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**Various close relationships for lesbian  
women in 1986 and 2005.**

Merethe Giertsen (Department of Social Work Studies, Finnmark University  
College, Alta, Norway)

Norman Anderssen (Department of Psychosocial Science, University of Bergen,  
Bergen, Norway)

MAILING ADDRESS:

Associate Professor Merethe Giertsen  
Finnmark University College  
Faculty of Business and Social Work  
NO-9512 Alta  
Norway

Phone: 00 47 78 45 05 00

Fax: 00 47 78 43 44 38

e-mail: [merethe.giertsen@hifm.no](mailto:merethe.giertsen@hifm.no)

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## **Abstract**

This work explored various close relationships (romantic relationships and motherhood) as this relates to historical time period. Two national samples of self-identified lesbian women aged 20 to 49 years in Norway were compared, one from 1986 (n = 123) and one from 2005 (n = 236). Data were collected through mailed questionnaires. No time-period effects were identified regarding lesbians' relationships with women and steady relationships with men. The same proportion had children in 2005 as in 1986. The overall results may reflect stability in social structuring forces in lesbian life in the last two decades.

## **Introduction**

Several researchers studying close relationships point to the need to explore the contribution of structural and historical factors, and the need to examine relationships outside of the cultural mainstream (e.g., Felmlee & Sprecher, 2000; Wood, 1995). In this article, we seek to explore various close relationships in the lives of self-identified lesbians within two historical contexts.

Important works within sociology and social psychology during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s have exposed social structures that regulated the lives of lesbian and gay men, such as homophobia (Weinberg, 1972), sexual stigma (Plummer, 1975), essentialist notions of sexual orientation (Richardson, 1984) and stereotyping and negative attitudes towards lesbian women and gay men (Herek, 1988). Although several of these social structures may still be strong, structural changes relevant to lesbian women and gay men seem to have taken place in Norway and other Westernized societies since the 1980s. In Norway, marriage-like same-sex partner registration was implemented in 1993, and Internet technology has provided much easier access to information about non-heterosexual sex and ways of living one's life, as well as offering new forms of exploring identities and connecting to other people. An increasing number of Norwegians report favorable attitudes towards lesbians and gays (Anderssen, 2002). In addition, the very distinctions between homosexuality and heterosexuality have been challenged (e.g., Seidman, 1996). It is believed that such recent historical changes have transformed the lives of lesbians (Patterson, 2000). However, very little empirical evidence exists from studies investigating this view. It is necessary to assess whether these structural, attitudinal, and conceptual changes have actually altered the living conditions for lesbian women and gay men so that important aspects in their lives are different today compared with only two decades ago.

Based on data collected in 1986 and 2005, we analyzed various close relationships in the life course of self-identified lesbian women, in the context of historical period. Specifically, we studied romantic relationships with women, romantic relationships with men, and giving birth.

## **Previous research**

Regarding romantic relationships with other women, the very concept of identification as heterosexual, bisexual or lesbian is based on some sort of romantic relation or erotic attraction (e.g., De Cecco's definition of sexual orientation, 1981). Therefore, romantic relationships with other people probably constitute a significant aspect in the life experience of most self-identified lesbian women. In general, whether one is in a steady relationship or not constitutes an important feature of a person's everyday life. In a Norwegian pioneer survey among lesbian women and gay men in 1978 (Bergh, Bjerck, & Lund), 56% of the lesbian women

(n=86) in the late 1970s reported being in a romantic relationship with another woman. In the late 1990s, 69% of the lesbian respondents (n=1135) in a national survey among lesbian women and gay men reported having a steady relationship with another woman (Hegna, Kristiansen, & Moseng, 1999). In the US, the figures range from 45% to 80% (Koh et al., 2005; Patterson, 2000). In Norway, among those who reported having romantic relationships with other women, the same proportion reported *living* with their lovers in the late 1970s (70%, Bergh et al., 1978) and late 1990s (73%, Hegna et al., 1999).

Regarding romantic relationships with men, many women who identify themselves as lesbians have complied with cultural expectations and explored heterosexual relationships on their way towards a lesbian way of life. Several studies indicate that a substantial proportion of lesbian women reported having had romantic relationships with men, both sexual and long-term (Bailey, Farquhar, & Owen, 2003; Brooks, 1981; Koh et al., 2005). In Norway, 84% of the lesbian respondents in the national survey reported that they had experienced a sexual relation with a man, while 59% reported that they had been in a steady relationship (more than three months) with a man (Hegna et al., 1999). Due to changes that have occurred within the past 20 years relevant to lesbians (such as more favourable public attitudes) one might expect that fewer lesbian women have experienced a romantic relationship with men today compared with the earlier period.

The issue of motherhood is thought to be crucial to many or most women in Western societies (Smart, 1992). In a national survey in the US, 21% of a sample of 2,431 lesbian and bisexual women reported having children (Morris, Balsam, & Rothblum, 2002). A growing number of women in the US are believed to have become parents after coming out as lesbian, in what has been described as a lesbian baby boom (Patterson, 1994). In the Norwegian surveys described above, Bergh et al. (1978) reported that 8% of the female participants had children, while Hegna et al. (1999) two decades later found that 13% of their lesbian and bisexual informants had children of their own. On the issue of *wanting* to become a mother, Hegna et al. (1999) reported that 29% of those who did not have children said they wanted a child, and we may speculate that this will result in more lesbian women of today giving birth.

## **Age of self-identification as lesbian and life-course**

Lesbian women report to self-identify as lesbian at different ages, and this has impact on their future lives. For example, age, sequence of, and time between different lesbian identity events, such as first sexual relation with another woman, coming out to parents, and establishing a first lesbian relationship, are probably different for women who self-identify as lesbians in their 20s compared with those who do so in their 40s (see Giertsen & Anderssen, in press). Age of self-identification as a lesbian may also structure various relationships which is the focus of this article. Based on this, the figures reported above could be different for

lesbians who self-identify as lesbians early in life versus those who do so later in life.

## **Effects of time**

Time measured on an individual level corresponds to time measured on a societal level, and these two variables constitute an extreme form of collinearity because of the logical correspondence between them (Glenn, 2003). Because of this, the effects of time as age and as historical period are difficult to separate. Further, gay and lesbian studies in general reporting on time effects often utilize cross-sectional studies with various age groups (e.g., Hegna et al., 1999) or time series studies (e.g., Savin-Williams, 1995; Troiden, 1988), while not being appropriately designed to assess this. In a cross-sectional study, one cannot distinguish between period and age effects based solely on differences between age groups. If one does, one runs the risk of conducting a time bias, or interpreting changes in terms of historical time when one actually measures the phenomenon at only one point in time (Riley, 1973). The same logic applies to comparing samples from different historical time periods, where the age distribution in the different samples differs. In comparing age-related phenomenon between samples, differences can be an effect of different age distributions, rather than that of different time periods. To assess historical time changes in an age-related phenomenon one has to compare samples of people of similar ages from different time periods. We have found no studies on lesbian relationships and time period effects that utilize appropriate samples.

## **Aims**

Based on the above literature review it is evident that existing literature suffers from time biases (especially comparing age groups within a cross sectional study). Thus, there is a great need for conducting research were one asses time period effects with comparable samples. The present work investigated whether historical period structured close relationships of lesbian women. Specifically, we investigated the following question: Did various close relationships in the life course of lesbian women change with historical time period?

From the review above, we expect that: (i) the same proportion of lesbian women today are in a romantic relationships with another women as in the earlier period, (ii) fewer lesbians today explore romantic relationships with men, and (iii) more lesbian women of today have given birth, and more wish to have children.

## **Methods**

### **Design and samples**

Two samples were established: one from 1986 and the other from 2005. The 1986 sample was recruited through the contemporary Norwegian national organizations for lesbians and gays, which sent a total of 250 questionnaires to female members (selected by the organizations), with response envelopes attached. In addition, 50 questionnaires were distributed at meeting places for lesbians. A total of 148 completed questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 49.3% (possibly higher since some organization members probably also attended meetings of lesbian groups and thus received two questionnaires). Respondents who reported identifying themselves as bisexual ( $n = 7$ ), or with unknown labeling of sexual orientation ( $n = 1$ ) were not included in the analyses. The resulting preliminary 1986 sample consisted of 140 participants, with ages ranging from 19 to 71 years. The 2005 sample was approached through the only contemporary Norwegian national organization for lesbians and gays. The secretariat of the organization agreed to select the first 40% female names from the alphabetically ordered membership lists of each local group, and to mail these members questionnaires and prestamped response envelopes. A total of 398 questionnaires were distributed, 327 completed questionnaires were returned, 12 were returned with unknown addresses, one was returned because of a male name, and one was returned stating that the respondent was a heterosexual support member, yielding a response rate of 85%. Those who identified themselves as bisexual ( $n = 16$ ), or with unknown labeling of sexual orientation ( $n = 1$ ) were not included in the analyses. Thus, the 2005 preliminary sample was a proportionally stratified sample consisting of 310 respondents in the age range of 17 to 76 years.

## Questionnaire and concept operationalization

For both samples, the questionnaires were anonymous. The relevant organizations undertook the distribution so that the researchers were not exposed to any personal names. The 1986 questionnaire was developed by Giertsen (1989) based on reports from various life course studies in Australia (Cass, 1979), the US (Ponse, 1978; Troiden, 1979), England (Ettorre, 1980) and Norway (Berg et al., 1978). The 2005 questionnaire was a modified and a shorter version of the 1986 questionnaire (see a more detailed description in Giertsen & Anderssen, in press). Items concerning the presence of close relationships were identical for both samples except for some of the questions where phrasing and response categories were slightly adjusted. Table 1 gives an overview of concepts and their operationalization.

**Table 1.** *Concepts and questions from the questionnaires in 1986 and 2005*

<b>Relationships with women</b>	<b>Operationalization</b>
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Relationship with a women today	<p>1986: A chronological line showing life course events upon which respondents marked the initiation and duration of intimate relationships.</p> <p>2005: Are you now in a steady relationship with a woman? Response categories: yes, no.</p>
Cohabitation with lover/partner	<p>1986: A chronological line picturing life course events upon which respondents marked the initiation and duration of different living arrangements.</p> <p>2005 (two questions): Are you now in a steady relationship with a woman? If yes, do you live together? Response categories: yes, no.</p>
<b>Relationships with men</b>	
Previous steady relationship with a man	<p>1986: A chronological line picturing life course events upon which respondents marked the initiation and duration of intimate relationships.</p> <p>2005: Have you previously been in a steady relationship (more than 3 months) with a man? Response categories: yes, no.</p>
Married to a man	<p>1986: Are you married? Response categories: yes, no.</p> <p>2005: Have you been/are you married to a man? Response categories: never been married, are married now, have previously been married.</p>
Thoughts about future possibility of living with or marrying a man	<p>1986, 2005: Do you think that at some time in the future you will marry/live together with a man? Response categories: yes, no, do not know.</p>
Having a sexual relation with a man	<p>1986, 2005: Have you been together with men sexually before identifying as homosexual/lesbian? Response categories: yes, no.</p> <p>Have you been together with men sexually after identifying as homosexual/lesbian? Response categories: yes, no.</p> <p>A response was categorized as yes if the participant answered yes on one or both questions. A response</p>

	was categorized as no if the participant answered no on both questions.
<b>Motherhood</b>	
Having children	1986: Do you have children? Response categories: yes, no.  2005: Do you have children of your own? Response categories: yes, no, co-habitee/partner has.
Wanting children in the future	1986: Do you want children in the future? Response categories: yes, no, do not know.  2005: Do you want children of your own in the future? Response categories: yes, no, do not know, co-habitee/partner wants.

\* The Norwegian concept “homofil” is in common use and is here translated as “homosexual”.

## Statistics

To compare groups of approximately the same age and who identified themselves as lesbians at approximately the same age, the total pool of respondents was categorized into 12 groups following two steps. In step 1, both samples were categorized into age groups of 10-year intervals (20–29, 30–39, and 40–49 years of age). Respondents who were younger than 20 or older than 49 were not included in the analyses since these age groups contained too few participants. In step 2, each age group in both samples was divided into two groups based on the median age when the respondents identified themselves as lesbian. Thus, early identifiers were those who reported being of median age or below when self-identifying as lesbians, and late identifiers were those above the median.

To assess a time-period effect, each of the six groups in the 1986 sample was compared with corresponding groups in the 2005 sample. Distributions (tested with chi square) and means (tested with t-tests) were compared at a 5% level of statistical significance. A time-period effect was believed to exist in the data when differences between 1986 and 2005 were relatively uniform across groups of different ages and age of self-identification as lesbian. The data were analyzed utilizing “NSDstat PRO” (a statistical package from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services, 2000).

## Results

A majority of respondents reported living in a city of more than 50,000 (1986: 83%, 2005: 69%,  $p \leq 0.01$ ). This difference corresponds to changes in membership within gay and lesbian membership (see Hegna et al., 1999). In 1986, 46% had completed college and university education; in 2005 the figure was 72% ( $p \leq 0.001$ ). Length of education was longer and income was higher in both samples compared with Norwegian women in general at corresponding time points (Statistics Norway 1990; 2004). See Table 2 for age statistics.

**Table 2.** Age statistics of the 1986 and 2005 samples in the 20–49 age group 1

Age	1986 N=123				2005 N=236			
	Mean age	Median age	n	%	Mean age	Median age	n	%
20-29	25.5	25.8	43	35.0	26.0	26.3	31	13.1
	-				-			
30-39	34.3	34.2	62	50.4	35.7	35.8	88	37.3
	**				**			
40-49	42.6	42.3	18	14.6	43.9	43.7	117	49.6
	*				*			

1 For each cell \* indicates statistical significant differences between time periods ( $p > 0.05$ , \*  $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ ).

## Romantic relationships with women

A majority in the various age groups (between 59% and 81%) in both 1986 and 2005 reported currently having a female lover, as shown in Table 3. The differences between 1986 and 2005 were minor and nonsignificant, and thus, there seemed to be no time-period effect present. Among those who reported having a female lover, a majority (between 58% and 90%) lived with her. The direction of the differences between the samples varied, and only one difference was statistically significant. Thus, there seemed to be no time-period effect on whether the respondents stayed with their lovers or partners.

**Table 3.** Romantic relationships with women and romantic and sexual relationships with men stratified by early vs. late self-identification as lesbian, age groups, and time periods (percent) 1

	Early identifiers	Late identifiers
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Age groups	20–29		30–39		40–49		20–29		30–39		40–49	
Time periods (n) 2	198 6	200 5	198 6	200 5	198 6	200 5	198 6	200 5	198 6	200 5	198 6	200 5
	(26)	(17)	(31)	(45)	(9)	(61)	(17)	(14)	(31)	(43)	(9)	(56)
Self-identification as lesbian 3	18. 0	15. 0	20. 7	16. 3	21. 6	17. 9	22. 6	21. 9	28. 8	26. 1	34. 0	28. 2
<b>Relationships with women</b>												
Having a relationship with a woman	68. 0	70. 6	77. 4	71. 1	62. 5	70. 5	58. 8	78. 6	76. 7	81. 4	66. 7	75. 0
	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Among those with a relationship: Living with a woman	82. 4	58. 3	79. 2	90. 3	60. 0	78. 6	90. 0	72. 7	69. 6	77. 1	33. 3	81. 0
	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	*	*
<b>Relationships with men</b>												
Earlier steady relationship	30. 8	17. 6	36. 7	34. 1	22. 2	31. 1	47. 1	57. 1	64. 5	74. 4	77. 8	64. 3
	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Married to a man												
never been married	96. 2	100	90. 3	100	100	96. 6	100	100	80. 6	90. 7	33. 1	87. 3
have been married		0.0		0.0	0.0		0.0	0.0				
married currently	3.8 0.0		9.7 0.0		0.0	3.4 0.0		0.0	19. 4	9.3 0.0	55. 6	2.7 0.0
	–	–	*	*	–	–	–	–	0.0	–	11. 1	***
									–		***	
Thoughts about future possibility of living with or marrying a man												
yes	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.2	0.0	0.0	0.0
					100	100					100	

no	84.	94.	96.	95.	0.0	0.0	94.	92.	80.	88.	0.0	94.
do not know	6	1	8	6	–	–	1	9	6	4	–	5
	15.	5.9	3.2	4.4			5.9	7.1	16.	11.		5.5
	4								1	6		
	–	–	–	–			–	–	–	–		–
Having a sexual relationship with a man	88.	29.	90.	62.	88.	78.	82.	78.	93.	90.	88.	92.
	5	4	3	8	9	7	4	6	5	7	9	9
	***	***	**	**	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–

1 For each cell \* indicates statistical significant differences between time periods ( $p > 0.05$ , \*  $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ ).

2 Maximum number in each analysis.

3 Included in this table since this age differs between the two samples.

## Romantic relationships with men

None of the respondents reported currently having a male lover (as seen in Table 3). A minority of the early identifiers (between 18% and 37%) and a majority of the late identifiers (between 47% and 78%) reported having had steady relationships with a man. The differences between the 1986 sample and the 2005 sample were small and nonsignificant, and thus, there seemed to be no time effect regarding steady relationships with men. A large majority of both the early and late identifiers (between 81% and 100%), with one exception in the 40 to 49 age group in 1986, had not been married to a man. Regarding heterosexual marriage, therefore, there seemed to be no time effect present (see Table 3). On the issue of future possibility of living with or marrying a man, almost nobody in either sample (between 0% and 3%) reported ever considering this, and the differences between the samples were minor and nonsignificant. Thus, regarding romantic relationships with a man, there seemed to be no time-period effect present. A majority in most age groups at both time points reported having earlier had a sexual relation with a man (between 63% and 94%, see Table 3). However, in 1986, 89% of the early identifiers in the 20 to 29 age group and 90% in the 30 to 39 age group reported having had a sexual relationship with a man compared with 29% and 63% in the corresponding age groups in 2005. This indicates a time-period effect whereby fewer early identifiers in the 2005 sample had had a sexual relation with a man, compared with early identifiers in 1986.

**Table 4.** *Motherhood: Stratified by early vs. late self-identification as lesbian, age groups, and time periods (percent) 1*

Age groups	Early identifiers						Late identifiers					
	20–29		30–39		40–49		20–29		30–39		40–49	
Time periods	1986	2005	1986	2005	1986	2005	1986	2005	1986	2005	1986	2005
(n) 2	(26)	(17)	(31)	(45)	(9)	(61)	(17)	(14)	(31)	(43)	(9)	(56)
Self-identification as lesbian 3	18.0	15.0	20.7	16.3	21.6	17.9	22.6	21.9	28.8	26.1	34.0	28.2
Having children, ones own	0.0	0.0	6.5	11.4	0.0	13.0	5.9	0.0	16.1	12.8	66.7	10.2
	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	***	***
Wanting children in the future	32.0	71.4	13.8	20.0	0.0	2.3	18.8	50.0	0.0	25.0	0.0	2.4
	*	*	–	–	–	–	*	*	*	*	–	–

1 For each cell \* indicates statistical significant differences between time periods ( $p > 0.05$ , \*  $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ ).

2 Maximum number in each analysis.

3 Included in this table since this age differs between the two samples.

## Motherhood

A minority (between 0% and 16%) of both the early and late identifiers in both samples (with one exception in the 40 to 49 age group in 1986) reported having children of their own (see Table 4). There was only one statistically significant difference between the samples; more late identifiers in the age group of 40 to 49 in the 1986 sample reported having children compared with the 2005 sample. Based on these analyses, we concluded that there seemed to be no clear time-period effect in the data on motherhood.

The respondents that did not have children were asked whether they wanted children in the future. Quite consistently among both early and late identifiers, more lesbians in the 2005 sample said they wanted children. Three of the differences were statistically significant, thus there seemed to be a time-period effect present.

## Summary patterns

In Table 5 we summarize main findings by collapsing the 20 to 39 age groups in each sample to yield samples with approximately the same mean ages, and (as above) the samples were divided into those who identified themselves as lesbians

early compared with those who did so later. Each column in Table 5 summarize the pattern for this particular group. We may assess time-period effects by comparing corresponding groups across the two samples.

There were no time-period effects present concerning the proportion of lesbian women who stayed in a same-sex relationship and were living together. There was no historical change concerning the proportion of participants that had been in a steady relationship with a man, and/or married to a man. Lesbian women of 2005 seemed just as consistent as those in 1986 in believing that they would not live with or marry a man in the future. Somewhat fewer in 2005, especially among early identifiers, had had a sexual relationship with a man, compared with 1986. There was no increase in number of participants having children, but more respondents in 2005 reported that they wanted children.

**Table 5.** Summary. Various close relationships of lesbians in 1986 and 2005 in the 20–39 age group (percent) 1

	1986 sample			2005 sample		
Early identifiers & Late identifiers	All (105)	Early identifiers (59)	Late identifiers (46)	All (119)	Early identifiers (64)	Late identifiers (55)
Self-identification as lesbian 3	22.7	19.3	27.1	20.3	15.9	25.4
<b>Relationships with women</b>						
Having a relationship with a woman	71.8	75.9	66.7	75.6	70.3	81.9
	–	–	–	–	–	–
Among those with a relationship: Living with a woman	78.4	84.1	70.0	78.7	79.5	77.8
	–	–	–	–	–	–
<b>Relationships with men</b>						
Previous steady relationship	45.2	32.8	60.9	49.2	31.7	69.1
	–	–	–	–	–	–
Married to a man						
have been married	9.5	3.4	17.4	3.4	0	7.3
married now	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

	–	–	–	–	–	–
Thoughts about future possibility of living with or marrying a man						
yes	1.0	0.0	2.2	0.0	0.0	0.0
no	88.6	91.5	84.8	92.4	95.3	89.1
do not know	10.5	8.5	13.0	7.6	4.7	10.9
	–	–	–	–	–	–
Having a sexual relation with a man	89.5	88.1	91.3	70.1	54.8	87.3
	***	***	–	***	***	–
<b>Children</b>						
Having children, ones own	7.6	0.0	17.4	8.9	6.5	12.0
	–	*	–	–	*	–
Wanting children in the future						
yes	15.2	22.4	5.3	35.8	31.4	35.7
no	48.5	41.4	57.9	32.1	31.4	33.3
don't know	36.4	36.2	36.8	32.1	37.3	31.0
	**	–	*	**	–	*

1 For each cell \* indicates statistical significant differences between time periods ( $p > 0.05$ , \*  $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ ).

2 Maximum number in each analysis.

3 Included in this table since this age differs between the two samples.

## Discussion

In the present work we investigated whether historical time may be seen as structuring the presence of various close relationships for lesbian women, and two samples of lesbian women recruited 19 years apart were compared. With this approach we sought to understand the roles that context and culture play as

conditions of possibility for and as structuring forces of lesbians' close relationships. As such, the study explored aspects in the life course of lesbians as it reflects the intersection of historical factors with personal biography (Elder, 1985).

## **Romantic relationships with women**

As expected, the same proportion of lesbians in 2005 and 1986 were in a steady relationship. Roughly speaking, three out of four participants in both samples reported having a female lover or partner. Kaufman & Johnson (2004) have suggested that romantic relationships serve the function of strengthening lesbian women's sense of being lesbian, that romantic relationships are important for lesbian women to maintain a lesbian identity. If this is an underlying structuring force that regulates the lives of lesbian women, our findings may indicate that lesbian identities were a fragile and challenged sociocultural construction before (in the 1980s) and still are. Stated in another way, heterosexual women continuously have their heterosexual identity confirmed in a heteronormative culture. For lesbian women this is not so.

The same proportion of those being in a lesbian relationship at both time points (almost 80%) shared their household with their lover. The total amount of lesbian women reporting cohabiting with their lover was 55% in 1986 and 60% in 2005. According to Giddens (1991), western societies see a family transformation where, for example, more women and men organize their lives as singles. This is also the case in Norway. Andersen (2007) reported that the proportion of individuals living in a single household increased from 12–28% in the 16 to 29 age group and from 10–19% in the 30 to 44 age group in the period 1987 to 2004. Looking more closely at the numbers in our study, and comparing these with the general population, two points emerge. First, more lesbian women live in single households compared with the general population. Secondly, the stability across historical time periods of lesbian women living in a single household differs from the change seen in the general population. In our samples, the proportion of women living in a single household was consistent across the time periods (45% in 1986 and 40% in 2005).

The reason for both the greater proportion of lesbian women living in single households and the historical stability in living arrangements compared with the general population might be structural features concerning the stigma attached to women identifying as lesbians, as suggested by Hegna et al. (1999). On the one hand, the existence of stigma attached to being lesbian may imply that more lesbian women seek a romantic relationship with other women to maintain a lesbian identity (as suggested by Kaufman & Johnson, 2004, see above). However, on the other hand, the same stigma may force many lesbian women to conceal their sexual identity and this makes it less likely to actually succeed in finding a person with whom to establish a relationship. In addition, the stigma may mean that lesbian women hesitate to establish a romantic relationship since this may imply a

relatively greater disclosure than being single. Another effect of a lesbian stigma is that several personal and social reinforcements, such as a family wedding etc. in one's relationship, is often lacking. Further, stigmatization of lesbian identity makes lesbian women invisible also to each other, and this limits the pool from which partners can be found. The sum outcome of the various stigma processes might be that fewer lesbian women have a steady relationship with other women.

## **Romantic relationships with men**

The historical time differences were minor concerning steady relationships with a man and of lesbians having been married (to a man). Historical period seemed not to influence the participants' beliefs in the possibility of living with or marrying men in the future. This may reflect an underlying essentialist notion of sexual identity in the sense that once a lesbian identity is established or acknowledged it is experienced as nonchangeable (Richardson, 1984; Plummer, 1981). This would be in line with the prevalent way of constructing sexual identity in essentialist terms. To the degree that sexual categories are understood in essentialist terms, labeling oneself lesbian becomes a very serious undertaking. This event becomes serious because, according to essentialist understandings, the insights and information and the new status are not transient, but permanent. It will necessarily entail an expectation that the chances of living a conventional mainstream heterosexual life are minimal. Roughly 70% of the participants in 2005 reported having had sexual relationships with men, which was somewhat fewer than in the 1986 sample. The difference between the samples was most distinct between those who identified themselves as lesbians early in life in the 1986 sample compared with those who did so in the 2005 sample. This historical change might be because early lesbians in 2005 actually started identifying themselves as lesbian three years earlier than those in the 1986 sample (16 years compared with 19 years (see Giertsen & Anderssen, in press). Thus, a period difference between the 1986 sample and the 2005 sample concerning sexual relationships with men may be explained by historical changes in age of self-identification as lesbians among the early identifiers. In other words, lesbians' sexual relationships with men may intersect with historical time and age of self-identification as lesbians .

## **Motherhood**

The hypothesis of more lesbian women having children in 2005, compared with 1986, was not confirmed. Around 8–9% of respondents at both time points reported having given birth. Thus, we did not identify a historical shift in the structuring of the lives of lesbian women in terms of having children. For those who had children, we did not ask whether the children were a result of an earlier heterosexual relationship. There might be differences between the samples in this regard. However, because of the relatively small proportion of participants who had children, we believe that the differences between the samples concerning giving

birth in a heterosexual setting vs. a lesbian setting may not be large. Statistics Norway (2002) came to a similar conclusion based on an analysis of men and women who registered as partners after the Act of Registered Partnership was implemented in 1993. They claimed that Norwegian media's notion of a lesbian baby boom was false. Based on this, and our own analyses, it seems that the reported US lesbian baby boom (e.g., Patterson, 1994) has not occurred among organized lesbian women in Norway.

## **Comments on methods**

This study differs from previous studies of lesbian lives since the data are based on two comparable samples 19 years apart. Further, the samples were relatively large, contrary to what is common in research on lesbian populations (Morris, 1997; Patterson, 2000). Since the samples were recruited through gay and lesbian organizations, the data may be generalized only to organized lesbian women. However, a methodological limitation of the study is that the retrospective nature of parts of the data may contain false memory bias. Further, the validity and reliability of the operationalizations is not established, although face validity seems acceptable since no complaints were noted in the open response alternatives and there were no apparent contradictions in the material. We realize that the study addresses only a few aspects of close relationships, for example we have not assessed total number of previous relationships or duration. It is important to acknowledge that a maximum number of 49 persons in the age range between 20 and 30 years in 1986 may have participated also in the 2005 survey. However, due to anonymity procedures the actual number is not known.

We want to caution against generalizing because the data stem from one country only.

## **Possible stabilizing factors across time periods**

A prominent feature in this study was the stability in the presence of various close relationships in the lives of lesbian women the last two decades. The most obvious reason for this might be that the types of changes that have been witnessed the previous years, indicated in the introduction section (structural, attitudinal, and conceptual changes), are not powerful enough to outweigh other stabilizing factors. Here, we may only speculate what these other stabilizing factors might be, and we will briefly suggest two.

First, the essentialist notion of sexual orientation and sexual preference might be stronger and more fundamental than queer theorizing might imply, and this may provide a stable feature across time periods. Pedersen and Kristiansen's findings (2003) suggested that relatively few young people experiment with same-sex sexuality or sexual identities. Anderssen and Hellesund's findings (in press) suggested that people tend to argue on essentialist grounds regarding adoption



(regardless of attacking or defending gay and lesbian adoption). Essentialist understandings have huge implications for everybody's self-concept and organization of life (Plummer, 1981). However, more lesbians of today wanted to give birth, as expected. We may ask, then, why don't they? Our suggestion is that the positioning of lesbian women in a marginalized position has constituted a stable social structure over the last two decades and that this has outweighed the effects of new discourses on family life in which 'gay and lesbian family' since the mid 1990s has become a more or less established term (e.g., Tasker & Golombok, 1997).

Secondly, many lesbian women today and in earlier times construct their lifestyle in a certain opposition to mainstream heterosexual life, and this might be a stable factor across the two time periods. For many lesbian women, it is neither an ambition to resemble heterosexuals nor to accomplish the same relationship gains, such as having children. Thus, political lesbianism might be a stable factor across time periods (1980s to 2000s). During the political consciousness-raising times of the 1960s and 1970s in several Western countries (parallel to movements such as antipsychiatry movement, second-wave feminism, and civil rights movement), lesbian and gay lifestyles became more possible and visible. Lesbian lifestyles emerged as not only a question of sexual orientation made normal, but also as a question of living life as a woman in a nonpatriarchal romantic relationship. The implementation of the Partnership Act in Norway in 1993 met with some resistance among lesbian women and gay men, and relatively few couples actually utilized the registered partnership opportunity (Halvorsen, 1998). Halvorsen suggested that there exists an ambiguity in the lesbian (and gay) communities in Norway: a tendency to become similar to the dominant heterosexual family ideal and a tendency to revolt.

One important issue goes beyond the ambition of the data and analysis in the present paper is that lesbian women and their choice of life style may influence their social surroundings and even social structures. However, in the present analysis we have wanted to rather strictly follow a structuralist approach, making it possible to identify factors that do regulate many peoples lives.

## **Conclusion**

We have addressed various relationships (romantic relationships and motherhood) in the life course of lesbian women as this relates to historical time period. Despite several structural changes relevant to lesbian women the last 20 years, the overall conclusion of this study is that stability in various close relationships for lesbians is a more profound feature than changes in these relationships.

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