A Qualitative Study of Sexual Identity Among Bisexual and Lesbian Women in a Lesbian-Feminist Community

by

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ABSTRACT

Social constructionist theories of gender convincingly refute the biological-determinist causal etiology of "sex becomes gender" by examining the ways in which one's identity as female or male, masculine or feminine, is shaped by the processes of early socialization, ongoing social interaction, formal regulation, and ideological interpellation within the discourses of sexism and heterosexism.

Just as gender is socially constructed as a dichotomy within North American non-indigenous society, sexual orientation is also normatively restricted to two modes of identity and expression, namely heterosexuality and homosexuality/lesbianism (Williams, 1987). Despite Kinsey's findings that ambisexual behavior was reported by a significant proportion of women and men surveyed, the persistence of the belief that one's inner sexual core is either heterosexual or homosexual has contributed to the continuing marginalization of bisexuals in scientific research, as well within the heterosexual, lesbian-feminist, and gay communities. Despite pressures to conform to either compulsory heterosexuality or to an exclusively lesbian identity, however, bisexual self-identification amongst women persists. From a post-structuralist perspective, bisexuality appears to constitute a social phenomenon which simultaneously joins together and deconstructs dichotomized categories of sexual orientation.

The purpose of my research is to explore the inter-relationships between women's personal beliefs about the nature of sexual orientation, their involvement in a lesbian-feminist community, and their choices of sexual identity. Given both the sensitivity of this topic area and my interest in challenging those

conditions which perpetuate sexual and other oppressions of women (and of men), I have chosen to utilize experiential, collaborative and action-oriented research methods which ground the data in these women's experiences. More specifically, I have created a data base consisting of eight in-depth interviews and a set of QSort questions with women who identify as either lesbian feminists or as bisexual feminists, and who participate in the lesbian-feminist community of the greater Victoria area.

The participants indicated that their choice to identify themselves as bisexual or lesbian was influenced by their placing particular interpretations on their sexual histories. The choice of sexual identity label was also influenced by the pressures of biphobia and radical feminist lesbian separatism within the lesbian-feminist community, as well as by the systemic homophobia, misogyny and heterosexism which organizes women's sexuality within the larger dominant culture. The constitution of being bisexual or lesbian involved a process of these women negotiating between their sexual feelings and behaviors and the range of external labels existent in the discourses of science, medicine, law, religion and lesbian-feminism. The results of this research support the dialectical perspective within social constructionism regarding the interaction between agency and social structures in the creation of a sexual identity.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

> Moving, we confront the realities of choice and location. Within complex and ever shifting realms of power relations, do we position ourselves on the side of colonizing mentality? Or do we continue to stand in political resistance with the oppressed, ready to offer our ways of seeing and theorizing, of making culture, towards that revolutionary effort which seeks to create space where there is unlimited access to the pleasure and power of knowing, where transformation is possible? This choice is crucial.
>
> (bell hooks, 1990, 145)

Rationale for Study

A commitment to "create space...where transformation is possible" (hooks, 1990, 145) and my interest in furthering feminist knowledge, both personally and professionally, informed my choice to undertake a qualitative study of female bisexuality in a lesbian-feminist community. However, within this overall purpose are more specific reasons.

Being a female feminist student of sociology led to frequent encounters with attitudes and practices of sexism in academe in which my experiences, and those of women generally, are historically rendered invisible or distorted within androcentric social science (March, 1982; Eichler, 1987a). By constituting women's sexuality and women's community as topics suitable for sociological interest and feminist analysis, I hope to enlarge the body of research which is woman-centred and non-sexist.

A related issue concerns my decision to confront attitudes and practices of heterosexism and homophobia in academe which perpetuate the invisibility and/or stigmatization of bisexual, lesbian and gay people as members of society in academic curricula and research topics, as well as within the ranks of academe itself. My research process was therefore oriented toward

studying the lives of bisexual and lesbian women in an in-depth manner which remained respectful and non-marginalizing of them (Wine, 1990; Paul, 1985; Bart, 1984; MacDonald, 1983). My selection of this particular research topic and methodology emerged from my own personal interest as a bisexual woman in the developmental and political aspects of sexual identity, and my professional concerns about reducing sexism and heterosexism in academe stem from my personal grounding as a feminist researcher. This, in turn, made it important for me to respond to the call for more research into women's sexuality, particularly with reference to an exploration of its diversities and to address a perceived gap in the literature on developing a feminist, non-essentialist paradigm for women's sexuality (Overall, 1988, 55; Hollibaugh & Moraga 1983, 404; Miller & Fowlkes, 1980).

In using a social constructionist theoretical framework and qualitative methods, I wish to challenge the received notions of sexual orientation and sexual identity as innate and essentially dichotomous. I want to add to the small body of research which has been done to date on female bisexuality which indicates that sexual subjectivity is, in fact, multiply located, fluid, processual, and constructed both by an individual's interpretation of her erotic attractions and her historical social context (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1977, 1976; Zinik, 1985; Paul, 1985, 1984; Klein et.al. 1985; Gregory, 1983; Klein, 1978).

My choice to undertake an interdisciplinary course of graduate studies also exposed me to a feminist post-structural perspective which privileged historical specificity, multiplicity and deconstruction over universalism. These analyses problematized the modern binary divisions of sex, gender, and sexual orientation

by reframing them into discourses of power and knowledge organized and mediated to support heteropatriarchy (Butler, 1990, 54; Weedon, 1987, 3; Foucault, 1980). Within this theoretical perspective, I became alert to some of the contradictions of an essentialist feminist sexuality within lesbian-feminism and its potential to reinforce the dominant norms even within this marginalized and overtly counter-hegemonic community.

As someone who has personally experienced the alienating effects of "biphobia," or discrimination toward bisexuals (Fox, 1991), within my own lesbian-feminist community here in Victoria, I wanted to locate and talk to other non-lesbian women in that community to explore the ways in which lesbian essentialism manifests in our lives (Penelope, 1992; Raymond, 1989; Silber, 1990; Clausen, 1990; Adams, 1989; Rich, 1980). Challenging this essentialism also required the comparison between bisexual women's sexual behaviors and fantasies and those of lesbian women to assess the extent to which they differed or were parallel. It seemed possible that in exploring, and thereby contributing to an increased awareness of the complexities, unique differences and particular similarities involved in sexual identity amongst bisexual and lesbian women, greater understanding and acceptance between us might occur. It follows that this also strengthens the potential for alliances between women (and gay and pro-feminist men) to resist institutions of patriarchal heterosexism (Daumer, 1992; Overall, 1988; Houston, 1988; Weir, 1987; Kinsman, 1987). I hope that my research will facilitate greater understanding of the complex interplay that is sexual identity as constituted by bisexual women and lesbians within the lesbian-feminist community, the community

itself being socially constructed both by its members and the discourses of heteropatriarchy.

The Thesis Outlined

In order to understand the unique ways in which bisexual women are marginalized within both scientific and feminist discourses of sexuality, I review literature pertinent to sexual definitions and feminist sexuality in chapters two and three. In chapter four, my description of the research methods used also includes an analysis of the ethical and political aspects involved in exploring women's lives and sexual identities from a feminist sociological perspective. The fifth chapter organizes the interview material and QSort results to address the processual and multiple aspects of sexual identity formation in bisexual and lesbian women. The thematic sections which emerge are analyzed comparatively across and between the bisexual and lesbian women, as well as with the research findings described in chapters two and three. Chapter six contains my conclusions on the extent of sexual essentialism within the lesbian-feminist community and its impact on bisexual and lesbian women. Future possibilities for further research which are suggested by these findings are also included in this chapter.

CHAPTER TWO: SEXUAL DEFINITIONS

In order to critically understand the implications of female bisexuality and lesbianism as social constructs rather than as purely innate biological predispositions, it is necessary to discuss the processes involved in developing and defining a sexual identity. Comprehending sexual definitions therefore involves both a review of existing literature on sexual orientation and sexual identity, and the operationalization of the theoretical concepts of sexuality employed in this research. I begin with a brief discussion of how the influence of sexual essentialism within the biological determinist perspective has tended to ignore or pathologize non-heterosexual sexuality. I then review social constructionist theories of sexual identity and discuss their implications for understanding bisexuality and lesbianism in non-essentialist ways.

Operational definitions of bisexual feminism and lesbian-feminism are presented in the next chapter, which contains a more specific analysis of the ways in which the expression of female bisexuality is theorized as a political identity within the contradictions of feminist essentialism.

Biological Determinism

A survey of the literature on bisexuality highlights the existence of two polarized views regarding the etiology and nature of sexual orientation, biological determinism and social constructionism. The first of these potentially exerts the strongest ideological impact on the individual at both the micro and macro levels due to its cultural status as a "common sense," or most popularly-held perspective.

The biological determinist perspective

promotes an essentialist view of sexual orientation as an innate predisposition or inner core which is static and impervious to external influences. Defined as a dominant sex/gender schema, the tendency in this perspective is to argue that there exist "naturally" only two sexes, male and female, two corresponding gender identities, masculine and feminine, and one correct sexual orientation, heterosexuality (Devor, 1989). To a lesser extent within this perspective, sexual orientation is further dichotomized into heterosexuality/homosexuality, the latter orientation being frequently pathologized (Terry, 1990; Bailey, 1991).

An Essentialist Sexual Orientation Schema

In order to illustrate how this essentialist perspective of sexual orientation manifests itself regarding bisexuality, I have transposed "sexual orientation" for "gender" within Kessler and McKenna's sex/gender schema (1978, 113-114). A brief analysis of each point follows this list.

1. There are two, and only two, sexual orientations (heterosexual and homosexual).

2. One's sexual orientation is invariant. (If you are heterosexual/homosexual, you always were heterosexual/homosexual and you always will be heterosexual/homosexual.)

3. Genital activity is the essential sign of sexual orientation. (Heterosexuality is indicated by genital arousal and sexual activity with an opposite-sex partner, homosexuality is indicated by genital arousal and sexual activity with same-sex partner.)

4. Any exceptions to the two sexual orientations are not to be taken seriously. (They must be jokes, pathology, etc.)

5. There are no transfers from one sexual orientation to another except as "arriving" at one's "true" sexual orientation.

6. Everyone must be classified as a member of one sexual orientation or another. (There are no cases where sexual orientation is not attributed.)

7. The heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy is a "natural" one. (Heterosexuals and homosexuals exist independently of scientists' (or anyone else's) criteria for being heterosexual or homosexual.)

8. Membership in one sexual orientation or another is "natural." (Being heterosexual or homosexual is not dependent on anyone's deciding what you are.)

The first two points illustrate the essentialist notions of sexual orientation as dichotomous, static and transhistorical. The focus on genital activity as the primary indicator of sexual orientation in point three divorces sexual behavior from erotic desires, non-genital touch, emotional attachments, social reference groups, and self-definition, and also ignores the potential for bisexual genital contact. Points four and five suggest that bisexuality is both an unhealthy and a merely transitory sexual identity. Point six insists not only that all sexuality can be, and in fact, must be categorized, but also assumes that these categorizations are exclusive and non-transferable. Points seven and eight refute any notion of the role played by socialization in the development of a sexual identity.

Implications For Bisexuals

Theorizing sexual orientation as a dichotomy leads to the marginalization of bisexuality within scientific sex research, in that bisexuality is often conflated with homosexuality (MacDonald, 1983). A further result of insisting that there exist only two possible sexual orientations is the perpetuation of conceptualizing bisexuality as a transitory or transitional orientation of persons in denial of a fundamental "inner" nature as heterosexuals or as homosexuals/lesbians (Zinik, 1985; Paul, 1985/1983, Hansen and Evans, 1985). Furthermore, since essentialism insists that sexual orientation stems from eroticizing either the other sex or the same sex, persons identifying as bisexual are seen to be as confused about their gender as they are about their sexual orientation:

> The conflict model of bisexuality is based on general assumptions about human sexuality .... First is the notion that homosexual interests eradicate heterosexual responsiveness. Since one would cancel out the other, they cannot exist side-by-side without creating irreconcilable conflict. This follows from the notion... that men and women represent opposite sexual poles; eroticizing one sex precludes eroticizing the other....
>
> (Zinik, 1985, 10)

Political Implications of Biological Determinism

Biological determinism is embedded within the dominant discourse of heterosexism, which is defined here as a complex, if unevenly organized, semi-overt

matrix of structural and attitudinal systems which proclaim heterosexuality as the transhistorical and transcultural normative sexual expression. Both within the field of sex research and in the development of state and institutional policies, the biological determinist perspective has been used historically to support sexist and racist practices against women, the poor, immigrants, indigenous peoples, lesbians and gay men (Terry, 1990; Kinsman, 1987). Furthermore, persons whose physical sex, gender (social sex identity) or sexual orientation evade the categories of female and male, woman/girl or man/boy and heterosexual do not fit into a heterosexist hegemony, frequently suffer from social and political invisibility and marginality and accompanying economic hardship, as well as being historically subjected to psychiatric institutionalization and criminalization (Eichler, 1987b; Kinsman, 1987).

Social Constructionism

> Why are we so intent on assuming an inner core of sexual truth? Why do we have to rewrite our histories and dismiss experiences that were at the time extremely powerful as 'just a phase'? Would it not be better to work from the hypothesis that sexual orientation is not a given ... but is rather subject to profound changes - and is in fact constantly created and recreated - as our sexual and social experiences unfold?
>
> (Valverde, 1985, 112)

Social constructionism focuses on the ways in which social actors create, or construct their identities within various social contexts and relations. Research on bisexuals indicates that understanding the process of constructing a sexual identity involves a wide range of psychological, behavioral, social and temporal

considerations (Zinik, 1985; Klein et al., 1985). These include one's own erotic and affectional desires, early socialization in one's family of origin, the availability of, and membership within, communities supportive to "alternative" sexualities, as well as prevailing attitudes within such institutions as law, government, religion, education and medicine. The acquisition and maintenance of a sexual identity, therefore, is a choice made on two interrelated levels. At a micro-subjective level, for example, a woman's sexual identity is developed through the individual's own interpretations of her particular erotic and emotional feelings and her sexual behaviors. She may or may not attach a particular label to these feelings and behaviors, perhaps preferring instead to see herself as a sexual being with the potential to experience sexual desire toward a wide range of objects (Klein et al., 1985; Zinik, 1985, Sprinkle, 1991). Concepts which address sexuality at a micro-subjective level include sexual orientation, sexual identity, bisexuality, and lesbianism, and will be discussed more fully below.

However, since all individuals are also located within certain structural relations and ideological mechanisms which act upon them, my discussion of these particular bisexual and lesbian women's sexual desire

and sexual identity must also examine concepts of heterosexism, the lesbian-feminist community, marginality, discourse, resistance and prefigurative practice. These constitute the macro-subjective level of forces which act upon, but which are also constructed through the dialectic between social structures and individual agency (Giddens, 1984).

Sexual Identity Formation

Social constructionism refutes the static view of biological determinism in locating sexual identity as part of one's social learning over the lifespan:

> Essentialism ignores the process of the creation of a sense of self....
> (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1989, 122)

The necessity for regarding sexual orientation as fluid, processual, and multi-dimensional, and therefore for using research techniques which permit a longitudinal analysis is stressed in most of the literature about bisexuality (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1989; Houston, 1988; Valverde, 1985; Zinik, 1985; Paul, 1985/1983; Lourea, 1985; Hansen and Evans, 1985, Klein, Sepekoff and Wolf, 1985; Cass, 1984; MacDonald, 1983). For example, from their research on bisexual women, Blumstein and Schwartz noted that

> From our data, we conclude that (a) sex-object choice and sexual identification can change in many ways and many times over the lifecyle, (b) the individual is often unaware of ... her ability to change, and (c) childhood and adolescent experiences are not the final

> determinants of adult sexuality.
> (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1977, 37)

In fact, research indicates that the bisexual identity tends to emerge in early adulthood, frequently within the context of a couple relationship (Zinik, 1985, 14; Lourea, 1985, 57). These findings support employing a research design which is sensitive to the processual and interrelational nature of sexual identity.

One such design was introduced by Cass (1984), who described a progressive six-stage developmental model of homosexual identity formation in which the individual was seen to move away from a heterosexual identity toward considering oneself lesbian or gay through a process of increasing commitment to these identities. Cass's research indicated that such commitment exists to the extent that one's own perceptions of self as a gay man or lesbian concur cognitively with what others perceive as that individual's sexual identity (Cass, 1984, 143). Her model therefore stresses the important role played by peers and associates within what she called "the homosexual subculture" (Cass, 1984, 151) in the development of a positive sexual self-identity.

Briefly, the six stages are (1) *identity confusion* caused by experiencing feelings and actions which could be defined as homosexual; (2) *identity comparison*, in

which the person begins to experience alienation from nonhomosexual others in comparison to her/his own feelings and actions; (3) limited and specific *identity tolerance* for being a lesbian or gay man, expressed through private social contacts with other homosexuals while maintaining a public heterosexual image; (4) *identity acceptance* through increasing positive contacts and an expanding social network within the homosexual subculture, while passing as heterosexual to avoid confrontations; (5) *identity pride*, in which the individual expresses her/his loyalty towards lesbianism or homosexuality through heterophobia, in which deliberately confrontational self-identifications as lesbian or gay are utilized to declare the importance and legitimacy of homosexuality. Positive reactions to these declarations of pride which are not consistent with expectations create dissonance, which leads to (6) *identity synthesis*, in which "dividing the world into good homosexuals and bad heterosexuals" (Cass, 1984, 152) is recognized as false and overly rigid. In this final stage, there is an awareness that one's social identity is more complex and multiple, and therefore exceeds the parameters of one's sexual orientation (Cass, 1984, 147-152).

How applicable is Cass's model for bisexual women? It is interesting that although Cass's stages involve

negotiating the simultaneous identification as both homosexual and heterosexual, she never names these transitions as denoting "bisexuality." Perhaps this explains why Cass presents only two options in her identity formation model, which are either the assumption of a homosexual identity or a rejection of it through returning to a heterosexual identity, rather than theorizing the possibility of a third choice, the assumption of a bisexual identity. Cass's emphasis on the importance of positive social contact with others in one's new subculture for successful identity formation suggests the development of a bisexual identity is problematic, given the lack of a bisexual community, and the absence of positive recognition of bisexuality within either the predominantly "heterocentric" scientific and social communities or the lesbian-feminist or gay male communities. However, it is possible that bisexual women may reach the identity synthesis stage to the extent that their identities as lesbians and as heterosexuals are externally validated. It is also possible that bisexual women experience the stages in two cycles, in that they first "come out" as lesbians when acting on same-sex attractions, and then "come out" as bisexuals when they recognize that they are still sexually attracted to men. The ways in which they negotiate the

demands of occupying these different subject positions has been described by Valverde as "managing":

> What bisexuals do is not so much escape the gay/straight split, but rather *manage* it.
> (Valverde, 1985, 115)

This concept of negotiating the "gay/straight split" also has implications in considering how sexual identity is negotiated by heterosexuals, gays and lesbians, given that the literature indicates that most people experience sexual feelings and act out sexual behaviors which are outside of the normative parameters of their particular sexual identity label (Clausen, 1990; Zinik, 1985).

Interpellation: Negotiating the Bisexual Identity

The ways in which a woman may sublimate her bisexual identity into seeing it as a transitory state is an indication of the degree to which she has internalized prevailing messages of sexual essentialism. The concept of interpellation is useful here. Leonard defines it as the "internalization of the ideologically constructed self" (Leonard, 1984, 115). He situates the process of developing a self-concept within symbolic interactions "based primarily on language, ideologies, dominant or subordinate, [which] interpellate or speak to the individual ... in the form of expectations concerning how to behave, think, feel and what objectives to pursue (Leonard, 1984, 115).

The extent to which women deny their sexual attractions and sexual experiences with other women within heterosexism or, in the case of lesbian women within radical lesbian feminism, with men, depends on how much they "consent" to the hegemony of sexual essentialism (Femia, 1982). This form of consent is also evident where lesbian and bisexual women privately and publicly invalidate past or present sexual desires and sexual behaviours for and with men as forms of "false consciousness" within a radical lesbian-feminist framework which demands sexual separatism.

Femia's trifold definition of consent is useful in examining the ways in which interpellation within either a dominant or subcultural essentialist sexual order occurs:

> First, one may conform because of the fear of the consequences of non-conformity.... This is conformity through coercion, or fear of sanctions - acquiescence under duress.
>
> Second, one may conform because one habitually pursues certain goals in certain ways in response to external stimuli. Conformity in this sense is a matter of unreflecting participation in an established form of activity.
>
> Hegemony is instead characterized by a third type of conformity: that arising from some degree of conscious attachment to, or agreement with, certain core elements of the society. This type of assenting behavior, which may or may not relate to a perceived interest, is bound up with the concept of 'legitimacy', with a belief that the demands for conformity are more or less justified and proper.
>
> (Femia, 1982, 38)

This first type of conformity may be illustrated by women who completely deny their same-sex attractions, or who dismiss these as "experimentation" or "swinging." It also applies to women who are afraid of being abandoned by, or excluded from the lesbian-feminist community and may consequently suppress their opposite-sex attractions.

Since same-sex attractions between women within a homophobic dominant social order are labelled deviant and therefore become politicized, Femia's second form of consent to behavior which is habitual and "unreflected" is more applicable to the phenomenon of "compulsory heterosexuality." Sexualities which problematize normative heterosexuality, such as bisexuality and lesbianism, demand reflection and an awareness of the non-habitual aspects of sexual identity.

In the third instance, bisexual women may persuade themselves that being a lesbian is more consistent with their feminism, and may therefore retroactively frame any former positive sexual experiences with men as forms of "false consciousness." For example, a woman may assume that her entrance into the lesbian sub-culture through the establishment of a same-sex relationship now delineates her as a lesbian, even though she may still eroticize men to some extent.

Conceptualizing (Bi)Sexuality

Operationalizing concepts of sexual identity, sexual orientation, sexual behaviors and sexual fantasy presents several challenges to the researcher. On the one hand, it is necessary to have some means of organizing and labelling the complex interplay of actions and emotions that constitute human sexuality. However, the resulting categories must also remain sufficiently flexible to encompass the shifting and overlapping aspect of this interplay across the lifecycle. Additional confusion about what meanings to attach to each of these concepts arises from the fact that sex researchers have historically used a wide array of labels, interpretations and applications to describe aspects of sexuality in both in their research reports and within the actual research instruments themselves (Shively, Jones and De Cecco, 1984).

Another problematic aspect involved in the operationalization of sexuality concerns the ways in which developing particular classification schemes may place inherent limitations on how that sexuality is defined. For example, a central theme discussed in the literature is the problematic utility of the Kinsey continuum concept of sexuality. On the one hand, researchers of bisexuality point to Kinsey's findings that "significantly higher percentages of people

exhibit bisexual behavior than exclusively homosexual behavior" as one of the earliest empirical refutations of sexual essentialism (Zinik, 1985, 7). They also use it to both challenge and expand the categories of heterosexual and homosexual (Zinik, 1985; Reiss, 1986; MacDonald, 1985; Klein et al., 1985; Hansen and Evans, 1985; Blumstein and Schwartz, 1989). On the other hand, however, flaws in both the Kinsey model itself and the ways in which it has been misused include the project's lack of longitudinal and multi-variate analysis (Klein et al., 1985), and its utilization of "the dominant model of middle-class male sexuality as a guide for understanding human sexual behavior" (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1989, 122). Both aspects, ironically, resulted in its utilization in ways which contributed to the discourse of essentialism:

> Unfortunately when the Kinsey group constructed the scale of zero to six, they unintentionally endorsed and extended essentialist ways of thinking by establishing a typology allowing for seven kinds of sexual beings instead of only two.... While the seven-point scale does enormously more justice to the range and subtlety of human sexuality, in its common usage it does not do justice to Kinsey's own belief in the changeability and plasticity of sexual behavior. (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1989, 121)

However, to the extent that later research widens its focus beyond the specifics of genital sex to include the ways in which historical and sociological factors such as self-labelling and social networks, for

example, operate in forming a sexual identity, this essentialist tendency is somewhat mitigated (Zinik, 1985; Klein et al., 1985; Coleman, 1985).

A survey of research on female bisexuality reveals three main criteria for defining a bisexual identity, namely, (1) experiencing erotic and affectional attractions to both women and men, both in friendships and couple relationships; (2) desiring and/or having sex with women and with men; and, most importantly, (3) positively labelling oneself as bisexual (Fox, 1991; Silber, 1990; Overall, 1988; Coleman, 1985; Zinik, 1985; Gregory, 1983; Blumstein and Schwartz, 1977). For example, Klein found that "the best predictor of a respondent's mean score on the [KSOG, or Klein Sexual Orientation Grid] was his or her self-identification" (1985, 44), and Zinik also found that one's choice of a self-identity label, rather than one's erotic desires or sexual behaviors, was the most significant criterion in establishing a sexual identity among bisexuals.

However, in some ways the self-identification of "bisexual" may also be a form of resisting being categorized as having any constant specific sexual desires or affiliations, and therefore represents a type of permanently deconstructing/reconstructing sexual identity (Clausen, 1990; Overall, 1988; Valverde, 1985). This resistance to being interpellated

into a hegemonic essentialist discourse may even result in the ultimate rejection of any sexual identity label.

For example, Clausen's refusal to take on the label of bisexual, although she meets the above criteria of emotional, erotic and behavioral expressions for bisexuality, underscores the difficulty of operationalizing bisexuality (and by extension, any sexual identity) as a discrete, static and apolitical category and as a meaningfully descriptive label:

> Stress on the potential for change in individuals and social structures is too often abandoned in favor of an essentialist preoccupation with what one "is," as defined by an ever-growing list of measures....
>
> I do not know what "bisexual" desire would be, since my desire is always for a specifically sexed and gendered individual.... Therefore, bisexuality is to me not a sexual identity at all, but a sort of anti-identity, a refusal ... to be limited to one object of desire, one way of loving.
>
> (Clausen, 1990, 454-455)

A fourth aspect, that of being able to access a supportive reference group, emphasizes the role of community in the adoption and maintenance of sexual identity (Silber, 1990; Klein, 1985; Cass, 1984; Krieger, 1983; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1977). Drawing on previous research by Warren (1974), Zinik noted that:

> One's sexual identity label reflects both the organization of one's self concept and one's membership in or allegiance to a particular group or social movement.
>
> (Zinik, 1985, 8)

Just how powerful is social context in the process

of defining oneself as a bisexual woman, particularly since positive recognition of this sexual identity is rare within either the heterosexual feminist or the lesbian feminist communities (Overall, 1988)? One result of the lack of external social legitimation for bisexual feminist women is the tendency to suppress parts of their sexual histories in order to avoid ostracization. For example, in her research on the ways in which non-lesbian women negotiated their sexual identities within a lesbian-feminist community, Silber found that the impact of audience on self-presentation was significant in the degree of inconsistency displayed between women's sexual preferences, identities and behaviors (Silber, 1990, 135). She attributed this to the confluence of these women's radical feminist ideological beliefs with their reference communities of lesbian feminist and heterosexual women, and noted that

> For these women, identifying oneself sexually is not based simply on erotic behavior or desires. Because they belonged to and identified with a politicized sexual community that was critical of heterosexuals and bisexuals, how they identified sexually became a very important marker of self.
> (Silber, 1990, 137)

As discussed more fully below, the impact of a lesbian-feminist reference group that politicizes lesbian identification as **the** politically authentic sexual identity for feminists on the formation and expression

of a woman's sexuality is an important consideration in operationalizing the terms "bisexual" and "lesbian." This is because the self-identity labels which women involved in this community choose may be as much, or more, a reflection of their attempts to conform to "political correctness" than they are descriptions of their erotic, emotional and behavioral experiences:

> The ascription of [lesbian] sexual orientation is gradually divorced both from sexual behavior and even from specific erotic attraction. Instead it becomes more literally a matter of orientation, that is, the focus of one's alignment, bearings, and inclination in life.
>
> (Overall, 1988, 51)

An acknowledgement that within lesbian-feminist politics the identity of "lesbian" may be assumed to represent a woman's ideological beliefs rather than her actual sexual practice, further problematizes operationalizing it as a sexual identity.

These considerations are more fully explored in the next chapter, together with their implications for the operationalization of "bisexual feminist" and "lesbian feminist" as used in this research.

CHAPTER THREE: THEORIZING A FEMINIST BISEXUALITY

Feminism is not a unitary system of beliefs and practices, but rather is best described as a constellation of differing and sometimes contradictory perspectives on the causes of and solutions for the oppression of women (Tong, 1989). The radical position, which includes radical feminism, radical lesbian feminism, and lesbian separatism, focuses on the ways in which the dominant paradigm for gender roles and sexuality within the relations of heterosexualism, organizes relations of power between the sexes such that women do not have full and free control over their bodies (Descarries-Belanger and Roy, 1991; Tong, 1989). The extent that radical feminism theorizes all heterosexual relations to be "compulsory" (Rich, 1980), however, is the degree to which women who relate sexually to men in any capacity are seen to be choosing their own sexual oppression. This chapter contains a discussion of how this "heterophobia" and "biphobia" is manifested within radical feminist theory and its practice at the level of the lesbian-feminist community. To facilitate this discussion, I present here a comparative description of the feminist and lesbian-feminist communities as they support or fail to support lesbian and bisexual sexual identities, a more particular description of the Victoria lesbian-feminist community, and operational definitions of "bisexual feminist" and "lesbian feminist".

The Contradiction of Radical Feminism

> If we are lesbian feminists, we are radically different from what the hetero-society wants us to be. It is not a fake difference, but a real difference. For example, lesbian sexuality is *different*, rooted in the lesbian imagination. It is not the same old sexuality that women must submit to in hetero-reality.
>
> (Raymond, 1989, 155)

The contradiction within radical feminism for bisexual women lies in the tension between its goal of complete sexual freedom for women and its conflation of all heterosexual sexual relations with "compulsory heterosexuality" (Daumer, 1992; Penelope, 1992; Ginzberg, 1992; Elliot, 1992; Faderman, 1991; Silber, 1990; Clausen, 1990; Raymond, 1989; Adams, 1989; Shuster, 1987; Gregory, 1983; Hamblin, 1983; Rich, 1980; Person, 1980). Although radical feminism rejects a biological determinist explanation for the origin and continuation of patriarchal social relations, its practice of framing oppression in primarily gendered terms tends to reify sexual choices into political positions (Phelan, 1989). Ironically, although its criteria for "naturalness" differ from the dominant sex/gender schema discussed in the last chapter, radical feminism tends also to dichotomize and essentialize particular sexual expressions into politically "correct" (lesbian) and "incorrect" (bisexual, heterosexual) categories (Faderman, 1991). A major consequence of this approach is the exclusion of nonlesbian sexuality as a politically relevant feminist position from which to analyze the construction of sexuality and the ethics of difference (Daumer, 1992).

Implications of Feminist Essentialism for Theorizing Sexuality

> If the goals of feminism and gay liberation include the abolition of the gay/straight split, and its replacement by a social system which does not label and categorize people according to whom they are attracted, then bisexuality is an important part of the challenge to the status quo. Its role could involve vindicating and affirming sexual ambiguity, in a world which is presently uncomfortable with any ambiguity.
>
> (Valverde, 1985, 118)

Within the lesbian-feminist community, a radical essentialist privileging of lesbianism as the most politically astute sexual identity results in heterosexual and bisexual women being regarded as insufficiently committed to their own liberation to the extent that they choose to continue to relate sexually to men (Ginzberg, 1992, 76). In constructing a standard of political "lesbian purity," radical feminism impoverishes its analysis to the extent that it ignores the experiences and knowledge of nonlesbian women and of lesbians whose sexual expressions do not exclude men:

> The quest to get at the meaning of lesbianism reflects the continuing reification of lesbian lives under the sway of lesbian-feminism.... In constructing the new lesbian, lesbian-feminists did not deal with the problem of difference. Rather, they erased it by valorizing and moralizing lesbian sex. The conjunction of lesbianism and radical feminism resulted in a new understanding of what lesbianism was about, what women were like and what and who the problems were. Any sense of the plurality of lesbian lives was lost in the construction of "the" lesbian - the unified epistemological and volitional agent. Confident in their status as victims/ survivors/ resisters of patriarchy, lesbian feminists brushed aside the self-understandings of other lesbians as male-identified, structured by power rather than informed by truth.
>
> (Phelan, 1989, 137-138)

Additionally, the defensiveness of "identity pride" (Cass, 1984) in radical lesbian feminism and lesbian separatism reduces the possibility of building social and political alliances between the lesbian-feminist community, the women's movement and other counterhegemonic groups of the New Left (Young, 1992). Of course, this defensiveness is also a response to the ways in which lesbian existence and lesbian contributions to feminist organizations are rendered

invisible by homophobia and heterosexism within mainstream feminism. In either direction, however, it is apparent that a political vision based on sexual essentialism is limited in its scope for liberatory practice and critique.

The Limitations of "Lesbian" Identity Politics

> Without the compulsory expectation that feminist actions must be instituted from some stable, unified, and agreed-upon identity, those actions might well get a quicker start and seem more congenial to a number of "women" for whom the meaning of the category [women] is permanently moot.
>
> (Butler, 1990, 15)

In addition to alienating nonlesbian women from feminist theorization and action, the sexual essentialism of the radical lesbian feminist critique reduces a woman's whole self to her sexual identity, and then artificially extrapolates an entire social identity based on this sexual identity: the sexual identity becomes conflated in a misapplication of "the personal is political" (Faderman, 1991). For example, drawing on Audre Lorde's concept of the erotic as extending beyond genital contact, Ginzberg argues that "defining whole persons in terms of their erotic attachments or sexual arrangements is both underdescriptive and overdescriptive" (1992, 81).

Ginzberg criticizes essentialism within lesbian-feminism as contributing in several ways to the ongoing tensions between women. A major focus of her discussion concerns three competing claims for the definition of what constitutes a lesbian: lesbian identity is variously theorized to occur from (1) being born with an innate lesbian disposition; (2) making a conscious political choice to be lesbian; or (3) insisting that all women are lesbians within Adrienne Rich's "lesbian continuum" (Ginzberg, 1992, 77-80).

Ginzberg notes how the first claim "leaves intact the assumption that if one could help it, one surely would" (Ginzberg, 1992, 77). Furthermore, the political intentionality of a woman who claims to have chosen, rather than to have been "chosen by," her lesbian identity, is undermined or invalidated by this "innate disposition" argument. The second claim - that one's lesbianism is a conscious choice - extends identity beyond sexual practice to include a "woman-identified" ideological, social and cultural orientation. Being a lesbian within this definition is regarded as a political choice open to any woman willing to renounce her heterosexual privilege. It is thus a definition which tends to place the most pressure on bisexual and heterosexual women to reject men as sexual partners in accepting the lesbian label in order to "qualify" as feminists. The third position claims that all women are potential lesbians to the extent that all relationships between women are seen to contain lesbian erotic moments, whether or not the women involved perceive them as such. Ginzberg admits that this perspective is more inclusive of nonlesbians, but argues that it shares a tendency with the second claim to desexualize lesbians and to therefore render "lesbian identity ... [as] some kind of mystical spiritualism" (Ginzberg, 1992, 79). What is needed is a non-essentialist definition of lesbian sexuality which neither reduces it to an innate psychological disposition nor abstracts it as a political choice outside of interpersonal relationships. What is required is a definition consistent with Audre Lorde's concept of "the erotic":

> An alternative solution to that of characterizing lesbianism as either a contingent or an essential characteristic of persons is needed.... Part of the problem lies in characterizing *persons*, rather

> than *acts, moments, relationships, encounters, attractions, perspectives, insights, outlooks,* connections, and *feelings*, as lesbian.
> (Ginzberg, 1992, 82)

It would seem that to the extent that bisexual feminism incorporates and problematizes both heterosexuality and lesbianism, and thereby "reactivates the gender and sexuality destabilizing moment of all politicized sexual identities" (Daumer, 1992, 98), it can offer a new epistemological vantage point from which to theorize sexual identity.

Bisexuality and Lesbian Identity Politics

> Navigating questions of identity in a postmodern age, Cloe dreamed not of instability or indecidability so much as of an intimacy not regulated through positionings in ostensibly stable sexual identities. Cloe longed for people with whom she could create herself anew, again and again, and for whom she could do the same.
> (Daumer, 1992, 94)

As mentioned in chapter two, bisexuality in women is rarely referred to in theorizations about lesbian identity except as constituting a transitional phase between being heterosexual and "coming out" as a lesbian (Daumer, 1992; Overall, 1988; Cass, 1984). When it is theorized as being a legitimate alternative sexual identity to heterosexuality or lesbianism, bisexuality still tends to be defined in biologically reductionist terms which focus on the frequency of same-sex and opposite-sex genital contacts (Rust, 1992). Neither conceptualization leads to an analysis of bisexuality that goes beyond the confines of a dichotomous sex/gender schema. Therefore, neither definition permits the liberatory potential of bisexuality to destabilize essentialist constructs of sexual identity, to emerge. However, some recent feminist theory has addressed this potential, identifying the utilities of bisexuality to include the

prefigurative de-centering of biological criteria in the selection of romantic partners (Rust, 1992) and its sensitizing capacity as an intentionally nonintegrational epistemological position from which to conceptualize gender and sexuality (Daumer, 1992).

Bisexuality - Destabilizing Gender and Sex Identities

Although it shares with the social constructionist perspective a rejection of essentialism and universalism, the focus of a post-structuralist approach is more directed at disturbing and dismantling all social constructs. In terms of addressing sexual orientation, the deconstruction of gender and physical sex as socially constructed phenomena becomes a necessary part of understanding their location within the knowledge/power discourses of sexuality (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1980). For example, this approach assists in our understanding of how the constructs of "female" and "feminine," "male" and "masculine" shape sexual expression and sexual identity. "Lipstick-lesbianism," "butch-femme," "lesbian-bisexuality," "gender-blending," and other interpretations of gender and sex within gay and lesbian subcultures reframe these constructs within different contingencies and juxtapositions of bodies, desires, and behaviors (Nestle, 1992; Ardill & O'Sullivan, 1990; Blackman & Perry, 1990; Silber, 1990; Devor, 1989). This reframing, which accepts rather than rejects or ignores bisexuality, has the potential to destabilize the hegemony of sexual essentialism within and beyond the borders of the lesbian community (Daumer, 1992; Butler, 1990; Kinsman, 1987):

> Our ability to respond to diversity *within* the lesbian community is linked to our capacity to articulate and reimagine the complex relations and interactions, as well as the shifting boundaries and allegiances, *between* communities. Hence, as a

> sign of transgression, ambiguity, and mutability, bisexuality also provides a necessary theoretical link between lesbian theory and queer theory, on the one hand, and lesbian ethics and queer ethics, on the other....
>
> (Daumer, 1992, 103)

In Daumer's usage, "queer theory" denotes a discursive attempt to expose and problematize the differences within and between the current designations of lesbian and gay which are, in de Lauretis's words, "paradoxically, elided, because taken for granted" by gays and lesbians (Daumer, 1992, 103). According to Daumer, queer ethics pose a challenge to lesbian ethics to the degree that they challenge essentialist identities and articulate "a plurality of differences among us in the hope of forging new bonds and allegiances" (Daumer, 1992, 103).

However, to the extent that a lesbian-feminist community is founded on a shared lesbian group identity and shared values and norms, women whose sexual identities do not conform are marginalized (Lockard, 1986, 86; Krieger, 1983). The marginalization of bisexual women is specifically supported by radical lesbian arguments against tolerating sexual diversities that are defined as inconsistent with "lesbian politics" (Penelope, 1992; Raymond, 1989):

> While debates raged in feminist circles about various sexual issues, many radical feminists discussed sexuality in political terms. Women were judged by their sexuality, with lesbians seen as the most politically progressive. Given this rather rigid view of sexuality, non-lesbians who wanted to be in the "women's community" or lesbian feminist community, were out of place.
>
> (Silber, 1990, 132)

Lesbianism has also been linked to a rejection of "femininity," and therefore of women who visually present as "feminine" (Penelope, 1992; Daly, 1978). For example, Penelope claims that "because femininity

in women is so highly prized by men, femininity cannot be positively valued in a lesbian context" (Penelope, 1992, 80), and concludes that "rejecting femininity is an essentially Lesbian act" (Penelope, 1992, 80). The same accusations levied against bisexual women for being able to "pass" as heterosexuals and to therefore enjoy "heterosexual privilege" are levied against "feminine" women as well: "in a Lesbian context, FEMININITY = HETEROSEXUALITY = CLOSETED = PRIVILEGE = LESBIAN-HATING" (Penelope, 1992, 96). The pressure to conform to radical lesbian feminist standards of sexual behavior and self-presentation is heightened against bisexual women whose appearance is deemed to be "feminine."

Feminist "Sisterhood" and the Lesbian Community

Early feminism naively claimed that all women were sisters simply by virtue of their being female, and it tended to ignore or minimize real differences in power and perspective between women of differing races, economic situations, physical and mental abilities, and sexual orientations (Faderman, 1991). Partially as a reaction to their invisibility within the largely urban and heterosexual women's liberation movement of the early seventies, lesbian women began to build their own communities (Faderman, 1991; Lockard, 1986; Hunnisett, 1983; Krieger, 1983; Ettore, 1980; Wolf, 1979).

> One of the primary functions of the lesbian community is to support lesbians in discovering, developing, and maintaining a positive lesbian identity.
>
> (Hunnisett, 1983, 40)

The lesbian-feminist community provides a social framework for feminist "sisterhood" or family relations which overtly and positively acknowledges the existence of lesbians, and as such is a distinct component of the larger, more politically active but less lesbian-aware

women's feminist community (Lockard, 1986). Hunnisett described the lesbian community as "the range of social groups in which the lesbian individual may feel a sense of camaraderie with other lesbians, a sense of support, shared understanding, shared vision, and shared sense of self 'as a lesbian,' vis-a-vis the outside world" (Hunnisett, 1983, 32). However, as Krieger noted, membership within a lesbian community, to the extent that this community is one in which diversity is minimized and similarities are pronounced, represents a challenge to the individual wanting to develop and maintain her own identity within a group (Krieger, 1983).

In her study of non-lesbians in such a lesbian-feminist community, Silber found that while the identity of lesbian included aspects of same-sex preference and sexual practice, it also constituted a political and cultural meta-status within the lesbian community. She noted that

> sexual identity is particularly problematic in the lesbian feminist community because for many it expresses not only one's eroticism but one's total identity. It is a master status which may encompass lifestyle, culture, political beliefs, and certain values.
>
> (Silber, 1990, 132)

To what extent does a definition of lesbian as a political sexual identity within the lesbian-feminist community render bisexual women's choices to relate sexually to men politically suspect and therefore deny the validity of their feminism? Previous studies indicate that an intolerance for nonlesbian sexuality within the lesbian-feminist community negatively impacts bisexual women's perceptions of their sexuality as reflecting their feminism. For example, Gregory found that the majority of feminist women she

encountered tended to feel they were bisexual "by default" rather than having deliberately chosen this identity (Gregory, 1983, 143), and as mentioned above, Silber found that the nonlesbians in her study chose not to publicly identify themselves as bisexual. These observations raise certain questions. First, how does a woman's circle of friends and lovers within the lesbian-feminist community facilitate or inhibit the development of a bisexual identity in that community? The creation of intimate bonds situated within monogamous same-sex relationships and friendships may "cement" a woman's community identity as lesbian, but does not address her erotic orientation toward males. Second, given that feminism supports a woman's right to choose her own sexual expression and identity, can it be assumed that the maintenance of a bisexual identity might be easier within a lesbian-feminist community? As I noted above in the discussion of compulsory heterosexuality, there is a tension in radical feminism between seeing heterosexuality as both disempowering and privileging non-lesbian women. This has implications for bisexual women who are attempting to live openly within the lesbian-feminist community, since part of their identity may involve being sexually active with male partners. Research on non-lesbians within this particular community tends to show that there exists little attitudinal or structural support for bisexuality (Silber, 1990; Clausen, 1990; Valverde, 1985; Gregory, 1983; Krieger, 1983; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1977, 1976). In addition, bisexuals are not defined as either a legitimate sexual group or as a social movement in their own right. As such, they constitute either a "silent" subsidiary of the gay/lesbian liberation movement, or a fringe sexual component of heterosexual sexuality. It is important

to address the role played by the lesbian-feminist community and the larger feminist community in validating women's sexual choices and sexual identities, and how this validation is qualified by an essentialist privileging of either lesbianism or heterosexuality.

Marginality: Bisexual Women in Lesbian Feminism

> Virtually every self-identified gay man I've ever met has been convinced that his sexuality is a biological given, but lesbians are a mixed bag. My own wildly unscientific estimate is that it's a pretty even split between the born lesbians and the born-agains. We talk about these differences within the lesbian community (and we bitch about the other side of the born-again syndrome - women who choose to stop being lesbians and go off with men).
>
> (Van Gelder, 1991, 86)

Prejudice against bisexuals, both in terms of homophobia within heterosexist society generally, and within the gay/lesbian community itself, results in their double stigmatization, or in the "double closet" (Lourea, 1985, 55). Lourea notes that the conceptual rigidity of sexual orientation puts psychological pressure on bisexuals to "pass" as heterosexuals in the "straight" context and as homosexuals in the "gay" context. These psychological pressures produce confusion, internalized homophobia, and even internalized heterosexism (Lourea, 1985). Constrained from "coming out" as a bisexual in either the straight or gay community for fear of stigmatization and rejection, bisexuals often have to live a doubly secret life, or are forced to relinquish part of their sexual identity to retain membership in a given community. For example, Blumstein and Schwartz describe the experiences of bisexual women encountering biphobia within the lesbian community:

> Those women who sought support in the lesbian communities of large cities report that it was exceedingly difficult to maintain a bisexual identity because of the hostility and mistrust of bisexuality in some parts of that community. Lesbian behavior and identification were reinforced while heterosexual behavior and bisexual identification were either discouraged or scorned. Respondents' reactions to the lesbian community's position were active rejection of heterosexuality and bisexuality, rejection of the lesbian community (or those portions of it most hostile to bisexuality), or disguise of their heterosexual interests.
>
> (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1976, 177)

Pressure to conform to lesbian-feminist community standards, while excluding bisexual women, also places restrictions on lesbian women. For example, Krieger's research into self-identity examined how women frequently felt either engulfed or abandoned by their rural lesbian community as group norms conflicted with their own individual needs and desires (Krieger, 1983, xiii). Although Krieger's research focused on self-identified lesbians, the experiences described by these women bear strong parallels to those of bisexual women whose marginality within the lesbian-feminist community is an ever-present reality (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1976; Silber, 1990). It is apparent that the existence of and membership within a supportive community plays an important role in facilitating a positive sense of sexual identity, but that this support is mitigated to the extent that community norms fail to recognize or validate the choices and experiences of its members.

Creating A Safe Space: Making "Communities"

In the midst of a homophobic and misogynist society, women have historically created "alternative" communities to affirm ourselves as female, as sexual beings, as feminists. Within these social and

political networks, women help each other survive, and hopefully stop, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, incest, wife battery, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and the feminization of poverty, to name only a few of the many forms of discrimination women encounter. We also depend on our communities as spaces in which we may socialize and celebrate with each other. These social and political networks include the lesbian, lesbian-feminist and larger "feminist" communities, which overlap each other but which are not identical. A brief discussion of the historical origins and current configuration of the lesbian-feminist community follows, and includes an analysis of how this community both intersects and is elided by the larger feminist community.

Community, Then and Now

The actual existence of a lesbian-feminist "community" is a relatively recent phenomenon, coinciding with the emergence of North American feminism and gay liberation more than two decades ago (Faderman, 1991). Prior to this time, gay bars constituted one of the few public places in which lesbians could meet each other (Kennedy & Davis, 1992; Nestle, 1992; Kinsman, 1987, 182-183). Although these bars continue to provide a space for women to socialize with each other, their purpose is often largely concerned with economic profit rather than the support of feminism or the celebration of women's energy. In addition, these bars cater to only a certain sector of the lesbian (and gay male) population, some of whom do not necessarily identify themselves as feminists.

With the second wave of the women's movement in the 1970's came the advent of women's centres, sexuality workshops, working collectives, women's dances, and consciousness-raising groups. Within these

cultural and political spaces, women began to identify and fight against a shared oppression under patriarchy, build a sense of sisterhood, and explore alternatives to heterosexuality (Faderman, 1991). Although only partially intersecting with the larger (and mostly heterosexually-identified) women's liberation movement (WLM), nascent lesbian-feminist communities provided social contexts in which to discover, analyze and confirm one's self as a lesbian feminist woman, as well as creating access to a larger social network of potential friends and lovers than had the bar scene of the forties and fifties (Nestle, 1992; Faderman, 1991; Hunnisett, 1983). That the intersection was only partial between the WLM and the lesbian-feminist community is the result of at least two different factors, the first one being the ways in which mainstream feminist organizations ostracized lesbians and failed to acknowledge lesbian issues, lesbian existence or lesbian contributions within feminist theory and practice (Creet, 1990; Adamson, Briskin and McPhail, 1988). In a defensive reaction to their exclusion from recognition within the WLM, some lesbian-feminists adopted a more radical separatist stance which argued that "feminism is the theory, lesbianism is the practice" (Faderman, 1991). This position constituted a second factor in keeping the lesbian and feminist communities somewhat distinct, in that the radical lesbian separatist rejection of monogamy, butch/femme roles, femininity, and sexuality with men as evidence of the infiltration of heterosexism into lesbian existence alienated many lesbians whose language and styles of dress and behavior and experience did not conform to these new feminist standards (Nestle, 1992). However, despite the countervailing pressures of heterosexism,

homophobia and heterophobia, there are many ways in which the WLM and the lesbian-feminist community overlap.

The Intersection of Lesbian and Feminist Communities

Although there are issues which affect lesbian and bisexual women particularly, such as homophobia in the courts regarding child custody or same-sex marriage (Banner, 1993; Stone, 1990), other forms of patriarchal oppression, such as wage ghettos and sexual violence, affect lesbian and nonlesbian women alike. Because the lesbian community tends to provide its members with primarily a private social context in which to affirm one's lesbian identity, it becomes necessary for lesbian-feminists seeking to organize for change on a broader political scope to also become actively involved in organizations outside this community. However, even within feminist organizations, support for the lesbian part of a woman's lesbian-feminist identity tends to decrease the further removed these organizations become from the grassroots community level.

For example, the larger women's community constitutes spaces in which the "mandates" of feminism are situated within relations of capitalism and state bureaucracy which variously constrain and subvert feminist aims. Organizations which have been created to address the concerns of women experiencing such issues as daycare, wife battery, poverty, sexual harassment, and sexual assault constitute the frontline of feminist practice. However, analysts of mainstream feminism have observed that in merely addressing the effects of patriarchal capitalism, formally organized feminist organizations are often coopted into treating the symptom instead of the disease:

> The exploitation and oppression of women are rooted in the structures of patriarchal capitalism. Sexism is so deeply ingrained in the social relations of patriarchal capitalism that a fundamental transformation of these structures is necessary. At the same time, the liberation of women rests not only on a liberation from sexism but also on a transformation of the relations of power that characterize all social relations in a patriarchal-capitalist society.
>
> (Adamson, Briskin & McPhail, 1988, 99)

To the extent that the transformational potential of lesbianism is hidden or downplayed within the more formally institutionalized settings and policies of mainstream feminist organizations, lesbian lives and the critique of lesbianism by heterosexism are both neutralized. An analysis of the ways in which this occurs is beyond the scope of this thesis, but it seems evident that there is a correlation between being financially dependent on state funding, a formalized organizational structure, and the amount of pressure exerted to keep "deviant" sexual identities relatively hidden within feminist organizations.

Likewise, there appears to be a relationship between informal organizations which depend on volunteer labour and donations, and a more overt connection made between feminism and lesbianism. Ironically, although lesbians historically have tended to be over-represented in founding and staffing feminist organizations, their presence remains largely unacknowledged. This, in turn, means that the potential impact of incorporating a lesbian-feminist critique into organizational goals or structures is also muted and derailed.

The Local Communities in Victoria

Because my study concerned the impact of the lesbian-feminist community on bisexual women's sexual identities, I now present a brief description of the

ways in which feminist practice occurs within and beyond this particular community. This material is relevant in understanding some of the comments of the participants in my research, all of whom have been involved at some time with either the organizations or activities, or both, listed below.

Community level organizations in the Victoria area which address women's concerns within relatively formal bureaucratic settings include the Victoria Women's Sexual Assault Centre and Transition House. Both of these organizations employ paid staff, have boards of directors, and are, respectively, partially funded by donations and by the Ministry of Attorney General, and by the Ministry of Social Services. SWAG, or the Status of Women Action Group, has two paid staff who job-share, uses core funding from the federal Women's Programs and the B.C. Ministry of Women's Equality, but depends primarily on volunteers for its political and administrative outreach. SWAG also tends to be more overtly pro-lesbian. The local chapter of DAWN Canada, or the Disabled Women's Network, is also largely staffed by volunteers. Everywoman's Books, Victoria's only feminist bookstore, is a completely volunteer-based collective of between 12 and 24 women which, together with the SWAG office, constitutes both an actual and permanent physical site of community, and a locus of cultural and political information. For example, it provides a children's play area and reading chairs for customers, sponsors annual poetry readings, sells books and magazines which specifically address lesbian, bisexual and gay issues, stocks "wimmin's" music, Tshirts, posters, and handcrafted jewellery, maintains a bulletin board for women's services and housing advertisements, and also is the main ticket outlet for women's dances, concerts, and workshops.

Women's collectives which depend solely on volunteer labour, and are funded largely by donations and subscriptions, include the Hot Flashes coffeehouse group, and the producers of the Victoria newsletter, ElleNews (formerly LesbiaNews). Less formal, more occasional settings for creating and experiencing a sense of "community" include sports events, private parties, lesbian camp-outs, women's dances, weekend workshops, weekly lesbian support groups, political marches and rallies, and to some extent, the "club," Rumors.

Although disabilities and financial limitations and being closeted may mean that a woman participates in the lesbian-feminist community only through subscribing to LesbiaNews or socializes privately, an observation of women's involvement in specifically lesbian social events constitutes a way of estimating the population of self-identified lesbians and bisexuals in the lesbian-feminist community. I have drawn on my own sixteen-year involvement with the lesbian-feminist community as a political activist, writer and participant in social and cultural events as a basis for my observations. In my experience, therefore, the average women's dance attracts an attendance of between 150 and 250 women, and the annual lesbian gala, a formal, catered dinner-dance with entertainers and a live band, usually draws about 300 women.

Sports events, such as softball tournaments and volleyball games, usually involve about 50 women as participants and spectators. Marches, rallies, workshops, and the women's coffeehouse tend to draw between 50 to 150 women, and women's group-camping usually involves between 20 to 30 women.

Adjacent to, and partially overlapping with the lesbian-feminist community is the bar crowd. On a

filled-to-capacity "women's night" at Victoria's only gay and lesbian nightclub, Rumors, there are usually 150 women in attendance. These women range in age from 19 to their early fifties, with the majority being in their mid-thirties to early forties. Approximately half of these women are in couples, indicated by their standing with, speaking to, and waltzing primarily with one another.

There is a fair amount of overlap between these populations, in that many of the same women are involved in the same recreational, cultural and political events. In my observations, these women appear to be predominantly Caucasian, in their early twenties to mid-thirties, without dependents, and from WASP "lower-middle" class to "mid-middle" class backgrounds. Of the women I have met through these various social circles, some are unemployed, self-employed and/or on social assistance, particularly the women with children under 19. Overall, the majority of "socially out" lesbians in Victoria, meaning women who choose to attend and participate in identifiably "lesbian" events, have at least some post-secondary education and hold occupations within both traditional and non-traditional fields.

As evident in the above descriptions, the lesbian and lesbian-feminist "communities" are diverse and multiply located, potentially involve quite a heterogenous range of women in terms of sexual and political orientations, and engage with more mainstream institutions in both cooperative and counter-hegemonic ways. It is important to remember, however, that as much as the lesbian and lesbian-feminist communities constitute relatively separate social spaces for women, their creation does not occur independently of the dominant heterosexist culture. Speaking about the

historical formation of the queer communities in Canada, Kinsman noted that

> ... this community is organized not only by gays and lesbians ourselves: it is also organized by the police, the mass media, and class and State organization. The gay community is not a natural phenomenon but is historically produced through constantly shifting struggles and relationships.
> (Kinsman, 1987, 185)

Affirming Ambiguity: Bisexual Women and Prefigurative Practice

> [The bisexual woman] is not necessarily an individual who is callously attempting to have the best and avoid the worst of both worlds; she may instead be a person whose experience can generate important insights for feminist theory and practice.
> (Overall, 1988, 55)

To the extent that the lesbian-feminist community makes room for self-identified bisexual women to freely express their sexual orientation, the possibility of prefigurative practice emerges. By prefigurative practice, I mean moving toward a society in which sexual orientation is no longer used as a system of categorization and power dynamics. In the meantime, bisexuals, as Valverde notes below, occupy the unenviable position of resisting two strands of sexual hegemony:

> It is interesting that although bisexuality, like homosexuality, is just another deviant identity, it also functions as a rejection of the norm/deviance model. People who are bisexual, and not just in a transition between heterosexuality and homosexuality, are people who have resisted both society's first line of attack and its second offensive, i.e. they have resisted both the institution of heterosexuality and of homosexuality.
> (Valverde, 1985, 115)

Bisexuality, to the extent that it constitutes both a multi-identity and an anti-identity, and becomes

more recognized as such, has the potential to deconstruct and destabilize essentialist categories of sexuality. This recognition will occur, however, only to the degree that the bisexual potentialities and actualities expressed by heterosexuals, bisexuals and lesbians/gays are also acknowledged. In the meantime, bisexual women are caught in the contradiction of the lesbian-feminist community. On the one hand, the community supports a woman to be sexual on her own terms rather than on the criteria set by heteropatriarchy, and also obviously supports her right to choose to be sexual with other women. On the other hand, however, bisexual women experience a tension in this support to the extent that their sexual expression with men is regarded as being a sign of cooptation into heteropatriarchy. The politics of sexual identity as constituted by radical lesbian feminism therefore denies bisexual women membership in the lesbian-feminist community on the basis of their bisexuality, while simultaneously offering them support for being female and woman-loving. Since an alternative "bisexual-feminist" community to which they can turn for support and validation for their sexual identities is, at best, only beginning to be organized in North America, and since their lesbianism problematizes acceptance as fully sexual beings in a heterosexist society, bisexual women seeking to be accepted into a community are pressured to suppress parts of their identities (Weise, 1992; Hutchins & Kaahumanu, 1991). To the extent that biphobia and heterosexism are challenged by bisexual women and their allies in both the "straight" and lesbian communities, however, bisexual women may locate the discursive space in which they can give expression to the entire scope of their sexual identities.

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

> The act of interpretation is not something which occurs only at one specific point in the research after the data have been gathered; rather, interpretation exists at the beginning and continues throughout the entire process. What kind of data and facts you are able to gather will depend on the kind of questions you think are important to ask and the way in which you go about asking them. The research process is a social activity which is located in a specific historical and social context, and involves intentional activity.
>
> (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, 23)

Rationale

There is a dialectical relationship between ontology - theories of what exists - and epistemology - ways of knowing what exists. Theoretical assumptions are embedded in particular ways of understanding the world, and these assumptions in turn guide methodological choices which tend to reproduce knowledge that supports the original theoretical assumptions. This suggests that care must be exercised at all stages of research - from developing the initial research problem to gathering data to analysis and application of the results.

In deciding to study women's sexuality as it is expressed within a community to which I belong and which I value, it was in my personal and research interests to select methods which tapped the rich resources of experiential data available while also empowering those who participated. Because I am critical of the positivist tradition in which research subjects tend to be regarded as mere "carriers of variables" (Babbie, 1986, 21) whose unique experiences are simply aggregated, then tested against a causal hypothesis for statistical significance, I wanted to employ methods which would challenge the received

notions both about women's sexuality and about studying women as sociological subjects.

Since I am also part of the academic community, it was also in my professional interest to add to the body of feminist research which, by more explicitly acknowledging the existence of sexism and heterosexism as forms of oppressive social relations within a "ruling apparatus," represents an alternative model of social science with liberatory potential (Smith, 1987, 56).

Becoming a Feminist Researcher

Since a part of my own agenda as a feminist researcher is to challenge received notions about women, it must be noted that one of the pressures which act against women's experiences being truly valued is the continuing distortion and invisibility of the experiences of researchers and of research subjects, resulting from the underlying mechanisms which shape theory and method in social science (Smith, 1987; Kirby & McKenna, 1989; DeVault, 1990).

Feminist social science stresses the necessity for female social scientists to utilize our dual, and often contradictory, positions within academe as both possessors of institutional power and as members of a marginalized group - what Smith calls our "bifurcated consciousness" - to understand how these mechanisms of exclusion and coercion operate to reinforce the status quo for all women (Smith, 1987, 6).

The notion of bifurcation is relevant in explaining my decision to select a qualitative and woman-centred research approach, as well as to my choice of subject matter. Although I was already using a feminist perspective before entering university, it was not until my undergraduate studies in the field of women's studies that I encountered a body of literature

about feminist social science which articulated my growing sense of unease about how to be both feminist and a sociologist.

With the stimulus of this feminist critique, I was able to understand some of the ways in which the North American sociological tradition of using mostly quantitative and seemingly apolitical studies rendered my own experiential knowledge essentially marginal to my professional identity. I realized that I would have to face the task of finding a way to satisfy the requirements of academe without sacrificing my ethical duties to myself and to other women, and chose research projects which permitted me to stay closer to the 'human' side of sociology (Hurley, 1989).

Choosing to be explicit about my sexual identity in this research was a decision I made on the basis of wanting the self-empowerment of becoming visible as a member of a sexual minority, a choice which others have also made (Bart, 1984; Clausen, 1990; Gregory, 1983; Hollibaugh & Moraga, 1983; Kinsman, 1987; Kitzinger, 1987; Loulan, 1987, 1984; Nestle, 1992; Norrgard, 1991; Raymond, 1989; Rich, 1980; Sprinkle, 1991; Valverde, 1985; Van Gelder, 1991; Weir, 1987; Wine, 1990).

I also felt that owning my particular perspective enhanced the objectivity of the research:

> [The] beliefs and behaviors of the researcher are part of the empirical evidence for (or against) the claims advanced in the results of research. This evidence too must be open to critical scrutiny no less than what is traditionally defined as relevant evidence. Introducing this "subjective" element into the analysis in fact increases the objectivity of the research and decreases the "objectivism" which hides this kind of evidence from the public.
>
> (Harding, 1987, 9)

More personally, my experience of self-identifying as a bisexual woman within the lesbian-feminist

community acquainted me with a different, but no less powerful sense of further marginalization as a member of a bisexual minority. The bifurcated consciousness this positioning produced has also been useful in designing the research questions and in establishing rapport with the participants.

Choosing a Design

As noted earlier in this thesis, my reading of the literature supports operationalizing sexual orientation as a fluid, multiply-located and socially constructed identity, rather than as an innate, biologically-determined disposition. This meant that my methodological and theoretical emphasis was focused on exploration, rather than explanation: instead of trying to establish any formal, universal and symmetrical causal relationships between women's sexual orientations and their identities as feminists, I used methods which would place the greater attention on the processual and multiple ways in which these women construct their everyday realities.

My choice to use in-depth interviews rather than a written survey, to gather partial life histories of lesbian feminist and bisexual feminist women is consistent with other studies of lesbian and bisexual women which feature subjective experience as the primary data source (Silber, 1990; Kitzinger, 1987:1986; Klein, Sepekoff & Wolf, 1985; Paul, 1985; Krieger, 1983; Gregory, 1983; Ettore, 1980; Wolf, 1979; Ponse, 1978; Moses, 1978; Klein, 1978; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1977, 1976; Wolff, 1977; Bode, 1976). Strategies of phenomenology and ethnomethodology, which privilege how social actors use intersubjective meanings to organize and interpret their social world, seemed the best methodological choice in terms of "grounding the data" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967),

because they place women's experiences at the centre of the inquiry. In addition, my intent was to design the research for women, and to take women's vantage point through "locating the researcher in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter" (Harding, 1987, 8). It seemed that using a relatively informal and semi-structured interview format, rather than a written questionnaire, would facilitate a more interactive and equal-power dynamic of social research (Oakley, 1981).

I created the interview questions and QSort statements (see below) to permit as much flexibility as possible in women's responses while still maintaining the research focus. I found it a challenge, both in the stages of design and of interviewing, to balance between staying focused on discovering how these women viewed themselves and each other, and suspending, as much as possible, any preconceptions which might blind me to the fuller depth and complexity of data potentially available to me. My most central concern was how to honour these women's experiences of occupying particular social identities as sexual actors and as feminists, yet also to contextualize the experiences as constituted within such sociopolitical structures as biphobia, heterosexism and patriarchy which organize, and often penalize these identities.

I found that the women themselves were often the best sources of information about their own struggles, and their words, combined with my own "critical reflection" facilitated the process of empowerment for all participants (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, 28).

I also had ethical considerations in trying to study marginalized groups in ways that did not perpetuate their oppression (Lerman & Porter, 1990; Kirby & McKenna, 1989; Maguire, 1987; Smith, 1987; Bart, 1984; Mies, 1983; Reinharz, 1983). Meeting these

considerations involved employing a variety of strategies throughout the research, ranging from designing the study from my own understanding of marginalization to keeping strict confidentiality of all participants, encouraging a collaborative interaction as much as possible within the interviews themselves, and answering their inquiries about the research both during and after the interviews. Although I did not structure any formal follow-up contacts with the participants, I did report the progress of the research project to them when asked, and I also promised each woman a copy of the final report.

The Study

The following section describes more specifically how the study was designed, including a discussion of how I selected, developed and deployed the interview schedule and QSort statements (Appendices A and B).

Designing the Interview Schedule

Guided by the examples of doing research with lesbians and bisexual women (Kitzinger, 1987; Gregory, 1983;), I developed a set of 45 interview questions (see Appendix A) which addressed those aspects of women's lives which the literature indicated were most directly involved in constructing sexual identities. Relatively open-ended, these questions invited women to recall being a tomboy, reaching puberty, and having same- and opposite-sex attractions as a girl and teenager, and to discuss how their adult understandings of themselves as bisexual or lesbian are affected by their sexual relationships and by feminism. The questions were grouped into sections as follows: demographics; self-definition of sexual identity previously and currently, as well as fantasies, self-perceptions, and sex education in early childhood and adolescence; adult sexual and relationship history,

including current relationships, monogamy, celibacy, pregnancy and abortion, children, and motherhood; the links between sexual identity and feminism, pressures and support within the lesbian and women's communities for sexual identification; perceptions of an "ideal" feminist community, personal evaluation of being bisexual or lesbian, and evaluation and solicitation of feedback about the interview process itself.

A Quantitative Cross-Check: The QSort

Although the interview questions provided a wealth of information about each woman's experience, I decided to utilize the additional technique of a Q-Sort both to cross-check the interview data and assist me in its later analysis into patterns and trends.

The QSort is a quantitative technique of data collection which has been effectively used to study lesbian identity (Kitzinger and Rogers, 1986). Originally developed by Stephenson in 1935, Q-methodology

> is a set of procedures whereby a sample of objects is placed in a significant order with respect to a single person, e.g. a sample might consist of statements of belief to be rank-ordered by individuals from "most agree (+5) to "most disagree (-5). The items so arrayed comprise a Q-sort, and Q-sorts from various people can then be correlated and factor-analyzed, the resulting factors indicating clusters of people who have ranked the statements in essentially the same fashion. The factors are then explained and interpreted in terms of commonly shared attitudes, perspectives or identities.
>
> (Kitzinger and Rogers, 1986, 169-170)

I decided to adapt some of the QSort statements from Kitzinger's work (Kitzinger, 1987, 74-75) by incorporating them into the interview schedule, and also into a series of 77 statements (see Appendix B), printed individually on small cards. These statements were then rated by the participant placing each card

into the appropriate, clearly marked and colour-coded envelope to signify her level of agreement or disagreement with each statement. Because I wanted to account for all the statements, and because some statements presumed a sexual identity to which not all participants would belong (e.g. a lesbian answering a statement that began "As a bisexual..." or vice versa), I also provided an envelope marked "Neutral/Does not apply."

Each set of Q-Sort statements was then coded and entered into an SPSSPC+ file, and two-way and three-way cross-tabulations were run between various statements and sexual identity. Constraints of time and a preference to assign the most weight of interpretation to interview data rather than to statistical data led me to choose against doing a full-scale factor analysis. These frequencies of various thematic categories sorted by sexual identity provided me with a simple yet informative summary of attitudinal and behavioral differences and similarities between the two groups. This summary also constituted a helpful comparative contrast to the interview data by revealing ways in which women sometimes differed in their answers between the interview and the QSort.

Pre-testing

Following the guidelines set forth by Kirby and McKenna on assessing the researcher's own biases, or "conceptual baggage" (1989, 49-52) I took on the role of participant in a taped two-hour self-interview, with a friend asking me questions from the preliminary draft of the interview schedule, and offering me critical feedback. In addition to identifying questions which were potentially difficult to understand or especially emotionally disruptive, this pre-test permitted me greater experiential empathy with future participants.

I also pre-tested the Q-Sort statements at this time, noting any typographical or grammatical errors.

Although I now think it would have been more scientifically sound and less personally stressful to have found an eighth participant elsewhere, I also decided to use this self-interview as part of my overall data source. Therefore, I constitute one of the participants of this research.

Sampling: Finding Participants

Since I wanted to focus my research on women who considered themselves lesbian feminists or bisexual feminists within the Greater Victoria area, I used a combination of advertising in places which serve the lesbian-feminist community and snowball sampling to find participants. I made sure to identify myself as a feminist and to state, as clearly as possible in the brief space allowed, the aim and parameters of the research project. The written ads were posted on the bulletin boards of Everywoman's Books and the office of the Victoria Status of Women Action Group, and read as follows:

FEMINIST RESEARCHER WANTS TO INTERVIEW
BISEXUAL AND LESBIAN WOMEN
for Masters Thesis in Sociology,
University of Victoria

If you are a bisexual or lesbian woman and would like to share what being bisexual or lesbian means to you, come be a participant in my research. This would involve a two-hour interview and answering a short questionnaire. The identities of all participants will remain strictly confidential.

Interested women please call
(researcher's home phone number)

Kelevelyn Hurley, B.A. (Honours)
University of Victoria, 1989

A similar, slightly shorter ad also ran in the October 1990 and November 1990 issues of LesbiaNews, a locally-produced lesbian feminist newsletter with a readership of approximately 100 women in the Greater Victoria, Vancouver Island and Gulf Islands areas.

In all, the combination of ads and snowball sampling produced over twenty potential respondents. The majority of women who first contacted me identified themselves as lesbians. Although I knew several of them, many of the women who first contacted me were not known to me. Although this was not a factor in participant selection per se, factors such as the woman's proximity to Victoria and/or finding a mutually convenient time to conduct the interviews did figure in finding participants. In addition, I chose not to interview anyone with whom I had been or was presently romantically involved, nor with anyone who indicated that her interest in participating in the research was primarily to develop a romantic relationship with me.

In seven of the eight cases, my previous acquaintanceship with various lesbian and bisexual women through social groups or professional associations, combined with their knowledge that I was doing this particular research, led them to either approach me in person to ask if I would interview them, or to refer women to me.

Constraints of time and financial resources meant restricting the sample size to eight women - four bisexual feminists and a comparison group of four lesbian-feminists, although I would have liked to have interviewed more women from each group, as well as introduce a second comparison group of heterosexual feminists.

The Participants: A Brief Sketch

The following sketches describe my bisexual and lesbian participants, and include the dates each woman was interviewed and the sexual identity she chose. To protect her confidentiality, I have assigned each woman a pseudonym, and have provided only general details about her background:

Sandra, 30, student, bisexual-lesbian feminist, interviewed 23 February 1990. No dependents, in a committed monogamous relationship with a lesbian and living alone at the time of the interview.

Denise, 24, single mother to a four-year old daughter, on social assistance and working part-time as a cleaner. Identifies as a lesbian eco-feminist and witch, interviewed 23 October 1990. Single and living cooperatively with two other lesbians in a shared house.

Frances, 45, a single professional woman who lives alone. No dependents. Interviewed 14 November 1990. Identifies as "a lesbian with a bisexual background" and as a feminist.

Kathleen, 42, self-employed professional. Bisexual mother of infant son. Shares home with father of child. Interviewed 17 October, 1991. Calls herself a feminist, but qualifies it as not being synonymous with "man-hating."

Ruth, 48, self-employed professional, bisexual feminist

currently in a monogamous, non-sexual relationship with a bisexual man. No dependents. Interviewed 30 October 1991.

Jean, 56, self-employed photographer, community volunteer and on partial social assistance. Identifies as a lesbian feminist, in a committed monogamous and live-in relationship with another lesbian. Has one daughter in her twenties. Interviewed 28 March 1992.

Carole-Ann, 45, tradeswoman and professional. Identifies as a bisexual and a feminist. Currently single, but wants a longterm monogamous relationship with a man. Has two grown daughters by a previous marriage. Interviewed 6 May 1992.

Loraine, 42, self-employed professional. Identifies as lesbian and feminist. In a committed, live-in monogamous relationship with another lesbian, no children. Interviewed 24 May 1992.

Demographic Profiles of Women Interviewed

The eight women who participated in the study either live in the Greater Victoria area, or had lived here until shortly before their interviews. Some co-own a house with their life-partner, while others live alone in rented houses or apartments.

In my sample, women's ages ranged from 24 to 56, the mean age being 42. All are white, six are from Protestant backgrounds, and two are Jewish. None of the women identified themselves as particularly religious, but several currently regard themselves as "spiritual," mostly in a goddess-oriented fashion.

Four women self-identified as "bisexual" and four as "lesbian." Women "came out" as a lesbians and/or bisexuals as early as 17 and as "late" as their mid-thirties. The ages and dates of "coming out" are difficult to assign, as most of the women's sexual histories show a great deal of overlap of sexual identities. All eight women indicated support for feminist ideals and goals.

None of these women were wealthy, but most were

sufficiently financially able to own their own cars, and to afford small vacations. Two women, those at either end of the age spectrum, however, were on social assistance. Overall, the women's paid and volunteer occupations include carpenter, teacher, masseuse, student, housecleaner, stylist, editor, photographer, coordinator for feminist organizations, secretary, and homeschooler.

Six of the lesbian and bisexual women have been married or have lived commonlaw with a man. One of the lesbians had gone through an informal commitment ceremony with her female partner.

Incest and Sexual Assault

As mentioned earlier in this paper, a woman's history of sexual abuse and sexual assault plays a role in her self-perception as a sexual being, and sometimes in choosing particular sexual identities and behaviors (Klausner and Hasselbring, 1990, 132-145). Although I am not claiming that there is any direct relationship between sexual abuse history and sexual identity, the relevance of sexual trauma on a woman's sexual behaviors and attitudes leads me to include this information about the participants. One woman, a lesbian, was incested by her father when she was under 3, and again at age 5. Another woman, a bisexual, was sexually abused from puberty to age 15 by a family friend. Two other women, both bisexual, had been sexually assaulted at age 13 in "date rapes" with males. One of these women was again sexually assaulted by a male at 18, and by a female lover at 22. Another woman, a bisexual, was raped by a boyfriend at age 19.

In all, 3 of the 8 women I interviewed had been sexually assaulted between puberty and their early twenties, and two women had been incested. These numbers are statistically consistent with other

research findings about the incidence of incest and sexual assault against women (Loulan, 1987; Russell, 1986; Ledray, 1986).

Marginality: Achieving Representativeness

The invisibility of lesbians and bisexuals becomes apparent to the researcher trying to gather a representative sample and to estimate population size and composition by age, economic status, race, and religious affiliation, due to a paucity of statistical information on these marginalized groups.

Census forms do not record sexual orientation or same-sex relationships, and it is questionable if members of sexual minorities would volunteer this information given the relative lack of legal protection for openly non-heterosexual people (Banner, 1992). Despite the lack of statistical data, it is important to situate my sample size of eight women within an estimate of the total lesbian and bisexual female population of the Greater Victoria area. This is not to undermine its worth as genuine sociological data based on more conventional criteria of large sample sizes for social science research, but is rather to underscore that these women cannot be seen as representative of all or most lesbians or bisexual women.

Conservatively, if ten per cent of any population is homosexual/lesbian, the number of lesbians in the Greater Victoria area is approximately 5 per cent of 300,000, or 1500 women. If perhaps another 10 to 15 per cent of any population are estimated to be bisexual (Zinik, 1985, 14), there are approximately another 1500 to 2250 bisexual women in this area. However, it is difficult to estimate how many of these women self-identify as lesbian or bisexual.

The eight participants in this research are

obviously not representative of all lesbian and bisexual women in general, or even in the greater Victoria area. Based on my personal observation, the fact that most of my participants were over 40 years of age also makes this group non-representative of the lesbian-feminist community. However, the data generated by eight intensive and detailed interviews, while unable to meet criteria of statistical significance or generalizability to a larger population conventional to sampling sizes of more quantitative designs, does constitute a body of information sufficient to generate grounded theory (Kirby & McKenna, 1987; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Interview Experiences & Ethical Considerations

Between February 1990 and May 1992, I conducted interviews and Q-Sorts with eight women. What follows is quite a detailed discussion of the procedures I used in the interview situation, the purpose being to highlight particular ethical issues involved in meeting the goal of participant empowerment within feminist research.

Getting Comfortable

Each interview followed basically the same procedure, the major difference being whether it took place at the respondent's home or at mine. Before starting the interview process, I asked each woman to read through a consent form (Appendix C) and the schedule of questions, and to feel free to ask me for clarification of any point. I spent this time getting the tape deck into position and testing the equipment to ensure it was working properly. This permitted the woman to get used to the presence of the tape deck and to the physical positions we would each occupy relative to it for the next several hours. This period also constituted a "friendly silence" in which she could

familiarize herself with the material we were going to be covering, and allay any fears she might have about upcoming questions.

Although I would have preferred to have standardized the procedure such that the QSort was done either always before or always after the interview, making allowances for an individual woman's limitations of time and energy meant that four women chose to do the QSort after doing the interview. However, I observed no appreciable difference in the kinds of answers received on the QSort or in the interview depending on when the QSort was done.

After the consent form was signed, I asked the woman if she was ready to begin before I turned on the tape deck. Once underway, as the interview schedule shows, I began with fairly emotionally neutral questions about demographic details, and then moved progressively into more potentially sensitive areas. After the completion of each section (marked on the appendix by dotted lines) I asked the woman if she wanted to take a short break, the rationale being that she might find answering some of these questions to be quite emotionally draining, but might not ask for a respite on her own. I also tried to be sensitive to nuances in her voice tone, or constant throat clearing, coughing, excessive laughter, avoiding eye contact, or other cues which possibly indicated the presence of strong feelings and the need to take a break to recuperate and shift focus.

On particularly sensitive issues, such as sexual assault, incest, or abortion, I reassured the women that I would follow their lead in setting their comfort limits about how far to pursue a particular line of questioning. Most of the participants reacted to this by assuring me that they were comfortable discussing

these issues, but just needed a few minutes to collect their thoughts:

> Even talking to you now, about [my] past and everything, it hurts at times, but it's good to talk about it. It really is. It's good to bring out things. It helps to resolve a lot of questions that [I] didn't even realize I had. (Kathleen)

Since my purpose was to gather as much information as possible about each woman's experience of her sexual and political identity, and still maintain a relatively equal power relationship with her, I often used small amounts of self-disclosure as appropriate to the situation to indicate empathy for her situation. This often proved to be useful in helping both of us to clarify her position or meaning on a particular issue, and it also further dispelled the artificiality of the interrogator/responder dynamic by introducing a more conversational mode. I needed to be careful, however, not to abuse her as a "captive listener" by talking too long and overloading the interview with my own opinions.

Although the interview was structured by section and topic, I also invited the women to guide me to areas which I had inadvertently left out. By asking women to collaborate with me in this way, I realized I had failed to address issues such as the impact of disabilities on a woman's sense of her own desirability, the challenges of being a lesbian mother which both parent and child face, and the particular discomforts and pleasures women experienced in their first relationships with men. Such participant contributions improved my research by making it more realistic and politically viable, and also, I feel, empowered the women by providing a forum for them to speak to their particular issues and know that these

concerns now constituted a part of the research findings:

> This is nice! You're listening to me. I don't always get someone to listen to me! (laughs) (Carole-Ann)

Language

A major part of the interview process was, of course, the language we each used. This included the text used in the ads, phone conversations to set up interview times, the contents of the consent form, the questionnaire schedule and the Qsort statements, a description of the process of keeping a journal for my own reflections, and, perhaps most importantly, the actual discourse of the interview itself.

As mentioned above, I utilized a technique suggested by Kirby and McKenna (1989) called the "self interview" which helped me to identify questions which were vague or awkwardly phrased, potentially traumatizing, or not directly related to my research interests, and thus beyond my purview, ethically and methodologically, to ask. After this self interview, I felt better prepared to begin interviewing others, and continued the self-monitoring process through keeping a journal of my feelings, reactions, thoughts, periods of excitement and of ennui throughout the entire research process. Since I am personally involved with the topics which were being discussed, what I heard taught me, challenged me, changed me. I felt it was important to keep track of my reactions on an ongoing basis, both as constituting personal information for me and as a methodological record. The journal also gave me an appropriate place to express emotional responses to what I heard in the interview situation that might otherwise have been expressed during those two hours in a potentially judgemental way. I'm referring more to

negative reactions, such as criticisms and feelings of defensiveness or grandiosity, than to positive "aha" experiences. I tended to be more spontaneous about sharing these with participants, since they invited further sharing on their part, whereas I presumed negative reactions might possibly shut them down.

I tried to keep in mind at all times that my role was not that of expert or judge, but of facilitator and listener. The conversational mode, in which the participant still did most of the talking but where the transitions between questions were less abrupt than in a more formal interview style, seemed to help me stay in this role, and I received feedback that the women felt more at ease with a mode that more closely resembled everyday speech patterns:

> With the interview process in the back of my mind, I was aware of the clock ticking and wondering "Oh god, am I being verbose, and am I being... whatever?" And, I noticed I was able to let that part go when we got into something was a little more conversational. When we were having an exchange, a bit more. (Loraine)

Other ways I used to alleviate tension and to make the interview more "natural" followed from my intention that the experience should be empowering, relaxed, and as much fun as possible. For example, I encouraged a woman to laugh if she wanted to, and I would often join her. This released tension, and helped prepare both of us for the more serious and sombre aspects of her sexual history which arose, such as failed relationships, homophobia, sexual harassment, sexual assault or incest, and feelings of anger and betrayal associated with the pressures to pass as either a heterosexual woman or as a lesbian. It was also important for me not to structure the language so rigidly that women had no room in which to put things

into their own terms or to use words that they would normally use. For example, other than in one QSort statement, I did not use the word "dyke" anywhere in the written material. One woman used this word to describe herself in the interview, and then asked me "Is it okay to use this kind of language on your tape?" (Jean). I reassured her that anything she said was okay to say on the tape, and I invited women generally to put things into their own words, to define themselves on their own terms, and to assign their own meanings and interpretations.

Part of this process also involved being patient and attentive while women wrestled to express something. As DeVault (1990) notes, listening to women also involves hearing our silences, those times when we struggle to articulate a concept which has no terminology within androcentric language.

Sometimes it was a difficult judgement call whether to stay silent because she needed the space in which to find her words, or to speak up because she actually was uncomfortable and needed to refocus. I tried not to "rescue," which I feel disempowers women by being based on the assumption that we are incapable of setting our own limits or of taking care of our own needs. However, as the "interviewer," and therefore, in some sense having more power to set the pace and structure of the exchange, I felt it was my responsibility to be as aware as possible of meeting the twin requirements of information-gathering and participant comfort.

A final note on language - I noticed as I transcribed the interviews that I often had begun to adopt some of the same phrases, tones of voice, and grammatical stylings of each respondent as the interview progressed. I have asked myself if this was

manipulative or unethical in any way, and have come to the conclusion that it was an unconscious adaptation which probably facilitated slightly better rapport, and which in no way harmed or belittled my respondent.

Overlapping Relationships

Since all but one of the respondents knew me through various mutual social or professional interests, and since Victoria's lesbian-feminist community is fairly small and close-knit, it was inevitable that we had to find ways to negotiate our overlapping relationships in ways which continue to respect their confidentiality. In some cases, the women were adamant that no one was to ever know they had participated in the research, and I reassured them that the terms of the consent contract and my own personal committment to their safety guaranteed their confidentiality. In other cases, some women were quite pleased to have been involved in the research and told others about it.

I admit that it was also a challenge, sometimes, to remember what someone told me "inside" the interview as separate from what I know about them "outside," and I feel some imbalance that I know more about their personal lives and feelings, in some cases, than they know about mine. The major way of dealing with this was in my choice to never refer to anything I learned about them in the interview in other conversations with them, unless they bring it up themselves.

Respondent Feedback

Each of the women interviewed was asked, as the final question, how the experience had been for her. All of them told me that it was powerful and empowering to talk to someone who listened carefully to what she felt and thought. All participants indicated they welcomed the opportunity to examine their lives and

choices within the frameworks presented to them through the questions. They often commented that certain ways of viewing their lives would not have otherwise occurred to them, but I never got the impression that they were adopting my philosophical framework uncritically. In fact, several women disagreed with the assumptions underlying some of the interview questions, a reaction which excited me because it signalled both their independence and their feeling sufficiently comfortable to express a different opinion from mine.

Transcription

Each interview was transcribed, longhand, onto note paper, and then typed into a separate computer file labelled only with a number. Bearing in mind that listening to women in a research mode requires paying attention both to language and other verbal cues (DeVault, 1990), I did not edit out laughter or coughing, throat clearing, unfinished sentences, or repeated phrases such as "you know?" and "I don't know."

Categorizing The Data

Once all the interviews had been transcribed, I read through all of them and marked the text in differently coloured highlight ink to demarcate four particular areas: pink indicated references to feminism, yellow indicated references to lesbianism, green showed bisexuality was being discussed, and blue referred to comments about the woman's experience of the interview process itself.

I then grouped together the same-coloured sections of the different interviews, and patterns began to take shape. For example, I realized that not only did the bisexual women have certain opinions and understandings about being bisexual, but so did the lesbian women.

Likewise, the bisexual women had experiences of being lesbian that sometimes contradicted, and sometimes paralleled those of the lesbian women.

It was at this point that I ran the aforementioned crosstabulations between sexual identity (coded SEXID) and the 77 QSort statements. This produced a quantity of attitudinal data on the themes of being a woman, being a lesbian, being bisexual, relationships/sex with men, and with women, being a mother, and being a feminist, which also helped me to organize my interview data.

Analyzing the Results

Analyzing the data proved to be the most difficult aspect of the study, in that I wished to interpret my findings without greatly reducing or homogenizing the women's individual experiences. To lessen the chance of this occurring, I chose to keep their voices as prominent as possible, and tried to juxtapose various excerpts of the interviews so that the similarities and differences between them would become apparent to the reader. However, I did discuss the contradictions and parallels between the various women's experiences and attitudes as a means of highlighting the links between essentialism and the disenfranchisement of lesbians and bisexual women. My research focus was primarily to discover the ways in which bisexual women are supported and hindered in constructing a sexual identity within the lesbian-feminist community. To this end, I was interested in comparing lesbian and bisexual women's experiences of relating sexually, emotionally and socially with men and with other women by noting contrasts and similarities amongst the two groups and between each of the women. It was therefore necessary to operationalize bisexuality, bisexual feminism, lesbianism and lesbian-feminism in ways which permitted

this comparative analysis.

Operationalizing Bisexuality

Given the preceding discussion of how female bisexuality is a problematized sexual identity both in its developmental and relational nature within the field of psychosexuality and in its political implications within a lesbian-feminist analysis, my operationalization of the term necessarily incorporates both dimensions. My chief criterion for defining a respondent as bisexual was whether or not *she* called herself bisexual. More specifically, however, I defined a woman as bisexual when her erotic desires, sexual fantasies, and emotional attachments are expressed toward both sexes to a relatively equal extent, when she has had, and/or desires to have, sexual experiences (simultaneously, concurrently or serially) with women and with men, and when she self-identifies as a bisexual (Zinik, 1985, 8).

Since my particular interest concerned what could be described as a "subset" of bisexual women, namely, bisexual feminists, I added the criterion of self-definition as a feminist and some historical involvement with a lesbian-feminist community. Identification as a feminist and involvement in the lesbian-feminist community were operationalized as including some or most of the following factors being present in a participant's history: having intimate (not necessarily sexual) friendships with feminist lesbians, non-feminist lesbians, and non-lesbian feminists, including bisexual and heterosexual women; expressing some form of critique about the existence and effects on women of heteropatriarchy (such as sexism, heterosexism, misogyny, homophobia and biphobia) based on her own experiences; attending lesbian dances and lesbian-specific sports events and

entertainments (such as films, readings, art shows); being familiar with pro-lesbian feminist literature; actively supporting feminist pro-lesbian organizations and causes; and indicating an ongoing commitment to fight the oppression of bisexual and lesbian women.

Operationalizing Lesbianism

I operationalized "lesbian" to describe a woman whose erotic attractions, fantasies, emotional attachments, desired and/or actual sexual behaviors are primarily but not exclusively expressed toward other women, and who self-identifies as a lesbian. I say "primarily" because the literature clearly indicates that women who identify as lesbian experience erotic attractions and sexual behaviors with males (Clausen, 1990; Hollibaugh & Moraga, 1983; Kitzinger, 1987). Women who are not sexually active with either sex, but whose main emotional affiliations and erotic imaginations involve other women, and who identify as lesbian, are also defined as lesbians. As with the bisexual women, my interest was in lesbian-<u>feminists</u>, and therefore the factors which applied to bisexual women in defining themselves as feminist and participating in a lesbian-feminist community also applied to this group, with some differences. For example, I did not expect lesbian-feminist women to necessarily include biphobia in their critique of heteropatriarchy, nor did I anticipate that they would socially interact with non-lesbian women to any significant extent.

The next chapter contains excerpts of the interviews and relevant QSort data which apply to the construction and maintenance of bisexual and lesbian sexual identities. Some commentary accompanies these excerpts to facilitate greater understanding of their comparative significance.

CHAPTER FIVE: RESULTS & ANALYSIS - WHAT THE WOMEN SAID

In this chapter I present the results of the interviews and QSorts. In order to facilitate a comparative reading of these results between the bisexual and lesbian respondents, I have chosen to group the results by sexual identity, with the bisexual women speaking first. The data have been organized thematically into sections which address the various aspects of sexual identity on two dimensions - developmental and political. Developmental aspects of sexual identity in childhood and adolescence include women's early sexual histories of emotional/sexual crushes and fantasies, sexual experimentation, sexual trauma, any sex-role education they received about femininity, being a tomboy, their experiences of menstruation and puberty, and their process in choosing an initial sexual identification. Aspects of the women's adult sexualities highlight the political dimension to the extent that lesbian-feminism is perceived to have influence over their sexual choices and self-identifications as lesbian or bisexual. These aspects include discussions by the women about their understanding of what it means to be feminist, lesbian and bisexual both generally and specifically as it applies to them personally. Also addressed are how the women perceive their sexual identities were and are formed within particular relationships with other women and with men, the ways in which these self-definitions changed over time, their experiences with marriage, partnership in monogamous and nonmonogamous arrangements, and experiences with pregnancy, abortion and motherhood. They also address the process of "coming out" as lesbian and/or as bisexual, an exploration of how this process was facilitated or inhibited by their involvement within the lesbian-

feminist community and the women's liberation movement, their definitions of what constitutes the lesbian-feminist community in comparison to the larger feminist, or "women's community," and their experiences of homophobia, heterosexism and biphobia within the lesbian-feminist community, within non-exclusively-lesbian feminist organizations, and within the larger heteropatriarchal society, as well as their visions of how sexual identity would be organized within an ideally "feminist" society.

The interview material is presented first, followed by QSort results as applicable. Although I have provided some analysis and summarization of the findings throughout the various thematic sections to point out congruencies and divergencies between the experiences of bisexual and lesbian women, mostly I have chosen to present what the women have said and to let those voices retain some degree of authorial prominence.

EARLY EXPERIENCES OF SEXUAL IDENTITY

Many of the women recalled having childhood dreams, fantasies, attractions and sexual experiences involving other girls or women:

> I loved my camp counsellors. Loved some of my teachers. I dreamt about them. I saved them from fires and floods. (Jean)

> I fooled around with girls and boys. I always had girlfriends, and I was a bit perverted in it when I was really young. I had amazing fantasies. At five years old...there was a young girl...who was a couple of years older than I was, and I remember ... I drew lipstick circles around her nipples and tortured her with a clothespin. And I had a girlfriend at fourteen.... We were counsellors at a camp, and we spent nights and nights and nights talking and fooling around. (Ruth)

> I started very young feeling sexual and being involved with boys at the time, and carried on from there. I was involved with boys. I was "going steady." I was dating, I was seeing boys, I was totally emotionally caught up with my little things that were happening with boys. I'm talking from about the age of 13, say, to 19, when I got married. But all along, there were women and girls in my life, but I never thought of it as being lesbian. (Frances)

Sex-Role Education: Femininity, Puberty, "Tomboyism"

I asked women to discuss their early sex-role education, their experiences of menstruation and puberty, and if they had been tomboys. Several women recalled that their mothers were unable to ease the transition from childhood into adolescence because they were either too reluctant to discuss menstruation and sex with their daughters, or because they passed on their own fear and shame when they did speak out:

> My mother was pretty open about describing sex and what things were like. I don't think I was taught it could be a loving thing as much as a tool to be used to get what you wanted in life. That was almost, I feel, the lesson she taught me. (Kathleen)

> When I first started menstruation, I remember my mother giving me some book by Ann Landers or Dear Abby or someone, and a box of Modess, and one of those little sanibelts. And that was it, you know? I don't remember any instruction about anything sexual. (Loraine)

> I wasn't upset, I wasn't relieved. I could live with [menstruation], it was never a big problem for me in any way. Read little booklets that my mother [gave me]. I don't ever remember my mother explaining any of it to me. (Frances)

> I hated [puberty]. I was the only kid in grade five that had a period or breasts or [pubic] hair, and I was teased. In those days, it wasn't cool to have tits as a kid. We didn't have Madonna, and people running around in their underwear (laughs) in those days. It interfered with

> everything. It suddenly put my mother's alarm bells to start, you know, warning me about this and that, and "You could get pregnant, now that you're menstruating." So, all the evils of the world had to be guarded against. And I lost... I wasn't a kid anymore. I had to be a grown-up now, and what the hell was that? So, no, I don't think it was a good time for me. (Jean)

However, some of the women recalled their first period being viewed positively, by themselves and their families, as an important rite of passage:

> In terms of my first bleeding, it was great. It was a celebration in the family. Exciting, and no trauma. My father was really excited, and my mother, because I felt really proud. (Ruth)

> I remember my father saying "Well, congratulations, dear. You're a woman, now." (Loraine)

Many of the women recalled being a "tomboy" as a child, and some also mentioned the ways in which their fathers supported them in developing skills not traditionally seen as "feminine":

> I climbed trees and built forts, and had rock fights and snowball fights, and beat up boys, and collected tadpoles and snakes and salamanders and snapping turtles. I was more of a boy than a boy. I was really tough. I had my own train set, and I actually was the leader of most of the in-fighting that went on. Boys would come and call on me to beat up other boys if they were in trouble. I used to go take care of them for them. I was very much so a tomboy. Played baseball, and just did everything boys did. In fact, my father's nickname for me was "Butch." (Kathleen)

> I know I had Roy Rogers twin holsters. And that was quite exciting, 'cause I had caps, too, you see, so I could go "bang bang" and make a lot of noise, especially with two guns. And I did. And I was fairly physically active, climbing trees and jumping off the garage roof into piles of leaves. My father taught me how to throw. We used to go to a cottage on [a lake] and it had a pebbly beach. And, every year, he would anchor a can that you could close the lid on, so it would be

> full of air, and it would float out there, and ... we'd use that for target practice. And I developed a great throwing arm and a really good aim. And that's probably some of my fondest memories of time with my father. We'd go out and chuck rocks at the target after dinner, you know, or in the afternoon or whenever. Skip stones, and stuff like that. (Loraine)

> Because I was the oldest of five kids, and I grew up on a farm, I got to do all the farm things. Like, I was driving by the time I was 13. So I was doing all the haying.... And I was really good at all those things. Like all [that] machinery stuff and everything. So I always felt it was a privilege, driving the tractor and running the bailer and running the combine, and, you know, all those things. And I knew how to work them and I knew how to fix them, and so my dad gave me that responsibility. And ... learning to use a gun, and my dad was a tracker, too, so he taught us how to track, trap, and all that stuff. (Carole-Ann)

> All my friends were boys. I did everything the boys did. I played football, hockey, and whatever they did, I did it. (Jean)

There is evidence which suggests that parental influence on a girl's developing gender identity can play a definite role in her coming to acquire a lesbian identity (Devor, 1989, 65-78). To see if this influence was noted by the women in my sample, I asked them in the Qsort statements to indicate whether or not their relationships with their mothers and fathers "explained" their sexual orientations. Three of the bisexual women agreed that their relationships with their fathers explained their sexual orientations, with one disagreeing. In terms of mother's influence, these figures were reversed with only one woman agreeing that her relationship with her mother explained her sexual orientation. In opposite contrast to the bisexual women, three of the lesbians disagreed, and one agreed that their relationships with their fathers had

influenced their sexual orientation. Two lesbians agreed that their relationships with their mothers explained their sexual orientation, with the other two completely disagreeing.

Early Sexual Self-Definitions

The concept of lesbianism was either invisible or negative to these women as they were growing up, making it harder for them to cohere their attractions to the same sex into a positive sexual self-definition:

> The first time I heard the word "lesbian" I think I was probably 14. I mean, maybe I'd heard it before, but I certainly had no memory of it. And I knew that I was different, that I liked girls from, like, grade one. It was sort of neat to find the word [lesbian] - "Oh, that's what I am." And then, to learn what went with it, as far as the public's view...was immediately, you know, "Oh, put a light over that bushel." I think that <u>that</u> really coloured things for me. For a number of years. (Loraine)

> ... all along, there were women and girls in my life, but I never thought of it as being lesbian. I didn't know the meaning of the word. (Frances)

Sexual Trauma and Sexual Self-Definitions

All of the bisexual women respondents and one lesbian had experienced sexual trauma either as young girls, at puberty, or as young adults. The impact of incest and sexual assault on these women's self-esteem is evident in the feelings of shame and fear they describe:

> I was only ... six or seven years old [and] there was a little girl that lived beside us ... that was always wanting me to sleep with her, to come over and sleep at her house. She would have been probably about ten, and then she would touch me and rub my back and then rub my tummy and then between my legs, and stuff like that. I was scared that I didn't want her to touch me. [Later on, when I was older, I was sexual because] I was probably looking for love and something that I didn't feel I was forced into ... because I had

> been quite hurt by being raped ... and I was scared. It was a date rape ... [and] was something I felt I'd caused, and I felt really ashamed about it. After that, I guess I just didn't feel good enough. For many, many years I really had a problem. And I guess all the way through my growing-up years, I really felt "Oh, well, it doesn't matter." Like I'd been ruined, you know? I don't know when I started enjoying sex, it was only as recent as maybe ... fifteen years ago. Before that, I never really liked sex. I just did it to get what I wanted, or to try to get love. (Kathleen)

> My father molested me all the time, ... before I was even four. (Denise)

> I was sexually assaulted as an adolescent, [and it was] my first sexual experience. I was raped while I was on LSD, but I didn't know I was on LSD. Then I had to go through nine days of worrying whether I was pregnant and taking the day-after pill, and feeling very guilty that I was killing something inside me at the same time. And going through the whole thing of feeling dirty and used and like "besmirched goods" and not a virgin anymore. And very disappointed that what I'd hoped was going to be a beautiful and romantic experience with someone I'd had a crush on turned into this act of total non-caring. And then, eighteen I think I was, and some guy gave me a ride home [from work]... and told me we were going to have sex. I tried to talk him out of it,... [but] I didn't feel like I had a choice.... I didn't tell anyone about it, I just felt no one would take me seriously. (Sandra)

> At first, [puberty] was exciting.... [But] then, that's when the abuse started, [and] I started feeling ashamed. And I still ... carry that shame. (Carole-Ann)

> I guess I was about nineteen. [He] raped me. Was vicious, brutal. It was awful. And I was pretty traumatized for a long time. And I think after that I didn't know sex could be any other way. (Ruth)

In some cases, the respondents also linked their sexual abuse histories to the confusion they

experienced about their sexual identities, and also spoke of how speaking up about their abuse histories in supportive contexts has helped them to overcome the trauma:

> [Working at the women's crisis centre] triggered a lot of memories that I'd blocked. I remembered being raped, being abused. I had a lot of anger and I had had pretty unhealthy relationships with men. It was a freeing experience, very liberating to call myself a lesbian [then, at the centre]. And, in a way, it gave me license to feel all the anger and the hurt and the wounded stuff. So that it was a powerful experience to name myself lesbian ... but more comfortable, and truer for me, to say "bisexual." (Ruth)

> When I was in a relationship with a woman, it seemed like ... I guess, up until then, I thought that... I hadn't had good sexual relationships with men, so I thought "Okay, well then, it must be with women." And it didn't turn out to be a good sexual relationship <u>either</u>, so. I mean, it just seems like, to me, it wasn't the person I was with, or the gender of the person I was with. It was ... <u>probably</u> because I hadn't started with dealing with being abused. I really see that I have a lot of courage having [broken the silence] and having faced [having been abused]. And it's made a huge difference for lots of people around me, because I have talked about it, I have let people <u>know</u>. At first, I couldn't believe the number of people who would come to me ... and say "It happened to me, too," and it was like I opened it up for lots of other people. [It's been hard], especially in my family. Like, "Don't talk about it." They're still like that. (Carole-Ann)

Adult Sexual Self-Definitions

Each woman I interviewed had her own definition of her sexual orientation, and held particular beliefs about the meaning of being a bisexual and a lesbian. It became obvious that these definitions and understandings were based both on their personal experiences of these as self-concepts as well as on interactions and observations within the contexts of the lesbian-feminist community. In the interviews, the

women tended to personalize and reframe the labels of "bisexual" and "lesbian" as self-definitions, and some of them also indicated their dissatisfaction with these categories as being too limited to describe their sexuality:

> I describe myself as a bisexual now, [but] I have described myself as a lesbian. (Ruth)
>
> There's no way that I can pin myself down and say that I am any one thing. Rather than bisexual, I sometimes feel like I'm multisexual. (Sandra)
>
> If I had to put a label on myself, it would be "bisexual." (Kathleen)
>
> I don't [define myself as bisexual or lesbian] unless someone presses me to say. Then I have been saying that I'm bisexual, but I haven't been involved with anybody for over a year. (Carole-Ann)
>
> [I define myself] sometimes as a lesbian, sometimes as "woman-oriented." [That] seems more broad than "lesbian." (Denise)
>
> I describe myself as a lesbian, with a bisexual background. (Frances)
>
> I define myself as a sexual human being who presently gives her energy in a lesbian relationship. But that could change to celibacy or just to heterosexuality or bisexuality or whatever. I just don't confine my sexuality, just that I have one. (Jean)

When asked to respond to the Qsort statement "Sometimes I call myself bisexual, and sometimes I call myself lesbian," one lesbian and three bisexual women agreed that this was true for them. Rather than describing a fixed sexual orientation, these women's self-definitions suggest a more fluid and processual identity that is consistent with other findings regarding bisexuality, and by extension, all sexual self-definitions (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1977). It may be that these sample results, which contravene the

hegemony of heterosexual/homosexual dualism described earlier, are in part a reflection of the women's sensitization to the fluid nature of sexuality during the interview/Qsort process itself. They may also underline the methodological truism that one's approach toward discovering knowledge will shape the knowledge discovered: research which uses an in-depth, anecdotal approach is more likely to produce data which include the full range of sexual experiences and identities across a person's lifespan, and is therefore less apt to reify hegemonic sexual categories.

DEFINING AS FEMALE, AS WOMAN, AS LESBIAN

Femininity

Heterosexism rests on the assumption that the universal norm is for all people to attract and be attracted to, the opposite sex. Within this framework, the sexuality of those persons who are attracted to the same sex is explained in terms of a default, the rationale being that these people were unable to successfully meet standards of physical attractiveness necessary to participate in heterosexuality.

A common heterosexist stereotype of lesbians is that they are unable to attract men because they lack the necessary feminine qualities. In order to be sexual beings, therefore, the assumption is that the only sexual choices open to these women are celibacy or lesbianism. Stemming from this belief is that idea that a woman who meets the dominant culture's standards of feminine beauty and deportment would not choose to be a lesbian. This was well illustrated by the way in which the male partner of one of the bisexual women reportedly reacted to one of her lesbian friends:

> Once in a while he'll say to me ..."Gee, what a waste. She's such an attractive woman, and a

> really nice woman. Why is she with a woman ?" (Kathleen)

To see how the heterosexist linkage between femininity and sexual orientation had been received and interpreted by women in the context of a lesbian-feminist community often critical of "the feminine," I asked women to talk about personal appearance and presentation.

One woman, a bisexual who was wanting to become involved with a man at the time of the interview, talked about her desire to heighten her feminine appearance and look less like a "dyke":

> I feel like I'm dressing more feminine, but sometimes I look at myself, and I still have [on] jeans and a blouse (laughs) and earrings. I don't know how it looks from the outside, but from inside I feel more feminine. I don't want to feel like I look like a dyke. And sometimes I think I do, and sometimes I think I don't. And then I'll walk through a crowd, and I'll see somebody who really looks like a dyke, and...they just zoom in on me, and I think "Oh shit!" But, [I react that way] just once in a while. It depends on how secure I feel, I guess. How good I'm feeling about myself. (Carole-Ann)

Another woman, a lesbian, seemed comfortable describing herself as "butch," but was careful to then set limits on what that meant to her:

> I think I've always seen myself, if you look at the butch-femme continuum, as being more on the butch side of it, but, I mean, this is not really...(laughs)...I'm not out there riding my motorcycle, slapping my leather chaps, you know, and that kind of thing. That's not who I am. (Loraine)

In the QSort, I asked women if they thought that lesbians look more masculine than do bisexual or heterosexual women. Three of the four lesbians, and the same number of bisexuals said that lesbians do not look more masculine. The remaining two responses were

both of moderate agreement. All four of the lesbians and two of the bisexuals, when asked if being a woman was very important to them, agreed completely, the other two bisexuals indicating that they mostly agreed with this statement.

However, when I asked women to respond to the QSort statement "I've never been very feminine," six of the eight surveyed agreed that this was true for them, with one lesbian and one bisexual woman each moderately disagreeing. Although wearing cosmetics tends to be culturally associated with being "feminine," and the majority of these women declaimed being "very feminine," seven of the eight women said that they liked to wear makeup.

Femme/Butch Roles

Historically, especially prior to the second wave of feminism in the late 1960's and early 1970's, participation in lesbian culture tended to involve assuming either a butch, or more "masculine" appearance and role, or a femme, or "feminine" appearance and role (Nestle, 1992; Davis & Kennedy, 1986). Although these practices are less prevalent, or perhaps more accurately, have become much more complex in contemporary lesbian culture, I still wanted to know if bisexual and lesbian women perceived themselves as butch or femme in their sexual relationships with men and/or with women (Ardill & O'Sullivan, 1990; Blackman & Perry, 1990).

I asked about these roles in the QSort rather than in the interview questions. In response to the QSort statement "I tend to be either butch or femme in my relationships with men", three of the bisexual woman and one lesbian disagreed. One bisexual indicated mild agreement, and two lesbians moderately agreed, the remaining lesbian selecting the 'neutral/does not

apply' response to this statement. In terms of occupying a butch or femme role in relationships with women, one lesbian and two bisexuals completely disagreed, with one lesbian strongly disagreeing. One bisexual mildly agreed, another agreed moderately, and one lesbian said she mostly agreed.

These results reflect that lesbians do not reject themselves as women, do not see themselves or each other as particularly masculine, and are not strongly role-identified in their sexual relationships. Their reluctance to identify as "feminine," however, may be due to its connotations of passivity, fragility, and powerlessness which are frequently presented in popular culture and also criticized within feminism.

RELATIONSHIPS

Being In Love, Being in Relationships

For some of the women, bisexual and lesbian, a growing dissatisfaction with the roles and the sexual relationships they had with men, combined with a sexual attraction to another woman motivated them to leave their marriages and explore lesbianism:

> I told her I was beginning to have an attraction towards her physically. So, anyway, she said she did for me, too, and that she thought I should leave [my male partner of 8 years] right away. And I was going to move in with her just as a temporary thing until I got together enough to get my own place, but that never happened. (Kathleen)

> I just wanted to live with my boyfriend, and sleep with him, and [getting married] was the only way I knew how to do it. But I didn't buy it at all. But I did it, yeah. But I realized very shortly thereafter that I wasn't cut out for it, and I left him. (Frances)

Are there vast differences in being in love or in relationship with one sex or the other, or are the experiences, in some ways, comparable? In my sample,

lesbians and bisexual women often spoke about similar relationship problems they had encountered, such as having a jealous partner:

> She became part of me, somehow. Part of my whole being, you know, and yet it wasn't a healthy part, you know. It was an obsession. It was my worst nightmare in the end. You know, having someone so obsessed with you .... She would actually follow me to see what I was doing, and she didn't want me to have any other friends. She liked to control my whole life. And I don't know why I stayed with her for so many years, on and off, either. I guess I just felt she needed me. (Kathleen)

> People have different expectations of what they mean by commitment, and it may mean just looking at another woman, or saying something that may be interpreted as flirtatious, or something can be, you know, kind of built up into possible, potential sexual infidelity. Depends on who you're with, and how open they are about it, and how secure or insecure they are. Because you pretty much do what your partner wants you to do or expects of you, unless you want to have a big confrontation and spend months discussing it. You usually go along with whomever you're with. At least, I do. (Frances)

Women also spoke about what they valued in their relationships with their partners, sometimes, as in this first quote, in comparison to their previous experiences with a partner of a different gender:

> I think what I liked the most about it was that he was very strong in speaking his truths about his feelings about me and about himself. And really coming forward in a way I haven't experienced with women. And that was really attractive to me. (Ruth)

> [I like] the intellectual challenges, and the freedom to be who I am. And for her to be who she is. And the lack of competition for attention from other people. And that's really nice. That means I can have all the friends that I want to have and as much time as I need with them without my lover freaking out and saying "You're giving her more attention than you're giving me." That kind of stuff. (Jean)

Do bisexual women's experiences of being sexual with women differ from lesbian's perceptions? Is loving a woman in any way similar to loving a man, or are the two experiences at opposite poles? How do the dynamics of attraction and desire and fantasy manifest for a bisexual woman, and how do they compare with those of a lesbian? Although, for reasons related to length and time constraints of this project, as well as concerns about maintaining the comfort of my respondents, I chose not to ask women in the interviews to specifically discuss and compare their erotic experiences as lesbians and bisexuals, their answers to the QSort questions address these issues.

Sex: Emotional and Physical Satisfaction - QSort Results

Two of the bisexuals indicated they think that sex is more emotionally satisfying with women than with men, and three said that sex with women is also more physically satisfying than sex with men. All of the bisexual women indicated that they either are, or have been, deeply in love with a woman.

The lesbians, likewise, all said they had been, or currently were, deeply in love with a woman. In terms of comparing sex with women to sex with men, three of the lesbians said that sex with women is more emotionally satisfying, and two said that it is also more physically satisfying. These findings correlated with other research on bisexual women in which both males and females reported more emotional satisfaction with their female partners [and] reported falling in love with women more often than men (Zinik, 1985, 15).

Of course, the QSort results also show that at least one lesbian disagreed that sex with a woman is more emotionally satisfying than sex with a man, and two of the lesbians disagreed that sex with a woman was

more physically satisfying than sex with a man. It is difficult to interpret these latter results. One explanation is that the lesbian who said that sex with a woman is not more emotionally satisfying may be coming from a place of hurt feelings about a current or past relationship, particularly since several women did indicate that some of their past relationships with women were either quite tense or ended painfully.

An alternative explanation for the three negative responses may be that in having had sex with both men and women, these lesbians experienced no significant differences, either physically or emotionally.

Three of the lesbians, and all the bisexuals, also agreed that they were, or had been, in love with a man. Of all eight women, only one bisexual woman said that sex with a man was more emotionally satisfying than sex with a woman. Two of the bisexual women also disagreed that sex with a man was more physically satisfying than sex with a woman, with one woman indicating mild agreement, and one woman saying she was neutral. Of the lesbians, one said she was neutral, and the other three indicated disagreement. One lesbian and three of the bisexual women also indicated that their sexual fantasies sometimes involve men.

Overall, the QSort results tended to show more areas of agreement than disagreement between bisexual and lesbian women, particularly with regard to their experiences of emotional comfort and sexual satisfaction with women as compared to with men.

Monogamy/Non-Monogamy

> Bisexual women... tended to have fewer but more enduring homosexual, as well as heterosexual, relationships.
>
> (Zinik, 1985, 15)

One woman, a lesbian, described her experience

with nonmonogamy in the mid-seventies, a period in which monogamy came under severe criticism within lesbian-feminism as heterosexist (Ross, 1990):

> This sort of primary, secondary, and tertiary relationship bit. Give me a break! I mean, it was all the rage, literally, in Toronto, to the point I thought, "Okay, fine. I'm not really cheating on this person that I'm involved with," as I started messing around with this [other] person. "Yes, this is what we're doing...So you're the secondary relationship, and don't you worry, honey, you're really my primary relationship, this is just a little something on the side, and you don't need to feel threatened by it." But, boy, did I ever feel threatened by it when my primary relationship person got involved with my secondary relationship person! "Oh, this is too messy, I can't stand it. I'm going to be monogamous." I mean, that was part of choosing monogamy for me, was the alternative was just too stressful. (Loraine)

I asked another woman, a lesbian, if she could picture herself in a relationship with more than one person at a time. She framed her reply based on her earlier experiences of having related simultaneously to both men and women:

> I've done that, I've tried it. I think it's very unworkable. Very complicated, very complex. Very energy-draining, and I'm not really motivated to go that route. (Jean)

The bisexual women who were in monogamous relationships with men at the time of the interview spoke about their ambivalence about becoming involved with other partners at the same time. Most noteworthy to me was how the women acknowledged a sexist double standard in their male partners' reactions to her possibly taking another lover, depending on whether she chose a woman or another man:

> He liked [my being bisexual]. It was fine with him. I think he preferred that. He would have

> loved me having a woman lover, and no other man, which pissed me off. [He would see another man as] a threat. He'd have to compete. (Ruth)
>
> Interviewer: But not another woman?
>
> Ruth: Yeah, and I was... Just drove me mad. Had major issues about that.
>
> I've joked around with him about having an affair with a woman, and he'll say "Fine," you know. Like, I really feel if I really wanted to, he'd be quite understanding about the whole thing. [But] not with another man. You see, a lot of men feel that way. They don't feel going to bed with another woman is the same. They just can't understand two women being in love with each other. They can't understand that. And they think it more as a frivolous game, or something like that. But I feel he would accept it. Not that I would want to do that, because it would be too many emotions, and it would hurt too many people. (Kathleen)

For another of the bisexual women, her ambivalence about attempting to relate to two partners at the same time stemmed from an awareness that there exist few cultural or social supports, in either the heterosexual or lesbian-feminist communities, for such relationships:

> The structure just isn't here to sustain that kind of relationship.... I can imagine being in bed with my "husband" and my "wife," but they would certainly have to know each other and like each other. If he's a heterosexual man and she's a lesbian woman, I don't think they're going to go to bed together! So then I thought, well, what's the solution to that? Do I have a woman, and then a man, and then he has a woman, and then she has a woman, and then I think, "How many people are going to be living here?" (Sandra)

One of the bisexual women described her experience of being in a relationship simultaneously with both a man and a woman:

> When I was in that swinger's thing for a while, I met a man... and his wife.... And they really

> were both attracted to me, him more than her. And I was attracted more to her than to him. Anyway, they asked me if I would consider living with them. And I did, for a while. And he treated us both equally, as, you know, a love triangle, and bought us things together, and we did everything together. But she resented it a little bit, because she was the only one before, and she had two children as well, and so we had to keep this separate from [them]. And I had my own bedroom, and all that, but we still did everything as a family too, together, and we had a cottage. ... It was nice for a while, but ... I wanted someone for myself, you know. (Kathleen)

All four bisexual respondents strongly agreed that monogamy was essential for a healthy relationship. This contradicts the stereotype that bisexuality and nonmonogamy are synonymous, at least as far as these women are concerned. However, it should be noted that other influences, such as having previous unsuccessful experiences with nonmonogamy, and an average sample age of 41 (possibly indicating greater personal conservatism) could also play a role in these responses.

Monogamy, Lesbians, Bisexuals and AIDS

Despite three of the four bisexual women in my sample indicating, in an idealized scenario, a willingness to be nonmonogamous, all of them said that they were mostly satisfied to be monogamous in their current relationships. The QSort responses to the statement "Monogamy is essential for a good relationship" showed that, in the abstract, there was slightly less commitment to monogamy by the lesbians than by the bisexual women. Although one lesbian strongly agreed with this statement, another completely disagreed, and the other two either mostly or mildly disagreed. This variation between the QSort and interview data may measure the difference between women supporting, in theory, the radical feminist critique of

monogamy as a heterosexist relationship model, yet choosing monogamy based on their past (only marginally successful) experiences in trying to manage and coordinate nonmonogamous partnerships.

An emphasis on monogamy as the most healthy relationship style may also be reflecting a greater awareness generally about the risks associated with having multiple sexual partners. The reality of sexually-transmitted diseases does possibly make longterm, monogamous relationships seem the least risky of all options, celibacy notwithstanding. A limitation of the QSort is that it does not permit respondents to enlarge on the reasons behind their answers, but it is possible that women's awareness of the risks of contracting AIDS has some influence in their attitudes about the importance of monogamy. The slight difference in responses between lesbian and bisexual women, with the lesbians indicating less commitment to monogamy, may reflect their differing perceptions of risk based on AIDS information which tends to ignore or downplay the risk to lesbians in comparison with women who are sexually active with men (Loulan, 1987).

The Experiences of Sexual Identities

The following section addresses and compares bisexual and lesbian experiences and/or understandings of coming out as lesbian and as bisexual, motherhood, feminism and community.

Coming Out: The Importance of Social Context

To paraphrase Zinik (1985) (above), taking on a self concept of bisexual or lesbian involves a combination of acknowledging and naming one's inner feelings and having one's identity mirrored back by others.

Seven of the eight women interviewed said that they had an early awareness of being erotically

attracted to both sexes, but felt more able to take on the identity of lesbianism within the supportive contexts of pro-lesbian feminist milieux:

> At that point, I was working at a women's centre, and so everyone just went "Oh, really? That's very interesting." No one had anything negative to say about it. A lot of them were heterosexual, too, and they were very pleased for me to have found what I wanted. It was great (laughs). That's probably why my eyes were opened again, because I finally found a safe place to come out again to myself with a safe group who were going to be supportive no matter what, especially supportive of me finding something that made me happy. (Denise)

Several respondents also attested to the importance of entering into lover-relationships with identified lesbians in their coming to assume a lesbian identity themselves. They compared these experiences to previous sexual encounters with heterosexual women in terms of being "experiments," rather than as signifying the assumption of a lesbian identity:

> I would say it was just an experiment on her part, that I went along with. There was no emotional involvement, and there was no follow-up. No, it didn't involve "love" or anything, it was just an experiment. But it was sex with a woman before I was a lesbian. She was the first, but it wasn't a "relationship," as such. Not at all. It wasn't until a few years later that I actually met a "real" lesbian.... And she actually asked me to come over and have a bite to eat with her, and I stayed the night. And that was my first "real" experience with a "real lesbian", and that's when I started to identify myself as a lesbian. (Frances)

The state of being in a same-sex relationship, rather than just being attracted to another woman but remaining single, had a significant influence in one bisexual woman's decision to label herself as lesbian:

> I have [called myself a lesbian] when I was in a relationship with a woman, and were together, I

> thought, as partners for life. Then I said I was definitely a lesbian, and I didn't want anything to do with men. And I was quite sincere about it. (Kathleen)

For another bisexual woman, the social context or environment in which she experienced same and opposite-sex attractions also influenced her to qualify her sexual self-definition:

> A "lesbian bisexual" is when I'm in the women's community and I'm with my lover and I'm finding her beautiful and finding all the women beautiful and finding myself beautiful. And I say "Yes, this is where I am, right now." [Yet] when I go to a mixed party...and there's a man there that I'm attracted to, I don't feel a dissonance with that. At that point, I know that I'm still a feminist and I know that I still love women, but I also know that I'm open to him. And then, maybe, that's when I'm maybe a "heterosexual bisexual." (Sandra)

Coming out as Lesbian: The bisexual experience

At various times in her sexual history, each bisexual woman interviewed identified as a lesbian, with varying degrees of comfort. For example, although Kathleen had said (above) that she called herself a lesbian when in a longterm relationship with a woman, she remained ambivalent about the label itself:

> I had a hard time with the word "lesbian." I really did. I had a hard time saying I was a lesbian. I would say "I'm not a lesbian...I just happen to love her," you know? I really feel that's exactly what it was. I don't feel I ever really was a true lesbian. I always knew, deep down that I wasn't completely lesbian. (Kathleen)

> I was identifying by how I thought others saw me. But I didn't feel comfortable with that. I mean, I didn't feel I knew for sure I was a lesbian. (Carole-Ann)

> I'm not even sure sometimes if, after having a relationship with a man, if I'll still feel bisexual, or if I'll finally, ultimately, choose to be lesbian. I can't predict that, but I have a

> sense that it's important for me not to be lesbian by default. (Sandra)

> It was a freeing experience, very liberating to call myself a lesbian.... To let myself have the feelings I had around hiding, I suppose, or not being able to name my feelings about women. It was a powerful experience to name myself lesbian, but more comfortable, and truer for me, to say "bisexual." (Ruth)

In all cases, bisexual women first expressed themselves sexually as adults in heterosexual relationships, while being attracted to women. They then each "came out" as lesbians, often concurrently with discovering feminism and most commonly while in relationship with another lesbian, and eventually rejected this identity as too narrow and began calling themselves bisexual.

Although three of the four bisexual women in this sample indicated that they are more interested in being actively sexual with men than with women, all four of them said they still feel emotionally attracted to women. None of them framed their lesbianism in terms of being a "false" identity, but rather said it did not adequately describe their full range of erotic identities.

Becoming Bisexual

Bisexual women attributed their rejection of an exclusively lesbian identity to a range of factors; a shift away from being exclusively or primarily attracted to women as sexual partners, encountering definitions of lesbian in the lesbian-feminist community which precluded sexual attractions to men, and changes in their personal circumstances which made having a relationship with a man more desirable and practical than having one with a woman:

> I've held my sexual energy better with men, although they drive me nuts emotionally. So

> that's been hard to look at. That took me years to come to, was that I wasn't so much sexually divided as emotionally divided. (Ruth)
>
> I feel now like I'm ready for another good sexual relationship, and I'm attracted to men. I feel quite attracted to men, and not at all attracted to women. Sexually. [And] I think you have to be a real lesbian to be in the lesbian community. And I guess to be a real lesbian, you can't be involved with men. That's also coming out of my hurt. I mean, I know that not everybody thinks that, but that's subtle, but always there. (Carole-Ann)
>
> I just wouldn't think of sex. I think what happened in our relationship, a lot of times, [was that] I started thinking of her [more] as a sister and a friend and a companion than a sexual partner, and that's where a lot of our problems were in our relationship all the way through. I probably am trying this [current] relationship [with a man] because of the fact of being a mother. I think if I hadn't had [the baby], I wouldn't even be trying this relationship right now. It wouldn't have happened.... I might not even be with a man today. (Kathleen)

The Experience of Being Bisexual: Bisexual Women Speak

Bisexual women's experiences of being bisexual feature them defining their sexuality longitudinally in terms of past, current and projected future relationships with both sexes:

> I've always been attracted to both sexes. When I'm between lovers, it's almost like I'm back at the edge of the cliff again: Now what am I going to be? What's my next choice here? I feel that my bisexuality is transitional only in that I'm getting to know it, and that it will continually change the more I explore it. (Sandra)
>
> It means that I have the best of both worlds. It really is great in one way, because I don't feel any different about men or women. I just care for the person, and I really enjoy sex with either sex. (Kathleen)
>
> At this point, I would like to have a healthy relationship with a man, sexually. And I wouldn't

> not get involved with a woman, if that's what comes up. (Ruth)

> I'm sexually attracted to men and to women. And, I mean, I can't tell right now if the next person I'm going to be sexually attracted to will be male or female. (Carole-Ann)

Being Bisexual - The Lesbian Interpretation

Lesbian respondents' perceptions of bisexuality were based either on their own previous experiences as lovers with men, or on friendships they have had with bisexual women. Like bisexual women, lesbian women tended to define bisexuality in terms of the ability to relate sexually to both women and to men:

> It wasn't until my thirties ... [that I started] to think of myself as lesbian, but realizing that I wasn't, strictly speaking, a lesbian, because I was still involved with men. (Frances)

> There's not a big difference between a bisexual woman and a lesbian woman. Only in that a bisexual woman is willing to also bond with men. (Jean)

Certain beliefs about heterosexuality were expressed by some of the lesbians, in some cases almost apologetically, which reflected an ongoing distrust and criticism of bisexual and heterosexual women who relate sexually with men. These lesbians seemed to object most strongly to what they saw as ways in which the politics of heterosexism foster a lack of emotional and financial autonomy in women who relate to men:

> I have this idea that bisexual women spend a lot more time on men than on women, in general, and in order for a woman in this society to spend a lot of time with men, or especially if they spend more than they do with women, they have to somehow become numb, somehow not notice the difference in the way they're treated in our society. In order to feel totally okay about heterosexual men, I would think they would have to be not quite as open. But I see, I know that that's garbage, right, because...I can imagine there are some

> men in the world who aren't doing dominance games.... I don't know any, though. (Denise)

> I'm not willing to sell myself for money, as a lesbian. I mean ... I don't have to have a partner that supports me. And lesbians, by and large, don't support each other. Why do heterosexual women need to be supported? (Jean)

> Lesbians' conversation tends to cover the broader range of topics, more variety, more intellectually stimulating discussions, than does sort of the typical heterosexual women's conversation. Isn't that an arrogant, horrid thing to say? (laughs) I suppose this comes from overheard conversations, but, you know, when I think of what my mother talks about with her friends, it's what the husbands are doing, and what the kids are doing, and things that are very much concerned with being a wife and mother. And even the lesbian mothers I know, they're not totally consumed with conversation about their children. (Loraine)

However, the QSort results show that three of the four lesbians disagreed with the statement "I have more in common with any lesbian than with any heterosexual woman." In addition, the fact that these lesbian women are willing to be open about their past identification as bisexual, are relatively positive about that experience, and also seem open, in some cases, to future sexual experiences with men may indicate some softening in the rigid codes of lesbian-feminism encountered by the bisexual women:

> I haven't wondered if I'm really a bisexual, but I have wondered if I could have a satisfying relationship with a man. (Denise)

> I could be a bisexual in my head, which is where I think I am a bisexual. I like to think that I'm open sexually to people generally. (Jean)

Despite indicating a potential willingness to be sexual with men, however, the lesbian women gave few indications of wanting to take on a bisexual identity. This may reflect their belief that to be lesbian is,

ultimately, to retain a measure of autonomy, safety, and separation from the potentially misogynist, and therefore self-destructive dynamics of patriarchal heterosexism. It also highlights the phenomenon, discussed by Silber (1990) of lesbian representing a "master status."

Coming out as Lesbian: The Lesbian Experience

Three of the four lesbians interviewed moved from identifying as heterosexual to seeing themselves as bisexual, and then arriving at being exclusively woman-identified. The other lesbian reported having always known she was attracted only to her own sex. Overall, these women's experiences of coming out as lesbians, and of being lesbians now, were generally more positive and less ambivalent than those of the bisexual women:

> It just felt really free all of a sudden. Everything made sense. It was just great. (Denise)

> It felt great. I was totally attracted to it, it felt like a revelation, it explained a lot of things. (Frances)

> It was like coming home. It was wonderful. (Jean)

> I knew I was a lesbian, I mean, I knew from the age of six, basically, that that's where my attraction was. (Loraine)

Being Woman-Identified in a Misogynist and Homophobic Society

The woman who chooses to relate sexually to another woman, whether she calls herself lesbian or bisexual, occupies an identity of sexual deviant, assigned to her by the larger heterosexist, patriarchal and misogynist culture. Bisexual and lesbian women are marginalized as threatening, ill, misguided, sinful, as "queer". These attitudes are also reflected in the fact that until recently, there has been no legislation in

place to protect lesbians (or gay men) against discrimination in housing, employment, pensions, child custody, immigration, and a range of other issues (Kinsman, 1987).

Within this hostile context, lesbian and bisexual women experience a great deal of social and financial pressure to "pass" as heterosexual:

> In the Welfare office and at job interviews ...there's a lot of pressure to be what they want you to be. In the Welfare office in order to not get hassled, to not have yourself investigated. They can investigate anyone for any reason, if they have any suspicion that you have ... or if they <u>say</u> that they have any suspicion ... that you might be doing anything that might be harmful to your child. It makes it seem like there's something wrong with me being a lesbian.... I think it can be really damaging to feel like I'm doing something dirty or disgusting or kinky. And I know I'm not. (Denise)

> I used to [feel pressured], when I worked, and I had a kid, a little kid, and had to fit in here and there. I tried to be as straight as I could be. I don't feel any need now. I'm not in any danger of losing a job or a friend. (Jean)

> There are times when I do [feel pressured], and I think that's in association with my family. That if I'm with my parents in their world ... then I sometimes feel slightly pressured to be, you know, to dress a little "femmier" going out into the world with them. And I do that. I will make those small acquiesces for their comfort. And it's probably nowhere near ... the change that they'd like to see.... (Frances)

> I would go into Rumors, but I wouldn't walk down the street holding a woman's hand. And sometimes when women or men are doing that, it makes me really nervous. I'm afraid I'll have to witness some sort of homophobia or something like that. Some kind of attack, or something. (Carole-Ann)

Creating A Safe Space: Making "Communities"

In some cases, the women I spoke with regarded the lesbian community as identical to the women's community

and the feminist community. However, most women tended to see places in which the lesbian community and the feminist community either overlapped or did not meet. Their perceptions seemed to depend on the extent to which they felt able to be involved in each community:

> Very often the terms [lesbian community and women's community] are synonymous. I think they're used inter-changeably. In a larger context, and a more heterosexual context, though, those two terms are separate. And that the women's community is more [of a] political community. Something, loosely speaking, an organism that promotes things that are of interest to women, or look out for the interests of women, an advocacy, a network kind of thing. (Loraine)

> Definitely two communities. The women's community I see as a group of women, feminist women, providing referrals and resources for women. I consider the women's community like the women's centre and all the political...and also the counselling and the comforting and the information, the safe place to be what you are, no matter how you act, no matter what you've done. The lesbian community.... I don't really know. I don't feel like I'm in the lesbian community. I feel like it's this group of a bunch of lesbians who get together and have fun together, but it seems like something that is really hard to.... It's like a group of people who've known each other for a long time, who are all lesbians.... Unless you've slept with one of them, or had a relationship with one of them, you're not part of the community. (Denise)

> I do not know what is referred to as the women's community in this town. I'm not part of any political or social group. I never have been. I don't join groups. I know there's what they call a women's community in this town. People always say to me "Oh, are you part of the women's community?", and I say, "Well, I have my friends." I sometimes go to dances, I sometimes don't, I sometimes enjoy them, I sometimes hate them. I have some friends who are lesbians. I have as many friends who aren't. They're all, relatively speaking, feminists. Some are enlightened women. I don't feel that separation, although again, with the so-called lesbian community, I

> have a handful of friends who are lesbians, maybe a handful, but [when] I go to these dances I see hundreds of lesbians. I don't feel part of the lesbian community. I don't even know who 99 per cent of them are, and I may have nothing in common with 99 per cent of them. (Frances)

Community, Then and Now

The actual existence of a "women's community" is a relatively recent phenomenon, coinciding with the emergence of North American feminism and gay liberation more than two decades ago. Prior to this time, gay bars provided one of the few places in which lesbians could meet each other (Kennedy & Davis, 1992; Kinsman, 1987, 182-183). Most of the women to whom I spoke were able to describe both the early bar scene and their subsequent experiences with other forms of women-identified community.

The Bar Scene

Several of the women "came out" in the early seventies, just at the onset of the feminist and gay liberation movements. There were few places, besides bars, where women could go to socialize with other lesbians, to "remove the heterosexual mask" for a few hours. However, the women remember the clubs of Toronto and Montreal as neither particularly safe nor validating:

> That club has been around since time began. I mean, it's dirty, dark, dank, seedy. It was a huge room with a dance floor, a bar and seating area, and, you know, disco-type music happening, and full of women. All these women dancing together and just being.... This club existed for that. Wow. Amazing. But it was also... gay society was still largely populated by the traditional bar dykes. And so there was a lot of that. There was a lot of, you know, the real kind of old-style butch dykes and really femmy women, and very clear roles. Fights would happen a lot. So while it was wonderful to walk into a place like that and think "Wow, this exists for women like me to be with other women like me in an

> intimate way, there were those other aspects that were like "Oh god, you guys! Come on! You know, if I wanted to watch a fight, I would have gone down to somewhere on Queen Street. [And] you know, closing time, they turn loose these three dobermans? They just run around barking and everybody gets out really fast.(Loraine)
>
> It was dark and dingy and smoky, and you had to be very wary. There was a lot of fighting at that time, like back fifteen years ago. There was a lot of drinking going on back then, more, you know, and lesbians could be very jealous and possessive, and if you looked at their girlfriend in the wrong way, or danced with her when they didn't want you to, you know? There was a lot of fights broke out in those places. [It] was sort of like another world down there, and I didn't really particularly care for it that much. And yet, that was the only place to go and meet other women, so you went. (Kathleen)
>
> There was a gay bar in Montreal. It was very heavy-duty butch/femme. I don't drink very much, and I'm not a butch or a femme, and I didn't know how to fit in there. And there was not only a cultural barrier, but a language barrier. And it was, in every way, not my scene. I didn't feel at home in it. And I went very rarely. But I did go, because I needed to be with other lesbians. To know that I wasn't the only one. But I never had a relationship or a date, or even a friend, out of going there. (Jean)

Sisterhood: The Lesbian-Feminist Community

Gay bars provided, and continue to provide a place for women to socialize with each other, but are in business to make profits, rather than to support feminism or to celebrate women's energy. The bars cater to a certain sector of the lesbian (and gay male) population, some of whom do not necessarily identify themselves as feminists. Women's centres, workshops, working collectives, women's dances, and support and consciousness-raising groups, created, staffed, and attended by feminist women, many of whom were lesbian-feminists, constituted the spaces in which all

the women with whom I spoke first discovered a sense of community. Community, for them, meant events and places in which to discover and confirm one's self as a woman, as a lesbian, as a feminist, to make friends, to find lovers:

> I was just hungry for whatever I could get my hands on. I was living in the suburbs, and there was not one person in my neighbourhood that I could talk to. Not one. So I ended up going back to Simon Fraser [university] and I found a support group. What were they called? CR groups, in those days. Consciousness-raising groups. I [also] went to a women's dance at SFU. I think it was 1975, or something like that, with a group of my friends. And I didn't know that it would be a lesbian dance. It was just called a women's dance. So, I took a whole group of my friends. And it was fine for most of us. There was [only] one woman who freaked out and went home. It was wonderful. It was just wonderful. Before that, I had just been reading [about lesbians]. But it was the feeling. I felt like I belonged.... I still feel that at women's dances. (Carole-Ann)

> It was wonderful. [The group] was all feminist lesbians. They were all bright. They were planning a lesbian conference, and I got really involved, hook, line and sinker. I met my first lesbian-feminist lover there.... (Jean)

> I went to my first International Women's Day dance ... [and] knew no one in this huge, enormous room. I'm sure there were maybe anywhere between five hundred and a thousand women. Massive amount of women, and I had never seen that many women who loved women. And I went [by] myself, and I remember I sat on a table at the side of the room, looking around, thinking "What the hell am I doing here? Will I ever have the nerve to talk to these women?" And still knowing I wasn't quite in the place that they were. My body knew. But I was really excited to be there, and it was very emotional and traumatic. And that was about eighteen years ago. (Ruth)

> I got involved with the women's community, the women's bookstore. I wanted to meet other lesbians. (Frances)

The lesbian-feminist community continues to fill some of the social needs of lesbian and bisexual women, although their sense of its location and role in their lives reflects a variety of positionings:

> As far as the lesbian community goes, I feel a part of a circle within that community. And I've always sort of seen the community as being made up of all these circles that overlap, sort of like the Olympic symbol, you know? I feel very much involved in the circle that I'm involved in. And it's always interesting to realize that that's a very small part of the gang of lesbians in this town.... I think there are many more of us than we are aware of. The lesbian community ... has always seemed to me to be totally and utterly dependent on social things, mainly dances. Sporadic dances. The coffee house. And, I guess, why I call it the "alleged" community is because I don't think that's really community.... (Loraine)

> I value the sense of community. Like, when I was in the ... collective, that was the best working collective I've ever been on. That was really good. It was...just easy to work with people, and we got lots done (laughs). All those events, and we always made money. You know? It was amazing. And it was fun, and people didn't do it if they didn't want to. (Carole-Ann)

Being Bisexual in the Lesbian Community

The bisexual women seemed ambivalent about feeling part of the lesbian-feminist community. They expressed feeling attacked for relating to men, being invisible to, and isolated from, other bisexual women, and other experiences of being pressured to conform to lesbian 'PC' (politically correct) standards:

> I can remember going to parties, and people would start these conversations about... How did it go? It was like a competition, and it was "When did you discover that you were a lesbian, or a dyke?" Or, "How long have you been [a lesbian]?" And the ones that seemed to "win" were the ones who had never been with men. And I just totally distanced myself and shut down in thinking that I was going to call myself bisexual in the face of that. [To

> define myself as bisexual], inside me, it's sort of a relief, but outwardly... Like, from society or from the culture, it's like "Now I don't belong anywhere." It's now like these two worlds. (Carole-Ann)

> As far as defining myself as bisexual ... that's been fairly recent. Strangely enough, I started to come to that definition more when I came into the lesbian community, because, inasmuch as I recognized and felt "at home" with part of what I was hearing and seeing and feeling, I realized that I wasn't completely home here, that this wasn't my home either, completely. And it's bothered me, feeling that there's really nowhere. (Sandra)

> Some people look down on [bisexuality], particularly if they're strong feminist lesbians. They don't like it. You know, they feel you can't be both. I realize there's a lot of other bisexual women out there, but I don't know that many, and I guess it's because of the fact that we're almost "closeted," I guess. More than lesbians. Like lesbians state "I'm a lesbian." But for a woman to say she's bisexual sometimes takes the chance of losing either a lesbian friend or a heterosexual friend. It's kind of bold to say you are a bisexual today. (Kathleen)

> I had a sense that because I didn't have a lover, I wasn't acceptable in the feminist community, the lesbian community, half the time. That I was more acceptable when I had a lover that was a woman. Then they were sure I was a lesbian, and I was more welcomed. (Ruth)

Bisexual women spoke of placing a high value on their social and emotional connections with other women in the lesbian-feminist community, and saw these relationships as integral and ongoing in their lives:

> [Women] help each other, and they care. They genuinely care for each other. I like that, you know. I really enjoy being with women usually more than men, that way. At one time I would have said not, that I don't get along well with women and I really prefer men's company. But after really getting to know women more, I think you don't have to compete with women. Like, I find heterosexual women quite often don't trust

> the other woman. They're always thinking you're after their husband or boyfriend. But lesbian women don't normally, as a rule, guard their selves as much. They all come together, and it's nice. (Kathleen)

> I feel that I have strong connections...and a lot of support and a lot of love in the lesbian community. [What I like most is] the love. The fun. There's a lot of caring. It's comfortable. I like the emotional content of it. I know it probably better than any other community. (Ruth)

However, the bisexual women also felt angered and excluded by practices of separatism they see operating within the lesbian-feminist community. These practices consisted of ways in which they saw lines of difference being created and maintained as divisive barriers between heterosexual, bisexual, and lesbian women, eroding the feminist community-building relationships that might otherwise flourish:

> All the judging that goes on. I mean, if you don't fall into this category or that category, and everybody knows everybody's business, and talks about it. I hate that. I hate that. I hate it. (Ruth)

> I've experienced this separation again in the women's community. Like, S.W.A.G. has had events that I've gone to, and there hasn't been one lesbian there. And then I go to a lesbian event, and ... maybe there's one or two, but as far as people I know, it's like there's not heterosexuals there. (Carole-Ann)

> When I first came out here, the lesbian community was really separated from either heterosexuals or gay males. And I think now they're at least trying. They're finding that more people are like myself, or at least have thoughts that way, that they are including them more. (Kathleen)

The women also talked about the threats to preserving a visible bisexual identity while being involved in the lesbian-feminist community. These included such problems as a lack of privacy in a small

and fairly closed community, pressure to conform to certain dress and language codes, and pressure to have women lovers, or, at least, to not have male lovers:

> [The lesbian community is] trying to pigeon-hole me, they're trying to categorize me and figure out where I fit in, and what do I like in bed and all those kinds of things, just on the basis of what I'm wearing. I think you can look almost...as masculine as you want and be acceptable in the lesbian community, but you can't look as feminine as you want and be accepted in the lesbian community.... (Sandra)

> You're not even allowed to call a woman a "lady," or anything. I just found that really hard. I still say "ladies" and things like that, but I don't mean it in a derogatory way. But there's a lot of women in the community who really take offence if you call them a lady, you know, and I don't mean it. They've got so many darn slots, and that's, I think, going too far. [And regarding me being with a man,] maybe they don't like it as well, and they would prefer, for their convenience or comfort, that I be with another woman, but they like me enough that they're having him at functions. (Kathleen)

> I always felt slightly attacked, because I was too "femmy" for them. And that was one of the things that was always a problem, was that I didn't look like they did. (Ruth)

The Feminist Connection to Sexual Identity: Activism

Five of the respondents, two lesbians and three bisexuals, have been active in feminist organizations throughout their adult lives. Although some of the women connected having a lesbian identity as a necessary precondition for feminist activism, the perception that it is lesbians who are primarily involved in activism is not supported by the fact that at least two of the women in my sample who founded feminist organizations did not fully identify as lesbian at the time:

> It's the lesbian women who have worked with and

> support things like transition houses and rape assault centres and the abortion issue. I mean, lesbians are part of that, very definitely. (Jean)
>
> I think a lot of times, lesbians are the ones who do the work. (Denise)
>
> I guess my first formal introduction [to feminism] was when I was starting the crisis centre ... for battered women. And I realized how antiquated our laws were in many respects, and how little support there was for women who were battered. (Ruth)
>
> I was involved with ... Status of Women, and actually helped start it. Yeah, I was leading women's groups. I led the women's group that started the ... women's centre! (Carole-Ann)

Feminism as Separatism

Given the pressures against being a visible lesbian in both the women's community and society in general, as well as the structural exclusion of lesbians from legal institutions, lesbian-feminism argues for, and constitutes the existence of, a necessary separate community. To the extent that this separatism becomes discriminatory against women who relate to men or to male children, however, it highlights the conflation of lesbianism with a form of privileged essentialism reminiscent of aspects of Rich's compulsory heterosexuality (1980).

Challenging The Anti-Male Bias in Lesbian-Feminism

As indicators of subscribing to a separatist politics, attitudes of discrimination against men and male children were not particularly prevalent among the women who spoke with me. This may be attributed to the fact that, with one exception, every woman recalled having had at least one positive relationship with a man, and that four women are mothers. Of the lesbians, three of them had been married, but left the relationships when they discovered their lesbianism. Of

the bisexual women, two have been married, and one of these women was in a relationship at the time of our interview which was possibly leading to marriage with a heterosexual man. The other formerly married bisexual woman expressed a wish to be in a sexual relationship with a man, and said she thought a bisexual man would be most compatible with her. Of the bisexual women who have never been married, one was currently in a romantic but non-sexual relationship with a bisexual man, and the other was in a monogamous sexual relationship with a lesbian woman.

Both the bisexual and the lesbian women I spoke with expressed criticism of how a politics of separatism from men and boy children is counter to their perception of how feminism must work in order to improve the balance of power relations:

> Some lesbians I know who have had children...don't have any men in their lives. I think that's a big mistake. I think that they should be doing something to have men in their children's lives. And I have heard lesbians with boy children making really derogatory remarks about men, often. And I think that's a really big mistake. And it seems so ironic, because these women are feminists, you know? (Carole-Ann)

> Some of the more radical fringe people, the "lunatic" fringe, want to give away their [male] kids.... They don't know how to deal with their boys. They don't know how to be good mothers and ... pass on the value system to the boys. And I know they talk about pressures from the outside, and "What's the good of me, because he'll go to school and learn?" But, I think there is a good. I think we're offering the balance, and the kid can grow up and make a choice. He could be Macho Man, or he could remember what his mother and her friends taught him. And say, "Well, I don't have to be Macho Man." Sometimes I don't like the way in which we exclude the possibility of men. I think some men are really sincere. They are really wanting to make changes for themselves, in their lives. And sometimes I think we don't let

> them. We don't encourage them in a positive way. Especially for the lesbian community. It's like there's an assumption that if we let a guy in, we'll be making his coffee. And I don't know that's true. I think we need to, sometimes, have a little interaction and make assessments as we go along, not to have assumptions that we're still living in the Dark Ages and every man is a rapist, or whatever. As long as we don't have lines of communication and openess, then we're dooming ourselves in some ways. (Jean)

> I want [my son] to be a well-adjusted person... I want him to feel everybody's fine in whatever is their choice. (Kathleen)

Lesbian Motherhood

Does being a lesbian mother change a woman's attitudes about her own sexual identity and about separatism? What are the effects of her lesbianism on her children, and does she feel pressured to be closeted for their sakes? I asked women to talk about their perceptions and experiences of motherhood, including if they wanted children, how they became pregnant, if they had ever terminated a pregnancy, and how being a mother related to their sexual orientation. QSort data showed that all of the women disagreed with the rather preposterous statement, "There is no such thing as a pregnant lesbian." I interpret this disagreement to mean that pregnancy and motherhood are not associated exclusively with being heterosexual. Likewise, all of the bisexual women and two of the lesbians disagreed that "Women with children are more likely to be bisexual than lesbian." These results reflect the fact that four of the eight women in the sample, two lesbians and two bisexuals, are mothers. Their children's ages ranged from one year to early adulthood. One woman has a son, the others have daughters.

The lesbian mothers became pregnant while

identifying as bisexual in informal relationships with men. However, each woman had raised her child as a "single" lesbian mother, although one woman had co-parented for 8 years with another lesbian. One of the lesbians described her pregnancy as accidental, while the other woman had tried unsuccessfully several times to bring a pregnancy to term before her child was born. One of the bisexual women had her two children while in a heterosexual marriage, while the other woman became pregnant accidentally by a man she was dating casually. Two of the lesbians interviewed spoke of liking children, but of never wanting to either become mothers themselves or to co-parent another woman's child. One of these women had gone through two abortions, and decided to stop having sex with men and to become a lesbian after she had the second operation. Of the bisexual women, one had an abortion because she felt she could not psychologically or economically support a child at the time, and then, for medical reasons, had a radical hysterectomy in her thirties. The other woman is in her early thirties and is undecided about having children. She indicated she has not been sexually active with men for ten years, and is currently in a monogamous lesbian relationship, yet said she would want to become pregnant through sexual intercourse rather than through artificial insemination.

The women who were "out" as lesbians while their children were still young spoke of the hardships and challenges on all family members, and speculated on the needs of others in similar positions:

> I think that some of the down side of being a lesbian is having your kid in regular school, and your children know you're a lesbian, and you have a woman lover and women friends and a women's social circle, and this kid has to go to school

> and interact with straight kids. And how does she, or he, in my case, she, deal with that? She wanted me to have a father for her so she could have a life like everyone else. I think that's a really important time in your life to have a support group. Not only for the mothers, but for the kids. To know they're not the only kids with "crazy" mothers, "weird" mothers. You know, "Not only is my mother weird, but there's ten more kids whose mothers are similarly weird." So I think it's important for children to have support if they have mothers or fathers who are not mainstream people. (Jean)

> She's not going to be going to school, at least not 'til she's older. I know that they have "fag" jokes and "lesbo" jokes, and I know if a girl's named Leslie.... I guess [I worry about] the gross jokes and stuff. I'm getting really nervous as she gets older. I don't want her, at such a young age, thinking that there's something weird about her mother, or her mother's friends, or anything. (Denise)

Women with children also mentioned how motherhood restricted their ability to meet people, either in terms of trying to find affordable childcare or discovering that a potential sexual partner could sometimes be "turned off" at finding out they were mothers:

> I think if I didn't have a child, there are lots of evenings where [I'd go out]. But, the bar is the only thing I know, and it's not open until it's time to pick up my daughter, and so I don't do anything. But if I were on my own, I would do whatever I wanted. I find that women tend to shy away. They imagine they're going to get some kind of responsibility for my daughter. But the reality of it is that I wouldn't let anyone have responsibility for [her]. It's been five years since she's been born, and most of the pregnancy I was on my own. Any relationships I've had, I don't want them involved too much at all. The only responsibility I can see is the [one] of finding sitters or something. Just minor responsibilities in relationships. But then, people always seem to see it as some big, heavy-duty thing. (Denise)

Room For Everyone: Envisioning a Diverse Feminist Community

As mentioned above, five of the women in my sample had either been active in feminist organizations at one time and were now "taking a break," or were still active. The other three women had never joined any organizations, but indicated that they supported such feminist causes as pay equity, read feminist books and magazines, and often spoke out about sexism to people in the course of their daily interactions.

I asked each of the eight women to talk about her vision of an ideal feminist society. I began by asking if they thought universal bisexuality would be a part of this ideal, and found that in almost every case, women felt this was too restrictive. They expressed a yearning to transcend sexual categories, and wanted to open up more space in society generally for sexual expression and choice:

> If bisexuality is redefined as whatever you feel, you act on, and you don't have to become any one thing, that we don't have homosexual or heterosexual anymore. That we don't have bisexual, that we don't have any categories for sexuality. That what you're doing, with whom, when you're doing it, is cool, and the basis of making relationships is not around the sex of the partner, but on other criteria, then yes, I can see that as being the goal. (Sandra)

> I think that if the patriarchy was already gone, and it was a few generations [later] so people weren't carrying over their old patterns, then I could see if it was predominantly - not entirely, but predominantly bisexual, it might be a good thing. I think it would be great if men could get a lot of what they're looking for with women from each other. I'd love to see all men be bisexual, and the women could be bisexual or lesbian if they want. (Denise)

> It'd be ideal if people want it to be, and felt free about it. They could certainly be that way. That would be ideal. If people feel constricted,

> or feel pressured to do one or the other, that's not ideal. But it would be nice if people had that choice and didn't feel pressured. (Frances)
>
> I don't think that's necessary. I feel what it should be is just acceptance of whatever anyone chooses should be acceptable to everybody, and if you want to make love to a rock and it's not hurting anybody, that's your business, you know. (Kathleen)
>
> I don't have that much invested in what everybody else does, or the choices they make. If I see anything that's a goal for any community, I'd like to see a goal of some peaceful solution to the planet, where it's a human issue, rather than a male/female [one], or how we act out our sexuality. (Ruth)
>
> No. I see a time when anybody's sexuality would be an ideal goal. I think sexuality comes in so many guises, you know? From celibacy, in terms of not even masturbating, to multiple partners, and who am I to say what's good for the world? I think what's good is letting everybody be free to have that expression of their sexuality. (Jean)
>
> Yeah! (laughs) I feel a bit arrogant saying that "My way is the best way," and that kind of thing, but.... Yeah, I think that if people weren't so hurt and so afraid, they would probably feel less isolated from each other. Less alienated. People would be free to be whatever they are. (Carole-Ann)
>
> It'll have to be after I'm gone, because I won't be bisexual. I'm quite convinced of that. I think that the sexual preference aspect is not in the forefront. I think a feminist society is one that recognizes the abilities of women as being worthy of equal respect and honour as those of men. And that sexual preference is, you know, an aside to that. (Loraine)

I also wanted to know if women thought that lesbianism and feminism were synonymous - how is the personal, political, or is the personal, in this case, one's sexual identity, sometimes not political? More theoretically phrased, I wanted to see if there is a perception of a particular relationship between one's

sexual identity and one's capacity to resist heterosexist hegemony. Overall, I found that women did not tend to privilege the mere possession of a non-normative sexual identity as the key site of resistance, but rather located lesbianism and bisexuality as constituting potentially disruptive and liberatory practices against sexual hegemony. The bisexual women tended to reveal more anger and frustration at the limitations of sexual liberation within lesbian-feminism in addressing their particular concerns than did the lesbians. I speculate that this may be due to the lingering idea that lesbianism is perhaps seen as more of a feminist sexual identity than is bisexuality, despite the critique of this perspective by the lesbians themselves:

> I think if the gay liberation movement hopefully is for sexual liberation of all people, it won't try to convince us that "gay is better." Because then we just have two people, one saying "gay is better," the other saying "straight is better," and nobody listens to anybody, and it's a stupid position to take up. (Sandra)

> If feminist lesbians think that we're not feminists unless we're lesbians, what the hell does sexual liberation mean? I don't get it. If being liberated sexually means that we're only liberated if we do it their way, what kind of liberation is that? It's as bad as the heterosexuals thinking we're sick if we think any other way sexually than they do. Where do we fit in? It's not about loving. It's about following someone else's rules. It's not about honouring a feeling, each person's truth. I don't see that as liberation. (Ruth)

> I'm for embracing anyone who wants to call themselves a feminist thinker. I mean, if your agenda is to empower me, do I care who you sleep with? I think all one needs is the desire to say "I am a feminist, and I want to put some energy into changing women's lives to make them better." Having an awareness about how we're oppressed, and what we need to do to lift that oppression. How

> we oppress ourselves, and how we let everybody else oppress us. The spectrum applies to lesbians as much as it applies to heterosexuals. I mean, you have bar dykes and you have professor dykes and you have ordinary people and ones with good feminist consciousness. And...I don't know what the percentage is in the wider population, but [the ones with good feminist consciousness are] the women that we hear about. They're the women that are activating for change and for acceptance, and for all that stuff. Bar dykes don't care. They just want their booze and a place to have it. (Jean)

> Some people say that ... lesbianism is the only real feminism, so if you're lesbian, you're living a feminist political stance. And maybe that's true, I don't know. I can't get a hundred per cent behind that theory, I don't think, really. There's certainly a lot of overlap, but that seems a bit simplistic to me. (Loraine)

I asked the bisexual women more specifically if there was anything about being bisexual that they particularly valued. Their responses tended to identify two privileges - a wider potential pool of sexual partners than lesbians or heterosexual women would seem to possess, and a perception of themselves as more tolerant of diversity than either heterosexuals or lesbians. However, I sometimes detected a note of defensiveness which I considered as possibly related to women attempting to rationalize the "down side" of occupying a marginal status:

> I can have the best of everything. I really can. You know, I really appreciate women and their softness. I really appreciate men and their manliness. Both I'm attracted to, in different ways. I think if I were probably lesbian entirely, I would be a lot more closeminded about people and other relationships, perhaps. And this way, I don't look at anybody and point the finger. (Kathleen)

> I like myself. I feel willing to love someone, people. I can't say I'm willing to love everybody. I'd like to be at that point. But I feel that I'm

> not restricted in my willingness to receive and give partnership, to have partnership. And that seems liberating to me. I feel that I have choice. (Ruth)

> [Being bisexual] gives us sort of the advantage of being able to see things that other people may not be able to see. And an understanding. (Carole-Ann)

> I feel that within everything there is the male and the female principle, and within me that comes out in feeling attracted to both sexes, feeling that I'm whole when both are here. (Sandra)

I also asked the lesbians about bisexual liberation, particularly focusing on whether or not they thought bisexual women benefit from lesbian-feminism. Most of these women admitted that they tend not to think about bisexual women in these terms, if at all, but at least one of them seemed to be more aware as a result of the interview questions on bisexuals as not being "real" feminists:

> I don't think of bisexual women and what their problems and issues and dilemmas must be in that lifestyle. (Loraine)

> Well, [regarding whether or not lesbian-feminism benefits bisexual women], it should, but I don't know if it necessarily does. (Frances)

> Yeah, I think that lesbian feminists speak for bisexuals and heterosexual women in everything, often or most of the time. My experience of lesbian feminist women is that we have women in general in mind. Women we want to help, not just lesbian women. (Denise)

> Well, [the lesbian-feminist sexual liberation movement] could speak for bisexual women. I suppose it's all a matter of semantics, and who's thinking what. You know, for me, I'm not all that conversant with the movement and its feelings about bisexual women. I would think that a bisexual feminist woman would be included in there, although I can see where sometimes they wouldn't be, just because of the description I was

> given earlier about them being viewed as fence-sitters and not committed and leaching off the women's movement. (Jean)

Comments

Even with only eight two-hour interviews, I managed to amass a prodigious amount of information from each woman, of which only the portions which seem to have direct bearing on sexual identity have been presented here. Overall, my findings support other evidence that sexual identity is a social construct which emerges within the interplay of personal desires and structural mechanisms. Further, the categories of bisexual and lesbian are not sufficient to understand the complexity of sexual expression as manifested by these women, since there is much overlap in their desires and range of experiences. For example, both the bisexual women and the lesbians acknowledged feeling pressured by both the lesbian-feminist and the heterosexual communities to adopt a unitary sexual identity.

The ways in which bisexual women "manage" the split between heterosexuality and lesbianism included "passing" as lesbian to all but their closest friends, withdrawing from the lesbian feminist community completely so as to minimize identity strain, dating a bisexual man, or selectively attending lesbian events where this did not conflict with a commitment to a male partner. Lesbian women exhibited a range of attitudes about bisexuality, including perceptions of women who relate sexually to men as dependent, coerced, boring conversationalists, and lacking in the ability to emotionally bond with other women. However, none of them argued that exclusive lesbianism was the best or ideal sexuality for a feminist society.

There were generally more areas of agreement and

similarity between the bisexual women and the lesbians than disagreement and difference, particularly with regard to attitudes about monogamy, separatism, motherhood, femininity, the importance of being in a lesbian feminist community, and the necessity for greater sexual freedom generally.

The implications of these findings for the theorization of bisexuality and sexual identity are more fully discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS

> We are the queer groups, the people that don't belong anywhere, not in the dominant world nor completely within our own respective cultures. Combined we cover so many oppressions. But the overwhelming oppression is the collective fact that we do not fit, and because we do not fit we are a threat. Not all of us have the same oppressions, but we empathize and identify with each other's oppressions. We do not have the same ideology, nor do we derive similar solutions. Some of us are leftists, some of us practitioners of magic. Some of us are both. But these different affinities are not opposed to each other. In El Mundo Zurdo I with my own affinities and my people with theirs can live together and transform the planet.
>
> (Anzaldua, 1981, 209)

This research represents the work of three years, a period marked both by the death of my father and a growing sense of myself as a feminist, a bisexual, and a sociologist. The process of researching bisexuality was often intensely personal and sometimes uncomfortable, since the exposure to differing opinions and critiques by the women I spoke with and the literature I read constantly problematized my own identity. I consider this process to have been beneficial, however, since it heightened my awareness of the shared sense of marginalization of other bisexuals, lessened the sense of alienation I felt from my "lesbian self," strengthened my resolve to work toward a nonheterosexist society, and introduced me to many others who do this work in their own ways.

The eight women who participated in this study and who spoke so openly about their sexualities provided me with many insights about the intersections between occupying various identities of feminist, lesbian, bisexual, woman, mother, worker, differently-abled and living in a society which privileges white able-bodied upper middle-class heterosexual males, seconded by

white able-bodied upper middle-class heterosexual females.

Although some of these women, as stated earlier, do not fear to be identified as either a participant in this research, or as a lesbian or bisexual woman in general, others perceived risks to their jobs and to their personal credibility within and beyond the lesbian feminist community should their identities become known. These dangers, despite recent legislative innovations to protect gay men and lesbians against discrimination, remain real considerations in their choosing to come forward and share their experiences with me. I mention this to again emphasize the reality of a heterosexist society within which these women's lives are lived and their sexualities expressed.

Analysis of the Results

My analysis of the results of the interviews and Qsort questions is based on noting the ways in which the experiences of sexual identity differ and are similar between the lesbian and bisexual participants, and comparing the findings to those in existing research in the fields of female bisexuality and sexual identity. Some implications of these findings for understanding both the process of sexual identity formation and the influence of the lesbian-feminist social context on sexual identity are drawn from these comparisons, and future research directions are also noted.

Constructing A Sexual Identity

Previous research on sexual identity formation suggests that a combination of sexual behaviors and fantasies, together with the existence of a supportive social context, are key factors in the assumption of a positive sexual identity. Added to these influences is the assumption of a particular sexual identity label by

the person her/himself. All of the women who participated in this research discussed how their early and adult sexual experiences and the social contexts of family, peers and the feminist and lesbian-feminist communities in which they were developing a sexual identity influenced their choice to take on a particular sexual identity label of lesbian or bisexual.

The Importance of Social Context in Sexual Identity

Most of the women indicated having had sexual attractions both to females and to males during their childhood and teen years, but due to a lack of support for same-sex attractions did not take on an identity of "lesbian" or "bisexual" until they reached adulthood. In adulthood, the process of becoming "woman-identified" was facilitated by the availability of a supportive social environment, particularly within the lesbian-feminist and feminist communities. Denise and Ruth both found support to come out as lesbians at the women's centres where they worked, although Ruth realized that her erotic desires did not preclude men when she attended a large lesbian dance. Sandra and Loraine found a sense of identity through various social and cultural activities in the lesbian-feminist community, although like Ruth, Sandra began to realize her bisexuality more specifically within an exclusively lesbian social environment. Jean, unable to make connections to other women in the bar scene, confirmed her feminism and her lesbianism by finding a lover and a focus for her energy when she joined a lesbian-feminist activist group. Carole-Ann, feeling alienated in her suburban neighbourhood from feminist critique, began leading CR groups, founded a women's centre in her area, and started attending women's dances. Kathleen entered a longterm relationship with another

woman and became more involved in women's culture as time passed. Frances left her husband and started educating herself with feminist books and travel to different women's communities, and "came out" by entering a relationship with an "out" lesbian.

The social context influencing a woman's sexual identity spanned community-level organizations and events and interpersonal relationships. Entering a longterm sexual relationship with an "out," self-identified lesbian seemed to play a key role in a woman taking on the sexual identity of "lesbian" herself, even if she had positive sexual relationships with men previously and was still attracted to men. For the lesbians, the discovery of a lesbian-feminist community and their own ambivalence about being in relationship with men meant that arriving at a lesbian sexual identity was like "coming home."

In the case of the bisexual women, however, the assumption of a sexual identity of lesbian was always partial to the extent that "lesbian" was seen as precluding an eroticization of males. Previous research on bisexual women also discussed ways in which they are ostracized or marginalized from lesbian-feminist communities by the radical lesbian feminist critique of compulsory heterosexuality and femininity. This is consistent with the experiences of the bisexual respondents in my research in terms of the pressures they experience to take female lovers and to hide their desire to have male lovers, to use "politically correct" terms of address (feeling constrained to say "women" rather than "ladies," in Kathleen's case), and to alter their personal appearances to appear less "feminine" and therefore more acceptable to the community. Pressures on these women to conform to radical lesbian feminist "PC" standards in their

personal habits, thoughts and behaviors was resisted in several ways: Carole-Ann chose to leave the lesbian-feminist community by severing most of the social contacts she had made within it and by trying to effect a less "dykey" appearance; Kathleen reduced her social activities and contacts to those accepting of her male partner; Sandra's commitment to a monogamous relationship with another woman rendered her bisexuality more of a political label than a sexual reality in the eyes of the community, her lover, and to some extent, herself; and Ruth's relationship with a bisexual man was kept secret from all but a few close friends. Despite these pressures, however, the bisexual participants spoke of their same-sex friendships in the lesbian-feminist community as being unique in terms of emotional bonding and intimacy, and stressed the importance of a "pro-woman" environment for their own identities as women.

Overall, both the bisexual and lesbian women tended to emphasize the value of the lesbian-feminist community in facilitating emotional closeness based on social networks, cultural events and shared political vision, rather than on the potential likelihood of meeting a sexual partner. This may, in part, reflect the socialization of women generally to be more focused on intimacy rather than on sex in relationships, but I think it also underlines the important role the lesbian-feminist community plays in enhancing women's positive regard of themselves <u>as women</u>.

Impact of Sexual Trauma on Sexual Identity

Is there a link between sexual trauma with males and eroticizing women, in the sense that lesbianism is a "refuge" sexuality for abused women? Although all of the bisexual participants had histories of sexual abuse with males, their choice to be sexual with women was

based as much on a continuing and longstanding erotic desire for women as on a choice to not relate sexually with men for a time. In Ruth's case, for example, taking on an identity of "lesbian" did permit her to begin to heal from her previous assaultive relationships with men, but her attraction to women both preceded the abuse and continued after she had completed a substantial part of her recovery process and was again relating to men.

Lesbian as a Meta-Status

Both the bisexual and lesbian women seemed to identify the absence of a desire for, as well as actual sexual intimacy with men as the main criterion in defining who was and who was not "lesbian." However, there was a difference between this abstracted definition of lesbian and the actual behaviors and attitudes of the lesbian participants. For example, with the exception of Loraine, all of the lesbians had been sexually active with males at some time in their lives and had identified as either heterosexual or as bisexual during this time. Again, with the exception of Loraine, the lesbians indicated varying degrees of willingness to become sexually intimate with a man at some future time. Silber's concept of "lesbian" as a "meta-status" might be useful here in explaining how the private expression of opposite-sex desires and behaviors of lesbian women are not accorded sufficient weight to change the sexual identity label to "bisexual": the term "bisexual" is perhaps more closely linked to specific sexual practices than to feminism and women's culture and community which have come to be associated with the label of "lesbian." Identifying as lesbian means that women who may also love men can still claim membership in the lesbian-feminist community and its associated cultural

heritage. However, to the extent that their full range of erotic preferences remains hidden, biphobic attitudes remain unchallenged. Bisexual feminists are seen as sexually and politically aberrant, as outsiders or marginal "poor cousins" to the lesbian-feminist community. The consequences of the exclusion of bisexual women from the lesbian-feminist community and the enforced invisibility of lesbian women's potential for opposite-sex attractions in lesbian social and academic discourse include the continuing dichotomization of sexual categories into heterosexual/homosexual and the continuing reification of unitary, static sexual identities.

Feminist Consciousness and Sexual Identity

Both the bisexual and lesbian participants displayed a keen awareness of the ways in which women are oppressed under heteropatriarchy, even to the extent of discussing how women unwittingly perpetuate this oppression between ourselves in abusive relationships and in failing to make alliances between lesbian-feminists and heterosexual women and men (gay and heterosexual). The bisexual women showed more awareness of biphobia and anti-femininity than did the lesbian women, and there was more criticism and generalization of heterosexual women's perceived economic and social privilege by the lesbian women. Lesbians were also more likely to identify other lesbians, rather than bisexual women, as important players in the feminist movement. The participants who were mothers decried the anti-male separatism they witnessed in the community that was directed toward male children, and called for more support for both mothers and children in lesbian families. In terms of homophobia from outside the community, Denise, Jean and Carole-Ann each gave examples of how they had felt at

risk of being victimized at work and on the street by sexual discrimination toward lesbians.

A Critique of the Research

I tried to employ feminist methodology as effectively as possible, given existing constraints of time and resources and my own initial inexperience in conducting a project of this kind. However, given the best intentions, there were still things which I would have liked to have done to make the research more socially and sociologically viable. These include having had a larger sample size of bisexual and lesbian women, as well as including heterosexual feminists as a second comparison group to the bisexuals. I would also have liked more focus on the particularities of sexual and emotional experiences of the women in same- and opposite-sex relationships to more fully address the <u>interactional</u> dynamic of women's sexual identity formation. It would have been useful to have somehow incorporated the QSort statements into the interview discussion itself, since a simple indication of level of agreement/disagreement required during the QSort procedure often left too much to interpretation in certain instances. I also now regret not having involved the participants more in the interpretation process, since I'm sure their feedback would have been helpful in seeing patterns in the data. However, at the time I was writing, the thought of trying to effectively incorporate into the draft the reactions and opinions of seven different women, some of whom had moved away from Victoria, seemed an impossible task. I think that a group interview might have also been a consideration, although there were factors mitigating against doing this which I explain more fully below.

No discussion of the application of feminist research is complete without acknowledging the

necessary component of social action involved. Pat Maguire (1987, 196) notes that

> [by] linking the creation of knowledge with social change, participatory research ultimately aims at three types of change:
>
> 1. development of the critical consciousness of both the researcher and participants;
>
> 2. improvement of the lives of those involved in the research process; and
>
> 3. transformation of fundamental societal structures and relationships.

I have asked myself what social action has taken place, and could yet take place, in the course of my research? And how has my research addressed these three types of change?

I do feel that my critical consciousness has been raised by seeing parallels between my personal experience and what these women chose to share with me, in that my previous sense of being the sole woman in this community to struggle with defining and creating a non-essentialist sexual identity is gone. In addition, my decision to label myself as both a feminist researcher and a bisexual within academe and the local lesbian-feminist community was empowering insofar as I have not experienced any significant negative reactions in either sphere.

In terms of the consciousness of the participants, particularly the bisexual women, I hope that their having had this safe, non-judgemental and empathic forum in which to speak out has assisted them to feel a little less isolated and more easily able to identify their oppression as bisexuals and as lesbians as political/cultural (external) rather than as a mere individual, intrapsychic (internal) experience. For the lesbians, I hope that asking them questions about

bisexual women has alerted them to the shared issues of invisibility and oppression of women which lesbian-feminism tends to ignore or downplay.

Has doing this research improved our lives? It certainly has improved mine, in terms of exploring these concerns as beneficial to my own development as a woman, a feminist, a sexual being, an academic, a researcher, a member of the women's community and the lesbian community, and as an advocate for the empowerment of marginalized people. I feel very honoured to have had these women trust me with their lives, feelings, memories, dreams and disappointments. They told me a great deal about themselves, relived their childhoods, puberties, marriages and divorces, hysterectomies, and sexual assaults while I sat across from them, the tape running. They also shared the thrills of discovering their first women's bar, of dancing that first time with their lover in a public place, the clean rage of taking feminist action, fighting homophobia and heterosexism, of coming out and coming home.

I think the kind of feedback the women gave me indicated that they appreciated the opportunity to reflect upon their lives to date and to see themselves as aware, active, and accomplished people. The opportunity which feminist interviewing provides women for self-reflection has been noted in other research (Oakley, 1981, 50).

Has the research transformational potential? Yes, I believe it does. I feel this potential is enhanced by using language that is accessible to most readers, not just to an audience of sociologists. In this way, people from other disciplines and even outside of academe entirely, can draw on the research for their own education. I would also like to see more research

on sexual and other minorities being done in ways which address the politics of marginalization within and beyond academe.

Although it would have been ideal if I could have found the financial resources and time to discuss a preliminary draft with each respondent and be guided by her feedback in creating the final text, I chose instead to solicit comments on the research process and design at the time of the interview. I also invited women to contact me if they had further comments, questions, insights or suggestions, and I intend to present each of the participants with a copy of the final product. I also intend to write and speak about my research experience and the discoveries in various feminist, bisexual and pro-gay publications and at conferences.

In hindsight, I realize that conducting a group interview would have been a useful research tactic in facilitating greater understanding and liaison between bisexual-feminist and lesbian-feminist women. Some difficulties which might have occurred include bisexual women being unwilling to participate if it meant "coming out" to lesbians, or even to other bisexual women, trying to monitor the emotional climate in the room, and recording and transcribing all the different voices of the discussion. However, I feel I can still further the aim of education by speaking at workshops, in seminars, in casual conversations, and through the printed word, inviting dialogue and discussion, and possibly, at some future point, organizing an informal support group for bisexual women.

Future Directions for Research

Over the course of doing this project, other research questions presented themselves to me as areas needing further investigation. These included

expanding the scope of the study to include heterosexual feminist women who are involved with the lesbian-feminist community, research on the ways in which bisexual men are included or excluded within the gay male community, the degree to which bisexual women choose bisexual men as partners, the ways in which transsexuals come to negotiate a sexual orientation and a sexual identity within the heterosexual and lesbian feminist/gay communities, and linked to this, more research which deconstructs sex, gender, and sexual orientation. I also think that a study of the children of lesbians and gay men, in terms of their development and assumption of a sexual identity, would constitute an important contribution to the literature on sexuality.

It is my belief that oppressions are best confronted by an informed resistance. I hope that this research is useful in extending the range of knowledge about women's sexuality in ways which will foster more empathy and cooperation between bisexual and lesbian feminists, as well as providing insights to academics and practitioners in the fields of sex and gender research, social movements, feminist therapy, social work, anthropology, and lesbian and bisexual history.

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INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Demographics

1. How old were you on your last birthday?

2. Where were you born?

3. What is your citizenship?

4. What is your ethnic background?

5. What is your educational background?

6. What is your present occupation?

7. Were you raised in any particular religious or spiritual tradition? Would you describe yourself as a religious or spiritual person now? Is this connected to your sexuality in any way?

8. Do you have brothers or sisters? Do you know of any relatives who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual?

9. Are you a member of any feminist organizations, or do you subscribe to any feminist newsletters or magazines?

10. How did you hear about this research project?

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11. Do you describe yourself as a bisexual woman, as a lesbian woman, or by some other term? If lesbian, was there ever a time when you described yourself as a bisexual woman? If bisexual, have you ever called yourself a lesbian?

12. What does being bisexual/lesbian mean to you? (sex of partner? feelings and fantasies about men and women?)

13. Do you think that there is a difference between being a lesbian and being a bisexual woman? If yes, what kind of difference? Any similarities? What kinds?

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14. What did you learn about sex and sexuality when you were growing up, and how did you learn? (parental attitudes? siblings? peer information? seeing someone naked, masturbating, being touched by someone else, touching someone else?)

15. As a child or as an adolescent, did you feel attracted to other girls or adult women? If yes, did you ever tell anyone about your feelings? Why or why not? If yes, what happened?

16. Growing up, were you a "tomboy"? If yes, how so?

17. At what age did you begin to menstruate, develop breasts, grow hair on your body? How did you feel about these changes (self-conscious, happy, relieved, frightened?)

18. At what age did you begin to think of yourself as bisexual/lesbian? (any special circumstances or reasons?) Looking back, do you think you were a bisexual/lesbian before you started thinking of yourself as one?

19. How did it feel to define yourself as bisexual/lesbian (happy, sense of relief, scared, ashamed?) Did you talk to anyone about it?

20. What was your first introduction to the lesbian community? (women's dance or event? feminist publication?) Can you remember how you felt? (curious? relieved; finally at home?, strange and out of place? sexually aroused?)

21. Do many people know that you're bisexual/lesbian? (family, friends, lovers, at work? any problems?) How did they find out (did you tell them?) What made you decide to come out to them? Or did they figure it out for themselves? How do you think they did this? (did you drop hints, something about the way you look?)

22. Did you have sex with men before you decided you were bisexual/lesbian? (Why or why not? did you like it? do you have sex with men now? plan to in the future? are you sexually attracted to men now?)

23. Did you have sex with women before you decided you were bisexual/lesbian? (Why or why not? did you like it? Tell me about your first female lover; how did you meet her; how did you become sexually involved? how did you feel about it? what happened to that relationship?)

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24. Are you married/have you ever been married (to a man, to a woman?)

25. Are you presently in a sexual and/or committed relationship with a woman? How did you meet her? What do you personally value most about the relationship? If you are bisexual, have you told her this? Why or why not? If yes, what was her reaction? Does your partner define herself as lesbian or bisexual? Community reactions (warnings? support?) Family reactions (acceptance, ignores it?)

26. Are you presently in a sexual and/or committed relationship with a man? How did you meet him? What do you personally value most about the relationship? If you are bisexual, have you told him this? Why or why not? If yes, what was his reaction? Does your partner define himself as heterosexual or bisexual? Community reactions (prejudice? support?) Family reactions (pressure to get married?)

27. What does monogamy mean to you (commitment? sexual fidelity?) Can you see yourself in a "monogamous" relationship with more than one person at a time? Why or why not?

28. Have you ever been celibate (defined here as no sexual intimacy with another person)? If yes, for how long? What motivated you to become celibate? Was it a positive experience? Why or why not?

29. Have you ever wanted children? Why or why not? If yes, how would you choose to become pregnant? (artificial insemination, donor sperm, with male partner, other). Do you think being a mother would affect how you feel about your bisexuality/ lesbianism? Would you tell your children about your bisexuality/lesbianism?

or

If you have children, how did you become pregnant (artificial insemination, donor sperm, with male partner, failure of birth control, other?) Do you think being a mother affects how you feel about your bisexuality/lesbianism? What have you told your children about your bisexuality/lesbianism?

30. Have you ever decided to terminate a pregnancy? If yes, can you tell me what influenced that decision?

31. Is there anything I haven't asked about relationships or celibacy or motherhood that you'd like to add?

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32. Do you call yourself a feminist? Why or why not? If yes, what does being a feminist mean to you?

33. What was your first introduction to feminism?

34. Some lesbian-feminist women say that bisexual women are not feminists because they give energy to men. Do you agree with this sentiment? Why or why not?

35. Some lesbians argue that a woman who calls herself bisexual is either really a lesbian, but is denying it because she doesn't want to give up the rewards of passing as straight, or is really a heterosexual, but wants to use the energy of the lesbian community. Do you agree with this? Has anyone ever said something like this to you? If yes, how did you feel, and did you say anything?

36. Do you ever feel pressured to pass as a lesbian to hide your bisexuality? If yes, when do you feel the most pressure? The least pressure? Do you ever try to pass as a lesbian? If yes, how do you do this, and how do you feel about it?

37. Do you ever feel pressured to pass as a heterosexual to hide your bisexuality/lesbianism? If yes, when do you feel the most pressure? The least pressure? Do you ever try to pass as a heterosexual? If yes, how do you do this, and how do you feel about it?

38. Have you ever wondered if you were really a bisexual/lesbian? If yes, why?

39. What do the phrases "the women's community" and "the lesbian community" mean to you (same thing or two different communities? Why?) What do you think that someone needs to do or to be in order to join this community/these communities? Do you feel like you are a member of this community/these communities? Why or why not?

40. What do you like most about the women's community/ the lesbian community? What do you dislike most about the women's community/the lesbian community?

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41. Do you see a time when everyone is bisexual as being the ideal goal for a feminist society? Why or why not?

42. If there was a bisexual women's support group in town, would you attend? Do you think there is a need for such a support group? Why or why not?

43. Do you think the lesbian-feminist sexual liberation movement speaks for bisexual women? Why or why not?

44. What are some of the things you personally like best about being bisexual/lesbian? In more general terms, what do you think are some of the most positive things about being bisexual? About being lesbian?

45. The final few questions! Has our interview been a positive experience for you? Why or why not? Is there anything I haven't asked about that you'd like to tell me? Do you have any comments or suggestions to improve the interview process? Finally, would you be willing to recommend to other lesbians or bisexual women that they participate in this research?

Q-SORT QUESTIONNAIRE

The scaled categories are:

+5 Completely Agree

+4 Strongly Agree

+3 Mostly Agree

+2 Moderately Agree

+1 Mildly Agree

0 Neutral/Does not apply to me

-1 Mildly Disagree

-2 Moderately Disagree

-3 Mostly Disagree

-4 Strongly Disagree

-5 Completely Disagree

The statements were not numbered on the original cards, but are presented as numbered here for easier reading.

1. I've always felt that I was bisexual.

2. Whatever happens, I'll always be a lesbian.

3. Whatever happens, I'll always be bisexual.

4. I feel uncomfortable in the company of men.

5. My relationship with my mother helps explain why I am a bisexual.

6. I never feel completely "at home" in the women's community.

7. I feel completely "at home" in the women's community.

8. Sometimes I get tired of the pressure to be "politically correct."

9. Part of my pleasure in being a bisexual is the way it shocks people and makes them disapprove.

10. I feel an affinity with heterosexual women.

11. Being a bisexual gives me a sense of freedom.

12. I've never been very "masculine" in the conventional sense.

13. I don't think it's necessary for me to tell everyone that I'm bisexual.

14. Sometimes I call myself bisexual, and sometimes I call myself a lesbian.

15. I came to bisexuality through feminism.

16. Lesbian women look more masculine than do either bisexual or heterosexual women.

17. My relationship with my father helps explain why I am a bisexual.

18. I usually see myself as either "butch" or "femme" in my relationships with women.

19. I think I would have a happier life if I were not a bisexual.

20. My relationship with my father helps explain why I am a lesbian.

21. I find my bisexuality difficult to come to terms with.

22. I feel uncomfortable in the company of women.

23. I usually see myself as either "butch" or "femme" in my relationships with men.

24. Being a lesbian is primarily a political act, rather than having anything to do with being sexual.

25. Being bisexual is primarily a political act, rather than having anything to do with being sexual.

26. I find my lesbianism difficult to come to terms with.

27. You can enjoy sex with a man and still be a lesbian.

28. No one is really bisexual.

29. You can have sex only with women and still be bisexual.

30. Bisexual women look less feminine than heterosexual women.

31. I am/have been deeply in love with a woman.

32. Lesbians are stronger feminists than bisexual women.

33. I am/have been deeply in love with a man.

34. You're not born a bisexual; it's a choice.

35. Being a lesbian gives me a sense of freedom.

36. I'd like to have children some day.

37. Sex with a woman is much more physically satisfying for me than sex could ever be with a man.

38. I like wearing make-up.

39. Being a woman is very important to me.

40. I call myself a dyke.

41. I get on well with women.

42. It's dangerous to get involved with a bisexual woman because she might leave you for a man.

43. I never go into straight bars or clubs unless I'm with straight friends.

44. I would be insulted if someone thought I was heterosexual.

45. Bisexual women look more "feminine" than do lesbians.

46. Lesbians never find men sexually attractive.

47. Sometimes I have sexual fantasies that involve men.

48. I've always felt that I was a lesbian.

49. A woman who is in a relationship with another woman for more than a year isn't a bisexual.

50. Bisexual women are really just going through a phase, and are actually lesbians or heterosexuals.

51. Unless you have had, and rejected, sex with a man, you can never be certain that you are a genuine lesbian.

52. I feel an affinity with bisexual men.

53. If a woman has never enjoyed sex with a woman, she cannot know she is a lesbian.

54. If a woman has never enjoyed sex with a man, she cannot know she is bisexual.

55. Bisexuals are stronger feminists than lesbians.

56. I don't think it's necessary for me to tell everyone that I'm lesbian.

57. Sex with a man is much more physically satisfying for me than sex could ever be with a woman.

58. Monogamy is essential for a healthy relationship.

59. I think I would have a happier life if I were not a lesbian.

60. Most people are really bisexual.

61. Sex with a man is more emotionally satisfying for me than sex with a woman ever could be.

62. My underlying sexual orientation is bisexual.

63. There is no such thing as a pregnant lesbian.

64. Women with children are more likely to be bisexual than women without children.

65. I never go into gay bars or clubs unless I'm with gay friends.

66. You're not born a lesbian; it's a choice.

67. My relationship with my mother helps explain why I am a lesbian.

68. I have more in common with any lesbian than I do with any heterosexual woman, even if she's a feminist.

69. Part of my pleasure in being a lesbian is the way it shocks people and makes them disapprove.

70. I've never been very "feminine" in the conventional sense.

71. I would be insulted if someone thought that I was

bisexual.

72. Everyone has the responsibility to be "politically correct."

73. I would be insulted if someone thought that I was a lesbian.

74. I feel an affinity with gay men.

75. I came to lesbianism through feminism.

76. I get on well with men.

77. Sex with a woman is more emotionally satisfying for me than sex with a man ever could be.

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA CONSENT FORM

Research project title: A Qualitative Study of Sexual Identity Among Bisexual and Lesbian Women in a Lesbian-Feminist Community

Investigator: Kelevelyn Hurley, B.A.
Sociology Department
University of Victoria
(604) 721-7572

Investigator's Statement

PURPOSE AND BENEFITS:

The aim of this research project is to investigate the interrelationships between women's personal beliefs about the nature of sexual orientation, their involvement in a lesbian-feminist community, and their choices of sexual identity. It is hoped that the results of this research project will increase the awareness and understanding of the participants, the scholarly community, the lesbian-feminist community, and the general public about the ways in which beliefs about sexual orientation and feminism relate to the choices that women make about their sexual identities. As the work will focus on bisexual feminists and lesbian-feminists, these women in particular should benefit from an increased public understanding of their identity processes and circumstances.

PROCEDURES:

Each participant will be asked to complete an interview session lasting approximately two hours, and a follow-up Q-Sort questionnaire. Interview sessions will be audiotape recorded, and will be arranged at the convenience of participants. Strictest confidentiality will be observed. No one's identity will be revealed without their permission. In the interviews, participants will be asked to describe how they experience being bisexual or lesbian in relation to family, friends, loved ones, co-workers, the lesbian-feminist community, and in the public generally. Participants will be asked to compare bisexuality and lesbianism, and to answer questions about what sexual orientation and feminism means to them. Participants will be free to refuse to answer any question(s), at any time, and for any reason. In the questionnaires, participants will be asked

to sort cards containing printed statements about sexual orientation, feminism, and the norms of the lesbian-feminist community by level of agreement with each statement. Participants may decline to answer the questionnaire, for any reason, and still participate in the interviews.

RISKS, STRESS, OR DISCOMFORT:

Participants will be asked questions about very personal matters. These questions may evoke painful personal memories or may, at times, cause some personal embarrassment.

OTHER INFORMATION:

The identities of all subjects will remain strictly confidential. Audiotapes will be retained in the files of the researcher for a period of five years after which time they will be destroyed. They will be used as a source of information for this project, and, with the consent of each participant, for future scholarly and lay publications. Only the investigator will have access to files containing any information which might identify participants in any way. Participants may withdraw from the research project at any time, for any reason. The only compensation offered to the participants for their contributions to this research is any personal satisfaction they may gain as a result of their participation.

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Signature of Investigator Date

Participant's Statement

The research described above has been explained to me, and I voluntarily consent to participate in this research. I understand that the audiotapes will be retained by the researcher for five years after which time they will be destroyed. I consent to the aforementioned tapes being used as a source of information for future scholarly and lay publications. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and understand that future questions I may have about the research or about participant's rights will be answered by the investigator listed above.

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Signature of Participant Date

Copies to: Participant and Investigator's file

VITA

Surname: HURLEY Given Names: Kelevelyn Wynavere

Place of Birth: London, Ontario

Date of Birth: 12 September 1959

Educational Institutions Attended:

University of Victoria	1987-1993
Camosun College	1984-1987

Degrees Awarded:

B.A. (Honours)	University of Victoria	1989

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Graduate Teaching Fellowship	1992
Dean's Scholarship	1991
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Publications:

none

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Title of Thesis: "A Qualitative Survey of Sexual Identity Among Bisexual and Lesbian Women in a Lesbian-Feminist Community"

Author [redacted]

KELEVELYN WYNAVERE HURLEY

22 April 1993