LESBIAN LIVES: PERSONAL IDEOLOGY, MENTAL HEALTH, AND SELF IDENTITY

By

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PREVIEW

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Abstract
LESBIAN LIVES: PERSONAL IDEOLOGY, MENTAL HEALTH, AND SELF IDENTITY

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Marquette University, 2009

Personal ideology is a component of personality that guides an individual's understanding of where value lies in life. Information on lesbians and personal ideology is a sparsely researched domain. Due to this group's position as a stigmatized minority, it is likely that a lesbian's personal ideology plays a significant role in how she adapts and functions within a society grounded in distinctly heterosexual norms. In this study, Silvan Tomkins' (1963, 1965, 1987) polarity theory of ideology was used to examine how personal ideology functions in the lives of lesbians. Two hundred twenty-six self-identified lesbians were surveyed to address two primary goals: (1) to investigate how individual differences in personal ideology impact the mental health of lesbians, and (2) to explore how personal ideology manifests in the self identities or life stories of lesbians. Data was collected using both quantitative and qualitative methods to gather information on ideology, mental wellness, and self-identity in a lesbian sample. A grounded theory approach was used to examine exemplar narratives and develop hypotheses regarding the manifestation of the two defining dimensions of personal ideology in lesbian stories, namely, humanism and normativism. Descriptive analysis reveals a snapshot of mental health concerns and reasons for seeking mental health treatment in a lesbian sample. Results of the study generally did not support predicted hypotheses in that differences in levels of humanistic and normative ideology were not significantly related to mental health variables. Moreover, hypotheses generated from grounded theory analysis of ideological exemplars were not supported upon examination of the remaining narratives, and thus, did not reflect true normative/humanistic differences in lesbian expression of life episodes. Alternative explanations and directions for future research are discussed

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INTRODUCTION

Personal ideology is a component of personality that guides an individual's understanding of where value lies in life. Research on personal ideology in heterosexual samples has supported the assertion that ideological belief exerts an enormous impact on an individual's life in terms of the contributions it makes to individual value systems (Carlson & Brincka, 1987; de St. Aubin, 1996; Stone, 1991), daily thinking and behavior (Carlson & Levy, 1970), decision making (Williams, 1984), and problem solving (Schultz, Stone & Christie, 1992, 1997).

Less is know about how personal ideology manifests in the identities of individuals of minority sexual orientation. Specifically, information on lesbians and ideology is a sparsely researched domain. Due to this group's position as a stigmatized minority, it is likely that a lesbian's personal ideology plays a significant role in how she adapts and functions within a society grounded in distinctly heterosexual norms. Maintaining an ideological perspective that adopts a conservative stance on societal norms and values conformity would conflict with a sexual identity that is outside of those norms. This could create an incongruency that could potentially manifest in high degrees of internal conflict. Lesbians who take this ideological perspective may not only continually receive, but also internalize, a message of being inherently wrong. Alternatively, maintaining an ideological perspective that adopts a liberal stance on societal norms and places less value on conformity may be beneficial to individuals with a sexual identity positioned outside of those norms. Consequently, it seems important to understand the role ideology plays in daily functioning in order to foster health and wellness in the lesbian community.

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The current study was designed to explore how personal ideology functions in the lives of lesbians. Two hundred twenty-six self-identified lesbians were surveyed to address two primary goals: (1) to investigate how individual differences in personal ideology impact the mental health of lesbians, and (2) to explore how personal ideology manifests in the self identities or life stories of lesbians. Data was collected using both quantitative and qualitative methods in order to gather a rich and comprehensive picture of personal ideology, mental wellness, and self-identity in a lesbian sample.

This study initially explores data related to mental health and treatment seeking in order to generate a profile of significant mental health concerns and treatment barriers for lesbians. The study then tests hypotheses related to how individual differences in personal ideology relate to the mental health of lesbians. Specifically, hypotheses are tested based on quantitative and qualitative data regarding the relationship between levels of humanism and normativism and responses on measures of reasons for seeking mental health treatment, reasons for considering mental health treatment, reasons for considering suicide, treatment seeking barriers, mental health concerns related to lesbianism, suicidal ideation, and substance abuse. Finally, a grounded theory approach is used on ideological exemplars to derive hypotheses regarding the manifestation of the two defining dimensions of personal ideology, humanism and normativism, in lesbian stories. The derived hypotheses are then tested to determine if they reflect true normative/humanistic differences in lesbian expression of life episodes.

To set the stage for the designed study, relevant background information will be reviewed. First, research examining the impact of personal ideology on lesbian well-being will be discussed. The theoretical roots of Silvan Tomkins' (1963, 1965, 1967)

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polarity theory of personal ideology is used as the primary theoretical guide for this project and will be examined in the context of his broader script theory of personality. Next, the impact of maintaining either a humanistic or normative ideological perspective will be discussed in terms of its possible influence on lesbian mental health and well-being. Based on previous research, hypotheses concerning the relationship between ideology and mental wellness are outlined and tested. Finally, research exploring how personal ideology may manifest in the self-defining narratives of lesbians will be discussed. The perspective that stories reflect the most salient aspects of experience and, moreover, establish and reinforce self-identities is discussed in terms of how lesbian ideology may be expressed through narrative. The process of applying grounded theory techniques to these narratives to develop hypotheses regarding how the stories of humanists and normatives may differ is then outlined and later applied to humanist and normative exemplar stories. Predictions related to how the narratives of humanistic and normative lesbians differ are then tested.

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Script Theory

Tomkins' (1963, 1987) script theory is generally concerned with the construction of personality as an interplay between past, current, and future interpretations of salient events. The theory describes how both information processing and emotional experience are closely related to behavior and thought. Tomkins' script theory emerged out of both the humanistic and cognitive affective movements in psychology (Singer, 1984).

The humanistic movement in psychology focused on understanding the whole person. This movement was concerned with defining both the uniqueness of the individual and those aspects of human living that transcended the individual level and

instead manifested in commonalities across all human experience (McAdams, 2006; Singer, 1984). The foundation of Tomkins' script theory of personality within the humanistic movement is tied to the writing and research of Gordon Allport and Henry Murray. Allport focused on the analysis of personal documents as a method for defining individual traits or values (Alexander, 1990; Singer, 1984). Through his research, Allport developed a theory that depicted humans as beings striving for new experiences who attempt to organize these experiences into broader concepts. Consistent with Tomkins' belief in the formation of scripts, Allport saw individuals as constantly trying to construct and define concepts in order to maintain a degree of order and rationality in their lives. Murray's influence on script theory is grounded in his belief in the personological tradition. Murray believed that personality "is a temporal whole and to understand a part of it one must have a sense, though vague, of the totality" (1938, p. 102). Similarly, Tomkins sought to understand the whole person as an active participant in constructing his or her identity across an entire lifespan (McAdams, 2006; Singer, 1984).

The cognitive-affective movement in psychology was primarily concerned with how individuals process information. Researchers such as George Kelly sought to understand how humans organize new information (McAdams, 2006; Singer 1984). Specifically researchers sought to investigate how novel information was used to carry out intentions and how individuals incorporated novel information into their overall belief system. Like Tomkins, these researchers were concerned with the motivation behind behavior. Where Tomkins' theory departs from traditional cognitive processing models is in both his emphasis on emotion as the primary motivational factor in humans, and his belief in the transactional relationship, rather than an interactional relationship,

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between an individual and his or her environment. Whereas an interactional model proposes that fixed characteristics of an individual interact with characteristics of an environment, a transactional model proposes that both an individual and his or her environment interact and influence one another simultaneously.

Tomkins' own cognitive affective theory positioned emotions as the primary motivators of behavior (McAdams, 2006; Tomkins, 1965, 1978). He saw emotions as the key to both amplifying innate drive signals, and cueing an individual into reacting to novel information. Thus, for Tomkins, emotions not only serve as reactions to internal experiences, but also as reactions to the information processing that transpires during experiencing and behaving. Within his cognitive affective theory, Tomkins (1978) identified eight primary emotions that aid in clarifying complex information processing: enjoyment, surprise, anger, distress, sadness, fear, shame, and contempt/disgust. The tendency to display primarily positive or negative emotions across diverse situations is associated with both the individual's socialization, or relationship to his or her early environmental experiences, and with his or her innate temperament. Differences in childhood socialization may lead to more or less emphasis on the anticipation of positive or negative events. Consequently, this early socialization may influence an individual's capacity or propensity to express either positive or negative emotions later in life. It is in this childhood socialization of different types of affect that individuals begin to develop various life scenes and scripts that, when reorganized and refined, eventually form the structure for belief systems.

Building on his cognitive affective theory, Tomkins' (1963, 1978, 1987) script theory maintains that individual personality development may be understood as a plot

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composed of the integration of various life scenes. Script theory provides a method for studying personality based on developmental, biological, and historical factors of an individual's life. The scene is the basic unit of analysis in script theory. Each scene is composed of some emotional expression towards an event or object within some identifiable episode. Individuals construct countless numbers of scenes in a day's time that vary in both content and importance (Carlson, 1982). For instance, the happiness (affect) an individual experiences upon hearing a joke on a TV sitcom (object) is as much a scene as is a person's grief (affect) reaction when hearing of a close friend's death (object). The salience of a particular scene is dependent on the interconnectedness and relationship to other life scenes. The more interconnected a scene, the more likely it will become an embedded aspect of personality structure. Scenes that are not connected by scope or content are referred to as "transient" scenes (Tomkins, 1978). Transient scenes fail to play a significant role in personality and instead become lost with countless other meaningless life scenes (Carlson, 1982). Those scenes which emerge in the structures of personality are those that either commonly arise in a person's life, "habitual" scenes, or those which represent a person's most significant needs or issues in life, "nuclear" scenes (Carlson, 1982; Tomkins, 1978). Interconnected life scenes help to form consistent rules, schemas, or scripts, for controlling, interpreting, and predicting future experiences (Carlson, 1981).

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A script can be described as a particular way of thinking, cognitive schema, or filter through which an individual is able to interpret experiences. Cornell describes a script as "the ongoing process of a self-defining and sometimes self-limiting psychological construction of reality" (1988, p. 281). In Tomkins' (1963, 1978, 1987)

theory, scripts are initially formed by connecting emotion based life scenes into a general pattern of experience, and are maintained to provide a way to interpret life's events. Over time, these scripts or patterns strengthen through a process called psychological magnification (Tomkins, 1978). Psychological magnification involves the interconnection of scenes. It is a process whereby a group of scenes is expanded through incorporation of new memories, thoughts, behaviors and emotions (Carlson, 1981). Magnification helps to establish cognitive rules of interpretation so that new life scenes are eventually experienced through these script rules. While scripts are capable of establishing rules for information processing, script formation is a process of continual change and reorganization. It is a transactional model of personality development according to which interaction between an individual and his or her environment causes constant evaluation, redefinition, and reconstruction of script content.

The legitimacy of Tomkins' theory of script construction and maintenance has been empirically tested and supported. The next section focuses on the empirical support for the process of script magnification, and the development of commitment, nuclear, and affect management scripts as outlined by Tomkins' script theory of personality.

Empirical Support for Script Theory

In an effort to provide empirical support for Tomkins' script theory, Carlson and Carlson (1984) used a plot generation exercise to determine whether differences exist in the magnification of positive and negative plots, and whether differences exist in the emotions associated with either positive or negative plots. In the plot generation exercise, participants were asked to generate four 90 minute television show plots based on either one positive (excitement or joy) or one negative (fear or shame) affect. Each

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plot was analyzed for (a) presences or absence of an interpersonal theme, and (b) psychological magnification. As described earlier, psychological magnification is the process through which scenes are connected in order to establish and strengthen scripts (Carlson, 1981). Based on Tomkins' script theory, it was predicted that plots centered on the social affects of joy or shame would contain more interpersonal themes than plots centered on excitement or fear (Carlson, 1984). Also, the researchers predicted that plots centered on negative affects (fear and shame) would elicit more psychological magnification than plots centered on positive affects (excitement and joy). Results supported both hypotheses. Those plots based on the social affects (joy or shame) contained more interpersonal themes than plots based on the non-social affects (excitement or fear). Moreover, a greater degree of psychological magnification was generated in negative affect (shame and fear) plots as evidenced by higher ratings of plot elaboration, character development, and psychological implications.

In another investigation, Carlson (1982) employed Tomkins' script theory to assess the various ways in which altruism may manifest itself in individual personality. She theoretically identified altruistic tendencies as either primarily "helping" or "reforming" in nature. She defined "helping" scripts as those primarily focused on "the alleviation of suffering in individual others," and "reforming" as those focused on "opposition to social conditions that oppress groups of others" (Carlson, 1982, p. 599). She tested whether these distinctions in altruism may characterize a personality in a manner consistent with Tomkins' commitment script. Within Tomkins' (1987) script theory, a commitment script is one that represents the persistence to commit and invest substantial energy to a long term activity in order to magnify positive affect. Secondary

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data analysis was performed on four studies that originally targeted individuals whose major concerns in life were altruistic in nature. She initially examined case studies of five helpers, originally investigated by McWilliams (1976), to determine the fit of Tomkins' script theory to their altruistic behaviors. In general results demonstrated support for Tomkins' hypotheses. Four of the five cases contained sufficient evidence that the patterns of altruistic behavior represented stable personality characteristics that persisted across contexts, and thus, represented commitment scripts.

Additionally, Carlson (1982) performed secondary data analysis on three separate studies of individuals classified as "reforming" altruists (London, 1970; Rosenhan, 1970; Tomkins, 1965). Within all three studies, reforming altruistic scenes were found across various contexts within individual cases. Because the reforming scenes appeared across diverse contexts, it is likely that the individuals' altruistic behaviors represented commitment scenes. In general, secondary analysis of altruistic scripts validated the conceptualization of commitment scripts as described Tomkins' (1987) script theory of personality.

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Another type of script found within Tomkins' (1987) theory is the nuclear script. Within script theory, a nuclear script often emerges out of a nuclear scene in which a positive event in an individual's life is spoiled and thus turns to a negative event. The scripts formed from these nuclear scenes are characterized by negative affect and often represent confusion about an individual's needs and goals. In another investigation, Carlson (1981, 1986) utilized a single case analysis to validate and trace the development of a nuclear script. Carlson analyzed autobiographical and dream material collected from a series of interviews with a volunteer named Jane. A nuclear scene emerged from

content analysis depicting the four-year-old Jane experiencing shame and anger following a misunderstanding with her father. Carlson found that salient features of this scene, including the emotions of shame and anger, re-occurred and influenced the development of Jane throughout life, demonstrating the centrality and influence of a nuclear script. Results also supported the availability of Tomkins' script theory in providing a framework for the analysis of case material.

A major component of Tomkins' script theory is the ideological script. According to Tomkins (1987), an ideological script is a particular script used to discriminate "moral, aesthetic, and truth values, what to believe is good and bad, beautiful and ugly, true or false" (p. 160). The ideological script is central to many aspects of human life, based on the significant influence it exerts on how people interpret the world and use those interpretations to then behave. This study is primarily concerned with how an ideological script is maintained in the lives of lesbians. The next section explores theoretical and empirical facets of Tomkins' polarity theory of personal ideology as it is situated in his broader script theory.

Polarity Theory of Personal Ideology

Personal ideology is an individual understanding of where value lies in human life and how life should be lived. It is a system of belief or world view that is used to interpret experience. Individual personal ideology operates in order to allow an individual to assign value, distinguish right from wrong, develop personal views on morality, and balance conflicting demands of society. The influence of personal ideology has been demonstrated in such research areas as religious belief (de St. Aubin, 1996, 1999), political orientation (Allport, 1929), parenting style (Elkhart & Alcock, 1970),

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interpersonal style (Eckhardt & Alcock, 1970), and views on social policy (Gilbert & Levinson, 1956; Smith, 1949). The polarity theory of personal ideology, as constructed by Silvan Tomkins (1963, 1965, 1987), provides a comprehensive framework of how a particular ideological stance contributes to value-based judgments of various dimensions of human life.

Personal ideology is a central component of personality and contributes to judgments of what is valuable and worthy in the world. As Tomkins explains:

> Ideological scripts attempt to provide general orientation of the place of human beings in the cosmos and in the society in which they live, an account of their central values, guidance for their realization, sanctions for their fulfillment, their violation, and their justification, and celebration of how life should be lived from here to eternity (1987, p. 170).

Tomkins further describes the ideological script as the most important subgroup of scripts because they "endow fact with value and affect" (1987, p. 170).

Within Tomkins' (1965) script theory, personal ideology results as a function of an individual's ideo-affective posture. Theoretically, an ideo-affective posture is a loosely organized, yet well formed, set of feelings and ideas that contain all the components that would eventually be expressed as a formal ideology. An individual's ideo-affective posture results from systematic differences in childhood socialization and innate temperament. It is the resonance of this ideo-affective posture that allows for accurate prediction of what ideological posture or view may be expressed by an individual. This ideo-affective resonance is "the engagement of loosely organized beliefs and feelings…when the ideo-affective postures are sufficiently similar to the ideological posture, so they reinforce and strengthen each other" (Tomkins, 1965, p. 74). It is

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