LESBIAN TRANSFORMATIONS IN DEALING WITH HETEROSEXISM

by

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Abstract

Using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), I explored the strategies that eight lesbians used in dealing with *heterosexism*, or the belief that a heterosexual orientation is superior to a homosexual or bisexual one. Participants were between the ages of 25 and 40, and had reached a comfortable acceptance of their sexual identity. In all cases, the women's ways of responding to and counteracting heterosexism appear to have become more effective over time. Collaboration with the women enabled me to present three models of "lesbian transformations in dealing with heterosexism," each of which builds on features from the preceding one. In addition, the information offered by participants has illuminated the nature of heterosexism, its impact on lesbians' lives, and some of the factors that make the experience of heterosexist oppression different for individual lesbians. Finally, the interview material helped me to draw implications with regard to counselling lesbians and training counsellors.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures

List of Tables

Acknowledgements

I wish to extend my sincere thanks to all eight participant-collaborators for sharing their stories and giving their time, reflections, and ideas to this study. Because of them, this research is alive and heterosexism is seen for what it is: a "real world" concern rather than an ivory tower one.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

As I near the end of my graduate studies, I prepare for my job search with two types of resumé, an "in" resumé and an "out" resumé. The former represents my closeted self, with such "respectable" work experience as ESL teaching and crisis line counselling; the latter presents an uncensored version of my work history, including two years as a volunteer counsellor at the Vancouver Gay and Lesbian Centre.

The reason I need two resumés is the same as that which motivated me to write this thesis: because *heterosexism*, or the belief that heterosexuality is superior to other sexual orientations, is still a powerful force in society, despite recent gains in the area of lesbian and gay rights. Lesbian and gay teens tell me it is still extremely risky--in fact, dangerous--to come out as homosexual in high school. And in the "adult," working world, I know my liberal, academic, white, middle-class background will not protect me from being barred from jobs if I indicate that I am a lesbian.

Because lesbian and gay people are still punished by society for being who they are, almost twice as many go to therapists as do heterosexuals (Hall, 1985). Many struggle with the *internalization* of negative attitudes toward them, and must work on "unlearning" these attitudes in order to accept themselves as they are. The task entails a major shift in perception, to the extent where heterosexist people are seen as

having misconceptions, and the self is no longer viewed as shameful, but is instead viewed with pride (Cass, 1979).

Even when such a shift in perception is achieved, however, a lesbian or gay person's struggles continue. Just as being in the closet has a cost attached, including fear, isolation, and a sense of shame (Browning, 1987; Kus, 1990; Martin & Hetrick, 1988), coming out and being visible have costs as well: openly identifying with a group that is typically derogated by society means having to find ways to live with integrity in the face of treatment that ranges from subtle shunning to exclusion by law, from verbal "digs" to physical attack.

In order to help lesbian and gay clients, counsellors must themselves be thoroughly familiar with issues that affect this population. At the same time, each person's struggle must be seen as unique. Sue and Zane (1985) caution counsellors against assuming that clients within the same minority group hold the same values and viewpoints as one another, or that they have had the same experiences. Therapy that takes place under such assumptions is unlikely to be effective. Therapists may overlook both environmental circumstances and personality differences, seeing clients as stereotypes rather than as an individuals. The same dynamic also sometimes happens between researchers and minority participants (Herek, Kimmel, Amaro, & Melton, 1991).

In researching how lesbians dealt with heterosexism, I expected that the lesbians I interviewed would come up with a

diversity of approaches and strategies that reflected their unique selves. However, I also believed there would be aspects of the experience of dealing with societal prejudice that would be common to most, if not all, the lesbians in my sample. Therefore, by using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) *grounded theory* method, I undertook to construct a model of how lesbians deal with heterosexism that would be inclusive of many different strategies and approaches, yet reflect some common themes.

Research Questions

The goal of my research was to arrive at a theory, grounded in participants' experiences, of how lesbians deal with heterosexism. This theory would be presented by means of a model reflecting the strategies and approaches the women described. It would be enhanced by setting forth conditions, derived from data, under which heterosexism is experienced. The following research questions guided my investigation:

1. What meaning does the term "heterosexism" hold for the lesbians in my study?

2. What are some shared aspects of the experience of heterosexism?

3. What contextual variables make the experience of heterosexism different for individual lesbians?

4. What strategies or approaches have participants used to deal with heterosexism?

5. Do these strategies or approaches change over time? If

so, how?

By asking participants about instances of heterosexism they had experienced, and incorporating questions similar to 1, 4, and 5 above (see Appendix A), I believed a picture would emerge regarding both the impact of heterosexism on lesbians' lives, and how they deal with this form of prejudice. This information would be relevant to counselling in several ways. First, it would help counsellors understand what heterosexism is, and to recognize both overt and subtle ways it manifests itself. Second, it would include effective strategies for dealing with heterosexism that counsellors could keep in mind when working with lesbian clients. And finally, I hoped the information gained from this research would assist counsellors themselves to counter heterosexism, both in their surroundings and in their own internalized attitudes toward homosexuals.

Important Concepts in my Research

Heterosexism. Over the past 15 years, the word "homophobia" has most often been used to denote prejudice held by heterosexuals toward homosexuals or bisexuals. The word was popularized by Weinberg (1972), who used it to allude to both the fear felt by heterosexuals around people they believed to be homosexual and the self-hatred felt by homosexuals as a result of the negative attitudes toward them. Hudson and Ricketts (1980) point out that to emphasize mainly the "fear" aspect of this phenomenon is to overlook the cognitive

reactions people may have as a result of cultural, moral, or legal views. They prefer the term "homonegativity" to account for both cognitive and affective responses.

While I find this term more accurate, it may still be too restrictive, since it limits the focus to negative attitudes (Herek, 1984) without taking into account the origin of these attitudes or their wide-ranging implications. Similarly with Fyfe's (1983) term "homosexual bias," the emphasis is on the recipient of the prejudice rather than on those who hold the prejudice (Neisen, 1990).

So far, I have found the term that best describes the phenomenon in question to be "heterosexism." The "heterosex-" part of the word identifies the source of the prejudice; the "-ism" part aligns heterosexism with other types of institutionalized discrimination, such as racism and sexism. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the suffix "-ism" denotes a system, either of theory or of practice, as well as a doctrine or principle. As such, "heterosexism" implies a doctrine or principle——along with resultant attitudes and behaviour——that holds heterosexuality to be superior to homosexuality (Neisen, 1990). This principle is embedded in our societal system, and manifests itself in such institutions as the law, which does not permit lesbians and gay men to marry, organized religion, which seldom allows lesbians and gay men to become religious leaders, and sometimes bars them from the religious community, and the media, which often ignores their

existence or portrays only stereotypes.

Internalized homophobia. This term refers to the introjection, by lesbians and gay men, of society's negative attitudes and assumptions about homosexuality. I do not use the term "internalized heterosexism," because I agree with Neisen (1990) that "heterosexism" signifies power held by one group over another, and those with no access to this power cannot internalize it. Instead, homosexuals internalize shame or self-hatred due to heterosexism.

Coming out. "Coming out" refers to a person's emerging awareness of same-sex attraction, and the eventual recognition of a lesbian or gay identity. There are commonly thought to be two "levels" of this process: coming out to oneself, and coming out to others. The following is Cohen and Stein's (1986) description of the coming out process:

> Coming out involves stepping out of the metaphorical closet where one's homosexuality has been hidden from others and possibly from oneself. A parallel process is not possible for a person who is heterosexual simply because there is not a need to hide heterosexuality in this society. Thus, in coming out, the gay man or lesbian often must disown or reclaim disowned or devalued parts of the self. (p. 32)

Dealing with Heterosexism: Experience of the Researcher

I am still in the process, myself, of experimenting with ways of dealing with heterosexism. Although I feel proud that I have had the courage to live as a lesbian, this courage has not always translated itself into active or creative ways of dealing with discrimination. The "don't-rock-the-boat" role I

7

have always held in my family has probably prevented me from meeting this challenge proactively; in addition, since much of my young adulthood was spent coping with illness and surgeries, I mistakenly believed my lesbian identity was not a very important concern.

I realize in retrospect that I did suffer from the effects of internalized homophobia, and did use what would rightly be termed "coping strategies." The first kind of coping behaviour I engaged in was silence. This prevented me from being treated as an outcast in high school, but at the cost of not revealing a major part of my identity even to my close friends. When I was twenty, I wrote a letter to a male friend--the only other person I knew was homosexual--asking for advice about how to meet other lesbians without my family finding out. Perhaps at his prompting, I sought out a lesbian "rap group," which met in a dark, shabby room behind a women's bookstore and had a downtrodden feeling to it that only served to amplify my sense of alienation. It was not until nine years later that I joined a lesbian community and came to understand the value of developing bonds with other lesbians.

In more recent years, I have discovered many ways of contributing to raising awareness of heterosexism and helping people to overcome its effects. I have spoken to crisis line volunteers about being a lesbian, and have given presentations on lesbian and gay issues in my counselling classes. I have joined the Gay and Lesbian Educators of B.C., a group that

attempts to educate teachers and counsellors about gay and lesbian issues; I have attended PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) meetings, joined gay pride parades, and volunteered on a gay and lesbian phone line. I have run coming out groups and counselled at the Gay and Lesbian Centre, where I often worked with lesbians and gay men who were beginning to overcome their fears—often while discovering their anger—and assert their sexual identity.

Yet, I was still anxious about a reunion of my extended family in California last June. Nearly all my activities in the year leading up to it had been linked to lesbian and gay issues: my practicum, my coming out groups, my proposal for this thesis. For this reason, in a typical conversation where I was first meeting someone, I was out of the closet within about three minutes. How would people react when I told them about the activities I was engaged in? Which of them already knew I was a lesbian? Would any of them be shocked? Hostile? Condescending?

I was sure I would not want to hide key facts about my life for the sake of other people's comfort. Therefore, my primary concern was the amount of energy I would have to put into dealing with my own emotions if I got negative reactions. I was secondarily concerned about "losing it" and "blasting" someone—possibly as the result of a lifetime of holding in rage—and the effect this response would have on my relationships with my closer relatives. In the end, I took a

"take me or leave me" stance, keeping in mind the possibility that I might need to confront people about their attitudes.

In this particular case, confrontation was unnecessary. The point is, however, that lesbians often spend energy strategizing in such situations (as do gay men). A woman in a lesbian relationship would probably find this situation even more problematic: Should I bring my partner? Will she *want* to attend? If she does come with me, how should I introduce her? She isn't just my "friend"! What if people are rude to her?

The more open we are about who we are and what we do, the more we will have to contend with questions like those above. My own ability to deal with heterosexism is uneven, depending on who I am dealing with. Someday, I may find the courage to address a class of high school students on the topic of lesbian and gay issues (and therefore heterosexism), yet I do not know if I will ever be able to reply calmly and edifyingly to a hurtful remark made by a relative. For other women, the reverse might be true. Precisely because lesbians have different strengths in this regard, I think it important for us to share our experiences and contribute the wisdom we have gained to the ongoing struggle.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I will provide some background to the problem of heterosexism, including a historical overview, common myths and misunderstandings about homosexuality, therapist attitudes, and characteristics of those likely to hold heterosexist views. I will then review the literature on the consequences of heterosexism, and the factors that affect a homosexual person's response to it. Next, I will look at the literature on coping with a stigmatized sexual identity, and the suggestions for therapists that have been made to date. Following this, I will discuss feminist ways of conceiving "coping," and introduce my choice of study design and methodology. Finally, I will explain the nature of the contribution I intend this study to make.

Heterosexism: An Overview

Despite some important signs of improvement in general attitudes toward homosexuals in recent years—such as the welcoming of lesbians and gay men into some religious communities, the offering of gay and lesbian studies at some universities, and the granting of survivor pension for partners in a few landmark cases—heterosexism is still, unfortunately, a potent and widespread force in society. Beran, Claybaker, Dillon, and Haverkamp (1992) found, in a study of attitudes toward six oppressed groups in which 324 primarily white,

middle class Americans were randomly selected and polled, that the respondents gave the highest level of support to women, followed by Jews, then blacks, then alcoholics. Results of this study showed that support for gay people was higher only than support for communists--except in opinions about access to civil rights, where 70% approved of parental custody for communists, but only 40%, for homosexuals.

Not surprisingly, similar heterosexist attitudes can be found among the high school population. In a survey of 402 American secondary school students, 64% said they would be upset or afraid if people thought they were gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Seventeen percent were not sure how they would react, while only 19% said they would not mind. When asked, "How often do you hear anti-gay or anti-lesbian remarks made at your high school?" 43% replied "often," and 51%, "sometimes," with only 6% replying "never." Although some students expressed the opinion that discrimination against homosexuals was wrong, others offered such comments as "I hate them" and "... just keep them out of my sight and away from me" (Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993, p. 196).

This is not to imply that American attitudes are necessarily less progressive than Canadian ones. The federal government has yet to add a "sexual orientation clause" to the Canadian Human Rights Act. Lesbian and gay people are far from attaining the right to legally marry in Canada, and many large, national companies still do not offer same-sex benefits.

Repeated bomb threats made to a Vancouver gay and lesbian

bookstore, in combination with arbitrary seizure by Canada

Customs officials of materials being shipped to this same

store, provide examples of how homosexuals have been harassed.

Melton (1989) describes the self-perpetuating nature of

heterosexism. He gives as an example a rule that has only very

recently been abolished in the U.S. and Canada: that of denying

gay people the right to serve in the military on the grounds

that they would, in the words of an American Army regulation,

undermine "the ability of the armed forces to maintain

discipline, good order, and morale" (p. 939):

> ... because they are barred from service in the Nation's
> military, homosexuals become stigmatized as "deviants,"
> and are viewed in terms of undesirable stereotypes. This
> process results in and reinforces prejudice ... against
> homosexuals by many heterosexual people. (p. 935)

Thus the cycle continues, particularly when it can be seen that

"even the authorities" condone such views.

History of Heterosexism

These modern attitudes have a long history. In sixth

century Western society, homosexuals were thought to be

responsible for plagues, famines, and other natural disasters,

and were hunted down and killed during times of crisis. In the

medieval period, same-sex attachments were associated with

witchcraft (Fassinger, 1991). In Christianity, gay and lesbian

sexual behaviour has traditionally been seen as a sin against

nature. In most other religions, homosexuality is also

proscribed. In psychiatry, it was long seen as a mental

illness; not until 1973 did the American Psychiatric Association remove homosexuality from its categories of pathology.

An important precursor to this decision was the research done by Hooker (1957, in Melton, 1989) that determined that gay and heterosexual men could not be distinguished from each other on the basis of their results on standard psychological tests, and that there was no greater degree of pathology among the gay group than among the heterosexual group. Also influential were the published results of the Kinsey study in which people's same-sex behaviour, thoughts, and feelings were found to be located anywhere along a heterosexual-to-homosexual continuum— regardless of whether they claimed to be homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual (McWhirter, Sanders, & Reinisch, 1990).

Common Misconceptions about Homosexuality

Numerous harmful myths about homosexuality still pervade the public arena as well: for instance, the notion that gay men must be "effeminate" and lesbians, "masculine" (Kus, 1990), or the belief that homosexuality is "unnatural" because it does not involve reproduction. There also exists a harmful belief that gay men will molest children, as well as a mistaken idea that homosexual parents will make their children homosexual. In addition, many still consider those with a gay or lesbian orientation to be sinful or mentally disturbed (Melton, 1989).

Other destructive misconceptions are that lesbians and gay

men are promiscuous by nature and therefore incapable of stable relationships, that they wish to recruit and convert others (Melton, 1989), that a neurotic family environment causes homosexuality, that homosexuality can be reversed at will (Goggin, 1993), that gay men and lesbians choose their orientation as a refuge from the opposite sex, that they make poor parents, and that they are lonely people with nothing to offer society (Griffin, Wirth, & Wirth, 1986).

Perhaps the most damning myth of all, however, is that which is conveyed to homosexual adolescents: that lesbian and gay teenagers do not exist. When young people show an inclination toward a gay or lesbian orientation, they are typically told by adults that they are simply "going through a phase," an idea that the youth themselves sometimes seize on (Savin-Williams, 1990). The traditional psychodynamic view supports this idea, as when a psychiatrist writes of "an allowable homosexuality ... which, under favourable circumstances, is gradually replaced by heterosexual development" (Robinson, 1980, in Savin-Williams, p. 207). Such a notion only causes more anxiety in adolescents, who come to think that anything other than "temporary" homosexuality must be unnatural, since it is so obviously not allowable.

Therapist Attitudes

Although headway has been made in challenging heterosexist attitudes in the mental health care field (Morin & Rothblum, 1991), a American study found that more than 20% of practising

therapists still treat homosexuality as a mental illness (Pope, Tabachnick, & Keith-Spiegel, 1987). In another, even more recent study, only 5% of a sample of 2,544 psychologists (85% of whom identified as heterosexual) reported a "gay-affirmative" approach to therapy (Garnets, Hancock, Cochran, Goodchilds, & Peplau, 1991).

Who Holds the Most Heterosexist Views?

Some research has been done regarding which people in our society tend to hold the most heterosexist attitudes. An inverse relationship has been found between strongly heterosexist individuals and the degree to which they knowingly interacted with gay men and lesbians (Staats, 1978). In his literature survey on attitudes toward lesbians and gay men, Herek (1984) cites the following findings: people with negative attitudes toward homosexuals are less likely to have engaged in same-sex behaviour themselves (Weis & Dain, 1979), are more likely to have lived in regions where heterosexism is prevalent (e.g., the midwestern and southern United States, the Canadian prairies, and in small towns or rural areas)--particularly during adolescence (Whitehead & Metzger, 1981), are likely to be older and to have less formal education (Snyder & Spreitzer, 1976), and are more likely to embrace a conservative religious ideology (Larsen, Cate, & Reed, 1983). Individuals with heterosexist viewpoints and reactions are also more likely to hold traditional attitudes about gender roles, have more guilt about sex, and be more authoritarian in personality style.

Consequences of Heterosexism

From the standpoint of lesbians and gays, there is much to lose, including many things that heterosexual people take for granted. Disclosing one's orientation can mean disruption of family relationships, ranging from temporary rifts to complete cut-offs. It can also mean the loss of such heterosexual privileges as marriage, children, custody rights, and next-of-kin rights. It can jeopardize a relationship that one or both sets of parents are hostile toward, or refuse to acknowledge. It can result in being shunned by one's religious community. It can threaten one's employment situation (Ritter & O'Neill, 1989). It can also lead to a decrease in physical safety. Ninety-two percent of gay men and lesbians report having been threatened or verbally abused because of their homosexuality, while over one third have been victims of violence for this reason (Fassinger, 1991).

Other losses are perhaps not as obvious, although they can be at least as acute. These include loss of self-esteem, lack of positive role models with whom to identify (particularly in adolescence), and the absence of a publicly sanctified relationship (Coleman, 1982; Lewis, 1984). Some people also feel that they have lost time--often many years of their life; that is, the time it took them either to recognize their sexual orientation or to gather the courage to disclose their gay or lesbian identity to others.

Unlike heterosexuals, those who are in the process of

realizing they are gay or lesbian do not have the security of knowing that this identity will be validated or accepted. Especially for teenagers, the realization can be devastating: while the lives of their friends centre on the excitement of getting to know members of the opposite sex, they feel completely isolated. Moreover, lesbians and gays do not usually have homosexual parents, relatives, or friends to help them anticipate the hardships they will meet in the socialization process (Kus, 1990). Therefore, the common taunts of "dyke," "lezzie," "fairy," or "faggot," when aimed at those coming of age in this context, can be particularly damaging. In addition, the fear of parents discovering one's secret can cause profound self-doubt and anxiety:

> It is one thing to rebel against parental values--that is understood and accepted to some degree in our culture--but what the young lesbian anticipates or fears ... is parental rejection of her *personhood* and the subsequent destruction of her relationship with them. (Browning, 1987, p. 48)

Browning's statement illuminates the reason homosexuals often react with shock or denial when they begin to discover their sexual orientation. The realization that they risk foregoing the acceptance and approval of others due to negative attitudes toward them often leads to shame and self-hatred. Neisen (1993) refers to heterosexism as "cultural victimization," and points out that those suffering from it show some of the same effects as victims of sexual abuse: self-blame, shame, self-directed anger, and helplessness. For youth, this can lead to substance abuse, depression, dropping out of

school, and conflicted relationships with family and friends. Many teenage male prostitutes are gay youth who have been expelled from their homes (Hetrick & Martin, 1987). More than 50% of lesbian and gay youth experience severe depression with suicide ideation (Gibson, 1994).

Factors Affecting Reaction to Heterosexism

The degree to which lesbians and gay men are affected by heterosexism depends on many factors. On the societal level, geographic location, social class, and ethnic background may all be factors (Shidlo, 1994). On the familial level, the degree of heterosexism adhered to by parents and other close family members has been seen to make a difference (Nungesser, 1983), and on the individual level, particular needs and defensive strategies affect each person differently (Malyon, 1982). Other individual variables that have been cited are personality type, age at first awareness of difference, overall psychological health, religious upbringing, and negative or traumatic experiences involving sexual orientation (Hanley-Hackenbruck, 1988b).

Paul (1984) suggests that men tend to have more intense negative feelings about being homosexual than do women, partly because of the harsher proscription against "nonmasculine" behaviour in men than "nonfeminine" behaviour in women in western society, and partly because men tend not to have networks of supportive friends in the way women do.

However, Riddle and Sang (1978) contend that sex-role

stereotyping has a strong negative impact on lesbians. Women have tended to define themselves in terms of acceptance by others. This can make growing up more painful for a girl who feels herself to be different because of a lesbian orientation. Moreover, women are often socialized to feel guilty about sexual feelings in general; they may therefore hesitate to explore an "alternative" sexuality for fear of being labelled promiscuous or delinquent.

Coping with Heterosexism

Much of the psychotherapy literature on lesbian and gay themes is about "coping with a stigmatized sexual identity" (as though it were the identity itself that were the problem), and tends to focus on negative coping strategies. For youth, who usually discover their lesbian or gay identity in isolation and with no knowledge of positive role models, strategies such as denial, withdrawal, identifying with the oppressor group, and attacking members of one's own group may seem to be the only ones available (Martin & Hetrick, 1988). Troiden (1989) details what he calls "stigma evasion techniques," almost all of which are examples of negative coping as well. Among these are "repair," or out and out attempts to eliminate same-sex feelings and behaviour, avoidance or denial, and escape through drugs and alcohol. He calls another strategy (the only positive one) "acceptance." He does not attempt to speculate on which societal or individual factors might predispose a person to choose which strategies; nor does he attempt to distinguish the

male experience from the female one, even though these are
quite different (de Monteflores & Schultz, 1978; Fassinger,
1991; Rich, 1980).

Cain (1991) reports on interviews with 38 gay men
regarding why they do or do not disclose their sexual identity.
Here, more positive strategies emerge, such as the revelation
of one's gayness in order to try to change the heterosexist
attitudes of certain individuals, to contribute to social
change through education, or to make oneself a visible role
model for gay people who are still struggling with their sexual
identity. Nondisclosure appears in some cases to be an active
rather than passive coping strategy, such as when the cost of
revelation is appraised as too great, or when one chooses to
claim the same right to privacy about sexual orientation that
heterosexuals have. In an article on gay men and the practice
of "passing" as heterosexual, Berger (1992) concedes that
passing may be necessary for receiving even a minimal degree of
support in an environment where heterosexist attitudes are
deeply entrenched.

Cass (1979) describes the process of reaching acceptance
of a lesbian or gay identity as that of becoming aware of
oneself as an acceptable human being despite society's
rejection of homosexuality. Hanley-Hackenbruck (1988b)
describes this crucial perception switch:

> Gradually, one realizes that the myths, stereotypes, and
> negative attitudes toward homosexuality are what do not
> make sense rather than the feelings, experiences, and
> the sexuality itself: "Yes, I *am* a good, healthy person

and I *am* a homosexual." (p. 30)

Accompanying this realization are the tasks of defining new values and standards contrary to one's upbringing and developing a new social as well as sexual identity (Hanley-Hackenbruck, 1988a).

Sophie (1986) notes, however, that not all women reach this point. For example, some simply refrain from identifying themselves as lesbians even though they have female partners. The issue of heterosexism is here sidestepped by declining a label that could elicit derision. Even for people who accept the label, considerable compromises are commonly made when much is at stake. Brown (1988) discusses ways in which lesbians and gays sometimes deal with their families of origin, so as not to be cut off by family members. These include maintaining geographic and emotional distance, or adhering to an unspoken agreement not to talk about their personal lives. In the latter situation, a lesbian or gay man's partner is often euphemistically referred to as a "friend" or "roommate." In another common scenario, a gay man or lesbian has come out to one parent or sibling who is supportive, but with the understanding that some other family member is not to be told. The lesbian or gay person may then be seen as the "cause" of strife arising from family secrets.

Lesbians' Ways of Coping

In an article that discusses lesbians' ways of "integrating a stable identity," Lewis (1984) discusses the

importance of relationships and community to lesbians,
especially when they first come out. Perhaps more often than
gay men, lesbians tend to form alternative families since, as
women, a feeling of relatedness is crucial--and in cases where
lesbians have been rejected for their sexuality, these close
friendships can form a buffer against the resulting pain and
isolation. Some women, defining themselves as separatists,
choose to live in all-female communities. This way, they can
gain a sense of freedom and independence. They can also develop
strengths and skills traditionally thought to belong to men,
and thus feel empowered.

Sophie (1987) suggests a number of techniques that can be
used by therapists to help lesbians cope with feelings of shame
and fear due to internalized homophobia. Among these are:
"cognitive restructuring," consisting of challenging the
negative stereotypes of lesbians that clients may hold; helping
clients to find positive role models; encouraging clients to
postpone giving themselves a sexual label during their
exploration process, especially while the term "lesbian" still
has negative connotations for them; giving clients practice in
self-disclosure via such techniques as role play and "empty
chair"; suggesting reading materials that contain validating
images of lesbians; and encouraging clients to seek support and
validation within the lesbian community.

<u>Toward a Feminist Theory of Coping</u>

In an article entitled *Can women cope?*, Banyard and Graham-Bermann (1993) express a need for new ways of conceptualizing coping. The authors point out that the ability to cope is not simply due to such variables as the kind of stressor involved, or how accurately one appraises one's coping efficacy (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), but also to a number of factors beyond an individual's control, such as whether one has power in a particular social context. According to mainstream coping theories, certain types of coping, such as "avoidance coping," are considered maladaptive no matter what the situation, while others, such as collective coping to gain group empowerment, are not discussed at all.

Smith (1990) reflects on how theory in general tends to become divorced from its origin: the real events that give rise to data. So-called "objectivity" acts as a mask that obscures what actually takes place. Hence a term like "coping" may come to seem like a known entity as long as certain of its variables are measured quantitatively. However, "coping occurs in a context shaped by social forces based on gender, race, class, age, and sexual orientation" (Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1993, p. 311), and measuring the impact of these forces on a person is beyond the power of any scale.

Feminist theory dispenses with the notion of objective truth arrived at through observation or interpretation, and instead places emphasis on empirical knowledge (Allen & Baber,

1992; Landrine, Klonoff, & Brown-Collins, 1992; Lykes &
Stewart, 1986; Oakley, 1981). What this means in practical
terms for research is that much weight is given to the
subjective reality of the participants (Hunnisett, 1986;
Reinharz, 1992), often by eliciting their stories and including
verbatim segments of these in the final text of the study. In
effect, the material derived from the participants *is* the data,
and interpretation by the researcher is minimal. Moreover, the
participants are included in the project as collaborators; they
are consulted about any patterns, schemas, or conclusions
arrived at by the initiator of the research. In instances where
the researcher has paraphrased or interpreted their speech,
they are asked for verification.

One study that reflects this approach was recently
conducted by Morrow and Smith (1995), who interviewed 11
survivors of childhood sexual abuse. The study was comprised of
in-depth interviews, a 10-week focus group, subsequent member
checking, and collaborative analysis, along with the use of
documentation derived from the literature in the area. The
starting point for the investigation was the participants' own
definitions of survival and coping. Then, in answering just two
open-ended questions ("Tell me, as much as you feel comfortable
sharing with me right now, what happened to you when you were
sexually abused," and "What are the primary ways in which you
survived?"), the women related their experiences. From the
stories, a theoretical model of coping with childhood sexual

abuse was developed, based on Strauss and Corbin's (1990) *grounded theory* framework. Included in the model were formulations of context, intervening conditions that affected choice of coping strategy, the strategies themselves, and the consequences of employing them.

My Own Research

My study is somewhat similar to the one just described, though limits on time dictated a smaller sample size and omission of an ongoing focus group. However, a one-time focus group was used for getting participant validation. Like Morrow and Smith (1995), I used Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory approach, in which a theory is arrived at inductively from the data on the phenomenon studied. The grounded theory method seemed particularly suited to a feminist framework, in that it values the subjective realities of the participants, and makes them the prime--in fact, the only--source of knowledge.

I intended this research to move beyond the kind of theoretical article offered by Lewis (1984) or Sophie (1987), toward practical knowledge gleaned firsthand from those desiring to share it. While Lewis and Sophie both make useful suggestions, their focus is on how women can be helped to become more comfortable with themselves as lesbians. My study, by contrast, was designed to focus on the societal problem of heterosexism, and to provide firsthand accounts of how lesbians

experience this problem. Moreover, because I planned to interview lesbians who were comfortable with their sexual orientation, I hoped to gather effective strategies and approaches from women who had used them. This study was intended to fill a gap in the sparse literature on the dynamics of heterosexism and how counsellors can help lesbians deal with this societal problem and its effects on their lives.

I do not intend for the theory developed from this study to illuminate, necessarily, the ways in which gay males deal with heterosexism, though there are likely some commonalities. Rich (1980) observes that the similarities between lesbians and gay men must be seen against the differences, such as degree of economic and cultural privilege, and kinds of relationships cultivated. The relationship between gender and dealing with heterosexism remains to be explored.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

I interviewed eight lesbians in order to construct an explanation of how lesbians deal with heterosexist attitudes and behaviours, including both specific incidents and ongoing situations. I used a way of investigating their experiences that I believed would both recognize their individual, subjective realities and yield a theory that reflected some of the shared aspects of their approaches.

The Participants

Interviews were conducted with eight lesbians between the ages of 25 and 40. Because I was particularly interested in discovering what stances or approaches the women found most effective, I stipulated in my recruitment notice (Appendix B) that I was seeking "lesbians who have reached a comfortable acceptance of their sexual identity."

With such a small sample, diversity in sociocultural factors was not particularly a goal. However, participants were, in the end, quite varied in terms of age (within the sample limits), occupation, worldview, and kinds of life experience. Two of the lesbians interviewed were mothers. Of these, one lived with a partner and was a co-parent; the other also had a partner, but assumed most of the parenting responsibility herself. Seven of the women were Caucasian and one was apparently a native Canadian who had been raised in a

Caucasian family.

Participants for the study were found by two methods: advertising and "snowballing." Advertisements were placed in two Vancouver-based gay and lesbian tabloids, and recruitment notices were placed in lesbian and gay community centres, restaurants, and bookstores (Appendix B). In these notices, I estimated the time commitment to be about two hours, divided between two meetings. I also made it clear that this would not be a counselling situation, but an opportunity for co-investigative research. I added that insight into one's own personal development or personal strengths might possibly be gained in the process, as well as the reward of contributing to knowledge about the way lesbians deal with heterosexism. Three of the participants came forward after seeing an advertisement.

"Snowballing" was achieved by asking lesbian and gay friends and acquaintances if they knew of lesbians who fit my study's criteria and who might be willing to be interviewed. The women then telephoned me, offering to be interviewed. Two of the participants were found in this way.

The remaining three participants were found when, chatting with them informally on separate occasions, they asked what my thesis was about. When I told them, they volunteered to participate.

Once a woman expressed interest in my study, I confirmed with her briefly the subject of the study, why I wished to conduct it, and what kind of help I needed. If she then

expressed a willingness to participate, I determined whether
she:

(a) was 25-40 years of age

(b) had reached a comfortable acceptance of her lesbian
identity (for example, was generally "out,"
associated with other lesbians, and so on)

(c) was able and willing to share with me the strategies
she used in dealing with negative societal or
individual attitudes toward lesbians

(d) could make the (roughly) 2-hour time commitment, in
two separate meetings, that the study required.

When the woman responded affirmatively to all of the above, she
and I proceeded to make arrangements for our first meeting,
which was then held at a mutually agreed upon time and place.

The Procedure

In order to uncover the experiences of study participants,
I used a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix A). After
the interviewee had signed the consent form (Appendix C), I
began the interview. Care was taken to repeat the same
procedure with each participant, though naturally, questions
varied depending on the content that emerged. First interviews
generally lasted about one hour. They were audiotape recorded,
and later transcribed verbatim. Following each interview, I
took notes regarding possible modifications to the interview
guide. I also recorded my impressions of the interview, and
made self-evaluative notes regarding my interviewing style and

technique.

The first interview question attempted to elicit the participant's understanding of the term "heterosexism." This question was asked partly to discover whether my own usage of the word was congruent with the participant's perception of its meaning, and partly to construct a definition from the women's responses. The second question ("Could you tell me about any instances of heterosexism you personally have experienced in your life?") was designed to be general. I did not typically ask about heterosexism in any particular area of life, such as relationships with friends and family members, job situations, or motherhood, because I felt that interviewees would talk more freely if given "space" within which to find their own focus of concern. Other questions were meant to elicit participants' opinions regarding the comparative effectiveness of their strategies, whether they felt their approaches or attitudes had changed over time, and how their stances fit in with their overall picture of themselves.

Normally, when using the grounded theory method, the interview questions evolve with the first several interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In a process called *theoretical sampling,"* themes appearing repeatedly are included via additional questions, while questions that do not appear to yield much information are dropped. In my study, however, I found it unnecessary to make continual changes to the interview guide. After modifying one question slightly and adding one

question following the first interview (see Appendix A, Interview Guides 1 and 2), I found the second version of the guide adequate for eliciting the information I needed.

In order to check the women's perceptions of the theory I was formulating, a second interview took place after all of the first interviews and resulting analyses were completed. Participants were offered a choice of joining a focus group designed for this purpose, or being interviewed once more individually. Although almost all of the women expressed interest in the focus group, we were not able to coordinate all of our schedules. Therefore, the focus group consisted of five participants and myself, and the remaining three were consulted individually (one before the focus group, and the other two, after). Due to logistical difficulties, these sessions were not audiotaped. On seeing participants a second time, I showed them the model I had derived from their data and asked for their opinions, along with amendments or validation of its various parts.

Confidentiality and consent. Each participant was given a duplicate consent form stating clearly the general purpose of the study and the time commitment involved. Participants were reminded that they could terminate at any point. They were also informed that, although the interview would be taped, the tape would be erased upon completion of my analysis. The women were further assured that their names would not be used in transcripts unless they wished to use their real first names.

Some of the women chose to do so. Initials of partners, children, and so on have been changed. Other identifiers, such as place names or groups the participants belonged to, were changed or removed except where participants gave me permission to include them.

Time, space, and equipment. For interviews, I used a small tape recorder with two microphones. In each case, I asked the participant where she would like to be interviewed. Three offered to come to my home; the remaining five were interviewed in their homes. The focus group session was conducted in a room at the Vancouver Gay and Lesbian Centre. Two of the individual confirmation sessions were conducted in participants' homes, and a third took place in my home.

Although the time of involvement in the study was estimated at two hours on the recruitment notices, actual involvement was closer to three or three-and-a-half: the confirmation sessions, which I had estimated at one hour, took 90 minutes--even in cases where I met with participants individually. Moreover, six of the eight participants also chose to learn how the information they had given me would appear in the thesis manuscript. These women each spent approximately half an hour with me on the telephone while I read the segments in which I had referred to them or quoted them, and made changes where requested to do so. (I offered to do the same with the remaining two people; however, they declined.)

I had thought that, during the interviewing process, even women who were comfortable with their sexual identity might uncover ambivalence in their own attitudes, as a result of reflecting on my questions. If a participant experienced confusion or strong emotions to a degree where counselling seemed necessary, I had planned to provide her with at least three referrals to experienced counsellors who were knowledgeable about sexuality issues. As it turned out, such referrals were not necessary.

About the Grounded Theory Method

In Strauss and Corbin's (1990) *grounded theory method*, data is "discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to [a given] phenomenon" (p. 23). The emphasis, then, is placed more on generating a theory rather than on verifying it. This theory is constructed from the raw data provided by the participants, who then work with the researcher to amend or validate it.

Because grounded theory is soundest when its elements are validated by collaborators, it embodies the feminist principle that conceives researcher and participant as cooperating in "meaning-making" (Hunnisett, 1986). It also approaches the ethical ideal in research with minority participants, wherein researchers forego the hierarchical structure that separates them from those whose experiences are being studied (Walsh-Bowers & Parlour, 1992).

Morrow and Smith (1995) use a grounded theory approach to outline a coping process in survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Zuk (1992) uses a similar approach when eliciting the learning and growth process of male batterers during a 24-week psychoeducational programme. In another study, the process of thesis blocking is compared to that of unhindered thesis writing in order to discover factors that contribute to ease of thesis completion (Rennie & Brewer, 1987).

Trustworthiness of the method. Relevant to this feminist-based, grounded theory study are three aspects of trustworthiness based on Guba's model (1981, in Krefting, 1990). These are: (a) credibility, (b) dependability, and (c) confirmability. Credibility is subject-oriented; since there is no single reality to be measured, the researcher must take care to represent the multiple realities revealed by participants as faithfully as possible. "Dependability" takes the place of "replicability" in quantitative research; that is, although it would be impossible to replicate the variability of experience found in, for example, story-telling, one should at least be able to trace the variability to identifiable sources. And finally, "confirmability" of data is achieved when participants validate the findings of the research.

As part of my desire to ensure credibility, I kept a field journal, in which I noted thoughts, feelings, hunches, questions, and problems that arose. In addition, I tried to capture on paper whatever biases or assumptions I became aware

of during the research process. This practise helped me to improve my interviewing technique to the extent where I was able to word questions more effectively, and in particular, to come up with better "probes." I then invited participants to form a focus group for their input on the model I constructed, including validation and amendments. According to Krueger (1988), the focus group is an efficient way of validating the results of qualitative research: it puts people in natural, real-life situations where they may, upon hearing other people's views, be more expressive than in a one-to-one situation. Other advantages include flexibility, "high face validity" or credibility, and time efficiency.

To ensure dependability, or consistency, of my findings, I conducted a careful data analysis, in which I checked and rechecked my codes in order to ensure that they reflected data content accurately. In addition, I retained all my memos detailing the evolution of codes, categories, and relationships between categories. The proposal for this thesis, along with the two versions of my interview guide, are also a part of my "audit trail." Moreover, the many verbatim segments of data used to illustrate themes emerging from my analysis enhance the study's trustworthiness.

Finally, the study's confirmability was ensured by the construction of models, since they provided a means of verifying what participants had told me. Moreover, because I had created verbatim transcripts of the interviews, I was able

to refer to exact phrases or ideas when consulting with participants. As mentioned, in addition to meeting face to face with participants for validation, I engaged in 30-minute telephone confirmation sessions with six of the eight participants.

Data Analysis

Data analysis took place concurrently with the interviewing process. Originally, I had planned to follow a *theoretical sampling* approach, in which "sampling [takes place] on the basis of the evolving theoretical relevance of concepts" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 179). In other words, the analysis affects the questioning, which in turn affects the analysis. Some concepts would be retained in the questions because they appeared to be theoretically significant, while other concepts could be dropped from the theory--and therefore from the questions as well--if they were found to be irrelevant. As mentioned above, however, I did not find a need to change the interview guide after the initial changes following the first interview.

In a process known as *open coding*, units of data in the form of single lines, sentences, or complete thoughts were summarized in the right-hand margin of the transcripts. Words or phrases used in coding were often taken from the data itself, to create what Strauss and Corbin (1990) call *"in vivo"* codes. For instance, the following statement was coded "double standard": "There's a double standard that if they talk about

their relationships, they're just talking, and if I talk about my relationships, I'm scaring them!" Descriptive categories were then created by grouping similarly coded sections of data. These categories also adhered where possible to the language of participants, though they were often at a slightly higher level of abstraction. "Double standard," "us and them," "economically marginalized," and "treated with disrespect" were all later grouped under "things being unequal," which was further transformed into the part of the definition of "heterosexism" (Chapter Four, Part I) referring to "exclusionary and unequal treatment."

Next, the data was *axially coded*: that is, connections were drawn between categories and subcategories, and a framework for "The Experience of Heterosexism" section (Chapter Four, Part I) was developed, along with a model that showed how ways of dealing with heterosexism evolved (Chapter Four, Part II). Axial coding provided me with a way to organize *the experience of heterosexism* into a composite definition of "heterosexism," a detailing of aspects of the phenomenon, causal and perpetuating conditions, and intervening conditions. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), causal conditions are "the events or incidents that lead to the occurrence or development of a phenomenon" (p. 100); intervening conditions "facilitate or constrain the strategies taken within a specific context" (p. 96). By illuminating the context of the area under study, causal and intervening conditions add "density and

precision" to a grounded theory study (p. 99).

I created a visual schema using a very large piece of cardboard, with themes, categories, subcategories and elements written on "post-it" notes. For instance, the theme "Impact" was further broken down into the categories "Impact on relationships," "Impact in the work world," and so on. These categories contained subcategories: for example, "Impact in the work world" included "career choice" and "work environment." These subcategories were broken down still further into discrete elements from interviews. Included in the "work environment" category were "assumption I'm heterosexual," "question of whether to come out," and so on. In reflecting on the relationships between categories, subcategories, and so on, I found I needed to reconceptualize parts of the schema a number of times. (This process included moving the "post-it" notes around to schematize the new relationships.) In continually returning to the data to reconsider relationships between categories, I was able to ensure that my theory was adequately "grounded."

In organizing categories and subcategories relating to *strategies* used to deal with or counteract the effects of heterosexism, I drew "key words" in circles, with "spokes" radiating outwards, ending in related words that were also encircled. This technique allowed me to add more spokes to the central words as I processed more data; it also allowed me to connect two or more key words or "hubs," thereby subsuming them

under a larger heading. For instance, "Drawing parallels" and "Correcting misconceptions" were both spokes of the key word "Educating," while "Calling it" and "Complaining" were connected to the key word "Confronting." Later, I realized that "Educating," "Confronting," and "Take Me or Leave Me" were all part of the larger theme of "Activism." My use of this technique to show relationships between various levels of categories culminated in "Model 1: Lesbian Transformations in Dealing with Heterosexism." This model was used as a springboard for Model 2, which was conceptualized by participants in the confirmatory focus group. And finally, by combining Models 1 and 2, I derived Model 3, in which I attempted to incorporate the best features of the two previous models.

<u>Assumptions</u>

A basic assumption underlying this research is that most, if not all, lesbians are subject to heterosexism, whether they perceive this to be the case or not. In saying so, I am taking into account societal laws and institutions that "discriminate indiscriminately" against *all* lesbians and gay men and that, therefore, could potentially be a threat or roadblock in our lives at any time; for instance, laws that refuse us the right to marry, have next-of-kin rights when a partner dies, or sponsor a partner from another country to enter our own.

In interviewing lesbians about how they dealt with heterosexism, I was assuming that the women who presented

themselves for the study considered themselves to have experienced heterosexist attitudes, and possibly, actions. Moreover, I held the premise that these women would be conscious of how they dealt with heterosexism. I expected that each woman's strategies would differ depending on such variables as family environment, intensity of the stressor, degree of support, socioeconomic status, ethnic background, and personality attributes. Also, I expected that each woman would use different strategies in different situations (Banyard & Graham—Bermann, 1993; Lykes, 1983).

Changing attitudes toward lesbians and gay men have been reflected in public policy in the last 15 years (Morin & Rothblum, 1991), and this fact accounts somewhat for the decrease in "private prejudice" (Melton, 1989). For this reason, I assumed that heterosexism would affect various age groups differentially, and did not interview lesbians under 25 or over 40.

Although the women I interviewed were those who felt positive about being lesbians, I did not assume that their positive lesbian identity was *necessarily* a result of having coped with heterosexism; there are many other factors in lesbians' lives (as in the lives of all people) that contribute to their self-concept. Among these are family relationships, friendships, achievements and competencies, and life events, as well as the degree of respect for women and girls in their culture and place of upbringing. However, I do believe that

awareness of heterosexism as a problem, along with the ability to respond to heterosexist oppression effectively, enhances a lesbian's sense of herself as a competent person.

My decision to interview only lesbians and not gay men reflects a belief that, because women are socialized differently from men, their ways of coping are different (Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1993; Gilligan, 1982; Morrow & Smith, 1995). Also, the form that heterosexism takes when directed toward lesbians is sometimes different than that aimed at men. For example, in some countries, such as Armenia, Estonia, Ghana, and Kenya, male homosexuality is prohibited by law, whereas lesbianism is not even mentioned (Tielman & Hammelburg, 1993). This may be either because it is considered negligible (i.e., women in these countries are themselves not considered enough of a threat to be taken seriously) or because it is assumed not to exist. In addition, the fact that women are still dominated economically by men is reflected in lesbians' low income levels relative to gay men (Rich, 1980). For instance, lesbians have fewer means of establishing high-profile lesbian-oriented businesses, community centres, and health care clinics. These factors contribute to the invisibility of lesbians, as does the scant coverage in the media relative to gay men. Moreover, lesbians are frequently omitted from language: for instance, the phrase "gay people" is often used to indicate "gay men and lesbians" in the same way that the word "he" has long been used to imply "he or she."

Limitations of the Study

First, it should be noted that my sample contains a self-selection bias, in that all participants *volunteered* to be interviewed. For this reason, the women may have more formal education and be more politically aware than would lesbians in a random sample. Because they were interested in discussing heterosexism with me, it is likely that most of the participants had thought about the topic a lot before our conversations. It is also likely that the self-motivation apparent in their coming forward to be interviewed is operative in their daily lives, including their ways of dealing with heterosexism.

Because the sample size is small, it does not fully reflect the diversity found in the lesbian community. For instance, all but one of the women are Caucasian, and all were raised in Caucasian families. Also, although I did not ask participants about their class backgrounds, the women do not currently appear to belong to widely disparate social classes.

Finally, this sample of eight lesbians could not include representatives of every political view or philosophy. For instance, this particular sample appears not to include extreme lesbian separatists (lesbians who choose, for social or political reasons, to associate mainly with other lesbians, leading their lives apart from men and sometimes from heterosexual women). However, the viewpoints and approaches found among these eight women were unquestionably diverse.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

This chapter will be organized into three parts, consisting of the following:

Part I: The Experience of Heterosexism

First, because ways of dealing with heterosexism are best understood in the context in which they become necessary (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), I will set out some important aspects of the experience of heterosexism that emerged from interview data. I will begin by presenting a composite *definition of heterosexism*. Next, I will present *the phenomenon of heterosexism*, with regard to both heterosexual attitudes and impact on the participants' lives. Third, under *causal and perpetuating conditions*, I will set forth participants' opinions regarding why heterosexism arises and why it continues. This part will end with *intervening conditions*, or factors that make the experience different for individual lesbians.

Part II: Dealing with Heterosexism

Part II contains the core of my research. It will begin with the process by which I developed a grounded theory of how lesbians deal with heterosexism, and will describe how a model expressing the theory came into being. First, *two preliminary models* will be presented: that which I initially constructed from interview material, and a second version of this model, restructured by participants in the focus group. I will then present the *third model*, primarily a synthesis of the first two,

along with the *grounded theory* on which this model is based. In the last section of Part II (the most extensive section of this chapter), I will detail the study participants' *strategies used in dealing with heterosexism*. Excerpts from the interviews will be used to illustrate these strategies.

<u>Part III: Creating a Nonheterosexist Society</u>

Finally, Part III will consist of the hopes and wishes for societal change, or goals for *creating a nonheterosexist society*, voiced by participants in interviews. These goals seemed to play a part in shaping some of the strategies and approaches in Part II, and represent an ideal "endpoint" in the transformation of lesbians' ways of dealing with heterosexism.

Part I: The Experience of Heterosexism

<u>Definition of "Heterosexism"</u>

The definition of "heterosexism" was arrived at by synthesizing the eight participants' responses to the first interview question: "When you hear me use the word 'heterosexism,' I'm wondering what meaning you attach to it." Once a definition was generated, it was brought back to all participants for confirmation. At this stage, the definition was slightly expanded. Its present form is now as follows: *Systemic or institutionalized hatred or fear of homosexuals, including the belief that homosexuality is wrong, sinful, or deviant, resulting in denial of rights and other forms of exclusionary and unequal treatment.* I will briefly expand on each part of this definition.

Systemic or institutionalized hatred or fear of
homosexuals ... Participants generally saw heterosexism as going
beyond individual fear and hatred; some pointed out it was deeply
entrenched in society's values and education system. Denise used
the words "systemic" and "institutionalized"; Julie said, "It's
an 'ism.'" Several participants drew a connection between
heterosexism, sexism, and racism as insidious and pervasive
aspects of society, and identified as a key, common element a
sense of superiority of one group toward another, coupled with
oppressive and exclusionary treatment.

... including the belief that homosexuality is wrong,
sinful, or deviant ... Virtually all participants made reference
to this aspect of heterosexism, several noting the negative
stereotypes they had heard regarding lesbian and gay people when
growing up, or the opinion that, as Susan said, they were "pagan
and evil." In a number of the interviews, derogatory terms for
lesbians and gay men were cited, such as "lezzie," "fuckin'
queers," and "faggot." Another important theme that emerged was
the tendency of heterosexuals to "sexualize" lesbians; that is,
to see them only as sexual beings and to assume that they are
preoccupied with sex. Meanwhile, it was pointed out, their
capacity for love is overlooked.

... resulting in denial of rights ... Among the rights that
were mentioned were the right to express affection in public
without fear of verbal or physical attack, the right to be out at
work without fear of repercussion, the right to receive work-

related spousal benefits, the right to marry and be recognized as a couple, the right to keep one's children after separation from a male partner, and the right to be recognized legally and socially as co-parents.

... and other forms of exclusionary and unequal treatment. Two participants used the phrase "us and them" to describe the schism that results from the view that heterosexuality is superior and homosexuality, inferior. Being excluded from the ranks of the "respectable," it is risky for lesbians to be who they are. They are faced with the choice of either being invisible or being penalized socially and economically. As Rae put it, being an out lesbian means being "economically marginalized," since choice of jobs and access to the financial benefits allowed heterosexuals becomes restricted. "It all comes down to money, because money is about power."

The Phenomenon of Heterosexism

This section in subdivided into the following areas: heterosexual attitudes and responses, the impact of heterosexism on relationships, the impact of heterosexism in the work world, the psychological impact of heterosexism, and the positive effects of dealing with heterosexism.

Heterosexual Attitudes and Responses

All the women interviewed made at least some reference to attitudes and misconceptions held by heterosexuals. Among those mentioned were the tendency to condescend and minimize, the

belief that being a lesbian is only about being sexual, that lesbianism is pagan and evil, and that it is a disease. Participants also commonly mentioned denial, fear, and shock as common reactions of heterosexuals toward lesbians.

Condescension and minimization. Heterosexual responses reported by participants included the belief that their lesbianism was "just a phase"; that they had been influenced by friends to become lesbians; that bad experiences with men had turned them into lesbians; and that a lesbian was simply a woman who "can't find a man." Also mentioned by two participants was a tendency for heterosexual men to feel titillated by the idea of lesbian sex and to regard lesbians as objects for their entertainment and pleasure. One interviewee felt that some heterosexual men enjoy pursuing lesbians, because they find it "more of a challenge."

Overemphasis on sex. Several of the participants reported an assumption that lesbians are more concerned with sex than are heterosexuals. Cheryl recalled a neighbourhood mother who worried aloud how she would explain to her son about his friend's "two mothers"; she seemed to assume she would have to give him facts about their sex life. A similar attitude, though much more overt, was reflected in one participant's exchange with a neighbour. Although the argument was unrelated to the woman being a lesbian, the neighbour blurted out, "Well, all you guys do is lay [sic] around and suck each other's cunts all day!"

Denial. Denise related that, when she showed a group of teenagers a video about the problems faced by lesbian and gay youth, one young man responded by insisting there were no homosexuals in his home country. Lee has experienced people telling her she was not a lesbian--apparently because she did not fit their image of one--even though she insisted she was. Susan remembered two young men who were among her worst persecutors in high school, both of whom she later found out were gay themselves.

Fear. Various types of fear-based reactions were noted, but the most common of these were discomfort and nervousness. Julie spoke of her partner's family's reactions when she and her partner show affection: they either joke about it ("Oh, you beasts!") or fall silent. Cheryl reported that she and her partner get stared at continually whenever they hold hands in public. When Denise tried to discuss homosexuality and heterosexism with youth in a life skills program, she sensed that several were afraid to ask questions about it. Marg remembered how her mother was "nervous" about meeting her gay male friends, a couple, yet could not explain why. Both Rae and Julie also mentioned the fear-based belief held by some heterosexuals that homosexuals will make sexual advances toward them.

Impact of Heterosexism on Relationships

Interview material showed heterosexism to have a profound impact on relationships with family members and partners in particular, and also to affect interactions with men, with co-

workers, and with other lesbians.

Parental attitudes. Among this sample of lesbians, parental attitudes ranged from complete acceptance to complete denial. One participant related feeling "shocked" that her parents had such difficulty adjusting to her sexual orientation. She expressed hurt and anger that they did not ask her about her personal life, did not invite her partner to family functions--although they invited her heterosexual siblings' spouses--and did not offer any sympathy when an important relationship ended. In short, she felt they did not recognize "that I actually have a life," and that the emotions that accompany events in lesbian relationships are real. Another participant also expressed frustration and pain at not being able to share with her older sister (who had had a parental role in her life) her hurt and anger at being "judged and condemned," since she knew she would only receive further criticism and blame in response.

Lesbian motherhood. The two lesbians mothers in the sample felt that heterosexuals tend not to regard them as "real mothers." According to Cheryl, this misconception stems from the belief that lesbians are always sexual, and therefore are unable to have a nonsexual relationship with their children. Cheryl also reported that, because she is the biological mother of their children, her partner is often not accepted as the other mother, although they have an equal role in bringing up the children. Both women also mentioned not being seen as "real lesbians" by other lesbians. They noted that this is particularly the case if

the lesbian has male children, or if the children are from a heterosexual marriage.

Both lesbian mothers raised a number of issues wherein heterosexism affects their children. Both are concerned that children are not being given correct information, or in fact any information, by adults at school. Both find it important to be open about being lesbians, in order to counteract negative impressions their children pick up from at school or from the media. One mother expressed concern that her children would turn against her and her partner once they became teenagers and started wanting to "fit in" with their peers. The other mother's children were already getting teased in school; for instance, her 10-year-old daughter was being called a "dyke."

The impact on the entire family is profound, Cheryl stressed. If a lesbian's parents refuse to accept her sexual orientation, the result can be a cut-off between parents and daughter; this in turn means that her children are not able to see their grandparents. If this is the case, children may even resent their parents for being lesbians.

Lesbian relationships. A recurring theme in the interviews was the fact that lesbian relationships tend not to be acknowledged or respected. Julie pointed out that, since heterosexual relationships are the only ones sanctioned by society, she and her partner are often "not really perceived as being a couple." Delyse further made the point that, due to a heterosexist belief that lesbian relationships cannot last,

lesbians themselves start to believe this is the case, and their relationships are negatively affected.

A lesbian couple's relationship is affected in other ways as well. In situations where two women feel compelled to hide the fact they are a couple, they have a sense of devaluing the relationship, or failing to honour each other, as when they find themselves unlocking hands as a tough-looking man approaches them, or when a lesbian's partner is not invited to a family function.

Negative reactions--or anticipated negative attitudes--toward a lesbian couple by one or both of their families can also cause division between a couple; for instance, if a lesbian is uncomfortable around her partner's family (because the family is uncomfortable in her presence), or if her partner feels uncomfortable around her own family. The couple may also disagree about how "out" they should be to family members, friends, or colleagues. As one participant attested, this can be an ongoing source of conflict that deeply affects a relationship.

Relationships with men. Some of the women interviewed said they had felt pressure to have relationships with men, or that they simply had not realized there was any alternative. Lack of attraction to the men they got involved with contributed to conflict in relationships, which led in at least one case to the breakup of a long-term marriage and the partner feeling abandoned.

Two interviewees recalled problems with regard to males in

their high school days: one found it difficult to deal with male classmates who liked her, while the other felt hurt that boys avoided her. Another participant remarked that it was hard to make friends with men, since they typically believed that lesbians must be "man-haters."

The lesbian community. The effects of heterosexism even spread to the way lesbians treat each other in the lesbian community. Several participants commented on the existence of an orthodoxy of dress, behaviour, and politics, which seemed to them an extension of the narrow-minded, prescriptive thinking espoused by mainstream society. Marg criticized the way in which lesbians often pressure each other to be "p.c." (politically correct), even to the point of discriminating against one another. She cited as an example a popular women's festival whose lesbian organizers, in an effort to create a women-only environment, do not permit women to bring in male children over the age of seven. Similarly, Rae reports having felt she had to be "political all the time." Cheryl laughed and agreed when I suggested that a lesbian's credibility among other lesbians decreased as the number of children she had increased. Lee talked about feeling pressured to "look like a lesbian," and noted that this pressure even affected the choice of clothes she wore to be interviewed by me. Emphasis on a prescribed "look" was also mentioned by Julie and Delyse, who pointed out that lesbians who did not conform to it became invisible both to each other and to society in general.

Delyse observed that, as a manifestation of unacknowledged

internalized homophobia, it was common for women to find fault with the lesbian community instead of looking inward. She also expressed the opinion that the desire of lesbians to distinguish themselves from heterosexuals often leads to a rejection of the heterosexual family model, so that although lesbians often try to recreate family, they do so "on a peer level, rather than an intergenerational level." One unfortunate consequence, she noted, was that the lesbian community then has little connection with children and elders, and is therefore unable to enjoy the richness they provide.

Culture gaps. Some participants observed the difficulty of bridging the gap between heterosexual and lesbian cultures. Susan related the experience of bringing a heterosexual friend to a concert by a lesbian performer, and then to a lesbian bar. The friend's shock and bewilderment reminded her just how "exotic" the lesbian culture can seem to a heterosexual person. Conversely, Delyse and Cheryl both reported that the heterosexual work world felt "foreign" to them, since the values and concerns of the heterosexuals in that environment were different from their own and those of their lesbian friends. Delyse further commented that, because of cultural differences, she found it hard to make heterosexual friends.

Impact of Heterosexism in the Work World.

Career choice. Heterosexism affects career choice, and therefore the economic status of lesbians, Rae emphasized. For one thing, lesbians who want to work in an environment that

reflects egalitarian, non-capitalist principles often end up working in organizations with little money; thus, unless they sacrifice their values, they are excluded from power. Regarding her own place of work, Rae stated, "We [the staff] work with marginalized people, and we are marginalized ourselves."

As several participants indicated, lesbians are also at a economic disadvantage compared to heterosexuals when the workplace lacks a strong union or employment benefits for same-sex partners, as is often the case. In addition, lesbian and gay people may lose or be avoided by clients who learn of their sexual orientation. A woman Julie worked with announced that she had stopped going to her massage therapist upon discovering she was a lesbian.

The work environment. One issue that came up both in the interviews and in the confirmatory sessions was the decision about whether to come out at work, and the consequences of revealing one's sexual orientation. Denise noted that, although she has recently gained the confidence to come out in job interviews, she still feels apprehensive about how her disclosure will be received by employers. Being out in a work environment can lead to feeling shunned or excluded by co-workers, as Cheryl attested. She added that government jobs in particular tend to be unfriendly environments for lesbians. Julie, who worked until recently in a fairly conservative company, felt that by not being out at work, she was protecting herself from "a potentially more oppressive environment."

On the other hand, being closeted at work also has a high cost, Julie noted. A lesbian can feel compelled to suppress talk about herself and her life, while the heterosexual people around her are talking about themselves and their relationships. Also, if she does not fit a stereotype, she is invariably thought to be heterosexual. Whether to attend a staff party was a dilemma for Julie: she did not wish to go without her partner. However, to attend with her partner would mean coming out, while not to do so would mean excluding her partner. Rae related being in the frustrating and painful situation of watching two gay men in her work environment being oppressed, and yet feeling powerless to defend them, since doing so might jeopardize her job.

Psychological Impact of Heterosexism

For the sake of convenience, the psychological impact of heterosexism is presented as a discrete section; however, the factors presented below pervade numerous areas, including work life, career aspirations, family life, and relationships with partners.

Internalized homophobia. Central to the experience of heterosexism is the emotional "wear and tear" resulting from such situations as those described above, and from many others as well. For example, sadness and loss were themes that occurred repeatedly in the interviews: loss of important relationships when family members or friends did not understand; or if not complete loss, distance between the lesbian and the people she was formerly close to; loss of job opportunities; loss of time,

when some lesbians discovered their true sexual orientation later in life, not having realized that living as a lesbian was an option; loneliness and isolation, before a woman found support, or when she found herself to be the only lesbian in a work or social situation.

Fear was another theme: of people's negative reactions, even when the lesbian was determined to remain true to herself and not hide her sexual identity; of being ostracized, publicly embarrassed, harassed, or physically attacked; of losing family, children, or friends; and of political backlash that might result in the removal of the hard-won rights lesbians and gay men have thus far managed to reclaim.

The participants often described how feelings of shame and insecurity resulted from being treated like "Satan's spawn," as Rae put it. Interviewees report having felt invisible, excluded, and misunderstood--even by their own parents, who in some cases avoided talking with them about their personal lives, and ignored their relationships. As a consequence, the women tended to blame themselves, especially in the earlier phases of dealing with heterosexism. Susan described how she had directed hostility outward toward the world, and self-loathing inward toward herself. She remembers feeling she was "a loser" in high school, because males did not show interest in her. Delyse, who has counselled lesbians, observed that some are apt to blame themselves for various troubles in their lives, such as in relationships or in mothering, thinking the "failure" is due to

their being lesbians. Susan believed her former pattern of getting into abusive relationships was partly a result of feeling that because she was a lesbian, she did not deserve to be treated with respect.

Hurt was another common emotion. Lee recalled her feelings of shock and betrayal at being abandoned by people she had thought were good friends. Rae related her experience of trying to join some female co-workers' conversation about their relationships, and being treated as if she were crazy: "... it's rejection of *you*, it's like continual rejection of you." Susan expressed the pain of isolation she had felt in high school: "*Absolutely* nobody wants me, heaven forbid *any*body would actually wanna touch me ...."

The energy drain. Virtually all the women interviewed referred to the energy it took to deal with heterosexism. Rae used the word "dailyness" to describe the struggle, "the having to reface and reface and reface that same situation over, which is fucking *wearing!*" She also pointed out that lesbians need to be "more sure than everybody else," in order to prove they are just as good. She spoke of the need to develop "multiple awarenesses"; that is, having to jump into someone else's shoes and back into one's own, in order to second-guess heterosexual people's reactions and weigh one's words accordingly. Along with protecting oneself, much energy goes into protecting other people because of their own prejudice, she added.

The energy spent deciding what risks to take was brought up

by almost all of the participants. When Julie and her partner decided not to come out to some conservative acquaintances but to pretend they were friends instead, it took "a lot of planning. A lot of energy ...." Lee said she took the trouble to "set out [the fact that she is a lesbian] at the beginning" of a new friendship, although she resented having to do so. Denise too, when speaking of her desire to test the level of comfort in a work environment by coming out during a job interview, expressed a similar feeling: "It bugs me that I feel like I have to say it."

Participants frequently expressed frustration and anger at people's ignorance or oppressive attitudes. Some reported feeling anger simply at realizing, as Rae put it, that "this is how the world works." Increased awareness of heterosexism is accompanied by first-hand knowledge of injustice. For Julie, becoming part of a couple underlined this injustice even more, because she knew she and her partner did not have the option of getting married, receiving same-sex benefits at their jobs, and so on: "It hits home. And I think that kind of makes you grow up ...." Rae observed that, as a result of experiencing oppressive attitudes, lesbians tend to develop "hyperawareness," or insight into the multiple sources of oppression that all marginalized individuals face.

Positive Effects of Dealing with Heterosexism

Although it is painful to realize "how the world works," Rae acknowledged that being a lesbian has given her a "tougher skin."

Also, she commented that lesbians tend to become aware of ways in which they sometimes oppress others; that is, they can identify oppressive behaviour because they have often been on the receiving end of it.

Both lesbian mothers commented on the atmosphere of honesty and respect that pervades their households. Both have resolved to teach their children to be proud of who they are and who their parents are, and both recognize that openness and flexibility in general are important to developing accepting, non-oppressive attitudes. Marg spoke of her efforts not to "control" her children just for the sake of feeling powerful, while Cheryl emphasized the importance of giving her children "lots of choices." Both mothers also expressed a willingness to discuss virtually any topic that interested their children, from sexuality to violence to AIDS.

In my confirmation session with Rae, I showed her my chart with dozens of "post-it" notes detailing the negative impact of heterosexism, and only a few indicating positive impact. She took a post-it of her own and added: "freedom; less restricted in choices/behaviour (if you're already out on a limb)."

Causal and Perpetuating Conditions

Although the effects of heterosexism were explored more deeply in this research than the causes, two themes emerged regarding possible causes: fear of difference, and desire of a dominant, privileged group for control. The former was expressed

by the remark "I think being different ... somehow *scares* people." The latter was expressed variously as "white male dominance," "politicians who ... impose their personal beliefs ... on thousands and thousands of people," and power over lesbians' money (in the work world) and over their bodies (in that they are sometimes in danger of physical attack).

Regarding factors that perpetuate heterosexism, one mentioned by nearly all the participants (when asked what meaning the word "heterosexism" had for them) was the assumption that everyone is heterosexual. Accompanying this assumption is the devaluing of alternatives, some participants observed. The problem was seen not simply as one of negative stereotypes and name-calling, but also of ignoring the existence of homosexuality by failing to provide information about it. Examples given were the absence of role models for lesbian and gay youth, the absence of books about homosexuality in school libraries, the scarcity of such books for youth in the first place, the omission of lesbians and gays from television shows and commercials, and the exclusion of the topic of homosexuality in classroom discussion.

Several participants stated that they had had no awareness, when growing up, that a choice existed:

> ... I grew up believing I was straight and that there was
> no other way to be .... I guess that is heterosexism ....
> All I ever heard was, "Damn feminist lesbian bitch!" That's
> what I grew up with from, from my dad .... You could be
> bombarded daily with ... heterosexuals kissing and
> everything but you never, ever saw (pause) ... two women.

> I never *thought* of lesbians, really. It was never mentioned
> in our home, there was nobody that I knew that were
> lesbians ...

> ... it's always assumed that you'll follow the traditional
> pattern ... of family as defined by society, that you will
> get married or live with somebody of the opposite sex and,
> you know, perhaps have children and just do what everybody
> else does, what's conventional, what's accepted, and take
> the route that's basically covered by law ...

Thus the possibility of being a lesbian was virtually erased,

while heterosexual relationships and family models were held up

as the only legitimate ones. Some participants mentioned being

pressured to have a boyfriend, or to marry and have children.

Another damaging, unconscious assumption was cited by Julie:

that homosexuality is a sexual orientation (with emphasis on

"sexual") while heterosexuality is not. As a result, lesbians

stand out as "other," and the aspects of sexual attraction and

sexual activity are overemphasized. This distortion in turn

results in the harmful beliefs that homosexuals are child

molesters or that there must be a sexual component to

relationships between lesbian and gay parents and their children.

These fears and mistaken beliefs were seen to pervade all

major societal institutions. Most frequently mentioned by

participants were the education system, the traditional family

structure, the work world, and the media. Also noted were the

law, politics, religion, the economic system, and science and

medicine. In the follow-up sessions, the women confirmed the idea

that these institutions served both to shape and to perpetuate

heterosexism.

The effects of heterosexism then feed into its continuance. For instance, Cheryl commented that because society punishes lesbian mothers by legal sanctions, negative stereotypes, and lack of support, many lesbians choose not to have a family even if they want one. The net effect is that the lesbian-based family is still a relative rarity, and the popular view of lesbians as not being family-oriented is maintained. More generally, as long as lesbians feel compelled to lie about their sexual orientation for the sake of social, economic, or physical safety, their invisibility is perpetuated and heterosexuality continues to be seen as the only valid way of being.

Intervening Conditions

During the course of the interviews, information emerged that served to answer the question, "What factors make the experience of heterosexism different for individual lesbians?" Although this material was not explored in depth, it seems important to present it, since it further illuminates the sociopolitical context of the problem. Many women, for instance, spoke of the significance of social support in confronting heterosexist attitudes or incidents. For some, this support consisted of "allies" in their families; for some, both heterosexual and lesbian friends; for some, a partner as well; and for many, a network of friends within the lesbian community.

Rae emphasized the difference that race and social class

make, and the corresponding degree of privilege involved. She gave as an example the selection of a nonheterosexist work environment, an option normally open only to those with financial resources and a reasonably high level of education. Susan cited her strict religious upbringing, which included the portrayal of homosexuals as evil, as contributing to her self-hatred. Lee pointed out that geographic location makes a difference; larger cities tend to have positive media coverage of lesbian and gay issues, thus increasing public awareness.

Regarding the work world, several participants made reference to the overall attitudes of management, their boss, and other staff members, as well as to the number of openly gay staff members and the type of job. Attitudes in the workplace ranged from those of an organization Denise worked for whose mandate was to move toward social change, including addressing such issues as sexuality and racism, to those of a social services outfit where Rae went for an interview: she later found out the organization had fired several lesbians because they were seen as "trouble-makers." (She found this fact especially disturbing since she had expected staff at a human services organization to uphold--at least nominally--nondiscriminatory policies.) Places with a strong union and same-sex benefits were seen as less heterosexist environments, as were places with progressive educational initiatives such as professional development workshops.

A number of factors were brought up in relation to the attributes of the heterosexual people with whom a lesbian

interacts, and the nature of her relationship with them. Often mentioned was the degree of denial or openness in her family, with some family members typically being more accepting of the lesbian family member than others. Cheryl, a lesbian mother, believes that, regarding a lesbian's relationships with her children, gender is a factor. She gave the opinion that male heterosexual children in particular were likely to become less accepting of lesbian parents when they reach their teens.

Other factors bearing on a lesbian's relationships with heterosexuals include how much contact she has with them (and accordingly, how much openness may or may not be necessary), how close a relationship she has with them, and how highly she regards them. According to participants, whether heterosexuals are--or can become--accepting depends partly on maturity level and degree of life experience, partly on willingness to learn and to be challenged, and partly on a person's level of self-esteem and flexibility.

Another set of "intervening conditions" relates to the lesbian herself: her situation, her experiences, and her personal attributes. For instance, Denise explained that because she was in a position of authority at work, and was therefore seen as having power, she was not directly confronted with heterosexist comments or attitudes when she came out. Moreover, she believed the degree of respect her co-workers had for her before she came out helped to smooth her way.

Cheryl observed that a lesbian's experience of heterosexism

differs depending on whether she has children. For instance, she conveyed a strong sense of responsibility to pass on non-oppressive attitudes to her children. She also cited the popular view of lesbians as poor mothers. Marg, the other lesbian mother I interviewed, often felt the need to help her children deal with heterosexist comments and behaviours of others, especially school peers.

During the confirmatory sessions, participants commented on the difficulty of pinpointing personal attributes that create a different experience for each lesbian, since it is impossible to identify to what degree any attribute *contributes to* dealing with heterosexism, and to what degree it is *shaped by* it. In general, however, reference was made to how "out" a lesbian is when confronted with any given heterosexist incident or circumstance; what cumulative experiences of oppression or other forms of adversity she may have had and how she dealt with such situations in the past; how much nurturing she received from her family or others in her environment; and how stable and positive a sense of identity she has, as derived from other important aspects of her life besides her sexuality.

Part II: Dealing with Heterosexism

Toward a Grounded Theory: Two Preliminary Models

Originally, I intended to create a single model, which I expected to show to participants for validation, change according to their suggestions, and present as the central part of this

thesis. However, during the lively focus group session, the model I began with underwent a major change in structure, resulting in a second model. Since both models are precursors to a third model, which combines aspects of the first two models and partly expresses my grounded theory, I will describe here how each model came about.

Development of Model 1

In order to construct Model 1: Lesbian Transformations in Dealing with Heterosexism, I followed the practice of categorizing the data into core categories and subcategories as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990). My goal was to outline a general *evolution* in the ways in which lesbians dealt with heterosexism, since it seemed clear that participants' strategies and stances had changed over time. Thus, the result was a model that traced a path of how women progress from passive to defensive to activist stances in dealing with heterosexism as they become stronger in themselves. In developing the model, I attempted to keep foremost in mind the importance of using only information elicited from interviewees. Where possible, I used their exact words; this practice is reflected in categories like "Take Me or Leave Me" and "No Room in my Life," and in such subcategories as "Putting up and shutting up" and "Calling it."

Model 1 consists of five *themes*:

I. Hiding

II. Preparing to Come Out

III. Asserting Awareness of Being a Lesbian
(originally called "Self-Focussed Coping")
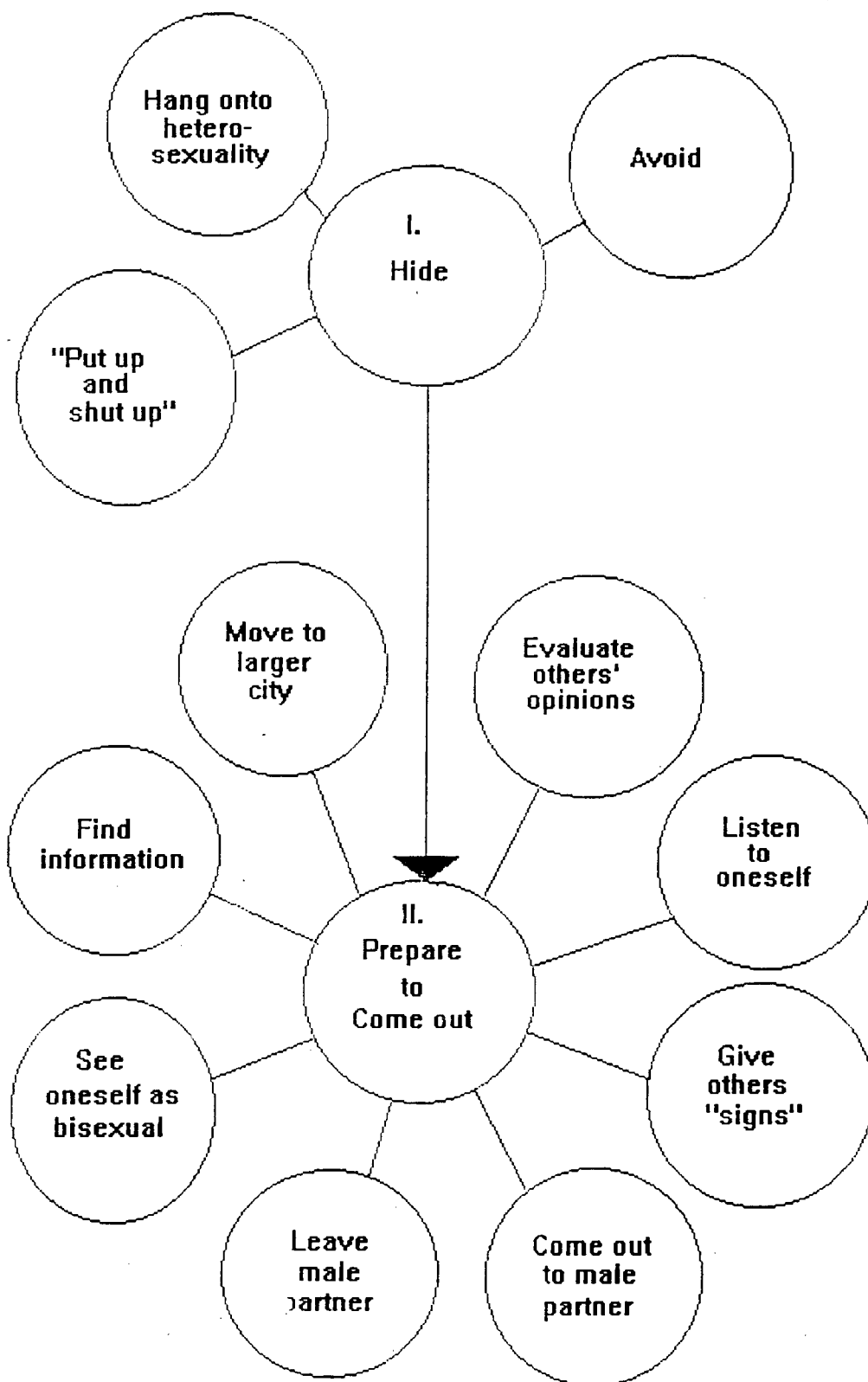
Figure 1

Themes I and II and their categories

Model 1: Lesbian Transformations in Dealing with Heterosexism

Figure 2

I.
Hide

II.
Prepare
to
come out

Seek
support

Come
out

Attack
back

III.
Asserting
awareness
of being
a lesbian

Choose
to
ignore

Release

Protect
self
and/or
children

"No room
in
my life"

Identify and
work through
internalized
homophobia

Role
models

Better
educa-
tion

Accept-
ance

V.
A
nonheterosexist
society

New
family
structures

Full
legal
rights

Equal
treatment
in the
media

IV.
Activism

"Take me
or
leave me"

Confront

Educate

89
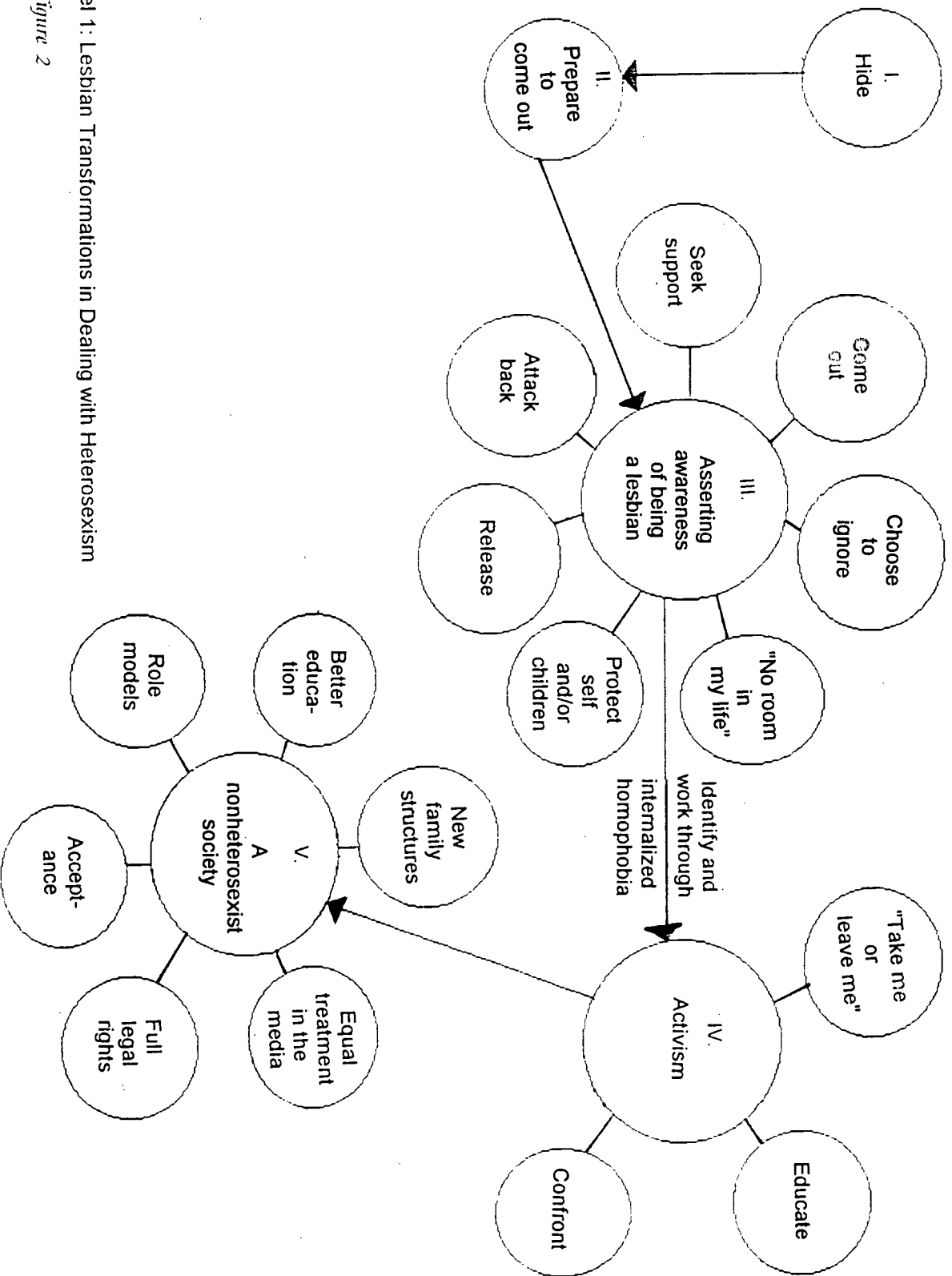
IV. Activism
    (originally called "Other-Focussed Coping")

V. A Nonheterosexist Society

All themes except the last one are comprised of the actual strategies and approaches of the women interviewed. The fifth theme, "A Nonheterosexist Society," reflects ideals that are valued by participants and that have informed their responses to heterosexism. It consists of suggestions the participants had as to how society in general, including gays and lesbians, should work toward dismantling institutionalized oppression of lesbians and gays--and by implication, how it should correct its stance toward other oppressed groups.

All themes are further divided into three to eight *categories*. The categories of themes III and IV are further divided into an average of five subcategories, or *elements*. I began the model construction after the third interview, and continued to expand the model as I completed more interviews. The process by which I established connections between themes, categories, and elements included making changes as my way of thinking about the data changed, and adding new pieces of information from participants during validation sessions.

The path described by Model 1 is not meant to be strictly linear; it only approximates the trajectory of the women's experiences, seen collectively. For this reason, I chose a somewhat amorphously shaped layout for the model: some of the women have used some of the strategies in some of the categories, and the result is a composite of these. Nevertheless, there did

seem to be an evolution from less to more effective ways of coping, as the following excerpts illustrate:

> ... I've ... learned to compromise a bit? Like I think when I first came out, you kind of go through that first coming out phase where you're totally like (pause, then emphatically:) It's gotta be *this* way, this way, this way, this way! Everybody's gotta accept me, it's gonna be great, and if they don't accept me, screw them, blah blah blah .... But I think, through work and (pause) growing ... a bit older ... just a few more years of experience in being out, and just who I am, I think I've learned to negotiate things a bit more? And learning that, like, I want change to happen, [but] it might not happen right now.

> ... it gets better as I get older. I used to get really angry or really, you know, upset and just say "Yeah? Well fuck you too!" ... And now, it's like, well god, you know, how human of them ...

> ... maybe they're curious! Right, I can start to think in a different way. You know? Like, and actually feel proud that they're looking at me. Right? .... That's been more my experience recently. It's, "Yeah! Look at me!" You know? "I am with a woman! And that's different, isn't it?" You know, and it's like, not coming from a (pause) fear place! It's coming from, "Why *wouldn't* they look?"... You know, they ... probably haven't *seen* many women walking down the street holding hands together like this, right? ... And so, it's kinda thinking of (pause) different kinda possibilities that are not informed by fear.

Given the nature of the changes described here and in other interviews, I felt the general transformation had to do with increased ability to imaginatively take the part of the person with whom one is dealing, as well as to take things less personally and realize people's limitations. Factors cited by participants as leading to more effective strategies were age, experience, working through internalized homophobia, and becoming more comfortable with oneself. Because the process of working

through internalized homophobia was implied in much of the interview material and confirmed as important in validation sessions, I placed it as a link between Themes III and IV ("Self-Focussed Coping" and "Other-Focussed Coping"). "A Nonheterosexist Society" represented the endpoint of this model.

Development of Model 2

When I had completed Model 1, I showed it to all participants, three individually and the other five in a focus group. As mentioned, during the focus group the model underwent a significant change. First, it was pointed out that "identifying and working through internalized homophobia" does not occur at any one point in a lesbian's life, but takes place throughout her lifetime. It was further recognized that the same could be said for the processes of "Seeking Support" and "Releasing Emotions," which I had designated as categories within the "Self-Focussed Coping" theme. There was also discussion of whether "Coming Out" could really be regarded as a discrete category, since several women felt they came out repeatedly to new people and in various situations throughout their lives.

During the focus group, "Self-Focussed Coping" was changed to "Asserting Awareness of Being a Lesbian," since, the group agreed, the behaviours associated with this theme were a natural continuation of those connected with Themes I and II, "Hiding," and "Preparing to Come Out."

The most significant change occurred when a discussion took

place about the "evolutionary"--and therefore hierarchical--structure of my model. While some women felt the path I had laid out reflected their experience accurately, others felt it was too linear, and hinted that it had a prescriptive quality about it. That is, according to my scheme, it seemed that some strategies for dealing with heterosexism were inherently "better" than others, and that their order of placement along the path reflected a judgment. Discussion at times turned into somewhat intense--though I believe not hostile--argument.

The placement of "Attacking Back" in an earlier phase than "Confronting," for instance, was questioned. Some participants felt that this placement was correct, saying that attacking was an insecure stance, whereas confronting derived from feelings of self-worth and self-entitlement. Others felt that because strategies such as getting angry, arguing, or intimidating an attacker were often necessary or appropriate, they were no less "evolved" than strategies in the "Confronting" category. One participant objected to the category name "Attacking Back," in that it automatically implied defensiveness. For this reason, the category appears in Model 2 as "Fighting Back," which I felt implied an active stance, but not necessarily hostile or vindictive.

After much back-and-forth regarding the implications of an evolutionary structure, someone suggested that the strategies be laid out in a circle, on "spokes" of a wheel, with "A Nonheterosexist Society" in the centre. This way, the implication
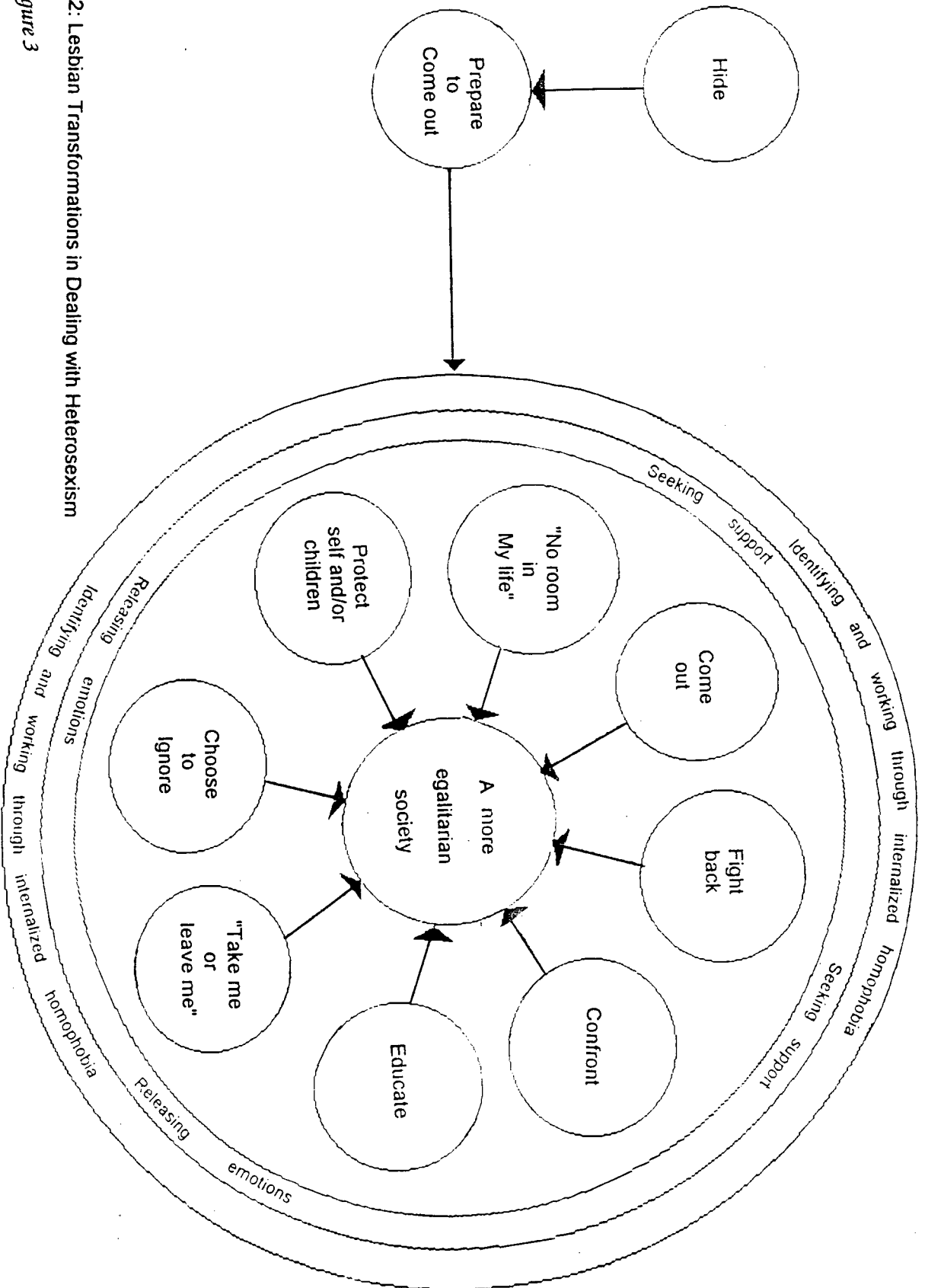
Model 2: Lesbian Transformations in Dealing with Heterosexism

Figure 3

Hide

Prepare
to
Come out

Seeking support

Identifying and working through internalized homophobia

Releasing emotions

"No room
in
My life"

Protect
self and/or
children

Come
out

Choose
to
Ignore

A more
egalitarian
society

Fight
back

"Take me
or
leave me"

Educate

Confront

73

that any one strategy was better than another could be done away with, along with the idea that a lesbian typically went through a series of phases in a particular order. The circle emphasized the fact that nonheterosexist ideals could be approached from any number of equally valid angles. A lesbian typically moved from one strategy to another depending on the situation. Some women also agreed that the circular structure allowed room for more and different strategies than the ones that emerged from my interviews; that is, the number of spokes could easily be expanded to accommodate an infinite number of approaches, stemming from an infinite number of philosophies or personal styles.

It was further proposed that "Hiding" and "Preparing to Come Out" lead into the wheel, since the decision to come out is tantamount to committing oneself to dealing with attitudes and situations resulting from heterosexism, or "entering the wheel." Another woman suggested that the continuing processes, such as identifying and working through internalized homophobia, be placed around the circumference of the wheel. This change would solve the problem of such processes being misrepresented as evolutionary phases or segments thereof; instead, they would be shown as always relevant to every lesbian, regardless of her approach to heterosexism.

In a subsequent, one-to-one validation meeting, a participant pointed out that the goals included in Theme V were not simply about striving for a nonheterosexist society, but

about creating a *more egalitarian* society; that is, working to
achieve these goals was ultimately a contribution to promoting
acceptance of difference generally. Therefore, in Model 2 the
endpoint, or centre of the circle, has been relabelled "A More
Egalitarian Society."

The last participant with whom I met for a validation
session preferred the first model to the second, because she
believed the process of learning to deal with heterosexism was
evolutionary. She added that she did not understand how such
strategies as "Being violent," "Being vindictive," or "Choosing
not to come out" could be interpreted as leading toward a more
egalitarian society; she felt they had more to do with protecting
oneself than about taking socially constructive action. Together,
we discussed alternate models that would reflect this concept:
for example, two separate circles, or a spiral. We agreed,
however, that this type of restructuring would still involve
making choices about which strategies were more "progressive" or
evolved than others.

When, over the phone, I described the problem to one of the
participants who had been at the focus session, she stated her
belief that what had happened during the focus group was partly a
reflection of "political correctness": that is, everyone had been
attempting to be "fair" by not placing one way of coping above
another, in accordance with a lesbian feminist ethical principle
of doing away with hierarchy.

When I later spoke by phone to another participant who had

attended the focus session, I discovered that she had agreed with my first model. She believed her way of dealing with heterosexism *had* evolved, becoming more effective over time--partly because she had become more confident in her sexuality, and partly because she was better equipped verbally to find effective words and phrases to oppose heterosexist ideas. In her view, one stage need not be seen as "better" than another, but simply as a sign of increased awareness.

In her view, another drawback to the circular model was that it seemed to imply an "endpoint" (i.e., the middle), or "nowhere to go," whereas my first model, which was more linear, seemed to allow room for growth in the form of new stages.

Model 3 and Statement of Grounded Theory

In weighing what various participants had said, I concluded that the two models each had unique strengths. Therefore, I created a third model that I hoped would combine the best features of the first two. Model 3 retains an "evolutionary" base, since all participants seemed to indicate that their ways of dealing with heterosexism had become more effective over time. However, its spiral structure may better represent a nonprescriptive, nonlinear pattern; one that implies that various approaches or stances are at times revisited. The spiral also allows for additional phases or stances to be placed anywhere along it, thus eliminating the problem of "nowhere to go."

77
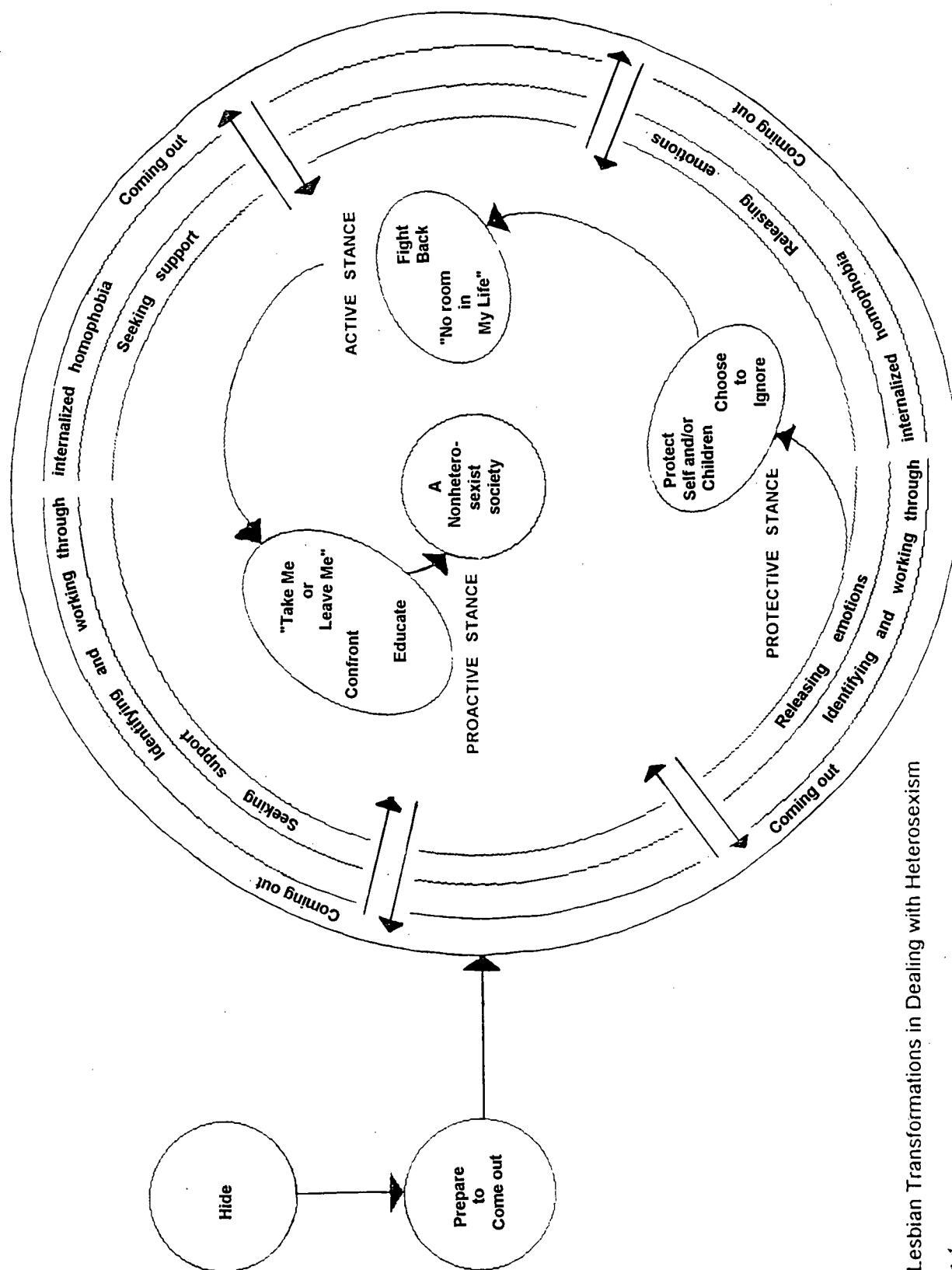
Model 3: Lesbian Transformations in Dealing with Heterosexism

Figure 4

Dealing with Heterosexism: Components of Model 3

Table 1

Continuing Processes:

I. Hiding

Avoiding
Hanging onto
   heterosexuality
"Putting up and
   shutting up"

II. Preparing to Come Out

Evaluating others'
   opinions
Listening to oneself
Giving others "signs"
Coming out to one's
   male partner
Leaving one's male
   partner
Seeing oneself as
   bisexual
Finding information
Moving to a larger
   city

Identifying and
Working Through
Internalized Homophobia

Coming Out

Coming out to friends
Coming out to family
   members
Coming out at work

Seeking Support

from heterosexual friends
from lesbian friends
from the lesbian community
from one's partner
from co-workers
from therapy

Releasing Emotions

Crying
Talking
Expressing anger
Using humour
Using sarcasm

III. Protective Stance

Choosing to Ignore

"Shaking it off"
Saving energy
Refusing to be "token"

Protecting Self and/or
Children

Choosing not to come out
Anticipating negative
   reactions
Switching children to
   more accepting school
Avoiding holding hands/
   expressing affection
   in dangerous areas
Walking away fast

Components of Model 3, cont'd ....

IV. Active Stance

Fighting Back

Showing anger
Arguing
Intimidating attackers
Being violent
Being vindictive

"No Room in My Life"

Avoiding traditionally
  heterosexist institu-
  tions
Being selective about
  one's work environment
Avoiding heterosexist
  people
Putting relationships
  "on hold"
Severing ties

V. Proactive Stance

"Take Me or Leave Me"

"Setting it out"
Refusing to hide
Showing affection in
  public
Rejecting stereotypes

Confronting

"Calling it"
Speaking out
Getting politically
  involved
Using "passive resistance"
Using logical explanation
Giving an ultimatum
Complaining

Educating

Being visible
Being a role model
Correcting misconcep-
  tions
Answering questions
Drawing parallels
Giving workshops
Educating children
Showing one's normality

VI. A Nonheterosexist Society

Better education of children
Equal treatment in the media
Full legal rights
Public role models
New family structures
Exploration of sexuality
Greater numbers of out lesbians
  and gays
"Acceptance" rather than "tolerance"

To my mind, some strategies appear to reflect *responsibility to oneself* more than responsibility to others—such as choosing, in some risky or uncomfortable situations, not to come out, or deciding to ignore heterosexist comments in order to save energy. Such strategies comprise the categories "Protect Self and/or Children" and "Choose to Ignore." In Model 3, these categories come under the heading "Protective Stance." Strategies such as putting relationships on hold, deciding to avoid heterosexist people or places, and arguing all involve *making statements to others* as well as defending oneself. Therefore, the categories to which they belong, "No Room in my Life" and "Fight Back," have been designated an "Active Stance." And finally, I have placed the categories "Take Me or Leave me," "Confront," and "Educate," under "Proactive Stance," because they seem to be employed mainly to *work toward dismantling heterosexism.*

It should be noted that while the strategies placed further toward the centre of the spiral may be more "evolved," they are not necessary more useful than the strategies of earlier stances. Usefulness depends on circumstances, personal style, one's objective, and so forth. To say that a lesbian sometimes uses the "Proactive Stance" strategies simply means that she has widened her repertoire to include them, not that she need maintain that stance. A strategy in the "Protective Stance," such as moving one's children out of a heterosexist school environment, may also be proactive; however, the emphasis is on responsibility to oneself or one's children, rather than on social activism.

Because Model 3 retains the circular structure of Model 2, it can still represent the processes of "Identifying and working through internalized homophobia," "Seeking support," and "Releasing emotions" as continual ones; they appear around the circumference as before. However, after further reflection on the focus group discussion, I made "Coming out" appear continual as well, as several women expressed the view that there are "layers" of coming out, and that lesbians come out to different people, and in new situations, throughout their lives.

Finally, upon some reflection, I changed "An Egalitarian Society" back to "A Nonheterosexist Society." In doing so, I am not implying that the participants do not seek to create a more equitable society for everyone. Moreover, I recognize that any measure of success in righting injustices toward lesbian and gay people would likely have positive reverberations for other oppressed groups. However, most of the particular goals mentioned in interviews had relevance for lesbian and gay people specifically. I wish to avoid implying that their fulfillment would necessarily achieve equality for other marginalized or discriminated-against groups.

Summary of the Theory

The data from participants indicates that lesbians become more effective in dealing with heterosexism over time. By "more effective," I mean both that the women seem to have become more comfortable in themselves, and that they deal with heterosexism

in more powerful ways. The overall movement is from fear
(Hiding), to deciding to assert one's lesbian identity (Preparing
to Come Out), to using self-protective strategies (Protective
Stance), to making a statement to others (Active Stance), to
contributing to the ideal of a nonheterosexist society (Proactive
Stance).

Essential features in the evolution of more effective
strategies are the ongoing processes of working through and
identifying internalized homophobia, coming out, releasing
emotions, and seeking support. Also important in a lesbian's
transformation, as evident from interview material, are a
decrease in defensiveness, an increase in anger directed away
from the self and toward "systems," a better understanding of
other people's standpoints, and an acknowledgement that people
need time to absorb and reflect on information.

Strategies Used in Dealing with Heterosexism

In this section, approaches and strategies for dealing with
heterosexism will be presented, according to Model 3, in the
following order: Hiding, Preparing to Come out, Continuing
Processes, Protective Stance, Active Stance, and Proactive
Stance.

Hiding

Although not all the participants talked of early phases of
coping with heterosexism, a pattern emerged from the ones who
did. Sometimes the information emerged spontaneously; other

times, it was elicited in response to the question, "Do you think your way of coping with heterosexism has changed over time?" Common to all the women who spoke about initial coping was the feeling they had to hide the truth about their sexual orientation. For Delyse, hiding came from "a place of fear." This may apply to the other women as well, as illustrated by the examples of their various ways of hiding.

Avoiding. For at least some interviewees, becoming conscious of lesbian feelings led to different kinds of avoidance. Rae avoided by doing drugs. Susan drank a lot in high school, and later isolated herself for several years, working "eighteen hours a day, seven days a week." When Marg first became aware of her lesbian feelings, she denied them:

> ... I was very frightened. And when my brother asked me if I was queer——he goes, "Are you queer? You're not queer, are you, Marg?"——and I went, "Oh no no no not me, not me!" (Both laugh.) And I proceeded to, you know ... there was a coupla guys that I had had in and outta my life like, one guy ... I had dated when I was sixteen and I tried to make a go with him, 'cause it was like, "I have to do this."

Hanging onto heterosexuality. Three of the women interviewed made reference to having had heterosexual relationships before coming out as lesbians. All three spoke of pressure to date men or get married, and at least two participants have been married. The following excerpt from my conversation with Marg shows how she first tried to adhere to a heterosexual role:

> M: ... I know I wrote in my diary at that time that if I was ever with another woman I would never go back to being with a man again (laughs slightly). And I always knew that if we broke up I would never be with another man, like——

E: --So you knew that even then.

M: I knew that then ... then we started planning to get married and I was very busy planning the marriage and then after that I was very busy between work and wanting to have children ... And then I got pregnant, and then I was busy being pregnant, and then I was busy being a mother, which, as I told you, was hard! (Laughs) Very fulfill--very "filling," not, I don't know if "fulfilling" is the word, but very "filling" ...

Cheryl too relates that she was well into her marriage and child-rearing before she realized she that she was a lesbian and that there were alternatives to staying in a traditional family:

... I didn't even come out as a lesbian until, like, maybe four and a half years ago ... I was married for about seven years. Um, and I think, like, my life was so harsh when I was a kid. And so hard, that just surviving it was enough, never mind thinking about being a dyke. Yet, I remember, at the time, many times, feeling, um, loving feelings toward friends, or sexual feelings toward friends. But I never thought, "Sexual feelings, I'm a dyke" (laughs a bit). I just thought--I didn't--I didn't think anything. 'Cause you know, it was surviving and getting through. Right? But they were *there*. But then, you know, I needed to get married, right? ... I needed to have kids ... I never *thought* of lesbians, really. It was never mentioned in our home, there was nobody that I knew that were lesbians, um, except now, I think, that those two women next door when we lived in that little town were not sisters like my mother told us!

"Putting up and shutting up". A few women described this way of coping as characteristic of their early struggles with heterosexism. The phrase is Rae's, but Julie also said she used to tolerate oppressive comments and behaviour far more than she does now. Rae noted that she often felt the need to protect herself--for example, in a work situation. She was also aware of protecting others from their own prejudiced way of thinking, by asking herself, "What does a heterosexual think of what I'm about

to say?" and then choosing her words carefully.

Preparing to Come Out

Another group of behaviours appeared to be intermediate steps between first awareness and asserting one's lesbian identity. As such, they might be said to constitute a "bridge" between trying to escape heterosexist attitudes and actively dealing with them.

Evaluating others' opinions. Julie recalled trying to make sense of the messages about homosexuality, both positive and negative, that she heard in high school. On one occasion, a male student was defending people's freedom to be gay, while Julie listened and two other students were "just rolling their eyes a little bit when he was talking":

> ... and he left and I made a comment, said "Well he has some, you know, interesting things to say." And they said, "Well, yeah, he was talking about gays and you seemed to agree with every word he said, ha ha!" And they both kind of laughed ... And I said to them, I said, "Well, does silence equal agreement?" And they said, "Well, it really seemed like it, I mean, you just kept nodding your head and not disagreeing." Kind of like that. So ... I was ostracized for not even, not even like explicitly agreeing with this person but just for not arguing with him ...

Susan recalls "testing the waters" at the dinner table:

E: You actually heard people saying that lesbians were evil, and stuff like that.

S: Yeah. (Pause) In church, and at home. I used to play with my dad and, at family dinners, "So, what about capital punishment?" (Both laugh slightly.) Oh, and about homosexuals? Oh, how ...?" There was like, four or five real, get 'im started, get 'im going type of topics.

<u>Listening to oneself</u>. Originally, I had named the above strategy ("Evaluating others' opinions") "Listening to others." When the women in the focus group saw that I had included it as a part of "Preparing to Come Out," they added "Listening to oneself," by which they meant getting in touch with one's true feelings, as opposed to what one thinks one *should* feel.

<u>Giving others "signs"</u>. Marg related how she had felt the need to "warn" her husband-to-be that she had been intimate with a woman:

> ... something inside me just said, "Tell 'im. Tell 'im, tell 'im, tell 'im. Don't be intimate with him before you tell 'im!" You know, and so the night that we had planned, I told him! I said, "I have to tell you this, it's very important," and he got upset, and he left, and ... we talked on the phone, and I said, "Well you know, don't *hate* me because of this. You know I, I don't know what it means ...."

<u>Coming out to one's male partner</u>. After a long internal struggle, Marg got up the courage to come out to her husband. She described the conflict that then ensued:

> ... he was very angry at first, and I don't blame him, like I mean he had this perfect life, he got to go fishing and when he came home from his job ... there was his wife and kids and a nice house and, you know he had this *family* ... you know, he said, "Oh, we can be friends," and, and, I honestly thought that he was, like, being truthful. Um, which turned out, you know, he wasn't ... he said, "Well you stay here, and you know, we can have sex once a month. Everything will be okay, right?" And I said, "T., I'm a *lesbian*. I can't have sex any more ...."

<u>Leaving one's male partner</u>. For both Cheryl and Marg, this step in their lesbian identity development appears to have been the key to opening up other options:

E: Can you pinpoint ... what it was that changed things for you so that you were *allowed* suddenly to think about women in that way?

C: Um, probably because I was (pause) free of marriage and I had choices in front of me. Like I didn't have to be backed up against that wall that I had been for the first, like, twenty-six years of my life ... I saw that there *was* another choice ...

Marg conveyed the bewilderment such a decision can bring at first:

M: Like, I don't think I ever had [such] ... a range of emotions. From being extremely happy and excited to knowing this new world had opened up to me, and, and, how quickly the old one was gonna be disappearing, to "Oh my god!" like the old world is disappearing (laughs slightly), you know ...

E: Well, you're losing something at the same time that you're gaining something (yeah!), it's very confusing.

M: It was a death and a birth at the same time.

Seeing oneself as bisexual. Delyse said she made the transition from heterosexuality to homosexuality by seeing herself as bisexual for some years:

... well I didn't come out as bisexual either, but it was to myself that I, I kind of framed it? You know and it felt, kinda more, uh, dealable with (both laugh slightly) than actually saying I was a lesbian ...

She added that because she was involved with a man when she discovered her feelings for women, bisexuality was a way of explaining these feelings to herself. Moreover, because she identified as a born-again Christian at the time, she felt her religion did not allow her to accept homosexuality as an option. Giving up her religion gave her the freedom to gradually do so.

Finding information. When Cheryl became aware of her lesbian

feelings, she found support from a book in the library before

seeking out other lesbians:

> ... I saw that there *was* another choice. No matter what
> anybody said, there was. You know (exclaiming): if there's a
> book on it in the library, other people are doin' it! (Both
> laugh.) ... and I knew that there were lesbians and gay men
> everywhere. I mean, I *knew* that! Though I didn't meet them.
> (Laughs a bit) Or, *thought* I never met them ...

Moving to a larger city. Denise discussed the difficulty of

coming out in a place where everyone knew her. Her move to

Vancouver provided her both with a chance to establish her sexual

identity in new surroundings, and to find support from the

lesbian and gay community that she knew existed here:

> ... I moved partly to be more out? Because I grew up in
> Winnipeg. And I ... worked with young people and I worked
> with a lotta young kids, too ... working at camps in the
> summertime and going to school, and then coaching in
> university and stuff, so I felt like I knew a lot of kids in
> a fairly small city. Where I felt like, I could walk down
> the street and ... who knows who'll be around the next
> corner (laughing), some little kid that saw me as Robin
> Hood one summer, you know, and just felt really, really
> closeted that way? .... I feel I have a community here, and
> a community that's supportive.

Thus, part of dealing with heterosexism can be finding or

creating an environment in which a lesbian feels safe to come

out, in that she has some control over when to disclose and to

whom, and knows there will be others who can help to validate her

lesbian identity.

Continuing Processes

According to participants, these processes are engaged in by lesbians on an ongoing basis throughout their lives, regardless of the strategies or approaches they use to deal with heterosexism.

Coming Out

Virtually all the women interviewed referred either to "coming out" or "being out" as an important part of dealing with heterosexism. In the focus group, participants agreed that coming out was something done continually throughout a lesbian's life. For this reason, they disagreed with my conceptualization of it in Model 1 as a discrete process. In Model 2, it is included with seven other strategy categories in a nonlinear pattern, so that it can be seen as a strategy one can return to again and again. In Model 3, it is shown as an ongoing, lifelong process, along with "Identifying and working through internalized homophobia," "Seeking support," and "Releasing emotions."

Even where they met with negative reactions, interviewees saw coming out as a positive step that helped them to solidify their lesbian identities. Delyse expressed the significance of *coming out to oneself* as the first step in the coming out process:

> D: [coming out] was kind of a choice and I felt really positive about myself ... in the time up to that, I could say I felt the effects of homophobia that were much more negative? ... And then coming out, and I felt ... really kind of good, and I felt high for about a year, right, you know, it's like "Yes! This is who I am!"

> E: So, was that because the conditions around you had changed,

or was that because *you* had changed?

D: Because I'd come to terms with, uh (pause), my sexuality ...
the working through a lot of that [internalized] homophobia
was ... in the years after that. You know, of like, feeling
bad about it ... 'cause I had a few sexual experiences
before I came out, with women and, and feeling (pause)
really uncomfortable? You know ... like somebody was
watching me? (Laughs) You know, that kind of feeling? Um,
and just couldn't relax and then when I came out it was
totally different .... that whole process of, of actually
coming out to yourself I think is really crucial—or *can* be,
it was for me, I think—crucial in addressing heterosexism
and homophobia in terms of myself.

Like Delyse, all the lesbians in this study indicated that,
ultimately, coming out helped increase their comfort level—even
though doing so sometimes meant dealing with others' reactions of
shock, fear, anger, or denial. For instance, in Marg's case
(presented above), coming out to her husband brought out the
painful truth about her feelings regarding their relationship,
yet represented an important step in her eventual realization of
a lesbian identity. And although Rae was upset about not being
offered a job for which she was a prime candidate, she also felt
good about not working for a clearly heterosexist agency.

Coming out to friends. Denise made sure she had a "safety
net" in the form of a support network when she came out:

D: ... I think, for the most part, in my life, I've been fairly
successful at avoiding, like, friends saying "I'm not gonna
be your friend any more," or people in my life saying "I
don't wanna have anything to do with you"?

E: How have you managed to do that?

D: (Laughing) ... I think it's just ... um, coming out the way
I did? I don't know. Like I told all my straight friends
first ... I just told certain people first? And, and made
sure that I had some straight friends who were supportive,
'cause I didn't have a gay or lesbian community to support
me, when I came out?

Lee, on the other hand, has had the experience of being abandoned by friends once she came out to them—as have a number of women in this sample. She said she had reached a point where she no longer wished to deal with feelings of shock and betrayal, or to put energy into a relationship that was not viable:

> ... this one woman who's become a great friend, I think three days after knowing her, I just said to her, "I'm gay! If you have a problem with that, let's not even bother trying to be friends because I don't wanna bother going through all this to have you, you know, shit all over me." ... And she was just like, "Oh! Well I think I kinda knew that you were gay. I think everybody sorta knows you're gay and um, *I* don't see it as a problem!" So it was like, "Oh great, then we can get along with being friends," you know?

Coming out to family members. Marg's relief upon coming out to her parents and children seems to have been proportionate with the degree of strain she felt staying in the closet throughout her nine-year marriage:

> M: It got to the point where every time I looked at [daughter] I had to tell her. But I knew that I couldn't say it was a secret? I didn't wanna say, it's a secret, don't tell anybody. 'Cause ... it *wasn't* a secret! ... that's why I told my mom and dad, within a month .... Because ... to me, this is something that needed to be said!
>
> E: ... if you bottle it in, then, you're still left with the feeling that there's something shameful.
>
> M: Yeah. And I didn't wanna feel the shame. I think, and I said that to Mom, "You know what I feel ashamed of, is the fact that all these years, I didn't (pause) know I had the right to be who I wanted to be."

Like Marg, Cheryl found it crucial to tell her children she was a lesbian so she could continue to have an honest, open relationship with them. Cheryl too concluded that coming out to her children could only be a positive thing:

> ... you're only giving them more choices, broadening their

horizons. You know? Yeah, and I always had in the back of my mind whether I was a lesbian or straight, that there were lotsa different people out there, lotsa choices, lots of experiences, lots of things to partake of ... So this was just (pause) another thing. You know? So it was no big deal! I told the kids like, right away. Like, right when I first started thinking about it, I told them that I was thinking about it.

Coming out at work. Without actively intending to educate others about heterosexism, lesbians sometimes end up "teaching" people about it through a single act of coming out. Denise's story about coming out in a work situation once more illustrates how coming out can be beneficial not just to the lesbian herself, but to those in her environment.

When Denise worked as a camp counsellor, she participated in a values sharing exercise with other counsellors wherein each person was to tell a partner their answer to the question, "What would you do if your son or daughter told you that they were gay?" After discussion in pairs, participants were to report to the group what their partners had said:

> D: ... So we were going around and one person said ... "I would never accept it, yeah, I'd throw my kid outta the house ... they would have to change it so they can't be gay," blah blah blah, like all those things, and like, it got to *me?* And my partner said, "Well, D. would be really accepting (laughs slightly), because she's a lesbian." And I just sat there and a coupla people just ... kinda, like went blank. (Pause) ... and then one of the guys came up to me and we had a talk after. It was kinda like, you know, a little uneasy, a bit?

> E: You mean, he felt bad about what he'd said.

> D: I think he felt bad about what he'd said. And then we had a discussion about it, and I just said, "You know, I understand where you're coming from? Like, I don't expect you to totally accept me, but this is who I *am*, and I thought it was important for you to know? ... 'cause you're gonna be working with me this summer, and, you know, it

> affects how I am? And, you know, by the end of the summer
> ... he said "You know, I'm glad that we worked together.
> Like I've learned a lot."

As Rae commented, deciding whether or not to come out at work often takes a great deal of energy, while a lesbian calculates whether the advantages will outweigh the disadvantages—or in some cases, whether she believes her job is at stake. In the above example, Denise was already out to a number of people at the camp and felt secure in her position. Julie, as I have mentioned, found it easier not to be out at work, since she believed her conservative co-workers would be uncomfortable with it and therefore make *her* feel uncomfortable.

Seeking Support

Like coming out, seeking support is an ongoing process for lesbians; hence, in Models 2 and 3, it is placed around the circumference of the large circle, rather than conceptualized as a discrete coping behaviour. Participants often spoke of support-seeking in connection with coming out. Supportive people, whether straight friends, other lesbians, partners, family, co-workers, or therapists, play an important role in all of the participants' lives.

Seeking support from heterosexual friends. Denise mentioned making sure she had some heterosexual friends who would provide support when she first came out, since she did not know many other lesbian or gay people at the time.

Seeking support from lesbian friends. Social support from other lesbians was mentioned by participants more frequently than

any other kind of support. In Susan's case, for instance, lesbian friends appear to have been crucial in helping her make the transition from feelings of alienation and hostility to an acceptance of her lesbian identity.

<u>Seeking support from the lesbian community</u>. Some participants saw the community as having the same role, for them, as Susan's friends had for her. Since the community gives respite from the feeling of being part of a sexual minority, it can help greatly to bolster a positive sense of oneself as a lesbian. It can also be an outlet for anger toward a predominantly heterosexist world. Delyse explained the special value the lesbian community held for her after she first began to assert her lesbian identity:

> ... deep down, I was not (pause) secure about, uh, my sexuality? You know, it's like on one level I felt good about it, but I know that I had to keep working at it? You know, because I couldn't just kind of relax and not think about it. It was like this, this awareness that I had to work out all the time, right? So, being ... more in the community and connecting helped to give me that strength to (pause) be more secure. In who I *was*.

Rae felt that shared experiences form a basis for lesbians to support each other, even though there are wide differences in their personalities and values:

> ... I think, yeah, about getting support, like I live with lesbians ... I have a lot of lesbians in my life! And not even people that I'm particularly close to--some of them I *am* particularly close to, but not a lot of them ... but yeah, we have had shared understanding of what it's like to be excluded and what it's like to be (pause) name-called ... and I think *that*, that is *coping!* And that is relying on that shared lesbian identity ... we have those ... common experiences of like, being shunned or being excluded or being hurt ...

Seeking support from one's partner. Julie implied that, in a
world that fails to treat lesbian relationships with the same
respect it accords to heterosexual ones, a close alliance with
one's partner is an important buffer. Hence, the very
relationship that elicits scorn is the key source of support for
both women:

> It's just an automatic assumption, well if you're two girls,
> you're friends. *Or* you're--(whispers) *lezzies!* You know
> (laughs), whisper whisper ... Or they don't take it as
> seriously? And that's very patronizing. Very heterosexist
> .... It ...[hurts more] as time goes by? Because when you
> get more into a relationship it becomes more important and
> (pause) it's a larger part of your life. I think you feel
> these things, or at least *I* do, a lot more. And ... we talk
> about them, and we think about them, and you know, having
> discussions, sometimes that raises awareness as well? Or
> brings it closer to home .... 'Cause we've discussed that
> sometimes and, and, you know, we both get angry and sit
> there in the car and swear. (Furtively:) "Stupid
> heterosexuals!" (Both laugh.) I mean, sometimes we just joke
> around, because ... you know you have to sometimes make
> light of the situation just for yourselves just so that you
> don't get (pause) into a rut of negativity.

Clearly a lesbian's partner can play a key role in helping
to reduce feelings of isolation and marginality. Cheryl too
expressed her good fortune at having found a partner who joined
her in opposing heterosexist attitudes, and who shared her belief
about being out to the children and to the public.

Seeking support from co-workers. Among the women I
interviewed, degree of support in the work environment ranged
from outright hostility to total endorsement. At one extreme, Lee
once had a boss who called her a "fucking queer" and said that he
wanted her "the hell out of the place"; at the other extreme,
Denise received complete support for coming out in a job

interview when the two interviewers were lesbian and bisexual. Among this sample, more positive, less heterosexist job experiences generally occurred when a significant percentage of the staff was gay or lesbian.

Seeking support from therapy. Only one participant mentioned seeking therapy, but spoke of it as a positive influence in her life. The subject came up incidentally, when Susan quoted the reaction of a friend to whom she had come out: "Oh my god, are you in therapy?!" Her answer was, "Well yeah, how do you think I got to where I am?" Susan said that therapy had helped her evolve into a more self-accepting person.

Releasing Emotions

Participants in the validation focus group agreed that releasing emotions is constantly necessary in dealing with heterosexism, no matter how long a lesbian has been out for, or how much her strategies or approaches change. Therefore, in Models 2 and 3, it is shown as an ongoing process. In fact, nearly all participants seemed to engage in release at some point during the interview. The types of release either engaged in or mentioned by participants were: talking about one's feelings to one's partner, to lesbian or gay friends, or to supportive heterosexual people; expressing anger or rage; having "a good cry"; and using humour or sarcasm.

Crying. Crying is one expression of outrage at an unjust situation. Rae spoke of her sadness and frustration when she knew she did not get offered a job because she was a lesbian:

> And I was sad, too, yeah, I went home and I ... think I did
> have a good cry about it because (pause) it's not *right*.
> It's not fair, it's not right ...

<u>Talking</u>. Talking with other people to whom similar things

had happened also served to validate Rae's experience. And as

mentioned above, Julie found an outlet for anger and frustration

by talking with her partner.

<u>Expressing anger</u>. This strategy differs from "Showing

anger," one of the strategies in the "Fighting Back" category, in

that it is used solely to unleash emotions rather than to make a

point. Nearly all the participants expressed anger at some point

during the interview itself, as Lee did in the following excerpt:

> I'm shocked that [my parents] haven't gotten used to [my
> being a lesbian] (laughing). You know, and I'm shocked
> that they have such *difficulty* adapting. And, you know, I've
> had friends that've said, you know, "Well, look at the
> generation they're from," and blah blah blah and it's like,
> well, that's bullshit! You know, like, people (pause) are
> adaptable.

Julie expressed anger toward "the religious right wing" and

politicians who attempt to restrict the rights of lesbian and gay

people:

> I find that ... of course highly offensive. It makes me very
> angry. It also makes me scared, that there's always the
> potential of a backlash, and that ... we won't obtain these
> rights? Because of politicians who, the way I look at it,
> you know, how dare they impose their personal beliefs? On
> thousands and thousands of people, I mean, what gives them
> the right ... to impose their values on us and stuff? The
> whole idea of them and us and (pause) them knowing better.
> And patronizing us, treating us like we're less than they
> are.

Using humour. Humour was used in a number of different ways.

Julie saw it as necessary for avoiding the trap of negativity

that comes from constant awareness of heterosexism. During the

interview, she used it to parody heterosexist attitudes:

> "Well you know, there are a lot of lesbians on, Commercial
> Drive and--" she goes (changing tone of voice) "There's
> nothing *wrong* with them or anything." Them, you know, them
> and us? "But (in hushed, confidential tone:), like, you
> never know!" And again, my first impulse was to say, "Don't
> flatter yourself"? But of course I contained myself because
> ... that's attacking her, basically ...

Lee used humour to express anger at the double standards of

behaviour that exist for heterosexual and homosexual people:

> I don't *ever*, I've *never* had anybody run up to me and say
> (whispering) "Oh by the way, I'm heterosexual!" (Both
> laugh.) "What?" "I'm a heterosexual." (Both laugh.) "Oh my
> god!!! Where did your mother go wrong?!" You know? (Both
> laugh.)

Marg advised her daughter to use humour as a way of deflecting

teasing:

> ... she'll come home and she'll go, "Oh I heard this: We
> must drink homo milk," right and, and I laugh and say
> "That's a good one! Next time they say a joke, say "Oh
> that's--" if it's funny. If it's ... *rude* and disgusting, I
> think that, you know, I want to know ..."

Using sarcasm. Sarcasm was used both as a way of countering

heterosexist attitudes and occasionally, during interviews, as a

form of release. Susan reported that she used to use sarcasm as a

weapon when she felt her integrity was being attacked:

> I just liked to hurt other people. If I can't hurt them any
> other way, I'll (pause) beat the snot out of them. I was
> really, *really* sarcastic and really snide and really, really
> put them down.

Although her sarcasm is no longer used in this way, it comes out

when she remembers how her eldest sister (who acted as mother to

her) treated her when she was growing up: "Like, when in doubt, judge and condemn. Always think the negative, always think the worst." Marg aimed sarcasm at judgmental heterosexuals as well, specifically those who believe lesbians are obsessed with sex:

> Oh yeah, we have sex everywhere, like when I'm grocery shopping, or when I'm doing laundry or when I'm talkin' to my kids about school! (Laughs slightly)

Sarcasm appears in these examples to be a way of combining anger and humour to create a vehicle for release.

Identifying and Working Through Internalized Homophobia

Although the phrase "internalized homophobia" was used by only one participant, material from interviews shows the effects of introjected shame or self-hatred to be profound. Susan described the effect of her strict religious upbringing on her self-image:

> That was hard. I was into hating myself for being pagan and evil and all the Christian things that you heard, and (pause) that sex was bad, especially gay sex.

Delyse spoke of having been affected by the idea "that ... lesbians are fucked up," saying that it caused her to question whether relationships were going to last. Moreover, because of the pervasive stereotype of lesbians as predominantly sexual beings, she had at times begun to doubt her lesbian identity when she was not involved with anyone.

Delyse also made reference to working through internalized negative messages in order to overcome fear of other people's judgments:

> ... if I have my *own* [negative] judgments, like if they're in there, then ... I'm gonna be affected by other people's

judgments because they're just gonna (pause) *connect* with my own .... Whereas ... if I deal with my own—get rid of them ... and deal with that fear, they're not gonna affect me.

During the validation sessions, several participants indicated that identifying and working through internalized homophobia was a perpetual process and an integral part of developing a healthy lesbian identity.

Protective Stance

The following strategies or approaches centre on respecting one's responsibility to oneself or one's children.

Choosing to Ignore

Choosing to ignore heterosexist incidents or remarks is distinct from "Hiding," in that it involves the exercise of choice once a lesbian's identity is clearly established.

"Shaking it off". Marg, who feels strongly about confronting heterosexism and educating wherever she can, explained that there were times when she felt it best to simply "let things go over":

> ... Things that I don't care to hear, like, one day a kid was in the school parking lot. He yelled, "Dyke! Dyke!" and, you know, I heard it once and I kind of turned around, and then he didn't say it again, and then I heard him say it again, and I just kind of thought, "It's not even worth it." Like sometimes it's not worth my trouble. If he'da been closer, I prob'ly would've, you know, approached him. But (pause) *I* woulda been the bad guy ...

At times, as in the above example, the choice to ignore is the choice not to lower oneself to the level of another's immature behaviour, combined with the decision not to waste energy on a situation with little potential gain.

Saving energy. Julie described an energy-saving strategy as an earlier method of dealing with heterosexism, that evolved into more active ways of dealing as time passed:

> ... I went through a stage where people said things and I'd heard it before and I just ignored it because I figured, well, I'm not really gonna be in this situation (pause) for a long time or, you know this might be a person that I'm meeting and I won't (pause) be meeting them very often, I don't wanna bother ... I just don't wanna waste the energy.

By contrast, Susan came to this way of dealing with heterosexism after years of hostile, aggressive behaviour—and only after she had learned to accept herself as a lesbian. For her, it represents a "mellowing out" that finally brought her some peace:

> I don't notice anything. Like people looking at [herself and girlfriend], or if we're walking down the street holding hands or something, like if they look, yeah whatever, I don't think about it ... Or,also I wouldn't notice unless it was like *really* obvious ... It's not worth my time. (Very long pause) I used to be a lot more aggressive. In most areas.

The above example supports the argument for a model of dealing with heterosexism that is not strictly linear. Susan's less effective coping strategies appear later under "Active Stance," while for many women, more effective strategies appear there.

Refusing to be "token". Rae voiced the necessity to be selective about one's battles, not simply to conserve energy, but also to avoid the trap of feeling one has to be a representative of all lesbians—a stance that, she pointed out, is more damaging than beneficial, in that it perpetuates the idea that there is a single lesbian worldview:

> R: ... I don't derive anything from that ... "This is what a lesbian is, this is what a lesbian believes, this is what a lesbian does ... this is how a lesbian *copes* ...." I mean if

you toe the party line, a lesbian copes by (stressing every word) *being political all the time*. That's a load of bunkum! That's tiring! You can't do it, nobody can do it! You know, nobody can be the token lesbian in every situation. And you know, I know, 'cause I've tried! When I first came out, that's what I thought I was s'posta do! And it's like *fuck!* You know it's not safe, and it's *tiring!*

E: It's just another box.

R: Mm-hm. And then ... people only see you one way. You are the token lesbian, you are not Rae ... you're not--the ten other things that you are in your life, you are--the *hundred* other things you are in your life!--you are (pause) token lesbian. And then you have to speak for every lesbian as if you are every lesbian.

E: (Laughing) That's right!

R: Like, I'm not a black lesbian, I'm not a disabled lesbian, I'm not a Jewish lesbian, you know, I'm not! And I don't wanna speak for those people!

Besides the wish to avoid misrepresenting other lesbians is

the desire for a reprieve from always being seen as a lesbian,

and therefore feeling pressure to "behave" like one. As several

participants noted, there does tend to be an orthodoxy or

prescribed set of "rules" to which lesbians hold other lesbians,

and many of the rules are related to the concept of "political

correctness." But as Rae observed, pressure can come from outside

the community as well, and lesbians can find themselves

overlooked as individuals while they are expected to fulfill

expectations of what a lesbian is.

Protecting Self and/or Children

This set of behaviours was used to avoid negative

consequences, including physical danger, for oneself or one's

children. Not all the women agreed that all of these behaviours

were constructive, but some felt they were appropriate in certain

situations.

Choosing not to come out. Although virtually all the lesbians in this sample felt it was important to be out wherever possible, some felt that in some situations, the gains from being out would be outweighed by negative consequences. Rae, as mentioned, spoke of the "economic consequences" of being out in a work situation, while Julie commented on the ongoing social discomfort it can cause the lesbian herself if co-workers react negatively; Julie also mentioned a trade-off she and her partner made, explaining their relationship as that of "roommates" when visiting conservative acquaintances, in order to avoid dealing with surprised or negative reactions; and both Delyse and Denise said they had not come out to members of their extended family with whom contact was minimal, since the investment of energy did not seem worthwhile.

Anticipating negative reactions. Some participants referred to the act of bracing themselves for hurtful or rejecting reactions from other people. For instance, when Denise showed teenagers in a life skills program the video "Out," which concerns the problems of lesbian and gay youth, she wasn't surprised when some of the males reacted negatively:

> ... it hurt, but I was prepared for it. Like I knew ... who would react and who wouldn't, and I ... had a feeling? Like, where things were gonna be, and what it was gonna be like.

Denise added that, at other times, she had to anticipate the negative reactions of co-workers when she decided to come out, and was careful to make sure she had supportive people around at

such times.

Switching children to more accepting school. Cheryl found

that the staff at her children's public school repeatedly refused

to acknowledge her partner as co-parent of their children:

> No respect for [my partner as co-parent]. No! They don't
> wanna get it! ... You know? Like and they direct things to
> *me!* ... Yeah, and the kids are not being taught [about
> homosexuality] in school, that it's okay, or anything like
> that--or that it's even available, as an option. So ... I'm
> switching them from schools, as a matter of fact, because of
> that. 'Cause I can't manage that kinda attitude any more.
> So they're gonna go to a community school.

The above excerpt gives a glimpse into how a heterosexist school

environment can affect not just one family member, but the entire

family.

Avoiding holding hands/expressing affection in dangerous

areas. Five of the eight lesbians interviewed brought up the

issue of physical safety. Of these, four talked of the danger of

holding hands in public, particularly at night or in the rougher

areas of the city. Participants said they would either avoid

holding hands in such a situation, unlock hands if people who

appeared threatening approached, or "walk away fast." Julie

outlined the dynamics of the issue clearly:

> Another thing that we do worry about from time to time on
> the street is violence? Um, there was one time when we were
> walking along holding hands, some guy rode by on his bike
> and goes, "Fuckin' lesbians." There's such a hatred in his
> voice. So that's a bit (pause) disconcerting ... And we like
> to hold hands, we don't really want to alter our behaviour.
> We get a lot of looks, and we totally ignore that. That's
> not a big deal, but we are constantly aware of potential
> violence. I mean women, in general, are ... always on the
> lookout, and that's another issue that bothers me .... So
> it's something that we're always aware of. And if we see a
> man coming toward us, and he looks a little bit, you know,
> suspicious, we ... unlock our hands and so we *do* have to

alter our behaviour, which (pause) I feel is so unjust. Like, why should we?

<u>Walking away fast</u>. Rae made the point that, although some lesbians have more social support and privilege than others, the fact remains that all lesbians are equally vulnerable to attack:

R: It does boil down to the lowest common denominator. My head bashes in just the same as anyone else's, you know? I could get beat up just as easily. I've been physically threatened just as many times as, as any other dyke out there.

E: Can you remember any particular instances of being physically threatened?

R: East Cordova. Um, 'gain, walkin' arm in arm with somebody, walking to a bar, and there was three guys ... coming towards us .... They turn around, "Fuckin' dykes," start walkin' the other way, start following us, we walk faster, they walk faster, we walk faster, we start getting a little nervous! (Laughing) You know, and then we end up going into our bar, which was okay, but ... those are the times when I wish I was six feet tall because I would turn around and fucking *fight* ... it's like, why should I have to fuckin' restrict my life 'cause some––Rrrrrrhh! It makes me so angry! You know, *why?* And––and I'm not doing any harm!

E: You're not hurting anyone.

R: You know? I'm expressing affection for my friend, you know.

E: You're showing love.

R: Yeah! ... It bugs me that I don't have those same freedoms! You know, that I *can't* kiss my friend. Or that, if I kiss my friend, I'm risking my neck. In some areas of the city. You know, like, what a load of bunkum!

Both Julie and Rae expressed anger at the injustice of not being able to show their love in public as heterosexuals often do; however, they would likely agree with Delyse's statement that she was not going to put her life in danger simply to make a point.

Active Stance

The strategies under this heading are characterized by the desire to make a statement to others, in addition to the wish to defend oneself.

Fighting Back

There was disagreement among participants as to whether this constellation of strategies represented a more defensive and therefore less useful kind of behaviour than that presented in the "Confronting" category, or whether it designated instead a group of sometimes appropriate or necessary behaviours.

Showing anger. A number of participants commented that, particularly in their earlier days of dealing with heterosexism, they tended to get very angry and to express this anger. For Lee, patience with others grew as she got older and could see others' lack of understanding as human weakness. Delyse felt that she no longer wanted to spend energy getting angry in the way she used to, but that "it was important to ... do that at the time." Thus for some lesbians, showing anger is part of a developmental process and does not retain its earlier levels of intensity.

Denise saw a place both for showing anger and for calmly trying to educate:

> There are times when I'm very militant and very like, "Fuck you" sort of attitude, but there are times where I'm more of an educator ...

Cheryl distinguished between a "helpless anger" that causes one

to judge both oneself and other people unfairly, and a healthy

anger that is directed at "systems." She felt that over time, she

had moved from helpless anger to healthy anger as she became more

aware of her choices in life, along with her rights and

responsibilities. Her journey may perhaps be compared to that of

Julie, who reported becoming angrier about heterosexism now that

she has a clearer idea of what she should not have to put up

with, while at the same time becoming less defensive.

Arguing. A few of the women interviewed mentioned arguing as

a way of trying to convince people to change their minds. In the

following instance, Denise recognized that the person involved

was not about to move from his position:

E: Nobody in Portugal is gay!

D: Exactly, that's what he said! And I said, "Well, how do you
know?!" He said, "Not in *my* family ... I'm old country
Portuguese!" (Laughs) ... and so we just got to a point
where I was going, "Yes, no,"and sort of arguing, and it was
just, it was just no point.

Julie related a similar experience of arguing with a man who

believed homosexuality was a disease:

I argued fiercely with him. He just pissed me right off. And
... I said, "Well, you're obviously not understanding a lot
of things ...." I was quite, you know assertive in the way I
argued and, I mean I felt good about doing that but I still
felt that I got nowhere. Because he was still completely
convinced that I was wrong and he was right. And--I mean I
felt good ... for expressing myself, for standing up for
myself?

For Julie, arguing may sometimes have value even if the act

of arguing does not result in persuading the other person. In

this instance, she saw the argument as a chance to maintain a

stand, and was glad that she had not backed down. She was, in

Delyse's words, "saying [her] own truth," regardless of how it was received.

Intimidating attackers. In general, participants seemed to agree that actively defending oneself was necessary in some situations. Rae remarked that this strategy would be more effective than trying to educate or confront calmly if one were directly attacked. She gave an example of such a situation:

> ... I remember walking down Robson Street one day, with my girlfriend, um, arm in arm, and some stupid guys from a car started revvin' their car, "Fuckin' dykes!" and we both turned around at the same time and approached them like this (hands on hips) and they drove off! (Laughing) And it was such a moment of triumph! I mean it was because we kinda looked around and I felt like nobody would let us get hurt .... And it happens so rarely. But they were like, they were young boys, too, they were sixteen, or whatever. And I guess they didn't expect that.

This strategy was satisfying for Rae and her friend because they were able to show the attackers they were not willing to simply "put up and shut up." She added that it was the "surprise" element that made the tactic so effective. (The viability of this strategy was contingent upon being reasonably assured of physical safety.)

Being violent. Susan resorted to vindictiveness as a way of expressing her profound anger at her peers for treating her as an outcast. In high school, this anger took the form of gang violence. Her fellow gang members were accepting of her, even though they knew she had a girlfriend. Susan implied that they too were outcasts who banded together in a common feeling of alienation from the rest of the school.

S: ... I used to be really calculating, really vicious, really

vindictive. Um, we used to like, basically (pause), stalk
poofers (long pause) that went to the wrong school. The
pretty people, the poor little rich bitches. And we'd wait
and watch, and we'd see what was most important to them. If
it was their hair, they'd have like an "X" shaved into their
head .... And like one eyebrow gone.

E: Wow, that's really tough!

S: It was, yeah ... we weren't nice ... [We did] really (pause)
vicious, awful stuff. Like one girl had an entire wardrobe
of leather clothes, and (pause) like a huge, huge closet,
and we like, snipped all of her clothes in four ... she got
targeted because she was putting [girlfriend] and me down.

Being vindictive. Once out of school and working in a

supervisory position, Susan again found herself the target of

name-calling in a strongly heterosexist work environment. Causing

inconvenience for other workers was her way of getting back at

them:

... at the time I was a shift supervisor, and did all the
scheduling for all the shifts? ... So I'd just be really
nasty with their shifts and their scheduling .... I'd be
short-shifting them, like having more three to eleven and
then in at four .... Union said there had to be eight hours
between shifts, so they'd have eight hours and like, one
minute before they'd have to be back for the next shift and
they lived in like south Surrey!

"No Room in my Life"

This category of strategy involves cutting ties with people

whose attitudes a lesbian finds oppressive, putting relationships

"on hold," and avoiding heterosexist environments. The interview

material indicates it can serve several purposes: making a

statement regarding how much one is willing to put up with,

conserving energy, and creating an environment for oneself that

contains less stress or conflict.

Avoiding traditionally heterosexist institutions. Whereas
Julie was angry that she and her partner did not have at least
the option to marry, Lee said she would avoid the entire
institution of marriage:

> I don't think I wanna marry a woman. I think that's a
> heterosexual, you know, institution and it's ... affiliated
> with religion and I don't see that religion has really done
> a whole lot in terms of promoting, you know ... liberal
> attitudes towards homosexuality, so I would have difficulty
> with ... the whole marriage thing. You know, so I might say,
> well, you know, I'm living with this woman and we're
> together for the rest of our lives.

Being selective about one's work environment. Rae explained
why it was important to her to work in an accepting work
environment:

> ... it's continual, wearing stress, to have to either be
> totally out and defend yourself all the time, or offend
> other people––all the time, and then have to deal with the
> fall-out from that, verbal or non-verbal, subtle or overt.
> ... a decision that I've made is that I don't wanna work
> anywhere where I have to be closeted. That's why I put on my
> resume––I mean, part of it is, 'cause that's relevant work
> experience and part of it is, like, "Fuck you! (Laughing)
> Don't even call me for the interview!"

Rae did add, however, that she had the privilege of being able to
be selective; that is, that she belonged to a social class and
profession wherein she could better afford to be choosy than many
other people.

Avoiding heterosexist people. Susan, who was shift
supervisor at her job, found that there were five or six people
who consistently angered her with disrespectful behaviour and
name-calling. Her solution was to work out a schedule where those
particular people all worked together, while she worked a

separate shift.

Putting relationships "on hold". Delyse found that, while she was developing a stronger sense of herself as a lesbian, she needed to withdraw from her heterosexual friends in order to establish closer ties to the lesbian community. The separation from these friends was not due to conflict, and some of the friendships were resumed later on.

By contrast, a deep and serious rift formed between Lee and her parents, whose denial of a large part of their daughter's identity contributed to the creation of a wall between themselves and her. Lee found the situation so frustrating that she stopped trying to communicate with them:

> ... you know, when B. and I split up, there was absolutely no acknowledgement that I might actually be in pain? You know, that I might actually be (pause) having a bit of a rough time dealing with this one, you know .... I mean, there's just *no* acknowledgement, and ... they *never* ask me about my personal life. And so I never tell them anything. You know, and if they don't wanna know, so they've made it perfectly clear and I've just decided well, you know listen, I don't think there's room in my life for their negativity. So I just don't deal with it any more.

Although she has not completely shut the door, Lee does not hold out much hope that her parents will change their attitudes: "... maybe, when I feel like being frustrated I'll try again and ... who knows?"

Severing ties. Rae acknowledged that it was sometimes necessary simply to sever ties, even with people she cared about:

> With people that you're gonna have some kind of continuing relationship with ... you have to educate people. And you have to give them a chance to absorb information. And then if they don't, then you have to write them off! At some point you have to decide, like, it's not worth it, this

isn't working .... I mean, you hafta decide how much effort
you wanna put into it, and how much you expect of the other
person in terms of educating themselves ....

She added that she tended to want to give people many chances,
since she realized that learning about how people oppress one
another was a process for her, and that it would therefore be
unrealistic to expect people to absorb a lot of information in a
short time.

Proactive Stance

The following strategies and approaches arise not only from
the intention to make a statement to others regarding the limits
of what one will put up with, but from a desire to challenge the
institution of heterosexism, with a view toward its
dismantlement.

"Take Me or Leave Me"

This category could just as well be called "Being Who I Am."
For most of the women, this approach was arrived at only after
passing through the Protective and Active stances of Model 3.
This stance is neither passive nor aggressive; rather, it is
assertive, in that the women insisted on claiming their right to
be fully themselves.

"Setting it out". This strategy has already been discussed
under "Coming out to friends." Both Lee and Delyse spoke of
making sure potential friends knew, from the beginning, about
their sexual orientation. Lee added that she did not want to
spend time cultivating a friendship in a case where she would

later be rejected for being a lesbian:

> ... I don't like setting it out, but I do set it out.
> Because I just don't wanna be bothered with people, um, if
> it's something that they can't deal with. You know, like,
> let's not play these games, let's not go through this
> charade, this is the way I live, this is my life, and if you
> have a problem with it this is a good time to check out. You
> know, before we get going. So ... most people that I meet
> now, I mean (pause), geez, they probably know within about
> ten seconds, or less, that I'm gay.

Similarly in a work situation, both Rae and Denise mentioned
their practice of making sure a potential workplace is an
accepting one before taking a job.

Refusing to hide. All eight participants in one way or
another voiced the necessity of being open about who they are.
This strategy is distinct from being visible in order to raise
awareness: in refusing to hide, lesbians simply go about their
business without making concessions to heterosexist beliefs or
attitudes. Lee verbalized this stance as follows:

> If people are gonna come into my house, it's gonna be pretty
> obvious to them pretty quick, you know, that I sleep with
> women and if they have a problem with it, then, there is the
> door.

Responsibility for heterosexist reactions is placed where it
belongs: on the heterosexuals who find themselves unable to
accept her lesbian identity. She referred to this policy as "not
running away," and gave the following scenario as an example:

> Like I just don't back down ... where it's a situation like,
> um, being invited to somebody's house for dinner. And then
> showing up with, you know, [partner] ... "You know, this is
> my partner and ... I mean, you said 'Bring whoever' and I
> did, and--" "Oh, everybody's heterosexual." "Great! We'll
> have a swell night ...." You know? (Both laugh.) And, and,
> am I still invited? I mean, do I have to stand at the door
> and ask that?

Showing affection in public. Cheryl stressed her conviction

that lesbians have not only a right but a responsibility to show

affection in public, even if they cause a stir, since not to do

so simply perpetuates a situation where such behaviour is

regarded as strange or wrong:

> C: ... we hold hands, and we kiss and do whatever we need to do
> in public, just like everybody else has the right to. Uh,
> like we don't hide at all ... but we're stared at
> continuously. And there's always, like, an uncomfortable
> feeling ... when I first came out, this girlfriend ... that
> I had and I went to a movie theatre. And I wanted to put my
> arm around her. And I said, "Is it legal? Are we gonna get
> kicked outta here, you know?" I didn't even *know* at that
> time, you know? I thought, "Oh my god, oh my god!" And she
> said, "Of course it is!"

> E: But that's ... how seldom you *see* it in society (C. laughs:
> I never see it!), that we, we begin to think that there must
> be something legally wrong with it.

> C: ... I don't see women kissing each other, um ... I don't see
> that! We go to the pool and we're all over each other just
> like teenagers, you know? And, always in the back of my
> mind, I think, What are they gonna say? What are they gonna
> say? Like what can they do, you know? And just the
> embarrassment of being confronted about that. But I ...
> force myself to do it anyway, 'cause I think it's my role to
> educate in some sense ...

Lee expressed the same idea:

> ... often we hold hands as we walk down the streets and
> once in a while ... I sorta feel like, geez, you know, we're
> getting some strange looks in this neighbourhood ....
> Sometimes that throws me a bit but it doesn't make me
> (pause) you know, wanna stop holding her hand .... It's
> sorta like, "If you people have a problem, then you should
> deal with it!"

Rejecting stereotypes. I have already made reference to the

dress and behaviour codes (commented on by several participants)

imposed not only on lesbians by other lesbians, but by

heterosexuals as well, perhaps to maintain an "us and them"

dynamic. In Rae's view, this kind of pigeonholing is destructive:

> R: ... declaring difference is ... nourishing ... I'm not
> participating ... in structures that oppress me ... when I
> say, "Well, *I'm* a lesbian and *I'm* not like that" ... I'm,
> like, stepping out of ... that particular way of seeing
> things, like pushing the bounds of what's possible.
>
> E: The limits of the stereotype.
>
> R: The--yeah! Yeah. Saying, like, "No, there's more
> possibilities than that; *this* is a possibility too!" Um,
> which isn't like, I'm a crusading hero or anything, it's
> just like (pause) making room for myself in a room.

This last sentence of Rae's epitomizes what the "Take Me or Leave
Me" approach is really about: it does not entail "crusading" as
such, but represents instead lesbians' determination to claim the
individuality and humanity that is rightfully theirs.

Confronting

"Confronting" refers to a way of asserting oneself without
defensiveness or hostility in response to a given situation. The
strategies in this category call for individuals acting in a
heterosexist manner to examine their own behaviour. They differ
from those in the "Take Me or Leave Me" category in that they
demand some sort of response from the other party.

"Calling it". In Rae's view, an important part of dealing
with heterosexist remarks or behaviours is to confront, directly,
the person who has made them, and try to make him or her aware of
the effect these words or actions have had:

> ... what do you have invested in the relationship? If you
> want this to be a continuing relationship, you have to put
> up with some silly comments and stuff and *call it*, and say
> like, you know, that's not okay to say that, that hurts me.
> And usually people hear that. You know, people who are some
> continuing part of your life ... will be willing to hear
> that .... Some people, you lose them. And that's hard.

Again, the theme of deciding whether the investment of energy is worthwhile appears. Apparent, too, is the element of risk involved: confronting someone can compel both people toward a "moment of truth" that determines whether or not the relationship will continue.

Speaking out. Rae stated that her approach to heterosexist attitudes and behaviours had "changed from putting up and shutting up to speaking out and taking what comes." The same could probably be said for many of the women in this sample. For Cheryl, "the bottom line is that honesty thing ... and fighting for things, you know? Being outspoken." Marg has reached a similar point in her life:

> ... after years and years, uh, trying to fit in, trying to be someone I wasn't, it's very important just to be (pause) open .... I don't think I have anything to *hide*.

Elsewhere in the interview, she said:

> I put my cards on the table, very, very bluntly .... I think I *have* to now? Because for so long, I didn't.

These participants convey a sense of having to speak out not only to edify others but to assert their own integrity as well.

Getting politically involved. In a sense, all of the women I interviewed are "politically involved" in that all refuse to hide in most situations, and are concerned with educating people and changing an inequitable situation. However, political involvement as a strategy in the "Confronting" category refers to taking specific measures, either individually or in a group, that would be seen publicly to attempt to right a given situation. For instance, Marg wrote a letter to *The Province* in response to a

letter that attacked lesbian and gay parents; Delyse became involved in the union at a former job with a view toward making lesbians and gays more visible in her workplace.

Using "passive resistance". In my original model, I used the words "Refuse to get angry" for this strategy. The words were taken from my interview with Lee, and were meant to capture the essence of the patient yet assertive attitude she described as one of her main ways of dealing with heterosexism. However, during the focus group, she pointed out that the strategy involved more than simply not getting angry; it was active, yet nonconfrontational. She used the phrase "passive resistance" to describe it.

This approach stems from her belief that "people don't learn a lot from aggression," and that it is better to call their actions into question in a way that neither attacks nor invites attack. In her view, a remark like "You know, sometimes I just don't know where your head is at" gives the attacker a chance to reflect on his or her behaviour, while the attacked person avoids stooping to the level of the offending person. In Lee's words, this is a "subtle, gentle type of confrontation." Julie said she often took this stance as well. She saw it as taking back power: "Why should I have to defend myself? It's their problem, not mine."

Using logical explanation. An example of this method of dealing with heterosexism was presented by Julie. She recalled a conversation with a friend's mother, who was scandalized by the

story of two lesbians who dared to kiss in a coffee shop, and were thrown out:

> ... and I defended them, I said, "Well, you know, I think that people should be allowed to do what they wanna do. They're not really hurting anybody" ... and she goes "Well, yeah, yeah. I guess that's true." So she kind of agreed .... And I said, "... you know ... not every man you see on the street is gonna wanna have sex with you," and she goes, "Well yeah, that's true ...." So she was kind of ... able to see that point of view, she wasn't completely (pause) out to lunch? But I felt good that I had spoken up. And I'd done it very softly, like I don't wanna attack people because that puts them on the defensive. And it makes them feel that they're right? And that's the last thing you wanna do! (laughs slightly) when you're dealing with a person like that, because then they become impossible.

Giving an ultimatum. Although Lee's parents have known for many years that she is a lesbian, they still do not accept the fact. For instance, they consistently ignored the existence of her partner and invited only Lee to holiday dinners, while welcoming the spouses of her brother and sister. Lee chose to confront her mother directly, stating that she would not come to family dinners unless her partner was invited as well. This way, she avoided a situation that would only have intensified her anger and alienation. She also put the responsibility where she felt it belonged, implying that it was up to her parents to change their attitudes if they wished to include her in family functions.

Complaining. Marg has complained to school staff about the fact that lesbian and gay issues were ignored by the school. When her daughter was teased about having a lesbian mother, Marg went directly to the principal to point out the school's responsibility to ensure that such behaviour was discouraged and

more respectful attitudes taught.

Complaining was also mentioned by participants as the "ideal" tactic in certain situations, though they did not actually register complaints in those cases. When Marg was verbally assaulted by a homophobic neighbour, she wished she had tape recorded the assault and "sued ... for slander." Likewise, Rae felt that when she was asked questions that seemed designed to elicit her politics during a job interview, she could have successfully lodged a complaint.

Educating

There is much overlap between "Educating" and the previous category, "Confronting"; however, the two are distinct in that the confronting is used to assert oneself in response to specific situations. It often involves educating, but education is not necessarily the main goal. When Marg complained to the principal about her daughter getting teased, for instance, she was primarily concerned about the welfare of her child, and secondarily with conveying to the principal why she found such teasing unacceptable.

In Models 1 and 3, I conceptualized "Educating" as a more "evolved" approach. This decision was based on the comments of several of the women. Delyse, for example, described herself as "less reactive"--because less fearful--than before, and "more ... tolerant and understanding and wanting to educate people." Julie spoke of a similar change:

> ... I went through a period where I was *very*, very
> argumentative and I ... didn't really think about the other

> person, that I may be attacking them or (pause) making them feel uncomfortable, putting them on the defensive. I think [now] I put more thought into that? And that's reflected in the way I deal with the issue. Like I try to be as rational as I can and I ... try to inform people if I'm coming from a position where I have information or knowledge or understanding that I feel that they don't have.

Educating seems to involve increased awareness of, and patience regarding, other people's process of "unlearning" heterosexism. More emphasis is placed on seeing the other person's point of view and trying to understand it.

     Being visible. The purpose of this strategy is not only to claim one's right to be oneself but to raise the awareness of others. Cheryl acknowledged that being visible was not always easy, but insisted it was necessary in order to get an important message across to those around her:

> C: ... the minute you do something like [show affection in public], you *are* the centre of attention. Like, you really call attention to yourself .... You know, so people stare at you *all the time* ...
>
> E: Yeah, you're making a big statement when you're not—
>
> C: —a big statement!
>
> E: —wanting to (pause), I mean, well, in a way you're wanting to, but that's not the point.
>
> C: Yeah! Yeah, in a way we do it (pause), um, that isn't the point. The point is (pause) that we are who we are. But there is a big statement in that, though. You know, one that we're not afraid to make.

Making a big statement *is* the point and yet it is *not* the point. The paradox arises from the fact that claiming one's rights and educating the public are inseparable. While Cheryl and her partner may simply want to be who they are, they cannot do so without having an impact on others.

Being a role model. Several of the women interviewed remarked that because they had had no role models, they had not realized that being a lesbian was a possible lifestyle, and a legitimate one. Through volunteering with a lesbian and gay youth group, Marg hoped to provide information and encouragement:

> ... talking and trying to educate, like, um, volunteering, and being around gay and lesbian youth is very important. To let them know that there are ways, you know, that you can grow to be a happy adult is very important. It's very important to stress that. I wish (pause) I'da had this, when I was a kid.

Denise has also provided education and guidance to young people regarding sexual orientation issues. On one occasion, a young woman she had worked with wrote her asking for advice:

> ... she's taking women's studies and so she's like, "I *hate* men!" and "What does this mean?" and ... "I don't know whether I can live without men, but ... all the guys I know are jerks" and this stuff! And so ... I just wrote her and said, you know, "Just because you're a lesbian doesn't necessarily mean you hate men .... And, you know, just because you're a feminist or you believe in women's rights doesn't necessarily make you a lesbian either!" .... I said, you know like, "Don't worry about it! Like, just do what you feel is right for yourself. Don't pressure yourself, take your time (laughing a bit), you know? There's no rush." So that was really cool too ... when I ... started coming out ... I didn't really have anybody to talk to about it. I just kind of dealt with it somehow.

Clearly, a major motivating factor in these women's desire to educate is the recollection of their feelings of confusion or aloneness when discovering their own sexual identities; they now want to give to others the information and support they feel they should have received.

Correcting misconceptions. A significant part of educating involves "re-educating," or undoing the harm that has been perpetuated by common myths or misunderstandings about lesbians. Julie gave an example of attempting to correct the belief that lesbians are more "sexual" than heterosexual women, and that they compulsively and indiscriminately make sexual advances toward other women:

> ... when that girl [co-worker, the day the interview took place] said that she was gonna stop seeing her massage therapist because she found out she was a lesbian, I stood up for, you know, for that. Like I countered what she was saying very calmly and ... I said, "Well, you know, she's a professional. I mean I doubt very much that she'd be making passes at every woman who, you know, happens to be on her massage table ...."

Examples given by other women show that it is also sometimes possible to give correct information in a succinct but edifying reply, such as when Susan responded to the exclamation, "Oh my god, are you in therapy?!" with "Well yeah, how do you think I got to where I am?" Similarly, when Marg's daughter was called a "dyke" by her classmates, Marg advised her to: "Tell 'em! You got it wrong! My *mom's* a lesbian, not me!"

Answering people's questions. When Marg was approached by an man in his seventies who pointed to her "Damned lesbian" shirt and asked, "You're not one of those, are you?" she took the question seriously:

> M: Like he's, like pointing at the back of my shirt. And I said, "Yeah I am!" and ... we talked for about fifteen, twenty minutes, and he asked me all kinds of questions, and some of them were personal and some of them, they were personal but they weren't? Like, you know ... "Do you hate

men?" and um, "Why, will you ever be intimate with a man again?" and "Do you find men attractive?" and just these kinds of questions.

E: Yeah, pretty personal questions for a total stranger to ask you.

M: Yeah, but I think in a way he needed to? Because he--I'm sure he went home and he probably said, you know, "Honey, I, I--" you know, like, to his wife--

E: --"I met a lesbian!"

M: Yeah! And ... he probably never met one--that he *knew* of! ... I didn't feel threatened at all. So that was kind of interesting. I enjoyed that.

This example suggests that what might normally be perceived as an insult can also be seen as an opportunity to educate.

Drawing parallels. A few participants gave instances of how they drew analogies to make their point, as Marg did in explaining to her mother that heterosexuals have more freedom than homosexuals do:

And she couldn't understand that! And I said, "Well, *you* can hold dad's hand, and not worry about being beat up, or being killed!"

Denise drew parallels to explain to a homophobic co-worker that discrimination against someone for being a lesbian was fundamentally the same as discrimination with regard to race or religion:

... we talked a lot and he had been through a lot with his girlfriend at the time about ... her parents not accepting him ... and I just said, "You know, like it happens in different ways, like where you're not accepted by different parents, and, because of religion, or whatever! And it's the same thing ...."

As a result of Denise's influence, this man did learn to examine his previously unquestioned heterosexist attitudes.

Giving workshops. In her work with youth, Denise has
conducted workshops in homophobia and heterosexism for people of
all sexual orientations. These workshops included a film about
violence toward gays and lesbians, small group exercises, role
play, and discussion of such topics as stereotypes, the
relationship between heterosexism and other "isms," and how to be
supportive of lesbian and gay people. She stressed the need to be
patient and realistic regarding how much a single workshop could
accomplish:

> You know, you don't expect someone to be, like, really
> homophobic and become, um, a supportive person, in like a
> day workshop or even a month of knowing you, but if they can
> move from, you know, totally homophobic to accepting (pause)
> and then, after a couple of years, hopefully to being, you
> know, supportive ...

Thus Denise acknowledged the typically slow process by which
people begin to question the tenets of a primarily heterosexist
society.

Educating children. Both mothers in this sample emphasized
the importance of teaching their children, and *all* children,
about alternate families and lifestyles. Cheryl underlined that
it is not possible for a lesbian mother to teach her children
self-acceptance if she herself is in the closet. Marg clearly
felt the same way, even though being out meant her daughter
getting teased at school:

> ... R. will come home and she'll be crying because some kid
> has teased her about me being a lesbian, and I said "Well,
> would you rather me be who I'm not? Just so that you're
> safe? You know, and I mean, I'm sorry that people tease
> you ...." I hug her and I try to be as sympathetic as I can,
> and understanding but (pause) I think that she, she
> understands it and she said, "No, it's better that you can

> be who you are ...." That's a lot to take. For a ten-year-
> old. I think I would be totally happy if (pause) they were
> teaching kids at school that there are other lifestyles.
> That there are other ways, because ... where are these kids
> learning this? Where are these kids learning to call my
> daughter a dyke because *I* am?

This kind of education means more than just teaching children
about alternate lifestyles, however; it means teaching them about
the discrepancy between the way things should be and the way they
are, and therefore about oppression:

> ... when I came out to R., she just happened to be reading
> about phobias! And it worked out great, 'cause she was
> reading about different phobias, and fear of the dark, and
> spiders, and, and they all had names, and I said, "Well
> here's another one, it's called 'homophobia.' It's fear of
> gay and lesbian people. And because of this, sometimes
> people could want to hurt me because I'm a lesbian. And for
> that reason, we have to be careful."

Essentially, Cheryl noted, for a lesbian mother a major part
of dealing with heterosexism is attempting to undo the negative
programming about homosexuality their children receive in public.
For instance, in her household, in place of a Father's Day
celebration is a day to honour Cheryl's partner and other parent
to the children, J. When the children told their teacher that
they celebrated J.'s Day instead of Father's Day, the teacher's
automatic response was, "Do you have an uncle? Do you have a
grandpa?"

> ... when they can't have J.'s Day in school, you come home,
> and you try to (pause) make up for that. You try to say that
> [the people at school] are wrong, and that they just don't
> understand, and they don't wanna understand, and it's
> unfortunate, and you try to discuss all that with your kids.

According to Cheryl, the key to cultivating open minds in one's
children is to be as open and honest as possible with them, and

to be willing to discuss with them any topic they are curious
about:

> You know, we talk about what sexual orientation--
> preference, whatever you wanna call it--*they* are. Like, we
> talk about that all the time! And ... like I have one
> daughter who says she's a lesbian, one daughter who, who
> fluctuates. One day she's straight, one day she's bisexual,
> one day she's a lesbian, and my son is like, adamantly
> straight .... they have choices, you know? What happens when
> they hit thirteen, and they can't--they can't say that, if
> they *are* lesbians? You know? Man! Oh!

Both Cheryl and Marg implied that there was no sense in
pretending to one's children that problems like oppression,
violence, and disease do not exist. Doing so would only teach
them a false view of life, and make them less prepared to deal
with life's hard blows.

Showing one's normality. Part of educating the public, as
both Marg and Cheryl observed, was showing people that lesbians
are basically no different from anyone else, and that their
families are like anyone else's family. Only by being visible can
they do this:

> M: ... it's very important that people see me. And know that I
> have a daughter in "Guides" and a son in "Beavers," and that
> I do go grocery shopping.

> ------

> C: ... I think it's my role to educate in some sense, you know?
> ... just to show that we're like a normal family. We take
> our three kids everywhere we go and, you know, we go family
> swimming, we go here, we go there, and we go on picnics, we
> go camping together, all that stuff!

Later during the interview, Cheryl added:

> ... it's about *normalizing* it .... It *is* normal for *me*. And
> average for me. But it isn't for my next-door neighbours.
> You know, so unless they get a chance to be exposed to it,
> other than, like seeing the Gay Pride [parade] on T.V. ....

I think ... sometimes those kind of formalized protests and
marches and rallies can be (pause), um, detrimental ...
[people don't get] a look at average C. and J. and their
three kids.

Part III: Creating a Nonheterosexist Society

Although no interview questions specifically addressed the

subject of goals, many of the interviewees put forth opinions as

to the kind of society they would like to live in. Because these

views seemed to represent an ideal "endpoint" toward which they

were ultimately striving, I included them in Model 1 as goals

placed at the end of a more or less linear evolution of

approaches. During the focus group, most of the women thought

these goals belonged in the centre of a circular model, so this

is how they appear in Models 2 and 3. They represent changes the

participants believed *society as a whole,* including the lesbian

and gay communities, should be trying to achieve. As such, they

inform the women's various ways of dealing with heterosexism.

Some women felt that the activities associated with these goals

would not only help to dismantle heterosexism, but would

contribute to a non-oppressive societal structure generally.

There were differing opinions amongst group members as to

whether these goals could be attained within their lifetime—and

in fact, whether they would ever be attained. However, all group

members agreed that they were worth working toward.

Better Education of Children

This issue was stressed particularly by the lesbian mothers

in the study as necessary for effecting a social change wherein

people could freely express any sexual orientation without being discriminated against. Although Marg and Cheryl are contributing to the "re-education" of their own children and of other young people they come in contact with, they both observed that schools need to take responsibility for providing correct information about sexuality, as well as about alternate families and lifestyles.

Equal Treatment in the Media

Marg talked about the movie "Serving in Silence: The Greta Cammermeyer Story," the true story of a respected army colonel who was fired from the U.S. armed forces because she was a lesbian:

> And I sat and I watched and I watched and [Cammermeyer and her partner] *kissed*, and I thought, "Thank god they really do!" You know, the whole time they were like this! (as if to touch another person lightly) They were lovers, and they touched like this! ... if this was a guy and girl in love, they'd be showing them in *bed* having *sex*. And I mean, two lesbians, oh god forbid they actually touch each other ... they had to sacrifice other things to get their point across. And that's where I get very angry and frustrated.

Cheryl's point about television coverage of the Gay Pride Parade is another example of unfair treatment by the media, in the form of misrepresentation; that is, the media favours the stereotypical and the flamboyant, such as the "Dykes on Bikes" ("Like, we're all a buncha biker chicks in leather!" Cheryl joked), and overlooks ordinary lesbians and gays and their families. As a result, the public is given a distorted picture of who lesbian and gay people are.

Full Legal Rights

The legal aspect of heterosexism was brought up by both Julie and Cheryl. Julie made reference to not having the option to marry, and to efforts of various politicians and religious leaders to try to restrict the rights of gays and lesbians. Both women brought up the widespread lack of same-sex benefits in the workplace. Chiefly, both underscored the point that lesbians and gay men should have the same legal rights that everyone else has.

Public Role Models

Marg spoke of the feeling of affirmation she experienced when well-known singers like Melissa Etheridge and K.D. Laing came out of the closet:

> I never had any role models .... I didn't until I came out ... And when I first came out, knowing K.D. Laing was a lesbian and knowing her songs were written about other women, it was like, incredible! It was this total, new freedom to know that ... there was a woman out there writing songs to other women ....

In general, the more lesbians start seeing themselves reflected in aspects of mainstream culture, the more visible and hence the more validated they feel.

New Family Structures

Delyse noted that the lesbian community has few intergenerational connections. She felt this problem existed partly because many lesbians were "reactive to" the heterosexual model of the family. In other words, since a heterosexual model is held up as the only model, lesbians tend to avoid it:

> That's one way in which heterosexism and homophobia affect

us is, I think, in how we organize our relationships, how we organize our ... family structure .... We only have that heterosexual model and so it's like we flounder about, right? ... trying to *develop*, you know, a structure in our community which I think we actually need, and which we lack a great deal of.

Delyse also touched on how this problem affected her own life:

... so *I've* been thinking, you know, about that, and how to get (pause) children in my life. I guess, you know, and ... (pause, then thoughtfully:) Yeah .... And you know, we *need*, uh, *elders* to learn from too.

At the same time that the public needs to become more accepting of lesbians, lesbians may need to be less reactive to the heterosexual lifestyle in order to embrace what is enriching about such aspects of it as intergenerational contact.

Exploration of Sexuality

Thinking about her young friend who was unsure about her sexual orientation, Denise suggested that sexual exploration be more generally encouraged:

... I think it's better if more people *did*, like, not necessarily go to sleep with a member of the same sex or anything but if they *questioned*, like if they actually sat down and said, "Wow! What would it be like? Could--does this fit me? Yes or no?" Then, like I think the world would be a better place.

This point ties in with the views of Marg and Cheryl regarding the education of young people. The knowledge that homosexuality is a legitimate choice would, if imparted early, prevent much fear and confusion for countless people later on.

Greater Numbers of Out Lesbian and Gay People

Cheryl stressed that major change cannot not take place unless greater numbers of lesbian and gay people come out:

... it's not going to change unless there are a hell of a

131

lot more ... lesbians who are willing to go out and kiss their lovers at Safeway.

She added that change takes place on an individual level, and that therefore the choices that any gay or lesbian person makes affect society as a whole:

C: You know, but if you have lesbians who won't tell their *kids* that they're lesbians .... Like (sighs heavily) ...

E: It's not like we need more than ten percent to, to bring people around, but ... fully that ten percent have to be open about who they are.

C: That's the *first* step! But that would be a *huge* step! If every lesbian woke up and said, "Today I'm going to be, um, as lesbian as I can!" ... or "Today I'm gonna be who I am, and who I am is kissing my wife!" You know? *That* will change things!

E: Just like, you know it's like they say if every--if every gay and lesbian suddenly turned purple or something, you know then, everybody else could see how many of us there were.

C: Yeah ... but it's not even like, making a big statement like turning purple .... It's, like, going to the grocery store, and buying your groceries together ... and making people ... aware that you are together. Like it's going to the swimming pool, it's enrolling your kids in school and showing up there, on Parent Day, both of you. You know, it's those normal, average things.

"Acceptance" Rather than "Tolerance"

While lesbian and gay people themselves must surely start to take more responsibility in the way that Cheryl describes, heterosexual people also need to take more responsibility: to begin with, they need to become more aware of the double standards regarding the privileges they have that gays and lesbians lack. Marg stressed that these double standards are reflected in certain attitudes toward lesbian and gay people, such as when heterosexuals pride themselves on being "tolerant":

> ... my mom and I have talked a lot and we've talked about tolerance and, and I, you know, I say, "I don't *want* tolerance. You know, I don't tolerate you! I *accept* you, right?" ... so I think I've opened my mom's eyes a lot.

As can be seen in the following excerpt of my conversation with Rae, "acceptance rather than tolerance" is a concept that lesbians themselves, having been raised in a predominantly heterosexist society, can easily lose sight of:

> R: ... [it] isn't like, I'm a crusading hero or anything, it's just like (pause) making room for myself in a room.

> E: Mm-hm. (Yeah!) And educating other people, about tolerance.

> R: Acceptance is what I want them to do!

> E: Yeah. Mm-hm. Yeah.

> R: (Pause. Then quietly:) I tolerate mosquitoes.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I will discuss both the theoretical and the practical significance of this study. I will then make some suggestions regarding future research in areas related to my own research topic. The chapter will conclude with a brief summary of my findings.

Significance of the Study

Theoretical Significance

Some of the participants' earlier strategies in dealing with heterosexism coincide with the early stages of the lesbian and gay identity development models put forth by various theorists (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989). For instance, some of the women gave evidence of what Troiden calls "stigma evasion strategies," such as escape through drugs or alcohol, overworking, self-isolation, denial, and defining oneself as bisexual. However, a paradigm like Troiden's does not seem to fit, overall, for these women. Troiden considers "group alignment" and acceptance of a homosexual identity to be elements of "stigma evasion," whereas in my research, there was no evidence beyond the "Hiding" and "Preparing to Come Out" phases that participants tried to evade their lesbian identities. In fact, finding lesbians friends was seen as a positive step toward strengthening their lesbian identities. And nowhere in any of the models to date is there mention of how lesbians and gay men deal

with anger at being oppressed, how they feel about their oppressors and how they respond to them, or how they learn to heal from the wounds inflicted by heterosexism.

A more appropriate paradigm appears to be Neisen's (1993) notion of "cultural victimization." In Neisen's scheme, coming out is similar to the abuse victim's statement "I have been abused," in that it brings truth to the fore and sets in motion the processes of establishing perpetrator responsibility (thereby freeing oneself from guilt and self-blame) and reclaiming personal power. Neisen asserts that the damage done to lesbian and gay people is partly due to overt kinds of discrimination, such as denying lesbians and gays the right to marry, and partly to more subtle but no less powerful kinds of oppression, such as perpetuating the invisibility of lesbians and gay men--for example, by excluding lesbian and gay couples from television programs and advertising.

Neisen's paradigm seems confirmed, to a large extent, by the experiences of the women in this study. All had experienced overt discrimination, such as name-calling, the threat of physical attack, having their relationships ignored, and not being allowed to marry. They also cited subtler kinds of oppression. For instance, several of the participants mentioned not knowing that living as a lesbian was a valid option. Most did not see themselves reflected in songs, movies, television, or people they met, and the only references to lesbians they heard were typically derogatory ones. The process they underwent was clearly

one of recognizing "cultural victimization" and learning to respond to it in healthy ways.

Rich (1980) sets the cultural victimization of lesbians in a broader framework, seeing it as an aspect of sexism. In her view, lesbians and heterosexual women alike are caught in a male-dominated system wherein "compulsory heterosexuality" is demanded in exchange for emotional and economic security. One way in which heterosexuality is "enforced," according to Rich, is by "the rendering invisible of the lesbian possibility" (p. 19); another is by glorifying heterosexual romance. Experience of both these factors was mentioned by study participants. Also, several participants connected heterosexism to sexism, or related it to other "isms." Hence, most participants saw heterosexism as a complex institution whose roots were intertwined with those of other forms of oppression.

Originally, I had intended to research how lesbians "cope" with heterosexism. I was guided by Lykes' (1983) definition of coping as the "effort to master conditions of threat, harm, or challenge ..." (p. 84). However, since many of the women's approaches reflect attempts not just to master these conditions but to *"e-radicate"* them (pull out their roots), I found the term inappropriate. For instance, while Neisen (1993) urges lesbian and gay people to become visible in order to "reclaim personal power lost living in a heterosexist culture" (p. 61), most participants in this study--through such activities as volunteering with youth groups, giving workshops, and writing

letters to newspapers—go far beyond simply being visible. As such, they not only take back personal power, but also attempt to help bring about a shift in the fundamental imbalance of power.

The women in my study have contributed not merely ways of adjusting to an unjust state of affairs, but ways of asserting a lesbian identity that challenge the institution of heterosexism itself. According to Cass' (1979) often-cited model of homosexual identity formation, a lesbian who reaches the final, "identity synthesis" stage "is now able to integrate [her] homosexual identity with all other aspects of self" (p. 235). The model I developed with the participant-collaborators goes further by emphasizing the role of self in society: it includes such activist approaches as confronting and educating as a way of asserting one's lesbian identity in a society that generally rejects lesbians. In other words, it is concerned with societal change, such that models like itself would become obsolete.

Implications for Counselling

Interestingly, of these eight women who had "reached a comfortable acceptance of their lesbian identity," only one mentioned therapy (though in a positive light), and only in passing. Another made reference to working through personal issues, such as internalized homophobia, in order to deal effectively with heterosexism. Perhaps one implication is that lesbians are not apt to rely on therapy as their only means of support. Among this sample, many other types of support were mentioned. Also, the focus of this study was on dealing with the

societal problem of heterosexism rather than with its psychological effects in particular; therefore the topic of counselling may not have been directly relevant in interviews.

Nevertheless, many factors in the data point to ways that therapy could be useful. For instance, several women commented that the growing knowledge that they had choices helped them to assert who they were. In therapy, clients can be helped to explore a full range of options. For instance, when in the early stages of thinking about their sexual orientation, clients can be reminded that they have time to decide, and need not act on same-sex feelings unless they want to or are ready (Gonsiorek, 1988). At the same time, asserting a lesbian identity can be presented as a valid, positive choice.

Also indicated by the data was a lack of the kind of information that made choices possible. Part of the therapist's role is to provide this information, in the form of facts, reading and video lists, and community resources (Browning, 1987; Kus, 1990). Exploration of stereotypes a client holds may also be necessary, along with discussion of other myths about lesbian and gay people (Hanley-Hackenbruck, 1988a; Sophie, 1987). At this stage, such books as Eichberg's *Coming Out: An Act of Love* (1990), Clark's *Loving Someone Gay* (1989), and Borhek's *Coming Out to Parents* (1993) may also be appropriate.

Crucial to counselling lesbians is acknowledgement of the ways that lesbians are made invisible, minimized, economically penalized, and in other ways oppressed. Discussion of these

factors is not meant to discourage, but to shift the blame from self to society (Browning, 1987). Women can be helped to see how they have internalized society's negative attitudes, and in many cases, family attitudes (Gonsiorek, 1988; Neisen, 1993; Sophie, 1987). Feelings of shame can be traced back to their origins. Therapists may need to point out that shame is not something we are born with, but comes from how we have been treated (Kaufman, 1989; Miller, 1994), both as individuals and as members of a particular group.

In addition, data from this study show that heterosexism has some positive "by-products," such as close bonds with supportive people, a "tougher skin," and increased empathy for people of other oppressed groups. As Ritter and O'Neill (1989) suggest, counsellors can reframe the experience of being homosexual in a heterosexist society as a "gift" that brings unique insight into loss and injustice.

The results of this study indicate that when a lesbian comes out, more and different support from that provided by just the therapist is important. Other lesbians can be role models for the coming out lesbian, and can greatly decrease her sense of isolation (Kus, 1990; Savin-Williams, 1990). Counsellors should be able to point women toward coming out groups, social and recreational groups, lesbian and gay community centres, dancing places, and advocacy groups. At minimum, a number for the lesbian and gay community's telephone information line can be provided, along with tabloids such as Vancouver's *Angles* and *Xtra West*,

which contain many more resources.

Corroborating statements by Lewis (1984) and Ritter and O'Neill (1989), the women in this study gave evidence that emotional release is central to dealing with heterosexism. Therapists can help to validate grief over loss or abandonment; frustration and discouragement over work situations, legal struggles, or relationships with those who do not accept their sexual orientation; anger and sometimes rage at society for being the way it is; and specific anger at rejecting or hostile people, or unfair situations.

My research results also show that dealing with heterosexism is often wearing: much energy goes into making decisions, trying to anticipate negative reactions to disclosure of sexual orientation, explaining oneself (or deciding not to), and dealing with one's emotions. Sometimes, clients may feel it is up to them to redress all wrongs. They may find it helpful to be reminded that they alone are not responsible for the state of society, and that they have the right to save energy and choose their battles carefully.

Many issues raised by participants point to the role of decision-making in helping lesbians to deal with heterosexism. Major decisions may include whether to leave a male partner, whether to be more "out," whether to confront one's friends or relatives about their attitudes, whether to sever ties with unsupportive people or put relationships with such people on hold, whether to come out at work, and whether to move to an area

where one expects to find more support. A therapist can assist clients to weigh gains and losses and to determine what they want or need most. Where clients are preparing for an important confrontation, role play or Gestalt two-chair techniques can be helpful (Sophie, 1987).

Emerging clearly from this study is the crucial role of education in dealing with heterosexism. Through discussion, rehearsal, and reading material, counsellors can empower lesbians to educate those they come in conflict with. As interview excerpts show, the ability to correct misconceptions about homosexuality effectively can be extremely valuable. Participants provided support for Borhek's (1990) belief that a willingness to see other points of view is key in increasing the other party's receptiveness.

One way lesbians have healed from the damage done by heterosexism is to become role models for others, including lesbian and gay youth. This way, they can provide the leadership and knowledge they once sought themselves. Some lesbians may choose to become involved in social advocacy, such as putting on workshops or engaging in political lobbying. Such actions serve to increase visibility and replace misinformation with truth; they are also likely to enhance lesbians' self-worth.

Counsellors need to provide "therapy" not just to clients dealing with the fall-out from heterosexism, but to a society that suffers from ignorance and prejudice. The first step is to educate ourselves. Professionals who say they treat lesbian or

gay clients no differently than anyone else may be well-meaning, but they lack awareness of the unique stresses arising from heterosexism. While it is important that counsellors be nonjudgmental, they should also understand the dynamics of this institutionalized prejudice and the kinds of strategies that counter it, including those that ultimately work toward its dismantlement.

Lesbian and gay issues should be a part of counsellor education (Iasenza, 1989; Sang, 1989); to ignore such issues is to ignore the needs of at least 10% of the population (Fassinger, 1991; Gonsiorek, 1988). Videos, books, and workshops can all play a role, as can the use of speakers to relate personal experiences, give information and answer questions. Ideally, the knowledged gained would enable counsellors to become social activists themselves. Because they are seen as being in the vanguard of knowledge about social sciences and human relationships (along with psychologists, social workers, teachers, and religious leaders), counsellors are in a unique position to educate the public.

Not surprisingly, this study yields evidence of heterosexist attitudes among children and teenagers as well as among adults. Because these attitudes have such harmful consequences, it is up to people in helping professions to communicate clearly the damage done by this form of oppression. Only then will teachers and parents be motivated to provide correct information for youth on sexuality and alternate lifestyles, and to promote acceptance

of difference. Education of this population is pivotal to building a nonheterosexist society.

Recommendations for Future Research

First, a study similar to mine, but with lesbians of different age groups, might serve to further test my grounded theory that over time, lesbians evolve strategies that are more effective than the ones they used previously. It should be noted, though, that findings might be confounded by historical effects; in that sense, a longitudinal study would be preferable. However, research into the effects of heterosexism on youth and on older lesbians would lead to knowledge regarding the special concerns of these age groups.

Certain issues that came up within this study but could not be fully explored bear further looking into, such as how heterosexism affects lesbians in work situations, lesbian couples, and lesbian mothers--both biological and nonbiological-- and their children. In addition, studying the effects of heterosexism on lesbian communities, by looking at intra- community dynamics, would likely bring to light how aspects of heterosexism become replicated in these communities. The phenomenon of "political correctness," for example, invites more exploration.

Research into heterosexism within any of the institutions mentioned by participants in this study, such as the law, the media, science and medicine, and religion, would yield rich

information. Also, though not brought up by interviewees, heterosexism in academia requires further investigation.

As mentioned, several participants made references to a link between heterosexism and sexism. This connection could be further examined: for instance, one could conduct a study similar to mine but include a question such as, "To what extent do you think your experience as a female in this society has influenced the way you deal with heterosexism?" Alternatively, the questions I used in my study could be asked of an all-male sample, so that responses to this form of oppression could be compared across gender.

As Betz and Fitzgerald (1993) note, more research needs to be done on "multiple oppression"; for instance, on the needs of lesbians from racial or religious minorities, or physically challenged groups. How do lesbian members of visible minority groups or religious groups experience lesbian communities? How do heterosexual people from these groups perceive lesbians? Is there a place for bisexual women or transgendered lesbians in lesbian communities? How are lesbian communities experienced by people from these groups?

Studying the relationship between ways of dealing with heterosexism and lesbians' family backgrounds, influential figures in childhood, or personality types might contribute to answering the question of why individual lesbians choose the strategies they do. Exploring a connection between how lesbians deal with heterosexism and how they deal with other types of adversity could shed light on why lesbians develop their

particular coping and strategizing styles, and how they put their personal strengths to use.

Investigation into how much information about homosexuality and heterosexism certain segments of the general public have could be edifying: for instance, police, teachers, parents, or high school students. Results could be compared with those of children of lesbian or gay parents. And finally, there has yet to be a "before and after" quantitative study, using a homophobia or heterosexism scale, on the effects of workshops designed to reduce heterosexist attitudes.

Summary

This study outlines the nature of the problem of heterosexism, and presents a theory to explain how lesbians deal with it. The eight participants' strategies for dealing with heterosexism show both diversity and resourcefulness in approaches. Early stages of grappling with the problem could be labelled "coping," in that the women typically experienced fear, confusion, isolation, or rejection, and their behaviours were initially related to psychological survival. Later periods seem, generally, to move beyond "coping" to confronting, educating, a "take me or leave me" stance, or a combination of all three. However, participants acknowledged that they drew on different strategies depending on the situation.

Other findings were:

1) the emphasis on the *energy* required to deal with

heterosexism on a daily basis

2) the often-mentioned *fear for physical safety*

3) the *changing role of anger*: some women reported being less angry now than before, while other women's anger increased as their awareness increased, sometimes taking the form of rage; also, some women who previously took anger out on themselves or those around them later directed anger at "systems"

4) an *understanding of the other* that seemed to develop over time, and to contribute to effectively countering heterosexist beliefs or attitudes

5) an increased *awareness of choices*, and of the right to live one's life in one's own way.

6) a connection between increased effectiveness in dealing with heterosexism and becoming more *comfortable with oneself*.

I hope the findings of this study will help to illuminate the dynamics of this complex, deeply-rooted prejudice. Counsellors can help lesbians to use "hyperawareness"—as one participant called insight into oppression through experience—to recognize when they may be taking over the oppressor's role and victimizing themselves. When a growing sense of injustice is accompanied by an increasing sense of self-entitlement and self-worth, helpless anger becomes healthy anger, and one's ways of dealing with heterosexism become more powerful.

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Orienting Statement

Procedures:

"Before we start, I will explain to you the procedures that I am required to follow.

"I am taping this interview so that I can listen to it again and transcribe it. No one else will listen to this tape, and I will erase it after I have finished transcribing it. I'll destroy the transcription once I have completed this study. If you would like to refer to yourself or others with assumed names, that's fine. But if you choose not to do that, I will change the names myself to ensure confidentiality.

"If at any time during the interview you decide you do not want to continue, let me know and I will stop the interview.

"Do you have any questions to ask me before we start?"

Introduction:

"I am doing this study in order to find out how lesbians cope with heterosexism. By "heterosexism," I mean the attitude that heterosexuality is superior to other sexual orientations as a way of being and of loving others. In asking lesbians how they deal with negative attitudes toward them, I hope to build a theory that reflects what they tell me about it. I'm interested in both what aspects of it lesbians have in common and what is different about it for each woman."

Interview Guide 1 (subject to revision)

1) When you hear me use the word "heterosexism," I'm wondering what meaning you attach to it.

2a) Could you tell me about any instances of heterosexism / (preferred term) you personally have experienced in your life?

b) How were you affected by that?

c) How did you cope with the situation?

d) What was the result of your saying / doing that?

(Repeat 2a, b, c, and d as many times as necessary)

3) When you think about the various ways in which you've coped with heterosexism / (preferred term), do any of them strike you as more effective than others? (Probe: Why?)

4) Now that you reflect on the ways you've dealt with heterosexism / (preferred term), I'm wondering how those ways of coping fit in with your total picture of yourself as a lesbian.

5) Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experiences, thoughts, or feelings about heterosexism / (preferred term)?

Interview Guide 2 (subject to revision)

1) When you hear me use the word "heterosexism," I'm wondering what meaning you attach to it.

2a) Could you tell me about any instances of heterosexism / (preferred term) you personally have experienced in your life?

 b) How were you affected by that?

 c) How did you cope with the situation?

 d) What was the result of your saying / doing that?

(Repeat 2a, b, c, and d as many times as necessary)

3) When you think about the various ways in which you've coped with heterosexism / (preferred term), do any of them strike you as more effective than others? (Probe: Why?)

4) Do you think your way of coping has changed over time?

5) Now that you reflect on the ways you've dealt with heterosexism / (preferred term), I'm wondering how those ways of coping fit in with your total picture of yourself.

6) Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experiences, thoughts, or feelings about heterosexism / (preferred term)?