



Lesbians and Alcohol Use

BY ESTHER ROTHBLUM

Do lesbians drink more alcohol than heterosexual women? In the not-too-distant past, the lesbian bar was one of the only places where lesbians could go to meet other women. On the other hand, many lesbian bars have closed down, indicating perhaps that lesbians are drinking less and have other places to socialize.

health & wellbeing

"Some of the early studies suggested that up to one third of lesbians were serious alcohol abusers," says Dr. Tonda Hughes of the Department of Nursing at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "But often these researchers collected their data from lesbians in bars. So it's not surprising that this method found a large number of lesbians who were heavy drinkers. I think that that is why we have the belief that lesbians are at risk for alcohol abuse."

Nevertheless, Dr. Hughes believes that lesbians drank more than heterosexual women in the 1960s and 1970s. "Lower rates of drinking

among lesbians now is partly due to changes in drinking in the whole population, to more health consciousness, and to the AIDS crisis, which has alerted us to the risks of alcohol and drug use," she says.

She also felt that lesbians used to drink more during the coming out process, in order to deal with social anxiety and stigma involved in meeting other women and coming to terms with being a lesbian.

In a study conducted in Chicago, New York City, and Minneapolis/St. Paul in the mid-1980s, lesbians overall were no more likely to report alcohol-related problems than were heterosexual women. Only lesbians in the 50-60 year old age range reported more alcohol problems than did their heterosexual counterparts.

Dr. Hughes has conducted a series of studies with lesbians and heterosexual women that focus on various mental health factors, including alcohol use and abuse. Her results indicate that lesbians these days are no more likely to drink heavily than are heterosexual women. In fact, lesbians were more likely to report abstaining from alcohol altogether for the past year than were heterosexual women.

Most of the lesbian and heterosexual women in her sample

drank alcohol at low levels. White lesbians, however, drank more than did African American or Latina lesbians.

"Interestingly, there are more lesbians who report that they are in recovery, though," she adds. Only two percent of heterosexual women had been in treatment for alcohol or in 12-step programs, compared with 17 percent of lesbians—a large difference. This may be the result of prior heavy drinking among lesbians.

Or it may be that lesbians are more aware of substance use issues than are heterosexual women. One of the questions in the survey is "Have you ever wondered if you had a drinking problem?" Forty-seven percent of lesbians answered 'yes' to this item, compared with only 14 percent of the heterosexual women. This finding again hints at heavy alcohol use in the past on the part of lesbians.

Finally, there was a trend for older lesbians to report more drinking, and these are the lesbians who were young adults during times when drinking was more part of lesbian communities.

Dr. Hughes is interested in exploring patterns of drinking across various age groups of lesbians. Specifically, she is interested in whether lesbians who came of age during the era in

which alcohol played a large part in lesbian communities continue to drink heavily. She is also interested in the question of how lesbians and their partners moderate each others drinking; research on heterosexuals shows that partners' drinking is a major factor in how much people drink.

All in all, we still know very little about all the factors that

increase or decrease lesbians' risk for alcohol abuse or alcohol-related problems. ▼

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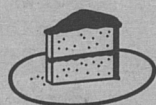
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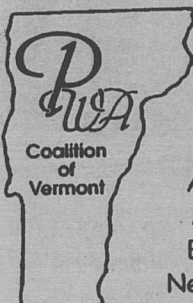
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