

**The Experience of Coming Out for Lesbians
Sexually Abused in Childhood**

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ABSTRACT

Although existing literature is rich with descriptions of the process of coming out for lesbian women, the present study is distinctive in its systematic examination of coming out from the perspective of lesbian women who were sexually abused as children. Through the hermeneutic-phenomenological analysis of interviews with selected participants who identified as lesbian women, the objective of this study was to identify and describe participants' perspectives of childhood sexual abuse, coming out experiences, and their perception of how these experiences might interrelate. Within the complex layers that were common to all the participants, the researcher attempted to interpret and make sense of phenomena across all cases, while respecting and recognizing the meanings that each participant brought to the interview.

The results of this study were consistent with findings from previous studies that suggested maintaining a lesbian identity is an ongoing task, continually informed by events and relationships that typically occur during the lifespan of an individual. However, in the course of this investigation, the findings pointed to a new understanding—the coming out process becomes more complicated when histories of childhood sexual abuse need to be considered. While family and social factors had powerful influences on coming out for all the participants, the emotional and behavioral strategies that each woman adapted in order to cope with long-term sequelae of CSA, also appeared to have considerable impact on the coming out process as well.

*This is for my daughters, Becky and Dina.
I am endlessly amazed by their grace, wisdom, and inner light.*

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