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Mary M. D. Selvidge PhD , Connie R. Matthews PhD & Sara K. Bridges PhD

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The Relationship of Minority Stress and Flexible Coping to Psychological Well Being in Lesbian and Bisexual Women

Mary M. D. Selvidge, PhD

Memphis, Tennessee

Connie R. Matthews, PhD

Slippery Rock University

Sara K. Bridges, PhD

The University of Memphis

ABSTRACT. This study explores minority stress among lesbian and bisexual women by examining the relationship of sexist and heterosexist events, self-concealment, and self-monitoring to positive psychological well being. The sample was made up of 373 lesbian and bisexual women, including 77 women of color. Results of a multiple regression analysis of the total sample indicated that, considered simultaneously, self-concealment and self-monitoring explained significant variance in positive psychological well being, while sexist and heterosexist events, though present, were not significantly related to positive psychological well being. Results were similar for the women of color alone. This

Mary M. D. Selvidge, PhD, is a private consultant, Memphis, Tennessee.

Connie R. Matthews, PhD, assistant professor at Slippery Rock University.

Sara K. Bridges, PhD, is an associate professor in the Department of Counseling, Educational Psychology and Research, at The University of Memphis.

Address correspondence to: Sara K. Bridges, Department of Counseling, Educational Psychology and Research, 100 Ball Hall, The University of Memphis, Memphis, Tennessee 38152 (E-mail: sbridges@memphis.edu).

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research provides evidence for the resiliency of lesbian and bisexual women and offers some applicable concepts (e.g., self-concealment and self-monitoring) to consider in research and practice with lesbian and bisexual female clients.

KEYWORDS. Lesbian, bisexual, women of color, well being, heterosexist, resiliency

Lesbian and bisexual women have the unique experience of negotiating life in a society where they are discriminated against for their gender, the genders of the individuals with whom they choose to engage in romantic relationships, and, for some, a multitude of other individual differences. Brooks (1981) defined minority stress as the stress of categorical status reduction and the daily hassles of being discriminated against or not afforded the same opportunities as majority group members. It has been well established that the gay, lesbian, and bisexual population is formally discriminated against in legislation (Fassinger, 1991; National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2002) and verbally and physically victimized on a regular basis (D'Augelli, 1989; Herek, 1989; Von Schulthess, 1992), and, thus, subject to minority stress. This puts lesbians and gay men at risk for lower self-esteem, higher rates of depression, and decreased feelings of general safety in the world (Garnets, Herek, & Levy, 1990). As women, lesbians experience additional minority stress due to gender. Experiences of sexism and heterosexism are significant stressors that have been found to affect women's physical and mental health (Landrine, Klonoff, Gibbs, Manning, & Lund, 1995). Brooks hypothesized that minority group members will have higher rates of dysfunction than majority group members. Regardless of this expectation, there is evidence that lesbians and gay men do not differ significantly from heterosexuals in their psychological adjustment and that many lesbians lead happy healthy lives (Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum, 1994; Gonsiorek, 1991). This suggests that some lesbian and bisexual women cope effectively with their minority stress and maintain high levels of positive psychological well being.

Very few studies of lesbians or bisexual women have actually featured well being, and those rare projects that are published have used absence of illness or limited measures of mental health as outcome variables (DiPlacido, 1998a). When practitioners and researchers focus on mental illness to the exclusion of human strengths and well being, there is a

tendency to begin defining mental health as the absence of illness (Ryff & Singer, 1996). This consistent research focus on negative outcomes rather than the resilience of women who are lesbian or bisexual may serve to further stigmatize and demoralize an already oppressed group. There is a need for methodologically sound research on resiliency and hardiness that measures theory driven positive psychological well being in stigmatized populations. Psychological well being is defined here as a complex, somewhat enduring construct that is also responsive to external influences. It is a positive psychological state along multiple cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. In this study, psychological well being was conceptualized along six of these dimensions as delineated by Ryff (1989: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth.

Minority stressors in the form of sexism and heterosexism have been identified as daily hassles (Allison, 1998). Daily hassles have been found to contribute more variation to well being than major life events (DeLongis, Coyne, Dakof, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1982; Kohn, 1996) and, in particular, higher daily hassle frequency was related to more psychological distress (Ruffin, 1993). Chronic frequent daily hassles in the form of sexist and heterosexist events have been found to increase negative psychological and physical symptoms, reduce life satisfaction, and decrease self-esteem (Coyle, 1993; DiPlacido, 1998a; Landrine et al., 1995; Meyer, 1995; Moradi & Subich, 1998; Waldo, 1999). The high prevalence of sexist and heterosexist or homophobic events in the lives of lesbian and bisexual women is well documented in the literature. Sexism and heterosexism propel anti-gay judicial decision making, inequitable salaries, harassment, property damage, and verbal and physical violence against lesbian and bisexual women (Badgett, 1995; Berrill, 1990; D'Augelli, 1989, 1992; Leonard, 1991).

In contrast to early gay and lesbian identity models (e.g., Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1979), some scholars are suggesting that "coming out," or disclosing lesbian identity may not be a necessary act for adequate self-esteem, life satisfaction, or a healthy gay identity (Cain, 1991; Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Ellis & Riggle, 1995; Healy, 1993; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Coming out issues may be more complex than the idea that being more "out" equates with better mental health. Cain conceptualized disclosure or concealment of sexual orientation as a process of information management in which decisions are made based on the individual's needs and the rewards or repercussions of disclosure or concealment in a particular situation. Larson and Chastain (1990) defined active concealment as a

different construct than disclosure. Concealment may have a negative impact on well being if an individual is concealing information which he or she perceives as negative. Self-concealment is defined here as a vigilant, dynamic process of withholding specific personally salient information from most people in an effort to manage others' perceptions of the concealer (Larson & Chastain, 1990). DiPlacido's (1998a) work, using the Larson and Chastain Self-Concealment Scale indicates that self-concealment among lesbian and bisexual women impacts mental health.

While there is considerable research on coping with stress, most of the literature that exists focuses on fixed coping styles or coping responses to particular stressful situations (Kohn, 1996). Some of the qualitative literature that addresses the process of coping with minority stress demonstrates that people coping within an oppressed framework choose their coping responses based on situational factors such as the demographic composition of the group, the type of discriminatory hassle, perceived risk, and perceptions of control in the situation (Hall, 1986; Lykes, 1983; Swim & Hyers, 1998). Lykes used the term *coping flexibility* to describe successful African American women who had a wide variety of coping possibilities and an ability to discerningly choose an appropriate response in discriminatory conditions. A significant part of coping flexibility is the ability of an individual to accurately assess and adjust to her situation (Kohn, 1996), a concept that may be accessed by the construct of self-monitoring (Lester, Smart, & Baum, 1994). Self-monitoring has two parts. It is the capacity to alter self-presentation. High self-monitors are able to adjust their behaviors to suit the current situation. The second important element of self-monitoring is an awareness of other people's emotions through nonverbal cues. A high self-monitor is able to read the social cues of those around her and then present appropriate behavior for the particular social situation. To date, there is no valid survey-based measure of coping flexibility (Lester et al., 1994), however, Lennox and Wolfe's (1984) Revised Self-Monitoring scale was found to be significantly related to life satisfaction for both gay and non-gay individuals and for both men and women (Anderson & Randlet, 1993). Therefore, it can be expected that self-monitoring, as one aspect of coping flexibility, may be positively related to psychological well being for lesbian and bisexual women.

The purpose of this study was to explore among lesbian and bisexual women, the relationship of sexist and heterosexist events, self-concealment, and self-monitoring to positive psychological well being. This study attempted to rectify several problems in the existing literature on lesbian

and bisexual women by studying within group variation, not assuming correspondence with gay males, including more ethnic minority and bisexual women than has been typical, seeking greater geographical diversity, and seeking a larger sample size with more appropriate power than previous studies (Brooks, 1981; Buhrke, Ben-Ezra, Hurley, & Ruprecht, 1992; Meyer, 1995). In addition, unlike much previous stress research or research with minorities, this project sought to identify both internal and external characteristics that contribute to or deteriorate from the healthy functioning or positive well being of lesbian and bisexual women.

The following research questions were asked.

Does the set of variables that includes the external stress of sexist and heterosexist events, the internal stress of self-concealment, and the personal resource of self-monitoring explain variability in the psychological well being of lesbian and bisexual women?

Do lesbian and bisexual women who experience more daily hassles in the form of sexist and heterosexist events have lower levels of positive psychological well being?

Do lesbian and bisexual women who conceal more have lower levels of psychological well being?

Do lesbian and bisexual women who are higher self-monitors have higher levels of psychological well being?

Do lesbian and bisexual women who conceal less experience more heterosexist events?

Are the influences of these variables the same for women of color?

METHOD

Participants

A total of 417 individuals responded to a request for participation in a women loving women well-being project. However, 44 people were eliminated from the study for various reasons, leaving a total of 373 women in the sample (see Results for discussion of respondents eliminated). The sample includes women from 43 states. The participants were between the ages of 18 and 64 ($M = 32.74$, $SD = 10.37$). In the past year, the total household income was under \$20,000 for 66 (17.69%) participants, \$20,000 to \$39,000 for 108 (28.95%) participants, \$40,000 to \$59,000 for

57 (15.28%) participants, \$60,000 to \$79,000 for 56 (15.01%) participants, \$80,000 to \$99,000 for 39 (10.46%) participants and \$100,000 or over for 40 (10.72%) participants. Seven (1.88%) women did not report an income. The levels of education were as follows: elementary education, 1 (.27%); high school diploma, 88 (23.59%); associates degree, 29 (7.77%); bachelors degree, 116 (31.10%); Masters degree, 85 (22.79%); and Doctoral degree, 54 (14.48%). Participants described themselves with respect to ethnicity as Black (n = 35, 9.38%), Caucasian (n = 283, 75.87%), Latina (n = 17, 4.56%), Asian (n = 9, 2.41%), Native American (n = 3, .80%), biracial/multiracial (n = 18, 4.83%), and other (n = 7, 1.88%). This ethnic distribution was similar to the 1999 U.S. Census data (U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 2000). One (.27%) individual did not disclose her ethnicity. Participants described their sexual orientations as lesbian (n = 263, 63.27%), gay (n = 11, 2.94%), bisexual (n = 86, 23.06%), queer (n = 23, 6.17%), or other (n = 17, 4.58%).

Instruments

Demographic Questionnaire

The demographic questionnaire was developed by the authors to gather descriptive information about the participants. We attempted to adopt a flexible view of lesbian and bisexual identity as it varies among individuals, within individuals, and across racial/ethnic identity groups (Golden, 1987; Greene, 1994; Shuster, 1987) Thus, participants were given the opportunity to self-label their sexual orientation by choosing among a selection of sexual orientation identifiers (e.g., lesbian, bisexual, gay, queer, heterosexual, homosexual, other). Other demographic information requested of the participants included racial/ethnic background (with an opportunity to self-label), age, highest level of education, income, number of people in household, and current state or country of residence.

Psychological Well-Being Inventory

Psychological well being was measured with the Psychological Well-Being Inventory (PWB; Ryff, 1999; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryff & Singer, 1996; Schmutte & Ryff, 1997). The PWB is an 84-item scale with 14 items for each of six scales representing autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. A confirmatory factor analysis on the scales of psychological well being revealed that a six-factor model with a single, second

order super factor was the best fit (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Since the focus of the present study was overall psychological well-being analysis was based on the overall PWB score.

The PWB uses a 6-point Likert scale for each item, ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*. Examples of an autonomy item and a personal growth item are, respectively, "I am not afraid to voice my opinions, even when they are in opposition to the opinions of most people," and "I am the kind of person who likes to give new things a try." Ryff (1989) reported internal consistency alphas for the six subscales ranging from .83 for autonomy to .91 for self-acceptance. No overall internal consistency coefficient for the entire scale was reported. Six-week test-retest reliability coefficients for the original 20-item per scale version, which is highly correlated with the 14-item version being used in this study, ranged from $r = .81$ to $r = .88$ (Ryff, 1989). Correlations between these two versions ranged from $r = .97$ to $r = .99$ (Ryff, 1999).

In this study, PWB scores were derived from the mean of each participant's 6-point Likert scale responses, such that scores could potentially range from 1, representing the lowest psychological well being to 6, representing the highest psychological well being. The mean computation method was chosen to avoid excessive loss of data for women who did not respond to all of the items. The overall PWB demonstrated strong reliability in the current study (Cronbach's $\alpha = .97$).

Schedule of Sexist Events

The Schedule of Sexist Events (SSE; Klonoff & Landrine, 1995) uses 20 items to measure the frequency of gender discriminating events encountered by an individual in the past year and in her entire lifetime. Examples of items are, "How many times have you been treated unfairly by your family because you are a woman?" and "How many times have you wanted to tell someone off for being sexist?" The SSE utilizes a 6-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 (*if this has NEVER happened to you*) to 6 (*if this has happened to you ALMOST ALL OF THE TIME [more than 70% of the time]*). This particular study was interested in the cumulative effects of chronic prolonged minority stress, which is more congruent with the SSE lifetime scale than the SSE recent scale. In addition, the PWB Inventory (Ryff, 1989) is a measure of enduring psychological well being, which is more likely to be affected by long-term stress. For these reasons and in the interest of keeping the survey at a reasonable length, this study only used the SSE lifetime scale.

The SSE was validated with a sample of 631 women, ages 18 to 73 years recruited in the community and on a college campus (Klonoff & Landrine, 1995). There was high internal consistency for the SSE–Lifetime Scale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .92$). The test–retest analysis was similarly reliable with an $r = .70$ ($p < .005$). There was also a high internal consistency in the SSE–Lifetime Scale in the current study (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .93$). Landrine and Klonoff (1997) recommend using the scale as a continuous variable in research, which is how it was used in this study.

A mean computation method was used to derive SSE scores for each participant in this study. Again, this was done to limit data loss. Scores on the SSE using this calculation method could potentially range from 1, representing the lowest frequency of lifetime sexist events, to 6, representing the highest frequency of lifetime sexist events. In addition, the last item, “How different would your life be now if you HAD NOT BEEN treated in a sexist and unfair way?” was not used to compute the sexist events scale. Conceptually it did not make sense to include that item with the other items which measured frequency of occurrence, especially when using the SSE as a continuous variable.

Schedule of Heterosexist Events

Although, Klonoff and Landrine (1995) report that they have constructed a Schedule of Homophobic Events, that information was not available for the present study (personal communication, E. A. Klonoff, July 15, 1999). The strong results from the SSE suggest that an instrument adapted for heterosexist events would share similar psychometric properties. As such, with permission from Klonoff (personal communication, July 15, 1999), the SSE–Lifetime Scale was adapted to reflect experiences of heterosexist events for use in this study. A pilot study was done to assess reliability of the new instrument.

The SSE–Lifetime was adapted by changing the wording from “because you are a woman” to “because you are lesbian or bisexual.” For example, the item, “How many times were you denied a raise, a promotion, tenure, a good assignment, a job or other such thing at work that you deserved because you are a woman?” was adapted as, “How many times were you denied a raise, a promotion, tenure, a good assignment, a job or other such thing at work that you deserved because you are lesbian or bisexual?” The following two items were left out of the adaptation because they were deemed inappropriate when the focus is on heterosexism rather than sexism: “How many times have you been treated unfairly by

your boyfriend, husband or other important man in your life because you are a woman?" and "How many times have people made inappropriate or unwanted sexual advances to you because you are a woman?" One item referring to name calling was adjusted for this scale to represent derogatory lesbian focused names. Additionally, there were some items that were adapted by changing "sexist" to "heterosexist," and "sexual" to "homosexual."

The Schedule of Heterosexist Events (SHE) is intended to measure the frequency of heterosexist events encountered by a lesbian or bisexual woman in her entire lifetime. Following the SSE format, the SHE utilizes a 6-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 (*if this has NEVER happened to you*) to 6 (*if this has happened to you ALMOST ALL OF THE TIME* [more than 70% of the time]). There are 17 items addressing frequency of heterosexist events. A mean computation method was used to derive SHE scores for each participant. Scores on the SHE using the mean calculation method could potentially range from 1, representing the lowest frequency of lifetime heterosexist events, to 6, representing the highest frequency of lifetime heterosexist events. In a pilot study with 21 women in the gay/lesbian community of an urban area in the mid-South, the SHE demonstrated excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$). The current study also found a high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$).

Self-Concealment Scale

Self-concealment was measured with the Larson and Chastain (1990) Self-Concealment Scale (SCS). This is a single factor 10-item self-report instrument addressing the following three aspects of self-concealment: inclination to keep things about oneself concealed, having a particularly distressing secret which is not disclosed to others, and discomfort about disclosing concealed information to others. SCS items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1, *strongly disagree* to 5, *strongly agree*. Examples of items are, "If I shared all my secrets with my friends, they'd like me less," and "There are lots of things about me that I keep to myself." Larson and Chastain report moderately strong internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$) and four-week test-retest reliability ($r = .81$). The current study also found strong internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$).

Although Larson and Chastain (1990) did compute high and low self-concealment groups, they did not report these scores. The current study used the SCS as a continuous variable that did not require such cutoff

scores. In keeping with the other scales, a mean calculation method was used in scoring the SCS. An overall SCS score of 5 represents the highest possible level of self-concealment and a 1 represents the lowest possible level of self-concealment.

The Revised Self-Monitoring Scale

The Revised Self-Monitoring Scale (RSM; Lennox & Wolfe, 1984) was used to assess participants' self-monitoring. The RSM consists of 13 items that assess two subconstructs, the ability to modify self-presentation and sensitivity to expressive behavior of others. These two constructs represent Lennox and Wolfe's definition of adaptive self-monitoring. The 13 self-report statements use a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from certainly always false to certainly always true. Examples of RSM items are, "I have the ability to control the way I come across to people, depending on the impression I wish to give them," and "I can usually tell when I've said something inappropriate by reading it in the listener's eyes."

Lennox and Wolfe (1984) reported adequate internal consistency alpha coefficients for the total scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .75$) and for the two subscales, measuring ability to modify self-presentation (Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$) and sensitivity to expressive behavior of others (Cronbach's $\alpha = .70$). In this study, there was also moderately strong internal consistency in the total scale of the RSM (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$).

The RSM was used as a continuous variable. RSM scores were derived using mean calculation. An overall RSM score of 6 represents the highest possible level of self-monitoring and a 1 represents the lowest possible level of self-monitoring.

Procedures

A national purposive sampling method was used to recruit lesbian and bisexual women for participation in this study. Participation was requested through friend networks, a newspaper advertisement, flyers sent to lesbian organizations and gay affirming churches, and requests through electronic listservs for lesbians, bisexual women, gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals, members of Division 35 (Society for the Psychology of Women), and members of Division 44 (Society for the Psychological Study of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Issues) of the American Psychological Association. In addition, all participants were asked to recruit acquaintances who they also knew to be "women loving women."

Contact with participants took place through the phone, the Internet, or by mail to ensure both participant privacy and consent. Interested participants were able to access the survey by requesting a hardcopy through a toll-free telephone number or through an online Web page version of the survey. Of the 85 hardcopy surveys requested, 22 completed surveys were returned (26% return rate). Three hundred ninety-five individuals submitted a survey through the online Web page. Michalak and Szabo's (1998) guidelines for Internet research were used both in the Web page design and in recruitment efforts.

RESULTS

Final Sample

In the final analysis, the data from written and Web-based survey participants were deemed similar and were combined. Twenty-six surveys (6.24%) were eliminated because their individual differences were beyond the scope of this study. Two (.48%) of these identified as men and 24 (5.76%) participants responded from outside of the United States. With the remaining data, the initial regression analysis tests of normality assumptions extricated four participants as outliers in the sample. One of these participants identified as heterosexual and was eliminated from further analysis for not meeting the participant criteria. Another of the outliers had an unusually high SSE score and was also eliminated. The other two participants appeared to have no substantive reason for being removed from the participant pool and were therefore left in the data set for the remainder of the analyses. Sixteen (3.84%) participants who did not identify sexual orientation, gender, or country of residence or who did not complete at least half of the items for each inventory were removed from the data pool. Following this process of eliminating outliers, irrelevant data, or incomplete surveys, the final sample was comprised of 373 lesbian and bisexual women, which was a loss of 44 (10.55%) participants from the original respondents.

Data Analysis

The means, standard deviations, and ranges for the participants on the independent and dependent variables are summarized in Table 1.

The results of a multiple regression analysis illustrated that the simultaneous combination of the four independent variables (sexist events,

TABLE 1. Means, standard deviations, and ranges on dependent and independent variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Positive psychological well being	4.75	.64	2.83–5.88
Sexist events	2.54	.70	1.10–5.60
Heterosexist events	2.40	.75	1.06–5.17
Self-concealment	2.31	.92	1.00–5.00
Self-monitoring	4.18	.62	1.62–5.77

N = 373.

heterosexist events, self-concealment, and self-monitoring) explained 42.58% of the variance in psychological well being, $F = 68.23(4, 368)$, $p < .001$. A closer examination of the relative importance of the variables determined that it was self-concealment ($\beta = -.63$, $p < .001$) and self-monitoring ($\beta = .25$, $p < .001$) that significantly influenced psychological well being. Correlations among variables are shown in Table 2. The correlation between self-concealment and psychological well being was moderately strong, $r = -.60$, $p < .01$, and in the expected direction, such that as women reported higher levels of self-concealment, they had diminished positive psychological well being. The positive correlation between self-monitoring and psychological well being was smaller, but statistically significant, $r = .18$, $p < .01$ and in the expected direction. This suggests that among lesbian and bisexual women, there is a positive relationship between psychological well being and the combined coping

TABLE 2. Correlation matrix of psychological well being and independent variables

Variable	1	2	3	4
Positive psychological well being	-.13*	-.17**	-.60**	.18**
Independent variables				
1. Sexist events	—	.65**	.29**	.16**
2. Heterosexist events		—	.28**	.15**
3. Self-concealment			—	.11*
4. Self-monitoring				—

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

construct of greater ability to modify self-presentation and higher sensitivity to expressive behavior of others. Although the correlations between sexist events and psychological well being ($r = -.14, p < .05$) and between heterosexist events and psychological well being ($r = -.17, p < .01$) were statistically significant and in the expected direction, the magnitude of the correlation was too small to be of substantive importance, and in the presence of concealment and self-monitoring, they did not significantly influence well being.

Table 3 shows the multiple regression results for the four independent variables. These results indicated that lesbian and bisexual women who actively conceal more, have a lower sense of overall positive psychological well being, and that women who reported a greater ability to modify self-presentation and who reported a higher sensitivity to expressive behavior of others, have a higher sense of well being.

The results of the multiple regression analysis with the 77 women of color illustrated that the simultaneous combination of the four independent variables (sexist events, heterosexist events, self-concealment, and self-monitoring) explained 46.15% of the variance in psychological well being, $F = 15.42(4, 72), p < .001$. A closer examination of the relative importance of the variables determined that only self-concealment ($\beta = -.63$) and self-monitoring ($\beta = .41$) significantly influence psychological well being. These results were consistent with those for the total sample and indicated that lesbian and bisexual women of color who actively conceal more, have a lower sense of overall positive psychological well being, and that lesbian and bisexual women of color who reported a greater ability to modify self-presentation and who reported a higher sensitivity to expressive behavior of others, have a higher sense of well being.

TABLE 3. Minority stress and coping variables explaining positive psychological well being

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SEB</i>	<i>B</i>
Sexist events	.04	.05	.04
Heterosexist events	-.05	.05	-.06
Self-concealment	-.44	.03	-.63***
Self-monitoring	.26	.04	.25***

$R^2 = .43$ ($N = 373$), $p < .001$. *** $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

Although there were some very small correlations between frequency of sexist and heterosexist events and positive psychological well being, the primary findings of this study suggest that there is no direct relationship between these minority stressors and overall positive psychological functioning for lesbian and bisexual women. Therefore, this project does not support minority stress theories which propose that external pressures from the daily hassles of sexism and heterosexism diminish well being over a lifetime (Allison, 1998; Brooks, 1981; DiPlacido, 1998a; Meyer, 1995).

These results contrast previous work which has linked sexist events to well being (Landrine et al., 1995, Moradi & Subich, 1998), as well as studies which have established a relationship between heterosexist events and well being (DiPlacido, 1998a; Meyer, 1995; Ross, 1990; Waldo, 1999). Well being in all of these studies was described as absence of negative psychological symptoms or health problems, or as self-esteem or positive states of mind. The data from the current project do concur with DiPlacido's (1998b) pilot study with 17 women, which did not find significant relationships between gay-related life events and psychological or physical health outcomes. DiPlacido (1998b) hypothesized that the absence of significance resulted from too little statistical power; however, the results of the current study indicate that there may have been some validity in her original findings.

One of the principal problems addressed in this project was the issue of psychological well being measurement in previous minority stress work. Throughout the minority stress literature, and particularly in the gay and lesbian stress literature, psychological well being has been defined as satisfaction, as absence of illness, or as a conglomeration of constructs lacking theoretical foundation (Coyle, 1993; DiPlacido, 1998a; Meyer, 1995; Napholz, 1995; Waldo, 1999). As such, it has been unclear whether or not membership in a minority group produces stress that actually impacts long-term positive mental health and functioning. This research sought to remedy this problem by employing a theoretically based, positively focused measure of the psychological well being construct (e.g., Psychological Well-Being Inventory; Ryff, 1989). That frequency of heterosexist and sexist events was not significantly related to overall positive psychological well-being might speak to the resiliency of lesbian and bisexual women in the face of social environmental stress. It may mean that being a member of a minority group and experiencing environmental

hassles based on that group membership does not automatically make one susceptible to poor mental health. Particularly for women, who have always lived in a patriarchal society and expect harassment and daily hassles based on their identity, these results may mean that lesbian and bisexual women somehow adapt to the stress of societal prejudice.

These results do not appear to be due to lower reporting of sexist or heterosexist events. The participants in this study report an equal or slightly higher frequency of sexist events than those women who participated in Landrine and Klonoff's (1997) norming study. Although norming of the SHE is still needed, there is no evidence in this research to suggest that the participants were underreporting frequencies of heterosexist events. For example, 70% of the women said that they had been treated unfairly by family because they are lesbian or bisexual at least "once in a while." Seventy-eight percent of the women had been called a derogatory name referring to her sexual orientation at some time in her life, and 37% had been called such a name more than once in a while.

Just because an individual is functioning well does not mean that she is not also distressed in some ways. This research has illuminated that positive well being and negative psychological symptoms may be two distinct constructs which can not be used interchangeably or on the same continuum. These results do not indicate that sexism and heterosexism do not hurt lesbian and bisexual women. Future research will need to distinguish between physical and psychological distress versus psychological well being in relation to minority stress.

There was a very strong relationship between self-concealment and psychological well being in this sample of lesbian and bisexual women. Previous research on the relationship of concealment and disclosure to elements of well being has been mixed. The results of the current project coincide with earlier qualitative and quantitative research, demonstrating significant relationships between both general and sexual orientation specific self-concealment and some aspects of well being (DiPlacido, 1998a; Ellis & Riggle, 1995; Hall, 1986; Healy, 1993). These results are not consistent with the research showing no direct relationship between sexual orientation self-disclosure and well being, as measured by relationship satisfaction, neurotic anxiety, or psychological adjustment (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Miranda & Storms, 1989).

As suggested in the introduction, self-concealment may provide a better explanation of variance in psychological well being than self-disclosure (Larson & Chastain, 1990). Self-concealment is an active process which consumes energy and may produce worries about accidental self-disclosure.

It takes considerably more effort to consistently monitor one's language and behavior in a self-censoring manner than to make decisions about when to disclose identity information (Healy, 1993). These results are consistent with the idea that being more "out" is not necessarily a direct link to greater psychological well being or more advanced identity development (Cain, 1991; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Rather, feeling or thinking that one must conceal personal information may be detrimental to positive psychological well being.

Much of the research addressing stress and coping has focused on fixed coping styles (Kohn, 1996). There is some evidence that women who cope effectively with minority stress do so by choosing an appropriate coping response for the specific situational factors involved (Hall, 1986; Lykes, 1983). The results of the current study are consistent with the work of Anderson and Randlet (1993) and the hypothesis that self-monitoring skills contribute to positive psychological well being in lesbian women. As the women in Lyke's (1983) study reported, successfully negotiating lifetime prejudice to one's advantage requires an ability to recognize social cues about prejudice and to respond discretely to different social configurations. These skills may be useful regardless of the particular prejudice in question. By knowing how to read social cues, perhaps they are better able to make choices about their own behavior, so that they can choose friends and environments carefully to best fit their goals and values in life.

A strong effort was made to recruit lesbian and bisexual women of color in order to explore the ways in which minority stress and flexible coping relate to psychological well being for women who experience triple minority status. It appears that the variables which impact psychological well being for lesbians and bisexual women as a whole, impact psychological well being for lesbian and bisexual women of color to an even greater degree. These findings provide empirical support for previous theoretical writings about lesbian women of color.

Several authors have suggested that lesbians of color may experience family, community, and spiritual/religious tolerance of a lesbian relationship as long as the lesbian nature of that relationship is not talked about openly (Greene, 1994; Greene & Boyd-Franklin, 1996; Morales, 1990). This means that some lesbian and bisexual women of color may need to make a choice about whether to not talk about their sexual orientation and continue receiving family and community support or to lose family and community support by openly disclosing their sexual orientation identity. The consequence of this nondisclosure may be an

absence of self-acceptance, one essential piece of positive psychological well being.

Maintaining nondisclosure and remaining connected to family and community may be more desirable for lesbian and bisexual women of color than for White lesbian and bisexual women because community and family provide buffers against racism in the dominant society (Demo & Allen, 1996; Greene, 1994). One part of this buffer could be modeling for how to effectively cope with prejudice, which may explain the strong impact of self-monitoring on positive psychological well being for lesbian and bisexual women of color. While most lesbian and bisexual women do not grow up in gay households, as a part of a visible minority, most lesbian and bisexual women of color do grow up in racial minority households. From an early age, they may be learning flexible coping skills for responding to racism and sexism. These skills can then be generalized to encounters with heterosexism. Self-monitoring skills, as a part of flexible coping, may be contributing more to lesbian and bisexual women of color's long-term positive psychological well being because they have used these skills all their lives.

As with any study, this one had its limitations. One must always use caution in interpreting self-report data. It is possible that there was some response bias in the participants' answers in order to make minority stress seem greater or to appear healthier. Because of the great care taken to make this an anonymous survey, it is hoped that participants felt free to answer the questions honestly. As indicated above, sexist event scores in this study are comparable to those in past research. The women also did not seem to be trying to appear overly healthy. A comparison of three well-being subscale scores reported by Smider, Essex, and Ryff (1996) in their study of 102 older women to the same subscale scores in this study indicates that participants in this project did not seem to be responding in a more socially desirable way about well being.

Self-report Internet methods also leave some question about the true identity of the respondents. One may even wonder if everyone who submitted a survey was actually a lesbian or bisexual woman. There is reason to believe that they were, given that recruitment sources were primarily mediated discussion lists serving lesbian and bisexual women. A mediated discussion list is one which is monitored by the list owner, who decides who may or may not participate.

Although this study made an effort to use known scales with previously proven psychometric properties, there was one unavoidable exception. An appropriate measure of heterosexist daily hassles was not

available at the time of data collection, and so one was devised for this project. To minimize the problems of a previously untested instrument, a pilot study was run, which demonstrated strong internal consistency in the SHE.

In addition, the SCS is a general measure, which does not address sexual orientation directly. Thus, it is not possible to know for sure whether participants were referring to their sexual orientation specifically. Conversely, it may be that this less face valid instrument allowed for a more subtle measure of sexual orientation concealment, which might have helped control for self-report bias.

There are several areas where future research can expand on this study. The unexpected internet responses from international women suggest an area of exploration examining cross-cultural differences. The preliminary results from this small international sample ($n = 24$) hint at differences between countries in frequency of heterosexist events. It might be interesting to target more international listservs in a similar study to compare heterosexism cross-culturally.

Bisexual women comprised a significant portion of the data sample ($n = 92$). It may be interesting to look at differences between bisexual and lesbian women. Do bisexual women experience the same frequency of heterosexist events as lesbians? An initial comparison among the participants in this study suggests that they do not. It would also be interesting to look at the effect of partner gender on heterosexist events, concealment, and psychological well being.

Future research may want to distinguish between sexual orientation concealment and other types of concealment that may be influencing psychological well being. In addition, future studies of minority stress may want to consider the effects of external daily hassles on the internal experience of lesbian and bisexual women. Other projects may want to look at psychological distress as well as psychological well being. The results of this study with regard to sexism and heterosexism indicate that future studies of well being with all populations must be very mindful of the way in which well being is defined and measured.

The self-monitoring findings from this research are original and need to be replicated, along with exploring other possible components of flexible coping skills, which may be particularly important in coping with minority stress. Similarly, future research could use the psychological well-being subscales to clarify what parts of well being are affected by concealment and self-monitoring.

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