

## Race/Ethnicity and Sexual Orientation: Intersecting Identities

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*Racial/ethnic minority women who come to identify as lesbian must confront the norms and expectations of both the majority and minority cultures in which they live. This article reports findings from a diverse sample of nearly 450 women and examines the effects of race/ethnicity on sexual identity development in African American, Latina, and White lesbians. African American and Latina respondents differed little in the timing and disclosure of lesbian identity; comparisons between women of color and White women revealed substantial variability. Findings are discussed in terms of their implications for practice with lesbians of color.*

• lesbian • identity development • race differences • African American • Latina

Race/ethnicity and sexual orientation are distinct but overlapping identities. Current understanding of identity development is based largely on theory and research focused on single (race/ethnicity or sexual) identity processes. The reality that most people have multiple cultural and social identities is rarely acknowledged or studied

(Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000). Further, much of the information about sexual identity development is derived from research with White gay men and is based on perspectives that emphasize comparisons with, and deviations from, majority group norms. These limitations are of particular concern when considering the social and psychologi-

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cal impact, needed support, and resources available to women of color who identify as lesbian.

Research examining the identity development process of (predominantly White) lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) women and men seems to support a generally sequential, but not invariant, progression through predicted "stages" of awareness, testing/exploration, deciding, disclosure, relationship involvement, and involvement in the larger LGB community (Cass, 1979, 1984a; Fassinger & Miller, 1996; Levine, 1997; Rust, 1993). Research also suggests substantial differences in the timing, spacing, and sequence of these developmental events between women and men (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000) and across racial/ethnic groups (Bohan, 1996; Smith, 1997). However, there is a dearth of empirical studies on sexual identity development in lesbians of color (Morris & Rothblum, 1999).

### ***Models of Sexual Identity Formation***

A number of theoretical perspectives and models describe the formation of sexual identity and "coming out" of lesbians and gay men (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Cox & Gallois, 1996; Fassinger & Miller, 1996; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Morris, 1997; Parks, 1999; Rust, 1993; Sophie, 1985/1986; Troiden, 1989). Most describe sexual identity formation as a linear or sequential developmental process that begins with awareness of same-sex attraction, progresses through stages of testing or exploration, and culminates in personal acceptance and public acknowledgment as gay or lesbian (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989). Public acknowledgment, or disclosure, of lesbian or gay identity is considered indicative of developmental maturity and a requisite of psychological health. This assumption is derived, at least in part, from the failure of most models to disentangle aspects of the identity development process that are per-

sonal and internal (awareness, deciding) from those that are interpersonal and external (relationship involvement, disclosure, community involvement; Fassinger & Miller, 1996). Such perspectives fail to acknowledge the effects of multiple, changing sociocultural contexts that lesbians and gay men of various racial/ethnic backgrounds and age cohorts experience as they begin and move through the identity development process (Bohan, 1996; Cox & Gallois, 1996; Eliason, 1996; Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000; Rust, 1996).

The stage-based process of sexual identity development has received some empirical support in the literature (Cass, 1984b; Fassinger & Miller, 1996; Levine, 1997; Rust, 1993; Sophie, 1985/1986). However, more contemporary perspectives contend that sexual identity development is a continuous, evolving process (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000) that is substantially influenced by the historical and cultural context in which it occurs (Fassinger & Miller, 1996; Gonsiorek & Rudolph, 1991). To date, most research on sexual identity formation has been conducted with White, middle-class, and older gay men (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000); few studies have included lesbians, and even fewer have focused exclusively on them (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000; Morris & Rothblum, 1999; Rust, 1993; Sophie, 1985/1986; Troiden, 1989). Nonetheless, a growing body of literature documenting gender differences suggests that current models are inadequate for understanding sexual identity development in women (Gonsiorek & Rudolph, 1991; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). Although a good many lesbians and gay men report similar identity milestones (awareness, deciding, disclosure) at similar ages (Cox & Gallois, 1996), substantial variability exists within lesbians and gay men as a whole (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). Variation in the sexual identity development process is so evident among lesbians that this variability has been described as "normative rather than exceptional" (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000, p. 298).

Historical context is also critical to un-

derstanding the identity development process. Significant social changes over the past several decades have affected both public visibility and social acceptance of lesbians and gay men. Historical events—ranging from the Stonewall riots in 1969 to “Ellen’s” 1997 self-disclosure as lesbian on national TV (D’Augelli, Grossman, Hershberger, & O’Connell, 2001)—provide a context for understanding the identity development and identity management strategies described by different generations of lesbians and gay men. Lesbians and gay men of different age cohorts have experienced varying levels of exposure to these social changes that have, in turn, influenced personal awareness of and attitudes about sexual orientation. Empirical support of the effect of historical period on identity development—including its impact on the timing or ages of first awareness, self-labeling, and disclosure; strategies of identity management; and responses to changes in public visibility—has been reported in qualitative studies of 31 White lesbians ages 23 to 79 (Parks, 1999) and 36 mostly White lesbians and gay men 65 years old or older (Rosenfeld, 1999).

Attitudes and beliefs about same-sex sexual orientation vary substantially across cultures (Bohan, 1996; Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000; Greene, 1997; Morales, 1990; Rust, 1996; Smith, 1997). In the United States, lesbians live within a majority culture that favors White, heterosexual, male, Christian, and Eurocentric values. Women who identify as lesbian must negotiate the norms and expectations of a heterocentric culture while simultaneously coming to terms with a stigmatized minority identity. Lesbians of color must, in addition, learn to manage and negotiate the sometimes divergent values and expectations of the racial/ethnic cultural groups of which they are a part.

Family and religion are primary sources of emotional support among many racial/ethnic minorities, and this is particularly true for African Americans and Latinos who must confront racism and prejudice in the dominant culture in the United States (Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000). Yet, a strong

anti-gay-and-lesbian sentiment also has been identified within the families and religious communities of women of color (Greene, 1997). Beverly Greene (1997) noted that for lesbians and gay men of color, disclosing a lesbian or gay sexual orientation can be viewed as an act of treason against the culture and the family (p. 221). Despite the acknowledged homophobia in African American and Latina communities, African American and Latina lesbians are strongly attached to their cultural heritage and generally view their racial/ethnic identity as primary (Greene, 1997; Mays, Cochran, & Rhue, 1993). While the strength of family ties may avert outright rejection of sexual minorities, tolerance is often gained at the price of silence (Bohan, 1996; Morales, 1990).

A number of authors suggest that the combined effects of racism in lesbian and gay communities and homophobia in racial/ethnic communities may act to limit both the internalization and disclosure of sexual identity among lesbians of color (Greene, 1997; Morris, Waldo, & Rothblum, 2001). Thus, the costs of sexual identity disclosure tend to be greater for lesbians of color than for White lesbians.

Data collected in Chicago from a large racial/ethnic- and age-diverse sample of self-identified lesbians provide a unique opportunity to examine similarities and differences in the sexual identity development experiences of lesbians of color and to explore the influence of multiple marginalized statuses on the identity development process. Given the paucity of literature on racial/ethnic differences in lesbian identity development, we approached this investigation in a largely exploratory and descriptive manner. In general, we expected to find differences in lesbian identity development and disclosure associated with race, ethnicity, and current age. Specifically, we examined the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1.* Ages at which lesbian identity milestones (first wondering, deciding, disclosure) occur, and the

*elapsed time* between milestones differ between lesbians of color and White lesbians but not between African American and Latina lesbians.

*Hypothesis 2.* Levels of identity disclosure differ between lesbians of color and White lesbians but not between African American and Latina lesbians.

### Method

#### *Sample Recruitment*

Data are from the Chicago Health and Life Experiences of Women (CHLEW) study conducted in Chicago in 2000–2001. Participants in the CHLEW were recruited using a broad range of recruitment strategies and ascertainment sources. Advertisements were placed in local newspapers; flyers were posted in churches and bookstores and distributed to formal organizations through formal and informal social events and social networks. Recruitment efforts specifically targeted racial/ethnic minority and other hard-to-reach women, including older lesbians and those with lower incomes. Lesbian/gay bars were excluded to avoid oversampling women who were heavy drinkers. Interested women were asked to call the project office to inquire about the study and to schedule an interview at a time and location convenient to them. Women were eligible for the study if they self-identified as lesbian, were English speaking, and were 18 years old or older. The sample included 448 respondents, each of whom was interviewed by a trained, female interviewer.

#### *Instrument and Measures*

Face-to-face interviews were conducted using a slightly modified version of the National Study of Health and Life Experiences of Women instrument (the Health and Life Experiences of Women [HLEW] questionnaire) and interview protocol. The HLEW questionnaire has been developed over the

past 25 years and has been used in five waves of data collection (1981, 1986, 1991, 1996, and 2001) in an ongoing longitudinal study of the drinking behavior and drinking-related problems of more than 1,600 women (see, e.g., R. W. Wilsnack, Wilsnack, Kristjanson, & Harris, 1998; S. C. Wilsnack, Klassen, Shur, & Wilsnack, 1991; S. C. Wilsnack, Wilsnack, & Klassen, 1986). The HLEW questionnaire has been extensively pretested and refined to include measures with the greatest reliability and construct validity (e.g., Harris, Wilsnack, & Klassen, 1994). Sexual orientation questions focusing on sexual identity, behavior, and attraction were developed in two focus groups with lesbians in Chicago. The CHLEW was pilot tested in 1997–1998 with 63 lesbians in Chicago. On the basis of this pilot work, revisions were made to the HLEW to improve sensitivity to, and inclusiveness of, lesbians' experiences.

Because the focus of the CHLEW was on risk and protective factors for heavy drinking and drinking-related problems among lesbians, data were collected on a broad range of mental health related variables such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation; physical and sexual abuse/violence in childhood and after age 18; and use of mental health services. The interview also included extensive questions about relationships, sexual identity development, and sexual identity disclosure. In this article we focus on select variables related to sexual identity and disclosure as described below.

**DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS.** Respondents were asked to select from a range of response categories representing the highest level of education completed and total household income (from all sources) during the previous tax year. Religiosity was measured on a 3-point self-rating scale (from 1 = *not at all religious* to 3 = *very religious*). For this analysis, relationship status was defined by whether the respondent was currently living with a partner or in a committed relationship (yes/no). Respondents were asked if they had ever given birth, adopted any children, or acquired any step-

children (yes/no) and if any children currently lived with them (yes/no).

**RACIAL/ETHNIC IDENTITY.** Respondents were asked to choose one of seven categories—White, Black/African American, Asian or Pacific Islander, American Indian, Eskimo, Aleut, or “other”—that most closely described their race. Those who chose the “other” category were asked to specify their race, and their response was recorded verbatim. All respondents were asked if they were of Hispanic or Latina origin or descent and, if so, which group (e.g., Mexican/Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Cuban, other). For purposes of the present analyses, only women who indicated “other” as a racial category and reported that they were of Hispanic or Latina origin or descent were categorized as Latina. All remaining respondents were grouped according to their racial identity (White, African American, or other). Twenty-seven respondents identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, or as biracial or multiracial. Given the small number of women in each of these groups and the diversity between the groups, these women were not included in our analyses. Similarly, because women who identified as Latina represented diverse ethnic groups including Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and women of Spanish origin from the Caribbean Islands, we were unable to conduct within-group analyses of the Latina respondents.

**SEXUAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT.** Three questions were asked to determine the ages at which respondents recalled first experiencing various identity “milestones.” Responses to the questions “At what age did you first wonder whether you might be . . . decide you were . . . tell someone you were . . . gay/lesbian/other?” provided a trajectory of sexual identity development. Respondents were asked for a chronological history of each of their committed relationships of at least 1 year and were asked to specify the gender of each partner. Responses were used to determine respondents’ age when they became

involved in their first committed relationship with a woman. Time intervals (in years) between identity milestones, and between milestones and first committed relationship with a female partner, were then computed.

**SEXUAL IDENTITY DISCLOSURE.** Respondents were asked to choose from a list of nine people (mother, father, sister, brother, other female relative, other male relative, female friend, male friend, or someone else) who they first told about their sexual orientation. Respondents were then instructed to rank, on a scale from 0 (*none of them*) to 9 (*all of them*), the level to which they were currently “out” to each of six groups of people: current heterosexual friends, casual heterosexual acquaintances, coworkers, work supervisors, people at school, and health care providers. Finally, respondents were asked to indicate if they were out to members of their family, including their mother (yes/no), their father (yes/no), and siblings (respondents were first asked how many sisters and brothers they had and, if applicable, how many sisters and brothers knew about their sexual orientation). Responses were examined separately for each nonfamily category (range = 0–9). A composite “out to nonfamily” score was computed by adding each ranking and dividing by the number of categories applicable to the respondent (range = 0–9). A composite “out to family” score (range = 0–3) was also derived for each respondent. Scores of 1 (*out to none*), 2 (*out to some, not all*), or 3 (*out to all*) were assigned based on reported “outness” to brothers and/or sisters. Because we considered disclosure to a parent as potentially more psychologically risky, an affirmative response for each parent was assigned a weighted score of 3 (*out to parent*) versus 0 (*not out*). Scores were summed and then divided by the number of family categories (mother, father, sisters, and brothers) applicable to each respondent.

#### *Data Analysis*

Analysis of data focused on two sets of comparisons: (a) African American with Latina

women and (b) lesbians of color (African American and Latina) with White lesbians. Demographic characteristics, ages of and elapsed time between sexual identity milestones, and levels of sexual identity disclosure were summarized for each of the three groups. Analyses included *t* tests and chi-square to test for statistical significance of bivariate differences between groups.

A series of one-way multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) were performed on three sets of dependent variables associated with sexual identity development: ages of *identity milestones* (first wondering, first deciding, first disclosure), *elapsed time* between milestones (time between first wondering and first deciding; time between deciding and first disclosure), and *identity disclosure* (outness to family members; outness to non-family groups). Individual dependent variables (DVs) were entered in the order listed within each set. Race/ethnicity was entered as a three-group independent variable; contrasts were examined between African American and Latina respondents and between lesbians of color and White lesbians. Prior to each MANOVA, assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance-covariance were assessed as satisfactory. Current age was then entered as a covariate in each of three multivariate analyses of covariance (MANCOVAs). Significance of each MANOVA and MANCOVA (including tests for homogeneity of regression) was evaluated using Wilks's criterion. Effects of race/ethnicity and between-groups contrasts were investigated for each set of DVs using univariate and Roy-Bargman stepdown analyses (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Interaction effects between current age and race/ethnicity were examined post hoc using standard regression analyses on each independent DV for which an interaction effect was identified.

## Results

### *Demographic Characteristics*

CHLEW respondents are highly diverse in terms of age ( $M = 38$  years; range 18–83)

and racial/ethnic composition (47% White, 29% African American, and 18% Latina). The CHLEW sample, as are most lesbian samples, is well educated overall; more than one half (55%) had a bachelor's or graduate degree. Household income, however, spanned a broad range; about 26% of the sample had annual household incomes under \$20,000, whereas 22% had incomes of \$75,000 or more per year. Approximately two thirds (67%) of respondents were in a committed relationship with a female partner, and approximately one fifth (21%) had children living with them at the time of the interview. Table 1 summarizes demographic characteristics for each of these race/ethnic groups and for the sample as a whole.

Lesbians of color differed significantly from White lesbians on all key demographic characteristics. White respondents were older and more highly educated, of higher economic status, and more likely to be in a committed relationship with another woman than were lesbians of color. Lesbians of color were more likely to report that they are somewhat or very religious, to have ever been a parent, and to currently have a child/children living at home. With the exception of religiosity, African American and Latina lesbians were similar on all key demographic characteristics. African American women were more likely than Latina women to report being somewhat or very religious (74% vs. 54%,  $p < .05$ ).

### *Ages of Sexual Identity Milestones*

Bivariate comparisons of the ages, sequence, and elapsed time between identity milestones are presented in Table 2. Differences between African American and Latina lesbians were not statistically significant, but White lesbians differed from lesbians of color in the timing of all identity milestones. Lesbians of color reported identity milestones approximately 1 to 3 years earlier than White lesbians.

MANOVA results of the combined identity milestone DVs indicated a significant effect of race/ethnicity, Wilks's  $F(6, 808) =$

TABLE 1 Demographic Characteristics by Race/Ethnicity

Variable	African American ( <i>n</i> = 130)	Latina ( <i>n</i> = 81)	White ( <i>n</i> = 210)	Total ( <i>N</i> = 421)	<i>p</i>
Current age in years					
Mean ( <i>SD</i> )	36.2 (9.4)	35.1 (8.2)	41.2 (13.3)	38.5 (11.6)	ns*, cc
	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	
Education					
≤High school	30 (23.1)	14 (17.3)	16 (7.6)	60 (14.3)	
Some college	54 (41.5)	32 (39.5)	43 (20.5)	129 (30.6)	ns*, cc
Bachelor's degree	27 (20.8)	16 (19.8)	64 (30.5)	107 (25.4)	
Graduate	19 (14.6)	19 (23.5)	87 (41.4)	125 (29.7)	
Annual income					
<\$20,000	47 (36.2)	18 (22.2)	43 (20.5)	108 (25.7)	
\$20,000–39,999	36 (27.7)	25 (30.9)	43 (20.5)	104 (24.7)	ns*, cc
\$40,000–74,999	31 (23.8)	25 (30.9)	61 (29.0)	117 (27.8)	
\$75,000+	16 (12.3)	13 (16.0)	63 (30.0)	92 (21.9)	
Religiosity					
Very religious	15 (11.5)	7 (8.6)	19 (9.1)	41 (9.8)	
Somewhat religious	81 (62.3)	37 (45.7)	79 (37.8)	197 (46.9)	a, cc
Not at all religious	34 (26.2)	37 (45.7)	111 (53.1)	182 (43.3)	
Currently in a committed relationship	78 (60.0)	53 (65.4)	152 (72.4)	283 (67.2)	ns*, cc
Ever acted as a parent	61 (46.9)	27 (33.3)	49 (23.3)	137 (32.5)	ns*, cc
Children currently in home	36 (28.1)	21 (26.6)	30 (14.8)	87 (21.2)	ns*, bb

Note. ns\* = African American versus Latina not significant; a = African American versus Latina,  $p < .05$ ; bb = lesbians of color versus White,  $p < .01$ ; cc = lesbians of color versus White,  $p < .001$ .

3.24,  $p < .01$ , although the association was small, partial  $\eta^2 = .024$  (see Table 3). Based on Roy-Bargman stepdown analysis, only age of first wondering about a lesbian identity made a unique contribution to differences across groups,  $F(2, 406) = 8.96$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ ; univariate contrasts indicated that *only* the difference between women of color and White women was significant,  $t(406) = 4.16$ ,  $p < .001$ . Thus, although women of color reported all identity milestones at earlier ages than White women, differences between groups in ages of first deciding and first disclosing were not significant after controlling for the age respondents first wondered whether they might be lesbian.

The interaction between race and current age, Wilks's  $F(6, 802) = 2.23$ ,  $p < .05$ , on ages of identity milestones was statistically significant, and standard regression analysis was used to evaluate this effect. Findings indicated that current age was positively associated with age of first wondering about

lesbian identity for both White women,  $F(1, 208) = 25.94$ ,  $p < .001$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .107$ , and women of color,  $F(1, 204) = 5.17$ ,  $p < .05$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .02$ , although the effect was stronger among White respondents. Thus, ages at which women of color reported they first wondered about a lesbian identity varied only modestly, whereas age of first wondering among White women declined more sharply among younger respondents.

#### *Elapsed Time Between Identity Milestones*

MANOVA results revealed no significant differences across racial/ethnic groups in elapsed time between identity milestones, Wilks's  $F(4, 810) = 1.16$ ,  $p = .326$ . Homogeneity of regression, with current age as a covariate, was investigated and found to be reasonable, Wilks's  $F(4, 804) = 2.35$ ,  $p = .052$ ; MANCOVA of race/ethnicity, with current age, on the elapsed time DVs revealed a

**TABLE 2 Sexual Identity Development and Disclosure by Race/Ethnicity**

	<i>African American</i> ( <i>n</i> = 130)	<i>Latina</i> ( <i>n</i> = 81)	<i>White</i> ( <i>n</i> = 210)	<i>Total</i> ( <i>N</i> = 421)	
<i>Age respondent first ...</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>p</i>
Wondered about being lesbian	14.4 (5.6)	14.5 (6.8)	17.5 (8.1)	16.0 (7.3)	ns*, cc
Decided she was lesbian	21.3 (6.7)	22.0 (8.2)	23.3 (8.9)	22.4 (8.2)	ns*, aa
Disclosed she was lesbian	22.7 (7.3)	23.3 (8.4)	24.9 (9.5)	23.9 (8.7)	ns*, aa
Same-sex relationship (1+ years)	25.4 (6.6)	24.2 (7.4)	26.6 (8.6)	25.7 (7.8)	ns*, aa
Involved in current relationship	33.8 (8.3)	31.4 (7.5)	36.2 (11.2)	34.5 (9.9)	a, cc
Elapsed time (in years) between...					
Wondering to deciding	6.9 (6.7)	7.6 (7.7)	5.8 (6.2)	6.5 (6.7)	ns*, aa
Deciding to disclosing	1.3 (3.8)	1.3 (3.5)	1.5 (4.4)	1.4 (4.1)	ns*, ns**
Deciding to first same-sex relationship	3.3 (6.7)	2.4 (4.8)	3.2 (6.7)	3.1 (6.4)	ns*, ns**
Deciding to current age	14.8 (9.4)	13.0 (8.4)	17.9 (12.4)	16.0 (11.0)	ns*, cc
Disclosure to current age	13.4 (9.6)	11.7 (8.5)	16.2 (11.3)	14.5 (10.5)	ns*, cc
Current level of disclosure					
“Out” to nonfamily (range = 0–9)	5.6 (2.9)	6.3 (2.3)	6.7 (2.4)	6.3 (2.6)	ns*, bb
“Out” to family (range = 0–3)	2.4 (.86)	2.3 (.77)	2.4 (.82)	2.4 (.82)	ns*, ns**

*Note.* ns\* = African American versus Latina not significant; ns\*\* = lesbians of color versus White, not significant; a = African American versus Latina,  $p < .05$ ; aa = lesbians of color versus White,  $p < .05$ ; bb = lesbians of color versus White,  $p < .01$ ; cc = lesbians of color versus White,  $p < .001$ .

significant effect of current age on time elapsed between identity milestones, Wilks’s  $F(2, 404) = 19.06, p < .001$ . After adjusting for age, elapsed time between identity milestones was significantly affected by race/ethnicity, Wilks’s  $F(4, 808) = 2.61, p < .05$ , although the association was small, partial  $\eta^2 = .013$  (see Table 3). Based on Roy-

Bargman stepdown analysis, only elapsed time between wondering about and deciding a lesbian identity made a unique contribution to differences across groups,  $F(2, 405) = 5.04, p < .01, \eta^2 = .02$ ; univariate contrasts indicated that only the difference between women of color and White women was significant,  $t(405) = 3.15, p < .01$ . Thus,

**TABLE 3 Tests of Race/Ethnicity and Race/Ethnicity With Current Age on Identity Milestones, Elapsed Time, and Identity Disclosure**

<i>Effect</i>	<i>DV</i>	<i>Univariate F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Partial <math>\eta^2</math></i>	<i>Stepdown F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Partial <math>\eta^2</math></i>
Race/ethnicity	Age of first wondering	8.96**	2, 406	.042	8.96**	2, 406	.042
	Age of first deciding	2.37	2, 406	.012	0.541	2, 405	.003
	Age of first disclosure	2.56	2, 406	.012	0.353	2, 404	.002
	Time wondering to deciding	2.27	2, 406	.011	2.27	2, 406	.011
	Time deciding to disclosure	0.115	2, 406	.0006	0.072	2, 405	.0004
	Disclosure to nonfamily	6.80**	2, 416	.032	6.80**	2, 416	.032
Race/ethnicity with age	Disclosure to family	0.288	2, 416	.001	0.763	2, 415	.004
	Time wondering to deciding	21.21**	1, 405	.050	21.21**	1, 405	.050
Current age	Time deciding to disclosure	13.63**	1, 405	.033	16.12**	1, 404	.038
	Time wondering to deciding	5.04*	2, 405	.024	5.04*	2, 405	.024
Race/ethnicity with age	Time deciding to disclosure	0.071	2, 405	.0003	0.215	2, 404	.0011

*Note.* DV = dependent variable. Significant differences between groups: \* $p < .01$ . \*\* $p < .001$ .

controlling for current age, women of color in this sample decided they were lesbian less quickly after first wondering about sexual identity than did White women.

#### *Sexual Identity Disclosure*

Overall, the sample was very “out” to family members and to nonfamily social and work groups. In general, women in the sample were most likely to have first disclosed their sexual identity to a female friend or relative. The majority of respondents were out to all of their current heterosexual friends (56%), supervisors at work (52%), and health care providers (66%). However, substantial proportions were not out *at all* to people at school (15%), coworkers (14%), supervisors (28%), or health care providers (11%). Respondents were most likely to have disclosed their sexual orientation to a family member, and 91% of the sample was out to their sisters. Women in the study were least likely to disclose their sexual identity to their fathers. Bivariate comparisons revealed no significant differences between African American and Latina lesbians in disclosure to family members or to nonfamily groups. Together, lesbians of color reported significantly lower levels of disclosure to nonfamily groups than White lesbians, but there were no differences between women of color and White women in disclosure to family members (see Table 2).

The combined identity disclosure DV was significantly affected by race, Wilks's  $F(4, 830) = 3.75, p < .01$ , although the association between race and this set of DVs was small, partial  $\eta^2 = .018$ . Disclosure to nonfamily groups was entered first in this analysis, followed by disclosure to family. Only disclosure to nonfamily groups,  $F(2, 416) = 6.80, p < .001, \eta^2 = .032$ , made a unique contribution to differences between White women and women of color,  $t(416) = 2.89, p < .01$ ; differences between African American and Latina women were not significant. A significant interaction effect between race and current age, Wilks's  $F(4, 824) = 10.66, p = .001$ , violated the assumption of homogeneity

of regression, preventing MANCOVA analysis of race and identity disclosure. Univariate analysis indicated this interaction was significant in affecting disclosure to family only,  $F(2, 413) = 19.97, p < .001$ . Among White respondents, current age and level of disclosure to family members were negatively associated,  $F(1, 208) = 45.14, p < .001$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .174$ ; among women of color, the association was positive and less robust,  $F(1, 208) = 9.74, p < .01$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .040$ . Thus, older women of color were somewhat more likely than their younger counterparts to have disclosed their sexual identity to family members, whereas older White women were far less likely than younger White women to have done the same. Older women of all three racial/ethnic groups were slightly less likely than younger respondents to disclose to nonfamily groups, but the differences were not significant.

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#### **Discussion**

The participants in our study were self-identified lesbians who volunteered to be interviewed. Although the degree to which the sample represents the larger population of lesbians cannot be determined, the overall consistency of the findings with those of previous studies lends credibility to the study results. As anticipated, African American and Latina lesbians were more similar to each other than to White lesbians in terms of ages at which they reported sexual identity development milestones, the elapsed time between milestones, and levels of sexual identity disclosure. In general, women of color were younger when they began to question their sexual orientation, proceeded more slowly in deciding they were lesbian, and then disclosed their sexual identity more quickly compared with White women.

Lesbians of color were less likely than their White counterparts to disclose their sexual identity to nonfamily groups, regardless of age. However, an interesting pattern

of age-related differences in disclosure to family was found. Older women of color were more likely than younger women of color to be out to their families, whereas the opposite was true for White women: Older White women were substantially less likely than their younger White counterparts to be out to their family members.

The timing, spacing, and sequencing of identity milestones reported by respondents in the CHLEW sample are not substantially different from those reported in previous studies (Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum, 1994; Garnets & Kimmel, 1993; Morris et al., 2001). Researchers report average ages of first awareness or questioning of sexual identity among women ranging from age 10 (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000) to age 18 (Morris et al., 2001). Self-acknowledgment of same-sex sexual orientation has been reported to occur between the ages of 17 to 23, on average, with disclosure typically reported 1 to 2 years later. Our results are well within these ranges. Our findings are also similar to those from a national study conducted by Morris and Rothblum (1999) in which lesbians of color also reported reaching some identity milestones earlier than White women.

Our findings pertaining to respondents' levels of sexual identity disclosure also parallel those of two earlier studies. Using data from the 1984 National Lesbian Health Care Survey, Bradford et al. (1994) found that African American lesbians reported being more out to family members than either White or Latina lesbians. More than a decade later, Morris and Rothblum (1999) found that African American lesbians had been out longer, but at lower levels (on a combined measure of disclosure to family and social groups), than either White or Latina respondents. Collectively, our data and those in the two studies above were collected over more than two decades. On the basis of the relative stability of disclosure levels reported by women of color in our sample, these findings suggest the possibility that social/historical changes in LGB visibility may have had less effect on the disclosure

decisions of women of color than on those of White women.

Differences between women of color and White lesbians in the effect of current age on identity milestones, elapsed time between milestones, and level of disclosure suggest a differential effect of social context on the two groups. Women of color reported much less variation in the timing and spacing of the internal/personal identity development processes (awareness, deciding) than did White women. Findings from women of color also reflect fewer age differences in disclosure to family members.

Information about, social tolerance of, and access to resources for lesbians have grown considerably in recent decades, yet these changes have likely occurred at different rates and with varied effects for different racial/ethnic groups. Age-related differences in the private and public aspects of lesbian identity development among women of color compared with White lesbians found in our study support this assumption. For example, the trend toward earlier awareness and greater disclosure to family found among younger White women suggests the influence of greater public visibility and tolerance on coming out among younger White lesbians. The effect of age was not nearly as strong among women of color and appeared to *reduce* disclosure to family (but with no discernible effect on disclosure to nonfamily) among younger respondents.

At least two possible explanations may account for our findings. First, greater public visibility and more open public discourse about sexual orientation increase both access to information and the potential that one's relationships or behaviors may be questioned. Yet, cultural expectations of silence about sexual orientation within racial/ethnic communities may have changed very little. Whereas younger women of color may exercise greater restraint in disclosures to family in an effort to avoid conflicts with this cultural norm, younger White women may be less affected by such expectations. Alternatively, having learned to manage societal racism through reliance on family and

community supports, lesbians of color may be less affected, in general, by shifts in the public discourse within the majority culture. Skills acquired by women of color in learning to navigate between majority and minority cultures may be more readily translated, independent of other social and historical trends, into acknowledgment, integration, and management of an additional minority status.

Bicultural competence, the second-culture acquisition model described by La-Framboise, Coleman, and Gerton (1993), provides a useful framework for considering the sexual identity development process. This model proposes a hierarchical acquisition of skills or competencies necessary to function effectively within two cultures simultaneously, without devaluing or losing competence in the original culture. The authors postulated that the acquisition of six competencies—positive attitudes toward both groups, knowledge of cultural beliefs and values, a personal belief in one's bicultural efficacy, communication ability, role repertoire, and groundedness within systems of social support—serves to limit the negative psychological outcomes predicted for persons living within two cultures. Within this framework, differences between lesbians of color and White lesbians may represent different levels of competency, in identity integration and management, developed by women of different ages and racial/ethnic affiliations.

Lesbians of color and White lesbians no doubt share similarities in the sexual identity development process. Both groups can be expected to encounter similar challenges emanating from the majority culture, such as the absence of visible role models, silence or prejudicial attitudes about same-gender sexual orientation, the presumption of heterosexuality, and pervasive homophobia (Bohan, 1996; Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000; Smith, 1997). Regardless of race, young lesbians do not have ready access to generationally transmitted information about the sexual minority culture or to positive lesbian role models.

Lesbians of color and White lesbians do, however, differ in at least one key area. As members of racial/ethnic minority groups, lesbians of color learn the norms and values of both minority and majority cultures. The acquisition of skills and competencies to function effectively within both cultures typically occurs under the guidance of family and within the safety of a supportive community. Apart from their sexual orientation, White lesbians are less likely to have had the experience of adapting to a stigmatized status. They, like lesbians of color, must acquire knowledge and integrate the norms of a minority subculture that has been hidden and denigrated. They may not be able to anticipate receiving support or affirmation from family or peers to engage in this exploratory process. African American and Latina lesbians also bring their experiences of minority rather than majority membership to this latter process (Greene, 1997). What is or has been a source of oppression may become a source of strength. Having experienced the challenges and developed the competencies necessary to negotiate this earlier process, lesbians of color may more readily acknowledge an additional minority status and may be better prepared or better equipped to meet the challenges associated with it.

#### *Strengths and Limitations*

Compared with most previous studies of sexual identity development, our sample is very diverse in terms of race/ethnicity, age, education, and income. This internal diversity helps to minimize the potential for systematic bias that may influence study findings. However, only women who identified as lesbian/gay were eligible to participate and, although recruitment strategies specifically targeted racial/ethnic minority and other hard-to-reach women, we cannot evaluate how well our sample represents lesbians as a whole or, in particular, lesbians of color. At best, generalizability is limited to women who are "out" enough to identify as lesbian in a confidential interview.

Our sample was drawn from a large urban area with a large, active, and identifiable LGB community. Women in our study likely had more access to lesbian-identified information and resources than what might be available to women in smaller urban or more rural locales. Inasmuch as information and resources may facilitate awareness and disclosure of a lesbian identity, generalizability is further limited to women for whom such access is also available.

Although use of an existing instrument is generally considered a strength, it can also be a source of limitations. In our case, because the HLEW was designed primarily to investigate risk factors related to heavy drinking and drinking-related problems, information about sexual identity development was limited. For example, questions about gender of respondents' first sexual partner, age of respondents' first same-sex sexual contact, and changes in respondents' perceptions of their sexual orientation were not included. This information would have been useful in comparing our findings with those of previous studies as well as in conducting a more in-depth exploration of the identity development experiences of respondents.

#### *Summary and Practice Implications*

Lesbians of color must simultaneously confront and learn to manage the triple oppressions of sexism, heterosexism, and racism that exist both within the dominant culture and within their own racial/ethnic communities (Greene, 1997). Facing this challenge can be a daunting task, provoking anxiety, stress, and isolation. This may be particularly true for those who remain closeted in their families, at work, or in other important areas of their lives.

Stress and isolation place individuals at risk for negative health consequences. Health care providers, including clinicians, are well situated to provide needed information, support, and acceptance that can serve to prevent these potentially negative outcomes. Yet, clinicians cannot presume that

lesbians of color will readily disclose information about their sexual orientation. About 20% of the women of color in our sample had disclosed their sexual identity to none or only one health care provider. Clinicians need to be conscious of heterosexist assumptions, proactively provide messages of inclusion and acceptance, and create opportunities for dialogue that encourage disclosure.

Extant models of lesbian identity development, while theoretically rich, provide little practical guidance as to how individuals, particularly those of different races/ethnicities, successfully negotiate the identity development process. Second-culture acquisition or bicultural competence provides an alternative and potentially useful framework for understanding and responding to the unique stressors encountered by lesbians of color. By focusing on strengths inherent in a competency-based model, health care providers will be better positioned to provide affirmative guidance and support to young or "questioning" women in their practices. More research is needed to further illuminate the essential skills and competencies used by women of color as they successfully negotiate and manage the tasks associated with lesbian identity development.

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