

AMAZING GRACE(S):  
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF LESBIAN HELPING PROFESSIONALS

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

Department of Educational Studies

We accept this thesis as conforming  
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

January 1999

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### Abstract

This feminist qualitative study was undertaken to explore the lived experience of lesbian helping professionals. The methodology consisted of life history interviews and a focus group with women who self-identified as lesbian and had education and work experience in nursing, teaching, social work and counseling. Networking sampling resulted in six white lesbian participants between the ages of 37 and 47.

As part of claiming their lesbian identity these women asked to have their real names revealed. Stories of gender socialization indicate traditional family structures. Resistance to gender roles and qualities of independence/leadership are seen in girlhood along with remembering of early same-sex attraction. Limited career options for women are noted in teenage years as is a concern for social justice and a valuing of caring for others.

Journeys towards lesbian awareness span the coming out ages of 18 to 38. Two women had been married and bore children within their heterosexual unions. Gender embodied experiences included pregnancy before marriage, abortion decision-making, acquaintance rape, and the isolation of motherhood. Four women revealed feminism and therapy as the contexts for the recognition of their lesbian desires in adulthood. The intrapsychic processes surrounding lesbian-ness were labeled internal compartmentalization and the social separation and secrecy about lesbian identity was termed external compartmentalization. Experiences of discrimination, harassment and other negative reactions were documented as well as stories of support.

Ethics and boundaries were issues which concerned these lesbians, who in closeted times could not discuss their dilemmas openly. Some benefits of lesbian-ness in professional careers include using their identity to educate others about diversity, disrupting the stereotypes, and confronting discrimination.

Implications for helping professional education include increased lesbians and allies among faculty committed to creating anti-heterosexist curricula. Lesbians are oppressed by sexism and heterosexism, so education is needed about the complexity of identity and the interlocking impact of multiple oppressions in capitalist patriarchal social structures. The Appendices contain an interactive educational tool called A Sociometry of Oppressions.

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### Acknowledgments

A mentor for my feminism, Dr. Shauna Butterwick has been one of my instructor/professors for the past five years. As my advisor for this project I could not have found a more supportive, nurturing and patient ally. She managed to guide and encourage me through the entire research/committee process, a very tricky terrain indeed, with caring and humour. This intelligent, hard-working woman loves her students and not surprisingly we love her too. I also wish to thank the other members of my committee and my external reader for bringing their scholarly input and their lesbian-ness to strengthen this thesis.

A very loving thank you especially to my mother, Joyce Bumstead R. N. (nee King) who has come through emotionally and financially for me many times over the years. This included a gift of the first year's tuition for this Master's program. The combined parenting of two special human beings, being raised in a large family, and my middle class background all contributed to my skills and ability to complete this work.

There were many friends, family members and co-workers whose support I am grateful for as they listened patiently to my rambling, ranting and raving on my journey towards and through this educational/research process.

Lastly, but maybe most importantly, I am very deeply grateful for the honor and privilege of working with the women who became the Amazing Graces, the lesbians who participated in this study. They gave generously of their time, touching me with their honesty and empowering me with their courage.

## Chapter One: Introduction

This qualitative study is an exploration of the life and work histories of six (including myself) lesbian helping professionals: Nancy Buzzell, Susan Diane, Pat Mac Diarmid, Joan Merrifield, Carla Randall, and Debra Sutherland. The participation, commitment and passion of these women was the vital energy that initiated and sustained this work.

### Amazing Graces

Throughout the months of the research process, I was consistently impressed with the honesty, the courage, and the quiet activism of these intelligent, hard working women. My academic supervisor noticed that I was repeatedly commenting on how amazing these women were and so one day she suggested the title Amazing Grace(s). I was a bit jolted by this idea initially but as I considered the impact of Amazing Grace(s): A Qualitative Study of Lesbian Helping Professionals it seemed attention grabbing with its religious connotations snuggled up against the word lesbian. I decided it was an appropriate way to re-frame a population that has been denigrated by many oppressive groups including some right wing Christian groups.

During my twenty plus years of employment as a nurse or counsellor, I have worked with thousands of people, listening to countless stories of adversity, abuse, grief and pain. I am always amazed at the endurance of the human spirit and its ability to surmount tremendous obstacles and difficulties. I saw again this strength of spirit in these women as they recounted the problems they have faced. My amazement was further fueled by how these women have travelled a step further to use their lesbian-ness<sup>1</sup> to confront and educate on social justice issues in their daily working lives.

The stories I heard and that are re-presented in this thesis were often about struggles in life, but there is also a level of race, class, and educational privilege which assists my co-

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<sup>1</sup>Lesbian-ness is a term coined by Wilton (1995), who rejects the pathological flavor to the term lesbianism which she parallels to words like astigmatism. She finds lesbian-ness a more flexible term with descriptive connotations such as "richness or loveliness" (p. x).

researcher/participants<sup>2</sup> as they journey past these struggles towards empowerment and the ability to affect change. There are other narratives that have been told and are waiting to be told, where people are not as privileged and/or are unable to overcome tremendous obstacles and injustices; where the human spirit does not receive the encouragement it needs to continue and suicide, addictions or numerous other actual deaths or small daily soul deaths prevail. There is much to be learned from all different types of stories and I do not want to negate these other lived experiences or minimize factors such as position on the social/economic hierarchy which influence individual and group perceptions/outcomes. This having been said, I am still in awe of the quality, depth and inspiration contained in the lesbian/career stories that I was privileged to obtain for this research project. The amazing part of my title I easily understood but I needed more information about the grace(s) aspect.

Grace according to Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (1977) has many meanings and some of these are as follows:

unmerited divine assistance given man [sic] for his [sic] regeneration or sanctification, . . . a state of sanctification enjoyed through divine grace . . . a virtue coming from God. . . disposition to or an act or instance of kindness or clemency. . . a special favor. . . a charming trait or accomplishment. . . sense of propriety or right . . . the quality or state of being considerate or thoughtful. . . three sister goddesses in Greek mythology who are the givers of charm and beauty. (p. 498)

Many of these connotations seemed suitable for women who, with courage and kindness, have risen above the surrounding oppression to dedicate themselves to daily helping and enlightening others. I was especially interested in the three sister goddesses and

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<sup>2</sup> I use this term to refer to the expanded role those in my study had in requesting to be named, in giving feedback on codes in the focus group, and commenting on/annotating the thesis. The lines between researcher and researched were blurred also when I was a research subject with one of my co-researcher/participants interviewing me. I recognize that as the primary researcher who is obtaining a graduate degree as a result of this study, I had the power and responsibility over much of the process in planning, conducting and writing this thesis. See Stacey (1991) for more on power imbalances between researcher and researched.

sought out other sources.

Stewart (1994) comments on these figures in Greek mythology:

Completing Aphrodite's retinue these smiling divinities ruled budding plant life and ripening fruit. Daughters of Zeus by the Oceanid Eurynome, their number and names varied. In time it was agreed that there were three: Aglaia, Euphrosyne and Thalia. Bringers of joy to every heart, in spring they danced with the nymphs. In Roman lore, they were depicted naked, as "they must be free of deceit" (Servius), or barely-clad, as "benefits want to be seen" (Seneca). To Neoplatonists symbolizing the three fold aspect of love, in medieval times they epitomised Beauty, Charity and Love.(p.289)

The honesty and vulnerability of my co-researcher/participants as they recounted their experiences to me, seemed high-lighted by this connection with the "naked" Graces. By wishing to have themselves identified in order to claim their lesbian identity, they are becoming exposed, wanting to be seen. I felt quite thrilled with this association between the women in my study and these three sister goddesses who play joyfully in the spring with the nymphs.

Starhawk (1987), witch, ecofeminist, peace activist and author, talks about Graces also when she outlines the necessity of leadership roles and how these differ in hierarchical and non-hierarchical groups. In hierarchical groups she sees that "all roles are filled by one person or a small elite, who are rewarded more highly than others"(p.276). In some types of non-hierarchical groups, "in which everyone has immanent value, fulfilling certain roles does not set one apart from the group or establish anyone as being intrinsically more valuable than others" (p. 276). Using the four directions of earth based religions she envisions four different types of leadership roles. One of these roles is for those she calls Graces stating:

for the South, the direction of fire, of energy we have the Graces, who help the group expand. . . . Graces are continually aware of the group's energy, helping raise it when it flags, and to direct and channel it when it is strong. Graces provide the group with fire: enthusiasm, raw energy, ability to expand. They make people feel

good, generate enthusiasm about the group, welcome newcomers, bring people in.

They furnish inspiration and generate new ideas. (p. 277-279)

These qualities could also be associated with the nurses, teachers, social workers and counsellors in my study. I have felt inspired by the wisdom and strength that permeates the narratives of these women. As enthusiastic leaders, not only in the lesbian and gay movement, but in their respective professions, serving diverse populations, they are daily creating new educational opportunities and strategies. More and more the title suggested by my equally amazing and inspiring academic supervisor seemed appropriate. Starhawk comments on Graces needing to “temper their enthusiasm with some of the grounding qualities of dragons.” (p. 279). Dragons are from the North and they “establish and guard the group’s boundaries” and “keep the group grounded”(p. 277). This is good advice also for those in helping professional careers.

Some of my co-researchers/participants are educating the public in volunteer lesbian and gay organizations. In this study though, under the theme, benefits at work, they discussed their paid employment in institutions such as hospitals, universities, community agencies and schools. In these more traditional settings, they are increasingly taking the risk of using their lesbian-ness to bring about changes in the beliefs around them. Despite worries for the security of their jobs and the increasingly organized backlash, middle-class lesbians such as the six involved in this study, are coming out individually and in groups, at home, at work, on the streets, and on bumper stickers everywhere.

#### Claiming Lesbian Identity

As I focused my Master’s thesis on exploring the interface between lesbian identity and the helping professions, I was aware that I would be publicly revealing my personal identity as a lesbian, a member of a much maligned and very marginalized population. Deciding to professionally, academically and personally disrupt heterosexism, was a risk I was willing and needed to take at this time in my life.<sup>3</sup> It seemed important to add to the information on lesbians’ lives as they struggle to live in a subculture surrounded by an often

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<sup>3</sup> Heterosexism is the belief that heterosexuality is superior thus rendering any other sexuality inferior.

hostile dominant culture. In conducting a qualitative study, I choose to collect data through a focus group and in-depth interviews, with others like myself, who interact daily in professional helping positions. As nurses, teachers, social workers, and counsellors, we have often remained invisible as lesbians in an effort to ensure our livelihoods.

I was quite prepared to protect the anonymity of the women who agreed to be included in this study but, from the initial interview, these courageous public service professionals took an activist stance in expressing their desire to name themselves as lesbians. They rejected my suggestions of using a pseudonym, instead choosing to be open and honest about their lesbian identity. They generously gave me their time, their lesbian/career histories and their personal and collective wisdom. One of these women consented to interview me so that my story became part of the data collected. I feel honoured and privileged to have heard their stories and to include myself as a member of this group of amazing lesbian helping professionals.

Entangled in the details of any one individual's life are the personal details of other people's lives. In order to address concerns about protecting the anonymity of significant others, the women in this study reveal their names and professional positions as lesbians who are teachers, social workers, nurses and counsellors, but the details of their stories are told in subsequent chapters under relevant themes, in a collective, non-identifiable way.

Although this thesis focuses more on professional paid work, these women have all done much of the unpaid work of homemaking, in some cases with both male and female partners. Some have also performed the reproductive labour of child bearing and shouldered the enormous responsibility of parenting. The six of us are listed next in alphabetical order with a quote from our interviews, our educational credentials, and our professional employment history.



"I am an out lesbian counselor, so when clients ask for a lesbian or gay positive counselor, they get me. I can give them a safe place to explore their own sexuality, something I never had."

**NANCY BUZZELL** B.P.E., MSc., Ph.D.

Teacher (elementary), Athletic Director/Coach, Instructor (university), Psychologist

"It's very hard to extract your lesbianism from your feminism. I can see heterosexism . . . I see the structures of society and how they play on women and the oppression of women. They end up being psychiatrized and medicalized - I will talk about their situation as a sociological thing - society has these views on men and women - I'll contextualize it."

**SUSAN DIANE** R.N., B.A., M.A.

Registered Nurse, Staff Development Instructor, Clinical Counselor

"It (oppression as a lesbian) can sensitize you to other kinds of oppressions because you can relate to it on your own personal level. You can say I'm white, so I have privilege in that way but I'm lesbian so I don't have privilege in that way."

**PAT MacDIARMID** B.A., B.S.W., M.S.W.

Social Worker (community agencies), Volunteer Coordinator

"I'm very conscious of my language. I never say when you get married- I say when you fall in love with someone, when you decide you want to be a partner with someone. . . . I use those kinds of words and I try to be really inclusive and I bring up options and alternatives. . . . I make it a very safe climate for the kids to discuss the issue."

**JOAN MERRIFIELD** B.ED.

Environmental Educator, Teacher (elementary)

"I have a vision of the kind of world I'd like to live in and I set about to do with my life - whether it is as a teacher or student or partner or whatever- is to try and create that world. I see that needing to occur across many borders, boundaries . . . what divides us - that keeps us seeming as different."

**CARLA RANDALL** R.N., B.S.N., M.S.N., Ph.D.(student)

Registered Nurse, Nurse Educator (college and university)

"Young kids are coming out in the school system and it is really hard for them and they need role models. They need support not just of the gay and lesbian teachers but they need the support from straight teachers."

**DEBRA SUTHERLAND** B.ED., M.ED.

Teacher (secondary), Instructor (community college), counselor (school, college, community)

### Socio/Cultural/Historical Contexts

When looking at lived experience in qualitative research, it is necessary to be aware of the political, social, historical and cultural structures in which this experience is embedded. My co-researcher/participants made the choice to be open about their lesbian-ness. How linked is this choice, at this historical time, to the activism that started in previous decades at the grassroots level and has now infiltrated the mainstream culture and the media? There are other scholars looking closely at this question (Faderman, 1991; Ross, 1995), but I wish to include a few comments here to give a background to my study and the co-researcher/participants' lives.

We are embedded in the political/social climate of the spring and summer of 1998 in the Canadian city of Vancouver. Some of us are involved in a larger group called the Gay and Lesbian Educators of British Columbia (GALE-BC). This grassroots, volunteer organization, over the past seven years, has made inroads into the education system by giving homophobia/heterosexism workshops on request. GALE-BC has also been a resource for other educators, administrators, parents, and community groups in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. This work has not gone unnoticed with the British Columbia Teacher's Federation recently voting to place heterosexism/homophobia into its education mandate. Other factions in society have also taken notice of the work being done by these educators and there is an organized backlash. Groups which often have connections to certain religious affiliations that view homosexuality as a sinful behaviour, are very much involved in resisting changes to teachers' and the school systems' ways of disseminating information about gay or lesbian life. In April of 1997, the school board in Surrey, a major city near Vancouver, banned three books (recommended by GALE-BC) from being used by teachers in its lower-level, elementary classrooms. This act was seen as discriminatory and led to an organized campaign by some teachers, parents and students, called Bigots Ban Books, to raise awareness and launch a constitutional challenge in the form of a lawsuit against the school board. As I write this thesis, newspapers such as the Vancouver Sun and the Vancouver Province, have daily headlines about this landmark court case.

This flurry of publicity is not isolated to British Columbia. The North American entertainment industry has also seen an increase in depictions of lesbians and gay male characters in major motion pictures and in magazines. Ross (1995) comments on this increased public visibility stating "how is it that the lesbian love that dared not speak its name is now, in the 1990's refusing to shut up?" (p. 3). She documents some examples of this phenomena as it focuses on lesbians.

In 1993, *Newsweek* featured two lesbians 'stepping out front and center'; *New York* magazine made a spectacle of 'lesbian chic' and assured all the non-queers that it's all white, professional, Armani-draped style and no substance. And the August cover of *Vanity Fair* showed singer songwriter k.d. lang and super model Cindy Crawford playfully acting out lang's lesbian sex fantasy. ( p.3)

This visibility has continued with North American wide interest as millions became glued to their televisions sets in 1997, to watch as comedienne Ellen Degeneres "came out" on her television sitcom. The Gay Pride Parade for 1998 in Vancouver had more registrants than ever before. This is quite surprising as a great many lesbians and gay men were out of the country in Amsterdam, either as spectators or participants, in the sporting activities of the 1998 Gay Games. Ross (1995) states "In urban and rural milieux, lesbian/gay/queer and queer-positive resources are multiplying - not shrinking - a testament to the fortitude and imagination of those faced with adversity, hostility and feelings of non-existence"(p. 230).

The reclaiming of the term queer<sup>4</sup> and the activism associated with it seemed to begin with "Queer Nation" and the "in your face" activism by gay men to bring AIDS awareness to the public. Thus a new generation of activism entered into the political arena but older activists remember other liberation movements that paved the way.

Queer rhetoric often gives the impression that direct action politics was invented in

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<sup>4</sup>Queer, although not embraced by all gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people, is a term used to reclaim and empower a derogatory label. It is identified with an attitude and strategies that deconstruct ideologies based on the homo-hetero binary, question notions of gender, reproductive sexuality and the family, and call for radical change in other social institutions all based on heterosexism such as "the press, the education system, policing and the law"(Smyth, 1992, p.20).

1987, that the Black and Women's Liberation Movement haven't happened, that the campaigns against nuclear weapons, abortion, reproductive rights and violence against women have not occurred and have had no influence on the way queer activism manifests itself. (Smyth, 1992, p.28)

Although Queer Nation had some lesbian involvement, it was critiqued as "having too narrow a focus, one that appeals to primarily white, middle class gay men and is oblivious to the special problems of lesbians, the working class and racial and ethnic minorities" (Faderman, 1991, p. 301). The nineties coalitions amongst lesbians and gay men is not without difficulties. "Of course ridding men of misogyny and creating a mutual confidence whereby lesbians no longer need to separate from men to define their own agendas is a difficult process" (Smyth, 1992, p. 29). Smyth proposes a question that many lesbians ask when working with gay men, one that could be broadened to include the frustration and rage that the feminist movement has had in dealing with most men since its beginnings. "Are gay men in queer settings willing to listen and be challenged?" (p. 29). Smyth also mentions the problems that non-white lesbians and gay men struggle with in an involvement with queer politics. Part of their struggle in "the 60's and 70's was the right to retain their cultural distinctness. 'Gay' or 'lesbian' may not be the primary basis of their identity, and to take on the label 'queer' is seen as a 'whitewashing' of their existence" (p. 32). Bisexuals and the transgendered populations are also struggling to find a place for their particular issues under the queer umbrella.

Faderman (1991) describes a study where older lesbians, looking back from the eighties, saw that "in earlier decades, during the traumatic events of their lives such as a breakup of a relationship, they received little or no comforting since they did not belong to a lesbian community and they could not tell their heterosexual friends why they were suffering" (p. 298). The eighties were seen by these women as much more supportive with a larger community and less of a need to be closeted in as many areas of their lives (p. 298). The seventies had witnessed the growth of small clusters of more politically active lesbian-feminists, usually in larger urban centers. These activities gave birth to Lesbian Nation, a forerunner to Queer Nation, which had a focus on consciousness raising and a vision of a

world based on values other than patriarchal androcentric ones. Many women-run cooperatives, festivals and other living, working and entertainment alternatives began during these "radical" times. Faderman (1991) comments on the 1970's successes of these very brave and hardworking lesbian feminists:

They identified the women's movement as homophobic and the gay movement as sexist, and they fought against both. In the process they not only forced those movements to open up to lesbian and feminist ideas, but they also established their own movement that created a unique "women's culture" in music, spirituality, and literature that made at least a small dent in mainstream culture. (p. 244)

Lesbian communities and networks became larger and were more established in the eighties rooted in these initial social experiments of the seventies.

These are some of the various social/cultural/historical contexts that surround the lesbian-ness of the life stories in my study which span the seventies, eighties and nineties. Also surrounding my co-researcher/participants is the gendered nature of the female socialization process which often leads women into the heterosexist environment of a female dominated professional career. I discuss these linked subjects in more detail in the literature review in chapter two.

### Feminism, Sexuality and Lesbian Identity: A Conceptual Framework.

This thesis and the stories contained within it are very much embedded in a feminist view of the world. The women's liberation movement has and is changing oppressive social/political structures and traditions which have constrained the human situation for thousands of years. "Feminism is among other things, a response to the fact that women either have been left out of, or included in demeaning disfiguring ways in what has been an almost exclusively male account of the world" (Lugones & Spelman, 1995). By claiming a feminist view, I am expressing my belief that women have been oppressed and my commitment to working towards changing this social/political/economic circumstance.

Simone de Beauvoir (1991/1952), a french philosopher who wrote The Second Sex, is credited for some initial feminist concepts, in particular, the construction and definition of woman by man as "other", as an object to his position as subject. The term "first wave

feminism" usually encompasses the nineteenth century women's movement which fought for, among other things, the right for education for women, temperance, and women's suffrage. Black women were involved in the early feminist movement, for example Sojourner Truth, a former slave who "challenged the popular doctrine of women's delicacy and physical inferiority" at a women's rights convention in the United States in 1851 (Andersen, 1997, p. 306).

Second wave feminism, usually thought to start in the late sixties, dealt with issues such as "access to birth control, rights to education and employment, and exclusion from formerly men only occupations and organizations" (Andersen, 1997, p. 313). The feminist slogan "the personal is political" evolved from consciousness raising groups that brought individual women's lived experiences out into the open so that systemic oppression could be recognized. The dominant discourse of the first wave and the early part of second wave feminism, had been written by and was mainly concerned with the lives of white, middle-class women who were attempting to throw off the inferior conceptions of woman/women, were fighting for equal status with men, and exploring the cause(s) of this systemic oppression. As more and more middle class women entered the paid workforce, equal pay for equal work became a major feminist issue. In the 1960s, 70s and 80s, the Black movement and anti-racist politics in the United States became the focus for many black women. They felt that they did not belong in the feminist movement which had evolved in the 50s and 60s with its focus on the isolation of the middle-class (usually white) wife and mother.

Responding to the criticism of racism from women of colour, of classism from working class women, and of heterosexism from lesbians, means that the feminist movement has now a much broadened perspective. Asserting the need for a women's agenda, not just proving equality to men, but looking at differences from them and amongst ourselves, became part of the later stages of the second wave. The inclusion of other oppressions continues to evolve with race, class and gender all high on the feminist agenda. Heterosexism and ableism have more recently gained a share of the focus of feminist politics and literature. Lesbians of colour(s) make a distinct contribution as they document

the interlocking affect of racism, sexism and heterosexism.

Feminist theory is not one theory as this brief overview of feminism might suggest. "Feminism is not dependent on ideological purity (indeed it has always been a mixture of conflicting ideologies) or any formal organizational structure" (Kramer, 1993, p. 52). Douglas (1990) comments that "feminists who disagree with a group's ideas or process just form another group" (p.11). There are numerous and diverse theories and positions taken by socialist feminists, radical feminists, cultural feminists (eco-feminists), marxist feminists, liberal feminists, lesbian feminists, postmodern feminists, poststructural feminists, global feminists, afrocentric feminists and more, plus sub-groupings and combinations among these branches. These different perspectives attempt to describe women's oppression and its possible causes and from these positions develop various liberating strategies. Issues often important to feminism are power, gender, sisterhood, voice and oppression. The deconstruction of hierarchies based on dualisms/binaries (for example male/female, public/ private, nature/culture) are noteworthy feminist concepts that influence political action and theory. Issues such as violence against women, unequal economic/occupational situations for men and women, the unpaid female labour inside the family structure, still very much plague society and garner feminist attention.

"Feminism is a medium for women to reclaim our anger, share it, proclaim it publicly, and ground it in the economic and political conditions of our lives" (Briskin, 1990, p.29). Unraveling the contradictions in women's lives can lead to liberating strategies, according to Briskin. Two of these contradictions she discusses are most relevant to this research. She refers to "the devaluation of mothering (mother work, house work, wife work) and the simultaneous presentation of motherhood as a woman's life work" (p. 2). I will discuss later how the female dominated professions can be seen as an extension of women's caring/mothering role into the public realm where caring is seen as "natural" for women and therefore devalued and not awarded a fair share of social power or monetary rewards.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The word "natural" brings us to the feminist arguments against biological determinism. Many behaviours that are seen as nurturing are learned and not confined to women.

Another contradiction Briskin reveals is the message that "heterosexual practices are deemed normal and natural" yet "history shows that sexual practices change over time, vary across cultures and must be learned. They also must be enforced through government and social pressure" (p. 4). Thus we have compulsory heterosexuality where women are taught "that their survival and life choices are (indeed, should be) bound up with men and marriage" (p. 4). This heterosexist ideology and its homophobic messages police sexuality and "result in an absence of gay - and - lesbian positive images and a deafening silence about homosexual reality" (p. 5). Heterosexism and its effects are outlined in the stories represented in this study so this subject will be discussed further in the literature review in the next chapter.

Progressive academic circles now have an increasing interest in feminist and queer theory/research, as sources of transformative social ideologies and practices (Honeychurch, 1996). In education courses and curricula in general, material on gays and lesbians is still negligible and adult education as an academic discipline has been critiqued as having neglected research in this area (Hill, 1995). Sexuality is often left out of the analysis in many areas yet is basic to the conditions and structures surrounding human social relations including institutional ones.

In a similar way to race, sexuality is seldom understood as part of the material conditions of one's existence, even though there is ample evidence that sexuality structures relations in the workplace, the legal system and administration of justice, state policies such as

immigration, social welfare and much more. (Creese & Stasiulis, 1996, p. 7)

In the past and in many places today, lesbians or women who love women, have been constructed predominantly in two ways: either as vile, evil, and sick or as an invisible, non-existent, or barely noticeable phenomena that happens only minimally and somewhere else. This annihilation of the ideology and practice of women bonding sexually, emotionally and spiritually enables heterosexism and male supremacy to continue as the only legitimate, "natural" existence (Kitzinger, 1987). Compulsory heterosexism serves the patriarchal order by ensuring that women have sexual/reproductive ties to men (Adrienne



Rich, 1980). "The 'private' nature of sexuality . . . leaves sexuality beyond the boundaries of most analyses, while reaffirming the normative assumptions about heterosexuality" (Creese & Stasuilis, 1996, p. 7).

The gay and lesbian activist social movement has brought attention to the injustices perpetrated against this group. This may account for the increasing media curiosity and preoccupation with lesbians in the nineties but the contrast with the past invisibility of lesbians is a bit confusing. Is this media blitz a fad with the public interest being only superficial and likely to fade? The Gay Games in 1990, held in Vancouver, and in 1994 held in New York, and recently in 1998 in Amsterdam, did not get media attention in North America even though world records in some sporting events were broken. Is the public really interested in the struggles and achievements of minority sexualities? Maybe as a result of and certainly in the midst of these academic and social/historical changes, I have chosen to focus my research on lesbians.

### My Position

In this postpositivist era, the researcher can no longer pretend to be completely objective, detached, and value-neutral. The white coat of the scientist we now know covered a human being usually male, often white and middle class, whose perspective coloured his research questions and methods. In qualitative methodology the researcher is seen as the "instrument of research" with her presence in the lives of the participants seen as "fundamental to the paradigm" (Marshall and Rossman, 1995, p. 59). Krieger (1996) discusses this "relationship between the observer and the observed. . . the many ways in which our analyses of others result from highly interactional processes in which we are personally involved. We bring biases and more than biases. We bring idiosyncratic patterns of recognition" (p. 180). Krieger looks deeply at the question of subjectivity in the research process and states that in social research we often "see others as we know our selves" (p.190). She goes on to state "in social science, I think, we must acknowledge the personal far more than we do. . . . We need to link our statements about those we study with statements about our selves, for in reality neither stands alone." (p. 192).

The impetus for collecting career/life histories of other lesbian helping professionals

came from a personal desire to share with and learn from others who are working in a contradictory space. I experience daily the tensions and contradictions of how my lesbian identity disrupts the heterosexist assumptions that inform the caring role of those like myself who work as helping professionals. My work history as a nurse/counsellor/instructor includes not only giving the occasional hypodermic injection but a variety of experiences such as facilitating group and individual therapy, case load management, and designing/teaching educational programs. I felt curious about the similarities/differences of the life stories of other lesbian helping professionals in areas such as nursing, teaching, social work and counselling. Although this study is informed by a personal passion I assume that it will offer insights and deepen understanding for others.

My particular insider status in this research project has been used to push deeper into areas about which I have knowledge and experience. I tried to be aware, as much as possible, of how my subjective experiences can colour the lens through which I view other's stories. I have included the parts of my story here that seem relevant to my position of lesbian helping professional who is now researching the stories of others with similar personal and professional locations so that my perspective/biases may be more obvious to the reader.

Growing up in small town Ontario in the fifties and sixties gave me no overt or conscious knowledge of homosexuals or of homosexual activity. Sexuality was not an issue discussed very often in my home and sex education at school was confined to sperm and egg movies which we now know are gender biased.<sup>6</sup>

I vividly remember gaining knowledge from my peers at about age 10 or 11 about intercourse and menstruation but there is no memory of whisperings or giggles about sex between women. How I learned or was told about lesbianism remains a mystery but I know that my very powerful reaction to the discovery of my lesbian-ness in my twenties meant that I had absorbed information/misinformation/myths at a deep level. This repression of

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<sup>6</sup> See the Biology and Gender Study Group, (1988/1989) for more information, contrary to popular belief, about the active role the egg (ovum) plays as its microscopic villae reach out and "select" a sperm and then "pull" it into the wall of its structure

knowledge, yet actually having knowledge which included society's condemnation of sex that is not heterosexual, seems to agree with the repressive hypothesis which Foucault (1978/1990) explores and deconstructs. Tracking discourses around sex back to the Catholic confessional, he calls it "the disquieting enigma: not a thing which stubbornly shows itself, but one which always hides, the insidious presence that speaks in a voice so muted and often disguised that one risks remaining deaf to it" ( p. 35). He maintains that there was a *proliferation* of talk and information about sex as parents and teachers worked to stop children from masturbating; medicine tried to therapize and cure people from all kinds of so called sexual disorders; and laws were made regarding various sexual crimes with the police attempting to enforce these. Discussing modern societies' views on sex he states "they dedicated themselves to speaking of it ad infinitum, while exploiting it as the secret" (p. 35).

I can only see, in retrospect, glimpses of my lesbian-ness during my childhood and adolescence. The roots of my feminist ideology can be seen more easily. "It's a man's world and it makes me angry" my mother would say as she lived her traditional wife and mother role. My father was probably more involved than many men in assisting in what seemed to me to be my mother's enormous job of raising their seven children. Coming home from his management position he would maintain, create and repair the structures of our various homes and automobiles and help with the household and child-caring duties. The traditional gender roles were expanded to include my brothers' assignment to their regular turn at doing the domestic chore of washing dishes. This seemed a bit one-sided though as I never did get a turn at mowing the lawn and my current ability or interest in fixing anything mechanical is limited. I was aware from an early age that I did not see my mother's life as one that I wished for myself. I often said as a child that I was not getting married. This usually brought laughter from my extended family of uncles and aunts who seemed interested in discussing what they saw as inevitable in the future of their precocious niece.

When I reached high-school at age thirteen, I remember deliberately avoiding the weekly discussion group conducted for teens by our pastor (having been told he would be

discussing dating). I accomplished this by explaining that I would rather join the church choir. Here I could sing beside one of my close girlfriends. Dating was not an activity that I looked forward to, and I eventually experienced it as somehow boring yet simultaneously tension laden. I could not understand why my girlfriends wanted a boyfriend with a car. I just wanted the car, the boyfriend seemed like extra baggage. Much to my delight I was able to purchase my first car from my grandparents at the age of eighteen. In this 1962 Pontiac I went off to pick up what seemed like the required boyfriend to go to the nursing students' dance.

Foucault (1978/1990) discusses the "hysterization of women's bodies" which leads to pathologizing and discrediting women's abilities due to biology (p.104). This discourse has helped to keep women subordinate for centuries and enabled the allocation of women away from the professions (de Beauvoir, 1952/1974, p.xxx). At age eleven after having read a book about a lawyer I discussed it with a male relative. This man was a lawyer himself and did our family's legal transactions. His response to my enquiries about law school were that I should be sure to take typing and shorthand in high-school and he would give me a job in his office as a secretary when I graduated. I remember being upset by his response and expressing some indignation about this to my mother. I completed high-school, and was accepted into several universities with an interest at that time in becoming a psychologist. My parents saw university as impractical and a place where drug abuse was rampant. Nursing was an occupation that my mother held in high esteem. Somehow I dutifully "chose" nursing school with my goal being to work in psychiatry as a way to help others and possibly finance future university studies.

After graduating, I worked for three years as a nurse. I then entered university and simultaneously ended a somehow dull, dating relationship with a nice young man who everyone thought was very "suitable" for me. I had been taking the occasional course and felt that I was obviously not turning out to be the "wife and mother" type which seemed to then point towards being a "career- woman". It was while studying full-time for an undergraduate degree in psychology and working part-time as a nurse that I fell very much in love with a female co-worker.

This was an exceptionally confusing time for both of us with intense, overwhelming feelings and absolutely no framework with which to understand these. I remember saying the word lesbian out loud once and this horrified my equally naive girlfriend. She seemed to handle the situation better on a concrete level though, choosing to leave her husband and move in with me. This unfortunately led to a "home-wrecker" image of myself and, along with the concurrent stressor of my mother's bout with cancer, plunged me into a depression. To say that I was completely unprepared and had difficulty accepting the enormity of this life-changing transition, is an understatement. One bizarre symptom of my difficulties which lasted for the better part of a year, was the pattern of rising in the morning and vomiting about three times a week. This I now recognize as my inability to swallow this new piece of information about myself. Even though I had no conscious awareness of learning anything about lesbians, somehow it had been communicated to me at some deep level that this was a despicable and deeply despised entity to which belonging was more than nauseating. The discourses Foucault (1978/1990) mentions that surrounded the "perverse adult" were obviously deep in my psyche (p. 104). I left the situation and put distance between myself and my girlfriend. My attempt to deal with my physical and emotional health led me to see several health care professionals. For about five years, my sexuality was never a topic of these discussions.

Situated in small town Ontario in the seventies, a lesbian identity to me, seemed to entail huge losses such as my respectability, my career as a professional in the community, and the love and acceptance of my family. I worked as a nurse and as a staff development instructor, finished my degree, occasionally dating men, but maintaining correspondence and often vacationing with my ex-girlfriend who was now living a fairly "out" lesbian lifestyle. Eventually I decided that I had to leave small town Ontario if I wanted to evolve into a whole, complete person. I had read the six books in the town library on the subject of lesbians, when a public display of homophobia/heterosexism clinched the matter for me. A police raid on a public washroom where video-cameras had been placed, led to charges against numerous men for homosexual activity. This led to court cases; families crumbling; jobs lost; and the suicides of two of the men. Gay activists from an urban center came to

town and gained media attention. This tragic mess was the final push for me towards finding a less barbaric community in which to deal with my sexuality/identity.

Migration to urban centers has been a theme in many lesbian lives. The move to bigger cities can bring anonymity so that working and living social lives as lesbians is possible. Finding an organized lesbian community with bars, coffee houses and social interest groups is another draw. Vancouver, where I have lived for the past fourteen years, contains many of these organizations. I have subsequently been involved in relationships with women in this city with its large and very active lesbian and gay community. I have sought out feminist therapists both lesbian and heterosexual and various self help and therapy groups as I worked through personal and career issues, some of which seemed related to dealing with external/internal oppression surrounding my lesbian identity and subsequent relationships. Although I have found therapy helpful, the more open I am about my lesbian-ness, the increasing visibility of lesbians in the surrounding culture, and the more I pursue expanded career opportunities, the happier and healthier I seem to feel. In the past fourteen years I have been out to many of my co-workers, more in some work settings than others but it is still a process for me to navigate the negative stereotypes and deal with heterosexist assumptions.

Choosing to focus my academic work and research on lesbians brought to the surface many core issues/blocks for me. For example, the University of Toronto offered to pay my airfare when I submitted a paper about my research on lesbians. It was to be presented and published as part of a qualitative research conference. Much fear and grief overcame me as I considered speaking in this academic public setting in the province in which I was born. Attempting to negotiate this coming out in academia so that I would not be the only woman in a session with three other men, brought resistance from the organizers of the conference. Fassinger (1996) pinpoints the problem I was having when she states "as woman-identified women, lesbians may experience an even greater need than their heterosexual counterparts for female support, again suggesting the additive effects on lesbians of a well-documented problem in women's career development" (p. 168).

In therapy I connected with the shame I had around being female, having feelings

and a body, amongst men who have been assigned traditionally a less embodied more detached and therefore more "professional" position. Not only did I have blocks to having a voice as a woman in a misogynist culture, but I also felt my core shame around speaking the unspeakable, standing up in an academic setting and discussing lesbian identity.<sup>7</sup> I had been working with the Gay and Lesbian Educators of British Columbia doing workshops with teachers and community groups but this was always done with the support of others and did not seem to bring forth the fear that I had around presenting at an academic conference. Luckily another woman had joined the session I was assigned to speak in, but I was still unable to accept the opportunity. My final block seemed to be my need to prepare my brothers and sisters, many of whom lived in Ontario, for this sister who was speaking in public about her lesbian-ness. After I had written all six of them about my plans and gotten some supportive comments from some of them, I finally felt able to take what seemed like this enormous step of flying to Toronto and presenting my paper.

Although I am doubly oppressed as a lesbian and a woman, I'm aware that my class, my whiteness and my educational background place me in a comparatively privileged position to many other people. I have been struggling for some time with the "ghettoized" nursing profession and its relationship to the medical hierarchy (Valentine, 1996)<sup>8</sup>. When I work in the role of counselor/therapist or psychiatric nurse, I bring a feminist perspective, viewing the systemic oppression of women as often a cause and certainly the context of their circumstances/unhappiness. I'm aware that not all lesbian helping professionals have a feminist outlook and that many nurses see the medical model in a different light. Issues such as these I attempted to deal with and monitor in my journal, a practice which is often part of a qualitative research procedure. The opportunity to do research and to disseminate

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<sup>7</sup>I wish to thank Miriam Mattila, rebirther, primal therapist and inner child counselor extraordinaire for her work with me on these debilitating issues.

<sup>8</sup>Valentine (1996), states in a discussion of nursing and its relationship to the female or woman's sphere that "female work ghettos are generally characterized by female domination, low wages, poor working conditions and limited opportunities for advancement". (p.99).

information, to add in some small way to the knowledge on this marginalized population, is exciting and rewarding for me. Canada is a country whose institutions with their patriarchal structures and relations of ruling like to be considered “tolerant” and “liberal”, so I have been able to study this subject in a very traditional university. One of the drawbacks though is that there is only the rare course which includes content on lesbians at the University of British Columbia.

### Research Questions

As I pull on the thread of a lesbian life, the thread that is gender starts to unravel also. The childhood of a girl, female gender socialization, often includes the roles of sister, daughter and mother with duties and behaviours mapped out under patriarchal family and institutional structures. Career choices are much affected by gender as the dominance of women in helping professional careers reveals. As I considered the lives of lesbian helping professionals my research questions were as follows:

#### Lesbian Identity

- How do these women define their identity/sexual orientation?
- When and how did they become cognizant of this (coming out to self)?
- What was that process/experience like for them?
- How has this affected personal areas of their life such as family, and friendships (coming out to others)?
- How does their coming out process affect their careers and how do their careers affect their coming out?

#### Heterosexism

- What are their experiences with heterosexism, especially in the work environment?
- If they have remained in the closet at some work sites, what was that experience like?
- How do they view lesbian and gay activism?
- What social action is needed to assist them and other lesbian helping professionals?

#### Gender Socialization and Career

- How did these women come to be involved in the helping professions?



- What do they like and dislike about their helping roles?
- What has their career journey (education, job satisfaction) been like for them?
- Do the participants feel that being female had a bearing on their decisions to become helping professionals?
- How did they perceive the sexual division of labour as they were growing up?
- What career choices were open to them?
- How did the heterosexual socialization of women impact their careers?

#### Significance of this Study

The process of defining one's sexuality has been done by many lesbians in what *appears* to be a knowledge vacuum. Out of thin air and sometimes alone, a lesbian may have had to deconstruct the heterosexist knowledge of herself as she confronts her desires and then reconstructs herself and her life. A lesbian is an ideal research subject for the constructivist notion of knowledge and learning. Hill (1995) discusses this transformation of identity and how gay and lesbian and other "unfree society learners are socialized across the life span to systemically misunderstand their identity, needs, relationships, and values. . . people 'unlearn' major ideas and feelings . . . Heroic features of this 'unlearning' include confronting stigmatization, discrimination, and self-hatred" (p. 148). Research on lesbians can give new insights into sexism less cluttered by heterosexist values, and possibly suggest alternative ways of dealing with the problems of human beings in many areas.

By using life history interviews and a focus group, this study facilitated and documented some of these untold experiences. By identifying themes in these six lives, the processes around discovering and living a lesbian identity are highlighted as well as the impact on careers in a professional helping capacity. Being placed in a professional position to work closely with other human beings can make coming out a risky process that many do not venture into as Khayatt (1992) explores in her book Lesbian Teachers: An Invisible Presence. Like Khayatt, who had been a teacher and then chose to study lesbian teachers, my awareness as an insider was that there were untold stories here, including both unexplored problems and strategies for solving problems, which can be illuminated and shared. My life herstory, and those of other lesbian women, have been lived inside this

dominant androcentric, heterocentric cultural ideology. We have walked a fine line between living our lives as we wish and surviving in a society that either hates us or denies our existence. Interviews bring forth stories of how a marginalized, stigmatized identity and/or leading a hidden or double life can affect health, economic survival and relationships with family, partners and co-workers. Resistance and survival are also themes as strategies are examined for living lives within and yet, somehow outside patriarchal structures. Social activism on a day-to-day basis unfolds as each interviewee talks of her everyday professional and personal interactions with others.

Women's studies and in particular lesbian studies can be informed by this research. Any social science discipline that professes to study human life could also be informed by research into lesbian lives. The helping professions, including the field of education, are charged with serving everyone equally. This seems impossible with little documentation on a segment of the population. Adult educators could become more responsive and inclusive as they design and administer programs for adults, some of whom will undoubtedly be lesbian. Higher education programs with a focus on training professionals, can gain knowledge for future curricula by listening to what lesbian helping professionals have to say about their education and working lives.

Research focusing on lesbian experiences gives a message to participants that they not only exist but are being given a space in which to tell their stories, and that their opinions are valued. They can gain increased self-understanding and receive some of the benefits of catalytic validity "in which the research process re-orient, focuses and energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it" (Lather 1991, p.68). Lather talks of "an emancipatory research where both researcher and researched become in the words of feminist singer-poet, Cris Williamson, 'the changer and the changed' " (p.56). The goal of emancipatory research, according to Lather, is "to encourage self-reflection and deeper understanding in the part of the researched at least as much as it is to generate empirically grounded theoretical knowledge" (p. 60). As the lesbian helping professionals in this study focus on our lives in the heterosexist and sexist institutions of family, education, and work, we are "helping" each other to clarify our past, explain the present and

move on to the future better prepared for the next struggle. Lather also suggests that “openly ideological, advocacy-based research has arisen as a new contender for legitimacy” (p.52). In this study I lay out the ideologies influencing my position as researcher, and tell my personal and professional story as it relates to this subject. I also am attempting to shift the misconceptions surrounding lesbians. Reading this thesis may empower other lesbian nurses, teachers, social workers and counsellors and influence others individuals to become allies in the fight against oppressions.

#### Map of the Thesis

In the next chapter I explore literature relevant to this inquiry including lesbian identity, heterosexism/homophobia, gender socialization, career and the female dominated professions. Due to the evolving research process, I added more information on racism, delved into the vocational psychology literature, and found a delightful book that focuses on ethics/boundaries. Chapter three discusses the life history and focus group qualitative methods that evolved and describes the data collection processes. Chapter four and chapter five, present and discuss the key themes selected from the data. Chapter six contains a summary focused on new developments that emerged from the research, a discussion of implications for the education of helping professionals, suggestions for future research and a final word from each of the graces.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter outlines the literature which provides the theoretical and conceptual framework for this study. Five areas were selected and provide the context for thinking about this work: lesbian identity, heterosexism/homophobia, gender socialization and female dominated professions, racism, and ethics/boundaries.

### Lesbian Identity

"Coming out" refers to a process required for lesbians and gays in a culture that dictates, polices and forces people into compulsory heterosexual ways of relating. Allowing into consciousness the realization that you are attracted to another person of the same sex (coming out to yourself), and then the continual, life-long process of deciding to come out (or not) to others, are both necessary in a culture that renders any form of sexual expression other than heterosexual as inferior, sick or invisible. Sedgwick (1990) points out that "there are remarkably few of even the most openly gay people who are not deliberately in the closet with someone personally or economically or institutionally important to them" (p. 68). These coming out processes can take their toll on an individual and can be life threatening as in the case of suicides or murderous lesbian and gay bashings. Other oppressions and discriminations, such as laws that benefit heterosexual relationships and render gay and lesbian ones illegitimate and invisible; the labelling of lesbian mothers as unfit and denying them custody of their children, not to mention job loss; denial of rental accommodations and denial of access to some medical procedures (ie. artificial insemination); can all easily be understood as painful as well as having profound material consequences. Personal rejection at the level of family and friends can also be devastating.

Sedgwick (1990) discusses the double binds in judicial systems that systemically oppress lesbians and gays "undermining through contradictory constraints on discourse the grounds of their very being" (p.70). The epistemological underpinnings of the heteropatriarchal economic and social structures rests on a system of binaries. This dualistic belief system contains such false dichotomies as superior/inferior, male/female, culture/nature, mind/body, public/private, heterosexual/homosexual, good/bad and numerous others that Sedgwick points out (p. 72). Homosexuality seems to threaten these

binaries in crucial ways. Just as patriarchal paradigms have been threatened by feminists who advocate against the sex-segregation of work with its unpaid or low paid labour of women, the heteropatriarchy is threatened by the very existence of a population of gays and lesbians who are living openly together, confusing the male/female binary by having sex with the same sex and not conforming to the stereotypical roles and ways of behaving.

Due to the extensive institutionalization of homophobia and heterosexism in North American culture and belief systems, personal coming out can also be full of perplexing contradictory and unpredictable consequences. Thus a friend can feel their own sexuality is threatened by discovering another's queer identity. Friends may question a lesbian's knowledge of herself and she may be accused of going through a phase. Relatives or friends may have guilt feelings about negative stereotypic comments that they have expressed previously. A friend may come out in response to another's disclosure and this can generate the possibility of attraction which was not seen previously. Parents and friends may not see a disclosure as the chance to have a closer more loving connection, but may see it as hurtful and unloving. Rejection due to religious beliefs of family and friends, who have previously claimed to love you, can be heart-breaking. These are only a few reactions amongst many others that render the coming out process similar to walking a mine field.

How do lesbians experience their own coming out process? How do they view their lesbian-ness and their relationships? "Gender is a powerful organizer of sexual behaviour, identity, and relationship patterns. In general, gay men are more similar to heterosexual men, and lesbian women more similar to heterosexual women, than to each other" (Garnets & Kimmel, 1993, p. 25). Not surprisingly lesbians, like their heterosexual counterparts, often have a relational outlook to their sexuality. In contrast to the predominantly sexual experiences that gay men have as they move towards a homosexual identity, "lesbians tend to experience sexual feelings in situations of romantic love and emotional attachment" (p. 27). The traditional heterosexual socialization of girls often promotes restraint on sexuality except in committed relationships such as marriage (p. 26). A focus on emotional connection in relationships is consistent with theories which highlight women as operating from an ethic of care and with connected ways of relating and constructing knowledge

(Gilligan, 1982; Belenkey, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986).

“A lesbian identity is a woman’s subjective experience or intra subjective account of her own lesbianism” (Kitzinger, 1987, p. 90). Historically, social control of marginalized and oppressed groups has taken the form of religion and then psychiatry/psychology. Kitzinger argues that “in constructing lesbianism as pathology scientists have taken the place of priests in condemning and rooting out socially unacceptable behaviour”(p. 40). The construction of any identity is done within a social and historical context. An account of any individual’s lesbian identity formation may change over time and be rendered differently, considering who it is told to, under what circumstances and other contextual factors.

In analysing interviews and questionnaires with sixty lesbians using a Q-sort methodology<sup>9</sup>, Kitzinger found five factors involved in these stories of lesbian identity. One factor accounts for lesbianism in the more traditional light of a personal inadequacy thus taking in the religious objections and/or scientific pathologizing. She found three other factors that are variations on a liberal humanist position. One set of these subjective accounts helped to “incorporate lesbianism into the dominant order” by seeing it as “a source of personal fulfilment”. Another set of accounts, by defining their experience as ‘true love’ again feed into a liberalist humanist position. A fourth set of subjective explanations viewed their sexuality as becoming aware of their “sexual orientation” which once again, is an individualist position (p.116 ). There is evidence in her sample of a fifth factor, an account of lesbianism that she labels a radical feminist factor. In this view, the woman sees her lesbianism as developing in a political way, as a challenge to heterosexuality and the patriarchal definitions of women (p.115).

Kitzinger is critical of the liberal humanist ideology interwoven in lesbians’ constructions of their identity. She perceives the outcome being one in which “attention is distracted away from the central (political) aims of radical feminism towards individual

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<sup>9</sup> “A Q sort is simply a collection of items which the person is asked to sort along a continuum from, for example ‘Very Like Me’ to ‘Very Unlike Me’. . . . Q methodology, then, is fundamentally a means of eliciting subjectivities” (Kitzinger, 1987, p.77-78).

(private) solutions in terms of personal happiness, self-fulfilment and true love, thus supporting the privatized ideologies of the dominant culture" (p. 123). Maintaining the public/private dichotomy, as discussed previously allows men to rule the public domain thereby relegating women to the ghettoised private. Thus Kitzinger feels that lesbians would be making a statement to advance the destruction of heterosexist liberal agendas by emphasizing the ways their story challenges heterosexism instead of telling romantic/liberalist humanistic stories.

As I look at my own account of my lesbian-ness, I can see evidence of all of Kitzinger's five factors. I became quite distressed and ill during and after my initial self-discovery. I saw doctors and other health professionals about my symptoms, and so, even though I did not discuss my sexuality, I saw my distress about it as something that needed medical treatment; therefore in some way as pathological or an inadequacy. I see evidence of my viewing my first sexual desires as a "love story" with a jilted husband involved. My sexual orientation became a private individual quest for fulfilment as I moved to a larger urban area. Thus these parts of my story all fit with Kitzinger's first four Q-sort factors.

The fifth factor involved a lesbian's subjective account that included evidence of challenging the heteronormative patriarchal constructions of women. This can also be seen in my story as I become aware early that I never wanted to marry (or have seven children) as my mother had. From an early age I had an intuitive knowing that I wanted something different for myself. I avoided the heterosexual dating programing of my pastor, escaping to the comfort of sitting beside my girlfriend in the choir. Dating was boring and tense for me, never comfortable in that unequal and confining role of someone's girlfriend who sat passively by while he drove the car. These parts of my story are a rejection of the dominant heterosexual constructions of male and female roles and of the confining institution of marriage with its traditional seemingly endless wife and mother duties.

Kitzinger approaches her analysis as a social constructivist which "does not assert any unitary doctrine or 'theory' about people or love, or sexuality" but sees mental/psychological processes as "generated from situated and constitutive social practices" (p. 188). Lesbians account for their own experiences and their identity formation

inside the ideologies that surround them. Kitzinger sees examining social practices as necessary and deconstructing liberal humanist ideologies as the goal for those interested in alleviating oppressions (p. 198).

Just following through on a decision to do research on lesbians has generated some destabilizing energy in my small corner of the world. As I discuss my interest in doing research in the academy in this area, suddenly I'm turning the conversation towards what has been considered a private matter, not usually discussed in a public or academic way. People become uncomfortable and I feel somehow vulnerable as my personal, sexual practices are at least wondered about. This is not the traditional view of the detached, even disembodied professional/researcher/academic. For a brief moment, both sides of a public/private split, researcher/sexual person, and other dualisms come into disturbing co-existence.

My experience is that of a white, middle class lesbian so on reading the literature on lesbian identity my experience seemed to be reflected, but it is noteworthy that there is minimal discussion on race and class issues for/with lesbians. The lesbian community is very diverse with women from all races and classes but this is not usually explicitly focused on in the academic research/literature.

#### Heterosexism/Homophobia

Heterosexism and homophobia are terms used sometimes interchangeably to describe the oppressive structures that lesbians and gay men face daily. Pharr (1988) defines homophobia as "the irrational fear and hatred of those who love and sexually desire those of the same sex" (p.1). Neisen (1990) feels that the older term homophobia, which "has become a catchall word for any type of negative attitude or action directed toward homosexuals" is inaccurate (p.21). The phobia suffix is a misnomer as it is more a prejudice than a phobic reaction and the prefix doesn't express the patriarchal structures that are underlying this attitude (p.23). He comments "the major determinant of negative attitudes toward homosexuality was to avoid sex role confusion by maintaining traditionally defined male/female stereotypes" ( p.23). These traditional stereotypes are based on male superiority and contribute to women's oppression.



The concept of internalized homophobia tries to capture the difficulties lesbians and gays experience as they struggle with their own feelings as a result of indoctrination with the dominant heterosexist value system. Neisen feels it is confusing to leave us with two types of homophobia, internal and external, so we then need to clarify which homophobia we are discussing ( p. 21). Are we talking about the homophobia that is external in the structures and views of people around us or are we talking about our own internal shame and self-hatred?

He advocates using the term heterosexism, in order to reveal and name institutional and individual acts of oppression. In addition to this, the attitude of superiority of one sexual orientation over another is revealed in the hetero prefix (p. 25). The uncomfortable feelings arising from heterosexist slurs and the resulting self-contempt that can lead to suicide, Neisen would suggest labelling as *shame* due to heterosexism (p. 24). There is a similarity of these feelings to other emotionally abusive situations with shame being the common factor. Neisen sees the cultural victimization that lesbians and gays suffer from as possibly following a similar recovery process to those who suffer from sexual, physical and emotional abuse (p. 31). He states "victims need to speak up, break the silence, or name the abuse. Perpetrator responsibility must be established. Personal power must be restored" ( p.31). It seems helpful to look at and name this shaming process so that its victims and helpers can move on to use recovery principals to assist the healing work.

I try to use the term heterosexism for the political reasons Neisen describes, but the term homophobia or its derivative homophobe are still used frequently and are in the literature and now known to the general public. Neither heterosexism or homophobia properly labels the hatred that culminates in the murders of gay men and occasionally lesbians. The activities of the Ku Klux Klan are inadequately covered by the term racism. Wife battering or domestic violence or crime of passion come under the label sexism. Hate crimes seems a better descriptor for these activities that sexism, racism and heterosexism can result in, but this depolitizes and individualizes what is really behaviour epitomizing the far end of an institutionalized patriarchal belief system.

Slightly different terminology is offered by Pheterson (1986) in a report of a study

done by Dutch women, identifying similar internal and external processes surrounding oppressions. This study was an ongoing feminist alliance project that ran three parallel groups with seven women from an oppressed population and five women from a dominant population in each group "to nurture personal change, political strength, and theoretical understanding of divisions between women" (p. 146). One of the groups focused on exploring alliance between lesbians and heterosexuals, another included Jewish and non-Jewish women, and the third group consisted of black and white women working together. This strategy of studying a phenomena at the same time as transforming it seems quite wonderful and in this case benefited 100 or more women over a two year period (p.151). In working to transform heterosexism, racism and anti-Semitism, Pheterson found the term "internalized oppression" helpful (p.148). This accounted for forces "perpetuating domination not only by external control but also by building subservience into the minds of the oppressed group" (p. 148). She identifies "self-hatred, self-concealment, fear of violence and feelings of inferiority, resignation, isolation, powerlessness and gratefulness for being allowed to survive" as the results of internalized oppression (p.148).

Thus internalized oppression includes the feelings associated with the concept of shame due to heterosexism as discussed by Neisen (1990). Pheterson (1986) also attempts to simultaneously transform "internalized domination"(p. 148). She defines this concept as the "feelings of superiority, normalcy, and self-righteousness, together with guilt, fear, projection, denial of reality, and alienation from one's body and from nature" (p. 148). These two concepts account for the dynamics inside all of us in situations where we are the oppressed and where we are the oppressor. It acknowledges the complexity of our various positions and behaviours in a diverse and stratified society.

In this paradigm what does the recovery process for all include? Pheterson discusses the concept of visibility, "being oneself fully, openly, undefensively, and expressively" (p. 148). She also includes the concept of pride defined as "self-acceptance and self-respect, in particular, respect for one's identity, one's heritage, and one's right to self-determination" with "indignation against the abuse of any human being, including oneself" (p. 148).

Pheterson discussed the development of ties to others in the oppressed group, or solidarity,

which means "knowledge of, respect for, and unity with persons whose identities are in certain essential ways common with one's own" (p. 149). Developing alliance or "knowledge of, respect for and commitment between persons who are in essential ways different but whose interests are in essential ways akin", is the ultimate goal in the groups working to overcome these patterns (p. 149). Having heterosexual women and lesbians work through their internalized domination and internalized oppression to "become partners in alliance against oppression" was one of the goals achieved. Group members in both the oppressed and dominator positions reported increased activism around issues of oppression in society after attending these groups (p.158).

The concepts of heterosexism and shame due to heterosexism or internalized oppression and domination seem important in sorting out the issues lesbians have as they attempt to live and work under the crushing oppressions of a heteropatriarchal culture. Some lesbian feminists are more likely to stress a socio-political solution over a psychological one. They see the problem as arising out of institutionalized social structures. Suzanne Pharr (1988) states "patriarchy--an enforced belief in male domination and control-- is the ideology and sexism the system that holds it in place. . . . How are gender roles maintained? By the weapons of sexism: economics, violence, homophobia" (p.8). The relationship of patriarchy and capitalism is the subject of much debate but it is important to note that late twentieth century capitalism also plays a significant role in the lives of women.

Wilton (1995) describes the phenomena of linked sexism/heterosexism when she states:

I follow the practice of referring to 'heteropatriarchy' rather than simply 'patriarchy' in order to foreground the co-dependency of sexism and heterosexism in the maintenance of male supremacy. The subordination of women within/by the regime of gender is inseparable from the oppression and abjection of lesbians and gay men. (p.xi)

I agree with Wilton about the oppression by an elite heteropatriarchy, but as a lesbian watching the relations of ruling at an everyday level, I have also felt and seen

oppression related to sexism when attempting to work in conjunction with gay men. The pervasiveness of sexism and heterosexism and other oppressions such as racism and ableism, is ingrained in our institutional/cultural structures and these complexities shift with each of our individual and group relationships/locations to the systems of privilege and dominance.

Pharr (1988) states "a lesbian is perceived as a threat to the nuclear family, to male dominance and control, to the very heart of sexism" (p. 18). In order to understand why lesbians are seen as such a threat, Pharr points to the economic basis of society with the pyramid of very few wealthy at the peak and "the 90 percent on the bottom. . . supplying the cheap labour"(p.11). This leads to a "fervent effort to keep those oppressive systems (racism and sexism and all the ways they are manifested) in place to maintain the unpaid and low-paid labour" (p.11). Waring (1988) a New Zealand politician and economist, also discusses the patriarchal nature of economics that she observed when investigating the economic framework used by the United Nations. She witnessed this as a globally united force involving all the heads of state including the Vatican (p.4).

"To be a lesbian is to be perceived as someone who has stepped out of line, who has moved out of sexual/economic dependence on a male, who is women identified"( Pharr, 1988, p.18). A woman who is not servicing men privately or domestically, unthinkable in this androcentrically constructed world, must then hate men. The love/hate binary seems to be the logic/illogic behind this belief. Any woman who steps out of line in a myriad of ways can then be labeled the despised category of lesbian, an outcast, an unspeakable entity.

Pharr explains:

Lesbian baiting is an attempt to control women by labeling us lesbian because our behaviour is not acceptable, that is, when we are independent, going our own way, living whole lives, fighting for our rights, demanding equal pay, saying no to violence, being self assertive, bonding with and loving the company of women, assuring the right to our bodies, insisting on our own authority, making changes that include us in society's decision-making; lesbian baiting occurs when women are called lesbians because we resist male dominance and control. And it has little or

nothing to do with one's sexual identity (p.19).

One of the more unpleasant accusations made towards a lesbian is that of being a man-hater. This term seems to be taking lesbians from a gynocentric position of loving women to a dichotomous, androcentric one. Women can not seem to be defined in a culture that is built on phallocentric structures, except in relation to men. Does anyone assume on meeting a heterosexual man that he is a "man-hater" because he has women as sexual partners? Assuming that a heterosexual man is a lover of women because he has sex with them can also be grossly inaccurate as the growing statistics on violence show. These document the tip of the iceberg of the reported criminal acts such as batterings, rapes, and murders of girls and women (Samuelson, 1994). I, on the other hand, along with most other lesbians and the majority of other woman, have never battered, raped, or murdered even one man. What I have had, as a helping professional, is many men over the years expressing their deep appreciation at how understanding, kind and effective I had been in assisting them with difficult, at times life-threatening problems. Thus I am servicing men, as well as women and children, in my professional public work which depending on the nature of the problem can entail caring for and about men in physical and psychological ways.

It is noteworthy that early in the AIDS epidemic when there was little public assistance mobilized, many lesbians assisted and cared for gay men suffering from this disease. It is curious indeed that lesbians like these, or like myself who are in caring professions, are labeled man-haters and heterosexual men (especially husbands) are considered the protectors of women yet there are many who are the perpetrators of violence against women. These mythology/belief systems are based on a reversal of reality in order to support the patriarchal hegemony.

Feminists, both heterosexual and lesbian, are often angry about "the injustices women face in the workplace, angry about the violence perpetrated against women, angry about persecution of gays and lesbians, and angry about the persistent denigration of women in popular culture"(Andersen, 1997, p. 9). Speaking up about the preference and privilege given to men and expressing anger about social injustices is also often labelled as "angry, man-hating lesbian behaviour" in an effort to invalidate this perspective and maintain the

status quo.

We can see how all women are kept in line with the threat of being called lesbian. Heterosexual feminists have confided to me that they have experienced this phenomena. All women then are controlled by the horror of the lesbian label in much the same way that we are kept in line by the threat of rape. Fear is what keeps women from going anywhere alone at night and keeps lesbians from coming out. Violence or the threat of violence, heterosexism, sexism and racism help keep women, lesbians and gay men, and racial minorities/majorities in fear for their safety and /or begging for scraps at the table of the elite, white, heteropatriarchal economic system (Pharr, 1988).

How do lesbians cope with this pervasive heterosexism? Through interviews with eight lesbians and a focus group, using a grounded theory approach, Abram (1996) documents a model of "lesbian transformations in dealing with heterosexism" (p.77). Abram's study was done with a sample size of eight lesbians who volunteered when she advertised for "lesbians who have reached a comfortable acceptance of their sexual identity" (p.154). The focus group and subsequent interactions produced collaborative models in almost a consensus-like process. Abrams (1996) uses the "grounded theory approach, in which a theory is arrived at inductively from the data on the phenomena studied" ( p.25). She goes on to say "it values the subjective realities of the participants, makes them the prime - in fact, the only source of knowledge" (p.25). She does conclude that "lesbians become more effective in dealing with heterosexism over time" (p. 81).

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). (Abrams, 1996, p. 82)

### Lesbians at Work

The economic reality of job loss is one that faces many lesbians. "As non-heterosexual women, their lifestyle places economic demands upon them to be self-supporting. As women, they must negotiate an unequal labour market that often places limits on the extent to which this can be achieved" (Dunne, 1997, p.127). Other major

losses can include family love and acceptance and custody of their children. Institutions, for example the legal, educational and medical/psychiatric ones, are wracked with heterosexism. Lesbians fear the "loss of public acceptance, a loss of allies, a loss of place and belonging. . . . they fear they will be no longer respected, listened to, honoured, believed. They fear they will be social outcasts" (Pharr, 1988, p. 22).

Making the decisions on when to, or how to, or where to come out, or whether to come out at all, must be weighed by the individual. Balancing job security and advancement while gauging the level of heterosexism in their work place is still a daily act for many lesbians. The crunch comes in maintaining a sense of self-worth and surviving economically.

Khayatt's (1992) research for her doctoral dissertation contained a sample of eighteen lesbian teachers. In her methodology section she uses Dorothy Smith's (1987) ideas that advocate starting from women's everyday experience and then studying how these experiences interact with the structures in which they are embedded. Men have been listening to each other, researching and writing about what is relevant to them, and women are located outside this (p.86). Referring to women, Khayatt states "their situations are trivialized, their reality is either discredited or discounted, and their whole being is objectified"(p. 87). Attempting to place women's experience into the "relations of ruling" meaning "that total complex of activities, differentiated into many spheres, by which our society is ruled, managed and administered" is a goal for women sociologists from Smith's perspective (Smith, 1990). Khayatt (1992) agrees with Smith's proposal:

What she is proposing is that the knower's bifurcated consciousness, the knowledge of herself as a subjectivity located in her body as well as in a specific material and historical moment, be extended to include her everyday experience in the ordinary everyday world superimposed by a knowledge of the social organization (p. 92)

From this position, Khayatt (1996) was able to locate the experiences of the lesbian teachers she interviewed and her own experiences within the wider social organization. In her case this included the relations of ruling impacting the primary and secondary school systems in Ontario, Canada in the eighties. She is able to question "how heterosexuality is

used by the ruling apparatus to expropriate women's productive and reproductive labour, how it is hegemonic, and . . . how individuals accept and integrate the dominant ideology in their everyday lives " (p. 94). She concludes that women loving women becomes a threat "in the implications such a life has on normative, prescribed female lives" (p. 243). Women as independent of men, as powerful and strong, regardless of sexual orientation, disrupts the "prevailing ideologies, the capitalist exigencies that promote and encourage systemic control over, and the continued, if more subtle, appropriation of, female labour and sexuality" (p. 242).

Ristock (1990) "administered open-ended questionnaires and conducted follow-up interviews with six lesbian feminist social service workers in 1987" (p. 80). Her study focuses on individuals working as helping professionals in a variety of agencies and institutions and thus portrays more than one type of work environment. Her participants all volunteered their time at a counselling centre for lesbians and gays and so had the experience of using their skills in an environment that allowed them to be out. This contradicted with their everyday paid employment situations. Only one of her participants was out at her paid work and she felt the strain of being a token lesbian. The rest were in the closet to some degree. "The homophobic social services system prevails regardless of the type of social service agency. We all need job security, so we are placed in the position of feeling compromised" (p. 77). Ristock adds to the "themes of contradiction and struggle" for lesbians by discussing those found in working in a lesbian and gay counselling centre (p. 79). The values and goals of lesbian feminists are orientated to ending "the oppression of women by challenging the male supremacy that underlies our culture" (p. 78). Gay men can have goals that conflict with this as they often "desire to have gay men freed from their intolerable 'deviant' positions and accepted within the existing (dominant) political and social structure" (p. 78). Ristock advocates for further research in the following areas:

As lesbian social service providers, we must view our work with an understanding of the contradictory relationships that exist between our personal realities and our public realities, between the personal and the political, between the heterosexual community and the lesbian and gay community, between the politics of gay



liberation and the politics of feminism, and between the service provider and the service recipient. (p. 79)

A study that came from the vocational psychology literature was done from interviews with ten lesbian women about the forming of their lesbian identity and their career trajectory (Boatwright, Gilbert, Forrest, and Ketzenberger, 1996). The women in this study were gathered through a friendship sampling and ranged from age 30 to 45 with nine white women and one African American. Many had attained above average levels of higher education and although many were in helping professions, there was more of a variety in careers with some in non traditional positions.

"Fully accepting what is defined by many in society as a 'nonnormative' sexual orientation is a long and multifaceted process consequently; 'coming out' may be defined uniquely by each individual" (Boatwright et. al., 1996, p. 214). Despite this acknowledgement of the individuality of the process and the social oppression at its root, these researchers go on to label this process a second adolescence. The coming out experience was conceptualized by Boatwright et al. around themes that described it as a "first 'real' adolescence", as a "second adolescence" and as "establishing a lesbian identity" (p.216-217). It is possible that these researchers' backgrounds in psychology leads to placing this often arduous process that can occur at any time in an adult woman's life into some sort of developmental psychological frame work. Boatwright et al. acknowledge feminist theories that critique such developmental theorists as Erikson, as possibly based on "white, androcentric, heterosexist experience and values". Yet they conceptualize the coming out process and its disorienting effects on identity, and at times career, as a second adolescence (p. 210). Is this label of a second adolescence necessary? Somehow a second adolescence seems to me to minimize the role that societal oppression plays in this uncovering process. It uses a concept, adolescence, which has some very white, eurocentric meanings. Also there needs to be some consideration of the life style/career changes around mid-life that can be true for many women, both heterosexual and lesbian. Women returning to school to pursue new careers in midlife is *not* a new phenomena, although psychologists have again dubbed it as a disorder and a stage, by labelling it the "empty nest syndrome".

Descriptions of adolescence vary from culture to culture and not all groups of people gear their ideas of maturity towards an autonomous independent adult nor do they have “dating” as one of these rituals. Belenkey et al. (1986) quote a study by Kagan that found that the Japanese value of *interdependence* contrasted with the American valuing of *independence*. Japanese parents were theorized to project autonomy onto their babies and therefore they perceived a need to coax children into a more dependent role to encourage the bonding seen as needed in adult life. American parents conversely were seen as projecting dependence onto their babies and this has a reverse effect on the direction children are encouraged to grow towards (p.178). I agree that awareness needs to be raised about the struggles and the joys of discovering a lesbian identity in a misogynist, heterosexist culture but I wish to question the need to make this fit into a pseudo second adolescence to fit into psychology’s developmental stages. Women in the Boatwright et al. study also described the coming out process in terms of “exploring, developing and solidifying a lesbian identity”(p.217). This perspective and terminology seems a preferable one when considering this identity process.

Boatwright et al. (1996) identified several themes affecting career trajectory: “educational delay” with descriptions of the emotional energy needed to focus on a new identity and intimacy; “career derailment” as a professional career took a ‘back seat’ to personal issues; and a “sense of feeling ‘behind’ their heterosexual peers” who had not had to deal with this disruption in identity (p. 217-218). “Loss of career opportunities” was one of the themes organized around the subject of societal homophobia. Examples included choosing less lucrative positions than ones in organizations that were higher profile and less tolerant, or actually losing a job possibility when mentioning a specialty in lesbian issues. “Fear of being discovered” was the theme that incorporated strategies for remaining in the closet at work. Both, fear of consequences such as loss of respect and the ultimate fear of being fired, were included. Isolating themselves at work, not being able to be honest or to really be themselves became coupled with feelings of being on edge and hating themselves for their dishonesty (p. 219).

“Internalized homophobia” consisted of a theme called “negative effect on self-

esteem and self-confidence” to encompass loss of prior professional confidence when learning of their lesbian-ness. The second theme under this heading was called “increased isolation” which resulted from strategies to hide sexual orientation and the accompanying shame and fear that resulted (p. 220). Amongst all this negativity, Boatwright et al.(1996), also found benefits which seemed to result from being part of the lesbian community.

For example “business benefits and networks” were identified which gained some of the participants increased financial opportunities. “Support for difficult challenges” was provided by lesbian friends who encouraged the participants to pursue new career paths and supported them when careers became difficult. A geographical move would be enabled by connections through links in lesbian communities. Becoming “diversity experts” is a benefit theme that Boatwright et al. found was strong as participants became involved in “a community of lesbian women committed to processing conflicts until consensus is reached” (p. 221) This led to increased ability to handle diversity issues in a professional environment and pride at how the lesbian community is far ahead of the straight community with the example of signers for the deaf being used a decade ahead of more mainstream enterprises. “Skill development” was another benefit identified which included advocacy skills from increased sensitivity to diverse issues (p. 223). Variations on many of these themes are seen in my research and will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

Ruth Fassinger (1996) also documents vocational issues for lesbians, looking at the internal and external barriers to vocational choice, implementation and adjustment. She identifies the following vocational issues for lesbians: “lack of self-confidence and decision-making skills; occupational stereotyping and limited perceived choices; bias in counseling and testing; lack of role models; lack of support from parents, families, spouses, peers, faculty resulting in a ‘null’ educational environment; self doubt; internalizing discrimination; guilt; fear of others’ attitudes; multiple role issues in the home-work interface; occupational discrimination; harassment; and ‘old boy’ systems” (p. 162).

#### Lesbians in Post Secondary/Adult Education

Does a lesbian fare better in the educational process than in the workplace as she prepares for her helping professional role? Unfortunately, there is evidence that post-

secondary institutions remain heterocentric with faculty and administration often not addressing their lesbian and gay students' needs. "The costs of heterosexism on campus are lowered quality and diversity of education provided, perpetuation of the sexist status quo and traditional roles, perpetuation of ignorance and perpetuation of prejudice against an oppressed group, and internalized oppression" (Baker, 1991, p. 30). Baker highlights areas of concern including "course content, textbook content, student support services, library resources, advisement, faculty employment, and collegial support" (p. 30). She feels that faculty and administrators are responsible for assisting in eliminating heterosexism on individual and institutional levels. Confronting heterosexist attitudes, encouraging gay role models in course content, encouraging dialogue about gay issues are some ways she sees faculty taking responsibility. Institutional level intervention includes: nondiscriminatory employment policies, hiring more gay and lesbian faculty/staff, monitoring textbooks for heterosexist content, incorporating gay content when designing inclusive demographic forms, and increasing gay and lesbian literature in the library (p.31).

Schreier (1995) would like to see a shift in the programming models in universities as they attempt to change heterosexist/homophobic beliefs and attitudes. Currently he sees an agenda that promotes tolerance and he would like to see that replaced with one that promotes nurturance. Tolerance means that something is "allowed" or "permitted" not necessarily something accepted, approved of or encouraged. A nurturing person is characterized as one "who gives sympathy and comfort, assists others whenever possible, and readily performs favors for others" (p.19). When this nurturing attitude is directed towards lesbigay people, there will be "genuine affection and warmth" and the willingness "to be advocates at many levels" (p. 20). His approach assumes that "gay, lesbian, or bisexual people are invaluable to our lives and culture . . . and need to be able to empower themselves . . . heterosexual(s) can help create this encouraging environment" (p. 22).

Some movement is taking place though and Hill (1995) outlines areas in which lesbian and gay adult education is taking place today. There are some independent schools in the United States as well as some courses appearing in other departments in colleges and universities. There are some actual departments of gay and lesbian studies with degrees

granted. Some libraries, cultural organizations, service organizations, and occupational associations incorporate this theme into educational opportunities. Mass media, gay and lesbian centers and bars, non-profit organizations and AIDS related health care agencies are all very involved in assisting to counter heterocentrism through adult education. Some churches and religious organizations as well as some political parties have developed gay interest groups. Hill argues that much of this activity does not reflect the character of a defiant and liberating, popular adult education social movement, rather it is an example of how groups that challenge power relations have become special interest groups and this depoliticization "has the potential to destroy the role of radical praxis" (p.153). Social movements are effective because they are fluid and are outside the status quo using unconventional radical methods that educate as well as push for social change. As these special interest groups and gay associations develop and become institutionalized the movement is taken inside structures that limit non-conforming behaviours. Thus instead of using radical grassroots strategies they become "domesticated and co-opted" (p. 152). Hill also suggests that "future adult education research will need to be sensitive to both the changing gay discourse and the heterocentric biases in past research methods, topic selection, methodological approaches, sample selection, data collection, data analysis, and reporting of results" (p. 153).

Chapkis (1994) identifies the additions that lesbian and gay academics are making as they take their place transgressively within the academy.

We tend to question authority, to criticize established methods of research and to see our work and our lives as explicitly political. We are at the forefront in rethinking our pedagogy-- how we teach and the relationship between students and teachers.  
(p.13)

Ettinger (1994) describes what happens when those who have been silenced begin to speak in educational situations:

An interesting thing often happens when people of colour speak up in a class: everyone else feels silenced. . . Everyone else really means People Lacking an Agenda (PLAs), people whose interest in race, class, and gender is grounded in

something other than the need to survive in an alien culture and/or to assess in good faith their own position in the multiple systems of subordination that constitute the culture (p. 51)

Ettinger goes on to describe the disorientation that can happen when the hegemonic heterosexual discourse is replaced by strategies that reject its often malevolent frames. "As subordinated people generate a discourse which implicitly or explicitly critiques the established order of the classroom PLAs begin to lose themselves" (p. 53). She suggests that white people and heterosexuals need to take some responsibility for racism and heterosexism. "To take responsibility is to find your footing in a world outside the dominant discourse. To take responsibility is to acquire an agenda" (p. 54).

#### Gender Socialization and Female Dominated Professions

Every female infant born into a patriarchal culture is subjected, in varying degrees, to painful circumstances related to discrimination and oppression. My focus in this study is on the oppression and discrimination that affects women in the Western world specifically North America, in institutions such as family, education and professional work.<sup>10</sup> Gilligan's (1982) work and those of subsequent researchers, for example Reitsma-Street (1991), indicate that identity for women is defined in relationship and evolves around an ethic of responsibility and care so that by the time a girl reaches the teenage years "the mandate to care is firmly established" (Baines, Evans, & Neysmith, 1991, p. 18). "Such traits as nurturing and taking care of others, serving and being orientated to contributing to others" have been actively cultivated through sex-role socialization (Kemp, 1994, p. 246). Baines et al. (1991) also see patriarchal notions of family involved in women's unequal role in caring. Women are indoctrinated into the ideology of motherhood and femininity and are socialized to "assimilate the expectations and norms surrounding caring in our society" (p. 19).

In a study of pairs of adolescent sisters, one who was considered delinquent due to contacts with youth court and one non-delinquent, Reitsma-Street (1991) found that "girls

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<sup>10</sup>For documentation of the torturous atrocities to infants, girls and women in many cultures see Daly (1978/1990) and Rush (1980).

not only learn to care and to bear the costs of caring, they are also policed to care and to bear the costs" (p. 110). She found that both sets of sisters were "pressured subtly and forcibly to care for others in certain ways, especially for boyfriends, fathers, and children, *more than* for themselves" (p. 110). She saw these young women learning that "women were the major providers of care for others and that they were expected to do likewise"; that they were to restrict caring for themselves to cultivating a physical appearance and personality that conformed to the "Western feminine female"; and that boyfriends are to be "the primary object of caring" (p. 116). She does mention that the delinquent sisters fought more against these lessons and she mentions some of them reporting "experimentation with lesbian relationships" but the rest of her focus and it would seem the sisters' focus is on boyfriends (p. 115).

What are some of the costs for these adolescent girls as they learn their societal lessons of caring? She found that "girls seriously restrict the development of their own interests and independence" (p. 120); "their bodies and spirits pay the price of sexual assault, unwanted pregnancy, inadequate birth control, as well as miscarriages and abortions" (p. 121); and they have an increase in "the risk of poverty and dependence" (p. 122). Reitsma-Street (1991) sums up some of these consequences stating:

Divorce, juggling home and paid work, pink collar ghettos, poor pay and poorer welfare and child care, and increasing unemployment, especially during times of recession, make girls even more vulnerable to poverty or dependence on others for food and shelter. (p. 122)

*Caring for* refers to "the instrumental and tangible tasks involved in caring" and *caring about* refers to the "expressive and affective dimensions" (Baines, 1991, p. 15). "Because caring is provided in the context of a supposedly freely entered relationship and regarded as 'natural' for women, the labour involved is often rendered invisible" (p. 14). If women want better wages as they care for others they are often accused of not caring about those they are giving a service to. "The pattern in which poorly paid women provide care to vulnerable populations has been evident throughout the development and expansion of health and social services in Canada" (p. 16).

Maternal feminism, the underlying ideology during the first wave of feminism that empowered and enabled women to work outside the home, also “reinforced the traditional role of women as caregivers” (Baines, 1991, p. 36). Based on notions of biological determinism, maternal feminism saw nurturing qualities in all women thus making them good agents for social reform. “Although maternal feminism was in many respects a narrow, biological, and conservative view of women’s caring role, it empowered women to work in hospitals, church-based social services, and schools and fostered a feminine consciousness and the solidarity of women” (Baines, 1991, p.42). This solidarity among women was evidenced by the creation of organizations such as the Young Women’s Christian Association, the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, and Big Sisters.

“Women’s early efforts to expand their public role were based on an ethic of care now embedded in the professions of social work, teaching and nursing” (p.24). Nurses had “an ethic of service and altruism committed to the public good” underpinning their work, but an emphasis on scientific medicine and a culture that affirmed the male-centered values of order, efficiency, and a hierarchical division of labour evolved so that “physicians became the key players in health care” (p.50). Yet the organization of the hospital “depended on a cadre of disciplined nurses to uphold the authority and primacy of the physician” (p. 55). Women teachers were also rooted in maternal feminism according to Baines and were to “uphold the domestic virtues of the home and transmit these to the broader community through the education of the young” (p. 51). Teaching young children especially was considered well suited to women with their caring orientation. Thus women could work outside the home in the caring roles of teaching, nursing and social work, but the maternal feminist ideology contained some biological determinism that made professionalization with its male ethic difficult to obtain.

“Men first gained a monopoly within the traditional professions and then gradually assumed control of the semi-professions” (Baines, 1991, p. 55). When discussing professional occupations, Kemp (1994) gives examples such as physicians, lawyers and registered nurses but she sees differences in the ways female-dominated professions remain semi-professions. Female-dominated professions she sees as “more orientated toward the



application of knowledge than the creation of it, and they lack the ability to monopolize that knowledge and to self-regulate" (p. 218). Baines (1991) states "critiques of professionalization suggest that although special knowledge and expertise are characteristics attributed to the professions, the key element is social power" (p. 37). The "service to humanity" values of the female-dominated professions are seen as extensions of the homemaker role and are thus devalued (Kemp, 1994, p. 218).

The subordinate nature of the relationship of the female-dominated profession of nursing to the traditionally male-dominated one of medicine, seems obvious to me having lived it, but she also cites the psychologist to social worker relationship as another example. "Women have been systemically denied legitimacy as healers as far back as the fourteenth century when university training was established as the credential distinguishing healers from witches" (Kemp, 1994, p. 218).<sup>11</sup> Universities prohibited women from attending and nursing is the area women were eventually allowed to dominate.

Are women who enter the paid labour force still consolidated in sex-segregated occupations and professions? Statistics Canada (1995), shows us that employed women in 1994 are still very much concentrated in female dominated areas with 70% "working in either teaching, nursing, and health-related occupations, clerical positions, or sales and services" (p. 67). A further break down of the figures reveals that in 1994 women were "86% of nurses and health-related therapists, 80% of clerks, 63% of teachers, 56% of service personnel, and 46% of sales persons"(p.67).

The attempt to attract men into these professions has shown that they often end up in more "male" roles of leadership and administrative positions. The few men who come into nursing, rise like oil mixed in water to sit in positions at the top (Kemp, 1994, p. 226). This then places them in the higher paying jobs in nursing as well as in a traditional place of authority accorded to men in Western society. Leighninger (1996) cites a similar condition

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<sup>11</sup>For more on witches (practitioners of the Wiccan religion) often the village herbalists and midwives see Starhawk (1979/1989). For three centuries the Christian patriarchy burned, drowned and hung greater estimated numbers of women than Jews were killed in Nazi Germany.

in social work. "From social work's beginnings, there has been a noticeable division in labor between male and female social workers with men generally in charge" (p. 129). The small number of female teachers who become principals in school systems has also been a finding of feminist researchers (Kinnear, 1995, p. 123). The increased numbers of men teaching in secondary schools also seems rooted in expectations of women to be caring for the children in a more maternal way in junior grades and men to "wrestle with a more formal academic program of educational theory" (Baines, 1991, p. 64).

Persuading society and some nurses that nursing deserves the recognition and rewards that are accorded some other professional work, has been difficult, according to Kinnear (1995). She sees "the monumental shape of Florence Nightingale" as towering "over the development of the occupation" (p. 98). Known for her pioneering efforts during the Crimean war and her initiation of schools for nurses, her legacy states that she was tireless and dedicated herself so nobly to helping others. Leighninger (1996) finds women social workers also have similar saint-like characteristics expected of them. She tends to point the finger at women saying "women have participated in this domination through their tendency toward altruism and self-sacrifice" (p. 129).

Autonomy seems to be the most difficult area that the nursing profession especially has yet to achieve. Hospital administrators and physicians have sought control of nurses. Kinnear (1995) views this phenomena as a gender issue with male administrators and physicians opposing attempts "from nursing organizations to regulate their own voice in the government of health-care systems" (p. 100). This notion of autonomy is at odds with what is expected of women in society, that is dependence and subordination. Just as the idea of a married woman being a professional was contradictory, so too is the idea of a group of women making authoritative decisions. Allen (1987) points out that although nursing says it is professional, it lacks control of "the terms, conditions and content' of its' work" (p. 7). Decision making regarding the type of service provided, the technology employed, the allocation of personnel, working conditions, what nurses wear to work, and the environment they work in, are all made without nurses input in most cases (p. 7). Allen states that this lack of control over their working conditions is often cited by nurses as one of the reasons

that cause them to leave the profession.

McPherson (1996) discusses the increased militancy of nurses as they unionize and participate in strikes, such as the one in British Columbia in 1989. "Frustrated with inadequate staffing, an intensified pace of work, insufficient salaries, and the dramatic outmigration of their co-workers from the province and the occupation, nurses in British Columbia went on strike" (p. 248). I participated in this strike and found it to be one of the most empowering experiences I have had as a nurse. Now in 1998, the British Columbia Nurses Union has obtained a strike vote again to assist in helping to settle their contract dispute with the Health Employers Association of British Columbia over excessive workloads and other unsatisfactory conditions. McPherson sees a combination of unionization, feminism and professional development as the factors in Canadian nursing's transformation to increased political awareness. She sees nurses now questioning "the concepts of femininity and professionalism that have been central to their occupational identity and organizational form" (p. 249).

Individual autonomy with its masculinist roots, seen as a core of what is considered professional, can be in conflict with a female dominated profession (Allen, 1987, p.9). Work by Gilligan (1982) and Belenkey et. al (1986) have suggested that there are other ways that some women prefer to make decisions which have more to do with collaboration and connection. Maybe the whole underpinning of the beliefs and practices accorded to male professionals which female-dominated professions have attempted to follow, are not appropriate or effective. Professionalism has been based on masculinist scientific notions of "objectivity and mastery or domination (as opposed to understanding)" (Allen, 1987, p. 13). Allen points out how this leads to inappropriate models for caring for sick people such as treating the client as a "mere body", and health care professionals working in a hierarchy rather than interdependently as they help another person (p. 13). "Mutuality in relationships and collective co-operation" are identified by feminists as "values conducive to redistributing the costs and benefits of caring between men, women, and the state" (Baines, 1991, p.25).

Baines feels that we need to begin by "recognizing women's caring as work" and

“identify the knowledge and skills” derived from this and “value these in the same way as more traditional modes of inquiry” (p. 66). Sitting in a classroom for elementary students recently I noticed posters on the wall with words and skills including “define” and “analysis”. I thought about these skills that are taught to young students. Would there ever be posters with “intuition” or “empathy” on them? What other skills do I rely on when I do healing work with clients that I have no names for that would be categorized under women’s caring or emotional labour?

Baines also points out that “professionalization has been accompanied by an attempt to objectify the cared-for and has led to blaming the victim” and possibly increased the distance “between women teachers, nurses, and social workers and those they serve” (p. 67). She feels that “a feminist ethos of professionalism needs to be based on an ideology that integrates an ethic of care and forms a more equal partnership with the cared-for” (p.67). This discussion around the client/professional relationship will be continued further in my review of Heyward’s (1994) work later in this chapter.

What of the heterosexual nature of relationships among professionals and those in what have been called the semi-professions or female dominated professions? The heterosexual family mythology constructs the notion of a naturally occurring “consensual, non conflictual source of support for all of its members” (Allen, 1987, p. 14). As the statistics on domestic (often male) violence in the family reveal there is a discrepancy between this myth and many families’ realities. This belief system or mythology, attempts to relegate “women’s sexuality to heterosexual, monogamous institutions and simultaneously to secure the benefits of women’s domestic labour for men” (p. 14). Is it really best for the elderly patient to be cared for in their home when the care then falls on daughters already burdened? The myth of the family being a caring situation for all usually takes a toll on those, often women, who are expected to do the caring. Lesbians are seen as a major threat to this system as they attempt to live their lives in some ways independent of men. The structures keeping these familial belief systems in place makes “extra-familial living emotionally and financially difficult to maintain”(p. 14). The lower wages paid to women resulting from their not being seen as primary wage earners; the lack of a career

ladder and short pay raise scale; and monopsony, where organizations such as "hospitals in a geographic area agree not to compete with each other" can lead to reduced incomes and career opportunities for nurses and other care-givers (p. 15).

Lesbians attempting to have a career in nursing and to some extent other female dominated professions, are then caught inside a masculinist, heterosexist structure. A lesbian helping professional in a career such as nursing, teaching, and social work which have been devalued as extensions of domesticity, works alongside other women, often invisible as a lesbian, one extra oppression and increased stressor added to her load. Lesbians grow up within female gender expectations and socialization patterns and have to deal with the treatment given to women as "not good enough", as second class citizens, as the "other" that Simone De Beauvoir (1952/1991) describes. The career limitations in professions such as nursing; the pay scale that reaches a maximum that is much lower than the fee for service income of some other professions; and a relationship to the physician that has its roots in a subservient, wifely role; could cumulatively be found quite strangulating. Added to this is the heterosexism that is institutionalized in society and in workplaces which could make life as a lesbian helping professional at the very least oppressive, with the fears of the possibility of job loss or discrimination a constant backdrop.

On the other hand, having co-workers who are usually female is one of the aspects of nursing I have appreciated. This aspect of female dominated professions may have been appreciated also by lesbians in the past as they dedicated their lives to their careers and worked closely with other women. Surely lesbians found employment in these occupations that initially were seen as appropriate for single women only. McPherson (1996) in a social history of Canadian nursing, discusses the compulsory heterosexuality that "served to marginalize or make invisible homoerotic relations" in nursing, a "world of almost exclusively female occupation in which bonds between women were accepted and encouraged" (p. 16). She found some "allusions to intense or special friendships between two students and occasional indications that some of these couplings were orientated along a masculine-feminine dyad, a less extreme version of the butch-femme personae that developed within the lesbian communities in the 1950s" (p. 183). She goes on to note that

there is “no evidence that the women identified as part of a couple pursued same-sex relations in their postgraduate careers” (p. 183). She did find letters written by a nurse in the late 1930's who was heart broken when another nurse that she had been living with, and in fact whom she had accompanied to a Red Cross outpost position, died of influenza. Her letters to other Red Cross personnel reveal that she was seen as the dead woman's life partner although the official obituaries announced only that her partner was “survived by her parents and a brother” (p. 185).

McPherson states that “companionate relations with other women was not unusual in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” when women “who chose work over marriage forged close emotional and social bonds with other women” (p. 185). This results in a debate amongst historians as to whether “emotional intimacy extended into sexual intimacy as well” and “should such relations be called lesbian if that erotic element is absent or unprovable?” (p. 186). She concludes that “heterosexual or lesbian women wishing to transgress openly the sexual mores of the day were not empowered by the restrictive sexuality inherent in nursing's conventional feminine image” (p. 186). In his book on lesbian and gay nurses Zurlinden (1997) rounds out the picture of Nightingale, the lady with the lamp, as he mentions letters written by Florence which reveal her passion for women that carried over into the bedroom. The lesbian-ness of this pioneering woman's life is not usually acknowledged in nursing histories, nor are her active political efforts. Certainly the presence of lesbians inside the female dominated professions is not new and feminist social historians are struggling with this subject as they delve into the past, aware of its androcentric and heterosexist records.

#### Racism

My particular sampling strategy did not result in any lesbian helping professionals of colour(s) and this issue will be discussed in later sections of the thesis, but the racism that is present in the workforce and in the helping professions could have had an indirect effect on this. Kemp (1994) outlines some American statistics on Black women's careers/work. She sees sex segregation with Black women found at the low paying end of female occupations. Kemp (1994) states that “Black women tend to be concentrated in serving the Black

community or in public service jobs. . . . their hourly earnings are consistently below those of both Black men and white women" (p. 224). According to the statistics, once Black women climb into the professions they are more numerous than Black men. She attributes some of this to their relegation to the female-dominated profession of school teaching (p. 213). In times of major change, white men end up in the best jobs, according to DiTomaso and Smith (1996) who also state "among women professionals. . . white women have a more favorable situation in terms of access to good jobs than do black women "(p.94 ).

Das Gupta (1996) studied "the most comprehensive settlement achieved in Canada with respect to systemic discrimination in the workplace" which resulted after "4 years of deliberations and hearings "(p.97). This followed a 1990 filing of complaints with the Ontario Human Rights Commission, by seven Black nurses and one Filipino nurse, against an Ontario hospital (p.97). She notes that "a pattern of segmentation of work along racial lines is a feature of health care in most of the advanced capitalist countries of the West"(p. 105). Das Gupta discusses the way in which "black nurses and other nurses of colour are often assigned to heavier duties in less specialized areas, less desirable shifts and units despite the fact that some of these nurses have considerable experiences and skills" (p.105). Promotions and performance appraisals are subjected to racial bias as are recruitment and disciplinary practices (p. 106-107). How this takes place on everyday levels includes excessive monitoring, blaming the victim (even when they may actually have been the target of harassment), and scapegoating (Das Gupta, 1996, p. 110). The stereotypes entrenched in health care about Black people come from myths that started in the slave trade. "Stereotypical ideas about Black people being 'childlike,' 'inferior,' 'unskilled' and 'dishonest' underlie the practices of infantilization, blaming the victim, bias in work allocation and underemployment" (p. 110). Das Gupta concludes that "race-blind and class-blind research leads to serious flaws in our understanding of what is happening in nursing and in health care in general"(p.115). I would of course like to add sexuality-blind research to Das Gupta's complaint about flaws in our understanding.

Varying degrees of homophobia/heterosexism are found in particular cultural groups, both historically and currently. Audre Lorde (1984) discusses the difficulties black

lesbians have as they are “caught between the racism of white woman and the homophobia of their [black] sisters” (p. 122). She states that in the Black community “any female self-assertion” is accused of being lesbian and black lesbians are seen as a threat to “Black nationhood” (p. 121). Thus life would seem particularly harsh for Black, lesbian helping professionals, whether they are in an occupational situation which includes service to a Black community or in an already stigmatized position, surrounded by racism, serving a predominantly white or mixed race community. Many may feel they must make a choice in their loyalties to the black community or the lesbian community although they are affected by both racism and heterosexism.

Native North American gays and lesbians are surrounded by serious racial discrimination, having barely survived the near genocide of the colonial white fathers, with poverty, substance abuse, and AIDS continuing to kill them in high numbers. They seem to have been given a much kinder heritage though from their native traditions. The concept of being *two-spirited* was “based on the recognition of people with alternate genders and/or sexualities as contributing members of traditional communities” (Wilson, 1996, p. 305). Wilson goes on to discuss how in some native cultures “two-spirited people were thought to be born ‘in balance’ . . . a balance of masculine and feminine qualities, of male and female spirits. . . . are often seen as ‘bridge makers’ between male and female, the spiritual and the material” (p. 305).<sup>12</sup> This two-spirited concept seems to be related to more than an individual’s sexual orientation/identity with its spiritual focus expanding the Western notion. As First Nations people are reclaiming their heritage, the inclusiveness of their community could assist in supporting a two-spirited woman as she navigates a professional education and occupation.

Racism coupled with sexism and heterosexism in the workplace is an area that needs further attention in research and academic literature in order to broaden our understanding of the complexity of identity and oppressive structures and situations.

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<sup>12</sup>It needs to be noted that there are many different cultures and cultural beliefs within the broad category of First Nations. This is true also of the cultural diversity subsumed under the category Black or Asian.



### Ethics/Boundaries

In response to one of the themes that arose during the interview/coding stage of the research, I explored the area of professional ethics and boundaries. As was discussed previously, professionalism is based on a masculinist, hierarchical and heterosexist paradigm. Being detached and objective, applying some type of linear logic to human relationships, both professional or personal (the later binary we know is a false dichotomy) just does not always provide the most viable options. Often at young ages these women were placed in positions with great responsibility, and as lesbians, especially in the past as closeted lesbians, they struggled with ethical concerns that may not have been voiced to other workers. Guidelines which were and are available may not suit their situation. The false dichotomies of the heteropatriarchy were set up to keep women at home as a man's private property doing unpaid labour. These rules are seen in a different light as lesbians (who really aren't supposed to exist) come to do paid women's work of caring for others inside masculinist structures.

In her struggle to understand her wounding from experiences in therapy with a "sister", another lesbian, feminist professional, Heyward (1993) comes to some profound insights into "professional" ethics and boundaries. Those of us involved in the helping professions need to reexamine these concepts and practices in light of their white, patriarchal, scientific, and classist origins. In her book, Heyward includes responses to her position from other professionals. Miriam Greenspan, a feminist psychotherapist, (in Heyward) defines professionalism as:

an entire hierarchical system of value, status, and ultimately of power. . . . a measure of worth that starts with the objective capitalist market value of the professional, the price he commands for his services . . . it ends with the internalization of this market value in the form of what psychologists call self-esteem (p.201).

What happens in this status conscious, credentialed hierarchy is that the "professional is somebody" and "the nonprofessional is nobody" (p. 201). Contrary to beliefs that this is accomplished entirely by "sheer talent, intelligence, perseverance and hard work", Greenspan sees that "often one is born to this by inherited class privilege" and

this hierarchical system keeps “people separate and unequal”(p.201). Once again the dualistic binaries are cited that polarize and keep some groups/individuals as other and devalued. Reason/emotions, with their resulting masculine/feminine associations, are then accorded to the professional and the client respectively. This “condemns the Patient to inferior status. ‘Neutrality’ is really the absence of connection to the devalued (nonprofessional) Other.” (p. 202). By possessing knowledge, the professional has power over the client (or student or patient) and this “inevitably leads to the control or manipulation of the Other by the Professional - if the Professional wishes to live up to the ethic of care he has been taught ” (p.203)<sup>13</sup>. Greenspan (in Heyward) cites R.D. Laing and Jurgen Habermas, as two professionals who commented on respectively, the disease of this ethic and the closed system of this professional paradigm (p. 203).

Heyward introduces the notion of patriarchal logic as “the systemic, pervasive ordering of our bodies/minds/souls/selves in relation to one another through a hierarchical construction of unchanging power relations. “(p. 4).

‘the fathers’ - are ordained by birth, race, class, religion, profession, custom, accumulation of wealth, or simply by their gendered genital structure, to hold and use power over others in a way that is benign, ethical, ‘logical’: that is, both to ‘help others’ and to secure their own power so that it does not change hands. (p. 4)

Seeing as unethical rules which do not allow the “cultivation of genuinely mutual relations”, Heyward wishes that “those of us who work as healers - therapist, doctors, nurses, priests, pastors, rabbis, educators, midwives - understand how badly abusive we can be by withholding intimacy and authentic emotional connection from those who seek our help” (p. 10). With her focus on the need for “mutual empowerment”, Heyward sees “erotic power” and the sacred in the Nicaraguan revolution and in therapy sessions as well as in

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<sup>13</sup> The masculine pronoun was used deliberately as the psychiatric and psychological practitioners were male initially and the structures put in place that continue are extensions of this objective, separate, detached, masculinist professional paradigm.

genital sexuality (p. 28).<sup>14</sup> She explains that "mutual authenticity is the root of all that is genuinely moral, creative, and liberating, whether in teaching, pastoral work, or psychotherapy" (p. 183). The ethical question then for professionals "is how to embody our institutional power in such a way that it is transformed into mutually creative energy between us and those who seek our help." (p. 185). This is done in the "context of collaboration. . . . we should try to be always in a process of giving this power up responsibly, with the help of our friends and colleagues, letting it be transformed by the power of mutuality." (p. 184).

In defining mutuality Heyward suggests "both parties becoming more 'zestful' . . . more deeply into the joy we know ourselves capable of when we are in touch with who we are created to be; brothers, sisters, friends in the world" (p. 232). Heyward feels that we need to look at how uncritically we use the concept of boundaries.

Those most involved in efforts to curb sexual abuse by therapists and clergy often tend to absolutize boundaries as walls that discourage intimacy of any sort between professionals and those with whom we work. This absolutizing of boundaries serves to reinforce the abusive logic upon which the healing professions have been structured in the first place - that is to hold patriarchal power in place. (p. 186)

Geenspan (in Heyward) comments on how the professional ethics in "seminars about transference and counter transference, interpretation, resistance, and acting out" can stifle "the compassionate impulse towards connection that motivates people to become psychotherapists in the first place" (p. 200). Professional relationships can obscure the person-to-person connection that is where any real healing occurs. The "'Nobody Home'" approach to therapy or other professional relationships leads to "the danger zone" being thought "to reside in any manner of person - to person touching - physical, emotional, or spiritual - that might take place in the relationship" (p. 197). What she sees resulting from this is that many professionals never learn "the art of being authentically themselves in a

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<sup>14</sup> Heyward spent time as a Witness for Peace in Nicaragua and was inspired by the "ethic of mutual empowerment" behind the fight for democracy and freedom against the "economic and military hegemony of the United States" (p. 147-148).

therapeutic way - in a way that allows the Patient to access her own inner authority rather than to rely on the authority of the Professional" (p. 200). When the designated client's personhood is seen as a threat to these professional boundaries, the professional who has internalized these rules feels discomfort and retreats. Greenspan questions "whether genuine healing of the individual is at all possible without the healing of our cultures's pathology" (p.205). She also looks at how ethics are positioned on this patriarchal, cultural paradigm which "stems from the fundamental domination of woman by man" ( p.205).

Heyward asks "When lesbian therapists say that *they*, unlike other therapists, cannot be intimate with lesbian clients or former clients because the dangers of sexual-boundary violation are too real, do they not see that all life-giving relationships are infused with both erotic power and danger?" (p. 171). She proposes that women struggle for right-relation, for "right, mutually empowering connection" that is " 'dangerous' in that it threatens to transform us and the ways we love and work" (p.171). Those who choose this option contribute to revolutionizing women's lives as opposed to those who chose "the safety of separation from sisters who they fear might love them either too much or not at all" (p.171).

Heyward's lesbian partner, Beverly Harrison, a professor of Christian Ethics, comments on professional ethics stating that these require "above all an ability to be deeply honest about our needs and an ability to meet others' feelings with the deepest possible candor" and an "openness to relational movement and change, so that in concrete ways helper and client become companions who can, together, reconceive and reconfigure their relationship without fear of having to conform to stereotypical patterns" (p. 211).

Lassen-Willems, an Episcopal priest and counsellor, another professional who responds in Heyward's book, clarifies that the book "is not saying that a healing relationship is a license for sex between therapists and their clients" but that it is about how "patriarchy fetters intimacy; how erotic energy, expressed in human intimacy, is an inherent part of healing; and how, in our healing roles we can all too often take on the mantle of the oppressor." (p. 220). He recommends that men abstain from sex in a healing relationship saying that "sex for us in healing relationships, has a different significance than it has for women because we have too often used power in our sexual relations to exploit others"

vulnerabilities.”(p. 222). He sums up what is needed in a healing process. “It does mean that honesty and openness about intimacy, about friendship, about mutuality, and, yes about sexual feelings and their expression must become part of our healing if we are to open to Sophie/Sophia, a genuine Sophic vision of healing.” (p. 222).<sup>15</sup>

### Summary of the Literature Review

This chapter has looked at the literature in five areas: lesbian identity, heterosexism/homophobia, gender socialization and female dominated professions, racism, and ethics/boundaries. The first area discusses the lesbian identity process, coming out to self and then others in a heterosexist world. The relational outlook of many women, both lesbian and heterosexual, towards their sexuality often results in confining this to committed relationships. It is important to consider stories about lesbian identity from a radical feminist perspective seeing lesbianism as an alternative to patriarchal heterosexuality and restrictive notions of womanhood.

In the discussion of heterosexism/homophobia, the concept of homophobia was problematized. Heterosexism and shame due to heterosexism were identified as important issues to focus on. Internal oppression and internalized domination were concepts used also to identify the dynamics affecting our behaviours as we deal with each other in a complex stratified society with institutionalized oppressions such as racism and heterosexism. The goal for each individual is to become aware of and overcome our internal patterns and develop alliances to other oppressed groups. It is crucial to recognize how sexism, heterosexism, and racism are all oppressions that maintain the economic/social/political supremacy of the white heteropatriarchal elite. Lesbians profoundly disrupt the dominant heterosexist/sexist ideology as they step out of the traditional women's role of economic dependence on and/or privately servicing men. Other research shows how lesbians evolve from fear and hiding, to take a proactive stance towards a nonheterosexist society.

Lesbians daily weigh the decision to come out or not against fears of job loss and/or

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<sup>15</sup>Heyward uses the figure of Sophia, who represented “Incarnate Wisdom”(p.220), and Sophie, who was the name for the “free-spirited girl-child and sister-spirited woman” inside herself (p.93). Both concepts were invaluable on her healing journey.

discriminatory employment practices as well as losses such as family acceptance, custody of children, and a decreased standing in society. These relations of ruling keep many lesbian helping professionals in the closet. Contradiction and struggle are constant themes for many lesbian social service workers as they move between personal/public realities, heterosexual and gay communities, feminist politics and gay liberation. Some research has conceptualized the lesbian coming out process as a second adolescence which minimizes the role social oppression plays in this sometimes painful, disorientating process that happens at a broad range of ages in lesbian lives. Research has also revealed the benefits of lesbian-ness in developing advocacy skills, or an expertness in diversity issues. These and other benefits of lesbian-ness can be used in work contexts. The heterocentricity in post secondary and adult educational settings, and in educational institutional structures and practices, has been examined, leading to practical suggestions for inclusivity in all areas.

In research that explores gender socialization, it has been noted that society polices young girls to develop nurturing traits and to shoulder the burden of caring for and about others which unfortunately results in the neglect of themselves. Maternal feminism, which had a basis in biological determinism, empowered middle-class, white women to move out of the home and into jobs that cultivated this caring for and about others such as social work, nursing and teaching (Baines, 1991). These female dominated professions based in an ethic of care are seen as semi-professions in contrast to male dominated professions that eschew a scientific basis, where efficiency and order are valued within hierarchical structures. The female-dominated profession of nursing is still struggling to gain recognition and monetary rewards through unionization, feminism and professional development. Issues around the masculinist notions of professionalization such as objectifying the client and increasing the distance between professional and client have also been studied. Historical research has studied close life partnerships of women in the helping professions. The question remains as to how to re-present these women if their relationships can not be proven to be explicitly sexual and thus labelled lesbian? (McPherson, 1996, p. 186).

Racism is another important issue to consider when studying lesbians. In the labour

market Black women are often at the low end of the pay scale. However they do have higher numbers in the professions in comparison to Black men due to their involvement in the female dominated profession of teaching. Research has documented systemic discrimination of nurses of colour(s). Black lesbians are then caught between white racism and Black heterosexism. The concept of being two-spirited, attributed to some First Nations cultures, is a more fluid idea that sees lesbian and gay people by their spiritual nature, often thought of being "in balance" and leading to "bridge maker" (mediator) community roles.

Research into the issue of ethics and boundaries in helping professional relationships has revealed masculinist notions of professionalism based on the patriarchal domination of woman by man. The professional is viewed as "somebody" who is to remain detached and "objective", thus devaluing the patient to the status of "nobody" which leads to professional control and manipulation. The emotional connection, both erotic and sacred, between two people which promotes healing through mutuality and authenticity is thus rendered impossible and the status quo of power is maintained. The suggestion has been made that lesbian therapists struggle with their woman clients to find "right-relation" by being honest about needs and feelings so that healing and transformation can occur for both parties.

This study of six lesbian helping professionals has been informed by the conceptualizations and research outlined in this chapter. In the following chapter, I review the methodological approach taken.

### Chapter Three: Methodological Considerations

#### The Unfolding of a Methodology

"The overt ideological goal of feminist research in the human sciences is to correct both the invisibility and distortion of female experience in ways relevant to ending women's unequal social position" (Lather, 1991, p. 71). Lesbians have been rendered invisible among women throughout patriarchal history. Feminist research that gives lesbians a voice and corrects the misinformation about them is needed. Qualitative research, an approach that has dominated feminist research, often uses narrative, instead of numbers, to give descriptions and interpretations of the people and the situation being studied.

My methodology, life history interviews and a focus group, evolved from a meandering path through my qualitative research courses which were in ethnography and my feminist focused graduate courses on women, education and work. Ethnographic research came from the field of anthropology and is now being adapted to other fields such as education, nursing and social work. "Ethnography is part of the interpretive and phenomenological paradigm which holds that reality is socially constructed through individual or collective definitions" (Butterwick, 1989, p. 26). The ways the researcher can explore, and then re-present, these individual and collective perceptions of reality, seem to be multiple and varied. Hammersley (1990) states:

There is considerable disagreement as to whether ethnography's distinctive feature is the elicitation of cultural knowledge (Spradley 1980), the detailed investigation of patterns of social interaction (Gumperz 1981), or holistic analysis of societies (Lutz 1981). Sometimes ethnography is portrayed as essentially descriptive, or perhaps as a form of story-telling (Walker 1981); occasionally, by contrast, great emphasis is laid on development of theory (Glasser and Strauss 1967; Denzin 1978). (p.1)

Ethnography literally means "writing the culture" and in my classes we talked about the field of education which looks at classroom culture and work culture. It occurred to me that if there was a classroom culture then there must be a lesbian and gay culture or subculture so I thought about ways of investigating it. "In an ethnographic study the researcher relies on observation, interviewing and document analysis or a combination of



these to provide an in-depth understanding of what is studied" (Schumacher & McMillan, 1993, p. 37).

My course work included an assignment in conducting field work to learn about participant observation, an ethnographic data collection method. I chose a lesbian bar as my "field" and took my small note pad to look for lesbian culture. Although it was quite interesting to ponder the cultural meanings of rituals such as a Drag King show, I wanted to explore other meaningful lived experiences of lesbians. Conducting interviews with individuals about the importance of the bar at various times in their lives and about lesbian culture in general seemed to add considerable depth to my participant observation field work. "Meaning-making is the heart of the cultural process, and the interpretation of meaning--from a slight distance, from one's own perspective and never to the exclusion of other interpretations--is the heart of the ethnographic enterprise" (Dawson, 1996, p. 9).

I attended another graduate course on women, work and education and conducted interviews with two lesbians about the intersection of their lesbian-ness with their work and educational experiences. The stories collected in these interviews seemed rich with information about lesbian lives. Interviewing is a skill I have developed as a helping professional but using it to elicit perceptions of lesbian identity and culture and how this intersects with the dominant heterosexist culture brought data which seemed fascinating to me. I developed a plan to conduct eight interviews and two focus groups which seemed doable in my time frame. So although my intent was ethnographic in that I wanted to add to cultural knowledge about lesbians and their lives as I elicited descriptions and stories, I did not do the participant observation or document analysis that are significant in ethnographic methodology. My intent was also feminist in that I wanted to create a space for the voices of women, in particular lesbians, a marginalized group of women, and bring their stories to light.

The researcher needs to "recognize the reflexive character of social research: that is to recognize that we are a part of the social world we study" (Hammersley, 1991, p. 1990). Hammersley goes on to state that the researcher "is the research instrument par excellence" (p. 18). As I thought about my position as a lesbian doing research with lesbians, my insider

status was obvious. I decided to use this insider position and knowledge in the work/education aspect also, choosing to focus on other lesbian helping professionals. The depth of the questions that I was forming about gender socialization and career, coming out stories, and the impact of heterosexism in work and education, made an hour interview seem too short. I made a final decision to do longer interviews with fewer participants, the number hovered between 4 to 6, and only one focus group. I called these lesbian/career history interviews and only on completion did I realize they were very much like life history or oral history interviews.

"If illuminating and resonant theory grounded in trustworthy data is desired, we must formulate self-corrective techniques that check the credibility of data and minimize the distorting effect of personal bias upon the logic of evidence" (Lather, 1991, p.66). An approach that addresses the personal bias of the researcher involves self-reflection often through journal writing and a declaration of one's own position and biases. My journal was used after the individual interviews and the focus group, to vent feelings and take stock of what had transpired. The identification of some of the themes started through this discussion with myself as I wrote about my process/progress with the interviews and how they intersected with the literature I had read. The focus group with all six of us present, helped to gain input on the themes I had found in the interviews. It also gave the group an opportunity to be part of the decision-making around the theme/issue of how to claim their lesbian identity.

As I was a member of the population I was studying it occurred to me that my story could add to the data. Placing myself in the hands of one of my co-researcher/participants to be interviewed accomplished several goals. It placed my story into the data to be coded so my curiosity about these differences/similarities was easily satisfied but it was also a benefit to the research in adding one more participant, one more perspective. Probably the most enlightening part of this process was that I experienced directly the vulnerability that my co-researcher/participants might also have felt as I answered the personal and professional questions on my research guide with one of my peers taking notes and taperecording. The power imbalance between this one co-researcher/participant and myself

was reversed for these two interviews thus blurring the line between researcher and participant. I did feel quite vulnerable and yet it brought me closer to the woman who listened. Transcribing my interview was another very illuminating experience as I listened to myself try to explain to another person the distress and confusion that were the consequences of the coming out experience for me. I felt very accepted by this co-researcher/participant and indeed experienced this as healing. I understood experientially why "therapeutic" was one of the words used by another co-researcher/participant as she described her interview experience. I felt that it was an important tool in reflecting on the subjective/objective binary and would recommend this for other researchers when they are researching a topic that intersects with their own experience. I am also aware that in my case I had helping professionals as co-researcher/participants so they have developed interviewing skills and have experience listening to other's personal stories.

My purposes in using these data collection methods was to look for themes/patterns that explore the processes and meanings of lesbian realities and also to gather stories for others to read and hopefully enter *vicariously* into these lives. I also wanted to include the participants as much as possible in a co-researcher role with involvement in some of the decision-making process. As a qualitative researcher there is a need to stay open for new and unexpected issues as themes arise out of the participants' stories. Some of the issues seemed fairly obvious before the study began, but as the coding process unfolded there was the excitement of watching unexpected themes emerge. Listening to my struggles with the theme of ethics and boundaries one of my co-researcher/participant's recommended a book which, like one of the goddess Diana's arrows, struck true. This is an example of the give and take amongst us that is not usually found in more traditional researcher/participant paradigms.

### Life History Interviews

According to Marshall and Rossman (1995), "the life history approach is used across the social science disciplines and is particularly useful for giving the reader an insider's view of a culture" (p.87). These authors point out the benefits of life histories as they "attempt to define the growth of a person in a cultural milieu"; "emphasize the experiences

and requirements of the individual - how the person copes with society, rather than how the society copes with the stream of individuals"; and "are valuable in studying cultural changes over time, in learning about cultural deviance" (p.88). For feminist research they are "a way of understanding, free of androcentric bias, how women's lives and careers evolve" (p. 88). They also suggest that "life histories are helpful in defining problems and in studying aspects of certain professions"(p. 88). Casey (1993) quotes those who suggest that life history and oral history are the same method with the former being the label given by sociologists and the latter the name used by historians. She feels though that "life history research aims to combine dimensions which have been separated out in other methodologies" (p.24.). My focus wasn't as broad as Casey's, who requested her women teachers answer one basic question - "Tell me the story of your life"(p.17). I was more specific about the areas I wanted covered but these included growing up female, discovery of sexuality, education and career decision making, as well as stories about their working lives.

Schumacher & McMillan (1993) in a discussion about career and life histories suggest that these will take two to seven hours (p. 427). I focused on career and lesbian histories which took a total of three to four hours for each woman divided over two different sessions. The participants were given the completed transcripts, which had been transcribed from the audiotapes, to see if they were satisfactory. They were invited to annotate and/or delete anything from their transcripts although they all waited until the first draft of the thesis to make any changes. Most of them annotated their own words to increase their intended meaning. One woman found the thesis draft quite "wonderful" and stated she and her girlfriend had both enjoyed it. Another woman critiqued some of the conclusions I had made in chapter six and some statements that she felt didn't really fit for her so we discussed these.

Matsumoto (1996), in her study of a Japanese American community points out, "oral histories, long a staple method for the anthropologists, proved particularly useful for gaining access to the experiences of people who left few personal written records" (p. 160).

Women's lives in general, have been under documented and as busy mothers, homemakers

and employees, they have had little time to keep personal records of their lives. "Oral history interviews provide an invaluable means of generating new insights about women's experiences of themselves in their worlds" (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 11). Lesbians have been doubly silenced so being able to facilitate the telling of their stories seems especially important to me.

### Confidentiality

The issue of confidentiality in conducting interviews with lesbians has been a concern to several researchers. Khayatt (1992) was very specific about her need to keep the lesbian teachers she interviewed completely protected due to their fears of losing their jobs if their closeted lesbian identity was leaked. She included a written guarantee as part of the transcript. She also agreed not to use the quotes in any continuous way, thus not constructing a personalized identity that would be recognizable. Her work was done in the early eighties within a particularly vulnerable group who worked for primary and secondary school boards in small towns in Ontario.

Ross (1995) on the other hand, interviewed lesbian activists for her oral history interviews and all but one of the original members of the Toronto organization whose history she was mining wanted their real names used. Her interviews took place between 1988 and 1991. "They argued strongly for visibility on strictly political grounds as a way of lesbianly claiming pride in themselves and their community" (p. 18).

Abrams (1996) agreed to her participants keeping their first names if they wished. As her study was conducted in Vancouver, I was aware of putting faces to at least two of the distinct first names. This did not seem harmful given the nature of her study which looked at the process of lesbians as they moved from hiding to an activist stance. She advertised for women who were comfortable with their lesbian identities which often means they are at a stage of being openly lesbian in most aspects of their lives and are therefore not in jobs which they fear losing.

I was concerned about the nature of the public service work of helping professionals, and was inclined towards maintaining anonymity. I liked the idea of the women choosing a pseudonym plus disguising any recognizable characteristics and details but maintaining

some sense of a continuous presence to their stories. The holistic nature of women's lives seemed better served by being able to represent the ways that the complexities of one life intertwine and evolve (Tom, 1993). Anonymity and confidentiality was also a priority with respect to their place of employment.

As I have outlined previously, from the first interview through to the last interview these women wanted to claim their lesbian identity. Some, however, expressed concerns for others in their lives whose stories were entangled with their own. Personal family and work secrets or difficulties *other than* the interviewees' lesbian-ness were revealed in these interviews. So several co-researcher/participants wanted to be able to protect these significant others, the siblings, parents, children or co-workers who had their own secrets or difficulties which featured in these stories. There can also be a delicate balance some "out" lesbians strive for, as they challenge heteronormativity and yet have a desire to protect others from the violence and shaming that heterosexism can bring to individuals and their families. Taking all these concerns into consideration, I eventually thought of a strategy which included putting names, education and professional roles at the beginning of the thesis, and then presenting their accounts in a collective non-identifiable way. Thus, unless someone reading the thesis had prior knowledge of the individual, it would be very difficult to place any statement or pieces of a story with one particular participant. This made places of work and other individuals in their lives as anonymous as possible. This strategy was discussed and agreed to by the participants in the focus group. I did lose the power of a holistic look at an individual life but the approach taken helped to reveal and highlight the themes that emerged and the similarities/dissimilarities among the co-researcher/participants. I felt that the segments of stories were powerful enough on their own that the reader would still enter into these in a felt sense.

### Witnessing

Gaining trust and rapport, facilitating the flow of stories that may be funny or sad, and generally being a witness to someone else's life, are all part of the researcher role. Matsumoto (1996) discusses the connection that she made with interviewees by initially telling them of her own connections to the Japanese American community she was studying.

My twenty plus years of experience as a helping professional of which only three were spent unaware of my lesbian identity established a similar common ground with my participants. Being a part of their lives in other situations or community groups was also helpful in establishing rapport.

Matsumoto brings up another very vital point when she discusses how "emotional outpourings occurred for which I was unprepared" (p. 163). In Matsumoto's example her participants weep as they tell the stories of traumas in their childhood and she herself had to stop and consider how interviewing, in the name of history, may have some psychological effects (p.164). She also discusses how this telling of traumas may bring some form of healing to her participants. "Although I felt leaden and depressed, the women seemed light hearted and cheerful, one of them whistling as she bustled around her house" (p.164). This grieving process seems similar to the stage that Judith Herman (1992), a feminist psychiatrist, calls remembrance and mourning in healing from, what she labels, complex post-traumatic stress disorder.

Gays and lesbians have been silenced and oppressed, often suffering from the traumas of verbal and sometimes physical abuse. Talking of the pain of discrimination and harassment with its effects on their lives, can lead to grieving as part of telling their stories. Tragically, women often experience the abuses of childhood or adult sexual assault or violence and I was concerned that these may be painful parts of my participant's realities. Having had experience as both a counsellor and psychiatric nurse, I felt quite capable of facilitating any grieving that might occur and making any referrals to other resources if needed. My role in these interviews is a case of witnessing; being another human being who is accepting, respectful, attentive and fully present to hear their stories.

Chronological order starting with their childhood seemed to be the easiest place to begin after the consent form was signed. I did find that the personal coming out story, the initial lesbian-discovery process, was always covered in the first interview. I had initially thought that this might be more personal and would be more comfortably told in the second interview. Possibly because of the trust already established or the centrality of the experience to their lives and to my research we seemed to move into this area quite early

and easily. The second interview was usually more focused on the intersection of lesbian-ness and career/work experiences plus expanding on areas covered too briefly or missed in the first interview.

Each interview was, of course, an individual experience. Weeping did occur with one participant as she discussed the damaging consequences on her life and the lives of those close to her that ensued in reaction to her disclosure of her lesbian-ness. I was surprised to find myself close to tears as one participant discussed a loving response from her father as she revealed her lesbian identity. This soon turned to laughter as I realized that I had been so caught up in the story that I had not noticed the tape recorder stopping. As this woman retold her "coming out to Dad" story I felt tearful again listening to her the second time. Not only was this a powerful story, but it illustrates how difficult it is to be listening to fascinating material and paying attention to the machinery and duties of the researcher role. My journal was the place I went to document, debrief and analyze these experiences. I personally transcribed all but three of the thirteen audiotapes. I actually found that I enjoyed this process which I had initially dreaded, thinking it would be tedious and boring. I felt like I was reliving the interviews and was better able to really hear the content and nuances of their voices in the transcription process. Due to time constraints someone recommended a professional transcriber to me and she transcribed three of the interviews.<sup>16</sup>

### Participant Selection

I had planned to identify participants using a snowball technique. This means that one participant would suggest another lesbian helping professional who might be interested in being interviewed. Word of mouth in the lesbian community, possibly due to its history of secrecy, is a common form of communication. In the course of my daily life though, there were some individuals who asked about my academic work at university and then either offered and/or were invited to be part of my study.

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<sup>16</sup> I would suggest using a letter/contract outlining the parameters of the work with the transcriber. This will give you some assurance of confidentiality and give clarity about details such as equipment needed and the time/financial parameters.



I wanted to have a diversity of ages and racial categories to give historical and ethnic diversity of experiences. Discrimination and oppression can affect each individual in different ways but this also depends on their race, class and economic privilege. Historical and social contexts are also at play in younger or more recently out lesbian lives. I did specify helping professionals who had an education in the female dominated professions of nursing, teaching and social work. I expected that my interviewees would identify as members of the middle class economic bracket but this can vary considerably depending on the employer organization and type of position individuals obtain. Association with men such as well-off fathers or husbands is another way that a woman's financial situation or sense of her class position can be changed. How my co-researcher/participants identify their class is re-presented in chapter four.

As I began my initial interviews with individuals that I knew from other areas of my life, I was aware that these were all white women. I began asking for names of lesbians of colour(s) from others in my network. As the study progressed I realized that I was having difficulty finding lesbians of colour(s) and when I did for various reasons they were unable to enter the study. I eventually became aware that the network strategy was not going to gain me the type of diversity I wanted. Introducing an entirely different sampling strategy such as advertising through newspapers or organizations would not have been possible within the time limits I had set out. All together I asked seven white women and five women of colour. The five white women who agreed to be in my study were all women who were involved currently in other areas of my life. One of the women of colour who I knew from a previous social setting, initially agreed to be interviewed but then called me to cancel. She expressing her fears around her lesbian-ness being revealed due to her solitary status as a visible minority in her professional situation. Discussions with my committee members lead to a consultation with a Black feminist faculty member.<sup>17</sup> The concept "lesbians of colour" was problematized as it suggests a commonality of experience that does not reveal the differences among women who are racialized minorities within a dominant

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<sup>17</sup> I wish to thank Yvonne Brown for her honesty, wisdom and constructive suggestions.

white society. It was suggested that I expand my literature review so that lesbians of colour(s) and issues of racism were given a voice in that way. Chapter six discusses race including whiteness as a cultural ethnicity.

Diversity of age was another issue. Most of the women I knew or who were referred to me, were in their thirties or forties. Thus my network sampling resulted in more of a homogeneous group of participants at least with respect to age and ethnicity. As I considered the deeper and more intimate questions asked in these lesbian/career life history type of interviews, and in the focus group, I wondered if after all this may have been the most appropriate selection method. The women had some level of knowledge and comfort with me from contact in other areas of our lives and this probably deepened the trust that lead to more open and vulnerable stories being shared.

#### Focus Groups

Abrams (1996) included a group session with her participants after she had worked with the themes from their interview transcripts. They developed *with* her a description and a theory/model of the process of moving from internalized negative attitudes regarding homosexuality, to an acceptance of themselves and eventually taking an activist position. Although I was not producing grounded theory as she was, I did want my participants to hear the themes that I had pulled from the data and to give their feedback. I was also anxious to see how the focus group would resolve my struggle for ways to respond to their desire to claim their lesbian identity.

As I shared the themes that emerged from the interviews in the focus group, I used co-researcher-participants' words to back up the themes, but did not identify which woman made which comments. Sometimes they would say "oh that was me" and expand on a particular comment, but everyone in the context of the focus group discussion, could stay anonymous at the level of their stories if they wished. This was similar to the plan I had for writing up the data in the thesis. By initially identifying them as co-researchers/participants, but not identifying any one woman's story, or the identities of the other players in her life or her geographic and work locations, I felt that I had a workable plan. I was pleasantly surprised at how quickly this plan became our agreement when I presented it at the end of

the focus group. Everyone felt that by reading over the thesis with the option of deleting or annotating any information, their concerns were addressed about other players in their lives, yet they would be claiming, to a certain extent, their lesbian helping professional identity.

Bernard (1994) states "the real power of focus groups is that they produce ethnographically rich data" (p. 229). Some expansion and debate on some of the more relevant themes such as ethics/boundaries, was elicited by the focus group and has been presented in the data section. Debate on themes such as attraction to/sex with women ended up on the cutting room floor as did other information from the individual interviews.

I held the focus group in my home after a discussion about the pros and cons of this with my supervisor. I had felt that the university setting might enable me to keep the discussion on the topic and not drift to more social items than if I was in the comfort of my own home. All of the participants I knew from other settings and had become friends with some of them as the course of the research and our other connections grew. Due to the level of intimacy of the content and the use of my home or the participants' homes for all except three of the twelve interviews, we decided that my home would be more conducive to sharing at this level in the focus group. Most of the time, I was able to keep the focus on the research. The participants seemed interested and probably stayed focused due to other time commitments later that evening. We managed to cover the agenda, which was posted up on the wall, in the allotted time even though we started late. Due to prior commitments and unforeseen problems, a few people couldn't make it on time. One of the biggest obstacles had been finding a time that was convenient to all of us, and this took much rearranging, so I was very happy when everyone was present. I had food and juice available so that when they arrived, participants could help themselves so that hunger didn't interfere with a group that ended at six o'clock in the evening. One of the co-researchers had been able to come early to help me with the preparation of flip charts and food and to offer emotional support, all of which I found invaluable.

Krueger (1994) suggests using name cards and placing these, after observing who is shy and who is chatty, so that the chatty ones are closer to the group facilitator and the shy ones across the room so that eye contact can be made to encourage more equal participation

(p.109). This seemed a bit manipulative to me although I had an ideal opportunity having addressed a card to each participant thanking her for her contribution of time, stories and wisdom. I also wanted people to feel free to sit where they felt the most comfortable as there was a variety of furniture in the room. I had a sense from my prior knowledge who might be more talkative than others and had been quite pleased with how the group was placing themselves but there was a last minute juggling of places which scattered this arrangement somewhat. I did feel that there was one quieter individual I neglected to bring out either through the seating or in the subsequent discussion. I will have to test Krueger's (1994) strategy for this at another focus group in the future.

### Data Analysis

Writing up my impressions after each interview, keeping a personal journal, and recording my thinking about the literature, were all part of the data collection as were the twelve interview transcripts and the transcribed focus group session. Excess data seems to be the norm as Schumacher and McMillan comment (1993), "most ethnographic data is so extensive that several studies could be generated from the data" (p. 486). Sorting all this out started in my cognitive process and in my journal as I transcribed the first interview. Themes started to emerge and subsequent interviews revealed similarities and differences, some of which linked to the literature I had read.

Two of my committee members sat down with me to go over the first interviews and give me feedback on how they coded and what themes they saw emerging. One committee member noticed that I had asked about disclosure of lesbian-ness to parents in only one of the two participants' interviews she had read. This was helpful as I could then include a future question with that participant and it was a reminder to be aware of the need to cover the same ground with each participant as much as possible. I also found that I was making too many notes in the margins as I compared my way of coding to those with more expertise.

"Experience is messy. Searching for the patterns in behaviour, consistency in attitudes, the meaning of a casual conversation, is what anthropologists do, and they are nearly always dependent on a ragtag collection of facts and fantasies of an often small

sample of a population from a fragment of historical time” (Wolf, 1992, p.129). Somehow researchers do make some sense out of their data and can illuminate something for others. How is this done? “Coding is the process of dividing data into parts of a classification system” thus “units of meaning” form clusters or categories (Schumacher & McMillan, 1993, p. 486).

I used Strauss’s (1987) coding paradigm which includes looking for conditions, interactions among the actors, strategies and tactics, and consequences (p. 27-28). He suggests reading the transcripts word for word to discover the deeper meanings that are involved and argues that if these are relevant, they will appear again as more data is obtained and coded (p.29). Placing a summary phrase or word (a “code”) for the information that the participant is expressing in the large margin I made on the right of the transcripts became easier with additional transcripts. Sometimes I used the participants’ words (“invivo” codes) or just words that came to me which seemed to encapsulate the concept ( p. 33). The code claiming lesbian identity started with my first interview where the co-researcher/participant said *I’m fine with my name being used. I mean this is my story and it is fine that I claim it and later I guess for me it is like lesbians laying claim to their stories so 50 years from now, 100 years from now, somebody is going to pick up this thesis and why can’t it be my name?* Subsequent interviews may not have used these words but the concept is still there. Take for example another participant’s comments that were coded claiming lesbian identity. *I don’t want to use a pseudonym really. I would prefer not to because I’m out pretty much everywhere. I’m not in the closet anymore so I would rather use my name.*

Writing memos about the emerging codes, or anything else that comes to mind while you are in the coding process, is also a suggestion of Strauss’s that I found helpful. It was similar to the journalling process but more specific. I would write these memos for each transcript and probably the greatest benefit was reducing the amount of data that I needed to look at when I began writing the data chapters. I did use more of the participants’ words in these than he suggests but I also wanted to have the participants speak for themselves as much as possible. I was interested in doing a more descriptive study rather than come up

with grounded theory which is a focus of Strauss' work.

"The ultimate goal of qualitative research is to make general statements about relationships among categories by discovering patterns in the data. A pattern is a relationship among categories" (Schumacher & McMillan, 1993, p. 495). Pieces that don't fit or negative instances need to be explained. "Alternative explanations always exist; the researcher must search or identify, and describe them and then demonstrate how the explanation offered is the most plausible of all" (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 116). Data analysis can be facilitated by discussing patterns with others such as one's research committee. I used the focus group for this purpose also.

Researchers need to remember that "when human behaviour is the data, a tolerance for ambiguity, multiplicity, contradiction, and instability is essential" (Wolf, 1992, p. 129). Inevitably the responsibility for taking a position, for the final analysis or the description or the grounded theory, lies with the researcher. "Writing about qualitative data can not be separated from the analytic process" (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 117). Choosing the words and what to share with others about the study is another analytic choice. There is a constant series of choice-making that is part of the research process. Tierney (1995) states:

If I have called for narrative diversity in how we insert ourselves into the text and with regard to those audiences for whom we write, then I am at least consistent in suggesting that we need similar narrative diversity with those whom we interview, observe, study, and become engaged. . . . One narrative size does not fit all (p.387, 389).

I felt quite committed to having my participants tell their own stories with minimal interference on my part. Warren (1986) states "some people feel that life histories speak for themselves and that no analysis should be attempted" (p. 7). She gives the rationale behind this perspective saying "life histories, like creative works of art, tend to be vibrant, living materials and they are sensitive to over analysis and dissection. Furthermore, they cannot be made to say what is not there; that is, life history as data cannot be forced" (p.7). As I chose the themes and the segments from the interviews that are re-presented in chapters four and five I was aware that I had already made some analytic decisions about what to include and

what to leave out so some discussion seemed necessary around the themes that emerged.

There were many themes and stories which I had to make hard choices about and soemtimes I felt like the editor of a film grieving over the fascinating material on the cutting room floor. Mostly I left out themes and stories that did not seem central to my focus on lesbian career histories. This seemed unfair to the two lesbian mothers in my study. With my focus more on career than family life, I decided to keep the family of origin stories only. Siblings were another large chunk from several transcripts that did not make it to chapter four and five. This in no way comments on the significance of these experiences. For one woman coming out to her siblings was more traumatic than coming out to her parents. For one lesbian mother coming out to her husband had enormous and heart breaking legal, financial and emotional consequences. The stories of coming out to children were also ones that were full of lesbian life's joys and sorrows. With my focus on career I felt more compelled to deal with some of the problems and issues raised around work and discussed these more extensively by bringing in relevant literature either in the literature review or in the final discussion chapter. My academic committee also wanted more analysis and literature reviewed on some themes that affected these six lives. By including segments of stories from the interviews in chapters four and five I satisfied my need to give the participants their own voice and have the reader enter vicariously into segments of their lives.

## Chapter Four: Family and Other Significant Influences

My hope, in this chapter and in the subsequent one, is that by giving space to the voices of these six lesbian helping professionals, I will deepen the understanding of their life conditions and the issues they continue to interact with in their daily lives. This information in no way is intended to be generalized to all lesbians or all lesbian helping professionals. These are the stories and issues that I have filtered out of conversations with these particular women, at this particular historical time and geographical place. Despite these cautions, I feel that I am adding to our knowledge base. I agree with Ellsworth (1989) who argues for "recognition that, contrary to all Western ways of knowing and speaking, that all knowings are partial"(p. 310). Other lesbians, other women, other helping professionals, and even the broad category of other human beings may see threads from these stories that can connect to their lives.

Common themes and influencing factors emerged in these stories of girlhood, teen years and adult life that seemed to describe and influence the evolvement of these women into the lesbian activists and helping professionals they are today. I have tried to re-present some of these important themes and influencing factors in this chapter.

### Demographics

#### Age, Education and Employment

This group of women were born between 1950 and 1961 with their ages at the time of interviewing: 37, 39, 43, 44, 47(2). Despite the closeness in age these women had a wide range of coming out ages (to themselves initially), resulting in their lesbian life stories touching four decades. Year of coming out included : 1968, 1978, 1980, 1988, 1984-1990, and 1990-1991. The earliest coming out to self was at age 18 and the latest at age 38. Their ages of coming out were: 18, 22, 24, 29-35 30-31, 38. Coming out to self is an individual process and for four of the women in this study there was a lesbian relationship that marked and triggered this revelation. For two women, there was a more internal process that revealed their lesbian-ness and thus the process was a gradual awakening that spanned a period of time as the 1984-1990 and the 1990-1991 dates and ages 30-31 and 29-35 reveal. This process will be discussed more later.



As was noted at the beginning of the thesis, there was a range of education and work positions. Work positions included teacher (elementary and secondary), registered nurse, social worker, nurse educator, instructor (college, university, staff development), psychologist, counsellor (community agency, college, university), environmental educator, athletic director and coach, and volunteer co-ordinator. Their educational histories include college diplomas and university degrees with the latter ranging from a bachelor's degree to a doctorate. Two of the women in the study were previously married and have children.

### Race

I have already discussed the fact that although attempts were made to find lesbians of colour(s) to participate, all the women in the study are Caucasian. I did know these women previous to their involvement in my study and three of the women I met in two organized groups for queer populations. Both of these organizations have predominantly white members and although the issue of the lack of members from other ethnicities has been raised, there has been very little movement towards any significant integration.

One of my co-researchers is a citizen of the United States of America living in Canada on a visa, with the rest Canadian citizens, born and raised here. Occasionally during the study, mention was made of European backgrounds, such as immigration by grandparents.

### Class

Given that these women were all working in professional occupations, they could be characterized as middle class. Their families' class seemed to be influenced by what their fathers' occupation was, although their grandparents were often mentioned in an attempt to sort out class position.

*I grew up in a middle class neighbourhood. My Dad was a professor at the university. My Mom stayed home. . . . a lot of the mothers stayed home. They were all sort of, you might call it up and coming middle class starting out . . . . My mother came from what I would consider a working class family and my Dad from a middle class family. It was just the beginnings of a middle class neighbourhood, a bit of a suburb.*

Another woman sees working class roots as her heritage.

*I grew up in what I would now see as a very working class family. At the time I would probably have said that I was middle class but I don't think at the time I quite grasped what that meant. My mother especially wanted that image of being middle class. That was her want and desire but clearly a working class family. My father doesn't have an eighth grade education. My mother has a certificate to teach. In the fifties you didn't have to get a degree. So my parents were working class and their parents were all working class. My father's parents worked in a saw mill and my mother's parents sheared sheep on my grandmother's farm.*

Some of the women referred to a more privileged background. *We had a lot of privilege in that my father had a good job and we had a cottage on the lake. The reference to grandparents also occurs in another example. My father had a family business. . . . It was a business started by my grandfather so there was a certain amount of privilege in that.*

### Family

It was a bit surprising to me how similar the descriptions of family were at times. Growing up in the fifties and sixties these women's families were quite traditional and heterosexual, the main agents of their socialization. There was a similar gender division of labour discussed.

*I was born in the 50's, so I had a very typical 50's family. My Mom stayed at home and almost like Father Knows Best on t.v., wore an apron and did the house kind of things. And she never worked when I was a child and my Dad worked for (a company). He was always sort of distant and would come home and he was the provider and Mom was sort of the nurturer and took care of the kids. I think they were pretty happy during my young years.*

For women who are seen as "not working", their jobs around the house seem very labour intensive.

*Scrub the floor and clean the house and cook the meals and all that. Like my mother did all that, well we helped, we had chores and stuff. . . . My mother is kind of a perfectionist so the house had to be immaculate . . . somehow it was chaotic but yet*

*it was silent too. It was repressed. We were kind of a repressed kind of thing, you kept your feelings in I think. But yet it was chaotic sometimes . . . . my father was there, he came home, he helped out, he had to help out but not emotionally there. He is an intuitive thinker, he's kind of a very intelligent, bright man, but. . . he's getting better in his 60's. I think he's developing a little bit of the feeler more but I would say that basically it was my mother and I when it came to emotional things.*

The theme of repression is mentioned in someone else's home. *Yeah very repressed sexuality, typical of a catholic family, if you want to know the truth.*

### Father

Fathers often seemed to have a more distant role within this traditional family structure as they go out into the public realm to provide for the family. I was surprised again at how similar descriptions of these men were across the interviews. Emotional distance, emotional abuse and alcoholism are mentioned.

*My Dad is very quiet, really quiet, not very expressive emotionally. A very sweet, kind man. I think he grew up in a family that was very non-expressive emotionally and that is where he is at. My Dad would do what Dads did in the 60's. He got up and went to work and came home. He was really good with us though in many ways. He participated a lot more than a lot of fathers around us. He was really good with little kids, but it was still a traditional delineation. . . . my Mom was a housewife. So my Dad was there for camping, those kinds of things, camping, swimming, skating, he was pretty good for that kind of stuff. But not great connecting with us emotionally as we got older.*

The theme of father as emotionally distanced continues. *My father wasn't ever really available to me just sort of there in my life but not really available. And I can't say that he and I would ever have talked about anything.* Another woman describes a similar type of relationship with her father.

*Interviewer: So your Dad is just supportive?*

*Participant: I wouldn't say- I mean he is not. My Mom is a more supportive person period than my Dad. What I meant he never had any wild negative reactions. Both*

*my parents have been supportive in terms of facilitating access with my kids at their place and financially sometimes from time to time because I have had huge legal fees. I'm still paying them off. But my relationship with my Dad is just completely different so it is hard to say. When I say supportive, yeah, in an indirect way.*

*Interviewer: You don't have that much of a relationship with him or?*

*Participant: Not at that level. It is more sort of day to day and he is not a talker anyway.*

Two women discuss their fathers' alcoholism and its effects. In my family my father was alcoholic and my Mom suffered more or less in silence most of the time. The second woman states:

*I would sit and listen to adults. I loved just listening and paying attention too and my father took me everywhere. The down side of it was he was an alcoholic and a drunk and that was really hard cuz I was really close to him and so I got sort of all of this good stuff but then I got the embarrassment of him. . . . Being with him was a mixed blessing for sure but I kind of really liked just being around him and being able to do things and seeing things, hearing things.*

One woman describes the way her family revolved around her father.

*She (Mom) would sort of say, "Don't talk to your father 'till he is done dessert". We were brought up to keep quiet and do not talk, do not make noise. Be quiet your father is sleeping. Your father has a headache. Everything was sort of centered around him . . . . Our whole family and what he needed and what he wanted and how grumpy he was.*

The role of big sister is played out as one woman tries to intervene for her siblings with her strict father. *(I) protected them against my father. If one of them did something wrong, I'd say oh no they didn't do it and like protect them because he was so strict. My father was really an authoritarian. But she still would try and get his attention. I was. . . trying to get my father to notice me and he never did. He never even noticed me, so it was quite hard for me too, I'd be mowing and thinking so I'm mowing the grass and he would never even look up.*

Emotional abuse was also clearly outlined by two participants.

*He always called me- he always called all of us kids imbeciles. There was a lot of you know he called us his niggers - we were the niggers. He did a lot of that kind of putting himself up on a pedestal and we were the lowly serfs. There was a lot of that but I became more aware of it when we moved. I think that he had said stuff before, but I think that I was also 16 now so I had started to really challenge him. And then we would get into these struggles together. But before that he would just say no to me and I would go around sulking, but I would not argue with him. I would not argue back. I was afraid of him actually.*

Another woman describes a similarly emotionally abusive father.

*So like I've said, I've parented my parents a bit. I can remember my father saying well if you can do it, anyone can do it. So he was very abusive emotionally and intellectually to me. He never did understand. He never will, I don't think, because we come from sort of different places but he was quite emotionally abusive. You don't have the brains God gave little geese, you don't know enough to come in out of the rain.*

One woman also cites aspects of her parents in a positive light describing them as a lot to live up to as far as role models. She goes on to outline her father's numerous activities. *He was always involved in projects and building things and making things and making money on them. It was kind of interesting although he wouldn't be one to tell you much but I could see all this going on. He kept really busy.* Another woman is grateful for her education which her father provided. *My parents only went to high school. They didn't go to university and they came from families that thought it might be a waste if you gave a girl an education but my father made sure we all went to university if we wanted to and we all did.*

### Mother

These women felt more connected to their mothers which seems rather typical of the traditional family structure. The loss of careers outside the home is noted and so is the oppression they are ensnared in at times. Some mothers are role models and some have

feminist leanings. *My Mom understood going for nurses training, she understood that, she could grasp that, and there was the security that there would be something afterwards for me. Even though this woman states I felt like I had no support from my parents she does go on to say my mother was good about calling and it was hard to arrange that. The phone was busy and I wasn't there or whatever it was not convenient.*

One woman saw her mother modeling care giving for her.

*My Mom was a nurse and so I think there was probably a model there. She really loved nursing. She stopped nursing when we were kids. She stayed home but she talked about nursing. She loved nursing. She was pretty much a care giver. My Mom was kind of your classic female care giver. And so I probably took from that when I was little. I did want to be a nurse because my Mom was a nurse (laughs). Yeah growing up I always had a little of that care giving philosophy approach to things and also I think that as I grew up I got from somewhere, maybe from my parents, certainly from my peers as a teenager, the kids that I hung around with, some basic sense of social justice or desire for that.*

Another woman also noted her mother's loss of career to family life.

*She stopped teaching to have kids and then couldn't go back to teaching because in order to keep your certificate at least in teaching you had to continue to teach. . . . she would have to go get a degree because now it was ten years later.*

The role of oppression in their mother's lives is noted by their daughters.

*They (grandparents) were disappointed that my mother didn't go to university and she married right out of high-school. . . . My mother didn't go on but again for my mother's time schools prepared woman to be wives that is about what I could see but my Mom was, I think, an okay student.*

*And later she states some time in that year (I) had an aha experience related to my childhood to how my mom had been just completely oppressed in terms of having no choice but to stay with a verbally and emotionally abusive man due to his alcoholism.*

The sexism involved in her mother's struggle to gain an education was obvious in

this woman's story.

*Like her brother- they could only pay for one child to go on to high school- she was from a farm background- the youngest boy. The other boy they knew was going to be a farmer. My mother wanted to go to school so she went and was a maid at somebody's house. Room and board for being a maid and then she went to high school. The high school burnt down. So she went to business college and then she became a secretary and then she met my father. So that was it- but she always wanted to be a nurse.*

This traditional family schema and its role for women did not seem appealing to some of this study's participants. *Marriage and children just looked like this thing that was an awful lot of responsibility. My mother felt overwhelmed with the responsibility. Another woman describes her sense of her parent's marriage.*

*He (Dad) would make fun of her in front of all of us and I have a lot of anger around that, I think that by the time I was 12 and 13 and listening to these conversations I was becoming politicized. I was mad at him, the way that he treated women and I also was mad at my Mom. I sort of blamed her for taking it and I didn't understand why she didn't just tell him to jump in the lake or something. I was really mad at her. I thought she was weak because she wouldn't talk back to him or whatever. Their kind of arguing was Dad would do the silent treatment for weeks and Mom would cry. I think that she was kind of afraid of his anger and he just wrote her off. You're an emotional basket case. He could never like deal with it- the crying thing so . . . I would watch them and think I never want to be in a relationship like this or do this.*

Some of the mothers seemed aware of the oppression for women around them and tried to make things different for their daughters.

*My Mom was fairly feminist in her own way and she would always encourage us to be able to take care of our selves . . . all these families in our neighbourhood that were supposed to be so stable and middle class, disintegrated. All the men were having affairs (laughs) and stuff. . . . there were all these women that were middle*

*aged and were left in chaos, emotionally and financially. Some did better than others in the end equation but most didn't do well. I think that that was what my mother was trying to protect us from to some extent by telling us that we needed to have something for ourselves. So we could depend on ourselves. . . . even though she was conservative in her own way and she was kind of afraid of the world in some ways- she did instill in us that you can have other than what you see around you. You can be a housewife but you don't have to be. You want to go play hockey? I'll go and get you a hockey stick. You don't have to feel that you are less than the boys. I think she had a sense of that because I think that it had affected her self esteem to some extent. I mean being a woman and being told that she was going to be able to do only certain things or she didn't have the right to do certain things. So I did get that instilled in me on some level although sometimes she was kind of contradictory about it. I remember her standing up to my uncle and saying look my girls can go out and play hockey. . . . they are strong.*

Even though these mothers did not have careers out in the public realm, their intelligence and abilities were not lost on their daughters. *In fact when my mother started working at the X center that was unusual and of course she was really good at it. My mother is very bright and capable so she just took over and did really well at it. Another woman states: my mother sewed and made hats and painted pictures and just very busy and talented too in her own way. These daughters describe having more of a relationship with their mothers, so in the later section on coming out to parents, mothers' reactions play a large part.*

### Role Models

As has been noted previously sometimes mothers and fathers were mentioned as role models. Grandparents were another source of mentorship which was another surprise for me. Teachers and coaches were also significant figures in childhood and teen years.

*My grandparents were working class and farmers but they were very political and way ahead of their times and so there was a really positive influence. I really do credit them for the birth of my social and political consciousness. I actually think*



*they were communist, but they weren't a member of the communist party but they were socialists for sure if not communists. And they spoke out and my grandfather had been involved in early union organizing when he came from (Europe) and was working in the coal mines in (Canada).*

One woman found a safe haven and a role model in her accepting grandmother.

*My grandmother was a pretty strong role model. . . the wonderful thing about her was she seemed so non-judgmental, I could tell Granny anything and she would just listen. She would sort of debrief me through it. She never got angry. She never said that is just not right or any of that stuff. She would just say to me well you know other people have other ideas about that. . . She would point things out to me. She did it in a very accepting way so that I felt that I could tell her anything. I could go to her house and just sit there and say "you know what my father is doing? I don't get this" and I could debrief through my grandmother. . . What I liked about her the most was she seemed really independent. She was a strong woman. . . to come to Canada with this man that she was married to but didn't really know and start a whole life here. I thought that was pretty brave and courageous of her. And she wasn't afraid of challenge either. She would challenge her husband and my father. My father would do things and my grandmother would say why are you doing that? why do you do that to my mother(her daughter)? I really felt she had guts. She was one of the few people my father would stop and actually pay attention to. Like if Granny said you are being a screw up my Dad would do a second look. And he didn't talk back to her so there was respect for the elders there. I highly admired my grandmother. When Granny said things like that everyone took notice. She challenged in a supportive way, supported my Mom, so she was a very strong woman.*

More about grandparents who were influential:

*My two grandfathers, in their own way were incredible models, and they didn't do a lot other than just let me sit and watch them work. One had cows and was a dairy farmer and one was a business person but retired and he had a woodworking -*

*beautiful, beautiful thing in his basement. None of my sisters wanted to do that but what I loved was just sitting watching. I probably wouldn't even do much talking but just see. To this day I love working with wood in my hands and I have many good memories of the smell of sawdust.*

Teachers often were role models for these young girls/women.

*The people who really mentored me were teachers and coaches. I was the kind of kid that was a nightmare for a teacher if they weren't confident in themselves.*

*I would be challenging them and testing them but the ones that were good teachers and were solid in themselves and just encouraged me, I would do anything for them.*

*I just really loved being curious and discovering things. I'm really quite appreciative of probably 5 or 6 people in my life- coaches and teachers would have been the big ones.*

It is hard to know where a role model ends and a crush starts, but this co-researcher/participant has very positive memories of her grade four teacher.

*I was absolutely madly in love with my teacher and she was a single woman. She was single and I had all this fantasy about what her life was like. She used to get up on top of this bench and she would read us poetry. She was a short little woman and she was so powerful about it. I was like blown away. I can still see her reading the Highway Man and she just turned me on to poetry for the first time in my life. I thought wow poetry does mean something . . . I came second that year in my class and I know it is because I worked so hard because she was so passionate about everything. I just idealized her.*

#### Independent/Radical/Leadership

Quite early these young girls seemed to lead very active lives and showed leadership qualities often forging ahead, doing things that others before them had not done. They pushed limits, sought out alternatives, and created new options at school. These characteristics seemed to start at young ages and continued on to activist endeavors later in adult life. *I found out that I was smart and I was a good leader and good at sports so I guess as I got more out of the realm of family and into school that's when I started to get*

more confident. Discussing her university education she states *I was the first one- nobody else had gone on or had done anything like that.*

Another woman describes her enterprising leadership role in her neighbourhood. *I was given all the responsibility of the oldest. I was the oldest grandchild too so there was lots of pressure in that regard. . . we had a basement turned into a play room and every summer I ran school. So all the kids came over and I ran school and they had lessons and they came every day. They had note books and all this stuff and then I would do a science field trip. I would raise money by going around just to all the store owners and saying I'm taking kids on a field trip and we need pop. I'd get pop and chips and treats and I'd get it all organized. Then I'd take the kids on this big field trip- scavenger hunt thing. Then they would have to do my activities or I wouldn't give them the prizes or the food.*

She and her family saw this as bossy but I saw it as early leadership development. *So I would be sort of in charge and I would be blowing on my whistle and you know like okay everybody be quiet. Toot toot! I would be doing the whole thing right. When I was young, I was quite bossy and I could convince people to do things. I didn't necessarily have to do the work I would be the organizer . . . and so people were kind of amazed that I would get all this stuff happening.*

These qualities resurfaced in high-school.

*I found this teacher who took me under his wing and he said "why don't you do a fashion show?" I had always sort of had an interest in clothes and fashions so he got me excited about running a fashion show. So I trained all these girls who were interested as models, how to walk and sit and all that stuff and wear these clothes. Then the stores joined and we went down and borrowed all their clothes and modeled them and everything. So I was the MC for that in my graduating year, and of course I got an honours prize in marketing.*

Another participant created an option in her junior high school that had not been there previously. *Me and a friend convinced the principal in juniour high to let us do our home economics hours at a school for disabled kids. She also pushed unsuccessfully at the*

boundaries around the industrial shops courses. *We asked to go into shops. We were not allowed to. There was a big kafuffle, like this was just not okay for us to want to do shops, because we were girls.*

One woman sees herself as a rebel and reveals an adventurous risk-taking spirit. *I was just a shit disturber from the day I was born I'm sure- just pushing every edge, every limit. If someone said you couldn't do it well that was just an open invitation to try.*

These qualities are seen later in life as these women take on activist roles not just in the area of gay and lesbian rights. *I'm actually in a NAROL film-a National Abortion organization. Finding her working conditions appalling, one woman attempts to do something about it. I lead a union campaign the first year I was out of school. . . I'm outraged and livid and calling the newspaper saying do you know how unsafe this is and that is getting printed in the paper.*

### Resistance to Gender Roles

Related to and overlapping with the above qualities is the resistance shown by these women to the restrictions that societal gender roles had on their lives. Quite early some saw the gender roles for girls and women as something they would avoid if possible. Many earned the "tomboy" label as they enjoyed active games and sports and some taking on the more stereotypical boys' chore of cutting the grass.

*I was very clear early that I didn't want to do what girls did because they didn't have any fun and they were always restrictions. I was always pushing the limit and so I was really quite close to my father and got to duck hunt and got to do all the things- like cutting the lawn was my job.*

She goes on to describe her resistance to the stereotyped role for women.

*Stay at home moms, I definitely did not want that. I didn't want anything to do with that. I wanted what men had. I wanted everything career, money, car all that. I wanted the position that men had in the world. I was really quite aware of that early. I did not want to be treated like a girl which meant devalued and stay in the home. . . . I made a decision when I was 14 when I realized how girls got pregnant that that would never happen to me.*

The “tomboy” label was used by some of these women as they explored the world around them.

*I guess you could say I was a tomboy at least that is what I remember about my growing up years. I always enjoyed building forts, playing outdoors, just being active and to my family's credit they just let me be. It didn't seem that there was any big issues around that and even though I was quite different from my mother who was very traditional. She didn't seem to hold me back. It didn't seem to bother her at all.*

The tomboy theme continues.

*I did find myself playing the tomboy role really to the extreme. I was always the father or the head of the household and I don't know where I got that from because I certainly didn't get that modeled by my mother, but I refused to do housework and I was like cutting the grass.*

At times the resistance takes the form of feeling quite different from the expected norm.

*There is a picture of the first communion of my sister who is two years older. Everybody is dressed up in their special clothes and I have my beanie and my plaid shirt and my jeans (laughs). When I look at that picture now I think I bet my mother probably just did everything she could to get me to change but she probably gave up because it was easier and I think that has been her experience. My experience was just feeling different from the time I was really little. . . . it is not like people want little girls to play with guns and go hunting and skeet shooting and so I persisted against the odds, tremendous odds probably.*

#### Limited Career Options

Despite their adventurous spirits and resistance to gender roles, when it came time to choosing a career these women found that many doors seemed closed to them. Some occupations were completely closed to women and the societal options for women outside the home seemed limited to the stereotypical ones of teacher, nurse or secretary.

*So what I really wanted to do when I was growing up was be an Episcopalian priest. .*

*... and in the early 1970's you couldn't be an Episcopal priest if you were a woman. It wasn't until 1976 that that was allowed. ... so I had to think of something else to do. ... it wasn't really an available option. ... I don't think I really had a lot of options available to me.*

*More women comment: I think if I had had more of a range of possibilities I may have decided to be a university teacher right from the word go as opposed to a Phys. Ed. teacher. ... But in those days again girls mostly did school teaching, nursing, secretarial.*

*And someone else states: You know, if it had been in a different time and I wasn't female and there had been other options you know I probably wouldn't have been (a nurse) but that's just how it happened.*

### Early Lesbian Awareness

As these women discussed their childhoods they all remember crushes and very close girlfriends. Looking back and sometimes at the time, these were seen as signs of attraction to other females. Obsessiveness, fantasies, hanging out with a lesbian teacher, looking up lesbian in the library, all point to a lesbian-ness that gets pushed aside or went unrecognized and unnamed.

*I had a best friend who I absolutely adored and we spent every minute together. ... She got one year ahead of me in grade 8 and I stayed behind and she got new friends ... we were still really close and then she went to high-school and well I've never known inside myself whether this was like the first love of my life or whether she was just my best friend. I've never been able to sort of figure that out, but I know that I tried everything- I hung out with her sister, I did everything to get close to her. I would come and see her after school and tell her these outrageous stories to fascinate her so that she would be wanting to be with me. And a lot of times I think that she thought I must be just nuts, but she was very patient through all of that. We had this rocky time in high-school where I had other friends and she had other friends and then we seemed to get back together in about grade 10. We got back as friends again. There was about two years where we were not really hanging out*

*with one another but all I could think about was her and how to be friends with her. I was devastated when she was with other girls. It was traumatic, the worst traumatic experience . . . . I can remember us having baths together and then all of a sudden we hit twelve and I started noticing what she looked like. I can remember looking at her and thinking oh that's what she looks like. I can remember her looking at me like I don't want to have a bath with you and she sort of put a stop to it. And all of a sudden I kind of got the message, really powerfully, that she was not into this and I was. . . cuz she was sort of like no this is not going to happen and I was really curious - just thought she walked on clouds.*

Another woman was aware of the nature of her feelings and proceeded to the library in her high school years for information on lesbians.

*(I) had a big crush on my math teacher and some other crushes and certainly the feelings I had toward my teacher were more than a crush because I definitely had sexual feelings too but it was more like a crush. . . I did try and find some reading material and of course it is very small town and a very small library. I think the library was only open one day a week and the collection was really old and no trained librarian and I remember that it would be just by chance I'd find certain books. But anyway I did try and find some books that had any mention of lesbianism. . . I managed to get my hands on something but whatever small little entry they had on homosexuality it was ugly. It was a medicalized model of perversion and sickness and so I figured well that's not true for me. The other thing of course was it was a stage- a Freudian thing about being immature so I accepted that that it was a stage and it was fine. . . There were these sort of signs through my teen years, there was really no opportunity to pursue that.*

Although this woman remembers avoiding dating, having close girlfriends and even hanging out with a lesbian teacher, she remained blind to her own lesbian-ness.

*I'd be beside my girlfriends in the choir right? My mother would say I would pick up sort of stray people. . . Like I remember that one in the choir, her father beat her and I remember bringing her home and the bruises on her legs and my mother was*

*like, "what, what" so she stayed overnight at my house one night. Another friend I remember, she was really bright, she was in a class below me and she was using drugs and I remember walking the streets. We went to a teacher's house and this teacher was a lesbian and actually, it's very interesting because she was close in age, like she'd be maybe 24 and we were like 16 or 15, 17. So I befriended this person and I took her, yes, my mother let me go out, it was a really snowy night and she thought I was going to this teacher's place. We went to this teacher's place but then we left there. So I'm out on the streets with this person who was high on something and my mother was not happy with that teacher because of that.*

This story is the only one where there is an awareness of a lesbian role model in the schooling years and the story gets fleshed out further in the focus group discussion.

*I told this teacher that people said she was a lesbian. It was actually a very traumatic experience because we were at her house. There was a bunch of us. She had us over to her house. We just hung out, us students and this teacher, and I don't know why I told her but she cried and she went into the bedroom with one of the women that we hung out with following her. They ended up in a relationship. They have been in a relationship for twenty years but yeah I cried and went out in the street and was so upset. Oh I hurt my teacher. Oh my God. She had to come looking for me. It was snowing. It was just a big drama anyway.*

Other women remember early awakenings that became repressed until much later in adulthood.

*I know that my first sexual fantasies were all about women when I was just coming into adolescence. It was all about women, about other girls, and that really freaked me out because I already knew that there was something not okay about that. It just wasn't acceptable. . . . I remember hearing, it was in a health class or something. Remember when we used to have those health classes (laughs)? And we would talk about things like menstruation. I think it must have been in a health class or in our books that girls often get crushes on female teachers or other girls and not to worry as it is a normal process or it is just a phase. I remember reading or hearing that*



*somewhere and I thought well this is okay so this doesn't mean that I am warped, that I am gay. I kind of comforted myself with that thought. So there is an example of me repressing my feelings.*

Another woman recalls her first awarenesses:

*My fantasies were of girls. I didn't realize that when I would go to shows and I only learned this when I was in my adult, but if there was a love scene I just kind of reversed something and they were two women. I didn't know that I was doing that but it was really funny that the male part of that would be so de-emphasized. It is funny what kids do (laughs).*

### Gender Embodied Experiences

Having a female body can lead to women only experiences such as pregnancy and childbirth. These embodied experiences and the individual/social circumstances surrounding these can lead to profound changes in a woman's perspective on her world. Sexual assault is another embodied experience that many women are forced to endure that also can shatter their frame of reference. Four such belief and life changing embodied experiences are discussed by my co-researcher/participants.

*I've had an abortion but I got pregnant and it was like I know what the answer is to this- I'm not having a kid. So (he) and I are not doing well in our relationship and I'm probably a little freaked out. I don't want to get pregnant again. . . .It wasn't working as well as some sense of guilt that I had about the abortion and his hurt and pain about him not being involved in the decision because we did talk about that. It was hard for both of us. Although I don't think that I ever felt that I should have done anything different. That was clearly the right choice for me and I think out of a self preservation mode for myself. (I)said it's about me- that is the bottom line and if you can't deal with it is about me than let's just not do this. For me it was about it is not the time when I can have a kid. I don't think that I really wanted children- that was like a separate issue. I'm 21 and I'm going to school. Its like no and I'm not sure that you're the person that I want to have a kid with and I definitely am not in a place to get married although I think that our lives were moving in that*

direction.

Another woman chose a different option but this also had significant life changing events for her.

*I met him when I was 16 . . . . And got pregnant when I was 19 and we got married that same year - we are having a baby, maybe we should get married. I loved him] but he was the first guy I went out with. The only guy I went out with. And I think part of it for me was -I was the boss in our relationship and I set the rules and needed lots of approval. I guess I was still seeking my father's approval and here was a male who approved of me and I was really aware of needing that approval. That is how to get ahead in life was you got male approval. It was really clear to me. . . . and then we had (a baby) and we were hippies and in that really hippy generation. So I spent almost 15 years smoking dope and being the hippy mom at home. Not working and baking bread and cookies and raising and home schooling my son. . . . I felt like I hadn't had my youth or something. I guess because I got pregnant so young.*

Her father's reaction to this event was extreme and also devastating

*The day (my husband) and I got married (my father) plowed the field completely with the tractor and hadn't come to the ceremony or anything. And he'd been mad at (my husband). We'd slept together before we were married and I was pregnant. So he was mad. He was sort of mad and then he thought (my husband) was really good because (my husband) married me because I was pregnant because you know women are supposed to be pure, right. He's a guy, he can do what he wants.*

Another woman finds that her pregnancy and subsequent role as stay at home mother left her isolated.

*I was always just out there just assuming that women could do what ever they wanted and doing it. I shouldn't say what ever they wanted. . . . so there was an aha after that- I was at home. I had taken a year off. I actually quit after that year . . . and then all of a sudden I felt, sssshheeee(expressive sound) cast adrift. Reliant on a man totally now. I had quit my job and had started to pick up small little things*

*from (my husband), who again didn't have much more of a consciousness than I did, but he started to talk about his money as opposed to our money . . . all the friends I'd made were in the school system. Then I was off with a baby and feeling very isolated because most of the friends I'd had were still working. And I was home with the baby which I was very happy to be but I drifted into the women's center sort of looking for companionship, comradeship and found it.*

Sexual assault is, tragically, a fairly common experience for women in the patriarchy and it had an impact on this woman's life and view of the world.

*It happened to me when I was living in (city). I was sexually assaulted. And that honestly, I think that was a catalyst for my feminism, to explore that more. Because I just had to look at the issues around what had happened to me because it was somebody I knew. It was a violent, intensely hurtful experience. And I went through all that classic kind of stuff. Like street violence for women as compared to in your home all that stuff that I had never really thought about. My world was really shaken. It went deep. And I started to take it all apart. Who I was in relation to the world as well as within myself, because it was my experience that I was trying to figure it out. Sometimes when you are doing that you start to analyze yourself and dig around a bit and get honest with yourself and where you have been in your life and what experiences have been for you. And in amongst that and in talking to other women, I just started to unravel my feelings about my relationships with men. Because I never was very satisfied with my relationships with men and what that was all about. So I think that . . . shifted some of those repressed emotions about women for me, strangely enough. Maybe not so strangely, sometimes traumas kind of make you evaluate things.*

As I looked at the other two co-researcher/participants' stories I didn't see a similar gender embodied experience that had the same life/ belief changing consequences. These two women had mentioned issues with sexual harassment and although the harassment was prolonged and serious for one, and a single incident for the other, neither woman discussed major life or belief changing circumstances resulting. What I did notice was that their initial

gendered experience, in their sibling positions in their family of origin, had lead to major decisions about themselves and their futures. They seemed to have looked at the gender roles being played out around them and made significant decisions about their lives. One woman was the eldest of seven children and from this position decided very early that the wife and mother role was one that she did not want for herself.

*I'm the eldest of seven so I'd have to say that would be quite important. Both my parents are the youngest in their families and so I think I was kind of raised to protect and care for them somehow. . . . And my mother's life. . . I just thought when I was young I can remember saying I don't want to. . . I'm not getting married. Then people laughing at me, uncles, and I figured . . . marriage and children just looked like this thing that was an awful lot of responsibility . . . the other children would come to me with problems and stuff. I always felt like I didn't really fit somehow. I wasn't an adult but I wasn't a kid either.*

Being the second of four girls also had a significant impact on this final participant's view of the world. *There were four girls in my family. I was kind of like the boy. I loved doing all that stuff and I was very clear early that I didn't want to do what girls did.*

#### Catalyst

This code overlaps with the previous one in some instances, where women identify what I have called gender embodied experiences as catalytic in shifting the direction of their lives. There are other experiences that are seen as pivotal in changing life paths. We have already seen this concept of catalyst applied regarding sexual assault. In the context of feminism this woman deals with the trauma of the rape and moves into unpacking her repressed lesbian desires. Feminism was the context and possibly a catalyst for another woman's exploration of her buried same-sex desires. *I guess there was a big click with everything so that was fine but that provided a context for exploring lesbianism in a different kind of a vein.* Another woman sees her first lesbian relationship as a catalyst. *It has always been really hard for me, because it was that first person that you ever fell madly in love with. I think I will always love her . . . it was a wild time for me but it was the catalyst with which I changed my life.*

Consciousness shifting events, belief systems crumbling, life changing experiences were important to these women as they attempted in retrospect make sense of their experience of moving from an acceptable heterosexual identity to the less common and more stigmatized one of lesbian.

### Feminism

Feminism is an important aspect in these women's lives, first through discussions about some of their mothers and then with each co-researcher/participant, as she continues on her journey through her life embedded in the patriarchal culture. Two women in the previous section mention the catalytic way that feminism, and the context of a feminist community, were involved in exploring repressed lesbian desires. This third woman had a similar feminist then lesbian experience.

*I joined the women's resource society board. I joined the Peace camp. So I got involved in woman's issues and peace issues. . . . so all my life became politicized all of a sudden and I met a whole bunch of really powerful and strong women and I was just enthralled. All these women are so incredible. The women were ten years my senior and I was like oh my God, if I could be like that, if I could even be half that kind of a woman when I'm ten years from now I'll be happy. I mean I admired them so much and they were doing some really neat things in (this city). They had all these women, 50 women together and they were all doing research in different areas. And they had printed some booklets and had conferences . . . It was a very political time for me. . . . There were women at the women's resource society, who were lesbian and I knew them. I knew they were lesbian. No one ever told me. I knew that and then at the peace camp, I started to find out that I was doing a lot of work with lesbians. It just turned out that I would end up always being with other lesbians right. And I remember going to a conflict resolution weekend and looking around and realized that I was the only straight person in the room. Even the presenters . . . were partners - two guys so I was like oh why am I just totally drawn to this community and why am I here in this community all the time?*

Another co-researcher/participant describes this increase in lesbians around her

before she is fully aware of her own lesbian-ness.

*I was around lesbians. I was involved in women's politics in (this city). And I was around lesbian women and I was hearing about things and their relationships. And I started to surround myself with lesbian women more and more. By the time I came out I had close friends who were dykes, who were just waiting for me to come out.*

Her involvement in the women's community and discovering that these women were lesbian was a surprise for this woman.

*(A seminar) was very interesting and I am just fascinated by these women and their power and what they were doing. And I'm really interested in the women that are there. I remember writing a note to the presenters and saying that it was just great and one of the things I liked was the physical contact, the touching that was going on between these women. They would just hug each other when they see each other and talk. It was just great. So I'm going to that and there is this concert . . . . It's this women's band and there is this interesting mix of people. . . . about 100 people . . . . My therapist and her husband are there and a couple other people that I know and I don't think anything of any of it. I think it is just great. Well it's a lesbian band that is playing. . . . So all these things are happening. The women doing these presentations are all lesbians probably most of the women that are at this seminar are lesbians. But I still don't have it figured out.*

There were two women of the six, actually the same two whose gender embodied life experiences were less obvious than the others, who did not discover their lesbian-ness within a feminist context. They were both lesbians before they became involved in any organized feminist activities. One of these women spent some time with a group of lesbian separatists.

*I still stayed as a lesbian and a feminist all the way through. It was really neat to be feminist and a lesbian but often they weren't together in a public way. You didn't have a lot of feminist saying and I'm a lesbian . . . . but certainly a percentage of the movement in the seventies were lesbians. When you look, an example would be look at the shelter program. Lesbians have started off almost every, the sexual abuse in*

*the 70's, the awareness and the advocacy for the shelter system around the seventies. As well lesbians were in the top in almost all those movements. It didn't become sort of an out issue among women and feminists until later. They are entwined but you very rarely had and I'm a lesbian separatist feminist. You didn't have many of those people coming out. I knew quite a few. . . . I was a sort of a radical. You know how in a social reform movement you have the reformist who say the system was basically not good but let's work within it and change it. And the radical's say the system is not working we need a new system. I was a radical and I think that this just played into this whole repressed hatred for male privilege. It just gave me a real good place that I could avoid dealing with men. I liked being a radical lesbian feminist separatist. . . . It was just working through a lot of our anger with men. . . . Let them sit at the back of the bus if at all. We were wanting to put them on an island somewhere (laughs).*

*Interviewer: You would have a lot less spitting on the streets.*

*Participant: oh God I hate that (laughs). That is a good example. Why is it? I played in sports all my life and I never have spit- why?*

*Interviewer: I don't understand it myself either.*

*Participant: Oh God and that is another thing I hate. So the most note worthy radical lesbian feminist that I ever knew was a professional in the city. She and her partner would invite all kinds of feminist, lesbian artists and entertainers to our city. My friend was in a position not to need men or their financial backing. So going out with her was such fun because she would be putting stickers on doors and just wouldn't take shit from anyone. If we were in a restaurant we got the best table all that stuff that women don't ask for.*

### Therapy

Another theme that runs through the lives of all this study's participants is an involvement in therapy. For most women, therapy began due to difficulties/ unhappiness in life circumstances not necessarily related to their lesbian-ness. Often though it is part of the context in which women discover their lesbian-ness. For one woman it did seem to be more

directly related to her coming out process and for another it started as an adjunct to her own professional development as a counsellor.

*I got into therapy when I was in nursing school. I did that because I was not succeeding in my OB.(obstetrical) rotation. It's like I don't want to go in there. I can't go to my clinicals. I'm like so freaked out. I go but I'm frozen I can't do anything. I can't stand it that these women are just screaming all the time and I can't do anything. So I'm not studying and I'm depressed. Life is not going very well. So I get into therapy and I spend probably that last six months in therapy and my first year I'm out of school I'm going to counselling. . . I'm at really at a critical place in my therapy and so my therapist says find yourself a therapist when you get settled in (new city) so I do. And one of the things that feels important to me is that I interview therapists instead of just take one. . . . I trust that process. So I call around and make some appointments and connect with this one therapist who's at the YW and her fees are reasonable and she wants to have an interview with me. She only does group therapy and she interviews people before they go to group. So she says in this interview that there are lesbians in the group and is that going to be problem. And no it's like it is not going to be problem. . . . So I'm in group a couple months and there is a woman who identifies herself as a lesbian in the group but it is not till a couple months later that it dawns on me that the therapist is a lesbian. . . . This (includes an attraction to her first female partner) is all happening at the same time that I am talking about this a little bit in therapy and it's dawning on me and all the other pieces in my life are coming together and its like oh.*

Another woman goes to therapy with her husband and realizes that she may be a lesbian.

*I went to see a counsellor because I was quite angry and a little depressed (postpartum depression). . . . Any way we went to a counselling session. (The baby) was about 5 months old and the counsellor asked us how our sex life was and we both said not great. And I said I don't feel particularly valued or appreciated. . . . then what I sort of realized right then too, if not before, was also I just think I'm*



*probably lesbian.*

One woman found her initial need for assistance never did uncover this basic issue, but she had therapy later in her adult life with feminist therapists, both lesbian and heterosexual.

*I was just getting worse and worse, sicker and sicker. It went through kind of a depressed stage where it was really an agitated kind of depression. Then there were these days where I slept. I remember one time sleeping for like 14 hours. I got depressed and just slept and slept and slept. I remember she (girlfriend) was having this party at her house and where was I? Why wasn't I there? I was too tired to come. So I was going through this psychological stuff that was taking place physically. . . . Basically I was having a nervous breakdown, I was getting depressed is basically what was happening. I couldn't cope with all this stress. My mother had to have surgery and radioactive iodine treatments twice. She was in isolation when that happened. Going to visit her, driving back and forth I was just a mess. . . . after she (girlfriend) left her husband and moved in with me, I started throwing up. I would be ill like three times a week. It was almost like I couldn't swallow this bit of information. So it wasn't a lot of fun. She'd bring me crackers and milk. I was just a basket case. I even had an upper GI series because they were trying to figure out what was the matter with my stomach. I was crying, I would sit in a restaurant and the tears would just roll down my face. She said what are you crying about. I would say I don't know so I was just a mess. . . . I got so sick I could hardly move. So I went to the family doctor and I said, I need something and he gave me anti-depressants and that started to pick me up. I think I might have got suicidal after that once I got the energy but I had not told anyone that I'm lesbian or talked to anyone about this other than (my girlfriend) and some of those friends in the beginning and (my best friend), but she said it was just a stage. So he sends me to a psychiatrist. I'd sit there and cry. I'd cry through the whole session. I have nothing to say. We never get anywhere. He has me on all these drugs. In the meantime. . . I got this executive job and I really shouldn't have been working at all. I had it for a*

*about a year. But I really, wasn't myself, I was taking all these medications that he's giving me. They would make me sick too because I'm really sensitive to medication so finally I actually checked in to (a hospital) and I said I've got to get off these drugs. They did all this psychological testing and no one ever asked me if I was a lesbian. They said it was a situational depression although they couldn't see any evidence of it while I was there.*

For other women therapy was related to other issues and was not a context for their lesbian identity realizations.

*I went to therapy when I was assaulted and that was a part of my trying to make sense of that sexual assault. Make sense of it as in not just an individual attack but kind of more societal than that. To some extent I had to go there with that because of the way it happened. Because it was somebody I knew. It didn't fit into the kind of you know. . .*

*Interviewer: Man on the street*

*Participant: Yeah it wasn't a fluke. It was very calculated.*

One woman started therapy in connection with her work.

*I didn't go to a therapist until I was in my 40's. It certainly wasn't to get over relationships or to deal with my sexuality or being a feminist or a lesbian none of that. I didn't go into therapy, when did I go, I've done a lot since, I was in my 40's. . . .I can cry anywhere now and frequently I do. I think oh god all the money I have spent so I can break down in restaurants (laughs).*

Another woman was focusing on her husband and family, neglecting her own development so therapy started her exploring what she wanted.

*I just started to get really stressed out and so I started to get counselling and so finally my counsellor said you need to separate from your (child). . . .you're with (your child) 24 hours a day. What are you doing for you? I started to think that maybe I should go back to school and so then I took the first steps toward getting my education instead of like focussing on (my husband's) career.*

This chapter has highlighted stories of family life with the influences of parents in

their traditional sex roles. It has depicted the character development of independent, radical leaders as the women discuss their acts of agency and resistance to gender roles. Their lesbian desires are noted early but then "forgotten" as most move on to heterosexual relationships. Some consequences of sex with men are described by these women. The role that therapy and feminism play in all six of these lives is discussed. Four of the women re-discover and act on their same-sex attractions surrounded by the contexts of feminism and therapy. Two women who decide at young ages that the traditional female role will not be their destiny move towards their lesbian-ness without significant involvement with men and before joining feminist organizations or entering a therapy process.

#### Chapter Four Discussion

As I examine the significant influences in these herstories, sexism with its gendered binaries, stands out at home, school and in the labour market. The male/female dichotomy with its public/private gender segregation of roles and its societal valuing/devaluing of these respectively, is depicted here. Mothers are noticeably confined to the home to care for and about the family. Although these women see their mothers as major influences and role models, the oppressive conditions that surround their lives are noted. Some of their mothers gave up careers and others sustain emotional abuse as they stay in homes that were androcentric and patriarchal. Two of the women become determined at young ages not to fall into the traditional marital female role as they observe this rigid binary. The female care-giving role that young girls are indoctrinated into early, according to Reitsma-Street (1991), is evidenced here also. Big sisters protect and help younger siblings, with one describing her successful efforts at occupying all the neighbourhood youngsters on summer holidays. Another avoids home economics classes but assists with disabled children instead. The lessons in care-giving and a belief in the ethic of caring is evidenced early with these girls who as adults go on to work in the helping professions.

Some of the basic feminist concepts such as equality between the sexes seems present in the ideology of the mothers of the co-researcher/participants. For example, one mother insists to a male relative that her daughters are strong and buys hockey sticks for them. Another mother talks to her daughter of her need to work as a maid to gain a high

school education while this was financed for her brother. The awareness of injustice and oppression of women is anchored in a personal way with stories of one generation to the next. Some of the mothers supported the education of their daughters towards careers that would give them financial independence. A father also makes sure that his daughters receive a university education that a generation earlier would have thought a "waste". Some feminist ideas then have made their way into societal consciousness in the 60s and 70s. One co-researcher/participant is able to negotiate other options to traditional home economics classes but still doesn't gain admission to the identified masculine area of industrial shops. Resistance to the traditional feminine role is seen with some of these girls attempting to disrupt the traditional boy/girl duties by mowing the lawn. The assertiveness of the independent, radical spirit that is in contrast to the more traditionally passive, supportive feminine role is strong in these stories.

The fathers discussed here perform stereotypical "provider" roles and are often seen as uninvolved in their daughters' everyday emotional lives. This turns up the volume for me on the reason/emotion dichotomy which is entangled with the public/private split for men and women. Processing feelings is relegated to women and this emotional labour is devalued. Men are confined to the more valued, rational "provider" role of working in the public realm. The emotional distancing of men/fathers and other gendered issues has been taken up to a certain extent by the men's movement. Contributions from this movement that examine and strategize around an enlarged and new male/father role, are discussed further in chapter six.

The silence and invisibility of older lesbians is noted with only one woman aware of a lesbian role model, a teacher, during her teenage years. Letting this secret out of the bag to her favorite teacher leads to tears for both parties and is never discussed again. The role modeling and influence of grandparents in these young lives was a surprise to me and a reminder of the remnants of the extended family structures that were still intact in North American communities in the fifties and sixties. Younger women whose families have been affected by increasing mobility and more nuclear family situations may not have had the benefit of knowing grandparents as intimately.

I wonder if I had obtained more diversity of ethnicities in my study would there also have been an increase seen in the influence of extended family structures. Collins (1991) reminds us of how leaving out black women's experience can miss the "workings of race, gender and class oppression in shaping family life" (p.52). She states :

Similarly, sociological generalizations about families that do not account for Black women's experience will fail to show how the public/private split shaping household compositions varies across social and class groupings, how racial/ethnic family members are differentially integrated into wage labour, and how families alter their household structure in response to changing political economies (e.g., adding more people and becoming extended, fragmenting and becoming female-headed, and migrating to locate better opportunities). (p. 52)

My participants had family structures which were fairly similar, with white, middle class and North American being the obvious descriptors, although there was some variation on the theme of class with working class mentioned and conversely some discussion of privilege.

The societal labour market sex segregation discussed by Kemp (1994) is reflected in the co-researcher/participants' perceptions of the limited career choices available to them. One woman in my study spoke of barriers to realizing her dream of becoming an Episcopalian priest due to patriarchal ideas that denied women a place in this position of congregational leadership.

Feminism and therapy seem closely linked in four of the stories I recorded. The theme of gender embodied experiences and the theme of catalyst are also overlapping, with each other and with the feminism and therapy themes. Life history interviews give a more holistic view of the lives of those being studied. By pulling out particular themes I have attempted to untangle the complexities, but it is necessary to remember that events in peoples' lives are layered, ever changing and interactive.

None of the co-researcher/participants use the term consciousness raising to describe this increase in their feminist awareness. It seems obvious though, as they discuss their involvement in a women's resource society, attendance at a seminar with all women

speakers, or dropping in to the local woman's center, that their consciousness was changing. Feminism and therapy appear to be transformative forces for those who had longer term heterosexual relationships and their lesbian-ness comes bubbling up to the surface in one or both of these contexts. Four out of the six women uncover their lesbian-ness surrounded by this therapy/feminism combination.

Even though lesbians have been very prominent in early grassroots feminist causes, feminism has been notably heterosexist. This problem was not examined until the second wave of feminism with publications such as Adrienne Rich's (1980) landmark essay on the compulsory nature of heterosexism. One of my co-researcher/participants was aware of her lesbian-ness from 1968 onward and in her discussion of participation in mainstream feminism, we hear of the uncomfortableness and silence around lesbian-ness that was part of the 70's movement. This woman, for a time, becomes part of a group of separatist lesbian feminists and describes their woman-centered activities unencumbered by a heterosexist focus. Moving towards organized feminist activities for three women in the study was part of a therapy initiated self-exploration process. Three others wander into feminist activities outside of or prior to involvement in therapy.

Gendered embodied experiences such as pregnancies, motherhood and sexual assault also are part of these women's herstories and can often be catalysts for them to reassess their lives and question their gendered roles and relationships. These stories caused me to reflect on how the social mores/norms and the relations of ruling (Smith, 1990) are unsupportive and detrimental to women's lives. Dealing with the aftermath of sexual experiences with men, whether consensual or not (in the case of the assault), can entail consequences that are often judged or condemned by others. Take for example the woman in this study who marries due to a pregnancy and she is then shamed and condemned by her father who demonstrates his feelings by not attending the wedding. Becoming pregnant when she is still involved in schooling and not interested in marriage, leads to the choice of abortion for one of the other co-researcher/participants. This decision is not looked on favourably by her boyfriend and she feels somewhat guilty about the unilateralness of her process but knows the choice of abortion was right for her. One co-researcher/participant

discusses caring for a baby at home, feeling isolated and financially dependent on her husband because she gave up her job which had included a social network of friends. Her husband was able to continue in his job, keeping his seniority and social networks. This move toward traditional roles for husband and wife and the devaluing of caring for children is reflected in the husband's reference to "his" money. A sexual assault was shattering to one woman. This horrible trauma led this co-researcher/participant to deconstruct the mythology of a "safe, civilized society".

These experiences seem a variation on the concept of "structural rupture points" that Fornow and Cook (1991) discuss where "social actors commonly forge new aspects of their identity" (p. 4). The coming out process itself is a "structural rupture point" but the gender embodied experiences here are ones that occur prior to this major transition in identity. Briskin (1990) discusses the contradictions that women face as they attempt to live out their expected roles in a sexist world. These gender embodied experiences are times when these women felt personally the effects of these contradictory messages. They seem to catch a glimpse of the underlying agenda, the "promotion of white male and middle class interests" (p. 9).

Two women initiated therapy around these gender embodied experiences and another woman was already involved in a therapy process at the time. The therapy that these women discuss seems to be influenced by a feminist perspective. One woman though recounts her initial encounter with health care professionals in a more traditional medical model approach. She is given medication for her symptoms, diagnosed with depression and does not reveal nor is questioned about her sexuality which happened to be one of her core issues. Although these stories were in past decades I would like to make the point that this medical model of psychiatry is very much alive in the 90s.

In my extensive twenty-five year experience in numerous psychiatric facilities in at least three provinces in Canada, feminism is still the "f" word in some medical settings and symptoms are still diagnosed and treated largely by measures such as pharmacotherapy and electroconvulsive therapy. The fact that a woman was sexually abused in her childhood, or that she is struggling with her lesbian identity, or that she is a single mother living in

poverty, or is in an emotionally abusive marriage, will most likely not be the basis of the treatment given. In the interdisciplinary treatment systems of psychiatric/psychology/nursing/social work there are pockets of feminists who are aware of social and economic oppression and the role these play in women's distress and dis-ease. The patriarchal medical model though is very entrenched and has considerable social/economic power so this often remains the ruling ideology. The roots of this professional power dynamic are documented in chapter two in the discussion on female dominated professions.

Feminists have examined the "negative effects of female socialization on mental health, the discrimination against women inherent in traditional psychological and psychiatric models of human development, and the negative impact of the mental health profession on women seeking treatment" (David, 1975). This work by feminists over several decades would hopefully influence the treatment women receive today. I think that in some places and situations it has, but working in numerous psychiatric inpatient and outpatient facilities and in community agencies, I know that it is still often a non-feminist perspective that greets those who need to seek therapy in many government financed institutions. The middle class situation of the women in this study leads them to be able to afford a therapist of choice who may actually assist with these issues and not one that is "on the gravy train", trained and working via a model entrenched in maintaining the status quo.<sup>18</sup>

Therapy is often an individual and private enterprise as opposed to the more societal focused community groups that feminism initiated in some areas in its early consciousness raising efforts. Therapy is now a more accepted way of dealing with life's problems and an important strategy/intervention for women dealing with with many issues, for example, the post-traumatic stress of sexual assault or the complex post-traumatic stress of incest (Herman, 1992). The inclusion of political and community change is very much a necessity

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<sup>18</sup> A client of mine sarcastically refers to the government paid psychiatrists and psychologists that she has encountered in looking for help as "being on the gravy train" which shows her insight into the social/political/economic conditions of the current institutions.



as well. Feminist psychotherapist Sara David (1975) comments "because women experience so many of the same conflicts, I feel that working in groups is more effective than individual counselling" (p. 173). In this study there was mention of feminist therapists who suggest their clients attend a women's seminar or who will conduct therapy for women only in groups. Feminists involved in the helping professions continue to strategize around this interplay between helping the individual wounded by a sexist, heterosexist, classist, ableist and racist culture and working toward political change of that dis-eased culture and its systems.

The two women in this study who have the least amount of heterosexual involvement and who decided at early ages to stay out of the traditional female marital role, did not fit into this theme of gender embodied experiences as easily. Their involvement with feminism is not linked to their initiation into therapy nor to their awareness of lesbian identities. Their experiences may be viewed in light of Kitzinger's (1987) suggestion that lesbian stories need to be told as an alternative to heterosexuality. These two women observed the oppressive subtext of women's roles in heterosexual relationships around them and at an early age made decisions based on this awareness. As children they were not aware of a lesbian alternative, but later as young adults they did become involved with a woman prior to serious heterosexual involvement.

In a culture that devalues women's reproductive labour, that judges and often condemns women for the consequences of heterosexual relations, and that makes child rearing and staying at home isolating and often paramount to financial suicide, the possibilities in lesbian relationships may appear more attractive. In the interviews we did not discuss, to any extent, the benefits of a lesbian life style other than the positive influences this brings to their helping professional work. In the focus group however there was a discussion about the joys of lesbian love and sex. Some of the co-researcher/participants discussed their lesbian relationships in comparison to their heterosexual experiences of love and physical intimacy. I didn't include this discussion in the data as this aspect of their lives/herstories was not as directly related to the focus of my

research on lesbian-ness and professional careers.<sup>19</sup> Looking at lesbian-ness as an alternative to heterosexuality brings up many questions that remain a mystery of human sexuality. For example, is sexual desire/behaviour a choice? Such questions remain interesting but outside the scope of this research. Listening to the early awarenesses of the same-sex desires of my co-researcher/participants may contribute to further work on this question.

Every one of these women had intense memories of close and important girlfriends and/or female teachers. Looking back they now understand these intense friendships/crushes as early lesbian feelings. At the time of the experience, some had the label lesbian for these feelings and some identified them as having a sexual component. This was often rationalized as a "stage" they were going through, but many did not view their closeness or interactions with other girls/women in this light. The invisibility and repression of lesbian-ness in the culture seems to be portrayed here. These feelings/thoughts become buried, often too terrifying to acknowledge. The compulsory nature of heterosexism comes into focus. The almost overwhelming annihilation of the ideology and practice of women bonding sexually and emotionally in the group and in individual consciousness is revealed (Kitzinger, 1987). These women repressed or suppressed their same-sex desires with most going on to date and/or co-habitate in heterosexual relationships. Heterosexual relationships played a significant role for three of the women for many years. In chapter five there is further exploration of the internal uncovering process of these repressed lesbian desires outlined by some of the co-researcher/participants.

We have seen in chapter four how as girls, teenagers and young women, my co-researcher/participants have navigated the gendered and heterosexist reality surrounding them. They became young teachers, nurses, social workers, with some aware of their lesbian-ness and others awakening to this in the midst of their professional careers.

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<sup>19</sup>I do feel that there is more work needed on sexuality/intimacy including heterosexual, gay, bisexual or lesbian. For more information on lesbian sex and relationships see Loulan (1987, 1984).

## Chapter Five: Conditions and Contributions of Lesbian Lives

Coming out, the acknowledging of lesbian desires, has been briefly touched on by the co-researchers/participants in chapter four. This will be explored more fully, highlighting the processes of coming out to self, the conditions surrounding this life changing transition, how others receive this information, and how professional lives are affected. I started with early family life in chapter four and so at the end of chapter five I will revisit the family theme as participants describe their experiences of coming out to parents.

### Repressive Conditions

Some of the negative conditions surrounding lesbian-ness have been mentioned previously such as the pathologized information one teenager found at her local library. Others discuss negative media information and attitudes at work and in educational settings. It is easy to see how these repressive conditions could extinguish the surfacing of lesbian desires.

*I remember being in the car with my parents actually I was probably about 5 or 6. . . . I was in the back seat and I guess there was something on the radio about homosexuality. I remember someone was ranting about gays and I remember my Mom turning to my Dad and saying well I don't think that they should be treated like that. They are ill. They are mentally ill and they need help. They should be given help. And I remember sticking my head into the front seat and saying who are they? What are you talking about? And she said they are just people that have a mental illness and people are being mean to them and they shouldn't be. They need help. They need psychiatric help. Now that is not a direct quote (laughs). . . . I remember that I filed that away somewhere and that was a time, as you know, where what you would read or see as a kid or as a teenager about homosexuality did have a lot to do with being looked at as a psychiatric disorder or imbalance or because of some environment in your home dynamics that had created it. And it was really kind of ugly. I thought that it was really ugly and kind of shameful. The fact that I kind of had feelings that would creep up on me like that later, I would really consciously*

*block those feelings because of a sense of shame.*

Another woman remembers the movies with lesbian content.

*I remember two movies that were about lesbians. The Killing of Sister George and The Fox. Susanna York was in that one, and The Fox by D.H. Lawrence, in both of those stories the lesbian gets killed off. You know it is a very unhappy ending.*

*There wasn't a positive movie that I remember and stories or books about happy lesbians were not available (laughs). I remember going to the library to look up lesbian and I was all over the medical section. It was so negative. There were no happy lesbian love stories any of that stuff at that time.*

The places in the past that lesbians had to socialize in were also described quite negatively by one of the women.

*I remember going to my first gay bar. You didn't take your I.D. and you fully expected a fight. It was just starting to be a little more open as far as stereotypical butch-femme roles, more androgynous. It was just beginning. They could be very unhappy places for lesbians. Drunk women who didn't like themselves. It was pretty negative. Most places were in old dilapidated buildings until I got a little older and went to Montreal and Toronto and Vancouver and things improved. Classier places, classier people in terms of dress it was a social cultural thing too. Yeah a lot of discrimination for dykes in those days.*

Working and educational conditions were viewed as negative for lesbians so being closeted was the norm.

*I wasn't into socializing with people on the unit much. It wasn't talked well shouldn't say it wasn't talked about. The head nurse and the assistant head nurse were probably girlfriends on the unit, I'm just remembering this, but they never addressed that. It was never talked about although I think that there were a fair number of rumors. . . . There were lots of couples working within the university and within the nursing program but again the nursing programs were extremely closeted or thought they were or didn't bring it up at all and sort of avoided the topic at all costs. So weren't helpful, weren't role models, weren't positive role models anyway.*

### Coming Out Process

Descriptions of personal reactions to the awareness of lesbian identity, ran the entire gamut among the six women in this study. This individuality and diversity of responses ranged from relief and empowerment through to trauma and depression. *It was a positive thing but I also knew that it was really dangerous and it was a secret.* Someone else states:

*It was always a relief to me. When I had to try and get honest with myself about different things. I struggled with it for a long time thinking- God I just don't think I can present myself to the world like this. Even though at one point I had quite a lot of lesbian friends. I respected them. I still had a lot of internalized homophobia because I just didn't want to be regarded by the world in the way I knew that sometimes lesbian women and gay men were regarded. And I have heard some really awful things as we all have and I just thought man, it sounds so ugly. There was still shame connected with it for me.*

Another woman describes an aspect of her coming out process:

*You get quite heady and empowered and there is a real freeing of energy... getting stronger and healthier... things were just clicking and even intellectually and so on. I was teaching the Women's Studies course and there was a whole bunch of different ideas coming and I was going to different conferences and everything. It felt better sharper, clearer. Everything was sort of coming together... this real kind of positive energy... alive and creative at the same time.*

A married woman wanted her husband to rescue her from her intense feelings for her first woman lover.

*I had told him all along. I'd said to (my husband) when I'm with her I don't know how to stop this. Then after things started to happen I said you know things are happening why don't you do something about it. I was sort of hoping he would take charge of the situation and save me or something. He just said, "there is nothing I can do about it." So I was left spending hours crying and thinking what am I screwing up my life. And it was really very traumatic, but in the end I had to make a decision.*

Another woman describes the beginning of a depression.

*It was getting more physical and I just remember one night she said I don't want to go in there, I don't want to go in there. We were sitting outside in my car. She was supposed to go in so we cuddled up together in the car. I remember I said the word lesbian one time and she just freaked. Anyway I started getting sick about all this. It started to really bother me. I kind of knew what was going on, I started like pacing, feeling depressed.*

The communication in the intimacy of one woman's first relationship is described here.

*What was really wonderful about coming out was that we talked about it constantly and every step that we took was from a place of being perfectly fine with it. That we never, neither one of us, ever engaged in anything that felt scary or awkward to the point where we didn't want to be doing it. And if that was the case we were both really good about saying so and things would slow down and we would talk about it. We would come to an agreement or understanding. So my coming out was great. It was like coming out with your best friend and yet there was that interest and excitement of not being best friends but becoming best friends.*

### Compartmentalization

The repressive conditions embedded in the culture, plus the negative reactions that occur when someone's lesbian-ness is revealed, can lead to a compartmentalization or a hiding of these desires and their resulting relationships. This compartmentalization takes place at an internal level as women repress, suppress or dissociate from their same sex desires. It also takes place on an external level as, once out to themselves, they keep their lesbian-ness a secret from others in various aspects of their lives.

### Internal Compartmentalization

Two of the participants had more of an internal journey towards their adult awareness of their lesbian identity. They weren't propelled into this discovery via a relationship as the other four identified. As these two describe their gradual reawakening of their same-sex desires, a clear picture of their internal process is painted.

*I got good at blocking things out and kind of burying things. It made it really difficult for me as . . . well you build a life around you, you know? It appears one way to people and it gets harder and harder to shift that. . . . I just started to be kind of honest about my feelings, and started to think hard about my life. Yeah I can pick all these times in my life when I pushed these feelings down and thought no I can't go there. I can't go there with my family, my life. I can't go there. And then I started to look at whether I wanted to be happy or not or whether I just wanted to kind of keep moving the way I was moving. Just kind of functioning. . . . I just spent a lot of time thinking about it. Kind of taking it apart all alone, in my head . . . . It was slow in the sense that it was a long process of unburying things, but once I really felt that I was going to be completely honest with myself it was just there. It was sort of like taking something that's there and you've got these layers over it and it sort of seeps through and you can put another layer on it to keep it from seeping through for a little while. Then when you decide you're tired of layers then it takes a while to pull them all off. But once you get there, it is there and it was always there. . . . It is not even a big surprise. It is just that you had to work to kind of undo the layers that you had built up. But it is not like it is somebody suddenly turning on a light or something. It's sort of there I don't know if that makes sense. . . . This is what it is and that is who I am and I always knew that deep down and I couldn't even go back. . . . when I was going through this process, I would lay in bed at night and I'd think back to my adolescence. My first fantasy thing about women and how I dealt with that. The crushes I had on different girls and how I would cover that up. The crushes I had on women later. I just thought God I was just really good at compartmentalizing those things. . . . I just couldn't work it into my life, my family's life, everything. So I would just kind of compartmentalize them and leave them there.*

Another woman describes part of her process towards her lesbian-ness that includes a revealing dream.

*They (sexual feelings for women) kind of went underground or seemed to be*

*channeled toward heterosexuality certainly. . . . I just became more conscious that I couldn't deny that I had lesbian feelings. . . . I think that I just went into this second stage of it wasn't so much repression as suppression. . . . I was attracted to (women) strongly and then I did have a dream too. It was an interesting dream. A sad dream too in a way, and really when I look back on it now to me it was sort of symbolic of some kind of a coming out process I suppose. . . . anyway what the dream was- it was a very powerful dream. It was in the setting sort of like the apartment we had rented . . . . There was a girl hanging and she was about 12 years old and she was hanging from the ceiling. And at first I couldn't tell if she was alive or dead. And then there was some small boys 9,10,11, throwing rocks at her and I chased them away. I said what the hell do you think you are doing and chased them away. Then I looked up at her and realized that she was alive and I said oh my God are you okay. And this kind of look of confusion and shame was there and she said oh yeah I'm okay. My Mom put me up here because I'm bad. And I said oh okay and then I went back in the apartment and shut the door and then I thought but this isn't okay. I don't write very many of my dreams down but I wrote that one down.*

*Interviewer: Was she like hanging, like in string?*

*Participant: Yeah, a rope like around her neck hanging from the ceiling.*

### External Compartmentalization

Coming out to others is a lifelong, sometimes, daily task as people move in and out of a lesbian's life. In the initial stages of attempting to live with the knowledge of one's lesbian-ness, there is much strategizing and decision-making around who to tell or not to tell, who knows or doesn't know. These women talk about the compartmentalizing, the keeping separate of various parts of their lives.

*I was supposed to go into residence (laughs). My family dropped me off but I never stayed in residence. I moved right in with her. . . . There were lots of closeted people and there was a secrecy. Don't be too obvious, and we are getting together later to go out to the club but don't tell anybody. You know all of that sort of in the closet stuff so you got this real clear message. . . I just felt so much pressure there*



*(in home city) I was in a high profile job and I wasn't out and it was dangerous to be out. Anyplace where I can meet people like myself in a different city that's where the fun was. I didn't get involved with people in (home city). I just separated out my work life and where I lived from the rest. We knew how to recognize each other and we found each other in every city we visited.*

Lines are drawn between who knows and who doesn't know the secret.

*So I was starting to come out at that time. I was in a committed relationship but I wasn't out amongst students, I wasn't out with my team players.*

*Another woman states : I wasn't out the first year. . . I came out secretly to three people. . . a couple of other people I told they were very open and understanding and very accepting, but I really didn't feel like I could tell the class. . . I really felt like I had this hidden thing going on like I would go over to the women's center where dyke talk was and go to meetings and then I'd sneak back to the department.*

This keeping parts of a life secret or separate from other parts can take its toll.

*I was really very scared that someone would see (my girlfriend) and I together and I was very fearful. I didn't know if I would get fired or I'd lose my job or never get a full-time contract and I used to just sweat buckets. Like I'd get up every morning and I'd stand in front of the mirror and I'd try on different outfits and say does that look like a lesbian. . . . how do I deny this relationship all day and then come home and be with her, so that was really hard. One time we walked into a restaurant and we were kind of holding hands a little bit and laughing and I looked up and there was the nurse from our school. I just died a thousand deaths because I felt oh my God she has seen me acting intimate. She is going to go and tell every one at school. This is what I thought in my own paranoia and I'm sure she told no one or didn't care. But I was like oh my God she is going to tell everybody. . . . so I went through three days of walking around school feeling like any minute someone is going to tell me and then I'm going to get fired and I didn't even know what rights I had. I didn't even want to bring it up to find out really what rights I had. I was really intimidated by the whole thing and thought you just have to play the game and*

*you have to hide and I was angry around it. I had internalized a whole bunch of homophobia.*

### Support/Allies

The reasons that these women had to compartmentalize their lives often were related to fears of negative consequences with job loss being one of the greatest fears. Sometimes these fears came true for some of the women in this study but other times these were not actualized. Here are some examples of occasions when the people around them such as bosses, co-workers and academic supervisors, were supportive.

*I really liked working with this gay guy because there was a sense of comradery and understanding. We could joke with one another in ways that didn't seem to happen as readily with the straight staff. Like having a big brother. We used to get together for dinner.*

Another woman discusses the positive experience she had in her graduate program. *I had nothing but support. I had three advisors who were feminist and were really strong at (university) for me on my committee, that were willing to go to bat for an all woman committee. I went through that program without any horror stories. That is the first time I have ever been in a graduate program where it went well. I just got support like crazy. Some people talk about how horrible a time they had with their advisor or their committee or their defense. It was just clear sailing. It was really, really the most positive time in my life as far as acceptance goes.*

Coming out in graduate school to a supervisor is a pleasant surprise for another lesbian.

*I talked to her before the class to basically to come out and say this is what my questions are about because I didn't want to be called on in class and answer the questions and not know if there was support. And I also felt like if I had been the teacher I wouldn't want that surprise. So I really had a lot of respect for her. It was sort of like there was this part of it was self preservation on my part and part of it was really having a lot of respect for her and not wanting to put her in the position where she would be surprised or that she would fail me or what ever. It wasn't just*

*selfish and I can remember being really nervous because I had not been out up to this point. I had been in school maybe a month and I'm thinking you know is this the end of my career. And she was great because I remember like telling her and being so nervous. I don't even remember what I said but at some point in the conversation she just looked at me, smiled and said thanks for sharing this, - I have to let you in on something. Some where in her life as teacher someone had told her that there were a few things that students would tell her that would mark her as a teacher and one of them would be when a student came out to her so that was a marker of you are now a teacher. And she was thanking me because I apparently was the first student who had come out to her. I sort of remember being surprised and shocked that I wasn't getting anything that I had thought were the possible responses.*

Her worst fears were never actualized as a teacher keeps her job when her principal discovers that she is a lesbian.

*One of my students outed me to my principal. She went and told him that she had seen me kissing another woman on Commercial Drive or something and I was pretty devastated. My teaching partner knew and so (the principal) was in a meeting and he was called out of the room and she (teaching partner) overheard some stuff. She came running to me and said, "they told (the principal) that you are a lesbian. What are we going to do? What is our strategy?" I was like I don't know what's our strategy. I was just panicked and so he came in. . . I was in huge denial maybe this will go away maybe (the student) hasn't told anybody. My principal comes to me and says "do you know why she hasn't been to school in three days?" And then I knew it was over. I said yes. He said that she had started rumours about you and I just burst into tears. And I said to him "this is not how I wanted you to find out." I really felt like I had been caught making love in the middle of my classroom floor in front of my kids. I felt totally exposed, vulnerable and that I had done something really inappropriate. Somehow I had broken the code of being a good teacher. I think what it had been is that we had kissed goodbye as we were leaving from somewhere and had been seen right. And I just said to him "I have been so*

careful." He said "Do you want to go to my office?" I was grateful and we went to his office and he put his arms around me and said "it changes nothing about your teaching." And he says "I have homosexual friends" (laughs). So I kind of knew, okay, he doesn't really understand all of it, but he is open and he is not going to fire me.

The following story shows a supervisor stumbling as she learns and evolves.

When I first told my boss who I am very fond of . . . She was asking me about my relationship with my parents. It was in the first week or two that I worked there and I said something about our relationship and there are things that I feel are between us. I said for instance I have never come out to them. I'm gay and I've never come out to them and that is an issue. She said oh you're a lesbian? And then she said I would never have known you look so normal( laughs). I kind of looked at her. My jaw dropped and she realized what she said and she kind of tried to back out of it a bit. She goes you are normal. She goes you are normal I didn't mean that and I laughed. I said it's okay, I know what you meant. At the time I was kind of taken aback, obviously she feels it is not normal or she wouldn't have said it. But she is somebody who is always trying to make an effort to unravel her prejudices. Sometimes she gets it, sometimes she doesn't, but she always tries. So I felt a little bit hurt, a little bit taken aback but I understand in getting to know her that that was just part of her learning. She was actually quite supportive of me in a number of situations. . . She said to (another heterosexual supervisor) who had an issue with an all queer event taking place and who felt it excluded heterosexuals- "that is not the issue- you are not a repressed minority." I was quite touched by it and I said to her "I really appreciate that." She said "well I really feel that that was wrong. And I said (to the other supervisor) anyway that event is not meant for your staff. It's for my staff and I support it." I was really touched by that cuz I know that she's had to learn a lot about things.

### Negative Reactions

Unfortunately not all the reactions to an individuals' minority sexuality have such happy endings. Job loss, discriminatory hiring practices, immigration policies, sexual harassment, attempts at suppression of a support group, and fear tactics on the street, are all painful memories for these lesbians.

This next story takes place in 1995 in the United States of America.

*I tried to get a job at this little school. It is a private Catholic school and they were pretty desperate for a faculty member. They actually needed two faculty members and this is in August. I just called them up and I say I'm thinking of moving to (this city). These are my qualifications. I got an interview like within 5 minutes. . . . She says we will need to have you write a statement in support of our mission statement which basically has you kissing the hand of the pope and pledging alligance. I say well I'm involved in a few activities that the pope might not support. And I don't even say that I am a lesbian. I say well I sit on this committee. I'm on the human rights committee . . . and (they) also have a pretty clear public statement around lesbian and gay issues. . . . I somewhere in there said I'm a lesbian and basically expect to be treated well. She wanted to know how I would go about teaching in this Catholic school. I said well I wouldn't see any problem. It would be kind of interesting to do that and if it is not part of the content of the class, I don't see that this necessarily needs to be brought up. When it does it needs to have the context of how people work with others who are different than they are. Then I even offered that I would even entertain having an article read in class that was in opposition to homosexuality and use that as a spring board for discussion which is probably where she got nervous (laughs) . . . . So I'm told that I now have to talk to other people. I can't make this decision independently. Where as before she had that information she could have just hired me. It ends up that I don't get the job. They are not going to hire me because my life style doesn't support the mission of the school.*

*Interviewer: And they tell you that?*

*Participant: Yes they tell me that. And I filed a complaint with the state human rights commission but because it is not a protected class they can't do anything about it.*

*Interviewer: What is not a protected class?*

*Participant: Lesbians are not a protected class. There is no anti-discrimination built into any of the state law or the federal law to support so it is perfectly legitimate and legal to discriminate.*

Actual job loss, a lesbian's worst fear, becomes a reality for this next co-researcher/participant.

*I did lose a job because I was a lesbian. . . . I was doing a pretty good job there. I hadn't finished my Ph.D. A new person came in, in charge of the lab and he wanted my position for some of his other people. So my position was not renewed, basically I was fired. The reason they gave me that my contract was not going to be renewed was because I hadn't finished my Ph.D. Well I can give you a list this long of people who had gone off and not finished their Ph.D. and still haven't got it by the way most of them. Behind closed doors, my friends and one other person. . . . (the Executive) said and besides she is a lesbian that is a problem for us. It was never said to me. It was said that I hadn't finished my Ph.D.*

*Interviewer: Right but your friends told you.*

*Participant: To them behind closed doors.*

The reaction to a having a support group for lesbian workers has an unusual twist. We decided to have a gay and lesbian bisexual support group for people at the organization and I sent a fax out to all the programs that if they wanted to meet with this group we would be at such and such a place at such and such a time on a Tuesday or whatever. It was faxed to the institution I work in . . . I guess one of the secretaries got it and was very offended by it. My boss was called into the director's office and told that it was insulting because it excluded heterosexuals and if heterosexual workers at the workplace had decided to have a support group for heterosexual women then of course lesbians would be offended.

Sexual harassment is a negative reaction that this woman endured for some time but eventually managed to get stopped. This story seems an example not only of men feeling entitled to sexually harass women but their behaviours seem justified by some heterosexual "lesbians just need a good man" mythology.

*I didn't know how to deal with men coming on to me and they shouldn't have been coming on to me in the first place. When we go away twice a year to these conferences it was meetings all day and then drinking and partying all night. I would tend to want to go off with the women and then that became a sore point. Like some women would slip away and that is when I would get. . .*

*Interviewer: These phone calls?*

*Participant: yeah. Banging on the door knowing that you are in your room but you won't answer the phone. The worst sexual harassment came when I was actually quite a bit older. There were three men involved that were harassing me and I didn't know how to make them stop. I consulted with a friend of mine who said you have got to go to the director. I thought he was part of the problem. So I went to him and I asked him to call off these three guys and it stopped after that. But one of them, I remember this distinctly, I was in my office and he was drunk at 8 in the morning. He came in, well not drunk but he had been drinking. I'm sitting in my desk and I turn around and he just grabs me and starts kissing me. And I push him away and I get him out of my office. I mean I was so in shock I couldn't even believe he was doing this. When I talk about sexual harassment that is probably the most obvious. The rest was all innuendos and very subtle comments and feelings of awkwardness. I knew that when I went to those places that I would have to once again deal with that like I had all those years. . . I'm sure it was worse because I was a lesbian. I didn't want to put up with it . . . As I see it, it really isn't a thing that I think women should have to go through but I got better at handling it. I got very good at saying look I'm not interested, period end of story.*

Institutional discrimination in immigration policies was discussed by one participant and is another painful totally unnecessary situation.

*Participant: No one within the university has really taken this on as an issue.*

*Interviewer: The issue is that a heterosexual student can get their partner a work visa?*

*Participant: That is correct.*

*Interviewer: An international student?*

*Participant: Yes and that is like published in the university information. It is on the immigration stuff that if one of you has a student visa your partner can apply for and receive a work authorization visa. What that means is you don't have to compete for jobs. You can go and apply for any job and if they hire you, they hire you just as they would a Canadian. They don't have to show that they have been unable to hire a Canadian for the job and then get you special permission.*

*Interviewer: And the legal thing somehow hasn't worked?*

*Participant: No we have applied once. We were told no. We applied a second time. We were told no. We have applied a third time.*

*Interviewer: No? Why do they say no?*

*Participant: The first time there was no reason given what so ever. The second time we were told that (lesbian partner) didn't qualify under the law.*

*Interviewer: And why was this?*

*Participant: That was vague. It wasn't said why. Then the third time we applied we applied for her through Vagerville just like a heterosexual couple would apply. They told us that she didn't meet the definition of a legal spouse. A legal spouse under Canadian immigration law is a member of the opposite sex whom you are legally married to and can show proof of a marriage certificate.*

*Interviewer: So how does this impact you and your career?*

*Participant: Well it makes it hard and I mean there is always the possibility of Canada immigration coming and taking (my partner) across the border and refusing her entry. One time we came across the border. . . she was hassled. We were hassled big time at the border to the point where we weren't sure that she was going to get to come across.*



*Interviewer: And that has been two years of this.*

*Participant: It will be two years in June. It affects us in that I'm the sole supporter of the family. I get caught up in this stuff and it takes me away from my studies. I feel guilty a lot of the time around what am I doing to my relationship. Should we have come here and neither one of us are particularly happy here. Part of that is because (my partner) doesn't have any meaningful work. I feel responsible for sort of dragging her here even though it's real clear to both of us that she is an adult and she made a choice to come here. But at the same time, it's real clear to me, I wouldn't have come here alone. It just makes it hard and then things surface with stuff about the lawyers. The first lawyer we were with her for a year and a half and we didn't really get anywhere. Initially we didn't have the court challenge money. It was my savings and that is gone. So that makes it harder to continue because well it is not getting anywhere. We almost have to continue because we have spent all this money. . . . I think that it does impact me and my being lesbian then has an impact on my career, my education. All that gets impacted in a huge HUGE way. I mean when she is depressed or I'm depressed about we are not getting anywhere. . . . it just becomes time consuming and there is probably other things that we could talk about or engage in than immigration talk.*

Most of these negative incidents have been related to work but there were stories of harassment if lesbian-ness is visible when just walking down the street.

*Like we don't hold hands all the time but once in a while we might hold hands for a little part of the walk. Especially late at night sometimes we do. So we were walking and we were laughing, sort of holding hands and we were walking off of the curb. This group of guys pulled up in this big red sports car and sort of blocked it, so we couldn't keep walking. Stopped the car and looked at us and sort of laughed out the window at us. Jeered at us. I was really caught off guard, because we had just been laughing about something funny and we were paying attention to each other. Then all of a sudden there was this car right there and four guys in it. I just got the feeling that they were going to get out of the car and beat us. We both just*

*stopped and we were almost paralyzed watching what was going to happen. They sort of had that look in their eyes daring us to just try anything. We didn't. It's sort of like you're flaunting it kind of look. Just do it and we'll get you. We just froze. In the car they just sat there. They didn't actually get out of the car. They looked like they were going to and then finally they spun the car around and sped off really fast, tires squealing and screaming. It really shook us up. We were going like "holy Jeez, how close was that call?" So it was probably the first time I really experienced a lot of hostility in a very public place. It was pretty scary and it felt very threatening and very intimidating. Of course it was meant to. It frightened us and then we sure didn't act like lesbians after that. We were sort of like walking home going "Oh my god, oh my god." You know and not touching each other. It was very upsetting.*

#### Ethics /Boundaries

These professional care-givers have been attempting to sort out ethical dilemmas and boundary issues often in a culture that doesn't even acknowledge that they exist. Some of the dilemmas these women faced many years ago in the context of a closeted life. At that time, secrecy seemed the only possibility for someone in a professional position. Talking to others for advice could rarely include the full story.

One woman discusses the brick wall boundaries that she developed out of fear of losing her job.

*I was really vulnerable when the odd student. . . would get a crush on me. I always felt vulnerable. I had a very clear, clear sense that I would not be involved with anyone that I was teaching. . . . none of that stuff. So thank God I had that really early. I had that clearly. There was no way. But I was so vulnerable because often times they didn't know what they were doing. They didn't know that they were seeking out or exploring their own lesbian identity. What I saw happen to some friends is that if you cultivated what would normally be just a friendship. Not a friendship outside of work I didn't do any of that. But were friendly to these girls in struggle that would want to talk to you. . . Sometimes they would even bring it up. Mostly by and large it was fine. You were like a counsellor but occasionally there*

would be a girl or a young woman that would be doing that and would get so scared that she would turn on you and say things about you. Now it didn't happen to me but it happened to a couple of my colleagues and those are dangerous, dangerous situations for a professional. When someone gets a crush on you and they won't know that it is sexual in nature and then they get that it is sexual. I saw that happen to a number of people. I was young and I was really quite vulnerable and that is why I had this thick boundary around me. If someone came to me wanting to explore that I didn't encourage it. They came during office hours if I'd be friendly and I'd encourage them to go to talk to someone. But I would try not to have any of those conversations. I would refer them out because that was the only way for me to stay safe. . . .if you are not even out as a lesbian, right, you are in a very dangerous situation. You have to do everything by the book and above.

*Interviewer:* Yeah and you weren't out- how is it dangerous? Is it that it could jeopardize your. . . ?

*Participant:* Career.

*Interviewer:* You could lose your job?

*Participant:* If the infatuation started with me I would just push it away and redirect. I didn't want any of that. There was part of me that really wished I could have counseled them and help them get some clarity, but it was just too dangerous, so I'd avoid it if possible. I'd stop the conversation and move on which a lot of us did I think in those days.

The need for complete distance between the personal and the professional is seen as very necessary by this counsellor in the lesbian community. She sees no grey areas here.

*I can. . . help them explore themselves and be non-judgmental because I'm out and it is clean and above board. If a transference develops, a positive transference, and if there is an erotic aspect to it then I help the client work with that. I have clear boundaries and it just goes back to that person to work it out and to understand it. It is more about them and not about me, just another way that they can understand themselves. You can't say that if you are not out. I don't think it is so easy to draw*

*that line. So I have a really clear boundary conversation that I have with my clients in terms of being a lesbian. Being out means that the community is small and I might run into clients. I might be counselling their ex-lover. I talk about what is going to happen if we run into each other socially and a lot of lesbian feminists have different boundaries. I have thick brick walls in terms of my boundaries. I'm one of those people who came up in the fifties and was trained in this way. It is still really important for me to have those really clear boundaries as a feminist. I've seen some feminists counsellors become friends with their clients but I'm not comfortable with it myself. They can be seeing clients and then when they are at a dance in the community, they can have a beer with them or that kind of stuff or a dance with them. I won't do any of that stuff. I have that conversation right up front with the client. What are we going to do when or if we bump into each other in the community. Then I basically say I'm your counsellor. I'm your counsellor for life. I will not be involved with you. I will not be sexual with you. I will be your counsellor. You can go away and come back. I will still be your counsellor. So I have a really clear role expectation there. . . . No I'm not going to have a dance with you all that stuff because lesbian therapists have a real decision to make around that in a smaller community. You have to decide how are you going to do this because in small communities forever is a long time . . . and the down side is that as a therapist we can become very isolated. The world is just too small with no place for me to be just myself without being aware that there are clients watching and wanting to know more personal stuff about me.*

Another lesbian discusses a different experience with these professional/personal boundaries when first coming out. A pivotal, life-enhancing relationship begins within the context of a professional setting when neither woman is aware of her lesbian-ness.

*So we start doing social things outside the (work place). . . she decides that she is going to move to (my city) because she wants to get a job there. . . . so she rents the bottom half of the duplex that I am living in. . . I am talking about this a little bit in therapy and it's dawning on me. . . and so we had this agreement between us that*

*we would always tell the truth in our conversations and one night we are watching tv. We are sitting on the couch and we start looking at each other. And she says to me so what are you thinking. It's like one of those oh shit kind of moments for me because I'm playing through my mind this little fantasy of what it would be like to kiss her. So I say that to her. I'm not really clear what her response is going to be but I say it and her response is like so what would be wrong with that and we end up kissing each other. . . . I remember (ethics and boundaries) being a concern. I mean I'm 21 and not having clear boundaries and really locating it and knew it at the time that it was really like who I am at this age and knowing that those boundaries are unclear. . . . And thinking so what are these rules about. Being in an environment where lots of those rules are questioned and rebellion and breaking them down. Just because it is a rule doesn't mean that that is what we should do. Rules are about people being controlled. I think that is a developmental task of someone early in their twenties. That you break some of those rules and you find out why they are helpful or not. And where they fit for you and where they don't. I don't know what I would do today confronted with the same thing because it wasn't awful. I wasn't punished. There is not that level of fear. Although I think at the time I was concerned and I was somewhat discrete but it had to be obvious to everybody. . . . I was having some difficulty finding those absolutes. . . . I don't feel at all judgmental about myself 15 years later.*

Another woman expresses concern that although she talked to senior staff about the boundaries between staff and clients, lesbian-ness was not part of the equation.

*I knew that we got along well. Anyway I remember asking one of the (senior staff) . . . I'm going like do you think it's a good idea if I see this woman outside of here? She's says well I'm going to go have dinner with. . . my(ex) client, we arranged to have this dinner. I'm like, oh okay, so it is alright. But I think there was something in me that kind of knew there was something else going on here but yet didn't quite know what you're supposed to do. Like whether you're supposed to be friends with clients or whatever. . . . It was just in the first couple of months of my coming to the*

city. . . this woman did want (to be friends). So I said okay, we'll go swimming or whatever so I started seeing her. . . So she starts seeing (a therapist) and then she addresses the fact that she thinks she is lesbian. I must have told her I was, I must have somewhere in there, I can't remember. I do remember that I told her where the hotels were because I knew where all the hotels were. So that relationship started to - all of a sudden I was aware that this relationship was turning sexual, like all of a sudden I was aware that I had some sexual feelings for this woman.

*Interviewer:* And she had them for you. You said that it was pretty clear that she had sexual feelings towards you and you were aware that you had them towards her.

*Participant:* Actually I think she started telling me she had these feelings for me before I was aware that I had them for her. . . . Anyway somehow this thing evolved and I remember thinking oh my god I mean this woman was a client and how did I let this happen. But it was down the road. . . I started going into therapy somewhere in there. . . . So anyway I remember things were getting hot and whatever and I said I can't do this until . . . its been six months. I don't know where I read that. . . . so that relationship went on for- it was off and on, it was the most amazing sexual relationship, the sex was really good. . . . Anyway that's a whole other thing. I would say from the first time I had sex with her to the last time there was seven years in between so you know, it wasn't like an insignificant relationship. But I do think there needs to be more about this. It's confusing this boundary issue- this ethical issue. . . . I really didn't think that I could go talk to anyone, well I did though- I ended up going to see a therapist right? Which was really good because it got me into my own issues and what was going on with me. But it's like, I talked to (the senior staff). . . . I think more needs to be done in this area. . . . Maybe it's because they think it's two women- they are just friends or they don't think of that part or they don't think to address that whole issue.

A young teacher struggles with the concept of boundaries, the imaginary division between the person and the professional persona.

*I was just learning boundaries of what it meant to be a teacher and there were times*

*when we would get together after (class) and go for drinks or at the end of the term. It wasn't like after each week. It was sort of a marker of accomplishments. There were just times when I realized that there was an attraction on my part to one of the students- like an older student. This was a community college and really learning about where those boundaries were or needed to be. Now I look back on that and I realize that it was a real time of growth and awareness about what my responsibilities were as a teacher. And how it is a place of privilege and power and realizing that I had responsibilities and not stepping over those boundaries. . . . I kind of see that it was those naive kinds of ways of looking at my world that I would step out into something that I shouldn't have been doing. . . . We would get together and have a picnic or just make additional contact and I think that that was not the most appropriate thing to do looking back on it. At the time I didn't have anyone to really give me direction. It sounded like it was fun and I liked these students. They were my peer group if we were outside of the school setting and outside of my role as a teacher so I really found them to be fun and entertaining and interesting people. The three years that I taught there blur together. Somewhere in there I had 4-5 students come out to me. 3 of them would have been men and then 2 students who started a relationship together during my (class). One had known that she had always been a lesbian and had been active in the community and then a classmate of hers who had not really given it much thought. They got together in a relationship and would come and talk to me periodically about it. After they graduated, by then I would I had left that school too and started teaching at the university. We did some social things together. This would have been a year -6 months to a year after I had left that teaching job. . . we were at different institutions by then.*

Coming out at work is once again the place where the personal shatters the boundaries around the professional image. Choosing to do this at work can be seen as an ethical dilemma.

*This year is the first year that I toyed with the idea of saying, "guess what guys, I'm a lesbian." . . . . I've just gotten to the brink and I've said to my teaching partner*

*that I may have to tell them this year and she said, "why, why should it matter?" So I backed down a bit. I'm still grappling with that. . . . what is the purpose of me coming out? I don't want to make them feel uncomfortable. . . it gives me more freedom to work on gay and lesbian issues because they don't see it as just my issues. I've brought it up as everybody's issue and you all have to deal with it. But I think if they knew for sure I was a lesbian they would think oh she always brings up her own things. So I'm kind of torn with it.*

Wanting to support young gay and lesbian students so they do not feel that they and their feelings towards the same sex are wrong, this teacher is working out what she feels is appropriate behaviour in her classroom. The focus group version of this dilemma appears here.

*Participant #1: Like the dilemma I had this year, I had two girls in my class. One is going through the coming out process. She was placed in my class because everyone in the school knew that she was a budding lesbian. And they wanted her to be safe and they figured lets get her in (my) class. So she has been with me three years. This year she fell madly in love with another student in the class who wasn't sure even what being a lesbian was or didn't even have very much information about it. . . . we talked about it a lot in class so she got the language for it. By the last month of school, these two girls were like draped over each other. We have a lot of lessons on the carpet at elementary. The girls were like draped over each other during class at all times like sitting one girl inside the other girl's legs with arms around and stuff. My partner and I didn't react to it in any way shape or form. We didn't say that is a good thing or a bad thing or anything we just let it go on. But then someone questioned me the last week of school and said would you have let that go on if it had been a boy and a girl. I said oh. I was wanting to protect the girl who is really in love with the other girl and wanting her to feel that she is an okay person. So my boundaries- how much am I willing to allow? How do I give her self confidence and at the same time say gee you know this is getting a little bit too physical for the class room or sexual, actually, for the classroom?*



*Participant #2: Was it more sexual than affectionate or was that hard to tell?*

*Participant #1: It was hard to tell. Isn't it when someone is on top of someone and they are cuddling and their arms are on their legs and you know like it is not too far?*

*Participant #3: at 6 and 7 and 8 but. . .*

*Participant #1: at 13- two girls who are fully developed?*

*Participant #2: It is hard to know.*

*Participant #1: So you see my boundaries were really challenged and I don't think I ever talked about it with my teaching partner. When one of them bought the other one perfume we both talked and went oh she bought her perfume- now what is going to happen (laughter in the room). And then there was this big thing about one of them came in and said she bought me perfume. And we said did you thank her (laughter in the room) and she ran out in the hall - thank you, thank you, thank you. She ran back and said it is expensive perfume. I said well she gave you a nice gift and I'm thinking- oh mygod, oh my god, don't you know what is going on? It has been a real challenge for me but sort of inside me and having to say what are the boundaries around that. When the girl who wasn't the one who was madly in love, who wasn't the budding dyke. . . . the other one who is kind of being on the fence. Not knowing which way she is going or maybe she is bisexual. But a boy gave her a love poem the last two days of school and our budding dyke was like face down in the couch crying. And I was like how do I counsel this. So I just went up to her- are you okay? Then the other girl came up and put her arm around her and said she is okay because she knows that we are friends for life. It has just been this emotional roller coaster all year. I know that my boundaries aren't really clear because I'm wanting to give her all this support.*

*Participant #3 Support with limits.*

*Participant #1 So yeah I have got to figure that out because it could happen to another student. I had a little boy- little boy- he is not a little boy. He came out this year and is now seeking out youth groups. All the teachers give me all the gay kids.*

*But it is a whole new territory.*

The focus group discussion about boundaries and ethics had a variety of opinions and concerns expressed. One woman is uncomfortable with leaving the issue of professionals having a relationship- particularly a sexual one with someone who has been a client/student/patient without a definite yes or no position.

*Participant #1: I guess what I was uncomfortable about is when you said you are not going to leave it black and white I guess that I wish that we. . . . that it would have come out clear that we did have a strong ethic because having sex with anybody that you have ever been in a power relationship with. That we had a clear ethic around that.*

*Participant #2: Not everybody has a clear ethic around that or has had or still has.*

*Participant #3: and it depends on the model for one, that is a very male model. The feminist people, coming from a feminist perspective, I know lots of therapists that felt that that was a power differential and down played that.*

*Participant #4: I think a lot is, we talked about developmental lately, for me a lot of it was for me when I started teaching at university I was 25 years old.*

*Participant #1. You would be the same age as your students!*

*Participant #4. And for me some of the boundaries that came up was I had students were older like that were 40. I was out and they are dealing with their issues about coming out. Had their own personal histories and wanting to talk about that or work through it for them. And my not being clear and not so much on a sexual relationship with them so much as not being clear what are the ramifications around my job.*

*Participant #3: Graduate students with faculty.*

*Participant #4: And other problems and current problems, husband and kids and lawsuits. I mean all that stuff started to come into play and I didn't have the experience or the people to talk to.*

*Participant #3: So up until about ten years ago it was pretty okay for graduate students to get involved with their profs. There were coaches involved with their*

*teams. It is really pretty ordinary. Or if you didn't like it there wasn't any vehicle for that - we are starting to looking at legalizing all of this. We are looking at what 1980 something or other? It has not been that long.*

*Participant #1: I'm not disagreeing.*

*Participant #3: We need to address it.*

*Participant #1: I'm just not sure.*

*Participant #3: It is more complex.*

*Participant# 1: I just want to make sure that how you address it- does the complexity come through. I guess it will if you say there is no black or white but I just don't want it to appear that we aren't very sure around an ethic around sexual relationships.*

*Participant #2: No because some people have these brick walls or had them-*

*Participant #1: I know that it is complex. I am thinking back and we talked about this in Seattle. That one workshop that Suzanne Pharr did, when we were talking about adult child sex. That is another thing we need to talk about because one of the big myths is that all of these gay people are predatory towards other people, including kids. So we really have to bring it out in the open and talk more and more about it but again develop a really clear ethic around that.*

*Participant # 3: Maybe separate- there is a difference between wondering and as a growth process of struggling with the issues rather than who believes in no sex. And staying away from the clear markers on the ethics. Look at the dilemma. Look at the decision making process. That is where the story is.*

#### Benefits at Work

Despite negative reactions and repressive conditions, despite limited assistance with ethical/ boundary decisions, these women are pushing forward, using their lesbian-ness to educate others and improve the world around them. This is done daily in everyday work situations. They name the problems, disrupt the stereotypes and put real faces to painful issues. Schools, hospitals, agencies and even prisons gain the benefit of these courageous women's efforts to increase understanding and nurture diversity.

*I've felt really good about being an out lesbian because I can sort of say hey you know this is how I live my life- I'm out. For some of the women its good for them to see that and they can be out about their lovers. They can be out about what their life is like. I remember a client once that took me aside and told me that she was having problems with a couple of the other women in the house. She said it's just all this lesbian stuff. I just can't stand it. She was quite homophobic and I actually said well we can talk about this but I guess I should let you know I'm a lesbian. She really felt very taken aback and was kind of like oh my God I've offended you. I said no its okay. Its a good opportunity to talk to me about it. What's the problem. We had this long talk. She said are you really sure that you don't mind talking to me about it. I said I don't because I think it is important. She just had a real aversion to it. I talked to her about the fact that she could continue to do that but it meant that she was going to cut herself off from a group of people. I said you can distance yourself. You can decide that, you have that choice, but you are cutting yourself off from all these possible relationships or friendships. You are judging people on something. You're going to cut yourself off from part of their lives. She was saying oh I wouldn't overtly ever discriminate against anybody or anything, but there is this other side to it. I know that we have had a good bond but she just hadn't realized I was a dyke. . . She said I don't think I can change overnight. I said no probably not but you know I'm glad we talked about it and you can ask me anything you want. I just sort of felt like maybe she was walking away knowing that she liked me as a worker and we had had a good rapport. It would make her think what is it that I am afraid of? What is it that is making me say that I don't want to be involved with women who identify as lesbians? How do I kind of merge that with the fact that I liked this worker and we worked well together and that she is a lesbian. So I feel like at least she walked away with those questions. . . I also said to her that even if you decide that you aren't okay with it, it doesn't make it okay for you to treat two other women in the house that you are living with, who have just as much right to be here as you have, in a negative way. That is your problem not theirs.*

In the eighties another lesbian was attempting to teach her classes about diversity in quite creative ways but did end up being silenced by the relations of ruling.

*Where I was teaching I was very clear that I was a lesbian and I had a poster on my wall. I see that this sort of transition and growth and this continuum of moving from well its fine if you know- to making it real clear that I'm a lesbian. I would have been wearing ties to work and I have a button collection. I don't know that I would ever have worn anything overtly lesbian or gay but very clear that I had far to the left politics and that issues around marginalization were important and needed to be talked about. During the 5 years I became more and more an activist in that I invited speakers to come and talk in my clinical groups. Most of them were lesbians or gay men and even if they didn't come to talk about being lesbian they came to talk about other issues. One was a black woman from inner city Detroit and she came to talk about her experiences as a black woman and most of the time she would come out to the groups as a lesbian. Then I had another woman come and talk about her experiences as a fat woman. She also was a lesbian and an activist and pretty much always she came out to the group but again that wasn't the focus of her being there. Her focus was to talk about her experiences as a fat woman to disrupt these 22 year old farm girls who have come to the big city, to have them kind of wake up and see that not everybody was just like them- of some level of white privilege... Actually I got in a lot of trouble for doing it. A whole lot of trouble. By the end of this I was written up for including content beyond the scope of the course and I was told that I couldn't bring up any of the topics around race, around poverty, around class privilege, around lesbian and gay issues... unless a student brought it up.*

Another woman finds that she is seen as approachable so this induces an environment where questions can be asked by her heterosexual coworkers.

*I didn't always get along with the whole little clique gay cohort that worked on that unit but they got a new head nurse at one point. Not new, he'd been on the ward and he was made head nurse, but this was before he was made head nurse and I was working with him. He was a heterosexual male and we got along fine. I remember*

him saying to me one night, we're on nights, you know how nights are, there is just the two of you there. So he's wanting to know, he said he wanted to know what this being a lesbian was about for me. He wanted to know more about it and he was scared of the other ones who were much more out kind of lesbians than me. I think I kind of gave him a bad time too like why does he want to know. . . he said oh gee I'm beginning to wish I hadn't asked this question. So I talked about how it happened for me and how I just had these feelings. I mean whatever he wanted I tried to explain to him something about it. I felt kind of good about that, I felt like I'm approachable. Whereas sometimes when people who are more aggressive and more in your face about it aren't. I think that maybe because I look more like something they are used to that they kind of can talk to me. I just thought this is very interesting that he wouldn't ask these other people who had been on the ward longer but he would come and feel safe to talk to me. . . he could express his ignorance and his desire to know more. So I felt good about that one.

Using her lesbian identity this woman intervenes within a context to make a difference at an elementary school.

I decided after hearing lots of homophobic name calling- well you just hear the word fag used all the time, that there has to be a better way to do this. So I slowly started to come out to kids if there was a context for it. I was always saying gay and lesbian positive sort of things and trying to be inclusive and trying to tie it together with other things. . . . but I talked to the staff last year and let them know that I thought I would come out to kids. It was around this time that stuff was happening out in Surrey with the book banning . . . A couple of these boys had watched way too much t.v. and even seen some inappropriate for their age videos including one with a lesbian sex scene. This is unbelievable. This is grade 2. One of the parents of one of the other boys had phoned me about this. She didn't know I was lesbian at that point either. But she said I just didn't know he was watching this video over there but then he came and told me and I'm upset. I said well I would be upset if I thought that my kids were watching videos at that age with no supervision. What is

*the context for this and where did this video come from and is this what the kids think it is about? Anyway a couple of these boys had made mention of this sort of in a snickering way and someone else had made a gay or lesbian comment. Now this didn't all happen in the same day but then I decided look I want to come out. So I told them. I said you know I been listening to you guys talk and I think that you have a bit of a mixed up idea about what it might mean to be gay or lesbian. I hear this name calling going on and I hear you thinking that it is all about sex. I said you know a gay person is just some one who falls in love and is more comfortable with somebody of the same sex. If it is a man they are more comfortable with a man and if it is a woman with a woman. But it is more than just sex. It is love and a commitment. I said and you probably think that you don't know anybody gay or lesbian because it is not that safe for people. You probably aren't aware but there are people and I said for example I'm lesbian. One of the boys started to giggle and laugh. (The 2nd boy) said don't do that. It is okay for Ms. X. to be a lesbian and I really like you. It was really neat and the other boy stopped laughing and kind of looked at (the 2nd boy).*

By talking honestly to these young boys she is respecting them and herself and by enlisting the help of other staff, this lesbian continues her work with this young population.

*I had done this talk to teachers last spring. I had said I would appreciate it too if I am not the only one around this school that is addressing homophobic name calling. (Talking with a student) I said you are just using that fag word in a way that is kind of derogatory again and that is what (another staff) has already talked to you about. It does hurt people because it is used in the wrong way to hurt them. I said the reason that I pay more attention to it too is because you know I am a lesbian. He kind of looked at me and then he said my grandfather is not going to let me come and talk to you anymore. And I said yeah I know there are people that have a lot of trouble with it. He said well I have a lot of trouble with it. I said yeah I can see that you do. Anyway he was on his way up and out as it was the end and (another student) was actually coming in. (The 1st student) looks at me and says does he*

know. I said actually (the 2nd student) is one of the first kids I came out to. (The 2nd student) said yeah it is like racism, because (the 2nd student) is part Filipino. He says yeah it is like racism and it is not a good thing. (The 1st student) says well I don't think it is okay and (the 2nd student) said well that is kind of odd isn't it.

One woman decides to take on the derogatory comments in her agency in an effort to improve the climate for minorities.

*We were in a partnership doing multi-cultural counselling and our executive director was making racist comments in the waiting room. I got to the point where I was fed up. I had just had it. I knew that I was taking a chance but I did it anyway. I went to our director. I said that is what is going on. It can't go on. We need to talk about it. She wanted to do a one on one. I said no it needs to be the whole agency. So they set up a meeting. . . . We had a few more management types that coordinated it and facilitated it. And basically I started off by saying this is my experience as a woman and as a lesbian here. I talked about wanting to heal this place with men and really owned a lot of my stuff and set the tone for some really honest discussion. When I hear those kinds of comments and jokes it hurts. It really hurts and it doesn't make me want to get to know you at all. Then I get this defensive reaction and then it just builds. That is not the only thing- that is homophobia, I hear racist comments, I hear dirty jokes, I hear sexist jokes, that is not okay. Then everybody sort of got in and for the most part it was really a lot of people talked. Then someone else talked about homophobia. One man walked out of the meeting. The executive director wasn't there and he was basically the problem at least one of the problems. Two of the other men were there and I did some debriefing with them. They were very upset that I didn't come to them one on one. I said there is no way that I would come to you one on one. That is not safe for me to do. So the only way that I can be safe is in a group where some people will facilitate and where my reality can be checked out. . . . This woman who has not been a close friend, has no investment in me at all steps up and she says you are right. I have heard that myself. I have been appalled at it as I walk down the*



hallway. And when she said that I just burst into tears. It was just so moving. We had a follow up meeting and of course not a lot was done but I had my day. And as an agency we couldn't afford to be racist, homophobic, sexist. We can't do that. It no longer was tolerable.

This teacher's goal is to make the classroom environment safe and inclusive so that a diversity of opinions and issues can be raised.

*I bring up options and alternatives, also- how would that affect gays and lesbians. I do bring the topic up and I have brought it up and I think I bring it up more often every year. I always do lessons on name calling at some point during the year. That usually goes on for about two or three months and in there I do some work on gay and lesbian issues if it's around name calling or if it's around discrimination or prejudice. We did a thing more recently on stereotypes. We did this thing on boy culture, girl culture, stereotypes and the gay thing came up because the boys said "we're always being called gay, why is that a stereotype and what does that mean". So I guess what I do as a teacher is, I make it a very safe climate for kids to discuss the issue. So my kids are not giggly about it anymore. My kids are quite able to discuss the issue like well if you were gay they'll just start a sentence like this, if you were gay it would affect you like this wouldn't it? . . . I think they know that when anybody does do any homophobic name calling the kids look over to see if I'm reacting. Then if I come over and say, "gee what was that I just heard. I think we need to talk about this some more." One time I had a kid say, "oh for god's sakes why did you say that? Now we're going to have to have name calling lessons." He was really perturbed with the other kids. Like couldn't you just keep your mouth shut. (Teacher)'s going to make us go through these name calling lessons now. If I do hear them I do the whole number around this is a two sided thing. One of the things is you call someone a name it's homophobic and therefore, it's a name to hurt someone first of all. Secondly what you're saying is if a person is gay, it's wrong to be gay and that's why this name works so good as a name call. So go through with them that there is those two things. And how would they feel if they were gay and*

*what if that kid is gay and you've just called him gay. How do you think he feels right now? That he's bad to be gay? What if he is? Don't you want him to have good self esteem? They go "Oh of course we do." They feel really upset that they've even possibly made that person feel uncomfortable.*

Students feel very comfortable in raising issues about lesbian/gay lives as this example demonstrates.

*The other day a student of mine put up his hand. We were talking about the stereotype that girls have to stay home and do most of the housework and raise the children. We talked about whether that was true or false to begin with. What was true about it and what was false about it. Also I add things in that it's interesting that you kids all believe that it's not true anymore yet 80% of women do have a job out of the home and come home and do the housework and mostly look after the children. Only so many percent of men do that so we're reading the stats. They were going, "What? How could this be?" They were really outraged about it. And then I started talking about it and said, "if you believe the stereotype, what is bad about it for girls and what is bad about it for boys." They talked about how girls had no freedom, no choices, couldn't have a career, were forced to have children even if they didn't want them, were forced to get married even if they didn't want to get married. They came up with all of that. Then we talked about boys and it meant that the boys had to get a job. What if the boy wanted to stay home and take care of the baby? What if the boy couldn't find a job and then he felt really bad because he couldn't raise the money for his family and they got into all this stuff. Then finally one boy puts up his hand really slowly. I said yes? And he said what if a boy chose to be homosexual and there wasn't a girl and you were just a boy with another boy. Who would do the housework and raise the baby? I said well you might have to adopt a baby but yes, that's a good question. Who would do the housework? So all the kids decided that the person who liked to do the housework would do the housework or you would take turns and do 50% each of the housework or you'd hire someone to do the housework. If no one wanted to do it well then I guess you would*

*have to hire someone to do that job because the housework has to get done. So it was really interesting because we talked a lot about . . . what is a girl's role and what is a boy's role. I said to them I've heard some kids in here call other kids tomboys and maybe they're not tomboys. Maybe they're just girls who like to do those things and what makes them boy things? They were all like "oh my god, what makes them boy things?" So I see my role as a teacher to constantly challenge their assumptions. Whenever they bring up something, to say do you think that is really true? Do you think that really is like that or does it have to be like that or do you want it to be like that? Does that work for people? Just constantly bringing it up and planting those little seeds and they sort of go, I hadn't thought about that, let me get back to you. . . . So I think there is definitely a climate in my room of safety around that. The kids know that I would deal with that. . . . I have no fear and I will face it over and over again.*

Jailhouse romances came up during a interview with a co-researcher/participant who had worked with inmates and ex-cons. She handles the issue of lesbian activity in jail with a different attitude than her heterosexual co-worker.

*(A co-worker) is the one who said things like women come into this institution, and they're heterosexual and they leave here homosexual. It is a huge problem. They are just coming out in droves as homosexuals and they come in as heterosexuals. They are being turned while they are in the institution. My jaw just dropped. I said what are you talking about? She said it is a major issue these women are being "converted". It is wrong. I was sort of on some level almost laughing because it was so crazy. I said well for one thing it doesn't sound like such a bad thing to me (laughs). It sounds fine and the other thing is seriously, where are you getting this from? What are you talking about? Yes women come into this institution and some have relationships with other women. Some don't. Some have before they come in and some only have relationships with other woman in the institution, jailhouse love affairs, and then they go back out and live a heterosexual life style on the outside. Some women identify as lesbian. The idea that there are all these lesbians in here*

*changing women and staff that are lesbians changing women, because that was the insinuation too, was lesbian staff doing this, as well as the lesbian activity in the institution. I said I don't buy that. I think that people make choices and explore and all sorts of things happen. Have varied identities, discover things about themselves in different situations. I wouldn't label any of the women anything other than they want to label themselves. She really was quite defensive because I think she thought that I was saying she was homophobic, but she was being homophobic big time!*

### Coming Out to Parents

My interviews began with discussions of family life. As these women mature and own their lesbian-ness, they begin to make decisions around how to cope with this stigmatized identity. Coming out to family members is a major marker and this includes siblings, parents, other relatives and for some, husbands and children. Although everyone's family members are aware of their lesbian-ness, no one seems satisfied with the current communication or acceptance they and their families have about their lesbian identity and on-going lives. Some of the stories were extremely traumatic such as a long custody battle. Some stories are very healing for the relationships of the people involved. I imagine that re-visiting and re-negotiating this topic will occur many times in these women's on-going relationships with their closest relatives. Stories of coming out to siblings, children, husbands and friends were many and varied. Obviously not everyone has children or a husband so these stories were less in number although fascinating and eventful. Due to the extensiveness of the data I have included here only the stories of coming out to parents. Everyone had this story and this is an important marker for the lesbian/gay community with the question "so are you out to your parents?" frequently asked.

*I certainly knew I had lesbian feelings and didn't tell anybody. When I did come out which was after 16 years with my ex husband, well 13 years we were married, my Mom was devastated. She just never saw it coming. She really loved him. One of the things I said was I knew ever since I was a teenager. And she said well I sure could have accepted it better then than now. And I said I don't think so. . . basically my Dad seemed to take it better than my Mom. He didn't go through all this guilt*

*and shame business. Although shame was there, maybe that was on Mom's behalf, because it is a small town. I know when I had come out to someone else in the small town, neither one of them was too pleased with that, because she was a bit of a gossip. She was a younger woman but the context of how I came out to her was honest and it was actually a good thing to do. In fact it gave my Mom someone to talk to. This woman was really supportive and my Mom didn't tell anybody for years. . . . it has been interesting to watch her coming out process to the point where she can actually have a few good jokes about it too. She is okay, totally okay with me being out now as well as can be really.*

*Interviewer. So your Dad is just supportive?*

*Participant. He never had any wild negative reactions and both my parents have been supportive in terms of facilitating access with my kids at their place and financially sometimes from time to time because I have had huge legal fees. I'm still paying them off but my relationship with my Dad is just completely different. So when I say supportive yeah in an indirect way but we don't really talk about me being a lesbian or anything or what that is really like.*

This woman has an embodied awareness of the connection between oppression and depression when she feels liberated by sending that coming out letter to her parents.

*You can't tell them, you're in the closet, you have relationships that break up you can't say to your family whatever is going on. So it's just very painful and they have no idea what I've been through. Then I thought you should tell them. I think part of it was the girlfriend I was with, told her parents, although I would never have done it the way she told them. Never, never. She is a different type of personality than me and doesn't really give a shit about people's feelings. Anyway I'm just very protective of my family and so I wrote this letter and I remember the day I mailed it. It was a very interesting letter because one paragraph was about the weather and one paragraph was about being lesbian and the rest of the letter was all about people that we knew and what was going on and blah blah blah. I think the paragraph about being lesbian just said something about the reason that I have been*

unhappy and depressed or one of the reasons or I'm in therapy again and one of the things that I'm trying to deal with is my sexuality. I'm lesbian and you probably are aware of this but . . . in order to improve, it's helpful to tell people which is why I'm writing you. It was just this one paragraph. It was interesting when I dropped that into the mailbox and let go of it, it was just like this huge weight lifted off my shoulders. It was like oh my god, oppression is related to depression. Something in there, I just felt so much better. They hadn't got it yet, it was still sitting in the little red box but you know I just felt like free, free, free. So I did get a letter back. My friends are going, did you hear back yet? It was very interesting because my mother had one paragraph about the weather and one paragraph about my being lesbian and then about three pages about what was going on with people so she just took my lead. She talked about that they had some idea, it wasn't a total shock. She felt badly that I had this pain or whatever and that she was concerned that I would continue to receive discrimination during my life. Then she just went on, it was very nice actually. . . it was just fine. That was that. Several months later, I went home and when I met them at the airport I could see pain in both their eyes when they saw me but I was just my usual self and talked and chatted. They came out of it, they were fine. Okay this is (our daughter) and she's this big lesbian. They say when you come out to your parents you put them into the closet and they go through their own whatever. But then somehow being with me and me just being me. And of course, we never talked about it.

This woman feels her parents have become less judgmental as they age and can therefore accept her lesbian-ness.

*It was a real relief when I finally told my parents. Even though they don't completely understand. They have changed enough over the years so that, especially my Mom could say I just want you to be happy. I don't think she could have said that ten years ago. You know she can now, she is in her seventies. She is a lot less judgmental and more accepting than she was. It was a relief. I have enough things to worry about (laughs). I actually came out to my Mom because I*

*didn't feel I could with my Dad. I told her she could tell him (laughs). I had my Mom tell my Dad because he is harder to talk to on that level and my Mom, she kind of suspected I think after a while. I've lived away from them for years and years and years and they live in the Vancouver area. So finally after many years I was living in the same area as them. They were a little bit more aware of my life and stuff and I think that she'd suspected. So I finally took her out and, this is probably two years ago something like that, and I took her out and had coffee with her. I told her and she said well I suspected and she was really sweet about it. I was quite upset and I said I had been afraid to tell her. She said what did you think I was going to do and I said well you know that your attitude to gays and lesbians has not been harsh, but it has not been accepting either. She has seen it as abnormal and dysfunctional and kind of dark and lonely I think. I said I remember things being said. I had debates with them about gay rights over the last decade and their response has been fairly heated. They have believed that gays and lesbians shouldn't have children things like that. So I said those things to her and I just said those things lead me to believe that this would be fairly difficult to accept. I know that you wouldn't stop loving me. She was really sweet. She put her hand over my hand and said you know I completely accept you and I want you to be happy. You don't have to worry it's okay for you to be who you are. That was really telling because I don't think my Mom could have done that ten years ago. And I think she was able to now because she has made some shifts. She doesn't completely understand. At one point in this discussion she said it just makes me sad that you'll never be a mother. I think you would make a good mother. I said it doesn't mean I can't be a mother, Mom. That is something that is a myth. There is all sorts of ways I could be a mom if I decided I wanted to be. . . . She told my Dad and he phoned me the next day. It's very difficult for him to talk about emotional things but he did his best. He said well if that's the way things are then well than that's how we accept that and we love you. He couldn't say that's great but he tried. He tried really hard to say it's okay, we accept you. I know he doesn't understand in many, many, many*

*ways but he's not going to. He's shifted too though and he's become less judgmental and he tries really hard to understand so I didn't have any condemnation from either of them.*

*This woman did not tell her parents, a lesbian friend told them for her:*

*Someone else came out to them and it was a horrible situation. It wasn't my choice. It wasn't when I wanted it. And I had a big pile to sort of clear up. I will never forgive her but anyway what I did with it, with my family was that I talked to my mother after. I think what happened was my friend came out to my father. The next morning my mother was pretty shaky so we went for a drive. So I told her and her first reaction . . . . she blamed herself and that is a very common theme. I should have done something different and then the next one was I'm really afraid for you. So they were two very truthful, common reactions. It is my fault and it is going to be a hard life.*

*Interviewer: Okay so that was your mother so how was your father with it?*

*Participant: He was drunk at the time. It was not very good so what I did was. . . . I put that woman on a plane and got her out of my life. . . . and then I went home a couple weeks later and sort of sat down with them and it was much better. I mean it is funny my mother knew, but didn't know, all those years and my father knew. . . his reaction was pretty well sort of none. He didn't say a lot- I've thought that was so- You can count on us. Both of them were saying that at the time. My mother said I wish that wasn't the case. Are you sure? (laughs). . . yeah the thing is I think that my mother would understand it. She has had good woman friends all her life. She understands the love between women but she just doesn't get the sex part. I don't think that women her age get the sex part anyway. . . . I don't think my father had many questions cuz what I found out is my friend told him everything about lesbian sex. You name it boom, boom, boom, boom. I don't think he had any questions left.*

*The relationships in her family are distant and painful for this co-researcher/participant.*

*I want as part of your data to have you note that we didn't talk about between family*



members the first time. And we didn't talk about it because I didn't bring it up. . . . You know it's much easier to talk about success stories then talk about something that is still fairly painful and unclear in my mind. So my, I guess I haven't ever had one of those, Mom, Dad, I'm a lesbian conversations. What we've had are accusations thrown at me that I have deliberately stepped outside of and said, "when you're not so angry and you want to talk about it, we can talk about it." . . . My parents came to visit me when (my ex-lover) and I were living together. So I'd been out a couple of years and they'd come to visit. . . . We are all of us going to dinner and my mother turns to me and said, "if you'd lived somewhere other than (a particular area) you two would be taken for a couple of queers." . . . It just sorts of gets dropped because we're all heading out to dinner, literally walking out the door. It's kind of how my mother has conversations and doesn't have conversations. Like they get dropped at the last moment. . . . We don't have a lot of contact. So I think that it's a lot of our family dynamics rather than about me being a lesbian because when (my ex-lover) and I broke up and I needed some help financially getting the house. I put the money into the house but I needed to buy a portion of it from her, buy her out. My mother loaned me some money and it wasn't clear that she understood what that was all about. I think she understood what it was about but we didn't talk about it. She was willing to sort of be there. It felt supportive but it never was discussed like about how it was supportive or this is what I'm doing and why. This is what I need and why. We never had those conversations. . . . I'm there for my brother's wedding and my Mom starts in with (your brother) thinks that you're nothing but. . . . one of those queers . . . . I want my Mom to own her questions. So I say when you're ready to ask me your own questions about my life and you're ready to show an interest in who I am then we can have this conversation. Until then I'm not going to answer (my brother's) questions if he's not here.

*Interviewer:* And your father?

*Participant:* My father's sort of nondescript in my life. I mean he's physically there but we don't talk. I think it's just it's like how we are as a family in that we just don't

*talk about meaningful things. So this is meaningful and it's meaningful in a way that would probably have some pain and hurt for my mother and we don't talk about it. We don't talk about anything that has any pain or hurt or really much in terms of accomplishments or successes either. We just don't have meaningful conversations. Even though on the surface we might appear to interact on a fairly regular basis. As in phone calls. Probably once a month. . . . I know from being in touch with my cousin with e-mail notes that my mother has asked or knows or has talked to her about it.*

*Interviewer: About your being lesbian?*

*Participant: Yes, I know that she knows and that she's curious, she's talking.*

*Interviewer: You seem pleased that she is talking to other people about it.*

*Participant: Well, am I pleased? Well I guess it just takes away that - is my mother so stupid she doesn't get it sort of question, when it's hard for me to imagine she is because I don't think of her that way. It's really this place of sadness for me that I can't have a relationship with her that works. Also I'm a bit embarrassed that here I am this lesbian who's out everywhere in her life and I haven't had the conversation with my parents which seems to be kind of ironic. . . . I'm really. . . I'm proud of how I am a lesbian in the world. That means something to me and there's this little bit of shame and embarrassment around how that's not the case in sort of my biological family. . . . what it does for me is to be real clear around my relationship with (my partner) around getting wills and durable power of attorney and all those things to have our relationship, if something should happen to me, be acknowledged.*

*This following coming out to Dad story is very moving.*

*I was saying, "oh my god my father's coming! I can't come out to him. We have to de-dyke the house." So I really put (my lover) through it. I said I can't tell him. . . . you'll have to be my roommate. I think it really hurt her actually. So he arrives, he gets off the plane and we're waiting for his luggage and he starts, "so are you dating any men?" I'm like, "no" and I thought I'd answered his question so I didn't think it*

was going to come up over and over again. Then we drive out to the beach and we're walking along there and he's like "Oh there's a young lifeguard why don't you go and talk to him." I'm like "Dad!" "There's a single life guard" he says. I mean how do you know he's single and he's like 22. I mean get a grip. So I thought oh this is going to be really hard. So we went to the house and I introduced (my partner) as my roommate and showed him his room and said, "(my partner) has moved in with me" and did the whole pretending thing. Then it was really quite uncomfortable. . . . The next morning we were sitting there at breakfast having coffee and he says, "so I really wish you had someone to spend your time with, to do things with, you're going to be so lonely. I was against your marriage . . . but you need someone. Have you thought of dating men." I just thought, I can't do this. So I said to him, "You're sixty-nine and I'm forty-five and I'm not spending the next ten days lying to you." I could see that the lies were going to have to start getting bigger and bigger. He wasn't going to let up, I could see it. He keeps at you and I thought, oh man, I can't do this. I said, "Dad, I've got to tell you the truth," and he said, "What?" I said, "(My partner) is not my roommate. I'm in love with her. She's my lover." I think he knew it. I think he just sat there for a few minutes and I burst into tears. He got up out of his chair, sort of stumbled out of his chair and came over and pulled me into this big bear hug. Dad's a big man, and just held me and he'd never done that. He'd done that once when I was 12 and I think I'd gotten into a fight with my sister and he came and held me. He just held on for dear life and I was bawling and bawling and maybe crying for all the hassles with my brothers and sisters and missing my mother and just said to him, "I was just so sure you were going to reject me." After he rejected my marriage I thought well this is over the top. I thought he would disapprove of me, reject me. I thought he would just say I can't stay in your home I have to leave. He's very religious. So I was bawling and bawling and he was saying, I think he said to me, "you're my oldest daughter, I always will love you." Something like that, I thought God you know, it was like the first time he'd ever said that, you're my oldest daughter, I'll always love you, it doesn't matter what

*you do, I'll always love you. I said, "you know I'm very happy, we have a good life together." I'm telling him these things and then (my partner) walks in and I'm like, I said "oh shit." (My partner) was being aloof. I said to Dad, "let me do this again." I went and grabbed (my partner's) hand and pulled her over and said, "Dad I'd like you to meet my partner and (my partner) I'd like you to meet my Dad." They shook hands and Dad sort of hugged her and said, "what did you think I would say or do? Did you think I would hit you or something?" . . . My father said, "I don't understand it but that's the way it is." . . . But then he went to our land with us and spent a whole week building on our cabin. He said to me things like, "well if I lived out here I'd come and help you out all the time building your cabin." We talked and talked and we had a great visit.*

One of the consequences of having so much data is that not all the stories collected can be used. Some of the stories not included here are about coming out to siblings, to children, to husbands and the ensuing consequences that at times were very painful and sometimes supportive. Often there is some re-negotiating of initial reactions as time goes by. None of my participants are where they would like to be in the form of acceptance, openness and connection with all the members of their families in regards to the lesbian-ness of their lives.

There is an extremely painful custody battle that I will leave untold because I don't have the room to do it justice in this study except to say that an excellent mother and esteemed professional lost custody of her children with her lesbian-ness being the determinant. There is a story of a teenage son who becomes confused and acts out as he adjusts to his parents' divorce. There are aunts that have to keep quiet about their lives in front of their nieces and nephews. Family traditions around Christmas are missed for many years due to rejection by siblings. On a slightly less gloomy note, one co-researcher/participant stated that the moment of coming out had never been really negative. It was the nervousness/fear before hand that she found difficult.

Amongst these stressful personal situations, these educated, lesbian helping professionals continue to work at their demanding jobs. These jobs, sometimes not well

paid and undervalued, are very much about caring for and about others. They give their service to a society that continues to struggle with acknowledging their existence or treating their relationships in a non-discriminatory way.

### Chapter Five Discussion

The heterosexism in the lives of these women creates consistent repressive conditions during their growing up years and early adulthood. One of my co-researcher/participants tells of a discussion with her parents about the "mental illness of homosexuals" making an impression on her when she was 5 or 6 years of age. The shame due to heterosexism that Neisen (1990) discusses or the internalized oppression outlined by Phetersen (1986) is seen throughout the memories of these women. They are affected by movies where lesbians are "killed off", court cases about washroom sex amongst gay men that lead to suicides, literature that pathologizes same-sex love, and the oppressive silence by the older lesbians around them. One woman comments on the 1970's lesbian bar scene noting the class differences of these hidden away places and how these sites felt far removed from her well established professional position. She goes on to mention the issue of alcoholism that she observed there that she attributes to internalized oppression and self-hatred. Substance abuse, suicides and the low self esteems that often underlie these, are all related to the shame dynamic that Neisen (1990) points out. This dynamic is seen with other forms of abuse for example, childhood sexual abuse, which have recovery/healing models that Neisen would like to see modified and applied to counselling with gay men and lesbians.

In this study, descriptions of the coming out process vary considerably with many revealing the conflicting feelings involved. For example the co-researcher/participants used descriptors such as "positive" but "dangerous and a secret", a "relief" but "it sounds so ugly", and "very traumatic but I had to make a decision". Briskin (1991) outlines how the messages around sexuality are contradictory for women so finding pleasure in something considered deviant that is shrouded in silence can be crazy-making for lesbians. There was also mention of some beneficial aspects of lesbian-ness such as the increased intimacy that is stronger than society's negative messages, for example, "it was like coming out with your

best friend yet there was that interest and excitement of not being best friends". The empowerment of integrating an aspect of self is reflected in comments such as "you get heady and empowered and there is a real freeing of energy".

In this study I interpret the self protective measure of fragmentation within the psyche as an internal compartmentalization. The subconscious material in one woman's dream depicts an example of these inner processes of awareness beginning to surface. Another woman describes her psychological "unburying" and peeling away the layers in her mind to uncover her same sex desires. The inward focus on their process by these two women was a gift to the research. The stories shared by the four other women did not reflect this internal awareness. Instead falling in love with a woman was the catalyst for their becoming conscious of lesbian desires. Further discussion on integrating the aspects of this journey to lesbian awareness including gender embodied experiences and compartmentalization can be found in chapter six.

External compartmentalization is how I have explicated the need of many lesbians, in the past and sometimes in the present, to section off parts of one's life from others after coming out to themselves. This is another self protective gesture but done consciously. Abram's (1996) grounded theory model has identified a similar strategy and called this the hiding stage in the process that lesbians go through as they learn to deal with heterosexism. Staying closeted is a common strategy especially in work environments where job loss could result if lesbian-ness is revealed. Boatwright et al. (1996) discuss this under the theme dealing with societal homophobia. The fear that is underlying what I have called external compartmentalization is reflected in one co-researcher/participant's story of agonizing over what to wear to work as a young teacher so that she could hide any possible suggestion of her lesbian-ness. Further evidence of this dynamic are the sleepless nights experienced after being seen with her lover by her co-worker. External compartmentalization as discussed by another co-researcher/participant included confining her lesbian life to trips to other cities in an attempt to protect her professional reputation at home.

Fears of negative material and emotional consequences are what keep lesbians in the closet. Pharr (1988), in her discussion of homophobia, sees it as a weapon of the white,

elite ruling patriarchy. Unfortunately there are numerous examples of very detrimental reactions to lesbian identity described in this chapter such as discrimination in hiring practices and in immigration policies, sexual harassment at work, harassment on the street, and actual job loss. Fortunately, under the theme support/allies, there are examples of some positive reactions such as kindness and caring, comradery, and advocacy shown to some of these lesbians by co-workers, supervisors, academic committees and school principals. Some of the attitudes and actions described here would be examples of the nurturance instead of tolerance advocated by Schreier (1995).

Dealing with lesbian-ness at work brought out some important issues in these helping professionals' lives. I listened to the struggles we all had as we attempted to locate our experiences, often as closeted lesbians or in the grey area before we are fully cognizant of our proclivities, into the existing professional frameworks surrounding us. We questioned boundaries and ethical decisions in our present less closeted circumstances, and we realized we are still sailing in uncharted waters. Some of the ethical/boundary issues revolve around when/how/why to come out at work, with clients, students, co-workers and supervisors. What behaviours are allowable in our particular classroom/work situation depending on the gender, age and sexual orientation of all concerned? Do we help other women who are struggling with their sexuality when we are in the closet in our roles of teacher/nurse/social worker/counselor? Do we socialize with clients/ patients/students? Is a life enhancing friendship/ relationship with someone we met in a professional role possible/impossible? Where do we draw boundaries and why do we draw them, between our personal and professional lives? What information about oneself is private and what is to be revealed in a public setting when you are a lesbian?

I found Heyward's (1993) lesbian feminist observations of the relations of ruling and their oppressive nature in the context of our everyday helping professional relationships, very illuminating and insightful. As lesbian helping professionals, these women have been trying to sort out how to make decisions in the face of rules which don't always seem to fit. Somehow Heyward's analysis seemed helpful to consider as she explores the patriarchal, heterosexist, and dualistic nature that the professional/client relationship and subsequent

ethics are based on. As I examined the ethics and boundary issues that seeped through the lesbian/career life history interviews there seemed to be a more extensive discussion needed and I have attempted to deal with this in chapter six.

The stories I have included under benefits at work in chapter five are probably the most inspiring to me. These women use their lesbian-ness and the insights that come with belonging to a stigmatized minority group, in creative, educational ways. Baker (1991) discusses the need for derailing the heterocentricity in educational institutions and practices. It appears that this is a commitment these women are currently living in their classrooms and work situations. This use of self in professional relationships seems to make a difference with all types of diverse populations. Children and adults alike are treated with honesty and respect, as my co-researcher/participants respect themselves and their relationships. Space is made not just for themselves but for others who are different from the prescribed norm. Making connections with those suffering from other oppressions, they include strategies in their work for education around racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, poverty, and fat oppression. They develop increasing awareness of diversity as an important role in their everyday professional interactions. Boatwright et al. (1996) discuss how the lesbians in their study also brought increased skills in dealing with diversity and oppression to their work environments as a result of their lesbian-ness and their involvement in the lesbian community. Advanced insights into socialization and sexuality are surfacing as one of my co-researcher/participants discusses her understanding of jailhouse romances. Her wisdom into the fluidity of sexual behaviour and the entwining of this behaviour with the surrounding societal conditions, seems very profound to me.

In this study those working with children seem to be paving the way for a better future. Broader minds can't help but be developing given the content these women are bringing to their classrooms and counselling offices. Students at universities and the public in the community are challenged and enriched by coming into contact with any one of these lesbian professionals in classrooms and community agencies. These lesbians have moved into more proactive abilities and practices at their places of employment and continue to work for change in institutional structures.



This is not the case in many social service agencies as O'Brien (1994) found in her interviews with lesbian, gay and bisexual youth in group homes and shelters in Toronto. In most of these facilities the youth "had to contend with 'institutional silence' concerning lesbian and gay male sexuality, were at risk of verbal and physical abuse, were isolated and forced to remain closeted" (p. 37). In most residences the social service workers who remained closeted themselves, were complicit with the institutional silence and this was detected by the youth in their care. She found that the small number of feminist group homes had a much different stance. The lesbian youths reported that these homes offered a recognition of the diversity of sexualities, made information available on lesbian community events and some even had openly lesbian workers. There is much work needed to create social institutions where all staff feel safe and supported in bringing their queer identities to work and then can help give equal service and create safety for lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and gay clients.

As they discussed coming out to parents, some of my co-researcher participants seemed to be at their most vulnerable. One woman expressed feeling relieved that I didn't ask about this area of her life initially. She remains unable to have a conversation with her parents about this major area of her life. The shame due to heterosexism (Neisen, 1990) is noticeable as my co-researcher/participants worry about how their parents will react to the news of their daughters' lesbian-ness. Fears of rejection and the loss of their relationship with parents as well as casting shame onto the family are noted. All these lesbians have some on-going contact with their parents and most have had at least one either verbal or written coming out discussion. There is still a dissatisfaction expressed by most of the participants at how the subject is still very rarely discussed with parents and siblings. One co-researcher/participant has a better relationship now with her father since she came out to him. Unfortunately this is an exception. Acceptance and interest about their intimate relationships from significant relatives seems to be a goal that is not yet reached by these women.

We have seen in this chapter how heterosexism surrounds and invades the psyches and lives of these lesbians. As they make it through their own coming out processes they

then strategized, sometimes for years, on keeping this secret outside of their professional lives so that they could remain economically viable. In recent years, they are taking more and more risks, coming out in an educational context and using their lesbian-ness to disrupt heterosexism and other oppressions in the classrooms and community agencies in which they work. Abrams (1996) noted this proactive stance in her study of lesbians who had reached a level of comfort with their lesbian-ness. My title is *Amazing Grace(s)* because I find the courage, creativity and honesty of this journey towards everyday activism quite remarkable and worthy of recognition.

## Chapter Six: Discussion and Future Research

In this final chapter, I begin by talking about how social movements have played a role in the social/political/historical contexts of these lives and this research. The themes of family, gender socialization and career will be explored further along with an integrated discussion of these six journeys to lesbian awareness. Life histories, according to Marshall and Rossman (1995), can bring problems in professions to light and with this in mind this chapter continues to explore the issues of professional ethics and boundaries. I also include some suggestions for future research along with a discussion of the limitations of this study, many of which only became apparent in hindsight. I have ended with some recommendations for future programs for helping professional education and a final word from each of the six co-researcher/participants.

### New Social Movements

In my study, the theme of claiming lesbian identity, might seem almost inevitable with the increased visibility and "outness" of larger numbers of lesbians and gay men in the 1990's and the availability of information in numerous public contexts. Yet, I still think that many lesbians, especially those with professional careers, do not feel able to take the risks and suffer the consequences that being publicly out might bring. Ross (1995) states "we need to ask for whom is outness an available and affordable option? We need to recall that the vast majority of lesbians (and gay men) are not out, lead double lives, and struggle to be whole human beings" (p. 230).

The stories I have gathered also need to be considered in light of past contexts where lesbians were less visible. Although the lesbians in my study were within an age range of ten years, their coming out covered a larger span, from the late sixties to the early nineties. Stories from the experiences of lesbians in the seventies and eighties are embedded in an historical, political and social climate where the need for secrecy and to stay closeted in most areas of their lives seemed much more acute.

Without two of these new social movements, the Women's Liberation Movement and the Lesbian and Gay Liberation Movement, this research could not have been conceived much less have culminated in such a visible claiming of lesbian identity. Feminism is the

older of these movements and is the context not only for research on lesbians but also for some of the continued development of qualitative research. We need more documentation and research on the very successful nature of these two, at times overlapping, movements with their educational strategies. Selman (1991) mentions the role that new social movements have on participatory democracy as they engage in "strongly adversarial and confrontational tactics" (p.135). He points out that they have an awareness of the need for "consciousness raising among the general public" (p. 135).

"The feminist movement has no organisational center, but is rather a vast array of semi-formal and informal groupings at all levels of social and political structures" (Newman, 1995, p. 255) Adult education which comes from a white, male, heterosexist traditional base has been very slow to acknowledge and study these educational strategies of the feminist movement which has had a profound impact on society (Butterwick, 1987). It has been even more reticent to explore lesbian and gay educational efforts (Hill, 1995). Obviously this needs to change and is changing as my thesis exemplifies. As Newman (1995) points out, adult education "can play a role in social action by providing people with the opportunities to analyse power"; to "examine modes of communication and cooperation" in these kinds of movements; and to plan "localised action" (p.255). To help provide the support/expertise for this work to be done in adult education we need to increase the numbers of feminist and lesbian professors/researchers. It is difficult for students to work in this area if there is no faculty with knowledge or interest available. Broadening the knowledge/research base about sexual minorities in all the social sciences including education can have a trickle down effect as this information impacts students and practitioners and sometimes the general public.

In the next three subsections of this final chapter I expand further on three themes identified in chapters 4 and 5: (1) family, gender socialization and career, (2) journey to lesbian awareness, (3) ethics and boundaries.

#### Family, Gender Socialization and Career

The gender delineation of the roles for men and women in the socializing institution of family is evident in each of the co-researcher/participants' stories of girlhood. The

public/private binary with its masculine/feminine and paid/unpaid labour is obvious. Some mothers gave up careers for family life, others stayed in emotionally abusive, oppressive marriages, and many worked very hard and yet are seen as "not working" in their role of wife and mother. As my co-researcher/participants made decisions about their own lives, these conditions of their mothers' lives did not go unnoticed.

Given the rigid gender roles of the times, I do not see as unusual the emotional distance these women felt from their fathers. Doyle (1995) discusses some work done on men's issues by two different American men's groups. The National Congress for Men and Children is "devoted to men's rights' issues, especially those that project a positive or pro male image of fathers and the role of fatherhood" (p. 13). This group feels that fathers have been shortchanged, arguing that "society views fathers, then, as simply the providers whereas mothers come out as the family's emotional center and wellspring" (p. 13). Doyle contrasts this group with the National Organization for Men Against Sexism who support a "'male-positive' approach to men's issues along with a profeminist, and gay-affirmative" one (p. 14). Apparently this second organization has shifted its focus in recent years "away from 'men's pain' (loneliness, addictions, insecurities) focusing their attention more on the issue of 'men's privileges'" (p. 14). Both these viewpoints, are worth more study and combined could give a broader look at the male role in society which seems sorely needed. I found one daughter's version of the healing in her relationship with her father very moving. This story seemed to contain a small seed of healing for anyone reading it from this individual and societal "father" wound.

Despite their independent/radical/leadership qualities that appear early, despite resistance to gender roles being a consistent theme in their childhoods, despite the feminist leanings of some of their mothers and the witnessing of their mother's oppression, these women take on traditionally female careers. Is this career choice due to societal streamlining of men and women into sex segregated occupations for these women? Limited options became a noticeable theme as other options, including Episcopal priest, were ruled out. The female dominated nature of the education and careers these women obtain, have the "'service to humanity' values", that Kemp (1994) notes with society labeling these as

“extensions of the homemaker role” (p. 218). Is this an act of agency as these women choose careers where they dedicate many productive years to helping others and that suit their abilities and personalities? Some of the women express satisfaction with their work and one participant stated that she loves her job. Another woman moved on to leadership positions and an eventual career change to what was traditionally a male dominated profession (psychologist) even though she started her career as a physical education teacher. Others also have had movement in their careers in positions which are not as commonly grouped into the traditional sex segregated career stream. Instructor and counsellor are two of these alternative positions which several of these women have held. The counselling psychology branch of psychology, has been more traditionally male dominated although not unlike medicine the numbers of women students is increasing rapidly. It is important however, not to equate choosing a traditional female dominated profession with submission to sexist gender roles. What is needed is not simply a redirection of women into traditional male occupations, rather what needs to happen most is a valuing of traditionally female jobs and skills, a valuing particularly of caring and efforts to create more real choices for both women and men.

Regardless of the occupational positions held, there is a consistent commitment to caring and to a vision of social justice woven throughout these stories. Some co-researcher/participants discuss the early beginnings of this focus as they help troubled friends in high-school, admire a grandparent's union activities, and help children with disabilities. Caring about and for others may be devalued by being considered an extension of the homemaker role but I think that both those that do this work at home and in society's institutions are doing valuable, extremely necessary and very often, highly skilled work. By examining the lives of lesbian helping professionals, this study helps to unpack the relationship between caring, heterosexism and gender socialization. The co-researcher/participants appear to have embraced the caring role of their chosen professions while at the same time they disrupt the heterosexist assumptions that are woven into the helping professions and caring.

### Journey to Lesbian Awareness

Foucault's hypothesis discusses how the role of family was "to anchor sexuality and provide it with permanent support"(p. 108). He states "parents and relatives became the chief agents of a deployment of sexuality which drew its outside support from doctors, educators and later psychiatrists" with deviations from this alliance becoming "'psychologized' or 'psychiatrized'" (p. 110). Many of these co-researcher/participants seem to have gone to the library sooner or later to look up lesbian in what limited resources were available to them. Often this included pathologized and/ or various developmental "stage" references and ideologies. Most of these negative societal messages are discussed by co-researcher/ participants under the heading repressive conditions. These surrounding conditions also included movies which depicted the deaths of lesbians, dilapidated back street bars, and criminal charges laid for homosexual activity.

The oppression of lesbian-ness seems to be all inclusive as young girls repress or suppress or mislabel very strong feelings for other females during teen years. For some, this repression/suppression continued during subsequent heterosexual relationships and marriages. The compulsory nature (Rich, 1980) of the hegemonic heterosexist discourse seems to have obliterated any ideology for these women of an alternative sexual expression. Only one participant becomes aware of her lesbian identity in her late teens by becoming involved with a lesbian who was six years her senior. Other women went on to date, and/or have sex with, and/or live with, men. Two women make marital commitments that lasted for 13 and 17 years.

The gender embodied experiences code evolved from stories of four participants who discussed the consequences for them of heterosexual relations (willingly or through force). These experiences such as pregnancy, abortion, early marriage and motherhood, post-partum depression and probably post-traumatic stress disorder following a rape, all lead to examining at some point the oppressive nature of the structures surrounding their gendered lives. Both feminism and therapy seemed to have connections to these experiences as well with an eventual lesbian identification process evolving for these women. It would be interesting to have more research that focused on how life events such

as those described here which are related to the consequences of heterosexual experiences play out in this androcentric culture, in the lives of women who do claim a subsequent lesbian identity.

Two women did not have gender embodied life experiences that were as visibly impacting as the other four. This meant that I had to consider what had lead them to examining surrounding and internal beliefs that may have been an initial step on the road to a life other than the predominant heterosexual one. Both these women as children had expressed wanting an alternative to traditional heterosexual female roles. Growing up as the eldest daughter of seven children and being one of four girls I saw as gender embodied experiences for these two women. Watching her overworked mother seemed significant for this eldest of seven. The second daughter of four girls also rebelled, not wanting all those "girl" restrictions placed on her and she managed to maneuver herself into a pseudo-boy vacancy in her family. These sibling positions/experiences seemed to lead to some early decision making about "not getting married," and/or "not getting pregnant", and/or "not doing what girls did". These decisions about not participating in future stereotypical gendered/heterosexist roles, before serious involvement in a heterosexual relationship and before a conscious awareness of a lesbian identity, although the later soon evolved.

Kitzinger (1987) suggests not telling the coming out story as one of falling in love, but instead she suggests stressing parts of the story that challenge the heterosexual/gender roles and norms. Although I think that an increasing desire for and awareness of an alternative to traditional heterosexual/gender roles and relationships is part of these women's stories, there is evidence at various points in their coming out stories of falling madly and deeply in love. I did not specifically ask about the quality or impact of love/sex with women, but several of the stories contained comments on the quality/powerfulness of this experience. We discussed the intensity of this phenomena further in the focus group and raised some questions about how this would compare to the bonding in heterosexual relationships. I would suggest that the quality/intensity of the felt experiences of sex/love between women seems to be, for these lesbians, part of their coming out stories as well as their increased conscious awareness of an alternative to heterosexuality. Further research



into the emotional and sexual bonding between women and women, men and men, and women and men would be interesting.

Feminism was part of every one of these lesbians' lives and continues to influence their perspective on their lives and their work. Sometimes feminism was the context for their reawakening of repressed lesbian feelings. Therapy is also something that all co-researcher/participants have entered into at various times to assist in expanding themselves. Sometimes this was related to other difficult life issues before realizing their lesbian-ness which lead to a re-examination of their lives. One woman was in therapy during her first lesbian experience, having initiated the process for other reasons. Career skill development for use with her client population was another co-researcher/participant's decision for entry into therapy. Once involved she has continued and gained insight into more personal issues in her life. Another woman was in distress about her lesbian-ness but did not discuss this in therapy. Heterosexist assumptions ingrained in the traditional professional therapeutic approaches meant that no one asked her about this possibility.

This last example illustrates the need for helping professionals to be receptive and to ask for at least a basic romantic/sexual history during a therapeutic assessment. I often wonder if clients seem to know intuitively who to talk to about this and who would not be able to help them. In my work as a counsellor, I was the only lesbian/gay person among the four counsellors in the office. I was also the only one who had any clients who were open about their gay/lesbian identity. As some staff were cognizant of my sexuality and others were not, I decided to bring in someone else to discuss gay/bi/lesbian/transgendered issues for the staff. I still seemed to be the only one who would have clients coming out in therapy sessions. Was it possible, I wondered, that clients just were not bringing it up with others or was it just a co-incidence that the only lesbian counsellor, albeit a partially closeted one, would just happen to have the lesbian and gay clients?

This phenomena may be the same one that operated for me as a returning mature student. Where it felt safe to bring up my lesbian-ness in university classrooms I did. This just happened to be in feminist professors' classrooms, often with all female students, where space for this seemed to be made by inclusivity in their language and in their reading lists.

This did not mean that these were heterosexual and homophobia free zones, decidedly not, but I felt more willing to take the risk and deal with the consequences in these classrooms. Somehow I did not feel safe to bring this issue up in mixed classrooms with male professors who usually did not mention this subject. Gay/lesbian clients may also have an intuitive screening criteria that allow them to check out the counsellor they are assigned to in government funded agencies, for signs that she/he creates a safe space for revealing their minority sexuality. Hopefully helping professionals who are lesbian and gay and who wish to help gay and lesbian clients/students/patients, will feel more and more comfortable to identify themselves to co-workers so that this population can be channeled to their case loads/classrooms. Two of the co-researcher participants mentioned that this channelling is happening in their present work places.

Compartmentalizing their lives into those who know their secret and those who don't, in an effort to protect jobs and relationships, was a strategy that most lesbians in this study employed at various times in their lives. This theme of compartmentalization began with a recognition of this strategy in relation to the external world but it popped up again as a co-researcher/participant mentioned her internal process of uncovering her lesbian identity. I found this description of internal compartmentalizing, burying and "unburying" feelings, placing layers over top and then taking them off, a fascinating image for the repression and re-awakening of unconscious same-sex desires. She is talking of a memory process that seems similar at times to the way that sexual abuse survivors sometimes refer to their repressed and then re-emerging trauma recollections. Herman (1992) quotes Dr. Janet, one of the first doctors along with Freud, who worked in the field of sexual abuse survivors then known as "hysterics". She states "Janet noted that post-traumatic amnesia was due to a constriction of the field of consciousness which kept painful memories split off from ordinary awareness." (p. 45). The awareness of lesbian-ness with its negative societal connotations seems too traumatic to be incorporated into a young girl/woman's self esteem or to be allowed into consciousness for any length of time. This co-researcher/participant discusses the psychological layers which were placed over these desires, but then were later pulled away to reveal a lesbian-ness that was underneath.

Often sexual abuse survivors will have nightmares/dreams as they struggle with re-emerging memories. The description of the "coming out" dream one woman retells is very disturbing. The image is a powerful one as she talks of discovering a young girl having been hung up by her mother, with a rope around her neck, for being bad. The symbolism in the dream may be referring to the consequences of keeping these feelings repressed - almost like killing a part of one's self. It also seems to speak to the fears that forced these "bad" feelings underground in the first place. Healing for survivors of abuse includes a re-telling of the trauma story and it is interesting how the re-telling of the coming out story is an important piece of lesbian culture/subculture.

External compartmentalization, or keeping parts of one's life separate due to fears of rejection or job loss, is made much more understandable as we look at the negative reactions that these women have endured. Avoiding these life shattering experiences makes the closet look like the only sane response, especially in less tolerant times.

Even now when laws are supposed to be improved, one lesbian couple is enduring separations, reduced financial income and the stresses of a legal battle to fight institutional discrimination in Canadian immigration policies/practices. We have a long way to go in improving even basic legal rights as well as improving negative attitudes and unfair treatment. As the stories in the negative reactions section of chapter five outline, there are still enormous barriers in some places. These barriers prevent these women from holding hands as they walk down the street, from obtaining and keeping jobs they are qualified for, from being fully themselves at work, from having a supportive administration behind them, or from getting the same treatment/benefits as heterosexual couples.

#### Considering Ethics and Boundaries

Dualisms such as male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, public/private, professional/personal, culture/nature, logic/emotions, and many others keep the patriarchy in place. This hierarchy, this system of interlocking oppression puts value on one half of the binary and devalues the other. As lesbians our very existence disturbs this system. As women who love women we disrupt this patriarchal logic so much that it enrages many people. As we "come out" in larger and larger numbers in a society where some segments

are at least attempting to tolerate us, we do not fit nicely into the structures around us. We bring new dilemmas and twists to old dilemmas. "Professional" values/ethics have been formed within and in service of this androcentric, complex hierarchical economic system. How we manage to survive within this system in order to secure our material reality, yet remain true to ourselves and assist others, is the dilemma of many people of colour(s), gay men, women of all colours including lesbians, the disabled, and all who have been "othered".

"Coming out" as young professionals often meant that my co-researcher/participants could not have open discussions with peers or supervisors about this process or the work related dilemmas that might be affected. There were various ways the women in this study handled ethical dilemmas and boundary issues. One woman formed "brick wall" boundaries and another questioned the need for rules that control people. Heyward (1993) argues for an ethic of mutual empowerment and authenticity in our connections with those we serve.

Having worked with a caseload of suicidal clients, I would have to agree with Heyward about the need for genuine connection in helping relationships. In my experience it saves lives. The fragile spark of spirit inside each person can be fanned back to full flame if there is an honest caring person to listen and connect with. Others may have different ways of working that do not include authenticity or a heart connection, but this is my conclusion after more than twenty years as a professional helper with troubled people from all walks of life.

I think that some guidelines are also helpful along with a commitment to self-care and a trusting connection with peers or some other type of supervision. Personally, I have difficulty continuing to do good work with clients if I am ill or very stressed in other areas of my life and if I do not feel supported or trusted by those that I am working with/for. Good work for me means listening with both my heart and my mind. This means attempting to "be with" the client in an honest, caring way- the genuineness of this approach clients can sense instantly. I do see this connection as a form of "sisterly" love. Heyward's discussion of the erotic and the sacred both being present in human connections where there is mutual

empowerment, rings true. Sexual feelings, as well as angry feelings, as well as any other human feelings, can occur in working closely with other human beings. Subconscious or unconscious feelings/needs/desires are present at many complex levels for all persons, both professional and client, as in most human interactions.

Some of the boundary issues discussed by my co-researcher/participants were about experiences many years ago, in closeted circumstances. Sometimes the people involved, professional or client/student/patient were unaware of their lesbian-ness. Today some dilemmas continue to remain unclear for many lesbians as they struggle with the question of coming out or not at work, mixing the private and personal together. When? Where? Why? To whom is it necessary or political or beneficial to come out? How safe is it? How does the age, gender and sexual identity of the parties involved affect ethical dilemmas?

I think as lesbians we are in uncharted waters about some of the dilemmas we face so part of our self-care needs to be connections with other lesbian helping professionals so that we are not making our decisions in isolation or without the benefit of someone who can understand the full extent of the situation. There is no perfect answer to any dilemma but only the answer that feels right for each individual involved within that particular context. I was impressed with the emphasis on context by one of my co-researcher/participants as she comes out in her job within a context that she feels is appropriate and will be educational for those involved. No two work situations and no two people are alike so many decisions have to be made on the merits of that unique situation. Sometimes we make decisions which in retrospect we would not do again but to err is human and provides some of life's best learning experiences.

With doctors and priests, most notably, making headlines as they appear in courts facing sexual abuse charges, there is a need for professional organizations to produce guidelines for ethical behaviour. Recently three nursing organizations, the Registered Nurses Association of British Columbia, the British Columbia Council of Liscensed Practical Nurses, and The Registered Psychiatric Nurses Association of British Columbia, prepared a paper to assist in preventing abuse of clients and provide expectations for professional behaviour (1994).

One of the problems with this RNABC, BCCLPN, and RPNABC discussion paper, is that it does not deal with the gendered nature of relationships. Gender can be critical to some dilemmas and the power dynamics are different in some situations due to this. An example would be the dilemma discussed by a co-researcher/participant as she watched two thirteen year old girls sit entangled together in her class. Questions about the sexual nature of this touching may be disregarded if seen by someone through a heterosexist lens. This teacher was aware of the possibility of there being a love interest involved but still was unclear as to how to handle this. Being questioned by a colleague about how she would have dealt with the same situation if it had been a thirteen year old boy and girl brought a whole different perspective for this professional to consider. We are not used to considering affection between two women or in this case two 13 year olds, as possibly having some sexual energy involved. Thus the gender of the individuals involved, and the possible sexual orientation/identity need to be known in order to look at the dilemma this woman sees before her. The gender and the sexual orientation of the professional is also paramount to this situation as it may not have come to light in someone else's classroom. This teacher takes students into her classroom when other teachers think they maybe struggling with the coming out process.

Sexual orientation/identity is not discussed in the RNABC, BCCLPN, and RPNABC paper, except under the emotional abuse section in a list of behaviours that demonstrate disrespect for the client. Emotional abuse is seen here encompassing certain behaviours including "insensitivity to the client's preferences with respect to sex and family dynamics" (p. 16). This seems to be the only allusion to same-sex relationships and I doubt if it would shift someone's homophobic/heterosexist behaviour to any great degree. I did not see a definition or problematizing of the word professional in this paper other than to say that the nurse-client relationship is "therapeutic in nature and is established to meet the needs of the client." (p. 8).

Abuse is defined in these nursing associations' discussion paper as "the misuse of power or betrayal of trust, respect or intimacy between the nurse and the client that the nurse knows can cause or be reasonably expected to cause physical or emotional harm to a

client.” (p. 6). Violence, abuse towards nurses and stressful working conditions are cited as some of the factors involved in situations where nurses have been abusive to clients.

There was a suggestion of empowerment of the client in this paper which states that the nurse-client relationship is “based on a recognition that people are able to make decisions about their own lives and are therefore, partners in the decision-making process” (p.6). There is an acknowledgment that intimacy as well as trust, respect and power are also present in the nurse- client relationship and that caring is the basis of the philosophic approach to nursing (p. 6-7).

Differences between the professional relationship and the non-professional relationship are outlined with the non-professional relationship categorized into casual, friendship and romantic (p. 9). It is stressed that “recognizing when a professional relationship is becoming a non-professional relationship is more important than recognizing the differences between them” (p. 8). Acknowledgment is made of the nurse having other roles/relationships with the client especially in a small community as well as acknowledgment that “non-professional relationships have the potential to develop between nurses and their clients (or their significant others or both) when such relationships did not previously exist” (p. 8).

One of the co-researcher/participants discussed the smallness of the lesbian community and this potential for dual roles. A close friend and a practicing therapist who has recently moved to a small town mentioned to me how blurred the boundaries become where everyone knows everyone else and how the context is much different for decision-making about boundaries. This sounds quite similar to the lesbian community where you can end up in the same social situation with all your ex-lovers and where clients and therapists sit side by side on the same committees licking stamps. There are probably pros and cons to the impersonalness of a larger community and to the continual involvement with each other that happens in a small community. The guideline in the RNABC, BCCLPN, and RPNABC paper is as follows: “The overriding principle is that the nurses’ interpersonal relationships with their clients (or their significant others) must not have a negative effect on meeting the client’s therapeutic needs or in any way infringe on those needs.” (p. 8).

This document states that "romantic (sexual) relationships are not acceptable within the context of the nurse-client relationship." (p. 8). What the nurse is to do, if this possibility is beginning, is to withdraw from the professional relationship. The rationale for this is that "it is rarely possible for the nurse to maintain sufficient objectivity about the person to enable the nurse to enter into the therapeutic relationship."<sup>20</sup> Difficulties often arise when there is an attempt to have a professional and a non-professional relationship *at the same time.*" (p. 13). In order to facilitate the awareness of this happening they include a list of "yellow lights"- signs that are a caution to the nurse and may mean that she needs to make alternative care arrangements and withdraw from the nurse-client relationship (p. 12).

Some of these yellow lights include:

frequently thinking of the client away from work. . . . spending free time with the client. . . . sharing personal information or work concerns with the client. . . . feeling responsible if the client's progress is limited. . . . noticing more physical touch than is appropriate for the situation or sexual content in interactions with the client. (p. 13)

Engaging in a relationship that is romantic or sexual with an ex-client, someone who no longer is in the care of the nurse, is to be given a green light, except in the case of a psychotherapeutic relationship. In this case a time limit of one year is needed following the termination of the professional relationship with the provision that in the nurse's professional judgement "such a relationship would not have a negative impact on the well-being of the client" (p. 15).

It seems helpful to have some guidelines for the professional with respect to boundary expectations especially when they are newly graduated and beginning to navigate a professional career. Terminating the professional relationship seems a sensible step if romantic/sexual feelings become the focus of the relationship. Honesty certainly with one's self and with the other person would also be a commendable avenue when this exit takes place. Small communities, which in most places includes the lesbian community, makes compartmentalizing relationships less realistic and I think that the final decisions rest with

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<sup>20</sup> Once again we see professionalism taking the objective side of the objective/subjective dualism here.



the persons involved. There have been friendships and even sexual/romantic relationships that have evolved from a beginning in a client/professional relationship. I have known lesbian couples where this is the case and they seem quite happy, but it is an area where research could give us more insight.

Coming out and being new to a professional career can happen simultaneously. The repression of lesbian desires and the confusion that can result as an individual is negotiating their coming out process can need special attention. Unfortunately many work places are still perceived as homophobic/heterosexist and so in order to not jeopardize a professional reputation or their livelihoods, external counselling seems to be the best suggestion for those in this position. More and more union contracts and employers are creating employee assistance counselling programs that can be utilized anonymously. One can not assume, however, that the counsellors in these programs are sensitive and aware of heterosexism/homophobia. Benefits such as employee counselling programs are yet another place where unions and those challenging heterosexism can fight for inclusive language, practices and services.

Are there guidelines for the lesbian practitioner that could be helpful when considering coming out at work or with clients/students/patients? This nursing associations' document discusses self-disclosure stating that it is for the "client's benefit" and is considered acceptable but not when it is a way "of meeting the nurse's personal needs" (p. 11). Political activists may see coming out as a benefit to society as a whole and encourage this disclosure. Being comfortable in one's work situation and being able to bring major aspects of yourself to work as heterosexuals are able to, seems a reasonable expectation even though that may be seen as meeting the practitioner's needs and not the clients. I think that a happier staff member can lead to a happier work environment for all the staff and the clients/students/patients. Taking the risk of coming out means weighing the possible homophobia/heterosexism of colleagues, supervisors, and clients/patients/students. This can be a difficult risk to take, especially if economic survival depends on that particular work site.

Finding support and allies in the workplace, increases the safety for each lesbian so

that she is not challenging the relations of ruling alone. One of my co-researcher/participants did take on the derogatory sexist, racist, homophobic/heterosexist climate in her organization, but she did this in a group setting and discovered that she did have some allies. Another co-researcher/participant sought out allies amongst the staff at her facility and discussed first what she was going to attempt to do as she came out within a context with her students. Once again it is difficult to slot each situation into a black and white, yes or no decision as patriarchal logic would have us do. Placing complex situations into some dualistic framework for decision making seems too simplistic. Giving space to conflicting ideologies and staying with the ambiguities can often lead to creative solutions. I find discussions with other like minded individuals helpful when facing ethical dilemmas but, in the end, I have to trust my own judgement and live with the consequences that ensue from my choices.

#### Limitations: Race, Age, Class and What About Religion?

The lack of some aspects of diversity in my sample of participants is an important limitation of this study. Although I had intended on having a mix of racial/ ethnic backgrounds, and in ages of participants, my network or friendship sampling strategy did not give me much diversity in these areas. I would suggest that researchers need to be aware that an initial strategy with more purposive, broader ways of obtaining participants is needed if a more diverse sample is desired. Newspaper advertisements and contact with lesbian of colour(s) organizations are two possible suggestions. As Kemp (1994) and DiTomas and Smith (1996) point out, Black women have less access to good jobs and Das Gupta (1996) points out that in the female dominated profession of nursing in a Canadian province, racism and the resulting discrimination is systemic. This may have meant that there are fewer women of colour(s) and therefore even fewer lesbians of colour(s) amongst the helping professionals in my daily circles of acquaintances. Three of the lesbians in my study were known to me through two lesbian and gay organizations. Racial diversity is negligible in these groups also. One lesbian of colour, a closeted professional, whom I approached about taking part in the study, was explicit about her fear of being outed by the research, viewing her visible minority status as making her very recognizable. There are

other factors that influence my connections, as a white woman, with racial minorities as Frankenburg (1993) explicates in her discussion of the way race structures the lived experience of white people and people of colour(s).

In White Women: Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness, Frankenburg (1993) has shown that "whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of racial privilege. . . . is a 'standpoint', a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society" and that "whiteness refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed" (p. 1).

She discusses a broad view of culture which she sees as "*constructing daily practices and world views in complex relations with material life*" (p. 228). Thus white women are affected materially by their whiteness and are "practitioners of white culture" (228). Whiteness and its cultural practices are considered normative and can be seen most easily by those whiteness "excludes and those to whom it does violence" (p. 228). She points out that although it "is coconstructed with a range of other racial and cultural categories, with class and gender. . . . the term whiteness signals the production and reproduction of dominance rather than subordination, normativity rather than marginality, and privilege rather than disadvantage" (p. 236).

Frankenburg argues that history shapes the present lives of the white women in her study "placing them in a range of relationships with people of colour that include relative privilege, social distance, explicitly articulated segregation, and local, fragile, and situationally specific forms of quasi-integration" (p. 238). The complexity of the historical and social forces affecting inter-racial relationship(s) is illuminated in this discussion by Frankenburg.

On a personal note, having had a lesbian inter-racial relationship, I found the comments by the white lesbians in her study who had been interracially coupled, striking a familiar chord for me. Take for example a white lesbian commenting on her interracial relationship and the dynamic of "my guilt and her anger" (p. 114). This seemed to encapsulate the underlying dynamic of some white woman and woman of colour couples, given the "impact of external social context" on the relationship (p. 114). I understood more

clearly not only the fragility I have seen in predominately white groups when women of colour speak up about their uncomfortableness, including lack of voice, but I was also enlightened by her discussion of "the burdens that racism places on interracial couples" both heterosexual and lesbian (p. 237). I would recommend Frankenburger's work to increase comprehension of the complex set of practices in place that maintain the racial domination of whiteness.

By not having a great diversity of age and ethnicity, I may not have obtained information on certain issues, yet I think that the intimacy of the conversations that evolved was influenced by the similarities among this group of women. The age and racial sameness added to the other similarities, of sexual identity and professional helping career. The level of trust I had built up having known these women in other areas/roles in my life, may also have enhanced the intimacy development. This dual relationship strategy may be frowned on by those that feel "professionalism" means keeping separate your personal life from your researcher role. I felt that building on already established acquaintance/friendships worked in my favour in the depth of the stories that I was able to obtain. In looking at future research, a study done by a lesbian of colour helping professional with lesbians of colour (s) via a network sampling would be interesting. This research might give a similar insider perspective that allows for a high level of trust such as I was able to develop with my co-researcher/participants. Life history interviews and focus groups that have the same level of intimacy and that examine the ways that the interlocking oppressions, of not only sexism and heterosexism but also racism, impact everyday lives would be a fascinating addition to the literature and to practical implications for helping professional work.

By looking at the early lives of these white, middle class women, we see the nature of their traditional 1950's and 1960's white, heterosexual families. Only two of the co-researcher/participants mention privilege in their discussions of class with most seeing their families as working or middle class. I think that in our present circumstances our white privilege and class privilege may be greater than we realize and this might have been illuminated if there had been a diversity of racial and class backgrounds. In retrospect it is

clear that I did not explore issues of racial privilege with the participants, that is, I did not specifically ask about their experiences of race or how they thought lesbians of colour(s) experiences would be different or similar to theirs. It is noteworthy, and a reflection of their racial privilege, that my participants did not talk about experiences of racial discrimination. Studies of less privileged lesbian helping professionals or semi-professionals such as health care aids, teaching assistants, and others who have contact with the public, but do not have the status accorded these women, may also bring to light other problems and strategies.

Although both Foucault (1978/1990) and Kitzinger (1987) mention the oppressive power of patriarchal religions, I did not think to include this area in my interview guide. My own background is Presbyterian and I imagine this may have contributed to my dis-ease around my lesbian feelings. There is a strict, almost puritan work ethic in this traditional Christian religion with its repression of emotions so that the "frozen chosen" label is apt.<sup>21</sup> The poetic, alive and Goddess-based pagan practices I have been involved in for the past ten years have been much more life-affirming and empowering. Only twice in the research did the subject of religious background surface as one woman discussed wanting to become an Episcopalian priest and another talked about the sexual repression typical of a Catholic family. This would be an area for others to include in further studies of lesbian-ness.

I did not include any questions in my interview guide on my co-researcher/participants' views on the lesbian butch/femme roles. This might have been an interesting discussion for lesbians in female dominated professions. Which category, butch or femme, do lesbians in the female dominated professions identify with? Are these roles which first originated in the 1930's and have waxed and waned and evolved over the years, of interest to lesbians in female dominated professions (Gibson & Meem, 1996)? Like the traditional male and female roles of heterosexuality, the male counterpart of butch has historically been a more valued position in these lesbian roles. Would someone that constructed herself as a butch have had a more difficult time fitting into these traditionally feminine nurturing careers? Gibson & Meem have written an interesting article on butch-

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<sup>21</sup> I am in debt to my mother for this "frozen chosen" analogy. She says she heard it in a sermon one Sunday.

femme identity and classroom teaching and I would suggest that more research could be done in this area.

I did have two lesbian mothers in my study and although I did comment on this, I did not include some of their stories around their children or focus to any great extent on this area of their lives. Lesbian motherhood needs research focussed specifically on it, including the marital break ups and custody battles that often have grave consequences for all concerned. Laird (1994) has done some interesting work in this area from her position as a clinician who argues for a "cultural perspective and an ethnographic stance" when working with this population (p.263).

#### Implications for Professional Education and Unions

One of my co-researcher/participants mentioned in her interview some changes that she would like to see in future education for helping professionals. I integrated these ideas together with other suggestions for future educational practices in professional schools for nurses, teachers and social workers. As discussed in chapter two, Baker (1991), Hill (1995), Ettinger (1994), and Scheier (1995) have made recommendations for educational settings that can also be applied to these professional schools. Teaching about lesbian-ness means that an understanding of identity and oppression is needed as a foundation. Lesbians are facing two oppressions at the very least, namely sexism and heterosexism, so an examination of their situation begins to illustrate the complexity of identity and the interlocking impact of multiple oppressions. I have included an experiential teaching exercise that I developed called A Sociometry of Oppressions in the appendix. This educational tool is now being used by GALE-BC and the British Columbia Teachers Federation to help illustrate the complexity of identity and the impact of multiple societal structures of oppression.

Schools of social work, teaching, and nursing play a key role in teaching about diversity and respect. Working with the public they are daily charged to care for all with understanding and compassion. It seems crucial that the caring professions take a lead role in challenging all discriminatory practices and institutions revealing the negative consequences and injustices of such practices.

Some movement is taking place in the curriculum, however, such efforts are often the results of too few educators and activists who face backlash and other forms of resistance. Being open to diversity includes being more gay and lesbian positive. Course materials that include racial diversity, still often don't include diverse sexualities. Actual courses that focus on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered issues are needed and these issues also need to be addressed throughout the curricula of other standard courses. Future clients/patients/students will benefit from the inclusion of critical discussions of heterosexism and this will create a more welcoming environment for lesbian students. Placements, preceptorships, and field experiences for students in organizations that are doing grassroots activist work or whose mandate is to service more diverse populations would be very beneficial. This would mean university faculties forming alliances with grassroots activist organizations. Although the lesbians in this study did not have the benefits of anti-heterosexist curricula, they are taking leadership in their current educational contexts. The importance of encouraging and actively recruiting lesbian and gay faculty into teaching positions, who are committed to anti-heterosexist work, in nursing, teacher and social work education needs to be emphasized.

Continuing education is carried out by professional development departments in some institutions and in some unions. These settings also need to develop opportunities for sensitivity and diversity training particularly in relation to heterosexism. Recently I was asked to assist with the British Columbia Teachers' Federation training as they prepared several of their members to train other teachers to deal with issues such as sexism, racism, heterosexism and homophobia, and conflict resolution. This union is taking a lead that others could follow. The British Columbia Nurses Union has a special interest group for its lesbian and gay members, but as yet does not have any language to address issues such as parenting benefits that meet the needs of its gay and lesbian members. There are some other unions that do have language in their contracts that addresses maternity/paternity leave by talking of co-parents and adoptive parents. This allows lesbian non-birth mothers and gay fathers to be given the same leave that heterosexual parents are granted. This last suggestion moves from policy to actual benefits that serve gay and lesbian needs. As one of

my co-researcher/participants suggested, this entails “ putting your money where your mouth is” for institutions and governments.

If lesbians feel comfortable and safe in their work environments with union and administration supporting them, they will be more empowered to contend with the heterosexism confronting them. A major shift in societal heterosexism will be felt when their professional educations help lesbian nurses, teachers and social workers educate about this in their everyday practices. Dunne (1997) found that many lesbians in her study conducted in England, Scotland and Wales, wanted to be working in an environment where they could be accepted and work towards shifting the sexism and heterosexism in social settings. The use of self, as the women in my study have exemplified, is a most powerful consciousness-changing educational tool for the lesbian professional who is able to be out and has support behind her.

#### A Final Word

In this study I have attempted to bring forward stories from six lesbian helping professionals about their lived experiences, to increase visibility, information and understanding about these lives. The combined impact of the oppressions of sexism and heterosexism is evidenced as these individuals talk of their struggles with repressive and negative conditions within discriminatory societal structures and ideologies. The stories of resistance and agency are inspirational as they culminate in emancipatory and inclusive educational strategies used by these courageous and creative lesbian nurses, social workers, teachers and counsellors. With the foundation of decades of work by feminist and lesbian/gay activists, and with the privilege of their white, middle class, well-educated social positioning, these social service professionals are daily making concerted efforts to shift the oppressive structures and ideologies surrounding them.

My hope for the amazing grace(s), for the six of us who were involved in this research that facilitated the remembering of our lives and brought us together to share the struggles and strategies we often orchestrate alone, is that we will feel a part of a community more empowered to make our daily contributions towards an oppression free world.



Here is a final word from each of the amazing grace(s) about :

**Discernment and conserving energy:**

*I also recognize there are some people who are open to talking to you (about feminism and lesbianism). . . . If I feel that openness. . . . if (there) is a curiosity there and willingness to listen . . . then I will spend a certain amount of time. . . some people want to learn and some people don't . . . There is only so much time in a day and so many years in a life.*

**Learning from your struggles and reaping the benefits:**

*Being involved in the women's community . . . those skills I bring. I actually think it's related to my feminism and my lesbianism that I end up in those circles and learn those things, so I'm actually more skilled than a lot of people who have maybe the status quo life and who maybe haven't had the pain and stuff, so I guess it's turning your scars into stars.*

**Fighting burn out and knowing that this too shall pass:**

*I feel comfortable with who I am. I'm glad that I am a lesbian. I couldn't imagine myself any other way. . . I'm discouraged right now. . . . I'm so tired of fighting the system. . . . I wonder if you can find some middle ground where you don't always have to be in the front lines, always working for less and dealing with the effects of male violence and oppression. . . I'd rather have a piece of land and grow vegetables right now and I don't know if that will change. I assume it will.*

**Setting priorities:**

*I'd like to do workshops for all the teachers in my school but you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink . . . They are worried about any negative reaction even though we are on solid ground to do this. . . they don't have to worry because they are straight but they still don't want any adverse parental action. . . . You can't do it all - so one thing at a time, in little ways, when and where you can.*

**Just talk about it.**

*We could talk about it (lesbianism). We end up compartmentalizing it so we either don't talk about it or we problematize it. And we make it odder than usual. When it*

*does get talked about it ends up in neon lights and glitter or something out there where it becomes bigger than it needs to be- rather than just talking about it.*

Modeling diversity and self acceptance:

*The strongest thing I can offer them (students) is that, hey, I'm different and there is an alternative, you can be different too. . . you can be okay with you.*

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## Appendix A Interview Guide

### Gender Socialization and Career

Would you tell me what growing up as a young girl was like for you?

Tell me about your family life and how the business of daily living was done?

Tell me about being a teenage girl?

How was your family similar/different from others in that geographical and historical location?

What thoughts did you have about job or career possibilities for you when you grew up?

What female role models did you have around you or that you sought out or idealized?

How did you come to pursue a nursing/teaching/social work education?

What was the experience of being a N/T/SW student like for you?

What do you enjoy about your role as a professional helper? What do you dislike about it?

Can you tell me of a particular experience where you felt you had accomplished something of value in your work?

### Lesbian Identity/ Sexual Orientation

When and how did you first come to an awareness of your lesbian-ness? What was the process of coming out to yourself like for you? Where and when did this process start?

Can you tell me about experiences of coming out to others such as family, friends, and children?

What is coming out to others like for you today and what are the choices you make around this?

How do you see this identity or set of experiences as fitting with or in relation to other identities or experiences you have had in your life?

### Lesbians in Post Secondary Education and in Professional Work

What is it like to be a lesbian and a N/T/SW student? Can you tell me some experiences that you had during professional school that are coloured by your lesbian-ness?

What would you change about your professional education and training?

Can you tell me of a time when you were uncomfortable at work that was related to being a

lesbian?

Do others make assumptions about you and how have you dealt with that ?

How does your ability to be out or not vary in relation to your coworkers? your clients ?  
your supervisors? other professionals? Support staff? How are you treated by each of these  
groups ? Can you give examples?

Have you felt that your career was impeded or enhanced by your lesbian identity? How?

How does your lesbian experience/world view affect your understanding of your work and  
your clients?

Do you see or handle issues or work situations differently than your heterosexual co-  
workers? Can you give me an example?

## Appendix B

### A Sociometry of Oppressions

The basic premise for this experiential educational exercise came from Logan et al.(1996) who were using it with social work students to educate around heterosexual privilege. I expanded it to give a sense of the interconnections and complexity of identity and the multiple structures of oppression in a hierarchical, capitalist, patriarchal society. Further refinement occurred as I used it in educational situations at the University of British Columbia, with the Gay and Lesbian Educators of British Columbia, and with the British Columbia Teachers' Federation. Although this educational tool still includes sexual orientation/identity, it has been expanded to include gender, race/ethnicity, age, class, occupation, ability and religion.

#### **Instructions**

A fairly large open space is needed which often necessitates moving furniture.

Explain that participants will be given an identity card and asked to move forward one step (or its equivalent if there are wheelchair participants) when answering affirmatively to a series of questions. It is helpful to ask if they would like to participate thus getting consent and leaving an option if someone just wants to watch.

Handout cards to each participant. Instruct them not to show their cards to other participants. You may need to help some participants individually if they have questions about their identity card. If you have a small number of participants try to pick identities so that you have a mix of sexual orientations, genders, ethnicities, religious denominations and abilities. A class of about 15 participants seems ideal although it can be used with smaller or larger numbers. About half an hour is needed to complete the exercise although this will vary depending on the amount of time it takes for debriefing each participant.

Have participants line up against a wall. If you include any closeted or secret identities start with participants with their faces towards the wall, otherwise they can be facing into the room.

Read out questions regarding social/economic privileges which are worded so that those with privilege can step forward.

Have participants stay in their resulting positions of privilege when the questions are finished.

Ask each one in turn to read out their identity and discuss what that experience was like for him/her. You are actually debriefing each participant but others will usually join in the discussion as this process continues. Be sure to have each and every person discuss what

the experience was like for them and as in any experiential activity be prepared for the possibility of someone's personal experiences being triggered so that further debriefing may be needed. As this activity is the taking on a *pseudo*-identity it usually does not trigger major personal revelations.

### **Pseudo-Identities**

(to be written on cards and handed to each participant)

White single heterosexual female secretary who has AIDS

White male bisexual artist (not famous yet) with a male partner. He also has a criminal record for possession of illicit drugs in the past. Currently he is a practicing Christian.

Asian-Canadian female nurse who is bisexual and in a committed relationship with a woman.

They are raising her partner's four Caucasian children.

First Nations bisexual female factory worker in a relationship with a white man. She practices traditional native spirituality.

Male to Female transgendered truck driver in a relationship with a woman.

16 year old high-school student who is lesbian and is deaf. She uses sign language to communicate and is a practicing Christian.

20 year old female Caucasian sex trade worker who is heterosexual and in a polygamous relationship with a male pimp. She is addicted to heroin.

Separated single gay white male who has custody of his ten year old daughter and who works as an elementary school teacher.

White heterosexual Christian male who is the CEO of a multinational corporation. He is married with three children.

35 yr. old white heterosexual female social worker who is married to a Jamaican Canadian man and they have two children. She is practicing the Wiccan religion (witch).

Black heterosexual female lawyer who is the only woman and the only person of colour working in a prominent firm.

White single lesbian stay at home mother of 2 small children living on welfare.

White 60 year old lesbian who is a general practitioner and suffers from epilepsy.

50 year old divorced female teacher who has raised her children and hasn't worked for the past 15 years. Her husband has left and he hide their assets.

Catholic Italian mother of three children who is a recent immigrant to Canada and does not speak English. She is married and works in an Italian bakery.

Gay Chinese-Canadian man who is raising a disabled child with his partner.

Indo-Canadian male psychiatrist who is heterosexual and a practicing Sikh.

14 year old Japanese Canadian lesbian Buddhist high-school student.

25 year old black disabled female university student (uses a wheel chair) and is a practicing Anglican.

Closeted gay male Jewish lawyer who is married with two children. He lives with his wife but has sex with his secret male lover of several years.

15 year old Hispanic- Canadian gay male high-school student who is a practicing Catholic.

Sometimes it is fun to add cards with famous participants.

examples:

k.d.lang  
famous Canadian singer,  
lesbian, vegetarian, partnered, white

Svend Robinson  
white gay male partnered unitarian  
famous Canadian politician

David Suzuki  
heterosexual married Japanese-Canadian  
environmental activist

### Questions

These are asked once individuals have their pseudo identity card, which they are instructed not to show to others, and are lined up *facing* a wall.

1. If you are free to be open about your sexuality with those close to you (example: out of the closet in most situations) please turn around and face the center of the room? (Individuals with a secret component to their identity will end up moving into the room *backwards*.)

2. Could you expect to speak openly and easily about your sexual orientation /identity at school or work with out fear of harassment or negative consequences?

3. Do you feel safe walking alone on the streets after dark?

4. Do you expect to be treated fairly by the police?

5. Do you expect that you and your body will be treated with respect and dignity as you work without fear of harassment?

6. Can you go to the corner store on foot quickly and easily?

7. You do not expect a group of teenagers to hurl insults or harass you as you walk by?

8. You do not expect you children will suffer harassment or discrimination at school?

9. Can you legally marry?

10. Do you expect to be financially well off and be able to travel during your retirement?

11. You are being considered for a promotion. Are you secure that your personal life or identity will not hinder you?

12. You are in a new social situation and you are asked if you are married- are you comfortable answering?

13. You have no qualms about bringing your partner to your office party?

14. Do you expect to be able to get a large loan from the bank easily?

15. Would it be easy for you to introduce your partner to your family?

16. You are one of 10 people being interviewed for a position. Do you expect to have a good chance of being hired?



17. Do you think that your chances are good when you are interviewed by a social worker to adopt a child?
18. Are you comfortable holding hands with your partner in public?
19. If you became ill with AIDS would some people say you were an innocent victim rather than you deserved it?
20. Can you expect to be a religious leader in your community?
21. Can you discuss your religious practices and holidays and openly at work or school without fear of harassment?
22. Can you communicate to others that you have just met easily?
23. If your partner died would you be automatically recognized as the next of kin?

Feel free to make up new pseudo-identities and new questions.