

Definition of Sexual Minority Raises Concerns for Reader

While I did enjoy the article by White and Boehmer (2012) in the March issue, I did have a hard time accepting the author's definition of *sexual minority women*. When I first saw the title, I immediately thought of minority women, thinking race or ethnicity. I just don't think that this title is appropriate. I have discussed this with some of my colleagues and I guess we are having a problem with the term (I don't want to use the word label).

The use of this term was not discussed in the article. Can you tell me how the authors came about using that particular term? I did enjoy the article and feel that it is a much needed topic; I am just not sure about the use of the term *minority*.

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The Author Responds

We use the term *sexual minority women* after defining that it encompasses lesbian and bisexual women, and women who partner with women. We use the term *sexual minority* as an umbrella term because we are combining sexual identities with women who report partnering with women, but do not identify as lesbian or bisexual. If this study had only focused on sexual identity, we could have easily talked about lesbian and bisexual women.

That explains the reasoning for our study. But it appears the reader's key point was not about a missing definition, rather more generally about the use of the term *sexual minority*. I believe there was surprise about applying the label "minority" to a group other than racial or ethnic minorities and, therefore, the reader was looking for a discussion of this terminology. We omitted such discussion because the use of such terms is well established. A PubMed search using the term *sexual minority* will identify a few hundred articles. Similarly, an Institute of Medicine report (Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health Issues and Research Gaps and Opportunities; Board on the Health of Select

Populations; Institute of Medicine, 2011) refers to lesbians, gays, and bisexuals as sexual minorities. To more fully answer the reader's key question, I'd like to further define that *minority* refers to a group of people who share a common characteristic that society perceives as inferior to the dominant group. Because of this social status, the minority group is subjected to discrimination and inequities in opportunities. We are familiar with the use of the term *minority* with racial and ethnic populations, as the reader points out. Similarly, our society, in which heterosexuality is the dominant sexual orientation, discriminates against individuals who engage in same-sex behaviors and those who do not identify as heterosexual. Therefore, anyone who does not conform to the societal dominance of heterosexuality is part of a minority group because of their sexual orientation.

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Reader's Response to Author

A few weeks have passed since I read the article (White & Boehmer, 2012). I felt, and still feel, it is about time that someone has expanded the science on the meaning of support among sexual minority women (SMW) and breast cancer survivors among members of this population. However, when I read the article, I admit to being thrown by the author's definition of SMW. This was a new term to me and, at the time, I did not feel this was a correct term to use for this population. I had many concerns about the use of the word "minority," but instead of looking at the term from my viewpoint, as a woman of color, I elected to ask several of my colleagues and friends to expand my knowledge and, in turn, my worldview.

After a few weeks of research, which included getting opinions from col-

leagues and friends, I have a better understanding of the term. What I found was that *sexual minority* is actually an old term for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersexual people. A very good friend of mine explained how the term *minority* is appropriate. While these individuals may not be an ethnic or racial minority, and while their sexual and gender choices are not of the norm (whatever that is!), they are a minority *because of* their sexual and gender choices. In fact, it was brought to my attention that the author of this article was slightly incorrect when she said only "lesbians, bisexual women, and women who partner with women" (White & Boehmer, 2012, p. 210); she should also have listed transgender women, as they have breasts and may be just as likely to get breast cancer as any man or woman. As researchers, we need to be more conscious about including all types of sexual/gender variants in studies.

I have a better understanding of the term SMW and it is an appropriate term. Again, I thank the authors for the article; it opens the doors to a better understanding, increasing knowledge and, in the end, the most important factor is increased understanding to who we are and not what we represent.

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References

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The authors take full responsibility for the content of the article. No financial relationships relevant to the content of these letters have been disclosed by the authors or editorial staff.

Digital Object Identifier: 10.1188/12.ONF.241