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MUTUAL BONDS: LESBIAN WOMEN'S LIVES AND COMMUNITIES

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The need to belong or feel a part of a particular group is a deeply human urge. For lesbians, it has special importance, for a sense of community helps to establish and maintain lesbian identity, gives one a sense of belonging somewhere, and provides the affirmation and acceptance that is missing in the larger culture.

(Pearlman, 1987, p. 313)

Models of lesbian identity development have become progressively more complex as researchers have learned more about lesbians' lives, but finding an affirming community is part of nearly every model of the coming out process (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002; Rust, 2003). The task of finding community must be repeated each time a lesbian relocates and is complicated by the hidden or informal nature of some communities. This chapter addresses the identity development process for lesbians, emphasizing the variety of possible developmental paths. I consider the role of identity disclosure (coming out) within this context, along with the importance of finding community. Finally, I address special issues related to the role of community in the lives of lesbians of various ethnicities, ages, religions, and locations. Therapists will find relevant recommendations for practice throughout the chapter.

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