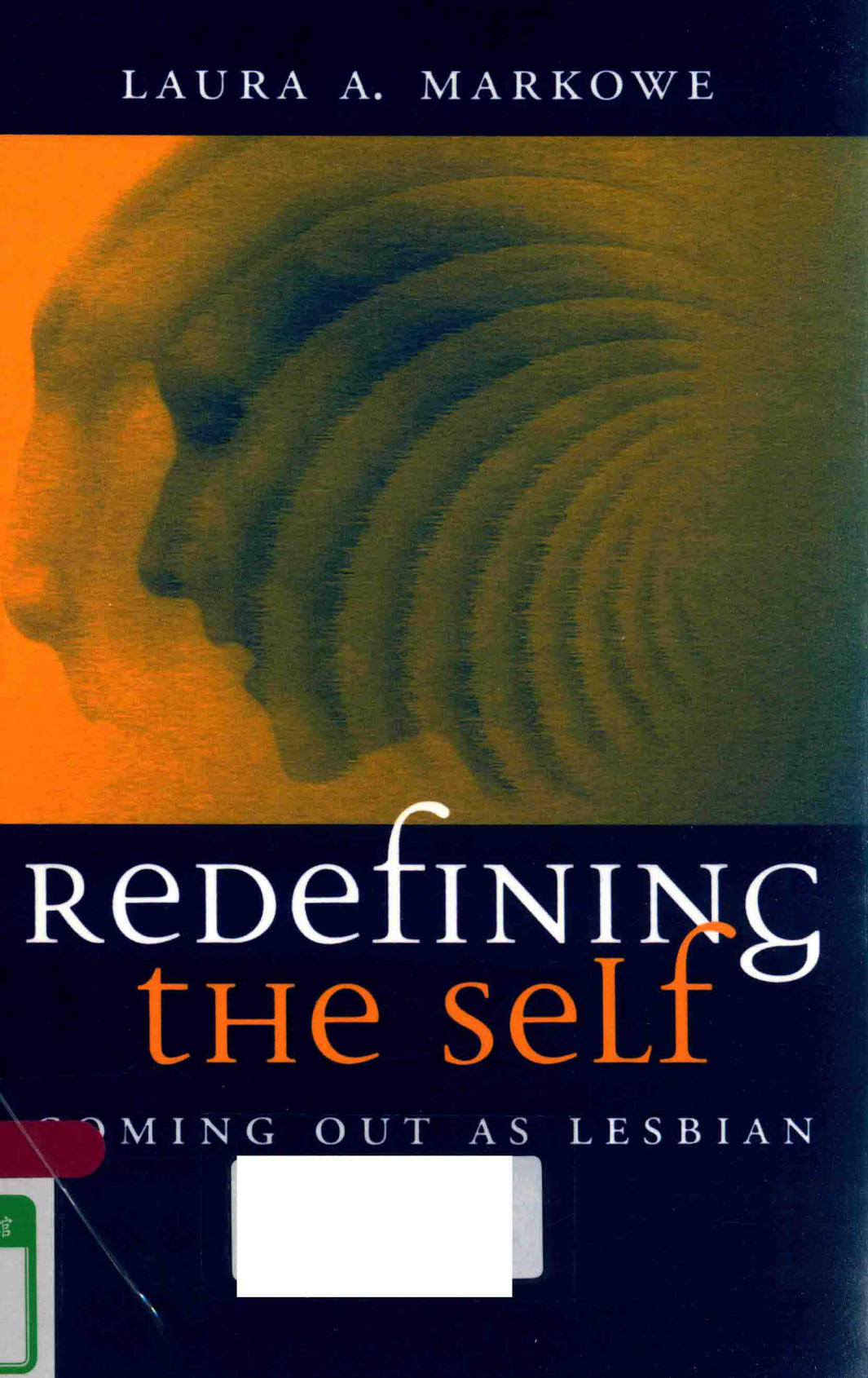


LAURA A. MARKOWE



redefining the self

COMING OUT AS LESBIAN

Redefining the Self

Coming out as Lesbian

LAURA A. MARKOWE

Polity Press

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Redefining the Self

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Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
1 Context and issues	1
Definitions	2
The coming-out process for lesbians: some issues and questions	3
Background	6
The study	9
Outline of book	10
2 A reconceptualization of coming out	12
An imaginary lesbian	12
Coming out as a process	24
3 Lesbian identity and attitudes towards homosexuality: the background	28
Lesbian identity and coming out	28
Attitudes towards homosexuality and stereotyping	44
4 A social-psychological framework for coming out	61
Lesbians as women: some issues of gender	61
Social identity	66
A societal perspective: social representations	70
Self-disclosure	80
Conclusion	86
5 The context of coming out	88
The investigation	88
The social context of coming out	94
6 Beginning with 'always' lesbian women . . .	108
The case studies	108

7 Coming out to self and others	124
Coming out to self	124
Coming out to others	133
Interplay of influences in the coming-out process	152
8 Lesbians with some heterosexual background	159
The case studies	159
A comparison of the groups	180
9 Therapy for lesbians: some issues	184
Why therapy?	184
General issues of therapy	185
Therapy with lesbians: its nature and limitations	186
Some issues in counselling/therapy of lesbians	188
Conclusions	193
10 Summary and conclusions	194
Coming out to self: a summary	194
Coming out to others: a summary	197
Interplay of influences	202
Methodological issues	203
Implications	204
Conclusions	208
References	212
Subject Index	232
Author Index	239

1

Context and issues

... when I realized that I was sexually attracted to this particular woman ... I felt absolutely terrible. I felt quite suicidal. I felt like walking into the sea ... I felt panic stricken ... and I felt quite excited and relieved in a way.
(Emma, lesbian group)

... the concept of liking someone of the same sex in that respect – in a sexual respect – is very foreign to me ... it's a foreign land. I mean it's more foreign than going to a country you know nothing about ...
(Robert, heterosexual group)

Lesbians exist within a predominantly heterosexual society. Heterosexual relations structure societal notions of gender which reflect division and power inequalities between women and men. Our society reflects particular understandings of gender, as well as ideas on human nature and 'normality'. 'Coming out', both in terms of coming to identify oneself as lesbian, and in terms of telling others about oneself, takes place within this social context.

Heterosexuals' attitudes are a fundamental influence in shaping the social context within which coming out occurs. Therefore, it is essential to consider heterosexual perspectives on homosexuality, in addition to lesbians' perceptions and experiences of coming out, to understand the coming-out process.

This study is an attempt to investigate both 'coming out to self' and 'coming out to others'. Becoming aware of oneself as lesbian is a profound experience for the individual. Analysis of 'coming out', however, requires not just investigation at the individual, intrapsychic or interpersonal levels, but also an understanding of the issue at intergroup and societal levels.

A considerable amount of anecdotal material on coming out has been published in recent years. Research, however, has tended to focus on gay men rather than lesbians, and has tended to be

American rather than British. While some women develop awareness of themselves as lesbian within a political or radical feminist context, some have been more isolated from other lesbians. It is lesbian women from this latter group that form the focus of this study. The study aims to provide a systematic investigation of the coming-out process for these more isolated lesbians, by a lesbian, from a social-psychological perspective.

After looking at definitions, some issues and questions relating to coming out will be raised. This is followed by a brief summary of the background literature and theory relevant to the study. Finally, in this chapter, an outline of the book is presented.

Definitions

Coming out

Coming out has been defined in a variety of ways in previous studies. The working definition used here covers both 'coming out to self' – becoming aware of oneself as lesbian; and 'coming out to others' – disclosing this information to other people.

Lesbian

The term 'lesbian' has its origins in the association of the Greek island of Lesbos with the poet Sappho (*circa* 600 BC). References to the use of the term 'lesbian' (in the sense of referring to female homosexuality) provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) date back to the last part of the nineteenth century. The dictionary definition of lesbian refers to women's homosexuality: 'Of a woman: homosexual, characterized by a sexual interest in other women. Also, of or pertaining to homosexual relations between women'.

This type of definition, focused only upon sex, provides a very limited view of lesbianism. Definition of the term 'lesbian' actually requires a broader, more complex basis, incorporating emotional, social and political aspects: issues that are to be developed and discussed in later chapters. For practical purposes, lesbian women participating in this study were simply women who defined themselves as lesbian or gay.

Homosexual

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) defines 'homosexual' in terms of having a sexual propensity for one's own sex, and gives

references to usage of the word dating back to the 1890s by, for example, Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis.

Some people have used the term 'homosexual' for men only. However, 'homo-' is derived from the Greek *homos* meaning 'same', as opposed to 'hetero-', from the Greek *heteros* referring to 'other' (*Collins English Dictionary*, 1979). Within the text here, 'homosexual' is used to refer to both men and women, unless otherwise specified.

Gay

Popular use of the term 'gay' relating to homosexuality is relatively recent. It was associated in particular with gay liberation, a movement aimed at freeing homosexuals from discrimination, originating in the United States in the 1960s. The Gay Liberation Front began meeting in this country in London – at the London School of Economics – in 1970 (Weeks, 1977). As with the term 'homosexual', some use 'gay' to refer only to men. Here, it is used to refer to both women and men, unless gender is specified.

Although differences in origin and detailed meaning of the terms homosexual, gay and lesbian are recognized by the author, the terms are used synonymously within this book when describing lesbians, unless stated otherwise. Where the terms gay and homosexual have been used in previous studies, or by participants in this study, where possible, indication is given if usage was limited to males.

The coming-out process for lesbians: some issues and questions

Why is coming out of importance?

Previous studies (e.g. Sophie, 1985; de Monteflores and Schultz, 1978; Moses, 1978; Brooks, 1981), anecdotal material on coming out (e.g. Stewart-Park and Cassidy, 1977; Stanley and Wolfe, 1980; Penelope and Wolfe, 1989; Holmes, 1988; Hall Carpenter Archives, Lesbian Oral History Group, 1989), and pilot-study data (Markowe, 1985) have indicated that becoming aware of oneself as lesbian and disclosing this information to others often involves a complexity of dilemmas and issues to be resolved. It is rarely a simple, straightforward process. It may involve dealing with a variety of 'hazards' (Baetz, 1984), and may affect much of a gay person's everyday life (Durell, 1983). Reflecting the potentially problematic nature of

coming out are studies that have found considerable levels of reported suicide attempts or suicidal thoughts (e.g. Trenchard and Warren, 1984; Bradford et al., 1994). At the individual and interpersonal levels, issues of coming out profoundly affect women's perceptions of self and their relations with family and friends. An understanding of the impact of coming to identify self as lesbian, and its effect on interpersonal relations, is important in order to identify possible problems, to generate ideas for the reduction of any such difficulties and, hence, to facilitate the process of coming out.

Taking a broader perspective, it will be argued that intra-psychic and interpersonal aspects of coming out may only be understood within the context of intergroup relations and the social/cultural context. From such a perspective, the issues of coming out may be seen as associated with, and as reflecting, fundamental aspects of notions of gender; relations between women and men in our society; power inequalities; and ideas on human nature, and 'normality'.

What happens during the coming-out process?

The coming-out process for lesbians is a complex process, that may broadly be divided into coming out to self, and coming out to others. Coming out to self, coming to define oneself as lesbian, has been considered in previous studies mainly from the perspective of stage theories (e.g. Cass, 1979; Chapman and Brannock, 1987). The pilot-study material raised questions of the appropriateness of viewing coming out to self in terms of linear stages. Positive and negative forces that may affect coming out to self and others were suggested.

When a woman has begun to think of herself as (possibly) lesbian, she may be in the position of considering making contact with other lesbians for the first time. She may also consider telling family or friends about herself. These decisions about coming out to others take place within the social context of a predominantly heterosexual society.

Importance of considering lesbian and heterosexual perspectives

Coming out needs to be interpreted at the societal and intergroup levels within the framework of the relationship of lesbianism to heterosexuality in our society; and at the interpersonal level by examining relations between lesbians and heterosexual people. It is suggested in this book that coming out as lesbian is only an issue

within the context of a heterosexist society: a society that is predominantly heterosexual and in which there is oppression of homosexuality. In the same way as it may be perceived that an investigation of women needs to be understood within the broader context of gender relations (e.g. Hollway, 1989), it is suggested here that issues of coming out as lesbian may only be meaningfully interpreted within the context of the relationship between lesbianism and heterosexuality in our society. Thus coming out needs to be investigated taking into account this social context, and examining the heterosexual perspective as well as that of lesbians.

Gender issues

Homosexuality and heterosexuality need to be viewed from the perspective of societal notions of gender. These reflect fundamental inequalities between women and men in our society.

Early conceptualization of gender in terms of sex role may be seen as restricted. Later studies, however, have illuminated how gender may structure our thinking through cognitive schema (Bem, 1981); and how gender may more usefully be thought of in terms of negotiable boundaries (Condor, 1987). Further, assumptions of gender polarization, androcentrism and biological essentialism may be seen as embedded in our culture (Bem, 1993). From another perspective, there may be different social representations of gender (Duveen and Lloyd, 1987).

Rigid notions of gender division may be seen as serving to maintain the predominance of heterosexuality within our society. Coming out as lesbian needs to be understood within the context of gender inequalities; the function of heterosexuality in maintaining gender division; and differing conceptualizations of gender.

Comparison of coming out with other minority group or life experiences

Taking a broad view of the coming-out process, there are other minority group experiences, or life experiences, that have some similarities with the coming-out process for lesbians. An examination of similarities and differences between coming out and other minority group experiences or life events may serve to illuminate what is occurring during the coming-out process.

Notions of 'stigma' (Goffman, 1963; Jones et al., 1984) and coping with threatened identity (Breakwell, 1986) provide frame-

works within which a variety of minority group or life experiences may be understood. Examples of such experiences described within these frameworks have ranged, in the case of stigma, from the physically handicapped to ex-mental patients, alcoholics or religious minority members; and from unemployment to sexually atypical employment, from the viewpoint of threatened identity. Coming out is to be examined from these perspectives in later chapters.

What would facilitate coming out?

Attempts to answer this question require consideration of issues at all levels, from intra-psychic through interpersonal and intergroup levels, to the cultural/ideological level. While coping mechanisms suggested, for example, in the threatened-identity model (Breakwell, 1986) may aid individuals at intra-psychic and interpersonal levels, and group support may play an important role, it may be that the crucial level for change is societal/cultural. Modifications in social representations to incorporate more flexible notions of gender and 'normality' may be essential for facilitating the coming-out process at intra-psychic and interpersonal levels.

Background

Areas that need consideration as background to understanding the coming-out process include lesbian identity; lesbian identity formation; the notion of coming out; heterosexuals' attitudes towards homosexuals, and stereotyping. Examination of these issues raises fundamental questions of conceptualization of gender; and relations between women and men in our society. Social-psychological perspectives of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981) and social representations (Moscovici, 1984), as well as the notion of threatened identity (Breakwell, 1986), contribute to an understanding of coming out.

Lesbian identity and coming out

Previous studies concerned with lesbian identity have suggested that lesbians may be seen as 'homoemotional' rather than 'homosexual' (Wolff, 1973), and that there may be more than one lesbian identity (Ettorre, 1980; Kitzinger and Stainton Rogers, 1985). 'Lesbian existence' within the context of 'compulsory heterosexuality' was

suggested by Rich (1981). Postmodernist thinking has focused on lesbian performance/behaviour rather than lesbian 'being' (e.g. Butler, 1991). These studies indicate lesbian identities may be seen as socially constructed.

In coming out to others, anecdotal material and findings of studies (e.g. Ponse, 1978; de Monteflores and Schultz, 1978; Moses, 1978) indicate the importance of considering non-disclosure as well as disclosure; and possible differences in the coming-out experiences of lesbians and gay men, and between younger and older gay people.

Coming out to family and coming out at work are two areas of particular importance, some lesbians telling family members and maybe coming out at work, and others taking the decision not to disclose this information (e.g. Trenchard and Warren, 1984; Taylor, 1986). Possible discrimination against the lesbian as a woman must be considered as well as that based on sexuality. In coming out at work, type of job and work environment are pertinent too.

Heterosexuals' attitudes and stereotyping

Attitudes towards homosexuality in Britain are still predominantly negative (e.g. Wellings et al., 1994). Such attitudes need to be understood within the historical and cultural context. Religion, for example, may have played an important underlying role in attitude formation (Coleman, 1980).

Many studies have attempted to construct scales to measure attitudes towards homosexuals (e.g. Herek, 1984a, 1988; Kite and Deaux, 1986). Conceptual and methodological problems of early studies have been highlighted by later studies.

Examples of issues investigated have been possible variations in attitudes towards homosexuals with sex or sex role of participant, or sex of target (e.g. Kite, 1984; Herek, 1988, 1994; Newman, 1989); and possible variation in attitudes towards homosexuals with beliefs about homosexuality as physiologically based, or determined by learning and personal choice (Aguero et al., 1984). A question raised is the possibility of changing attitudes towards homosexuality.

Stereotypes may affect interpersonal behaviour through, for example, self-fulfilling prophecies (Zanna and Pack, 1975; Jones et al., 1984). Studies of stereotyping of homosexuals have focused on sex role (e.g. Taylor, 1983), finding that lesbians tend to be perceived as similar to heterosexual men, and gay men as similar to heterosexual women. Measures of sex role have included the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI: Bem, 1974) and the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ: Spence et al., 1974, 1975).

A social-psychological perspective

A social-psychological analysis of coming out needs to be understood within the framework of issues of gender. Power differences related to gender are essential to consider. In coming out, whether to self or others, the lesbian must be seen as a woman, with all the implications being female has within our society.

Doise (1978, cited in Doise, 1984) has suggested different levels of analysis. The coming-out process requires examination from inter-group and societal perspectives, as well as on individual/interpersonal levels.

From the perspective of social identity theory, where social identity refers to the part of a person's self-concept deriving from group membership (Tajfel, 1981), or self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987), coming out may be seen in terms of salience of social categories (Oakes, 1987). This perspective incorporates notions of 'personal' and 'social' identity (Turner, 1982). Social identity as lesbian may be seen as becoming salient during the coming-out to self process. In coming out to others, social identity as lesbian is *made* salient.

Social representations may underlie lesbians' perceptions and experiences of coming out, and heterosexuals' attitudes towards homosexuals. Social representations have been defined by Moscovici and Hewstone (1983) in terms of cognitive matrices linking ideas, images etc., or as common-sense theories of aspects of society. Through social representations, scientific notions are transformed into common-sense knowledge. Social representations conventionalize and categorize persons or events, and are prescriptive (Moscovici, 1984). Attitudes may be considered as individual response dispositions based on collective representations (Jaspars and Fraser, 1984). Moscovici and Hewstone (1983) have suggested that social representations of human nature may underlie racialism. It is suggested here that such representations may underlie heterosexism too. In addition, social representations of gender (Duveen and Lloyd, 1987) are relevant to considering lesbians and coming out. Theories about the development of homosexuality, such as those based on a medical model, physiological explanations, or the psychoanalytic perspective, are likely to be reflected in relevant social representations, and may influence attitudes towards lesbians.

Attributions or 'common-sense explanations' (Hewstone, 1983) may influence the coming-out process on individual and social levels. Behaviour may be attributed to disposition or situation; or to internal or external factors. Biases in attribution include the

'fundamental attribution error' of a tendency to underestimate the effect of situational factors and overestimate the effect of dispositional factors (Ross, 1977); and actors attributing their actions to situation, while observers attribute the actions to disposition (Jones and Nisbett, 1972). Both these biases may occur when a lesbian tells a heterosexual person about herself.

Especially pertinent to coming out is the notion of social attribution (e.g. Deschamps, 1983), with attribution perceived as influenced by group memberships and social representations. Contributing towards an understanding of coming out at an intergroup level of analysis is the notion of social category memberships as dispositional attributions (Oakes, 1987). The societal perspective of attribution provides opportunity to consider the historical-temporal dimension (Hewstone, 1989a), which is of particular relevance in considering coming out. Attributions are likely to affect both coming out to self, and coming out to others.

There may be some similarities (as well as differences) between coming out and other minority group or life experiences relating to self-acceptance or self-disclosure. The notion of threat to identity (Breakwell, 1986) provides a general framework within which coming out and other experiences may be interpreted. Breakwell defined threat in terms of the identity processes of assimilation-accommodation and evaluation being unable to comply with the identity principles of continuity, distinctiveness and self-esteem. Threats may arise externally, or internally through conflict among the identity principles. Coping strategies may be at intra-psychic, interpersonal or intergroup levels. Choice of strategy is seen as determined by type of threat, social context, identity structure and cognitive resources.

Notions of self, self-presentation and self-disclosure all require consideration in an investigation of coming out. Mead's (1934) conceptualization of the self as originating and developing through social interaction provides a useful basis. A further perspective for considering coming out is the dramaturgical framework of Goffman (1959), with social interactions viewed as performances. Studies of self-disclosure generally (e.g. Jourard, 1971; Derlega et al., 1993) are relevant to understanding aspects of the coming-out process. Issues include the effects of non-disclosure, and self-disclosure in friendship formation.

The study

The study on which this book is based included interviews: with lesbians on their experiences of coming out; with heterosexual men

and women on their attitudes towards lesbians and gay men; and with women on communication with friends and family.

Outline of book

'Coming out' may be considered from a variety of perspectives, including anthropological and historical, philosophical and political, sociological and psychological viewpoints. It is not possible within one book to begin to cover these diverse theoretical perspectives in the depth that each merits. Acknowledging these limitations, 'coming out' is presented within this book largely from a social-psychological perspective only. Incorporated into the study, however, and developed within the social-psychological framework, is an integral feminist perspective.

Having considered the main issues and context in this chapter, Chapter 2 begins with Clare's story. Clare is an imaginary lesbian, based on pilot interviews, who forms the basis for a reconceptualization of the coming-out process. In coming out to self, identification as lesbian is suggested to be based on strong emotional feelings directed towards women, together with awareness of lesbianism as an option, and a level of emotional acceptance of homosexuality. For coming out to others, initial circumstances, approaches taken in coming out, telling the other person, reactions and outcome, require investigation. Both coming out to self and others must be understood within the social context.

Chapter 3 provides part of the theoretical background. It is divided into two sections. The first part looks at some of the literature on lesbian identity and coming out. This includes focuses on the older lesbian, coming out to family, and coming out at work. Heterosexuals' attitudes towards lesbians are fundamental to an analysis of coming out. The second part of Chapter 3 looks at background literature concerned with attitudes towards homosexuality and stereotyping. Notions of sex role are examined, and possible implications of stereotyping are considered.

The social-psychological framework for the study is presented in Chapter 4. This includes issues of gender, social identity theory, social representations, and self-disclosure.

The first of the chapters focused on the findings of this study, Chapter 5, introduces the investigation, and discusses results relating to the social context of coming out. This includes coverage of stereotyping, perceptions of people's views about homosexuality, and perceptions of the portrayal of lesbians in the media.

Chapter 6 presents four case studies of women. The first three case