

**Power in Lesbian Relationships**

by

**Jude Pustil**

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We accept this thesis as conforming to the required standard.

  
Professor ~~J. Cassom~~, Supervisor (School of Social Work)

  
Dr. Laurene Sheilds, Outside Member (School of Nursing)

  
Dr. Martha Haylor, Outside Member (School of Nursing)

  
Dr. Pamela Moss, External Examiner

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University of Victoria

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Supervisor: Professor J. Cossom

### ABSTRACT

This thesis addresses the questions: 1) In lesbian's own voices, what is their experience of power dynamics in their partnered relationships? and 2) What do lesbians think produces or influences these experiences of power? The study is a feminist, qualitative, participatory study (with the researcher as participant), conducted with a group of eight lesbians. This group met for three sessions of three hours each for data collection, and once for feedback following the completion of the first draft of the findings.


A thematic and interpretive analysis explores participants' stories about power struggles and their ideas about individual and cultural influences on these struggles. The themes identified include: ways of thinking about power; aspects of relationship that relate to power: boundaries, respect and trust, communication; focal points of power struggles: money, children, sexuality; playing out of power dynamics: differing perceptions, abuse, leaving; patriarchal constraints; healing: attention to inner self, and the value of support and sharing.

Examiners:

  
Professor J. Cossom, Supervisor (School of Social Work)

  
Dr. Laurene Shields, Outside Member (School of Nursing)

  
Dr. Martha Haylor, Outside Member (School of Nursing)

  
Dr. Pamela Moss, External Examiner

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is lovingly dedicated to my son Mike Pustil. For having had to endure being a casualty through no choice of his own.

I so honour the ways he survived it despite me, the most amazing and dynamic young man he is, and the fact that he has always stayed connected with me - no matter what.

I hope that some of these words can soothe his heart and help continue the healing. May our bond be ever stronger. May he feel in these pages the deep love and respect I hold for him. And may he know what a true inspiration he was in this work.

...Imagine how it feels to always belong - belong in a diversified community, for it is the diversity in nature that gives the web of life its strength and cohesion. Imagine a time where everyone welcomes diversity in people because they know that is what gives community its richness, its strength, its cohesion. Imagine being able to relax into our connectedness - into a web of mutually supportive relations with each other and with nature...

...Imagine a world where there was collective support in the overcoming of individual limitations, where mistakes weren't hidden but welcomed as opportunities to learn, where there was no reason to withhold information, where honesty was a given. Imagine a world where what is valued most is not power but nurturance, where the aim has changed from being in control to caring and being cared for, where the expression of love is commonplace.

...The very fact that you can imagine these things makes them real, makes them possible.

Margo Adair

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores power in lesbian relationships. I analyzed and examined issues and dynamics of power by facilitating and participating in group discussions of eight lesbians. This research gave this small group of women an opportunity to discuss their experiences and address a taboo topic.

I am interested in this topic personally, professionally, politically and academically. I am passionate about this research. For some time I have been trying to understand the nature of power in lesbian relationships, and searching for ways to approach the special difficulties and myths about their power dynamics. I also want to further break silence on this still largely hidden topic. This research has led to valuable consciousness raising; to learning with other lesbians; to inspiring, heartfelt dialogue; and to the development of knowledge on the subject. It is important that more information be made available so that lesbians can work together better to find creative solutions to the personal and societal-structural problems we encounter.

As a lesbian, I am frequently disturbed by power struggles and abuse of power, dominance and control that I hear about in lesbian relationships. In my own relationships, power struggles and abuse of power have troubled and confused me. I have experienced profound power differentials in my own lesbian relationships, and in one relationship in particular I felt this in an extreme way. It was frightening, distressing and disillusioning to experience abuse in an intimate relationship. I assumed that two feminist women in an intimate relationship would be less inclined to experience

power struggles than heterosexual couples. Professionally, after years of applying feminist analysis to my counselling with abused women, I well know the ways that power and abuse are often part of heterosexual relationships. But I thought relationships between lesbians would be different. I am aware that there are individual, personality problems that affect power dynamics in relationships. But there is also the political and social context of the culture lesbians live in that can be explored when examining power struggles. By the same token, finding solutions to these problems does not rest solely with individual lesbian families or couples. It is also an issue for lesbians to explore and resolve together as a larger community and it is an issue that heterosexual society must also explore. The responsibility for rectifying these problems does not rest solely with lesbians, either at a personal or a political level. Academically, this topic is still minimally explored. It deserves attention because we need to know more about intimate lesbian relationships, and the devastating consequences of power struggles that turn to abuse. In conducting this research I have had to examine my values, assumptions and beliefs concerning women in relationships, and deconstruct them through understanding others' research and writing and in hearing the women speak in this research.

### **Preliminary Conversations: Groundwork for the Thesis**

In 1995 I conducted a preliminary exploration of the topic as part of a graduate research course to gain more insight into power in lesbian relationships. My inclination, even then, was to use a group to explore this. However, due to time constraints it was easier to conduct personal interviews. To this end, I dialogued individually with seven

women. During in-depth conversations with each woman we explored her experience of perceived power dynamics in current or past lesbian relationships. It was noteworthy that only one woman described her relationship as egalitarian and balanced in terms of power. All others had serious concerns about power imbalances and issues of abuse of power between themselves and their partners.

These conversations provided valuable insights about the topic. They also demonstrated the need to conceptualize this concern at a structural as well as at an interpersonal level. An important theme in these conversations was the secrecy and isolation around issues of power. Several women discussed relationship concerns with me which they stated they had been unable or unwilling to share with anyone else. This sense of secrecy reinforced perceptions I already held. Feelings of isolation and secrecy clearly described by these lesbians seemed of critical concern since they suggested disconnection from others. Feeling disconnected relates to power since this can affect an individual's ability to understand and act on her problem, and can create a life that is devoid of support from others. This can be more serious for lesbians since this is a group of people that experiences significant disconnection by virtue of being oppressed. Being in an intimate relationship with power problems or abuse, has the potential to create extreme isolation.

The women I talked to indicated that they often disagreed with their partners as to the location or nature of power imbalances in the relationship. Two had been in a relationship with one another, although it had ended some time prior to our conversations. Speaking to each member of this couple separately revealed that both partners felt powerless, and each thought the other had all the power in the relationship.

Does this mean that when there are relationship power problems, no one feels powerful? Or does it mean that partners have different perceptions of power in the relationship?

I was not totally surprised by the results of my preliminary conversations. They provided me with some support for impressions I already had from my own relationship experiences, friendships and my experience as a therapist in the lesbian community.

Another important insight I gleaned from these seven conversations was that although lesbians often feel the negative impact of power struggles in their intimate relationships, they believed something else was possible. These women were exploring and trying to change their relationships, were hopeful this was possible, and were talking about it as best they could with other lesbians. Some very moving recommendations and suggestions about how to deal differently with these problems, arose spontaneously out of the painful experiences of women whose stories I was honoured to hear.

The final insight derived from this preliminary work was related more to the method and process of the project than to the focus of the conversations. Bearing witness to women's personal stories is a powerful way of gathering information and gaining understanding. It is an excellent way to bring women's experiences into focus for further investigation and learning. This experience made me keen to work in this way with other lesbians. As I explored possible ways to continue this research I began to think about talking with lesbians in a group. I wondered if sharing in a group might provide women with the opportunity to hear each others' stories, find common threads, build on each other's responses and know that they were not alone. I also thought a

group might be an appropriate way to begin to explore and change some of the isolation, secrecy and disconnection that may have occurred in women's relationships. I wondered if there could be a foundation of support in a group; the potential to learn from each other and to act together on our own behalf in ways we had not considered doing alone. This kind of sharing, it seemed to me, had the potential to be rich and dynamic. Might conducting a group for this research be a way to enact feminist consciousness-raising and weave different colours and textures into the fabric of discovery about power in lesbian relationships?

### **The Shadow of Patriarchy: The Myth of Power Equity in Lesbian Relationships**

A foundation of this hetero-patriarchal culture is a system of privilege and dominance in which women have less power than men. As a feminist I understand that men have privilege and power which they use for domination and control. This use of power is internalized socially and culturally; it is embedded in our consciousness in subtle and profound ways. It is a social power rule that men should be dominant and is played out in our daily lives in a myriad of ways. The oppression I experience as a woman and a lesbian in this culture gives meaning to this institutional power arrangement. Feminism examines and analyzes the inequities, mistreatment, and exploitation of women in society. It is embedded in Canadian society that power is ascribed to men, and powerlessness, to women.

Just as the broader Canadian culture is embedded with certain views of power, so, it seems to me, there are mythical concepts among lesbians about the nature of power in their relationships - namely, that there can be no power imbalance between two women

in a couple where neither member is ascribed a societal role of dominance by gender. I have subscribed to such a myth. It builds on the belief that because the intimate relationship is between two women, and because women share power "better" than men, it will necessarily be different, better, and devoid of destructive power struggles, differentials or abuse. I want lesbian relationships to be notably unlike heterosexual relationships. Because of this, my disappointment was deep as experience and observation crushed the myth.

There are other aspects of this myth. I, for example, believed that women in relationships have better access to their emotional selves, and thus are more willing to uncover and explore their pain and affective problems. I also believed that women have more skills and willingness to communicate and resolve conflict together, so that when they run into difficulties they are more adept at managing them constructively. Given these and other traditional roles for women in our society, and the fact that society does not automatically assign a role of dominance to either member of a lesbian couple, I thought lesbian relationships would evidence better resolution of power struggles and fewer instances of abuse of power.

Yet, in therapeutic sessions, in preliminary research conversations described above, and in my friendships with other lesbians, it became clear to me that a wide spectrum of power patterns and problems exist in lesbian relationships. These ranged from everyday power conflicts that were not necessarily problematic if addressed and resolved, to emotional and mental mistreatment and physical battering. I believe that every day power struggles or conflicts in relationships are inevitable. They most frequently occur because of our differences, and our need to learn how to respect those differences. If

differences are respected and negotiated so both partners can be themselves, power conflicts can be defused and used as an opportunity for growth and deeper connection. If, however, this does not happen, and one partner "needs" to control the other, then abuse can occur.

I see abuse as the far end of a continuum which begins with power struggles that are inevitable and not necessarily destructive. By abuse I refer to the physical, emotional, social, economic, and psychological ways that one partner manipulates, terrorizes, or exercises control over the other. An assumption I make is that one reason these problems occur is because of an internalized, patriarchal, gender politics, that can then lead one partner to have power over another and the potential subsequent abuse of power that occurs in intimate lesbian relationships. I am discussing this possible outcome of power dynamics because the effects of abuse are so devastating to individual women and their children. I believe that power is at the core of all abuse. So examining power dynamics in lesbian relationships is essential in order to dissect what becomes problematic, what doesn't, and why.

It is important to note that abuse in lesbian relationships is the same as, and at the same time, different from abuse in heterosexual relationships. In heterosexual relationships, it is usually the man who has power and is the abuser. This clarity of roles is not present in abusive lesbian relationships. Society does not assign roles to one as the abused and the other as the likely abuser in lesbian relationships. From my practice and personal experience in lesbian relationships, I have observed that the abuser in one relationship can be the one who is abused in the next.

This means that from outside the lesbian community people cannot always tell which woman is the abuser and which woman is being abused. This is important and can have repercussions. For example, when two women in a lesbian relationship each go to a transition house for support the shelter may not be able to identify correctly who is the abuser, in its efforts to support and protect the victim. Not only are lesbian women abused, they also abuse power. This renders it a more complex and less visible problem. Abuse is more difficult to identify when the results of women's lesser power is combined with the myth of equality between women in relationship.

I believe there is strong social pressure within the lesbian community not to speak of power struggles or women's abuse of power. Perhaps this is because of the risks of sharing the pain of our relationships with a homophobic society that might be even more judgmental about lesbian problems. Challenging the myth is not easy. However, it is critically important to do so. Battering does occur within lesbian communities and it is essential that lesbians not minimize "the great danger and destruction in lesbian battering" (Hart, 1986, p.183). An important effect of abuse (physical, emotional, verbal, etc.) is that it leaves the perpetrator more powerful and controlling than the one who is abused. Abuse destroys lives, relationships, and families. It leaves women shattered, facing the difficult choices of leaving and struggling alone, or staying in a debilitating and demoralizing situation. It can often take battered lesbians many months or years of careful consideration about power and control, to leave, and to reach a place of clarity about who did what to whom and how hurtful it really was (Hart, 1986).

## **Breaking Silence**

There remains much silence in the lesbian community on the subject of power struggles and abuse in relationships. What little is written about it, and there is some, is not proportionate to the seriousness of the problem (Lobel, 1986; Renzetti, 1992, Taylor and Chandler, 1995; Ristock, 1991; Elliott, 1990) . Women do not talk to each other easily about power and abuse in their relationships. This means lesbians have ignored or buried power problems in their relationships. There have also been more pressing concerns, like survival in a world where they face daily discrimination.

I am eager to participate in breaking silence on this topic. I consider this thesis one more tool that can help break this silence. As a community, lesbians must talk to each other about important power issues in their relationships.

Without an analysis of lesbian relationships in the context of patriarchal, heterosexist society, it is difficult to understand the silence, and to see why individual lesbians have sought safety behind it. Professionally, I have often seen lesbians struggling with power and inequity in their relationships and who are reluctant to reach out for help. They express fear to discuss what is happening; and they feel alone with their power struggles. The taboo against giving voice to problems in lesbian relationships may, in large part, be an attempt by a threatened minority to present a positive, ideal image of their relationships in a homophobic society, lest they be judged harshly and discriminated against even more. There is also great fear that imperfections in lesbian relationships will be used as ammunition to prove that these relationships are inherently flawed. Flaws like this could then be used to further support the ideology

that homosexuality is sick or wrong, and not be an acceptable form of intimate relationships.

Hearing negative stereotypes and feeling prejudice perpetrated against us, lesbians begin to absorb and believe these lies and myths - a form of internalized oppression. Both internalized homophobia and the reality of the dangers of a homophobic society may intimidate lesbians from talking about or seeking help for relationship problems. One way to counteract homophobia, individually and collectively, is for lesbians to reinforce the specialness of women loving each other. Do they convince themselves that being special means they do not have to deal with issues of power? These beliefs have been an important part of lesbians valuing themselves, dealing with internalized oppression, and countering societal rejection. This thinking can backfire, though, if it is used to deny that lesbian power struggles and abuse happen (Benowitz, 1986).

These responses comprise a complex phenomenon and present something of a paradox. Because lesbians feel judged in this society, they can create defensive, larger-than-life images of their relationships. These images are at risk of being crushed by societal homophobia, which then keeps lesbians caught up in maintaining the myth of perfect relationships. It is important to challenge people's distorted beliefs about lesbian relationships. For lesbians to maintain internal silence about problems in their relationships is ultimately self-destructive.

Lesbians are afraid to rock their relationship-boat in a world where heterosexism feeds economic inequality, threats of violence and judgements of immorality. For a lesbian, her intimate relationship may be her only haven - something that she cannot easily challenge.

## **My Feminist Perspective**

Underlying my personal, professional, political and academic interests is a strong feminist perspective that has informed every aspect of this research. Because feminism is a world view with various interpretations, following is an explication of how feminism informs my life and work.

As a feminist, I strive for congruence in my personal, professional and political life. These worlds are inseparable and woven together in a fabric of who I am as a woman, feminist, lesbian and social worker. A basic tenet of feminism and my life is that the personal is political. I believe that in experiencing and examining issues and problems that arise on an individual, personal level, I must also analyze how social, economic, cultural and structural institutions and forces oppress and impact women's lives. Conversely, it is not enough for me to politically espouse feminist principles unless I also incorporate them into my personal relationships by behaving in a way that reflects my politics. In this way the political is also personal. It is important to understand that conceptually the personal and the political can be separated, but practically they cannot always be separated. Action following analysis, through leading an examined life is a critical part of feminism. Understanding without action is useless.

Feminism is about examining the politics of gender in our institutions and our relationships. It is also about understanding power relationships in all aspects of our world (deBeauvoir, 1952; Millet, 1970; Morgan, 1970). I am imperfect in my strivings in this regard. Yet these are foundational principles in my life that I want to address and be challenged with continually. I work personally and politically to create a world that operates from a place of shared power - an alternative model of power to the

patriarchal, hierarchical one that dominates this culture. Therefore, I must be willing to examine, unravel and take responsibility for the manifestations of power imbalances in my personal life, as well as seeking to understand the nature of structural and institutional power. All this is an integral part of my struggle as a lesbian feminist, and helps to explain why I was drawn to this particular research.

## **Structural Influences and Lesbian Relationships: Conceptualizing the Concern**

### **Contextually**

As a professional therapist and social worker I see how power dynamics in relationships are influenced by societal structures. Looking at the lives and relationships of lesbians in a structural as well as inter-personal landscape is essential to capture a broad view of power problems and paths to possible solutions. Mullaly (1993, p. 122) defines structural social work by explaining that it is "descriptive of the problems that confront social work in that they are an inherent, built-in part of our present social order". He goes on to say that "our social institutions function in such a way that they discriminate against people along lines of class, gender, race, sexual orientation, disability, and so on." Mullaly asserts that "structural...indicates that the focus for change is mainly on the structures of society and not solely on the individual" (1993, p. 122). Because structural influences are often implicit rather than explicit, two lesbians experiencing relationship problems may view them as only manifestations of their unique personal attributes and struggles, and fail to see the impact on their personal struggles of being members of an oppressed minority.

In Canada we grow up in a predominantly hierarchical, patriarchal, heterosexist culture that practises and imparts models of power as dominance of one person or group over another, as opposed to ones stressing connection and co-operation. Ours is a society that endorses hierarchical views of power by valuing competition rather than collaboration and co-operation and reinforcing power as superiority and oppression. Socialization with regard to power, gender and sexual orientation runs deep and strong, and we have all drunk deeply of these attitudes and beliefs. Power and dominance represent issues for all relationships in our society, and lesbian relationships are no exception.

Another structural dynamic that affects lesbian relationships is the predominant patriarchal context of our culture. Gender-role stereotypes and expectations form a strong fibre of this society's fabric. We learn from birth onward what is appropriate for a "girl" and a "boy", and the consequences of failing to perform according to social expectations. Lesbians are neither separate nor immune from these cultural prescriptions. They too internalize this dominant outlook, even while struggling to adopt a radically different lifestyle and construct a fundamentally divergent meaning for their lives.

Heterosexism further influences lesbians by applying a negative connotation to lesbian relationships. Through every social institution we are subtly taught the tenets and expectations of heterosexism. We are indoctrinated to believe this is the "normal" way to have a relationship. This is reinforced through mass media, education systems, and cultural, religious and spiritual practices. Lesbians, like all women, grow up with a lifetime of predominant heterosexist role-modelling in their families and communities.

We are taught to believe lesbian relationships are deviant. Even as we struggle to create something different as lesbians, we are deeply affected by this dominant perspective.

Lesbians, then, are a marginalized and oppressed group on two fronts. First, they are women in a patriarchal world; second, they are partners of the same sex in a heterosexist society. This marginalization affects lesbians because they are not widely valued, honoured or acknowledged as having legitimate relationships and families, creating terrible stress in their lives and relationships. Lesbians are seen, and see themselves as outside mainstream values which can also lead to feeling abnormal; a situation not well tolerated in our culture. It can be risky for lesbians to acknowledge their concerns and difficulties in relationship because of the vulnerability produced by this marginalization and lack of validation. It is necessary to understand these structural realities to analyze power struggles between lesbians in a partnered relationship.

The structural influences of patriarchy, hierarchical power models, heterosexism and marginalization that impact upon a lesbian couple can be extremely detrimental. Some days I am amazed that as lesbians we can keep taking one step after another in this environment.

### **The Personal Importance of this Research**

Though I have been hurt and disillusioned by the struggles and abuse of power in a personal, intimate relationship, I believe it is possible to create healthy lesbian relationships. It is possible to face truth in relationships, speak out about it, and take part in creating innovative solutions in lesbian relationships and the lesbian community.

I am committed to this as a lesbian, as a professional social worker and as a feminist activist. Good places to begin the exploration, change and healing are through introspection of my own experience and pain, through dialogue and analysis with other lesbians, and through this research. I think this research has the potential to be an invaluable personal healing tool, a milieu for discovery and growth for others, and a way to suggest and then create new social and political solutions, and policies that address issues of abuse of power in lesbian family and community.

I want to be involved in relationships and communities that reflect these values at their core: mutual respect, honesty, tenderness, caring, a balance of shared power and a strong sense of family and community. I think many lesbians want similar values in their lives.

I am curious why many lesbian relationships often do not reflect these values, and why each member of a couple frequently has different perceptions about the relationship's power dynamics. There is a difference in values between the talk I hear and what I see in lesbian relationships. Though the talk frequently mirrors the values I consider to be critical in relationship, the behaviour often does not. In undertaking this research I want to understand better the struggles with this, and uncover some of the patterns of pain, abuse, disillusionment and disappointment that I believe are common in our relationships. Perhaps understanding these patterns will lead us toward ways to change unhealthy power dynamics.

There are often problems and issues within any relationship; issues concerning one, or the other, or both partners. Difficulties, if they develop in a relationship, are not at issue here. What determines the health of the relationship is the way that issues are

perceived, dealt with and resolved. If power imbalances are not acknowledged and addressed, then resolution of them becomes very difficult. They are often contributing factors to the dissolution of lesbian relationships.

Thus I have chosen this topic for a variety of reasons. Personally, I have experienced the pain of unhealthy power struggles. I do not want to do that again. I want to create new ways of understanding and relating for myself. As a therapist and social worker I have worked with women experiencing power-in-relationship problems. I want to improve my insights, analysis, and effectiveness in facilitating change in others. As a lesbian feminist, I want to contribute to a better world that reflects my values, ideals and vision. I want to be part of lesbian learning to act as living resources for each other, to deal with our problems in creative, open ways. I am aware that academically there is little understanding of power issues in lesbians' lives, and high credibility may not be given to researching the values of partnership and shared power. I would like this research to change and challenge this in some small way.

I strongly believe that neither professionals, nor individual lesbians can resolve these difficulties alone. Change is called for in interpersonal relationship dynamics and the larger political picture. In order to work with these difficulties structural, societal issues must be addressed as well as lesbians examining these power dynamics in the contexts of their individual relationships. I am committed to examining and analyzing these problems, seeking political and social change in the lesbian community, and arriving at resolutions for our relationships and our community.

## **Research Questions**

As a result of my personal experience, reflections on the experiences of other lesbians and my review of the literature, I realize that there is a great need to explore the theme of power in intimate lesbian relationships. That exploration should be in the voices of lesbians themselves, as they talk together and continue to break silence together about both the personal and the societal experiences they have had with power in their relationships. From this beginning place, I formulated my research questions. These are the questions I wanted to ask lesbians as we move through this process of exploration together.

The research question is broken into two parts. First: In lesbians' own voices, what are their experiences of power dynamics in their partnered relationships? Second: What do they think produces or influences these experiences of power?

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **POWER: A CONCEPTUAL REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

Attempts to study, explain and analyze relations of power are ancient. Theorists approaching the subject from differing perspectives have been concerned with relations of power and authority for the past 25 centuries (Sills, 1968). Power is a complex social, psychological and political phenomenon, and its analysis is beset with problems and complications. For example there is no single accepted definition of power; there have been many changing shades of the definition and meaning over time.

In this chapter I explore briefly some historical explanations and concepts of power, by reviewing literature in sociology, psychology, feminism and lesbian feminism to better understand how power operates in human relationships. In particular, I trace the recent development of thought on power in feminism and lesbian feminism, and how this applies to intimate lesbian relationships. I also refer to writings on oppressed group behaviour, enmeshment and fusion to shed some light on particular characteristics of power in lesbian relationships. Lastly, I discuss my own perspectives on power, and lay out some of the concerns, issues and questions that arise for me.

#### **A Brief Historical Look at the Concept of Power**

It appears from the literature that early political theorists concerned themselves mainly with the power relations within a certain defined community, and presumed that

its meaning was a matter of common sense, relating to authority (Sills, 1968). For many years, concepts of power have been implicitly woven throughout social science literature with little analysis of power relations. Finally, after many centuries, feminist thought and analysis is one of the avenues that helps us be more explicit about power relations and their repercussions interpersonally and structurally.

There are conflicting views in early literature about whether the roots of power are personal or societal. There was a tendency to polarize views of power along these lines and very few early thinkers integrated personal and social concepts. There seems to be little understanding in the literature before feminism - except in some of the Marxist literature that addresses class - that gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality are not solely personality or group differences, but are also structural patterns representing unbalanced power relations in our society (Griscom, 1992).

Conceptually, the idea of power has been defined in many different ways. Within the social sciences, in particular, psychology and sociology, the definition of power usually reflects ways in which patriarchal structures define power in society - through resources, money, influence, control and physical strength. Historically, theorizing about power has been done primarily by men and the voices of women have been excluded. Most early writing fails to collect or examine their stories and experiences, or to represent their views (Miller & Cummins, 1992).

Alfred Adler (1927) initiated discussions about power in psychology and his definition stated that power was quite simply about domination or control. He stressed two key concepts: the struggle for power by the individual, and social interest. His belief was that internally there is a will to power that is like a poison, fed by an

environment filled with a fascination for power. Adler (1966) felt it was essential to find new ways to awaken and enhance social interest in power. He noted that the lack of social interest in power could stem from economic and racial circumstances or a family atmosphere that consumed people's time and energy (Adler, 1927). He was also a pioneer in examining the inferior status of women in patriarchal society. For the first time, his perspective on power suggested an integrated analysis of power in terms of both the individual and society, though his ideas about society were based on the assumption that it was homogeneous in nature.

After Adler, between 1927 and 1959, the subject of power was largely ignored in the psychology literature until Dorwin Cartwright (1959) edited a collection of essays entitled Studies in Social Power. This volume recognized the difficulty of defining power and admitted that no single explanation of it informed its chapters. Cartwright and other field theorists understood power as a relational concept, and as something more than coercion or control. Kurt Lewin (1951) initiated this relational construct that was then explored further by French and Raven (1959) in "The Bases of Social Power", - a chapter in Cartwright's book . They defined five common, significant bases of power - reward power, coercive power, legitimate power, referent power and expert power - as ways that one person may influence or control another. This work in categorizing and naming bases of power was a useful step in the process of analysis, since it expanded our understanding of the domains of power and ways of thinking about it. Power was no longer looked at uni-dimensionally as authority or control. There were limits, however, in the ways these authors analyzed how power was

understood in the larger society, since they did not include any structural or societal analysis of power.

Though Cartwright was concerned mainly with the problems of social structures, most social psychologists focused on power relationships in dyads and small groups. Kenneth Clark (1965) was an exception to this in that his study of power and Black Americans, integrated social-structural concerns in his work. His focus was on power in relation to race and he omitted gender analysis. Power was at the forefront of his analysis when he discussed change strategies for unjust conditions in the ghetto. His unique definition explained power as "the force required to bring about - or to prevent - social, political, or economic changes" (Clark, 1965, p. 199). Clark understood that power was a concept linking all levels of analysis, from the personal to the social-structural. What is interesting to note is that even though some early theorists included structural elements in their analyses about power, the one element excluded was heterosexism. It was and still often is a significant omission in a world where it is still quite acceptable to oppress homosexuals.

Winter, in his book The Power Motive (1973), added unconscious processes and emotions to the concepts of power offered by field psychology theorists. He defined power as the capacity to produce intended effects on the behaviours or emotions of another. Generally the literature on power in psychology reveals a picture of struggle, in which power is measured by an individual's ability to dominate another, win a conflict, or exert "power over" another person. Lukes (1979) defined power as the ability of one person to control another. In the same way, social exchange theory

asserts that human relations involve the exertion of influence by controlling both tangible and intangible resources (Homans, 1974).

A very similar perspective on power is offered in sociology. Max Weber (1946, p. 24) explained power as "the chance of a man or of a number of men to realize their will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action". He viewed the one with power to be in a position to impose his will in a given circumstance. His main concern in analyzing power in political systems was with legitimate power, or authority.

In pre-feminist literature power terms cover a wide range of concepts. Some of the words used are: influence, authority, persuasion, dissuasion, inducement, coercion, compulsion and force (Sills, 1968). It is clear that conflict, force, control, domination and resistance are recurrent themes in the patriarchal constructs of power (Duffy, 1986). These themes reflect a foundation that is built on the concepts of "win-lose" and "power-over". In traditional views of power, it is defined as structured, hierarchic, and primarily interpersonal, with the exception of Clark (1965). In other words, whoever has more money, resources or influence, wins the battles or controls the choices of another and is the more powerful.

### **Feminist Thoughts about Power**

A more heterogeneous way of critically analyzing power emerges through feminist conceptualizations of power. Women's visions about power bring new understandings to its definition, and possibilities for transformation of the whole idea of power. They stand in contrast to those proposed by men. It is important for women's experience to

inform the creation of theory and understanding about power, instead of allowing power to be explicated solely through patriarchal lenses and assumptions (Miller & Cummins, 1992).

Jean Baker Miller (1982) defines power as having the capacity to create a change or some kind of movement. The whole notion of having and using power to enhance rather than to limit the power of others while also increasing your own, is one that I can imagine suiting women. Certainly ideas about power when expressed through women's voices and experience, have the potential to be very different from traditional, patriarchal concepts. Feminist concepts of power can also be more varied, follow a different path and come from very different conceptual roots (Miller & Cummins, 1992). However, women still have to struggle with power values that dominate in a patriarchal society.

Women's experiences of being connected with others helps to formulate new visions of action, power and movement in the context of relationships, including intimate, friendship, working, etc. One core difference is that a patriarchal view of power is based on an assumption of "power over", where the emphasis is on one person or group having control over another, while feminist analysts work with the concepts of "power from within", "power to" and "power with". Here the position of control lies within the self or within the power of community. The focus is on developing and maintaining personal power as well as sharing and using power to be community activists and creating change socially, politically and economically. It is not focused on power over others, except to acknowledge, analyze and change these "power over" relations. These concepts of "power within" and "power with" connect to an analysis of power as

it exists, but also reflect the potential to use power in a more positive way; as an ideal towards which to strive.

In Dreaming the Dark (1982), Starhawk clarifies the essence of "power from within" from a spiritual perspective. She explains that there are still some moments - despite the destruction and evil in the world - when we feel the movement of life unfolding, and when we grasp and believe that life is moved by a power deeper than that of the gun, or of domination. Starhawk asserts that this power might prevail if we had a stronger sense of how to call it forth in our lives. She maintains that it is based on values that are very different from "power over", or the power of destruction that supports all the institutions of domination that surround us. She poetically defines "power from within" as "the power we sense in a seed, in the growth of a child, the power we feel writing, weaving, working, creating, making choices, [that] has nothing to do with annihilation" (Starhawk, 1982, p.3). Moreover, she associates her own definition of power as more connected with the original root meaning of the word power, from the Latin *podere*, "to be able". Thus power comes from within and speaks to us of powers of sustenance, healing, creativity and connectedness. Starhawk asks how we can overthrow the principle of "power over" to shape a world based on the principle and values inherent in "power from within".

Power is at the core of feminism, since examination of power dynamics, differentials, and relations are central to feminist analysis of oppression. There is no escaping power as a sociological factor in our culture. From a feminist perspective, power relations shape every institution and infiltrate our thoughts, ideas, beliefs and values. What has been ignored for too long are women's perspectives about this. What are women's

views of how power is defined by the larger culture? How do women themselves define power through their own voices and experiences? How does power operate in their lives? Could women have power? Do they want it? How influential is the myth that women do not and should not have power in any form? Is it not true that we hold the idea in this culture that women do not need power? Are other models of power really possible, besides the patriarchal framework of someone having power over someone else? Is it possible to create a balanced form of power that relates more to equality than sameness; perhaps a dynamic flowing and sharing of power? Is it possible to create a living model of power that honours difference and integrates this dynamic flow as a balance instead of some prescribed equation that will maintain balance? How would this operate? What would it look like? These are some of the questions that concern feminists and are reflected in their writings.

Feminists have discussed "power over" in the broad framework of patriarchy (Brownmiller, 1975; de Beauvoir, 1952; Millett, 1970), looking at gender-based, social (Connell, 1987; Lengermann & Wallace, 1985; Lipman-Blumen, 1984), political (Eisenstein, 1984), economic (Reskin, 1988), and sexual (Sanday, 1985) inequalities in power. Feminist activists have dissected how these social structures affect individual powerlessness in a way most psychologists and feminist therapists have not. There is controversy between feminist therapists and feminist activists about the most effective way to address power issues. Does individual therapy really address these problems and contribute to lasting change or should the focus be on political and social change through consciousness-raising groups or community action initiatives similar to the feminist activity that was more common in the 60s and 70s (cited in Yoder and Kahn,

1992)? As a 90s feminist activist and therapist, I think both approaches have a part to play in change. This research compels me to examine this dichotomy again, more closely.

This major debate of personal versus societal change pervades feminist literature. In Changing Our Minds, Celia Kitzinger and Rachel Perkins (1993) argue that as feminists they do not accept psychological explanations of women's problems. They assert that psychological interpretations shift political concerns into personal and individual issues and believe this is dangerous for lesbian feminism, because it is anti-feminist. They speak about how it may be possible to help fix up women individually without ever really confronting the inherent political power problems that are the root of these personal troubles. Feminists like Kitzinger and Perkins assess that the difficulties we experience are related to oppression. Psychologists tell us they are within us and we can fix them ourselves, or with outside help such as therapy.

The support and sisterhood that women now find in therapy used to be ignited in political activist groups, consciousness-raising groups, or in friendships between women. Feminists insist that we must be cautious about the cloud that is formed by psychological thinking that covers up the causes of our difficulties, and limits what we see as the possible alternatives for resolution (Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993). This book challenged me as a therapist and a lesbian feminist activist to re-examine, discuss and think carefully about the location of women's power problems and issues, and what can and should be done about them.

Feminists assert that personal and interpersonal inquiries or issues must be informed by a structural perspective. However, both are crucial in that it is imperative that we

deal with our own personal relationships to power and the problems that manifest in our relationships with others, and it is essential to recognize that power dynamics in personal relationships are reflective of what pertains in the larger society. Society gives men power. Men are expected to use "power over". They have the power of rank and position in a gender-based culture. Brownmiller's (1975) emphasis on the societal elements that support rape enlarge our ideas about rape from seeing it as an individual pathology, to understanding it as male domination and abuse of power; men's power over women. Woman-battering and rape are now more likely to be seen as male abuse of power, and not a particular couple's personal problems. This has been a dramatic and very important shift in societal analysis and use of the concept of power over the last 20 years.

We live in a culture that reinforces and legitimizes male rule as "power over" others. Women, people of colour, gays and lesbians, and other significant marginal and oppressed groups are not present in the top levels of "power over" hierarchies. The history, experience and presence of these people is often erased, ignored or trivialized. Their voices are silenced. Power is institutionalized as an agent that gives certain members of patriarchal society licence to oppress others. We see evidence of this in the prevalence of homophobia, woman-battering, racial discrimination in the workplace, and other institutionalized forms of oppression.

Gender differences are also connected to the ways that interpersonal power affect verbal and non-verbal communication. Henley (1977) showed that gender differences in communication patterns reflect gender-based differences in access to and use of power in society. For example, men more easily access power by speaking or taking up

space during communication, while women are more likely to leave space in communication for others' input as well.

Gender is not the only factor influencing accessibility to power in communication. This acknowledgement separates Henley from many other researchers. Race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation and other factors also function as structural determinants of power distribution and communication patterns. Henley sees two different kinds of power: one creates, the other destroys. Her understanding of power explains it as "the context in which our lives are lived, the oxygen of our social life, as unnoticed but as encompassing as the ocean to the fish" (Henley, 1977, p. 188). This image helps us view the positive and creative potential of power.

Carter Heyward (1989) also concerned herself with an analysis of structural elements, and reinforces Henley's idea that the effect of social power forces are manifest on a physical level in our bodies. They are tangible on a gut level. Since we all exist in a world where we don't experience mutual and egalitarian power relationships, our physical selves reflect the domination and violence of our culture, often by the manifestation of illness. Heyward has been involved with the Stone Centre theorists in researching mutuality in relationship. Jordan, one of these theorists, in her paper "The Meaning of Mutuality" (Jordan et al, 1991), explains that there can be no mutuality in a relationship where one person is in a power position of domination or control over another. This means that disconnection, competition and inequality are inevitable. Mutuality implies interaction, reciprocity and compassion, which is the antithesis of a relationship that is based on power struggle and inequity.

While gender plays an important role with respect to differential power in this society, it is not only men who are abusive, or who use "power over". Elements other than gender contribute to power problems and abuse. Domination and unhealthy power dynamics do not only happen in heterosexual relationships, and men are not the only perpetrators. I do not think we can minimize or underestimate how often it is the case that men are the perpetrators, and what a serious problem this is. However, these dynamics occur between women as well, and women can also be perpetrators of domination and unhealthy control. There are presumptions that keep us locked in the belief that this is not possible between women that perpetuate myths about women. This can make it harder for lesbians to realize that these problems are real in their relationships, and to remember that they are not crazy or imagining it.

A salient example is presented in "The Meaning of Mutuality" (1991). Jordan et al (1991, p. 89) states that "often mutuality comes more easily for women in woman-to-woman relationships, which can provide wonderfully sustaining mutual empathy and care". Whereas it is true that this may be possible, and I and others have not completely given up the hope that it is possible in intimate relationships with women, this kind of comment, often found in women's writing, makes it harder to trust our perceptions and experiences, and to risk telling the truth about our lives and relationships when women are cruel to us or abuse power in our relationships.

Another example is Jean Baker Miller's "Women and Power" (1991). She believes that women have a tendency to deepen the worth of others and to recognize what valuable work this is. This may be true of many women. However, for a woman who has the opposite experience with another woman in an intimate relationship

Baker-Miller's comments are "crazy-making". Miller also explains how women can bring a special set of skills to many situations because of how they can fine-tune themselves to the complexities around them. Here, she is referring to the belief that women are emotionally more sensitive and aware of many innuendoes in any given situation. Again, this may often be true, but few people are writing about or acknowledging what happens when this is not the case.

Another striking example of the presumptions that keep us locked in believing that women are beyond power struggles occurs in Dorothy Smith's article, "The Renaissance of Women" (1984), where she addresses the problem of isolation and segregation in the academy. She states that "the discourse of women is open, necessarily political, necessarily in the world, necessarily caring" (1984, p.10), and goes on to elaborate that "it is that consciousness of others which the discourse of women enunciates" (p.10). Smith also asserts that "the discourse of the women's movement is essentially open, never established, finalized, concluded", and that "women say this for themselves," in an "openness to new voices" (p.11). Even though her context is a discourse about women in academe and women as "knowers", her generalizations help support the myth that women necessarily relate to and respect other women differently than men do. Women's discourse, both politically and personally is not necessarily open, caring, conscious of others or open to new ideas. Women are sometimes silenced, abused, manipulated and ill-respected by other women in myriad ways. This fact must be acknowledged and included in our discourse, theory, analysis and writing in order to reflect the full range of woman-to-woman experiences, and create the space for truth-telling, healing and change. I believe this is a challenge to some of the

assumptions of cultural feminism, namely that women are unquestionably good just by virtue of them being women.

I appreciate that this is a complicated issue, because many of us are beginning to value a whole new way of sharing and balancing power - something that has not been traditionally valued. We have been taught to view and use power as dominance, and many women have been oppressed by this. We want to be aware of power, but in a very different way. We do not want it used against us, but to be engaged in formulating a new way of working with power. To do this we have to understand how power is used in the dominator model and how it is used against us. We also have to value relational power as something we can negotiate differently using a different model, more in tune with feminist values. This is no easy task. It is difficult to deconstruct traditional heteropatriarchal power. The influences and constraints imposed by society's long-standing view of power are insistent. Even if we change our relational ways of dealing with power, we still live in a world where structural prejudices dominate. Therefore, there is a great need for us to continually examine and dissect this issue and raise consciousness about it.

Our socialization experiences also inform our expression, accessibility to and utilization of power (Winter, 1988). For example, we see that from a very young age power is embedded in the socialization in play, language and social mores between girls and boys. We are socialized to believe that women don't want or need to attend to power. Social relationships are changing as women take possession of certain kinds of power traditionally held by men, (e.g., in the workplace and in relation to money) and create different kinds of power based on newly evolving definitions. Many women have

been socialized to believe that power can and should be shared. Feminists proclaim this ideal. Do lesbians have higher ideals about power sharing with other women than with men? If so, then is their disappointment therefore greater? What - in addition to themes I have discussed - may create even greater barriers for lesbian women, in acknowledging and unravelling power dynamics in their relationships?

In my frequent informal discussions with lesbians, it is clear that many struggle daily to create dramatically different relationships with women than the heterosexist norm. There is dismay, disappointment and disillusion that few are able to attain a significantly different sense of sharing power and creating equality than they have done in relationships with men. In Caldwell and Peplau's "The Balance of Power in Lesbian Relationships" (1984), power is defined as one partner's ability to influence the other's behaviour. They find in their research, as have other researchers (Reilly & Lynch, 1990; Risman & Schwartz, 1988), that though most lesbians say that a balance of power is essential to them, that for about 40% it is not a living reality in their relationships. None of the research reviewed has helped me to understand why this is so. The research I studied discusses that there is a connection between the level of respect and affection and power equality in relationships (Rohrbaugh, 1992). These writers also found that a surprising number of partners did not agree about power-sharing in their lesbian relationships.

In the studies of the social status of lesbian partners, there did not seem to be significant differences in these areas (Koepke, Hare & Moran, 1992). Power differences in lesbian couples studied could not be attributed to education, income or asset differentials between partners. While power equity was the ideal for most women

studied, many had not attained it. Another noteworthy finding is that many research accounts indicate that often there is no agreement between the partners as to whether power has been equal or shared or not. It seems that often one partner feels there is no significant power differential, yet the other feels quite powerless. In situations where I have known both women of a partnership and there are problems, this has definitely been the case.

It is important to note that one cannot think of lesbians as a homogenous ideological group of people. There are at least three different groups (and probably many more): lesbians, lesbian feminists, and feminists who are lesbians. What is different about these groups is their beliefs, values, politics and perspective. It is hard to even define these three groups precisely. To simplify I would say that lesbians see themselves as women-identified, and first and foremost sexually and relationally involved with women. Feminism, or the politics of being a lesbian is relatively insignificant to them. Lesbian feminists see feminism and being a lesbian as inseparable. They believe that being a lesbian is a political act. Because of this they have an analysis of heterosexism as well as of sexism, and challenge themselves to live up to feminist political ideals. Feminists who are lesbians are primarily feminists who happen to also be lesbian because of sexual preference. Their politics and analysis focus on feminism and does not necessarily include heterosexist analysis. It is likely that the experiences of and perspectives on power could be quite different amongst these three groups.

Many women have hope that their intimate relationships with other women can be significantly different from those with men: that in fact there is a potential for a different kind of intimacy with women. This hope can create much grief, pain and

disappointment when it is not fulfilled. Perhaps internalized patriarchy makes it hard for some women to live feminist politics in their relationships. Sometimes women have told me that they felt their relationships with women were like the worst parts of relationships with men. Often women expect another woman to be more tuned in to caring, feelings, needs and relationship. Women expect other women to understand oppression and patriarchal influences in their daily lived experience. It is confusing, disturbing and often terrifying when it is not different. It can also be difficult to figure out what to do about it.

Personal power goes beyond the individual, and manifests broader social influences. This is the domain where social and collective action weave a fabric of new definitions of power that are more related to the "power from within" model. Valuing "power from within" in preference to "power over" is at the heart of feminism. "Power over" is the root of much societal gender-based oppression. Personal power is one of the forces that provides the building blocks of social change. Feminism asserts that the personal is political; it is also true that the political is personal. Personal and collective power are both elements that are needed to change this culture's unhealthy views, values and dynamics associated with power.

As a therapist, a social worker and human being I struggle with the balance of the political and the personal and how they fit together. I was moved when I reread "The Politics of Silence" (1988) by Robin Morgan, an eloquent feminist thinker. Her writing is relevant to this research because she discusses the power that is inherent in either speech (the one who speaks more) or silence (the one who is quiet more) in intimate relationships between women. It was evocative of my own experience, since I was seen

as the one who spoke, and addressed issues more, and so was seen by my partner as the one who had more of the power. I felt my partner held a lot of power in her silence, or refusal to speak. She felt my speech had inherent power. It was profound and helpful to have named some of what I and many other women have struggled with, that is hidden and minimized in our communication patterns. To have this author address the power politics of communication styles between women, is significant. It affirmed my own trials with this issue to read Morgan's beautiful handling of the dance between silence and speech that can often become a battleground. When she says, "More complicated because I fear your anger (often the initial and most accessible means by which your silence overflows into speech) if I prod too much" (Morgan, 1988, p.189), I can really relate and understand her sentiments from my own experience. As a therapist, too, I have often seen couples struggle with this issue.

It is essential to talk about power dynamics that operate through our speech and silence. What is fascinating about Morgan's approach to this topic is that she illuminates both roles; speaker and silent one. She discusses the need to be aware that speaking has power, but remaining silent can be a different yet equally important form of power. Morgan talks about the desire to have both people in a relationship change as part of the solution. Perhaps a path between one's silence and the other's speech could open up something new between them.

The Stone Center theorists are a group of women in Boston who research women's connections and mutuality in relationships. They have expanded on the notion of power. Miller (1986) redefined power relationally as the ability to create full development. Much of the theory that preceded her writing saw autonomy and

connectedness as opposing forces, but she saw the possibility of them coming together. She explored the idea that feeling effective and liberated (components of autonomous power) could go along with feeling strongly connected with others. She was creating a concept of interdependence where one could simultaneously increase another's power at the same time as increasing one's own. This offers a new vision of power that removes it from the limitation and destructiveness of "power over" another. As Surrey (1987) noted, it means that empowerment involves enriching each person's power, which in turn raises the potential for mutual empowerment in a group.

In her article entitled "Relationship and Empowerment" Surrey (1991) suggests that we can extend the idea of relationship beyond support, affection and contact into the realm of action and growth. We tend to think of relationship as a personal support network more than as a context for political action. This is not a new concept to me as a feminist who moves politically in the world through collective action and relationship, but I do not think that much has been written about this. I appreciated her idea of combining agency and community, and forming new visions of action, movement and power through relationships. I admire her reference to giving meaning to the power that lives within being, moving and acting together. I know that the potential in women's ways and connection is much more related to "power from within" than "power over" (though of course this is not always the case). I liked Surrey's ideas about "power with other" or power in connection or relational power. It appeals to my sense of the importance of community in life, where we have personal relationships with others, and come together to connect and out of that emerges the possibility of taking action together to make changes. I had not really linked this with power before. For

me there is a deeply felt sense of rightness and congruency about how this application of power might play a part in creating more reciprocity and mutuality in relationship. This changes how we perceive and act out power dynamics, since it encourages more of a balanced sense of shared power between those who are in relationship and taking action together.

Surrey refers to this kind of power as having the potential to enrich one's own personal power, as well as someone else's. There is much to learn about this way of relating and sharing power. I believe it is the essence of what is possible in relationship and community, even though it is a very complicated notion. I value this author's ability to expand the concept of nurturing to become one of mutual empowerment that really can exist in a truly interactive and reciprocal relationship. I also think it is important how clearly this author links action to empowerment. For me they are inseparable. Power with or power together is a concept that excites me. Here power is not something to be competed for as a scarce and limited resource, but the possibility is raised of creating mutual power that is truly nurtured and facilitated by and with others. Power with or power together implies that we can recognize the importance of how moved we can be by the ideas and emotions of others. This can help us to create a new space for relationship where indeed there is room for each person to be who they really are, and to change because of the powerful effects of their interactions with others.

This concept also connects to communal learning. By placing ourselves in the experience of others, and using that for growth, we can create something larger and more inclusive than ourselves. This is something I strive toward. This relates profoundly to my research about power in lesbian relationships. Maybe it is one way

we will find new forms of relating to each other in partnership and community in order to resolve and move through some of the disturbing difficulties in non-mutual power relations we are faced with in this culture (Griscom, 1992).

Lykes (1985), a feminist psychologist has also moved to a new place in her analysis of power. She has developed a concept of social individuality which brings together the self, others, and society in an experience of social relations determined by the inequalities of power. Her analysis is that power is more than a relation, but also a process within certain persons or groups that undergo change over time. Her theory has a political basis, reflecting the innovative nature of her research with Central and South American women who are protesting state violence, and how central power is for them both individually and socially.

It is important to include the voices of marginalized women in this discussion of power. Most people in positions of power and privilege don't know enough about those who lack access to these things. For example, white women may not be aware of their privilege when compared with women of colour. Sensitizing ourselves to difference offers the possibility of deepening our ideas about power, since focusing on difference highlights power. Marginalized individuals often tend to understand group differences better because they live in the dominant as well as the oppressed world.

Audre Lorde (1984) and bell hooks (1989), are two black authors whose writings speak from the margins of the dominant culture. They use their difference as the starting point for building ethics of power that are relevant to women, and insist that the knowledge of difference is essential in order to move to a place where mutual interdependence is possible. They believe we cannot know what we share in common

unless we recognize our differences, especially if there are power differentials.

Difference is at the core of understanding power in the way it presents us with political challenge and also in the great opportunity it offers us for creativity (Lorde, 1984).

Often the recognition of difference has the potential to ignite power struggles as we undertake to make others like us, instead of appreciating and accepting the differences.

It is hard to imagine what kinds of collective action or initiatives could offset the profound effects of internalized socialization, assist women and men to fight the dominance hidden within their behaviour and communication, or really affect change in the controlling powers of killing, war, or global economic relationships (Griscom, 1992).

Another interesting perspective arises in a piece by Judith Bardwick (1977) in "Some Notes About Power Relationships Between Women". She observes interactions in relationships between women in a small group who were part of a Women's Development Program, and notes that they are grounded in issues of either getting or wielding power, or attacking those who seem to hold power. She explains the different kinds of power she recognizes as coming from a role, from a skill, as power exercised for psychologically compensatory reasons (they are vulnerable or feel inadequate, and so manipulate others to protect themselves), or personal power. Her analysis is that women who do not feel as powerful see power as being limited, and finite. This fits with Surrey's (1991) thinking that competition for power pits people against each other in zero-sum power contests, because if one has it, that implies the other does not. This reinforces historical beliefs about patriarchal power by supporting the notion there is some one who is in control or has the power, as opposed to power being shared.

Bardwick (1977) also explains that women who feel less powerful use attack to compensate for their feelings. This could be an important element in the analysis of interpersonal as well as structural power.

### **Lesbian Feminist Literature**

Shifting attention to the lesbian feminist literature, it is evident there are clear differences between feminism and lesbian feminism. Rich addresses some of these in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience" (1980). Through poignant examples she demonstrates that lesbian existence is neglected in much feminist scholarship. She insists that it is the enforcement of heterosexuality for women in this culture that is the essential means by which the male right of physical, economic and emotional access, and "power over" is assured. Rich argues that gender inequality, the domination of males in this culture, and the taboo of homosexuality play a lesser role. Gough (cited in Rich, 1980) listed the following characteristics of male power: forcing sexuality on women or denying it; demanding or exploiting women to produce; controlling the children or robbing women of their children; confining women physically; using women as objects; cramping their creativity; and withholding knowledge and culture from women. Adrienne Rich declares that these are some of the ways that male power is manifested and maintained, using means from physical brutality to control of consciousness, and makes the connection that many of the forms of male dominance are in fact negotiated to enforce heterosexuality.

One of the means of enforcement of heterosexuality is to render lesbianism invisible. Rich contends that feminist research and theory that contributes to this invisibility is

counter-productive to the liberation and empowerment of all women. In her writing she addresses the importance of women-identified experience, whether sexual or not, as including a rich inner-life, bonding against male dominance, and giving and receiving practical and political support. She sees women's identification with other women as a source of energy and female power. Her belief is that forcing invisibility of women's relationships has meant the loss of power for all women to change the social relations of the sexes, and to free each other from the norms of heterosexuality. These elements all enhance the personal and collective power of women.

Lesbian existence both breaks a taboo and reflects the rejection of compulsory heterosexuality. It also represents an attack on male right of access to and power over women. Lesbian life is an act of resistance and a way to say "no" to patriarchy, but it is more than this. It is a way to politically and wholly live our lives. There is an organic (pre-patriarchal), feminist, political element in choosing a woman lover or life partner in the face of institutionalized heterosexuality. This lies at the heart of lesbian feminism. Lesbianism is a way to regain power over our own lives by denying men power over us. Taken to the extreme it has become lesbian separatism, which advocates that the only way to deal with the power of men is to live a life without them. Rich concludes that it takes tremendous courage and understanding of the politics, economics and cultural propaganda supporting heterosexuality to really comprehend the complex nature and breadth of power men hold over women, and then to undo it.

Penelope (1992) talks about the lesbian perspective as a lesbian-centred view of the world where lesbians work and create together, and live a vision of lesbian community. She clarifies her belief that being a lesbian is not just a choice, but a decision to be who

we are. It is not only a choice about sexual preference, but a decision to stand in the world absolutely where we are ourselves, no matter what the consequences. In Lesbian Ethics (1988), Hoagland discusses moral agency under oppression, defining that what she considers to be lesbian ethics enable and develop individual integrity and agency in relation to others. She suggests that separation, at the very least from the heterosexist belief system, is central to lesbian moral agency, and raises the question of whether power is an ethical or a political consideration and concern. I think it is both. I believe power has political implications since it forms the foundation of all of the institutions and structures of this society. It also believe that power cannot be separated from ethics, since it is closely tied into the appropriate ways of behaving toward each other.

Sonia Johnson is a writer who addresses lesbian relationships and community in a way that I find stimulating and evocative, though by no means do I agree with all of her ideas or vision. She challenges us to look at very difficult issues in our lesbian lives. Her book, The Ship That Sailed Into the Living Room (Johnson, 1991), questions the whole notion of relationship and its validity as a means of intimacy. She suggests that it is not possible or desirable to create healthy relationships that resemble patriarchal, heterosexual models in any way. Johnson believes that many lesbian relationships follow this model and are doomed to fail, because they are based on values that are incongruent with a new and different way of relating.

Out of this World (1993), extends Johnson's ideas and their practice further into her life experience. The arguments in this book challenge us to live her ideas and ideals and to be congruent with her lesbian feminist philosophy. She writes from within her life, living on a communal piece of country land with other women friends. The book is full

of her explorations and conversations as she confronts herself and others to examine what they do, and to change it. I think her notions push us to explore and define a lesbian ethic that can guide us to what is appropriate or inappropriate behaviour in relationships. Johnson asserts that the new way she is creating friendships and sexuality is essentially different from that of "mensworld". She contends that lesbians have to be willing to give up heterosexual notions of love, sex and relationship altogether to create a new path true to the way women would organically be if they had not been shaped and damaged by patriarchal rules and roles.

I find Johnson extreme in her thoughts, perhaps to drive her points home. I don't consider her ideas to be the ideal for creating healthy relationships, but at least her challenges help us to look at ways that we may need to redefine relationships in order to work with power differently. Certainly there are many things about relationship that do not work. I think it is a positive thing to look at relationship closely, to examine it, ask some important questions about it, and reshape some of it to what we want, need and dream about in our intimate connections. Shared power and a new sense of balance are two of these ideals. I also appreciate the importance Sonia Johnson attributes to friendships, seeing them as essential unto themselves and also as intimate relationships. In other words, she does not honour only primary intimate lover relationships. She honours friendships and gives them an important place in her vision that I understand. Along with this, she sees community as central to life. I believe that relationship should be a part of community, and that relationships are healthiest when they are fed by, and are actively a part of community. In this way a relationship then has the kind of support and living resource it needs to grow and flourish.

Johnson's ideas are engaging about living in the spirit of abundance and holding to the ideal that there is enough for everyone, as opposed to a scarcity consciousness that surrounds this culture. This vision challenges the idea of zero-sum power where power is seen as measured, defined and finite; where if one person has the power it means that the other does not. Johnson suggests that power can be shared; or flow from one to the other - as opposed to presuming that someone has to be in control, or has the power. She reminds us that what we are usually referring to when we talk about and question power, is in fact control, and not a vision of shared power at all.

These ideas are very close to my politics and values as a lesbian feminist, but they leave part of me troubled - the part that wants to make sense of the fact that hurtful power dynamics still happen in the context of women's relationships with each other. In my research and reading I have explored literature on lesbian battering to try and better understand its dynamics at work. I re-read Naming the Violence, Speaking out about Lesbian Battering, edited by Kerry Lobel (1986). In one chapter, a woman wrote of the horrors of her relationship, and that the real meaning of lesbian battering (though it often does include physical battering as well) really has nothing to do with having a hand raised against you, but with the emotional, mental, spiritual and verbal abuse and mistreatment that many women suffer in their relationships with other women. I and others have not been immune simply because we are strong, vocal, assertive, activist, political, feminists, who have worked with other battered lesbians, or are perceptive and aware. This happened in my home and my heart and my life; to me and my children. Gender alone does not explain it, because abuse is about power and control in lesbian relationships, just as in heterosexual ones.

I include here some of what is moving to me in Adrienne Rich's "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying" (1975). I have read this often and always find it compelling and poignant. Her writing reaches inside me and speaks of ethics and vision. It is relevant to the theme of power, because telling the truth, or striving toward it, is all about exercising power. Honesty, and sharing of our inner truths is powerful, because the more real information and knowledge we have about each other in relationship, the more likely it is we will be able to share power, as opposed to one person exercising it over another. Being truthful means both people are more vulnerable and taking risks. The ways in which we hold people off, how we lie, deeply affect our ability to be open, to create intimacy and to share power with the other in relationship. Rich (1975, p. 186) says, "Lying is done with words and also with silence". Perhaps silence is a more hidden, but no less potent source of untruth. The holes it leaves are part of the lie. Lying is a way to maintain control, by manipulating or confusing the other.

Another potent insight for me is: "The liar lives in fear of losing control. She cannot even desire a relationship without manipulation, since to be vulnerable to another person means for her the loss of control" (Rich, 1975, p. 187). When Rich says "There is no 'the truth', 'a truth' - truth is not one thing, or even a system. It is an increasing complexity" (1975, p. 187), I am reassured, because I do not feel there is an absolute truth about these matters, but rather an ethical sense of what is right or not. Included in that is what one's intentions are, and whether there is willingness to explore the truth with another. When a power problem operates in relationship, it is hard to tell the truth, because the focus is on maintaining control and not on telling the truth, implying

vulnerability. Lying means that parts of the self are hidden, and that holds a certain kind of power.

Finally, Sheila Jeffreys says much about power in The Lesbian Heresy (1993), and discusses how damaging the following new attitude and belief about lesbian sexuality really are. She criticizes sexologists, and lesbian sex therapists who assert that infrequency of sexuality (not having sex very often) is a big problem for lesbians, and that the way to deal with this is to create a tension, barrier or power difference of some kind sexually that rekindles the excitement and eroticism again. Jeffreys insists that this is a power discrepancy modelled on heterosexual notions, and not something to which lesbians should aspire to enhance their sex lives. She explains that the exciting erotic possibilities offered by power differences (or sado-masochism) are only an imitation of the traditional institution of heterosexuality used for the political control of women. She, like other lesbian feminists, dreams that something different is possible in lesbian relationships.

### **Lesbians and Oppression**

Another important area in the literature relevant to my research on power in lesbian relationships is that of oppressed group behaviour, or specifically how lesbians structure their relationships to deal with oppression. One might expect that in lesbian relationships power dynamics would be exacerbated, because of the special presence of societal oppression. For Roberts (1983) it is clear that one of the things that happens in oppressed groups is that their characteristics become negatively valued. There is also a tendency for the subordinate group as well as the oppressor to internalize the norms of

the dominant group, and to believe that being like the oppressor will lead to power and control. Of course, this is not necessarily true, and the unexpressed aggression that happens as a result, and which is experienced by the oppressed, leads to low self-esteem and self-hatred. What happens, then, is that since the aggression cannot be expressed toward the oppressor, it is transformed to intra-group or inter-relational conflict. In other words, the oppressed become alienated and fight within their own community and relationships, because they are powerless to oppose the real target - the oppressor. This could theoretically explain the breakdown of lesbian relationships, and be helpful in analyzing and understanding their power dynamics.

It is easy to understand the need for women in lesbian relationships to protect themselves from discrimination (DePoy & Noble, 1992). The absence of broad social support and the lack of formal, institutional social structures to affirm their lives reinforce this. Overt and internalized fears of homophobia mean that many lesbian relationships are closeted and insular, as a way to cope. Lesbians' need for survival and protection can affect every aspect of a couple's life, from home environment, to money management, division of labour, private affirmations of commitment, and parenting. Often secrecy, invisibility, carefully selected support networks and isolation are ways to mitigate discrimination and oppression. Therefore if the couple is in difficulty, or having trouble with destructive power dynamics, it may be difficult to access help, and remedy the situation.

## **Enmeshment and Fusion**

Another important concept in the literature that relates to oppression is enmeshment or fusion. This refers to the merging together, and the lack of sense of self and individual identity that some lesbians experience in partnerships. This has also been referred to as fusion. This phenomenon of intensely strong bonding has been explained as a way of uniting together against any external hostility. Krestan and Bepko (1980) address the importance of boundaries to understand the nature of fusion in relationships. They explain that if a lesbian pair meets resistance (from each other or the community) in an attempt to define boundaries, or receives a response (from each other or the community) that indicates that boundaries are unacceptable, then the boundaries can become more rigid and create an isolation where partners cut themselves off from others. This resistance could come from the expectation that some have that true closeness in relationship means that there are no boundaries. Sometimes this is protection that lesbians use against a hostile world. Individual boundaries can then become blurred, and as partners struggle to define themselves individually and assert their differences this can lead to distancing, conflict or power struggles between the individuals.

Kaufman, Harrison and Hyde (1984) see the problem of fusion as evidenced by the need to distance by creating space in order to deal with potential merging. They define the need for space in six dimensions: territorial, temporal, financial, cognitive, emotional and environmental. Lindenbaum (1985) suggests from her practice she observes fusion, or the difficulty in allowing difference to manifest and be respected between the partners, as a behavioural pattern that often creates a crisis and initiates the

break-up of the relationship. She discusses the need for partners to feel a separate self in a relationship, an ability to acknowledge and honour differences, and to understand the role that competition can play in creating this problem and also in helping to resolve it. An unhealthy competition can set partners against each other and exacerbate a power imbalance that already exists. A healthy competition can encourage both partners to be their own personal best and support each others' strengths in the process.

Although I acknowledge that this problem is a significant one in lesbian relationships, I have always objected to the terms "enmeshment" or "fusion". They are used as an insult that blames lesbians who use this form of survival rather than encouraging lesbians to analyze why this phenomenon takes place. I have yet to see much written by lesbian feminists who sensitively and honestly approach the issue. This topic is addressed in a refreshingly different way in Changing our Minds, by Celia Kitzinger and Rachel Perkins (1993). It is a relief to read their ideas and identify my own concerns with the concepts of merger and fusion. According to Kitzinger and Perkins, these concepts are used to blame lesbians who are victims of heteropatriarchal oppression and hostility, and create a pathology out of an important survival and coping strategy. They suggest that these problems are real and that there are serious questions that need to be explored and answered. However, they assert that doing this in a political context will be far more beneficial than simply naming merger or fusion as psychological problems. These authors would like to see some of the following questions discussed in a way that honours the social complexity of the issues lesbians face. How can lesbians create an equilibrium between their relationships with their friends and their lovers? How do lesbians live in relationship and also stay connected to

the broader lesbian community? How do lesbians handle the hatred and disrespect toward their relationships from a homophobic world? These are critical questions that call for discourse, rather than using psychological labels to simplify and mask problems.

Lesbians use enmeshment and fusion as survival strategies. These strategies of divisiveness and fusion, when used in the face of oppression, point out another paradox. Lesbians use fusion as a way of bonding together for protection and survival. Yet this can create relationship problems, since, the differences between women in partnership need to be recognized and honoured to sustain a healthy relationship.

### **My Personal Standpoint on Power**

In this chapter I have often referred to "power over" - a context in which a hierarchy of power is assumed as part of a dominant patriarchal culture. Power relations shape all the institutions of our society, infiltrate our thoughts, values, ideas and beliefs. I think that there are among many other kinds, positional power and relational power. These two are of course, related. Positional power refers to the power inherent in statuses and roles. One might assume lesbians differ from heterosexuals in that they do not bring the difference in positional power of man and woman into a relationship. Some lesbians, however, do bring elements of positional power into their relationships in the form of age, economic status or professional status, for example.

Relational power refers to the power dynamics that happen between people in relationship to one another, or one's own personal sense of power (as opposed to power issues in society). It is defined by many different factors in relationship. It is the discussion about power dynamics in relationship that identifies who has more or less

power, or what the different types of power are that each partner holds. In many lesbian relationships relational power has the potential to be dynamic and constantly negotiated. Power can move easily from one partner to the other. Relational power is also about the power that comes of people connecting with each other. In some circumstances, because of the combination of each partner's cultural ideas about power and the possibility of personal pathology, there is the potential for power struggles or abuse in relational power.

My own standpoint about power comes from a deep inner strength and sense of power from within, and power in connection with my family, friends and community. I strive for equanimity, and a sense of trust, respect and tenderness as the foundation for intimacy and relationship. The power I value in relationship springs from this core. I know, too, that there are societal forces that profoundly affect how powerful I am able to be, and how power will be shared, balanced and managed in my relationships.

I am a committed, lesbian feminist and that colours and affects my viewpoint, perspective and values in relation to power. As a Jewish lesbian feminist, I have experience in being a member of different marginalized and oppressed groups, and in understanding that power discrepancies are not solely restricted to gender. As a feminist I know power is a gendered concept, and that is an important part of my analysis. However, when all of the aspects of who I am can join together in an integrated way, then I am able to experience the essence of my power. This then translates into my life actions as it is reflected in my relationships and experiences. As Audrey Lorde (1984, p. 120-121) put it in Sister Outsider:

My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the

restrictions of externally imposed definition. Only then can I bring myself and my energies as a whole to the service of those struggles which I embrace as part of my living.

I have a vision of mutuality in relationship that moves together with intimacy - a reciprocal interchange in which both people affect one another deeply and feel the mutual impact. Mutuality involves both being receptive and giving and allowing them to flow together in a balanced and free way; where there is not a weighing and measuring, not a scarcity consciousness about intimacy, but a trust that a different kind of relating is possible and that there is enough caring, compassion, tenderness and respect to create it together. This vision of mutuality is directly connected with power because if mutuality exists the potential for shared power is enhanced immeasurably.

Connected with this different sense of mutuality is a different model for power within relationships. There is much in the literature about models that support a concept of power as dominance over submission and powerful versus powerless. In The Chalice and the Blade, Riane Eisler (1988) discusses the two models she sees as possible for our society. In the "dominator model" she explains that the powerful part of the population uses power over the other part. In this model equity is not acceptable and hierarchies are supported by force or the threat of force. Through coercion, any behaviours or attitudes that do not meet the dominator mores are discouraged. In this culture that operates predominantly on a dominator model, this happens through male domination - both subtle and overt - and through violence and abuse. Authoritarianism is used to reinforce a mindset that supports the perpetuation of injustice and social inequalities in human relations.

In a "partnership model" connection is the foundation that works in the mindset and context of the intuitive, and non-rational. The inner magnetism that pulls us toward

affiliation with others contains the beginnings for an alternative model for human relations. This model represents a movement from fear and defence to interconnectedness and growth. It places value in nurturance, caring and love that is freely expressed. Joanna Rogers Macy says in her interview by Bobbi Levi in "Womanpower":

This transition in our concept of power is radical. It involves seeing power not as a property we own, not as something we exert over others, but as a verb, a process we participate in. This is a huge evolutionary shift (as cited in Wheeler & Chinn, 1991, p. 7).

In Peace and Power, Wheeler and Chinn (1991) present the values of a feminist alternative to patriarchal power. These include the power of process, letting go, wholeness, collectivity, unity, sharing, integration, nurturing, distribution, intuition, consciousness, diversity and responsibility. These alternative models of power have common threads. They emphasize the connections between people that support the possibility of sharing power in a new way and fit with the vision of mutuality described above.

One possible alternative to a dominant model is a version that thinks in terms of a constant, set amount of power that needs to be equally distributed. Sameness is strived for; each partner has half of the power. This belief about a finite amount of power does not fit with my conception. I want to challenge this model of finite power with a different vision; one that provides different beliefs and assumptions about the balance of power; one that encourages a flow of power between people. This flexible framework might not look exactly power-equal at any one point in relationship, but overall it is balanced. I believe that in healthy and positive relationships this flow exists as a sense of equity, more than an equality. In other words, it is not the same, or 50-50, but it is

balanced and shared. I am interested in how people have to shift in relationships to achieve this. What exactly does this dynamic flow mean? How is it connected with interdependence? What are the implications, and what risks are involved in changing relationships in this way? I conceive of power in relationship as directly related to my own personal, and therefore, interpersonal power; where being more fully myself not only affords me power, but also my partner, or others with whom I relate.

I know that I and many lesbian feminists I know and work with are committed to relationships of shared power and equity. I do not think this is disconnected from our feminist values that insist that we not just talk feminism, but live it actively and honestly. This then means we have to examine and create different power relations amongst us.

I also have strong concerns about congruency. This is a value I hold deeply, and strive toward in my personal, political and professional life. I say strive, because this is an ideal. I also hold a strong value that strives for congruence between my personal and philosophical beliefs and my everyday actions. I struggle with and object to lesbian feminists who speak about feminism and power dynamics politically, but mistreat each other or their partners. I see this as the political failing to be personal. Feminists want our personal and political lives to join. If we analyze power politically as feminists, then we are obliged to examine and act on it personally as well. We are all individuals with vulnerabilities and personal needs, even if we often make them invisible behind our intellectual or political walls.

These ideals I hold about a different way of working with power are a strong foundation and motivation for my research. Exploring this issue with other lesbians

means that even in the face of sometimes feeling overwhelmed and exhausted by the demand of this topic, I did not have to face it alone.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY, METHOD AND ETHICS**

#### **Laying the Foundation**

Since the beginning of this graduate programme, I have been clear about my area of research. I have not had to spend energy to determine what I wanted to research. I have immersed myself in literature that is relevant to the theme of power in lesbian relationships. I have engaged in ongoing discussions with my partner, my other housemate, friends, other lesbians and colleagues who have reinforced some, and challenged other, ideas of mine. These discussions brought into focus new questions and issues. Throuout my graduate studies, I have been examining my values, assumptions and knowledge about power in relationships. I believe that all the ways I have been surrounded by the topic of my research - by thinking, writing and talking - contributed to the development of my methodology. The blend of interpersonal, non-academic and academic pursuit of this subject has kept it vital for me.

In this chapter I discuss my reasons for choosing feminist methodology, the principles of feminist methodology that pertain to this study, my reasons for engaging in participatory research, my method for selecting participants, and the process of selection, the group profile, the data collection and analysis processes, confidence in the data and the ethical considerations that I confronted in doing this research.

## **Choosing Feminist Methodology**

In developing an appropriate research approach, I chose a qualitative, feminist, participatory research method. It was essential that the methodology be reflective of my lesbian feminist ethics and perspectives, and the passion, vitality, and personal and political nature of my research topic. My methodology stems from my values, and the clarification of these values (Reinharz, 1979). According to Brinton Lykes, feminist research is passionate; it is "communal rather than hierarchical." This kind of research seeks to equalize the relationships between the researcher and the participants (cited in Reinharz, 1992, p.182). Reinharz explains that "passion is a disruption of conventional research etiquette," and that "it requires courage to violate the norms of dispassionate research" (Reinharz, 1992, p.259).

Generally speaking, feminist researchers do not consider feminism to be a method per se, but more a perspective used to arrive at appropriate methods. Because there are diverse definitions of feminism, there are different perspectives on feminist research, and much creativity and flexibility in feminist research methods. However, a common thread in the literature is that women's lives are considered to be significant and worthy of research, both as individuals and in a social context with other women (Reinharz, 1992).

Although there is no single, feminist methodology or definition of feminist research, engaging in feminist research implies that the social construct of gender informs the investigation and analysis. Feminist research starts from the assumption that women's experiences are hidden and distorted. Given this assumption, a goal of feminist

research is to illuminate women's experience as a step toward shifting the unequal social balance of power for women (Lather, 1991).

Feminist scholarship, then, is not easily defined. It is a challenge to find a description that is inclusive and unifying rather than separating. It may not even be desirable to determine definitions, criteria or particular qualities applicable to all feminist research (Maguire, 1987). Feminist researchers are choosing not to be bound by a constrictive framework.

To lend some clarity and form to the idea of feminism I will refer to Maguire's explanation of feminism being a world-wide movement to redefine and redistribute power. She explains that:

Feminism is: (a) a belief that women universally face some form of oppression or exploitation; (b) a commitment to uncover and understand what causes and sustains oppression, in all its forms, and (c) a commitment to work individually and collectively in everyday life to end all forms of oppression (1987, p. 79).

Feminist research challenges dominant power structures and assumptions of science and society rooted in patriarchal values. Feminist research is committed to social action and social change. It is important for feminist research to enhance the lives of, and contribute to knowledge and theory about women. For the most part feminist researchers consider personal experience, including that of the researcher, to be an essential ingredient in research. There can also be a strong affiliation expressed by many feminist researchers to participants, because of the frequent nature of the interaction between researcher and participants (Reinharz, 1992). To me, this feminist approach is a more honest and congruent way to approach my research, and to honour both the women who are a part of my study, and my own involvement and experience in the topic.

## **Feminist Methodology Principles that have been Prominent in this Research**

Doing research within a feminist framework means operating from a set of principles that guide every aspect of the research process. In this section I examine the basic research principles that reflect my standpoint as a lesbian feminist researcher and the methodology used in this research. These principles are: an examination of power in the foreground of my research; congruence between my feminist values and my research methods including evidence of lesbian experience and oppression and an obligation to be non-oppressive in my approach; a commitment to political action and social change as part of my research; visible evidence of the women participants' lives and experience in the research; and a sense of consciousness-raising throughout the process.

### Examination of Power

My feminist politics mean that I felt a great responsibility to the participants of my study. I wanted to be attentive and careful that this research used a process that included a goal of empowering participants (Street, 1992). I wanted this research to be as liberatory and authentic as possible. One of the primary ways to achieve this is to honour the women who share their experiences with me, by giving them space to speak with their own voices and from the centre of their own experience. Only incomplete and misrepresented meanings can emerge from a culture in which the voices and realities of women are systematically silenced and dishonoured (Harding, 1987). By creating space for, respecting and hearing each other, we are affirmed and made visible

as individual women with lives that deserve recognition and attention (Hartung, Ollenburger, Moore & Deegan, 1988).

There is no way to escape that the very nature of research means there already exists a power differential between myself and the other participants. The idea about, the motivation for, as well as the investment in the research process, all meant that I had a certain kind of power the other participants did not. I wanted to begin to work across and respect power differences between me, the researcher, and the participants who were involved in the research. In this respect it helped that I was also a participant. By being a participant I had the space to be as self-disclosing as the other women during the groups. This element of self-disclosure, according to Reinharz (1992), is a sign of good feminist practice in research. This put us all on more equal footing, though clearly I had different responsibilities as a researcher as well. I was responsible for initiating, carrying out, and documenting the research in ways that the others were not.

Being a participant did not solve all of the power issues in this research, and in fact in some ways it made it more complex. I believe that though I had more power than the other participants in certain ways, there were ways that they also held more power. They had knowledge, experience and ability to reflect on the stories they shared, that meant they were powerful. I don't necessarily think they were conscious of it, but it manifested in the way they shared and spoke about their lives.

The issue of power is integral to research. For me, this was doubly important. Even though I believe that power is an issue in any research, because my research is about power struggles it seemed even more important to address it. This means that the

whole approach and strategy needs to be sensitive and respectful of power, and as transparent as possible.

This sensitivity meant that I must be attentive to the implications of power and oppression at every level of my research. Lather (1991) in Getting Smart, explains that one of the assumptions that guides her work as a feminist researcher, is "the politics of empowerment" (p.3). By this she suggests that critical research provides a foundation for liberation, and must be based upon methods that give individuals both a clearer understanding of the world and the power to change.

#### Congruence Between Feminist Values and Research Methods

One integral aspect of my life is that I am a lesbian feminist. I wanted to do research that matched this important element of my experience; to be part of feminist scholarship that risks speaking about and analyzing social oppression for lesbians. I am accountable as a feminist researcher not only to academe and the social work profession, but also to other women, and lesbians. I take this obligation seriously because of my commitment to the continued examination of power, and because I value striving to live my life actively involved in stopping exploitation of the oppressed. Harding (1987) reminds us that those who are actively engaged in fighting against the oppression of women in day-to-day life are likely to develop unbiased and non-sexist research. Creating feminist research has the power to clarify the world for women (Hartung, Ollenburger, Moore & Deegan, 1988; Bristow & Esper, 1988).

Because this was an interactive research process, and the group members were actively involved in some parts of this study together with me, the participants were

more a part of the research than in traditional research. They helped to analyze and interpret the data, and to determine the continuation of the group. Stanley and Wise (cited in Reinharz, 1992) discuss this method of doing research as involving sharing of power, and also ownership of the material by everyone and not just by the researcher. In this research I wanted to be a researcher who engaged in an authentic dialogue with other lesbians - a dialogue that can explore and be an example of a lesbian feminist ethic. I wanted to have group members' participation, through dialogue, in as many parts of the research as possible. This was somewhat limited because I decided what form my research would take, and the nature of the research topic prior to establishing a group of participants. Nevertheless, many parts of the research are inclusive and participatory. This all fit with my ideas of congruence of my feminist values and my way of approaching research.

### Commitment to Political Action and Social Change

Up until 20 years ago, there was a paucity of research about lesbians. This means we are without important information about a large and marginalized segment of the population. This can be rectified by giving voice and credibility to the stories, lives and analyses of women and lesbians themselves.

Lesbian experience and oppression is unique and is often hidden in research about male homosexuals. In my research and readings, I was struck and dismayed by how heteropatriarchal the perspective and language was, and how that viewpoint excluded lesbians from dialogue, studies and policies about family, relationship and reproduction. Patriarchal values are disseminated through the use of language; particularly through

research. I hope this research will add to the growing body of work that challenges this and offers a new form of expression true to women, by offering some of the daily repercussions of being a lesbian and a woman as an active and credible aspects in this research. I strive to be an activist, a revolutionary and a socially responsible critical analyst and researcher. In this research I sought to reach truths that were as yet unspoken or hidden, and I believe there are many truths that come from women's experiences and knowing. I hope this research can support the attempt to produce a new kind of knowledge that is free of the constricted patriarchal ways of knowing, and that can celebrate, as feminism does, women's diversity (Reinharz, 1992). Naomi Black (cited in Reinhartz, 1992) a Canadian political scientist urges us to recognize that feminist research expects and values the subjectivity of women's personal experiences.

Reinharz (1979) stresses that the most productive position for a researcher is a sense of dissatisfaction with the present frameworks for investigating social issues. I have many concerns about how lesbians are treated in their relationships and how they sometimes treat each other, and felt very dissatisfied with the ways these concerns are usually addressed. Often these issues of power struggles are ignored, or left unexamined in lesbians' lives.

As a feminist, and because I am conducting research from a feminist perspective, I also concern myself with political action and social change. Therefore it was important to honour myself as an "insider" in how I view the world, perceive my place in it, and give voice to my own experience. My experience is also a part of what informs the needs for action and change. In this way I hoped to engage in a form of research

discussion that could offer power to women and be a significant part of stimulating political and social change.

Through the research process and the subsequent knowledge developed I hoped that the words and expressions of lesbians would potentially inform practitioners, policy development and further academic pursuits. In this way our lives could be affected in profound ways.

If the personal is political, then looking at how we live our personal lives, including our relationships, is a political act. Examining and constructing lesbian ethics about how lesbians behave in relationships with other lesbians is political and community work, and is therefore something with which all lesbians need to concern themselves (Bart, 1988). Lesbian ethics, and the details of how we treat each other is not a private concern. It is a public concern and a political act.

Considering group discussion as a method for data collection provided an opportunity for all of us to better understand the principle of working collectively to effect change. As long as we act alone to improve our own circumstances, social, political and economic oppression will persist and be reinforced. Lather (1991, p.73) reminds us that one of the purposes of feminist research is "to empower the oppressed to come to understand and change their own oppressive realities". The lesbian community must challenge unhealthy power struggles among lesbians, break silence about them, and hear each others' stories. In this way we can begin to make change together.

Research which encourages self and social understanding and change-enhancing action on the part of 'developing progressive groups' requires research designs that allow us as researchers to reflect on how our value commitments insert themselves into our empirical work (Lather, 1991, p.80).

I had wondered perhaps, if out of the research there would emerge the possibility of continuing to meet as a group to address the issues and take action in our community with other lesbians to affect a change in how we deal with relationship problems. This would be another way to create political action and social change from this study.

### Evidence of Women's and Lesbians' Experience

Feminist research strives to honour a multitude of women's ways of knowing (Reinharz, 1992). Australian scholar Dale Spender (cited in Reinharz, 1992) explains that at the heart of feminism is the wisdom that there is no one truth or expert; no one way that leads to some objective form of absolute knowledge. Feminism values the experiences of all women.

I wanted lesbians to be visibly present in this study. That is why I wanted to present our many voices, the many themes and innuendoes, and to make audible as, Patricia Sexton suggests, the personal and collective expressions of our group (cited in Lather, 1991). I hoped to be open to hearing and then presenting lesbians' lives in a way that honoured their truths, whatever they were; to be able to present our lives and address our issues, as Acker et al. recommend, without violating our realities (cited in Lather, 1991).

I believe that the women, including myself, who were participants in this research, are the expert knowers of their own lives and experiences. Their experience forms the essence of what can be known in this area. Feminist research seeks to uncover "more empowering ways of knowing" (Lather, 1991, p.85). It is not congruent with what I believe about power dynamics or a balance of power for me to set myself apart from

and superior to other women as an expert, just because I am the researcher. I cannot be an expert in knowing all women's lives; only my own. In Peace and Power, Wheeler and Chinn describe women as remembering the wisdom of knowing. To me this means that we can have access to and remember what we know. This knowing is deeply hidden among layers of patriarchal conditioning. Even though it is sometimes tiresome to uncover, it is uplifting to do so, and becomes easier with the support of other women. (Wheeler & Chinn, 1991).

I want to be an integral and impassioned voice in the centre of my research and not simply an objective, impartial, theoretical voice, since this would be incongruent with my world view. I want to make obvious the ways in which my involvement makes the research come alive for me, and how that moves me. I do not want my life as a lesbian woman in family and relationship to be separate from my life as an academic researcher. This does not mean I ignored my responsibility for the ethical and political concerns that arose with participants, or the research responsibilities that were clearly mine. For me, this was not simply an academic research exercise, but a significant part of my own and other lesbians' experiences. This research helps to unravel distressing aspects of our lives.

### Consciousness-Raising

Lather (1991, p.72) explains that a "reciprocally educative process is more important than product as empowering methods contribute to consciousness-raising and transformative social action". I hoped my research would act as a consciousness-raising experience for me and the other participants, and hopefully for

others who read my research. I also wanted to be able to change awareness through dialogue. In this way through awareness of the threads of communication and the differences between us, we can begin to create a collective understanding of power dynamics as a society and community of lesbians, and not just as individuals. This could also help to form a basis for knowledge development in feminist research.

Feminist legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon (cited in Reinharz, 1992) also discussed consciousness-raising groups as a feminist method for doing research, because they encompass values that give women insight and awareness about their experiences from their own perspectives. It is interesting that although consciousness-raising is considered a unique feminist method, Reinharz (1992, p.221) "found no examples of its research use other than a few cases that deviate from its typical meaning".

### **Knowledge is Created through Participatory Experience**

I have chosen participatory research because it is collaborative and interactive and allows the possibility of exploring power in lesbian intimate relationships with others. It enriched the whole process for me to be an active participant and not just an analyst. One of the values Reinharz discusses in On Becoming A Social Scientist (1979, p.10), is that research should be "unalienated labour". She suggests that the best way to reduce alienation is by creating a sense of collaborative community in research. Doing participatory research as a group also had something to do with the fact that there are not copious amounts of material available about power struggles in lesbian relationships, so developing a knowledge base as a participant with other lesbians seemed valuable. In feminist research, knowledge is generated through an

intersubjective process between the researcher and the participants. Doing research in a group offered a foundation for exploring power struggles together, and developing the beginnings of knowledge about it together.

I wanted to combine some of the elements of participatory and feminist research because they both have the potential to confirm women's perceptions of their own experiences. Both encourage marginalized people to think about the links between their personal lives and the broader social, political and economic trials that they face.

In participatory research, the researcher is expected to be an integral part of the research, walking beside the other participants and "err[ing] on the side of action for social justice" (Maguire, 1987, p.101). I was interested in the essence of women's experiences and their interpretations of them. Sociologist Francesca Cancian (cited in Reinharz, 1992) explains that participatory research creates knowledge through a process involving democracy and interaction in relationships. She asserts that participatory research includes the space for personal consciousness-raising and community action, the potential for participants to share in decisions and skill acquisition, and the utilization of participants' feelings and experiences as part of the development of knowledge about women.

As a researcher it felt important to confirm and affirm the reality of my personal experience by being part of a group where I was heard and could analyze my experience with others. This does not mean, however, that I needed others to agree with me, or have had the same kinds of experiences as I. Agreement and similar experiences are powerful, but the validation of my experience came from having such a safe place to be non-judgementally heard and respected, and an opportunity to explore it with other

lesbians. I also assessed my assumptions and values continuously, and their impact on my research. Being part of a consciousness-raising group helped me to do this.

Feminist research also requires a high degree of reflexivity on the part of the researcher, and I addressed this in the chapter that examines my reflections on the method used (see Chapter 4).

### **Selecting the Research Method**

My plan was to create an alternative method for doing feminist research that would match my values and research perspective and provide useful information on the topic. Some characteristics of alternative research methods that Reinharz discusses in On Becoming a Social Scientist are that they focus on process: be authentic but creative; be sound and intuitive; emphasize the personal; and be a combination of objective and subjective approaches (1979). I considered these principles in finding an approach that was suitable for this research.

My method was determined by the problem (power issues), and the population (lesbians) that I am working with. I chose a method (a group discussion format) that fit with a feminist methodology. This seemed like a relevant and appropriate way to explore this problem in lesbians' lives, and to create useful research that is by lesbians, for lesbians and not just about lesbians.

I was concerned how I could develop a research format that evolved out of the problem of power dynamics in lesbian relationships. I decided to use a group discussion format for different reasons. Even though I knew I would learn much if I used individual interviews or questionnaires, I thought that creating a group where

lesbians could talk together seemed potentially far richer. Sharing stories, hearing that we were not alone, feeling support, moving experiences out of the personal realm by analyzing how societal pressures shaped our experiences, was part of what could make this a fertile research process. Reinharz (cited in Lather, 1991) discusses developing a format that is interactive and that points to patterns, themes and meanings of the data, rather than having a method that offers predictability and control.

I hoped to offer lesbians the opportunity to share their stories, bear witness to each other, and use the group for personal healing and support as well as potentially for political action. When I discussed the format informally with others, many women were excited and attracted to the possibility of sharing and learning together in a group. Some said they would feel too raw or vulnerable, but most could see the power of exploring the subject with others.

I feel strongly that as lesbians we need to be living resources for each other in our relationships. Finding solutions to relationship problems together is in contrast to the heteropatriarchal model where family and relationship are usually private matters, and the problems of abuse and control are silenced and kept secret. This privacy feeds isolation, and despair that accompanies unhealthy relationships. I hoped to be part of creating a different model in a lesbian community where personal relationships are subject to the scrutiny and support of others - a healthier way to be in relationships and families.

As a member of the oppressed minority I was studying, I have a certain awareness about gathering and analyzing the data in ways that are sensitive to overcoming our oppression, not adding to it. I felt that part of what would help everyone to maintain

power in the group, was my being a participant because I would be less likely to set myself apart from the others, since I was not only the researcher, but also a facilitator. Being a facilitator also represents certain kinds of power by affording me the possibility of directing the group and making decisions that others did not.

I decided that to increase the likelihood that women would talk freely about power in relationships it was important that participants not be there with their current or former partners. I assumed from my knowledge of power dynamics, that if there were power problems, we might not hear about them if a woman's partner was sitting there in the group. There are strict allegiance and betrayal codes about what can or cannot be shared with others that operate in the context of relationships. I wanted to create an atmosphere where women could feel free to share what they wanted, and where they were the ones to decide what to share.

I chose a co-facilitator because I hoped through this to create added perspective for the group sessions as well as for me with the data analysis and interpretations. I knew that the material discussed would be very close to me personally and emotionally, and I wanted to have some assistance with objectivity when it was needed. I did not want my personal and emotional connection with this topic to take over the group. This role of the co-facilitator was designed to make it easier for me to be researcher, facilitator and participant by including someone else collaboratively in these roles. This helped to eliminate some of the sharp distinction between me and the other participants, since I was now not the sole facilitator. The woman I chose was interested in this research, in being part of the group, and was also a close personal friend of mine. She helped me to set up for the groups, initiate conversations, monitor the members of the group

emotionally, keep the discussion focused, set out the guidelines for the group, debrief with me at the end of each session and plan for the next session.

The plan was to have three group meetings, each of three hours duration, with a group of eight lesbians, including the co-facilitators. A fourth session was later added to ensure the women's feedback on the first draft of the data analysis. Nothing was considered as part of the final report unless all participants thought it was reflective of what happened and what was said in the group. This also added accountability to the participants.

### **Selecting Participants**

The participants were lesbians all drawn from a mid-sized community in British Columbia. I moved to this community three months prior to beginning data collection. Since I was working with a marginalized group that is for the most part hidden, I had to be creative about finding willing participants. I used a snowball sampling method. Through word of mouth and strategically placed posters (see Appendix 1 for Poster) to inform women about the study, I sought their potential volunteer participation. It was difficult to determine the most effective way to select members for the group. I knew none of the group members (except for the co-facilitator) prior to this research. The women involved had to be self-declared lesbians who had been in at least one lesbian relationship. I had no other criteria for selection. I was hoping to find a group that was diverse in age, race, class and other factors, though I did not select for this. Since I was interested in women who were willing to share their experience of power struggles in intimate relationships, it was essential that they be willing to speak about their personal

lives in a group. I chose the first six women who contacted me, because they met these criteria.

I chose eight as the optimum number for the group. I thought eight was a good group size to give everyone an adequate chance to share, to produce a variety of experience, but not to make it unwieldy. I hoped the participants would be verbal and reflective, and possess the desire and ability to engage in critical analysis of their relationships. Each potential participant met with me prior to the start of the research group to clarify the purpose and intent of the research, to have their questions answered, and to give informed consent if they decided to participate (see Appendix 2 for Informed Consent Form).

During these individual meetings I explained my personal, professional and political reasons for doing this research. I also discussed my research questions, and that I planned for us to discuss power issues and what influences or affects these dynamics in our relationships through the telling of our stories and our critical analysis together. I explained that it was not a therapy group, and told them how much time would be involved in partaking in this research. I answered any concerns and questions that they had, and asked for them to read the informed consent form and sign it if they wanted to be part of the study.

### **Group Profile**

I present here a group profile of the women involved in this study. This information was gathered from a page that each woman filled out for me (see Appendix 3 for Group

Profile Sheet). The women who told their stories in this group are very diverse, but also have some striking similarities.

The eight participants ranged in age from 36 to 57. All are white. Of those who identified their ethnic background four identified as Canadian, with German, English, Scottish, French, Welsh, Irish and Polish ancestral roots. One woman is Jewish, with Russian, Polish and Hungarian ancestors. All spoke of their class origins. Five of the women grew up in working or poverty class homes, and of those, three still considered themselves to be working class, whereas the other two said they are now middle class. Three women grew up middle class, and two of them described their adult lives as being economically downwardly mobile, whereas the third felt she has remained middle class.

Participants' employment roles at the time of the research included community service worker, forestry aquaculture lab technician, high school teacher, financial assistance worker, nurse, chef, community mental health outreach nurse, and social worker. There is a strong predominance of human service occupations represented in this group. Education was diverse, including a B.Sc., BSW, MSW student, diplomas in fashion design and business administration, university level elementary education, massage therapy certification, accounting clerk technician, two and a half years completed of a BSW, nursing diploma, grade 11, and RPN, RN, university adult education and the school of life.

Four participants had never had any involvement with children or step-children in their lesbian relationships. The other four had involvements of many different kinds, including two who are mothers of blood children, all grown; three have step children,

some grown, several teenagers and some youngsters. One woman has six step grandchildren. Another is a god-parent, and helped to alternately inseminate her lesbian partner with donor sperm. I refer to it as alternate insemination and not artificial insemination because there is nothing artificial about it. It just happens to be an alternate way of getting pregnant.

One participant is single. All the others are currently involved in intimate relationships. One woman has a non-live-in lesbian lover, and the other six live with female partners. The lengths of current relationships ranged from three months to 12 years. Everyone had been involved in other relationships previously, whether marriages with men or other lesbian relationships, ranging in duration from several months to 20 years.

Five women had been aware of their lesbianism since childhood or adolescence. One felt that women's studies had been pivotal to her coming out at age 45, and the other two came out in their thirties. One woman is visually impaired and another is dyslexic. They included this as significant and so I did as well. All of the participants identified themselves as feminists.

Of the eight participants, none withdrew during the research. I cannot claim that the women in this study are representative of all segments of the lesbian community.

### **Data Collection**

The data were gathered in a way that was congruent with the values, ethics and philosophy of conception of feminism. There were three, three hour group sessions that were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis. These three sessions took place over

two months. A fourth session took place after the initial data analysis draft had been written, but before it was finalized, so as to include feedback and input from the participants, and to ensure that the report was accurate and authentic. This last session took place three months after the other sessions ended.

We began by setting up agreements together as part of the first session, as to what was needed to create a safe and trusting environment. After the initial discussion about group agreements I explained again the focus of the group being on each others' stories in relation to power dynamics; exploring what we mean by power; and examining what power dynamics contribute to relationships working or not, and what might make a difference if there were difficulties. I purposefully did not have a set of structured questions because I wanted the flow of each woman's stories and experiences to shape the sessions. More than anything, I wanted to create a forum where nothing experienced would be taboo to discuss, and where group members could feel each woman's path in relationship, positive or negative. I wanted us to have the space as lesbians, to see what would emerge if we had the opportunity to speak honestly and openly about topics usually kept hidden.

Open questions served as a discussion starter during the first session, and the group moved from these to other areas of concern for the group members. An example of a question is: "What were some of your experiences with power in your relationships?" The only consistent theme was that of power. No woman was intentionally afforded more power, or say than others, though it is obvious that there were power implications from the diverse characteristics described in the group profile. I believe that there are always power factors operating in any group. These characteristics and the inherent

power connotations certainly may have had an affect on who spoke, when and how much, etc. However, I regarded and honoured each woman as an equal participant with valuable insights, ideas, thoughts and feelings to share and contribute to the group.

### **Data Analysis**

The analysis of the data is both descriptive and interpretive. It is descriptive in that I report on the content of the research by describing in detail these lesbians' report of their lives and relationship experiences. Interpretive analysis began as soon as I became interested in doing research on this topic. I began to reflect on my own experiences, and talk with and analyze relationships of other lesbians. I conducted an extensive literature review, which has included reading other women's stories and interpretations. Doing this research has changed how I observe relationships and interactions. I have learned to listen when women speak explicitly or implicitly about power. I constantly meet women who have relevant stories to share with me. All of this has contributed to my understanding of this topic, and my approach to this research.

I transcribed the group sessions from audiotape to computer file, and then made hard copies of the transcripts. The transcribing process gave me an opportunity to make further meaning of the material building on my understanding of it in the group. Hearing the nuances of voice tones, and where levels and expressions of ease or discomfort were evident, added to the meaning of the data.

I tried to maintain a balance between our sharing and the voices of the participants and my role as the interpreter and analyzer of the data. I made journal entries at various points in the research process and I keep one that contains my reflections on

both content and process during this phase of the research (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). This was helpful because it allowed me to keep track of some of my reflections, sit with them for a time, come back to them, and then use them as part of the analysis. One example is that I wrote about how similar the experiences of the women in this group were. That struck me, and I knew I needed to include it in the analysis, because although it was not planned that way, it also was not a mistake. I think this was in part due to the fact that women who had been in relationships with unhealthy power dynamics wanted a place to share and analyze what had happened. I also think that they all knew some of my story and difficulties, and so that may have made it easier for them to become part of the group.

This part of the research was a time to absorb the data, become familiar with them, and see the patterns that reflected the content of the conversations emerging from them that formed their essence (Carney, 1983). I wanted to ensure in my interpretations that I gave the appropriate weight to hearing and acknowledging the voices and lived experiences of the participants, and to critically analyze the social constructs that influence their lives (Kirby & McKenna, 1989).

As I worked with the data I searched for clusters of similar thoughts or ideas that were relevant to power. I paid particular attention to recurrent expressions, words, phrases, images and metaphors. I identified themes that were at the core of the material. I then identified and put together groups of information that fit together. I found appropriate wording from the voices of the women to describe and support the various themes. I read and reread the transcripts until I was fully satisfied important information had been grouped and the main themes had been identified. I found

appropriate wording from the voices of the women to describe and support the various themes. I continued my reflective journal, and used questions and insights from there to come to a deeper understanding of the data.

I asked the co-facilitator to conduct an analysis at the same time as I, as one way to check my findings, and I hired her to do 15 hours of work simultaneously but separately from me on initial transcript analysis. Twelve of these hours were spent on her own analysis, and three with me comparing what we both found. In this way, I gained from her ideas about content themes. It was important to have another opinion to act as a check and balance of what I considered to be important content.

The instruction I gave her was to extract major themes that she felt should be included in the data analysis. When we compared notes and discussed our separate analysis, we found we had 12 thematic areas we had each selected that were either identical, or very close. We each had several smaller themes that were somewhat different. We each had questions about aspects of the data that were unclear or that did not readily fit other categories. I used this categorization to form the base of further data analysis. I was encouraged by the similarity of our findings, given that we had worked independently.

The final step was to take the initial findings back to the group for ideas and insight and to ensure that what I would be reporting was indeed reflective of our time together. The participants were eager to be involved in this part of the study and curious to know what I had extracted from our sessions.

The data were shared with the participants in this session by me reading each section of the analysis that I had written, and giving time for feedback in between. There was

the open-ended possibility of continuing to meet as a group beyond this point if it proved valuable for the women involved, or if we decided to carry on and create some further education or social action as a group. In the end, we agreed to continue meeting.

### **Confidence in the Data**

I am aware as I consider the issue of validity that qualitative research has different criteria for examining credibility than does quantitative research. Heron and Polanyi (cited in Lather, 1991, p.66) assert that "currently paradigmatic uncertainty in the human sciences is leading to the re-conceptualizing of validity...Inquiry is increasingly recognized as a process whereby tacit (subjective) and propositional (objective) knowledge are interwoven and mutually informing". Lather (1991, p.66) also offers a new vision of validity that includes a commitment to "a more just social order". Guba and Lincoln (cited in Lather, 1991, p. 66) have reported that at the very least, in assessing validity, qualitative research should include "triangulation, reflexivity and member checks". I strived to maintain a self-critical attitude about how my ideas and beliefs affect the research. Wherever relevant and appropriate, I have identified my assumptions and biases, and any changes I have experienced in my perspectives toward this research material. I included a process of incorporating co-facilitator (see Appendix 4 for her written feedback) and member feedback as a way to check and balance my perceptions and preconceptions. This was an important way to help create validation for my research, even though it is not generalizable to the lesbian population.

I am able to trust the description and analysis of my data because it represents the voices and experiences of the women participants. I did not want the women to feel identified in my thesis, but I did want them to recognize themselves and their words. I have aspired to bring the participants into my research as actively as I could, and this influenced my reporting and attention to details in the process of data analysis and interpretations. My aims in this research match Lather's ideas when she says:

A more collaborative approach to critical inquiry is needed to empower the researched, build emancipatory theory, and move towards the establishment of data credibility within praxis-oriented, advocacy research (1991, p.69).

### **Ethical Considerations**

This section addresses ethical considerations and issues in relation to this research from the point of view of university academic standards, and in light of feminist research ethics.

The ethics of conducting research with humans, as represented by the University of Victoria's Committee on Research and Other Activities Involving Human Subjects, concerns itself with several areas. These were addressed in the application made to this committee (see Appendix 5) and approval was granted for this research. The principle ethical concerns in this research are: (1) responsibility for the well-being of the participants (causing no harm), (2) confidentiality, (3) full disclosure of the research intentions with informed consent. I discuss each concern in turn and then close with comments on feminist ethics.

### Responsibility for the Well-being of Participants

The research consisted of three group sessions in which individuals were asked to share personal experiences. Group sessions of this kind has the potential to open feelings and create a sense of vulnerability. Women could have emotional reactions to the material being discussed. While some emotional reactions can be positive and healing, I thought it was my ethical responsibility to provide safety and support for any woman having difficulty with her reactions. This was done several ways. First, I am an experienced group facilitator, with established therapeutic skills. Second, I selected a co-facilitator who is also an experienced group leader, and who agreed to help me identify and respond to participants at risk. Third, I offered one-to-one time to participants who felt they needed support and further discussion at the end of a group session. I was also prepared to facilitate a referral for counselling if it was needed and wanted by any participant. Finally, I included time at the beginning of each session to discuss group agreements aimed at increasing the safety of group participants. In these ways, I felt prepared to deal responsibly and ethically with any negative or intense reactions to the group sessions, should they arise.

### Confidentiality

The issue of confidentiality concerning personal information about group participants was clearly addressed. At the first group meeting we created group agreements, one of which was to maintain confidentiality. I kept group session audiotapes and any other research data locked in a cabinet. With the group's knowledge and permission I shared these only with the co-facilitator, who helped

process the data. I used code names for group members instead of using their real names on transcripts. I will ensure that the tapes are erased when the research is complete. The first draft of the data analysis, which included a variety of direct quotes, was reviewed word for word with the group to ensure that no one felt they were publicly identified.

### Informed Consent

Participants received full information, both verbally and in writing, concerning the nature, duration, and intent of the research and the group sessions. I explained the group process, and how it would be used in research before asking for written, informed consent (Appendix 2). The participants were free to share only what they were comfortable sharing, and could withdraw from the group and the research any time they wished. Involvement was totally voluntary.

### Feminist Ethics

In addressing questions about power in lesbian relationships, it was essential for me to be aware and sensitive to power issues in the group, and to deal with these ethically. The ethics of feminist research are important to me. These I would characterize as: (1) attention to power issues, being as clear as possible about them, (2) placing high value on the direct expression of experience of women being studied; that is, using the voices of women, (3) attention to context and structure of our lives in the analysis of women's condition, as opposed to blaming women for their personal problems, (4) stressing the value of research which has the potential for political action and social change.

Power issues in the group were addressed in relation to my dual role as researcher and participant. I noted in my research proposal and in my application to the Committee on Research and Other Activities Involving Human Subjects that I planned this dual role. Indeed, it was because of feminist ethics in relations to power that the participant research model was chosen. I wanted my voice to be included in the research and not separate from it, both as a researcher and also as a participant with experience to share. I discussed this dual role and the potential for boundary issues with the group. I deliberately provided a co-facilitator to help attend to any complications this might bring. The researcher has more contextual power than participants; being a participant helped to balance that power differential to some degree. I was expecting the same kind of sharing and self-disclosure of myself as I was of them.

I also discussed at length with my supervising committee and the group, the possibility of role confusion when the group continued and shifted to a non-research group, after the three planned sessions. This brought up two issues: (1) a shift in power relationships when a the researcher/participant became just a participant, and (2) the question of the researcher obtaining further data from individuals participating in a group beyond the end of the planned research time frame. These issues were discussed openly with the group. Members granted permission for the group to proceed beyond the original agreement for three sessions and to use whatever I felt was needed from those sessions to write this thesis.

This research places high value on the direct expression of women's experience. A strong theme in feminist research stresses gathering information directly from women's

experience and staying true to that. This research builds on the voices of lesbians, talking of their lesbian experience. It is important that research about lesbians be conducted by and with lesbians. That the researcher comes from lesbian experience, and the voices of lesbians form the substance of this research gives authenticity and credibility to this work.

Feminist ethics require that analysis be grounded in analysis of social context and structure. In this work, women not only told their individual stories, but there was comparison and analysis that led the group to greater understanding of common themes which affected us all. In this way we came to understand the feminist tenets that the "political is personal" and the "personal is political". As early consciousness-raising groups taught us, women talking together personally can be a powerful tool for social analysis.

Throughout the group meetings there was an awareness of the possibility of these discussions leading toward social change. Speaking each woman's story aloud in a society that reinforces silence about women's personal experiences was an act of social change. The writing of this thesis is an act of potential social change in a social context that has historically ignored lesbian experience. The decision of the group members to continue as a consciousness-raising part of the lesbian community also contributes to change in the lives of the participants, and the community in which we live.

Ethical considerations were an important part of the development and process of this research project. As I have stressed, I am committed to a political stance as a feminist and as a social worker, based in women's experience, analysis and action. These

motivations have guided this research, and also framed the ethical principles and practice used in conducting it.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **REFLECTIONS ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS**

In this chapter I would like to present some of my reflexivity as a researcher. I believe there are several unique features about this research, and I want to discuss how the group research process, my dual role as a participant and as researcher, and the fourth feedback session developed. Reinharz states that because this kind of research can be such a personal activity, it is important to include vivid explanations of the research experience, including values, findings and questions that arise (1979). This chapter is an opportunity to include some of these thoughts.

#### **Reflections on the Group Process Research Methodology**

It is somewhat unusual to undertake research, even feminist qualitative research, with a group. My instinct and intellect dictated that this would be a more effective, honest and productive way to research this topic, since historically there has been silence, secrecy and isolation shrouding the often painful experiences of power struggles in lesbian relationships. I hoped that a group format would allow a rich and deep dialogue that has been missing for so many of us in exploring and resolving our relationship difficulties.

I have facilitated many groups in the course of my professional life, and appreciate the complexities that can operate for any group of people. Facilitating groups can be extremely challenging because of differences of personality, style, needs of group

members, conflicts, and the difficulty of sharing personal stories and emotions with others who are initially strangers. It is essential that a safe environment be created so that group members can offer their experiences in a climate of respect.

When I began to reflect on what might have contributed to the ease, comfort level and safety of this group, there are some elements I can readily identify, and other parts that remain a mystery to me. To begin with, the individual interviews that took place in my home were informal, which may have contributed to an initial sense of comfort about the research group.

I was clear about the purposes and parameters of the group, the research and the role of the co-facilitator, confidentiality, and how I would be conducting and participating in the research. I said that I wanted to do this research to break silence together, and to create a forum for exploring and analyzing together what we had experienced about power in our relationships. I believe that this ability to make clear what would happen and make the possibilities of the research come alive helped to contribute to a sense of comfort and security for the beginning of the group sessions.

When we first met as a group, it was in an office waiting room that was central, quiet, accessible and free. The co-facilitator and I arrived early enough to make the space cozy and comfortable, with appropriate lighting and had tea and goodies available. I think all of this contributed to a sense of safety and trust initially, and helped us all to relax somewhat. After the first session I asked if everyone wanted to meet at my house instead of the office. The response was that they felt very comfortable at the office and there was no need to change the location. We continued to meet there for the three sessions that were taped and transcribed for this research.

Again, in the first session, I reviewed important information about the research and the level of confidentiality I could ensure. I then asked the group members to outline what they needed to work well together, develop trust and to feel confident about confidentiality. This was a way to create group agreements. It is something I have done in every group I have worked with, but I have never felt it to be so easy as with this group. This process was completed in 15 or 20 minutes. Everyone was clear about what was important. There were no disagreements. More important, the established guidelines were honoured, and the three sessions followed with an ambience of respect, caring and openness.

I am grateful for the ease with which this happened. My sense was that there was such a relief for all the group members to finally share and hear some of the most difficult experiences and memories of our relationships, that there was a comfort and a sense of support in being in a place where that could happen. There was definitely increased ease, trust and sharing with each group session, but I clearly remember feeling overwhelmed, even at the end of the first session, at the level and depth of participation, and the eagerness of us all to meet again.

I welcome the opportunity to work in a group. I have done it often in my work, in many different contexts, and usually find it enriching and rewarding. I know this attitude has contributed to my strengths and abilities as a group facilitator. I am sensitive, non-judgemental and respectful of the inherent value of each participant and the worth of their personal expertise. I believe these qualities were another factor in the creation of a safe milieu for this group process.

I also know that the composition of a group, and the chance mix of personalities is a critical, though unpredictable, factor affecting group coalescence. We were fortunate in this respect. The women in this group, though all at their own place in coming to terms with past relationships, were open to each others' stories, experiences, ideas and feelings about relationships. There was insight, inspiration, support, food for thought, and connection because of this openness. Members saw it as an opportunity both to be introspective and to learn from our pasts.

This set the stage for a depth and quality of sharing. There was so much to share, so much that had been unspoken for so long, so much with which we felt alone, that once we all realized that we were there for similar reasons and intentions it really took little for the group to get going. The co-facilitator and I both paid attention to what was happening in the group, but there was little for us to do. If we strayed too far from the topic, we would gently steer it on course again. However, this was rarely a problem.

In the two subsequent sessions, we planned the lead-in to the dialogue a little differently. The co-facilitator and I met between sessions to discuss the highlights and any possible areas that we might want to focus on in the next session. We came prepared with some ideas that we could have presented to the group as a way to initiate the conversation for the second and third sessions. Some of these were: how does the male model of power over fit with feminism, and how do we deal with the fact that it doesn't when it includes women using power over with each other?; or what is respect, what does it mean to each of us and how do we know if we are being respected? However, the group members jumped right in with thoughts or questions from the last

session and the discussion took off in its own direction, generated by the needs and ideas of the participants. There were times when women would come with something on their minds, either from the previous session, or from having thought about something since the last session. This would then initiate another path of dialogue. The conversations were lively and intense. There were some very humorous moments, and some very touching times when some of us were moved to tears. Each woman shared from a personal and authentic place. Naturally, some spoke more than others, but no one monopolized time and space. There was room for each woman to bring her unique experience and to be heard. Hearing was as important as speaking in this group. The depth of sharing and intimacy, as well as our analysis of what goes on in our relationships grew stronger in each session. There was a sense of coming to know each other and walking important paths together.

Throughout the sessions, I was aware of and spoke about the fact that because my research was about power, I felt a special obligation to attend to power dynamics and be sensitive to how these developed within the group. In my experience and that of the others we did not feel there were any significant power problems that emerged in the group. Perhaps this was because we only met for the purpose of this research three times, and that was too short a time for power dynamics to unfold. Yet as we continued to meet as a group, I still do not think there were problems arising out of power differentials.

## **Reflections as Researcher and Participant**

Even though consciousness-raising groups are considered part of feminist research, as mentioned earlier, they are not used as often as they were in the 1960s. The double role of researcher and participant is not encouraged for many practical, sensible reasons. Dual roles are complicated. They can make it very difficult to be a researcher, by blurring boundaries, or encouraging the researcher to overidentify with the subject and be unable to stand back from it enough to offer sound analysis and interpretations. This role duality could have made it difficult for me to report my findings accurately if I had overidentified with the data. I wanted to be careful not to find only what I wanted to find in the data.

However, when I decided to explore this area of research, I did not want to divide myself into pieces. This is not how I move through the world. This does not fit my politics or my values. As a feminist I hold strong to the idea that only when we are able to bring together all the different parts of ourselves can we begin to understand, heal, and move forward. I could not imagine simply doing an academic exercise that ignored and invalidated this principle.

Because this issue was personal for me - not just professional, academic, or theoretical - the only way I could honour this profound, painful part of my life was to include my own experience as a vital, valid part of the research. I included myself as a participant in the group so my voice could be heard, not silenced. I believe this has been a powerful and courageous act, though not always easy and straightforward. It is a challenge to learn to honour each woman's voice and life as crucial, including our own

and to keep these in balance. In this process I allowed myself the opportunity to be fully present, and to be honoured in this act along with the others.

From a feminist perspective there was also power for the group inherent in my self-disclosure as a participant. It breaks down barriers to be in a group and participate fully with others, as opposed to being set apart from the others in the role of researcher. It was important to me to reduce the distance between researcher and researched.

I believe that I have been humbled by including myself in this research, since much of what we did share was about how power had been abused or misused in our relationships, often at our own expense and to our detriment. Especially as a professional, having had many years of experience doing crisis work and working with abuse (both with heterosexuals and lesbians), it is important to remember that no matter how much we know or have witnessed, none of us is necessarily protected or immune from the cruelty of abuse in our own personal lives and relationships. I know abuse in a very different way than I used to through my work. Including myself as a woman experiencing this kind of devastation, and not simply a researcher writing about it, makes the research much more real and alive. This validates my own reality, and that is a way to reclaim my power. It is a way to resolve the unresolvable.

When I began to formulate this study, I was emotional and passionate in a way that both fuelled the research in a positive way but also ran the risk of clouding my vision and impacting upon my ability to do it justice. My supervisor and I discussed the pros and cons of this at length. I decided that I was not afraid of the emotion. I knew it would help this research to come alive; that there would be enough time and space between my experience and the thesis that would temper the rawness.

I believe though that of course my experiences around painful issues of power in relationship must have shaped many aspects of my research. I am sure that it framed my discussions with participants both before and during the process, it helped to formulate my conceptualization of power throughout the study and it affected my analysis. My experience gives me a certain perspective and foundation from which I share, formulate thoughts and analyze what happens to me. I learned and grew considerably in these respects by engaging in this process with others who shared some of my feelings thoughts and analyses, and challenged others.

I think the element of this research being "close to home" gives it more credibility and validity. I am pleased that this has not been solely an academic process. Many times I have been grateful to be so close to the research and passionate about it. I remain interested and involved with it, through the copious amounts of work involved.

This has meant that I have had time and opportunity for personal healing in many ways. Through journal writing and reflection as part of my directed studies; and access to reading other women's ideas and accounts, I have had the opportunity to engage in deep introspection.

The benefit of the research group, and the inspiration, insight and wisdom of the multitude of woman I have had the honour of informally talking with throughout this process has fuelled my enthusiasm and commitment to this process. Also, the challenges provided by my supervisor and committee, and my own reflections as I move toward and away from the material in the many ways I had to, in order to analyse and write up the data, has given me added perspective on this topic. It has been invaluable to be an integral part of this research every step of the way; and not separate from it;

even though, of necessity at different times I moved closer to it or backed away.

At times this was difficult because I was simultaneously immersed in the material on different levels. Sometimes I was overwhelmed with the impact of my own experiences, those of other women, and the material I was reading. There was an ebb and flow - the feelings would turn to reflections, insights, and renewed vigour for delving deeper. I also had a rhythm that worked for me. I would move close to the material and engage with it intensely, and then create space from it for a week or two. This helped me integrate what I was seeing and learning.

### **Reflections on the Fourth (Feedback) Session**

The fourth session, in which I read my first draft of the findings and asked for responses from the participants, occurred three months after our third group meeting. I added this session because I wanted both to offer accountability to the participants, and also to verify my descriptions and interpretations of their experiences. Laslett and Rapoport (cited in Lather, 1991) discuss the importance of these elements in their research.

I was excited and nervous about this session, feeling a very strong commitment to honour their input and feedback, and I wanting my writing truly to reflect what we had shared. I also felt vulnerable to expose my analysis to the scrutiny of seven other women. I was eager to discover if what I had written was true to what we had discussed, and if they found the content valid and "true", would their level of comfort with it be a concern? This was a way that I gave space for "member checks" with the participants, as Lincoln and Guba recommend (cited in Lather, 1991). I hoped it would

create a stronger sense of collaboration among us to include this in our process. I wanted to include the texture of many voices and interpretations besides my own, as Mulkay (cited in Lather, 1991) describes, to dissipate some of my power and authority as a researcher, and allow the material to design meanings of its own.

I taped this session, not for transcription, but to aid my memory in reviewing and incorporating its content. We met for six hours, including a dinner break, but most of the time was spent with me reading the analysis and having discussions as things came up, or sharing interpretations of how together we could make sense of the data.

I explained what I had done since our last research session, my transcription process, and the work the co-facilitator and I had done analyzing the data. I described how I had ordered the material and read it asking to be interrupted if at any time there were comments on the writing, the headings, themes, accuracy, representativeness of the ideas, ability to reflect our time together, concern about recognition of themselves and their voices in the writing, or lack of confidentiality. There were some interruptions and discussions during some sections, and much discussion at the end of many of the themes.

It was reassuring to see women recognizing their stories, their words in the text. We were reminded of how many of our precious conversations and most intimate and critical dialogues go unnoticed, and are given no space. They were thrilled that these conversations would not be forgotten. I realized that there is great power and honouring in respecting ourselves and our experiences enough to record them.

There was repeated surprise from women who marvelled at the fact that we had covered so many themes in our discussions. The depth and volume of what we had

shared amazed us all. As I read, we made some changes, suggestions, offered interpretations and ideas about the order, titles and sections of the writing. Mostly, the members felt that they had been seen, heard and well represented in the writing. Because it was my analysis and writing, and I had attachment to it yet wanted it to be acceptable to the group, I also felt it was critical that I remain open to the input, so the writing could reflect our journey as a group.

There were a couple of times during this session when someone remembered something in particular that was said that was important, that they either felt I had left out or needed to be expressed differently. It was very important in those moments that we had a group of minds to remember and discuss various perceptions. I was grateful that I did not have to respond to these as an individual memory. Sometimes the transcripts helped us remember; at other times the group could verify together what had actually happened.

Women also spoke in this session of the strength of this group experience for them; of the many ways that this manifested itself, through individual healing; provoking thoughts and awareness about power in relationships; gaining support and caring from others; being in a respectful and non-judgemental environment; and the exploration of critical issues together as lesbians.

We discussed our feelings about and interests in continuing to meet as a group again. One woman said she was hesitant to commit herself, because of time and work constraints, but that she still would like to be part of the group. The rest of us expressed the desire to be flexible about her ability to attend, and said we wanted her to continue to be part of it when she could. The other seven of us clearly wanted to

continue meeting once a month. Two women have agreed to set this up in the coming months. One woman said that because of this group, she felt inspired to write a book about lesbians' experiences, and she wondered if the group would be willing to be part of this or help in some way. That was left open for later discussion. It was clear that the direction, format and movement of the group would be shifting and growing, and all of us would play a part in this process. I am only one member of this group, and though I initiated its first stage, it will now have a life of its own.

This is an example of feminist research methods that honours the politics of feminism. All participants felt ownership of the research and demonstrated an ability to let their ideas and leadership blossom. It was clear to all that this group benefited everyone, validating the feminist methods used (Reinharz, 1992).

At the end of the session, I gave each woman a small symbol of the journey we made together in this research. I spoke about what my connection with each woman meant to me and its importance. It was moving and powerful to acknowledge the connection and its significance. I hope to create a special celebration feast for us all on the completion of the entire research process. However, it was essential at that time - having read my version of the coming together of our stories - to honour each woman's contribution to this work, and to my life.

I felt the pride each woman had in this material. It is not just my research, but there is a sense of ownership for each woman who contributed to it. There was a reciprocity that we experienced in doing this research together - a certain kind of intimacy as well as a give and take between us. Hammer and Saunder (cited in Lather, 1991) discuss the possibility that women doing research together can create a two-way process if

what transpires is interactive self-disclosure that provides the foundation for a sense of mutuality. This reciprocity was a "mutual negotiation of meaning and power" (Lather, 1991, p.57). It created the possibility for rich dialogue among us, and the space, analysis and support to understand and change how we approach relationships. The success of this kind of research depends on how much women are allowed to be at the heart of determining, defining and taking initiative on the issues that emerge in research (Lather, 1991). The participants in this study were at the centre of this process.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

This chapter presents the six major themes and the sub-themes that emerge from the content analysis of the three research group sessions. There are content clusters into which most of the data can be categorized. These six inter-connected themes all relate to the issue of power in lesbian relationships, and flow from the group members' own experiences, understandings, stories, concepts and analysis of power. The themes also relate to the socio-political context of power with respect to living our lives as lesbians. The six themes discussed are: 1. Ways of knowing about power in lesbian relationships. 2. Aspects of relationship that relate to power. This theme has three sub-themes: a) boundaries, b) respect and trust and c) communication. 3. Focal points of power struggles. There are also three sub-themes here: a) money and material possessions, b) children and c) sexuality. 4. The playing out of power dynamics. Three sub-themes emerge here: a) differing perceptions, b) abuse and c) leaving. 5. Patriarchal constraints frame power dynamics. 6. Healing. This theme has two sub-themes: a) attention to inner self as a way of healing and b) value of support and sharing. The discussion themes were different in emphasis in each session, though there was some crossover of themes to other sessions.

In this chapter, my voice is included with those of the other participants. I have not identified myself when I am speaking, just as I do not identify any other participant. I want to be afforded the same anonymity and confidentiality as all other women in the

group. This is appropriate since I am a participant, as well as a researcher in this context.

### **Theme 1: Ways of Knowing about Power in Lesbian Relationships**

As outlined in the literature review, one of the challenges of studying power in relationships is that there are so many different conceptual and definitional approaches. This research group reflected this diversity. At the beginning there was an attempt to define power, that was unsuccessful in producing a single agreed upon definition. Rather, dispersed throughout the group's dialogue were diverse ideas of what power, and how it is defined are understood and experienced in lesbian relationships. Many of these conceptions of power form a base on which some other themes build. I want to discuss some of these ideas about power first to underscore the variations of thought and experience in the group.

There did not seem to be a strong need in this group to define power in a singular way with which we all agreed. Indeed there seemed to be an unwillingness or lack of need to have a unitary definition of power. We seemed to have an understanding among us about what we meant by power. Power issues for the lesbians in this study started from the stance of powerlessness they experienced as women and as lesbians, but moved to a desire for a new way of relating based on balanced power, or respect for "power within". As group members spoke about power in terms of past unhealthy, abusive or failed relationships it was clearly connected to a concept of "power over" someone that we learn early and well in this society. The predominant way of looking at power in this society is the patriarchal "power over" conceptualization. The women

struggled with this sense of power, and their growing desire to use power differently. The data reflect the writings of feminist theorists who challenge the status quo, and who offer egalitarian relationship models, where power can be balanced or shared (Jeffreys, 1993). For the women in this group, when they felt they could speak out or define out loud their own boundaries, or bottom lines, they felt they were challenging the models of "power over" they had experienced. When discussing their ideal of power, or what was missing in former relationships, group members envisioned shared power between partners. They spoke of respect and trust, envisioning new kinds of relationships without abusers or victims.

One woman reinforced this notion of shared power explaining that power "moved back and forth to be healthy" in a relationship. She felt there was a certain sense of "balancing out" that happened when partners allowed their emotional variations to offer space to share power, for example in the area of decision-making. For her, giving space to emotional variations - different times of feeling vulnerable, strong, etc. - was part of what helped determine a sharing of power. Another stated she envisions power as a "kind of give and take," and went on to say that she thought that power is about control, and "it looks different in different situations."

Power was also conceptualized as that sense you have when your cup is full and you feel balanced, or centred in your self. It was described as a solid sense of self, and a feeling of stability in self-esteem. One woman expressed that "with regard to personal power [she] gave alot of it away", and that dramatically affected the dynamics of her relationship. It seems that she meant that she took better care of her partner than

herself. Things were different when she learned how to own her inner, personal power and care for herself more.

This ties in with an interpretation about how connected power is with looking after oneself, instead of focusing on the other by "just constantly giving everything that you have to somebody else." There was also discussion about the need "to get really clear on what [the] bottom lines were to hang onto [one's] own power," emphasizing the need for clear, personal boundaries as part of defining and maintaining healthy ways of dealing with power. Alternatives to this risk creating a situation in which a woman feels in a constant "state of angst" about trying to balance work and personal life and giving (to one's partner) to the point of feeling empty, and never feeling that enough was given.

Some conversation centred on unhealthy, debilitating power dynamics present in a relationship for a long period of time. This was evidenced by a condition of ceaseless tension and worry that is connected to relationship power differentials. This is a red flag, warning us that there is an inappropriate and possibly damaging imbalance of power between partners.

The group debated whether power struggles and differentials were inevitable. The consensus was that power struggles cannot be avoided in relationships. However, what really mattered was whether power was used or abused, and *how* partners chose to deal with power. It seemed clear for the group that power is an essential and inevitable component in human relationships, including lesbian partnerships. Such was the initial range of thought about power in lesbian relationships.

It is challenging and perhaps even threatening to aspire to alternative ideas and definitions of power than those with which we have been indoctrinated. It was obvious through group members' stories, that though their new vision of power in relationships is not definitively formed, they are dissatisfied with their experiences of power in relationships, even with women. They reflected on different ideas of power and what they would look like in a partnership. It is difficult for lesbians to create a new socio-political vision of power, given that a hierarchical paradigm of power is so deeply entrenched in this culture, and that lesbians are marginalized. It also means that partners' visions about a new way to relate in terms of power need to be similar in some basic respects; that their definitions need to have congruence. There was clearly not congruence of views about power in relationship in the experience of many group members. This proved to be problematic for them, and was a contributing factor in the eventual dissolution of many relationships.

**Theme 2: Aspects of Relationship that Relate to Power: Boundaries, Respect/Trust and Communication**

Many factors related to power either added to the growth and development of a healthy relationship, or contributed to its demise. Boundaries, respect, trust and communication are some of these factors. This theme includes those aspects of the interaction in the relationship that were discussed that affect and relate to power dynamics. It also encompasses facets of self that influence power experiences within relationships. How we manage boundaries, respect, trust and communication all have important personal implications, as well as power repercussions for interaction between

partners. In other words, all three sub-themes emerge from our ideas of self, our personal sense of well-being, and also reflect these attributes in our interactions with others.

### Boundaries

Unlike others this sub-theme threaded its way through all three sessions, though it was predominate in the first. I think about boundaries, bottom lines or limits in relationships as aspects that help us define who we are and what is important to us. They help keep us clear about what we need and want, and what we can and cannot live with in interpersonal relationships. Boundaries have to do with the exercise of power in relationships. It became clear from our discussions that it is essential to identify one's boundaries, recognize that they are important and have the courage to act on them. An example that a group member gave, is being clear from the beginning of a relationship that you insist on monogamy. If you know that you must have this in order to remain in an intimate relationship, then it is essential to put it out in a straightforward way.

There was strong group acknowledgement of the need to be clear in relationship in a way that many felt we had not been. We considered "what do [we] need to hang on to, no matter what?" Many of us had struggled through failed or abusive relationships and some had become more clear about the "five or six bottom lines, things [we] can't live without, that [we] won't compromise for any reason." Boundaries were a significant issue in this group since most members felt that in many relationships we did not have limits, or were not clear about them, or did not stick to them. Many also shared that in

retrospect they could see it had been their job to please the other, with little or no regard for their own needs or limitations. One woman said:

I didn't have any clear boundaries around myself. That was the reason I was constantly just giving myself away. Like ah, I had no bottom lines. It was like I was an endless pit, ya know, I could just keep doing this forever, and why was I so damn empty inside?

This led to some important discussions about our feelings that if boundaries are clear, then perhaps others are less likely to violate them, especially if we are able to be explicit about the consequences for boundary violations. One woman talked about:

Knowing yourself well enough to be able to put yourself out there. Like if I find out that you are lying to me, then I don't want to be in a relationship where you are, - where lies are carrying on. So that means as far as I'm concerned, the relationship will end. And it's like you put that right out on the table to begin with in terms of revealing yourself to the other person, and that's part of the boundary.

Some of us had had experiences of stating boundaries and consequences, only to realize that they were more like threats than limits with consequences, since the considerations of leaving a relationship, even in light of very abusive behaviour, is no lightweight matter. Stating boundaries was not an easy thing to do if we were with someone who did not respect them. We talked about fears of putting out boundaries clearly; like being rejected, being alone, being abused and hurt. One woman summed it up by saying,

...I think for me just getting to know my boundaries and getting to say that, ...be vulnerable, ...see what I can't accept, that's a scary place for me. Maybe you won't want to be with me or, so I'd get afraid there.

Another woman talked about the risk of being willing to give up a relationship, if boundaries are crossed, when she said:

If you put out your boundaries really clearly and these are not things you're willing to compromise on if those boundaries are tested or pushed, then you have to be willing to give that up. And that's what I find is the hardest. It feels like a lose-lose situation. It's like you either let go of some of those boundaries or you lose this relationship that you're invested in.

She went on to add that "You keep your sense of yourself. That's the tradeoff. You keep your self-esteem, your personal strength. But it doesn't always feel so great." During this conversation we also talked about how sometimes we have just wanted to sway or change the relationship somehow, to make it better or easier or to pretend it's not so bad, by having our "boundaries be wishy-washy because of the other person's needs." This illustrated another dynamic that happened when there was confusion over where one partner ends and the other begins.

Being clear about boundaries in relationship means knowing ourselves, which involves hearing and paying close attention to inner voices that give us important messages about being true to ourselves. Relationships mean a certain degree and kind of compromise or negotiation, but as one woman put it "...I think it's just putting it out there... You have feelings that are very much unique to you, and to be honest and revealing is part of being intimate with one another - and as hard as that is, at least you put yourself out there." Another woman agreed that a kind of real honesty about what's happening for you, and also about the things you won't move on is essential. She was clear that there are things:

That you won't compromise on 'cause I think where I have found myself is compromising the thing that matters most...that I never should have crossed over...there's a whole realm of other things that wouldn't have mattered -- but those ones...do matter.

Another woman's reflections were as follows:

Those boundaries are important to your survival. And what you said about not crossing that line - and if you do cross that line you make those adaptations in a relationship that you never recover from - or you lose some of yourself.

All of this affected the level of respect that we had for ourselves and that others held for us. Clearer boundaries seem to be related to a higher level of respect in the

relationship. The bottom line seemed to be that not knowing, acknowledging and speaking to our boundaries and limitations does not work. It was like a script for a failed relationship. One woman gave us an example by telling us about a major disagreement between her partner and herself. After a couple of days of working through it, she realized that it was not a matter of boundaries or a bottom line for her, but for her partner it was. She said:

...I cannot tell you the enormous respect I had for her that she never gave in at any point because it was that important to her...and it really built - that was one of the first stepping stones - in our relationship - it strengthened it - and it's a healthier relationship because of it.

She added, "I did win because I really have more respect for her than I did."

It also seemed to be easier to put out clear boundaries when abuse or disrespect was more obvious. As one woman stated,

It's interesting when we are talking about power and control if it's blatant, I have boundaries. Like boundaries where I wouldn't tolerate like physical abuse and out-and-out blatant abuse, but it gets muddled when it gets into the emotional abuse and when it's kinda not clear....

It was amazing how many of us felt the clarity of physical abuse as obvious and easier to define, whereas the subtleties of emotional and verbal abuse were much harder to address clearly. The continuum of power problems seemed to be threaded throughout all of these discussions; from everyday issues of decision-making to outright abuse of power.

From the conversations of the group there was an important relationship between power and boundaries. If both partners of a relationship were free and encouraged to demonstrate and clearly express their boundaries, then there is the possibility of profound respect between them. Making space for a partner's boundaries and definition of the relationship is a form of respecting who the other person is. In this way this

theme and the next one on respect are also closely related. However, if only one person's boundaries are allowed to exist, and define the relationship, then it seems inevitable that an unhealthy power imbalance will ensue. In this way boundaries are strongly tied to respect, since having a power balance implies respect for each others' boundaries.

Men are taught to claim and defend their boundaries. In a patriarchal culture, when men define their boundaries, it is often an act of aggressive space-taking. Women are not taught to respect their own limitations or to voice them. In the group women talked of how hard it is for them to establish boundaries. When they did talk of setting their bottom lines, of holding firmly and clearly to their boundaries, it was obviously an act of self-respect. The women have experienced living in a society which does not respect women as much as men, and even more so, does not respect lesbians. For a lesbian, defining one's own boundaries and gaining respect for it, is a radical, political act. Women are criticized for being selfish if they do define clear boundaries, and are taught to take others into consideration before themselves. They are told that it is admirable and necessary if they are being good and loving partners to give beyond what is healthy, safe or comfortable for them. This, of course, translates into relationships between women. We are not warned that there are some bottom lines we cannot violate without doing damage to ourselves and other boundaries that are less important and can be safely compromised or negotiated.

It is important to consider whether one's own or one's partner's needs or boundaries carry more weight in relationship. This fits a dominator model where power is not viewed as balanced or shared (Eisler, 1988); where it is not possible for both partners

to set boundaries and have them be respected; where the assumption is that there is a finite amount of power in relationship, and that if one has it, the other does not; if one is in control, the other is powerless. Lesbians, too, are socialized to this model of power in relationships. However, some desperately want to establish a new paradigm of relationship. Though, this is not without huge challenges.

Lesbians experience other factors that influence boundary-setting in relationships. There may be more freedom about boundaries in lesbian relationships because some of the rules are not set in the same way they are in heterosexual relationships. This freedom also means that there is not the same support and reinforcement for lesbian relationships, concerning boundary-setting either. Boundary-setting is important in all relationships, homosexual and heterosexual. It allows partners to be different and to be themselves. However, there are other complications. Because lesbians live as an oppressed minority in a hostile world, they usually bond quite closely in a partnership for protection. Boundaries can become quite blurred and enmeshed because of this. This was true for many of the participants of this study, and relates to the concept of fusion in the literature. Lesbians may need to spend more time unravelling and understanding the nature and effects of fusion and enmeshment in their relationships, that flow at least in part from their minority status. This reflects the ideas put forth by Kitzinger and Perkins (1993) that emphasize this blurring of boundaries as an important way for lesbians to survive and cope with the pressures of living in oppression. They underscore the need to explore alternatives together for resolving these difficulties as opposed to blaming the women for not being personally independent enough. This is clearly one example where it is important to take a broader political perspective of a

difficulty that lesbians face, as opposed to looking only for personal, individual resolution.

There are paradoxes here. We act in certain ways as lesbians - by over-involvement with each other, or by idealizing our relationships - both as protection from a homophobic culture, and as a way to survive without credibility or status. These responses create suffocation that is unhealthy and unrealistic in a relationship, or set unreasonable expectations to live up to. What is a defence for relationship is also a threat to it.

### Respect and Trust

Respect was at the core of discussions about power. There was much agreement and many stories about how we had been disrespected in the circle of our relationships. Our stories shaped the grief, loss and pain present in an intimate relationship where mutual respect was absent. There was no question among the women of our group that respect was a bottom line; that in fact none of us felt that a healthy relationship could ensue without a high level of mutual respect. It was seen as an essential ingredient, and though we didn't always know what it would look like exactly, we all knew what it felt like when present, and when it was absent. As one woman put it:

I think part of what I'm figuring out day by day, is what that means. What does it look like in concrete terms?...Because I know what it feels like. There was no question that I wasn't getting it in terms of how I felt that I wasn't respected, and I do now. And so I'm kind of step by step figuring it out.

We had some fascinating conversations about what respect does look like to us, and how we could recognize it. Most of us were shaking our heads in disbelief as we shared our stories, realizing the degree to which we had been treated disrespectfully.

The examples of lack of respect were many and varied, and had devastating effects.

The erosion of self-respect and worth when another we are so close to, or supposed to be close to, treats us in such a disrespectful manner, was horrifying.

There was discussion about having been brought up with a clear understanding of what respect means between people who love each other, and expecting that it will happen in our lives and relationships too. We believed that loving someone meant respecting them and acting in a certain way. We trusted that we would be respected and so we were shattered when we were not. There was shock and anger about a partner saying she does respect you and wants to respect you, but obviously not following through in her behaviour. One comment demonstrates this when a woman said:

...And then somewhere down the road it hits you why is this person trotting off and having affairs with someone else, or doing things that are just kind of basic trust, and in doing that, showing extreme distrust for them, and at the same time going along telling them that they love them. Now, you talk about power. Crazy-making.

There was a delicate balance between gaining the partner's respect and maintaining that essential sense of self respect that is so needed in a solid relationship. In one woman's experience she was:

Trying so hard to make it work, trying to work it through - in terms of her respect - and respect for myself. I'm still recovering...I would sit by myself after a blow-out and wonder why am I doing this?...And then going to sleep on eggshells, feeling no resolution.

We all knew this was not how it should be in a healthy relationship. We felt that in a healthy relationship there would be mutual respect which would create a solid foundation for shared power.

One important attitude we identified that would indicate respect was an acceptance and a flexibility toward differences. Often differences were a source of tremendous

tension and conflict as partners strove to make their partner more like themselves.

There seemed to be a sense of security (though false) that if partners were more alike they would be more likely to stay together. Somehow it was less threatening. We agreed that differences are inevitable in any relationship, so how we deal with them is what is so important. It is crucial to have respect for each others' way of being in the world, and to be curious about the differences that exist. One woman had come to terms with this in a lovely way when she told us:

As I learn how to take care of myself and be responsible for me, it matters to me less and less how she is. And I find I like her more and more if I'm not tied up in how I think she needs to be for me to be okay.

The key factors seemed to be not allowing ourselves to give up who we are for someone else, and acknowledging and appreciating the differences that existed between us and a partner. Again this was where bottom lines came into it, since there were always some differences, or some ways that someone might be that we could not live with. Often though, if it is not a bottom line issue, honouring differences was a critical part of a healthy way of relating, where both partners are able to be themselves and to grow. This repeats what was said about boundaries and underscores a significant relationship between boundaries and respect. It also relates to self-respect by holding on to who we are even if that is very different than how our partner is. This also fits with the conversations about boundaries and demonstrates the important relationship between boundaries and respect as well. Sorting out what is "me", "you" and "us" in relationship is an essential part of respecting each other, and also exercising the ability to create clear boundaries. This gives the flexibility to grow and change within the relationship.

Trust was also vitally linked with respect. We felt that it is hard to respect someone you don't trust, and impossible to trust if respect is not present. As one woman said, "I think that trust for me - once that trust is lost - then what can there be - There can't be any as far as a friendship goes...". Another very clearly told us, "I don't know how you build a bridge back over that broken trust." A woman who understood how damaging that kind of a rift can be, responded by saying, "You can't and there's no sense trying to waste your time and energy trying to do it..."

Another part of the theme concerning respect had to do with others' disrespect for our relationships. Some of that was related to the special structural vulnerability of lesbian relationships and ways in which our relationships were not acknowledged or honoured as valid and serious by heterosexuals. Some of it had to do with our partner's unwillingness to protect and support the relationship by how they behaved with other women. Some examples will help to clarify this. One woman spoke of "that value - [that] just isn't there - you would find someone that you really cared for and then - other people would try to break you up - that was very very popular". She was speaking about a certain kind of disrespect for relationship boundaries from other women, as well as dynamics that are disrespectful of one of the partners. It was especially painful if the other partner silently sits by, allowing it to happen without addressing it, or worse yet, does not support the partner being disrespected.

One woman had painful memories of another woman inappropriately throwing herself onto her partner. She told us:

It was hard - I didn't feel respected - but I did ask her - I said this doesn't feel - this feels strange for me ya know - I'm getting these messages - where are you coming from? - and she [her partner] got angry with me - so I felt not respected by both of them - and then, so then they decided they would see

each other without me - and we were on a budget and they would go out for \$150 dinners - and I'd be looking after the bills.

We agreed this not only felt disrespectful but also abusive. There was a great difference between reaching out to and having friendships with other women, and being manipulative or abusive in how you act with other women. Another woman shared that:

There was a really different dynamic that happened when it was clearly a friendship that I mean, I always got a really different sense when it was clear that this was a friendship and that our relationship was important to her, from when it was someone I knew she was interested in and then our relationship became not important to her anymore - she was encouraging that...

There was a definite threat or power imbalance that occurred because one partner was disrespectful of the relationship in situations where she was in fact sexually interested in someone else. This issue could also be considered to be about boundaries, as women strive to define self and other in the context of parameters around sexual intimacy and friendship.

The issue of respect also got complicated around ex-partners, especially if there had been abuse in that previous relationship. One of our group members remembered a recurrent incident where her partner accused her of blocking the partner from having friendships. This woman's partner insisted on having a friendship with an ex-partner who had been abusive to her and her child for many years. This participant felt it was a threat and also was extremely unsafe, and she explained to us that the scariest part was how disrespectfully her partner had dealt with it. She explained that it was not a problem for her partner to develop other friendships but:

It was who she chose and how she did it...because I felt like it was up to her to be respectful - of our relationship and to let this person know that - and she just wouldn't do that - so that was like a manipulation and trip and threat to our lives and our family and our relationship together.

Another interesting conversation took place about what happened when partners didn't tell us the truth in order to protect us, and how connected that was to lack of respect. This conversation took place among three women: "often people don't tell us the truth to protect us. I've heard that more than once," "and that's so disrespectful," "well it doesn't protect you anyway," "it protects them from your anger," "and it makes you anxious - because you know - I think we instinctually know when someone isn't being straight with us - I certainly felt like I knew."

When we were discussing how we really did work out power dynamics, one of the group participants said, "...It fluctuates doesn't it? And we struggle to try and balance it all out in every way we can. It takes so much recognition and respect." This was really true when looking at how to manage power struggles differently. Another woman reminded us of the other essential ingredient of respectful relating by encouraging us all to "listen to those messages when they come through, that say, 'I'm not being respected here'. We did know but we didn't honour that. We didn't listen to those voices". Those voices were critical as part of our own self-respect, and affected the way others respected us as well.

From these discussions it is obvious that respect is central to the concept of power, and helps to determine whether power flows from a dominator model, or is visualized as a shared phenomena (Eisler, 1988). It was clear from group conversations that the power of interpersonal respect in intimate relationships is paramount. It seems that where there is more respect between partners, there is more possibility of a balance of power in relationship. If there is mutual respect then there is space to embody one's own power, which creates the potential for both people to stand firmly in their own

personal power, and so perhaps share it in a more balanced way. With mutual respect each person can express and experience power, which means both partners can feel powerful. This concurs with Rohrbaugh's research (1992) discussed in the literature review, where she discusses her findings that there is a connection between the level of respect and affection that is present, and the power equality that is experienced in that relationship. The greater the respect, the more likely it is that power will be shared equitably. If respect is one-sided and non-mutual, then a power imbalance will be perpetuated.

Respect is also connected with honesty which relates to power. It is hard to feel respect or trust, if honesty is not present. Telling the truth creates vulnerability, and unless it is mutual, one person may hold more of the power. There is often a sense of control or abuse of power if there is lying or withholding between partners. When a partner feels disrespected or lied to it can leave her feeling unsafe and vulnerable, which then feels like powerlessness. This is reinforced by Rich's discussion about honesty (1979). Being honest is a way to share power.

Our attitudes about difference also influence the level of respect in relationship. If we are able to withhold our judgements, and open the possibilities of how we view life, perhaps we could be more curious when confronted with differences. This would help us to respect both partners approaches to life and relationship. It takes great mutual respect to work through power dynamics when they do emerge, and to show consideration for another.

Respect also has socio-political roots. We are taught to respect those who are defined and accepted as more powerful. In this culture that means men, heterosexuals

and those in authority in ruling institutions. In this society respect is not necessarily awarded and earned based on how we treat others. Lesbians are disrespected for having "deviant" relationships. Respect and trust are reciprocal, and so the lives and relationships of lesbians are affected by living in a societal distrust. It is not surprising, then, to see how disrespect reflects itself in intimate lesbian relationships.

The level of respect in relationships is related to our ideas and assumptions about power. If we believe power is about win-lose, and see it as a commodity that one partner has and the other has not, then only one partner can feel respected. This can then create serious and unhealthy relationship problems. Sometimes, though, the level of respect can shift, as seen in the findings. In other words, one partner who was not previously respectful, becomes more respectful. I wonder how this happens when it does shift. It would be interesting and important to explore what makes a woman open to looking at the fact that she has not been respectful to her partner. What makes us stop and look at how we behave, or change how we behave?

### Communication

Another sub-theme prevalent in this research group was that of communication between partners, including the influence of unfinished emotional business on those communication patterns. It arose in all three sessions. Communication was seen to affect and be affected by power dynamics in a multitude of ways. "Power over" relationship dynamics cannot live in an environment of appropriate and healthy communication patterns. For many of the women it was considered a bottom line, or something they could not live without. Also, through the experience of failed

communication in relationships healthy communication became a necessity. One woman stated:

I have to be able to be in a situation where there's a certain kind of communication, a willingness to keep working through and moving through stuff even when you're bogged down in it and it feels lousy, and when it's difficult. 'Cause I feel like, it's not an issue that things will come up, things will definitely come up, it's how you deal with it that matters to me, right?

One woman hoped that she was gathering a "set of tools" to help her communicate better in subsequent relationships, so she wouldn't have to repeat the same mistakes or bad experiences.

There were many insights about communication, how we learned it and the bad habits we carry into adult relationships from the past. As one woman put it in describing how she and her partner get tangled up in unhealthy, stuck communications, "Both of us come from situations where we have mothers who disrespect us...um talked to us in ways that were hurtful...". She went on to explain that that's how they treat each other when they are stressed or having a strong emotional reaction to something the other has said. They take on the personae of their mothers instead of being themselves and finding a different way to share what they are feeling.

Many women in the group agreed that in order for intimacy to grow and develop, we have to be willing to risk and to feel safe in sharing some very personal and often difficult parts of ourselves. This can be disarming and calls for a definition of power that leaves space for both partners to show their vulnerabilities. It means we have to abandon the notion of power as control, or of being in control. Showing the places where we are weak or struggling to change old habits can be a source of strength and closeness in a relationship. It can facilitate empowerment of both "selves". It can, however, be a risk if only one is willing to be vulnerable in this way since it can invite a

power imbalance. It helped to equalize the power if both women were willing and able to open up in this way. In one woman's words, "it's important to do that because it makes living together gradually better - the relationship is stronger because we did that".

This is a complicated issue though because as one woman stated, "it's that desire for intimacy that means that you don't have your power, in this situation in a sense".

Sometimes we compromised ourselves to try and create a sense of intimacy, by giving over our power. The problem is that real intimacy cannot be born into the environment of hostility and disrespect that comes from power struggles. Moving toward intimacy can make us more vulnerable, and if we are not engaged in this process with someone who was mutually engaged and respectful of us, it was a very unsafe environment for creating intimacy. If both partners are able to share and be vulnerable, then the power can be equalized, and trust can be built. If only one person does this, then this cannot happen. This power differential could happen when "you were the only one who was working", or the only one willing to share and communicate in this way. As one woman so aptly put it, "It takes a lot of work and - you can get into that place of being complacent because you don't want to rock the boat...". It was clear from our conversation though that the complacency and fear she was referring to by being unwilling to reach out and communicate even when it is difficult, just didn't work; and in fact kept in place the myths about "what the relationship should look like and not what it actually [does] look like".

One woman explained how, when confronted with inconsistencies and incongruencies from her partner, she tried to address them, and talk about them. She

told us, "I would try and discuss it or talk about it and there was no way in, and there was no way through it or around it - but I kept trying. I banged my head against the wall." She went on to explain that even after she and her partner split up and went to mediation to deal with their assets fairly, she just gave up because it was just another power trip. She told us that:

You can't do mediation if you are in a power struggle - what mediation is about is presuming that both people in good faith are gonna work it out and it just felt like one big power trip and I just thought, like forget it - I just said I need to let go of it - my life and my energy is more important - really it's just things ya know - it's just material possessions - it wasn't my heart or soul - that's what I needed to get out of there.

It takes both partners committed to looking at and dealing with the reality of their relationship, to create genuine intimacy and balanced power.

During another conversation one of the women shared that she felt "shut down and couldn't communicate...I just wonder how much that had to do with power or control." She had felt silenced by her partner and became wary of what she said. She expressed, "...Every time I tried to communicate something, the focus was on how it was said, the tone of my voice and all sorts of other things rather than ... just the actual content of what I was saying." She felt attacked and defensive, so she used not communicating as a "way to take some control." Another woman agreed with this tactic and said, "I bowed down and backed off and I don't know, maybe that's a way of having some control for myself." She learned to monitor what she shared so her partner would not get inappropriately angry at her for nothing. This kind of caution around power dynamics was very common.

Also, what sometimes happened, is that our partners would take it out on us or our children when they were really angry at themselves, or about something very separate

from the relationship. The kind of anger that is connected with power trips was usually misplaced for a myriad of reasons. This clouded and bottled up the possibility of good communication.

Often there was caution about sharing some things because we didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings, and we hadn't learned very positive ways to share difficult sentiments. One of the group members said, "...For me it's hard to say what I want if I don't feel respected, but if they have that respect for me I should be able to speak my mind without worrying about hurting anyone's feelings."

It was also seen as essential to learn to communicate in order to explore our differences and use them to work together and for each other, and not against each other. From one woman's experience, she asked:

But isn't that where communication comes in? Because it's inevitable that there will be power struggles and power differentials - the question is, when they come up what are you gonna do about it, how are you going to use it or abuse it? Are you gonna be able to get to the place where you and your partner can talk about it, and then have some understanding about what each others' perceptions are, or what each other meant, or where each other is coming from - I mean part of the difficulty in my relationship was that as much as I tried to get to some of that - it never happened and so the stuff that went on that was abusive, or power trips or power struggles or whatever were unhealthy dynamics, just escalated.

Reconciling differences, honouring them and learning from them challenging.

However, "honouring the differences is a kind of empowerment, to be respectful and to honour the other person...acknowledging your own strengths and weaknesses and the same with theirs", takes a certain level of maturity and willingness. "Putting that right out, to speak it - I think that's where the sharing comes - and the communicating", in one woman's opinion. It was hard, if not impossible to do this kind of sharing without good communication. There were clearly many examples of abusive relationships, and

blatant disrespect from one partner to the other, that meant this kind of risk-taking and vulnerability didn't work, no matter what was tried. One woman said though that she "find[s] if [she] can just stop blaming and have some compassion for" her partner, then she can at least calm down enough to keep communicating and not turn the interaction into a disaster or an "upheaval". It was not uncommon for her to feel that "[she] may have been a bit focused on [herself] and [her] needs and not completely being understanding of the other person." In a relationship where there was an avenue of communication open most of the time, we were able to look at and change the ways in which we were not very open to each other.

Another woman responded to this by saying:

That's part of maintaining the power for some people - that's where my partner maintained a lot of the power was refusing to communicate. My idea is that it made her feel more powerful to make me feel off balance. I think that the very act of not communicating increases some people's sense of powerfulness.

"I guess" - shared another woman during a different conversation about willingness to communicate and move through the difficulties that emerge in relationship - "there's a power taken in silence too isn't there?" This affirms the section of the literature review (p. 34-35) where I discuss the potential for power to reside with the one who is silent in relationship, and not only with the one who speaks out. I believe we all entered into relationships believing "We're both gonna get something out of it - and it's gonna be empowering..." It was evident from all of the stories in the group though that "We come into it [relationship] for different reasons." This may have led to a difficulty or inability to communicate honestly about the underlying reasons for being in the relationship in the first place. Often these reasons were not conscious, which made it infinitely more complicated in terms of communication between partners.

One very interesting turn in the conversation revolved around discussion about the similarities between our current partners and our ex-partners, and the fact that we do "Get attracted to the same kinds of people...and keep living that out again until [we] learn the lesson from the last relationship, and hopefully [we] have some better tools to act out this new relationship in a healthier and better way." We were optimistic, though often sceptical as well, that we could learn how to communicate differently, in some new ways, and even choose someone who was willing to do it with us.

I think part of what has been so devastating for many of us is the reality that it isn't only men that don't communicate easily, or talk about things. The fact that women, and lesbians struggle with these same issues is a powerful admission and revelation. As one woman said, "I think alot of lesbians don't even talk about these things - let's not talk about men and what they talk about - 'cause a part of what's horrifying to me,... is 'cause alot of women don't and alot of dykes don't". It was both powerful and scary to break the silence about these issues. These admissions were not intended as excuses for the non-communicative behaviours of many men in relationship. What is being underscored here is that gender and sexual orientation are not the only explanations for being non-communicative. By breaking silence about these truths in lesbian relationships we can begin to examine the reasons more carefully and honestly in this context. It did not serve us well as lesbians; in fact it made us crazy, to ignore these difficulties in our relationships simply because we felt that women should be communicating better. We didn't always, and we need to carefully examine why.

There was a delicate balance between dealing with the painful miscommunications that occur between lesbians in relationship that are futile, and "working on

communication - practising - practising and being brave enough to trust in people to communicate" and at least continue to try. Sometimes we could carry on trying, and other times it was clearly useless. We struggled to establish the difference.

Communication has a critical relationship to power. When there is more communication and also more effective communication between partners, the power can be shared more, as opposed to being polarized either into silence as in withholding, or speech as in talking things out. If there is more opportunity to share, reveal ourselves and be curious about each other, no one has control and so there is more potential for power to be shared. When communication is lacking, there is greater possibility for feeding fears in relationship, which can undermine the balance of power and a sense of mutual trust. If partners are not mutually engaged in communication this makes it unsafe for intimacy, and can create a power struggle where someone has to be in control.

Communication is also linked with respect. It seems that there is a reciprocal relationship between power and communication. In other words, power dynamics profoundly affect communication between partners, and communication styles also affect the power dynamics that partners experience with each other. It is hard to know which comes first. Morgan (1988) addressed the power politics of communication styles between women when she discussed both the power of silence and the power of speech. Many women in the group struggled with this issue of differing styles and expressed that often the difficulties experienced because of styles of communication were either hidden or minimized.

Whether an intimate partner is open, available for communication, and vulnerable to the other affects intimacy, and thus affects the balance of power within the couple relationship. Communication style and ability also determine whether power issues can be named and discussed in a relationship.

If there is genuine respect between partners, then it is possible to share difficult things with the other, even if this is hard. This also means there is less chance of hurting or destroying the other person with what is shared. It is essential to communicate and ask questions to comprehend and respect differences and different perceptions between us. If we communicate in this way then it is possible to use differences between us to work toward each other instead of against each other. There is also power in speaking about our differences and acknowledging our own and others' strengths and weaknesses. The act of being silent and not communicating verbally has an inherent power, as much as does the act of communicating.

In patriarchal culture, talking, or keeping silent, are communication styles which are partly gender-assigned, and value laden. Socio-politically we are taught to respect men's voices and words more than women's. It is considered acceptable and appropriate for men to speak loudly, take up verbal space and monopolize conversations. This culture is not as interested in or accepting of what women have to say. If their style is verbally boisterous and space-taking they are considered rude or aggressive. Women also learn to be cautious and fearful about what we share with those who have more power than us, because they may get angry with us or hurt us.

For the lesbians in this group, value was placed in open communication based upon respect, and on balancing rather than on controlling power. Where there is more

openness, willingness and ability to communicate, there is more possibility for sharing power. As Koepke, Hare & Moran (1992) emphasized, the importance of emotional intimacy and expressiveness goes hand in hand with the importance of a relationship that is egalitarian. So if emotional intimacy and communicativeness is lacking, there will be barriers to creating power equity in relationships.

Lesbians are often silenced by hatred, violence, oppression and fear. We are stifled in freely communicating our differences in a hostile environment. We are not listened to, heard, or given space and credibility for our difference; not allowed to make visible the delights, difficulties and stories of our lives. This reality manifests in our intimate relationships as well. Lesbians struggle with the fear of rejection, of being alone, of not being recognized or loved, even with each other. These structural, institutional influences affect lesbians' abilities to communicate with each other in intimate relationships.

A paradox is that if women are taught to be more quiet than men, there is a parallel expectation that women are more emotionally communicative than men. This is an interesting paradox to live with. The truth is all of us, women and men learn that silence or withdrawal is one way of surviving if we feel threatened. Gender is not the only reason or explanation for being non-communicative. Lesbians too respond in this way in relationships, and it can profoundly affect the balance of power in their relationships. Communication is really the vehicle, the means through which respect, honesty, trust and power are conveyed.

This discussion about communication reminds me of one of the myths I used to have about lesbian relationships. When I discussed this in the introduction, I outlined how I

believed from my social conditioning that women were more emotionally communicative, had more access to their feelings and might be free of power issues. This was my thinking before personal experience taught me otherwise. What I think after having done this research, is that I was not alone. Many of us felt this way, and hoped relationships would be different between women. I still hold hope that a different model is possible, and that there are other lesbians who aspire to communicating differently in both words and actions.

### **Theme 3: Focal Points of Power Struggles: Money, Children and Sexuality**

These sub-themes of money, children and sexuality are the circumstances where power issues can arise within relationship. They are the areas where power is manifest most obviously. They are also the places where power dynamics (power over) show up in our relationships.

#### Money and Material Possessions

Money and material possessions is another sub-theme when examining power dynamics in lesbian relationships. In the review of the literature there is no agreement as to how money relates to power. Some studies have shown that lesbian relationships did not follow heterosexual or even gay relationships in this regard. In other words, in lesbian relationships those who made more money or had more financially or materially did not necessarily wield more power in the relationship (Koepke, Hare & Moran, 1992). Other studies demonstrated that money was one of the variables that affected who had more power in a relationship. Our group was not dissimilar, in that not

everyone agreed about this. Some women felt from their experiences that money meant power. In other words that earning more or having more, meant exercising more power with one's partner. One conversation about this gave us much food for thought.

One of the group members asked another whether she and her partner had lived in her place (house) or the partner's. When she had established that it had been at her partner's place, she said, "Right, she wasn't gonna leave was she? It was her place - she wasn't free to leave, which gave you the power, there's no question about it - just like if someone is making money and someone else isn't working, who has the power; the moneymaker...". What I found so fascinating about this comment, is that it could really have gone either way. In other words, if it was one partner's place originally, then if there is a break-up, the person whose place it is could be seen to have the power, since they get to stay in the house and don't have to move. So, it could be seen both ways. The one whose place it was had more power in ownership; the one who left had the power and freedom in leaving.

Another woman agreed that "Money is an issue - that the person making the money has the power." She was answered by another woman saying:

Now a person is making the money - the other person isn't - so you just said - I'm making money so I feel great - I don't think that I've got the power - but the other person sees me making the money - and the other person making money feels power - I didn't ask for it but I get it 'cause I've been making all the money - and you keep saying - but I don't want the control - that's not what this is about - because I'm making money, you're not but we're sharing - but you are the moneymaker so you always have the ultimate say.

Not everyone agreed with this analysis. In one woman's words:

I was the one with more money in my relationship but she did power trips about money around everything you can imagine - and I just thought wait a minute - this isn't how it's supposed to be. I didn't have more power because I made more money, because of the mind games she was doing about it. It was very confusing and crazy-making. She felt powerless and dependent, so she started to do power trips to start to get power, because she perceived that I

had the power because I was making the money. Of course what was ironic was that I didn't have the power - I felt like even around money stuff that she did.

This begins to demonstrate some of the confusion around the issue of money in relation to power. As one woman put it, "...Isn't everyone's perception of their own powerlessness so unique?" This came up several times, and not just about money, that often both partners felt powerless. I am not sure what to conclude from this, other than to note that it is significant that our perceptions of our own sense of power or powerlessness often differ dramatically from how people see us or imagine we feel.

There were also a lot of strong feelings about the division of property and assets at the ending of relationships, and their connection to power. One woman could "Remember [her] first relationship ending and [she] wanted out of it so desperately" that while her partner was at work she and three friends moved her stuff out. She actually took very little. She said:

I mean you could walk into that place as though nothing had ever shifted. So that was not an equal split, but it also wasn't something that was up for discussion either because there was no discussing about the ending of the relationship. You just didn't talk about it and so I just walked out with what I considered to be my things, and the things that were jointly purchased were all left behind.

Other women described their leave taking as desperate as well; needing to "get out of there as quickly as possible for survival."

One of the participants explained that though she left with little, that after a while her ex-partner would send her money every so often. She felt this was an appropriate way to deal with the ending of their relationship, and told us they have maintained a friendship to this day. She felt like her ex was telling her, "Well I know it didn't really work out the way it was supposed to...that's what I could do at that time and now - this is what I can do...". Again, the way the ending happened was connected to whether or

not there was a power struggle going on, and so in fact whether there could be any connection afterwards or not. She also told us that in a subsequent relationship her friends would not allow her to just leave again without anything. They said to her:

Don't be so damn stupid - get your act together here - it's easy for you to just turn your back and walk away and she can take everything but is that really fair to us? Is that really fair to you? Some of that money that you invested in that stuff - really should be part of our future - if you give it all away then it's not really fair.

She thought this was such an interesting perspective. So do I. She said she never would have thought of it in that way before. There was discussion as well about having drawn up legal contracts to protect everyone's interests in the event of a break-up. The painful truth, however, was that these didn't necessarily hold up in court primarily because lesbian relationships were not taken seriously. Also, if it was important to end the relationship quickly for sanity and survival's sake, it became difficult to settle legal matters. One woman emotionally shared, "I didn't have the moxie to push it - I didn't want to drag things through waiting two years with all that stuff hanging - with all my money invested - I didn't have the strength to stand up to her." Another told us that "for your own sanity and health sometimes you need to break ties."

There was also some conversation about one of the women who was an ardent feminist telling us in no uncertain terms that she had never left without getting her fair share in heterosexual relationships, and addressing how badly she'd been treated. She figured it was "a really interesting power dynamic that happens in lesbian relationships where I've been alot more passive around it" because "your heart gets more into it or something."

Another experience was shared by a woman who had been in relationship for nine years and "within 15 minutes we had split everything and both of us were happy and we never actually talked about it." This is an example of how possessions are not always an issue of power. For some lesbians the arena of resources was not part of the power dynamics, even in a relationship that ended poorly.

### Children

The whole realm of children, step-children and grandchildren was another difficult and painful area in relation to power dynamics. The group was split half and half; four women had had experiences with children, either their own or their partner's or both, and the other four women had no experiences with children in the context of their intimate lesbian relationships. Many women bonded with and formed their own relationships with their partner's children, only to be forced "to divorce everything" including the children, once the relationship ended. It was so hurtful to feel that we had really given ourselves to a child and parented them and nurtured them, and then to be turned into the evil step-parent and denied access.

One of our group members gave a poignant example of a lesbian couple who split up, and even though they could barely relate to each other, "they both have been co-parenting this child for a long time - and are very committed to that - and that's rare." There do not seem to be many lesbians who are able to do that, and maintain a healthy connection as well as a supportive environment for the child. We were reminded in this conversation that this is indeed "rare in heterosexual break-ups too - where it's amicable and things are done in the best interests of the child."

Unfortunately, for everyone involved, these ties were often brutally and suddenly broken, not leaving much choice for the step-parent but to let go and grieve, leaving children as the casualties.

The birth mother - whether this is to the child's advantage or not - is the one with the power and the rights in these situations. As one woman explained to us:

I felt like I had this connection with him - and even when we split up - I knew that he was very caring and sorry that this was happening - but still being faithful to mom - and the other day I was parked outside of the old homestead - and I haven't seen him in two years - and I sent him a birthday gift and I write to him, but he never responds - he's eighteen or so - and so it was like hi - and he drove by me and he gave me the finger - and he didn't even acknowledge me - and I was like - I was just stabbed - and I wasn't ready for that - and all I could think of was that in [my ex-partner's] anger with the changes that happened when I moved out - that she painted this picture of me and it was so hard - and that was a power trip that I really resent that she had to keep him somehow - like that was a real power dynamic, and it always was even in our relationship - that I didn't have much input - she didn't want - she wanted to bounce things off me and have my opinion - but for me to actually parent him - but she wanted it - but she didn't - not directly to him - so it was a balancing act to live with him and I was more his friend - but I wasn't prepared at all - it was a power thing that she's turned him against me - he's just innocent in all this.

This example is striking because it portrays so many of the painful and complicated issues about what happened with children and our relationships to them in the process of ending an adult relationship.

There is no question that part of the complication and difficulty came from living in a culture that does not honour lesbian relationships, or value and validate that they are families with legitimate connections and relationships with children, that should be protected in the same way they are in heterosexual relationships (unless someone is abusive with the child). The desire and attempt to find a way to co-parent among lesbians was something many of us could relate to, had felt conflicts and ambivalence about, and finally had to let go of because of an unhealthy or abusive adult relationship.

This issue relates to the concepts of legal power, guardianship and custody, as well as inter-personal issues of power and relationship. What happened if you had lost respect and trust for the other adult and basically didn't want to have any connection with her, but you wanted to maintain a relationship with the child? There were some difficult and as yet unresolved questions to wade through together and answer. "The whole issue of children and lesbians raising children is so complicated", were the words of one of the women in the group.

Another woman described how her child had become a casualty in the misdirected and inappropriate way that anger was expressed by her partner. She told us that it was "really hard and does have to do with power." She explained that "alot of her (her partner's) anger and resentment about alot of things, mostly unrelated to the son or his behaviour, became a real power dynamic and then (he) became a target of her anger...". This was a difficult dynamic to change unless the partner had been willing to be the adult, a good role model and learn to deal with her intense feelings differently. There were many intense feelings that emerged in step-families, and it is a well known fact that "it's the most thankless job being a step-parent." Definitely it was one of the most difficult.

Children became casualties in other ways. It was important to teach our sons in particular about sexism and homophobia. However, it was critical that we remember that they were still children and not yet grown men, and that they struggled as children and teenagers to make sense of our lives and relationships, find their place in them, and figure out how to navigate their often secret world as part of a lesbian family, and fit this into other parts of their lives. This is no simple task and it is essential that we

balance teaching them respect and support for women and lesbians, along with having compassion for the difficulties they faced. One woman described her protection of a scared step-child by telling her partner and a friend to "cool it - this kid is not a man", and it's not appropriate to put "our feminist diatribe onto this poor little boy". This is a special factor to consider in lesbian parenting partnerships. We have enormous responsibilities to help our children in this way, at the same time as dealing with our own discomforts about being lesbian in this world. It is complex, and takes adults who are willing and able to guide their children in this way together.

It was similarly damaging and inappropriate to over-focus on and label a child as homophobic.

The other thing that happened a lot was him being accused of being homophobic, and that was another power trip she did - and that was really hard - and very alienating - she was really pushing him away - he was no more or less homophobic than any other teenager that I've met - all of them struggle with it - I mean they're doing sexual identity and peer pressure and looking at their own sexuality and starting to feel more sexual - I mean it's up there - it's like one of the #1 issues when you are a teenager.

This was a comment from one of the mothers in the group. All children needed to learn about the prejudice and harm that exists because of homophobia. They also needed understanding and compassionate adult role models to help them examine and deal with their own.

It was also difficult for the step-parent to stay in touch with the child after the relationship had ended because the blood parent held the control of that child's life and also controlled who would spend time with her/him. As one participant put it, "You don't have control over the situation - definitely - and there is an allegiance that kids have to their parents which you know is appropriate because they have to survive." As lesbian step-parents we had no legal or social power. Sometimes we found ourselves

dealing with blood mothers who for some reason felt threatened by a continued relationship between the step-parent and child. One of the women said, "I don't know whether being the blood mother you're afraid that the child - that you'll lose a special love to another, to your partner - or what the threat is..." Another responded by saying:

As a blood parent I have always felt like anybody who was really connected to my kid, I loved, because it made my job easier...and it meant that there were more people for my kids to relate to and connect with...it takes the pressure off me.

This woman seemed to gain an increased sense of power from the many adults that connected with and supported her children.

This was clearly not true for all parents in the group. Some struggled with being parents at all, and some found it easier to accept the responsibility of children in their lives. It was possible that for someone who had a difficult time parenting, that a partner who was more comfortable with it could have been a threat in some way, and so the blood parent may then have used their power and control in hurtful ways. One way this was discussed was controlling by withholding letters and gifts sent, or blocking other ways that step-parents still tried to connect with their step-children. It was very painful not to know if these ways of reaching out to let a step-child know that you still cared, were received or not.

One of the group members told a very moving story about step-children and step-grandchildren and how she had hoped that somehow having grandchildren together would help her and her partner "finally get to be a family." For her it was possibly a way to rebalance a sense of power and fix up a failing relationship. It didn't take her long to figure out that that was not possible or even desirable, given the state

of their relationship. However, the pain resounded in her touching words when she told us, "I finally realized that that's it - that I just was not gonna be part of that - my partner, my three grandkids, and just like that - gone - everything was gone." The losses suffered through this kind of break-up were astounding. Deep pain was palpable in these stories. Perhaps like the loss of any child - we never recover from it completely.

One of the women who has never dealt with children in her relationships was very touched and said, it "...makes me think how flexible we have to be - I think especially in these kinds of relationships, because we don't have any legal recourse of any kind." She went on to say:

I haven't had to live any of it - but I can just imagine the heartache of having spent years raising children - like I've read stuff about lesbians inseminating and having children together - and the birth mother of course would have all the rights - what happens to the other?

The other possibility with children was the closeness that they develop with certain adults who are intimately involved in their mother's lives. This had the potential to be very positive and long lasting but often when the partner was dumped, so was the child. This was "devastating" for these children who get "really close to these women" and then watch them disappear "through no fault of theirs." There is an unavoidable lack of power for step-parents that plays a part in these situations where children are left and rejected, or inadvertently disconnected from the step-parent.

One final comment from one of the participants touched on many delicate and difficult points connected with this when she said:

...It's very difficult because I can easily be seen as yet another - who's doing that (dumping a child) - which is really not how I want to be doing it at all - it's very complicated to figure it all out and not be yet another person who's letting a kid down - being trustworthy to a kid - I don't have control over it - I feel so powerless in it - I have struggled with that - I don't have any power

and there's nothing I can do about it - all that I can do is be the adult - and still stay connected - and let him know where I am - and that he's welcome to be part of my life and family at any point.

I believe this woman was referring to the lack of power she felt to change the situation at all. She had no legal recourse, and because of her deteriorated relationship with the child's mother, she had no power to actively still be part of this child's life. It is an extremely complex matter dealing with children in lesbian relationships. And power can play a significant part in it.

The ultimate power over children in lesbian relationships resides with the biological mother, unless she is unable or unfit to take care of her own children. She has the final authority, the step-mother or co-mother has none. The non-biological mother has no legitimate power. Unless the biological mother is very committed and works very hard to openly and honestly maintain equal post-separation access and connection for the children with the other mother, their partner is rendered powerless in her attempt to maintain a lasting connection with the children.

Children can be used as a way to wield power in lesbian relationships, often in extremely unhealthy ways. Because we live in a society that does not validate lesbians' relationships and families, our roles as parents, singly and together are tenuous. Many consider lesbians are not normal or appropriate as parents. Lesbians constantly face judgements about their unsuitability as parents. For traditionalists and right wing radicals, lesbian relationships and families are seen as a threat to the survival of mainstream heteropatriarchal families. As with financial matters, there is no legal recourse for lesbians who are not biological mothers. This further damages already delicate relationships between children and step or co-mothers.

## Sexuality

Sexuality is another realm where power dynamics can be played out in lesbian relationships. There were many ways that this theme manifested itself in the group discussion. It was possible that "one person [was] in charge of sexual dynamics - or initiating" sexually, or that the one with "the least vested interest" held the power sexually in the relationship. That is, if one partner "really isn't that sexual and the other person is," then the one with the least [vested] interest was in control sexually. It is interesting to note (as one of the participants pointed out) that this is the opposite of how it is in heterosexual relationships where the woman may have the least vested interest in sex, but she certainly does not hold the power, the male partner does. The woman is the more vulnerable in this situation, not the man who may have been pressuring her or seducing her.

Many of the experiences of group members supported the fact that in lesbian relationships the woman with the least vested interest did indeed have greater power to control or withhold sexuality, and that the woman seeking a sexual relationship was the more exposed and vulnerable. One of the women who had experienced this explained also that:

It's just been lately too where I'm getting a sense of power too - I can find myself in a sense of power - that like an undertow - I always get pulled in and instead of being in control of who I am and me and my sexuality - if the other person is confused about their sexuality, then I find myself getting confused.

This woman was describing the kind of sexual control she felt by someone who was confused about her sexual orientation and was less invested in sexual intimacy than this participant. She told us , "...that's a very powerful thing because I get locked into that -

and then the control is with the other person". She was "getting sucked into that person's waffling about it and reacting as though [she] was waffling".

There was something "about the dynamics of falling in love with or starting relations with someone who may not be clear about being a lesbian." There was a certain power that women coming out of heterosexual relationships held. We gave it to them by trying to make them comfortable, and by being patient with them, even if it was uncomfortable and confused us. Another dynamic that happened was that "the other person can withhold affection and sex if there's an argument - so that's very powerful," especially to someone who said, "I really relate to intimacy, I relate to contact, physical contact and being close - 'cause I'm a very tactile and physical person." Her experience was that affection and closeness "get withheld by the person who isn't really all that into it."

Another woman responded that her experience was similar although not the same.

She said:

Being in menopause, my sexuality is very different at this time than it has been in the past - and it causes problems - it's difficult - 'cause I can see the dynamic gets set up when one person seems to always be the one who's initiating and the other person seems to be the one who is always declining - and it becomes a very tender subject after a while. It becomes very difficult in order to balance and still maintain a sense of equality - because where the desire for sex is not equal - the power in the relationship never seems equal - there's always the one wanting who always seems to be the more vulnerable.

She went on to say that she felt she did have a "kind of power", but she didn't want it.

What she wanted was "some kind of mutuality."

As we discussed our sexuality one of the women had an interesting and thought-provoking question. It came out of our conversation about power in sexuality but it relates to power in general. She asked us, "Is that part of what happens around power

dynamics - that it's game-playing and crazy-making, or that there are other agendas or scenarios going on that you don't necessarily know about or find out about?" Another woman continued with that thought, adding that "it doesn't come out of a real honest kind of place - it comes out of wanting to manipulate the situation" in order to have control.

For one of the participants, considering celibacy was a way to take care of herself and "take some power back." She didn't want to be in that "very powerless position...following someone else's steps all the time...constantly responding and reacting to what someone else is doing...". She felt like it would be "much more powerful to get off the merry-go-round and say, 'you know I'm gonna plant my feet on the ground'."

From our discussion it was evident that:

In some instances sex is power - it is used as a power base, as a power tool - the controlling - intentional withholding - not understanding where you may be at emotionally - the fear of what will happen if I deny it, or don't feel like it - and if you're not interested I'll go look for somebody else - it can be used as a threat to control a relationship or another person - it can be used as power in terms of withholding as well - I have seen it used as a power base - both in giving and receiving - giving and withholding.

One of the women in the group had never been involved with a woman other than an adult survivor of childhood sexual assault. In other words, she has had several relationships, all with women who are adult survivors of sexual assault. She felt like sex was "incredibly related to power." Her relationships involved "alot of agreements" that "allowed the other person to be in control of the sexuality." The agreements involved when sex happened, under what circumstances, what they did, and were a way "to be kind of sensitive or demonstrate caring." They involved "always allowing [the partner] to initiate, always allowing [her] to make the rules about what happens." Of

course this really affected their ability to be spontaneous, and "felt really restrained and constrained." It also was a way, according to this woman, that the partner held the power or controlled the relationship.

This is tricky and complicated, because an important feminist way of healing from and dealing with sexual abuse is for the woman to be clear about her needs and limits, where she is comfortable, and what she will and won't do sexually, or in any other way. It is a part of respect to honour each other in this way. On the other hand, it created a very unbalanced dynamic that could not go on indefinitely in an intimate relationship without repercussions. If one partner felt she could rarely if ever initiate, and the other one always had to in order to feel comfortable or safe, there was the risk of manipulation or control through sexuality. It became "one person being in control - at the expense of the other person's control."

Another question posed about this issue was, "is this partner ...using that victim place to take your power?" This is a delicate issue, worthy of more discussion. It is complicated because, "does that become a control issue then, or is it something that any of us as feminists can absolutely support as a woman taking care of herself - it's complicated to figure out how to create a sense of balance or equality in relationship where there's a dynamic - a very important dynamic - but...".

Another avenue of dialogue led us to a conversation about lesbians who wanted to get their own needs met sexually and who didn't worry about "who they are trampling" in the process. One woman said, "I don't think that has so much to do with sexuality as it has to do with other stuff - you know the pursuit and the newness - and the insecurity

and fear - the adrenaline, the drama, the crisis..." Another asserted it was "almost like adolescent behaviour."

The relationship between power and sexuality is not a mystery. We live in a culture where social norms teach sexuality in terms of women pleasing others, usually men. Men hold the sexual power in this culture; they are in charge. Sexuality is not regarded as a realm where there is equality and balance of power between partners. For some that is changing as we try to create sexual relationships that are respectful of both partners, and where power is shared. Traditionally, sexual women are seen as dirty or bad, and spoken of in derogatory terms. There are many sexual taboos for women. It is especially not acceptable for women to be sexual with each other. In this way lesbians face a double taboo about their sexuality.

I believe where there is a sense of mutuality and respect, then sexuality can flow in a way that is shared, and that gives both women a sense of power and creativity. If the focus is only on one woman's needs and desires, it is impossible to create a shared sense of sexual power.

Money, children and sexuality all relate to power in our society. Patriarchy attaches importance to who has the money, who births the children and whose sexuality is most important. For the women in this study, in discussing these topics, societal attribution of value was less important than issues of respect and communication, which determined how these matters were dealt with within a relationship. For them, it was not so much who had the money, as how decisions were made about it. For example, if there was something to be worked out financially, did one person take control and unilaterally make the decision, or were both partners consulted and involved? The

experiences of these women were diverse around money issues. Some felt that money did not create a significant power differential in their relationships. Others felt that it did, though not necessarily with the one who earned or had more money, having more power. This was interesting in light of Koepke, Hare & Moran's research (1992) that clearly showed that in terms of social status in lesbian partnerships, there were no significant power differentials attributed to income or assets.

Lesbians are not afforded legitimacy or legal status in a relationship with regard to material resources, children or sexuality. When lesbians face separation, there is no recourse for dividing assets legally, or for equal access to children. Because lesbian families are not recognized and honoured in this culture, lesbians often do not honour their own rights. This exacerbates the possibility of power struggles about these important issues. Rohrbaugh (1992) underscores this when she discusses issues of competition or control over parenting. She suggests that this conflict may reflect and magnify internal feelings of tension, guilt and competition about caretaking and nurturing that are stimulated simply by virtue of being in an intimate partnership with another woman. There are many unanswered questions about these dynamics in lesbian relationships and raising children together that were highlighted in this research. Some examples are: What is the best way to raise children together in a lesbian family? How can lesbians best deal with the complications of being two women raising children in a hostile environment? These questions and others have vital effects on the relationship and families, and can harm or enhance a child's life profoundly. It can be particularly hard on children who get caught in the middle of a power struggle between lesbian partners.

Sexuality is also linked to power. If sexuality is not coming from an honest and caring place, it can be used to manipulate and control a partner. Also, when there are different, unequal sexual desires in a relationship, the one who wants less can have control, leaving the other vulnerable. In this group, lesbians expressed the desire to change these dynamics by creating relationships where sexual power is shared as well. Sexuality in lesbian partnerships opens important areas for further research and examination.

#### **Theme 4: The Playing out of Power Dynamics: Differing Perceptions, Abuse and Leaving**

This theme includes the consequences of playing out power dynamics in an unhealthy or destructive way. Differing perceptions of power between partners is one way this manifests and that can become a deadlock as partners struggle about whose perceptions are right. This affects who has power and how it manifests. It often can become a dead-end, where leaving is the only healthy option. Abuse is another of the most common ways that power is played out in an unhealthy and damaging way, and the need to leave is often one of the only ways to deal with it.

##### Differing Perceptions of Power

One of the areas discussed in the literature that also emerged as a sub-theme in this group, was that of different perceptions of power that are often present for partners in a relationship. Sometimes, in the group, the reports of power perceptions were so at variance that it was hard to believe that the two women were in fact living in the same

relationship. There were two different aspects of this issue. One was that there were indeed differences in perceptions about who had power which were, I believe, inevitable. In other words, partners will most probably have some distinct differences between them, and often dramatically different perceptions of what is happening in the relationship. The second aspect of this issue is that sometimes, if these became extreme they also involved power differentials or power struggles. The question for one woman was not, 'are there power or other differences in lesbian relationships?'. It was "how you deal with it" that most mattered to her. "How do you reconcile [differences] and really honour them and learn from them? It's challenging." There is a "kind of empowerment" in honouring these differences, and being respectful of the other person.

Another woman made clear for us the profound effects of this kind of communication, when she said:

Acknowledging your own strengths and weaknesses and the same with theirs - like putting that right out as opposed to just accepting it within yourself, but to speak it as well - and I think that's when the sharing comes.

The other part of this problem was that often lesbians (not unlike other people in relationships) had different perceptions of what was real, and what was actually happening. Whether this was because of differing world views, values or other factors, I'm not sure, but the differences were sometimes profound enough that the chasm created became vast and unbridgable. One woman said:

We used to have arguments about whose reality was right because we didn't see things the same at all. I felt like - are we in the same movie? Like if someone had heard both of our hits of reality - they would have been very confused and thought we were on different planets. And that was very confusing to me - even trusting my own reality after all that - it seems hard in a power struggle not to do that - her reality ruled more than mine.

One part of this discussion that was fascinating was that there were several references to the fact that there were times in relationships when one person felt that

they were powerless, and the other partner saw them as having all the power. One of the women pondered, "...But isn't everyone's perception of their own powerlessness so unique?" She explained that both she and her partner made assumptions about what the other was feeling in a certain situation, until they checked it out. When they actually got down to talking it through, they realized that their assumptions were not necessarily correct. She told us, "...Then we can both let go of our positions and look at the other one's position." This really helped them grow and learn about each other in the context of their relationship.

Another woman shared her experience.

Well I found something interesting...'cause I was able to talk to my ex - since our last meeting and talked to her about power and how I felt that I had lost power and that I felt that the only way I could get power back was to leave - and her interpretation of it all was that I had the power - and she didn't have the power and that ultimately the person that has the least vested interest in the relationship ultimately has the power - and because there was the threat of my leaving, I had the power, but I felt totally powerless in this relationship. - And she thought contrary, that I had the power. - But I felt powerless...

I think this is an excellent example of the way that both partners felt powerless, each from their own perspective. There were times when both women's perceptions were valid and made perfect sense, given their life experience. If we were able at those times to be curious about this difference, and there was the space in our relationship to allow this, then growth and changes could have happened as we heard each others' perspective and saw each others' position. This could have created more closeness and more potential for intimacy:

Because to be honest and revealing is part of being intimate with one another - about what's happening for you - and also about the things that you won't compromise on. The beauty is that if it works...you do end up on a different level together.

It meant there had to be a certain degree of respect, trust and safety in relationship. If these didn't exist, or if one partner refused to communicate, or if there was too much of a power imbalance or difference of perceptions about power on one side or the other, it was impossible to overcome it.

When considering different perceptions about power, what can happen is that one partner's version or perception of reality takes over. This leaves no room for discussion, negotiation, curiosity about the other's point of view, or a shared perception where each partner is right and feels heard and seen. What usually occurs is a power struggle of trying to determine who is right. Often, of course, one partner wins and the other loses. One has the power and the other does not. This reinforces Surrey's (1991) findings that competition for power pits people against each other, where only one partner can have power in a relationship. Someone has to be in control, as opposed to power being shared and balanced between two powerful partners. Reilly and Lynch (1990), and Risman and Schwartz (1988) also referred to the differing perceptions that exist between partners. They wrote about the surprising number of partners who did not agree about power sharing in their relationships, who did not agree as to whether power was equal or shared or not. These authors explained that sometimes one partner felt no significant power differential while the other felt powerless.

This links to respect and trust. If these qualities are present, then it is possible for partners to have differing perceptions of power without these posing a threat in the relationship. Power issues do not necessarily dissolve with trust and respect, but they are less likely to become damaging in the relationship if partners share a foundation of respect and trust.

### Abuse: Power Gone Wrong

Many of the women shared stories and experiences of being abused by partners.

This included sexual, physical, emotional, verbal and psychological abuse of any kind.

If we defined it as violation or abuse, then it was. For example:

It took me a long time to admit that I and my child had been abused in a very cruel way. We were not beaten physically. There were no bruises, nothing obvious to see. Those who knew me well noticed signs and red flags of psychic deterioration. The abuse we suffered was verbal, emotional, crazy-making, mind games and absolute lack of respect.

Many of the women in the group shared the experience of being in relationship with another woman, a lesbian, and being treated so badly "you could hardly breathe."

It was certainly not a prerequisite for membership in this group to have been abused in a lesbian relationship. Yet I was struck time and again as we were willing to risk telling our stories, our truths, with how much abuse we had put up with for so long. I am sure that the opportunity for such a group experience provided the need we had to meet and talk, because many of us had been so devastated in relationship. It was astounding how many of us spent many years with women who we believed cared for us and loved us, only to discover how hurt and violated we had been. It was frightening and absolutely unacceptable. We all felt that abuse must stop, and that we as lesbians in community must see that it does. Abuse is always about power and control. It was rarely exposed and talked about, especially among lesbians. However, we changed that for us through the process of this group. Though there is still much silence about abuse in lesbian relationships, it is being better addressed now through some articles and books that are looking at these issues (Renzetti, 1992; Taylor & Chandler, 1995; Ristock, 1991 & 1994; Chesley, MacAuly & Ristock, 1992; Pajot, 1993; Hammond, 1989; Blenman, 1991; Elliott, 1990; Grover, 1991). I was

awe-struck to witness all of our courage in the telling and sharing of some brutally painful experiences. Experiences that never should have happened and that are not our fault. Here are some of these stories.

One woman told us:

You love somebody and you care about them and you are making a life together with them and so you act in a certain way - and so when that didn't happen, then it was kind of horrifying to me. At first it was like a jolt, it was like an incredible shock of how could this be happening - like scratching my head and making excuses, and then realizing that she really didn't respect me - or whatever her idea of respect was certainly wasn't like mine.

Another said:

For me, one of the tools that I have brought with me from relationship is, well, sort of developed in the course of going through these relationships - is really paying attention to what I'm feeling - that's hard to do in a relationship that's abusive - because you are always being, well, the other person's goal in life is to keep you off balance. That was certainly my experience in an abusive relationship - is that I never knew from minute-to-minute what I could do to make it better or what I could do that was right - whatever I did was wrong - whether I'd done it yesterday or not or whether it was right yesterday or not - I was so crazy and it just got crazier.

Emotional abuse can be much harder to recognize and identify than physical abuse.

As one woman put it:

It's interesting when we are talking about power and control if it's blatant. I have boundaries - like boundaries where I wouldn't tolerate physical abuse and out-and-out blatant abuse - but it gets muddled when it gets into the emotional abuse and when it's kinda not clear. It's overpowering, overwhelming when you're right in the middle of it. I would describe it in myself as almost a helpless feeling - and yet I don't really think of myself to be helpless - it has to do I think with how much emotional investment I have in the other person and it's like I don't want to believe it's happening - and so it's not happening.

This voice helps us to recognize and examine how difficult it is to extricate oneself from this kind of abuse, "even when it was so totally contrary to everything [she] believed about [herself]."

Even when we have worked with others suffering and surviving abuse, and we recognize all the signs, it was difficult to see and believe them in our own lives.

Sometimes we thought since we knew about abuse, that it wouldn't happen to us. This woman's words demonstrate how this is simply not so.

I mean, I knew all this stuff about violence against women and I know the cycle of abuse and all that - but there I was living in a situation where we'd have the honeymoon period and then it would start to escalate, and a lot of times when she was being abusive to me, she was being very inconsistent - what I'd say or do one day would be fine and then something I'd say the next day would just bring out this incredible rage in her - and yet I stayed and I think part of the reason I stayed was because I was so off balance.

When she heard this one of the other women said, "There's always a need for acceptance too - let's just keep at it, let me try something, let me try this - looking at what did I do here, rather than just what an asshole they are...". It was clear from so many comments that we continued to think there was surely something we could do or say that would make a difference; make it better; when in fact there was nothing that could be done to change an abuse of power unless both partners saw it that way, and usually, of course, this was not the case. One woman shared with us:

It doesn't matter what you do, it's the wrong thing - you get punished so - I think the basis of that was this person wanting to feel in control - but - it was so screwed up - I mean she had no concept of what it felt like to feel in control and so there was all this just crazy stuff going on - in order so that she could feel in control - and she never felt in control.

I think we often knew that things were not okay and we were not being treated right, but we hoped it was temporary, that it would change, that somehow we could make it be better. This was obvious when one woman said:

I would walk around knowing that what was happening was not okay. - like in a million ways - I mean it took me a long time to get out of there - but I think from the very beginning when it started to be wrong, I knew that it was violating some part of me.

Another said:

It was a very abusive relationship - and there was a lot of drugs and alcohol involved there - and I knew I shouldn't be in that relationship - and yet there was a part of me that didn't know what boundaries were either - so like part of me said oh maybe I should stay - oh what's it gonna look like if I leave - and uh maybe she'll kill herself if I leave and the threat was there - and that was a very powerless place for me - and she was the one with the drug and alcohol problem and I was the one that was powerless - that doesn't make a lot of sense to me - and I stayed in that one for almost 12 years.

The life drain of that kind of a power struggle was truly unfathomable, and yet it was "amazing the number of women who have been in that situation for 20 years." One woman said, "I think just being in it for just about four just about did me in."

Some other comments were, "No this isn't right." "I have to get out of this." "I should never have done this." "I should have seen the writing on the wall." "I should not have trusted her." "I was left with all this anger - why didn't I leave?" We have all given ourselves a hard time for staying, while knowing and having compassion for "the dynamics and stuff that keeps you there - being hopeful." Talking about this together was affirming and reassuring. It was powerful to recognize ourselves in each others' distress, grief and struggle.

What was the power associated with abuse really about? What was really going on when one lesbian was abusive to another? Sometimes it was the inappropriate ways that one can learn to cope with feeling powerless by exerting power over another. It was a way to maintain false control and superiority. It was a way to make oneself feel okay especially when you didn't by exercising control over another in an abusive way. Also as one woman said, "I think there are people who are really kind of crazy - I think there are people who really react in neurotic ways to the situations - and do consciously and really actively try and manipulate the power interactions with people...". Often questions would arise: "Is it a mind trip or a game? Is that part of what happens around

power dynamics? Are there other agendas going on? Does it come out of wanting to manipulate the situation or person?"

Another woman was describing to us the extent of how she had been shattered and broken by her abusive ex-partner. In her words:

When a person takes that from you - then you know you've lost something - and it's really hard to get it back - really really hard - if you ever do really get it back - you keep trying and trying - it takes a long time.

It was shocking to hear how devastating these experiences of abuse were for all of us. They have left scars, disappointment and disillusionment; and also a sense of strength and humility because of having survived.

Withholding communication was a very abusive way to increase someone's sense of powerfulness. It was disrespectful and damaging to a relationship if one partner reached out to communicate and was ignored or silenced by the other. The craziness and horror of being treated with extreme lack of trust and "at the same time going along telling them that they love them. Now you talk about power...".

It is obvious from the above stories that abuse is directly related to power and control. It is about the need to maintain power and be in control by terrorizing, demoralizing or intimidating another. It is the extreme form of an unhealthy power imbalance in a relationship. Certainly lesbians are disempowered women with little social or political control. This contributes to some lesbians trying to compensate for this lack of external control by controlling their partners. However, this is no excuse. Women always have a choice about how to deal with powerlessness. As Bernie Parks explains (cited in Taylor & Chandler, 1995):

...Emotional and physical violence are used as effective tools of power and control and the abuser makes a choice about using that violence. We can no longer afford to view violence as a male phenomena, but as a control issue (p. 52).

Bardwick (1977) also explains what happens when women manipulate others in order to protect themselves, or to compensate for psychological discomfort like feeling inadequate or vulnerable. They may perceive their partner as more powerful and so attack her as an inappropriate way to equalize power in the relationship. From these two examples we see that abuse can come from both personal and political roots. Either way it is not an acceptable choice for dealing with powerlessness.

In a number of relationships where power had been used abusively, women in the group talked about how this affected them. They shared stories of leaving relationships, of losing self-confidence or self-worth, of losing or giving away their "power within". Typically, in these kinds of relationships, the women acknowledged that there was little discussion or agreement between partners about issues of power. Abuse for them implied diminishing another's power contrasted with Surrey's (1987) idea about how empowerment involves enriching each person's power. Her image of empowerment was more connected to the notion of "power with" than the abuse model of "power over".

#### Leaving: The Consequences of Unhealthy Power Struggles

"The only way I could get my power back was to leave," was something we heard over and over in the group. As one woman emphatically stated:

That was the only way I could do it - and there's something so distressing about that - I mean it's okay. in the end - it's like, well, that's how it had to be - I'm not regretful about that - but there is something that makes me kind of crazy about that - I couldn't come to a balance, or figure it out with her, and I couldn't get my power back for myself while I was still being in that situation.

There were many profound and disturbing repercussions after being in relationships where power dynamics were detrimental and did not get resolved. One woman told us that:

I find that when you leave a relationship where you felt used - and when you go to the next one - at first I noticed I had a bad attitude - like I'm not gonna be used again - I will not be the one in that position again - it took me a while I guess, checking the tool box - no this person is a different person - this is different - it's not the same.

This was a common theme, this need to keep reminding ourselves that we were not in that abusive situation anymore and that in fact things could be different. It seems that after the devastation of these particular kinds of relationships where power struggles figure so prominently, sometimes it is so shattering that it is hard to really believe a relationship could be different. Believing that it could be different, and then acting on this was an important part of the healing and moving on. Another woman who had moved on in this way could relate and she told us, "...it took me years to know that I was reacting to a present relationship as if that person was the past relationship - and I just feel like furious...". One of the women said she felt "much more sane and stronger on [her] own," after being in a relationship where she felt extremely powerless. This was another consequence of power imbalances in intimate relationships, that women who were otherwise strong and fairly self assured, were reduced to a state of helplessness and inaction by these dynamics. It was a "horrible feeling." It was an "overwhelming emotional investment."

One of the women explained to us that she "was dying on the inside in the relationship." She knew it was not a healthy relationship for her and said, "I don't know if I was losing myself and lost power. I was emotionally ill. I couldn't make much sense. I knew it didn't feel right or healthy and I didn't see it working, so I left." She

went on to say, "I felt shut down and couldn't communicate - so that's why I said I would not walk on eggshells and I would not not communicate" in a future relationship. She knew she could never do that again. Another woman said that she had felt like she was dying and "dealing with a low grade depression." She said she "certainly felt emotionally ill."

We had some important discussion about what kept us in these awful relationships, and why we didn't leave sooner, even though there was understanding and compassion for how difficult it was to leave, for myriad reasons. One woman's insights added to this conversation when she said:

I think that what kept me there was a value that I had about working things out, and that's a great question - how do you know when enough is too much, when you shouldn't try one more time? How do you know when someone is being such an asshole that you shouldn't be there in the first place, let alone keep trying? But I do have a value that says I made a commitment - not as something that I bow down to - I don't want to be swallowed in it and lose myself in it - but there is something to me that happens when you honour a commitment and work with that, provided that you are both doing that - and the problem in our situation was that we weren't - and I can't stay committed with someone who isn't doing that with me - it's very destructive and unhealthy if you are not [both doing that].

Many group members had experienced being with partners who were self-centred and were not able to be in a mutual or reciprocal relationship. This meant that someone's needs were ignored and the other's needs took over at the expense of her partner's. One woman said, "There's got to be some way to take care of yourself in a way that doesn't say...'I'm taking care of me and I don't care about you'." Another woman described how her partner of nine years was only concerned for how things worked for herself and not for her partner. She said matter of factly that that's just how it was and that if this woman did not want to help her she should get out of her life. This complete lack of concern or regard for the needs and wants of another was a

common thread in our discussions. For some this attitude was "inconsistent and incongruent" with agreements they thought they had made with their partners, and all of these behaviours formed a basis and impetus for leaving.

It seems that another significant reason for staying beyond what may be appropriate and healthy was the hope that "people can change," though one of the women felt like her "relationship was rocky from day one," and that we needed to stop hoping that things would change like on tv and in the movies because basically "people stay the same."

One of the severe consequences of staying in a relationship for so long when it was awful, was that it was a tremendous drain on our life energy. Often for "health and sanity" it becomes essential to leave and save ourselves. As one woman put it, "you felt like you had to escape. It was like escaping with your life, and alot of people in this room have talked about that." Comments like these gave a sense of the urgency and desperation that accompanied the need to leave. One very moving story affected us all rather profoundly. This woman told us:

After the dust settled I found that I didn't have any soul left - it was all gone - and going inside I just found that I was totally empty - I couldn't fill it up - couldn't get my feelings back - couldn't get anything back - when I met [my new partner] I wasn't really me - there were two different people - and it felt so hard for them to come together as one person - closer every day - but it's been a really long haul - and this one person is all of these things - suicidal - it doesn't matter 'cause there's nothing inside - there's no soul there - there's no trust - there's no love - just a walking vessel - it takes a long time to get it back...but I had to write a letter to the person and say that's it - don't ever contact me again - I don't want to have anything to do with you - I don't want to see you - I don't want to hear from you - that's been four years now since I left - and I've been struggling with this all along...

She went on to say:

It was just dead - your soul, your desire, anything that keeps a person going was all gone - it takes years, and I still can't see it happening completely. It'll

probably take a few years yet I think, to fill my cup again, but it's coming. There's something there now.

Even this woman who had been so totally depleted was still sad that she had to end it like that, and could not even salvage a friendship out of it. However, she knew that was not possible because what she had suffered had been so heavy and life-threatening for her. This had been an 18 year relationship. Sometimes it seemed to be life-saving to cut off contact like that. It may have been the only way we could get ourselves and our energy and power back. It wasn't possible to reconcile a friendship with someone who was abusive to you and treated you so badly, unless, maybe, some profound acknowledgement and genuine apology took place.

One of the heavy consequences was that what began as a loving partnership with dreams, hopes, plans and intentions turned to ashes with not a shred of caring left intact on which to build a friendship. Once that trust and bridge was broken, "there can't be any as far as a friendship goes." It took a while to regain the ability to trust others as well. As our power came back, so did our trust. It was always a risk in relationship to open up and trust. "It's a risk - being willing to reveal yourself - because that's where intimacy is born." Never was it felt more than when we have experienced it being shattered so completely in an abusive relationship. So, the leave-taking was always accompanied by tremendous loss, even when it was the only and right choice.

Leaving did not necessarily imply power for the woman leaving. I believe it was a way to reclaim power in an unworkable situation with someone who was abusive, but in and of itself, the one who was leaving may have felt powerful for getting their own life back, or powerless even though they were "stepping out of it."

Sometimes this sense of powerlessness for the one who was leaving came from a sense of having failed. It felt like a "lose-lose situation - where either you let go of some of those boundaries or you lose this relationship that you've invested in." It also might have been like it was for one woman who told us it was "like I was losing my home - I was living in a place that I really loved - and I had to leave because it was her place - there was for me an incredible feeling of rejection. I felt so powerless."

I was struck over and over again by the images and descriptions used to explain the bottom group members reached that led to leaving. One told us, "I lost myself along the way - 'cause I gave too much - I overstepped my own reach." Another said vividly, "...It's heavy to get yourself back after an intensively abusive relationship where it's like a transfusion - and what you're describing where you feel like you've been drained away or sucked away."

Another repercussion that came from leaving, is that we got to see that it can be different in another relationship with a different partner. One woman shared her perspective from inside a current healthy and vibrant relationship.

I feel totally different right now - like it feels like such a different scene and such a different possibility - there's such a different kind of respect and honouring - it's like day and night - and it helps to clarify what wasn't happening over there - I don't think I really got it until I was in this relationship - and saw the difference that can happen when you handle it differently - and you deal with it respectfully - and you're honest.

This statement from one of the participants summed up another positive element of leaving, "...Now that I'm out of it I feel like I've won - 'cause I feel like I'm not stressed out, not in that place of really being held down in that relationship - some part of me that was really not growing there."

Leaving an unhealthy or abusive relationship relates directly to power. When all other attempts have failed, it can be the only way to reclaim power from within. The consequences of unhealthy power dynamics are far-reaching, since they can be shattering and can instill a profound fear of opening or trusting in subsequent relationships.

Despite high levels of marital breakdown and divorce, women are expected to stay in relationship, no matter what. They are dependent and afraid in the face of abuse. Leaving an unhealthy or abusive relationship is not easy. Shame is part of what makes this difficult. Quitting a relationship is controversial and difficult for women given our socialization; staying is acceptable. Women are taught to stay in relationships, to be committed, to give, to care for, to make excuses, to forgive and forget, to make it better, to change it, to fix it, to try again and try harder until and even when we bleed and break. To stop giving ourselves away to others, especially when they hurt and abuse us, and to really listen to ourselves when we have had enough in relationships, for most women, including lesbians, is contrary to everything we are taught to believe in this society.

The findings in this research related to abuse and leaving a relationship parallel writings by feminists about abuse, with special considerations of the marginalized position of lesbians (Elliott, 1990; Hammond, 1989; Lobel, 1986; Nicarity, 1986; Pajot, 1993; Ristock, 1991; Cecere, 1986). In this research many women graphically described their personal experiences of abuse, and spoke longingly of wanting to experience different and more healthy relationships.

### **Theme 5: Patriarchal Constraints Frame Power Dynamics**

The rules and expectations ingrained in us in the hetero-patriarchal culture we are part of, are inescapable. They formulate and inform our ideas, experiences and beliefs about relationship. They affect how we formulate our ideas about and ways of navigating through power in this society. Even as lesbians, thinking we are approaching and managing relationships differently, more creatively, with more possibilities, still we are trapped in the social, political, familial and institutional mores of this training. It is possible to become more conscious of this, learn ways to deal with it and change it from within. However, until the whole of society is dismantled and restructured in a way that is not hetero-patriarchal, we are susceptible to its influence, in ways both overt and subtle. It is no wonder then, that we heard in our group many references to the profound effects that this upbringing has had on us, and how it creeps into our relationships. Some of us have tried to establish something new and different. Some lesbians in the group were content to create exactly the kinds of relationships, families, and marriages that parents and those around us had. Many of us realized, though, that part of what ensures a more balanced sense of partnership, equality and power in a relationship is to address hetero-patriarchal issues and move to a different model.

One of the issues related to this theme was about the "expectations that women will do it [be in relationship] differently than men." One participant said that she expected "that women are more respectful and are better on the emotional plane and better at doing [that] consistently." The only problem was that it didn't turn out to be that way in her intimate relationship with one particular woman any more than it had been with

men in her life. She found this "really scary." We have learned from a young age that men are less emotional, harder to connect with in relationship, and women are the opposite. When we found out the hard way that this wasn't necessarily always true, we felt as though we had been betrayed. We often did not attribute any of it to our sexist training, though. We usually blamed ourselves and thought that we had failed in some way or that we were somehow defective in relationship. One woman was acutely aware of this when she told us:

It all makes me think, okay, where are we as a society? We've evolved to this point in the 90s where we have so many choices and the feminist awareness that we've had in the last 20 years and I feel pissed off that I bought the myth - and I don't think it's real - maybe I'm just bitter - I mean there's a big romantic side of me that wants that, but I don't know how realistic it is - I've been through so many relationships where I've tried and tried, and I'm just not sure.

Another participant said "We get so caught up in judging relationship by longevity - success or failure based on how long people have been together - and I don't think we always have to be together for a long time...there can be wonderful short term relationships where each person gets something important out of it and then they go on their way." How is that for a challenge to hetero-patriarchal ideals about relationships? She went on to say that she believed that we didn't learn very well how to be in relationships in a healthy way from our parents and others. Another said that she could not even think of five relationships that were enviable of all the ones she has known in over 40 years. What does that tell us?

It tells us that we learned that especially as women we should make excuses for those who do not treat us right, be ever hopeful, and keep trying in relationships if we want to succeed. It tells us that we somehow understood that it was our responsibility and if a relationship ended, then it was our fault. It tells us that we learned that being

complacent was good, because it ensured that our relationships would last forever. It tells us that we came to believe that we were very powerful in our abilities to make bad relationships better if we gave more and tried harder. It tells us that we were taught that to "rock the boat" was not desirable and so we spent most of our time living up to some ideal of what relationship should be, rather than what it actually looked and felt like. As one woman put it, "like don't rock the boat and then it sinks."

Another woman explained the differences she felt in a lesbian relationship now, after many years of being heterosexual. We could see from her comments how these differences were linked to consciously diverging from the values we all grew up with about relationship expectations. She said:

I feel differently now. I value my service - but for me that is one of the beauties of being in a lesbian relationship. We don't have that patriarchal imbalance. One of the great things is that I didn't start out in this relationship feeling that it was my job to make the other person happy, or that it was my job to make them comfortable, or that it was my job to be sure that all the shit work got done - all those things that were built in before. It's not an automatic assumption on my part that that's how it is. The automatic assumption on my part is that it will be shared. It's not an underlying lack of balance to start with. I suppose that's a personal thing and not necessarily so in a lesbian relationship, but to be coming to a lesbian relationship from my own personal history, there is a big difference.

Luckily she has a partner who can meet her there, and share with her in that way.

Unfortunately it does not always work this way. As one woman said, "This was ... what I considered a solid and mutually empowering, really caring relationship and something changed." That was a common theme among us. We felt as though a relationship started out fairly balanced and respectful, and then something changed it. This left us with feelings of confusion, anger, helplessness and betrayal. We kept hoping in vain that somehow magically our original partner was going to return. We

were holding out for that, and the disappointments were deep and grave when that never happened.

Another woman expressed her grave disappointment when she said, "I wanted to share in that way with a woman, and expected to, and then when I didn't so intensely, I felt, well, this may as well be a man." Perhaps part of why the disappointment was so grave was that "your heart gets more into it or something", and that somehow as feminists we were more passive with other women than we were with men if we were being hurt or disrespected or abused.

As women we are taught in this culture that it is our role and our job to be "more giving and more nurturing." We are judged for being "selfish" if we decided to take better care of ourselves than others, some of the time.

We live in a culture that is still extremely unfriendly, non-supportive and often downright hostile to homosexuals. One woman said, "I think this whole thing (she was referring to our difficulties as parents) has to do with how society looks at homosexuality." This came at the end of an intense conversation about the difficulties of raising children in lesbian relationships. She went on to say, "... You have to lead a double life - so what value is the relationship given? - there's no real value - the law doesn't back it up - nothing backs it up...". Someone else said, "there is no need to think about commitment because society doesn't support that." Another woman added "...It's hard enough step-parenting - but it's doubly hard step-parenting in the context of a lesbian family - and relationship 'cause there's no validation and no acknowledgement that it's even a family or a relationship...or something that is valuable." Lesbian

relationships are not respected in the same way as heterosexual ones are. One woman was hopeful in her current analysis that:

Maybe we're a new culture - just brand new - you know - we've been around, but we've just been around in pieces and now we're coming together and so now we have to build our own rules and guidelines and our own laws. Even though lesbians have been around for centuries, since the dawn of time, I think there is a difference emerging from out of the shadows.

It takes a lot of hard work and support to maintain our culture as lesbians and keep it growing under the shadow of heteropatriarchal dominance. Until fairly recently "...We were denying our own existence - and our own feelings for one another - because it was just not something you could safely put out there and acknowledge to anybody - without feeling jeopardized somehow."

It is clear that the women felt that living in a hostile culture, with no legal or social support, and no validation of lesbian lives, relationships and families, renders them more powerless. It is inevitable that these dimensions will have a profound impact on our lives inside of our relationships. It is inevitable that hetero-patriarchal culture will drain power from lesbian relationships.

### **Theme 6: Healing: Attention to Inner Self as a Way of Healing and Value of Support and Sharing**

There was much focus on ways to heal ourselves after relationships where we had experienced unhealthy power dynamics. Much of this emphasized both personal ways that we have learned this through intuition and skill building, and also the empowerment afforded by being part of a support network such as this research group.

### Attention to Inner Self as a Way of Healing

A sub-theme that was discussed primarily in the first two sessions included both the ways that we recognized that we gave power away to our partners, and related to this, the ways we did not pay attention to our deepest and most knowing selves. By this I mean the parts of ourselves that know what is good for us, and healthy, even if we don't attend to them. There were many examples of women giving themselves away as a way to hopefully become intimate or to make a relationship work. Many thought this was connected with what they did that was so damaging to their personal power. As one woman put it:

With regard to personal power - I gave a lot of it away - my own personal power is really mine and I have to be very careful with myself not to give all of that, or too much of that away, because then I end up in a sort of victim place.

When she was asked to clarify about how she gave her power away, she said:

...Trying to please all the time - without regard for what I want - not satisfying [my] own needs and [my] own being, and just constantly giving everything that you have to somebody else - without any personal satisfaction coming out of it - so it's like there's nothing left for [me] - I eventually get to the point where I feel like I have no energy left.

After this explanation, many of us recognized this behaviour in ourselves, and another woman said:

...So then that brings me to something I've been trying to look at - the control that I'm seeking in that - what is it? There must be some control in giving your all totally - empty - it's hard to look at - 'cause you feel like a victim and you feel oh what else can I do - I've done and given everything - maybe in trying to please and give so much - you might be able to control what the other person does and then they'll love you and ensure that it will last for a long time - the fantasies - then the other person is swallowed by it and then it's over - unless there's a balance.

This rang a bell for several of the women present. One began talking about having recently split up, and shared some of the thoughts she had been having now that she was living on her own. She said:

I still realized there was some part of me that I gave up in the relationship - that I'm starting to get back now - I feel like I'm a different person now than I was in that relationship - and yet I felt very strong and like we had a very equal and mutually nurturing relationship - but I wasn't myself - my self-esteem was in the gutter - I just allowed myself to fall into that place of being taken care of - to the extent that I gave up something - and I'm really interested in this because in the relationship I was in with [another woman] which was really abusive, I was in that position of giving up a lot - I would give and give and give - and I would try and please her, and I lost myself, but I lost myself in a different way in this other relationship...

Another woman who could also relate to giving herself away, to the point of being the "overgiver and the pleaser," shared that what helped her to "hang on to [her] own power" was getting really clear on her bottom lines. "...That was like a huge revelation for me..." This helped her come to terms with what she needed to support her in relationship, and to recognize the level of "starvation" she was experiencing, in a cruel and abusive relationship. It was profound for her to recognize this. She spent time in her life figuring out what the bottom lines meant in "concrete terms," because she said, "I know what it feels like...there was no question that I wasn't getting it in terms of how I felt." What was significant was that we always knew when it didn't feel right. We got strong messages from our innermost selves, though we didn't always pay attention to these messages.

One of the things that group members expressed over and over was the power of "paying attention to what [we are] feeling." Asking ourselves important questions also seemed to be the key for more active listening to the voices within that monitor whether we are in a safe and appropriate relationship or not. One woman asked herself, "Do I feel centred?" For her an off-balance place was a cue that something was very wrong and she needed to pay close attention. She was familiar enough with that feeling of "not coming from the centre of [herself]" to recognize that it was not healthy. She also

knew when she was feeling an "anxiety that roams around in [her] body" that she was "not in touch with [her] own power and [her] own needs." It let her know that there was not a balanced feeling or respect in her relationship. She acknowledged that for her this took conscious and "constant checking-in" with herself.

Others could certainly identify with that "state of angst - for years - for years..." that we had all lived in, and the need to keep asking ourselves, "...is this what I really want to do? - 'cause I can so easily get lost in that give away place - am I doing what I want for me, am I taking care of myself? - I really have to do that, and if I abdicate the responsibility, I abandon myself and what happens then is I get mad at myself."

We talked about how difficult it was to know or tell that someone was going to be trustworthy, not lie to you, or abuse power. The truth was that there were no guarantees, and we couldn't know that for sure from the onset. What we could do was "get those signals" that help us "listen" to and be alert to the "red flags," the "inconsistencies and incongruencies" that told us that that we were losing our power, or with someone who was not trustworthy. In one woman's words, "It's that very thing of not paying attention to the signals that has ended me up in a powerless place." It is amazing what we lived with and adjusted to in a relationship. It was astounding that we saw ourselves as quitting or as failures when we were indeed engaged in the most crucial act of self love and caring. We were well trained as women to believe it was not self caring. This means actively retraining ourselves and each other.

One of the participants described her experience in a relationship that was "all encompassing." She expected all their needs would be met in the relationship which she said:

Lead to a very isolated life - and then everything starts falling apart because self was not cared for - you're making all kinds of compromises - you don't want to create any waves - or see angry bursts or upheavals - and so you give your power away, you give your needs away - you give your friends away - and then you're left with this big void.

In another account we witnessed how overwhelming the feelings of helplessness became, and the reality that we were helpless to change an abusive relationship, or one where the power was very imbalanced. This woman told us:

I was constantly in a place where I felt like there was no resolve for this, there's no way to work it through, there's no way to talk about it, there's no way to be civil about it - everything I try, every time I do something, every where I turn there's a brick wall - and this constant feeling of helplessness - like there is nothing I can do to make it be any different, or to make it work, or to make a bridge back to trust and respect - I often felt like, well, what happened to our friendship, to all the things we communicated about for so long, and talked about and agreed upon - I felt like I was with a monster and someone I really didn't recognize, somebody who was totally different than who I had started out with - and the constant feeling of trying to get back to something we'd had - or trying to figure out what to do about it - it didn't matter how much I thought I knew her - but I really felt disrespected and wondered what am I doing here, and especially in terms of my kid - that was one of the hardest places for me.

Another woman responded by saying, "...That's when you need to realize that it is not up to you, you can't - it's not all yours - you have your own stuff - and that their acting out is hard not to take personally." Even in the light of hard evidence it was difficult to not keep trying, hoping, overgiving, and thinking it might change. It was painful to give up and to let go so totally, when it really hit us that there was no hope and that we, or we and our children were sinking. Over and over we heard admissions of knowing that we were "dying on the inside, not healthy, emotionally ill, shut down, depressed, attacked, defensive, not trusting my inner voice that was screaming." We made comments like, "I knew that what was happening was not okay., I knew it was violating some part of me, I knew I shouldn't be there, I should never have done this, I should not have trusted her," and we talked about how detrimental it had been for us

not to heed our own signals and symptoms. Sometimes it was hard for us to trust our own perceptions and feelings. But we all realized that we needed to trust ourselves more in this way and be less swayed by the perceptions of partners, or sometimes friends.

Sometimes our experiences become transformed into the tools we take into other relationships. Our pain becomes part of the learning and insight that helps us create a different relationship the next time, or our learning from relationships that have failed give us new ways to pay attention to our inner cues that can guide us to more healthy situations. One woman said she felt:

So profoundly disappointed and shocked - like shaken - more than shaken - disillusioned - all those things and more - and it hasn't wiped out all my experiences that I have had with women in relationships or with women friends but I think it made me - more on guard or something - more sceptical...

She saw this as a positive way of being more cautious and used it as a tool for being more aware in a future relationship.

It often seemed that our only two choices in a bad relationship were either to "compromise who [we are] and lose a sense of [ourselves], or feel like [we] want others (partners) to be different," and more like us. It was clear that "both of these are dangerous," and that ultimately neither worked. It was essential to learn how to be respectful and honour the differences and learn from them, or to separate and find our own ways. It was "hard to stay in yourself and follow what you believe," difficult to be "true to yourself," and essential to remember that "inner voices do matter." They gave us important information that we could not live without. Some things could never be compromised; some were negotiable. If we gave ourselves away "you hate yourself

for that." The trade-off was "to keep your sense of yourself, keep your self-esteem - your personal strength."

To stop giving our power away and to really listen to ourselves when we have had enough in relationship, is opposed to everything we are taught to believe as women in this society. Even with hard evidence of unhealthy power imbalances and abuse it is difficult for us not to keep trying, over-giving and thinking it might change. Our power is directly related to whether we are able to be centred in and listen to our deep selves, or whether we give over our power by ignoring ourselves and our internal messages. This is not the only factor that determines whether we hold power or not, but it is an important piece of it. There is definitely a relationship between our sense of self, self-confidence and autonomy and feeling powerful in our relationships.

#### Value of Support and Sharing

It was evident from the comments of the women that there was value in meeting to discuss these issues. Yet it was not easy to come together with seven other women in a group, and share some of the most intimate and often painful parts of one's relationship. It takes courage, wisdom, great strength and humility. I was inspired by the willingness of the group members to share deeply from the well of our experiences. As stories were told and feelings unfolded, we had the opportunity to learn an enormous amount about each other, to reflect on and learn more about ourselves, and to understand more of the meanings of power in our relationships. This was a unique opportunity, and a shift in how we usually communicated and carried on our lives.

What follows are some comments and statements that let us know we were on a positive track to use this approach to discussion and data gathering . One woman said at the end of the first session, "...I just had sort of a burst of energy...kind of just enthusiastic about hearing and learning..." Another said, "I think it's taken alot of courage for all of us to put out some of the stuff that we have here tonight...I fell good about sharing..." One participant "found it extremely interesting how most of us [had] been through a lot of the same things." She said, "At first when I sat here tonight I thought I really don't know what I can say...but as we went along it's amazing how many times I felt like I could really relate. It was good."

It was obvious that to say what we had in out hearts and minds, was a relief, reassuring and it was a powerful act to be engaged in together. As one woman put it:

I've really enjoyed this session tonight - it's really interesting and passionate and fun and I feel really good that I've been here and part of it. It feels good that we are open to this and to really looking at ourselves and looking at where we came from and where we want to be, and finding ways to get there.

It was affirming for us all to know that something important was happening. The sessions were also lots of fun - there was much laughter. One woman ended the second session by saying that she was "...helter skelter right now in regards to `yes it can work - no it can't - ya - no - ya - no'..." We all broke out laughing and enjoyed the truth and the humour in her comment. Another group member appreciated the "depth of sharing and the courage to talk about what we've been through and how hard it is sometimes - the level of learning and what shifts it...". One woman ended the second session by reminding us "That it is so powerful to speak out and hear each others' voices because we are so conditioned not to do that..." It was a living example of "...Being willing to

be open about [these issues] in community and not just talking about it with our partners or close friends."

These group meetings were an inspiration, an incentive and thought-provoking for many of the women. One woman shared:

I'm quite willing to change and I'm quite willing to look at myself - and it's good to listen to other people because it helps me to get a perspective on things - and it's kind of neat to laugh about it - so I like this sharing - 'cause I personally grow from it - and I was also quite comfortable sharing with the people who are here...at first it was difficult because we're in a community, and we know other people out there - so it took some risks - but I got a lot from it.

It was challenging in a small community to create enough safety together that women felt they could take the risks to which this woman referred. Another woman said she thought that we "set down sufficient guidelines to appease" and for her to feel comfortable in taking these kinds of risks. She said that she "...Very much enjoyed this particular group of people - and enjoyed the sharing" which had not been an easy thing for her throughout her life.

There was certainly a growing sense of the sharing and intimacy from one session to the next, as demonstrated in this woman's words:

I'm really enjoying the fact that we are more intimate. You could see the change from the first session to the second and third, and I'm certainly more comfortable. We are developing more intimacy and trust. It was hard, the idea of risk-taking, and sharing things about my partner - and people in this room know who she is - and jeopardizing that - and I don't want to do that - and I feel that it's safe to do that - we've gotten to know each other - it's useful - like peer counselling or something.

One woman felt that the support and sharing of the group "really helped [her] to get back to [her] grass roots." She was reminded that she was "not alone - and that talking about power in relationships is a very good topic - and sharing philosophies too - and we've gone down deep...a real unique situation here..."

"Aside from the laughing," remarked one participant, "every time we've met I've come away with one or two or several really poignant remarks or things that have really hit home for me...or have given me food for thought, or changed my perspective...in some way...relationships, or power dynamics...". Another woman agreed with her and added:

...[This group] has given me the strength to work on things I've had on the shelf for a long time - so that's exciting - and I'm curious to share some eagerness that we can take from this out to our circles. That's important, that we communicate and share the depths of joy and pain and all of that - the things that we keep - that we haven't been talking about till now. I think [we're] right on the cutting edge...

Finally, at the end of the third session one of the women discussed how "amazed" she was "At how easy it's been to connect here and how comfortable it feels...and how much and how deeply [everyone] has been able to share...about difficult things...not easy things." She added, "I feel very moved and amazed at what we've created and done here - and I have such appreciation for all of us." There was tremendous value for all of us in participating in this group.

### **Overall Observations**

What is interesting to note is that the starting place of this thesis was exploring power dynamics in lesbian relationships. Without doubt there was influence from my own experience, perspective and vision, yet I did not begin with a focus only on power issues or struggles. However, it is clear from the analysis that the whole group had experiences with power issues and conflict, and some dealt with serious abuse. Though this is not where I began, it is certainly an important part of the findings.

Another overall observation from the findings is that even though critical analysis

from a political perspective as feminists was important to the women in this group, and it clearly happened, there was more time spent on the personal aspects of power in their lives. Women shared their personal experiences and stories and shared how they had been affected by power in their relationships. This was not surprising to me. First of all, one of the research questions asked for their experiences in their own voices. Second, it was an important opportunity for all of us to finally be given licence to discuss things we had not previously shared with many others. Third, I believe that personal sharing enhances the depth of critical analysis that is possible. When our analyses are grounded in personal reality our understanding is enriched. However, this takes time. Because we only met for three sessions, this was limited, and so the amount of analysis and political examination that we were able to do was limited as well. We did examine some of the themes from the political perspective, and certainly one of the themes, that of patriarchal constraints, addresses these elements of analysis in depth. But the focus of the sessions was much more on personal sharing than on the larger, structural issues that affect power in lesbians' lives. However, these themes can also be analyzed from a structural perspective to increase our awareness of how the context in which lesbians live their lives is critical when examining the experience of power in relationships. For this reason, since my own perspective includes analysis of the personal and political, I have addressed this further in the analysis and discussion sections.

Yet another larger theme that emerged from the data was that in the group women with diverse backgrounds and experiences shared some profound similarities. We were often struck by the common threads in our relationships. All of us had been involved in

relationships where we felt powerless, hopeless and ill-respected. In group sessions it became clear that we had similar ideas about what a healthy relationship looked like, what we were striving toward, and what it looked and felt like when unhealthy power dynamics were operating.

Many of the themes from this research, like children, sexuality and abuse are ones that have serious implications for social work practice. As care-givers, we need this information and knowledge in order to help lesbians create healthy relationships and families. In the section about healing through attention to our inner selves there are many wonderful, practical suggestions from the participants about how to help women come to know and trust themselves better. As social workers and service providers it is essential that we concern ourselves with finding out more about what happens in the lives of lesbians and their families. We also need to be instrumental in educating those in positions of power who can make changes that will increase status and credibility for lesbians. Any practitioner providing social, legal, educational or health services to lesbians and their families needs to be open to eliciting and hearing more about lesbians' lives. It means educating about heterosexism and homophobia to help care-givers examine their values and attitudes about homosexuality. Hopefully these changes can eventually be translated into policies that offer support and legitimation for lesbians and their families.

## CHAPTER 6

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

#### **Thoughts about the Findings**

Power in lesbian relationships has been little explored. In this last chapter I address some of the research issues I encountered and share my thoughts about them. I then go on to discuss ideas from the group about tools for personal and community change. The chapter ends with some thoughts on my fears about doing this research, and some concluding comments.

One of the things I have been asked and have thought about throughout this research is the difference between power dynamics in lesbian and heterosexual relationships. This is of great concern to many people; less so to me. I have thought about it, and it is an area of research that deserves attention, but it has not been my focus in this research. Nor do I want it to be. This research is about and by lesbians. This is important to me because there is such limited research available about the lives and experiences of lesbians. I am interested in how power dynamics might be the same or different for lesbians and heterosexuals (or even gay men), but in this research I am more interested in power in lesbians relationships. This topic has been so little explored, that I wanted to stay focused solely on this. I think doing comparative research would be valuable and interesting, and is another area of research for someone else to undertake. There is still so much to learn about what happens for lesbians; this research is only the beginning.

At a personal level, there may be many relationship similarities for lesbians and heterosexuals in relation to power. Structurally, though, the picture looks very different.

I believe the issue of power in women's relationships and the way that relates to violence and abuse is very complicated and cannot be unravelled merely by examining heterosexual or male models. The power issues that women struggle with together are different and come from a different place than in heterosexual relationships. I cannot imagine that this research covers more than a first step in this understanding; a critical step, but just a beginning nonetheless.

It was significant for me that while all of the women in the group brought struggles and problems to share with each other, we also had some solutions right from the beginning. As soon as an issue arose and stories were shared, we looked at how to do it differently, or what we learned, or what we might think about or learn from others' experiences. We were actively and creatively involved in our own ideas and solutions. This was a very important statement about how innovatively we were dealing with very painful situations. I think part of what happened to allow this creativity was, as Surrey (1991) describes, that the group came together to share and to take action. This was very empowering for all of us. There was reciprocity and interdependence that came from this joint action that gave us a sense of personal and communal power.

I want to state clearly, however, that even though lesbians can, and need to be creative problem solvers to address power issues in intimate relationships, the responsibility does not rest solely with them. It is critical that heterosexuals also engage in this process from their perspective, and use their power and privilege to make

necessary changes that will facilitate solutions. By examining their values about homosexuality and dealing with homophobia, heterosexuals can be allies in helping lesbians to overcome serious relationship problems.

In the literature review I noted that ideologically different groups of lesbians would probably differ in their outlook and ideas about power in relationships. What I discovered from doing this research with lesbian feminists, as participants identified themselves, (see Appendix 3), is that we all wanted to be able to look at power as a feminist issue, and to explore the constraints affecting us as lesbians in a heterosexual world. Both of these themes were essential to the participants. It was also important for us to have a personal as well as a political context for sorting out our experiences and exploring changes together. In other words, we needed the group to share personally and enter each other's lives. We want to continue meeting as a group, because we believe there is work we can do together about this issue that we could not do alone. The restriction of only meeting three times meant that more emphasis was placed on personal experiences. However, there was also some focus on political analysis, as is evidenced in the theme of patriarchal constraints.

There are some distinct aspects which are not attended to in the data of this study. The most obvious limitation, discussed previously, is the size and selection of the participant group. Another limitation is that the relationships discussed by subjects in this study were only viewed through the eyes of one member of the relationship. Note, too, that none of the women in this study identified themselves as abusers of power. Therefore, the findings do not address the perspective of the power-abusing partner. The research was exploratory, and not intentionally focused on any particular sample of

lesbians. It was simply designed to provide a forum for eight lesbians to talk about their experiences with power in intimate relationships. Nevertheless, the data here are consistent with feminist theory, and in particular, with lesbian feminist ethics concerning the value of creating non-patriarchal, non-hierarchical, power-balanced relationships (Jeffreys, 1993; Hoagland, 1988).

Another important theme that has woven its way throughout this process for me involves consideration about what I believe about power struggles. I think that there are healthy power struggles. Not all power struggles are inherently unhealthy. I believe that power struggles are an inevitable part of relationship; that power is something that is continually negotiated and evolving. It shifts and moves back and forth from one partner to the other. Sometimes this is painful and hard work; at other times it flows easily. This is part of what creates vulnerability. It can also strengthen us in our relationships. This raises some important questions as well. For example: What would healthy power struggles look like, feel like, be like?

I also think it is possible that what one partner views as healthy power distribution could be seen as unhealthy to the other. Whether and how partners reconcile this is what shapes a healthy relationship. I also believe that there are paradoxes when looking at power struggles. Power struggles can be healthy or problematic, depending on the situation. They can be an aspect of positive relationships if the partners are respectful and communicative, or can evolve into a destructive or abusive relationship. Much remains to be discovered about these processes of the directions in which power flows in lesbian relationships.

## **Tools for Personal and Community Change**

I want to address the theme of change in this chapter since it is a significant part of the research and many ideas about change came out of the group. Some were more personal or individual ideas or tools for change. Some were more connected to the power of community, and spoke of social action. Some of these ideas have been discussed under other themes, but some have not.

One of the tools involved taking what we learned from one relationship and using it in the next. There were serious concerns about our abilities to apply what we learned in one relationship to the next. However, it was agreed that it was "too painful to keep learning these things" over and over again. The concerns come partly from the level of damage and devastation that take place in a destructive relationship, and how difficult it is after that to believe it can be different in another relationship. What we realized is that talking through experiences and having support to deal with them was a significant part of doing things differently in subsequent relationships.

Paying attention to what we were feeling gave us important information about how healthy we were in relationship. Scrutinizing whether we felt centred, anxious, respected, balanced were all very effective ways to "check-in" on ourselves. Listening to what we heard from the inside, and trusting ourselves was critical.

Communication was seen as an essential tool. Taking the time and the risk to address issues when they arose was central to creating a healthy, constructive relationship. This helped us to see a situation from the other's perspective, an invaluable tool in creating intimacy and promoting growth between two people. Talking about power, was, in and of itself, a profound tool for change. This topic has

been shrouded in silence for so long amongst lesbians that it was experienced as a healing relief to acknowledge and discuss it. Also, getting clear about bottom lines or boundaries in new ways was fundamental for a relationship built on respect.

One group member suggested that the only way to "preserve your own power is to really be looking for something all the time - and say is this really what I want out of this relationship?" Another said, "...just go to that place of balancing and checking in - keep checking in and then working on communication - practise - practise...and be brave enough..." to keep trying, or to know when it is time to quit. In the final analysis when all else failed, or even before then, leaving was a good, life-giving tool, since sometimes we could feel "saner and stronger" on our own.

One of the ways to begin to use community as a medium for change in relationships where power is an issue was to

Use each other as a living resource, by finding our strength and figuring out a way to use that resource in community and our relationships - so that we don't keep our relationships behind closed doors and isolated - and feel like it's a separate existence the way it is so much in heterosexual families and relationships - and that comes out of the strength and power we feel together in relating together as women and as lesbians.

This means reaching out to one another. It means opening our relationships up for discussion and exploration together, both the good and the bad. It means finding ways to talk about difficult issues because

That's the thing that will change it - and to figure out ways to do it differently - and talk about all the stuff that gets to be so secret - and so hidden and so shameful - and so humiliating - and so hard to talk about.

It means finding ways to keep track of each others' relationships so they don't become hidden or isolated. It means finding ways to address the problems we see in creative and safe ways, but finding how to deal with them instead of running away from them because they are difficult. It was acknowledged that though not easy, this was

critical. It means using the power of community, numbers, and appropriate ethics, to offer help to or get rid of abusers at the first signs, before they damage other women and children. These are some of the ways that we can begin to change our relationships by how we behave as a community.

The words of a group member rang true and loud along these lines. She said that after she left the first session and thought about all that we had shared, she felt that we had "dwelt on the negative somewhat." She knew that it was "all real and it all happened" and she was not trying to minimize any of it. She felt it was important, though, to "bring up the empowerment that can happen between two women..." to give "the essence of power that [women can] share." She said that she just wanted to say it out loud. She went on to say:

I guess I just try to remember the different relationships I have been in and the vulnerable places I have shared with women - fears in my life, that they have helped me put into perspective - or when I think it's all too much - ya, that was a nice sharing of power - when one of us felt stronger than the other, or surer - it's pretty magic - so I just thought we should say that too.

She was referring to a place of power, not necessarily equal power every moment, but shared, balanced power that is certainly possible between women, whether it is two or many - a definite alternative to the dominator, power-over model. This was a good reminder about why we even think it is possible to share radically different power relationships with women.

### **Fears about Doing this Research**

I have been aware throughout this research that I am afraid of criticism from other lesbians for exposing delicate and painful realities about our relationships. I am also concerned about what non-lesbians might do with information that I bring out of

silence, secrecy and shame, and into the open for examination. What will they think about lesbians? Will this provide further evidence for some that lesbian relationships are sick, bad or wrong? Could it create more hatred, oppression and homophobia, and be used as ammunition against us? What might be other negative consequences of uncovering and speaking truths about lesbian relationships? Will my lesbian colleagues and friends feel betrayed? These are fears and arguments that have been strong reasons to keep silent and not discuss power, abuse and other problems in the past. It is frightening for a lesbian to address these issues.

I have carefully examined the consequences of not doing this research. I decided that I could not follow this path because I value truth, integrity and congruency. I believe that what we stand for politically as feminists, must match how we behave in our personal lives and relationships. I also know that the only way to resolve issues of power is to speak our truth, lay out real problems, examine together what is wrong, and analyze how we can rectify what is problematic. This process will make us more vulnerable. Yet paradoxically, I believe it will make us more genuinely strong.

If we allow secrets to be perpetuated, and silence to remain, we also block our access to healing. In this it is also essential to honour my voice, my experience. This research is one way for me to have voice. Otherwise I will feel silenced and disempowered. There is a strong and deep, internal power in truth-telling.

## Conclusion

One question has a way of leading to many others. This research has evoked issues, experiences and moments that have at times been disturbing or deeply emotional for me. It has broadened my scope and vision for understanding the topic. The more I talk with other lesbians about power and relationship, the more I see there is to know, and the more intrigued I am about a growing repertoire of questions, concerns and considerations. Until recently this topic has been ignored and avoided. We are just beginning to explore openly what it entails.

Doing this research has been exciting. The wider our vision becomes, the more experience is embraced, the greater the possibility that we will find innovative solutions to complicated problems. I do not see a plethora of role models yet (lesbian or other) to help us deal with issues of power imbalance in relationships.

I brought together and participated in a group of lesbians talking about their experiences and ideas of power in intimate relationships. I envision other groups such as this in the future that could be a very powerful way of change, both personal and structural. I believe that many hearts and minds are better than one to find new ways to deal with entrenched problems. Women working in groups can address interpersonal dynamics and political structural issues that are problematic for lesbian relationships. This research has reinforced this principle for me and other group members.

I want to continue as one member of a community of lesbians and friends exploring how we can use each other as a living resource to deal with what troubles us. Patriarchal power thrives on secrecy and isolation. It teaches us to manage problems alone, or within our nuclear families. This perpetuates a hierarchical model of power in

community and family. This patriarchal way of thinking tends to exclude other options for dealing with power in relationships. My wish is that instead of keeping problems behind closed doors, we learn to talk to each other and share ways to balance power in our relationships.

Perhaps there are community approaches to penetrate these delicate, complicated issues through political and social analysis. Through collective reflection and action, we can find support and ways to learn and grow stronger together. This research group has been one successful avenue of community and group exploration. I hope there will be others like it.

Throughout the group discussions, women talked of the struggle to shift from "power over" relationships in which they felt disrespected, to relationships based upon "power within", or "power with" another. These women clearly demonstrated the value of the group dialogue as a way to challenge their own thinking, and to learn new ways of relating. In the traditional feminist style of "consciousness raising groups," (Allen, 1970) this research group was useful not only for delineating issues of power, but also for charting directions for change.

To live in a different fashion, to pave a new way, means sustaining a vision that is challenged daily, and susceptible to fracture. It means moving with courage and persistence in a world that is hostile to difference. It means being willing to learn and grow through our own mistakes and those of others. No small steps, these.

I also feel a strong commitment to bring these issues to the attention of professionals who work with lesbians. Therapists and care-givers need to be better equipped to offer assistance and support to lesbian individuals, couples and families who are striving to

deal with troubling power dynamics in their lives. Professional helpers who are sensitive to these issues will take the family life of lesbians more seriously, and can be instrumental in creating practices and policies that support and enrich the lives of their clients.

For me, the whole process of this thesis has been, as Judith Fetterley calls it, an "act of survival", a point of reference and a path of healing (cited in Reinharz, 1992, p.195). When relationships are shattered by power-over dynamics, unresolved shards are left. This research has helped me to begin to resolve the unresolvable. I am enriched with the power of women learning and growing together, and have a hope for paving a better way in relationships, as yet uncharted. This research has inspired and ignited my vision, opened possibilities wide, and renewed my commitment to progressive personal and political change.

All of us in this research group found our voices; trusted our voices; celebrated our voices. I am changed by this experience; moved as a consequence of shared intimacy and vulnerability. Through our discussion of power in lesbian relationships, I have experienced the delights and deep satisfaction of knowing, believing and trusting anew that change is possible. Lesbians in relationships can deal with power differently. I have again been blessed with a profound appreciation for what is possible among women.

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## APPENDIX 1

### POSTER

#### LET'S TALK ABOUT OUR RELATIONSHIPS!

*NEEDED:* Six to eight Lesbians, to participate in a group to discuss intimate relationships in a supportive, sharing way.

*PURPOSE:* Experienced group facilitator is interested in exploring issues of power in lesbian relationships, with other women, for Master's Thesis, University of Victoria Faculty of Human and Social Development.

*WHEN:* Four sessions, around two and a half hours each, between November and March. Times and places to be arranged.

*CONTACT:* Jude, (and my phone number). Will provide more information to those interested.

**This is a chance to participate in feminist research, and to learn about ourselves in relationship at the same time.**

**APPENDIX 2****CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE RESEARCH ENTITLED,  
"POWER IN LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS"**

I understand that this research project is studying dynamics of power in intimate lesbian relationships. I understand that I will be asked questions, in a group context, about my thoughts, feelings and insights about my experience about how power operates in my relationship, and what I believe has influenced that. I understand that the group will include 5-7 other lesbians.

I understand that my participation is completely voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without explanation.

I understand that any data collected in the research will remain confidential; any results will be kept in a locked cabinet. Furthermore, I understand that my name will not be attached to any published results, and that my anonymity will be protected by using code names to identify individual participants.

I understand that the group sessions will be audiotaped and that the tapes will be kept in a locked cabinet during the time of research, and writing of the thesis, and will be erased upon successful defence of this thesis.

I understand that the only people who will listen to the tapes are the researcher and her thesis supervisor (if necessary).

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX 3****GROUP PROFILE SHEET**

In order to do my analysis properly, I need to include a profile of who is in the group (it will be non-identifying). To help me in this part, I would appreciate your filling out the following- briefly- and returning it to me as soon as possible. Thanks. These will be kept confidential.

**Name:**

**Race/cultural background/ethnicity:**

**Class - growing up, through life and now:**

**Age:**

**Education:**

**Relationship status (past and present):**

**Kids/stepkids:**

**Work:**

**Handicaps:**

**Lesbian personal history (brief):**

**Are you a feminist:**

## APPENDIX 4

### CO-FACILITATOR'S REPORT

I was honoured when Jude asked me to co-facilitate her research group on power in lesbian relationships. My role was to be two-fold: I would participate in group discussions; I would also help Jude monitor process in the group and make note and facilitate discussion of any themes that emerged.

From the beginning, I felt comfortable -- completely at home as a member of the group. Even though I attempted to stay removed enough to act as facilitator, I found myself becoming very caught up in discussions. Interjecting my own thoughts and feelings seemed entirely appropriate. I purposely held myself back from taking too directive a role, mostly because the discussions seemed to take on a life of their own, and part of Jude's methodology, as I understood it, involved "letting women talk, seeing where the discussion went". It was only in the second session that I felt that I hadn't acted in a facilitation role at all.

I, like everyone else, learned a lot from the discussions and appreciated the support I got from other women in the group. As co-facilitator (unlike everyone else), I had the privilege of reading over the transcripts. It was both inspiring and gratifying to be reminded in this way about what we all had contributed to the discussions.

**APPENDIX 5**

OFFICE OF RESEARCH ADMINISTRATION

UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA

**Certificate of Approval**

University of Victoria  
 Committee on Research and Other Activities  
 Involving Human Subjects

<u>Principal Investigator</u> <b>Jude Pustil</b> Grad student	<u>Department/School</u> <b>Faculty of Human &amp; Social Development</b>	<u>Supervisor</u> <b>Dr. J. Cossom</b>	
<u>Co-Investigators:</u>			
<u>Title:</u> <i>Power in Lesbian Relationships</i>			
<u>Project No.</u> <b>252-95</b>	<u>Start Date</u> <b>1 Nov 95</b>	<u>End Date</u> <b>30 Jun 96</b>	<u>Approval Date</u> <b>19 Oct 95</b>

**Certification**

This is to certify that the University of Victoria Ethics Review Committee on Research and Other Activities Involving Human Subjects has examined the research proposal and concludes that, in all respects, the proposed research meets appropriate standards of ethics as outlined by the University of Victoria Research Regulation Involving Human Subjects.

Michael Corcoran,  
Associate Dean, Research

Alex McAuley,  
Associate Vice-President, Research

**This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the procedures. One year extensions may be granted provided there are no changes in the procedures.**

## VITA

Surname: Pustil

Given Names: Judith Lynne (Jude)

Place of Birth: Toronto, Ontario, Canada

### Educational Institutions Attended:

York University	1969 to 1971
Selkirk College	1989 to 1990
University of Victoria	1990 to 1992
University of Victoria	1994 to 1996

### Degrees Awarded

B.S.W.      University of Victoria      1992

### Honours and Awards


University of Victoria      Entrance Scholarships      1990 and 1991

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Title of Thesis:

### **Power in Lesbian Relationships**

Author   
Jude Pustil  
December 2, 1996