This research uncovers a pattern of support and the existence of a relationship network that runs strongly counter to the stereotyped view that lesbians in later life find themselves friendless and without support. The hypothesis that the older lesbian has developed friendship networks to replace missing or weak kin ties is substantiated. The findings are based on 20 in-depth, structured interviews with lesbians whose ages range from 50 to 73.

THE OLDER LESBIAN

LOVE RELATIONSHIPS AND FRIENDSHIP PATTERNS

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This article explores the subject of intimacy and aging by studying a heretofore neglected population of women, lesbians over the age of 50. The authors focus particularly on the patterns of support and nature of relationships that appear to exist for the women studied, whose ages range from 50 to 73. Much of the data presented question popular prevailing myths about older lesbians, especially those that picture the older lesbian as lonely, totally isolated, and without anyone to love or care about her in old age. Special attention is given to two areas that contribute to an understanding of support and intimacy in later life: (1) love relationships and (2) friendship patterns.

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Other issues which this article will touch upon include the following.

(a) Are uncoupled lesbians single by choice or through just not having found the right person? What decisions have these lesbians who are now over the age of 50 made about their love relationships?

(b) What are long-term relationships between lesbians like? Does sexuality continue into old age? Does sexuality change as lesbians age, and in what ways?

(c) When the sampled older lesbians ended a long-term relationship (equivalent to divorce), did they get the support (emotional or financial) they needed? Were friends, or relatives, or co-workers told of the breakup? What role did each group play in providing comfort or understanding? Indeed, was there any support at all, from anyone? How does a closeted lesbian cope when she has lost a mate and the people around her are aware only of the more minimal loss of a "roommate"?

(d) Where do older lesbians meet other lesbians? In what kind of settings did the respondents meet their mates?

(e) In what ways do the lives of feminist lesbians differ from the lives of nonfeminist lesbians?

Wolf (1978), in reporting preliminary trends in her research on close friendship patterns of older lesbians, contends that because older lesbians have less chance than heterosexuals for close family ties due to social stigma and because they are also less likely to have children, they have developed close friendships which offer support. Lowenthal and Haven (1968) refer to the life-long need for intimacy:

Lowenthal and Haven show that a single intimate friendship is an effective "buffer" against demoralization produced by the three major kinds of social losses that beset older people: widowhood, retirement, and diminished social participation. Indeed, the morale of people who are more isolated in old age, but who have one intimate friendship, is as high as that of people with increased social participation.