

INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

Bell & Howell Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600

UMI[®]

**'NO EXPERIENCE REQUIRED': COMING OUT AND IDENTITY
FORMATION OF MIDDLE AGE LESBIANS IN THE ATLANTIC PROVINCES**

Lisa M. Walters

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Masters of Arts
in the Joint Women's Studies Programme

at

Mount Saint Vincent University
Dalhousie University
Saint Mary's University
Halifax, NS

August 1999

Copyright © 1999 by Lisa M. Walters



National Library
of Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Acquisitions et
services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file *Votre référence*

Our file *Notre référence*

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-56821-0

Canada

ABSTRACT

But then I had no context in which to put my feelings. All I knew was that I felt an admiration and emotional bonding with them...But with the perspective of time, I realize there was something else involved, too. Something I didn't understand at all then. (Margarethe Cammermeyer, Serving in Silence)

Coming out of the closet and identity formation in the life of a lesbian, or any gay person for that matter, are significant. Coming out can be emancipatory in that it frees one from the constant work of hiding one's sexuality, which can distance one from family, friends and society. Coming out can also present its problems such as fear for safety, loss of emotional and financial support from family, job loss, and physical and emotional abuse. Identity is also complex and ever changing, both from a personal and societal perspective. For a woman claiming a lesbian identity, it means fitting that identity into the other parts of her life, while also finding her place within the gay community. Both of these issues affect and are affected by all of one's life experiences.

The following were the focus of this thesis: gender, in the form of heterosexism; location, in terms of resources and community support available; and, age, in terms of the effects of ageism from an often younger society and lesbian community and living as a middle age lesbian. Through the use of case studies and oral histories, the coming out and identity formation of three middle age lesbians from the Atlantic Provinces were investigated. Their experiences encapsulate and resonate with those of women who have come out and identify as lesbian at different times in their lives, in different decades of this century, as well as in different decades of their lives.

DEDICATION

To Lucy and Sylvia who were there at the beginning and remain so

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank many people who have been supportive to me throughout the writing of this thesis: my research participants, without whom I would not have a completed work. Your honesty and willingness to share your stories is very much appreciated; Kim, for listening and having to endure my long hours of work over the past two years; my mother and friends for your support and for not forgetting what I look like. I'll be able to spend more time with all of you now that this is over; Ursula Kelly, a special thank you for your guidance and words of encouragement when I really needed them. I don't know if I would have made it through this without your help; my committee members, Mary O'Brien and Barb Keddy; Meredith Ralston, who had a great shoulder to lean on during my first year; and Lee Perry, the fastest transcriber I know.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE	i
THESIS DEFENSE FORM	ii
PERMISSION FORM	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
DEDICATION	v
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vii
CHAPTER 1: LESBIAN IDENTITY AND COMING OUT	1
<i>Background to Study</i>	4
<i>Research Design</i>	7
Participant Search and Selection	7
Interviews	8
Data Analysis	12
<i>Ethical Considerations</i>	12
Informed Consent	12
Confidentiality	13
Other Considerations	15
CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY: CASE STUDY MEETS ORAL HISTORY ..	17
Case Studies	19
The Case for Oral History	21
CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE ANALYSIS	25
<i>History</i>	25
The 19 th Century: The Beginning of Women's Independence	26
The Early 20 th Century: Movement to the City	28
The 1950s: Movements and Medicine	30
The 1960s: Beginning Visibility	32
The 1970s: The Movement Goes Public	34

The 1980-90s: We're Here, Get Used to It	38
Gay History in the Atlantic Provinces	41
Nova Scotia Gay History	42
New Brunswick Gay History	44
Newfoundland Gay History	45
Prince Edward Island Gay History	45
CHAPTER 4: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: COMING OUT AND IDENTITY	47
<i>Coming Out</i>	47
Coming Out and New Closets	51
Coming Out in Middle Age	54
<i>Lesbian Identity</i>	56
Language	59
Labeling	63
Identity Construction	65
Lesbian Identity in Albuquerque: A Study	70
<i>Aging</i>	73
Our Aging Society and Ageism	74
Being a Midlife Lesbian	76
Relationships at Middle Age	77
Motherhood	80
Parents	81
Health	83
CHAPTER 5: STORIES TO TELL	86
Cher	86
Maria	93
Gabrielle	97
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION OF DATA	102
What's in a Name	102
Change in Identity	103
Butch/Femme Ideology	106
Language	108
Bisexuality	110
Impact of Age on Identity	111
Impact of Community on Identity	112
Coming Out	112

Living “Out” in Atlantic Canada	123
Relationship to the Gay Community	125
Age and Coming Out	126
CHAPTER 7: EPILOGUE	131
REFERENCES	141
APPENDICES	150
<i>Appendix 1</i>	150
<i>Appendix 2</i>	152

Chapter 1

Lesbian Identity and Coming Out

Coming out and identity are important and much discussed issues in queer theory. The issues surrounding them are complex and subject to the influence of a variety of factors such as gender, location, age, class, culture and race. Three of these factors, gender, location and age, form the basis of this thesis on the coming out and identity formation of a sample of middle age lesbians in the Atlantic Provinces.

Coming out and identifying as a lesbian may be emancipatory in that they free one from “the closet” of fear and shame which comes from messages received from, and the omission of information by family, peers and society. Coming out and identifying as a lesbian can also be difficult and dangerous, as they create risks such as unemployment, abandonment, public attack or violence (Bass and Kaufman 1996; Eichberg 1990; Faderman 1981; Gibson 1993; Kaufman and Raphael 1996; Markowe 1996; Signorile 1995). A 1993 survey by the Nova Scotia Public Interest Research Group documented the legitimacy of these fears. The survey revealed that 72% of respondents had experienced some form of verbal insults and threats and 68% of respondents choose to modify their behaviour to avoid discrimination and harassment.

Coming out may not mean telling everyone, but it can mean taking the power to tell those one wishes to tell more about oneself. It may include an admission to oneself and, subsequently others of one’s identity and often spans most of one’s life. This honesty also represents a significant disadvantage. We are told as young children to be honest. However, if we are gay, we are told to keep it to ourselves because our sexuality is something about

which to be ashamed. This hiding and denial can negatively affect self-esteem because we come to believe that there is a part of ourselves that is so bad we must hide it. The constant work of hiding one's sexuality takes a toll on many of us. When we do not share who we are, we distance ourselves from those to whom we are not open. The threat to self-esteem may be compounded by the feeling that we are not even courageous enough to tell the truth (Eichberg 1990). As Bennett (1982) relates,

[i]t is the experience of the closet, of a void created by fear on one side and silence on the other. It produces a form of oppression that comes not from the things people do, *but what they do not do*. At best, this experience leads to feelings of anger and alienation. At worst, it produces an attitude of apathy and indifference. For some it is...insanity, for others, a living hell of self-hate and self-betrayal. (4)

In addition, coming out may seem never ending as one must choose whether to come out or not every time one enters a new situation. As well, as Butler (1993) relates, coming out must be repeated to be effective, but still exists "as a vain effort to produce effects that it cannot possibly produce" (107).

Coming out for a lesbian is complex because being a woman in a male dominated society, she faces sexism, as well as heterosexism and homophobia. Heterosexism assumes that everyone is heterosexual and, thus, the world for a lesbian may often mean her invisibility within it. Heterosexism is compounded by compulsory heterosexuality, which still works to influence women into roles based primarily on their gender and subservience to men. In supporting the existence of compulsory heterosexuality, Rich (1993) discusses the institutions, both public and private - patriarchal motherhood, economic exploitation, the nuclear family, and others - which serve to control women and keep them in a position that

is subordinate to men. Women who do not conform to the doctrines of these institutions, for example, lesbians, face the possibility of discrimination, alienation and violence (Rich 1993). In addition, women may also face racism and classism, though these issues have not been specifically addressed in this research.

Homophobia, the fear of homosexual people and of homo-erotic tendencies in oneself, may mean a lesbian keeps part of her life hidden from family, friends and co-workers out of fear of the repercussions of a homophobic society. For a middle-aged lesbian, coming out and living as a middle-aged lesbian, may be compounded by ageism. Ageism affects not only her experience in a society that values youthfulness, but may also leave her feeling estranged from an often younger lesbian community. However, as related in the anthology, Lesbians at Midlife: The Creative Transition, edited by Sang, Warshow and Smith (1991), midlife may offer a different perspective on living as a lesbian.

To identify as a lesbian is also complex because identity means something different to everyone. Identity is also subject to change. Fluidity of identity is so whether one identifies as a lesbian, a mother, an employee, and so on (Auger 1992; Faderman 1991; Butler 1997). Identity may be influenced by many factors including experience, age and location (Wittig 1997; Kinsman 1987). Some parts of our identity may be more overt, while others, such as a lesbian identity, are, for some women, often kept hidden. Identification may be constraining as people attach certain characteristics with a particular identification. Butler (1997) states that she is “no more comfortable with its homophobic determination than with those normative definitions offered by other members of the ‘gay or lesbian community’”

(301). Each group tends to carry with it assumptions of what it means to be a part of that group. Butler (1997) asks,

[i]s the “subject” who is “out” free of its subjection and finally in the clear?
Or could it be that the subjection that subjectivates the gay or lesbian subject
in some ways continues to oppress, or oppresses more insidiously, once
“outness” is claimed? (302)

Despite this, there are positive effects of claiming an identity, such as a feeling of pride and a sense of belonging to a greater whole. These effects can be particularly important for gay people who do not feel a part of the heterosexual norm. Thus, as Butler (1997) states, they are “sites of necessary trouble” (301), meaning they are necessary for our assertion as a legitimate group claiming rights, as well as an identification for those who are outside the “norm”.

While the term lesbian was formulated in the late 19th century, lesbian identity today is a result of changes in society, challenges to compulsory heterosexuality, the reemergence of the feminist movement and freedom of sexuality begun in the 1960s (Miller 1995; Faderman 1991). Today, there are as many ways to identify oneself as a lesbian as there are lesbians in the world, for example lesbians of color or economically disadvantaged (Auger 1992). From this investigation it was clear that these myriad meanings are clearly influenced by age and location.

Background to Study

The issues of identity and coming out have been of personal interest to me since I came out 8 years ago. When I first came out in Halifax in 1991, I began searching for all the literature I could find on these topics. I was somewhat successful, as there has been much

exploration of the topics of coming out and identity. However, I was not as successful in finding information about the experiences of coming out and identification of lesbians in Canada, particularly the Atlantic Provinces. As Kinsman (1987) states, “[t]he resources necessary for an historical account of the emergence of lesbian and gay life in Canada remain widely dispersed, waiting to be recovered from the mists of the past by innovative activists and historians” (66). In addition, much of the literature I found at that time was often written by men and, though meant for both lesbians and gay men, did not reflect my experiences. Though I have since been able to find more information, I feel there is still a lack of information on women in Canada, in addition to a lack of information on the experiences of middle age lesbians. There has been more research on this group of late (Sang, Warshow and Smith 1991; Auger 1992; Adelman 1986; Cooper 1986 and 1988; MacDonald 1983; Meigs 1984), however, I believe there is a need, given our aging population, to look further into the experiences of women in Canada, and particularly in the Atlantic Provinces.

To locate the experiences of such women, I began a review of the literature on gay history in Canada, focusing particularly on the Atlantic Provinces. Miller (1995) and Faderman (1981 and 1991) were able to offer information on the beginning of gay and lesbian history around the world, focusing primarily on North American culture. For a Canadian perspective, I was able to find Kinsman (1996), Ross (1995) and McLeod (1996), in addition to the film Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives (1993). McLeod’s (1996) study focused on gay and lesbian liberation from 1964–75 and in particular identified many of the organizations and events that were available for the gay and lesbian community in Canada during this time. Obvious from his work was the lack of organizations

within the Atlantic Provinces at the time. From a review of current resources available, though there are many more today in 1999, there are no organizations focusing on the particular needs of middle-age lesbians.

In terms of coming out, much of the literature identifies a stage-by-stage process for coming out to family, friends and coworkers (Eichberg 1990; Signorile 1995, Schneider 1988). Though this work may be supportive and provide helpful advice on broaching this subject with loved ones, it often oversimplifies an incredibly complex and never ending experience. It is theorists such as Butler (1997), Sedgwick (1993), and Wittig (1997) who enlighten the complexities of coming out and identity. Butler (1997), in particular, focuses on the continual need to come out in new situations, while illuminating the fact that the closet maintains power over us as our coming out and declaration of identity will remain unclear, not only to ourselves, as it is subject to change in different situations, but to others, who can never know what our coming out or identity mean to us.

Bradford and Ryan (1991) report on the findings of a national lesbian health care survey done in the United States on lesbians between the ages of 40 and 60 which indicated some of the issues for middle-age lesbians. It was found that though many were out to a significant number of people in their lives, they had not come out to family. In addition, coming from outside an urban centre impacted level of outness, as well as coming out later in life. The survey also indicated the women felt out of place in an often younger lesbian community. Similar issues faced by middle-age lesbians are also addressed by several other authors (Adelman 1986; Auger 1992; Baker 1988; Gee and Kimball 1987). In addition, a

culmination of articles edited by Sang, Warshow and Smith (1991) uncovers issues from health concerns, parenting and relationships at middle age.

Research Design

Participant Search and Selection

The participants, three middle-age women who identify as lesbian, were chosen. Women who identify only as lesbian (as opposed to bisexual, etc.) were chosen, however, their specific definition of lesbian was to be brought out as part of the research itself. These women had been “out” for at least a year and expressed comfort with their sexuality.

Homophobia and heterosexism made locating participants more difficult. Thus, in order to secure participants, the snowball sampling technique was used. Friends were contacted who might know of women interested in participating in the study. Gay and lesbian organizations at three universities were also contacted. A phone number and email address were made available as a means of contact. I provided information on who I was, my purpose in conducting this research, and that I respected the need for confidentiality and anonymity. As I was fortunate to obtain participants through these methods, no further attempts were made to contact participants through other media.

Three women volunteered for this research, all of whom were white and from lower to middle class backgrounds. Cannon et al (1991) found that when they searched out research subjects, white, middle class women volunteered more often, as there were fewer obstacles to their participation and also less reason to feel uncomfortable and be suspect of the process. However, in support of this they state, “[t]o generate theory, it is much more useful if the small samples under study are relatively homogeneous, since extreme diversity

makes the task of identifying common patterns almost impossible” (115). So while this sample was limited in unfortunate ways, its limits did not eliminate all of its usefulness.

Interviews

The interviews were conducted in an environment chosen by the participants. Each initial interview lasted approximately 2 to 3 hours. A follow-up interview was completed with each participant lasting an additional 1 to 2 hours. The interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed verbatim by an assistant instructed on the importance of confidentiality in terms of storage and handling of the tapes, disks, and transcripts, as well as the information contained on said items.

Questions were formulated to guide the interviews (see Appendix A), however, it was expected that the participant’s stories would flow as they began to talk of their experiences. My past experience of asking other gay people to share their coming out experiences was that they often feel comfortable and willing to share their story. Chase (1995) discusses the importance of having questions in accessible language. This thesis has also been written in accessible language in order not just to give voice to these women, but to provide a context that they fully understand.

An initial pilot interview was done with another middle-age lesbian who would not be part of the final research. This pilot provided feedback on the interview questions. Participants were given the questions to review prior to commencement of the interview. They were encouraged to ask any questions at that time or at any other point during the interview.

Nothing was edited from the transcripts, including pauses and laughter. DeVault (1990) noted the importance of paying attention to the way things were said, particularly any difficulties in expression. Devault (1990) furthers that the phrase "you know" is not an empty phrase, it is "a request for understanding" (103), at which point it is important to respond with a nod of affirmation to make the interview more comfortable (Anderson and Jack 1991; Chase 1995). Thus my experiences of coming out and living in the Atlantic provinces served as a resource and a place from which my understanding came.

Taping of the interviews was done to allow more freedom for the researcher to pay attention to nonverbal communication and for the participants to allow their thoughts to flow. Devault (1990) noted that "taping interviews [allows]...easier concentration on the face-to-face interaction instead of on remembering what is said" (106). In terms of language, participants were asked to explain any terms or jargon they may use (Anderson and Jack 1991).

Participants reviewed the taped interview transcripts, as well as their stories to be included in the thesis to ensure the production of a work that they felt fairly represented the reality of their experiences and of which they approved (Patai 1991). Chase (1996) discusses the importance of having participants review their transcripts, as well as specific information that will be used, by stating that "[s]ending transcripts and asking for permission to use specific passages gives a certain amount of control to participants and reduces the vulnerability they might feel from exposure of their stories" (48). They were also free to contact me at any time with concerns, questions or other information. These women are the experts of their lives and they should feel, as much as possible, that they were speaking on

their own behalf in the research. The ultimate production of the thesis paper is the responsibility of the researcher, however, it is also a picture of the participants' stories. The researcher's attitudes and experiences were also an integral part of the research, as this was the impetus for the pursuit of this topic.

Validity in research refers to the extent to which the research reflects the reality of the participants, but is also somewhat generalizable to those beyond the research project. Lather (1991) reveals three types of validity that must be attended to when performing research. The first of these, construct validity, requires recognition that during the research process, challenges may present themselves that will result in a revision to the research design. Participants were encouraged to be involved in the writing of their stories and were able to contribute information after completion of the interviews. Face validity, meaning the results of the research make sense to others, was achieved, as stated previously, by allowing participants to review their transcripts as well as their stories that were included in the thesis. Finally, catalytic validity was achieved when participants and the community feel affected by the research. It is hoped that participants had the opportunity to review the complex, though empowering, coming out process that enabled them to identify as lesbian in a homophobic society.

As a lesbian who struggled through an eight year process of coming out, I shared these experiences with the participants. The participants knew that I am 33 and from a lower middle class home which has deep roots in a working class ideology. I have grown up and lived in the Atlantic Provinces all of my life. My only language is English, I am Caucasian and have several years of post secondary education. Some of these are factors which provide

me with a privileged position in society compared to many others. However, as a feminist researcher, I attempt to attend to my privilege, as well as the differences of the women who were a part of my research project. I interacted with the participants in order to develop a feeling of shared experience.

An interpretation of any event is based upon our personal experiences. When I consider those factors which shape my personal experiences, I include my identification as a lesbian, my role as partner, teacher, student, friend, daughter, niece, aunt, sister and cousin, my experiences of personal relationships, both homosexual and heterosexual, my career path, and so on. Based on these factors, I know my interpretations can be very different from others. However, these differences do not ignore the fact that I also have very similar interpretations based on the similar experiences of others, for example, other lesbians. Because of these experiences, I believe that my decision to research topics within areas of similar experiences was justifiable. Finally, I do not believe that anyone could purport to be an expert on a particular group of which they were -or were not- a part, despite the intense reading and research they may have done.

Our identity also influences our location in the research, as well as the authority provided by those various locations. Lal (1996) echoes these notions, “[u]navoidably, the many locations that shape my identity and notions of self influenced my choices, access, and procedures in research and also permeate the representation of research subjects in my writing” (190). My identification as a lesbian influenced my thesis topic. Hence, my research was conducted from a location familiar to me. Some of the other parts of my identity - student, teacher, feminist - will influence the analysis and conclusions of my

research. However, I realize that it is not enough for me just to state the positions that influence my analysis as, “[t]his lip service to difference does not inform an assessment of how such positionings are implicated in one’s analysis...” (Lal 1996:197). Thus, I must ensure that I represent my participants as they would have intended and not based on some predetermined agenda. Therefore, I believe it is important, as I previously mentioned, to have participants involved in the research process, and particularly have them review the data collected about them.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the interviews, I made field notes regarding nonverbal cues and some overall reflections on the interview. When transcription of the interviews was complete, I, as well as the participants, reviewed the transcripts. The length of the initial transcripts was approximately 30 pages and the follow-up interviews averaged 10 pages. Any changes, additions or deletions were completed on the transcripts at this time. On reviewing the transcripts, I concentrated on two key areas, coming out and identity. For each of these areas, the impact of age, location, and family background. As I read through the transcripts, I highlighted and made marginal headings for these areas of analysis. After completing this step, I began writing the stories and analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Informed Consent

The participants were asked to sign a consent form (see Appendix B) which outlined the responsibility of the researcher and their option to withdraw from the study, with no questions asked, if their comfort level changed or if they so desired for any reason. They

were reminded of this option during all stages of the research process to ensure they continued to give their informed consent for their inclusion in the research. If there is an opportunity in the future to share this information in another venue, participants will be contacted before including their anonymous stories. Their knowledge of the use of the information is particularly important if the information is to be shared within communities of which the women may be a part of or may have been a part of in the past, as they may not wish to reveal their lives in certain localities in which they may be identifiable.

Confidentiality

The participants were interviewed in their choice of locale, mostly in their home environment, for their comfort and confidentiality. It was also hoped that this choice of location would lessen the power dynamics of the researcher and participant relationship. When one is in one's own environment, one tends to feel a greater degree of control of a situation. In addition, participants were encouraged to choose a pseudonym that would be used throughout the taped interview.

There was the potential that painful memories could arise during the interview process. Though I could offer an understanding ear to any issues that may arise, I feel uncomfortable in a counselor role, as I have not had any specialized training in this area. Therefore, a counselor, Deborah Kaetz, M.Ed, M.SW was available to speak with participants about issues that could have arisen. Having a counselor available may have been necessary as providing their stories for this project could have been the first time some of these women shared their coming out experiences. A variety of resources, contact numbers

of local gay and lesbian organizations, phone lines, and so on, that may be helpful for women who are unaware of the gay community in the Atlantic Provinces, was also available.

Transcripts were kept in a safe place in my residence and will be destroyed or otherwise disposed of, according to the participants wishes, upon completion of this research. Confidentiality and anonymity of the participants was of the upmost importance, particularly because of the nature of the research topic. The lesbian community tends to be small and it is sometimes easy to identify one another with minimal description. Thus, as previously stated, participants were able to review the presentation of their stories to enable them to change particular identifying information. In addition, the participants had the option to speak to me first in public if they did not wish others to know how they knew me. As a previous member of a 12-step program, which requires anonymity of members, I am aware of the process when meeting people and referring to how I may know them. This method is also frequently used by therapists when seeing clients in a public arena as it respects the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants.

It was made clear to participants that the thesis will be available to others in a library setting and thus is open to public viewing. They will be provided with a final copy of the thesis if they wish to receive one. They were invited to the thesis defense and thanked in general, without, of course, being named at a public event.

The research was conducted by a woman, about women, and for women. The first two issues are obvious in the choice of women as participants and the inclusion of their stories as part of the thesis. It is hoped the final product will benefit the women being interviewed. This research provided them with the opportunity to revisit their experiences

of coming out, its importance in their lives, as well as its difficulties. Reflecting on such experiences, often after much internal struggle, can be empowering. The power to name oneself and be proud of that identification is something that is hoped as an outcome of the research. Our experiences of coming out today are a part of our history in the struggle for gay and lesbian visibility and equality. Thus, this thesis will be offered as a part of the history of lesbian coming out in Canada, in particular, the Atlantic Provinces.

Other Considerations

Limitations of presenting this work within the dominant community result from heterosexist and homophobic ideologies and practices. In addition, the process of coming out is not always understood within the general community as many of those people do not have to endure the same often long and difficult process to declare their sexuality. Heterosexuality is seen as the “norm” and, thus, only if one is otherwise, is there a need to declare that difference. Many of those who are not a part of the gay community need more understanding of the process, the power of naming and the lived experience of a middle-age lesbian. This knowledge may enable them to become allies which could increase the comfort level and safety of those who are a part of the gay community. If difference is ever going to make less of a difference, those in the dominant position must participate in dismantling their own ideologies of power and oppression. This can only be done with the knowledge of that power and oppression and its effects on those in non-dominant positions.

In this chapter, the case study/oral history method used for this research was introduced. The next chapter will include a more indepth discussion of these two methods, their similarities and thus ultimately their compatibility as a methodology.

Chapter 2

Methodology: Case Study Meets Oral History

It was my intention in this thesis to conduct qualitative research on the coming out experiences and the emergence of identity of three middle-age lesbians, which, for the purpose of this study, were women between the ages of forty to fifty-five. The three women, each from a different Atlantic province, had very different coming out experiences. Through these very different experiences of coming out, I hoped to gain an understanding, first, of the impact life in the Atlantic Provinces had on their coming out experiences and identity development. I looked specifically at their struggles, as well as the influence of family, community and age on their identity and coming out.

For the purposes of this research, a feminist approach was used through which I sought to maintain a more equitable distribution of power between myself, the researcher, and my research participants. Thus, I have included the words and language used by the participants, as well as their personal stories, to ensure their voices, often silenced in a sexist and heterosexist world, were fairly represented. As part of this approach, my role as researcher was also that of an active listener, in addition to asking clarifying questions, as necessary.

To achieve these purposes, a combination case study/oral history was used to gather data. The case study method provided an opportunity for an intensive analysis of specific details that may be overlooked using other methods. As Reinharz (1992) states “[c]ase studies of...women’s experience...are necessary both as models for future generations and as the raw data of future secondary analyses, comparative research, and cross-cultural studies”

(166). For the purpose of this research project, three cases were used to permit a more in-depth analysis. This analysis allowed for common themes to arise while also allowing for the investigation of differences.

I chose the case study/oral history method as I felt it was important to ensure the voices of women were heard, particularly those of “ordinary” women (Jelenik, 1986). Hearing women’s voices acknowledges the value of women’s lives and encourages identification through the recognition of similar experiences. It is important to chronicle the lives of women who may not have made what are considered major inroads in the public world, but whose experiences represent or resonate with other women’s experiences at a particular point in time or other women’s experiences of a particular event and whose accomplishments are just as noteworthy, but often go unnoticed. By looking at women’s lives, we, at times, may see ourselves reflected in their experiences. Hence, there is the likelihood we could become empowered by observing their struggles. Identification is particularly important for lesbians as our lives and experiences are even more hidden than heterosexual women because of heterosexism and homophobia.

In terms of this thesis, it is hoped the creation of these stories/oral histories will benefit the participants, the researcher, and others. For the participants, being part of the project represented an opportunity to be heard, a situation that has long been denied many women, ensuring our part in history is often hidden. It also provides the participants with the opportunity to gain further insight into their situations living as a middle age lesbian in the 1990s in the Atlantic Provinces, insight that may lead to further growth and change as a result of unresolved issues from their coming out process or to a more content settlement

with their present life experiences. It is hoped the information gathered will be relevant to other women, particularly those in conservative Eastern Canada, as life history is based on one's lived experience and others encountering similar situations will be able to relate to these experiences. It is also hoped the information will be of benefit to the general population. Increased awareness of our experiences, especially the process of coming out, increases the possibility of alliance. In addition, it is hoped this research will adjust the biased view of history that often excludes the experiences of women, particularly the experiences of middle-age lesbians in this particular geographical locale.

Case Studies

The case study was the chosen method for gathering data for this research. This method was chosen because it provides an opportunity for an intensive analysis of specific details, covers a lengthy period of time and, thus, can produce a more well-rounded, holistic study (Feagin et al 1991; Reinhartz 1992). The case study method is important for research pertaining to women because women's stories and accomplishments have often been avoided or only briefly mentioned in mainstream historical texts. Thus, feminist interest in case studies comes from a desire to document women's lives and to generate theory based on an analysis of these lives (Anderson and Jack 1991).

Reinhartz (1992) discusses three major purposes for a feminist case study: to analyze the change in a phenomenon over time, to analyze the significance of a phenomenon for future events and to analyze the relation among parts of a phenomenon. Hence, "[a] case study...can permit the researcher to examine not only the complex of life in which people are implicated, but also the impact on beliefs and decisions of the complex web of social

interaction” (Feagin et al. 1991:9). Case studies can both prove and disprove generalizations, but this is not their only intention. Reinharz (1992) adds that case studies defy,

the social science convention of seeking generalizations by looking instead for specificity, exceptions, and completeness. Some feminist researchers have found that social science’s emphasis on generalizations has obscured phenomena important to particular groups, including women. Thus case studies are essential for putting women on the map of social life. (174)

She furthers that as we do case studies, we recognize the need to do more of them.

Our voices have often been unrecognized and restrained in our patriarchal society. As Heilbrun (1988) discusses, “[a]nonymity, we have long believed, is the proper condition of woman” (12). The facts of history have often been discussed separate from those who are a part of that history. Thus, women and people from a variety of cultural and other diverse backgrounds have had their histories excluded from common knowledge. Women’s voices have been excluded for many reasons, including lack of education and lack of power. In addition, many historical sources, diaries, letters, etc., have been devalued because they are not deemed to be true “factual” knowledge. These sources are criticized for their subjectivity and often become marginalized. However, documenting women’s voices insists on and acknowledges the value of women’s lives. This acknowledgment can be particularly important for lesbians whose lives and experiences are even more hidden than heterosexual women due to heterosexism and homophobia. It is also important for lesbians in Canada, particularly the Atlantic Provinces to be heard, as there has been a lack of information pertaining to gay and lesbian history in this region (Kinsman 1987). Robin Morgan claims that with,

documenting women's status and accomplishments (or lack thereof) in different countries must be a top research priority, so we can clarify the way women's lives are similar and vary globally and so we can engage in effective action on women's behalf. (As quoted in Reinharz 1992: 171)

Gorelick (1996) also points out that,

[w]e must uncover not only the different experiences of diverse groups of women but also the processes creating these differences. We must trace how these processes of oppression - racist, imperialist, class, national, religious, and sexual - are connected to each other and determine, in very different patterns, the lives of all and each of us. (36)

In addition, it is important to study location to determine its impact, particularly its impact on one's oppression. As Alcoff (1991-92) states "where one speaks from affects the meaning and truth of what one says..."(6). Skeggs (1995) furthers that our location, both social and cultural, impacts how we describe our world and the world we describe.

A small sample of three cases was used for this research, permitting a more indepth analysis of the experiences of the women involved. Chase (1996) discusses the significance of choosing a few cases by stating that using "a small groups of stories...to serve as examples of the processes we want to study, and in our writing, we present those examples fully to demonstrate the relationship between specific stories and the cultural context." (45) The choice of three cases allowed common themes to arise, while also allowing for the investigation of difference.

The Case for Oral History

By their very nature, case studies also encapsulate oral/life histories. When describing the term 'oral history', the purpose is to create a written record of an individual, in this case a woman, from her perspective, in her words. The oral history itself is a

combination of interviews, observations and, possibly, material obtained from the interviewee. Streubert (1995) states that the oral history method is used “to gain an insider’s view of a particular phenomenon of concern” (260). She furthers that it was derived from symbolic interactionism in that we learn about ourselves and define our world based upon our interaction with others. There are two forms of oral history: A complete oral history, which would relate an individual’s entire life; and, a topical history, which covers a phase in the individual’s life that is relevant to the research being done (Denzin, as cited in Streubert 1995). For the purpose of this project, a general topical history was done which covered a phase in the participant’s life - coming out and identification as a lesbian.

One of the most important reasons for research by and about women is to empower women. Oral histories can be particularly important in this respect because many women, due to lack of access to education, cannot read or write or do not have a voice to ensure their words are heard. As Reinhartz (1992) discusses, oral history allows us

to develop feminist theory, express affinity and admiration for other women, contribute to social justice, facilitate understanding among social classes, and explore the meaning of events in the eyes of women. (134)

Many oral histories of women of accomplishment have been completed to show respect or pay tribute to these women. The lives of many women of the early suffrage movements have been chronicled, as well as early women doctors, teachers and writers. These chronicles acknowledge the value of women’s lives and encourage identification through the recognition of similar experiences. However, oral histories of ‘ordinary’ women’s experiences, at a particular point in time and of a particular event or place, are also important. Conway (1992) furthers these notions with,

[b]ecause so much of modern cultural criticism teaches us about the fragility of identity and the difficulty of achieving a strong sense of self, we are interested in hearing many distinct 'voices' explain their experience.

Oral history is usually only given the recognition it deserves in feminist establishments. However, the recent emergence of interest, since the 1970s, in women's lives and the study of women's issues, has given more precedence to women's oral history and writings. Thus, by revealing women's history, we allow women's voices, once silenced, to be heard, thus, encouraging and, perhaps, empowering more women to share.

While doing this research, I thought it was important to ensure participants were not overly shaped by the research agenda in the telling of their stories. However, their responses were inevitably shaped in some ways by our interaction. The oral histories created for this project were constructed around open, yet particular, questions with a particular purpose. Thus, there always exists the possibility that stories were not revealed in the way the person meant. In an attempt to diminish this effect, the questions asked were general enough to allow the women to reflect on their experiences and choose what was central to their past. Anderson and Jack (1991) note that, "[o]ral history interviews provide an invaluable means of generating new insights about women's experiences of themselves in their worlds" (11). They add that the spontaneous exchange that can happen during the interview process - enabled by open, more general questions - allows for the possibility of freedom and flexibility for the researcher and the participant.

There were also inherent difficulties surrounding interpretation of the information. Interpretation of any event is based upon our own experiences and, thus, are to a certain extent, individual to ourselves. While I often shared the interpretations offered by the

participants, there exists the possibility that I may place different meanings on their experiences. In addition, what I included and excluded in the chapters is based on my views and thoughts and my specific research purpose. However, being a lesbian, I knew I was closer to their experiences and, thus, better equipped to interpret and understand their experiences than might a heterosexual counterpart. Minimally, shared sexual identity allowed a certain comfort conducive to the research process. To overcome some of the difficulties, Streubert (1995) noted the importance of reviewing with participants the data generated to ensure the life history represents their reality. All the women were asked to review the transcripts of the interview as well as the stories included in Chapter 5. They were able to make any revisions or additions they felt were necessary. In addition, the use of the participants language lessens the likelihood of misinterpreted meaning. The participants were also asked to explain any terms or 'insider' expressions they used. As stated by Anderson and Jack (1991), "[i]f we see rich potential in the language people use to describe their daily activities, then we have to take advantage of the opportunity to let them tell us what that language means" (15).

In order to research a topic, a review of work done by others is necessary. The next two chapters contain a review of literature on the topics of gay and lesbian history in general, in Canada, as well as in the Atlantic Provinces and issues surrounding identity, coming out and aging.

Chapter 3

Literature Analysis

Gay and lesbian history spans every century and every country in the world. However, it was not until the late 19th and early 20th century that gays and lesbians became more visible to society as a whole. For women, in earlier times, romantic friendships allowed them to live independently of men and their relationships were considered honorable. This status did not last, however, as the medicalization of homosexuality placed these relationships under suspicion. In addition, many fundamentalist right-wing religious groups, state that homosexuality is even mentioned and admonished in the Bible. Despite this, the gay and lesbian community continued to flourish. Though there is evidence of a gay and lesbian community in Canada throughout parts of this century, most of the community was centered in larger cities outside of the Atlantic Provinces. It was not until the 1970s, and then to a limited extent, that much visible activity occurred in the Atlantic Provinces. What it means to be a middle-age lesbian in the Atlantic Provinces is to have been influenced by a variety of historical, social and cultural issues. How such issues intersect with the coming out process and identity is the focus of this thesis and this review of literature contained in the next two chapters.

History

Gays and lesbians have a long and varied history. Early examples of same-sex relationships existed in ancient Greece, Rome, and China, through the Middle Ages in Western Europe, Japan and England. There is also evidence of same-sex relationships in native cultures of North America, Polynesia and Siberia. In order to look at gay and lesbian

history in Canada and the Atlantic Provinces, it is important to begin with a more widespread focus, particularly of the United States and Britain, as these countries have had the greatest impact on Canadian life and culture. As Kinsman (1987) states, “[o]ur various forms of sexuality and the identities built around them are organized through the sex and gender relations that have existed in different societies” (24). He furthers that, “[e]xamining historical experiences can help us understand from where lesbian and gay oppression has come, where it may be going, and the possibilities for change” (23). It is often thought that Canadian gay and lesbian history is 15 to 20 years behind that of the United States and Britain, meaning the progression of, for example, the gay and lesbian movement in Canada evolved after such movements occurred in other countries. Thus, some visibility and activism within gay and lesbian history did not occur in Canada until after strides had been made in other countries (Kinsman 1987; Ross 1995).

The 19th Century: The Beginning of Women’s Independence

In the 19th century, women were able to adopt a more openly visible identity separate from men, as the result of several factors, including industrial capitalism and urbanization. These factors resulted in changes in traditional family structures and increased independence for women who entered the work force outside the home. It is thought the evolution of liberal and democratic societies in Western Europe and North America also had an influence (Miller 1995).

During this time there was an increase in visible romantic friendships among women who were beginning to live independently of men. Novelist Willa Cather, Jane Addams, founder of the settlement house movement and M. Carey Thomas, president of Bryn Mawr

College are only a few of the noted women of the 19th century (Miller 1995). Further evidence exists of women from the upper and middle classes who expressed their love for other women through letter writing, books and diaries. It would be presumptuous, however, to believe that this was not present for all social classes. Some women of the working class passed as men and worked alongside them. Some of these women were married to other women. However, there is limited evidence about the nature of these relationships or whether the motivation for such unions was economic, psychological and/or sexual (Faderman 1991).

Faderman (1991) noted that, "women's intimate relationships were universally encouraged in centuries outside of our own" (1). There were many examples of women's commitment to one another during the 19th century in England, France, Germany and America. The terms used for these relationships were "love of kindred spirits," "Boston marriage," and "sentimental friends". These romantic friendships were considered noble and virtuous. The relationships were also considered to be platonic, as it was thought that two women would not be interested in becoming sexual with one another. These relationships were also encouraged as women were not allowed significant contact with the opposite sex until they were married. Faderman (1981) continues that "[i]t was reasoned, apparently, that young women could practice these sentiments on each other so that when they were ready for marriage they would have perfected themselves in those areas" (75). Thus, because it served men's self interest, sentimental friendship was deemed innocent, and not threatening to the "sanctity of marriage." Such relationships could also help keep a marriage together at a time when divorce for women was almost impossible. Thus, these relationships between

women were often not an alternative to marriage, as economic and social necessity meant men and women were often forced to marry, despite any homosexual feelings they might have.

Homosexual relationships, as previously stated, were not stigmatized or considered abnormal or deviant, as people during the 19th century were not defined by their sexual orientation. However, this changed in 1869 when the term 'homosexuality' first appeared in relation to men and in 1870 in relation to women. At this time, the medical establishment began to use the concept of homosexuality as a medical condition and a means of classification. Thus, the homosexual became a person who "possessed characteristics and attributes of the opposite gender" (Miller 1995:xxiii). It was argued at this time that homosexuality was inborn, therefore not sinful. This development represents a shift from a moral and religious attitude regarding same sex relations to a more scientific one.

The Early 20th Century: Movement to the City

During the early 20th century, romantic friendships between women continued to flourish due to the growing economic independence and literacy levels of women. Women could now choose a career over marriage. Despite the fact that after World War I, love between women came to be generally feared in America and England, urbanization resulted in a migration of people to cities, which offered gay and lesbian people some safety and anonymity and, thus, the ability to create a gay community.

During the 1910s and '20s in the United States and Europe, especially in the Greenwich Village area, there was a period of radicalism. Ryan (1988), who identifies several stages to the growth of the gay and lesbian community and liberation, characterizes

the period between 1908 and 1945 as the first stage. This period was marked with “sporadic efforts by individual gays and lesbians aimed at defending the legal rights of those charged criminally for living their sexual preference. There are no major victories and the public is largely unsympathetic” (102-3).

Some instances during World War II point to a growing public awareness and scrutiny. During this time, “the “medicalization” of homosexuality and the spread of the ideas of psychology...increased awareness of the subject” (Miller 1995:231). This period was the first time in history when armed forces recruits were questioned about their sexual orientation. However, this scrutiny may have been the least of the persecution suffered by gay and lesbian people during this time, as Hitler and his forces targeted and killed many gay men and some lesbians during World War II.

At the end of World War II, which Ryan identifies as the second stage or what he calls “Urban Consciousness” (Ryan 1988:103), homosexuals were actively excluded from military service as a result of being labeled homosexual. This time marked the first when large numbers of men and women were given the homosexual label. Before this point, homosexuality was considered an illness, not an identification. This identification, and the subsequent expulsion of gay men and lesbians from the military, created a new homosexual consciousness and an impetus for a more organized gay community, particularly in large urban centers.

The same impact of the homosexual label did not occur in Canada. Here, the label was more insidious, more damaging to self-worth, and encouraged little awareness of belonging to a social category of people. The Canadian military placed gays and lesbians

under the category “psychopathic disorders” and “anti-social psychopath” (Feasby, as quoted by Kinsman 1987: 110). During the cold war, there was an internal flushing out from federal service, of those suspected of being gay. In addition to this, there is no evidence of any organized gay movement in Canada until the 1960s, an indication of the fact that Canadian gay history is different than that of the United States.

The 1950s: Movements and Medicine

Ryan identified the 1950s as a time of searching for gay identity, protests, the rejection of homosexuality by dominant culture, and the continued evolution of homosexual subcultures. During this time, the mental health profession began to take a negative stance in regards to homosexuality. Though Freud thought everyone was innately bisexual, that homosexuality was the result of arrested psychological development and that homosexuals could not change to heterosexual, others did not share his view. Homosexuality was thus created as a pathology. It was listed in the first issue in 1952 of *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Mental Disorders (DSM-I)* as a sociopathic personality disturbance. The next revision in 1968 saw homosexuality listed under other non-psychotic mental disorders with pedophilia, masochism, and so on. It was not until 1986 that all references to homosexuality in the DSM-III R were removed (Miller 1995). Before this removal, however, a number of techniques, such as aversion therapy, shock treatment and lobotomies, had come into practice in an attempt to change homosexuals into heterosexuals.

The first significant challenge to the pathologization of homosexuality was put forth by Alfred C. Kinsey, who in the late 1940s, interviewed more than 10,000 men and women on their sexual habits. He discovered that both men and women had homosexual experiences

and thus he felt sexuality existed on a continuum from exclusive heterosexual to exclusive homosexual behaviour. From this, he postulated that homosexuals made up 10 percent of the general population. The effects of his findings were mixed. Homosexuality could no longer be considered an exception, but many, including Joseph McCarthy, a United States senator, used these statistics to try to prove that homosexuality was a threat to society. In addition, it is extremely difficult to be statistically precise about its prevalence as many choose not to come out. In fact, it could be speculated that 10 percent is a low estimate.

During this time, the homosexual community began to organize. The Mattachine Foundation, a group of gay men and lesbians, was formed. The Daughters of Bilitis, one of the first and more famous lesbian organizations also began in the 1960s. However, Faderman (1981) noted that, in the 1960s many homosexual organizations such as Mattachine were male-dominated. This sexism, in addition to other issues such as heterosexism, helped create gender differences in terms of personal and social experiences as a lesbian (Vaid 1995; Jay 1995). Thus, for example, since many of the social spaces were male-centred, there were few places women could meet and feel safe, possibly making it more difficult for someone coming out.

A homosexual subculture developed around the bar scene, which became the center of the community, offering a sense of community and a relatively safe haven. For women, the bar scene enforced codes of behavior and dress known as butch/femme, 'butch' being the stereotypical masculine role, whereas 'femme' was the stereotypical feminine role. This role division was primarily thought to be enacted by those who were part of the working class, however, middle class lesbians were also influenced. Though some believe this behavior

was an attempt to imitate heterosexual relationships, Nestle (1995) contends that butch/femme relationships were “complex erotic statements, not phony heterosexual replicas” (Nestle as quoted in Miller 1995: 323). Regardless of how one views these relationships, “there can be no doubt that its highly defined patterns of dress and behavior offered many women a sense of security during a period when hostility against gays and lesbians was at its height” (Ibid:323).

In Canada in the 1950s and 60s, urbanization, changing social values and the Kinsey report had an impact much as it did in the United States. This impact was felt particularly in larger cities such as Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, where there were more spaces for developing community. Thus it was in these three cities in Canada where the budding gay liberation movement flourished. In addition to the bar scene, a number of novels published in the 1950s and 1960s offered a representation of lesbian life. The dominant theme of the novels was based on the butch/femme ideology with alcohol, violence and a male figure who “rescues” the femme from the butch, imitating heterosexual relationships. Though many were written by men with the female characters succumbing to suicide, alcoholism or conversion to heterosexuality, there were also examples of more positive images of lesbian sexuality from writers such as Ann Bannon, Valerie Taylor and Paula Christian. These novels “offered readers positive role models as well as information about gay clothing styles, argot, bars, coffee-shops, resorts...and neighbourhoods...” (Ross 1995: 14).

The 1960s: Beginning Visibility

According to Ryan (1988), the 1960s marked the “birth of a truly national american (sic) gay and lesbian movement...Fundamental to this stage is the establishment of

identifiable populations of gays and lesbians that begin to be courted by municipal, state and national politicians” (104-5). During this time, the community was under attack from sections of society, particularly from the police who regularly raided gay establishments. This harassment lead, in June of 1969, to the Stonewall riots in Greenwich Village, an event which galvanized gay and lesbian liberation struggles in the United States, the aftermath of which was felt worldwide.

During the 1960s, there were the beginnings of a more active gay and lesbian political movement in Canada, as well. In 1964, the Association for Social Knowledge (ASK) was formed in Vancouver and the ASK Community Centre opened in 1966. Some other items of note were television specials and articles in mainstream newspapers and magazines. Articles appearing in MacLean’s in 1964 “are believed to be the first full-scale articles in a mainstream Canadian publication to take a generally positive view of homosexuality” (McLeod 1996: 3). CBC-TV broadcasted several shows during the 1960s, one in 1964, “an hour-long discussion of legal, medial, and religious attitudes towards homosexuality on the program *Other Voices*” (Ibid: 14). Attitudes were opening in other sectors, as well. In 1965, The Canadian Council on Religion and the Homosexual was established to “aid in public education about homosexuality and the plight of the homosexual in society” (Ibid: 19). As early as 1964, there were attempts to have homosexuality decriminalized in the Canadian Criminal Code, as well as action later for the inclusion of homosexuality in Human Rights legislation. In 1967, an omnibus bill was introduced by then Justice Minister Pierre Trudeau and passed. This bill decriminalized private homosexual acts between two consenting adults

21 and older. The amendments to the Canadian Criminal Code came into effect in 1969. At this time, similar changes had yet to occur in the United States.

The 1970s: The Movement Goes Public

Ryan (1988) identifies the 1970s as the stage when “the gay community institutionalizes itself” (105). During this period, there was an increase in gay activism and an increase in the number of gay and lesbian organizations. Though much of the literature available is for countries other than Canada, there is evidence of activity in Canada, especially around major urban centers such as Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. McLeod’s chronology of gay and lesbian liberation in Canada between 1964–1975, lists gay and lesbian organizations in Canada during this time. Only sparse entries exist for the Atlantic Provinces and those which are included do not begin until the 1970s. (A more detailed discussion of the activity and organizations in the Atlantic Provinces is included later in this chapter.)

Some of the organizations formed outside of the Atlantic Provinces in the early 1970s included the Community Homophile Association of Toronto, Vancouver Gay Liberation Front, Front pour la libération homophile in Montreal, Gays of Ottawa, the Canadian Gay Activists Alliance (CGAA), Gay Alliance toward Equality (GATE) and the Toronto Gay Action (TGA). The National Gay Task Force formed in 1973, the Gay Community Centre of Saskatoon opened in 1974 and, in Montreal in 1975, a group called Slightly Older Lesbians (SOL) was formed for lesbians over 30. The formation of this latter group recognizes the need for specific kinds of support for women over 30 and into middle age. However, there has not been a group with such a focus formed within the Atlantic Provinces as of yet, though several groups have and continue to exist for younger men and women,

many centred around universities. The Canadian Gay Press Service formed in 1975 and included papers from Toronto, Montreal, and Saskatoon. Clearly, in larger Canadian cities, the opportunity to be part of the gay community was available for those willing to be involved. However, involvement also carried with it the risk of being more open about one's sexuality in a society that was still not very accepting.

To help alter this situation, other changes were occurring, as well. In 1975, the first public hearing in Canada of a gay civil rights case under provincial human rights legislation occurred in Vancouver when the Vancouver Sun refused to print a two-line classified ad for the Gay Tide newspaper from GATE. Though GATE won the case initially, the ruling was later overturned. The case ultimately ended up in the Supreme Court of Canada, "making it the first lesbian and gay rights case ever to make it to the highest court in Canada" (McLeod 1996: 206). The Sun won based on freedom of the press in 1979, but later that year they changed their ad policy and allowed the ad to run. In 1977, Quebec became the first jurisdiction in North America, other than municipalities, to place gay and lesbian rights in the Human Rights Code. In addition, in some areas, openly gay and lesbian candidates ran successfully for public office.

Political developments in the United States, with both positive and negative outcomes, spilled over into Canada. There was an increasing conservatism in the 1970s that extended to gay rights as well as other issues, such as pornography and reproductive choice. In Dade County, Florida, in 1977, an ordinance was passed, but later overturned, "that prohibited discrimination on the basis of affectional or sexual preference in areas of housing, employment, and services" (Ross 1995: 157). An antigay movement began, headed by

Anita Bryant, former Miss America. However, despite its negative effects on gays and lesbians, many felt Anita Bryant did the gay movement a favor by putting gay and lesbian issues in the spotlight, allowing public debate on the struggles of this community. (Rotello 1998). This development filtered over into Canada as organizing began in response to the conservative right, including the Ad Hoc Coalition to Stop Anita Bryant formed in Toronto in 1977 by the Coalition for Gay Rights in Ontario.

Ross (1995), whose book, The House that Jill Built, focuses on women involved with the Lesbian Organization of Toronto (LOOT) during the 1970s, notes that the climate seemed right for lesbian feminist organizing in the 1960s and 1970s. Though in the mid 1970s, lesbian activism seemed to be fading in the United States, in Canada, particularly in Toronto, things were just beginning. She furthers that since World War II, there were many changes in Canadian life, with the

expansion of capitalist markets, the tremendous growth in university and college enrolments, the increasing numbers of women entering the labour force, the introduction of the birth-control pill, new abortion technology, a declining birth rate, and the increased attention to sex-related issues in the media and advertising. By the late 1960s, a climate of reform prevailed in Canada. (23)

Other movements, such as Civil Rights, the second wave of feminism and anti-Vietnam war resistance, helped pave the way for gay and lesbian liberation. For a while, the women's liberation movement created some separation in the gay and lesbian movement as women focused their attention on women's and lesbian issues. Kinsman (1987) notes,

[l]esbians, because of their lack of economic resources as independent women in this society, have a much smaller commercial scene-usually restricted to a couple of businesses in the larger cities. This discrepancy has

continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s, leading to important inequalities and differences in the social spaces available to lesbians and gay men. (184)

Ross (1995) furthers that for women this was an important time.

Occasions like concerts, drop-ins, peer counselling, theatre, and dances made possible the discovery of what it actually meant to 'be' a lesbian and 'do' lesbianism in an active, self-consciously feminist and celebratory manner...[e]xtensions of the social/cultural tradition of rap groups, potlucks, and coffee-houses in the early 1970s, ...enabled identification with emergent lesbian-feminist culture in safe, supportive contexts. (204)

Quoting McCoy and Hicks, she notes,

[t]o many women, "the community" became an entity with a life of its own...it held the power to pass judgement, and as a new-found home for the homeless, it took on a mighty significance. It seems little wonder that many lesbians in despair look toward the community for magical fulfillment of expectations, dreams, and hopes which have previously been thwarted by patriarchal culture. (as quoted in Ross 1995: 204)

At this time, many feminists, particularly lesbians, rejected what they felt to be feminine, such as makeup, perfume, tight dresses, shaved legs and armpits, and so on. In addition, the style of dress was heavily based on butch ideology, which became an identifying feature for lesbian culture. From this developed certain codes of dress and conduct which "were communicated through visual and printed descriptions in U.S. feminist and lesbian newspapers, and in books..."(Ross 1995: 87). Ross (1995), whose study centers on LOOT, a group of primarily white, middle class lesbian feminists, found that during this time, "many LOOT members saw their style codes and collective living as the ideal means to channel two mighty resources-lesbian anger and energy" (107). For them, conforming to codes offered "a sense of moral worth denied them in a culture that decreed them obscene" (108). However, those who did not dress a certain way, often were or felt excluded from the

group. A similar exclusion was often felt by older lesbians and those from a working class background who felt ignored by middle class lesbians (Ross 1995; Faderman 1991). It was especially true among women of color. This feeling was not uncommon within the lesbian community, as noted by Franzen (1996), during the period 1965-80, in Albuquerque, the years when feminism became a significant influence among lesbians. Working class women remained around the bar scene, whereas middle class women were involved in political activism and tended to reject butch/femme roles which they felt were regressive. Ross (1995) notes,

[i]n 1967, researchers Simon and Gagnon noted how norms, argot, and various kinds of social activity reinforced the experience of identity and collectivity for individual lesbians and male homosexuals. (91)

Finding a community and being included were important during this time as there were few organizations available and few positive images outside of these organizations in what was otherwise a largely heterosexual society.

The 1980-90s: We're Here, Get Used to It

Though there was some separation of the gay and lesbian community in the 1970s, the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s brought the gay and lesbian communities together. Miller (1995) notes,

[t]he AIDS decade had brought about extraordinary changes within gay and lesbian life-creating a deeper sense of community, putting gays in the public eye...There was no doubt that as the nineties dawned there was now a stronger, more committed gay community, hardened by adversity, that was poised to play a greater role in American life. (462)

The AIDS epidemic brought a backlash from the conservative right who termed AIDS 'the gay disease'. Miller (1995) notes that it was not until the death of actor Rock Hudson from AIDS in 1985 that attitudes began to change. He further states that,

[t]he twin effects of the epidemic and the Reagan administration's neglect strengthened the gay community as a political force during this period. Before AIDS, few gays and lesbians had participated in their own civil rights struggle...But AIDS changed all that, bringing into the movement many gay men - and lesbian, too - who had never participated in any gay political activity before. (452)

During this time, other new issues came to the forefront including parenting and family issues, partly as a result of an increasing number of lesbians having children.

The gay community in the 1990s began to play a greater and more visible role in everyday life, evidenced by the existence of gay and lesbian characters on television, in movies and in the mainstream print media. This visibility has been particularly heightened for lesbians. In the early 1990s, lesbians were featured on several mainstream magazine covers, including Newsweek and Vanity Fair. Lesbian couples and characters appeared on television in programs such as *Roseanne*, *NYPD Blues* and *Mad About You*. One television show, "Ellen", in 1997-98, centred around the life of a lesbian, Ellen Morgan, played by lesbian Ellen DeGeneres. Several mainstream movies such as *Three of Hearts*, *Basic Instinct* and *Fried Green Tomatoes* featured lesbian characters, though the images were not always positive. Many celebrities came out as lesbian including Melissa Etheridge, k.d. lang, and Amanda Bearse. As stated by Ross (1995), "North American lesbians, predominantly white and middle-class, seem to have reached a level of public visibility and personal confidence unimaginable in earlier decades" (3). Ross (1995) also notes that, now, in the 1990s, there

are support groups in large urban centres, including the Atlantic Provinces. There are a wide range of social services including counseling, coming out groups, groups focusing on legal issues and lesbian and gay caucuses in unions. She furthers that,

[s]ocially, needs are met by lesbian/gay bars and assorted 'Dyke Nites' at straight clubs; Lesbian and Gay Pride Day committees; church groups; choirs; recreation clubs; potluck dinner clubs; and lesbian softball, soccer, golf, swimming, bowling, water polo, and curling leagues. (220)

There are also magazines and papers including Gayzette, now Wayves in Halifax and Xtra in Toronto and Vancouver, Canadian lesbian anthologies, lesbian/gay radio shows, as well as academic studies, including Queer Theory offered at Mount Saint Vincent University.

In the 1990s, however, despite increased visibility and acceptance from heterosexual society, there are still difficulties within the lesbian community. Despite the fact that lesbians might be expected to work together as a cohesive unit, Ross (1995) notes that "[s]ince the 1970s, the presumption of an instant unity among lesbians qua lesbians has been proven both false and intolerant to differences" (222). She furthers,

[i]n the 1990s, perhaps more than ever, contests over what 'lesbian' means rage on. Exhibiting 'authentic' behavioural, ideological and style codes...is still esteemed among many politicized lesbian feminists as one method of revealing one's inner self, securing high moral rank, and locking up political credibility. (227)

She continues however

[i]t is unclear to me whether communities of bar lesbians, closeted, suburban gay women, and lesbian feminists are closer together today than they were twenty years ago. The majority of lesbians (and gay men) continue to live double lives, hiding their sexuality in fear of damaging consequences. It's possible that greater numbers will come out in the 1990s... (221-2)

Despite some of these issues, other advances have been made in the political and legal arena, including the extension of spousal benefits to same-sex couples by companies and the government, anti-discrimination legislation in several provinces including Nova Scotia in 1991 and New Brunswick in 1992 and pending changes to the Family Law Act in Nova Scotia and other provinces. In 1988, sodomy and anal intercourse between consenting adults over 18 was no longer a criminal offense. In 1980, Canada became the first country in the world to have a nondiscrimination clause protecting gay people, designed specifically for federal employees in the Canadian Union of Postal Workers. However, there is still some way to go as evidenced by the continued confiscation of lesbian and gay materials at the Canada-US border and the fact the federal House of Commons only recently included sexual-orientation protection in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Gay History in the Atlantic Provinces

There is little available information on gay and lesbian history in the Atlantic Provinces. McLeod (1996) notes, of the 129 active gay and lesbian groups between 1964-75, only four or approximately three percent were in the Atlantic Provinces. Of the 108 gay and lesbian periodicals published between 1964-75, two were from the Atlantic Provinces: Aboutface by Community Homophile Association of Newfoundland, which was published from the summer of 1975 to May 1976; and, the GAE Monitor published by Gay Alliance for Equality from November 1972 to January 1974. MacLeod also included a list of gay bars and clubs, though he cautions that not all establishments may be listed, as only establishments in Canadian metropolitan areas with the most active lesbian and gay communities were included. Many establishments had mixed - gay, lesbian and straight -

clientele and thus were not included in his list. Of the 332 establishments listed, seventeen were in the Atlantic Provinces. These establishments were located in Fredericton, Saint John, Halifax, and St. John's. Thus, the lack of a visible gay and lesbian community within the Atlantic Provinces would have made it difficult for those out and coming out to find a place to be and a group with which to identify. Current listings in the Wayves reflect a similar distribution. Though there are more organizations, 106 listed for the Atlantic Provinces, the organizations are mainly centered around the major cities of each province or exist on university campuses. Thus, those in rural areas are still likely to feel fairly isolated and this creates the need for them to travel outside of their area to seek organizational support. However, this sparcity does not eliminate the presence of informal collections of lesbians and gay men who have formed supportive informal networks in rural settings. (Riordon 1996)

Gabrielle, a participant in this study, was also familiar with the early history of the Atlantic Provinces. She believed, during the 1960s and 70s, there was not a lot of activity. She discussed with elders in the community the existence of community in the early part of the century. She was told that, at that time, for lesbians in Canada, one "hung around ball fields, or you hung around the armed forces, and hoped that you could run into some women." Gabrielle believed that many gays and lesbians in the Atlantic Provinces moved to Halifax to seek anonymity, as this was the big city in the Atlantic Provinces, or else they moved to Toronto. She added that in Toronto in the 1970s there was what many considered a Maritime lesbian ghetto.

Nova Scotia Gay History

Of the four Atlantic Provinces, Nova Scotia had the most active gay history. Most of this activity, however, until recently, centered around Halifax. The first organization formed in the Atlantic Provinces was the Gay Alliance for Equality (GAE) in Halifax, founded in 1972. GAE operated a telephone counseling service (GAELine) and a bar called "The Turret" which was opened in the mid 70s and stayed open until the mid 80s. This bar was later replaced by "Rumors" in the early 80s which was run by the Gay and Lesbian Association (GALA), a continuation of GAE. Rumors remained open until the mid 1990s. Recently in 1999, Millenium opened in the same location, only to close three months later.

GAE and later GALA were politically active organizations. During the 1970s, GAE participated in protests against the CBC, who refused to carry a public service announcement for the GAELine. They also picketed a local bar which was refusing gay clientele. In 1973, they presented a brief to the Nova Scotia Legislature recommending that sexual orientation be included in the provincial Human Rights Act. They also met with the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission to discuss the brief presented to the legislature. The commission denied the need for the inclusion, arguing there were a lack of cases of discrimination against gay people. In response, GAE began documenting cases themselves.

The first gay bookstore in Atlantic Canada, the Alternate Book Shop, opened in the autumn of 1975 in Halifax. In 1973, Halifax was the only Atlantic Province to send representatives to a gathering of Canadian queer organizations in Ottawa. In the late 1970s, there was a National Gay Rights Coalition Conference in Halifax and a Gay Alcoholics Anonymous group began that continues today. This AA group just recently, in 1998, celebrated ten courage roundups, a gathering of Gay AA groups from around the Atlantic

Provinces, as well as outside the Atlantic Provinces and Canada. The women's movement had an impact on the gay and lesbian community in Halifax as well. There were a number of women's centres in the early 70s. Often these groups were more heavily made up of women from a working class background, but in the late 70s, more middle class women became involved. These groups offered support to the lesbian community, as many of the women involved were lesbians, and did work on consciousness raising.

Currently, and for most of the 1990s, there have been a variety of organizations operating throughout Nova Scotia. There are groups in smaller communities such as Truro, Wolfville, and in provincial regions such as the south shore and Cape Breton. There are now several bars that are gay or gay positive. There are women's dances at various locations in Nova Scotia and several yearly events such as camping weekends. In a recent addition of Wayves, 31 organizations were listed for Nova Scotia and an additional 23 listed for Metro Halifax. There are also six organizations serving the Atlantic region which operate out of Halifax.

New Brunswick Gay History

In 1974, the first gay and lesbian organization in New Brunswick, Gay Friends, was formed in Fredericton. It had only three active members and finally folded a year and a half later. In Saint John, in 1975, a gay helpline, Speak Easy Gayline, was formed. A number of other groups existed such as a Friends of Lesbians and Gays group (FLAG) in Fredericton, Fredericton Lesbians and Gays, and Northern Lambda, a joint group with Maine, New Brunswick and Quebec. This rural group, started during the 70s, is still in existence today and has managed for a number of years to plan a yearly gay and lesbian symposium. Other

groups included Lesbian and Gay Organization of Saint John (LAGOSJ) and Gays and Lesbians of Moncton (GLM), which was a group for English and French gay people and another group in Bathurst. In Moncton in the early 1980s, gay and lesbian dances were held at the University de Moncton. There is also a gay bar in Moncton which has been open for many years. In Saint John, a few bars opened for short periods only. For a while individual women organized dances for the communities in Saint John and Fredericton. Today, however, the situation has changed somewhat as there are 31 organizations listed for New Brunswick. However, as is true for the other provinces, these organizations are focused mainly around the larger cities or the universities.

Newfoundland Gay History

In 1974, in St. John's, 13 people turned out to form Community Homophile Association of Newfoundland (CHAN), a large membership for the time. Many of the members lived in small outports and maintained contact by mail. A second branch of the group formed in Corner Brook in 1975 and remained active until 1980. In 1975, CHAN sponsored a lesbian/feminist workshop in St. John's. A member of the group spoke to a Special Joint Committee on Immigration Policy concerning gays and the Immigration Act. Gay Friends of NB and GAE of Halifax did the same, reflecting some communication among groups was occurring. Today, there are ten organizations listed in Newfoundland, all of which are located in St. John's.

Prince Edward Island Gay History

No record of any groups or activities was found for Prince Edward Island during the 60s or 70s. Gabrielle, a participant in this study, noted that it was not until the 1980s that she

heard of a significant community there and this remains true today as the only listings for the province are a women's production company and an AIDS organization. However, in Charlottetown, there are occasional women's dances and an annual women's conference.

It is evident from this review that there is a wide and varied history of the gay and lesbian community, both in Canada and other countries. Though there was evidence of an active community in Canada throughout this century, much of it was centered in larger Canadian cities. This made coming to terms with the issues of coming out and identity, as discussed in the next chapter, that much more difficult for those in smaller areas such as the Atlantic Provinces.

Chapter 4

Conceptual Framework: Coming Out and Identity

Coming Out

The concept of coming out of the closet is a fairly recent one. As Johansson and Percy (1994) discuss, the term "closet" derives from house construction. The term denotes a windowless and airless alcove for storing clothes, sealed off by a door. This notion differs from the older English meaning of any private room or chamber (5). When these two meanings are brought together,

‘to closet oneself’ came to connote privacy and remoteness on the one hand and narrow confinement on the other. The aspect of secrecy and the suspect character of whatever was hidden appears in the old expression ‘a skeleton in the closet.’ (Ibid:5)

The concept of the closet and its meaning for gay and lesbian people was introduced in the mid 1960s and restricted until late 1970s to gay jargon meaning to conceal one's homosexuality. Despite the fact of evidence of homosexuality through the ages, the reluctance of Western society to accept differences, such as homosexuality, meant gay and lesbian people remained hidden in society. The expressed need to come out of the closet did not begin until the gay liberation struggles of the 1960s and 70s where visibility was seen as essential to gaining equality rights.

Coming out is often considered a process, and as such, many identify various stages. (Schneider 1988; Eichberg 1990; Signorile 1995). However, coming out is an individual experience and a life long process. As Schneider (1998) offered,

[a]lthough each individual act of coming out is irrevocable, the coming out process itself, is almost never a linear, 'A' to 'B' enterprise. We come out, we retreat, we come out again and so on. (49)

Schneider (1988) discusses the coming out process in five interrelated stages of development:

- (a) the growing awareness of homosexual feelings and identity;
- (b) developing intimate same-sex romantic/erotic relationships;
- (c) developing social ties with gay and lesbian peers or community;
- (d) developing a positive evaluation of homosexuality; and,
- (e) self-disclosure.

Eichberg (1990), on the other hand, considers coming out as a three phase process. The first phase, the personal phase, involves the acceptance by the gay or lesbian person of their sexuality. This acceptance is followed by the private phase where one begins to share with others. This sharing ultimately leads to the public phase where one's sexuality becomes integrated into one's daily life. Through the coming out process, one begins to include one's homosexual identity as part of one's self, rather than the definition of one's self. At this point, one determines how being gay fits into the rest of one's life.

There are usually three patterns of experience related to coming out which can shape the process in various ways. Some people have always had a sense of being gay or lesbian or the feeling they were sexually different. For some others, it seems to be rather abrupt, usually as a result of falling in love with someone of the same sex; this is common for many women. Finally, some others move back and forth from heterosexual to same sex relationships and attractions until finally settling, often in their teen years, if not later. The process can also result from sexual exploration, although some people involved in sexual exploration do not see themselves as gay or lesbian. For some, sexual exploration coincides

with first labeling themselves gay or lesbian and, for others, they are able to label themselves before any sexual involvement.

Many factors, including family, societal pressures and religion, influence one's realization and acceptance of one's own homosexuality. Despite the many patterns of coming out offered by popular literature, there is no one path to follow or one journey common to all gays and lesbians. The process does not include the completion of one step and the transition to the next step. People oscillate as they encounter new situations and new people.

There are different experiences of coming out because each of our relationships is value-laden. Thus, we have different reasons for choosing to come out to friends and not parents, or some family members and not others. It is not necessary to come out to everyone because some information is not necessary to share. Barbone and Rice (1994) echo this notion,

[s]elf-disclosure is and should be self-serving, and so it makes sense to examine each opportunity in order to determine if it truly does promote one's own identity interests. We may decide that disclosure of gayness to our parents best helps us by bringing to our relationships added information which will better aid us in defining ourselves to them. We may decide that sharing our orientation with fellow passengers, or the postman, or the boy bagging our groceries does not in any way enhance our relationships or bring about any benefits to us in any way...It is at the point at which one decides to whom and when and how to disclose different things about one's self that one is really the most empowered and, consequently, virtuous. (107)

The process of coming out appears to be different for men and women. This difference is largely due to the gender socialization process, particularly limiting for women, that also enforces heterosexism. Most women are convinced that marriage is inevitable, even

if it is sometimes or often unsatisfying and oppressive. The structures which maintain that oppression continue to exist. Thus, the majority of lesbians have had sexual relationships with men, many often having been married for a time. Some women, when they initially discover their feelings for women, feel they might be bisexual. For some women, this sexual identity is easier to accept as it means they are still attracted to men and thus meet societal expectations. However, it is important to note that sexuality is fluid in that specific expressions of it, be it lesbian, bisexual or so on, are part of a broad complex of experiences.

In a study done by Rust in 1993, she found in her sample that lesbians were an average age of 15.4 when they experienced their first homosexual attractions and 17 when they first questioned their heterosexual identity. The average age of first identifying themselves as lesbian was 21.7. Of those women who identified as lesbian, 41 percent identified themselves as bisexual at some time (Rust as cited in Jay 1995:38).

In my own experience of coming out, I initially realized my attraction to women and thought I must be bisexual. I continued in heterosexual relationships for the next eight years, however, my feelings and attractions for women grew stronger. I told myself if I tried harder, I could erase these feelings and live happily in a heterosexual relationship. It was not until the death of my father that I reevaluated my life and realized I could no longer continue to live this lie.

The experience of coming out is different for everyone. We each have different coping mechanisms and resources to fall back on during difficult life experiences. Thus, the process can be quite smooth for some, but a more painful experience for others. Denial and attempts to fit into a heterosexual norm often make the process more difficult. Many deal

with internalized homophobia - often displayed in self-hatred and discomfort with gay and lesbian culture - during their coming out. The level of internal homophobia will correlate with the levels of influence from family, religion and community and their attitudes toward homosexuality. However, the process of coming out can be emancipatory in the sense that it frees one from the lies and half-truths of the closet and the ill-effects of homophobia.

Coming Out and New Closets

Both Butler (1997) and Sedgwick (1993) argue that coming out is a process of opening up new closets, implying that gays and lesbians are never truly free from the closet. When we choose to come out to one person, there are likely others in our lives with whom we are not out. We also choose to remain or reenter the closet due to fear for our safety, loss of employment or other supports. Even though we may consider ourselves to be out to most of our friends and family, unless we choose to display some signifier of gay and/or lesbian culture, we are, for the most part, presumed to be heterosexual.

Presumed heterosexuality has enabled gay men and lesbians to live in a homophobic and heterosexist society often unnoticed. Thus, in our lived experience, we often remain in the closet because it is not important to claim our sexuality every moment of the day. However, our lack of claiming and our resultant invisibility reasserts the power of the closet over us. As Sedgwick (1993) argues, "there can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence" (46). If every gay person were out, our sheer numbers would serve as a force with which to be reckoned. Such visibility would

make it more difficult for people to adhere to negative stereotypes when they realized that so many of the people they know and interact with daily are gay.

As Signorile (1995) discusses in his book on outing oneself, "the closet" robs gay and lesbian individuals of a full, rewarding life, forcing us to live with various levels of fear and shame. However, difficulties and fears faced as a result of coming out will never be as difficult as the stress of staying in the closet. More specifically,

the closet has been a destructive force in too many of our lives...it has led to alcohol and drug abuse, depression, insomnia, phobias, stress, and other even more serious emotional disorders. These emotional problems can then lead to or exacerbate physical disorders, such as hypertension, heart disease, stroke, and even cancer. (xxii-xxiii)

Mohr (as cited in Mayo 1990) discusses the closet as "...an institution which is so evil and insidious that the moral individual, as a matter of dignity, cannot participate in its existence or continuation" (54). He further describes the closet as the primary mechanism of oppression and as such, it recruits us out of fear to become willing agents of our own oppression. Thus, the closet offers a means for gay and lesbian people to avoid discrimination, an opportunity not available to all or most members of visible minority groups. However, to stay in the closet is to not only have our existence denied, but also erased because denial would mean our existence was acknowledged. Many people exist by blending into the background, thus forcing us to surrender our identity in favor of survival in a heterosexual world. This invisibility hinders our access to civil rights as the gay slogan illustrates, 'silence=death.' Sadly though being out could also mean death. As the NSPIRG survey revealed, crimes may be reported, but the motivation for the crimes are not. "Thus the closet effectively closes off certain uses of the courts and political activities, depriving

gays of full civil and political rights” (McCarthy 1994:33). As a result of individual and institutionalized heterosexism and homophobia, one can easily understand why so many people do not report such crimes and choose, instead, to remain in the closet.

When a gay man or lesbian comes out to someone, that person’s fears and opinions are challenged. Their view of what it means to be gay often changes. The knowledge that someone they know and/or love is gay may force them to rethink previous understandings of homosexuality. Many, including Eichberg (1990), believe that coming out is a gift we can give that will help the entire community, in terms of understanding, replacing stereotypes, and allowing greater diversity and self-expression. In addition, those whose lives we are a part of could further increase the numbers we could hopefully count on for support.

Despite the fact many gay men and lesbians have come out, the results are not always positive. As Kaufman and Raphael (1996) state, “in spite of our increased visibility, we are still stigmatized. The source of our difference, our sexuality, is *still* not openly discussed, *still* considered unnatural and shameful” (9). They continue,

[a]lthough gay men and lesbians may be out, their lives can still bear the signs of shame: silence in the family around being gay, a lack of political consciousness, compulsive or addictive behaviors, a life bleached of intimacy. (11)

Thus, coming out can be very powerful, but it also carries with it many risks.

My own declaration of my lesbianism, though very empowering to me, and made as the result of an eight year struggle, still served to move me into new and different closets. I was out to my self and several close friends. To others, I was still the same person, except that I was no longer with my male partner of five years. However, even those who were

aware of my lesbianism can never truly know what that means to me. Even with the advantage of being gay themselves, no one can ever truly know another's experience. Thus "*the closet* produces the promise of a disclosure that can, by definition, never come" (Butler 1997: 302).

Coming Out in Middle Age

For women, coming out at middle age can be a significant change after having lived a heterosexual life for many years, often being married and having children. In a study conducted by Charbonneau & Lander (1991) on women from mid 30 to mid 50 who had come out at midlife, they found there were many different events that had provided a supportive context for coming out. These events included illness, marriage breakup, celibacy, the impact of the women's movement, attending consciousness-raising groups, rethinking lesbian stereotypes or the death of a parent (my own personal impetus for change).

For women who had left a heterosexual marriage,

[t]he decision meant letting go of an important piece of ideology; these were women who had grown up believing in the sanctity of marriage and who had derived a strong sense of identity in fulfilling the traditional heterosexual role of wife and mother. [however] separation and divorce were major turning points that allowed them to feel more independent. (Charbonneau & Lander 1991:38)

These researchers found that most of the women did not consider the possibility they could be lesbian until a series of events led them to question why it was they thought they were straight, for example, falling in love with a woman or becoming sexually attracted to a woman. For these women, the identification of lesbian was not within their realm of reality and thus many were surprised they were willing to embrace the label. For some, it was easier

because of their previous involvement in political activity. For others, it was a result of feminist activism and, thus, a political choice. Whatever their experience or reason for coming out, many of the women found there were difficulties coming out into a community that, for the most part, consisted of women in their twenties and early thirties. Many of the women felt they were not treated as an 'authentic' lesbian because they had come out at middle age.

A change such as this at midlife is no small change. Charbonneau & Lander (1991) found that "[a]lmost all the women remembered-often with precise dates and much detail-specific events that framed the change. The shift in sexual self-identity was so dramatic that the steps stood out in their minds" (37). The researchers also found differences based on how these women expressed their sexuality. The women who had chosen to be lesbian were more likely to be more vocal about being lesbian to former husbands, children, parents and colleagues. Those who had discovered what they believed to be their latent sexuality were often quieter and more cautious about coming out. The reserachers felt this level of caution was a reflection of homophobia in our social systems and cultural values. However, "despite the differences in their presentation of self, both groups are startling confirmations of the potential for radical change in later stages of the life cycle" (Charbonneau & Lander 1991: 43). They felt that lesbians who come out at midlife challenge the assumption that sexuality is set at a young age.

According to Bradford and Ryan (1991), the National Lesbian Health Care Survey done in 1984 in the United States on nearly two thousand lesbians between 40 and 60 found that, "60 percent of midlife lesbians were out to more than half of the people in all their

networks” (149). They continue that a high percentage of these women had come out to their gay friends, but only 24 percent had come out to family and straight friends. It is likely that fear of rejection keeps them in the closet with these groups. In addition, women who live in cities of their birth were more open, as well as women in small and large communities, rather than mid-size communities, defined as those with populations between 50000-499999. Small communities often may offer a sense of community for those who are part of it and large cities may offer the advantage of anonymity. They also discovered that,

the longer ago the experience [relationship with another woman] had occurred, the more open respondents were about their lesbianism in middle age. Least “out” were those women (eight percent of the sample) who had their first sexual experience with another woman after 40. (149)

It is clear that it does take time to integrate being lesbian with the other parts of one’s life. However as Schneider (1998) notes in her study, being out and the resultant community support that being out can offer is important as a woman ages.

Bradford and Ryan (1991) concluded from their study that,

[m]iddle-aged lesbians who participated in the National Lesbian Health Care Survey seem to have worked out an approach to life that is both realistic and creative, taking into account society’s continuing resistance to full acceptance of gay people, while preserving the individual’s right to choose her own life whenever possible. Women in our sample had little to do with traditional social institutions but a lot to do with personal relationships, family life and alternative communities...Although their private lives are often quite hidden from family members, co-workers and the larger community, lesbians have found ways to create full lives for themselves. (160)

Lesbian Identity

Identity is a complex and much discussed concept especially within politically marginalized groups. According to Webster’s dictionary, identity means what a thing or

person is, meaning its name or classification. It is also its recognizable individuality, while at the same time denoting sameness, exact or close likeness. Thus, even within this simplistic definition, there exists the conflicting concepts of sameness and difference.

Identity means something different to everyone and that something different is not static, but subject to change over time for the individual claiming a particular identity. Identity is based on many factors including who we are with and what situations we are in. Some parts of our identity may be more overt, while others, such as a lesbian identity, are for some people often kept hidden. When we choose to keep a certain part of our identity hidden, people are only able to see what we reveal or what they suspect. However, even revealing one's lesbian identity does not disclose fully what this identity really means. Identification can be constraining, as people attach certain characteristics with a particular identification, such as lesbian. Each group tends to carry with it assumptions of what it means to be a part of that group. Despite this, there are positive effects of claiming an identity such as the feeling of pride and a strong sense of belonging to a greater whole. These effects can be particularly important for gay people who may not have family support.

As noted earlier, evidence of the existence of same-sex relationships throughout our social history has been documented by a variety of gay and lesbian historians. However, there is a specific division regarding the development of an identity from these same-sex relationships. This division is between those who are defined as "essentialists" and those who are defined as "social constructivists." Essentialists believe gay and lesbian identity and culture existed from ancient Greece to the present day and is largely biologically determined, innate and fixed. Essentialist definitions of lesbian identity are often narrow and rigid.

Social constructivists believe, conversely, that without the existence of certain social developments, gay and lesbian identity could not have emerged as we now know it. These developments are said to have not occurred until the late 19th century. Thus, prior to this time, people engaged in same-sex behaviour, but did not identify or were not identified as gay or lesbian. Constructionist definitions of lesbian or gay are broader, less stable and more fluid. Despite the variation, the lines between these two definitions are not so neatly drawn. Same-sex relationships have existed throughout history, but without a social context to define this population, one would not be able to adopt a gay or lesbian identity. For men, the end of the 19th century marks the time of the initial adoption of a homosexual identity. For women this claim to identity did not take shape until the early 20th century when women were able to assert themselves as independent from men (Miller 1995; Faderman 1991).

Kinsman (1987) states that “[o]ur various forms of sexuality and the identities built around them are organized through the sex and gender relations that have existed in different societies” (24). He furthers that identities such as heterosexual and homosexual are socially constructed, stating,

[i]n patriarchal and capitalist societies, sexuality and sexual identity connect a number of needs—emotional contact, friendship, sensual closeness, bodily pleasure, and genital sex—with notions of biology, gender, and reproductive capacity. This formation of sexuality implants the ideas of masculinity and femininity within our very social and sexual beings, making it very difficult to disentangle our various needs grouped together as sexuality from biology, reproduction, and gender. Our sexuality has come to be defined by naturalist notions to such a degree that the process of social organization is rendered invisible (or unconscious). (25)

The development of gay and lesbian identity occurred with changes in society. With the industrial revolution came the movement of people from their home towns to larger cities

where they could maintain a certain anonymity. This anonymity allowed the creation of safe social spaces for the development of gay culture. Women also gained independence from men, thus allowing them to develop an identity outside of the household economy. According to Kinsman (1987), sexual identity emerged first in the upper and middle classes and moved later to the working class. For women,

[t]his lesbian identity in the U.S. had roots in the tradition of working-class women who passed as men-sometimes living with other women-and the tradition of passionate romantic friendships between middle-class women. Among black and working class women this cultural formation took place in the 1920s American jazz scene, in early networks of apartment parties, and in the few bars and clubs in which women could gather. (54)

These notions of sexual identity are, however, culturally based, reflecting largely western notions of sexual identity and culture.

Language

Consistent with the development of identity was the development of a language to name that identity. The earliest used terms for someone attracted to or who had sexual relations with someone of the same sex was "homosexual," which applied to both men and women. *Homosexual* was the clinical term, introduced in the late 19th century, used to refer to those having an attraction to someone of the same sex, but this term was used mostly for gay men. In the late 19th century, lesbian was used specifically for women. The term *lesbian* referred to the Isle of Lesbos, a Greek island populated by women where the poet Sappho was said to have lived and written poetry that celebrated women's love for one another. Sapphic was a term also used in the early 20th century before lesbian came into popularity.

The term *gay* was and still is commonly used to refer to both men and women. It seems to be a term that many use with more comfort than lesbian or some of the later reclaimed, but previous derogatory, terms. The origins of the term *gay* are interesting,

[a]ccording to historian George Chauncey, it was in the seventeenth century that the word *gay*, which had always connoted pleasurable things, began to indicate a life of immoral pleasures. Later, when applied to women in the nineteenth century, *gay* meant *prostitute*. By the early 1900s, homosexuals appropriated the term as a camp word to refer not only to themselves, but to promiscuity, flamboyance, and lack of restraint. Since the 1940s, *gay* has been the preferred term used by homosexuals to refer to themselves. (The Lesbian Almanac 1996: 83)

At the beginning of the 20th century, until just before Stonewall, *homophile* was also used to name homosexuals. This term was used in Canada in the 1960s and 1970s to name several gay and lesbian organizations of the time. Newfoundland's CHAN, discussed earlier, is an example of relevance to this thesis.

A variety of terms for women were used in different parts of this century. Some have come and gone in their use and some have had a reemergence at different times. In the 1920s, *amazon* was commonly used to refer to a lesbian and was reclaimed by lesbian-feminists in the 1970s. The term *amazon* itself, came from Greek mythology. According to The Lesbian Almanac (1996), "the Amazons were a nation of stately and powerful warrior women who reputedly lived (without men) near the Black Sea in Scythia in about the twelfth century B.C." (78). *Bulldyke*, *bulldagger* and *sergeant* came into use in the early part of the 20th century to refer to a *butch lesbian*, whereas, *mannish woman* was a code word often used by heterosexuals in the early 20th century to refer to butch lesbians. A *passing woman* was a woman in the 19th and early 20th century "who dressed, acted, and lived as a man, often

living with and marrying a traditionally feminine woman” (The Lesbian Almanac 1996: 88).

A *spinster* was also a code word for lesbian.

Queer came into use in the early part of the 20th century. It was a derogatory term, like *fag* and *dyke*, used by heterosexuals or the dominant culture to describe homosexuals. During the 1980s these terms were reclaimed by the gay community in an attempt to take away the power of their hurtful intent. These terms are often used by activists, often younger people, in the gay and lesbian community now as it “blurs both gender and sexual orientation and is regarded as more inclusive of difference than *lesbian* or *gay*” (The Lesbian Almanac 1996: 89). Throughout this paper, I will use the term *gay* to refer to the community and *lesbian* to refer to women as these are the terms most commonly used by the participants in this thesis, as well as those most commonly used in the gay community and society at large. As this thesis is meant to serve several purposes including being a voice for the women involved, the use of their language is important. In addition, it is meant to be a resource for the gay community and society, particularly in the Atlantic Provinces, and thus the use of a familiar and accepted language is important for this purpose, as well.

During the 1940s, the terms *butch* and *femme* came into popularity. A butch was a woman who preferred more masculine dress and identity, whereas a femme was a lesbian who preferred more feminine dress. The term *fluff* was another word used for a femme and *stud*, *diesel dyke*, *truck driver*, *dyke*, and *stone butch*, a butch lesbian who did not want to be touched during sex, were other terms used for a butch lesbian. The butch-femme code of behavior was common from the 1940s to the 1960s. However, it is still evident today and was very evident in Canada in the 1970s. During the 1940s to 60s, a *kiki* was a term used

for a woman who could not decide if she was a butch or a femme. The term was also used to describe two butches or two femmes who were in a relationship at a time when butch-femme relationships were the norm. After Kinsey's landmark study in the early 1950s, *Kinsey 6* was also used, with the 6 referring to those who identified as exclusively homosexual. The *third sex* was another term for homosexual, the first and second being heterosexual men and women respectively. Other terms used for lesbian were *rug-muncher*, *invert*, *urningin*, *gynander*, *viragint*, *contrasexual*, *androgyn*e, *moderne*, *roaring girl* and *female adventurer* (Richards 1990; The Lesbian Almanac 1996).

There was some differentiation made in the 1940s between those women who choose lesbianism and those women who felt their sexuality was innate. *Elective lesbian* was "[a] woman who experiences her lesbianism as chosen or elected, rather than as innate (The Lesbian Almanac 1996: 82), whereas a *primary lesbian* was "[a] woman who experiences her lesbianism as innate or biological determined, rather than as chosen or elected" (Ibid: 88). It is interesting to note that this difference of identity experience is a precursor to the current essentialist/constructionist debate in gay identity. *Lavender menace* was a term used in the 1970s for more outspoken lesbians who were part of the feminist movement.

Today, terms such as *glamour dyke* are used to refer to a lesbian who deems fashion and glamour important. A *granola lesbian* is a lesbian who is into health consciousness. A *leather dyke* is a lesbian whose style centers around leather clothing and accessories. Since the 1980s, the term *lipstick lesbian* has been used for a woman who might previously in the 1950s been referred to as a femme. *Luppies* are lesbian yuppies, a *political dyke* is a lesbian activist and a *power dyke* is a lesbian who is in a position of high visibility or influence.

Older lesbians became known as *Crones* in the 1970s when this term was reclaimed and younger lesbians, in their late teens or early 20s, were known as *baby butch*, however a woman who has recently come out is sometimes known as a *baby dyke*. A *bar dyke* is a woman who spends a considerable amount of time in women's bars.

Labeling

It is clear from the many terms noted above that identity is a complex concept. When one claims an identity or when one is externally imposed, that identity will have a different meaning and will change over time. Our identity is based on many factors including our experiences, age and location. When we reveal that identity to others, they may attach their own assumptions to the meaning of that identification, which can be constraining. This highlights the fact that identity is not within our individual control and thus has both a personal and social aspect. The personal aspect is our individual definition which is subject to change over time. The social aspect arises from our interaction with others, be they the same or different from our declared identities. Therefore, we can not control other's definition any more than it is possible for us to truly know ourselves what an identity means. However, there is a fear that we will be recolonized by the label of lesbian, meaning certain characteristics some people feel go along with being a lesbian will be generalized to be the wants and needs of everyone. Butler (1997) states that she is "no more comfortable with its homophobic determination than with those normative definitions offered by other members of the 'gay or lesbian community'" (301) The problem then becomes which identity will be used. One of the issues that both Wittig (1997) and Butler (1997) try to resist is one all encompassing definition.

As mentioned previously, the term lesbian was not formulated until the second half of the 19th century and lesbian identity was a phenomenon of the 20th century when sexologists searched for a definition of women who loved other women (Faderman 1991).

Faderman (1991) states that,

[a]s the century progressed, however, women who agreed to identify themselves as lesbian felt more and more free to alter the sexologists' definitions to suit themselves, so that for many women 'lesbianism' has become something vastly broader than what the sexologists could possibly have conceived of-having to do with lifestyle, ideology, the establishment of subcultures and institutions.(4)

Lesbian identity has come to embrace a multiplicity of meanings. There are as many ways to identify oneself as a lesbian, as there are lesbians in the world. For some it may mean sex with another woman, for others it may mean friendship, with no sexual context. McDaniel (1995) identifies a multiplicity of definitions of who may be included under the category of lesbian,

[a] woman who so describes herself may choose a woman for her sexual partner. She may want and find a life partner, or she may not ever want to live with another woman. A woman who is a lesbian may choose a woman for her life partner and never be sexual with her or any other woman. A woman who is a lesbian may find her primary social satisfaction in the company of other lesbians, or she may not. The reverse is also true. Women who are not lesbians can and have lived together companionably for decades. Women who are not lesbians have sometimes chosen other women for sexual partners. (4)

Auger (1992) furthers this stating there is,

no such thing as a "typical lesbian." Lesbianism is not merely a set of behaviors based on the preference of one sex over another, whether one acts on this preference or not. For many, lesbianism is also a political and emotional stance in the world, which creates an ideological base by allowing lesbians to define ourselves and each other. (81)

Thus our community encapsulates the diversity of lesbian identity including “lipstick lesbians”, “stone butches”, “dykes on bikes”, as well as women of different ages, and racial and cultural communities. Lesbian identity today is a result of changes in society, the questioning of so-called compulsory heterosexuality, “the social conditioning of women to believe that marriage and sexual coupling with men are inevitable for them” (The Lesbian Almanac 1996: 81), and the reemergence of the feminist movement and freedom of sexuality in the 1960s. Faderman (1991) includes in these social changes,

the gradual establishment of lesbian subcultures in large cities; the relationship of class to the nature of those subcultures; the effects that all-female environments such as women’s colleges, the military, and women’s bars have had on the development of lesbianism; the ways in which feminism and gay liberation changed the view of love between women, both for lesbians and for society in general; and the forces that have moved female same-sex loving from the status of romantic friendship to sickness to twilight loves to woman-identified-woman. (6-7)

Ross (1995) notes that in the 1990s, the issue remains of what defines a lesbian.

Identity Construction

According to social constructivists, one may be born a lesbian, that is, having a sexual attraction to women, but one identifies as a lesbian through living in a particular way, conforming to or resisting certain cultural norms and practices. Wittig (1997) supports the notion of constructed identity by examining the categories of woman and women. Wittig (1997) identifies the category “women” as derived from our social relationships. The category “woman” is a political and biological category used to enforce heterosexuality. We have thus been compelled to act along the lines of this biological category, which is (falsely) considered part of our nature. She furthers this, quoting Simone de Beauvoir who stated,

[o]ne is not born, but becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society: it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. (265)

Based on this, there is a need to create new definitions, as Wittig (1997) states,

one needs to know and experience the fact that one can constitute oneself as a subject (as opposed to an object of oppression), that one can become *someone* in spite of oppression, that one has one's own identity. There is no possible fight for someone deprived of an identity, no internal motivation for fighting, since although I can fight only with others, first I fight for myself. (269)

Women, particularly lesbians, can increase their level of empowerment by naming themselves, as there is power in naming ourselves as part of constructing our own identity. However, this process is not a simple one. When a woman declares her lesbian identity by coming out, it is also a refusal to keep a part of her identity hidden. It can be an empowering experience, but a life long process as one must continually come out in new situations and with new people. Society forces one into a continuous process of coming out, which despite its promises, can not produce the effects we desire - being visible as a lesbian - because of the instability of identity categories and the conflicted nature of social relations.

Butler (1997) sees identity categories as,

instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression. (301)

The fear is that we will be recolonized by the label of lesbian, meaning certain characteristics some people feel go along with being a lesbian will be generalized to everyone. These generalizations can occur fairly quickly. One of the issues that both Wittig (1997) and Butler (1997) try to resist is one all encompassing definition. No one definition can relate to

everyone's lived experience. Thus, a name may conjure certain images, but these images may not be part of the lived experience of the individual claiming that identity. For the women who were a part of this study, identifying as a lesbian had a different lived reality based on, among others things, their age and their location in the Atlantic Provinces.

Many people resist particular identities or certain characteristics they feel may be tied to an identity. Some fear claiming a certain identity means they will be recolonized by it, however some others resist claiming an identity based on a rejection of the politics of identity. Homophobia may be one reason for a rejection of a gay identity, but there are others. We may not be comfortable with the definition used to claim certain rights, which could result in the rights of some becoming the legislation for all. The rights of some were ignored during the early part of the women's movement. The early movement was influenced by white, middle-class, well-educated women. The rights of women of color, working-class and lesbians were ignored. One definition can not fit everyone nor can any signifier remain static.

The construction of identity and differing definitions of an identity make relating to each other more difficult. Truly knowing another's experiences is never possible. We may be able to understand another's experiences if our own are similar, as we may extend our experiences to theirs. However, this is sometimes not enough. It is this instability of identity categories that Butler (1997) addresses in "Imitation and Gender Insubordination". Butler (1997) agrees with Franzen (1993) regarding the lack of clarity of the label lesbian. Based on this we may question who has the right to a lesbian identity and who defines the term "lesbian", or if one definition is possible.

We cannot control the effect of our declaration and the subsequent definition of our identity nor the reaction of the person we have come out to. This being true, we may question why a person would come out. However, our lack of claiming can reassert the power of the closet over us as we must keep a part of ourselves hidden, which can negatively affect our self-image and self-esteem. We may choose to disclose our identity, but part of that identity is always concealed and out of our control. We cannot control the meaning of that identity to other people, nor can we ever fully understand its full and true meaning to us. Schutz (1967) states that one cannot understand another person's lived experiences in the same way that person understands them. One would have to experience the same events, in the same order and give them the same attention that this other person did; in other words, one would have to be that person. However, this does not mean we cannot understand another's experiences, even though we may place different meanings on those experiences. The problem also lies in the fact that there is no one definition for lesbian identity and there is no one common feature all lesbians share.

Despite the drawback of identity categories, Butler (1997) sees them "as sites of necessary trouble" (301) because of the importance of identifying with a group in order to feel a part of something, to reap the support this unification can provide, and to challenge oppressive uses of labels. However, too strict an adherence to an identity may serve to divide people as one identifies with one group without seeing beyond identification, something which occurred in the feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s. The initial purposes which brought women together then were overshadowed by separate identities and needs. It is important at times to let go of our singular identities and learn to work together because,

despite our separate identities, there are shared struggles. As Butler (1997) states, despite identities' difficulties, "there remains a political imperative to use these necessary errors...to rally and represent an oppressed political constituency" (303).

For Butler (1997), though the categories of identity are not clear, it is better to have them because of the visibility they create. This increased visibility, achieved by our coming out to others, may create more support for us. Homophobia is fuelled by a fear of the unknown. When others see the people they know identify as lesbian, the fear is diminished and it is then harder to maintain an attitude based on stereotypes. Identity categories are also necessary in order to effect change. Butler (1997) further states that the ambiguity of the terms can also be used to resist classification.

If we consider the social environmental factors that have characterized lesbian existence, it is easy to see the multiplicity of identities which arise from these environments. Our identities are constructed and constantly changing. They bring us together, but also keep us apart. They are sources of strength, as well as areas of resistance and weakness when the categories are not inclusive enough. I do not believe we can reject identity or the politics surrounding it, but there is a need for a reevaluation of current identity categories and more open, dynamic construction. Despite our differing identities, there is a need for people, particularly those who are part of marginalized groups to come together and make change.

Whether one chooses to identify as Jewish, lesbian, bisexual, or working class, each group carries with it many assumptions of what it means to be a part of that group. There are the positive effects, such as comfort and the pride of feeling a part of something one renders life-giving and worthy of celebration. Pride is especially important for people who

choose to identify as gay because, for gay people, the same family support available to other racial and class groups may not exist. As Eichberg (1990) discusses, for other minority groups, discrimination faced daily as a result of stereotyping and ignorance are shared by parents, other family members and often even entire communities. For gay people, this support must be more actively sought out because it does not often exist in their living environment. However, even within the gay community, oppression may still exist on many grounds such as gender, race, class, ability, size, ethnicity, etcetera. Despite the uncertainty and ambiguity of lesbian identity, there is a need for some identification. However, it may be that we will need to have broader, more open lines to this identity, to reflect the diversity of people who form a gay community.

Lesbian Identity in Albuquerque: A Study

In the gay community, a sense of identity is often deepened by participation in the community. The elders of the community provide their social and political knowledge to those newly entering the community. However, access to a community can be affected by a variety of factors including age, class and physical proximity.

In the article "Differences and Identities: Feminism and the Albuquerque Lesbian Community," Franzen (1993) traced how three subcommunities of lesbians defined themselves and each other during the period from 1965-80 in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Franzen illustrated the complexity of lesbian identity and the importance of lived experience in identity formation.

As stated previously, in the gay community, identity is often formed by participation in the community. The elders of the community provide their social and political knowledge,

in this case of lesbian culture and identity, to those newly entering the community. However, when Franzen moved to Albuquerque in 1980, she did not find connections between younger and older lesbians as she had seen in other lesbian communities. What Franzen found, instead, was a division in this community along social lines, in addition to the absence of minorities, including women of color. This division can be problematic for a community because a shared identity and community consciousness is important for cohesion and politicization. This cohesion is especially important in the gay community, which still fights for equitable treatment in society, but is still divided along class, gender, race and age lines.

To understand why this lesbian community was split in this way, Franzen interviewed lesbians who were involved in the community between 1965-80. She tried to balance her sample according to race, ethnicity and class factors, as well as between lesbians who were born and raised in New Mexico and those who settled there as adults. Her analysis centered around the identity of the women, which was based on their public lesbian activity. The three lesbian identities she found were: women socially and politically active as lesbians within feminism (feminist lesbians); women socially active as lesbians mostly through bars, but not politically active (bar lesbians); and closeted women not socially or politically active (closeted lesbians). A separation existed among these groups based upon the formation of their lesbian identities. The closeted lesbians would associate with both groups, but more comfortably with the bar lesbians. The bar lesbians and feminist lesbians did not associate with one another.

The bar lesbians and closeted lesbians were part of the history of Albuquerque, which was based on Hispanic and Native American culture and the civil rights movement. These factors helped create and maintain a gap between marginalized and privileged groups. Bar lesbians and closeted lesbians were also part of a growing lesbian and gay community. For gay people at this time, finding a bar meant finding an identity and a community, as it was the only place to meet. The bar scene offered a place to socialize, with minimal harassment, learn about others like oneself and how to deal with the pressures of living as a gay person in a homophobic and heterosexist society. This situation is still often true today, though with the increased openness and acceptance of gay and lesbian people, it is easier to create one's identity outside of the bar scene. Though the closeted lesbians were not active in the bar scene, often because of job concerns, their identity served as a reminder of the danger of being out for the women who were out. These women,

defined themselves in part against each other, but in an opposition free of hostility. They saw in each other two ways to be lesbian, one based on safety and passing and one based on risk. (Franzen 1993: 303)

This solidarity did not extend to the feminist lesbians who were seen as outsiders not only to the lesbian community, but to Albuquerque.

The feminist lesbians built their identities around the university. Their connections were around feminism and lesbianism. Their politics separated them from the bar lesbians for several reasons. The feminist lesbians did not socialize with gay men, often because of previous relationships with men and feminist separatist rhetoric about men. The feminist lesbians did not approve of butch/femme ideology, which they felt centered too much around heterosexual norms and practices. They also would not address issues surrounding sex, an

important issue for the lesbian community, as lesbianism was more of a political rather than sexual statement for them. The bar lesbians were alienated by the feminist lesbians' actions and ideas, which they viewed as foreign. Though the closeted lesbians came into contact with the feminist lesbians, there remained a mistrust among them. The closeted lesbians did not feel the feminist lesbians understood their decisions to remain closeted and the feminist lesbians felt betrayed by the closeted lesbians who offered them less than their full support.

Based upon the study of the lesbian community in Albuquerque, shared lesbian identities and shared feminist identities were not enough to maintain solidarity. The division occurred because sexuality was at the core of the issues involved and sexuality can be a problematic basis for political solidarity. The feminist lesbians did not see how sexuality interacted with racism and classism to separate women within the lesbian community. It was as if they possessed more of a theory of lesbianism, whereas the bar lesbians had more of a grass-roots experience of it. Thus, neither group could embrace the other's identity.

As the Albuquerque lesbians discovered, there are many ways to identify oneself as a lesbian. Their example illuminates the fact that identity, lesbian or otherwise, is sometimes not enough to bring a community together. However, Franzen thought the community could have been more united had there been other organizations for the women to meet, discuss issues and work together on common projects of shared struggle.

Aging

Experiences of aging vary. These differences can be influenced by biological, physical, social and emotional factors. Other factors such as sex, race, culture, class and sexuality can also affect one's experience in both positive and negative ways. Being a

woman in a male dominated society, one contends with sexism, as well as a myriad of other issues, depending upon one's situation. When a woman is a lesbian, she must also deal with heterosexism and homophobia. For a middle-aged lesbian, these factors may be compounded by ageism, fear and discrimination on the basis of age. Ageism affects not only her experience in a society that predominantly values youthfulness, but may also leave her feeling estranged from an often younger lesbian community. As stated by Cooper (1986),

[a]ging is a real process, which takes place differently in each individual. Ageism, on the other hand, is a constriction that rearranges power relationships, just like any other kind of discrimination or prejudice. When one ages, one may gain or lose. With ageism, one is shaped into something that is *always* less than what one really is. (54)

Based on this, being a middle aged lesbian can have far reaching effects on family, personal and social relationships.

Our Aging Society and Ageism

We are presently living in a society that is aging faster than in previous generations. This phenomenon is due to several factors including declining birth rates and improved health care. According to Gee and Kimball (1997), population aging has been increasing throughout this century, but there has been a substantial increase in recent decades. A large percentage of this aging population is composed of women. Gee and Kimball (1997) note that, according to Census of Canada and Statistics Canada, the percentage of males to females is decreasing, and the number of men gets lower as age increases. There are a number of hypotheses for this age differential, including biological and social factors which work against men's health in old age.

Though women may live longer, longevity has its problems. As Gee and Kimball (1987) state,

the status and position of older women is not universal, but varies with the wider social, economic, and cultural context. In contemporary society, older women are devalued and powerless as a direct result of a wider society that oppresses all women, regardless of age, in the interest of preserving a male-dominated social order. The low status of older women represents an extension and intensification of the negative impact of sexist society, due to the added factors of age stigmatization and physical frailty. (9)

According to Gentry and Seifert (1991), ageism consists of three parts:

(1) prejudicial attitudes toward aged persons and the aging process; (2) discriminatory practices against the elderly, especially in employment; and (3) institutional norms, practices and policies that perpetuate negative stereotypes, limit opportunities and undermine the dignity of older persons. These three mutually reinforcing factors have transformed aging from a natural process into a social problem and the elderly bear the consequences. (225)

Further to this, The New Our Bodies, Ourselves (1984) notes three sources of ageism, “our society denies the reality of infirmity and death...[it creates] isolation of elders and dismissal of their skills and wisdom [and]...our profit-oriented system...devalu[es]...those who don’t ‘produce’” (516). There are very subtle forms of ageism, such as not wanting to disclose your age, to blatant forms of ageism, such as violence against the aged. Women suffer as a result of ageism in a society that values youth and encourages hiding your age with hair dye, skin cream and measures as drastic as surgery. Gee and Kimball (1987) note that,

[w]omen are supposed to *be* attractive to men and to *do* work for men (and their children). Then, as women age, losing their attractiveness and becoming widows, their social usefulness is gone. Even women who do not meet societal expectations, either by choice or chance, cannot avoid negative evaluation-they are “failures” as women. (10)

Ageism can be exacerbated by class. Older women experience higher rates of poverty, in addition to no longer being seen as useful, contributing members of society. However, Baker (1988) found that “people from wealthier backgrounds often appear and act younger than poorer people of the same chronological age” (3-4). She furthers that this difference is influenced by factors such as being part of a class that has more access to resources and means to maintain higher levels of self-esteem.

Ageism permeates all age groups in society because age is relative. When we are in our teens, 30 seems old. When we reach 30, 50 may seem old. “This way of thinking can continue well after our sixties, an indication of the general denial of aging in our culture” (Loulan 1984: 193-4). However, the fact that our population is aging has caused many to begin to rethink some of the stereotypes and attitudes toward aging. The concerns of youth are now being replaced by a new respect for middle age. In addition, many people realize that, as they age, they have more experience to bring to life’s challenges and often more confidence in their ability to make it through. According to Loulan (1984), “If we don’t listen to society’s messages about us, our lives are no less vital and compelling as we age” (194).

Being a Midlife Lesbian

Despite such detractions and disadvantages, society also attaches a certain degree of respect with increasing age, particularly among the middle and upper classes. What respect one does not gain from outside, may be acquired as a result of a certain peace and confidence that aging, particular middle age, can provide. As Crux (1991) states, “I have survived enough crises, hard times, that I know I do get through. When I was younger I was never

sure” (25). This peace and confidence can extend to sexuality, helping one feel more comfortable sharing this aspect of one’s identity with others. Continuing to hide one’s sexuality is very hard on one’s self-esteem and thus many women feel, as they age, such a burden of hiding is no longer wanted or necessary. A woman may also feel different in how she continues to express her identity. Cruikshank (1991) stated that “[l]esbianism is still central to who I am but it seems muted now, and I am not as much a public lesbian figure as before” (32). She furthers that “[her] lesbian identity is more secure now than when I was more militant and more focused on lesbianism because I am surer of who I am (32).

Many of the contributors to Lesbians at Midlife: the Creative Transition supported the feeling of peace in many areas of their lives as they entered middle age. Sang (1991) states that

lesbians have different developmental issues at midlife than those reported for both males and traditional females. One of the major issues was the need to *balance* the diverse aspects of their lives, i.e., work, relationships, interests, community and spirituality. Unlike traditional women and men who were first getting in touch with the part of themselves that had been excluded until midlife, career or intimacy, lesbians have been developing both these areas over a lifetime. (213)

Despite the positives, there are difficulties being a middle age lesbian. The women’s and gay liberation movement has made it easier for women to identify as lesbian. However, the elders of the community often have a difficult time feeling a part of a younger lesbian community in which many activities focus on the younger generations. With the elders less visible in a community, young women have fewer role models as they, themselves, age and less access to a broad repertorie of knowledge and experience.

Relationships at Middle Age

Finding a partner, whether of the same or opposite sex, can be difficult at any age, but it can be especially hard for women in the lesbian community because of the invisibility of the community. This invisibility is compounded by ageism, as the visible lesbian community is largely populated by those 30 and under. As Loulan (1991) states, "They (middle age lesbians) aren't just floating around the bars, (and) Get-togethers sometimes seem contrived" (15). Many people, by midlife, are in committed relationships. Partnership is seen as superior to the single life and many women, even if they are part of an unsatisfactory relationship, will remain for fear of being alone.

The national lesbian health care survey discussed earlier indicated that of the women surveyed, 60% were in relationships. Bradford and Ryan (1991) felt this indicated that,

[h]aving a primary relationship is clearly very significant to middle-aged lesbians but just as clearly involves ongoing stress. It is extremely difficult for gay people to maintain a committed partnership without the larger support of family and community available to heterosexual couples; midlife lesbians in our sample are clearly not exempt from this reality. (161)

Having a relationship at midlife can have a different meaning for a lesbian. She may finally be taken seriously in her personal and professional life. Her family and her relationships, particularly if they have been long term, are more likely to be treated like a marriage. If she has been alone for a long time, her family may be happy to see her with someone, even if that someone is a woman. As Loulan (1991) discusses, when one is at middle age and has not been married to a man or dated men in years, people stop asking if you are ever going to get married. For women who have not come out, she furthers that midlife is an ideal time to come out, as women at midlife, or during most of their life for that matter, are not considered sexual beings. Thus, "[s]ex isn't the first thing that straight

people think of when they see us as a couple” (Loulan 1991:14) which may make it easier for society to accept one’s expression of lesbianism.

Not all women, however, are interested in pursuing a relationship. Coss (1991) completed a study of women over 40 who had grown up and come out at a time when long-term committed relationships between women were less likely to happen. She found that, for these women, a relationship would be fine if it did not disrupt the balance they had in their work and social lives. For them, “[t]he empowerment from being single and independent is offset by the fear of aloneness and isolation that failing health could bring ” (133). Some felt that being single was not as hard as it once was. She further states that “[s]omebody who’s been in a long relationship is stranger in the gay life than people who’ve been in and out of them” (134). However, some expressed that it is financially more strenuous and it is difficult not to have someone to share the good and bad times, vacations, and so on. They also worry if they become sick and are single.

For a lesbian who is first coming out, dating can present a whole new area of uncertainty as women do not have the same experience with dating as men have. As we reach the age of dating, men are taught the finer art of courting. Women, on the other hand, are taught the submissive role of waiting to be asked. The rules of dating have changed somewhat since the women’s movement, however, women are still not often taught all the nuances of dating, such as asking a woman on a date. Thus, women may be very self-conscious. However, as some of the literature indicates, women often have two very different reactions to this situation. Some women are so happy to be free from their heterosexual (dis)union that they enter the lesbian community with excitement. Loulan

(1991) furthers that “[m]idlife is the time in our lives when many of us come to believe the idea that our life is not a dress rehearsal and if we don’t get on with it, one day it may be too late” (16). On the other side of this enthusiasm are those women who fear an unfamiliar situation and one that is not always open to middle-aged members.

Motherhood

Many feel that aging may not be as difficult for some lesbians because they are no longer so closely identified with childbearing. Therefore, the end of menstruation is not such a traumatic event for many. However, this is not necessarily the case, as all women have been conditioned to believe they are not fulfilled if they do not have children. Many lesbians have children from heterosexual marriage and many want to and do have children in lesbian relationships.

Having children, in any situation and at any age, can be difficult. However, there are added difficulties if one is a lesbian mother. If one is single, it may be more difficult to find someone who wants to take on the added responsibility of children. If one is in a relationship, one must deal with homophobic and heterosexist assumptions in health care, educational institutions, and so on, that do not recognize non-biological parents, particularly if that parent is another woman. There is often inadequate support within the lesbian community as many lesbians do not have children or remain in the closet for fear of societal attitudes and prejudice against their children. Rothschild (1991) states “I think my children suffered, not only because of my being a lesbian, but because they didn’t have a sense of safety and normalcy either in the straight world or as a part of my life in the lesbian

community”(97). She adds that “[a]s a lesbian mother, I felt caught between the needs of my children and the lesbian community” (97).

The issues can be more profound for women who come out after years of heterosexual marriage. One of the most difficult realities a lesbian must face is coming out to her children. She can fear their rejection, as well as their loss in custody battles in courts that may support homophobic and heterosexist practices. When Rothschild (1991) came out in her early forties, she did not realize how it would impact her children or how her life would change. Her children were in their teens with a heightened awareness of themselves and sexuality and how they wanted things to be. She felt it can be more difficult during this time for teens to accept their parents’ sexuality. She states that,

[h]ow our children react to us forces us to look at ourselves and have thoughts about ourselves we wouldn’t have if we weren’t parents. Liz and Chris felt the stigma of having gay parents; therefore, it played into my doubts. All the homophobia around me came flooding in. (93)

However, she found that as time went on, things got easier as her children became more comfortable and chose friends who were less conventional and more accepting. Around the age of 16 or 17, teens often begin to deal better with their mother’s sexuality, as Rothschild (1991) states, as their identity no longer rests on their mother.

Parents

Relationships with parents and other family members can be difficult at the best of times. Family struggles can be compounded when one is a lesbian, as homophobia and heterosexism does not exclude families. When a child comes out as gay or lesbian, parents may feel it is their fault. Coming out may be seen as a temporary idea because of a bad

relationship or sexual experimentation. Such resistance by families can occur regardless at what age a woman comes out. For lesbians, in particular, male family members may feel threatened as they often assume that lesbians hate men. These fears cause many lesbians to separate themselves from their families and other heterosexual people in an attempt to protect themselves, their partners and their children from possible rejection. If she chooses to remain part of these networks, it means the choice of either hiding a part of her life or choosing to take the risk of coming out. If she chooses to keep her sexuality to herself, she may feel on guard about what she says. Even if she is out, she may not have the same freedom to discuss her personal life or express affection with her partner within her family unit. However, coming out to your family can result in many positives. Knowing someone gay or having someone gay in the family helps to dispel myths about gay people. With increased openness and knowledge in society, many parents are more accepting today.

Warshow (1991) completed a study of 24 lesbians between the ages of 40-57 in New York City to determine how midlife lesbian identity and participation in the lesbian/gay community impacts on relationships with mothers. She discovered four categories of feelings about lesbian identity which included non-accepting, defensively accepting, accepting (private), and accepting (political). She found the women were evenly divided between accepting and non-accepting. However, of the women who were accepting of their sexuality, their relationships with their mothers tended to be better. Many of these women felt they had done the work to accept themselves and were able to have an open relationship with their mothers. Of the women who were not accepting of their identity, most spent the majority of their social time with other gay and lesbian people. Those who were comfortable

with their identity were less likely to segregate themselves and often participated in mixed groups as an openly gay person. Warshow (1991) felt that,

[a]ccording to developmental theory, certain life events can create a crisis at one time in life, but can be more acceptable at another. It would seem that lesbians must deal first with their internalized homophobia before they can have satisfactory relationships, feel in control and participate more fully in the world. (82)

As women reach middle age, their parents are often reaching retirement age and perhaps may require care. This situation can be difficult for lesbian children because it is often the “single” or (seen as) “unmarried,” daughter, who is left to care for parents. This expectation can be especially difficult for a woman who is not out to her family for it puts a strain on all of her relationships.

Health

Aging affects everyone differently. Kehoe (1989) suggests that some older lesbians are younger in spirit than older heterosexual women since lesbians have fewer socially imposed expectations. Many are more active and may be in better health, as they worked outside the home, often in nontraditional jobs. Despite this, as we age, health is an increasingly important issue. Reaching the menopausal years coincides with many physical and mental changes. Menopause results in less estrogen and progesterone being produced, periods stopping and other physical and emotional changes. Some of the emotional changes can include sudden mood changes, hot flashes, depression, irritability and anxiety. The symptoms occur irregularly and may affect one’s interest in sex. Auger (1992) states that “[l]esbians who become sexually dissatisfied or bored with their partners, especially those in long-term monogamous relationships, sometimes used menopause as an “excuse” for not

wanting to have sex anymore” (83). However, as Auger (1992) also indicates, “[t]here is no bio-medical evidence to support the idea that hormonal changes which occur during menopause effect sexual desire, attractiveness or sexual capacity” (83). Once a woman’s body adjusts to the hormonal changes it is going through, her sexual desire can return.

Bradford and Ryan (1991) found from their lesbian health care survey that midlife lesbians were in good mental, physical and social health, but this health was accomplished through the help of counselors and other gay people rather than through social institutions that serve the heterosexual population. However, they also found certain health care issues particular to midlife lesbians. They found that,

[w]orry was a common experience for well over half of these lesbians, suggesting that midlife lesbians are more likely to live with disabling stress than are other women...Midlife lesbians appear more likely than women in the general population to experience worry and more likely to have their daily lives affected by the extent of their worry. (153)

Lesbian’s concerns differ from the general population as their lives center around our homophobic and heterosexist society. The researchers also found that a substantial proportion of respondents reported tobacco, alcohol and/or marijuana use, but their dependence on alcohol was no different than women in general. A high percent (73%) had sought out mental health counseling at some time in their lives. The survey also indicated that “midlife lesbians appear to report (health) problems with about the same frequency as do women their age in the general population” (156). However, they found that there were fewer women than in the general population who were willing to go to a doctor’s office. Some of the fear and dissatisfaction with health care centered around the assumption of heterosexuality or not feeling comfortable coming out to a health care professional.

In Canada, in recent years, there have been changes in human rights legislation in relation to the gay community, as well as the extension of benefits in certain sectors to those in same-sex relationships. Discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is now against the law in Nova Scotia, as well as some other provinces. Despite this gain many lesbian couples will not be recognized as next-of-kin in cases of accident, illness or death. Sweeney (1995) found many women in her study had "taken steps to insure that their own wishes will be carried out in case of an emergency. They have medical guardianship, power of attorney and living wills drawn up" (114-115). However, none of these measures are guarantees. In addition to these stresses, many lesbians fear financial hardship, particularly if they become ill. They may not be covered by a partner's health plan because the plan may not cover same-sex partners or, if it does, her partner may fear coming out at work to attain health benefits for a same-sex spouse. If one has a health plan at a present job, a lesbian may stay with that job to keep the plan because switching to a private health plan will not cover pre-existing illnesses or may not cover same-sex partners. Thus health and health care seem to be ongoing issues for lesbians.

Many of the issues discussed in this chapter take on an added life in Chapter 5 which includes the stories of the three women who participated in my study.

Chapter 5

Stories to Tell

This chapter will tell the story of the lives of each of the women who were a part of this study. From these stories one can see the triumphs of these women's lives and the hardships they endured in their journey for self-acceptance.

Cher

Cher grew up in a small rural community in the 1950s in a working class environment. She remembers having crushes on young women when she was in her teens, but doing anything about it never occurred to her. Growing up in a small rural community, Cher does not remember hearing much, if anything, about gay people. What she did hear was very negative stereotypical images of gay men and lesbians. Although she had feelings for women, these stereotypical images made it difficult for her to accept this part of herself. She says "I think I was so much a lesbian inside, that I swear, I thought everybody could see through, so I did everything I could to dress up (like a woman)."

It was not until her late teens, when she moved briefly to a large city outside the Atlantic Provinces, that she first heard about other gay people and became aware of a gay community. However, she was not brave enough to explore this part of herself at the time. She states, "[I] did everything in my power so that no one would ever know [and]...if anyone got close to me, female friends, I used to back away." Consequently, Cher dated men, hoping to find a male partner who would help her forget her feelings for women. Eventually, Cher married a friend to whom she stayed married for nearly twenty years.

When she was first married, Cher felt she “could handle being gay and live a straight life like you’re supposed to do.” Unfortunately, this feeling did not last long. Only a few years into her marriage, Cher’s struggles with her sexuality re-emerged. One night, after being married for only four years, she admitted to a friend she thought she was bisexual. Being bisexual was easier for her to accept because it meant she was still attracted to men and thus helped justify her marriage.

Cher’s struggles with her sexuality resulted in several bouts with depression, serious weight loss and repeated episodes of suicidal ideation. She believed suicide was a way out and felt if she followed through with it, no one would ever know her thoughts about women and she wouldn’t have to struggle with these thoughts anymore. However, not wanting to leave her two children kept her from following through with such notions. As she states, “they gave me a focus of living.”

It was at this time that Cher went to see a psychiatrist. “I wanted somebody to find out, but they would have had to dig because I wasn’t ready to spill my guts to anybody.” Though she did admit to the psychiatrist she “didn’t want anything to do with men,” the therapy only lasted for two sessions.

As time went on, Cher realized she had to leave her marriage, but felt it was important to wait until her children finished school. At the same time, she continued trying to reason with herself to make the marriage work.

I talked to myself out loud and I say well, ok, you have a half-decent husband, a home, a cottage, a car, a truck, what do you want? And, I’d be crying...I knew what I wanted. And then I said to myself, you know you’re never going to have the guts to face this. So, just get over it...settle for what you have.

A lot of people would give up their life to have what you have. And I tried to convince myself of that.

As her children got older, Cher went back to work and started her own business. However, these changes did not rid her of her depression and thoughts of suicide. She states, “it was all I could think about.” One night, when her children were older, she had a near successful attempt at suicide. She took a combination of beer and sleeping pills and waited for them to take effect.

I just reached that point where nothing mattered any more, I couldn’t go on, I didn’t want to keep on living with a man. I had to get out and my only way of getting out was suicide, that’s what I thought.

It was at this point she realized she needed help and began seeing a psychologist on a regular basis. However, she was still unwilling to tell the psychologist about her feelings for women, so instead, made another attempt to keep her marriage going. However, in late 1989, she was diagnosed with a degenerative illness. One month after being diagnosed, in early 1990, she separated from her husband. About a year later, she admitted to her psychologist that she was a lesbian. As she states, “it was the first time that I said it out loud that I was a lesbian.”

Even though Cher had finally admitted her feelings, she felt she would never act on these feelings because she was living in a small rural community in the Atlantic Provinces and this is where she intended to stay. She stated, “I thought that I would go to my death and no one besides my little small groups of friends in my small home town...would ever know for the rest of my life.” However, this was not to be the case. Her feelings changed when she went on vacation to a large city outside the Atlantic Provinces and fell in love with it.

When she came back to her hometown, she decided to begin saving the money to move and wait for her youngest child to finish university. She wanted a change and decided she needed to do it before she turned 50. Cher stated, "it was in my mind that if I didn't make this big move before I turned 50, that I didn't know if I would have the courage to do it." After several years she had enough money to move.

It was in this new city that her coming out occurred, in a sense by accident, since it was still not part of her plan. As she was walking around the downtown area one day, she noticed a bookstore that turned out to be a gay and lesbian bookstore. She states, "for someone who didn't want to come out, I was hooked." It was here she met some women, started going to women and lesbian activities and groups and finally went out with a woman.

At this same time, her oldest child was living with her and began to grow suspicious of the places Cher was going and the people with whom she was spending time. Her child confronted her. Telling her children was her biggest fear and she feared her oldest child's reaction the most. However, her fears vanished as both were very accepting. Although, as she states, "I never meant to tell anybody. Now I'm glad, and I think once my kids knew...it was just like a whole new life, like I didn't have any more fears." She furthers that

[m]y kids, bless them, were the easy part in this transition and I knew that once I had that conquered, then I could conquer everything. By the same token, I still didn't think that people home had to know...I still had a little bit of phobia there.

This fear changed when she met her current partner, Summer. "[I]t was like I met my soulmate, it was like I knew I met somebody that I could spend the rest of my life with."

Since Cher has been with her partner, she has been very open about her sexuality. She continues,

I think once I met Summer, that all of a sudden it wasn't worth it any more to stay in the closet for me, I wanted to get out on the rooftop and shout it out...I think I was so totally contented with myself, who I am and what I am, and I'm out now to everyone, it's not an issue for me any more.

It was at this point she truly began to accept her sexuality and has not looked back. Cher decided to tell the rest of her family because she refused to lie to them about herself and the nature of her relationship with Summer. Cher knew it would not be easy because her family's expressed opinions of gay people were that they were not normal and only thought about sex. Despite this, Cher came out to her family in a variety of ways: face to face; by phone; by letter; and, by tape. Trying to convince her mother that being a lesbian was not "all in my mind" has been difficult and she states her mother still has "problems with the lesbian word." Two of her siblings have been fairly supportive, but she does not have contact with the other one, who is part of a very anti-gay church organization. She says of her family "that maybe they don't understand, but they felt I was very brave in coming out and...just wished me all the best." Cher understands their difficulty getting used to the idea as she had a lifetime to get used to it, but for them it is new and being from a small rural community with little exposure to difference makes it harder.

Cher has been lucky because most people she has told have responded positively to her truthfulness. She mentioned one friend whose friendship was lost, but throughout her coming out process she has felt "I was willing to gamble the works. Summer was worth it to me. So if I lost everyone, it would have hurt, I won't say that it wouldn't, I would be

lying, but it was going to be their loss.” She has been rather surprised that it has not been a big issue with friends in her hometown.

These experiences have opened the doors for Cher to be very open about her sexuality. She no longer hides her sexuality from anyone, either on a personal or professional level. As she states,

now, I can honestly say that I really like who I am. I love the person, I love that I have so much self esteem...I love that I don't have to hide in the closet any more. And I love that I can look people in the eye and actually say yeah, I'm gay. And I say it with pride, and I introduce Summer to people, and I say it with love.

Currently Cher works in an office environment and is open with her co-workers about her sexuality.

For Cher, being in her 50s and having come out, there is no looking back. Though she would not want to do anything to hurt or embarrass her partner, “in the same token, I'm not going to lie to people.” She thus feels she has developed an attitude since turning 50,

I turned 50, I stopped caring what people thought and started living for me and for what I valued in life. I started living for my integrity, what was truthful, what was meaningful. I did not stay around people anymore just because.

The coming out process has helped give Cher her self-esteem and, for her, being out means, “I'm finally alive.” Though being a lesbian and being out is important, she also feels that

it's not the be-all and end-all, but it's who I am, so I don't want people to think any more that I'm straight and I don't ever want to live a lie again...I was in the closet too many years.

She continues,

I've dreamt about as far back as I can remember, it's what kept me going, and even in my worst moments, I would always say one day, I am going to be in

love with a woman, one day, I am going to love a woman, and one day I will be happy. I don't know if I ever thought it would happen, but I thought what harm is it to dream...I was so sure I was never going to come out, so sure I was going to die with this, and yet I had that dream...(now) I'm bloody living my dream and nobody, no one in this world can take that away.

Though sometimes Cher wishes she had come out earlier, she feels it happened at the right time in her life. If it did not happen when it did, she may not be with the same person and may not have her two children who have been a support to her. When she thinks about the years she wasted, she thinks about the ones she still has. She does worry about her health and having to be taken care of as she ages, but when someone asked her recently whether she would rather have her illness or her depression, she chose her illness, stating, "[i]t was a physical thing and I could deal with it."

Cher now lives with her partner of two years. She is comfortable in her identity as a lesbian and as a middle age lesbian. For Cher, being in middle age is positive as she feels "life is just beginning." She continues, "[e]ven though I'm an older lesbian, I don't feel old, I feel as young now as I did when I was 18, 19. My body doesn't think so, but I think so." She continues to be very active in the gay community and does not feel inhibited from doing so because of her age. She plans to be more involved in the future, despite the progression of her illness. Coming out as a lesbian has helped Cher gain a sense of herself and thus society's messages about homosexuality and aging she feels do not affect her to a great extent.

I see things differently. I see things more clearly. I see things for what they are and I feel I have more empathy, and being gay, coming out, has opened my eyes to so much more because I just didn't think about this before, but you can be such a nice person...when you are true to yourself, you can be true to so many other things.

She is happy with her new life and will continue to thrive as long as her health allows her.

Maria

Maria is a single lesbian in her early 40s. She has lived in the same urban center in the Atlantic Provinces all of her life. She grew up in a small, middle class family surrounded by very negative attitudes about homosexuality. She did not become aware of herself as a lesbian until her mid 30s. Prior to this time, she considered herself heterosexual, although she has since remembered times in her childhood and teens when she felt extremely close to women and became sexually excited being near them. However, at the time, she pushed these feelings away.

In her mid 30s, Maria experienced attractions toward women, particularly toward one woman in her life. At the same time, she was in therapy. When she began experiencing the attraction, she was very scared. Maria felt she was a terrible person, but realized she needed to talk with someone about these feelings and decided her therapist was the only choice. As she relates,

this day I went in the office...it's possible that chair could just have been shaken off its legs...I was so scared but I knew that I wanted to talk to somebody because I was this bad person. Not really bad person, but there was something terribly wrong with me...I told her I've got something...terrible to tell you, but I need to talk about it...it wouldn't have felt any worse if I had [said]...'by the way, last night I went out and murdered my next door neighbour', you know, that wouldn't have been any harder to tell her than to say you know what.

Fortunately, Maria's therapist reacted very positively and continued to be a positive support for her as she continued coming out.

When Maria first admitted her feelings to her therapist, she thought she must be bisexual which, she states,

was the only way that I could accept myself in all the things I had done previously...I would have felt like perhaps you were living a lie for those many years or any feelings that you had for men...weren't validated.

The feelings that she was bisexual lasted for about a year. During this time, she continued her therapy and began to gain a better self image. This was a very positive time for her as she states,

I could see a woman and I could see an attractive woman, and I could say hmm. She's cute or she's attractive...that felt really good...to accept myself for who I was and also to let myself look...to let myself just be.

At this point, she was able to label herself as a lesbian which Maria felt, "was quite a change to go from that to...accepting myself as a lesbian." For Maria, this admittance was no easy feat. Her attractions toward women came very much as a surprise to her. She also was not aware of the existence of gay and lesbian people until her late teens and knew very little of the existence of a gay community.

Maria has chosen not to come out to her family at this point as she does not want to lose them if their reaction is negative, which she fears will be the case, based on their attitudes. She has raised the subject, to test them, to see if the "positive influences of society in general would rub off on them," but, unfortunately, the changes in opinion have not been great enough to come out. This circumstance has been very painful for Maria as she feels her family only sees part of who she is and are missing a very important, and to her, an exciting part of herself. "[I]t's like my person is cut in half." However, she would consider taking the risk if she were in a relationship because she would want to share this joy with them.

Although Maria was out to herself and some friends for a year or so, she considers the event of attending her first lesbian dance as the true point of coming out. Since that time she feels her coming out process has occurred fairly rapidly from her first realization and utterance to the current day. However, she currently considers her coming out process to be at a standstill as she has told those she needs to tell or feels safe telling.

we keep making those decisions if it's safe to come out to somebody, or how a person's going to react to you...so you have to keep making decisions, judging the situation, sometimes being worried...if someone finds out who I am, how they're going to react...So that part is hard. And then I say to myself...[I] wouldn't want to be any other person, you know, there is nothing like being attracted to a woman.

She has come out to most of her friends and to the people at work she has known longer, feels comfortable with and wants to "share things with at a personal level." She works in a non-teaching position in an educational setting and though she does have contact with students, she does not feel the same restrictions as if she were a teacher. Maria feels her relationships have improved because of her coming out because she is able to discuss her life more freely and discuss her feelings with more than just her lesbian friends. For Maria, being out and receiving these positive reactions has been "a positive reinforcement for the person who I am." However, the fact that she is out in some places and not others seems to put a "spotlight" on those places in which she is not as open,

before, I wasn't out to anybody...Therefore, the idea of stifling and not communicating and not expressing the person I am was the same for everybody...But now, just like my parents, when I cannot communicate to them the person who I am, then the feeling of...sadness, that you experience from not being able to talk to somebody about who you are as a lesbian and what you're doing in your daily life.

Though she has not had a relationship with a woman to this point, Maria looks on the experience of being attracted to someone as a very positive one. To her it means “you’re capable of loving another woman and ...to know that if you’re capable of fully loving someone else...someday there will be that right person for you.” Maria also would not change much about her coming out. She would not change the people to whom she has or has not come out. However, if circumstances had been different and the same people and supports had been around earlier, it would have been beneficial to have known earlier, despite society’s opinions on homosexuality. She stated,

if I had come out many years ago, there would have been more of that positive experience [seeing a woman and acknowledging an attraction]. But again, the negative would be that society many years ago, because of being more straightlaced...being a lesbian or being a lesbian couple years ago was much more difficult.

Maria has made friends in the lesbian community, and she attends lesbian activities and dances, but she has not participated in more visible activities such as a gay pride parade. However, she would consider some if she were in another place, and not in the city in which she lives, mostly because she is not out to her family or everyone at work. She feels living in an urban center has been an aid to her coming out. She says, “I would not have come out, perhaps as fast as I did when I started” had she not lived in a city because there would not have been the same opportunity to be involved in lesbian groups, or the same access to dances, and so on.

For Maria now, being middle age has made her more accepting of others and of herself. She is willing to take more chances and she feels that, if she were younger, not being accepted might be more devastating. She does not feel that her access to the community is

hampered by her age. "I honestly do not think that the gay community is any harder for me to make friends than anything else." In fact, she thinks it may be somewhat easier because those who have been in the community for some time will often be teachers. Being middle age has allowed Maria more insight into herself. With this insight, the terms, like lesbian, have deeper meanings to her. Even though she has reached middle age, Maria admits "I'm not ready to slow down." She admits, "I don't think I'm a lot different than when I was 16 or 18 or 20 or 30." She feels for her "the things that I like about middle age are just more reinforced by being a lesbian." Maria feels this to be true as she contends lesbian society is more open to exploration, spiritual and otherwise.

I think being a lesbian in middle age is, this is all theoretical, but I would suspect there is more positive reinforcement for the people who want to "start again," want to change their life around, or want to really discover who they are and get down to the nitty-gritty, the basics of what they believe is important to them?

Based on this, Maria is considering changing careers and does not feel being in middle age is a barrier to this change. As she states, "it's not until your 40's and 50's 'til you really get the nitty-gritty of what you like, what you don't like, what would work or not work. So in a way, your life is just beginning." Despite this, Maria does have some fears as she ages. As an aging single person, she is concerned about being sick or dying alone. She has some health and money concerns and knows the responsibility of aging parents would fall on her. However, Maria continues to be a very positive person who claims she "wouldn't want to be any other person ...[because] there is nothing like being attracted to a woman."

Gabrielle

Gabrielle, who is in her mid 40s, came from a working class background. She spent part of her childhood in a rural area before moving to an urban centre. It was there that she came out at the age of 19 when she fell in love with a friend. She expressed her feelings of attraction to her friend, who responded that she wasn't interested, but that the feelings were okay, a very positive response, considering it was the late 1960s. Up until this point, she admits she was not aware of her feelings towards women. Given the time, there was not much discussion in her family or in society about sex or sexuality. She did, however, feel her school was different in that it provided her with "an intellectual openness about a lot of things." She continues, "you can't say it was supportive, but in an indirect way it was, because it wasn't negative." Despite this, she did feel, once she realized her feelings towards women, "there was an incredible sense of being alone with this." However, Gabrielle did realize that, while she felt alone, she was not alone.

Soon after her initial realization, Gabrielle found a gay male friend, and after coming out to each other, they spent time together in local bars searching for a gay community. That summer, while working, Gabrielle met a woman who was 'rumored' to be a lesbian. She didn't know any other lesbians at the time and finally brought up the issue with her. They began a relationship and Gabrielle felt "from the first minute of any sexual contact...infatuation and love, throw that all in, I just felt like I came home." They were together for a few months, but it ended badly. She feels this was partly due to the fact there were "no role models to fall back on" in terms of having a good lesbian relationship.

After this relationship ended, Gabrielle and her gay male friend continued searching for a gay community. One evening they met a man, in what they later found out was a gay

male cruising area, who helped them find what gay community existed in their area. The gay community at the time was based around a few bars, which could be very dangerous. Gabrielle observed that the lesbian community which existed in these bars at the time was based very much on an extreme butch/femme ideology, although she admits she did not fall into either of these rigid categories.

During this time, Gabrielle did not struggle with definitions of lesbian or with coming out. As she states, "I wasn't really aware of what society said a lesbian was back then. About the only thing I thought, it was really weird, or sick." Despite this, she felt "[i]t was really intriguing. I was fascinated." For a time after Gabrielle came out, she did struggle with wondering if she might be bisexual. She did try "dating some guys a little bit, but not much and [it] didn't do anything for me," however, she wanted "to see if maybe I'd forgotten something, left something behind." After this phase, she settled with comfort into being a lesbian.

Gabrielle came out to her siblings soon after she realized her feelings. Initially her siblings didn't want her to talk about it, but they are very accepting now. She did not come out to her parents at the time because she didn't feel comfortable talking about the issue. "Any time the subject came up...I never felt totally safe to talk about it because...my father had such negative viewpoints...more directed towards gay men." This withholding of herself was hard on her self esteem. Gabrielle has chosen not to come out to her parents although she knows her mother is aware of her sexuality. She feels that,

[with her parents] generation in the Maritimes, there's a way of their knowing and not knowing...they recognize the relationship but they don't want to hear

about it because they don't have the tools or the comprehension or the understanding to deal with it.

Since that time, she admits, "I've been very very close to the family and very loving and sometimes I think in some ways I didn't give them enough of a chance to deal with it."

Gabrielle moved away from her hometown soon after coming out because "that was the thing you did. You went to a big city where you could hide yourself and be anonymous and be removed away from family." She also needed to have some separation from her family and had little contact with them for nearly 10 years. Her lack of contact was partially because of her parents, but she also says she was "coming to terms with myself and who I was."

When she first moved to the city, she was unable to find any community until she met some women from her hometown who took her to a local gay club. For a while, she was the only woman there, but slowly more women became a part of the gay community. Most of the gay community at the time consisted of working class people. Gabrielle felt this was so because the middle class were more afraid of losing their jobs. Gabrielle sees the community today as very different from then because it seems more middle class, and there seem to be rigid expectations related to being a part of the community, such as thinking, dressing and being a certain way. She feels this change has complicated the whole coming out process. She states, "back then [the 1970s], it was pretty simple. If you did it, you were, and if you didn't, you weren't. And if you want to find out if you are or not, do it." She continues, "[o]nce you slept with someone, then you were out. You had to do that in order to be out."

When Gabrielle first came out in the 70s, some political organizing around gay and lesbian issues was beginning. For a while Gabrielle was very active in the movement and very out. She states, “[y]ou’re young and in your radical mode and you’re out to change the world.” During this time, she was able to ignore a lot of the prejudice. She attended meetings and conferences, and admits, “[i]t was quite an adventure.” When she started university a few years later, she became a little quieter. She also feels she got burnt out after awhile. As she began to work, she became quieter still about her sexuality because there was no protection under Human Rights at this time.

Gabrielle does not feel she struggled with her identity so much as her struggle to find a community. However, she adds, “I think I have been scarred by a lot of prejudice.” She does admit her identity “used to mean an awful lot to me, but now...it’s just one small part of who I am.” Now that Gabrielle has reached middle age, she states, “I’m more settled with it, I don’t have to go through all this young, foolish growing pains.” Now, in middle age, Gabrielle feels she is “still the same person.”

Today, her friendships reach beyond the gay community and she is open to most of her close friends. However, she is cautious in her coming out and will often test the waters before doing so. For her, it’s “whatever makes life a little easier...and sometimes that means being a little more quiet.” Other concerns have also required her distancing herself from the community. However, the community as it exists today is not something she wishes to have as large a part in as she did in the past.

Looking back, Gabrielle would change little about her coming out, because “[i]t’s my story, it was an adventure.”

From these stories, many similarities and differences among the women arise. In addition, their stories encapsulate much of the history and experiences discussed in the literature review. A discussion of these similarities and differences will be contained within the next chapter.

Chapter 6

Discussion of Data

The stories of the three women who participated in my research were diverse in their experiences of life in the Atlantic Provinces. However, they also shared many experiences surrounding their lives as lesbians. These similarities and differences will form the basis of this chapter which, based on a feminist perspective, will contextualize the research data within the history and literature reviewed in chapters 3 and 4. Covered here are issues of identity, followed by issues surrounding coming out. A focus on living in the Atlantic Provinces and issues surrounding being a middle age lesbian will also be discussed.

What's in a Name

The initial questions asked of the participants centered around their identity, their struggle to find that identity and the various influences that had an impact on the formation of that identity. Though each woman shared a similar name for her identity, lesbian, the definition and declaration of that identity differed. Each woman's definition was constructed based on a biological determination and around butch/femme categories. This definition and the coming out which brought them to that point was impacted by their age, the time during which they grew up, their location in the Atlantic Provinces, the limited gay community in many areas, and the invisibility of resources.

Each woman indicated the benefits of realizing she was a lesbian and each saw coming out as a way of finally being true to herself and with others. Their identification developed from feelings toward women to the realization that lesbianism was an option and, finally, the acceptance of homosexuality. Thus, according to Miller (1995) and Faderman

(1991), their initial definitions of their identity fell along essentialist lines, meaning that each felt identifying as a lesbian was an admission or acceptance of their true feelings based on an innate emotional and sexual attraction to women. As each woman stated regarding their meaning of the term lesbian,

[it is] somebody who...is attracted sexually to women...who identifies more with women than men. (Maria)

[it is about] how I express myself and choose to live in terms of...a sexual partner. (Gabrielle)

[t]hat label means...I like my own sex [and]...my sexual orientation is different than what most people consider normal. I consider it normal. To me it's not really a label. (Cher)

Although the women were clear in labeling themselves as a lesbian based on biological factors, it was also clear that their definitions were broader and changed as a result of their interaction with the gay community and through their experiences living as a middle age lesbian now. Cher added to this by stating, "being middle aged made the definition for me."

Change in Identity

When the women were asked how the definition of their identity had changed, each noted a shift from identifying themselves as bisexual to identifying themselves as lesbian. As noted by Rust (1995), 41 percent of lesbians initially identified as bisexual. This statistic was not surprising given the time period during which these women grew up. During the 1960s and 70s, women were subject to a socialization process in which options other than heterosexuality were hardly visible, culturally and, where they were heavily demonized.

One's identification is based on feelings, attitudes, beliefs and images of that identity. Thus, as these women became more comfortable with themselves and became aware of supportive dimensions of the gay community, their definitions of themselves as a lesbian expanded and changed. 'Lesbian' no longer encapsulated all of who they were, but has become integrated into their lives. Such integration is often a final stage in coming out (Eichberg 1990).

Maria offered the greatest reflection on the change in her identity. For her, lesbian changed from "an identifying tool" to being more than an identity, but a word of "empowerment." She continued, "now I have all the ABC's, D's and E's filled in...whereas before, I just had this subject heading lesbian." She compared the development of her identity to that of a biologist who analyzes a particular item and discovers there is more to that item than just its label. Maria also recognized that "identity is often developed through likeness." The term has more meaning now as she has more knowledge of what it means to be a lesbian by being part of the gay community and admits her identity developed from "a combination of time, people and work." This growth in meaning was evident in all of the women's definitions and supports Wittig's (1997) notion of the social construction of identity. Thus these women felt they were born lesbian, but from their words it was evident that their definitions were constructed through conforming and resisting cultural and social norms. In addition to the construction of identity, this construction resulted in a multiplicity of meanings for lesbian. (Auger 1992; McDaniel 1995; Faderman 1991; Franzen 1996)

Gabrielle's definition was heavily shaped by her early involvement in the gay community. She felt during the 1970s, the community was centred more around working class values. She felt lesbian identity was simpler when she first came out because there was

such a limited community, those who were a part of it stuck together regardless of their differences. Now, she feels the gay community in her area is defined more around middle class values and ideology, with certain implicit requirements for how to dress and act. Because of this rigidity, Gabrielle was less interested in being a part of the community at this time. This feeling, coupled with the fact that Gabrielle has been aware of herself as a lesbian for some time, has meant the importance of labeling herself as a lesbian has changed. She stated, "it used to mean an awful lot to me, but now...it's just one small part of who I am." Gabrielle felt being a lesbian was integrated with who she is rather than being the dominant feature of her identity. Again, as Eichberg (1990) relates, the definition becomes a part of who one is, rather than the defining characteristic. For Maria and Cher, naming themselves as lesbian was relatively new and the same degree of integration was not evident.

For Cher, identifying as a lesbian was an expression of part of who she is, as is identifying as a mother or daughter, and, as with these identities, the label is less important than the lived experience. Cher recognizes, as Butler (1993) does, that when one declares oneself a lesbian, the definition will have a multiplicity of meanings. Cher felt mainstream heterosexual society encodes a strict definition of lesbian and will use that as the only identification that forms who a person is. Thus Cher, would reject the need to label herself and felt, or at least hoped, the need for labels would disappear over time. Despite Cher's resistance to labeling herself, she identified as a lesbian with pride. Her self-esteem surrounding her identity comes from realizing, but not expressing her feelings for many years, and feeling she never would.

Butch/Femme Ideology

The butch/femme ideology, though introduced in the 1940s, still correlates widely within the discourses of lesbianism. For many women, these binaries constitute what it means to be a lesbian. Thus, when one begins to identify as a lesbian, it is often around one of these definitions that a woman measures herself. This point was illustrated by many of the women interviewed for the National Film Board of Canada film, Forbidden Love: The unashamed lives of lesbian women.

Each of the women in this research project identified with notions of butch/femme ideology, in part, reflecting their generation and their life in the Atlantic Provinces and Canada. For Cher, and particularly Maria, it was also a reflection of lack of experience with the gay community. In their earlier lives, for them, a lesbian was defined according to how she dressed, whether she wore makeup and even how she walked. Back then, the identities 'gay' and 'lesbian' had very negative and stereotypical connotations. Cher felt that men were "queen figure[s]" and women were "big butchy types, strutting around in their leathers." Thus, when Cher became aware of her feelings, she did what she could to hide being a lesbian by wearing dresses and makeup. However, she felt this disguise was ineffective because, as she states, "if I think about it, I strutted with my hands in my pockets." However, now she feels her walk has more to do with her self-confidence, rather than with the fact she is a particular kind of lesbian.

Cher, along with the other women, felt some of their tendencies were butch, such as having been a tomboy growing up, and all of them felt this characteristic should have helped them realize sooner that they were a lesbian. Maria, who felt that she was butch, mentioned

that she was a tomboy when she was young. Maria felt that most tomboys are lesbians, “the ones that clued in” and “most of the lesbians I’ve encountered...[are] middle of the line, the granola type, or more of the butchy side.” She saw dykes “as being more butchy than femme type.” She was not sure about women who appear more femme and wondered if they “need for the other person to take care of them, like in the heterosexual relationship.”

Gabrielle did not struggle with society’s definitions of lesbian because as she stated, “I wasn’t really aware of what society said a lesbian was back then. About the only thing I thought, it was really weird, or sick.” Instead, she thought it “was really intriguing. I was fascinated.” For Gabrielle, her early involvement in the gay community and the women’s movement impacted on her identification as a lesbian in such a manner that she did not have the same rigidity in her definition now. However, Gabrielle did remember how the community used to be in the early 70s. She related this when she discussed a conference she attended in Toronto in the 70s. She told of women at this conference who were talking about the lesbian community in the US in the 30s and 40s. Gabrielle related, “it sounded like where I grew up...only in the 70s.” She continued that when she first came out, the scene she came into had an “extreme butch/femme thing going on and the real stone butch thing.” She felt that “it was the most twisted extreme of f..ked up heterosexuality.” When she moved to a larger city in the 70s, there existed predominantly these lesbian and gay extremes - butch women and drag queens.

Their notions of butch/femme ideology and its implication of identifying as a lesbian was reflective of society’s opinion or vision of what it was to be a lesbian. Maria, more than the others, internalized society’s notions and was surprised by the realization that lesbians

are all different, they are in all professions, from different nationalities, and so on. Maria also had the greatest difficulty accepting lesbianism and was fearful of meeting other lesbians because of her preconceived ideas of what a lesbian would look and act like.

Language

As noted in Chapters 3 and 4, during this century, a variety of terms have been used to describe lesbians. The three women in this study used a variety of these terms to describe themselves and had varying levels of comfort with these terms. For all of these women, the negativity from society created a dislike for the label lesbian and thus influenced their ability to name themselves as a lesbian. For them, the word *lesbian* “was a dirty word” (Cher).

For Cher, the negative connotations attached to “lesbian” were from many sources including family and friends. Cher stated her mother “used to actually shudder” when she thought about two lesbians who lived in their community. Her mother’s feeling was that homosexual people thought only about sex, and she did not see them as real people. Cher continued, “I didn’t even like the word lesbian. I did everything in my power so that no one would ever know.” To Cher, queer meant “you’re not human, you’re just totally out to lunch.” Her comfort with these terms has changed, as she related, “being marked as a lesbian, it was a good mark.” In addition to lesbian, Cher frequently used the term gay women throughout our discussion, but remained uncomfortable with the term queer.

From her family, Maria heard that lesbians were rough women who “were born deformed...[like] somebody who was born without a leg...and those people are not mocked, but they’re looked upon as they’re a lesser of a person.” Maria also saw lesbians as tough, nasty women. It was not the fact that they were attracted to women that she found negative;

it was the social culture of which lesbians were a part. These negative feelings made it difficult for Maria to accept herself as a lesbian. When she realized her attraction to women and decided to tell her therapist, she said, “it wouldn’t have felt any worse if I had...[told her] I went out and murdered my next door neighbour...that wouldn’t have been any harder to tell her.” However, Maria is now able to name herself a lesbian, but for her, the term queer refers to someone who is “not with it...out of their mind” and thus this is not a term she uses in reference to herself. She liked the term dyke, but found it “more cutesy to me than empowering.”

For Gabrielle, it was not the definition of lesbian that she found negative, but the sound of the word lesbian. She stated that it is “ugly sounding” and that perhaps in different languages it might sound better. She would thus rather use terms such as dyke or queer. Maria and Cher were also comfortable with the term dyke, but were uncomfortable with queer. Their discomfort reflected the fact many words are used in negative and derogatory ways to describe the gay community. Gabrielle’s acceptance of terms such as queer was likely reflective of her activism. However, Gabrielle’s comfort with the term queer was somewhat surprising since she had been out for a long time and experienced much homophobia firsthand, through her community involvement in the 70s, as well as prejudice from her family.

All of the women heard very negative messages about lesbians and homosexuality in general from their families and society. Both Cher and Gabrielle were born and raised in small towns which offered little, if any access to a gay community. Though Maria lived in a larger city, she was not aware of a gay community, although she did remember hearing

about a bar when she was a young adult. Despite this minimal knowledge, she did not realize or understand the nature or extent of the gay community.

Bisexuality

As mentioned previously, each of these women identified as bisexual for a period of time when they initially recognized their sexual attraction to women. For Gabrielle, identifying as bisexual was for a very brief time only. For her, considering she was bisexual was more a test of her true feelings. Thus, she dated men “to see if maybe I’d forgotten something, left something behind.”

Cher admitted to a friend only a few years after she was married that she thought she was bisexual. She stated to the friend, “that I was like Elton John,” a reflection of the importance of having popular figures with which to identify. For Cher, knowing there was someone else must have been some relief, however, had she been aware of positive lesbian role models, she may have been able to admit her feelings sooner. Instead, her transition lasted many years. She felt she would not have lasted through 18 years of marriage had she accepted her lesbian identity earlier as she stated, “being a lesbian really meant that ‘what the hell was I doing being married?’”

For Maria, bisexuality “was sort of a coping tool to perhaps help acknowledge any relationships of the past...[and] give them a little bit of validity.” She saw it as a “stepping stone” in her identification and coming out process and, for her, the transition was brief.

All of these women’s early identification as bisexual suggested the negative impact of dominant heterosexual ideology in society and throughout the lived experiences of these women. An initial acceptance of themselves as bisexual did not leave them as far removed

from the “norm” and, as such, was an important step in their coming out as, and their acceptance of, themselves as a lesbian.

Impact of Age on Identity

As noted previously, there were generational effects on when and how these women identified as lesbian. As Markowe (1996) states,

[a] woman whose perception of self as lesbian was beginning to form during the 1950s, with its more restrictive notions of sexuality, would almost certainly view her lesbian identity differently from a woman, perhaps born during the 1960s, who came to perceive herself as lesbian during the 1970s. As social and societal representations relating to gender, sexuality and human nature change, notions of lesbian identity vary. (Markowe, 36)

In addition, living as a middle age lesbian also impacted on their current definition. For each of these women, age seemed to have impacted their acceptance of their identity and their willingness to share their identity with others. Markowe (1996) suggests that older lesbians generally have a more positive definition of their identity. For Cher, now in her 50s, lesbian was no longer a dirty word and she no longer cared what people think. She also felt being in middle age helped make the definition for her as she felt better able to accept her identity. However, she felt meeting her partner, Summer, her “soulmate,” was the final push in her self-acceptance as a lesbian and in being able to use the word lesbian with pride.

Gabrielle felt her identity was more settled now than when she was younger. However, she felt this had more to do with maturing and the fact she had been out as a lesbian for a long time, rather than with the fact that she had now reached middle age. Maria felt more accepting of herself as a lesbian and others and felt that being in middle age gave

her more insight into her identity. However, she did not feel there was an impact on the identity itself.

Impact of Community on Identity

None of the women were initially aware of a gay and lesbian community and, when growing up, had not heard much, if anything, about gay people in their hometowns. Anything they might have heard was negative. Gabrielle, however, did begin a search for a gay community when she began to identify as lesbian because she felt certain there had to be others like her. Their comments suggest the direction of these times,

[b]eing from a small town, we never heard that much about gays or lesbians.

(Cher)

you couldn't find anything to read, you couldn't find any place to go...there was an incredible sense of being alone with this. (Gabrielle)

Initially this isolation resulted in their inability to label their feelings.

Once Maria became aware of her feelings, she felt it was easier to identify herself as lesbian because she lived in a city. There she had more exposure to a wide range of people and she felt her identity developed from this broader exposure.

Coming Out

Though much of the research indicates that coming out occurs in a somewhat linear fashion, from one stage to the next, time spent in each stage can vary greatly for individuals. In addition, different supports and circumstances affect and shape each of these stages (Eichberg 1990; Schneider 1988; Signorile 1995). Markowe (1996) asserts this notion stating, "[i]t is unlikely that any general order of disclosure will be found, since it will

depend on particular circumstances, and on an individual's closeness to family or friends" (26). These differences were evident in these women's stories.

For Gabrielle, coming out occurred fairly quickly. For Cher, when she finally admitted her feelings and moved away from her hometown, her coming out occurred fairly quickly as well. For Maria, the process seemed slower, likely related to the fact that she did not become totally aware of her feelings until her late 30s.

Coming out affects one's everyday life and is affected by everyday life. For all of these women, the time period and place in which they grew up undoubtedly affected their experiences. Thus, certain expectations can and did seem to have an impact on their lives, for example, there was an overriding expectation that women should marry, though only one of the women in the study actually did so. Each woman had a different comfort and need in openly declaring their sexuality to others. Often, when one first comes out, there are two reactions: a wish to tell everyone; or, a caution due to fear. When Maria and Gabrielle decide to come out to someone, they first test the reactions of those to whom they are about to come out to the issue of homosexuality.

For Cher and Maria, who did not come out until later in their lives, "being out," that is, openly declaring their sexuality to others, was somewhat more important than for Gabrielle, who has been out for over 20 years. Cher, however, despite declaring her feelings for a similar amount of time as Maria, was aware of her identity for a longer time period. This awareness, in addition to the fact that she is in a very happy relationship, has made her more open with others. Maria also admitted that if she were in a relationship, she may be more open, particularly with her family. As discussed in the national lesbian health care

survey, such patterns as these are common. Many lesbians (60 percent) were out to more than half of the people close to them, but only 24 percent were out to family and straight friends. The smallest percentage were women who had had a sexual experience with a woman in the recent past.

For Maria, coming out did not occur until she was in her late 30s when she became attracted to a woman, not an uncommon occurrence for women (Groves and Ventura 1983). Up until this point, Maria considered herself heterosexual. She admitted there were times when she would become “sexually excited...sitting next to somebody,” however, any attractions she felt were pushed away. When she first acknowledged her attraction to women, she felt there was something wrong with her. Despite the fact that her identification as lesbian occurred in the 1990s, her exposure to the gay community was limited, leaving her vulnerable to and surrounded by negative stereotypes from her family and community.

Maria’s coming out was aided by therapy, which allowed her a deeper exploration of her feelings, and, eventually, an admission to herself of her attraction to women. When she confronted her feelings, she knew she had to tell someone and felt her therapist would be a good start. Maria feared her therapist’s reaction, but also felt her therapist would understand her feelings. This, as well as other positive experiences, gave her the confidence to come out to others. Maria felt very positively about coming out and its impact on her. She stated that she “wouldn’t want to be any other person...[that] there is nothing like being attracted to a woman.” Maria likened her coming out to “opening...the door to Oz” and felt “considering the number of years that I was living in the dark” it was a short span of time

from telling her therapist and going to a lesbian dance, which she felt was her true coming out.

Maria remains cautious when coming out. She stated,

we keep making those decisions if it's safe to come out to somebody or how a person's going to react to you... so you have to keep making decisions, judging the situation, sometimes being worried...if someone finds out who I am, how they're going to react.

However, she did feel coming out was "a positive reinforcement for the person who I am."

She admitted,

being out is very important but it's also very important to make decisions who you want to be out to...you have to be wise and it's not like you decide, OK, I'm going to be out...in the society that I live in, right now, you have to make choices.

Maria tended to focus on the more personal aspect of identifying herself as a lesbian, and less on the social impact. Based on this, Maria considered herself to be partially open. She has told many of her friends and coworkers that she is a lesbian, and she attends lesbian activities in her community. However, she has not told her family, as yet. She is angered and saddened by the fact that she is not out to all the people with whom she would like to be out, particularly her family.

Family can be one of the greatest challenges for a gay person in the coming out process. We are told that our families will always love us "no matter what", but homosexuality can divide families (Eichberg 1990). Maria has made attempts to come out to her family,

I've brought it up [homosexuality] over the years seeing if things would change...to see if any of those positive influences of society in general would rub off on them.

Unfortunately, the change has not been significant enough for her to risk it, “[i]t’s just too darn scary!” She did admit that if she were in a relationship, the likelihood would be greater. She didn’t like the fact that she felt only half a person with her family as there was so much she must edit out of her life to protect her identity from them.

Cher, like Maria, had a difficult time coming out. Negative societal and family messages were ingrained in her. Though Cher realized her feelings for women in her late teens, she wanted to find a man who would help her forget these feelings. When she did get married, she felt she could contain her attraction to women. This feeling, however, did not last long.

Despite this realization, Cher did not come out until after almost 20 years of marriage, a marriage in which she choose to stay because of her children. Throughout her marriage, Cher tried to reason with herself that being married was the best thing for her. She knew what she really wanted, in her heart, but she felt she would never have the strength to face it. Though she knew there were other gay people, and she did have some peer support, she did not feel she would ever be able to come out. These feelings are not uncommon, as many people are aware of their feelings of homosexuality, but feel they can not and will not ever face the feelings for many different reasons, including threats to relations with colleagues, family, and children (Eichberg 1990; Signorile 1995).

During this struggle with her lesbian identity, Cher had a serious bout of depression, to the point that she wanted to kill herself. For her, committing suicide felt as if it might be an escape from anyone knowing her feelings. The only thing that kept Cher from following through was her children. She also admitted, “I used to drink to forget, I could handle things

then, it was a lot easier.” Many people dealing with issues of sexual identity turn to alcohol or drugs to push away the feelings. Throughout this depression, part of her hoped someone would find out she was a lesbian, however, she stated, “they would have had to dig because I wasn’t ready to spill my guts to anybody.”

It was not until Cher’s final attempt at suicide, which prompted her to see a therapist, that she began to deal with her feelings. This help, along with being diagnosed with a serious illness and deciding to move, precipitated her coming out. However, she was still unsure of whether she would come out to any others than those she had already told. In addition, she did not feel at this point she would come out to any one else in her hometown because she felt they were too conservative and would not be accepting of her.

After Cher’s move, she began to meet other lesbians. However, it was not until she met her current partner that she began to come out on a grand scale. Often, once one is in a stable, happy relationship, coming out to others is not only possible, but necessary . A couple often does not want to hide, what for them, is often very freeing. Cher stated, "once I met Summer, that all of a sudden it wasn't worth it any more to stay in the closet, for me, I wanted to get out on the rooftop and shout it out."

Cher’s greatest fear was coming out to her children. Coming out to children and parents is often the most fearful part of coming out because these are the people in our lives whom we rely on for love and acceptance (Eichberg 1990). Cher’s children, now adults, have been very accepting and, for Cher, once her children knew "it was just like a whole new life, like I didn't have any more fears." Since that time, Cher has come out to all of her family and friends and is very open about her sexuality on a daily basis. When she finally

admitted her feelings to herself, she felt that even if she had lost her family, it would have been hard, but she finally had to be who she is. Since coming out to her family, she admitted she has lost some closeness with some, with most, things are the same. She also felt some of her friends are closer now. Cher was rather surprised, in a positive way, by some of the reactions from family and friends. She was not sure why people accepted this now, many being from the small town, but most of the people she told were happy for her.

Cher, who is now open in every instance, must deal with the threat of homophobia as a result of her openness. However, she felt this risk was a small price to pay and was one that often does not get realized because of the nature of her declaration. When speaking with her, her self-assurance and her pride were very evident. She felt her identity was “not an issue for me anymore”, but a fact of her life. A retelling of a recent experience when she encountered someone from her hometown illuminated her feelings,

[i]t just never dawned on me to make up a story or anything like that. But that's the way I feel and I'm OK with it...because I feel so good about myself and our relationship. And I also feel if I don't make it an issue, that the people I'm telling it to, they're not going to make it an issue, whereas if I stutter and stammer and almost say forgive me, but I'm gay, then they're going to say, well, why?...I'm a big believer that if I don't make it an issue, they won't make it an issue. So, I feel now, that I've reached the ripe old age of 50 and then some, I don't really give a damn any more. I don't really care if somebody gets offended, it's their issue, it's their attitude that they have to work on, it's not something I have to struggle with any more. And I feel that I am educating everyone that I'm telling, or that I'm coming out to ... I mean, I don't meet someone and say Hi, I'm Cher and I'm gay...[but] if it comes up in an everyday conversation, I'll say it.

Cher was very open in declaring herself a lesbian in a number of other ways. She has been involved in several gay groups, has participated in gay pride marches and plans more involvement with gay rights, particularly for middle age and older lesbian women. She was

also out in her office workplace. She felt age impacted on her choice to be out because she felt she has an attitude now that she is in her 50s,

[when] I turned 50, I stopped caring what people thought and started living for me and for what I valued in life. I started living for my integrity, what was truthful, what was meaningful.

Cher furthers that being open was important to her because, as she stated, "I'm finally alive."

She continued, "[i]t means that I'm finally being who I am inside." It took her a long time to get to where she is now and she refuses to hide her happiness, feeling, "[i]f I never came out, I would have no reason to live."

None of the women judge others for not being open. However, Cher seems to feel being open about one's sexuality is a goal for all lesbians to work towards. This belief is likely a reflection of her struggles to get to this point in her life, as well as a reflection of her personality. She left the clear impression that being open was something to aspire to because it is who you are and to do any less is to not be your true self. Eichberg (1990) asserted this notion when he discussed the fact that revealing our true selves was a gift we share with others. Cher furthered this point,

for me, just being a lesbian everywhere, it's very important for me now. I means it's not the be-all and end-all, but it's who I am, so I don't want people to think any more that I'm straight and I don't ever want to live a lie again. I've been away too long, I was in the closet too many years and 18 years of marriage and trying to commit suicide, and being a lesbian now is very important to me now because it is who I am. I think it's, I mean I make it sound quite simple, but it took me a lot of years to say that and do I ever want to deny it? No.

She concluded by saying, "as hard as it might be coming out, and being who your really are, it's not as hard as living a lie."

Gabrielle had no realization of her sexuality before she was 19, but she felt, as the other women did, that this lack of realization was a consequence of the time and place in which she came out. However, compared with the other women, Gabrielle came out much earlier. When Gabrielle initially identified her feelings, she continued to date men, but admits that they “didn’t do anything for me.” Like Maria, she felt “from the first minute of any sexual contact [with women]...[I experienced] infatuation and love...I just felt like I came home.”

When she first realized she was gay, after spending some time in her own small community searching for a gay community, Gabrielle moved to a larger city, a not uncommon pattern for gay people. She separated herself from her family and from the hurt she felt would occur if she was open with them. She didn’t feel comfortable talking about the issue. “Any time the subject came up...I never felt totally safe to talk about it because...my father had such negative viewpoints...more directed towards gay men.” She stayed away from her family for about 10 years and this time she spent away was a time for “coming to terms with myself and who I was.” This struggle affected her self-esteem and she worried “about what people think and realizing that some people don’t like who I am.” These doubts, however, did not stop her from being open about her sexuality until her mid to late 20s when issues of employment became a concern.

For Gabrielle, now, coming out is not the issue of importance it once was, particularly when she first came out and was involved in activist work. Now, she has been out for over 20 years and does not feel the need to tell people as soon as she meets them. However, if someone who will be important in her life, they will either discover it or she will tell them

because, “[a]nyone that gets really close, I find I’m pretty much open to all of them.” Now, however, she admitted “it’s just one small part of who I am” reflecting the integration noted by other writers such as Eichberg (1990). In her present employment situation, Gabrielle is not out, but if she were otherwise employed or in a long-term relationship, she felt she may be more willing to be out. However, she remains cautious for, as she stated,

there’s some situations where I know it would be fine and it would be really nice to be...open. I think sometimes you don’t need to...make an issue of it.

For Gabrielle, it’s “whatever makes life a little easier... and sometimes that means being a little more quiet.” She has other concerns now which take more of her focus than being out. However, she admitted that hiding too much can be very damaging to your self and your self-esteem. She added,

I think being on reasonable terms with yourself and not in denial is important, and living your life so that the people that really matter in this respect know, and so that you’re functioning in a way that feels good, is important. So, I think to a certain point...some people do need to know.

Gabrielle has come out to some of her family, but has never made the admission to her parents. She feels they know, but like many families of their time, find it is easier not to address the issue up-front. As she stated,

there’s a way of their knowing and not knowing...they recognize the relationship but they don’t want to hear about it because they don’t have the tools or the comprehension or the understanding to deal with it.

However, Gabrielle did feel that, had she been in more permanent relationships, she may have made the admittance to her parents. Despite the fact her parents were not open to homosexuality, Gabrielle did not feel they hindered her coming out. She stated,

I just happened to clue in and know what was going on and I immediately went in hot pursuit...I was quite eager to find out, to find people, find community.

Gabrielle has come out to her siblings, who were not initially supportive, but are very supportive now. When asked if being out was important, Gabrielle mentioned that it depended on what being out meant.

Both Cher and Maria admit that it could have been a positive experience to have been out earlier in their lives, however, they both also admitted that they felt coming out happened when it could. For Cher, coming out happened at this time because she was meant to be with her partner Summer, who also came out only recently. Maria admits if all the circumstances that lead to her coming out had been in place earlier, it would have been wonderful to be out, despite the fact that society was very “straightlaced.” She continued, “if I had come out many years ago, there would have been more of that positive experience [of acknowledging her attraction to women]”, but she recognizes there would have been negative experiences, also. For Gabrielle, all she would change would be “a little less heartache.” However, she admitted her coming out experience was “my story, it was an adventure” and she wouldn’t change anything. She did wonder, though, that if she had had it together earlier, there might have been the chance she would now be in a long-term relationship, although she admits it may not have worked out that way, anyway.

Another issue in coming out relates to being open about one’s sexuality at work. People spend a great deal of their lives at work. When it is necessary to hide who we are and the nature of our relationships, it can limit the comfort and cortegality of our relationship with co-workers. In addition, lack of disclosure may require a woman to play the role of a

heterosexual woman, with all the dress and attitude necessary to pass in that role. However, being open in one's work situation may also put one's job and career in jeopardy. For Maria and Cher, they felt the risk was worth it. Both had the advantage of coming out at a time when human rights legislation extended to homosexuals and, thus, offered them some protection. This legislation, however, did not seem to have as significant an impact, as the mere fact that they wanted to be open in their work environments and felt safe to be so. Gabrielle does not come out in work situations. Her fears centre around the nature of her work and that, at times, it can involve interaction with children. She knows well how homophobia can be fuelled when it is known that a gay man or a lesbian works in such contexts.

Living "Out" in Atlantic Canada

All of the women in this study are from the Atlantic Provinces. Two of the women grew up in very small rural areas and one grew up in a city. For Cher, the messages she heard from her small town were that homosexuality was illegal. Because of this, Cher never expected to come out to people in her hometown. She also felt that if she had stayed there she would not have come out herself, at least not to the extent that she has now.

For Cher, being away from her hometown and living in a larger Canadian city outside of the Atlantic Provinces made it easier for her to come out. When she moved to a larger city, she became involved in the gay community and this involvement helped her coming out. When she returned to the Atlantic Provinces, she came out at her job, however, she stated "I find the community here not quite so open...maybe it's from the culture here, it's still a religious culture." She felt the gay community was close-knit, almost to the exclusion of

outsiders, who subsequently find it hard becoming part of the community. She felt this closeness was linked to a fear of being open. In addition, Cher felt there was a significant amount of alcohol and drug abuse in the gay community, but she was not sure whether this was reflective of the culture of the Atlantic Provinces or of a particular problem within the gay community itself or both. Bradford and Ryan (1991) found in their national health care survey that alcohol and drug abuse was an issue in the gay community, but that the percentages of lesbians who suffer substance abuse was no higher than for women in the general population.

Maria felt that living in a large urban center influenced her decision to come out. She felt that "I would not have come out, perhaps as fast as I did when I started" had she not lived in a city because there would not have been the same opportunities to be involved in lesbian groups, have access to dances and so on. However, living in the city where there was some access to a gay community did not aid her in realizing her feelings when she was younger. It often seems that those who are outside the gay community can be oblivious to it. Certainly it is so that regardless of the circumstances or social context, reconciling one's sexual identity can be a long struggle.

Gabrielle did not feel that living in a small community influenced her coming out for, as she stated she "came out in spite of it." She identified her major struggle as finding the gay community. At the time, there wasn't much and what she did find was to her, a "really rough bar scene." In addition, Gabrielle did not feel the same negative societal viewpoints that the other two women mentioned. In particular, she mentioned her schooling which she felt was different in that it provided her with "an intellectual openness about a lot of things." She

continued, “there wasn’t judgement in high school, but nobody was really out.” She explained, “you can’t say it was supportive, but in an indirect way it was because it wasn’t negative.” However, there was nothing to read and no place to go, so “there was an incredible sense of being alone with this.” She did know she was not really alone, though which was interesting, considering the time of which she speaks and given that many people did and still do feel this way.

Relationship to the Gay Community

Gabrielle does not feel the same identification with the community as she once did. She does not feel her lack of participation is age-related, but rather reflects other concerns in her life at this time. Some of her experiences with the community in the past few years suggest to her that she does not have a lot in common with the community. She felt that much of her discomfort was about social class. When she first came out, the gay community consisted mostly of people from working class backgrounds and they often did not have the same career concerns as people in so called white collar jobs may have had. This working class community, Gabrielle felt, was more open and did not set up such rigid requirements for acceptance which she felt exists today. She questioned whether a “real” gay community remains in existence. In addition, Gabrielle felt that, for what community does exist, “if you’re older, you’re not really a part of that or you’re not perceived as being attractive as a young person would be.”

For Maria, becoming a part of the gay community has been somewhat difficult as a middle age lesbian, but she also stated, “I honestly do not think that the gay community is any harder for me to make friends than anything else.” However, she admitted, “it’s hard

to make grapevine to connect the little groups so that's why I think I don't meet a lot of people in my age range." Despite this, Maria has attended various lesbian and gay functions and found "going to...social events eases the coming out process." However, Maria did find that, at dances, the music was often geared toward the younger crowd, but she admitted, depending on the event, there was often a mixture of women of various ages.

Age and Coming Out

Of the three women, Cher was most strongly affected by age in terms of coming out. It was nearing the age of 50, in addition to other events, that pushed Cher to admit her feelings. Cher set 50 as her target and felt that if she didn't make the move by then, she may not make it at all. She felt she might lose her courage, thinking that, perhaps, at that point she would be too old to change. For Cher, now, being in middle age has enabled her to be more open because she does not have the same fears as younger people might have when coming out to parents and family. She felt, "I got an attitude once I turned 50." She continued,

I turned 50, I stopped caring what people thought and started living for me and for what I valued in life. I started living for my integrity, what was truthful, what was meaningful. I did not stay around people any more just because. I stayed around my friends were people that meant something, it was friends, not acquaintances. So it was a combination of all of that, that built up, I guess my self esteem.

For Gabrielle, being in middle age is not the greatest influence on her decisions regarding coming out; other issues have been more deciding factors. However, she did feel more comfortable being who she is because she felt that, since she had been out so long, she had had more time "to incorporate that [coming out and being out] into my life." In terms

of being in middle age, Gabrielle, like the other women, felt the messages from society were changing. As she stated, "I used to think, 'Oh my Gosh, I'll be middle aged some day.' Now I think, I'm still the same person." She felt that "because the baby boomers...[are] getting into middle age now, I think it's a little more positive message than maybe it used to be." She also felt societal messages for women do not have the same impact on lesbians,

I think it's always been easier for lesbians to be older and be considered attractive to other women, or to be considered a possible, or a potential sexual partner, although you don't get the propositions or the interest...you used to get.

Sang (1991) affirmed this notion in Lesbians at Midlife: The Creative Transition.

Maria also did not feel age impacted her coming out and her degree of openness. However, she felt, "being middle aged, I'm more accepting of other people" and, in turn, of herself, which enabled her to be more open with others. Maria also admitted, "I don't think I'm a lot different than when I was 16 or 18 or 20 or 30." In terms of society's portrayal of middle age, she felt there was a greater focus on being active. She stated, "[w]hen you're in your middle age, people don't criticize you if you say, I want to do some fun things, I want to enjoy myself. And I think that's what's happening now." This theme was a common one in many of the articles in Lesbians at Midlife: The Creative Transition. Maria, at middle age, felt more relaxed and had a better sense of her priorities. She would like to change careers and did not feel being in middle age was a barrier to this, "[i]t's not until your 40's and 50's 'til you really get the nitty-gritty of what you like, what you don't like, what would work or not work. So in a way, your life is just beginning." For her, "the things that I like about middle age are just more reinforced by being a lesbian."

For Cher and Maria, coming out at this age, as Cher relates, was reminiscent of being 18 or 19 because "I feel like I'm just starting my life." This feeling is not uncommon for someone who has come out, who goes through the stages of youth again because they are relating to people and relationships in a whole new way.

Age has impacted, to some extent, on these women's involvement in the gay community. Each of the women admitted that, at many of the gay events they have attended, there were often more younger women who may tend to be exclusionary of older women, as is much of society. However, Cher, in particular, noted the importance of bonding between the older and younger generations for support and sharing.

None of the women seemed to consider themselves old. Each woman was comfortable talking about her age and was proud and happy to be where she was. They all seemed to feel that society has changed somewhat, though ageism continues to exist for both the young and the old, a fact noted by Loulan (1984) also. In addition, none of the women try to hide their age in any way, which may be reflective of their age and the fact that there is less pressure on lesbians to meet societal stereotypes of what it means to be a woman.

Other concerns of aging - illness, finances, and loneliness - also occupied these women's thoughts. Health issues were noted by Bradford and Ryan (1991) in the lesbian health care survey. All the women had some fear around being ill, not being able to care for themselves and having to depend on someone else. However, as Cher stated, "being who I am makes the negative part of it [aging] easier for me to deal with." Cher now considers herself to be middle class and, as was indicated earlier by Baker (1988), class and income level impact on one's experience of aging. She has been able to make preparations such as

a living will, retirement plans and life insurance. Cher and Maria, the two women who are presently in middle class, did not seem to have fears in the same way as Gabrielle, again likely reflective of their class differences.

Besides health concerns, aging parents of lesbians were also a concern. Often, the care for aging parents falls on the women of the family, and often on a lesbian daughter who may be seen not to have the same responsibilities and commitments as other family (read, heterosexual and married with families) members. Cher and Gabrielle do not live near their families at this point and did not feel that the main responsibility would fall in their hands as other family members were likely to be better able to handle this responsibility due to their proximity. Maria, however, did have this concern, which is compounded by the fact that she has not come out to her family.

Relationships seemed to be important for each of the women at middle age for a variety of reasons, including companionship and health. For Cher, having a relationship now was important. However, she felt that the importance of being in a relationship resulted from the fact that she was currently in a relationship. As she stated, before this relationship developed, "I didn't know if I ever wanted to live with anybody again," a likely result of many years in an unhappy marriage. For Maria, being in a relationship "becomes more important every year." Gabrielle felt it was important to be in a relationship as she aged, particularly because of how the community has changed. "[I]t's such a lonely place." The national lesbian health care survey noted that 60 percent of middle age lesbians are in relationships, however, Coss (1991) found that, for many women over 40, having a relationship would be fine, but these women enjoyed being independent as well.

Despite the fact these women wish to be in a relationship, finding that relationship may be difficult, as noted by Loulan (1991). However, none of the women in this study were particularly concerned about this aspect of their lives. Cher did not feel it was difficult to begin a relationship if you were willing to go out and meet people. Maria felt it might be easier in middle age because as women age they often become more interested in a longer term relationship. However, she did feel that older lesbians were not as visible within the gay community. Gabrielle also did not feel it was any more difficult, because "if someone's meant to come into my life, they'll be there."

Aging brings with it a variety of issues for a middle age lesbian. Some are positive in nature, such as a better sense of one's self, whereas others are negative, such as difficulty finding a relationship and being a part of the gay community. However, it seems that each of the women was quite content in middle age, both as a woman and as a lesbian.

Chapter 7

Epilogue

The courage to come out and identity as a lesbian or gay man in our often homophobic and heterosexist society can be seen as truly amazing and inspiring. The last 40 years, since the beginning of an active gay and lesbian movement in Canada, we have seen many changes in our society. The gay community has come together to form supportive organizations and develop resources for those coming to terms with their sexuality. There are books and magazines available, not only in gay bookstores, but in mainstream bookstores. Our lives have been depicted in movies and television. Despite this, the battle is not yet won when individuals such as Jerry Falwell accuse children's toys (TeleTubbies) of being gay and thus inappropriate role models for young children or young men like Matthew Shepard are beaten to death because of their sexuality. Thus I am always moved upon hearing someone declare with pride "I am a lesbian" or "I am gay" and am continually inspired and curious to hear others struggles and stories.

This research began as the result of my own struggle in coming out. After eight years of denying my feelings, I realized I could no longer hide how I really felt. However, finally admitting my feelings and living as a lesbian became a struggle that continued as I faced daily - and continue to face - what it meant to live as a lesbian in a homophobic and heterosexist society. I searched for information to help me deal with the myriad of feelings that were a result of my declaration. I found some information to aid in coming out, but felt it was focused more on the struggles of gay men. I was unable to find much information about women in Canada, particularly women in the Atlantic Provinces. This dearth of

information lead me to ask members of the gay community who I came into contact with to hear their stories. As a result of this, when the opportunity emerged to do graduate research, the only research that would possess true meaning for me was to further explore coming out stories for other women from the Atlantic Provinces. I have not been disappointed as a result of my work. What I discovered were three inspiring accounts of struggle because of unfamiliarity and isolation, but eventual triumph because of increased awareness that could no longer be denied. The experiences of these women each of whom came from a different Atlantic Province resonate with my own experiences, but also offered other struggles and insights. Thus for me personally this thesis was another step in my coming out and acceptance of my lesbian identity. I feel greatly impacted by these women's stories and think of them often.

This thesis represents the specific stories of three middle age lesbians. The benefit of this work goes first of all to them in providing the opportunity to voice their stories. Each woman was happy to have the opportunity to participate and has asked for a copy of the final thesis, which has been provided. The second benefit of this research is in the acknowledgment and documentation of stories that have been ignored in our history. As mentioned by several of the authors (Reinharz 1992; Conway 1992; Anderson and Jack 1991), hearing women's stories is important in a society where women have long been silenced. Though the experiences of the gay community are finally beginning to be documented (Kinsman 1987 and 1996; Faderman 1981 and 1991; Miller 1995; Ross 1995), the experiences of middle age lesbians in Canada and the Atlantic Provinces are all but absent. This thesis represents one instalment in an amended history.

This study was an attempt to address the impact of issues such as gender, location and age on coming out and identity formation. This research generated a vast amount of data. Thus there are many other areas available for further research. For example, a more in-depth gay and lesbian history of the Atlantic Provinces is needed, as well as more work into the social construction of identity through involvement with and experiences in the gay and lesbian community. Clearly from the data collected in my research, it may be concluded that, as lesbians, we often inhabit the prevailing discourses through which our identities are constructed. These women may be seen as both “taking on” existing categories of definition around what it means to be a lesbian as well as resisting other categorical definition.

As stated in the introduction, women of color, various classes and cultures possess issues with coming out and identity formation that were beyond the focus of this research, but which warrant further study. I chose the factors of age and location on coming out and identity formation because of how these resonated with my own experiences and concerns as well as the community of which I am a part.

There has been a wide, varied and evolving gay and lesbian history in Canada and the Atlantic Provinces. To come out and identify as a lesbian in Canada, or the Atlantic Provinces for that matter, is to have been part of a culture and history largely hidden. Gays and lesbians have become more visible in society in the late 19th and 20th century, however, in Canada, this visibility centers more in larger cities. There was not evidence of an organized gay movement in Canada until the 1960s, but as indicated by the film, Forbidden Love, a community, though largely hidden and in large cities, did exist. It was not until the 1970s, and then only to a limited extent, that much visible activity occurred in the Atlantic

Provinces. Though more organizations exist today, I believe that, as a lesbian living in Halifax, the largest city in the Atlantic Provinces, there still remains a lack of gay community of which to be a part and that which does exist is often male-dominated. This lack of a lesbian community was evident for the women in this study. As Gabrielle related, for those who are not aware of their sexuality or who are outside of the gay community (read are heterosexual), the gay community can be a whole different world of which many are not aware, despite the increased level of knowledge that exists in our society today. This lack of activity was evident in the fact that two of the three women did not come out until much later in their lives. One woman, Maria, was largely unaware of the gay community whereas Cher felt isolated in her small rural community. Thus there is a need for support from the gay community and the heterosexual community for these women, particularly middle age lesbians. Research such as this can highlight these needs and act as a starting point for change. These experiences also highlight the need for a broader social discourse to exist, for example, within educational institutions and media.

Each of the three women who participated in this study had very different experiences of coming out and identity formation, but they shared many factors of influence such as family, friends, and society, in addition to gender, location and age, and they shared many experiences as well. Their ideas about homosexuality were formed from societal messages, though sparse (and nearly always negative) in the Atlantic Provinces, from family and peers. It was clear that the subject was largely taboo and that gay people were to be pitied, feared or rejected and were considered disgusting. The reduction of homosexuality to a medicalized definition, in addition to its admonition by many church groups, clearly impacted on these

women's ability to come out and accept their lesbian identity. By the late 19th century, a shift from a moral and religious view of homosexuality to a more scientific one had occurred, but it is important to note that the impact of all of these views remains today.

The three women, so chosen because of their identification as lesbian, offered varying definitions of that identity. None of the women felt their identity was a choice, but rather was an admission or acceptance of their true feelings. Their definitions changed and expanded because of their differing life circumstances, family and personal relationships, work experiences, gender, location and age. In addition, an indication of the impact of location and age was particularly evident in their initial identification as bisexual and their identification with butch/femme ideology as was the impact of gender socialization of women that enforces heterosexism. The continued existence of a narrow butch/femme ideology points to the continued impact of heterosexual society and the lack of education related to broader discourses of sexual difference on issues of identity. In addition, these limiting factors impacted their language used to name their sexual difference and their comfort with its use.

The importance of their identity to their present lives varied, being greater for the two women, Cher and Maria, who had recently come out. Part of this was reflective of their age and the fact they do not have the same fears they might have had when they were younger. It was also reflective of the fact they have only recently admitted their feelings. Thus Gabrielle's identity was more integrated because she had been aware of her feelings longer and had been involved in the gay community for a long time. Not surprisingly, Cher, because of her struggle to reach this point, was the most open about herself. Being in an

unhappy marriage for 18 years and now being ill has prompted her to want to live her life fully and openly. Having a happy relationship has also made being open easier and to some extent more important, as Maria also related.

For all of the women, coming out represented a freeing process because it was an admission to themselves of what they considered the true nature of their feelings. Perhaps the widest variance in the lives of the three women was in their coming out stories. Though they shared similarities in terms of the impact of factors such as location, age and so on, each woman also had very different experiences. The fact they were no longer denying their feelings seems to have been somewhat life changing in more than just the obvious sense.

Gabrielle came out very early, but now remains more separate from the gay community because of personal concerns and what she feels is the loss of a community feeling that existed in the 1970s. Most surprising from her story was her feeling that there were others besides her who shared her feelings about women and her search for a gay community in her area in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Though still not open with all her family, she is open with some family members and friends. However, time and other concerns have lead her to a quieter sense of her identity and the assertion that there are other parts to her identity than being a lesbian. In addition, from Gabrielle's story, we find that though her schooling was not open about issues of homosexuality, there was a certain openness in attitude. This feature of Gabrielle's story illuminates the fact there is a need for education within our school systems at all levels, as well as within our work places, around the issues of the gay community. In the early school years, inclusion of such books as Heather Has Two Mommies by Leslea Newman and Daddy's Roommate by Michael

Willhoite can open up dialogue to different families and help children who are a part of such families feel more included and legitimized. In the junior and senior high school, along with sex education, there needs to be education on coming out, homophobia, and identity for both homosexual and heterosexual students. This education would help create a new consciousness that would allow support not only from the gay community, but from the heterosexual community within which the women in this study largely make their lives. Had this educational space existed for the women who were part of this study, their coming out could have occurred with less difficulty.

Cher, despite realization of her feelings at an early age, was confined by heterosexism and marriage. Eighteen years of marriage, two children, a sudden illness and approaching 50 enabled her to gain the strength to make an admission of her feelings. Since that time she has moved quickly forward in her new life. She is open with her family, friends and co-workers. She is proud of her identity and her statement that she is “living a dream” encapsulates her present life experiences. Cher’s “matter of fact” admission of her identity and sheer conviction to live her life honestly is inspiring and, in this respect, I think of our interview together often. Her story highlights particularly the need for outreach in rural areas.

Maria was mostly unaware of the existence of the gay community and her feelings until her 30s. Her realization was thus very frightening to her because of messages she had heard and internalized from family and society. This fear has caused her to be more cautious in her declaration of her identity. Despite this, she is open with many people in her life, except her family whose reaction she still fears.

As the literature and these stories indicate, there is no one way to come out, nor does coming out have a true ending point. In addition, the creation of homosexuality as the 'other' and heterosexuality as the 'norm' has facilitated the need to declare oneself as other. The recognition by society of the issues of coming out and the difficulties faced by a gay and lesbian person coming out would help decrease its negative impact on our lives. It would be a positive effect to work towards the abolition of the need to come out, which could also be a result of the acceptance of all varying identities - bisexual, transsexual, transgendered, gay and lesbian. It was evidenced by authors such as Eichberg (1990) and Signorile (1995) that coming out and being open can help others change their views when the people they know, live with, and work with are gay. They must rethink their previous understanding which can lead to understanding and support. It is hoped research such as this is another step in the direction of the rethinking of homosexuality and increased support from the heterosexual community.

We are now living in a society that is rapidly aging. Gee and Kimball (1997) document the fact that women live longer than men. This can create problems for them because of social, economic and cultural factors. Add to this being a lesbian and we have made the situation more complex. There has been some research on the issues of women as they age. Worth noting in terms of the needs of older lesbians is Claire Schneider's work Lesbian Aging: An Exploratory Study which looked at coming out, psychological and physical health of lesbians between the ages of 55 to 65 around Toronto. However, I was unable to find specific work on middle age lesbians in Canada, and particularly the Atlantic Provinces which is where the focus of this research serves its particular purpose.

As we age, some issues become less important, like being part of the status quo and some, like health, may become more important. My overall sense from this research reveals a certain ease with one's self and one's sexuality in middle age. The experiences of living in a society that is still not totally accepting has helped these women develop mechanisms to deal with other issues that arise as they age. For these middle age women, coming out offered challenges and rewards. There was, for them, a new respect for their decisions that may not have been there had they been younger. Reaching middle age provided these women with a certain peace and confidence which extended to their identity. It also impacted the importance of that identification as it became less a central force in their lives, as was the case with Gabrielle. However, there were other issues of concern such as health and aging parents. Health concerns were more prevalent for those women who were single. Aging parents were also a concern for Maria, who will likely face alone the expectations of their care. In addition, the lack of visible role models who are middle age within the gay community leaves this population feeling underrepresented. Thus again, research such as this is a further step into bringing these women's lives greater visibility. Again, for me personally, though I have had some fears as I age, this research has shed some light on how life can be positive and I look forward to a more enlightened and understanding society as I reach middle age.

Overall, this thesis points toward the impact of two issues in particular, location and age, on one's coming out and identity. However, it also shows the strength of women who were able to come out and identify as lesbian despite the impact of these factors. There is a certain comfort in this knowledge and that offered by these women as they reach middle

age. In this thesis, I have attempted to hold a tension between the need for particular stories to be voiced and documented and the need to interrogate and question the social construction of these stories. I have, perhaps, leaned more towards the former as a focus of my research. I have done so in order to maintain the freshness of these women's stories and to respect the vulnerability which comes with their telling. This thesis demonstrates the power and importance of story both for those who have, finally, the opportunity to tell their story and, as importantly, for those who have the opportunity to hear it.

REFERENCES

- Acker, Joan, Kate Barry, and Johanna Esseveld, Objectivity and Truth: Problems in Doing Feminist Research in Fonow, Mary and Judith Cook (eds) Beyond Methodology: Feminist scholarship as lived research. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991: 133-153)
- Adelman, Marcy (ed), Lesbian Passages: True stories told by women over 40, (Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 1986)
- Alcoff, Linda, The Problem of Speaking for Others. Cultural Critique, (Winter 1991-92). Number 20. pp. 5-32
- Anderson, Kathryn and Dana C. Jack "Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses" in Gluck, Sherna Berger and Daphne Patai (eds.) Women's Words: The feminist practice of oral history. (New York: Routledge, 1991)
- Auger, Jeanette A. "Living in the Margins: *Lesbian Aging*" Canadian Woman Studies, Volume 12, Number 2, Winter 1992, pp. 80-84
- Baker, Maureen, Aging in Canadian Society: A survey, (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1988)
- Barbone, Steven and Lee Rice, "Coming Out, Being Out, and Acts of Virtue" Journal of Homosexuality, Volume 27, Number 3/4 (1994), pp. 91-110.
- Bass, Ellen and Kate Kaufman, Free Your Mind: The book for gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth-and their allies (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1996)
- Bell, David and Gill Valentine, eds. Mapping Desire: Geographies of sexualities (London: Routledge, 1995)
- Bennett, Paula "Dyke in "Academe (II)" in Cruikshank, Margaret, Lesbian Studies: Present and Future, (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982)
- Boston Women' Health Book Collective, The New Our Bodies, Ourselves, (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1992)
- Bradford, Judith & Caitlin Ryan, "Who We Are: Health Concerns of Middle-Ages Lesbians" in Lesbians at Midlife in Lesbians at Midlife: The Creative Transition, Sang, Barbara, Joyce Warshow and Adrienne J. Smith (eds), (San Francisco: Spinsters Book Company, 1991)

- Brady, Stephan and Wilma J. Busse, "The Gay Identity Questionnaire: A Brief Measure of Homosexual Identity Formation" Journal of Homosexuality Volume 26, Number 4 (1994), pp. 1-22.
- Buss, Helen M., Mapping Our Selves: Canadian Women's Autobiography in English, (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993)
- Butler, Judith, Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex", (New York: Routledge, 1993)
- Butler, Judith, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" in The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory, Linda Nicholson, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1997)
- cad, "Passages: Aging Lesbians Meet", off our backs, Volume xx, Number 5, May 1990, p 8.
- Cammermeyer, Margarethe, Serving in Silence, (New York: Penguin Books, 1994)
- Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women. Feminist Research Ethics: A Process. (Ottawa: CRIAW/ICREF, 1996)
- Cannon Lynn Weber, Elizabeth Higginbotham and Marianne L. A. Leung "Race and Class Bias in Qualitative research on Women" in Fonow, Mary and Judith Cook (eds) Beyond Methodology: Feminist scholarship as lived research. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991)
- Charbonneau, Claudette & Patricia Slade Lander, "Redefining Sexuality: Women Becoming Lesbian in Midlife" in Lesbians at Midlife: The Creative Transition, Sang, Barbara, Joyce Warshow and Adrienne J. Smith (eds), (San Francisco: Spinsters Book Company, 1991).
- Chase, Susan E. "Personal Vulnerability and Interpretive Authority in Narrative Research" in Josselson, Ruthellen (Ed.) Ethics and Process in the Narrative Study of Lives. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996)
- Chase Susan E. "Taking Narrative Seriously: Consequences for Method and Theory in Interview Studies" in Josselson, Ruthellen & Amia Lieblich (eds) Interpreting Experience: The narrative study of lives. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995)
- Chekola, Mark, "Outing, Truth-Telling, and the Shame of the Closet" Journal of Homosexuality Volume 27, Number 3/4 (1994), pp. 67-90.

- Conrad, Margaret, "'Sundays Always Make Me Think of Home': Time & Place in Canadian Women's History" in Not Just Pin Money, EDS B. Latham, R. Pazdro, (Victoria: Camosun College, 1984)
- Cooper, Baba, Over The Hill: Reflections on Ageism Between Women, (California: The Crossing Press, 1988)
- Cooper, Baba, "Voices: On Becoming Old Women" in Women and Aging: An Anthology by Women, Alexander, Jo et al (eds) (Corvallis: Calyx Books, 1986)
- Coss, Clare, "Single Lesbians Speak Out" in Lesbians at Midlife: The Creative Transition, Sang, Barbara, Joyce Warshaw and Adrienne J. Smith (eds), (San Francisco: Spinsters Book Company, 1991)
- Cruikshank, Margaret, Lesbian Studies: Present and Future, (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982)
- Cruikshank, Margaret, "The Example of the Sea Birds" in Lesbians at Midlife: The Creative Transition, Sang, Barbara, Joyce Warshaw and Adrienne J. Smith (eds), (San Francisco: Spinsters Book Company, 1991)
- Crux, Lauren, "The Ripening of Our Bodies, the Deepening of Our Spirits" in Lesbians at Midlife: The Creative Transition, Sang, Barbara, Joyce Warshaw and Adrienne J. Smith (eds), (San Francisco: Spinsters Book Company, 1991)
- Devault, Majorie L. "Talking and Listening from Women's Standpoint: Feminist Strategies for Interviewing and Analysis" in Social Problems, Vol 37, Number 1, February 1990. pp. 96-116.
- Donovan, James M. "Homosexual, Gay, and Lesbian: Defining the Words and Sampling the Populations" Journal of Homosexuality Volume 24, Number ½ (1992), pp. 27-47.
- Douglas, Carol Ann "Passages: Lesbian Aging" off our backs, Volume xviii, Number 4, April 1988, pp. 16-17.
- Dunne, Gillian A. Lesbian Lifestyles: Women's Work and the Politics of Sexuality (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997)
- Eichberg, Rob, Coming Out: An Act of Love (New York: Penguin Books, 1990)
- Faderman, Lillian, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991)

- Faderman, Lillian, Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1981)
- Feagin, Joe R., Anthony M. Orum and Gideon Sjoberg, eds., A Case for the Case Study (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991)
- Fernie, Lynne and Aerlyn Weissman, Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives, (National Film Board of Canada, 1992)
- Fonow, Mary Margaret and Judith A. Cook, Back to the Future: A Look at the SECOND Wave of Feminist epistemology and Methodology" in Fonow, Mary and Judith Cook Eds Beyond Methodology: Feminist scholarship as lived research. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991)
- Franzen, Trisha, "Differences and Identities: Feminism and the Albuquerque Lesbian Community" in The Second Signs Reader: Feminist Scholarship, 1983-1996, Ruth-Ellen B. Joeres and Barbara Laslett, eds. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996)
- Fuss, Diana, ed. Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories (New York: Routledge, 1991)
- Gee, Ellen M. and Meredith M. Kimball. Women and Aging. (Toronto: Harcourt Brace & Company Canada Inc., 1987)
- Gentry, Jacquelyn H. and Faye M. Seifert, "A Joyous Passage: Becoming a Crone" in Lesbians at Midlife: The Creative Transition, Sang, Barbara, Joyce Warshow and Adrienne J. Smith (eds), (San Francisco: Spinsters Book Company, 1991)
- Gibson Smith, Carolyn, "Proud but Cautious": Homophobic Abuse and Discrimination in Nova Scotia, (Halifax: Nova Scotia Public Interest Research Group, 1993)
- Gorelick, Sherry, "Contradictions of Feminist Methodology" in Gottfried, Heidi (ed.) Feminism and Social Change: Bridging theory and practice. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996)
- Groves, Patricia A. and Lois A. Ventura, "The Lesbian Coming Out Process: Therapeutic Considerations" The Personnel and Guidance Journal Volume 62, Number 1 (1983), pp. 146-49.
- Heilbrun, Carolyn, Writing a Woman's Life, (New York: Ballantine Books: 1988)

- Jay, Karla ed., Dyke Life: From Growing up to Growing Old, A Celebration of the Lesbian Experience, (New York: Basic Books, 1995)
- Johansson, Warren and William A. Percy, Outing: Shattering the Conspiracy of Silence (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1994)
- Kaufman, Gershen and Lev Raphael, Coming Out of Shame: Transforming Gay and Lesbian Lives (New York: Doubleday, 1996)
- Kehoe, Monika, Lesbians Over 60 Speak for Themselves, (New York: The Haworth Press, 1989)
- Kinsman, Gary, The Regulation of Desire: Homo and Hetero Sexualities (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1996)
- Kinsman, Gary, The Regulation of Desire: Sexuality in Canada (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1987)
- Lal, Jayati "Situating Locations: The Politics of Self, Identity, and "Other" in Living and Writing the Text" in Wolf, Dianne (ed) Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996)
- Lather, Patti, Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy with/in the Postmodern. (New York: Routledge, 1991)
- Lee, John Alan (ed), Gay Midlife and Maturity, (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1991)
- Lhomond, Brigitte, "Between Man and Woman: The Character of the Lesbian" Journal of Homosexuality Volume 25, Number 1/2 (1993), pp. 63-73.
- Likosky, Stephan, ed. Coming Out: An Anthology of International Gay and Lesbian Writings (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992)
- Lorde, A., Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (California: The Crossing Press, 1982)
- Loulan, JoAnn, Lesbian Passion: Loving Ourselves and Each Other, (San Francisco: Spinsters Book Company, 1987)
- Loulan, JoAnn, Lesbian Sex, (Minneapolis: Spinsters Ink, 1984)

- Loulan, JoAnn, "'Now When I Was Your Age': One Perspective on How Lesbian Culture Has Influenced Our Sexuality" in Lesbians at Midlife: The Creative Transition, Sang, Barbara, Joyce Warshaw and Adrienne J. Smith (eds), (San Francisco: Spinsters Book Company, 1991)
- Macdonald, Barbara, Look Me in the Eye: Old Women, Aging and Ageism, (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1983)
- MacDonald, Barbara with Cynthia Rich, Look Me in the Eye: Old Women, Aging and Ageism, (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1983)
- Maguire, Patricia, Challenges, contradictions, and Celebrations: Attempting Participatory Research as a Doctoral Student in Park, Peter, Mary Brydon-Miller, Budd Hall and Ted Jackson (eds.) Voices of Change: Participatory research in the United States and Canada. (Toronto: OISE Press, 1993)
- Markowe, Laura A., Redefining the Self: Coming Out as Lesbian, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996)
- Mayo, David J. and Martin Gunderson, "Privacy and the Ethics of Outing" Journal of Homosexuality Volume 27, Number 3/4 (1990), pp. 47-65.
- McCarthy, Jeremiah, "The Closet and the Ethics of Outing" Journal of Homosexuality Volume 27, Number 3/4 (1994), pp. 27-45.
- McDaniel, Judith, The Lesbian Couples' Guide: Finding the Right Woman and Creating a Life Together, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1995)
- McLeod, Donald W., Lesbian and Gay Liberation in Canada: A Selected Annotated Chronology, 1964-1975, (Toronto: ECW Press/Homewood Books, 1996)
- Meigs, Mary "On Aging", Canadian Women Studies, Volume 5, Number 3, Spring 1984, pp. 67-69.
- Miller, Neil, Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History from 1869 to the Present, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995)
- Morehead, Albert and Loy, The New American Webster Handy College Dictionary, (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1981)
- Morris, Jessica F. et al, "Finding a 'Word for Myself': Themes in Lesbian Coming-Out Stories" in Dyke Life: From Growing Up to Growing Old, A Celebration of the Lesbian Experience, Karla Jay, ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1995)

- National Museum & Archive of Lesbian and Gay History, The Lesbian Almanac, (Berkley Books, New York, 1996)
- Neuman, W. Lawrence, Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches (Massachusetts: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1991)
- Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women, Letting in a Little Light: Lesbians and their families in Nova Scotia: An illuminated manuscript, (Nova Scotia: Nova Scotia Department of Supply and Services, Publishing Section, 1996)
- Patai, Daphne "U.S. Academics and Third World Women: Is Ethical Research Possible?" in Gluck, Sherna Berger and Daphne Patai (eds) Women's Words: The feminist practice or oral history. (New York: Routledge, 1991)
- Pearsall, Marilyn (ed), The Other Within Us: Feminist Explorations of Women and Aging, (Colorado: Westview Press, 1997)
- Phelan, Shane, "(Be)Coming Out: Lesbian Identity and Politics" Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society Volume 18, Number 4 (1993), pp. 765-90.
- Poor, Matile, "Older Lesbians", in Lesbian Studies: Present and Future Cruikshank, Margaret (ed), (Old Westbury: The Feminist Press, 1982)
- Reinharz, Shulamit, Feminist Methods in Social Research (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992)
- Rich, Adrienne, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" in The Gay and Lesbian Studies Reader, Henry Abelove et al., ed. (New York: Routledge, 1993)
- Richards, Dell, Lesbian Lists: A look at lesbian culture, history, and personalities, (Boston: Alyson Publications, Inc., 1990)
- Riordon, Michael, Out Our Way: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Country, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1996)
- Ristock, Janice and Joan Pennell, Community Research as Empowerment: Feminist links, postmodern interruption (Ontario: Oxford University Press, 1996)
- Ross, Becki L. The House that Jill Built: A Lesbian Nation in Formation (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Incorporated, 1995)
- Rotello, Gabriel, "The good some bad straights do" The Advocate, Issue 772, November 10, 1998, p. 96

- Rothblum, Ester D. et al, "Lesbian Baby Boomers at Midlife" in Dyke Life: From Growing up to Growing Old. A Celebration of the Lesbian Experience, Jay, Karla (ed) (New York: BasicBooks, 1995)
- Rothschild, Matile, "Life as Improvisation" in Lesbians at Midlife: The Creative Transition, Sang, Barbara, Joyce Warshow and Adrienne J. Smith (eds), (San Francisco: Spinsters Book Company, 1991)
- Ruby, Jennie, "Passages V: A Multiracial conference on aging and ageism for all lesbians" off our backs, Volume xix, Number 5, May 1989, p 8.
- Ryan, William J. "The Homosexual and Gay Movements" in GRIGES (Groupe de recherche interuniversitaire et interdisciplinaire sur la gestion sociale) Homosexualités et tolérance sociale (Ville St-Laurent: Prologue Inc., 1988)
- Salholz, Eloise et al "The Power and The Pride" Newsweek (June 21, 1993), pp. 54-60.
- Sang, Barbara, Joyce Warshow and Adrienne J. Smith (eds), Lesbians at Midlife: The Creative Transition, (San Francisco: Spinsters Book Company, 1991)
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, "The Epistemology of the Closet" in The Gay and Lesbian Studies Reader, Henry Abelove et al., ed. (New York: Routledge, 1993)
- Signorile, Michelangelo, Outing Yourself: How to Come out as Lesbian or Gay to your family, friends and Coworkers (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995)
- Signorile, Michelangelo, Queer in America: Sex, the Media, and the Closets of Power (New York: Random House, 1993)
- Schneider, Claire M. Lesbian Aging: An Exploratory Study, (Halifax: Dalhousie University, 1998)
- Schneider, Margaret S, Often Invisible: Counselling Gay & Lesbian Youth, (Ontario: Central Toronto Youth Services, 1988)
- Schutz, Alfred, The Phenomenology of the Social World, (Trans. G. Walsh & F. Lehnert, 1967)
- Skeggs, Beverley (ed.) Feminist Cultural Theory: Process and Production. (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1995)

- Streubert, Helen J. And Dona Rinaldi Carpenter, Qualitative Research in Nursing: Advancing the Humanistic Imperative, (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1995)
- Sweeney, Victoria E., The Social Support Networks of Older Lesbians: A Creative Response, Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Acadia University, Wolfville, NS, 1995.
- Thumin Janet, "Common Knowledge: The Nature of Historical Evidence" in Skeggs, Beverley (ed) Feminist Cultural Theory: Process and Production, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995)
- Troiden, Richard R., Gay and Lesbian Identity: A Sociological Analysis (New York: General Hall, Inc. 1988)
- Vaid, Urvashi, Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay & Lesbian Liberation, (New York: Anchor Books, 1995)
- Vicinus, Martha, ed. Lesbian Subjects: A Feminist Studies Reader (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996)
- Warshow, Joyce, "How Lesbian Identity Affects the Mother/Daughter Relationship" in Lesbians at Midlife: The Creative Transition, Sang, Barbara, Joyce Warshow and Adrienne J. Smith (eds), (San Francisco: Spinsters Book Company, 1991)
- Wittig, Monique, "One is Not Born a Woman" in The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory, Linda Nicholson, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1997)
- Wolfe, Susan J. and Julia Penelope Stanley, eds. The Coming Out Stories (Massachusetts: Persephone Press, 1980)

Appendix 1

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. How do you name your sexual identity?
3. What does this identity label mean to you?
4. Describe any memories of struggle or confusion you had with your sexual identity?
5. Do you still struggle with your sexual identity? If so, what is the focus of these struggles? If you do not struggle, why do you feel that is so?
6. Has your sexual identity changed over time? Why or why not. If yes, how has it changed?
7. Describe how your various relationships (friends, family, co-workers, etc) have impacted on your sense of sexual identity?
8. Do you see a relationship between place of community (birth, early years, currently) and how you see your sexual identity? If so what is the relationship?
9. Do you feel being at middle age has impacted your sexual identity? If so, how?
10. What does being out in your sexual identity mean to you?
11. Do you consider being out important? Why or why not?
12. Do you consider yourself out? Why or why not. If yes, how are you out?
13. Describe the coming out process for you as it has evolved to this point.
14. In what ways has your coming out been hindered? Supported? (eg. family, religion, etc)
15. Describe how your various relationships (family, friends, co-workers, etc) have impacted on your coming out.
16. Have your relationships been altered by your coming out? Why or why not? If yes, how?

17. Do you see a relationship between place of community (birth, early years, currently) and your coming out? If so, what is the relationship?
18. Would you change anything about your coming out process?
19. Do you feel being at middle age has impacted your level of outness? If so, how?
20. Describe your relationship to the gay/lesbian/bisexual/queer community.
21. Do you feel your relationship to the gay/lesbian/bisexual/queer community has been affected by your being middle age?

Appendix 2

Informed Consent

I, (print name) _____ understand that this interview is about the experiences of the coming out process and sexual identification for middle age women. The information being gathered is to fulfil the thesis component of a master's degree program in women's studies. I have seen the interview questions and recognize that some of the questions that will be asked are personal. I may refuse to answer any questions that I do not feel comfortable answering. Given the nature of this material, I may contact Debi Kaetz, a counselor, to discuss any issues that may arise from the interview. I understand that my participation is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time with no penalties. I understand that I will participate in taped interviews and will have the opportunity to read and change the transcript of said interview. I have the right to ask that the tape-recorder be turned off at any time. I also have the right to say that I am feeling uncomfortable or that I disagree with Lisa. I understand that I will not be identified as a participant and any identifying information may be deleted from the final report. I may direct the treatment of the tapes upon completion of the thesis. I understand that the information will be used for academic purposes only and confidentiality will be held in all instances. I have read this consent form and understand what it says. My signature is my consent to participate in the interview.

Participant

Date

Researcher

Date