LESBIAN SOCIAL WORKERS' EXPERIENCES IN THEIR PROFESSIONAL WORKING

RELATIONSHIPS

by

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Lesbian social workers have been acutely aware of the inadequacies of the social work response to lesbian client needs. At a time when we are experiencing unprecedented gains in civil rights, we are also experiencing increased violence and renewed social and political oppression. Feminist research must start from the experiences of the researcher. As a lesbian feminist researcher, the concern of lesbian social workers' experiences in the workplace was sought. The present qualitative study examines the experiences of five lesbian social workers, all over forty-five years of age, primarily in middle management positions in the health field. Within a focus group, the participants discussed a variety of personal experiences within self-defined 'gay-positive' work environments. Content analysis was used to extrapolate themes. Visible lesbian and gay co-workers and especially supervisors created a 'gay-positive' work environment, however participants felt being an 'out' lesbian was compromised by a number of factors. These included internalized homophobia, institutional discrimination, feminist principles denied within a hierarchy, as well as self-censorship due to reactions from other employees. Homophobic expression increased when heterosexual representation decreased. Possibly due to their managerial status, and/or internalized homophobia, some ambivalence about being ‘out’ in their work environment also became evident. The findings are discussed in terms of implications for policy and practice in order to address homophobia and provide nondiscriminatory ethical practice in the profession of social work.
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INTRODUCTION

Ourself behind ourself, concealed -
Should startle most.
(Emily Dickenson)

Historical discrimination of lesbians and gay men has only recently been challenged by the gay and lesbian movement. In the context of fear surrounding AIDS, this minority group still lives in the shadow of ignorance that labels them by society’s institutions as criminals, sinners or sexual deviants. Alfred Kinsey reported in the late 1940’s that gay and lesbian people existed in every geographic region of the U.S., in every occupation, social class, and age group, and concluded that if there were no social restraints such as homophobia or heterosexism, homosexual activity would appear in a much larger portion of the population. Levy (1995) claims that because of the difficulty in collecting accurate data about lesbian and gay people, there are probably similar proportions of lesbians and gay men throughout all social classes and ethnic and racial communities. Social workers must not only acknowledge that at least 10 per cent of their client population and co-workers are gay or lesbian (Biery, 1990; Blumenfield, 1992; Woodman, 1992), but become informed of the issues and needs this creates. Social workers working with lesbian and gay clients need to understand what it means to be a gay man or a lesbian in a heterosexist and homophobic world. Although the social context appears to be rapidly transforming, gay men and lesbians occupy a marginal status (Levy, 1995). As a white, middle class, lesbian feminist social
I have been acutely aware of the lack of understanding of lesbians by social workers. Because of my own experiences of being ‘outed’ by a heterosexual social worker and discriminated against as a lesbian employee, I have a strong desire to challenge homophobic attitudes within the social work profession. I have also been warned (sage advice) that I not identify myself as a lesbian when applying to social work university programs. I felt unsure if I should come out in classrooms, practicums as well as in the workplace for fear of negative reactions and discrimination. Thus, my awareness of the entrenched homophobia within social work has led me to this point.

My particular research question is to reveal the ways in which homophobia impacts on lesbians within the social work profession and in their workplace. I was curious if other lesbian social workers were experiencing discrimination in their work environment and in what forms it had taken. What in fact are the real experiences of lesbian social workers in their relationships with other social workers? Are lesbian social workers feeling secure about being ‘out’ at work? My intention in this thesis is to explore the experiences of lesbians in this profession, in order to make known the conditions of invisibility that lesbian social workers may face.

I would like to acknowledge the significant contribution lesbians have made to the field of social work despite discrimination. I am convinced that there are many lesbian social workers, however we are underrepresented because we do not feel safe to come out, to the detriment of the social work profession and to ourselves. It is important that the voices represented here will be joined in the future by others so that we can alter the illusions and stereotypes that have been so destructive and silencing. Social work codes of ethics have named us in terms of sexual orientation in an effort to
prevent discrimination of lesbians and gay men (bisexuals and transgendered). I discuss this further as well as provide definitions to clarify language used and provide an overview of existing social work literature to reveal how we as lesbians have been presented.

**Codes of Ethics**

There are two codes of ethics that social workers in British Columbia are required to follow. The national, Canadian Association of Social Workers Social Work Code of Ethics (1994), and provincial, the B.C.A.S.W. Code of Ethics which states,

> Social workers are pledged to serve without discrimination on any grounds of race, ethnicity, language, religion, marital status, gender, sexual orientation, age, abilities, economic status, political affiliation or national ancestry (1984, p.4).

The profession of social work is founded on humanitarian and egalitarian ideals, is committed to the goal of effecting social changes in society as well as being accountable to the people they serve, to their profession and to society. However, social workers have not been required to address sexual orientation until recently, reflecting the traditional roots within social work that pathologize lesbians and gay men. Effective social work with lesbians and gay men must begin with an understanding of the context that creates prejudices and stereotypes. As bell hooks (1988) explains,

> Often when the radical voice speaks about domination we are speaking to those who dominate. Their presence changes the direction and shape of our words. Language is also a place of struggle. The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves - to rewrite, to reconcile, to renew. Our words are not without meaning. They are an action - a resistance (p.28).
Definitions of Terminology: A Framework for Professional Standards

In order to clarify the meaning of certain words used in my thesis, I define the relevant terminology used. These definitions are of my own choosing, and may not be agreed upon by everyone.

Lesbian: As Pharr (1988) says,

To be a lesbian is to be perceived as someone who has stepped out of line, who has moved out of the sexual/economic dependence on a male, who is woman-identified. If lesbians are established as threats to the status quo, any woman who steps out of role risks being named lesbian. A lesbian is perceived as a threat to the nuclear family, to male dominance and control, to the very heart of sexism (p.18).

Patriarchy: As Pharr (1988) defines it, "Patriarchy is an enforced belief in male dominance and control as an ideology and sexism is the system that holds it in place" (p. 8).

Sexism: As Abbott & Love (1971) state,

The common enemy of feminists and lesbians is sexism. Sexism is not merely the preference of society for one sex, and the attribution to that sex of various preferred qualities and attitudes at the expense of the other sex. Sexism emerges from making reproduction rather than personal pleasure or personal development the goal of sexual intercourse (p.604).

As Pharr (1988) explains,

Part of the way sexism stays in place is the societal promise of survival, false and unfulfilled as it is, that women will not suffer violence if we attach ourselves to a man to protect us. A woman without a man is told she is vulnerable to external violence and, worse, that there is something wrong with her.... backed up by a society that shows women in textbooks, advertising, TV programs, movies, etc., as debased, silly, inferior, and sexually objectified, and a society that gives tacit approval to pornography. When we internalize these messages, we call the result "low self-esteem," a therapeutic individualized term. It seems to me we should use the more political expression: when we internalize these messages, we experience internalized sexism, and we experience it in common with all women living in a sexist world (p.14-16).
Feminism: Pharr (1988) defines this term,

Feminism is a theoretical analysis of how this domination as a given, is enforced. Economics is seen by many feminists to be the root cause of sexism. The major tactic, world-wide, is to provide unrecompensed or inadequately recompensed labour for the benefit of those who control wealth. If anyone steps out of line, take her/his job away (p.12).

Adrienne Rich (1979) wrote,

Black and white feminists have in common a commitment... to a profound transformation of world society and of human relationships; and that we agree that such a transformation requires minimally that every woman be self-identifying and self-defining, with the right to determine how, when, and for whom she will exercise her sexuality and her reproductive powers (p. 279).

Heterosexism: Audre Lorde (1984) defines heterosexism as the "belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving and thereby its right to dominate" (p. 45).

As Karen Rash (1993) explains,

Heterosexism is fundamentally a denial of homosexuals’ and bisexuals’ equality as persons and an affirmation of their stereotyped role as deviant, unnatural, sinful, criminal, and shameful. This heterosexist view has historically shaped our social institutions, including the institution of the family. The traditional image of the nuclear family remains upheld as the ideal, the most wholesome and desirable despite frequent violence against women and children, incest, male domination, female subordination and objectification, and unequal economic remuneration that are contained within its parameters. Such is the legacy of the institution of the family (p.8).

Stereotyping: Another weapon in the heterosexist arsenal is stereotyping. Herek (1991) describes stereotyping as the categorizing of people which results when individuals are classified on the basis of one characteristic.

Homophobia: Pharr (1988) defines homophobia as the irrational fear and hatred of those who love and sexually desire those of the same sex. As Pharr explains,
Heterosexism creates the climate for homophobia with its assumption that the world is and must be heterosexual and that such a display of power and privilege is the norm. Heterosexism and homophobia work together to enforce compulsory heterosexuality and that bastion of patriarchal power, the nuclear family (p.16).

Internalized homophobia, like internalized sexism, are the messages inflicted on us through the stereotypes of what it means to be lesbian, causing low self-esteem.

Passing: Elana Dykewomon (1988) editor for Sinister Wisdom writes,

Passing is about appearing to be who you’re not; about being acceptable or invisible to those who exercise power over you. But it’s not simple. It works on a hundred levels at once, and it shifts, from moment to moment....Passing on your job as straight; passing (as whatever you can) when you apartment hunt; trying to pass as younger or older; passing by tone of voice, choice of words, assumptions you don’t challenge, beliefs you don’t actively defend....Among lesbians, to pass is either to present yourself as a man or as a straight woman (p.3).

According to Abbott & Love (1971),

Lesbians and feminists are part of the larger struggle against oppression waged by all groups that refuse to be dominated by a hierarchical system in which certain groups are considered naturally superior, and others naturally inferior. In this battle, assimilation is the characteristic trademark. Lesbians who conceal their sexual preference are not persecuted; feminists who remain housewives and mothers are not rejected; prostitutes who conceal their occupations are not admonished; blacks who can pass for white are not discriminated against. It is only when oppressed people stand up and openly announce who and what they are that they are either pressured into assuming their correct roles and levels in society, or they are crucified (p. 605).

Marginalization: As Kirby & McKenna (1989) explain,

The margin is the context in which those who suffer injustice, inequality and exploitation live their lives. People find themselves on the margins not only in terms of the inequality in the distribution of material resources, but also knowledge production is organized so that the views of a small group of people are presented as objective, as "The Truth." The majority of people are excluded from participating as either producers or subjects of knowledge .... Focussing on the world from the
perspective of the margins allows us to see the world differently, and, in many ways, more authentically (p.33).

Present social programs both assume and reward heterosexual family structure, and the majority of social programs are based on the assumption that all people are heterosexual. Lesbian and gay families are for the most part rendered invisible. Further, because the nuclear heterosexual family is seen as the only model deserving of social support, lesbian and gay families have historically been discriminated against. This discrimination is a measure of the effectiveness of keeping minority groups in their place.

Feminist research: As quoted in Smith & Noble-Smith (1986),

Feminist research must start from the experience of the researcher, who must be prepared to make herself as vulnerable as those being researched. Their attempt to construct feminist research starts by going back to the fundamental, egalitarian principles of feminism, that change in women’s oppression can only occur by changing our consciousness of our everyday experiences and it is these experiences that need to be carefully documented (p.141).

Institutionalized Discrimination: Pharr (1988) discusses how discrimination occurs through institutional expectations she calls the ‘defined norm’,

a standard of rightness and often righteousness wherein all others are judged in relation to it. This norm must be backed up with institutional power, economic power, and both institutional and individual violence (p.53).

As Pharr explains, for all groups it is not just the physical violence that threatens us but the ever constant threat of violence. For gay men and lesbians this interplay of institutional and personal violence comes through both unwritten and written laws. For example, laws which make sex acts that do not lead to reproduction illegal, whether between two women, two men or a man and a woman - married or
unmarried clearly speak to our deepest fears of our own sexuality. As Blasius (1994) explains,

What is least tolerable about homosexuality is not the sex acts themselves but the appearance, the social visibility of lesbian and gay people and their affectional relations with each other throughout the fabric of social life (p. 137).

Blasius further explains why we are a threat,

The existence of gay and lesbian relationships throughout the institutional framework of society, as well as the coming out of individuals, undermines domination - compulsory heterosexuality - and opens up sexual normativity to a greater range of human possibilities (p. 149).

Petersen (1994) speaks of her experiences of 'institutional resistance' which refers to the active opposition of people who hold positions of power within institutions and who thwart the implementation of institutional change because they have an investment in the status quo. Petersen mentions this as well in the context of the political tensions between the gay and lesbian movements,

That white gay men dominate the political/legal agenda, and that lesbians always suffer the consequences, but only occasionally reap the benefits, of what gay men say and do (with and within the law) (p. 339).

Oppression: As Johnson (1987) clarifies,

It is a historical truth that the oppressed must rise and free both themselves and their oppressors; that the oppressors never, of their own accord, curtail their violence or relinquish the privilege it buys them, even though individual members of the powerful group may wish for an end to it and work toward that goal....People often argue that men are also oppressed. Although it is true that patriarchy will not let them be "oppressed" as males in the same sense as women are oppressed as females. The experiences that most men interpret as "bad" in their everyday lives are truly random. They are not systemic, not woven inextricably into the fabric of society. This does not mean that certain groups of men are not oppressed. As Marilyn Frye points out, oppression occurs, unlike random "bad" things, absolutely and nonrandomly to people because they belong to a particular group, a group from which
they can never escape. Women are oppressed as women, Blacks as Blacks, Jews as Jews. But men are never oppressed as men (p.289).

Hate Crimes: Hate crimes, which are also called bias crimes are according to Finn & McNeil (1987),

words or actions intended to harm or intimidate an individual because of her or his membership in a minority group; they include violent assaults, murder, rape, and property crimes motivated by prejudice, as well as threats of violence or other acts of intimidation. Lesbians and gay men are principal targets of hate crimes according to recent surveys (as cited in Herek; 1989, p.948)

Coming Out: Coming out or being out is about visibility. As Pharr (1988) explains,

Though lesbians have grown in visibility over the past twenty years, great numbers of our population still live in complete or partial invisibility, however, every act of lesbian visibility is an act of resistance. For many of us, then, becoming entirely visible is the central place of risk taking. It is also the core of our self-esteem and organizing issues. When we talk about the necessity of becoming visible in our sexual identity, it would be a mistake to assume facilely that every woman faces equal risks and thereby insist that we all employ the same strategies and methods in coming out (p.84).

As Blasius (1994) expressed,

Coming out is also the fundamental political act. It involves rejecting one’s own subjection (being ‘in the closet,’ ‘passing,’ treating others homophobically, etc.) that is the product of historical processes of domination by heterosexism. It further involves, through recognition of and by lesbian and gay people, cognizing or thinking over and thinking differently of oneself and ones relations with others – creating oneself under what thereby become different historical conditions....One does not come out once and for all, however, and coming out is not just a disclosure of one’s gay or lesbian identity to others. Rather than being an end state in which one exists as an ‘out’ person, coming out is a process of becoming, a lifelong learning of how to become (and of inventing the meaning of being) a lesbian or a gay man in this historical moment (p.116-19).

Social Work Curriculum and Institutional Discrimination: Social work curriculum reinforces rather than opposes the status quo. Blasius (1994) claims,
Institutionally, homosexuality is erased from or distorted within educational curricula and the mass media, denied status in or as family, identified with gender disfunction, and 'tolerated' (if at all) as second-class humanity - all of which is legitimized either by legal prohibition or lack of protection, as well as by religious and moral exhortation (p.117).

Homophobia and heterosexism are intertwined, not only in society but in social work and other helping professions. As Laura Bencov (1994) challenges,

How wide is the gulf separating true lesbian and gay experiences and what well-meaning people believe about homosexuals? It's difficult but crucial to speak across that gulf. Though not always, homophobia is sometimes more a matter of ignorance than of hatred - or more accurately, a matter of ignorance into which the language of hatred seeps. It is not surprising that this occurs. Homophobia is ubiquitous, while much of lesbian and gay life is still blocked from view. We often think that we know a great deal about things we have no experience of. Bigotry thrives on that tendency - it is what enables reality to be drowned out by myth (p.11).

As Kirby and McKenna (1989) state, "Doing research from the margins challenges the status quo.... [It] allows us to begin to rename our experience, and thus participate in creating knowledge we can use" (p.170).

In order to question the "heterosexual panorama" as explained by Blasius (1994), the above definitions are important, not only in order to live up to the B.C.A.S.W. code of ethics, but to offer non-discriminatory service. Without an understanding of the general character of oppression, as well as the forces in place that maintain it, our research, theory and knowledge base remain heterosexist in nature, maintaining a standard of unethical practice. The intention of uncovering lesbian presence within social work is one form of "truth telling" necessary at a time when according to Levy (1995), current literature on lesbian and gay families reinforces the marginal social status of lesbian and gay families. I focus on lesbian social workers in
their workplace because as Levy (1995) states, lesbians and gay men frequently encounter discrimination in the workplace because of their sexual orientation.

In chapter one I explore the discrimination of lesbians in society historically up to the present within theory and research. The academic literature on lesbians, and studies on workforce discrimination expose the absence of representation on the experiences of lesbian social workers in the workplace setting. Chapter two presents my research methodology. In chapter three I present the findings and discussion from these findings. In chapter four I discuss implications and offer my concluding remarks.

When lesbian social workers, by their visibility in coming out, address the concerns that they recognize as "specific" to their experiences as women and as lesbians they are in a political position to acknowledge the inequalities they observe and personally experience. By the example of their own lives, lesbian social workers exert pressure on the (traditional) framework within their institutions of employment, education and heterosexual society. They are in fact living the ethic that social work proposes: "I will effect social change for the overall benefit of humanity" (B.C.A.S.W., Code of Ethics, 1984; p.6).
CHAPTER ONE

Literature Review

The fact that lesbians are able to call into question, by their visibility, the structures of heterosexism means that their visibility potentially threatens all the structures they are involved in as social workers such as family and child welfare programs, mental health services, hospitals, health care facilities, alcohol and drug programs, many non-profit organizations, social planning, corrections and counselling centres. In order to explore the experiences of lesbians in this profession it is important initially to identify what this profession has to say about lesbians. The mainstream literature on lesbians provides a context in which to place ourselves. It frames an understanding of what lesbian means within the traditional heterosexist standard as defined earlier. As Rash explains,

Western culture has allowed "experts" to define reality and the best solutions to problems in that reality. Every day matters have been removed from the hands of every day individuals and relocated in the hands of men who hold positions of power in medicine, psychiatry, religion, justice, and other societal systems. Built into those fields and institutions were fundamental assumptions about reality that came about due to the very positions those men held in the social structure. (Rash, 1993, p.11)

It will be evident on reviewing the available literature on lesbians in social work that lesbians are being marginalized. As Blasius (1994) has explained, because our visibility threatens the heterosexual structure of the very institutions that lesbian social workers are employed in, to maintain hegemonic control, the appearance of lesbians must be denied. In order to understand the position that lesbian social workers are in at present, it is important to review the academic literature as a way of measuring
acknowledgment of our existence as well as how we are (mis)represented / perceived by the profession. Inaccurate representation and pathologising lesbians are forms of institutionalized discrimination that continue to challenge our legitimacy and integrity. According to D’Augelli (1993), lesbian and gay men are a hidden population on campus, and they are also invisible in the curriculum. This literature review endeavours to expose the heterosexual bias more or less unchallenged within social work literature.

**Historical Discrimination**

**History of the term homosexual and lesbian:**

It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that physicians and psychiatrists conceptualized a homosexual type. The invention of the term "homosexual" was preceded by, and was an attempt to label scientifically and hence govern, individuals who participated in a distinctive way of life. It was only towards the end of the 19th century as women entered into wage labour, and were able to release themselves from the heterosexual kinship system making exclusive homosexuality possible, that lesbianism became a pathologized identity.

The sexologists, responding to the first wave of the women’s liberation movement needed to label a behaviour they wanted to stigmatize. Until then, there were no words to name love between women. Their labels: homosexual, invert, and the sex-specific Sapphist and lesbian indicated their views on lesbianism. (Wolfe & Penelope, 1993). As Wilton (1995) reminds us, the scholar of lesbian history is faced with two problematic sets of disbursal: the destruction of evidence of sexual deviance
which dogs any attempt to reclaim a homosexual subject and the tendency of historians simply to ignore women.

Increasing political repression in the twentieth century justified by medical expertise, legal enforcement (of for example, statutes prohibiting sodomy, public lewdness, and sexual solicitation) and absence of civil rights protection against social discrimination, existed to curtail our existence:

Men were executed for sodomy in the American colonies as early as 1624. Throughout the past three centuries, lesbian and gay Americans have been routinely subjected to many forms of institutional violence including felony imprisonment and fines, castration and clitorectomy, forced psychiatric treatment, dishonourable discharge from the military, and general social ostracism (Katz, 1976; as cited in Herek, 1989; p.949).

In 1986, Rabin, Keefe and Burton stated,

Only 13 years ago, homosexuality was still labelled as an illness, and therapists frequently tried to change the sexual orientation of gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals. Homosexuals were subjected to an array of treatments including medication, aversion therapy, electroshock, lobotomy, castration, hysterectomy, and clitorectomy. The Gay Liberation movement challenged these questionable psychiatric attitudes and techniques and forced the American Psychiatric Association (APA) to reevaluate its definition of homosexuality. In 1973, the APA removed homosexuality from the list of mental illnesses (p.294).

Klinger (1995) reminds us that discrimination of lesbians has deep historical roots using the example of the Salem witch hunts. Daly (1978) wrote in depth on three centuries of the European witchhunts.

The increased visibility of gay men and lesbians since World War II has perpetrated increased hostility and violence (Comstock, 1991). Jenness (1995) offers an empirical analysis of 32 gay/lesbian sponsored anti-violence projects in the United States and comments that victimization of gays and lesbians by these groups would otherwise go unnoticed by law enforcement officials and mental health authorities.
The provincial governments of Alberta, Northwest Territories, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador still have not amended their Human Rights legislation to include sexual orientation. As the National Action Committee on the Status of Women Voters Guide (1997) reports, some provinces have left language in the legislation that defines "spouse" as a partner of the opposite sex, and others have exempted employee benefits and rights to partners plans from the legislation. What’s worse, there are still fifty federal statutes that limit spousal benefits and rights to partners of the opposite sex. EGALE (1996) states that these statutes marginalize the individual partners in same-sex relationships, stigmatize their children, and undermine the effective functioning of their family units.

Civil Rights Protection for Lesbians

In Canada, it is only recently that lesbians have been given any legal protection from discrimination. The Lesbian Issues Committee from the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (1997) reports on the considerable gains since the formation of the first lesbian and gay rights organization in Vancouver in 1964. In 1969, homosexual acts were decriminalized in Canada. In 1977, Quebec was the first province to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. They report,

In 1979, the Canadian Human Rights Commission recommended that the Federal government amend the Canadian Human Rights Act to identify sexual orientation as a ground for discrimination. Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom became part of the Constitution in 1982 and in 1985, but included, though not naming sexual orientation. It became explicit that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation was illegal in Canada. The governments of Alberta, North West Territories, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador still have not amended their human rights legislation to include sexual orientation. As well, some provinces have left language in the legislation that defines "spouse" as a partner of the opposite sex, and others have exempted employee benefits plans from the legislation. The
recognition of same-sex benefits of same-sex couples as families is the fundamental equality issue for lesbians and gays today (p.59).

According to Majury (1994), the most entrenched flaw in the legislative prohibitions against discrimination is that they are framed in terms of "sexual orientation," a label that is seen to include lesbians and gays and possibly "other sexual minorities." Majury feels that the term sexual orientation is problematic:

It has been narrowly interpreted by tribunals and courts and, in its gender neutrality, it promotes a gay male standard to which lesbians are assumed or expected to conform. The meaning of being a lesbian and the inequalities we experience as lesbians are not represented in the label sexual orientation (p.289).

Majury believes that lesbian oppression is more accurately understood as sex discrimination than as any other form of legally recognized discrimination. Majury prefers "sexual identity" to "sexual orientation" because, "Lesbians are being drawn into and judged by a standard that may have very little to do with the realities of their lives, their self-definition, the inequalities they experience and the priorities they would have for change" (p. 303).

Specific examples regarding discrimination that are not experienced to the same degree by gay men include economics. A lesbian most likely has more limited and less remunerative job prospects and is more likely to be trying to support children - with all the attendant problems and expenses that child care presents in the context of the paid work force. The use of psychiatry and the pathologization of lesbians as mentally ill have received little attention as gay issues. In addition, the physical and sexual violence inflicted upon lesbians is different from the violence to which gay men are subjected, in terms of where it takes place, the forms it takes, and its overall impact.
The focus and import of issues of sex, sexuality, and sexual practice are different for lesbians than they are for gay men. Lesbians, Majury claims, "particularly outspoken lesbian-identified lesbians, are being subjected to a vicious and virulent anti-lesbian anti-woman backlash" (p. 307).

Thus Majury argues that politically and strategically, the sex discrimination analysis of lesbian oppression offers the most promise for understanding the full depth and meaning of the widespread fear and hatred of lesbians. She recommends that lesbians need to be named specifically as a protected group. In order to avoid lesbian claims being dismissed summarily, leaving lesbians without any legal protection against discrimination, she recommends the inclusion of discrimination against lesbians as a prohibited ground of discrimination in human rights codes and in the Charter.

**Hate Crimes**

According to Klinger (1995), careful study of anti-gay/lesbian violence is a relatively recent event. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force has been instrumental in gathering yearly data on eight American cities since 1984. The 1990 Hate Crimes Statistics Act requires the federal U.S. government to collect data on anti-gay violence with other bias-related crimes. There is some variation in quality and results between the different surveys, however half or more of socially active gay men and lesbians have experienced some form of physical anti-gay violence as well as twenty to seventy anti-gay homicides a year (Comstock, 1991). As Jenness (1995) states, efforts to document anti-gay and lesbian violence generally are undertaken by gay and lesbian sponsored anti-violence projects in order to challenge law
enforcement agencies and legislative reports...[which] highlights the underreporting of both official crime and undetected hate-motivated violence against gays and lesbians (p.156).

In his analysis of violence against lesbians and gay men in the USA and Canada, Comstock (1991) cites findings from one project in Winnipeg which found:

In response to calls for assistance by victims of anti-gay/lesbian violence the practice of on-duty police officers is frequently (1) to refuse to intervene, either to protect the victims or to apprehend the perpetrators; (2) to minimize the seriousness of reported incidents, because the victims are lesbian or gay; (3) to blame the victims; and (4) to harass verbally and/or to abuse physically the victims (as cited in Wilton, 1995, p.199).

Cases where the ‘homosexual panic defence’ have been used to get charges reduced for murder legitimizes rather than addresses the larger issue of why the defence is admissible at all. According to the December 9 Coalition in their minutes (Nov.,1995) the Attorney General seemed genuinely surprised to learn the defence had been used many times.

**Present Court Decisions Regarding Discrimination**

The Supreme Court of Canada has unanimously held that the Charter of Rights prohibits discrimination against gays and lesbians. Section 15 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (enacted in 1982) has been the focus for lesbians and gay men. Known as the ‘equality section’ which came into effect in 1985, it provides protection from discrimination on specific grounds. In order to enforce Charter rights, individuals must litigate. For example, a majority of the Supreme Court ruled in *Egan v Canada* [1995] 2 SCR 513, that legislation which fails to recognize same-sex couples equally constitutes sexual orientation discrimination, in violation of s.15 of the Charter of Rights:
sexual orientation is demonstrated in a person’s choice of life partner, whether heterosexual or homosexual. It follows that a lawful relationship which flows from sexual orientation should also be protected. ...The definition of ‘spouse’ as someone of the opposite sex reinforces the stereotype that homosexuals cannot and do not form lasting, caring, mutually supportive relationships with economic interdependence in the same manner as heterosexual couples. The appellants’ relationship vividly demonstrates the error of that approach. The discriminatory impact can hardly be deemed to be trivial when the legislation reinforces prejudicial attitudes based on faulty stereotypes. The effect of the impugned provision is clearly contrary to s.15’s aim of protecting human dignity, and therefore the distinction amounts to discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (file # 23636, paragraph 175, Nov. 1, 1995).

Egan, who had lived with his partner for over twenty years, challenged their exclusion from Canada pension benefits.

The Supreme Court then went on to hold that ultimately it is up to Governments and Legislatures to take responsibility for bringing discriminatory legislation into line with the equality guarantees in the Charter of Rights.

The Egan decision has now been applied by many other courts and tribunals. In Moore and Akerstrom v Canada,[1996] CHRD No. 8 (CHRT), a Canadian Human Rights Tribunal held last year that the Federal Government was required to extend same-sex benefits to federal employees.

In Re K (1995) 23 O.R. (3d) 679. the Court held that same-sex couples should be treated equally with opposite-sex couples for adoption purposes.

It is submitted that the legal responsibility of governments is now quite clear: it is discrimination and a violation of the Canadian Charter of Rights to enact legislation which fails to treat those in same-sex relationships equally. In EGALE’s view, it is abdication of legislative responsibility to allow these matters to be decided by the Courts. Rather than waste public money defending discriminatory laws before the
Courts, it is submitted that it is far better for Legislatures to take the lead and comply with their obligations under the Charter of Rights, by ensuring that laws do not discriminate against gays and lesbians by privileging those in opposite-sex relationships (EGALE, What’s Happening in the Courts, p.1-3, Jan.23, 1998).

**Literature Review on Employment Discrimination**

I examine the literature on employment discrimination as my focus is on lesbians in their positions of employment. There has been an absence of hard and systematically collected evidence of employment discrimination. Perhaps this can be best explained by Wilton (1996),

> The stigma assigned to same-sex affectional/erotic behaviour and the concomitant professional risk to individuals studying such behaviour has policed the academy as effectively as any other arena of social life, severely limiting research activity in this area as it limits sexual activity in the private sphere. Plummer’s more recent work suggests that there has been little improvement: Our enemies are everywhere- it is hard to get funding, people would like to stop us doing our work, we may not get tenure, people look with suspicion on lesbian and gay causes, there is employment discrimination, and so on. (Plummer, 1992:12 cited in Wilton, 1995, p.165)

In 1972 two books, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon’s *Lesbian/Woman* and Sidney Abbot and Barbara Love’s *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman: A Liberated View of Lesbianism*, were published in the U.S.A. setting a tone of lesbian-authored accounts of lesbian lives. Moving beyond what it was like to live as a lesbian, lesbian-authored texts in the 1970’s and 1980’s began to discuss heterosexism, the legal position of lesbians, the relationship between sex and gender, the development of theories of lesbianism in psychology/biology, etc. and other directly relevant issues (Wilton, 1995; p.170-1).
Anecdotal evidence, including the following quote from American lesbian writers Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon (1972) indicate the reality of the majority of employed lesbians at that time,

most lesbian workers try to avoid discrimination by living a dual life: on the job, they "pass" for heterosexual, complete with imaginary boyfriends; during evenings and weekends with homosexual friends, they let their hair down (as cited in Levine & Leonard, 1984; p. 702).

There appear to be limited studies on numbers of lesbians discriminated against in the workplace available. The American study by Levine and Leonard (1984), "Discrimination against lesbians in the workforce," claims that "no one has yet synthesized what is known about their situation" (p. 701). Levine and Leonard (1984) defined formal discrimination as institutionalized procedures to restrict officially conferred work rewards such as promotions, salary increases, or increased job responsibility; and informal employment discrimination as non-institutionalized policies that permit harassment and other unofficial actions taken by supervisors or co-workers. Levine and Leonard’s research examined data collected from lesbians on job discrimination due to sexual preference. They provide a comparison of their data with previous American studies that ask a few questions regarding employment discrimination - apparently as an afterthought, for none examined employment discrimination in depth. As Levine and Leonard explain, Bell and Weinberg (1978) were concerned with social and psychological adjustment of lesbians; Brooks (1981) with how stress influenced lesbian behaviour; Chafetz and Associates (1974) study with the social and sexual dimensions of lesbian life; and Saghir and Robin’s (1973) study with lesbian etiology, psychopathology, developmental background, and
sociological concomitants. Only Beth Schneider’s (1981) study concentrated on labour-force status, but her major concern was with coming out at work.

Levine and Leonard (1984) present the findings of anticipated discrimination in three of the previous studies on lesbians,

Chafetz and her associates (1974) found that most lesbians feared losing their jobs (two-thirds of their sample agreed that their jobs would be in jeopardy if it became known that they were lesbian. Brooks (1981) reported similar findings; nearly two-thirds of her respondents "could not state with any certainty that they would not lose their jobs if their sociosexual orientation were known." Likewise, about three-quarters of Schneider’s (1981) sample felt that disclosure of their sexual preference would cost them their jobs or income (p. 703).

Levine and Leonard explored factors affecting employment discrimination: in addition to measuring standard socio-demographics, they examined each worker’s job type, work environment, work history, experience with perceived and actual discrimination, and openness about sexual orientation. They utilized a questionnaire containing thirty closed and open-ended questions, and recruited the field sample from a range of different gathering places (bars, women’s bookstores, a dance), organizations (political groups, professional associations), and other social networks. Their sample of 203 New York lesbians (primarily white collar, middle class, and highly educated) support the findings of previous empirical research that employment discrimination was a serious problem. Their findings show that 60 percent anticipate discrimination, 24 percent actually experienced discrimination, and 28 percent remain closeted as a coping mechanism. Most of the remainder worked in fields more tolerant of lesbians, such as jobs employing large numbers of gay men (the arts, beauty, fashion); or in firms owned or operated by lesbians, women, or gay men; or jobs that served their communities. Some lesbians stated that they set up their own businesses to
sidestep discrimination. As one participant explained, "It is very difficult to work where you cannot be yourself. Instead of accepting this compromise, I chose to adjust my career to my lifestyle. I now own two gay businesses" (p. 707).

In Saghir and Robin’s work (1973), 12 percent of the respondents were asked to resign, were fired or were given warnings once they were identified as lesbians. In Levine and Leonard’s (1984) sample, hiring and firing tactics posed the biggest problem; of the women reporting actual discrimination, 29 percent were not hired for a job, were fired or were forced to resign. The second most common problem was restricted mobility. Nearly 10 percent of the women who reported discrimination were not promoted or were demoted. The women also experienced problems with pay and work assignments. Four percent were denied raises or were restricted in duties.

Verbal harassment was the most common informal discriminatory act in the Levine & Leonard study. Those who feared job discrimination also expressed concern about the possible reaction of co-workers. Nine-tenths of these women predicted that their co-workers would harass them with taunts, ostracism, and even violence. The prior experience of others in their offices often led to these fears. The fear of anticipated discrimination appeared to be a constant controlling factor. However, cases of informal discrimination justify reasons for not coming out or being visible. For example the authors state,

Three-quarters of the women who experienced discrimination reported that they were exposed to gossip, taunts, and ridicule. The second most common form of informal discrimination was non-verbal harassment; a little more than one-third of the women endured hard stares, ostracism, and damage to personal belongings. Finally, about one-tenth faced physical harassment, including violence (p. 706).

Levine and Leonard discussed ‘coping mechanisms’, i.e. passing,
To shield themselves from possible discrimination, most women in this study stayed closeted; only 23 percent informed most or all work associates. Almost four-fifths (77 percent) were partially or totally closeted on the job: 29 percent told some friends, 21 percent told only close friends, and 27 percent told no-one at all. But this tactic has its costs. Most women were dissatisfied with passing; slightly less than two-thirds of those who were either completely closeted or out only to close friends were displeased with this situation... the mental anguish associated with living a double life is the root of this dissatisfaction.... Women who were either mostly or totally out indicated that they did not feel this psychological stress (pp. 706-7).

According to Ponse (1978), pretending to be heterosexual generates anxiety over possible sanctions as well as severe strain from maintaining a false heterosexual identity. Pharr (1988) expressed concerns around visibility, as the central place of risk taking:

While visibility for one woman might mean the loss of a job, for another it might mean the loss of her children, and for another the loss of her life. Certainly risks differ for lesbians of colour and white lesbians. We cannot ignore these differences... (p.84).

By a secondary analysis of the data from their study with the other studies, Levine and Leonard estimated the extent of employment discrimination. They determined that 31 percent anticipated employment discrimination because of sexual orientation, 13 percent had actually experienced it, 8 percent of the women had lost or had almost lost their jobs because they were lesbians and in order to avoid discrimination, 72 percent of the lesbian community remained at least partially hidden at work, with 28 percent completely closeted. Three of the five studies took place in New York or San Francisco, cities well known for their tolerance of homosexuality. As Levine and Leonard state,

Our data indicates that individual attributes such as age, occupation, education, and income have minimal impact on anticipated and actual
discrimination or coping strategies. What does seem to count is the work setting. Women who worked in New York City suburbs were far more likely to expect and encounter discrimination than those in private settings, although the latter in fact experienced discrimination more frequently. Finally, lesbians employed in small enterprises were less likely to anticipate discrimination than those who worked for medium or large institutions (p. 708).

This suggests that location of employment as well as type of employment has a significant effect on discrimination of lesbians in the workforce.

According to Rosalie Miller (1990), a lesbian occupational therapist, lesbians are over-represented in the health professions which include nursing, physical therapy, social work, speech pathology and audiology, and rehabilitative counselling, among others. She described her experience with co-workers being reserved because they knew she was a lesbian. As she explains,

They do not mistreat me or give me the cold shoulder for the most part; and I know that the majority like and respect me as a person and co-worker. It is just that they hold me at a little distance personally. On the wall over my desk is a small framed picture of my partner (lover-friend). No-one, student or colleague, has made one comment about it in the two years that it has been there. In the casual conversations about weekends which occur over the coffee pot on Mondays and Fridays, I often mention something about what "Kathy and I" did or are planning to do. This kind of statement is not met with gasps, or with silence, but rather with a change of subject. "Oh how nice. Well George and I..." Certainly I am competent and dedicated in my work. But I do it with the feeling of being an outsider, and with the awareness that I hold something back from what I could be contributing (p. 7-8).

These American studies, now over ten years old, give us an indication of past American employment discrimination. I turn now to relevant Canadian literature.

**Canadian Research on Employment Discrimination**

The most recent study on employment discrimination was done at SFU. Stephen Samis (1995) surveyed 420 lesbians, gay men and bisexuals in the Greater Vancouver
area regarding discrimination and violence. Samis found that 20 percent believe they have been fired because of their sexual orientation, 23 percent believe they have been marked more harshly on performance evaluations, 20 percent think their sexual orientation has been a factor in being passed over for promotion, and 21 percent believe their orientation has prevented them from being hired at all in some cases. Because of the fear of discrimination, Samis learned, close to three-quarters of both gays and lesbians hide their sexual orientation from co-workers.

Lack of studies specific to lesbians in the labour force is surprising considering,

Lesbians must work. Put most simply, few lesbians will ever have, however briefly, the economic support of another person... lesbians are dependent on themselves for subsistence. Thus, a significant portion of the time and energies of most lesbians is devoted to working (Schneider, 1984, p.211).

If lesbians fear and experience discrimination in most occupations, as indicated in the studies reviewed, the experiences of lesbians in the profession of social work are suspect.

Social Work and Homophobia: Lack of Research on Gays and Lesbians

In 1972, Weinberg challenged social workers and other mental health practitioners to face, "a new challenge: to change the homophobic attitudes of the larger society - not the orientation of gay persons." A decade later Gramick (1983) claimed social workers had given little attention to this area in their practice and research. DeCrescenzo (1984) claims that social workers had the highest homophobic scores among helping professionals. DeCrescenzo and McGill (1978) found that social workers were more homophobic than psychologists and psychiatrists and Wisniewski
and Toomy (1987) found that one third of the social workers they studied were homophobic.

In a bibliography covering Canadian literature on gays, only ten references to social work were identified (Crawford, 1984, as cited in O’Neill & Naidoo, 1989). In their literature review, O’Neill and Naidoo (1989) cite 22 readings from Canadian social work sources, including three from *The Social Worker* (Dorais, 1988; Jacobsen, 1988; Tremble, 1988.) Studies of lesbians within the profession are minimal. According to Schlesinger (1983) in his review of the topic of male and female homosexuality in the social work literature from 1977 to 1982, Lowenstein (1980) published one of the first social work articles dealing with lesbians and encouraged social workers to have a special mandate to be sensitive to the needs of minority members within the general community and within our own ranks. Schlesinger (1983) mentions that Potter and Darty (1981) consider some myths about lesbianism, and point out that lesbianism has received little attention from the social work profession and that Hall (1978) was one of the first social workers to outline the steps that social workers can take in working with lesbian families.

The first is to acknowledge the existence of the lesbian family and recognize it as a special group with a special identity and special needs. Second, social workers can continue the process of self-exploration and dialogue with lesbians and non-lesbians, clients, and colleagues about the issues raised in this article of parenting, self-disclosure, stigma, and formation and maintenance of lesbian families within the inimical context of the dominant culture’s fear of homosexuality (as cited in Schlesinger, 1983, p.11).

the sentiments of the time by encouraging us to "discreetly" come out to certain co-workers or clients, thus maintaining the status quo. Grace does not give an analysis for change. Instead he advises social workers to find more supportive/suitable agencies to work for. Also not addressed is the issue of location. In rural settings, lesbian social workers may be more vulnerable to discrimination than their urban sisters, with less mobility and fewer employment options. According to Wilton (1995) an investigation into the differences between rural and urban lesbians is long overdue. The invisibility of rural lesbians is but one consequence states Wilton, "of the erasure of lesbian existence from the social world more generally" (p. 179).

O’Neill (1995) reports that the lack of responsiveness to the needs of gay, lesbian and bisexual clients is not surprising, given that many social workers still lack knowledge and sensitivity regarding same-sex sexual orientation, despite data which counters stereotypes about the lives of gay men and lesbians (e.g., Gonsiorek, 1982; Wingrove & Rodway, 1985; Risman & Schwartz, 1988).

Policy Concerns and Inclusivity in Social Work Education:

Until recently there has been a pervasive silencing of gay and lesbian existence as a policy and practice concern within social work education. According to Newman (1989) methods are necessary for including curriculum content that increases social work students’ acceptance of lesbians and gay men as clients and colleagues. Without this part of their education, social workers are likely to be ill-formed and possibly homophobic; lesbian and gay clients, therefore, will continue to be at risk of receiving inappropriate and ineffective services. As Dulaney and Kelly (1982) conclude,

Today's social workers are individuals working within a homophobic society. It is hardly surprising, then, that in order to be effective in
dealing with gay and lesbian clients, workers need additional education and support from the beginning to the end of their professional lives (as cited in Schlesinger, 1983, p.10).

Van Soest (1996) claims that although a number of educational resources have been developed to prepare students for practice with lesbians and gay men, evidence suggests ambivalence on homosexuality among social workers and within social work education. She points out that although formal policies clearly disclaim discrimination against and promote social justice for lesbians and gay men, their impact has been inconsistent, pointing to the presence – however submerged – of the cultural conservative/moral traditionalist camp within the profession. Gramick (1983) claimed that despite the generally homophobic milieu in this society, social work practitioners have given little attention to this area in their practice and research. According to Donadello (1986), there is an implicit and pervasive view in the social work profession that issues of oppression of lesbians and gay men and the discrimination of lesbians and gay clients are not serious concerns. For example, she notes that a debate over the wording of the Council on Social Work Education Curriculum Policy Statement resulted in the declaration that content about minority persons and women must be included, whereas content on special populations, including those with a lesbian or gay sexual orientation, should be included. O’Neill (1995) suggests that this lack of attention to gay and lesbian issues within social work education is linked to CASSW accreditation standards which do not require schools of social work to address sexual orientation in their policies, programs and curricula. Despite detailed recommendations regarding changes to social work policies, curriculum content, student selection, and the creation of a safe academic environment for gay men,
lesbians, and bisexuals (Murphy, 1991; Newman, 1989; Woodman, 1992), O’Neill claims that social work accrediting bodies have been ineffective in inducing schools of social work to address these issues. It appears that a complex web of social, organizational, and individual factors presents impediments to change in social work training with respect to this issue (Dulaney & Kelly, 1982; Gripton & Valentich, 1985). O’Neill (1995) in his study based on the experience of gay men in relation to social work training reveals an unsafe climate in schools of social work for public discussion of, and lack of accurate curriculum content regarding the topic. There is also evidence, he reports, that the general silencing of lesbian and gay issues is supported by the wider university environment and the values of social agencies regarding sexuality and the family.

Van Soest (1996) examines American policies which exclude host institutions from the standard that prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation to which schools of social work are held, along with its implications for broader education policy and practice. Van Soest supports Tievsky’s (1988) analysis that the growing influence of the Christian New Right movement during the 1970’s and of the "Moral Majority" fundamentalist movement during the 1980’s - coupled with the AIDS crisis - fuelled anti-homosexual feelings among Americans (Tievsky, 1988). As Van Soest (1996) points out,

> Although these formal policies clearly disclaim discrimination against and promote social justice for lesbians and gay men, their impact has been inconsistent, pointing to the presence - however submerged - of the cultural conservative/moral traditionalist camp within the profession. (p.55).
The American NASW National Task Force on Lesbian and Gay Issues has since 1979 been in operation to improve discriminatory employment practices and other forms of discrimination. In Canada similar work has been done, initially by the CASSW Task Force on Multicultural and Multiracial Issues in Social Work Education and by the gay and lesbian caucus of the CASSW.

The slowly emerging body of radical literature which aims to offer a critical approach to social work theory, continues to omit lesbian experience and existence (Langan and Lee, 1989 as cited in Logan and Kershaw, 1994). What is perhaps most disappointing of all is that the texts which focus on anti-discriminatory practice, while making reference to lesbian and gay issues, do not consider them worthy of the same amount of space afforded to other groups (Thompson, 1992; Webb and Tossell, 1991; as cited in Logan and Kershaw, 1994). According to Webb and Tossell (1991) this is unfortunate considering that, of all groups, lesbians and gay men are the most consistently and blatantly discriminated against. As D’Augelli (1993) states, lesbians and gay men are a hidden population on campus, and they are also invisible in the curriculum (p.257). Positive perspectives on lesbian and gay issues in mainstream social work literature can be fostered while challenging traditional deviancy perspectives (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1993; Weeks, 1989, 1991; Kitzinger, 1987). Van Soest believes that social workers reside, "in the temperate middle ground between conservative and progressive ideologies." Van Soest says this is consistent with Rein’s (1970) observation over 25 years ago:

Social work literature contains the implicit assumption that there is a consensus on professional values.... The possibility of a conflict of values is never suggested although, in actuality, opposite sets of values are often embraced simultaneously (cited in Van Soest, 1996, p.55).
However, positive developments in social work education about lesbians and gays will not happen until lesbian and gay teachers feel secure in their own institutions. Dankmeijer (1993) suggests that more attention should be given to the homophobic conditions under which such teachers work than the requirement that they all come out. O’Neill (1995) acknowledges that the patterns of oppression experienced by lesbians within universities differ from those of gay men (D’Augelli & Rose, 1990; Herek, 1988; Norris, 1991; OFS, 1991), and identified the need for a separate study of social work education from the standpoint of lesbians.

Lesbians in the Social Work Profession

Only two sources appear to have concentrated on lesbians as social workers. The first is from a British anthology entitled, Women, Oppression and Social Work: Issues in Anti-discriminatory Practice (1992) edited by Mary Langan and Lesley Day. In chapter eleven, "Lesbians, the State and Social Work Practice," Helen Cosis Brown criticizes the lack of lesbian inclusion in social work literature. She reports: "Recent feminist social work literature has had little, beyond generalities to say about lesbians" (p. 204). She refers to studies by Dale and Foster (1986), Hanmer and Statham (1988), and Dominelli and McLeod (1989). Supporting O’Neill’s conclusion, Brown points the finger at social work curriculum,

Social workers traditional pathologising of homosexuality still acts as a powerful influence on social work courses ... much social work training is directly homophobic (p. 210).

As a result, this creates a need which Brown expresses very eloquently,

Lesbian social workers have been concerned to develop a better social service response for lesbians, for both altruistic and pragmatic reasons. While lesbian clients are pathologized and discriminated against, so are
lesbian social workers. Lesbian social workers aren’t just social workers; they are also older lesbians, lesbian mothers, lesbians with disabilities, future lesbian foster-parents and lesbian co-parents, all of whom may have interactions with social services departments. Lesbian social workers have often been acutely aware of the inadequacies of the social work response to lesbian clients’ needs, and because of this they have been motivated towards change. (p.207-8)

The present study will explore these sentiments further, including whether lesbian social workers feel safe in coming out. As Brown warns,

To come out as a lesbian social worker, student or teacher, still carries risks....even when working in more progressive agencies, lesbians may have great anxieties about being known as a lesbian. Some of these anxieties may be due to the way lesbians internalize or identify with homophobia, but most will arise from rational fears of colleagues’, employers’ and clients’ responses....lesbians know that being ‘out’ in a progressive Labour-controlled local authority is different from being ‘out’ in a ‘radical right’ authority. (p.209)

Brown also mentions the double oppression of lesbian social workers of colour and lesbian mothers, who may need to make clear choices in relation to where and with whom they are safe to be ‘out’.

The second source, "Lesbians in Canada" (1990) edited by Sharon Stone contains a chapter entitled "Working Dynamics in the Social Services: the Relevance of Sexual Orientation to Social Service Work" by Janice Ristock (pp. 73-80). Ristock interviewed six lesbians volunteering at the Toronto Counselling Centre for Lesbians and Gays in 1987. These social service workers included a front line worker for the Children’s Aid Society, a relief worker at a feminist collective, a second-year social work student, a social worker at a traditional psychiatric institution, a community college instructor for a child care program, and a director for a youth counselling program. All volunteered with this agency in order to be visible and feel empowered as lesbians. Ristock expresses the frustration that many of us suffer,
As lesbians in the social services, we are often in the contradictory position of providing a needed service to marginalized people - many of whom are lesbian or gay and struggling with their sexual orientation - yet we feel we are unable to disclose our sexual orientation because of the potential discrimination we may encounter; because of our own internalized homophobia; and because of the powerful ideology of compulsory heterosexuality (pp. 73-4).

Five of the six women interviewed in Ristock's study were 'out' to some people at work. That is, they were selective about whom they disclosed their sexual orientation to. The following quotes speak to the apprehension of feeling protected yet constrained by this selective openness:

The only possible benefit at this point in time is that colleagues look at what I do rather than get hooked up on who I am... there are many difficulties... I encounter ignorance and prejudice on an almost daily basis (p. 75).

The selective process requires hypervigilence, at a cost:

I protect myself from homophobic students and administrators. But I don't feel as free as I would if I were totally out (p. 75).

I feel torn - sometimes my silence ends up supporting heterosexism (p. 76).

Ristock frames the political and ethical dilemma for workers:

We are often placed in the role of being social control agents in our social service work, while at the same time we are controlled by the heterosexist social service system. The women I interviewed feel the constraint in their social service role and acknowledge its limiting effect on their interaction with service recipients. In fact, they all feel that their discreetness regarding their sexual orientation is beneficial only from the agencies' perspective....These women indicated through their responses the complex and contradictory nature of being a social service provider. A homophobic social service system prevails regardless of the type of social service agency. We all need job security, so we are placed in a position of feeling compromised (p. 77).

In the course of promoting positive initiatives towards lesbians, it becomes clear that in the social services field, tension exists between the personal and public lives of
these women as well as between the personal and political. Only one woman in Ristock’s study identified herself as "out" to everyone. However she found that she was treated as the "token," i.e. expected to educate people concerning homophobia, compulsory heterosexuality and feminism; and she experienced pressure to conform to such expectations. Regardless of these women’s commitment to facilitating personal and political change, given the homophobic society they lived in, they were forced to gauge the risks involved in making the political statement of declaring themselves lesbians.

As Ristock summarizes,

Once again the contradictory nature of our work is evident. As lesbian feminists we believe in working towards social change and ending oppression based on class, gender, race, and sexual orientation. The reality of our work environments, however, makes our political convictions difficult to achieve. (p.76).

The implications are far-reaching: lesbian and gay social workers cannot be seen as role models, advocates or teachers with special knowledge and information. More evidence of discrimination would not be surprising given the research findings reviewed. More importantly, if discrimination is occurring, what impact does this have on lesbian social workers?

The present research appears to be the first time lesbian social workers, who have earned their B.S.W. (and possibly their M.S.W.) can speak their truth as a visible and viable group, not just social service workers (as in Ristock’s study), but lesbians who have experienced similar academic structure as students as well as in the larger social services structure as employees. Having outlined the literature on historical discrimination and lack of visibility and understanding of lesbian experience, Chapter
two discusses the methodology for data collection on lesbian social workers to further the understanding of this marginalized population.
CHAPTER TWO

Research Methodology

Focus of Inquiry

This qualitative study of lesbian social workers was designed to examine the ways in which homophobia impacts on lesbians within the social work profession and in the workplace.

Qualitative inquiry typically focuses on relatively small samples, selected purposely in order to provide information-rich cases for study in depth...whose study will illuminate the questions under study (Patton, 1990). I wanted to create a dialogue among lesbian social workers, particularly to relate experiences as visible lesbians in their work environment. This interest was selfishly motivated due to my own experiences of discrimination, the struggle for 'community': social worker by occupation, but lesbian to the core (not a preference, not an orientation). The research question was based on the underlying question,"Where are others like me ?" Applied qualitative research contributes knowledge, "that will help people understand the nature of the problem so that human beings can more effectively control their environment. Applied qualitative researchers are able to bring their personal insights and experiences into any recommendations that may emerge." (Patton, 1990; p.153-4).

Many feminist researchers propose a qualitative approach to research to derive new concepts that are a better reflection of women's lives as well as a commitment to the goal of social change. Dabs' (1983) term "passionate scholarship" reflects the intent
to conduct research to document, so as to change, the social conditions of women. As Gottlieb and Bombyk (1987) explain,

for the purposes of the research, that process can help women analyze their circumstances and plan for personal change. These revelations can also be included in the reports of the findings. However, the primary mission of such a research effort should be the knowledge it produces. (p.30)

However, as Calhoun (1995) points out,

Outside of literature whose specific topic is lesbianism, lesbians do not make an appearance in feminist writing except via an occasional linguistic bow in their direction executed through the words ‘lesbian,’ ‘sexual orientation,’ or ‘sexualities.’ Race and class do not similarly remain systematically in the ghostly closet of referring terms (p. 8).

Keenaghan (1994) reminds us that feminist theory has been criticised as ‘political’ rather than ‘value-free’ or ‘objective’ and is therefore outside the bounds of ‘science’. Given the lack of attention to the invisibility of lesbians and gay men within feminist research, Keenaghan recognizes the value of making gay men and lesbians visible to be not only political but for the sake of ‘truth’ to be a necessity.

The concept of institutionalized discrimination has been extensively explored as a vehicle of sexism and racism according to Keenaghan (1994), however it would seem now necessary to explore the impact of institutionalised discrimination against lesbians and gay men. Kitzinger claims that institutionalized discrimination effectively acts as a censor of work by lesbians and gay men:

many academics view research on homosexuality and lesbianism with a considerable degree of suspicion and hostility (sufficient that researchers are often warned that they are risking their academic careers by studying this topic). (Kitzinger, 1987, p.3 as cited in Keenaghan, 1994; p.85).

As Calhoun (1994) argues,
To the extent that feminist theory lacks a concept of heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals as members of different sexuality classes and thus of heterosexuality as a political structure separable from patriarchy, feminist theory must treat lesbian oppression as a special case of patriarchal oppression and remain blind to the irreducibly lesbian nature of lesbian lives. (p.559)

Celia Kitzinger (1987) argues that the shift from ‘pathological’ to gay affirmative models merely substitutes one depoliticized construction of the lesbian with another, while continuing to undermine systematically radical feminist theories of lesbianism. As Calhoun acknowledges,

...separating sexuality politics from gender politics is exactly what must happen if there is to be a specifically lesbian feminist theory rather than simply feminist theory applied to lesbians (1994, p.562).

The more recent and apparently ‘pro-lesbian’ research is constructed in liberal humanistic tones representing a new development in the oppression of lesbians. The liberal conviction that lesbianism poses no threat to society, that lesbians can be integrated into and contribute to the social order is, fundamentally a contradiction to radical feminist theory. Lesbian feminist theory did not spring up in a vacuum, it developed out of our experiences in coming out, from the reaction against us, and particularly from our efforts to understand and analyze that reaction. The essay by Adrienne Rich (1978), "Compulsory heterosexism and Lesbian existence," demonstrates that compulsory heterosexuality has been so fierce and inflicted so many great losses that we don’t know at this point if women are heterosexual or "choose" heterosexuality in order to survive. According to Bunch (1987), lesbian theory must have a practical value for us to understand and change the circumstances of our lives.

In working out which strategies will be most effective the interaction between developing theory and actively experimenting with it becomes most clear. For in all
aspects of theory development, theory and activism continually inform and alter each other. Calhoun (1994) discusses the fact "that to refuse to be heterosexual is simply to leap out of the frying pan of individual patriarchal control into the fire of institutionalized heterosexual control"(p.564).

Julia Penelope (1990) has said that as lesbians we occupy a dual position, "simultaneously oppressed by a society in which we are unwanted and marginal and envisioning for ourselves a culture defined by our values, with lesbian identity at its core" (The Lesbian Perspective, 1990; p.102 as cited in Wolfe & Penelope, 1993; p. 266). As Wolfe & Penelope (1993) explain,

As Lesbians, we seek to establish a self-determined identity - a sense of self - confirmed through connections with others and transmitted through common culture(s) - for Lesbians, one that affirms our material identity, grounded in our sexuality (p.9).

They go on to explain why this is so important,

Invisibility is part of the social construction of a Lesbian identity because so many of us, especially if we were born before 1970, developed our identities in an informational vacuum. To understand the Lesbian experience, one must somehow imagine what it would be like growing up into an identity that is unmentionable in any positive or helpful context. As the heterosexual agenda becomes clearer and clearer and its requirements and strictures become more and more insistently coercive, Lesbians have very few options, none of which are attractive. Of course, we have the option of remaining silent about what we are feeling, the option probably chosen most frequently. We keep our dismay and discomfort to ourselves. Worse, even our silence may only buy us time....This is "invisibility."

It is not a rhetorical fabrication. It is real. It is the silence imposed on each of our Selves, on each Lesbian who instinctively rejects the identity displayed, coerced, imposed by everyone and everything in her life. It is intended to destroy a Lesbian's sense of Self, and more often than not, succeeds in doing so. But some survive. Some of us have lived to tell our stories, to create Lesbian texts, to read Lesbian texts,.... All of these activities must be pluralized, multiplied, complicated, and pluralized
again because there is no single, narrow, one-sentence definition of "The Lesbian" (p.23).

The lesbian feminist theoretical framework speaks clearest of my own oppression and is therefore the most useful as an acknowledgement of the challenge to voice. As Patton (1990) explains, regarding orientational qualitative inquiry, "The researcher’s own perspective must also be made explicit....Begins with a theoretical or ideological perspective that determines what variables and concepts are most important and how the findings will be interpreted "(p.85).

Emancipatory Lesbian / Feminist Methodology

My identity as a lesbian social worker put me in a central experience that I wanted to explore with other lesbians. Phelan (1994) explains why she supports this form of methodology:

In practice, getting specific is a process of weaving threads. It is conceptually possible to separate out one thread and say "this is class" and find another that is labelled "gender" or "race" or "sexuality," but that separation alone will never do justice to the way that the whole fabric is lived. Getting specific therefore is more like story telling than like analysis, though both are required .... Of course, this kind of theorizing implicitly denies all of the tenets of modern social sciences. Instead of removing myself from the field of study, I am placing myself at the centre. Getting specific means turning social sciences on its head; it means working out from the centres of our lives to seeing the connections and contradictions in them. The failure of contemporary political theory, especially liberal theory, to speak to our lives, suggests that such a radical course is at least worth trying. I believe that the actual narrative of my life speaks more convincingly about mutthood, about class and race privilege and about the oppression of lesbians, than any scholarly treatise or argument (p. 32).

I hoped to provide an opportunity through emancipatory research what Lather (1991) described "to empower the oppressed to come to understand and change their
own oppressive realities” (p. 53). Given the oppressive forces aimed at lesbians in general, the use of a feminist and emancipatory research method would allow me and the participants to be free to provide information that empowered us all and furthered the understanding of what lesbian social workers experience in their daily lives.

Focus Group

Because this research investigates how lesbian social workers experience their work environment and because lesbians tend to be ‘invisible’ within the larger heterosexual structure, their visibility to each other is very validating. Therefore I chose to do a focus group in order to foster the awareness of shared commonality of experiences as well as exploring diversity of experiences. The focus group was intended to produce a semi-structured discussion regarding lesbian social workers and their experiences working with other social workers. As indicated in Stewart and Shamdasani (1990), “the most common purpose of a focus group is for an in-depth exploration of a topic about which little is known” (p.103).

The focus group was designed to allow group members to exchange information within a supportive atmosphere, with the intention of creating a safe place for lesbians to share their personal experiences. Disclosure of discrimination can be cathartic because such mistreatment is intended to keep lesbians disempowered and silent (marginalized). The group process thus creates an avenue where lesbians can share their experiences and through this experience, can (hopefully) create empowerment, a common ground where an anti-discriminatory response can occur, i.e. political action.
Purposeful Sampling

Lesbian social workers are not always easy to spot in the social services field. Their invisibility keeps them isolated. As a lesbian, I was able to use ‘word of mouth’ as a recruiting technique. A snowball sampling technique was necessary in order to reach them, defined as locating information rich key informants...the key begins by asking well-situated people (Patton, 1990).

In addition I advertised the request for participants (Appendix B) in two local gay/lesbian newspapers, Xtra West and Angles. I also posted an announcement on the Vancouver Lesbian Connection (a lesbian community centre) bulletin board. The newspaper advertisement reached a wide audience based on the response from a variety of people who had commented on it, however all of the focus group participants came from word of mouth starting with a phone call to an acquaintance who I knew had her M.S.W. She was instrumental in accessing the others that attended. I recruited self-defined lesbians. For the purposes of this research one’s self-definition was my criteria. In addition, the acquisition of a B.S.W. degree with employment experience as a social worker in the last ten years was required.

Focus Group Interviews

The structure of a focus group interview is with a small group of people on a specific topic. Groups are typically six to eight people who participate in the interview for one-half to two hours. The object is to get high-quality data in a social context where people can consider their own views in the context of the views of others (Patton, 1990). The focus group was composed of five women located in the lower mainland. Although there were three other potential participants, they were unable to
attend, two were out of town and one changed her mind for personal reasons. The participants were white, middle class women. They were all similar in age, close to fifty. Four members were parents, one a grandparent and four out of the five were in partnerships. All members of the group were employed in professional agencies in the health field which required a rich social work experience and most were in mid to senior management positions, requiring a master’s degree. As committed feminists, they had a strong sense of professional and personal ethics.

Locale

The focus group was held on the evening of March 22,1995 at Britannia Community Centre (East Vancouver) in a quiet classroom. The focus group lasted one and a half hours with two participants leaving twenty minutes early due to parental responsibilities. The participants were all punctual. They all knew each other and two of the participants knew me from the lesbian community. I felt that Patton was right, "Focus groups tend to be highly enjoyable to participants" (p.336). Other advantages are the natural environment. "Inhibitions often are relaxed in group situations, and the more natural environment prompts increased candour by respondents." (Kroeger, 1988, p.45). The environment was intimate as we crowded around a table. The ability to express their feelings was not a threatening task for these women - they enjoyed having the opportunity to speak of their experiences and to have their experiences heard for the first time. Before introductions I handed out consent forms, (Appendix C) and set up the tape recorder for transcription purposes. I introduced myself as a lesbian social worker. The credibility and validity of this study depended on this. I explained a bit of my background including that I came out as a lesbian in 1979. My credibility as
a researcher is strengthened by my involvement over the years in lesbian politics (in several provinces and cities in Canada) since that time as well as my participation in lesbian conferences and political forums. My political/professional identity as a radical feminist lesbian provides me with the experience to discuss issues of discrimination within the lesbian community. My employment experience as a counsellor, specifically with women, in the transition house movement as well as with two sexual assault centres, has allowed me to gather the skills to conduct a focus group of this nature. In addition, my past research endeavours and acceptance at U.B.C. to do lesbian research, testing and developing questions in seminars, discussions with other lesbians as well as consultation with my instructor Gail Zuk as well as my faculty advisor assisted my credibility as a researcher.

Validity

Validity is the degree to which the procedure really measures what it proposes to measure.

Focus group discussions have high face validity ... results are not presented in complicated statistical charts but rather in lay terminology embellished with quotations from group participants" (Kroeger, 1988, p. 45).

The focus group members were pre-selected, came together on a specific topic, involving primarily open ended questions in a permissive environment conducive to sharing, listening, and responding. The exploration of this issue, the process of discussion, due in large part to the believability of comments from these women confirm its validity. As explained further,

The nub of qualitative research - and its claim to validity - lies in the intense involvement between researcher and subject. Because the moderator can challenge and probe for the most truthful responses,
supporters claim, qualitative research can yield a more in-depth analysis than that produced by formal quantitative methods. (Mariampolski, 1984, p.21; as cited in Kroeger, 1988; p.40).

Thus validity depended on "people open[ing] up in [the] focus groups and shar[ing] insight that may not be available from individual interviews, questionnaires, or other data sources" (Kroeger, 1988, p. 42).

**Soundness**

The participants had two concerns before we started the discussion, first confidentiality, and second, representation (soundness). Regarding the protection of confidentiality, I assured the participants that only non-identifying data would be used and they agreed to this on the condition that the edited transcript would be reviewed by one participant to ensure this, (which I did, receiving approval).

Secondly, the participants felt that they were not an accurate reflection of lesbian social workers because they all defined their work environments as ‘gay-positive’. I encouraged them to trust that whatever was discussed was important. The research was about their experiences; and these are unique to their particular experience as lesbians and as social workers. Regarding soundness, because I knew two of the participants and the participants knew each other, there was a level of comfort and intimacy in talking about their experiences, telling stories, expressing interest in other points of view as well as commenting on particular personnel whom they felt were homophobic.

The focus group centered around one open-ended, non-directive question (Stewart et al., 1990, p.89): "What does it mean to be a lesbian social worker?" The participants set the agenda and conducted "the direction of the response" (Stewart et
al., 1990, p.60). With a request to be more specific as a prompt, the next question focused around treatment by co-workers, "What is it really like with other social workers - in school, in the workplace, in other groups you’ve come in contact with, other agencies - what have your experiences been?" The third question I asked was regarding discriminatory Ministry of Social Services policies regarding foster parenting and adoption. I asked the group, "is it the social workers doing the policing, or are we speaking about the larger picture? Are we as social workers responsible for changing that?"

**Description of Analysis**

The use of grounded theory and constant comparative analysis was used to explore the treatment of lesbian social workers by their workplace. Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) is useful on the topic that is largely anecdotal. Grounded theory assumes data collection and analysis are tightly interwoven; preliminary analysis directs the amount and type of further sampling. Consistent with Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) process of "discovering" theory, underlying uniformities were discovered and formulated theoretical ideas from a set of concepts. The word and line content analysis was made possible by coding the transcript of the taped discussion. In using a qualitative method, I was able to use "words and observations to express reality ... with in-depth information into fewer cases" (Kroeger, 1988, pp. 37-38).

In looking for themes, I open-coded phrases, words, or concepts. Each code was then grouped with similar codes under a property or more general coding. These themes that emerged from the content analysis were grouped together to form a better
Inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis. First the analyst can use categories developed and articulated by the people studied to organize presentation of particular themes. Second, the analyst may also become aware of categories or patterns for which the people studied did not have labels or terms, and the analyst develops terms to describe these inductively generated categories." (Patton, 1990; p.390).

Using colour coding to keep the five members separated on the transcription was my way of identifying the speaker. I cut and pasted the discussion under specific headings, example Code of Ethics, Homophobia, Censorship. These headings became categories that seemed to reflect a set of circumstances or experiences that were discussed. These in turn informed more generalized themes. These themes are:

**Theme one: Meaning of Lesbian Social Worker: Past and Present**

**Theme two: Homophobia At Work**

a) predicting risk of being ‘out’ at work

b) awareness of homophobic stereotypes

c) self-censorship

d) internalized homophobia

**Theme three: Loss**

a) Lesbian Social Worker as (M)other

b) Lesbian/Feminist Politic

c) Role as a social change agent
Some examples of focus group dialogue will be discussed in the next chapter to support the themes and subthemes.
CHAPTER THREE

Findings and Discussion

I discuss the themes that the content analysis revealed and draw on the conclusions from previous studies in the literature review in order to support the findings. The intention of exploring the findings is to support the theory that lesbian social workers are experiencing discriminatory treatment by their co-workers, other social workers.

Theme One: The meaning of Lesbian Social Worker - Past and present:

This theme developed out of an ability to reflect on changes in attitude over a period of twenty years due to the age of the participants. I think it is important to keep in mind the participants’ sense of present ‘gay-positive’ work environments.

Angela: There are I guess odd issues that come up when you work in a very friendly office and an office that has a lot of gay people the way we do, and you don’t recognize ah difficulties

Andrea: [We are a ] good representation of people who... [are] twenty years into their practice, who are in the higher end of it; and I think it is different when you are starting at the bottom of the rung and you’re starting as a line worker and your employer is not gay nor gay friendly. Maybe it would be different. I think it is different than it was twenty years ago.

Angela: When I started at the office that I’m working in still, almost thirteen years ago, and I started as a line worker and at the time, my direct supervisor was not I don’t think we would say gay friendly....She objected to people just living together ....so I wasn’t out to her....I wasn’t going to volunteer the information to people who could make decisions about my career and life....And the person she reported to... nor was she gay friendly. In fact, I remember on one occasion she talked about some facility service providers who were running an all male facility and wasn’t the service provider gay and did that seem right to me?....I just knew that none of this was acceptable to her and so I wasn’t out to her. I was out to ...half the people in my office but there were people I knew wouldn’t be able to understand or wouldn’t be very accepting of it....so
it’s easier for me in the office where I am now but I do recognize all the
time that there are things that I don’t say, I mean there are things that I
do say; I do have a partner but there are things that I don’t say that I only
say to [other lesbian co-workers]. We have our sort of sub-conversations
and they are much more open. It is supportive in the office to be able to
have a group of people to be able to talk to even though I think that the
majority of the office knows that I’m a lesbian.

Martina: The places I have worked, since I graduated for the second and
third times I haven’t been out in any of them officially although I would
feel the most comfortable being out in the one that I work for now. I
mean... it wouldn’t really bother me; part of the reason that I haven’t
come out is that I haven’t got a partner and I don’t - it just doesn’t come
up very much.

Nancy: Well I just came out period in 1986. "Angela" was the one that I
went to have the chat with.
Angela: The facilitator
Nancy: Yes. They got me to go to the Gazebo...we went to the Lotus first
and then the Gazebo and the Outdoors Club .... but as far as work goes,
I’ve worked at this place now for six years and if nobody has figured it
out it’s because they’re dumb but its not a - you know we don’t sit
around and talk about lesbians or anything like that but I’d always talk
about my partner, I use her name all the time...it’s a non-issue. Now if I
was aggressive with it, it might be an issue, but, you know and I’m
senior management. It’s really a non-issue. It certainly does help though
having other people in the office.

Theme two: Homophobia at work

Concerns are divided into four subthemes, a) predicting risk of being ‘out’ at
work, b) awareness of stereotypes, and c) self censorship and d) internalized
homophobia.

a) Predicting risk of being ‘out’ at work:

Margaret expressed the risk of being ‘out’ at work:

Well because we know that homophobia is kind of the standard mind set
of you know of a large number of people in society we know that we
have to step carefully if we don’t want to upset them. If we do want to
upset them and we’re willing to take that kind of a risk but there is
definitely a risk involved.
I think that to be more open and interactive and all would be probably more useful in those circumstances. But you know every time a homosexual does that there is much more at risk especially when there’s not the auspices of [gay senior management] any longer, but much more at risk for any fallout at all; whereas the straight secretaries will always have jobs.

It is rather a lucky sort of a thing but I think it does make a difference and as you say we’re overrepresented. I mean, I guess for the ten per cent we definitely are but I know that a third in the office things might become a little uncomfortable. The other people they feel a little bit like we’ve taken over. At this point it doesn’t feel like that. I know if we had another lesbian or gay man on staff that we’d become - it would start to become an issue.... That people don’t expect to have to work with a minority... when they become the majority.....when they figure themselves to be the majority and when that happens and they are willing to put up with some tokens, they’re willing to put up with a certain percentage but I think when the percentage of minority takes over - wow- you’re in for something.

b) Awareness of homophobic stereotypes:

As Nancy reminds us,

Part of the fabric of who we are as people is that we also learn all the stereotypes and we learn how malicious they are.

Angela explains:

We still have those [stereotypes] in the back of our mind. We’re saying where you work gives us some freedom or it doesn’t give us any freedom. To be accepted in a way it just comes with the territory.

c) Self Censorship:

Margaret, who had not experienced homophobic reactions explained why:

I’m cautious enough and I sum up people in a particular way and if already my assessment is that they are narrow in their perspective in other areas than I’m going to be very careful and I’m not going to come out in that way unless I have very good reason for doing so. So to say I didn’t have that challenge, maybe it’s only because I knew how to avoid it.

Angela:

We had a coffee break, and there were five or six of us. Three of us were dykes, and the other two were straight.... When I had to tell everyone the
story I suddenly realized that I was - it felt like I was taking my clothes off in this restaurant or something, I thought, wait a minute, I ‘m telling this story - it’s a very inside story - not everybody is going to go ha ha! that’s hilarious, and I realized that no, they wouldn’t just get it. And - it wouldn’t crack them up. They would think of it as a real problem or something. Well, and they did....uncertain how to react.... should she laugh or should she ....In fact there was a very funny kind of dynamic going on. I realized I should have just told it to [just lesbians on staff]....I was kind of tricked: lulled into this feeling that it was perfectly all right. These people I’ve known for ages but it wasn’t perfectly all right....But that’s the kind of thing that happens when you feel like you are in an accepted place.

And so its easier for me in the office where I am now but I recognize all the time that there are things that I don’t say, I mean, there are things that I do say: I do have a partner, so I talk a lot about my partner, but there are things I don’t say that I only say to [other lesbians] We have our sort of sub-conversations and they are much more open - it is supportive in the office to be able to have a group of people to be able to talk to even though I think that the majority of the office knows that I am a lesbian.

Margaret describes her experience,

Or it’s the non-reaction. I mean obviously I wouldn’t like the negative reaction but I’ve been in situations in the office where we are kinda sharing stories and I say something that you know has to do with my life, my partner, my family and no one would say "oh my God, how terrible" but there’s not any follow-up. There’s not any "And then what?" or any of the things that one would normally say - interest- or even I would be quite open to someone saying, "Well what’s it like? You know you have this little girl and you’re a lesbian." I’d like someone to ask me. They don’t....So sometimes I find myself nattering on because I think that’s the thing to do even though the questions aren’t being asked. I don’t do it so much in a group but I’ll do it one to one with a worker. But you know there’s usually no response. I’d like to say, "oh this is because everyone is so totally accepting." I just - I don’t think that’s the case. I really don’t because I hear what is said in other areas and it just wouldn’t fit that they’re so relaxed about all of this. I think there’s an acceptance on a fairly superficial level and that’s kind of about it. And as long as it doesn’t have an impact or it doesn’t challenge their lifestyle and I think that’s - sorry - just the censorship comes in at that level.

Andrea: I think because earlier - [the] Director of personnel [was out] which does sort of set the tone. He was openly openly gay not um I was going to say militant but really was making a point of uh making sure that gays and lesbians were not discriminated against in the agency. I’m
not sure he accomplished it....Now he’s left so I think some of that is dwindling. Some of it I think is unfortunate that it’s dwindling cause I think we’re becoming more like other agencies and have more censorship....I would often be in the lunch room with him and others. I saw something that I felt more uncomfortable with which was the opposite. People in the lunch room - and there were fifty people working in this particular setting. So at any given time there might be twenty people in the lunch room - perhaps only two or three that are gay; um there was an incredible discomfort and a censorship that they really didn’t - weren’t free to speak their mind or they censored the stories that they were going to tell that weren’t necessarily prejudiced but that they thought might make a gay person more uncomfortable...and they would be more cautious until the gay people left the room. And then you know they would be a little bit more free....

d) internalized homophobia:

Andrea: I felt a little bit concerned about the younger heterosexual secretaries who were like - choking - like what do I say here because I don’t really know - and they were uncomfortable because they had never been in settings before that they’d known they were sitting beside a gay person and they had very few people to say that to. They didn’t feel comfortable saying ‘oh my God, like he’s gay, she’s a lesbian, ‘he’s gay’ - and these are all their superiors, like- ‘I don’t know what to do with these people’, cause a lot of them have never felt that they had been exposed.

Angela: I mean that assumes that homosexual people are going to be all over you when you say anything. Instead of it you know that’s heterosexuals trying to protect themselves. And because of the power issue. I think that to be more open and interactive and all that would probably be more useful in those circumstances. But you know every time a homosexual does that there is much more at risk especially when there’s not the auspices of [gay senior management previously mentioned]

Margaret: I think we are kind’ve a very polite group. I mean I’m really very conscious of that but this particular group of us it’s true we talk about things - partnerships being OK and it was interesting [Martina] when you said you’re single and so it doesn’t come up and I think that that is different and it all sounds very nice - my partner and I are going to do this or that - it all sounds extremely - much more respectable.... I think there are other issues...
Nancy: that you just declare yourself a lesbian without having a partner so what’s your reason for being a lesbian?....Why would you be? Martina: Yeah why would you take on that label?

Theme Three: Loss

a) Lesbian Social Worker as (M)other

Margaret makes the conclusion that social workers believe in the stereotypes regarding lesbian parenting and therefore do not question their homophobic intent,

For co-workers like other social workers I think for you to be gay I think its okay. I think if you have children I think that that’s another issue - I don’t know how acceptable it is among social workers who have an open mind to know another social worker with a child and I think more so if you then want to choose to take on someone else’s child.

Martina described a social worker she knew who worked for the Ministry of Social Services:

But she identifies herself as a social worker and has very strong feelings about not presenting herself as a lesbian. In particular because she has a child and feels it shouldn’t be part of her identity... maybe there’s something - the nature of the beast being in child apprehension. I think it’s a real question - the clientele is different and you have to be squeaky clean if you’re going to apprehend somebody else’s children for various reasons.

b) Lesbian/Feminist Politic:

Angela was able to talk about the conflict she had as a ‘conscious’ lesbian social worker,

Because there are principles I hold as a lesbian feminist that aren’t born out in the workplace - and that’s not even a homophobic workplace, but just in the workplace in general.

For Angela, such compromises resulted in betraying herself politically. She expressed it this way,

lending my energies to the professional scene in some ways compromised my lesbian feminism more than I wanted to admit.
Angela described the multiple levels of compromises,

That I work for an agency, that there is an authority that agency holds, that it wrecks some peoples lives, I mean presumably there’s some good that’s being done. But, anyway, all those compromise me, need to say nothing of how it is to be in a heterosexual place where you have to self-censor. Beyond all of that I participate in the greater world which I don’t always approve of.

Angela described how this feels as a person in middle management,

And I participate you know sometimes with my head down and blinders on but I do participate so that erodes my sense of self, my image of myself, who I am essentially inside that gets eroded on a daily, weekly, monthly basis depending on what’s happening and what decisions I have to make.

As Margaret explained "there are some places you can work that are...easier on your conscience."

c) Role as a Social Change Agent:

The ability to feel pro-active in the field towards social improvement is an important facet of being a social worker in theory and ideally in practice.

Unfortunately these women did not express much hope of social change. A possible reason for this was the commitment as feminists towards social change and the experiences within social work education as well as being a part of the generation that fostered a commitment towards social change in the 1960’s. Several participants had been involved politically in lesbian and gay rights work in the 1970’s. At the management level, these participants most likely are in positions that defy the grassroots beginnings of many services committed to social change. Given that lesbian feminist activities are ongoing, there seemed to be some disillusionment regarding social change possibilities within their employment.
As Margaret explained, "I learned early that I wasn’t going to make sweeping social changes from my vantage point as a social worker. I could probably make bigger social changes as a lesbian and a feminist."

Nancy expressed how this feels, "Yeah you know I still have to watch what I say, when I say it; what I wear, when I wear it. It’s comfortable but it’s not the same as being out out."

The voices of these women speak to the various ways that self value and respect as lesbians have been compromised and the ways in which heterosexism infiltrates the professional appearance of lesbians in social work practice. I will discuss these at length with some suggestions for improvement.

Theme one arose out of the ability to reflect upon the first question, "What does it mean to be a lesbian social worker?" The participants, given their age, were able to discuss changes over a passage of time. They felt that Society had come a long way in their tolerance of gays and lesbians. The freedom to be an out lesbian compared to twenty-five years ago was seen as possible and did not appear to carry the same degree of stigma as that which had been held historically. However, the participants expressed concerns about the profession of social work and what it means to be a social worker. One participant expressed her disappointment around the lack of social courtesy given to social workers by other professionals. She had also expressed concerns about the historical lack of education standards within the Ministry of Social Services. The punitive nature of social work was also mentioned as a concern. These participants felt that pride in one’s profession was important. There was pride in terms of the positions these women held and their process of getting there. The lack of integrity of other
social workers, particularly some in senior management, had undermined this experience. There was embarrassment that certain social workers "didn't have a social work ethic." While improvements in provincial and federal legislation and policy changes within social work had occurred, as discussed earlier, the personal experiences of homophobic comments from individuals in management had led the participants to be closeted or cautious with whom they came out to. As well, participants had remained closeted due to the mandate of the organization. Even though the participants felt strongly that their present work environments reflected a gay-positive outlook among staff, they all explored ways in which homophobia still permeated their work environment in subtle and covert ways. Due to the influence of an 'out' gay person in management who had previously been skipped over for a promotion, there was an expectation from him that a 'gay positive' standard be maintained. Therefore overt expressions of homophobia were less apparent. However there was acknowledgement that there continued to be homophobic reactions from straight co-workers when the level of tolerance had been compromised. Without gay representation and leadership at the management level, there appeared to be an increase in homophobic tension, suggesting that this level of tolerance was artificially maintained. So although there appeared to be a realm of safety in being out in their present positions, there continued to be a selective screening process based on fear of backlash. This supports Levine and Leonard's conclusions around 'coping mechanisms'; i.e. where 77 per cent of their subjects were partially or totally closeted on the job and 23 per cent informed most or all work associates. In the present study, participants voiced that they were clearly most comfortable being out to others in their
present workplace. However there were still reservations about being out to all fellow employees, reflecting the accuracy of Levine and Leonard's 77 per cent (4/5) semi-closeted status. The findings support Levine and Leonard's conclusion that what counts in terms of actual and anticipated discrimination was the work setting. This also reflects the Samis (1995) study which indicated 3/4 of gays and lesbians hide their sexual orientation from co-workers. No participants had personally been fired from a job, or passed over for a promotion. However the work setting appeared to continue to inform these participants in their comfort level regarding being out, as indicated in the studies mentioned.

Several comments regarding past employment discrimination informed their present comfort level. One participant was encouraged to apply for a much desired position in a catholic organization by an ex-coworker who in so many words indicated that in order to be eligible for the position, an investigation into her personal 'lifestyle' would entail that she model friendship with her lover of ten years. In refusing to comply with this condition, the person on the hiring committee became furious, indignant and discussed the situation in detail with another mutual ex-coworker. Martina knew that she would never have been hired or been able to keep a job in a catholic agency where she had been employed if she was found out. She felt that the myths regarding abuse of children was the most prominent reason for remaining in the closet. Even in the present, this participant, who worked with seniors, was reluctant to come out due to myths she thought they might believe that would cause them to be afraid to have her come into their home. For these women, the 'hetero-institutions' they worked for reflected the professional/heterosexual assumptions. Fellow workers
were free to openly express their dis-ease when family values were challenged by the "political" presence of what it means to be a lesbian. Thus, these lesbian social workers were struggling with what is acceptable in the slow-changing 'heterosexual panorama'. Anecdotal evidence of others' experiences in social work also reflect this struggle, supporting the fact that not much had changed since Lyon and Martin.

Theme two developed out of a lack of safety in a homophobic world as it is expressed in the workplace. The level of assumed safety created the following subthemes.

a) Predicting risk of being 'out' at work: Participants expressed the hypervigilence that is required in order to 'fit in' with co-workers in the heterosexual workplace. The level of comfort about being 'out' as lesbians in the workplace is based on the impact of internalized homophobia as well as living and working in a homophobic society. There were definite stages in the coming out process taken in order to survive in the work environment. Having to make a living was a priority over being an out lesbian in the workplace, again reflecting Lyons and Martin. The 'gay positive' work environment that the participants described seemed to be directly influenced by a gay male standard, which did not necessarily equal a lesbian friendly reaction. This is because lesbians challenge compulsory heterosexuality in a significantly different way than gay men. Privilege is based on the white male standard. In other words, lesbians may receive different reactions from co-workers and support staff than gay men do, particularly if the gay men are in positions of power. I think lesbians in positions of power within social work threaten the status quo to a greater degree than gay men do. This may have informed the 'silent treatment' as a reaction from other workers. Ristock
(1990) gave three reasons for not declaring oneself lesbian. These were because of the potential discrimination we may encounter, because of our own internalized homophobia, and because of the powerful ideology of compulsory heterosexuality. I would like to suggest a fourth condition: lesbians are not seen as deserving of leadership and success and are not to be acknowledged when they are in such positions of power.

Participants were aware of the stress caused by living up to heterosexist standards in their places of work at a cost to maintaining their lesbian identity. The solution for these participants was in finding work environments that appeared most honouring of their personal and political identity. The awareness that their co-workers were only minimally interested in their lives as lesbians was distressing to these women. Negative reactions or silence from so called progressive co-workers were experienced by all the participants. For example, the need to censor personal stories when fellow workers showed their discomfort was necessary. Heterosexual story telling also became strained when there were gays and lesbians present. The concern that neither group felt they could authentically speak of their experiences in this ‘gay positive’ work environment is a clear measure of the power of compulsory heterosexuality. Everyone is affected by these standards, even though the mechanisms that keep it in place are not obvious or visible until challenged by a significant gay and lesbian presence. The unknown risk however in speaking about being a lesbian remained constant for these women because of potential backlash that could result. Co-worker reaction was nebulous, not based on clear cut homophobic reaction, but more subtle and therefore in some ways more dangerous. To be more ‘out’ therefore
carried risks for these women, but they were not sure what that would entail. The fear surrounding anticipated reaction is the controlling factor. This supports the previous research discussed, where lesbians were closeted or careful in how and with whom they were out in order to protect themselves from anticipated homophobic reaction. Even co-workers that claimed acceptance could influence the 'outness' of discussion because of their negative reaction. This supports the experiences of Miller (1990) who felt that she was holding something back, and that her co-workers "hold me at a little distance personally." What these women 'hold back' is their authentic selves. The 'holding back' feeling that is created from this experience compounds the issues around self value as a worker. As Miller explained, "Certainly I am competent and dedicated in my work. But I do it with the feeling of being an outsider." This is how homophobia works: it undervalues or dismisses the competency and contribution of gays and lesbians in the workplace. The feeling of being dismissed by those in positions of heterosexual privilege has been described in this excerpt by the poet Joan Annsfire (1995):

I want to scream
to shove my pushy, damn-lesbian's face
into the blank, anonymous abyss
of indifference far worse than hatred;
the uncanny ability to
turn the other cheek, avert the gaze;
quiet complicity in the eye of
someone else's hurricane.
-"At Work"

b) awareness of homophobic stereotypes: Due to participants knowledge of the destruction of stereotypes and myths that may be present in the thinking of others in their work environment, these participants attempted to negotiate their impact through
a variety of means, including staying closeted. They were hopeful that their positions could provide positive lesbian role models in order to counteract negative stereotypes, if in fact they were out. These women felt quite alone in their capacity to be a successful "lesbian" social worker. As a result, these lesbian social workers valued their fellow gay and lesbian co-workers.

Each woman in her own way tried to educate those they worked with. This education was an attempt to dispel the power of these myths and stereotypes. There was also an admission on their part that this attempt had a minimal impact in the face of established beliefs and attitudes ingrained within homophobic tradition. Margaret referred to education as 'nattering on' about her concerns as a lesbian because she felt that was necessary in the face of silence. Because of a lack of response, these women felt they were not taken seriously. To remain 'token', these women felt misinterpreted, similar to the individuals in Ristock's study. Despite referring to their female partners, it appeared that other workers did not have to change their homophobic thinking, nor did they want to change. For example, in trying to relay an 'inside' story about being lesbian with co-workers present, Angela described it as "feeling like I took my clothes off." This metaphor can be interpreted in a number of ways, but speaks loudly of the comfort of the 'clothes' closet that is available as an alternative to feeling naked under the glare of the heterosexual gaze.

c) self-censorship: Self-censorship is a measure of and protection from the perceived potential hostility that threatens to occur with lesbian visibility. As a result, lesbian social workers valued their fellow gay and lesbian co-workers and found it extremely difficult to judge at times what was "acceptable" lesbian behaviour within the
(heterosexual) work environment. How safe, in other words, is a "gay-positive" work environment? Gay-positive work environments challenge homophobia and in this study, despite the attempts of a strong visible gay man in management, and several lesbians on the staff, interest from others in their work environment was perceived as "we don't want to talk about your identity as a lesbian". This perception appeared to be more heightened (often experienced through silence) when these lesbians discussed their relationships as mothers or as foster / adoptive parents. This tension that their visibility elicited created an inhospitable climate for raising relevant issues. There was a double standard associated with conversation around private lives. The non-reaction towards lesbian mothers though was particularly demonstrative of the level of discomfort towards these women. Those who had had the opportunity to work for Catholic-funded agencies felt that it would be impossible to be out due to the openly homophobic employment policy and process of investigation they required. The group members also felt that being employed by (at that time known as) the Ministry of Social Services where they felt most lesbian social workers were employed would be "soul-destroying." Their conscious choice to work outside the Ministry was because of the anticipated homophobia they felt would occur. They gave several examples of women they knew who remained closeted for this reason as social workers for the Ministry of Social Services.

Brown (1992) referred to this,

It is common for workers to be afraid that parents may damage them after children have been removed. Lesbian social workers' fears are often focused on the client misusing information about their sexual orientation and this may become a factor in whether she chooses to be 'out' at work (p. 216).
The high cost of invisibility for some lesbian social workers appears to be the price one pays for a secure position within the Ministry of Children and Families. The concern of possible retaliation from clients is an extension of the anticipated mistreatment directed at them as lesbians from co-workers.

d) *internalized homophobia:* This sub-theme articulates the pressure on individuals to fit within a standard of heterosexual behavior on a systems level. Although most of the participants felt comfortable in their work environment, their comfort level and security were potentially threatened by the imbalance their representation created. This imbalance creates a homophobic reaction, as heterosexual co-workers felt displaced from their position of majority privilege. It would appear that the privilege enjoyed by the heterosexual majority is threatened by any visibility. The fact that gays and lesbians never were a majority speaks to the inherent homophobic reaction to any visible presence in the workplace. Interestingly, Andrea felt compassionate towards heterosexuals whose discomfort was obvious in her workplace as most young secretaries for example, had never been ‘exposed’ to gays or lesbians. This is an example of internalized homophobia: to be more concerned about the discomfort our visibility causes for others regardless of the discomfort our invisibility creates for us.

The ‘gay-positive’ workplace required the indoctrination of new heterosexual employees. A heterosexual secretary took it upon herself to indoctrinate new secretaries in how to proceed in the midst of lesbians and gay employees. Although meant with the best of intentions, explaining how to be around gay and lesbian people without offending them reinforces lesbians and gays as ‘other’. Such indoctrination caused a self-censoring of heterosexual expression as well. This reaction appeared to
provide a closing of heterosexist ranks which reinforced the homophobic fear of reprisal if heterosexual bias was expressed. This form of censorship created tension in the workplace rather than allowing for open discussion. Although there was acknowledgment that this is what homophobia is and how it works to maintain the balance of heterosexual privilege, these social workers were unsure of what the repercussions would be if this tension increased. This is a powerful tool of homophobia, as the unknown consequences keep people in line, invisible, maintaining the status quo, and for Andrea, feeling apologetic.

In making an ‘acceptable appearance’, acceptable to our oppressor, dress codes were established at some work sites. Maintaining a professional gender-coated appearance acceptable to the heterosexual norm was considered to be one of the working conditions, another form of self-censorship. The imposition of maintaining a ‘female / feminine’ appearance is one of the conditions laid on the lesbian body by the profession as well as by society.

Discriminatory treatment participants had personally received at the hands of Ministry social workers was an example of discrimination based on policies and government standards. Being on the receiving end of such discrimination put their ability to be out in their positions even more tenuous.

In the third theme a culmination of forces reflect a sense of loss, as social worker and as lesbian.

a) Lesbian Social worker as (M)other: The ability to balance one’s life with one’s occupation as a social worker requires compromise and loss. These compromises often involve how one appears - the subtle markings of (heterosexual) acceptable carriage,
rapport and professional decorum that are rewarded with heterosexual privilege. Thus to ‘pass’ or not requires negotiating the margins of what a social worker should appear to be. Of all the myths surrounding being lesbian or gay, perhaps none are as harmful as those that surround the relationships lesbians and gay men have with children (Herek, 1991). Because social work as a profession is particularly concerned about the needs of children, the discrimination experienced by lesbian social workers was most apparent when it involves children. It appears that stereotypes of lesbians as a threat to children continue to exist within social work belief systems, as in society at large. At the time of the focus group it was still illegal for lesbian or gay couples to adopt or foster children. Only single lesbian or gay men could adopt or foster. Because lesbians represent a challenge to the heterosexist right to have (control over) children, issues around motherhood are even more exacerbated by those wishing to foster or adopt children or work with children. It appears that social workers were following rather than questioning policy and practices that discriminate against lesbian and gay men as parents. This exposes the compilation of forces at work to prevent challenging such policies until recently. They are not free to be ‘lesbian’ and be ‘social worker’ because the profession does not value or accept anything other than a heterosexual model of professional decorum. Depending on the work location and mandate, this compromise may involve staying completely closeted. Discussion of one’s partner with co-workers was seen as tolerated as long as it appeared to imitate heterosexual co-workers activities with their partners/families. According to Martina, co-workers in her workplace had rallied around a gay or lesbian co-worker who was dealing with an ailing partner. For Martina, the fact that she didn’t have a partner was reason enough
not to be out at work. Because they take their profession and their politic seriously, such compromises are a loss both as lesbians and also as lesbian social workers.

Nancy expresses the loss when we maintain (their) invisibility: "I don’t get to be the kind of lesbian I want to be all the time. It would make a difference because I think we’re good social workers by and large and I think we do really good jobs." In addition, Margaret felt that the profession has changed: "I think we came into this business initially to make things better for other people but I think its not like that now... very often social workers are the enforcers of the prevailing political thought."

b) *Lesbian Feminist Politic*: The participants felt that the desired work environment was ideally feminist, however, there was a general feeling of disillusionment in finding such a work environment. These women chose to shelve their personal politic in order to compete in the labour market. At some point, there was a realization that their lesbian politics would have to be sacrificed in order to be ‘acceptable’ social workers. These include decision making on issues that fit within a hierarchical model well established within patriarchal laws and order. The impact of attempting to balance two worlds potentially can create an ‘identity crisis’: how to maintain one’s professional identity and one’s personal value system as a lesbian feminist brings me to the question, can we practice what they preach? As one participant cried out, "Am I proud of what I’ve done?" Our participation and location in the hierarchical patriarchal structure means that we compromise our personal ethics, politics and freedom of speech in order to make a (heterosexual) living. For example, Martina felt that, "I don’t think I look like a dyke and so you know I feel like I can kind’ve slip by and nobody would notice that much and since I don’t have a partner."
c) Role as Social Change Agent: Although these lesbian social workers were open about their disillusionment with the political process of social change, their experiences are important for reminding us of the coercive nature of institutions such as social work to return to a heterosexual agenda. Homophobic policy and practice reflects an acceptance of heterosexual values and belief systems. The impact of working in a field that professes (feminist) ethical principles honouring social change when in reality social workers entail a role as ‘enforcer,’ results in mixed emotions. The participants felt a sense of betrayed idealism in their perception of what was possible as lesbians in social work as well as concern of becoming one of them - an enforcer instead of a social change agent. Margaret expressed this disillusionment: "we would all have believed that we could make some sweeping social changes - not even changes for individuals or improving individuals or even family situations but changes on a social level."

As Brown (1992) reminds us,

In the course of promoting positive changes for lesbians, it became clear that to challenge heterosexism in social services departments and in social work practice meant challenging a substantial part of social work theory. It became apparent that it is not enough to move from oppression to acceptance; to establish non-discriminatory services for lesbians it is necessary to create a climate of equality for lesbians, which gives them the confidence to raise relevant issues within their workplace. The scope for such developments depends on the political will of councillors and social service committees, as well as the broader pressures of national politics (p. 208).

These social workers felt they could use their membership with the B.C.A.S.W. to fall back on if necessary in cases of discrimination. However, this would not protect registered members from non-members of the association. Although the Code of Ethics provides some security, there is evidence that lesbian social workers experience
homophobia in their workplace in a variety of subtle ways, particularly for lesbian mothers. The rules are not clear on what one needs to say or do to illicit a homophobic response. They were aware that heterosexuals have not disarmed themselves of ammunition (stereotypes) to be used against them. Depending on the political climate, coming out is a dangerous but courageous act. It may just be by chance that the work environment is accepting. As a result there was quite a lot of dialogue and ambiguity about whether they were out or not at work indicating an alarming lack of social change towards lesbians in social work and in general.

Sadly, the lack of social acceptance from co-workers created doubts about legitimacy and value (self-esteem), indeed excellence in the profession because they are lesbian. There was a strong desire to be truly represented; to be seen and to see others in order to challenge the heterosexist assumption that a) lesbians and gay men are not social workers and b) lesbians and gay men are not legitimate role models in middle and senior managerial positions in social work.

In addition to the understanding of what it means to be legitimate as a social worker, is the understanding of what it means to be legitimate period. To be in a couple was responded to as being more acceptable than being single, however under the surface of silence may dwell the belief that lesbians do not choose to love women but just happened (accidentally) to fall in love with another woman. They would ‘normally’ have chosen heterosexuality but ‘accidentally’ in a weak moment happened to meet and fall in love with a woman. This kind of thinking keeps gay and lesbian relationships from being taken seriously, as well as making the assumption that such (temporary) relationships are not only not seen as ‘immediate family’, but interim
measures for something more lasting; i.e. heterosexual. As well, the reaction to being single and still calling yourself lesbian exposes the homophobic question, "why would you take on that label?" Regarding employment, this perpetuates the thinking that being lesbian should be of secondary importance to the chance at a great job, where one's lesbianism must be kept hidden, disguised or eliminated. The participants reported that they knew lesbians and gay men willing to hide their sexuality in order to work in restrictive work environments such as the Ministry of Social Services, (The Ministry of Children and Families) or Catholic funded positions.

Religious institutions are the last bastion of heterosexism and misogyny. One participant expressed with understandable shock, the expectation that she hide her lesbianism in order to satisfy investigators into her personal life that she was an acceptable candidate i.e. a ‘non-practising’ lesbian for a social work position. Due to this standard no social worker would be living up to the B.C.A.S.W. Code of Ethics if they were employed, for example, by the Roman Catholic Church.

Summary

Supporting previous studies on lesbian employment, lesbian social workers are only as safe as the environment they work in. Some participants were ambiguous about being "out" at work. There was not a comfortable dialogue in the workplace, creating self-censorship to ensure job protection as well as personal safety. The stereotype of lesbian as child abuser seemed to be an undercurrent in a number of work environments if for example they are affiliated with the Roman Catholicism or social services. Internalized homophobia was expressed regarding client and support staff reactions to being a lesbian. The importance of other lesbians was seen as both
supportive and a potential risk to staff reaction. At the same time, wanting to be visible so as to be seen as a valued role model to social work, was seen as ideal given that the lesbians in this focus group were unsure if they were accepted as lesbians and good social workers. This speaks to internalized homophobia again as the label lesbian continues to be a stigma. Being sure that there are a great number of gay men and lesbians in social work, there was a thirst for this to be acknowledged and valued by the profession which so far chooses to ignore this fact. The war zone is an apt metaphor for the problems that some lesbian social workers may face in their work environment, especially if they feel that their work environments, unlike these five participants, is not ‘gay positive’.
CHAPTER FOUR

Implications for Social Work and Proposed Solutions

In this final chapter I will discuss specific areas of concern that impact on the practice of social work and provide my thoughts on proposed solutions. My final conclusions though somewhat pessimistic, are a reflection of the sentiments of the participants of my study as well as my own experience as a social worker.

Although the focus group participants felt sure that they could rely on the B.C.A.S.W. Code of Ethics to protect them in the case of discrimination in the workplace, the overall feeling of the group was that there was still a lack of sensitivity regarding lesbian families and relationship issues. In order to redress this lack of understanding I will outline specific issues that I feel need to be addressed.

Stereotypes of Lesbian as Child Abuser

Of all the myths surrounding being lesbian or gay, perhaps none are as harmful as those that surround the relationships lesbians and gay men have with children (Herek, 1991). Because social work as a profession is particularly concerned about the needs of children, the discrimination experienced by lesbian social workers was most apparent when it involved children. It appears that stereotypes of lesbians as a threat to children continue to exist within social work belief systems, as in society at large. Despite a lack of evidence to support this stereotype, the fact that lesbian social workers are experiencing a wide range of negative reactions in this regard indicates that this damaging and discriminatory stereotype needs to be confronted and dismantled within social work education and practice. It is important to get the facts straight: the great majority of sexual abuse perpetrators are heterosexual men. This is
an example of the patriarchal twisting of the truth which though unfounded, is constantly driven home by those trying to protect family values, for example, those opposed to gay and lesbian educators, childcare workers and members of the clergy or government. It is important that all social workers refute this stereotype whenever they hear it, as ‘truth telling’ is an obligation by social workers.

As Kominars (1995) explains it,

Gay men and lesbians are keenly aware of what it is to be the victims of physical and emotional violence. It seems ironic, paradoxical even, that gay men and lesbians in the military or anywhere are considered to be a threat - predators - to heterosexuals. Publicizing the statistics that most of the child-molestation in this country is done by heterosexuals (Berger & Kelly, 1994) addresses and corrects one of the basic criticisms used against gays and lesbians. I believe that any strategy for change starts with this acknowledgement. Starting there, we can begin to work on basic re-education about what is acceptable behaviour and what is not so that it fits into a context of honesty about sex and crime which presently does not exist (Kominars, 1995; p.36-7).

Social workers should inform themselves of legal recommendations and actively work with lesbian and gay organizations to pressure policy makers and politicians to their importance. In addition, a recognition of the effects of negative religious messages about homosexuality is necessary. According to Booth (1995), because of the religious messages which teach that women are inferior or secondary, lesbians in particular suffer a double dose of injustice. (Booth, 1995; p.61)

**Working with Lesbian Families**

Because much of the prejudice experienced by lesbian and gay families springs from inaccurate assumptions about gay and lesbian parents and about their children (Falk, 1990; Patterson, 1992), it is nevertheless widespread. As Laird (1993) claims, the state of our knowledge is very thin. I have discovered no ethnographic studies of lesbian families - that is, "thickly described"
studies of individual families - and very few studies of lesbian communities or lesbian cultural life. We know very little, for example, about how lesbians are fashioning families and redefining notions of kinship. One exception is Weston (1991), who concludes that lesbian notions of kinship are becoming an important force in the remaking of American culture.

According to Hall (1978), effective social work with lesbian families and couples requires self-exploration, the acquisition of a particular set of clinical tools, and the assumption of an advocacy stance in the larger society. Self-exploration is an ongoing process of attitude and feeling analysis. The clinical tools necessary are ways of seeing and working with clients which incorporate cultural dimensions of lesbian lifestyles. Finally as stressed by Hall (1978), the importance of the social worker’s endorsement of gay families - individually with lesbian clients and collectively in professional organizations is most important.

As Brown reminds us,

in practice, social work agencies tend to deal with lesbians in one of two ways. Either the woman’s specific needs as a lesbian remain unrecognized and ignored, or her lesbianism becomes the central preoccupation, the prism through which her every word and action is interpreted (p. 201).

Therefore, social workers need a bifocal approach - a way of seeing the presenting problems of lesbians as both affected by and separate from sexual orientation.

Professional Training With Lesbian and Gay Couples

Despite myths to the contrary, many gay men and lesbians are in relationships (Herek, 1991). Unfortunately, many professionals working in the area of social services have received little or no training with regard to the special needs of gay and lesbian couples (Murphy, 1991). Because biology and the gender-socialization of women present issues for lesbian couples that differ from those faced by gay male couples.
(Browning, Reynolds & Dworkin, 1991; McClandish, 1987; Murphy, 1992), social
workers need to be informed of the differences between heterosexual and homosexual
couples, and the differences between gay and lesbian couples, as well as appreciate
the uniqueness of each couple/family. For example, empirical studies on gay and
lesbian couples (Berger, 1990; Reilly & Lynch, 1990) frequently use "living together"
as one criteria for the definition of the "couple relationship." However, it has been
shown that almost half of gay and lesbian couples do not live with each other (Jay &
Young, 1977).

Similar to the experiences of the participants in the present study, Laird (1993)
makes clear,

In the context in which women's stories in general and lesbian stories in
particular are constrained and devalued, lesbians face story censoring
decisions every day. Heterosexual couples live in contexts in which their
couple relationships are part of ordinary conversation, a central part of
their life narratives. For lesbians, every shifting conversational context
represents a new decision: How do I define my life, my family, in this
context? Do I use "I" or "we"? Do I act as if I'm single? Do I invent a
boyfriend, pretend that "we' is a heterosexual relationship? How will my
descriptions and language affect my children, my parents? How will my
language risk my job security, my future, my child’s future? How will my
"outness" (or "closetedness") affirm or validate the centrality of my
partner in my life and in the parenting of my birth child? What costs do
my silences exact?..... Further more, when the specific nature of the
relationship is not voiced, others in the social context are also more
uncertain and constrained. Those who might be more accepting and
inclusive also have to edit their conversations; they are sometimes
unsure about the commitment in the relationship, sometimes concerned
about offending. Others may treat each partner in the lesbian
relationship as single, calling the two of them the "girls" or the "ladies" -
terms that are personally and politically offensive to many if not most
lesbians. (p.128-129).

Laird encourages us to become allies, to become familiar with the strengths and
unique possibilities in lesbian families and to take on the responsibility to help educate
Patterson (1995) asks, "What are the elements of a supportive social climate for gay and lesbian parents and their children? As yet, little research has addressed such questions" (p. 273).

**Lesbians and Social Policy Concerns**

Weston (1991) concludes that lesbian notions of kinship are becoming an important force in the remaking of American culture. Because lesbians and gay men create families that do not fit the legal parameters of the family, there is conflict between people's self-definitions of their families and legal definitions. For example, lesbian and gay couples cannot adopt as couples, but must instead do single-parent adoptions. Despite the provincial Ministry of Social Services policy directive in 1995 which effectively removed the prohibition against placing adoptive children with gays and lesbians, (until then, single applicants - whether self-identified as homosexual or heterosexual - could only adopt special needs children), gays and lesbians wishing to adopt under the newly-released policy will be allowed to do so only as single parents. Social policy initiatives must examine the privileged position of heterosexual marriage, not to extend the legal and social definition of marriage to cover cohabitees or even homosexual couples, but in the opinion of this researcher, the aim should be to abandon the status of marriage altogether and to devise a system of rights, duties, or obligations which are not dependent on any form of coupledom or marriage or quasi marriage.

**Lesbians and the Profession**

The 'heterosexual panorama' which exemplifies social work does not honour the participation of lesbian social workers. The dedication of these participants speaks
to their valuable participation in the profession. They are not being acknowledged for
their contribution as lesbians. Social work texts need to be rewritten to include lesbian
contributors past and present to this field.

a) Social Work and Homophobia

The forces of heterosexism/professionalism blurs the vision of social change
that these lesbian social workers came into the profession armed with. The choices
around visibility as lesbians are continually eroded by a profession that believes they
are being ethical in their practice (honouring diversity) while maintaining a false front
of liberal tolerance. To maintain invisibility as a lesbian social worker in order to feel
'safe' in one's occupation does not reflect this profession's promised agenda of social
change and non-discriminatory practice.

The profession therefore needs to take a hard look at what lesbian and gay
experience within this profession tells them and adopt necessary changes to foster a
more egalitarian (feminist) agenda.

b) Social Work and the B.C.A.S.W.

This professional association is in a position to represent the needs of lesbian
and gay registrants. When I contacted them about this concern, I was told that perhaps
there were no lesbians in social work, and that it was therefore a non-issue. Because
gay and lesbian members have not been visibly represented, a commitment to lesbian
and gay issues by the B.C.A.S.W. is necessary in order to reflect the ethics it has
written.

Although the BCASW has not reported on discrimination of lesbian social
workers, the experiences from this study range from employment tension between
heterosexuals and lesbian and gay workers in the workplace, even in "gay-positive"
agencies to discriminatory hiring practices within religious-affiliated organizations. A
thorough investigation into employment practices within the government as well as in
the non-profit sector regarding lesbian and gay staff would increase our knowledge of
working conditions for lesbian and gay social workers.

c) Lesbian and Gay Curriculum Content

As Kennard (1984) states,

Despite an increased awareness of available lesbian material, lesbian
students, both inside and outside classrooms, will for the foreseeable
future be expected to read the familiar heterosexual biased literature.
Can we reread / rewrite the old canon so that it no longer excludes the
lesbian reader? Can we do it in such a way that we do not in the process
exclude other readers? (p. 648).

It appears that lesbians are unable to read themselves into social work curriculum,
because there are no standards around gay and lesbian content. Perhaps this explains
why social workers are operating in the dark regarding lesbians and gay issues. Even
when policy directives are in place regarding the need for inclusion of such issues, the
belief in its importance remains questionable. Because we are not visible within social
work curriculum, our ability to be political agents and positive role models remains
ineffective regardless of a growing library of gay and lesbian concerns. Without clear
curriculum policy and guidelines regarding lesbian and gay content, it seems that
social work education will continue to remain illiterate in this area and deal with what
is superficial: that which is obvious. As Brown (1992) states,

To equip social workers with the knowledge and skills necessary to offer
an adequate service to lesbian clients is a difficult task. As lesbians find
themselves in a defensive position, in relation to their lives and rights,
much writing relevant to social work is arguing for an anti-discriminatory
social work response. While, given current trends, this is essential, it
does not resolve more complex debates around lesbian psychologies, lesbian parenting, lesbian mental health issues, lesbians and the aging process, and so on. Some more exploratory work is being done in the United States, looking in a more complex way at lesbian psychology and the impact of oppression in a non-pathologizing way (Boston Lesbian Psychologies Collective, 1987). Similar work needs to be undertaken in Britain, for social workers to begin to offer a sensitive and appropriate service to lesbian clients (p. 205-6).

Following the British and American trend in anti-discriminatory policy is necessary in order to develop strong policy and curriculum guidelines for the profession in Canada.

d) Social Work and Referrals to Other Professions

To offer resources that welcome and validate lesbians and their families is necessary in order to live up to the code of ethics. This can be challenging when a wide variety of agencies are involved. However, referrals to other agencies and services need to be made with sensitivity in regards to the attitudes of referral agencies towards lesbians. Unless this is done, they are not safeguarding the interests of their clients. Gay and lesbian resources may not exist outside of large urban areas. Being informed of what's available to your community is essential to providing quality service.

Social Work and Prevention of Homophobic Violence

Gay men and lesbians can be fired from their jobs, evicted from their homes, and lose custody of and visitation rights to their children. In their most severe form, prejudice and hostility result in violence that ranges from verbal harassment to murder. Herek (1989) reports that in recent surveys as many as 92% of lesbians and gay men responded that they had experienced anti-gay verbal abuse or threats, and as many as 24% report physical attacks because of their sexual orientation. Murphy (1994), claims
that such attacks are often not reported to the police or appropriate authorities because they fear that they will be subjected to secondary victimization at the hands of police or others. Because social workers may be one of the ‘others’, it is important for social workers to work towards exposing and addressing homophobic responses in their own communities, by the public at large as well as by other agencies, schools, religious organizations and community services. By social workers taking a political stand on this issue, the community will gain knowledge which will benefit not only adults and their children, but youth at risk: lesbian and gay teens. The ‘Bash Line’ has recently been formed in Vancouver to offer support to those who have experienced ‘homohate’.

Social Workers and Homophobia

No analysis of the lesbian and gay experience can be complete and valid unless a critique proceeds within the context of homophobia. An excellent resource from this perspective is the work of Suzanne Pharr. It is important that social workers become informed and actively work towards the removal of prejudice by modelling non-homophobic practice that includes taking action against any evidence of homophobia within their own practice environments. According to Kominars (1995),

Crucial to the undertaking is the respect for every individual’s freedom to use his and her talents and potential. Consistent with this respect is the acceptance - even the celebration - of whatever sexual orientation the individual has been blessed with. We will fail if we begin from guilt, or shame, or the inclination to apologize for individual differences, or the intention of sparing someone else’s feelings. Acknowledging ourselves as we are, and allowing other the same freedom provides the baseline for change. (p. 32)

Kominars (1995) encourages us to end the silence which surrounds homosexuality and talk openly about what has been true from the beginning of time -
that gays and lesbians have always been an integral component of the world in which all men and women live and work and putting an end to the lie that everyone is heterosexual. This includes ongoing dialogue around relevant lesbian and gay issues in order to create a forum for professional dialogue.

Social Work and the Code of Ethics:

It is not enough that social workers follow a code of ethics. The CASW Code (1994) definition regarding the best interest of the client as “that the social worker will consider the client as an individual, a member of a family unit, a member of a community, a person with a distinct ancestry or culture and will consider those factors in any decision affecting the client” (p. 4). Without mentioning gender or sexual identity when considering the best interest of the client, the concept of the client becomes inscribed within a purely patriarchal framework which reinforces what Monique Wittig has called the heterosexual contract. The code’s Preamble continues to mention culture as an all-encompassing notion for all individuals which does not honour the specific experiences of lesbian and gay peoples. Lesbians and gay men have many "cultures" within the gay and lesbian world, which this code does not acknowledge by referring to one cohesive "culture." This oversight reflects a non-feminist ethical agenda and in fact does not incorporate the use of the word feminism. The profession of social work claims to be founded on humanitarian and egalitarian ideals. Although using the word feminist would be more appropriate if we are going to understand the basis of inequality and the inherent power differentials, this code makes the goal social justice for all. It is more accurate to reflect these sentiments as coming from those who have social justice inherently. To aspire to social justice for all,
we as social workers must operate within a feminist framework in order to attack the core of our society's unjust foundation: white supremacist patriarchy and misogyny. Thus this code of ethics falls short of the agenda that it proposes: to promote social change. Without this analysis schools of social work as well as the profession will follow an ethic that continues to foster homophobia and heterosexism as the rebar in this foundation. A code of ethics needs to specifically state that social workers will adopt a feminist, non-homophobic and non-heterosexist stance in order to "not discriminate against any person on the basis of race, ethnic background, language, religion, marital status, sex, sexual orientation, age, abilities, socio-economic status, political affiliation or national ancestry" (CASW, 1994, p.10).

In this way, we are using the principles of a new ethic, one that acknowledges that discrimination exists, that within our profession discrimination exists. This owning, that as social workers we are aware of our own discriminatory practices, but willing to address them (as we too are products of a heterosexist and misogynistic society) is the kind of ethical code that is based on truth.

Although this approach may be seen as "radical" by some, it is such radical surgery that is necessary in order to live up to a code of ethics that advocates change and promotes social justice. As Audre Lorde so eloquently put it, "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (p.112). As social workers we have a responsibility to not only promote social change, but to question whether social change is possible given our present system. At a time of incredible fiscal restraint, are social workers able to put their politics forward based on ethical practice in a similar
way that lesbians and gay men use their sexual politics to work towards a model of sexual equality?

Conclusion

Although the participants felt that there has been “a lot of water under the bridge” regarding what it means to be a lesbian social worker, there continues to be a wide range of reactions to lesbian social workers from those in their places of employment. These range from supportive to superficial tolerance, to non-acceptance. This diversity within the workplace regarding a level of comfort with lesbians suggests that social workers are not consistently following the codes of ethics regarding non-discriminatory practice based on sexual orientation. Without strong direction from the CASW and the BCASW, lesbian and gay social workers are being held captive to a heterosexist standard, a standard that does not respect their unique contribution to the profession of social work. This standard will continue and perhaps worsen as the climate of acceptance towards lesbians and gay men remains inclement. Supporting our profession’s lesbian and gay population to come out is one step towards improving this climate. However, as long as the profession of social work remains silent surrounding myths that keep lesbians and gay men in the closet, we continue to oil the patriarchal engine whose roar deafens our ears to the voices of difference.
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APPENDIX D:
RESEARCH QUESTIONS FOR FOCUS GROUPS

1. What does it mean to be a lesbian social worker?

2. Does it come up at all?

3. Do you think that that person still continues that commentary but just not in your presence? Or do you think that person was trying to figure out where your sexual orientation was at, by making comments?

4. What is it really like with other social workers in school, in the workplace, in other groups you’ve come in contact with, other agencies? What have your experiences been?

5. Is it the social workers doing the policing on that level? Or are we speaking about the larger picture? Are we as social workers responsible for changing that?