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Abstract

The important presence of community in creating success, well-being, and happiness is essential. Perhaps especially important for those marginalized others where a sense of “community” might be limited due to being different from what society sees as norm. This article explores the different ways women who sleep with women (WSW) evaluate their personal well-being in regards to community and relationships. Specifically, the impact inclusion has on community, practitioners, developers, and professionals who create spaces where others (LGBTQ+) belong. Participants included 37 self-identified WSW from the United States, with a majority being from Southern states. The purpose of the study was to examine perceptions and experiences among women of minority sexual groups. Contributing factors that may lead to more holistic lifestyles emerged. Discussing these questions revealed insight as to why WSW are more negatively affected in health and happiness than their heterosexual counterparts. Most importantly, these questions served as a platform for meaningful conversation, adding rich experiences, thoughts, and perceptions to research regarding the LGBT community.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, lesbian, community, inclusion, emotional well-being, social capital, WSW

1. Introduction

Community represents an essential component to a life of well-being. Various attempts are being made to include members of excluded groups in cities, policies, laws, in workplaces, higher education institutions, teams, recreational spaces, sacraments, or religious practices [1]. Inclusion has been suggested as the key solution to the injustices caused by exclusion [1]. In fact, inclusion has advanced issues like allowing gays to openly serve in the military, women in armed combat and ex-offenders to vote. But what if inclusion hurts us as well?

This article provides a framework for understanding community and inclusion among women who sleep with women (WSW). The authors were intentional in
selecting the term “WSW” (the frequently used public health term for lesbians), as it is often utilized for those who engage in same-sex sexual behavior, irrespective of their sexual identity [2]. This means that someone who might identify a pan-sexual, where the choice of partner is not dependent on gender, also may participate in a sexual relationship with women but not attach themselves to the identity of lesbian. The authors do agree that researchers should not erase the individuality of the identity of “lesbian” [3], however, they specifically chose to utilize the term of WSW as it is more inclusive of a group which has largely been unseen or unheard when it comes to experiences within typical health care systems and policies [4]. Furthermore, it is significant to understand that the authors of this study use several terms to refer to the LGBTQ community including LGBTI, LGBTQ+, and various other familiar LGBT+ acronyms. This was a careful choice to give voice and respect to the true population referenced in the supportive studies, as often times research examines this population as one unit, as if, L, G, B and T is an acronym insinuating a homogeneous group. Yet each letter represents an overabundance of different races, ethnicities, ages, lived experience, barriers, socioeconomic status and identities.

With the acceptance and equal treatment of all, comes the disappearing of spaces and places of community. Instead of having an identified “gay” bar or restaurant or community space, LGBTQ+ community are now more included in most mainstream places and welcomed fully pending on their location and proximity to progressive areas.

The connection between health and place is of significant interest to public health professionals [5], yet, WSW have reported disappointment in the quality of community available [6, 7]. A lack of population, the overlapping of gay male scenes, and successful integration into social and cultural spheres were most frequently identified [6]. In the case of happiness, just 18% of LGBT adults describe themselves as “very happy,” compared with 30% of adults in the general public who say the same [8]. Inclusion may not always produce positive effects on those that still remain isolated. It is apparent that the LGBTQIA+ community has become more widely recognized in the public spotlight, however, the results of some of those victories and their effect on creating community and diminishing community within the population of WSW has yet to be thoroughly evaluated. As such, this article looks at the impact of inclusion on community as both a physical space and virtual social network among WSW. Moreover, the balance between maintaining a distinct LGBT community versus becoming a more blended part of the American mainstream and its effects on emotional well-being is explored.

The terminology WSW is commonly used in research to describe those who engage in same-sex sexual behavior, regardless of identity [2]. This article examines psychosocial variables in the WSW culture to understand how perceptions, experiences and values impact community.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

Institutional Review Board Approval was granted for this study and active written informed consent obtained. Thirty-seven self-identified WSW volunteered to participate in 60–80-minute focus groups in person or virtually. In total, the 37 self-identified WSW (either current or in past relationships) voluntarily participated both in-person or virtually. For this study ages ranged from 20 to 64 (M = 34.5). Generally,
participants were largely non-Hispanic/White (94%), residing in Ohio (32%), South Carolina (27%), and Georgia (27%) in the United States of America.

2.2 Design and procedure

The data was collected between October 2016 and March 2017 with a lone, trained interviewer and a student assistant for administration support. Demographic variables including age, gender, orientation, and race were collected from each participant. Prior to the study the research team gathered relevant information for the proposed studies and developed a list of questions related to core areas that heavily influence one's life. Those influences were identified as: marriage/relationships, family/parenting, community/social fabric, and emotional well-being. These condensed influences were pulled from positive psychologist Vanderweele [9] who proposes that the five domains of human life needed to flourish are: spirituality, family, work, health, and community. The same list of questions was asked to each participating focus group in the same sequence and the questions were open ended in which the participants discussed among themselves the question highlighted by the researcher. If conversation delayed, or illumination was needed the researcher further probed the participants to better recognize the data they were providing by their answer. Following the initial questions follow up probes were administered to gather relevant additional data. The questions were open-ended and were not mandatory, as to ensure emotional and identity safety.

Focus groups were utilized due to the benefit they specifically provide researchers in the health and medicine field, as they provide a safe space for participation from people who are often hesitant to be interviewed individually, who might lack the skills to write or read, and feel as if what they might have to contribution is not important to the conversation [10]. Additionally, the opportunity to join the focus group remotely or anonymously was offered in order to provide safety the already present minority stress or heteronormative pressures often apparent in society. Data collection was planned and conducted using the theoretical framework of the minority stress model [11], as researchers were gathering data that specifically related to
collecting the unique and sometimes hostile stressors that might arise within experiences of WSW in regards to social and emotional well-being.

Focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed for validity in collection. After reading the transcripts, two trained coders/researchers formulated a system based on recurrent themes. Codes were preliminary until verified by relevant quotes [12]. As such, findings presented are a description of themes that recur [13].

Recruitment of participants occurred across multiple strategies. Each approach started with an informational flyer (Figure 1) describing the study’s intended purpose. The flyer was disseminated across social media, Universities and word of mouth. Potential participants accessed a SurveyMonkey sign up link on the flyer and researchers then scheduled focus groups based on availability.

3. Results

Four over-arching core themes were identified including: 1. Shame and Fear, 2. Community, 3. Gender Roles and 4. Normalcy. This article further explores the core theme of Community and participants perceptions of community. Community subthemes occurred over 463 times among the transcribed data. Four subthemes within community emerged including the ideas of (a) Community is easy to find, (b) Community is hard to find, (c) Community as a physical space, and (d) community as a social network. Table 1 references a sample of statements identified under the core theme of Community and further categorized by its subtheme.

3.1 Perceptions and experiences

Through the collection of data it is noted that participants of the study had experiences that differed greatly. From having an easily accessible community immediately available and often right out their door in cities, to only knowing a handful of similarly minority identities within their hometowns that are more rural and having to drive 2+ hours to find a “gay” physical community. In addition, participants noted the drastic ease that comes with being in a city compared to just 30 minutes outside of a city center. The data also represented the experience and ease of use in utilizing social network platforms to find a community, both in physical spaces and online spaces. Lastly, the overarching theme found within these four subthemes is that community and safety often lie within a younger generation as mentioned by participants: it is found in liberal traditional colleges, and among artsy “kids”, etc.

4. Discussion

Results of this study are subject to several limitations worth noting. For example, focus groups were conducted with a small sub-set of the population and all useful information may not have been captured. Socially desirable responses may have been provided and these responses may differ from those that may be gathered through a different format. As participants were volunteers with an interest in the focus group topic selection bias may have occurred. Moreover, the majority of study participants
Perspective Chapter: Is Inclusion Safe? The Importance of Community Among Women Who...
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Subtheme 1: Community Easy to Find
P6: In Philly I did not have to find anything, it was just there.
P9: There's really only community in major cities I feel like.
P3: I found community without even really looking for it.

Subtheme 2: Community Hard to Find
P4: So it's still hard to pull women together and try to form a community. I think you are right, because men do it all the time. You can be (..) and there will be a gay men mecca. Because they have money, they have the same interests, they all work out, they are concerned with their bodies, they are concerned with health.
P3: For some reason they (gay guys) all come to the clubs and stuff and the women do not.
P5: When I lived in New Orleans there was a huge community of women. And there was one lesbian bar. And the rest were gay men bars. There was one lesbian bar!
P7: It was a lot harder to find the lesbian community. I was co-chair for City Network. I'd like to say I put my time in there. It's mainly guys, but, I met a handful of women. I found different circles of women but it just seems like the guys will all get together somewhere but the women are just little satellites in various places.
P3: I've moved a lot so I've had many experiences. So thinking about growing up, small little town, I knew two gay people. And I wasn't out. Big cities I find easier or when I was in college and had that rugby culture. But the small towns I definitely feel a struggle of less community there.

Subtheme 3: Community as Physical Space
P1: I asked someone why there are more gay bars. And they said most of the artistic kids go to all of them. And the bars are owned by the gay people. So they just feel they are comfortable wherever they are. And is not that wonderful? And exactly what we wanted? Inclusion. I do kinda like having a bar though. Maybe it's my age.
P10: I remember living in Hattiesburg, Mississippi and the only reason there was gay people was because of the liberal school there. The university, research school. They bring a lot of people in. There wasn't really adult gay people, they were all college aged gay people. And as a young professional working at a university, and I could not hang out with my student athletes because that's wrong. The only adult gay people, I did not really hang out with, because it was people that did not really have purpose in life and they were never community oriented so they were all kind of sporadic and did not really care about education or well-being. Or not being stereotypical I guess. So that was very interesting. We would drive an hour and a half just to go to a gay bar. And XXXX's been to this gay bar. And it was literally as big as this table in the middle of nowhere and you had to bring your own alcohol. And every time I went to this gay bar there was a road block a mile down the road. So they were like, trying to get the gay people I guess. They knew. I mean we would drive and hour and a half to get to the gay bar and it would just be like, all these people who came out of the woods into a shack, and you were frightened because you were like, oh my god. This is a wrong turn—the hills have eyes! You were here and it's just like well we are all gay so it's fine. Its okay, we all have the same purpose right now so its cool. And then you would leave and you would not see another gay person for like 3 weeks and then you'd be like, alright load up, we are going to the gay bar. We need to hang out with the gay people. And that's how you would meet other gay people because they lived 2 hours in the other direction cause they drove 2 hours to get to the gay bar. And I remember when I lived in Hattiesburg, right before I moved, that they opened a gay bar. And we were all like, what?! Oh my gosh! I'm telling you there were cops outside that gay bar every night. And it was like, they wanted to catch everybody so they could shut that place down. So that was always very interesting. We would always find a DD and be like, come pick us up because there is police. Find a straight person to pick us up.

Subtheme 4: Community as Social Network Spaces
P2: I remember when XXXX and I started this we met randomly online and became such good friends. I went on tinder, plenty of fish, all of it and sent a generalized message saying hey this is who I am we are starting a lesbian community please join and I gave them the name of the site and we went from 1 to 200 in a year.
P5: I moved here from New York City to here in February. And I put myself on Match. February will be 2 years since Gabby's gone. And I knew I was moving here last year (time is moving by so fast, I'm trying to keep up) Um... So I put myself on Match cause I knew I was moving here and I wanted to meet people. So I wasn't on there to date, I was on there to meet like people.
P8: I was happy to find that (community) recently because of awesome people like XXXX. It was so drastic of a difference between Effingham and Savannah even though they are only 30 minutes apart because there's nothing in Effingham. There's no LGBT community what-so-ever. So social media kind of saved me in that respect in moving to Pooler. When I turned 21 and I could go and find community.

Table 1.
Community subtheme direct quotes.
were under 40 years old, predominantly Caucasian, thus results may not be applicable to all ages, racial and ethnic groups or geographic locations. Lastly, items such as rural vs. city or political background were not collected to offer a further dissection into how “place” and “politics” affects ones shared experience within the data collection.

Since 1969 the concepts of community have evolved and sometimes regressed among the LGBTQ population, as recent studies suggest a united LGBTQ community is often misleading [7]. Such examples of differences in perception between diverse groups under the LGBTQ+ umbrella point to the need to examine specific experiences of WSW community [14].

MacQueen et al. [15] state that community can be seen “as a group of people with diverse characteristics who are linked by social ties, share common perspectives, and engage in joint action in geographical locations or settings” (p. 1929). Block [16] proposes the idea that community is about the experience of belonging. Community is not as a place, but the citizens in the community each time that they discover a place where they feel that they belong. In a simpler sense Block suggest that community is not defined by physical space, but rather the relationships that are formed within the space shared. Community as a sense of belonging is somewhat similar to Anderson [17] who states that “communities are to be distinguished, not by their fallacy or genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (p. 6).

The term “community” takes on a different meaning for many people including WSW. According to Easterbrook et al. [7], a “gay community” is often hypothesized or termed as a “melting pot” in which all LGBT persons are united and integrated into one sexual minority community. For the purpose of the study we identified community as “safe physical space and virtual space that leads to a physical reality” for those who identify as WSW.

The value community provides translates to the term “social capital.” According to Putnam [18], social capital is “connections among individuals –social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them (pg. XX).” It is clear we, as humans, derive benefits from our relationships with others. As simple as finding a reliable plumber, which can save you money and frustration, or borrowing a ladder from a neighbor, which can save you time.

Yet, the value of social capital can go far beyond just time and money benefits. Coleman [19] coined this concept “social capital” and suggested that it had the ability to take social ties and common norms and values and increase economic efficiency in variety of ways like better education, job access, raising better socialized children, and even launching long term careers for people [20]. Social capital is critical to a community as it gives citizens the ability to dissect problems more easily, lessens our tendency to be aggressive towards others, and also widens our awareness to many more resources and opportunities [21]. Moreover, our social networks have the ability to not only keep us healthy and happy, but to also assist us in identifying other resources or opportunities that might have not otherwise been made available [22]. McIntosh [23] states that the initial interaction of finding a healthy “community” is of most importance as once it is found the benefits begin to “spill-over” into many different lifeworlds and thus create a positivity train.

There is a great need for locating supportive networks and for connecting with others with similar experiences in order to combat rejection of our perceived differences [24]. In the opposing view, does the presence of such non-heterosexual places alienate the ruling majority? Is this even a valid proposition considering mainstream or “regular” bars/places are more common and accessible in the United States? According to PBS NewsHour [25] there are only 21 lesbian bars remaining in the
United States. Therefore, the need for the relationships we find in community seem to be of even greater importance for populations like WSW struggling due to their identity. But how do you find community if inclusion's goal is to diminish a separation of differences, in physical spaces and virtual spaces of community?

Identified places of safety are extremely important to those others living in rural communities away from progressive cities. Thus, it is important to determine the balance of inclusion. Does inclusion leave behind those still struggling with their identity and seeking a place to come home to and belong? While there is a new wave of virtual communities within the internet, there are still barriers for older populations who come out later in life.

Heavy emphasis on the importance of virtual community exists. Thus far, research further dissecting the new growth and uses of social networking websites which have been designed for non-heterosexual users is limited. A study by Hillier and Harrison's [26] in Australia discovered that commonly online platforms are used by non-heterosexual youth and young adults to practice what might be their new sexual identities, same-sex friendships and intimate relationships that they have been slowly uncovering. Likewise, Addison and Comstock [27] maintain that LGBT-positioned social networking websites are indeed virtual spaces of safety, where youth and young adults can rehearse critical moments in their lives, such as sexual disclosure before “coming out” to their friends and family.

Per a new policy by Social Platform Tumblr, adult content will no longer be allowed to be shared within the platform. While the underlying purpose of this new policy is to keep Tumblr a safe space, these new regulations are blocking posts with LGBT themes that are not considered inappropriate [28]. This means searchable tags like #gay or #bisexual are being banned due to possible association with inappropriate content. LGBTQ people have found Tumblr to be a powerful space for self-representation. Through keyword or hash tagging practices, transgender stories, art, and dialog are often shared. This space allows LGBTQ youth to engage in Tumblr's fan communities and learn about queer culture [28]. This content is not just hidden from youth, but all users. This means that LGBTQ+ persons seeking out positive stories, experiencing conflicting feelings, or facing formative life challenges will not have access to media that may help them learn more about their identity and feel supported and not alone or excluded [28].

As collected in the data, WSW expressed both strain and effortlessness in finding physical spaces as community. Participants also suggested that it was easier to locate community as a physical space near more urban cities or city centers, while others expressed the ease of finding a network through social platforms (apps) which then guided them into a “physical community” space.

The data proposes that access to community is both difficult and easy pending on a person's location, the energy they put into outreach, and access and skills related to technology or social media. Direct correlation between the prevalence of data that suggest community is hard in reference to location (rural), and if community is easy when accessing social networks was not explored further. The research does suggest a need to further explore how to provide a more physical space to those seeking out those connections in more rural areas and also how to access community when relocating to such places. So what might contribute to a more holistic lifestyle for WSW in order to improve both the connection of social and emotional safety? Future efforts might focus on acquiring funding for the training and use of social media platforms for older nontraditional others, the creation of WSW specific applications or national community groups (like gayforgood.org which is only available in 16 cities currently)
or perhaps the creation of pop up LGBTQIA+ events in rural spaces. Creating a community of emotional and physical safety ultimately provides WSW with the ability to “belong”. As noted by author and research Brene Brown [29], true belonging only happens when we present our authentic selves to the world without sacrificing who we are, a sacrifice WSW often take when they do not feel safe.

Identifying small things that will contribute to larger scale impact is definitely a start---but the fight is long and requires more attention, research, and funding. Small versions of how individuals can be change makers in creating community have surfaced through grassroots efforts. Community happens without space. How can experiences of all WSW be changed, and not just those in certain locations?

How do practitioners build community without space, or create places where ones once stood? Finding those small items of disorder within the WSW community, could provide an alternative ending and reduce the occurrences of the macro negative perceptions within one’s life and offer the chance of a place to ultimately “belong”.

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**Statement of submission**

This chapter has not been submitted elsewhere for review. An overview of the larger dataset used within this chapter was used for an peer reviewed journal articles submitted in 2019 and 2022. However, those articles focuses more broadly on the major themes identified in the study’s focus groups. Whereas, this article, focuses more deeply on community, safety, and inclusion within the LGBTQ+ community.
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