosexual Same-Sex Behavior, Allomothing, Pair bonding, EEA

The allomothing hypothesis (Kuhle & Radtke, 2013) states that self-identified heterosexual (mostly straight) women sexually pair-bond with other women to help in rearing each other's offspring when condition-dependent circumstances (such as mate abandonment or mate death) are met. The allomothing hypothesis (Kuhle & Radtke, 2013) maintains that allomothing is a survival strategy, a strategy that is used to help women and their offspring survive under certain conditions (especially in the Environment of Evolutionary Adaptedness [EEA]). Even though the hypothesis is heavily centered on same-sex sexual behavior, that behavior is used as a bonding mechanism, one that is theorized to be strong (Kuhle & Radtke, 2013).

Women were asked to describe, if they wished, a little about their same-sex sexual experience. The question was open-ended:

“Please describe the context or situation in which you experienced physical or emotional attraction to a woman.”

The question was administered to get an idea of why females engaged in same-sex sexual behavior. Both physical and emotional components were included in the question. Further, to get a richer understanding of why heterosexual women engaged in same-sex sexual behavior, context was included in the question. “Context” can include school, work, bars, and so on. One hypothesis was that self-identified heterosexual (mostly straight) women engaged in same-sex sexual

behavior with a close female friend. However, the thematic analysis was exploratory.

Thematic analysis is a research technique that is used to define themes in data. This can be done, for example, with qualitative responses. This analysis was used to examine potential commonalities among responses to a question asking about with whom and in what context heterosexual and mostly straight women engaged in same-sex sexual behavior experiences. The question was one section of a broader survey that examined same-sex sexual behavior in relation to allomothering in females.

METHODS

One hundred and twelve self-identified heterosexual (mostly straight) women completed the quantitative sections of the survey, however, out of the 112 women, 68 women did not write a response, while 44 women did. A thematic analysis was conducted on the 44 answers (see appendix I for complete list of responses). Participants were recruited via Facebook. The stipulations for participating in the study was that women had to self-identify as heterosexual or mostly straight and have engaged in same-sex sexual behavior at some point in their life. Only women over 18 could participate.

RESULTS

Five major themes were found in the data:

Theme 1: Friendship

The most common theme emerged in those responses that included the word(s) “friend” or “friendship.” No less than 44.2% of the responses included a reference to a friend. For example, these answers included “being at home with a friend,” “friends around me,” and “I have engaged in intimate sexual behavior with a female friend. I do not desire emotional connections with women, I have no interest in dating women, but the female body is extremely attractive. That’s a major turn-on.”

Theme 2: Alcohol/Bars/Parties

The second most common theme was “alcohol/bar/party,” since 16.2% of women included one of these words in their answers. Responses include “at college parties, at bars, in situations where there is alcohol and people are truly enjoying themselves”; “physical attraction occurred in social situations, i.e. party or vacation, usually involved slight intoxication, most of these contacts were not taking place in public, only the girl and me knew about it”; and “met a few woman casually at a bar or party and I found them attractive physically and liked their personalities.”

Theme 3: College

The next theme involved the word “college,” with 11.6% of women mentioning a college experience. Examples include, “she was a friend of mine in College,” and “A woman I knew in College and we kissed and touched each other, we were good friends but we talked about guys all the time.”

Theme 4: Being around Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Individuals

The next theme was “being around bisexual/gay/lesbian people.” A large number of participants—11.6% of women—cited being around gay or lesbian individuals in their responses. Some of the answers include “met a lesbian at Pride Celebrations many years ago and became very close with her on every level,” and “around friends that are bi-sexual or gay and they have propositioned me.”

Theme 5: Other

The fifth theme was designated as “other” and included various responses. No less than 18.6% of women fell into this category. Some examples of “other” include “nothing specific, just general”; “I find female form beautiful and sexual. There’s no one particular context or experience. Just women”; and “I have dated 2 women in my life. Ultimately both connections went from sexually charged to ‘room mate’ in a very short time. I am now happily married and my husband and I engage in sexual fantasies that involve me and other women but they do not extend to real world application.”

DISCUSSION

The most common theme related to same-sex sexual behavior involved responses including the word “friend” supporting the hypothesis. A friend is someone who is usually close, and is someone who is a person that can be depended upon (Goodman & O’Brien, 2000). As noted by Goodman and O’Brien (2000), close female friendships are often as important to women as relationships with a husband or a significant other. Often, in fact, women seek emotional support from a friend more than their husbands or primary partner (Goodman & O’Brien, 2000). Furthermore, pair-bonding via sexual or intimate contact can increase the strength of a bond (Crenshaw, 1996; Fleischman et al., 2014; Kirshenbuam, 2011). It is not surprising that same-sex sexual behavior would take place between friends, as far as the allomothering hypothesis is concerned. If a female friend is in need, and the situation is a case of survival of offspring or the self, two women may pair-bond sexually to increase emotional ties between them and therefore increase their chances of survival. Intoxication was another common theme; it may simply be that when women are drunk, either a little or very much, their capacity for same-sex sexual behavior emerges as a result of feeling less constricted when consuming alcohol.

“College” was another popular answer as to where and with whom a same-sex sexual experience took place. College and friends sometimes overlapped, and

in college women are often in dorms together with many women. The label “Lesbian Until Graduation,” or LUG, may be picking up on a tendency for women to experiment in same-sex sexual behavior in college, an environment rife with female friends and an environment that often does involve alcohol (Levin & Blitzer, 2006).

Women indicated that being around lesbian, bisexual, or gay people sparked an interest to engage in same-sex sexual behavior. Being exposed to this behavior in others could ignite an ancestral mechanism that makes women curious about same-sex sexual behavior; as mentioned, curiosity is a major reason why many females engage in same-sex sexual behavior.

The thematic analysis also had a category designated as “other.” Several answers in this category did involve men, and also casual sex. The “other” category indicates that women are engaging in same-sex sexual behavior for a myriad of reasons.

It is interesting to note that women who identify as heterosexual and mostly straight often engage in same-sex sexual behavior in their early twenties, the time when women are at highest fecund (Savin-Williams & Vrungla, 2013). Perhaps that is the best time for a female to be open to same-sex sexual behavior in case of abandonment by a male or some other stressor in the environment, and to be ready for allomothering with another woman. Although self-identified heterosexual (mostly straight) women may not be as sexually attracted to women during ovulation, but at times other than conception (Fleischman et al., 2014), the openness to the behavior is what is key. Women who are not in the crucial fecundity period are, for some reason, more open to same-sex sexual attraction. I propose that the reason for this is that allomothering is considered a back-up system for increasing chances of survival.

Conclusion

In the context of the allomothering hypothesis, the findings are not surprising as pair-bonding and same-sex sexual behavior among heterosexual and mostly straight women could happen more easily perhaps with a friend. Further, the friend then could be seen as a potential suitable allomother. Unfortunately, the sample of those who did answer the question was small, thus future studies could hopefully generate more responses to explore if friendship is a common denominator to many heterosexual and mostly straight women who do engage in same-sex sexual behavior.

APPENDIX I

All the answers to the question “Please describe the context or situation in which you:

experienced physical or emotional attraction to a woman.”

Responses from self-identified heterosexual (mostly straight) women:

“Nothing specific, just general.”

“She was a friend of mine in College.”

“I have a strong attraction to a female friend of mine and we have recently talked about possibly going further.”

“In my early 20’s, my best friend was bisexual. We engaged in kissing but I felt more sisterly love for her.”

“In a bar in New York in my 20s – she was the bartender, we ended up making out and to this day I could recognize her perfume if I smelled it.”

“Seeing or knowing a woman I found attractive, fantasizing.”

“One night stand, was great, but we didn’t fit together for anything long term.”

“My friend.”

“Strong friendships, moderate physical attraction.”

“Lesbian co-worker asked me on a date once.”

“There was a woman in an off- Broadway play who I was strongly attracted to.”

“Physical attraction occurred in social situations, i.e. party or vacation, usually involved slight intoxication, most of these contacts were not taking place in public, only the girl and me knew about it.”

“The two prominent contexts include close friends that I admire or strangers.”

“I find female form beautiful and sexual. There’s no one particular context or experience. Just women.”

“One of my bisexual friends and I were getting very close and, for a week it so had a loving emotional relationship. We would cuddle and watch movies in bed. When she expressed her love for me, we kissed, but I felt zero attraction. One of the greatest lost loves of my life.”

“Playing truth or dare with a group of friends and being dared to kiss a girl who I found extremely attractive – I found myself wanting to kiss her more.”

"I have engaged in intimate sexual behavior with a female friend. I do not desire emotional connections with women, I have no interest in dating women, but the female body is extremely attractive. That's a major turn-on."

"Several female friends or co-workers."

"Being at home with a friend."

"Friends around me."

"Looked up to her, admired her strength and was curious about exploring her."

"Short-term fantasy based."

"At college parties, at bars, in situations where there is alcohol and people are truly enjoying themselves."

"Friends."

"In school."

"Attracted to a few women for some reason."

"When drinking."

"A friend."

"Met a few woman casually at a bar or party and I found them attractive physically and like their personalities."

"Emotional intimacy is easy, physically only when alcohol or drugs are involved."

"I have dated 2 women in my life. Ultimately both connections went from sexually charged to "room mate" in a very short time. I am now happily married and my husband and I engage in sexual fantasies that involve me and other women but they do not extend to real world application."

"Around friends that are bi-sexual or gay and they have propositioned me."

"Often prefer the company of women to men."

"Friendships."

"Met a lesbian at Pride Celebrations many years ago and became very close with her on every level."

"Passing crushes and infatuation with beautiful personalities. Too shy to ever actually act upon feelings and always pretty sure feelings would be unrequited."

"Usually with women I had known."

"Attracted women physically and emotionally."

"A woman I knew in College and we kissed and touched each other, we were good friends but we talked about guys all the time."

"I had one romantic and sexual relationship with someone."

"Close friend."

"Have had threesome with a woman and a man."

"Friend and I met in University, we spent time together often. We were always dating men."

"Before my marriage I did experiment and I liked it."

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