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WOMEN LEAVING HETEROSEXUALITY AT MID-LIFE:
TRANSFORMATIONS IN SELF AND RELATIONS

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in partial fulfilment of the requirements
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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate women's experience of leaving heterosexuality at mid-life. Nine lesbian (or gay) identified women, ranging in age from 41 to 55, who had been previously married and who had previously identified as heterosexual participated in the study. During interviews of approximately 2 hours in length, participants were asked to describe their experience of transformation from a heterosexual to a non-heterosexual identity and the impact that this change had on their daily life and relationships. The interviews were transcribed by the researcher and a grounded analysis was conducted utilising QSR NVivo 1.2.142, a software programme designed to facilitate qualitative analyses. The grounded analysis was carried out according to the procedures and principles of grounded theory and methodical hermeneutics. Taking a participant-researcher perspective, the researcher added data from her own experience as a mid-life lesbian to later phases of the analysis.

The resulting theoretical representation is a hierarchical category structure consisting of four levels. Twenty-nine first-order categories, which were grounded in the transcript data, were grouped together to form the following second-order categories: "Socialization," "Marriage," "Lesbian Awakenings," "Self-transformations," "Coming Out," "Breaking New Ground," "Leaving the Marriage," and "Shifting Motherhood." These higher order categories were subsequently grouped into three meaningful third-order categories: "Heterosexual Life," "Leaving Heterosexuality—The Experience of

Transformation,” and “Leaving Heterosexuality—Relational Transformations.” The categories “Heterosexual Life” and “Leaving Heterosexuality” reflect the before-and-after quality of the overall experience of leaving heterosexuality at mid-life, while the two aspects of leaving heterosexuality, “The Experience of Transformation” and “Relational Transformations,” reflect changes in self and identity versus changes in roles and relations. The core category that evolved as the overall organising representation of the data was one of transformation, which I labelled “Women Leaving Heterosexuality at Mid-life: Transformations in Self and Relations.

The findings of this analysis are discussed in terms of the following: the social construction of identity; the experience of transformation at mid-life, including the labels we use for sexual orientation and women’s capacity for intimacy and intimacy needs; coming out as a mature woman, including the loss of heterosexual privilege and coming out to family members; and the redefinition of family.

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It is difficult to separate the time and energy spent researching mid-life lesbian experience from my own transformation and, as such, there are potentially far more people towards whom I feel a strong sense of gratitude than I can appropriately thank on these pages. I have been very fortunate to have had a dissertation committee composed of three highly skilled academics, each of whose individual areas of expertise has been a valuable source of edification and support. First, for her interest and her agreement to supervise my proposed research study that was somewhat outside of the spectrum of most of her students' projects, for her vigilant efforts to keep my ideas focused on a plan that was researchable, for her expertise as a researcher and as a writer, and for the hours and hours of time she spent poring over my work, I owe a debt of gratitude to my academic supervisor, Dr. Shaké Toukmanian. Second, as I planned out and embarked upon the grounded analysis, Dr. David Rennie was an often tireless source of information and education into the procedures and philosophical underpinnings of a methodology that I had chosen as one that fit with my worldview. His support got this project off the ground

and my head out of the clouds of uncertainty about the particulars. Last, but by no means least, I wish to thank Dr. Sandra Pyke for her forbearance with my frequent queries and my somewhat sporadic timing, and more importantly, for her abundantly wise, intelligent, and encouraging comments during the proposal and final draft stages.

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downs. Old friends, especially Karen L. and Lauren have been there through the many, many years of the undergraduate and graduate programmes, rarely asking “are you almost done yet?” and like my family, they have supported me in all kinds of ways, while themselves traversing the sometimes rough waters of our relational transformations.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgements	vi
Table of Contents	ix
Chapter 1	1
<i>Introduction.....</i>	<i>1</i>
Horizons of Understanding	1
Biases and Perspectives	2
My Personal Experience	2
Research Question, Purpose, and Goals.....	7
Chapter 2	9
<i>Review of the Literature.....</i>	<i>9</i>
Historical and Postmodernist Perspectives on Homosexuality	11
Psychological Perspectives on Homosexual Identities	19
Stage Theories: The Cass Model	19
Feminist Perspectives.....	27
Cass Revisited	32
Coming Out.....	35
Heterosexism.....	36
Relational Model and Coming Out to Mother	40
Internalised Homophobia and Therapy	43
Mid-life	45
Psychological Perspectives on Lesbian Couples and Families	49
Legal/Psychological Outlaws.....	56
Chapter 3	61
<i>Methodology</i>	<i>61</i>
Procedure	69
Participants.....	69
Interviews.....	73
Data Analysis	75

Explanations for Terminology	77
Labelling Sexual Identity	77
First Person	79
Participant-Observer Research.....	80
Chapter 4	81
<i>Results</i>	81
Hierarchical Category Structure.....	81
<i>Heterosexual Life</i>	87
Socialization.....	87
Values, Morals, Religious Beliefs.....	87
Mother Connections.....	89
Intimate Friendships.....	93
No Previous Experience.....	96
Participant/Research Summary	98
Marriage.....	99
Marital Expectations	99
Reflections on the Marriage.....	102
Sex	109
Participant/Research Summary	111
<i>Leaving Heterosexuality—The Experience of Transformation</i>	112
Lesbian Awakenings	114
Lesbian Stirrings	115
Attraction, Bisexuality, Lesbian Sex.....	118
Owning My Lesbianism.....	125
Expanding Horizons.....	132
Participant/Research Summary	137
Self-Transformations	138
Clues, Reconstructing My Past.....	139
Evolving Concept of Self.....	142
We Are What We Wear?	147
Labels.....	151
Participant/Research Summary	154
Coming Out.....	155
Mental Preparation.....	156
How We Come Out.....	160
How the World Receives Us.....	163
Coming Out to Significant Others	169
Privacy, Closets, Conspiracies	177

Participant/Research Summary	186
Breaking New Ground	188
Between Two Worlds	188
Same-sex Relationships	191
Strength, Support, Therapy	197
Participant/Research Summary	200
<i>Leaving Heterosexuality—Relational Transformations</i>	202
Leaving The Marriage	202
Gaining the Courage to Leave	203
The Process of Leaving	205
Relationship with Ex-husband	208
Participant/Research Summary	210
Shifting Motherhood	212
Mothering and Shifts in Mother Role	212
Children's Coming Out Process	217
Children and Mom's Lesbian Partner	219
Participant/Research Summary	222
Chapter 5	224
<i>Discussion</i>	224
Why Now?	224
Identity	225
Labelling Sexuality	228
The Experience of Transformation	229
In Search of Intimacy and Equality	232
Coming Out	235
Heterosexual Privilege	236
Coming Out at Mid-life	238
Families	239
Reflections on Method and Process	242
References	247
Appendices	269
<i>Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Ad</i>	269
<i>Appendix B: Research Study Description Form</i>	270
<i>Appendix C: Interview Guide</i>	272

<i>Appendix D: Informed Consent Form</i>	274
<i>Appendix E: Participant Profiles</i>	276
Figure 1. Summary Chart and Demographics.....	72
Figure 2. Hierarchical Category Structure	83

Chapter 1

HOMOSEXUALITY, also called SEXUAL INVERSION, is usually defined as the sexual attraction of a person to one of the same sex (from Gr. homo-, "same"; not from Lat. homo, "human being," "man"). This usually, but not necessarily always, leads to various physical activities culminating in orgasm or sexual climax. Female homosexuality is often referred to as lesbianism (q.v.). The term pederasty implies sexual relations between men and boys.

Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1964

Introduction

Imagine what it is like to live and mature as a heterosexual woman, experience yourself and the world through the eyes of a heterosexual woman, possibly to marry and to have children within the traditional "wife and mother" context, and then to make the transition to lesbianism, to redefine yourself as a homosexual, or perhaps bisexual person, and to live and experience the world through the eyes of a person who is no longer part of the heterosexual norm?

Horizons of Understanding

Following current practice in the presentation of qualitative investigations (Rennie, 1994a; Kirby & McKenna, 1989), the following is a brief description of the horizons of understanding that underlie my inquiry. Because my own process of leaving heterosexuality influenced this research endeavour both consciously, in terms of my interest in the phenomenon on a theoretical level, and most likely in ways that I might not have been consciously aware of as I proceeded through the analysis, this section also

describes what I believe to be the relevant milestones in my own identity transformation and coming out process. My goal here is to highlight the impact on the current research project of my perspectives and personal understandings regarding homosexuality, lesbian identity and sexual orientation.

Biases and Perspectives. My perspective on research inquiry is coloured by feminism and social constructionism. As regards the former, I am interested in theory and research that redresses imbalances in the literature with respect to women's history, experiences, and points of view. Regarding the latter, I take a social constructionist stance in the sense that psychological constructs, such as sexuality, sexual orientation, and identity, do not reflect a physical reality as much as they are socially constructed categories that serve a function in maintaining status quo. This topic will be addressed further in Chapter 2. Finally, as a student and practitioner of clinical psychology, I work and theorize within the experiential humanistic tradition, which values people's experience and subjective reality.

My Personal Experience. This section is a summary of my own story, which I recorded as an initial memo prior to conducting the interviews for the present study.

I was 44 years old, with three teenaged children and I had been married for close to a quarter of a century when out of the blue I experienced a powerful attraction to another woman. Insofar as I could recall, I had never felt romantically or sexually attracted to a woman before. In the three years that followed, there were a number of

significant changes in my personal and family life. Divorce, leaving the matrimonial home for a small apartment on my own, establishing times and places with my children where I could try to support them through the upheaval they were experiencing, financial difficulties, falling in love, making a home together with my new partner, and coming out to extended family, friends and colleagues were all part of my experience (while I was also working towards completing my PhD). Simultaneously, I experienced a metamorphosis in my sense of sexual identity.

In order to deal with the roller coaster of emotions that I experienced during this period, I sought counselling on three occasions. The first counselling episode occurred after I told my husband that I felt I could no longer remain in the marriage. Together, we saw a marriage counsellor for the purpose of exploring my wish to leave the marriage. However, because I was not yet ready to disclose my changing sexuality to my husband, the marital therapy turned out to be less of an exploration of my thoughts and feelings and more of a preparation for separation and divorce. The therapist, a male psychologist, provided concrete help with different aspects of this process, including how and when we should talk to our children about our divorce. Around the same time, I sought personal counselling in order to explore my budding lesbian feelings and to gain the emotional and mental strength necessary to leave my marriage and, as I saw it, to break up my family. I was unable to afford to pay a psychologist myself, so I found a social worker, who I saw for a few months. She helped me to deal with the more difficult moments during the

break up of my marriage. I did disclose my lesbian feelings to this therapist, but the focus of therapy remained on my marriage break up. In retrospect, I think that I was not entirely sure about how a heterosexual therapist would be able to help me deal with lesbian transformation issues, and therefore, I was not comfortable talking with her about my lesbian transformation. A few months after that therapy episode ended, I had a few sessions with a gay male therapist about some of the issues that came up for me in a new lesbian partnership. I felt that he helped me to normalise the lesbian partner experience.

Initially, the label “lesbian” did not feel quite right to me. Although there seemed to be some women like me in the stories I read, most of these women conceptualised themselves as lesbians who for one reason or another had not recognized their “true” identity until later in life. This did not fit with how I experienced the transition in my sexual orientation. I had experienced myself as heterosexual prior to becoming romantically and sexually attracted to a woman, and the latter came as a surprise that was not easily reconciled with any past experiences that I had had. Furthermore, to me a “real” lesbian was someone who had always experienced herself as different, someone who was physically drawn to other women and who had probably been aware of her same-sex attraction most of her life. For me, this was all brand new and my same-sex attraction was only directed towards one person. As well, the lesbians I knew were part of a social milieu that was unfamiliar to me. They socialised with one another, went to bars, clubs, events that I had only a shadowy knowledge about, and they had a *shared*

understanding of what their lives were all about. Furthermore, lesbians were part of a marginalized group who lived within the bounds of stigma and social derision, which made me queasy about adopting the label “lesbian” on two counts. First, there was the fear of what the label would mean to me, my family and my various social roles; perhaps a real lesbian knew how to deal with stereotyping and homophobia, but I certainly did not! Second, because I had lived a life of heterosexual privilege, on another level I felt that I had not earned the right to call myself a lesbian and I worried that the lesbian community—in other words, my new partner’s social network—would see me as some kind of an impostor. As a white, middle-class, mother of three, who up until recently had been living in relative comfort in the suburbs, who was I to adopt, perhaps co-opt, the decades of struggle and stigmatisation of women who had legitimately earned their stripes in the form of an alternative identity?

During this period, I read voraciously, in order to make some sense of my experience of self-change. I was as fascinated by the earlier fiction of Virginia Woolf, Vita Sackville-West and Radclyffe Hall as I was by contemporary lesbian writers, like Jane Rule, Anne Marie MacDonald and Dorothy Allison, although perhaps no further ahead in terms of understanding my own transformation. Lillian Faderman’s (1981) historical account of women’s experience of same-sex love, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* provided the foundation for a budding theoretical understanding of lesbianism. However,

it did not answer the three questions that plagued me: Why me? Why now? Am I a lesbian? Autobiographies, including the freshly minted *No Previous Experience* by Elspeth Cameron (1997) and compilations of personal narratives, such as *From Wedded Wife to Lesbian Life: Stories of Transformation* (Abbott & Farmer, 1995) and *And Then I Met This Woman* (Cassingham & O'Neil, 1993) assured me that other women came out at mid-life and even later in life. Although that knowledge was comforting, I continued to struggle with my three questions.

Inasmuch as I couldn't call myself a lesbian, neither did I feel comfortable with the label "bisexual." This was in part for the same reasons that I was unable to claim a lesbian identity, but mostly because I had had no previous awareness of attractions to both sexes. However, from my readings and reflections, an idea began to play about my mind that perhaps we are all inherently somewhat bisexual and that manifested sexual identities might be more a matter of socialization than biology. The idea that sexuality might be more malleable than current theory suggests came from reflecting on the fact that I, a heterosexual person, was observing within myself a sexual attraction for a member of my own sex. This idea continued to buzz in the background of my consciousness as I considered as I began to formulate the research question that related my personal questions to a broader epistemology concerning sexual identity.

Research Question, Purpose, and Goals

The overall research question for the current study was: what is the experience of making the transition from a heterosexual lifestyle and identity to a homosexual, lesbian, or bisexual lifestyle and identity for women over age 35? In particular, I was interested in learning how women who have made this transition define themselves, the extent to which the shift from heterosexuality to non-heterosexuality has affected their self-concept, and the impact that such a change might have on their interpersonal interactions and everyday lives. As a psychotherapy researcher I have been concerned with the role of self and identity in the healthy and adaptive functioning of human beings and, more recently, I have become interested in non-heterosexual identities and in shedding stereotypes of the past that have been associated with gay and lesbian people.

Historically, psychology has endorsed a biased and pejorative view of homosexual people, originally classifying homosexuality as a mental disorder. Even several years after homosexuality was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, DSM-III (American Psychiatric Association, 1980), professional journals were slow in their attempts to eliminate the pathological taint to the label (Boston Lesbian Psychologies Collective, 1987, Introduction) and the profession has only fairly recently begun addressing the issue of heterosexism in psychological research (Herek, Kimmel, Amaro & Melton, 1991). Therefore, as a psychology researcher treading in muddied waters, it has been important for me to remain sensitive to these issues, and I hope that

my inquiry into identity and lifestyle will facilitate a realistic understanding of the needs and issues that are associated with the population under investigation.

Therefore, the purpose of this research was not merely to explore a particular experience (i.e., the transition from a heterosexual identity and/or lifestyle to a lesbian identity and/or lifestyle) but also to make this experience public. In generating a public understanding of this transition, I hope to add my voice and the voices of my participants to the growing literature on lesbian and, more generally, non-heterosexual identity and lives. The potential public benefits ensuing from this type of research are: gaining a better understanding of the issues that non-heterosexual women face in Canada at this time; furthering the academic discussion in psychology regarding lesbianism and lesbian issues; underscoring the call for acceptance and validation of different lifestyles and different family constellations; and adding to the literature on self and identity.

Chapter 2

Contrary to popular belief, homosexual behaviour can be seen not only in human beings but also in animals, sometimes in immature ones but more often in those deprived of a normal sexual outlet. ...Such behaviour in primitive societies occurs among females as well as among males and is usually confined to mutual masturbation, but an artificial phallus may be employed. It is probably not so common among females as males.

There appear to be four possibilities in the causation of homosexuality in human beings: (1) a genetic aberration; (2) an endocrine disorder; (3) a psychological condition; or (4) a mixture of two or more of these. ...No discernible difference between the physique of the homosexual has been shown by any recorded tests, microscopical, macroscopical, biochemical or endocrine. ...It is generally accepted by psychologists that men who in normal circumstances will behave heterosexually and enjoy a normal life with women may become inverted if deprived of female company (in prison, in prison camps, in warfare, at sea, and so on). The percentage of cases in which this occurs is not known. ...Not all male homosexuals are of the outwardly effeminate type, and some can be dangerously violent.

A certain number of homosexuals are curable by psychological treatment, a fact that invalidates the view of its causation by genetic or glandular aberrations. Treatable cases are those who suffer from excessive timidity with members of the opposite sex or who have painful symptoms.

Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1964

Review of the Literature

In the course of doing the grounded analysis for this project, my knowledge of lesbian/gay/bisexual identity, coming out, and issues pertaining to gay and lesbian families was limited to common knowledge, a preliminary reading of lesbian literature

and history, and a couple of recently published books containing stories of women who came out in later life. As a result, my understanding of these issues at the time of completing my analysis was sketchy and anecdotal. A subsequent search of the literature, which I did after conducting the analysis in keeping with the general tenets of grounded theory methodology, revealed a growing interdisciplinary body of scholarship and research in the areas of gay and lesbian identity formation and coming out, and a small emerging literature on gay and lesbian families.

In order to make a reasonable contribution to the discourse on lesbian identities and experiences, I found that to delve into the psychology literature alone would be far too limiting for two reasons: 1) because a large portion of the literature on topics pertaining to lesbian, gay and bisexual people have come from other disciplines, primarily sociology and women's studies; and 2) perhaps more importantly, because there are fundamental arguments about the nature of homosexual, bisexual, and heterosexual identities currently taking place in the social sciences as a whole, under the rubrics of social constructionism and feminist theory. Therefore, the following discussion of the relevant literature has been drawn from the fields of psychology, sociology, feminist theory, and social constructionist theory. It is organised around the themes of identity, coming out, and family, and it briefly touches upon psychotherapy where applicable.

Historical and Postmodernist Perspectives on Homosexuality

In *Psychiatry, Psychology, and Homosexuality*, Ellen Herman (1995) traces the history of American psychiatric and psychological perspectives on homosexuality. Her discussion begins at the time when the mental health profession took the place of religion in prescribing what was normal, so that homosexual behaviour shifted from being 'evil' to being 'sick.' She follows psychiatric and psychological views on homosexuality through the period of its declassification as a mental disorder, the birth of Division 44 of the American Psychological Association, and the recent appearance of journals devoted to lesbian and gay issues, up to our present concerns with homophobia and the appropriateness and utility of psychotherapy with gay and lesbian clientele.

Other scholars have recounted similar histories. Silverstein (1996) describes the various forms of treatment that homosexuals have encountered throughout the 20th century, noting that the first attempt to "cure" homosexuality by surgery was made by Steinach in 1917 (Schmidt, 1984, as cited in Silverstein, 1996). From the arena of psychotherapy, aversion therapy continued until the 1970s. Silverstein contends that psychoanalysis has yet to dispense with a pathological perspective on homosexuality. He notes that "*the efficacy of treatment has rarely been the criterion governing its use*" (p. 11).

Rothblum (2000) acquaints us with the cultural and psychological significance of lesbian/gay/bisexual (and to some extent transgender/transsexual) resistance, including

gay presence in the Harlem Renaissance and the now infamous Stonewall riots¹. These events in lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered/transsexual (LGBT) history raised social awareness about the minority status of non-heterosexuals and issues of homophobia and harassment. As well, Rothblum's analysis testifies to landmarks in lesbian/gay/bisexual mental health history that bear upon the discipline's movement away from aversion (or conversion) therapies towards affirmative psychology. Citing Drescher's 1998 article in *Journal of Homosexuality*, she points out that Freud himself had a relatively affirmative attitude towards homosexuality and he saw bisexuality as innate. Nonetheless, Rothblum contends that "reorientation" therapies were "based on psychoanalytic theory" (2000, p. 69) and like Silverstein, Rothblum observes that such therapies are still in use today, despite cultural changes and research evidence to the contrary.

Prior to the past 25 years of affirmative research on gay/lesbian/bisexual people, "the focus [of research on homosexuals] was often on the pathology of homosexuality" (Rothblum, 2000, p. 73). A notable exception to the pathology view was Evelyn Hooker's landmark study in the 1950s of "normal homosexual men" in which she compared a sample of non-psychiatric and non-incarcerated homosexual men with heterosexual men on projective tests and found no difference (Marcus, 1992, as cited in

¹ An oft cited highlight of the era of LGBT resistance was the Stonewall uprisings of 1969, when a group of gay men, lesbians and transsexuals fought back during police raids of the Stonewall Inn Bar in Greenwich Village. See Rivera (1995) for Sylvia (Ray) Rivera's moving personal account of that period in LGBT history]

Rothblum, 2000). Although it was to be a couple more decades in the making, Hooker's study paved the way for affirmative research in the fields of psychology and psychiatry.

It is clear from these accounts that psychology has come a long way in its theoretical and procedural stance on homosexuality. However, it is also evident that the field of psychology has a long way to go in its understanding of sexuality and, as will become clear from the following, psychology remains relatively unsophisticated with regard to sexual identity development. Moreover, sexual identity formation inside and outside of psychology remains unclear and controversial (Brown, 1995; Foucault, 1976/1978; Kitzinger, 1995; Spargo, 1999; Turner, 2000)

Both the nature of human sexuality as well as the social category "lesbian" is currently under fire by postmodernists and feminist psychologists. According to Kitzinger (1995), following Gergen (1994) and Plummer (1992), postmodernism has replaced what she calls "strong social constructionism" and it differs from the tenets of "weak social constructionism:

The theoretical underpinnings of postmodernism—its rejection of the 'grand narrative' of science or of any 'reality' unmediated by human experience; its refusal of the 'unitary self' and concomitant characterization of people's shifting, multiple, fragmented identities constructed through 'performance'; its reliance on texts or discourses that don't reflect or reveal reality but take meaning from their audiences—have proved very attractive to erstwhile 'strong' social constructionists. Moreover, this new label serves to clearly differentiate them from the 'weak' social constructionists whose position was increasingly conflated with their own in the psychological literature, and, ultimately has removed them from the increasingly stale social constructionist/ essentialist debate. (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 137)

Weak social constructionist arguments focus on the way that social forces influence how identities are constructed. Kitzinger (1995) notes that psychology today often reflects a weak social constructionist viewpoint, particularly in the area of learning and developmental psychology, where socialization is deemed crucial in determining human behaviour and cognition. Taking a weak social constructionist stance on homosexuality, one would argue that the media and other agents of socialization play a significant role in the construction of attitudes towards homosexuality. In contrast, a strong social constructionist argument, grounded in poststructuralist deconstruction of language, dismantles our very notion of the social category “identity,” viewing it as one of many linguistic devices that have been reified and used to maintain the order of things. This argument “takes issue with the notion that homosexuality (or heterosexuality or bisexuality) are natural givens and challenges the idea that some people ‘are’ or can discover themselves to be gay or lesbian, while others are ‘really’ heterosexual (or bisexual, or whatever other categories of sexual orientation the culture has spawned)” (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 143). Why bring up the deliberation on strong versus weak social constructionism? I suggest that prior to delving into an investigation focusing on lesbian identity from psychological perspective, we need to understand the social, political and historical underpinnings of the constructs that are called upon in such an investigation. However, psychology for the most part has not arrived there yet, as the discipline continues to be entrenched unreflectively in the tenets of essentialism.

[Essentialism] refers to the view that sexual categories and sexual identities represent fixed personal characteristics that are inherent, objective, transcultural, and transhistorical. Essentialism treats sexuality as a biological force underlying genuine gender differences that in turn serve as the basis for sexual categories and identities. In relation to sexual orientation, essentialism argues that differences in sexual desire create categories of persons known as homosexual and heterosexual that are fundamentally the same across time and in different cultures. (Stein, 1996, p. 86)

In a way, weak social constructionism may seem to have replaced essentialism as the dominant ideology in the social sciences, because nobody adheres anymore to the essentialist position that psychological categories such as the self, identity, or sexuality are based purely on biological or psychological mechanisms within the individual. In other words, today's psychological theorists are as apt as sociologists and anthropologists to pay lip service to social, cultural, and political context in our construction of categories of knowledge. However, lest we become complacent in our assumption that we all have become social constructionists, Kitzinger (1995) is quick to point out that these "weak" social constructionist ideas are very different from a postmodernist analysis. Moreover, she observes that essentialism continues to be the dominant paradigm through which much of psychological research is carried out despite the history of social constructionist critique within the discipline (Gergen, 1985; Gergen, 1994), trends in the direction of qualitative methods in psychotherapy research (Toukmanian & Rennie, 1992; Elliott, Fischer & Rennie, 1999; Rennie, 1996) and the introduction of constructivism, a tradition that at least tips its hat to postmodernism, into psychotherapy (Neimeyer, 1998).

From a postmodern perspective, it is understood that identity is a socially constructed phenomenon and, therefore, that any formulation of theory about gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity formation is going to be based upon current assumptions and restrictions on the categories “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” and “identity.” Mary McIntosh (1968/1981) is recognised as the forerunner of social constructionist critique on modern homosexuality. McIntosh observed that homosexuality was generally believed to be a condition “characterizing persons in the same way that birthplace or deformity might characterize them” (p. 30). She countered that in fact homosexuality was not a condition but rather a *social role*. Eschewing the trend at that time in social research, which was the endeavour to discover the aetiology of homosexuality and noticing that the label homosexual did not necessarily coincide with homosexual behaviour, McIntosh turned the focus of her sociological examination onto the construction of homosexuality as a condition. She argued that the label “homosexual” acted as a mechanism of social control, on the grounds that it established a boundary between behaviour that was “permissible” and behaviour that was not, and also that it served to segregate those who are labelled deviant from the bulk of society, which could thus retain its purity “in rather the same way that the similar treatment of some kinds of criminals helps keep the rest of society law abiding” (p. 32). Although McIntosh is credited with being the first to suggest that homosexuality acted as a social role (Broido, 2000; Kitzinger, 1995) she is not the last to dispute essentialist notions about sexuality.

According to Foucault (1976/78), the social categories “homosexual” and “homosexuality” have their origins in reforms of the institutions of medicine and punishment of the 19th century and they were linked with social labour requirements at a time when sexual practices needed to be limited to providing a future labour market. Prior to that period, “sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them.” It was one of a number of “peripheral sexualities.” In the 19th century, the focus of social attention shifted from the act to the person, and “the homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology....The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (p. 43). Foucault’s analysis, therefore, details not only the way that homosexuality serves as a social role, but also the emergence of homosexual identity. Foucault does not argue that homosexual behaviour did not exist prior to the 1800s. He argues, instead, that the relationship of behaviour to person shifted, so that the person became defined by, or identified by, the behaviour.

In recent decades, social constructionists have focused their attention beyond the category “homosexuality” to an analysis of sexuality more generally. By questioning the binary nature of sexuality, this debate opens up the possibility for diverse forms of sexual identity and behaviour. Postmodern deconstructions of sex and gender categories include the current revitalisation of the study of butch-femme gender role categories in lesbian

relationships (Carter & Noble, 1996; Levitt & Horne, in press; Kennedy & Davis, 1994; Nestle, 1992); anthropological studies of such “anomalies” as Indigenous *berdache* and historical accounts characterising homosexuality as a third sex or third gender (Herdt, 1997; Trumbach, 1997); discussions on the nature of bisexuality (Broido, 2000; Fox, 1995; Rust, 2000); an emerging literature on transgendered and transsexual identities (Stryker, 1998; Turner, 2000); queer theory, a postmodern analysis of the politics of sex and gender (Driver, 1996; Butler, 1991; Spargo, 1999; Turner, 2000) and in some avenues of the budding interdisciplinary field of gay and lesbian studies in the United States (Escoffier, 1992; namaste, 1992) and in Canada (Gammon, 1992). It is far beyond the scope of this project to endeavour to review these burgeoning literatures, but I think the fact of their existence bears reckoning vis-à-vis the subject of mid-life lesbian identification. What is clear from the existence of these postmodern discussions is: sexual behaviour and sexual identity are not necessarily equivalent; and modern constructions of sexuality and gender as dichotomous and binary are in question, thus paving the way for constructions of multiple genders and multiple sexualities. As these not yet institutionalised ideas filter into non-academic realms through film and other media, potential categories are opened up in the public stream of consciousness regarding sexual practices and possibilities. Hence, the experience of an abrupt shift in sexual identity from heterosexual to lesbian or bisexual in a brief space of time becomes a possibility in minds where it might not have existed before.

Psychological Perspectives on Homosexual Identities

Stage Theories: The Cass Model. Soon after the formation of the Association of Lesbian and Gay Psychologists in 1973 (Herman, 1995), which evolved into Division 44 of the American Psychological Association (Rothblum, 2000), psychologists turned their attention to theories of lesbian and gay identity development. From the mid-1970s until the mid-1980s several theoretical models emerged in the literature that have been classified as *stage* models of lesbian and gay development because they define homosexuality identity development as a series of stages (for reviews see Sophie, 1985/86 and McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Of these, Troiden's (1979, 1989) 4-stage model and the 6-stage model developed by Vivienne Cass (1983/84, 1984) have been most widely cited. Troiden's model of homosexuality identity acquisition (1979) was initially based on a sample of 150 gay men. He later revised his model to apply to men and women, utilising the theory and research of Ponce (1978) and Cass (1979, 1984). Cass's model (1983/84, 1984) has received the greatest amount of research attention and her Stage Allocation Measure (1984) continues to be utilised (Whitman, Cormier, & Boyd, 2000).

Cass (1983/84) based her theory on the intersection of two psychological constructs pertaining to the self: identity and self-concept. Whereas she described the self-concept as "all those self-perceptions or self-attitudes that a person holds, and the affective component attached to each of these self-representations," she referred to

identity as “organized sets of self-perceptions and attached feelings that an individual holds about self *with regard to some social category*” (p. 110) [italics added]. Troiden (1989) added, “self-concept is broader in scope and encompasses a wider range of social categories: identity encompasses only situationally relevant dimensions of self-concept. Although Cass discriminated between these two constructs on the basis of their points of reference, she acknowledged that both were made up of self-images and, as such, identity was a cognitive structure, which could be differentiated from behaviour. Thus, Cass made the important distinction between sexual identity—that aspect of self that pertains to one’s sexuality—and sexual acts, or behaviour. This distinction had not always been made clear in discourse on homosexuality, leading to confusion and conflation of terms used to convey the cognitive aspects of sexuality (e.g., sexual identity) and behavioural aspects (e.g., sexual preference, sexual orientation).

Cass’s model of homosexual identity formation (1984) was designed to apply to both men and women. It is an integration of cognitive, affective and behavioural features that is characterised by the following stages:

1. *Identity Confusion*, perception of one’s own behaviour (thoughts, feelings, actions) as homosexual
2. *Identity Comparison*, considering the difference between self and heterosexuals, feelings of alienation

3. *Identity Tolerance*, movement towards commitment to homosexual self-image, seeking out company of homosexuals in a limited selective manner, self-image is separated by public and private spheres
4. *Identity Acceptance*, gaining a more positive view of homosexuality, developing a network of homosexual friends, selective disclosure to non-homosexuals
5. *Identity Pride*, experiences pride in self-identity and fierce loyalty to homosexuals as a group, experiences anger at social stigma, uses confrontation
6. *Identity Synthesis*, anger and pride become less emotionally volatile; homosexual identity becomes an aspect of one's identity versus all of one's identity, increasing feelings of peace and stability about self

Each stage is comprised of cognitive, behavioural, and affective responses and strategies that will affect the trajectory of identity development from that point onwards, with the ultimate possibility of "identity foreclosure" at any stage. For example, stage one is characterised by three possible paths of development, depending upon the individual's perspective on and valuing of homosexual identity. "The individual will either consider the possibility of a homosexual identity (accepting this as positive or negative), or reject this possibility entirely, foreclosing further development" (Cass, 1984, p. 150).

Cass (1984) constructed the Stage Allocation Measure and the Homosexual Identity Questionnaire to test the validity of her model. The Stage Allocation Measure consists of eight single-paragraph descriptions of the ways in which a person might

ideally characterise himself or herself at each stage, including one paragraph used to profile the ideal heterosexual person. Subjects are asked to choose the profile that best describes themselves at the present time. The Homosexual Identity Questionnaire contains 210 items, of varying lengths that are scored via the relationship between given response to predicted response. It purports to measure the 16 cognitive, behavioural and emotional dimensions that underlie Cass's 6-stage model. In a preliminary study utilising these measures, Cass (1984) found support for the 6-stage model of homosexual identity formation, although some blurring of the boundaries between stages was evident suggesting a need for further refinement of the measures.

Since its conception, Cass's model has been heralded as both "a well developed explication of the psychological processes involved" (Gonsiorek, 1995, p. 32) and a "pioneering attempt to quantify and validate a model of lesbian/gay identity formation" (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). However, as in the case of any ground-breaking work, a number of criticisms have been levelled at the model. Cass's theory has been critiqued on the basis of conceptual restrictions of her model and on the basis of methodological problems in its application. With regard to theoretical limitations, McCarn and Fassinger (1996) observed that successful negotiation of the six stages of homosexual identity acquisition requires "exceptional political awareness and identity disclosure" (p. 510). Similarly, Chan (1995) critiqued the Western bias inherent in this model, pointing out that the model presupposes a set of specific conditions for synthesis of a positive identity

that might not be relevant under the domain of different cultures. Methodological issues have been raised in terms of validity and generalisability of the measures. More specifically, McCarn and Fassinger (1996) suggested a potential problem in the form of the “confounding of self-designated stage allocation and instrument completion” (p. 510) and Whitman, Cormier, & Boyd (2000) called into question the static nature of the Stage Allocation Measure, after they used it to explore decisions about coming out at various stages in lesbian identity formation. “Asking participants to place themselves in one stage versus another may have put constraints on their ability to fully and accurately represent their dynamic processes” (p. 16). McCarn and Fassinger (1996) raised the issue of generalisability, noting that Cass’s research was based on Australian samples, and they suggested that its wide utilisation in the United States without any consideration of contextual differences was problematic. The same argument could be extended to Canadian studies.

The Cass model is one example of a trend in psychology to conceptualise and classify the development of homosexual identities in terms of stages. Extant stage models have been critiqued on the following grounds: the assumption of linearity in identity formation and failure to take into account those people whose gay/lesbian identity formation does not follow a linear progression (Brown, 1995; Gonsiorek, 1995; Sophie, 1985/86); rendering bisexuality invisible by reducing it to an artefact of foreclosure when individuals fail to move into the later stages (Fox, 1995; Chan, 1995; Sophie, 1985/86);

ignoring diversity in identity and coming out, including the distinct identities of “nonhegemonic cultural groups” (Chan, 1995, p. 93), the multiple identities held by members of different racial groups (Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000) and the experiences of previously married lesbians (Lynch & Murray, 2000); and because stage models have been based on retrospective accounts of adults, usually men, they do not necessarily account for the experiences of adolescents (Savin-Williams, 1995) or women (Brown, 1995).

In an attempt to redress the problem of linearity in existing stage models, Sophie (1985/86) compiled a more generalised 4-stage model from six models (including the Cass model). The six models were comprised of four to seven stages. She then tested her generalised 4-stage model against the more specific models in a two-year longitudinal study of the process of lesbian identity development. She gave a series of two to three structured interviews, separated by intervals of three months to 14 volunteers, who were recruited through an article and an ad in a campus newspaper that addressed confusion about or change in sexuality. These interviews focused on a number of areas, including sexuality, work and school, psychological well-being, friendship, kinship, and changes in interests and activities. The transcribed interviews were analysed qualitatively and quantitatively.

Sophie found that the more general model reflected a trend in lesbian identity formation quite well, but once specificity was introduced into the stages, in terms of the

more detailed descriptions in the existing models, several participants' experience of lesbian identity formation diverged from expected trajectories, particularly in the later stages. Sophie suggested that one reason for this discrepancy might be the social and historical context in gay and lesbian identity formation. Specifically, she pointed out that her research was being conducted 15 years into the gay liberation movement and that the role of anger and pride in the latter stages of lesbian identity formation might have been more crucial in the early days of that movement when existing theories were being developed. Another reason for the discrepancy in Sophie's findings might have been the small sample size. Given the general trends in her data, Sophie concluded with a word of caution to future researchers that "the process of the development of a lesbian identity, or of a change in sexual orientation in general, must be viewed in the context of current social and historical conditions" (Sophie, 1985/86 p. 50).

More recently, McCarn and Fassinger (1996) have attempted to address issues pertaining to gender, culture and race by formulating a more comprehensive and complex model of lesbian identity development. Picking up on the current trend of conceptualising homosexual identity as a minority status, McCarn and Fassinger reasoned that the development of a sexual minority identity would be similar to the process of racial/ethnic or gender minority identity formation. Moreover, in people who are defined by different minority labels, the development of one minority identity (e.g., racial, ethnic, or gender) might be complicated by the development of another minority identity (e.g.,

sexual). Attending to the effects of oppression and discrimination as described by pre-existing models of racial/ethnic, gender, and homosexual identity development, McCarn and Fassinger have generated a four-phase model of lesbian identity formation that operates in two dimensions: individual sexual identity and group membership identity. To highlight non-linear movement within the developmental pathway, the term “phase” is used instead of “stage.” The four phases—Awareness, Exploration, Deepening/Commitment, and Internalisation/Synthesis—occur in both domains and each phase incorporates experiences and behaviours particular to each of the two domains. One may be at a different phase in the individual domain versus the group domain, implicating potential conflicts in one’s identity and there is no essential end-point to the process. The entire process of this dual identity formation is seen as circular and continuous. Preliminary validity testing of their model was done utilising Q-sort methodology. Strengths of McCarn and Fassinger’s model are that it allows for non-linearity in sexual identity formation, it recognises the impact of diverse experiences of women and minority groups on sexual identity, and it is open to socio-historical context (Sophie, 1985/86) in the sense that there are no specific requirements for self-disclosure, or political action, in order to successfully negotiate the later stages of a lesbian identity. Some might argue that in their attempts to create an inclusive model that can be applied to diverse aspects of identity formation, McCarn and Fassinger have forfeited utility.

However, since there has been very little empirical work emerging from the model at this point its heuristic value remains uncertain.

Stage models represent one type of lens through which lesbian identity formation has been examined. Other perspectives are biological, psychodynamic and feminist psychodynamic (Brown, 1995). According to Brown, biological models and traditional psychodynamic models are problematic because of their assumed pathology of non-heterosexual identities, their focus on aetiology, and their mono-cultural and Eurocentric biases. Although feminist psychodynamic theory sees lesbianism as a normative possibility, Brown observed that few theorists in this area have directed their attention to a full explanation of lesbian identity development, with the exception of Carla Golden (1987).

Feminist Perspectives. Golden's (1987) theoretical perspective on lesbian identity formation evolved from her work as an educator and counsellor of female college students, between 1977 and 1983. From an unspecified number of interviews with young women who were exploring their sexual identities during that period of time, Golden concluded that sexual identity did not always, or necessarily, correspond to sexual behaviour and that there is a great deal more diversity in women's self-defined sexual identities than psychologists normally recognise. In formulating her theory of lesbian identity development, Golden drew upon object relations theory as a framework for understanding a greater propensity for bisexuality in women than in men. As well, she

made use of Adrienne Rich's notion of the "lesbian continuum" in order to categorise sexual identity through the positioning of women's experience of attachment to other women on a continuum from close emotional bonding at one end to sexual desire at the other (Rich, 1980, as cited in Golden, 1987). Like other feminist theorists, Golden ascribed to the minority group definition of non-heterosexual identity that defines lesbians as marginalized and stigmatised. However, she pointed out that there is a crucial difference between social categories and personal experience. "Describing a social group is quite different from the psychological task of understanding what it means to any particular woman to identify as a member of that group" (p. 22).

Following Ponse (1978), Golden divided lesbians into two groups, primary lesbians and elective lesbians. The former had experienced themselves as different from an early age and their lesbian identity was seen as an essential aspect of themselves, something over which they had no control. Elective lesbians, however, had not experienced themselves as different from other women; their lesbian identity was perceived as somewhat of a conscious choice, either politically or erotically induced. Golden observed that sexual behaviour did not necessarily follow from sexual identity in either of these groups of women, since primary lesbians could have experienced sexual intercourse with men and elective lesbians might have had sexual experiences with other girls when they were young. Golden (1987) further sub-divided elective lesbians into two groups: those who subjectively experienced their current lesbian identity as an essential

aspect of themselves, an identity that they had not recognised before, and those who experienced their lesbian identity as a shift away from a former heterosexual identity. Thus, Golden theorized that sexual identity, particularly for women, was much more fluid than previous research had suggested.

Similarly, Brown defines lesbian identity as fluid and detached from sexual behaviour and, like Sophie, she asserts that “*the notion of lesbian identity is culture bound as well as time bound*” (Brown, 1995, p. 3 [italics added]). The latter point was brought home compellingly in Faderman’s (1981) historical treatise, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*. Tracing the history of romantic friendships, lesbian experience, and lesbian identity from the 16th century to the present, Faderman has shown that in eras when love between women was condoned, it flourished to the point that “it was virtually universal” (p. 16). Whether or not women engaged in sexual activities remains unclear but the romantic and often erotic expression of love between women was abundantly prevalent in literature, correspondence, and other accounts of daily life up until what Faderman, with a hint of sarcasm, calls the “dangerous feminist threat” of 19th century. Nevertheless, *lesbian identity* is a contemporary phenomenon, as Faderman suggests throughout her historical analysis. Most women who were passionately committed to one another in the 18th and 19th centuries would not have considered themselves lesbians, even though looking at them through 21st century eyes, we might give them that designation.

In the following quotation, Brown makes an implicit but important, I believe, distinction between her definition of what a lesbian is and lesbian identity:

I define a lesbian as a woman whose primary sexual and affectional attractions are to other women and who has a sexual minority identity, that is, recognises through the use of language or symbolic expressions that her sexual orientation places her apart from a sexual mainstream, even though she may not use the term 'lesbian' per se. (For example, she may call herself 'gay,' purposely eschewing the term lesbian, reflecting class and cultural origins where the latter term is more stigmatized than the former. Or she may call herself 'queer,' a more inclusive term arising from postmodern constructions of sexual identity popular in some groups of younger women, in which gender politics has lost the significance it held in an earlier generation of lesbian feminists.) ...Overt sexual expression of lesbian identity is not required....What is core to this definitional model is that the lesbian sees her relationships and connections to women as *primary*, whether acted upon or not, and identifies herself as outside the sexual mainstream (Brown, 1995, pp. 9-10)

In the above definition, Brown describes the fluidity of lesbian identification, the distinction between identity and behaviour, and the primacy of relational connections between women as a determinant of lesbianism. Implicit in Brown's definition is the distinction between her (or anyone's) ascription of the label lesbian onto other women and women's ascribing to themselves a non-heterosexual label. In other words, when I define another woman as a lesbian, or when I define a group of women as lesbians, even as I include myself in that array of others, it is not the same thing as defining myself as a lesbian. This is important because it relates to psychology's attempts to define lesbian identity through biological models, psychodynamic models, or stage models. The label "lesbian" acts as a marker of ascription to self or to others, but in the sense that labels have a both a shared meaning in the cultural group from which they arise and also an

individual meaning that is not necessarily the same for every woman, so must we be alert to this distinction in formulating theories and models of identity. In order to move beyond the limits of stage theories of lesbian identity formation, Brown (1995) suggests we attempt to construct models of identity formation that address the bio-psycho-social elements of identity formation that also have at base an understanding of human sexuality as “a collection of complex and fluid phenomena” (p. 19).

Other issues in lesbian identity formation include heterosexist bias in theory and research and the experience of identity in older lesbians. In a recent issue of *Journal of Social Issues*, devoted to theory and research on women’s sexualities, Garnets and Peplau (2000) observe that a great deal of the current theory regarding women’s sexual identities and experiences rests on norms obtained from male experiences and assumptions that fail to take into account unique facets of women’s lives. Moreover, they suggest:

Although the public commonly categorizes women as heterosexual, lesbian, or perhaps bisexual, women’s lived experiences often defy these neat classification schemes. Some women view themselves as heterosexual but recognize strong attractions to other women. Many middle-aged lesbians had sexual relationships with men in their youth. Two women with similar personal histories may define their sexuality differently. For some women, explicit sexuality is not particularly important; emotional bonding with a partner is what counts. (Garnets & Peplau, 2000, p. 184)

These ideas add to the current discussion about the complexity of sexuality, or sexualities, to use Garnets’ and Peplau’s (2000) preferred description. Kimmel and Sang (1995) further argue that the heterosexist bias in adult development theory that relegates women primarily to traditional family and caretaking roles, and views men solely in terms

of outside work, might be best addressed by considering variables associated with lesbian and gay mid-life development. For example, patterns of work and intimacy seen in heterosexual couples, and changes in women's sense of self pertaining to "empty-nest syndrome" do not yet fit the experience of most mid-life lesbians. As well, the authors cite a study by Charbonneau and Lander (1991) that documented the experiences of 30 women who identified as lesbian between the ages of mid-30s and mid-50s. Many of these women reported feeling sexual for the first time in their lives. According to Kimmel and Sang (1995), "these findings attest to the fact that sexual development does not necessarily proceed according to one defined path" (p. 200).

Therefore, the current postmodern and feminist literatures suggest that theories about sexuality and sexual identity formation need to address the following: a) heterosexist biases and assumptions; b) unique aspects of women's experiences, including those of mid-life lesbians; c) the nature and stability of sexual orientation; and d) development and fluidity of sexual identity.

Cass Revisited. In apparent response to current trends, Cass (1996) recently revised her model, suggesting the viability of bisexuality as a final outcome of sexual identity formation, and paying heed to the social constructionist critique of Western perspectives on identity. The overall structure of her model remains unchanged, however. Although disagreeing with the essentialist perspective on theoretical grounds, Cass reconciled her model as a practical tool in the dealing with clients' psychological

realities. Thus, Cass proposes that mental health practitioners should understand the constructed nature of sexual categories, but she contends that they also need to understand their clients' subjective experience of identity:

Derived from the indigenous psychology, the psychological reality for our clients is that they are "searching for identity," "finding myself," "needing to be a whole person." Their understanding draws on significant Western indigenous concepts such as personal growth, maturity, identity integration, and self-development to direct their needs and personal desires. We must give weight to these experiences. Hence practitioners, on the one hand, must acknowledge the formation of a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity, as a Western phenomenon, that is guided by the directive of Western indigenous psychologies and constructed out of the reciprocal interaction process, and on the other hand, must simply accept their clients' psychological realities as real and significant experiences for them. (Cass, 1996, p. 231)

In placing her focus on the practical utility of her theory, Cass joins the ranks of researcher-practitioners who recognise the impact of the social, historical and perhaps political context underlying our psychological categories and theoretical suppositions, while at the same time seeing as essential, and placing importance on, the experience of those to whom these categories and suppositions apply. Neimeyer (1998) makes a similar case in his marriage of constructionist ideas with constructivist therapy. As an example of the harmonizing of social constructionism and agential constructivism, Neimeyer cites Guidano's (1995) "movieola" therapy technique in which he has clients explore aspects of events as if they were movies that they could rewind, slow down, or zoom in and out. Neimeyer suggests that through this technique clients are able to situate their focus in between their immediate bodily experience of the event, and their symbolically organised representations of it. "Guidano's therapeutic approach thus enables the counsellor to

facilitate a client's evolving self-theory, in keeping with a postmodern view of identity as a fluid process rather than a static process" (Neimeyer, 1998, p. 144). Neimeyer also presents examples of the application of postmodern ideas to family and narrative therapies. However, he concludes on a cautionary note, explaining that to take a social constructionist position as a psychotherapist in fact calls into question basic assumptions about objectivity of diagnoses, professional neutrality, and "it undermines our taken-for-granted belief in stable, singular, and sustainable identities, instead conjuring an image of selves that subtly or dramatically shift with alternations in the conversational context" (p. 146).

These scholars contend that as theorists we must make psychology accountable for the historical and cultural contexts underlying its constructs, but as practitioners who need to recognise human agency and who work within the paradigm of people's subjective experience, such a questioning of our essentialist assumptions is not all that easy, particularly as Cass (1996) points out, considering that we are not alone in holding these assumptions. The belief systems of our clients too have been formed through current ideologies and the dominant moral order. Furthermore, Kitzinger (1995) would probably see these attempts to bring social constructionist thought together with psychological action as examples of weak social constructionism, honourable perhaps but not examples of social construction in action. This is because social constructionism is a critical theory, designed not to eradicate essentialism, but to act as a political watchdog in

a sense, to keep us from taking ourselves and our theories too seriously. As Neimeyer himself points out, the aim of applying postmodern theory to psychology “is to ‘clear a space’ for alternative methods, theories and ‘readings’ of social reality, which collectively offer fresh possibilities for psychological research and practice” (p. 137). In this spirit of reconstruction, I hope the foregoing review of the literature on lesbian identity formation has ‘cleared a space’ with respect to traditional models and, therefore, that the experience and expression of identity in women leaving heterosexuality at mid-life will add to the discussion of the nature of sexual identity.

Coming Out

In general, the discourse on coming out has been subsumed under the identity literature. With respect to stage theories in particular, coming out is defined as an aspect of lesbian/gay/bisexual (LGB) identity formation, usually consisting of one of the later stages of the identity acquisition process and has often been seen as an “external measure of commitment to homosexuality as a way of life” (Troiden, 1989, p. 65). Alternatively and additionally, LGB identity acquisition has been called “coming out.” Therefore, with little exception, the literature on the concept of coming out has been ineluctably bound with identity formation. Having completed my analysis prior to these readings, however, it is my contention that coming out is a process unto itself, interwoven with identity development, of course, but one that is experienced as a singular phenomenon. Therefore, the brief discussion that follows will expand upon four issues that have been

discussed in the literature related to disclosure of one's non-heterosexual identity and that have not been addressed in my discussion of the literature on identity: 1) prejudice and homophobia in mainstream culture; 2) the effect of coming out on the mother-daughter relationship; 3) internalised homophobia and therapy; and 4) coming out at mid-life.

Heterosexism. Despite the seemingly tolerant winds in the air of late, GLBT individuals (i.e., either those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or transsexual, or those who are defined as such by others) continue to face prejudice and homophobia on a daily basis. For example, EGALE Canada, the advocacy organisation and lobby group whose mandate is the advancement of equality and justice for gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people and families in Canada, recently reported:

Customs Canada continues to discriminate against lesbian and gay bookstores, and lesbian and gay materials continue to be banned from public schools. Unequal treatment remains in areas such as age of consent laws, exclusion of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgendered people from hate crimes legislation, and the notorious "homosexual panic" defence, which enables the murderers of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgendered people to seek reduced sentences if their victim "came on" to them. (EGALE Monthly Update, 2001)

Further evidence of homophobic attitudes and discriminatory treatment of non-heterosexuals comes from the academic and legal systems. Gannon (1999) and a colleague studied attitudes towards lesbians and gay men in academia. They surveyed 85 female and 66 male undergraduates, measuring their attitudes towards gay men and lesbians, feminism, pornography, and animal rights on scales that had been psychometrically tested on previous research. Associations between these scales were considered and compared to measures self esteem, using the six-factor Self-Concept

Scale (Stake, 1994, as cited in Gannon, 1999), gender identity, using the Extended Personal Attributes Questionnaire (Spence & Helmreich, 1978, as cited in Gannon, 1999), and cognitive development, using the Social Paradigms Belief Inventory (Kramer, Kahlbaugh, & Goldstein, 1992, as cited in Gannon, 1999). Among their findings were: an association between absolute thinking and negativity towards gays and lesbians; a tendency for men to express more hostile attitudes than women towards gay men and, to some extent, towards lesbians; and the observation that women who tend to see themselves as strong, competent, creative and talented tended to display positive attitudes towards lesbians and gay men.

Carleton (1999) looked at the way that lesbians and gay men are depicted in legal discourse in the United States. Carleton critically analysed the representation of gay men and lesbians in four federal and state court cases in the United States that took place between 1986 and 1996. He determined that although some changes are beginning to be seen in the attitudes of some courts, often lesbians and gay men continue to be defined by negative legal imagery that overly emphasises the role of sex in defining a person's character. Carleton contends that the current trend towards a tolerant view of homosexuals in legal rhetoric and policies is a step towards affirmative rhetoric and policies, and that the latter will require articulation of concerns and lobbying on the part of supporters and members of the gay community.

The impact of prejudice and discrimination on the person is powerful. It shuts us down; it shuts us up. It leads to a multitude of fears, of losing friends, support, love and, in the arena of work, losing jobs, promotions, or credibility. In her ethnographic study of lesbian teachers in Ontario, Madiha Didi Khayatt explored the experience of being both a lesbian and a teacher. Using an open-ended style of questioning, she interviewed 18 lesbian teachers, whom she had recruited by word of mouth. Khayatt points out that the group of lesbian teachers she interviewed was not intended to be a representative sample, and therefore, no statistical generalisations could be made. Instead, her study was “more an institutional ethnography that takes the everyday world of lesbian teachers as its problematic” (Khayatt, 1992, p. 105). She asked her participants about the kinds of experiences they had encountered that might be related to their lesbianism and how they coped with being a lesbian in the school system.

Khayatt points out that teachers are expected to model and reflect current cultural standards:

It must be remembered that the publicly supported school system here in Ontario (for example) is considered *in loco parentis*, acting in lieu of the parents, who are presumed to be heterosexual, heading a nuclear family, and adhering in other ways to the hegemonic ideology. A gay or lesbian teacher, by definition, stands as a contradiction to the concept of *in loco parentis* since it is always assumed that homosexuality precludes parenting. In addition, the notion of the lesbian or gay teacher is potentially subversive in that she or he would always be suspected of attempting to recruit or convert youngsters to a homosexual way of life and/or politics. (Khayatt, 1992, p. 171)

Heterosexist social sanctions in the education system kept the teachers Khayatt interviewed from disclosing their lesbian identity and made them fearful of having their

lesbianism become known. They felt vulnerable in the face of gay/lesbian jokes or comments by students and, perhaps more poignantly, unable to counsel or serve as positive role models to gay and lesbian youth who were struggling with their own coming out issues. Official anti-discriminatory policies on the part of the board of education and/or the teacher's union did little to dispel these teachers' fears because of the overwhelming heterosexist bias in the teaching profession. As Khayatt suggests, the loss of their job is not necessarily the biggest fear that teachers have to face. "They could forfeit their 'authority' in the classroom, their credibility with their peers, their 'appropriateness' with the parents, and their legitimacy with the administration" (p. 206). Khayatt's study highlights the invisibility of lesbians in professions such as teaching that are regulated more strictly than other professions by heterosexist normative standards.

Utilising the framework of Ken Wilber's (1995, 1996) transpersonal meta-theory of spiritual evolution as the location for a pluralistic perspective, Pardie (1999) presents a theoretical analysis of heterosexism simultaneously on individual and cultural levels. She points out that the overwhelming majority of people in this culture grew up having their sense of self shaped by heterosexist attitudes, which on a broader cultural level have been shaped by fundamentalist religion. Arguing against the heterosexist bias that she sees as underlying homophobia and in favour of psychological and spiritual growth, Pardie points out: "Natural variation in sexual orientation and/or in the actual experiences of erotic attraction across the lifespan are obscured by the sharply defined boundaries of

stereotypic categories” (p. 102). Moreover, Pardie argues that “maintaining a self-image congruent with heterosexual stereotypes requires the psychological distancing of thoughts, feelings, or interests inconsistent with social prescriptions” (p. 102). Thus, in order to transcend heterosexism, Pardie suggests that we must set aside our introjected beliefs and get in touch with our authentic inner experiencing, not unlike the mandate of the humanistic psychotherapies.

For Pardie (1999) identifying as gay or lesbian involves just such an experience of “disidentifying with socially conditioned worldviews which do not fit the truth and meaning of subjective experience” (p. 103). The existential challenge of this quest is the loss of heterosexual privilege; going against cultural taboos; and being rewarded with an opening up of “an inner and outer space of relational possibilities, erotic and nonerotic, which did not exist from the perspective of the old worldview” (p. 104). Finally, Pardie predicts that all people can benefit from such an opening up: “ultimately, the ideologies underlying heterosexism devalue all relationships” (p. 105).

Relational Model and Coming Out to Mother. Heterosexism also plays a particular role in a lesbian’s coming out to her mother. Rosen (1997) describes the impact of coming out on the mother-daughter relationship in terms of the Stone Center model of relational human development. The three concepts “mutual empathy”, “relational authenticity” and “relational differentiation” are seen as the cornerstones of development of a self-in-relation to significant others. Mutual empathy refers to the

subjective inner experience of mutual attunement between self and other that begins during infancy with the early mother-daughter bond. According to Stone Center theorists, this early relationship is defined as “an experience of emotional and cognitive *intersubjectivity*: the ongoing, intrinsic inner awareness and responsiveness to the continuous existence of the other or others and the expectation of mutuality in this regard” (Surrey, 1991, p. 61).

The relational model draws heavily upon the writings of Carol Gilligan (1982), and Nancy Chodorow (1978) with particular emphasis on the latter’s object-relations theory. Miller postulated in 1976 that women conceptualise their sense of self around affiliation (as cited in Surrey, 1991). This sentiment was echoed by Gilligan, “women not only define themselves in a context of human relationship but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care” (1982, p. 17). The self-in-relation model regards women’s affiliative nature as a basic tenet and further proposes that relational being is the primary experience of a woman’s sense of self. According to Kaplan, Gleason and Klein (1991), the following process occurs within the dynamic of the early relationship between mother and child:

...women’s core self structure emerges out of experience of a relational process. Beginning with the earliest mother-daughter interactions, this relational sense of self develops out of women’s involvement in progressively complex relationships, characterized by mutual identifications, attention to the interplay between each other’s emotions, and caring about the process and activity of relationship. (p. 123)

Whereas, boys in our culture seem to be given the implicit message of, “a basic relational stance of disconnection and disidentification” (Surrey, 1991, p. 56), girls apparently tend to develop two expectations: 1) that their own sense of self will be enhanced through psychological connection with others, and 2) that psychological growth occurs through mutually shared experience. These expectations become schemas about self-in-relation that carry forward into adult relationships.

Extending from the relational model, relational authenticity is defined by Surrey as the “ongoing challenge to feel emotionally real, connected, vital, clear and purposeful in a relationship” (as cited in Rosen, 1997, p. 245). Finally, relationship differentiation is defined by Surrey as “referring to a process which encompasses increasing levels of complexity, choice, fluidity, and articulation within the context of human development” (as cited in Rosen, 1997, p. 245). These three components of the relational model combine to create a developmental challenge, first between mother and daughter and later between a woman and her other significant relations, that consists of preserving connection while fostering each other’s growth and change (Rosen, 1997).

The relational model challenges traditional theories of human development that predict autonomy, separation and individuation as the goal of a mature self-concept. Having its genesis in the postmodern notion of constructed selves and fluid identities, the relational self offers an understanding of the cultural difficulties inherent in coming out within the context of the mother-daughter relationship. In terms of self-in-relation theory,

coming out to one's mother has a tremendous impact on the mother-daughter relationship because of heterosexism. As Rosen contends, to the extent that a mother brings her own heterosexist assumptions to her task of mothering, she is in danger of failing her lesbian daughter just as her daughter is in danger of failing her. This is because in relational terms, for a heterosexual mother to be truly empathic towards her lesbian daughter, she would need to fail in her major culturally-defined task of passing the baton of the traditional heterosexual role to her daughter. Similarly, for the lesbian daughter to be truly empathic to her mother, she would need to a) "disavow certain internal realities," and b) "remain inauthentic in the relationship" with her mother (Rosen, 1997, p. 248). Rosen puts it quite strongly: "Cultural requirements make it almost impossible for mother and daughter to adapt and grow and maintain connection in the face of these particular changes in the developmental realm of sexuality" (p. 251).

Internalised Homophobia and Therapy. Heterosexism has also been described as harmful to the individual on an intra-personal level, in the form of internalised homophobia. Gonsiorek (1995) offers the following definition:

Children who will eventually be bisexual or homosexual often develop an awareness of being different at an early age. They may not understand the sexual nature or precise meaning of their differentness, but they soon learn it is negatively regarded. As these individuals develop and mature, they reach a fuller understanding of the nature of this difference and the considerable negative societal reaction to it. These negative feelings may be incorporated into their self-image, resulting in varying degrees of *internalized homophobia*. (p. 32)

In her review of the literature on internalised homophobia, Johnson (1999) underscored the association between "the system of negativity towards homosexuals" (p.

65) and the psychological cost to the gay or lesbian individual. In a nutshell, it can keep us from thinking that we deserve respect and tolerance and it negatively affects the situation and timing of coming out. Citing current concerns about the potentially pathologizing implications of doing therapy with LGB clients (Kitzinger, 1996; Perkins, 1996), Johnson tentatively outlines “a model for increasing therapeutic efficacy” (p. 73) for gay and lesbian clients who seek therapy for internalised homophobia. In this model, Johnson articulates three goals of effective therapy outcome in working with internalised homophobia:

a) to address the impact of internalized homophobia on the establishment of a working therapy alliance; b) to increase awareness of internalized homophobic attitudes in the context of the client’s level of functioning and the anticipated treatment goals; and c) to increase insight into connections between internalized homophobia and factors such as external stressors, personal history, and self-esteem. (1999, p. 73)

To the extent that these represent important aims of therapy for any type of internalised problematic issue, Johnson’s goals appear to be consistent with good therapy. However, I think therapists also have to be conscious of the external source and ubiquitous nature of this particular form of internal distress, so that we don’t inadvertently blame the victim. Falco also suggests that therapists take a cautious approach when dealing with internalised homophobia: “Therapist and patient may check for unresolved doubts the patient harbors about the healthiness of her homosexuality, what stresses she encounters because of her love, and what her beliefs are about lesbianism” (1996, p. 410). Because

we are currently at a crossroads in terms of social acceptance of GLBT communities, caution seems to be the best approach to therapeutic determinations.

Mid-life. The mid-life coming out process has received very little attention in the literature, particularly the consideration of women's experience. Up until very recently, I had not been able to find anything in the literature that described the experience of women who left heterosexuality at mid-life. One book has been published on the subject, Karol Jensen's (1999) *Lesbian Epiphanies: Women Coming Out in Later Life*. Jensen interviewed 25 women (in the United States) who had been married to men and who currently identified as lesbian or bisexual. Her respondents ranged in age from 28 to 58 and therefore represented a wider than mid-life age range. The primary goal of her work was to elucidate the processes involved in the construction and deconstruction of identity (see Jensen, 1999, Introduction). To meet this goal, she asked her participants three questions concerning: 1) significant events in their life history; 2) their sexual development; and 3) their descriptions of the moment they knew something in their lives had to change.

From a qualitative analysis of the interviews, Jensen created an heuristic model of the combined cognitive, affective, and behavioural processes of self-discovery that her participants underwent. The model is structured around six domains of experience: "sexual information, marriage, establishing identity, allowing oneself personal awareness, role models, and taking steps to change" (1999, p. 11). Combining her results with the

current literature on sexuality and identity, Jensen suggests that because girls in the United States are discouraged from seeing themselves as sexual beings at all and because it can be shameful to allow oneself to experience one's sexual feelings during adolescence, it is, therefore, even more difficult for a young woman to define herself in terms of a non-heterosexual identity. Moreover, Jensen's participants alluded to the processes of socialization and heterosexism as playing an important role in their process of gender orientation and in their decisions to marry, whether or not they perceived of themselves as heterosexual. As well, Jensen points out that the lack of lesbian role models exacerbated the difficulty in her respondents' ability to form a lesbian or bisexual self-identification. Jensen suggests that in order for women to develop a non-heterosexual identity, they need to develop several layers of knowledge about themselves and their own bodies, about the cultural determinants of the marriage contract, about the influences of heterosexism and sexism on their lives, and about their capacity for self-determination within the confines of a patriarchal society.

In the more general literature on coming out, the disregard of women's experience is likely due to the presumption that has existed for decades in the human sciences that research and theory generated by and with men can be generalised to women. The paucity of information on coming out in general may be due to the fact that "coming out" has been defined as or subsumed under the topic of identity formation. In addition, it may be difficult to operationalize coming out for research purposes, because of its multifarious

nature. Although the term has an apparently coherent meaning in common usage, in fact it is a slippery notion when one attempts to pin it down with formal terminology. To clarify, consider the example of determining when a person is “out.” To how many people, and in what places, does a person have to disclose her or his sexual identity in order to be considered “out”? In what ways do people who are coming out act that differentiates them from people who are in the closet?

Lynch and Murray (2000) examined the experience of coming out as lesbian and gay parents and stepparents. The authors addressed decisions and consequences of coming out to significant others. They operationalized coming out by considering the relationship of those to whom their participants were out: “we considered a person to be ‘out’ when she or he had self-disclosed to family members or reported that someone else had told the children” (p. 9). In a qualitative analysis of interviews with 23 gay and lesbian couples, Lynch and Murray found flexible child-based patterns of disclosure and age-related patterns of acceptance in the children. Decisions about coming out were primarily based upon three considerations: the age at which parents thought children could best understand and handle this information, not wishing to cause their children undue stress, and custody fears. Children’s acceptance of their parents’ self-disclosures was primarily age related, with adolescence apparently being the most difficult period for children to accept the news of a parent’s gay or lesbian identity and very young children being least likely to respond negatively. Lynch and Murray found that there were other

factors besides age that affected children's acceptance, including situational factors such as children's friends coming into the home, and temporary alterations in children's display of acceptance. At these times, parents tended to defer to their children's needs. The authors observed that "when lesbian and gay parents feel that their homosexuality interferes with their children's sense of well being, these parents accommodate to their children" (p. 12).

Not all mid-life lesbians (or gay men) have children. The process of coming out at mid-life, a virtually unexplored territory, is described by Reid (1995) as a "minority developmental experience" as opposed to "a normative developmental event that is anticipated by the individual" and "recognized as a developmental marker by the larger culture" (p. 219). The older lesbian will not find her experiences echoed, nor any advice given on coming out to her family, co-workers, or friends, in the tales of life's passages emerging out of the dominant culture. The experiences involved in coming out often require "a major expansion of the self" (Reid, 1995, p. 219) and the support of a "family" of gay and lesbian friends (Weston, 1991). Thus, Kimmel and Sang (1995) observe that mid-life lesbians depend on similar aged friends for support often to a much greater extent that they rely upon their families of origin. More research is needed on the lives and experiences of mid-life lesbians in order to fully comprehend the impact of coming out on this stage of a woman's life.

Psychological Perspectives on Lesbian Couples and Families

The psychology literature on lesbian couples and families has mushroomed in the past 15 years, under the two general topics “relationships” and “counselling”. Regarding relationships, several authors have endeavoured to compare lesbian (and gay male) relationships to heterosexual relationships. Murphy (1997) cautions against comparisons that might add to pathological perceptions and discriminatory practices. However, different authors contend that comparing same-sex couples with opposite-sex couples on patterns of relating may help contribute to the understanding of cultural and gender determinants of partners’ relating behaviours (Julien, Arellano & Turgeon, 1997). Others suggest that such comparisons can dispel myths and stereotypes, such as perceived lack of happiness in lesbian and gay relationships (Peplau & Spalding, 2000). Peplau and Cochran (1980, as cited in Peplau & Spalding, 2000) matched groups of heterosexuals, lesbians and gay men on demographic variables and compared them on love and liking scales. No significant differences were found in relationship quality among the three groups and both lesbians and gay men reported positive, close and satisfying relationships with their partners.

In a 1988 study, Zacks, Green, and Marrow found that lesbian couples reported significantly higher levels of cohesion, adaptability and satisfaction than heterosexual couples. More recently, Kurdek (1994) began the first wave of a longitudinal study comparing lesbian, gay male and heterosexual couples on relationship satisfaction. In a

2000 follow-up study, focusing on commitment, Kurdek found that in both same-sex and opposite-sex couples' maintenance of close relationships appears to occur through an interaction of forces that both attract individuals to the relationship and constrain individuals from leaving the relationship.

Relationship commitment is one of the topics that has received a fair amount of attention during the past decade in gay and lesbian couples research. Focusing on his subset sample of same-sex relationships, Kurdek (1995) reported that changes in relationship commitment over time were related to changes in attachment, autonomy and equality in the relationship. Unfortunately, although Kurdek divides his samples according to gender, the theory underlying his methods and constructs fails to challenge traditional gender assumptions and it lumps the experience of lesbians with that of gay males. Little research in the area of relationship commitment has paid any regard to the effects of unique lesbian experiences. One exception is Slater (1994) who examined challenges to lesbian couplehood when one partner has an affair, and another example is Connolly's (1999) exploration of strength, resiliency and longevity in 10 long-term lesbian couples.

A topic that seems to have received the bulk of attention with regard to lesbian relationships is the concept of fusion, or *merging*. Fusion has been defined as follows:

In lesbian love relationships, an intense intimacy between two partners that causes them to be overinvolved with each other. The result is that the differences between the two seem to be lessened, and each partner's ability to maintain an independent identity is weakened. Often blamed for lesbian bed

death, or loss of sexual desire. (The National Museum & Archive of Lesbian and Gay History, 1996, p. 83)

Earlier views of fusion, seen in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships, were very negative and tended to pathologize lesbian relationships, as the above quotation implies, and women in general. For example, Burch (1982) suggested that women are pulled towards a loss of boundaries in their intimate relationships and that lesbians are more likely to succumb to fusion than heterosexuals. Pearlman (1988) proposed that social sanctions against lesbian relationships prolonged lesbian couple merger. More recently, theorists and researchers have suggested that women's capacity for connectedness and intimacy has been constructed through the lens of the traditional male model of development that values autonomy and individuation and that has pathologized closeness and intimacy in lesbian relationships, and in women's intimate relationships in general (Jordan, 1997; Mencher, 1997; Miller, 1991; Surrey, 1991). Several authors have recommended that this perspective be re-evaluated and that further research focus on women's capacity for closeness, intimacy and mutuality (Hill, 1999; Finch, 1999; Mencher, 1997; Roper, 1997).

The concept of intimacy in same-sex and heterosexual couples has been considered by a number of investigators, although the operational definition of intimacy has fluctuated over the years and continues to remain somewhat inconsistent. Helgeson, Shaver and Dyer (1987) critiqued a priori conceptualizations of intimacy based on measures of "self-disclosure." They suggested that intimacy was more realistically

operationalized through measures of “appreciation”, “affection”, and “warmth” (Helgeson, Shaver & Dyer, 1987). More recently, intimacy has been examined through the categories of “communication,” “romantic love,” and “supportiveness” (Rosenbluth & Steil, 1995). In addition, it has been subdivided by emotional, recreational, sexual, and social domains (Schreurs & Buunk, 1994) and one’s capacity for intimacy (Rosenbluth & Steil, 1995). Alternatively, it has been defined loosely in terms of survey responses (Kotulski, 1996). The research on intimacy is beginning to offer some potentially worthwhile findings. For example emotional intimacy which is valued more highly by women than men appears to be more common in lesbian relationships than heterosexual relationships (Schreurs & Buunk, 1994) and relational intimacy may be facilitated by a balance of power in the relationship (Rosenbluth & Steil, 1995). However, until the concept of intimacy is defined more consistently, a certain amount of ambiguity remains regarding the contributions of these findings to our knowledge of lesbian couples.

Another topic that has been the focus of lesbian couple theory and research is the quality of the relationship. Variables that have been related to satisfaction/dissatisfaction in lesbian relationships are: internalised homophobia (Downey & Friedman, 1995); relationship equity, gender roles, personal autonomy, and role conflict (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Reilly & Lynch, 1990); coming out (Jordan & Deluty, 2000); and the importance of rituals and narrative (Hall, 2000; Pace, 1999). More general themes that are emerging in the literature on lesbian relationships pertain to the current debate over

lesbian and gay marriages (Halvorsen, 1998; Luetzen, 1998), attempts to gain spousal benefits (Schneider & O'Neill, 1993), and challenges of interracial and interclass differences (Pearlman, 1996).

Counselling or therapy with lesbian couples is the other general topic that has seen a significant increase in the psychology literature in the past 15 years. Narrative therapy (Hall, 2001; Laird, 1994), Adlerian therapy (Fisher, 1993), Kohut's self psychology (Mitchell, 1988), and family systems therapy (Scrivner & Eldridge, 1995) are among the modalities that have been prescribed for lesbian couples. Because the notion of fusion and merger have played a role in the pathological view of lesbian relationships, it has been a central focus of therapy until recently (Burch, 1982; Green, Bettinger & Zacks, 1996; Pardie & Herb, 1997). More current issues arising in lesbian therapy include the still rarely addressed spectre of domestic violence and lesbian partner abuse (Goglucci, 2000; Morrow & Hawxhurst, 1989), and alcohol and chemical dependency and abuse (Anderson, 1996; Wetchler, Nelson, McCollum, Trepper & Lewis, 1994). Additionally, a number of factors have been identified as particular to treating lesbian couples, and it is suggested by the authors that therapists have a working knowledge of these issues: (internal and external) homophobia, invisibility, and minority group status (Igartua, 1998; Marvin & Miller, 2000; Mencher, 1997). Igartua (1998) cautions "that therapists should not use heterosexual standards when evaluating lesbian relationships because this may lead to misconstruance of a couple's emotional intensity as pathological" (p. 391).

Finally, issues pertaining to ethnicity, culture and racism and the double-edged sword faced by couples who are both lesbian and members of a visible minority are beginning to be addressed as issues in psychotherapy (Greene & Boyd-Franklin, 1996)

The fall/winter 1999 issue of the *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* was devoted entirely to lesbian mothering. The second edition of a sociology text, *Canadian Families: Diversity, Conflict, and Change*, includes a chapter entitled “Lesbians and Gay Men Inside and Outside Families” (O’Brien & Goldberg, 2000). These are only two examples, both Canadian, of the growing literature on lesbian and gay families that has emerged following what is colloquially known as the “lesbian baby boom,” a term used by Pies (1987, as cited in Falk, 1994) to describe the steadily increasing number of lesbian-headed households in North America since the 1970s. Gay fathers are apparently also on the increase (Barret & Robinson, 1994) but their numbers are smaller, probably because of homophobic attitudes on the part of the legal system related to both custody issues and adoption (as well as the obvious biological impediment). For the purposes of this writing, I will be addressing lesbian households.

In 1995, Miriam Kaufman, a paediatrician and Susan Dundas, a child psychiatrist, cited the need for more research on lesbian-headed families. Their rationale was legal and psychological. Pointing out the sluggish pace at which Canada’s legal system was responding to calls for legislation to protect the rights of gay and lesbian families, custody losses, the lack of legal status of non-biological parents, the Income Tax Act that defines

spouse as someone of the opposite sex, and the psychological effects of these issues on families, as well as the effects of living in the closet and of internalised homophobia, Kaufman and Dundas (1995) called for a redefinition of family and a research programme designed to address lesbian-headed households.

With respect to legal and social issues, a number of changes have taken place in Canada and the United States since 1995, yet there is still much that remains to be done. In our last census (2001), the Canadian government allowed gay men and lesbians to indicate that they lived with a same-sex partner. This will allow, for the first time in history, the possibility of some realistic statistics on Canadian gay and lesbian families. On August 15, 2001, the Ontario public elementary school teachers union voted on behalf of encouraging school boards to allocate funding towards educational material about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender subject matter (Capannelli, 2001). As exciting as these changes are on one level, they are bounded by the continued social realities heterosexism on other levels. "Inside and outside the legal system, lesbian [mothers] and gay fathers continually deal with a series of negative stereotypes that social-science evidence has completely discredited" (O'Brien & Goldberg, 2000, p. 134). Furthermore, stereotyping and "marginalization of lesbian families is not always experienced as blatant or aggressive homophobia. Often it is experienced as a sense of discomfort in teachers and administrators, a feeling that cognitively they want to deal appropriately with the

issue, but are being confronted with challenges to their own deeply-held ideas and values about sexuality and family” (Epstein, 1999, pp. 69-70).

Legal/Psychological Outlaws. According to Falk (1994) the major problem that American lesbians and lesbian-headed families have in the courts is homophobia in the form of stereotypic assumptions about lesbian lifestyles. As soon as a woman’s non-heterosexuality is noted, it becomes the focus of all legal proceedings from that point on, particularly in child custody cases where the best interests of the child are usually considered solely from the standpoint of heterosexist ideology. In her survey of the relevant literature, Falk came across two broad assumptions made by the courts about lesbian mothers: 1) they are mentally ill and 2) they are less maternal than heterosexual mothers. Furthermore, Falk noted that these assumptions are related to concerns that children raised in lesbian households are more likely to be molested, concerns about children’s gender role development and sexual orientation, and concerns about stigma-induced trauma to the child. Similarly, in a discussion of the Canadian judicial position on lesbian mothers, Rowe (2001) argues that lesbianism is what is really on trial in these custody cases. In addition, Radbord (1999), a lawyer, distinguishes between heterosexism at the different levels of the judicial system in Canada:

Whatever success lesbians have achieved at the supreme court of Canada in pursuing abstract equality rights, lower courts sometimes participate in and reflect the systematic homophobia of our society. I have heard a judge remark about a lesbian parent “I have no problem with her as a mother, but with her life” and “she chose this lifestyle and she can live with the consequences.” In that case the judge ordered the stay-at-home mother to leave the matrimonial home, the children to be primarily resident with the father, and the mother’s limited

access time with the children to be held outside the presence of her girlfriend.
(Radbord, 1999, p. 87)

Do psychologists fare any better than the courts in their attitudes towards lesbian families? Crawford, McLeod, Zamboni and Jordan (1999) had 388 American professional psychologists rate (one of six) vignettes about a couple wishing to adopt a 5-year old child. When the child was female, they found a greater proportion of the psychologists who rated heterosexual vignettes recommended custody than those psychologists who rated the vignettes describing gay male and lesbian couples. These authors conclude that systematic training on sexual diversity should be employed by psychologists who plan to offer services to the gay and lesbian community.

According to O'Brien and Goldberg (2000), three negative stereotypes that lesbians continue to face inside the Canadian legal system, and in Canadian society more generally, are: 1) children raised by lesbians will become lesbian or gay; 2) children in lesbian-headed families will not develop "appropriate" gender identity (i.e., one's sense of maleness or femaleness) or "appropriate" behaviour associated with their gender; and 3) children will suffer emotional damage due to the stigma of living in a lesbian-headed household.

As regards the increased likelihood that children of lesbian parents will become gay, O'Brien and Goldberg (2000) citing Kirkpatrick, Smith & Roy (1981) and citing Golombok, Spencer & Rutter (1983) observe that investigations to date suggest that there is no difference in the proportion of gay or lesbian children in lesbian-headed households

as compared to children reared by heterosexual parents. Golombok and Tasker (1999) reviewed more current studies and reported similar conclusions. On the one hand, this information is useful to lesbian and gay parents in making headway in the legal system. On the other hand, and from a postmodern perspective, this attempt by researchers to refute heterosexist concerns by convincing mainstream society that lesbian parents won't reproduce their deviance through their children serves to bolster essentialist arguments about sexuality, rather than to promote affirmation of diversity. In a society that truly accepted sexual diversity, there simply would not be a concern about the numbers of gay men and lesbians.

Considering the belief that children in lesbian-headed families will not develop appropriate gender identity or gender behaviour, O'Brien and Goldberg point to studies that "show that when these children are compared with children of heterosexual-headed families and control groups, no significant differences emerge in their development of gender-role identities and gender-role behaviours (Golombok, Spencer & Rutter, 1983; Green, 1978, 1982; Hoeffler, 1981)" (as cited in O'Brien and Goldberg, 2000, p. 134). Again, whether or not children will develop "appropriate" gender-role identities and gender-role behaviours seem to be the wrong questions. As families headed by lesbians and gay men continue to break new ground, and in the course of attempting to redress homophobia and intolerance, we need to reconsider the social and perhaps the political meanings behind what we currently consider appropriate. Moreover, the potential for

more flexible models of gender identity exists in relation to family diversity. For example, Wright (1998) recently completed an ethnographic study of five “lesbian step families”, so termed as to indicate a family consisting of two women who define themselves as lesbians, and at least one child from a former relationship. In Wright’s account of the struggles of creating a matriarchal system in the face of patriarchal society, and of dealing with the myriad stresses and strains of family life within a heterosexist environment, she puts forward the notion that these families represent models of gender flexibility:

Male dominance and privilege teaches boys to discount, fear, even hate what is defined as female. It teaches girls to acquiesce, to give up, to accept a lesser role in the world. Lesbian families, not through any particular virtue or superiority, avoid reinforcing male privilege simply because they are two female *heads* of household. (Wright, 1998, p. 197)

Wright observed that the mothers in her study also actively worked against sexism and heterosexism, and that they encouraged their children of both sexes to develop themselves “based on acceptance of human traits, rather than gender-specific traits” (1998, p. 197). Similar patterns of attending to the person of the growing child, rather than the gender, are to be found in recently compiled stories of lesbian motherhood in the United States (Wells, 1997) and in Canada (O’Reilly, 1999). The mothers whose stories are told in these anthologies pay tribute to the importance of looking beyond prescribed social norms and standards in creating and defining family.

Finally, with regard to the concern in legal and social arenas that children will be emotionally scarred due to the stigma of living with a lesbian parent, O’Brien and

Goldberg (2000) highlight the literature that opposes this claim. They also point out the erroneousness of this line of questioning, stating that “this argument suggests that only people from powerful social groups should have children, for only their children would be socially accepted—a racist, anti-immigrant, and class-based argument” (p. 134). Thus, instead of using social stigma as a weapon against lesbian mothers, these authors suggest that the legal system should be working towards eradicating it. In the field of psychology, more germane explorations than the cause of homosexuality or the maternal ability of lesbians might come from focusing on people’s experience of sexuality, including hitherto unexplored domains, such as the role of the non-biological co-parent, health issues of mid-life and aging lesbians, and the vast experience of sexuality, including the experience of leaving heterosexuality at mid-life.

Chapter 3

Methodology

In making the decision about methodology, two considerations emerged from my deliberations. First, the research question is at once highly personal and highly exploratory. Therefore, it was necessary to get as close to the data as possible, but at the same time to be able to draw back and take a more analytical stance, in order to attempt to fully explore and to generate an understanding of the material. Second, the experiences and phenomena of my research interest could not have been readily teased out of experiments, nor for that matter out of other methods, such as surveys and longitudinal studies, that fall out of traditional, positivistic empiricism. In large measure, my resolve regarding methodological appropriateness was fostered by the relatively recent works of Toukmanian and Rennie (1992), and Rennie (1994b, 1995a, 1995b, 1996 & 2000a).

To be more specific, the traditional methods of social science research, borrowed from the realm of natural science at a time when positivism and foundationalism reigned as dominant ideologies (Rennie, 1995b, 2000a), cultivate an approach to psychological phenomena that places the researcher on the outside of the phenomenon of interest. The argument has been made quite convincingly that when the object of study is some aspect of being human (like, for example, identity) this subject-object dualism is not attainable, since as human researchers we cannot extricate ourselves from our human beingness (Rennie, 1994b, 1995b, 2000a). From the standpoint of the philosophies underlying the

natural and human sciences, Rennie argues for qualitative methods as a more appropriate venue for human science inquiry, in part because qualitative methods “address the real world external to the researcher in which the relativity created by the subjectivity of the researcher is acknowledged explicitly” (Rennie, 1995b, p. 49), and also because of the aim of coming to an understanding of human phenomena, as opposed to the natural science aim of demonstration of truth (Rennie, 1994b). Following Rennie’s (1995a, 2000b) postmodernist call for a human science approach to social science, the current study employed a qualitative methodology.

Furthermore, the current study was carried out in the spirit of theory generation as opposed to theory verification (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As such, it has culminated in an interpretative and descriptive account of the lived experience of heterosexual-to-homosexual life transition of my participants. A grounded analysis was applied to the transcribed interviews. The overall approach to this inductive method originally proposed by Glaser and Strauss is the “analytic procedure of constant comparison”: an “explicit coding procedure” married with “theory development,” revealing the general purpose of the “constant comparative method” which is the “creative generation of theory” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 102). Thus, my analysis involved interpreting, defining and exploring emerging patterns in the interview material and labelling the concordant categories and their properties, in order to build a theoretical understanding (or model) of the type of change process that I was investigating. Included in this process

was the generation of a large number of memos. Memos are documents that range in size from a few words to more than a page of text that describe the researcher's thoughts, speculations, interpretations and biases in relation to the emerging categories and their links. As well, memos can include any a priori knowledge that the researcher has. Memos are incorporated into later stages of the analysis, as appropriate. My grounded analysis followed the general procedures outlined in Glaser and Strauss (1967), and it was conducted in accordance with the logic of justification outlined by Rennie (1998, 2000a).

Rennie (1998) observed that following their earlier introduction of grounded theory methodology and its success in the social sciences, Glaser and Strauss later developed different ideas about the way in which grounded theory should be conducted. Although many of the procedures within the method remained the same, some significant differences arose, which, according to Rennie (1998, 2000a), had more to do with the ways in which the authors' appealed to scientific principles and their diverging opinions about the logic of inquiry than on procedural questions. Given that the value of the method rests on the logic of its assumptions, these differences might be seen as potential threats to the value of the grounded theory method in the human sciences. However, Rennie (1998, 2000a) makes a potent argument in favour of a viable logic of justification for grounded analysis, which he calls methodical hermeneutics. By applying this logic of inquiry when we are doing grounded analyses, Rennie suggests that we can feel confident that we are doing good empirical and rigorous work.

Without attempting to delve into the philosophy behind Rennie's arguments, it is important to note that grounded theory is based upon different assumptions than quantitative methods, which are derived from a natural science approach to human science (Rennie, 1996). According to Rennie, the logic supporting grounded theory balances realism with relativism. In other words, methodical hermeneutics recognises that different perspectives on the part of different researchers are inevitable, and furthermore that this will mean differing results. However, the differences are not expected to be divergent to the point of solipsism, because there are also commonalities in judgement (Rennie, 1998) within the "community of inquirers" (1998, p. 107). Therefore, as long as one's categories are grounded in the data, the results will be judged credible as they "ring true" to other researchers, participants and others within this domain of common understanding.

Rennie (2000a) sees grounded theory methodology as an inductive approach to hermeneutics; it is empirical as well as interpretational. Through a process of induction, meaning is abstracted from and applied to bits of text (i.e., an interpretation is made) compared to other bits of text, and then higher-order categories are abstracted from the initial ones in the creation of an overall theoretical understanding or conceptualization of the entire text. Induction keeps the researcher close to the data and therefore "justifies the assertion that claims to understanding are grounded" (p. 109, 1998). Furthermore, the induction is self-correcting because of its immersion in the data in an interdependence

with abduction, where abduction was defined by Peirce (1965, as cited in Rennie, 1998, 2000a), in his theory of inference, as involving creativity and imagination in the formulation of a hypothesis. Hence, according to Rennie (1998) abduction (i.e., the generation of categories or hypotheses about the meaning of text) is tested by induction (i.e., through the constant comparative method) which leads to further abduction, and which is tested by further induction, making induction self-correcting.

Moreover, because qualitative methodology is based upon hermeneutic assumptions as opposed to the positivistic assumptions of quantitative methodology, Rennie (1995b, 2000a) advises against imposing positivistic standards on qualitative methods. In fact, Rennie (1995a) argues that confusion arises when the rhetoric of natural science is called upon to evaluate the returns of qualitative methods (a confusion that Rennie suggests may be less prevalent when qualitative researchers, or human scientists, have built a substantial rhetoric of their own). One example of the imposition of positivistic standards on qualitative research concerns theory verification.

Initially, Glaser and Strauss (1967) presented grounded theory as a method for generating theory that was grounded in the data, and which later could be subjected to experimental verification. Rennie (2000a), calling upon the philosophical schools of pragmatism, hermeneutics, and Peirce's theory of inference, argues that the grounded theory method is tenable on its own, without further verification or validation, as a method for developing a conceptual understanding of a psychological phenomenon. Thus,

verification, as a tenet of the hypothetico-deductive approach and positivist thinking, does not belong in the realm of grounded theory, because grounded theory is about producing theories about the *meaning* of human experience. This meaning is determined in the movement between subjectivity and reflexivity of the participant and the researcher, and “it is very difficult to preserve the subjective by appealing to the objectivism of natural science methodology (Rennie, 1998, p. 109).

Another example of imposing positivist standards unnecessarily is making interjudge agreement a necessary requirement in the development of grounded analysis categories. Rennie states:

Because it is the activity of grounding that provides contact with the data representing the phenomenon under study, it is important that qualitative researchers not delegate the analytic work...In any event, even if the case is satisfactorily made that collegial co-construction of an understanding contributes to rigor, it should not be considered a condition of rigor (1995b).

Rigor in qualitative research requires balance (Rennie, 1995a, 1995b, & 2000a) between realism and relativism: to err too far on the side of realism puts us in danger of lapsing into foundationalism, and if we move too far towards relativism we risk solipsistic subjectivism. The individual researcher generating categories in a grounded analysis is similarly faced with the prospect of striking a balance between being too grounded and tied to the data, so that an unwieldy number of categories is created through which no coherent understanding can be made versus being too thematic and therefore moving away from the data entirely. Plausibility is the final test of this work, and “to the extent that the formulation has been carefully grounded in the data under study, the chances are

increased that the formulation represents objectively what is common in the culture and will be judged credible” (Rennie, 1995a, p. 32).

It has also been argued that psychological research has traditionally failed marginalized people (Mencher, 1997). Kirby and McKenna (1989), have designed a step-by-step manual for novice qualitative researchers on doing qualitative research with marginalized people. Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded analysis methodology is presented in a modified form that serves the purpose of giving marginalized people a voice in the research as well as to present this research as a tool for social change. Since lesbians are marginalized in Canadian society, and since I was concerned at the outset that my research would be conducted in a manner that provides a voice, as opposed to adding to marginalization, Kirby and McKenna's book was one of the guidebooks consulted for the present study.

Following accepted procedure, a literature review was not carried out until the taxonomic structure of the present theory had been worked out. As Glaser and Strauss (1967) stated: “A substantive theory generated from the data must first be formulated, in order to see which of diverse formal theories are, perhaps, applicable for furthering additional substantive formulations” (p. 34). They warn that the attempt to apply formal theory to the generation of new concepts and hypotheses too early in the game can have the unfortunate consequence of “forcing” the data into a priori assumptions, as well as “a neglect of relevant concepts and hypotheses that may emerge” (p. 34). Kirby and

McKenna (1989) also do not recommend doing a review of the literature until after the data analysis is carried out. They suggest that the research should be guided as much as possible by the voices of the participants rather than preconceived notions and theory.

This is not to say that I had no a priori assumptions, going into this research. Certainly, my own experience was a large factor in determining questions that I asked, and the ways in which I interpreted the data. Moreover, prior to this work, I had read fairly extensively on a variety of related topics, including social constructionism, identity, lesbian history and contemporary lesbian issues. According to Rennie (1995b), this knowledge was acceptably brought to bear on my research, so long as it would enter into the hermeneutic circle of the methodology. In more general terms, this means that the researcher's initial perspective or set of beliefs about the phenomenon under investigation influences her understanding of the phenomenon, and taking that understanding with her into the investigation she allows (or finds) her understanding to shift during the period of analysis, and she then brings this new understanding to bear upon continued analyses. All the while, therefore, the a priori understanding is negotiated with the knowledge that is created by the attempt to more fully understand the phenomenon through the interpretative process of the grounded analysis. This appears to be an important distinction from the traditional empirical approach to psychological research in which the literature is searched for an appropriate model that might subsume the results of an

investigation. Hence, many, many, memos, a great deal of introspection, and continually revisiting the original data has, I believe, kept my own interpretations sound.

Procedure

Participants. Participants were recruited through word of mouth² and through an ad in the Siren Magazine (a magazine for lesbian and bisexual women; see Appendix A for a copy of the ad). Participants were directed by the ad to call my home on a second telephone line, which had been installed for the purposes of safety and confidentiality. In an initial phone screen, I identified myself as a researcher and lesbian, I briefly described the goals of my research project, in terms of gaining an understanding of the lived experience and issues faced by women who make a mid-life transition from heterosexuality to lesbian (or bisexual) identity or lifestyle, and I assessed callers' suitability for my project based on the following criteria: over 35 years of age, previously married, had identified as heterosexual, no longer identified as heterosexual, and was available to commit to a 2-hour interview. As well, I gathered a minimal amount of demographic information: if she had children, ages and sex of the children; her current relationship status; the number of years she had been married; the number of years (or months) she identified, or lived, as homosexual; and preferred sexual orientation label. I then gave the initial research question to the prospective participant so that she could do some thinking about her experiences before meeting with me. Of twelve women who

² A lesbian friend and faculty member at the university provided me with names of potential participants.

initially called the phone screen number, nine met my research criteria, and six of those were available to be interviewed.

The number of participants required for a grounded analysis is never known ahead of time. Selection usually stops when the categories are saturated. According to Rennie (1996) the procedure of describing categories, if done well (i.e., a balance is maintained between being too grounded with being too abstract) should produce no more than 50 categories, while Glaser and Strauss (1967) recommend no more than 20. Neither of these figures necessarily determines the number of participants. Generally speaking, however, the number of participants for a grounded analysis is on the low end compared to the number required for a quantitative study, as low as five to ten.

Nine women, made up of the six participants obtained from the telephone screen and three participants who were recruited by word of mouth, participated in the present study. I mailed each woman a Research Study Description form prior to the interview (see Appendix B). The nine participants identified themselves as lesbian or gay following marriage and/or a lifetime of viewing themselves as heterosexual. Figure 1 shows a summary chart containing demographics. At the time of the interview the participants ranged in age from 42 to 55, with a mean age of 47. They had been married from 10 to 29 years ($M = 18$), and they ranged in age from 35 to 50 when they first identified as lesbian or gay ($M = 41$). The number of years since identifying as lesbian or gay ranged from 2 to 14, with an average of 6 years. Eight of the nine participants had

children. Participants were not asked questions about their race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. However, it was clear at the time of the interviews that all of the participants appeared to be white, and from their stories, I obtained some indirect knowledge about social spheres and job status. Appendix E provides a brief description of each participant in order to aid the reader in distinguishing between the different women as the excerpts of the transcripts are presented in Chapter 4.

Figure 1. Summary Chart and Demographics

ID	Age	Children	Mode of Transition	Label of Choice	Relationship Status	Work	Year Marriage Ended	Years Married	# Years Gay/Lesbian	Age when first ID'd Lesbian
Jean	51	M=22; M=18	Sexual attraction	Gay	Single	secretarial-- medical office	1989	15	8	43
Vivian	51	M=31	Fell in Love	Gay	In 13 year relationship	bus driver	1986	18	14	37
Alice	41	no children	Self as Lesbian	Lesbian; Queer; NOT Gay	Single	graduate student	1994	>10	6	35
Diane	44	M=9; M=13	Self as Lesbian	Lesbian; Dyke; Gay	Single	secretarial-- medical office	1997	11	2	42
Marie	44	F=2; F=8; F=15 F=17; M=20	Sexual attraction	Lesbian	In Lesbian relationship; living apart	office	1999	20	3	41
Dawn	54	F=21; F=25; F=29	Sexual attraction	Queer; Gay; Lesbian	Single	social work; coming out support	1996	29	4	50
Louise	42	F=6; F=12	Self as Lesbian	Lesbian; NOT-Gay	In Lesbian relationship; living apart	teacher	1999	15	4	38
Marta	55	M=19; M=23	Sexual attraction	Lesbian; NOT-Gay	Lives with Lesbian partner	social work- political activism	1991	22	9	46
Iris	46	M=15	Self as Lesbian	Queer; Gay; Lesbian	Single	mental health	1992	16	8	38

Interviews. The audio-taped interviews were approximately 2 hours in length (see Appendix C for the detailed interview guide). Informed consent was obtained at the beginning of the interview (see Appendix D for a copy of the consent form). Six interviews were conducted in participants' homes, two were conducted in a research lab at the university and one was conducted in a private room at the participant's workplace. The choice of location was made at the time of the telephone screening and depended upon which was more suited to the individual participant. Prior to beginning this project, I was aware that some participants' narratives might have included distressing events that could have brought up painful emotions for them in the retelling. Thus, I specified at the beginning of the interview that although I was interested in hearing as much as possible about their experiences that they were in control of how much they wished to divulge and that if, at any time, they did not wish to continue on a particular subject, this was entirely up to the individual participant, and I would not pursue such a topic further. As well, I informed each participant that if the interview itself should bring up unfinished business that she would like to work on in therapy, I would provide her with a list of referral resources. In fact, none of my participants asked for a therapy referral, and the feedback I received from each of them at the end of the interview assured me they did not feel any pressure to talk about anything beyond what they wanted to disclose.

Although I was optimistic that the interview experience would be positive for participants—specifically, the pleasure and validation inherent in telling one's own life

story and the opportunity to collaborate in creating a shared understanding of the phenomenon—at the same time, I was concerned about the possibility of exposure. The fear of exposure exists in the gay/lesbian community as the fear of “being outed”. For those women whose family and/or associates were not aware of their lesbian/bisexual identity or lifestyle there was the concern that such a disclosure would jeopardise their place within their family, work, or other social network. Thus, I made every effort to ensure that participants were not outed through their participation in my research. Informed consent and confidentiality were important aspects of the research project from the interview stage through to my written work, and all identifying information, including names, dates, and in many cases, locations was removed from transcripts before I began the grounded analysis.

With respect to their experience of the interview itself, participants were unanimous in giving me positive feedback. Most described the experience of doing the interview as “fun” or at least as “comfortable” and “non-threatening.” Some experienced it as similar to a therapy session because in telling their stories, either they realised how far they had come, or they began to gain some new insights into their transition. Two participants sent me a follow-up email to say that the interview had given them valuable food for thought. All wanted copies of the final manuscript.

During the write-up of the analysis, I contacted each of the participants on three occasions to inform them of my progress and once to offer them the opportunity to give

me feedback on the early work-in-progress. Five participants responded to tell me that they would be interested in receiving a copy of my work-in-progress. Of these, two responded to the draft that I emailed them. The following were their comments:

[Marie] I have read it several times now and being a year later, I have added some experience to my own coming-out process and I can relate very much to so much of what you have said. Bottom line is: there is a very big price to pay to march to a different drummer. I also believe there is a very big price to pay Not to march to it once you "hear" it!!!

[Louise] It felt reassuring for me that others had done the same thing as me.

Hence, the two respondents indicated that they were satisfied with what I had written thus far. Three other participants responded to my email updates only. Also, I spoke to two participants at a social gathering about my progress. All five of these women responded in an encouraging manner, and all of them stated that they were looking forward to seeing the final product. Because the response to my attempts to keep participants up-to-date was positive and the response to my attempts to keep them involved was minimal yet positive, I continued with the analysis without pressing them for further feedback.

Data Analysis. The present research utilised the grounded methodology described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as further clarified by Rennie (1994b, 1996, 1998, 2000a) and as refined for research with marginalized populations by Kirby and McKenna (1989). The tape recordings were transcribed using Microsoft Word 2000. Although the process was time consuming and labour intensive, I decided to transcribe the tapes myself to ensure confidentiality, and in order to get a closer connection to the data. The "data" for the study were the transcriptions. After saving a copy of each of the transcribed

interviews as a rich text file, these were imported into QSR NVivo 1.2.142, a software programme designed to facilitate qualitative methods. The transcript was then segmented into meaningful units of analysis, known as meaning units (Rennie, 1996; Rennie, Phillips & Quartaro, 1988) or bibbits (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). Segmenting of the text into meaning units was done in the manner described by Rennie (1996, 2000a) in which the text was blocked first, and following this blocking or segmenting of the text, the *meanings* (or categories) that I interpreted to be *in* each unit were assigned to that unit. The process of category generation was greatly speeded up with my use of the NVivo programme, as opposed to the traditional by-hand marking and sorting of index cards, and I was able to work progressively through the entire text, referring back through all previously generated categories, with the generation of each new meaning unit. As usual, each unit was assigned to as many categories as applied to it.

After several categories had been established, links between groupings and across categories were conceptualized and named and, together with the categories themselves, these links were scrutinised in the search for higher order categories. As well, renaming and reducing of an overly large (and redundant) number of categories that I produced early on occurred throughout the middle and late stages of the analysis. The process continued, as new meaning units were compared to each category, until saturation of the categories seemed evident. Relationships among the categories were worked out, and a judgement was made regarding the placement of each category in the overall theoretical

picture, in the service of developing a parsimonious theory (Rennie et al., 1988). At this stage, the copious memos and notes that I had been making throughout the process of demarcating meaning units and interpreting categories were reviewed and utilised in the production of categories or linkages as appropriate. A core category, as an organizer of the ensuing theory, was induced from the patterning (and re-patterning) of all lower order categories and their links.

Explanations for Terminology

Labelling Sexual Identity. At the outset of my investigation into the phenomenon which I have come to call “leaving heterosexuality at mid-life,” I began using the term “homosexual” as an umbrella category to define non-heterosexual identity. For example, believing homosexual to be an inclusive label, I hoped it would draw women to my recruitment ad who labelled themselves as “gay,” “lesbian,” “queer,” or “bisexual.” However, as the interview process and analysis progressed, I changed my mind about the word homosexual. It did not fit most women’s self-identity because it was perceived either as too clinical or pejorative.

The descriptors that were used by participants in this study when discussing non-heterosexual identity included lesbian, gay, dyke, queer and bisexual. In order to maintain consistency in the writing and decrease confusion that might arise in attempting to use all possible ascriptions all of the time, and because lesbian is the term that I am most comfortable using myself, I use the term “lesbian” throughout this dissertation when

referring to the post-transitional sexual identity under discussion. I also occasionally use the term “queer” as an umbrella term to impart a more generic description of non-heterosexual identity, one which has come to represent “a more inclusive term arising from postmodern expressions of sexual identity” (Brown, 1995, p. 10). However, I would like to make it clear that not all of my participants use the words “lesbian” or “queer” to describe their sexual orientation. The variation and rationales for preferences in labels will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 4, under the heading “Labels.” For now, suffice it to say that strong individual differences emerged in participants’ preference for personal sexual identity ascriptions: some participants use the term “gay” and did not like the word “lesbian”; others did not feel that generic terms should be used because they are not descriptive of women; and still others preferred to use no ascription at all. Therefore, when referring to a particular participant, I will use her label of choice wherever possible.

Another term that came up occasionally in the interviews was “butch-femme.”

The Lesbian Almanac (1996, pp. 80-83) defines the terms “Butch,” “Femme,” and Butch-Femme” as follows:

- Butch:** 1. A lesbian who prefers masculine dress, style, expression, or identity. Though there have been butch lesbians throughout history, the term was probably first used in the United States in the 1940s. Butch was formerly a common nickname for a young boy and also the name of a severe men’s haircut.
2. A gay man who is traditionally virile or masculine in speech, dress, and sexual behavior.

Femme: A lesbian who prefers feminine dress, style, expression, or identity. The term was probably first used in the United States in the 1940s, as a counterpoint to butch, and comes from the French word for woman.

Butch-femme: According to Joan Nestle, an erotic lesbian partnership between a butch and a femme that was part social rebellion and part intimate exploration of women's sexuality. Butch-femme code of lesbian behavior and style was prominent from the 1940s to the 1960s. During the second wave of feminism in the 1970s, butch-femme relationships became regarded as embarrassing by many younger lesbians who perceived them as an Uncle Tom mimicry of straight society, rather than as an elaborate erotic communication between women.

First Person. When I decided to research a topic that was at once controversial and within the province of my own personal experience, I took to heart the words of Kirby and McKenna (1989) who describe good grounded research on marginalized people as that which "recognises the real life experience, includes those on the margins at the centre of research and uses a reflexive approach where the researcher is fully accounted for in the process..." (1989, p. 164). As a member of the group under study, I therefore became the 10th participant, and my story, recorded in memo form, became part of the analysis. Having thus placed myself in the role of participant-researcher, for the purposes of the grounded analysis, I was then faced with the task of how does one report on a group of which one is a part. After a great deal of deliberation, I decided that the best approach is to make use of the first person, plural, when appropriate, rather than always describing participants in the third person. More specifically, I will refer to participants in the third person, (e.g., she, her, they, their) when discussing individual participants, when referring to transcripts and participant narratives, and when discussing first-order categories, wherein my own reflections were not part of the data. I will use

first person pronouns (e.g., us, we, our) when describing more general aspects of the emerging taxonomy and the theoretical picture, so as to make clear my participant-researcher status, and the fact that my own reflections and experiences were brought to bear upon the analysis and the emerging theoretical picture.

Participant-Observer Research. In this writing, I have attempted to bring together a whole that makes sense of each of my participant's experiences, as well as my own, without detracting from any one story. Starting with the interviews, I did my best to utilise the skills that I have acquired as a person-centred therapist to listen for unique aspects and meanings in my participants' experiences, even when, or especially when, they differed from my own. Following this through to the writing stage, I have attempted to retain a respectful and non-judgemental stance with respect to differing viewpoints, perspectives and experiences. To this end, I have kept in touch with those participants who have shown an interest in keeping abreast of my written work. I have provided them with brief overviews of the emerging theoretical formulation. All of my participants have shown interest in hearing from me, but most have not provided me with any specific feedback other than stating their continued interest in hearing how the work is progressing. Specific feedback, when I have received it, has been positive and appears to indicate that I continue to remain on track.

Chapter 4

Results

When I was married my father handed my new husband and I a wedding gift in the form of a cheque. On the back of that cheque he had written, “May this help launch your canoe on the winding river of matrimony.” Little did I know at the tender age of 20 years that the river of matrimony was just one tributary of the coursing river of life, a sometimes beautiful journey that can turn dark and stormy, and send you skittering off course—where we can find ourselves floundering on shore, wondering how we got there. During those washed ashore periods, we have the opportunity to reflect back on the way we came and also ahead to where we are going, and we might realise that we haven’t been going where we need to go, or where we thought we were headed, and so we might decide to strike out on foot to find a new course. The process of finding one’s bearings can be bewildering and frightening. We don’t know what surprises are up ahead and sometimes it’s hard to see the forest for the trees. But as challenging and terrifying as this process can be, it can also be a rich, rewarding and very empowering experience because we are pioneers, breaking new ground, and by the time we get our bearings again, we’ve learned a lot about what we are capable of and what life is all about.

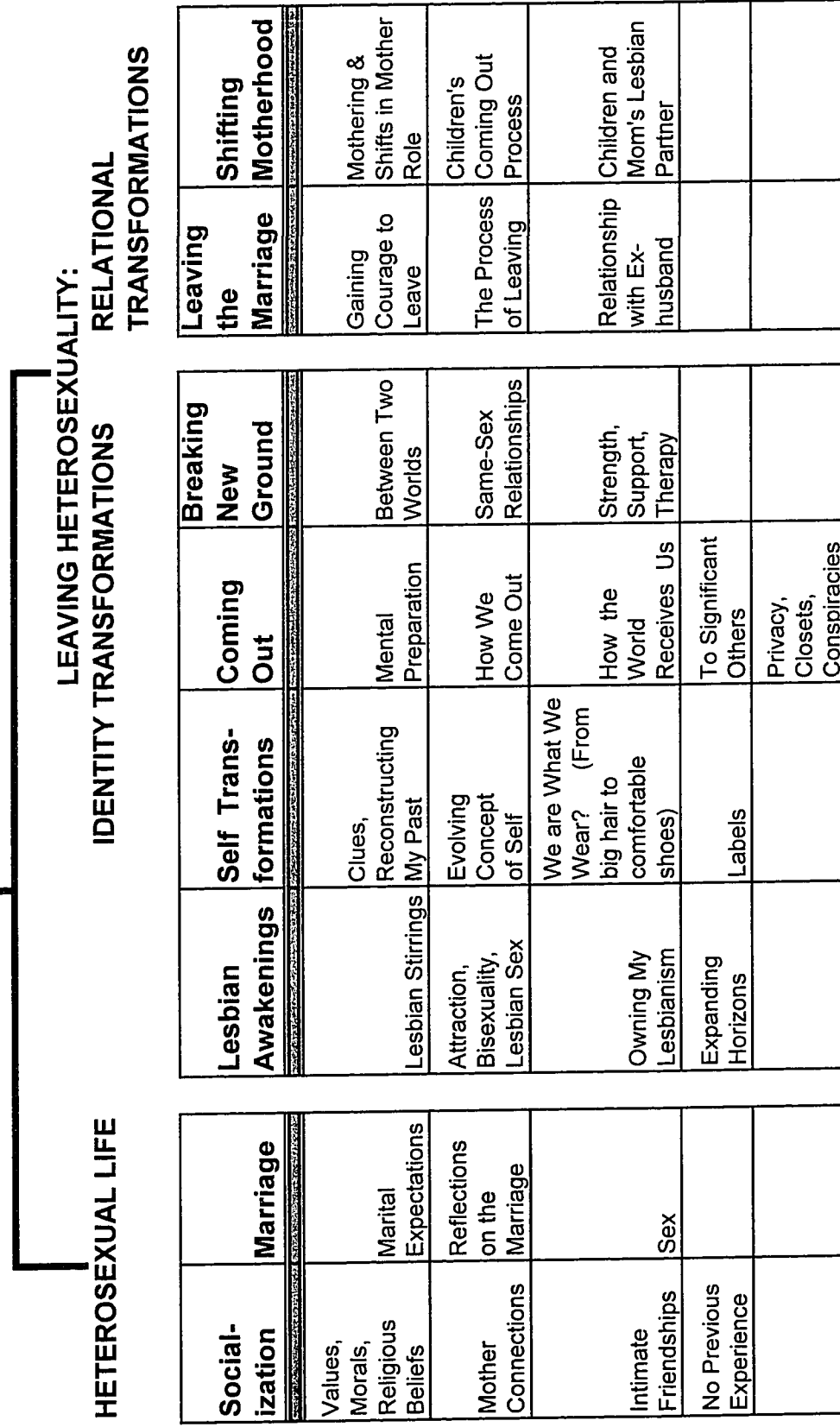
Hierarchical Category Structure

The category structure that emerged from the analysis is shown in Figure 1. It can be seen that the core category subsumes three levels of higher order categories which, in

turn, subsume a total of 29 first-order categories. Prior to grouping these 29 categories into more meaningful clusters and labelling them with their second-order category names (e.g., “Socialization,” “Lesbian Awakenings”), I initially had nearly 200 first-order categories. This rather large and unwieldy number of categories emerged through my early attempts to remain close to the data and grounded, leaving no stone unturned as I hunted for meanings inherent in each meaning unit. In subsequent iterations, I was able to review my budding category structure with an eye towards more meaningful and abstract conceptualizations, and I began a process of merging very similar categories, purging redundant ones, and renaming others. During this period, I was careful not to impose irrelevant, judgemental, or overly abstract category labels onto my participant’s accountings, which might have occurred otherwise in my desire for abstraction and parsimony. The constant comparative method kept me grounded throughout the procedure, and no meaning units were lost in the reduction process. Instead, I feel confident that, in the end, the taxonomy that has emerged reflects a clear and coherent structure that more readily facilitates a description of the lived experiences and interlacing processes of the transition than would have been the case otherwise.

Figure 2. Hierarchical Category Structure

WOMEN LEAVING HETEROSEXUALITY AT MID-LIFE: TRANSFORMATIONS IN SELF AND RELATIONS



Once the first-order category structure began to take shape and as the categories began to reach saturation, I embarked on the process of working out relationships across categories and generating higher level categories. Memos and relevant experiences of my own were brought to bear upon the emerging taxonomy, as I worked towards creating a tentative categorial structure and theoretical model, always cycling back to the original data for confirmation of my emerging conceptualizations. This process continued, as outlined in the previous chapter, until the current hierarchical structure emerged. Eight second-order categories emerged as meaningful descriptors for groupings of first-order categories that appeared to belong together, and as the analysis proceeded further, these eight higher order categories were subsumed under three third-order categories: “Heterosexual Life,” “Leaving Heterosexuality – the Experience of Transformation,” and “Leaving Heterosexuality – Relational Transformations.” “Heterosexual Life” and “Leaving Heterosexuality” reflect the before-and-after quality of the overall experience as described by my participants, and as I perceived in my own transition. There are decided pre-transitional versus transitional (or post-transitional) aspects to this experience that initially were best conveyed by separating the second-order sets of categories into two groupings (i.e., Heterosexual Life and Leaving Heterosexuality). Subsequently, the first-order categories that initially had been grouped together under “Leaving Heterosexuality” were divided into two separate groups, “The Experience of Transformation” and “Relational Transformations.”

The second-order categories “Socialization,” and “Marriage” are contained by the third-order label “Heterosexual Life” because each of these categories, and the first-order categories they subsume, represent themes from the period of time when participants considered themselves to be heterosexual. The third-order category, “Leaving Heterosexuality—the Experience of Transformation,” includes four second-order categories that represent internal and external change processes, including “Lesbian Awakenings,” “Self-Transformations,” “Coming Out,” and “Breaking New Ground,” and the third-order category “Leaving Heterosexuality—Relational Transformations” includes two second-order categories “Leaving Marriage,” and “Shifting Motherhood,” each of which represents a significant change that is somewhat outside, but intertwined with the experience of self-transformation.

An ongoing struggle in this research has been to capture, in the form of a meaningful label, the experience that I am attempting to understand and describe. A series of similar but different titles were initially considered and discarded, like, for example, the title, “From Heterosexuality to Homosexuality: Mature Women in Transition,” which seemed to reflect the essential change aspect of the experience for me. However, early on in the data gathering phase, I realised that the phrase “heterosexuality to homosexuality” was not sufficiently expansive to capture the range of potential shifts in sexual orientation, nor was the term “homosexuality” an acceptable label in the eyes of

many gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, for a variety of reasons, including its history of use as a clinical term and pejorative associations with the word.

The struggle towards defining a meaningful title for the dissertation was tied to the germination of my core category. I considered a number of possible interpretations for the core category until I decided upon a conceptualization that I believe to be multidimensional in its applicability to the data, representative of all of the lower order categories, and “the key concept that organises the theory” (Rennie, 1998, p. 103), “Women Leaving Heterosexuality at Mid-life: Transformations in Self and Relations.” The first half of the phrase (i.e., “women leaving heterosexuality at mid-life”) describes the who, what, and when of the experience; it is basically an overview of the process as seen from the outside, a vantage point from which to contextualise and understand the experience to be described by the participants, through my interpretation and presentation. I chose the phrase “leaving heterosexuality” as opposed to “coming out” or “change in sexual orientation” because the former seems to capture my participants’ varied experiences of newly acquired sexual identity, as well as providing a closer contact with the meaning of mid-life change in sexual orientation for this particular group. As opposed to acquiring or taking on a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identification, the process, at least in the initial stages, appears to be one of leaving, or removing, the heterosexual identification. The second phrase “transformations in self and relations” pertains to the experience as I understand it, a complex process involving a number of change processes:

change in self, changes in social roles, change in sexual orientation, change in marital status, and changes in relationships with others. Each of these changes are described in greater detail later in this chapter as the first-order categories are fleshed out. The rest of this is organised around the hierarchical structure of the model, with the larger sections divided according to third-order categories and smaller sections devoted to second-order and first-order categories.

Heterosexual Life

Socialization

As indicated in Figure 1, this second-order category encompasses four first-order categories: “Values, Morals, Religious Beliefs,” “Mother Connections,” “Intimate Friendships,” and “No Previous Experience,” which were coded under the rubric of “Socialization” because the meaning units that they code described the figures and forces that shaped who participants became as individuals. As well, this category provides a backdrop for the different ways in which participants conceptualised themselves as social beings.

Values, Morals, Religious Beliefs. “Conventional,” “traditional,” and “conservative values” were terms that participants used to describe their families of origin. Most of my participants came from family or cultural backgrounds where conservative and/or traditional values held sway. Heterosexism and intolerance towards

homosexuality are corollaries of conventional conservative values that would be expected to have played a role in these women's development. Thus, most participants stated that, as young women, they did not even recognise the possibility of a lesbian identity, and some recalled thinking that gay men and lesbians were sick or perverse. Louise³ commented on how, even up until very recently, her own unexamined values had kept her from people and places that she has since come to cherish: "I was a big-time conservative, and I, was hostile to women! I was hostile to the people who were most like me!"

With regard to gender socialization, the consensus seems to have been, as one participant put it "we never really thought about our sexuality, we just accepted what we'd been told!" It appeared to me that as an agent of socialization, religion played a key role in the lives of several participants. Mainstream church and synagogue embodies a powerful instrument of socialization with the capacity to provide support, safety and succour on the one hand, judgement, condemnation and rejection on the other. On the negative side, religion represents the harsh voice of patriarchy, where women have historically been told that their place is in the home, in submission to their husbands—not a comfortable locale for a woman who resists heterosexist ideology. Moreover, condemnation of homosexuality as a sin and perversion by the mainstream churches has persisted for centuries. Thus, when Marta joined the convent as a young woman, she

³ Initially, I identified participants using a numeric code. However, upon reviewing early drafts of my write up, these codes imparted an artificial flavour to participants accounts. Therefore, I decided to give participants a name and I invited my participants to choose a pseudonym for themselves. Thus, the actual name of each participant has been changed to preserve her anonymity.

found that even in that female dominated space, religious patriarchy held sway. Even before she understood what it was all about, she recognised on some level that lesbianism was feared like the plague. On the positive side, some participants found strength and courage from religious teachings. Still others were encouraged by finding a place of worship that respected gay and lesbian relationships. However, this more positive side of religion reflected more recent experiences, and thus was not a feature of participants' stories of their early socialization.

In short, none of the women I spoke to described a particularly liberal upbringing. In fact, most of the conversation about family and cultural values was peppered with recollections of traditional and conventional beliefs, and in the case of religion, the religious right was dominant. Moreover, several of the participants recalled preserving the morals and values of their upbringing in their adult years. Therefore, as young women, the possibility of taking on an identity that was classified as socially and morally deviant, whether they felt sexual or romantic attractions to other women or not, would not have been within their realm of deliberation.

Mother Connections. The role of mother was prominent in the narratives of my participants, from descriptions of relationships with their own mothers, or step-mothers, relationships with female relatives or other women who embodied a mother role, or when describing themselves as mothers. In general, mothers were seen in two ways: 1) as agents of socialization, and 2) as providers and receivers of love and nurturance. As

agents of socialization, mothers act as role models, and through their actions they convey certain expectations towards the actions of their children. In this sense, participants recalled becoming aware of their mothers' expectations and how these expectations played out in their own lives, for better or for worse. Through their own transition, some participants gained a recognition of their own mothers' role vis-à-vis the status quo. For example, Marie came to see her mother as upholding a patriarchal system, where men are in charge and women's status is low, making it difficult for her to relate to her mother on an even ground. Like Marie's mother, other mothers of that generation expected their daughters to become wives and mothers like themselves. Thus, both mothers and daughters experienced some degree of shattering of their relationship when daughters' marriages broke up. Marie's relationship with her mother remained strained at the time of our interview:

I think a lot of it, was just, this is what you're supposed to do [I. mmhm] this is what's expected and so I did that [I. expectations are such a big thing] Oh huge, huge - and I think recently, I realised that, um, as I, once I married - suddenly, I had a different relationship with my mother than I'd ever had, I'd never had a relationship really with my mother, it was always, um, my mother had expectations, um - you know, I always, I felt like I was always trying to live up to her expectations, and she was never happy, you know [slight laugh] and suddenly when I got married, she was suddenly happy, [I. mmhm] about what I had done and when I produced a child - it was, 100 times better, you know, and my mother doted on me, and I suddenly became very important in her life. [I. uh-huh? it probably felt really good?] It did, it was like the first time in my life, I felt acceptance by my mother [I. yeah] though I don't have it today, believe me!

Participants also saw mothers, or mother figures, as important sources of love and nurturance in their lives. Issues that emerged were: the need for a daughter to feel

supported by her mother, the fear of hurting her mother, and the pain of losing a mother's acceptance. These issues speak to an empathic connection between the participants and their mothers or close mother figures. Concerned about hurting their mothers or harming their relationship with their mothers, some of the participants have not come out to their mothers. However, on the other side of the coin of mutual empathy is the daughter's continued need for an empathic connection with her mother, and therefore the need for her mother's blessing as she charts an unknown path for herself. Those participants who were unable to share their whole selves with their mothers experienced another type of rift in their relationship, which will be discussed further under "Coming Out to Significant Others."

Alice described a turning point with her mother that occurred after she won an award which was to be presented publicly in a queer venue. Her excitement barely contained, she called her mother to tell her about the award, but she was hit with a wall of silence as soon as her mother found out where the award was to be made. Alice angrily hung up on her mother for the first time in her life. A week later, a tearful discussion ensued between the two of them, in which she told her mother:

Look, I'm not going, to pretend, that, that didn't hurt me, and I know, my response to it hurt you, and I'm sorry that it hurt you, but, you're not going to make me invisible. I know that you're afraid that, there will be a news clip and your friends will see it and what will they think, what they think is whatever they will think, I can't control that, and neither can you!

In the discussion that followed, the feelings of both Alice and her mother were brought out into the open. Alice reported that since that time, her relationship with her mother has been less strained.

Mothering by women other than their own mothers played a role in the lives of participants as well. Just as women who lost their mothers early on turned to grandmothers or other women for guidance and support, women who lost the support of their own mothers during their lesbian transition sometimes turned to older lesbians for advice and support. Inasmuch as mothers are seen as important figures in the family dynamic, this seeking of mothering outside the biological family seemed to reflect a need for family connection.

This presence of mother in the narratives of my participants was not paralleled by the presence of a father. Over half way through the coding, I began to realise that fathers were conspicuously absent from the narratives, a discovery that had not occurred to me during the interviews. One participant did not mention her father at all. Another participant did not discuss her father except to say that she had had to look after him and her siblings after her mother died when she was quite young. Two women had fathers who died when they were young. Three participants mentioned their fathers in one brief comment, hinting at poor relationships with them. Of the two remaining participants, Alice described a fairly good relationship with her father, a man who “grew up through a very rigid, codified, um, Christian with a capital C set of rules, for living” and who had a

hard time dealing with the change in her sexual identity because of his religious beliefs. However, she is confident in his love for her and they have been able to find a common ground for communication. The other participant who talked a little bit more about her father described him as an unhappy and unhealthy man, with whom it was difficult to have a relationship. She did not come out to her family until he passed away a few years ago, not feeling comfortable to do so when he was alive.

Absent fathers and poor father-daughter relationships seem to be the only commonalities across the participants who did comment upon their fathers. Why participants said so little about their fathers is unclear. It may be that I unwittingly and unconsciously discouraged talk of fathers and men, given the fact that my own father passed away 10 years before I began this research and was, therefore, not a part of my own coming out process, from which I drew my initial questions. Whatever the reason, absence of a supportive father figure is clearly evident, and absence of fathers in the narratives themselves is the most common theme around fatherhood.

Intimate Friendships. Prior to their sexual attraction to women, close female friendships were a cornerstone to the relational lives of the women I interviewed. The main properties of this category are: always having a closer bond with women than with men, female role models, and mentors. Nearly all of my interviewees described a long history of close friendships with women that began well before they felt any kind of same-sex sexual attraction. Diane remembered being part of a trio of best friends in high

school. Not long before our interview she had been looking back at her high school diary and found an entry describing her friendship with these two girls, alongside a question she had written to herself: “when am I going to start to like boys?”

For other participants, the close friendships that developed in public school and high school were very meaningful and when they didn’t last, or when friends moved on, the hurt was intense. Marie remembered being a late bloomer in terms of developing an interest in boys, and the pain that she felt when friends moved away from shared childhood games is described in the following passage:

I had a friend, I still have her, we’re still very close friends, um, and we were, kind of, in the same place, you know in, we, we played together, she was one of the girls who, came to the point where, she stopped, playing, with me um, and started moving on to, more girl like activities, and I didn’t, and I remember feeling so, angry at her! Betrayed!

Female role models and mentors were another important aspect of participants’ relationships with women. After moving across the country to accommodate her husband’s work, Alice was floundering until she was encouraged by the example of a new friend to return to university, and from there, her world opened up dramatically. For Marta, who always found herself “drawn to a much more female centred world” she found friendship and mentorship when she joined the convent. Later in her transition, Iris was supported by lesbian mentors as she transversed cultures. Recently, Louise had begun to develop a plan to help other women going through this process. Several of the participants had engaged in some kind of group support work, and virtually all indicated a desire to share their stories in order to help others. In sum, close female bonds and

mentorship in one form or another was a persistent theme in female interpersonal relationships for these women.

Similar to the lack of mention of fathers, with the exception of their ex-husbands, none of my participants talked about close friendships with men. Two classes of comments were made regarding relationships with men: 1) the impact of gender roles on the expectations of male-female relationships, and 2) level of comfort with men.

Regarding expectations of male-female relationships, Vivian had been brought up within a familial context of strongly defined gender roles. In her words:

The guy goes out to work, the husband goes out to work, he comes home, and he doesn't want to know anything about the house, the kids, or anything! He just wants his beer, his whatever, sit down, go out to work the next day, he doesn't want to know any problems!

Similarly, Marie had been socialised to believe that she had to belong to a man to be somebody:

...but even if we don't say those words, somewhere - somewhere inside we, we believe that, [I. yeah] that we need to be, to be somebody, we have to belong to, some male you know? [I. exactly] The church talks about that, you know, belonging to your father and then to your husband.

In the main, it seemed that my participants grew up at a time when gender roles were strongly defined. Thus, they described their husbands as the breadwinners of the family, while they were responsible for hearth and home. Even in the workplace, gender distinctions around division of labour and power were clearly apparent. Overall, these distinctions seemed to have created boundaries that were difficult for these women to bridge.

The other class of comments made by participants was their level of comfort with men. In high school, Alice recalled doing more reading than flirting. She felt undesirable to men. It was only after she was married that her husband, who had known her in high school, told her that the young men at school thought she was attractive but they considered her aloof, and therefore, unapproachable. Diane always felt uncomfortable dealing with men, also. However, once she discovered her gay identity, that changed for her, and she no longer had trouble working with or having discussions with men. Dawn also said she always felt less comfortable around men, versus women, although with gay men, it was different—she found them easier to be around.

No Previous Experience. Despite some participants' exposure to gay friends or family members, none of the women I interviewed had grown up with any real understanding of queer identities or cultures. Other than overhearing whispered comments about inverts, fruits, or queers, or the rare peak at a forbidden book or magazine, it just wasn't discussed. To the extent that homosexuality was recognised in the past, it seemed to have been men, rather than women, who were the subject of discussion. By and large, the women in my study who had any knowledge of queer identity as young people understood that homosexuality referred only to men; the idea that a woman could love another woman was unknown to them. By today's standards, this lack of recognition might seem quite surprising.

Half of my interviewees were aware of someone in their past who was gay or lesbian. However, their awareness of their friend's or relative's sexual identity and their understanding of his or her struggles was minimal. To exemplify, Diane talked about her older sister who has identified as a lesbian since she was in her late teens, and who came out in her early 20s when Diane was engaged to be married. Although her sister has subsequently become a source of information and support, at that time, her lesbian identity was foreign and perplexing to Diane:

She was, coming out to my family and, and um, she refers to herself as a lesbian, and she always has, and when she used to say that, maybe that, that's part of my, my bias, when she used to say that, I used to think it sounded like a disease...and my sister was always different, in everything, and so this was just one more thing where she was different ...it's very different now, for kids, than it was then [I. yeah] it was really different and my sister struggled really, really hard [I. yeah] being gay, at that time, and she internalised a lot of self-hatred, but I couldn't, I just couldn't understand.

Another participant, Vivian, has a gay brother whom she was so used to keeping in the family closet that she didn't think to mention him when I first asked her what previous experience she had had with gay or lesbian people. Later in the interview, she suddenly remembered him, at which point, she referred to him as a "closeted gay" whose sexual orientation has never been the subject of family discussion.

The shroud of ignorance in past decades surrounding non-heterosexual identity and the lived experience of those whose sexuality differed from the norm seemed to have been tantamount to a conspiracy of silence. It created an atmosphere of invisibility around gay men and lesbians with little possibility of bridging the gulf of understanding.

Furthermore, when gay men or lesbians were talked about, they were the subject of scorn, and seen as unnatural at best, evil at worst. Thus, from the start, their capacity to love another woman was alien to them. Without an adequate language for their own lesbian potentialities, same-sex erotica and partnerships was not relevant for these women until their mid-life transformation. For example, Jean recalled her first sexual experience with another woman when she was only 17. She did not, however, identify this experience as a lesbian relationship at that time. Instead, she saw it as something that all girls did, nothing out of the ordinary for heterosexual girls. In her words:

When I was 17, I had a best friend, and, that was when I had my first taste of being, with a female, but, I put it down to, like a teenage crush type thing? [I. right] And, probably all best friends did this, you know? It was, I mean, it was obviously nothing major, we were kids!

Participant/Research Summary. Like most of my participants, I grew up in a conventional, conservative, atmosphere, bounded by a right-wing religious ethic. Such an atmosphere is not likely to welcome homosexuality into its midst. We (my participants and I) developed close intimate connections with women, beginning with the close bonds we experienced with our mothers, or mother-figures and later finding comfort in close friendships and female mentorship. For most of us, fathers figured less predominantly in our lives than mothers. Moreover, our relationships with other men were mediated and limited by gender distinctions, and many of us found it difficult to relate to men.

Like the book by the same title, we basically had *no previous experience* (Cameron, 1997) with gay or lesbian culture, or with lesbian identities, prior to setting out

on the courses that were to change our sexual identities. Moreover, emerging from the heterosexism of our conservative beginnings, we had no role models, and no language with which to describe romantic or sexual inclinations towards someone of the same sex. Perhaps that is why tradition prevailed and we moved into the next socially sanctioned phase of our lives—marriage.

Marriage

Three first-order categories were clustered to become the properties of this overarching category, “Marriage”: “Marital Expectations,” “Reflections on the Marriage,” and “Sex.” Within each of these categories, meaning units were coded that describe a number of issues, concerns, and aspects of marriage and married life.

Marital Expectations. In coding this category, it became evident that the topics generated by participants centred around answering three questions: Why did I marry? What did marriage represent to me? What were my expectations of married life? In answer to the first question, these women as a whole were no different from most women in the 60s and 70s who married for love on one level and according to the dictates of society on another level. Some of the participants were very much in love with their husbands when they married. Others were unclear about their feelings and just went along with the process, still expecting their marriages to last. A third group recalled experiencing a lack of loving feelings. Regardless of how they felt about their prospective mates, the resounding consensus was that these women did what was

expected of them. They married and had children (with the exception of one participant) whether or not they felt a real desire to do so. In fact, potential careers were put on hold, or abandoned altogether, in the service of societal expectations. As Dawn put it:

I got married at, 21, it was, what was totally expected! You know, I had to, there was no, other route, that, that I at that time could conceivably even follow. I remember, I dated, my former husband for five years, before we married. I met with him, and I started dating when I was 15, so I mean, that was the path that I was on, at a very early, and there was no other thought. I can remember at one point, as, we started out our married life in [name of city] where he went to do his Masters, and I can remember thinking "I'm not sure if I really want to do [the job that she was doing at that time] I think what I really want to do is to teach, but that means, going to teacher's college which means I couldn't, like, I couldn't get married," you know, and in that year support [her husband] which was the plan, so I, I think, [teaching] was just not even um, ever really in my realm of consciousness.

It is unlikely that any of us ever really spends a great deal of time consciously examining our potential choices when we are about to enter the institution of marriage. As Jean pointed out, choice isn't part of the equation, even when talking about sexual orientation, "I was 25 when I got married, it wasn't like I was a kid, uh, um, I didn't get married because I thought 'well, I have to live this hetero lifestyle'. I'm sure, if I had met somebody, a woman, back then, I would have found a way, to be able to, get away with it." Right, most people don't stop and think about whether or not they have a choice. Choice does not enter into it, even for a woman who, looking back, felt that she would have entered into a gay relationship if the right woman had come along. She didn't give any thought to the type of relationship she was entering. She just fell in love with a man

and she married him; and for most of us, this is probably true, we don't stop to examine our potential choices before selecting a mate.

What did marriage represent? Among the reflections on why they married, participants portrayed marriage as a route towards security—emotional and financial—and acquired social status, as well as a vehicle for moving through a future of shared happiness with a compatible mate. It is important to consider the social forces that shaped the destinies of women of this era. According to Prentice et al. (1988), although middle-class women made up greater numbers at universities than in previous decades, higher education still was not an option for many women in the 60s and 70s when such gender-based educational distinctions as home economics for girls versus shop for boys were still being made in high school classes. The idea of sending a daughter to university remained atypical of middle-class families. In 1966, the Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario polled parental attitudes regarding appropriate careers for their children. Nursing, teaching and social work—typically lower paying professions—were the occupations that parents deemed appropriate for their daughters, while for their sons, they preferred business, science, medicine, engineering, architecture, and the legal profession (Prentice et al., 1988). Thus, the financial picture for most unmarried women was bleak, and marriage represented the only path to financial security for the majority of women; if she couldn't be a doctor, she could at least marry one! For example, Alice, who in more recent years returned to university to complete a PhD, had struggled

financially as a young woman, so financial issues were an impetus in her decision to marry:

Was I attracted to this guy? Not in the slightest! [I. No? How did you reconcile that, to yourself, what, what kind of things did you think about him?] He was stable. I wasn't going to be hungry. I wasn't going to have to worry about paying my bills, as long as I, basically agreed with everything he said. He was kind, and generous, both financially and with his time, uh, there were certain things that we enjoyed in common, we both liked, to read, a lot, we had an interesting, a, a very eclectic interest in music [I. mmhm], we both really liked, films.

Emotional security was another reason given for marrying, as described by Marie:

I was probably more motivated by, the, um, the lack of, family unity that we had in our home, more than anything else, you know, like it was, um, my father was an alcoholic and you know my mother was a classic co-dependent and um, life fell apart, and just wanting to, establish those family norms.

Thus, the expectations my participants held about married life were: the belief that they were marrying for life, despite any misgivings they might have had at the outset; shared interests with their spouse; and sexual compatibility. The degree to which these expectations were upheld is discussed in the next sections.

Reflections on the Marriage. The topic of marriage was inevitably an important focus for the participants in this project. Thus, "Reflections on the Marriage" was made up of a large number of meaning units, coded in terms of both positive and negative comments on participants' experience of marriage. The within-category properties reflected their perceptions of: what they got out of the marriage; what was missing in their marriages; and marital unhappiness and problems. As expected, financial security was a benefit of marriage for many women. For others, however, the dream of financial

security was not fulfilled, and occasionally, marriage meant that a wife had to work at two jobs when a husband was out of work. A woman lucky enough to have married a man with a reasonably high income level experienced world travel and the choice to stay home with her children. By and large, for Canadian women of my generation, world travel was afforded by membership in or by marriage into middle-class or higher income levels. Similarly, for most of my participants, the possibility of experiencing the world was ineluctably bound to marriage. Nearly half of the participants spent a period of their marriages living in other provinces and/or other countries. Husbands' career was the primary vehicle for these sojourns, with the exception of one couple who worked in the same field, taking families to such diverse countries as Asia, South America and Britain for extended periods.

Reflecting on their marriages, a couple of my participants observed that safety and heterosexual privilege were things that they “got out of marriage.” In a heterosexist society, one is assumed to be heterosexual, unless one's non-heterosexual orientation is made public in some way. In Canada, gay men tend to be identified in public more easily than lesbians because, for example, a pair of heterosexual men are not expected to book hotel rooms together, hug or show affection in public, or to go out to the movies, (dining, drinking, etc.). These things are social “privileges” that are afforded heterosexual couples and women, presumed to be heterosexual, who can engage in all of the above without eyebrows being raised. Given this double standard in socially acceptable behaviour

patterns across gender and sexuality, the loss of safety (in the form of gay-bashing) and the loss of public heterosexual privilege were not generally the first things participants had to confront, when they began to consider shedding their heterosexual identity. However, there was a less public aspect to the privileges and safety of heterosexuality that fell within the borders of participants' families and social circles.

Participants soon became aware of these implications of leaving heterosexuality. For example, Iris went to a coming out group during the early period of her transition. She noticed that some of the women in the group just wanted to state that they had fallen in love with a woman, and not that they would consider themselves other than heterosexual. She had the following to say:

I think the women, in the group I went to, as new as they are in the community, or in this new culture whether they recognise they're in it or not, um, they're scared, because they do know! They do know, they have a really good idea, and some of them voiced it, you know "and here I am suddenly" and not that, "I just fell, fell in love with a woman." Well good for you that's a start "and now I don't want to give up, all this other stuff, all the nice stuff, I don't want to give that up." [I. mmhm, yeah, and I think you are right, I think that it's probably um...] But you have to give it up! There's, there's not a choice about it, you have given it up! It will never be the same, it's like when you have a kid, life is never the same again!

Another participant, Diane talked about her own response to her fear of losing the privileges associated with assumed heterosexuality:

When it, really counted, when I really had something to lose, I retreated to, you know, safe, heterosexual family ... [she and her husband] developed a way to live together, that allowed both of us, to, be about our lives, um, but it was, very, very stressful [I. yeah] and, the lack of, of real, I mean I was involved with somebody throughout the whole thing, um, so, I had, a, a vehicle, emotionally, and physically, and uh, but I was exhausted, absolutely exhausted, because I was

still trying to maintain, um, the home, and some, uh, look of normality for my kids [I. yeah] at the same time I had this whole other life...

Thus, these participants were brought to an abrupt awareness of the meaning of heterosexual privilege in our society and what its loss might mean to them. Other participants spoke of heterosexual privilege and safety more indirectly. For example, most saw the opportunity that marriage afforded them to have children and raise a family as a benefit of the marriage. Married life also provided emotional security in terms of familiarity and companionship and not always having to make decisions alone. Some participants had loving, intimate bonds with their husbands, while others coped with estrangement and discord. In general, however, marriage was not experienced as being bad and at least half of the participants spoke about their ex-husbands with fondness and respect.

Several participants admitted to early worries about getting married, or later, during their marriage, having the feeling that something was missing. Before their marriages, Marie and Louise experienced what was called at the time “wedding jitters.” They both described feelings of terror at the prospect of being married for life. Jean felt suffocated in her marriage and couldn’t figure out what the trouble was. She was restless and unhappy, and she felt that there had to be more to life than what she was experiencing. Similarly, Vivian never felt comfortable in her role as wife and mother. She needed some kind of change, but she wasn’t able to pinpoint just what that change should be, and she had no idea how to deal with her restlessness and discomfort. Alice

also experienced feelings of uneasiness that in retrospect she attributed to her heterosexual life. Feeling herself slowly disappearing, she finally attempted suicide. It was then that she realised that she had to leave her marriage. Marie had similar feelings of discomfort. Feeling like a failure, she blamed herself for not being able to find some kind of emotional connection with her husband.

Some women thought about having affairs, and at least one woman tried that route without resolving her uneasiness. Thus, despite the benefits of married life, participants felt restless, lonely, or unhappy, but they were not able to pin-point the cause of their unease. Upon listening to these women's attempts to explain their marital dissatisfaction, it became apparent that they had had no language for their discontent, no reference point from which to make sense out of their growing unease. According to the dictates of the society they grew up in, women were supposed to take pleasure in, and be fulfilled by, marriage and raising children. To come to a recognition that "I can't be me in his world" was verging on self-denial. Alice described her experience this way:

I didn't have a lot of outlets, for my, intellectual development, you know? I, I found it very difficult, so, my only, connection, to the outside world, if you will, was my husband! And he just, didn't care about that, he had this vision of living in this perfect house, with this perfect wife, and, you know, two perfect dogs, two perfect cats, and, you know, it was an unliveable fairytale. [I. yeah] I couldn't do it, and after a while, I started to get, I started to lose myself.

Another issue that came up for these women under the rubric "something missing in the marriage" was a growing awakening and discontent with heterosexual gender roles and division of labour. On the other side of the coin of financial and emotional security is

the unspoken expectation of a strict division of labour regarding careers, childcare, home and social life. The stereotypical picture of the man going out to work, while the “little woman” cared for hearth and home had been emblazoned in their psyches long before they took that step themselves, and as much as they might have considered themselves products of the 60s liberation movement, they were as quick to fall prey to socially constructed norms for married life as anybody else. In this way, Jean came to realise that as much as she and her husband cared for one another, she was not free to be an independent agent in that union. Happy to have children, in the beginning she enjoyed being a “stay-at-home mom” and did not question her husband’s preference to keep her out of the workforce. Once her youngest son was in kindergarten, however, she wanted to get back to work and she found that his view on the subject of her working, “anything to keep me happy, but he wanted me home and happy!” was beginning to suffocate her.

Similarly, Diane found that the initial benefits of traditional marital gender roles did not come free of cost:

I just went along, he basically was in charge of everything, and controlled, although it appeared I had a lot of control, but ultimately, um, whatever happened was really because of what he wanted. I had lots of free time because I was home with the kids, but, that was because he didn’t want me doing any of the stuff, so I had, all these commitments on my time, [I. yeah] I didn’t make a lot of choices about most things, I didn’t even think about making choices!

Thus, along with a sense of restlessness, for several of the participants, feelings of frustration with the status quo emerged, and resentment began to build up. Towards the

end of the marriage, this resentment sometimes escalated into explosive fights, as Alice describes in the following passage:

I resented him, mightily, because at no point did he offer, to share [the workload] and he was quite content, to have somebody else do it for him! ... I just looked at him, "we are in different worlds, and these are !never, going to meet." So then, you know, he called me names, and swore at me, he never, raised a hand at me, he wouldn't dare, but what he would do, is get in my physical space, and I'm very short and he wasn't, a tall man, but he was stocky, so he would get in my physical space and talk, into my face, loudly.

For two participants, ordinary marital problems and issues were exacerbated by the threatening and violent behaviour of abusive husbands. These participants often dealt with marital unhappiness by taking on all of the responsibility for problems, and blaming themselves when things went wrong. They were not alone, however. For example, Marie, whose husband was not abusive, also described a tendency to shoulder the blame for marital problems:

I started off in the early years thinking that, I was failing to do something, and so I worked really hard at, trying to fix, whatever it was, so I became, I just did everything to please him, that I could think of, and, it, of course didn't change anything...he was always content in the relationship, like it was all, fine to him, you know. When I started making noises, you know in the last few years about being unhappy, he was like totally confused.

As Marie explained, self-blame only made matters worse in the end. Moreover, over half of the respondents, reflecting upon marital problems, commented that their marriages were not particularly problematic compared to other marriages, and a frequent comment about their husbands was "he's not a bad guy," suggesting that their difficulties were not a result of bad choices in husbands, as much as the pain of growing apart. Sometimes,

when this was happening, there was a need to place the blame on someone, whether blame was warranted or not, in order to try to make sense out of a difficult period. For example, Jean remembered saying things to her husband that, in retrospect, were meant to push him away, although at the time she just remembers feeling angry. Similarly, Louise got the following advice from a friend, “it’s okay for you to leave this marriage, you don’t have to make it sound like it was a hard year, because maybe it wasn’t and he’s not a horrible guy.”

Sex. The pleasure of heterosexual sex varied across the different participants. However, for many this was a problematic area. Five participants did not enjoy sex with men, and they felt that they were not sexually compatible with their husbands. A sixth noted that her sexual relations with her husband declined over time. The remaining three women felt that they had a satisfactory or good sexual relationship with their husbands. For them, lesbian sex simply added a new dimension to their sexual pleasure (see “Attraction, Bisexuality, Lesbian Sex”).

Although marital sex was not a specific interview topic, three issues emerged: lack of intimacy; lack of sexual pleasure; and constructing sex problems as her fault. The importance of intimacy in healthy sexual relationships, particularly for women, is common knowledge. Marie and Dawn reflected on the intimacy in their marriages as follows:

[Marie] You know, there’s a sexual, act, and there’s making love and having you know, a sexual, a loving sexual relationship, which are two, totally different

things [I. yeah] you know, and what I had, for all those years, with my husband was a sexual act [I. yeah] only, and nothing more.

[Dawn] I knew passion [in the marriage], so it's not like I didn't have passion, you know, with a man ...uh, maybe it's that emotional connection, that you often have with a woman that you don't necessarily have with a man.

Marta, found that the liberal attitudes of the 60s sexual revolution afforded her and her husband greater opportunities to talk about sex:

We were living collectively, there was a *lot* of experimenting going on, anyway, (I. mmhm) um, and, a lot of talk about, you know, we were all married, uh, open marriages, and, a lot of sexual exploration, and what does all this mean, and, uh, most of us were, too conservative to actually *try* a lot of it? But there was a lot of, talk about it, we all knew people who were doing it, we were exploring a lot of our own feelings.

Enjoyment of heterosexual sex varied widely across participants. Dawn and Louise had been quite content sexually, prior to their transition, and Jean had enjoyed sex with her husband until the marriage started to dissolve. For most of the others, sex problems were evident at the beginning of the marriage and they became an issue throughout the entire marriage. One participant in this situation was Marta. She described her marriage as a happy one that was missing sexual satisfaction. For her, sex eventually became unimportant. Other women found that they could achieve orgasm and/or sexual pleasure more readily through masturbation than they could with their partner.

Lastly on the topic of sex, a matter of concern for some participants was blame and guilt. Jean struggled with this issue over the course of a physical illness. She felt that her husband did not understand the nature of her physical condition, and that he thought

she just didn't want to have sex, when, in fact, she was totally exhausted. Arguments about sex left her feeling guilty, angry, and eventually, resentful. Another participant, Marta, recalled her husband's suggestion that their marital sex problems were caused by her being "just too uptight" and he suggested that she should see a therapist so she could learn how to relax. In fact, during her first sexual experience with a woman, she discovered that she had no trouble relaxing. As these women talked about marital sex, I got the sense that they often co-opted the sex problems in their marriage as their fault, while at the same time, feeling un-empowered to do anything about them.

Participant/Research Summary. To conclude the section on "Marriage," some of my participants married for love, many married because there was no other choice available to them; they expected to be married for life, to be financially and emotionally secure, to enjoy sex with their husbands, possibly to have children, and maybe even to live happily ever after. As I recall my own reasons for marrying, I was a young girl more in love with the idea of wedded life than I was with the person I was about to marry. For each of us, what marriage turned out to be, in reality, varied considerably. Some of us had a great deal of financial security, which meant that we could enjoy being "stay-at-home moms," while others had to work outside the home. This is not to cast working outside the home in a negative light; rather, it is an indication of the different degrees of choice that each of us obtained through marriage. Emotional security and sexual enjoyment varied as well. For all of us, as "wives," we were afforded currency in the

social market of “heterosexual privilege,” meaning that we were entitled to sex, a life partner, emotional, financial and social security, raising a family of our own, etc. The degree to which these privileges were in fact realised, varied across couples and across socio-economic lines.

A common discovery during the married years was a sense of unrest and the feeling that something was missing. Depending upon the weak point in the marriage, often a particular issue in the marriage was blamed for this uneasiness. Some women articulated in retrospect that they seemed to have needed to find fault with their husbands in order to distance themselves. As well, some began to notice gender disparities in their marital unions, and sexual relations died down or became less enjoyable. My own experience was also reflective of this sense of unrest and sexual disparity, and like many of my participants, I often felt guilty and responsible for all of the problems in the marriage.

Leaving Heterosexuality—The Experience of Transformation

The category, “Leaving Heterosexuality,” is divided into two third-order categories: “The Experience of Transformation” and “Relational Transformations.” The experience of the transformation pertains to the processes involved in taking on a lesbian identity and coming out to others. Relational transformations includes changes in significant roles. Together they encompass the larger change process—leaving

heterosexuality at mid-life. Relational transformations will be examined in the next section. This section outlines the experience of transformation, which encompasses a number of internal and external change processes. These include transitional, transformational, and coming out processes that appear to be happening simultaneously.

In the literature on homosexual identities, often the term “coming out” has been used to describe both internal and external processes. Two quotations that follow, illustrate this dual meaning of the term, both within the queer community, as is evident in the first quotation, and within the psychological literature on queer identities as in the second quotation. According to *The Lesbian Almanac*, coming out means: “To acknowledge one's homosexuality, either to oneself or to others; most often a public declaration of being lesbian or gay” (The National Museum & Archive of Lesbian and Gay History, p. 81). Herek (1995) defined coming out as follows:

Lesbians and gay men must traverse a sequence of events through which they recognize their own homosexual orientation, develop an identity based on it, and disclose their orientation to others. This process is usually termed coming out (a shortened form of coming out of the closet) (p. 335, italics in original).

This dual meaning of the term can be confusing to heterosexual people, and even people who are undergoing their own coming out process may be unsure what coming out means exactly. In particular, a woman who comes out later in life, who has had little to no exposure to queer communities, may find the term “coming out” foreign and irrelevant to her; as one of my participants put it, “coming out, to me, represents someone like [partner] who has been gay all her life and finally, allowed people to, see her, for, who

she really is.” Moreover, as I listened to participants’ stories, and in the process of analysing their transcripts, it became increasingly evident that the term “coming out” could not possibly convey the rich and diverse nature of the change processes that they were undergoing. These change processes amount to a transformation in self and self-in-relation to others that I have constructed into four second-order categories: “Lesbian Awakenings,” “Self-Transformations,” “Coming Out,” and “Breaking New Ground.” The first two categories contain first-order categories that describe the emergent internal processes of recognising and coming to terms with one’s own lesbian or gay behaviour and taking on a lesbian or gay identity. Within the current taxonomy, the category “Coming Out” pertains to the more external, interpersonal process of disclosing one’s lesbian, gay or bisexual orientation. Finally, “Breaking New Ground” accompanies the transformation further, highlighting the discovery-oriented processes of traversing the gap between heterosexuality and lesbianism, and the negotiation of same-sex relationships.

Lesbian Awakenings

The second-order category “Lesbian Awakenings” unites four properties: “Lesbian Stirrings,” “Attraction, Bisexuality, Lesbian Sex,” “Owning My Lesbianism,” and “Expanding Horizons.” These first-order categories describe events, feelings, and thought processes from early on in the transformation, when participants found themselves acting outside the bounds of their previously accepted heterosexual behaviours and/or flirting with queer identities, until well into the transformation, when

they began to wrestle with the meanings behind taking on an identity of “other” in a heterosexist society. Although more often than not, sexual attraction to a woman was the precursor to lesbian or gay identification, this was not always the case. About 1/3 of my participants came to a recognition that they were lesbian (or gay) prior to actually becoming attracted to another woman, or falling in love with a woman. More will be said about this in “Self-Transformations.”

Lesbian Stirrings. Prior to their lesbian transition, the women I interviewed experienced a variety of what I call “lesbian stirrings.” One of their early lesbian stirrings seemed to have been the signs of unrest that at least half of my participants experienced in their marriages, as described previously. Participants described this restlessness, loneliness, and unexplained unhappiness as a longing for something that they needed but that they didn’t know existed. Beyond these signs of unrest, the experiences that were coded under the heading “lesbian stirrings,” are: participants’ exposure to other ways of thinking, and their dawning awareness of the possibility of something other than heterosexuality.

My participants were women with a sense of adventure, and with a capacity to traverse ordinary social boundaries in areas other than sexual orientation. Four returned to school as adults, for retraining and for higher education, three chose to work in the unfeminine occupations of bus driver, political activist, and home repair, and five of the participants moved thousands of miles from home at different points in their lives. These

experiences, along with adult career changes and involvement in volunteer and community activities were all factors that exposed these women to different cultures, experiences, and perspectives. Previously unquestioned family values and cultural norms were put to the test through exposure to different cultures, marginalized groups, racism and homophobia. For some participants, there was an emerging awareness of feminist values, and they began to realise that the traditional, conservative values they had grown up with did not meld with their changing worldview. For others, this was the first time they came into contact with “out” lesbians. Dawn described the experience of entering a new workplace where she first met a number of politically active lesbians in terms of culture shock:

It was an entree into, another culture almost, and like stepping off the plane, I just, stepped into, this workplace, um, and, so, in the same way we experience culture shock [slight laugh] when we, travel, I think, that there was, culture shock on, on my part there [in the workplace]. That’s when my, sort of, curiosity started, to develop, my interest in, which is again, a pattern that I have, when I’m preparing to go to a new country, I, you know, get all these books and information, on the country that I’m visiting, so uh, now I can’t say that it was, specifically at that time that I started to read, but at that time, I started, to volunteer with the AIDS committee, so that was another place where of course that culture manifests itself.

Most participants experienced an emerging awareness of the possible existence of something other than heterosexuality prior to actually experiencing a sexual attraction towards another woman. These experiences were not necessarily about sexuality, but they were transformative. They offered the possibility of considering new ideas and perspectives, and often these experiences came as a shock, or an epiphany of some kind.

For example, Alice described her first realisation that such a thing as woman's studies courses existed as a light being switched on:

[An old friend] was telling me about this great course she was taking, women's studies. It was like somebody threw a light switch on! I went, "women's studies? what's women's studies? tell me about it." So, she started telling me about it, and, "oh, yeah, okay", I said "well, yeah, I can do it, I can do that!"

Other transformational experiences were more of a sexual nature, such as when Marta attended her first feminist conference. She found herself jolted out of her heterosexual slumber by a physical reaction to being in close quarters with a group of women:

We were sleeping practically on top of each other, or *literally* sitting on each other's laps! And, I experienced a kind of energy, and physical response like I'd never experienced sitting on any man's lap! [laughing]

Still other experiences were more subtle, although no less transformational. For example, Vivian and Dawn found themselves wanting to be protective towards the lesbians in their workplaces, and at times even defending these other women against homophobic attacks. Alice and Diane were drawn to, and intrigued by, seeing women together in soft-core porn films and magazines. These and other participants recalled unexplained feelings towards another woman that, in retrospect, could only be described as sexual attraction. The possibility of misinterpreting such a powerful experience as sexual attraction seems quite astounding, yet that is exactly what seemed to have occurred, at least until participants gained a language to describe their feelings. To exemplify, Dawn articulated a powerful dream of making love to another woman, a woman who in fact turned out to be her first lover. It was the dream that began to articulate the feelings that in waking life

she had not been able to understand or describe. In another example, Marta recalled a conversation with a close friend. Even as her words betrayed her feelings, she had been unaware that she was attracted to this woman:

I remember very clearly telling my closest friend in the convent, uh, that I was very serious about somebody, because, he was, uh, the man most like her, that I had ever met. I remember the exact words [I. wow] uh, I still didn't have a clue what I was saying, or what that meant!

Thus, for most of these women, the transition from heterosexuality to lesbianism was heralded by signs of unrest, exposure to different cultures and alternative viewpoints, and the recognition that there was another way for them to live and love. Through these lesbian stirrings it appears that a language was discovered that made it possible for us to create a different reality.

Attraction, Bisexuality, Lesbian Sex. This category encompasses what my participants had to say about attraction, bisexuality, and their discoveries about lesbian sex.

Early feelings of being attracted to another woman were exciting and terrifying. Some women seemed to have been mentally prepared for the experience, whereas it took others by complete surprise. Those who were more prepared had either had a strong memory of attraction to another girl as a young woman, or else they had always recognised some sexual energy towards other women. Participants who were taken by complete surprise by these feelings often did not experience the attraction as positive, at least initially. Since most first attractions tended to occur either while the person was still

married, or prior to her identifying as lesbian, such attractions often inspired confusion. For example, Marie had been married for nearly 20 years when she found herself attracted to a female friend. She described her feelings in the following passage:

I remember, feeling, very confused, about the feelings that I was having, like, um, thinking, I don't know if I consciously thought "I'm attracted to her" but I remember thinking, um, just this overwhelming feeling of wanting more than just, being a friend, you know, I wanted to, uh, kiss her, you know? Or touch her.

Although confusion was one type of response that participants experienced, other responses included excitement and celebratory feelings. Women who were already separated, or who had already conceived of the possibility of a lesbian identity, were less likely to feel ambivalence and more likely to feel excitement at the possibility of flirting with a woman.

Alternatively, the timing and situation of a first lesbian attraction also had an impact on the participant's reaction to it, as the experiences of Vivian and Dawn illustrate. Vivian had never experienced sexual feelings with another woman. Then one night she was offered a joint. She tried it, and the next thing she knew, she was "necking up a storm" with a girlfriend on the chaise lounge in her backyard. She said, "I thought about it afterwards, and we were both embarrassed, the next day, and I [asked friend], 'did that really happen?', and she went, 'yes, it did' and I said 'Oh! okay then,' but she would, she, she's um, married, still married." Only after this experience did Vivian begin to allow herself to think about the possibility of being attracted to a woman. By contrast, Dawn, who also had never conceived of the possibility of same-sex attraction for herself,

experienced a slow dawning of realisation that she felt an attraction toward a female friend. This realisation occurred within a context of becoming comfortable with and curious about lesbian and bisexual women at her place of employment. As traveller, she often did a lot of reading in preparation for her travels. Thus, like an explorer in the unknown of the lesbian/bisexual/gay world, she delved into books on the subject, volunteered for an AIDS committee, and slowly acculturated herself into this new world, before she realised that it was all part of a journey of self-change. By the time she experienced an attraction for a lesbian friend, she was less shocked by it than Vivian had been.

A theme that came up over and over in this analysis was the inadequacy of familiar language to describe participants' initial experiences of same-sex attraction, romance, and sexual feelings. With respect to attraction, participants talked about their lack of awareness of sexual energy prior to their transition, about not recognising attractions to other girls that in retrospect they realised, and the way that socialization might have impacted their thinking about potential lovers. Dawn put it down to sexual repression, stemming from her early socialization:

I think, that, my sexuality, was very suppressed, even as, as a married woman, so, that was a piece of it too, like, I wouldn't have been able at all, at that point to say, "there's some sexual energy here" - whether it was between me, and, and another woman, or... Now I do group work and I'm always aware of sexual energy!

Participants were not prepared for an attraction to women, not able to conceive of the possibility—they had no language for same-sex attraction in their repertoire of sexual

understanding. In reviewing their first lesbian experiences, the feeling of attraction was recalled as being strong, but the ability to describe it had only recently surfaced. This absence of articulation suggests that the mechanics of heterosexist society served not only to keep us in the dark about gay and lesbian culture, but also hindered us from entertaining the possibility of anything other than opposite-sex attraction for ourselves.

Other attraction-related remarks by participants had to do with similarities between heterosexual attraction and same-sex attraction, and dispelling popular misconceptions that they came up against in their daily lives. Often queer sexualities are seen as extreme or bizarre in the eyes of the public. Having been faced with questions and comments in this vein, some participants made a point of articulating the commonalities between same-sex and opposite-sex attraction. For example, like heterosexuals, lesbians and gay people are attracted to different people based upon idiosyncratic preferences of all kinds. In addition, coming to an awareness of a gay or lesbian sexual orientation does not mean that you will suddenly develop an attraction to your same-sex friends, as Jean pointed out: "I'm not attracted to every woman I see, any more than I was attracted to every guy I saw when I was living a heterosexual life!"

On the subject of bisexuality, there was little disagreement among my participants. None of them experienced their identity as "bisexual," and most of them reported that they could not see themselves in a sexual relationship with a man ever again. Speaking about two men she knows from work, Jean put it this way:

I mean, they're !really nice, cute guys, and I always, you know, we have this, flutter of the eyelashes and everything else, and [friend from work] was saying "you're telling me, if - - no?" and I said, "absolutely not, I, I'd have dinner with him, I'd go to the show, I'd do anything, he's a great guy, he's cute, but I will not sleep with him."

Two participants thought that they possibly could, but probably wouldn't ever have sex with a man in the future. Nevertheless, and despite the fact that more than half of the participants were attracted to their husbands when they married, when asked directly, none of them opted for the label "bisexual" as a description of their sexual orientation. Although there seemed to be somewhat differing understandings and values placed on bisexuality as a sexual category, most of these women wanted to make it clear to me that they did not consider themselves bisexual.

Experiencing sex with a woman was something about which most participants were interested in telling me. Sex became a voyage of discovery. The first stop in the journey was the exciting, unknown territory of a whole new way of having sexual relations that was entangled and complicated by their intimate knowledge of another body through the experience of their own identically-formed bodies. The first sexual experience, while holding surprises for some, was incredibly exciting and joyful, and in some respects terrifying. For the most part, it was a positive event, one that some women likened to a homecoming to one's sexual self. The following comments elucidate the nature of this experience for my participants:

[Vivian] ...that was the first time I'd ever, ever, ever had an orgasm, and I was so embarrassed!

[Alice] ...that was my, that was my first relationship, and my first experience with uh, lesbian sex, and in many respects it was wonderful. God! Women smell way better than men!

[Diane] It was something totally different [I. yeah] yeah. It was, um, sex with a man was, it was okay, it was fun, it could be, good, but, um, that first kiss with a woman, was like "oh my god!"

[Dawn] I experienced passion in a way I've never experienced passion before. I, experienced, um, comfort, in terms of my body, and sexual self, uh, in a way that I had never experienced before.

[Louise] ...it was marvellous, it was wonderful, and it was, um, even listening to music, [I. uh-huh] became, more accessible, it became more accessible to me because most music, is about a sexual relationship.

[Marta] I felt like somebody, who, had, a really vibrant sexuality for the first time in my life ... it, was mind-boggling [I. yeah], it was like, that's what it is supposed to be like!

[Iris] I can remember my first experience with a woman, and I just felt like "oh, this is it, this is what's been wrong, this is why I haven't, like, been happy, sexually!"

The next stop on the voyage of discovery was finding out about their own sexual needs, which occurred when participants encountered differences between lesbian sex and hetero sex. There seemed to have been something missing in the sex lives of several participants up until their discovery of lesbian sex. In some cases, what was missing was as simple as having a lover who knew what a woman needed, sexually and emotionally.

As Jean put it:

I find, with a woman, there, there's a closeness there, that there isn't with a man [I. mmhm] um, stemming, I don't know, from the same thing, we're, we're all alike, we tend to know, maybe what women like more.

Thus, for some, it seemed that their sex lives were unfulfilled because of something their husbands were not doing. For others, the discovery that they made was more about themselves, as they came into contact with their own sexual needs. Thinking about her marriage, Marie attempted to explain this type of epiphany:

I don't know that I ever had any, attraction feelings for him that I would today think that were normal, um, and I didn't think that, at the time, that it was abnormal, I didn't realise there was an absence of those feelings, I only see it now, as I look back. ...denial can be so strong and conditioning is so strong [I. yeah] you know? I never had questioned that, you know, I had nothing to compare it to, I didn't have anything to compare it with, then [first lesbian relationship] and suddenly, I had a comparison, and, there was no going back [I. yeah] it was not the same!

Similarly, Vivian felt that the change in her sex life was like night and day. As she said, with a grand laugh: "I have a sex life [now], a great one!" Given these experiences, one might presume that sex caused the transition. However, my participants' stories indicated that this transition was quite a lot more complicated than a change in sexuality, as will be addressed further along.

As a construction of sexual identity, Butch-Femme sex-role identification was brought up occasionally in the interviews. It is generally accepted in GLBT literature that butch-femme relationships have gone out of favour in North America (The National Museum & Archive of Lesbian and Gay History, 1996). However, this perception is in no way certain (Levitt, in press; Nestle, 1992). Although none of my participants portrayed their own sex-life as butch-femme, there was some discussion of sex roles that seemed to bear butch-femme qualities. In particular, one participant stated that she was attracted to women that "look feminine," and she described herself as always being "very tomboyish." Another participant, whom I would describe as much more femmy than butchy, in terms of *The Lesbian Almanac's* definitions, in describing her sexual relationship with her partner, commented on how she dressed seductively, and how she

tended to act with her partner like she would at the hands of a male lover, particularly at the beginning of their relationship. In general, when the topic was addressed head-on, participants eschewed butch-femme stereotypes, while at the same time acknowledging some kind of butch-femme mystique still operated in the lesbian culture as they understood it. The comments of Diane provide an example of this viewpoint:

Well actually, there's a lot of these, like a polarity or dichotomy, cause even the Butch-Femme thing, it's just, to me, you know, top-bottom thing, and are you top? [I. I haven't quite figured it out yet (both laughing)]. It's like, who really cares? I mean, I don't have to define myself, and this butch-femme thing, I mean [ex-lover] would be, she's so butch, and she would always, you know, "that's so femmy and that's so...", like, I don't have to define myself this way, in bed, I will do what I, want to do!

All in all, it is apparent that sex was an important determinant and example of participants' transformational experiences. Moreover, negotiating changes in sexuality and sex roles appeared to be a complicated and ongoing process for many.

Owning My Lesbianism. As described previously, coming out involves both the internal processes inherent in recognising one's lesbian or gay identity, as well as the external aspect of acknowledging one's homosexual orientation publicly. This category reflects the former—participants' descriptions of their internal processes as they came to grips with their own non-heterosexual identity. Here, I am not talking about owning or accepting the *label* "lesbian" necessarily. Rather, the term "owning my lesbianism" refers to recognising oneself as no longer part of the heterosexual norm, whatever label one chooses to describe one's sexual orientation. The process of owning their lesbian identity seemed to have taken place in stages, according to the stories told by my

participants. As they progressed through these stages or periods, the meanings attached to acquiring a non-heterosexual identity shifted. Additionally, not all women entered lesbianism at the same place. For some women, falling in love was the beginning of the journey, whereas other women began to think of themselves as lesbian through other cues, such as recognising that they were more physically drawn to women, and for some the process seemed to have been mediated through strongly held social or political values. In whatever way the process unfolded, it contained the features of major shifts in identity, akin to puberty or entering motherhood.

The first stage of non-heterosexual identity acquisition seemed to be taken up in coming to terms with the realisation that they were either attracted to women in general, or falling in love with a particular woman. At this point, several participants still described themselves as heterosexual. I wasn't surprised to hear this because of a joke that is heard in lesbian circles, one that is widespread enough to have found its way onto tee-shirts seen on Pride Day. It states: "I'm not a lesbian, my girlfriend is." The meaning underlying this joke is that some women are not comfortable claiming a lesbian identity. Considering the fact that the women I interviewed held their sexual orientation to be heterosexual for many years, their early reticence at seeing themselves as non-heterosexual, despite evidence to the contrary, is not surprising. Thus, many women began this journey by maintaining an almost split identity, in terms of retaining their heterosexuality while engaging in lesbian behaviour. Marie described her thought

processes during the transformation in her sexual identity. The following statement was her understanding of this early period:

I first began to, think of myself as, in love with a woman. [I. uh-huh] That was all that I could say, that I loved a woman. I, couldn't, um, I couldn't even think of calling myself a lesbian! ...really in the last, two years, that I've, been able to admit to myself, before that, the first four years, um, I think I still considered myself, heterosexual, um, I just, was, in love with a woman.

Following the stage just described, where behaviour and sexual orientation differed, and seemed to have been contained as separate self-schemas or separate aspects of identity, a second period began, when the discrepancy between behaviour and identity was deliberated. During this period, women considered their same-sex attractions, romantic inclinations, and sexual behaviour in light of their understanding of heterosexuality, usually in an attempt to fit the former into the latter. At some point, the antagonism between these two facets of self (or constructions of identity) came to the fore, forcing a renegotiation of sexual identity. The navigation of this change was easier for some than for others. Many participants battled with the demons of homophobia, fear of being different, and anticipatory fears about coming out. For Marta, who gave a name to this category, the battle included all of these issues: "I was, I was feeling very ambivalent, and too afraid to be outside of a traditional family context. [Afraid] to really, own my lesbianism." Her husband suggested that they continue to live as a married couple, and if she were discrete she could have affairs with women on the side, and so for awhile she tried to convince herself that he was right, and that she should try to do it his

way for the kids. Diane recalled a conversation with her sister, who came out as a lesbian much earlier, about her fears:

I remember saying to my sister, “but I don’t want to be gay, I don’t want this to be real, I just can’t believe it, I don’t want this to, be,” because I just fought to think that, it was gonna be such a, difficult [I. mmhm] thing to do.

Similarly, Marie struggled to reconcile her lesbian attraction with the teachings of her church, and the impossibility of this situation created feelings of shame and fear. As she explained:

It was a very powerful thing, for me, I had never experienced anything like that, and that brought a lot of confusion, because my mind kept telling me, that this was wrong, and bad! and I needed to stop it! and I couldn’t, stop it, and I have never felt so powerless!

When I asked her how she dealt with the shame she responded:

I know I cried a lot I, I prayed a lot, um, I said “I’m sorry” a lot, um, I justified, um, I made promises, you know? um, “I’ll never do it again.”

Other participants had arguments with themselves, and sometimes with others, over what constituted being gay or lesbian. For example, Alice described her quest to grapple with her own definition of lesbian identity that included questions from others:

...that made me think, well, so what’s the criteria? [I. mmhm] Do you have to have had, a sexual experience, with another woman to say you are a lesbian? I don’t think so. I don’t uh, you know, um, somebody actually said to me, before, that ever happened, “well how do you know then?” I said, “well I know what attraction feels like.” “Oh, well, what if you meet somebody, and you have sex, and you don’t like it?” And I said, “well, I’ve had sex and not liked it before.” [both laugh]

After the break-up of her first lesbian relationship, Diane found herself reconsidering her lesbian status:

I found myself driving around in January, catching myself saying, “no you still are a lesbian, even though you’re not in a relationship” because I found myself telling myself “so I’m not gay anymore.”

In a description that lent meaning to the transformative nature of the processes involved in leaving heterosexuality, Marie equated this period to giving birth:

I felt very much alone, in the whole process, and it was, it was a process of moving from here, to, to here, but in here was really, frightening, you know? [I. yeah] Of not really, being grounded anywhere. [I. right, that too, freedom, not to...] Yeah, transition’s always the worst, that’s what I say. [I. yeah, it is, even in labour, I don’t know if you remember that] Oh yes I do! [both laugh] And I’ve thought of that often, it’s the same thing, it’s like giving birth, it’s like you get to a point where, you think, there’s no going back, [I. mmhm]) and, it couldn’t be worse than this, so [I. laughs] I’m just gonna go for whatever, you know, and you just do it, because you have to do it [I. yeah] and then at the end, you produce something, positive.

Thus, the second stage of this internal coming out process—owning my lesbianism—appears to have required an uneasy dialectic that culminated in mapping a new territory in sexual identity. Participants described the next stage as a final layer of realisation, or the last piece of the transition. Marta talked about this period in terms of developing the courage to accept herself as a lesbian, and she contextualised it in terms of her political experience and dealing with oppression:

The experience, was, um, sort of, the last layer, in many ways, in terms of me coming to some kind of um, complete, uh, both realisation of, not only who I was but, who I wanted to be? [I. mmhm] And, developing the courage to completely accept that, and to move forward on the basis of it. And it’s interesting because, uh, that came, from having experiences that had little to do with, sexuality [I. uh-huh?] but, had everything to do with oppression and people standing up for who they were and, what they wanted in their lives. [describes the political situations and severely impoverished social and environmental conditions in war-torn countries where she did relief work] ...and it was in that context, I think that I finally came to, full, complete acceptance of who I was, and, the realisation that I had spent so many years of my life involved in, the peace movement, or

international development in human rights issues, supposedly, standing up for human rights, and it was always other people's and I wasn't willing to take any stand on behalf of myself [I. [slowly] yeah!]. And working with a lot of women, who, uh, were facing death, every day, um, and who had family members, killed, and having to, confront the fear of, of you know, having military rifles pointed at me, and tanks taking over where we were, and being tear gassed, and all that kind of stuff, um, meant I, could never come back and not, stand up for myself, [I. yeah] cause if I didn't, I couldn't stand up for anyone else, so it was a real, sort of final conversion experience in a lot of ways?

Although the final stage of owning their lesbian identity did not necessarily involve the same level of dramatic context for other participants, it was still a profound shift for nearly all of women I spoke to. To illustrate the experience of change, after five years of uncertainty and debate about her sexual identity, Dawn concluded that she has reached a new understanding of herself:

In the last year, that it's, I've concluded very, certainly, that I, could not go back, to, being heterosexual...
I think that um, this whole transition has been, very much about, a search, in terms of, my uh, self image, my self-esteem, my self, sense of self-worth. And certainly I think, um, the more I came out, the greater, that those feelings of self-worth became, and I think that, now as a fully out, lesbian, um, it, yeah, the, the use of these terms [lesbian, gay, queer] and my comfort with them is a reflection of how, far, I've come.

Alice described her mental work similarly:

By the time I'd admitted it, out loud, I'd gone through a very long process, of going inside my own head to try to figure this out, and was, recognising, I just couldn't live in that world, in the heterosexual world, anymore [I. mmhm] and, um, which had, you know there, there are overlaps, in, what I couldn't live with. I certainly couldn't live with, the, social construction of masculinity and femininity, that always, left me as, second place [I. mmhm] or, with an opinion, as long as it converged, I couldn't do that anymore, for sure! [I. that's a big step] It was huge, it was huge, it terrified me, um, I also liked the way women's bodies were, developed, and, and I'm not talking about just, you know, the, traditionally, presented, feminine, young, voluptuous, you know, nubile bodies. I liked women's bodies, I liked they way they moved, I liked the way they got older, they were interesting, I wanted to be near them.

The experience of reformulating their identities—unearthing their “dyke” personas, as it were—was a joyful process in many ways, as Dawn told me:

I get a great deal of joy, out of, the experience of being, a lesbian, whether it's, um, through, a whole world that's opening up for me, and discoveries I'm making, experiences I'm having, or whether it's just through my, you know, blossoming sexuality, um, sensuality, all that kind of stuff! And, and that joy is, I mean I have joy in lots of areas of my life, but, this is a, this is a part where, where I've given, I'm just, given constant joy, and, I really, I really do appreciate that? I don't know if I've really answered your question? [slight laugh] Maybe, it would be hard, to compare, but I'd never say that I was more, or, less happy, uh earlier [I. right, right, like, there's something different] mmhm [I. like a new dimension, happening, or] and it is great to be more grounded in, in, who you are, and I think that has to, contribute enormously, to your well being and therefore, to the happiness you experience!

Another participant, Diane, described the feelings attached to her shifting identity:

I'm so much more settled with myself, and my own identity, and, I think it is a big part of it? I feel different, I get up in the morning, and I sometimes chuckle [looking at herself in the mirror], and it's like “yeah I am, I'm such a dyke” [slight laugh] you know? Or, sometimes I just, feel like I'm losing touch with that identity, so I wear my grey stuff [I. yeah] that feels more, my corduroy shirt, I mean, I'll do stuff like that just because that defines me in that, in that light.

Although most of my interviewees described the process of owning their lesbian identity in terms of stages, two participants articulated a much smoother transition. I suspect that this is due to the fact that they had done a lot of their inner work earlier on, because they had had previous experience with either the lesbian community or a lesbian relationship when they were much younger. In addition, unlike those participants who had no prior experience to act as a scaffold for their mid-life same-sex attractions, these women had a framework from which to start to build a non-heterosexual identity. Overall, the women I interviewed judged this transition as a unique process, one that was

intertwined with, but separate from, the external coming out process. In fact, it seemed that the next stage of the process for many was coming out to others. Before delving into that piece, however, I will continue to outline some of the more internal aspects of the broader self and self-in-relation transformation process.

Expanding Horizons. This last category under the umbrella of “Lesbian Awakenings” pertains to the ways in which my participants sought to understand and enter the lesbian culture, once they claimed a lesbian identity. Searching out connections with other lesbians, mentorship, and reading/researching all played a role in expanding their horizons within the broader lesbian culture. Originally, I had named this category “Learning Lesbian Etiquette” because of the socialization process that occurs in any group when a neophyte enters. In this case, participants talked about the ways in which they learned the ropes of lesbian culture. Upon further reflection, it seemed more appropriate to talk about participants’ acclimatisation to lesbian culture through the particular vehicles that they utilised: group connections, mentors, and media.

To imagine the plight of a woman coming to terms with a lesbian identity at mid-life, is to imagine yourself suddenly not being able to count on your closest friends and relatives to understand you in ways that you had taken for granted before, moreover to feel like a lost soul in your social community, and to know that there are people like you out there somewhere, but you are bereft of a map or guidebook to help find them, and then finally, if you were able to find them, you probably don’t speak their language yet.

To belong to a community is to have your sense of self validated. Thus, these women searched for a connection, someone they could relate to. Some found a sense of community and connection in political groups, others took courses, attended women's groups and functions.

When they found themselves in the company of other lesbians, participants experienced a sense of joy. More than just an attraction to another woman, this experience implied an attraction to a culture. It seemed as if a whole new world opened up for some participants, a world that allowed them to explore new possibilities within themselves in a celebratory atmosphere which, of course, stands in direct opposition to the harsh judgment that society metes out to homosexuals in most social circumstances.

Four participants reported that prior to leaving heterosexuality themselves, they felt comfortable and relaxed in the company of lesbians. One participant, Marta, first encountered lesbians in her work as a social activist. She found herself comfortable around them, but also somewhat in awe of these women who were leaders of feminist organisations and political groups. Similarly, Vivian first met a group of lesbians through her work. After changing jobs, she attended a party where a number of the women were lesbian:

It was like being at a pyjama party. I felt so comfortable. I, was very, very relaxed, and they were all teasing me, "come on Vivian, when are you going to fall off the fence?"

Correspondingly, Iris enjoyed the atmosphere of women's dances and clubs when she first began to enter the lesbian social scene, and upon moving into the gay district in

her city, she felt comfortable around people she knew identified as gay or lesbian. In the same vein, Louise talked about how much she enjoyed the experience of attending her first women's music festival:

It felt really good and, very celebratory to be there with all these great women! And um, to see them, just openly, be with each other and you know, show affection for each other and, that was wonderful.

Four participants described what it was like for them to have lesbian mentors—women who helped them negotiate lesbian culture in the early stages of their transition. Mentors came in different packages. For Vivian, the woman that she fell in love with became both partner and mentor. She taught her what to expect from a same-sex relationship, and challenged Vivian's pre-conceived notions of gender roles and responsibilities. Mentors gave valuable advice when needed. Alice described the best advice she ever received about coming out:

I had to whisper, because I couldn't say that word out loud, and I remember looking at her and saying "I think I'm a [mouths the word] lesbian" and she's very, you know, she sat back and she said, "okay, that's all right, that's a possibility", and I looked at her and said "what do I do?" [I. laughs] And she gave me the best advice I've ever had from anybody, she just looked at me and she said "why do you need to do anything?" And that gave me permission [I. Wow! That's great]. It was like, yeah, I don't have to do anything! It's like, no, I don't have to jump into groups, or, [laughing] go through some initiation!

Other mentors were helpful in getting women through the doors of lesbian community, like the mentor that Iris had:

I got myself a "dyke mother" at that point, she was great, this was another woman I was working with, and she's a very good friend to this day as well, and uh, she was just a riot, she said, "the hair has gotta go." ... She kind of advised me, and it was very helpful, I don't know if the other woman you've interviewed have had this experience, but for me it was really, great, because, I was like a

teenager, I didn't understand, I didn't have a clue. I mean you know, I'm pretty perceptive but that was that was new, so I'd ask her questions and she would tell me and she would, you know she wasn't presumptuous or anything, and she'd let me make my own mistakes, but she was, a wealth of information, especially about who was who, in the community!

Thus, those women who had a friend in the lesbian community to guide them along found it much easier to get to know other lesbians, to date, and to get support when they needed it. In contrast, women who did not have this mentoring resource seemed to have a harder time making connections because of the lack of knowledge and support in the general community for women coming out later in life. Besides, just meeting other lesbians can be difficult, unless a woman is willing to sit alone in smoky bars, and then risk leaving alone at night from an area of town where gay-bashing adds another element of risk. Women's clubs and groups can be a better alternative, although they are not well publicised in mainstream media (so you have to know where to look for them) and they tend to cater to particular sub-groups which may not meet the needs of women who are coming out later in life. There are also women's festivals, lesbian social events, and women-only campgrounds, but again a woman who is just coming out is unlikely either to know about them, or to be comfortable going alone to these types of events. This presents a number of obstacles in the way of an un-partnered mature woman who wishes to enter the lesbian community. Moreover, as was pointed out by Dawn, who has been involved in community support work, the potential to meet other lesbians is even more difficult for women in rural areas. All of the women I interviewed were lucky enough to

live in urban or suburban areas, and although some found it more difficult than others to make community connections, eventually all were able to do so.

Another way that these participants expanded their horizons was by reading and researching. Several of my participants talked about their early fascination with books, movies, and magazines that portrayed gay and lesbian lives and issues. Some recounted a nearly insatiable hunger to know more about lesbian life, to understand more about the experiences they were having, and to have their own experiences contextualised and validated through the stories of other women. In part, for me, this research project served a similar purpose.

Specific individual reasons for researching gay and lesbian history, issues, and stories were described by participants. For example, Alice talked about the importance of being able to contextualise our experience:

...people like Judith Butler, who just made, an incredible impact on me, because a lot of the stuff that she talks about, is, the political necessity, and at the same time, the problems around, signifying always and only, as this, and how you can construct that language, whether we just go from one closet to another [I. ah]. You know, you open a closet door, in order to find what is it? Just another closet? [I. hm] And, I think that that's very powerful [I. mmhm] I think that her viewpoint, on, the flexibility, or the fluidity of, subjectivity, is extremely powerful, and it, it gives us permission, to investigate the things that, we need to find out about for ourselves. Not all of them are going to be, what we think they are, or what we hope they are, but that's okay.

Others talked about the importance of reading and researching in order to arm themselves against homophobia, and to get some kind of validation for their experience. These explorations also provided participants with advice and information about divorce,

custody, coming out and other topics of concern. For example, a few participants talked specifically about locating books and other resources on talking to children and coming out to family. Although informative, these resources were not always encouraging.

Marta explained what this was like for her:

I read everything I could get my hands on, in terms of coming out stories, uh, including an entire book about coming out to your kids and all this kind of stuff. ...fuelled a lot of my fears, because, while a lot of the stories were wonderful success stories where the kids said "I love you, anyway, mommy" or "I love you anyway, daddy", uh, at least half of them were gut wrenching, and heart breaking, where, you know, one kid, accepted it and another kid never spoke to them again, for as long as they lived, uh, somebody committed suicide. I mean, I would read these stories, and I would just sob!

Participant/Research Summary. The category "Lesbian Awakenings" is the story of the awakening of that aspect of us that is our potential for same-sex relationships. As our lives unfolded, many of us entered universities, travelled, or engaged in unconventional occupations that broadened our horizons and opened our minds to diversity. In my own case, returning to university in the early 1980s was a consciousness raising experience. This exposure to different cultures and alternative viewpoints in combination with a growing sense of unrest in our lives and/or in our marriages brought about the stirrings of new possibilities.

The first feelings of attraction towards another woman, and the first relationship with another woman were momentous experiences fraught with terror, excitement, and, joy, and experienced with varying degrees of surprise. Most of us had not developed an adequate language with which to describe our experiences, particularly the experiences of

attraction and sex with another woman, which proved ultimately to be a joyful and gratifying celebration of connection. Comfort and pleasure extended to the everyday world of lesbian culture, for many of us, and aided us in the experience of experimenting with our own identities.

The process of acquiring a non-heterosexual identity, or owning our lesbianism, occurred over time in an apparent stage-like progression, that for many of us began with an early period of coming to terms with lesbian attraction, while still conceptualising ourselves as heterosexual. Next came a period of re-evaluation, a process of deliberating same-sex attractions and behaviours in light of our conceptualizations of our own sexuality. Following that, there appeared to have been a re-conceptualization of our sexual identification, in which we saw ourselves as no longer belonging to the heterosexual norm. Throughout this process, we have sought out connections with mentors and like-minded people, in order to expand our horizons within the broader lesbian community, and we looked for books, articles, and films in order to contextualise our experiences within a diverse understanding of sexuality and identity.

Self-Transformations

The second order category that I have labelled “Self-Transformations” encompasses transformations in participants’ perceptions of self, self-in-relation, and identity that I have distinguished as separate from the previously outlined change in sexual identity. I have made this distinction in categories because the experience of these

two processes—taking on a lesbian identity and changes in self-perceptions—were described by my participants in discrete narratives, and because I experienced them as distinct in my own mid-life transition. “Self-Transformations” envelops four first-order categories, “Clues, Reconstructing My Past,” “Evolving Concept of Self,” “We are What We Wear?”, and “Labels.” Each category captures a different aspect of participants’ experience of self-change as a result of leaving heterosexuality at mid-life.

Clues, Reconstructing My Past. How did participants make sense out of this transition? How does one account for a later-in-life lesbian or gay identity and/or behaviour? These are not merely academic questions. They are questions that my participants and I have asked ourselves, in one way or another, many times since leaving heterosexuality at mid-life. As well, they are questions that have been asked of us by friends, family members and significant others. During the interviews, my participants attempted to make sense out of their transition by reflecting upon internal processes and external forces, and by looking for clues in their past. This category is structured around participants’ reflections upon their past behaviour, clues that they considered relevant to current behaviour and identity.

One topic of conversation that permeated the interviews was “how I was different from other girls.” Three participants described themselves as tomboys who did not enter the dating scene as early as most of their friends. Marie, described an idyllic childhood

followed by subsequent difficulty moving into the adult scene that society had prescribed for young women:

I was always involved, with boys, in these activities, and that was things like, wading through the pond, catching pollywogs, looking for gophers, climbing trees, building tree forts, riding horses, all of those things [I. right] which my, which girls grew out of really quickly? And I didn't, I didn't grow out of them, and I didn't want to grow out of them, and I, I didn't want, to become a teenager, and I didn't want to leave teenage-hood and become an adult, I, sort of went kicking and screaming the whole way.

Marie also went through a confusing period when her friends stopped climbing trees and building forts with her, when they began to experiment with make up and flirting with boys. At first she felt angry and betrayed. Much later, after she had matured physically, and she found herself the object of male admiration, things changed somewhat. However, she remembered that even then, she was not as interested in dating men as her friends were. In her words:

All of a sudden, I could fit in to this world that my friends were in. [I. right] And so, I just kind of played the game. Now I never did the, I never dated. I didn't, go out with different boys.

Similar to Marie's description, other interviewees recalled not dating or not being interested in dating as young women. As discussed previously, Alice remembered feeling undesirable in high school. Moreover, she preferred books to flirting. Diane did not like boys very much when she was in high school, and as mentioned previously, she wrote in her journal that she wondered when she would start liking them. Finally, Iris put it this way: "Well, when I think about it, I think I was probably always lesbian, but I just didn't know it. I dated boys, I never liked it particularly much."

In their attempts to make sense of their current lesbian identity, or behaviour, nearly all of my participants re-evaluated their past female relationships. Most remembered crushes on other girls or female teachers at some point. All of the women I interviewed talked about having had close emotional connections to other girls. At least two of them engaged in a period of sexual experimentation with another girl, during their teens, which they did not think too much about at the time. Thus, these early attractions seemed to have been, for the most part, unquestioned at the time of the experience. However, in retrospect, they appeared as potential indications of participants' present sexuality. Jean put it this way:

All my friends had crushes on, you know, teachers, as well [I. right], so I never, really, thought I was gay? I just thought that well, "probably lots of people have crushes on other people."

Thinking about her more recent close friendships with women, Jean explained what it was that she preferred about being with a woman:

There's a, there's a bond, that you have with women, it doesn't have to be a sexual bond, but I've found that out, from my friendships over the years, that, it didn't matter, because I didn't know that I wanted to be with a woman yet, but I got such a lot out of close friendships with women, because, we think alike, um, we're more understanding of each other, I think, because, women, most women think alike.

Another type of meaning-making that three of my participants engaged in very briefly was looking for a cause of their mid-life transition. For example, two participants, wondered if early sexual abuse might have contributed to their current sexual orientation. Another interviewee wondered if being adopted had had anything to do with her

becoming gay. This line of thinking—looking for a cause—seemed to have been externally imposed somehow, because we don't tend to ask the question “why am I like this?” unless there has been a negative value attached to whatever “this” is. Furthermore, the question of causality seemed to reflect participants' struggle with their own acceptance of themselves as gay, and therefore might be considered in terms of internalised homophobia. However, because I did not pursue these causation questions further in the interview, the possibility that they reflected internalised homophobia must remain speculative. Moreover, the notion of causality does not appear to be relevant to the lived experiences of the participants, either through their holistic narratives or in the emerging categories, both of which suggest a dynamic process of change rather than a static response to some a priori cause.

Evolving Concept of Self. This category balances participants' pre-transformation self-construal with their image of self at the time of our interview; it describes how participants saw themselves differently and, to some extent, how these changes came about, and finally, their thoughts about future directions.

When asked if they saw themselves differently, virtually every interviewee replied most assuredly in the affirmative. When asked to describe how they were different, participants often responded by reflecting upon past and current actions and locating their self conceptualizations within the context of these behaviours. One example of this style of responding was Marie's narration of a recent experience. Her partner had gone away,

her children were with their father, and she was left on her own for the weekend. She realised that she wasn't feeling very well emotionally. After pondering a number of possibilities, she was unable to determine the cause of her bad feelings, so she thought she would find relief by going shopping, phoning a friend, or visiting someone. But, shopping didn't help, and she couldn't think of anyone to phone or visit. It occurred to her that she just felt lost! Over the next few days, she did a lot of thinking and journaling to try and understand what had made her feel so lost, and she came to realise that:

it had a lot to do with, the, the transition from heterosexuality to homosexuality for me, um, in that, I don't relate really, well, to my old friends? anymore? and it's not because they've changed or they've judged me, they haven't, the friends that I have told, which is most of them, [I. mmhm] have been very supportive and very accepting, but I just realised that I don't, there's a lot that I don't have in common, and, with them any longer, and maybe never did, but I worked at, fitting into that lifestyle.

Upon continued reflection, she began to feel that she really had little in common with the heterosexual friends with whom she had associated for many years, and she noticed that she also did not have very many gay friends:

...so I realised how alone I was, and, I thought that through and I thought that through and I came to a point where I realised that, um, you know, I was always looking for acceptance, somewhere, and, I don't have it anymore in the heterosexual community. I don't have that acceptance any longer, I'm not really connected, not really grounded in the new community, I'm nowhere.

In retrospect, she had the following to say about the impact of working through her experience of feeling lost:

I came out of that with an absolutely, um, grounded feeling about myself [I. mmhm, mmhm] you know, that "I'm okay" [I. right] and you know what? I like who I am, and I don't feel any shame about who I am [I. wow, that's] and I don't even want to hide who I am. I mean, I don't go around, telling people that, you

know that I, I don't go around telling people that I'm gay, but I would have a very difficult time, um, you know like in the past, if I've heard people making jokes about gay people or whatever, I would just sit there and feel squirmy but say nothing. I would have no problem now, saying "excuse me!" [I. yeah] You know, like I feel really empowered [I. yeah, uh] you know because that's about me.

This mode of juxtaposing past behaviours with current behaviours was a common device used in the self-defining narratives of my participants, and one that presented a clear picture to myself, as listener, and to the participants themselves, of the particulars of how their self-concept—an ephemeral presence to the average person—had changed. In addition, the theme of empowerment, represented in this particular story was fairly common throughout other participants' descriptions of self-change.

Besides feelings of greater empowerment, other common themes of change included the following: feeling more grounded and settled in themselves; a greater sense of freedom; realising what they wanted from life and learning how to get it; feeling more whole or complete; gaining independence while at the same time losing confidence in the heterosexual "happy-ever-after" fairytale; trusting themselves more and acquiring a more cautious attitude towards trusting others; becoming more comfortable around men and relating to women differently; recognising and working to rid themselves of internal homophobia; enjoying or coming to terms with singlehood; and increased confidence in general. Of course, to some degree these changes could be attributed to a natural maturation process, rather than a transformation in self founded on leaving heterosexuality. However, the change in self that was experienced and communicated to

me by my participants was clearly founded on their mid-life transition. Most women described these changes as being quite profound. As Alice put it succinctly: “When I look at the person I was, in my 20s and the person I now am in my 40s, I’m thinking ‘oh my’ [laughing] those two people don’t recognise one another!”

Some participants described milestones and turning points that effected changes in their sense of self. A significant milestone for most women was leaving the marriage, as this meant leaving a lengthy union. Therefore, an entire category was generated from women’s articulations about gaining the courage to leave their marriages, which will be fleshed out under the heading “Leaving the Marriage”. Another milestone that became a category was coming out. In addition, participants described turning points in their lives that affected their self-concept, such as becoming a single person for the first time in many years. Singlehood meant having to rely upon themselves, both emotionally and physically, in ways that they never had to rely upon themselves before, thus challenging their notions of dependence and ability.

In a more subtle articulation of change, participants talked about moments when they began to claim their own space. Claiming their space meant that at some point along the progression of their transition, some participants began to realise that they had been pushing aside their own needs all along in favour of the needs and wants of others. They realised that they had been giving top priority to the needs of their husbands, as well as catering to the demands of their children, parents, siblings, and other people. As they

began to think about claiming their own space, participants had the following types of thoughts:

[Marie] I spent so much of my life feeling like I owed everybody [I. mmhm] you know, like I, I owed my mother and I owed my, you know, my employer, and my children and everybody, I owed them, certain things, you know? I never owned, my own life, my own self!

[Jean] I wanted time, for me, to do, just nothing if I chose to do it, but not be on somebody else's schedule, somebody else's slate and being marked out of ten for everything.

[Diane] ... and this was the best thing, I would have done, I would just lie there on the bed, I don't know what I was being, I was just existing as, me, no-one touching me no-one wanting anything, no-one asking me anything, no-one, I could just be, and be, and I used to, I used to just say "I just wanna be" and [slight laugh] whatever that means, I don't know, it just meant something [I. yeah] really important.

This realisation allowed participants to re-evaluate the various roles they played for others, the purpose of their existence, their right to claim their own identity as unique human beings, and their rights to have their own needs met. These thoughts became an impetus for the changes that followed.

Finally, as participants described changes in their self-concepts, they formulated thoughts about their future. Many of these reflections referred to their lesbian status. Nearly every woman contended that they would never revert to heterosexuality, even if that meant remaining single for the rest of their lives—a profound declaration coming from a group of women who had not conceived of a lesbian identity at all until relatively recently. This aspect of their self-transformation appears to be quite stable, in light of the

knowledge that four out of the nine participants have not been in a heterosexual relationship for eight years or more.

Other future considerations related to self-change were one participant's plans to develop a supportive network of lesbian and lesbian-friendly associates, another's desire to work with gay and lesbian youth, and another woman's decisions to support other women who are coming out later in life. Three of my participants had already begun to do similar kinds of work, both in the volunteer and paid labour forces in an attempt to make a difference for others.

We Are What We Wear? Initially, the name of this category was "From Big Hair To Comfortable Shoes" which, I hoped would say it all. The more I thought about it, however, it occurred to me that some readers might not find the title meaningful, so instead, I have posed a question, the more comprehensive version being: does our external presentation define or represent who we are on the inside?" In recounting stories of transformation, participants often provided me with examples of external behaviour, as described in the previous section, as well as changes in their appearance and style. Three subjects emerged as the central meanings behind the external representations: self-identification, cultural identity, and femininity.

External representations of a changing identity included a wide variety of alterations, such as name changes, new hair styles, changes in apparel, and changes in home furnishings. For each participant, these alterations in their external presentations of

themselves reflected the ways in which they had come to see themselves differently on the inside. Often, participants were not entirely certain about how to go about making these alterations, which often created a trial-and-error approach. For example, some participants described how they tried out different clothing styles, until they found something that suited them. On a more evocative note, Alice changed both her first and last names in order to reflect her internal transformation process. For Alice, this was a powerful way of allowing herself to express her new sense of self.

Clothing can be a method of identifying oneself as a member of a particular group, as in the uniforms worn by sports teams, or in the style of dress of an ethnic or cultural group. In a more subtle manner, one's social class is often heralded by the clothes we wear. In the same way that many sub-cultures develop a style of dress that identifies them, lesbians, unless they identify as Femme, tend not to wear the short-skirted, high-heeled, and "frilly" attire that might be classified as feminine wear. The average lesbian is more likely to be seen in comfortable clothing and shoes at work, home and play, than the average heterosexual woman. Of course, this is a generalisation, but one that is communicated often enough to have reached the ears of all of the participants in my study. Consequently, several participants described the changes that they underwent on the outside as they left the world of heterosexuality and immersed themselves in lesbian life and their image of being a lesbian.

One aspect of lesbian image is eschewing what mainstream society classifies as “feminine” attire. As a result, some of the participants described an initial uncertainty about how they should wear their hair, or what type of clothing was appropriate, which pointed out to me a deeper struggle around their conceptualizations of femininity. To better illustrate this struggle within its social and personal contexts, I will use Vivian as an example. As a heterosexual woman, Vivian saw herself as very feminine. She wore her femininity like a badge because that was what she thought she had to do, what she thought everyone else did, and what her husband expected. In her own words:

I never owned a pair of blue jeans, I never wore slacks! I was always, even when I went, bloody well shopping, I was, dressed to the hilt, because that was how [husband] liked it. My makeup was on, my, I would never dare go out without my makeup on! My makeup was on, my hair was done, I was in heels, nylons, skirt, dress, whatever, suit, that’s how I did my shopping!

After falling in love with a woman and recognising that she had changed in some way, she began to wear jeans and pants instead of dresses, and she stopped wearing make-up. She felt that she needed to signal her newly acquired gay identity, whereas her feminine look gave people the wrong impression, and it made her partner feel uncomfortable, as if they were attempting to present a Butch-Femme image when they went out together.

After awhile, however, her adopted dress code began to feel unnatural to her:

I always wore slacks, and I tried to really dress down, and, and that, and, to me it, wasn’t, as natural to me? Only maybe because that was the way I was brought up, I don’t know, [I. right] but I enjoyed, wearing dresses [I. yeah] and things like that, and then I’d buy them, and they’re in the closet, and I never wore them, whereas I used to wear them all the time.

Since that time, Vivian has come to recognise that she doesn't have to give up all of the trappings of femininity as a gay woman. Again, in her own words:

I've found myself, lately, going back to it, and, wearing my makeup again, and getting my nails done, and stuff ... now I'm finding a happy medium. I enjoy, dressing up, and being very feminine, whereas I thought that, what I perceived, what I saw, when we went out, that most gay couples, there is a role, model, you see either very dykey, or ultra-fem [I. yeah, that Butch-Femme thing]. Right, well now I know that, I can be feminine, and it has nothing to do with my relationship!

Several participants related having modified their attire, from what would be classified as traditionally feminine to a more comfortable style of dress that was meaningful in terms of the underlying change in self-concept. Like Vivian, these changes were mediated by shifting notions of femininity for some women, whereas others described them in terms of heterosexual dress codes that they happily abandoned. As an example, Alice conveyed the change in her appearance from "long nails," "big hair," and "three shades of eye-shadow" to her more relaxed short hair, make-up free look as a recognition of her former acceptance of social norms:

I bought right into all of those sort of, well not entirely bought in, but, that was the way, if you were going to be an attractive woman, that was the way you presented yourself to the world. And the way that women got along in the world, was, to attach themselves, in some sort of heterosexual union. You had, a boyfriend, you had, a successful husband, you know, that was the path, that, was there. [I. right, so, this is something, I hear, a lot, it may be important, in the sense that, um, there was no, no, thought, because there was no, choice] It didn't occur to me I had a choice.

Taken together, changes in self-presentations appeared to reflect a deeper sense of change in these women's self-concepts, and their connection to lesbian culture.

Labels. Yet another way that we can wear on the outside some aspect of our inner selves is through labels. Labels are not always chosen emblems, however. Society and specific agents of society often attach labels to people that connote positive and negative values, and that serve to contain people within certain social boundaries. Therefore, the subject of labelling can be a touchy one, particularly when one is talking about a culture that has had a history of being maligned by society. On the whole, my participants recognised the personal and political ramifications of the labels that we ascribe to sexual orientation, and this knowledge was brought to bear upon their personal preferences for, and usage of, particular labels.

The first question that I asked participants was what label they used to describe their sexual orientation. As previously mentioned, none of my participants used the term “bisexual” to describe their sexual orientation. Due to its association with pathology, “homosexual” was not a label of choice. Labels that were used included “lesbian,” “gay,” “queer,” and “dyke.” Whatever label a participant used, she usually had a fairly strong preference for one label over another. Some participants preferred the term lesbian over the other labels because it is not gender-neutral. More specifically, in media and literature, when the word lesbian is used, women remain visible, which is very different from public discussions of gay or queer identity, or homosexuality, in which women can, and have, become invisible. On a related note, some participants felt that the term gay has truly become equated with the male gender. Hence, since they were not men, they

would not use this term to refer to themselves. For example, Louise described herself as lesbian, and had the following to say:

Often, often heterosexuals will refer to “the gay community” and friends of mine who are hetero and, who, are, talking to me. It irks me when they call me gay, it irks me, um, cause it’s just not right! It just doesn’t fit!

In contrast, other participants preferred the word gay over lesbian. Some preferred the term gay because of the negative meanings that had become associated with the term lesbian. Media and mainstream culture had produced images of nasty, harsh women, or radical lesbian revolutionaries, which did not reflect their image of themselves as non-heterosexual women. Others preferred the term gay because they felt that it was important to remain inclusive in a socio-political environment of oppression against all homosexual people.

The majority of participants used different ascriptions for their sexual identity depending upon the circumstances. The usage of each term depended upon the particular social situation they were in, the rationale often being strategic use of the most appropriate term within different social networks, in order to a) proclaim a supportive allegiance to a socially stigmatised group, b) retain visibility as a person and as a woman, and c) to reclaim language that has come to be used against homosexual, bisexual, transgendered and transsexual populations. The following two examples, first from Dawn, who declared that she was comfortable using lesbian or gay to describe her sexual orientation, and then from Louise, who prefers the term lesbian to describe her own

sexual orientation and does not use the term gay, illustrate some of the individual reasons for using a broad range of labels :

[Dawn] I think, a big, piece, around, it taking so long for me to, um, on a conscious level even, come to terms my orientation, was the kind of labelling that, existed, when I was growing up, or, even still does, um, you know very negative kinds of, kinds of descriptions, whether it was the old fashioned fruit cake, or freak, or uh, weirdo. I mean, I can't even remember all of them but there were certainly no positive, connotations, in any kind of reference, to homosexuality [I. right]. I, because, I, think, I feel so good about who I am and where I'm at right now, I feel really comfortable with different labels. I like to be considered queer, and will, name myself that, uh, certainly gay is great uh, lesbian, so, um, I think it's about reclaiming, even though I haven't been consciously aware? that I'm doing that? And it feels like a really important part, of the transition.

[Louise] It's a fun kind of thing, uh, it fits in terms of calling ourselves queer. I remember, that, that queer conference that they called it a queer conference, you know, it seemed, at the time for me, pretty radical, to call ourselves queer [I. mmhm]. It's okay, calling ourselves that, and I like it because that does refer, very well, to both male and female, um and bisexual, whatever, you know, transgendered, notions of homosexuality [I. uh-huh] I think that fits, pretty nicely. And dyke again, like, dyke would be, real strong at a place like Michigan, or some, other kind of gathering of lesbian women.

While some participants used different labels depending on the circumstances, others rarely ascribed a label to their sexual orientation. For example, Vivian did not feel that any of the terms in current use described her sexual identity, which she experienced as very personal, and intimately tied to her relationship with her partner: "Like you've got heterosexual, homosexual, and if, if you had another word there, and [partner] was in that other word, then I'd be that other word!"

Thus, in general, the participants were cognisant of the personal and political ramifications of the labels they used. However, sometimes, they appeared to be arguing

opposite positions when fuelled by the same rationales. For example, some women talked about their disdain for labels, saying they did not think it should be necessary for us to be labelled. “Lesbian/gay is part of me, it’s not what I am!” In contrast, other participants felt that it was very important to talk about labels and to identify as lesbian, gay, queer, bisexual, or whatever the case may be. The difference between the two positions faded when I realised that in the first case, participants were talking about labels being imposed upon them, whereas in the second, they were referring to the rationale for claiming an identity.

Participant/Research Summary. Leaving heterosexuality at mid-life appeared to have engendered a number of changes in self and self-in-relation to others. First, I noticed a tendency within my participants, as well as within myself, to want to reconstruct our past, once we had gone through the process of owning our lesbianism. We reflected upon our marriages, our past behaviours and thoughts, and the external forces in our lives that might offer clues to explain our current non-heterosexuality.

Changes in our sense of self tend to be contextualised in the thematic stories. Common themes of change included a sense of empowerment, being grounded, independence, claiming our space; and self-growth. Some of the milestones that we experienced as significant in our self-growth were leaving the marriage; coming out; and singlehood. Changes in external appearance, or self-presentation, seemed to reflect inner

changes related to self-identification, cultural identity, femininity, our disidentification with heterosexuality and our connection to lesbian culture.

Sexual identity labels are an aspect of self-representation about which most of us have an opinion. My participants' preferences for specific labels were tied to political and personal values, specifically beliefs about: homophobia; heterosexual privilege; self-growth; and responsibility to the queer community. Similarly, for political reasons, I usually use the term "lesbian" when describing my sexual identity to others, and yet more personally, I don't always think of myself as a lesbian because of old associations with this term. Like my participants, I don't identify with the term bisexual, and like Vivian, I am unable to come up with a term that fits my very personal experience of sexual identity. The label that feels closest to describing my personal sense of sexual identity is "non-heterosexual."

Coming Out

As previously outlined, the term "coming out" generally refers to both the processes involved in coming to an awareness of one's sexual identity and to the processes involved in coming out to other people. My use of the term "coming out" in this writing refers to coming out to others. This category captures the internal processes that my participants engaged in as well as the feedback and consequences they faced as they disclosed their sexual orientation to others. While I take the reader on this journey of disclosure, it is important to remain aware of the fact that coming out is not a one-time

affair. One does not just come out of the closet and be done with it. In fact, we make decisions about coming out everyday of our lives, in any number of greater and lesser interactions with the world. In the myriad of life's daily interactions (e.g., in discussions with teachers, students, co-workers; making medical appointments or visiting medical offices; having repairpersons come into one's home; meeting new acquaintances at parties), queer people are often faced with the decision of whether or not to dispel assumptions about their presumed heterosexuality.

The category "Coming Out" contains five first-order categories: "Mental Preparation," "How We Come Out," "How the World Receives Us," "Coming Out To Significant Others," and "Privacy, Closets, Conspiracies." Each of these categories reflects an aspect of the overall coming out process experienced by my participants.

Mental Preparation. To come out of the closet, or not to come out of the closet: that is the question that participants struggled with before taking the first step and coming out to that first person. In today's post-*Ellen* era, wherein the media representation of gay men and lesbians often appears to be a tolerant portrayal of just another minority group, it may seem to some that there is no need for queer folk to remain in the closet any longer. However, the tolerance that has been portrayed in the media does not come anywhere near to painting the whole picture. Certainly, for the group of women I interviewed, the fear of negative evaluation and retaliation was great.

Thus, this category describes the weighing and balancing that occupied participants' thoughts as they prepared to come out. Particular thoughts and issues were of the following type: planning how to come out and what to say; anticipating others' reactions; and rationales for coming out and for staying closeted. Associated feelings that my interviewees recalled included fear, guilt, and shame.

Initially, a great deal of planning and mental preparation was done by participants. Given their former place in the heterosexual world, they were well aware that the process of coming to terms with their transition would not be easy for their families and significant others. In the hope of making their personal transition and its interpersonal ramifications as easy as possible on significant others, there was a spontaneous engagement in preparatory planning, as described by nearly all of the participants.

Aspects of planning for coming out centred on when and how to tell significant others. Most participants had strong feelings about timing and who was to be told first. While the particulars of who should be told first varied across participants, the importance of timing did not. The following example came from participant Dawn:

I gave a lot of thought to how it was going to happen and, my vow was, that my family would be the first to know. At this point, I had not even come out to the woman that I was really attracted to.

Participants also gave a considerable amount of thought to how they would come out to people, focusing a great deal of attention on how they would come out to their children. For some participants, like Marta, this challenge led them to seek information on the topic:

I had *never* talked about it with them, I had no idea how they would react! [I. mmhm] I had read everything I could get my hands on, in terms of coming out stories, uh, including an entire book about coming out to your kids and all this kind of stuff, and tried to figure it out.

In planning how they would come out, all anticipated the reactions of others.

Since this was an entirely new phenomenon for them and their significant others, it was hard to imagine how others would react. As Alice stated:

I knew that my parents, loved me a great deal, and, they had always, supported me, in whatever fashion they could. But I knew that this would be, totally outside their experience, and coming from a very, deeply fundamental background, it would be extremely, hard for them to get their heads around.

Often participants played out imaginary coming out scenarios. For example, Louise described what she imagined the reaction to be if she were to come out at her place of employment in the teaching profession: “people [would say], ‘Well, why are you bringing this up? What does this have to do with education?’” None of the women I interviewed had anticipated overly positive reactions when they came out, except when they thought about coming out to other lesbians. They hoped for understanding and some degree of support from particular people, but no-one expected either of these reactions with any degree of certainty. In the main, their imaginings were cautiously hopeful, but peppered with a large measure of assuming the worst, as described by Marta in the following passage:

...working through all the fears, and a *million* possible scenarios, and what will I do, if he, does, blah, blah, blah, [I. right]. So, that all took a lot of, processing, for me? Um, and really dealing with uh, you know, what do I have to put in place to deal with, the potential rejection.

These anticipatory scenarios were typically tied to negative emotions, including fear, guilt and sometimes shame. Fear was the most common emotion experienced by participants. In particular, they had fears around rejection and loss, primarily loss of financial security, loss of respectability, loss of friendships, loss of family connections, and most acute for the mothers in my group, loss of their children. Sometimes these fears became almost unbearable, as Marie described in the following passage:

I fantasised about running away, I had a whole plan, of um leaving the province and, you know, making a new life, away from, all of the, the things that I had here, because I couldn't imagine, telling my family, or my friends, or my church, or my work, I couldn't imagine, what would happen if any of them ever found out.

A sense of vulnerability was clearly evident from participants' accounts of this aspect of leaving heterosexuality, as was made explicit by Louise, who said she was motivated to get a legal separation from her husband because "I felt, vulnerable. I felt that, if I made any kind of mistake, he could take the kids away from me."

Within the context of these anticipations, fears, and vulnerabilities, participants made (and continue to make) decisions about coming out. The mental preparation for coming out, or for staying closeted, seemed to involve a process of exploring and working through the emotions and cognitions, and finally, coming to a decision based on a rationale that made sense of that decision. Some of the rationales that participants articulated for not coming out were: "I don't feel, that, half the people in this office could deal with it," "[Family members] live so far away, they don't need to know," "I had this image that I needed to protect," "I'm a peacemaker, I don't hurt people," and "I could lose

my job.” Rationales that were expressed when participants decided to come out included, “I don’t like working with people to whom I can’t talk about my home life,” “I had to stop living this incredible contradiction,” “I decided that I was going to live my life in an honest way,” and “I could no longer suppress it, like it had to be out or it was going to kill me.”

Thus, the challenging process of changing one’s sexual identity was not the end of the transformation for these women. Coming out to others initiated a whole new set of challenges, beginning with the mental preparation of having to decide when to come out, to whom to come out, and how to come out. In the next section, I will talk about how participants described the experience of coming out.

How We Come Out. This category comprises participants’ conceptions of coming out, and some of the ways in which they chose to come out. In general, participants viewed coming out as yet another component of the process of transformation. A number of women described coming out to family and significant others as a long, or gradual, process. In the words of Marta:

...it took a few years, of [coming out] gradually, like I didn’t, do it all at once? [I. mmhm] I had, friends, where they had a family gathering and made an announcement or something, or got a letter, or [slight laugh] you know, did a, series of visits, and visited everyone, within a couple of weeks. I didn’t do any of those things, for me it was a very gradual process, um, of sort of experimenting and, and as I got more and more comfortable?

Similarly, Iris had the following to say about coming out being only one aspect of her transformation:

It's a piece of the process. It's a major piece, but it's just a piece, and once you get from there, where you grow from, from there is the major piece of where your work is, I think.

For other participants, coming out meant self-disclosure, and there was a sense that it shouldn't have to be any more than just that. For example, Diane said, "...the coming out part is just, it's really a matter of, telling the people who are important to me that, 'okay, this is what I'm doing now'."

Another aspect of coming out can be likened to the experience of a debutante who makes her debut into society, in this case, society meaning the lesbian community. Although my participants did not use the terms "debutante" or "debut," there was a sense of making a debut in participants' accounts of lesbian social life. A description of the joys that Iris experienced when she entered the lesbian social scene seemed to mirror more directly this debutante aspect of coming out:

The coming out process was a real, awakening, for me. In a way it was like being a teenager again [I. mmhm, mmhm?]. It was fun. I had a great time....I had a ball, I had fun. I went out and met people. I did all kinds stuff, and I didn't sleep with anyone, I just, had fun, getting to know who was out there, getting to know people. It was a real freedom and liberation for me [I. aha] it felt very good. It felt right for me.

Thus, coming out meant a number of different things to the women I interviewed. It was a means of self-disclosure, it was a long, gradual change process that became one part of their overall transition, and it was an introduction to an exciting new world.

To a certain extent, the "how" of coming out was unique to each participant. Jean sought her GP's advice as to whether or not she should come out to her children, while

Alice either told people directly, or she let people know about her PhD subject matter—lesbian sexuality—allowing them figure it out for themselves. There were, however, many similarities in the ways that women came out. All had some uncertainties about exposing their lesbian identity to other people. Therefore, they tended to proceed with caution at first, or they learned very quickly the cost of exposing themselves too soon, or to the wrong people (see “How the World Receives Us). Thus, they developed a couple of strategies to lessen the sting for themselves and for others. One strategy was establishing an order of importance for their disclosure. It was important to some participants that their children were told first, whereas for others, telling the children first might threaten loss of custody. For these reasons, their decision about when to tell their children was made very early on in the coming out process. If possible, it was important to have a network of supportive friends established before they began to come out to family members. Hence, most participants thought ahead about the order in which people were told, so that people who were presumed to be most supportive were the first to know.

Another coming out strategy was to get a feel for a person’s level of homophobia before coming out to him or her. Often this strategy was developed after a disastrous mistake, wherein a participant realised too late that the person she had just come out to was not taking the disclosure well. This leads me to the next section in which

participants' accounts of coming out will be told from the perspective of how their self-disclosures were received.

How the World Receives Us. There were four types of reactions that participants met with when they disclosed their non-heterosexuality: 1) homophobia; 2) tolerance; 3) acceptance, and 4) support or celebration. Meaning units in this category included both participants' direct experience of each type of reaction, as well as their awareness of other people's coming out stories. Counting up the meaning units that fell under each type, I noted that the vast majority of meaning units (16) fell under the category "homophobia," seven meaning units could be classified as "tolerant" responses, five as "accepting," and two as "supportive or celebratory."

Homophobic reactions that participants experienced included disapproval and/or condemnation, verbal attacks or threats, harassment, loss of friendships, and denial of their lesbian identities or denial of their same-sex partnerships. There was a fairly wide range of disapproving homophobic reactions. On the lighter side were reactions like the way Marie's brothers dealt with it: "We would just rather not know about this. We don't approve. We don't like it. You're our sister. I guess we have to put up with it." On the darker side of this type of homophobic response were stories of women having to listen to verbal tirades by friends who couldn't believe it, or couldn't cope with the news that their friend was now a lesbian. In one of these scenarios, Dawn went away for the weekend with an old friend, with whom she and her family had always shared a close bond. She

made the mistake of coming out to her friend on the first day of their visit. The friend's response was extreme disapproval, and a prolonged appeal to Dawn that she should see the damage that she was going to do to her husband and her children. The experience felt like a verbal attack, and the resulting pain created a rift in their friendship, which ultimately made Dawn much more wary of coming out to others.

Other participants experienced threats and harassment. In many cases, threats were directed at them by ex-husbands who warned that their wives would never get custody of their children. This type of threat was often, but not always, an immediate knee-jerk reaction that was not followed through. Occasionally, threats escalated to a more serious or violent level. Vivian had her apartment trashed and was followed and harassed by her ex-boyfriend. In a less familiar situation, Iris described experiences of harassment and name calling as she walked along the sidewalk of Toronto's gay district. More than half of the women I interviewed lost friends after coming out. In some cases, there was an immediate rupture in the friendship, whereas other people described a gradual loosening of ties, or a change in the intimacy level of the friendship. Some friends and/or family members responded by choosing to deny the woman her lesbian identity, or by failing to recognise her partner.

The second type of reaction that participants experienced when they came out was tolerance; in other words, *we love you, or, you are okay, just don't display your sexuality in front of us*. Although not all participants were out to their families, those who did

come out frequently experienced the tolerance-type response. For example, Dawn described what it was like to come out to an elderly aunt:

It was quite funny actually, because she expressed, how much she loved me and always had loved me, why would I ever think that their feelings, my uncle and her feelings, would ever change, and I said, “well you know I just didn’t know, we’ve never, ever talked, about homosexuality in our family”... She said, “well it’s not like [uncle] and I *admire* homosexuals, but we’ve *never* stopped loving you!” [still laughing] And I thought “this is why I didn’t tell, tell you immediately.”

Likewise, when mothers came out to their children, although children seemed to want know what was going on, once they knew that their mom was a lesbian, many didn’t want to continue the discussion in greater depth. These reactions will be described in more detail in the section “Coming Out to Significant Others.”

Parents also tended to respond with tolerance and some confusion as they moved through their own process of discovery and tried to make sense of their daughter’s later-life transition. In many cases, negotiating the coming out process with parents seemed to be difficult for everyone. Understanding that her parents might not have the same frame of reference for understanding her lesbian identity as her own cohort should, Alice attempted to meet them half way by not appearing “overtly partnered” in their presence. Describing a visit with her parents when she was in a lesbian relationship, she stated that:

We didn’t go around holding hands, or, you know, kissing in front of them. I don’t see the point, in pushing buttons, of the people that, are your family who, who I love, and are supportive of me, and I’m trying to be supportive of them. They will much, more readily come to, understand, if they *ever* will, the way I live, and the way I am, if I’m not, trying to, convert them, to it [I. mmhm]. They have their own process for that.

Acceptance and understanding was what participants hoped for when they came out, but it is rarely what they got. Unfortunately, a truly accepting reception appears to be an unusual response to disclosure of a non-heterosexual identity at any stage of life. Moreover, it seemed that acceptance was measured generously by participants. For example, Vivian began to tell me how accepting her neighbours were, but upon further reflection, her certainty began to waver:

Now, my neighbours know us, they're very accepting, they know all about us.
The *have* to, unless they're stupid! [I. laughs] We've been here for 11 years.
They've never seen a man come in, except for my son.

Thus, she felt pretty safe in assuming that she and her partner were accepted in the neighbourhood, yet, she had not actually tested her neighbours' acceptance directly. In a similar vein, some participants were shocked by positive responses from people who they had considered potentially homophobic. Occasionally, when this happened, a response that probably would have been perceived as merely tolerant was experienced as accepting simply because it was better than what had been anticipated.

In some cases, friends were genuinely quite accepting. Two participants had friends tell them that they were not surprised at all by their friend's disclosure, and that they had actually suspected this for some time. In both cases, participants were a little dismayed by this type of foreknowledge and uncertain about how they should respond to their friends' comments. A common reaction to people's acceptance was surprise, as Iris recollected about coming out to two of her straight friends:

They were both, very, very accepting, so that was a very pleasant surprise for me [I. yeah]. I didn't see, how they could, not accept it, knowing, they knew who I am and they've known me for years, but, there's always that possibility that people just can't deal with it.

At the positive end of the spectrum of potential responses is celebration and/or support. Two participants described very positive reactions. One of these, Marie, described a very supportive response from her best friend of ten years, a straight woman:

[Friend said:] "I'm not at all surprised" and *that* shocked me! We talked about that for a long time, um, and, and she was very supportive, and she, talked very much, about, this is your life, and nobody has a right to judge you, and, it's nobody's business.

As well, Dawn, came out into a group that was made up in part by lesbians, and lesbian-friendly women. Dawn described it as more of a celebration:

I came out to my co-workers, because, we did this very difficult group work ... so, as co-facilitators, you grow very close, and, it would have been crazy for me not to, disclose, what was happening in my life, and, I knew, that they'd be, completely, celebratory, and, in fact the woman that was nudging me along, who felt that she knew what kind of woman I might be attracted to? [She] did this dance around the kitchen as I [both laugh] so, you know, you *need* that right? It was great!

Another mode of reception that participants sometimes noticed over the course of time was friends' or relatives' denial of earlier homophobic comments or reactions. For example, some time after the painful coming out experience, when her close friend verbally attacked her, Dawn decided to try to patch things up with her lifelong friend. At that time, her friend completely denied her earlier reaction. Although Dawn had the details in writing, she decided not to confront her friend over her "forgetfulness," since she felt that it would not do any good. However, their relationship remained quite

shallow for a long time afterwards. Thus, when a woman might still be feeling the sting of a homophobic remark, it seems that the individual who made the comment might have transformed his or her thinking from homophobic to tolerant, or from tolerant to accepting, and may have forgotten his or her earlier comment.

Before moving on to the next section, there is another aspect of *how the world receives us* that deserves some attention, that is, participants' thoughts and feelings on coming out to the mainstream world. With a real sense of frustration, some participants expressed how difficult it was being defined in terms of people's biases, stereotypes and preconceived notions of lesbians or gay people. Jean felt that as soon as people found out she was gay, she became a "gay person" instead of a "person." She exclaimed: "[being gay] is part of me, it's not *what* I am!" Iris said: "it's important for me that the person be able to see, me, for who I am, without all the, crap that they have in their heads about, what a lesbian is," and quoting a gay male friend who had been in a 20-year relationship, Diane said: "I really hate the fact, that gay men are assumed to be really promiscuous, and have, you know, no relationship." Of particular concern was the tendency for people to put the person's sex life ahead of the whole person, as Iris reflected upon:

Visibility for me speaks to, um, people, eventually, hopefully in the outer society accepting, lesbian and gay people for who we are, and get their heads out of the bedroom [I. right]. We have lives, we don't just have sex.

In addition to the general aspects of coming out, participants described particular events and issues around coming out to significant others that I chose to collate into a separate category. These events and issues will be discussed in the next section.

Coming Out to Significant Others. Relationships with close friends and family members can pose special challenges and special opportunities for support, when women leave heterosexuality at mid-life. This category describes issues that were particular to the process of coming out to closest friends, siblings, husbands, parents and children. I will discuss the more general meaning units first, followed by specific issues relevant to coming out to husbands, parents and children. Generally speaking, coming out to significant others was a highly emotional experience for most participants, and the reactions of close friends and family members had a powerful effect. A common issue was the failure of close friends and family to understand what her lesbian identity meant to the woman in transition. For example, Marta was unable to convince her brothers that the reason for her newfound happiness was the shift in her sexual orientation and her new partner. Although they could see that she appeared happier, they were only able to understand her change in terms of her divorce:

They don't relate it to my coming out, they relate it to my having gotten divorced [I. mmhm?], because that for them, was the significant thing. But, I see the two things as inseparable, and in fact, what they're picking up on, I don't think has to do with the divorce except the divorce was a vehicle that lead to, my being able to live my life, which is the real issue.

Another example of the gap in understanding were comments made by bewildered parents and friends of the type "Well, are you happy now?" which unfortunately were

received by participants as dismissive put-downs and served only to widen the gap between them. The question appeared to arise out of people's inability to grasp such a drastic change in light of their previous knowledge of the person, and to attempt to make sense of the transition in terms that they could understand. For example, a few participants were grilled by family members about the evil things that their ex-husband must have done in order for them to have made this change.

Coming out to their mothers reflected many of the issues and challenges that I have already addressed. It should be noted, however, that five participants had not come out to their mothers at the time of our interviews, including two participants whose mothers had passed away. Although Marie has not come out to her mother, she had been informed by relatives that her mother suspected and that she did not accept or condone her daughter's lifestyle. Marie stated that she had come to terms with her mother's lack of acceptance, and that it no longer pained her in the way that it would have in a prior stage of her personal growth. Earlier on in her transition, she would have been "devastated," but at this point, she was able to accept her mother's reaction and the fact that she and her mother could not be close.

Another participant, Marta, also felt that her mother might know that she and her partner were a couple. In her case, Marta felt that as long as the relationship was not made explicit, her mother would be okay with it. She noted that her mother treats her partner as a member of the family:

She *clearly* knows the difference, between the woman who's my partner and the woman who's my good friend [I. yeah] and, wants me to know she knows the difference, and, that that's okay, but she doesn't, want to deal with any of it directly!

Although Marta described being relatively happy with her mother's partial acceptance, it still pained her to some degree that she was not able to share a significant aspect of her life with her mother. However, the fear of rejection and hurt kept her from doing so. In her words:

I have friends, who came out to their mothers directly, and their mothers' response was, "that's fine, but don't ever raise it again, I don't *ever* want to hear it again!" [I. brutal] And, their, their mothers went on to act as though they never were told, and, they did *not* treat their partners as a spouse [I. no]. They simply went on as though they did not know this about their lives. [I. that's gotta be so, horrible and rejecting] So, I guess I'd rather have it that my mother, treats us, as though we were a couple in *every* way, shape, or form, is wonderful to both of us, but doesn't want to deal with it directly.

Both of these cases highlight the pain of not being able to share one's whole self with significant others, particularly with one's mother, from whom society teaches us to expect unconditional love.

Iris has not come out directly to her mother. Her comment below highlights the significance and importance of the kinship network that has been called "chosen families" (Weston, 1991):

I think she knows, because mother's are pretty perceptive, but my father, I wouldn't care to tell him anything about my life, ever. [I. Are they not together?] They are together. My sisters know, uh, they're okay with it. My family, mostly all live far away, so I haven't really. My real family is my family of friends, and straight friends who really, matter to me.

Another area of special attention was coming out to husbands. For those women who did so, coming out to their husbands was a unique and potent experience. Although some couples were able to negotiate the wife's transition and a new kind of affiliation evolved between them, none of the relationships made it through this stage unscathed, whether because of the discovery that the woman was a lesbian, or simply because of the separation and/or divorce. Approximately half of my participants had virtually no relationship with their ex-husbands at the time of the interview. None of those men had known about their ex-wife's transition at the time of separation and divorce, with the exception of Vivian's boyfriend, who, as previously discussed, reacted with violence and harassment. For the remainder, one participant was not out to her husband at the time of the interview, another participant thought her ex-husband knew, although she had not told him herself, and the other three had come out to their husbands as part of the experience of transformation.

Because her children were young, Diane was still dependent on her husband for financial support at the time of our interview. She was afraid to disclose anything to him until custody arrangements had been made. Her fear was a common one, that he would react in anger and retaliate by fighting her for custody of their children. Given the coming out stories of two other participants, this fear seems to be a realistic one. For example, during the break up of their marriages, both Louise and Marta experienced a period of time when their husbands threatened to take their children from them after

discovering their lesbian inclinations. In the case of Louise, the act of coming out to her husband was not a single occasion. They lived together for many months after she first came out to him, and she recalled that during that period, it took about six months of discussion before he accepted the fact that she was a lesbian. At some point along the way, this man, whom she described as a “very gentle man” became angry, threatening and unpredictable, and it was during that period that he threatened her with loss of custody of their young girls. Similar to Louise, Marta kept her husband informed of her same-sex attraction as it emerged for her. Initially, his curiosity was piqued, and he was interested in exploring sexual relations with the same women that she was attracted to, within the confines of their marriage. However, once he realised that her attractions to women were exclusive and that they meant the end of their relationship, his feelings changed:

...and he started getting heavy handed, uh, if I left, I wouldn't get the kids, he was going to sue for custody, uh, all these kind of things. So, what up to that point had been, although very stressful and tense, fairly, caring, was starting to get nasty.

Possibly because her children were older at the time, and custody was not so much of an issue, Dawn's experience of coming out to her husband was somewhat different. Inasmuch as custody may not have been an issue for this couple, the differences in Dawn's coming out experience might be also due to having always had a close relationship with her husband. She described his initial reaction as follows:

I told [husband], ... and the *amazing* thing is, that [he] said “I've known, for a long time”! He had been in [another country]. He had taken, a bit of a weekend, holiday, and was on the beach and thought to himself, how sad, it would be, if I spent the rest of my life, not realising who I was. [I. really?] Yeah, so, not to say

though, that it wasn't devastating for [him] [I. mmhm] because, you know we were close as a couple, and as he said, "I had, thought about a future together, growing old together, retiring together, enjoying life together" and that was all, taken away from him.

Inevitably, coming out to husbands was extremely difficult because of what it meant to both members of the couple: an end to the marriage, rejection of her role as wife, and rejection of him as husband. The woman's elated feelings around her newly emerging sexual identity and/or partnership were mingled with guilt and sadness, and her husband's reaction to being rejected was a mixture of sadness, grief and anger. Confrontations around custody, finances, and other relational issues were bound to emerge.

An especially difficult experience for many of my participants was coming out to their children. Of the eight participants who had children, two had not discussed their sexual orientation with them, Jean, because she felt that her sons would ask when they were ready, and Diane, because of her fear that she would lose custody if her husband found out. When Jean entered her first lesbian relationship, she asked her physician for advice about coming out to her sons, who were adolescents at that time. Her GP suggested that she wait until they asked her. In the interim, her boys, who were 18 and 22 at the time of the interview, lived part-time with her and her partner and part-time with their father, and they were aware of the fact that their mother and her partner shared a bed. Moreover, they brought them both breakfast in bed on Mother's Day. However, no questions had been asked, so there had been no direct discussion around their mother's

sexual orientation at the time of our interview. Four out of the five participants who had come out to their children described it as an extremely difficult experience. Voices were shaky and eyes filled with tears as participants recounted what it had been like for them to come out to their children. Nothing could be as devastating as telling their children something that was certain to shake their world.

Children's reactions seemed to vary across age and gender. Vivian came out to her son when he was in his 20s and his reaction was "whatever makes you happy mom, go for it." Iris came out to her son when he was about 9 or 10, and, "he started to cry" and when she asked him what was going on for him, he told her that he was afraid that she would get hurt, because he had heard all about gay-bashing. Marie gave a detailed account of her children's reactions:

My oldest daughter took it the hardest, um she didn't quite know, how to respond, and [shaky voice] she cried um, [I. was she 18?]. She was 18.... My children were raised in the church [I. mmhm] and she wanted to know if that would mean that I would go to hell, and if that meant that I didn't love God anymore, and if that meant that I would, leave the church.... My youngest one's eight, and I mean, it's no problem to her. [I. no] She has absolutely [I. she'll grow up with it] like "it's no big deal, so what" [I. yeah] you know? Two women love each other, it's no problem, it's just normal to her. My 15 year-old, she kind of has a raised eyebrow about things, like "I'll wait and see how this, pans out" [I. uh-huh] and she's, she is not a problem either, I thought she would be, and she's not. My son, who's the oldest, he's 20. [I. ah] He prefers to just not know, about things, "okay, I have enough information, just, I don't need to know any more" and he always asks, like whenever he comes over "where's [partner]" you know, and he's always very respectful.

Marta also described differences in how her two children reacted to the news that their mother was a lesbian:

I came out to [oldest son] maybe, 1994 actually, so he would have been 17 [I. mmhm, okay] and um, my other son, at that point, would have been, 13 [I. right]. So, I first came out to the oldest one, and, that was a positive, experience, so, that gave me the strength to come out to the younger one.... [Oldest son's] response was, you know, "you're my mother and if this is what you want, um, you know it's none of my business, uh, you know, I love you, I think you're great, and uh, that's all there is to it." It was sort of like "what's the issue?" [I. hm] He didn't, particularly want to talk about it, [I. mmhm] at any great length. I gave him all kinds of options, you know, told him I wanted to periodically check with him about how he felt about, things.... [Youngest son] was very angry at me, for not having been direct with him much earlier [I. oh!] and express that. [I. When you came out to him, did, was that an initial, uh, issue, for him, or did that, did he?] Well, I think, he was relieved, unlike the older son because it helped him, he's, make sense of a lot of things? [I. yeah] Like the fact that all his friends wanted to know why we didn't sleep together? But he expressed his anger, that, he had not known earlier. [I. mmhm] Whereas, if [oldest son] was angry, and he probably was, he never, would express it.

Therefore, it seemed that older boys took the information less emotionally than older girls. At the same time, they did not want to be given any more information than necessary, while older girls exhibited fear and sadness and wanted to be given more information. Younger boys, in general, exhibited more emotion than older boys, and seemed to want more information, whereas younger girls, seemed less emotionally affected than older girls, and they were more immediately accepting of their mother's lesbian partner. Similar to these children's reactions, there seemed to be a gender distinction in the reactions of participant's siblings: sisters, on the whole, tended to be more supportive and more receptive to the details of their sisters' coming out process than brothers.

To summarise, it was clear from these experiences that coming out to mothers, husbands, and children held special challenges, and occasionally special rewards.

Overall, the experience was much more difficult and complicated than coming out to the rest of the world.

Privacy, Closets, Conspiracies. This category assembles and expands meaning units pertaining to the tension between privacy and legitimacy and aspects of the women's sense of being closeted that I have come to call "conspiracies of silence."

In my own experience of this transition, I have often felt a tension between privacy on the one hand and legitimacy on the other. The need for privacy is experienced as a desire to keep my personal life personal, not wanting to be singled out as different, nor wanting to have to expose myself and my partner as lesbians every time someone in a social situation asks me a question or makes a comment that assumes that I am a married, heterosexual woman. The need for legitimacy is experienced as a desire for recognition of my status as partnered, as opposed to the assumption that I am single, or that I am a divorced heterosexual woman, and a desire that my relationship with my partner be recognised as a valid and legitimate relationship. This tension between privacy and legitimacy has played a role in our coming out process as a couple, and at times it has meant differences of opinion around coming out, because my partner tends to be more of a private person by nature, whereas, for me, the desire for legitimacy often supersedes my need for privacy. I had noted this tension in a memo before beginning my interviews, and as I began to talk to the women in this project, I found that the tension between privacy

and legitimacy existed also for others, although it became more complex than I had understood the phenomenon to be originally.

Expanding upon my original dichotomy, participants' experiences began to highlight a broader distinction between very personal and practical issues versus more general and political issues. More specifically, privacy was associated with avoiding discomfort to self and others, personal safety, and maintaining some of the privileges that are accorded to heterosexuals; legitimacy was associated with visibility, legal entitlement, gaining support, and responsibility towards issues pertaining to lesbians and the broader queer community.

The issue of comfort levels around coming out was raised by several participants, in terms of readiness to *out* oneself, and in terms of not wishing to make others uncomfortable. Although they all seemed to be trying in one way or another to challenge stereotypes and preconceived notions about lesbians and others who might be labelled "queer," these women also talked about not wanting to hurt their loved ones, either with information that might be overly upsetting or by attempting to force others to come to terms with, and accept, their gay identity. Therefore, each of these women told me about people in their lives, people to whom they were not out, or to whom they did not talk too much about their lesbian identity, or people from whom they did not expect too much in terms of the person's ability to openly accept his or her relationship to a lesbian. In many cases, I am referring to participants' children. However, there were also parents,

grandparents, aunts and uncles, and others to whom this level of privacy was applied.

With regard to her parents and being out, Alice talked about her own struggle with the issues of privacy and legitimacy:

I, politically, resist, that kind of, de-ality [*sic*], you know? Why should I have to pretend, to anyone, or allow [heterosexual] assumptions to be made about me? [I. it makes you a different person from, that] Yes. [I. you're not you, it's not] yeah, and, it also means I'm living, some kind of lie. At the same time, I'm not going to come down on anybody else with both feet, who cannot, negotiate, that way, who needs those boundaries, who needs the separations. We all come to this in a different way, and you have to, you have to be able to look yourself in the mirror and say, "yeah, this is, this is okay, I can live with this, this makes me comfortable." [I. mmhm] You have to know your own boundaries and respect them, and you have to respect the boundaries that other people create for themselves.

In addition, some participants talked about the importance of being ready to come out, and the importance of respecting an individual's right not to be out. For example, Dawn, who has done some work in the area, pointed out that there are special challenges and issues that apply to certain cultures and groups of women, one example being rural women. According to Dawn, these women tend to be somewhat isolated within their communities and have few support systems. Thus, they are not able to make use of the services that larger cities like Toronto have to offer to facilitate the coming out process.

Those coming out issues that related to maintaining some of the privileges that are accorded to heterosexuals and issues of personal safety seemed to be best exemplified by participants' accounts of being out in the workplace. A number of my participants were not out at work. Their reasons for keeping quiet about their sexuality can be subsumed under the topics of privacy, job security and personal safety. With regard to privacy,

participants who were not out at work either described themselves like Jean did, as a “private person” who does not discuss personal matters with office colleagues, or they simply considered their private lives to be nobody’s business. This privacy issue is probably similar to a more universal non-sharing of personal matters that occurs in the office environment, whatever a person’s sexual orientation. A different issue was job security, which was also cited as a reason for not being out at work. Often, stories they heard about gay people who had lost their jobs created a concern that their job might be in jeopardy if they were to come out at work. Even if job loss was less likely, due to changed laws or policies, for example, there was an element of risk in being the only out gay person at their place of employment. Therefore, Louise, a teacher, said that she was out to her principal but not to her fellow teachers.

Personal safety was also a concern for some women, a concern that stemmed from jokes spread around the office, and homophobic and racist comments made by co-workers. Thus, these women were left feeling somewhat vulnerable if they were to consider opening up and placing themselves under public scrutiny. Because of these concerns, participants who were not out at work did not talk about their home-life in the workplace, they did not bring their partners to work-related functions. By not doing so, they allowed their co-workers to think that their partner was their room-mate, and they did not correct co-workers erroneous assumptions that they were straight. As a result, these participants were not able to be authentic with their co-workers. People with whom

they shared the greatest portion of their day, people who felt free to share their own cares and concerns were in the dark about the cares and concerns of these women. For example, when people in her place of work suffered losses, or break ups, Jean said she was there to offer sympathy and support, and she could be called upon to cover for someone who had to be away due to a family emergency. However, when her long-term relationship broke up a few months prior to our interview, nobody in her office knew about it. Unlike her co-workers, she had to suffer in silence at work.

Furthermore, the benefits accorded to other people's partners, husbands and wives, both economic and social, do not apply to women who are not able to be out at their place of work. Their own family membership remains invisible in the workplace. Such invisibility also has an effect on their relationships with their co-workers. For example, after Jean came out to a couple of co-workers, they admitted that they would have liked to have been able to talk with her openly in the past, but they never asked her or said anything for fear of upsetting her. They admitted to gossiping about her instead, wondering behind her back whether or not she was gay, rather than just asking her. Furthermore, when they realised that she had gone through a break-up while she worked with them, they felt bad that they weren't able to offer her support.

As mentioned, legitimacy was also discussed by participants in terms of visibility, legal entitlement, and responsibility towards the lesbian and queer community. Looking at all of the relevant meaning units, participants' concerns about visibility had the quality

of a double-edged sword. Some participants talked about the negative effects of visibility, such as being potentially open to gay-bashing, while others focused on the negative effects of *invisibility*. Jean, who described herself as a “private person,” who was not out to everyone in her social circle, described her frustration with what seemed to her to be the wrong kind of visibility. She was troubled by media coverage of the Pride Day parade that has propagated an image of gay people as flamboyant and overly sexualised. She felt that this type of visibility led to misconceptions of gay people in general, and that it did not reflect her life or lifestyle. In her words:

That’s why we have such a bad name, because [the public] see that, and they assume that we’re all like that! They don’t give us credit for just wanting, to be in a happy relationship and have a nice home life [I. right] the same as everybody else. They think that we’re all, secretly, walking around with sequinned g-strings [I. laugh] waiting to rip our clothes off, because that’s the only way we can get attention! I don’t want attention. I just want to be able to live my life.

In contrast to this scenario, Louise was concerned about invisibility. She recalled her previous ignorance of lesbian culture that stemmed from the lack of visibility of lesbians in her own family and community. Another participant, Diane, talked about her experience of coming out to a friend and feeling like part of her was being denied, when her friend, in an attempt to be helpful suggested that she did not have to come out to anyone else because it wasn’t anyone’s business but hers. Somehow, this seemed to leave her feeling invisible. Her gut response to her friend’s comment that “it’s nobody’s business, there’s nothing to tell” was as follows:

But there really is something to tell! To them, there’s something wrong with me. They think, they would perceive something, being wrong with me, and yet I

know there's not. I know that there's this part of me that's perfectly good [I. yeah] but I can't, tell them.

Legal recognition was another legitimacy related concern that participants expressed vis-à-vis their hopes for changes in Canadian Law around lesbian and gay rights, and they commented on their own experiences with legal issues. In one example, when Diane went to a lawyer to seek advice about custody, he advised her against coming out. She recalled the conversation as follows:

I said "I just realised this, I'm, I'm gay, and um, I want to know where I stand legally," and he, basically said to me, "here's the bottom line, you have no, you don't lose anything because you're a lesbian. There's no problem, in the eyes of the law, but you can't afford the \$30,000.00 to have me fight your case, if [her husband] should turn against you." [I. right] "If I'm the 6th or 7th person you've told, make me the last."

Another participant, Vivian, talked about how she and her partner had special papers drawn up along with their wills to ensure each other the rights of inheritance. Otherwise, they were concerned that they would not legally be entitled to each other's estate, their shared property and possessions. The general consensus was that the legal system has perpetuated a state of invisibility and illegitimacy around gay people and lesbians and that changes are coming very slowly.

Finally, on the topic of legitimacy, some participants voiced their interest in and commitment to queer community involvement and political action on issues such as the effects of homophobia and equal rights. Participants varied on the degree to which they felt a personal sense of responsibility to the queer community (i.e., made up of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and transsexual people). For some participants,

community involvement and action made up a large part of their work and/or personal lives. For others, these issues took up a smaller portion of their time, and still others did not appear to be involved in issues at the community level. These differences seem to reflect a matter of personal interest. An additional reason for the different level of community interest and involvement might be related to age differences. I say this because the two participants who experienced their transition latest in life (i.e., over the age of 45) Marta and Dawn, also appeared to be two of the most politically active women in the group. Dawn, who left heterosexuality at age 50, described her work with queer youth as an extension of her personal growth and “enhanced awareness of” issues pertaining to the “whole world of homosexuality.”

On the topic of “privacy, closets, and conspiracies”, both during the interviews and in my analysis of the transcripts, I became increasingly aware of external forces that worked towards keeping these women in the closet. The advice that Diane received from her lawyer not to talk about her sexuality a) served to heighten her fears of losing custody, and b) was echoed by family members and/or friends of most of the other participants. Sometimes, well-meaning people sought to discourage their friend or family member from putting herself at risk of rejection and alienation, while others acting in the name of family unity, or some other self-imposed role of protector of family values, sought to keep her from disclosing her transformed sexuality to certain members of their family, or social circle. I have called this phenomenon *the conspiracy of silence*, because in order

for the silencing to have an effect, the person herself has to comply. Typically, women did agree to keep silent about their sexual orientation in these situations.

A good example of the conspiracy of silence, although not directly related to these participants, was described by Vivian. In her account of the closeted nature of a male relative's homosexuality, she explained that nobody ever talked about it because his gay identity was a "skeleton" that had been "thrown into" the family closet. Thus, this man lived with a significant aspect of his selfhood cut off from the rest of his family. In a similar vein, some participants were not out to children, or other close relatives, because of the warnings of other people who seemed to be serving the role of gatekeeper between them and other family members. For example, Marta, who is not out to her mother, had considered telling her at one point, until her brothers intervened:

They felt very strongly that I should not, label myself a lesbian to my mother, that uh, she's, you know, right now she's 79 years old. She has her own way of sort of thinking about the world, and stuff, and, she should not have to face this, at this stage of her life, that it was hard enough for her, for me to get divorced and, she's very happy that I'm happy, and um, we should just leave it at that. And, I really struggled with that for a long time, and, I have had, sort of roundabout conversations with my mother, but [brothers] both, feel *so strongly*, and independently of each other, that I should not do this, that I've been scared, to do it.

Thus, the message that Marta and others got from their family censors was one of doom and gloom should they disclose their sexual identities, and furthermore, the underlying message is that these women are dangerous, because they could cause a great deal of harm just by telling someone close to them about themselves.

Participant/Research Summary. Coming out, a never-ending story, requires preparation and action and it involves other people's actions, which are rarely predictable in advance. Thus, coming out is a complex affair. My participants and I dealt with substantial anticipatory fears, guilt and shame, around coming out. Prior to electing to come out, we often engaged in a great deal of planning, a process that helped us to deal with our fears. We considered how to come out and what to say, how others' might react, and we created rationales for coming out and for staying closeted.

While coming out into the lesbian and gay community is often an exciting and happy event, coming out to friends, family, and community was very much the opposite in many cases. It continues for many of us to be a long, gradual process. My participants developed strategies to make coming out easier on themselves and others, strategies such as establishing an order of disclosure, and getting a feel for a person's level of homophobia before coming out to him or her. As a fairly self-disclosing individual, it took me awhile to learn these strategies.

Four types of response to my participants' self-disclosures were: 1) homophobia; 2) tolerance; 3) acceptance, and 4) support or celebration. Homophobic reactions, ranging from moderate levels of disapproval to all out condemnation were in the vast majority; tolerant reactions of the type "we love you, and whatever you do is okay with us, just don't display your sexuality in front of us" tended to be common from family members; next common were acceptance reactions, of friends or family members who

were okay with it and did not display any shock; and celebration reactions, of the “I’m happy for you” type, were very rare, especially from heterosexuals. I was surprised when I counted the meaning units in this particular category and discovered the preponderance of homophobic responses. When I considered my own coming out process in light of this calculation, I realised that I too had been on the receiving end of a fairly large proportion of homophobic reactions, and like my participants, I also tended to expect the worst, so that tolerance sometimes felt like acceptance.

The most difficult coming out experiences involved mothers, husbands and children. The mother-daughter bond created special difficulties as well as special opportunities for support. It can be terribly painful to keep one’s whole self from one’s mother, the person we expect to be the provider of unconditional love. Because of the importance of this type of love and caring, when significant family members are not there for us, sometimes we create families of our own (Westin, 1991). Coming out to husbands was inevitably extremely difficult because it meant the end of the marriage. Coming out to children was the most difficult coming out experience for many of us, because of concern about not wanting to hurt our children, and for some, because of custody fears. Because my children were older, I did not have to worry about custody. I had moved out of the family home several months prior to coming out and was living alone. I invited them to my apartment for lunch in order to tell them about my new relationship with a woman. I was terrified, and they were late! I told them after we ate our lunch, which I

hardly tasted. Although there were some tears, it was not as bad as I had anticipated, and certainly nothing like the devastating period a few months prior when they learned that their parents were splitting up.

The tension that I had experienced personally between privacy and legitimacy was expanded through my participants' accounts. Privacy was associated with avoiding discomfort to self and others, personal safety, and maintaining some of the privileges that are accorded to heterosexuals. Legitimacy was associated with visibility, legal entitlement, gaining support, and responsibility towards issues pertaining to lesbians and the broader queer community. Conspiracies of silence pertain to people and institutions that work to keep us in the closet.

Breaking New Ground

This category entails changes in participants' way of life and the way that they dealt with these changes. It encompasses three first-order categories "Between Two Worlds," "Same-sex Relationships," and "Strength, Support, Therapy."

Between Two Worlds. During the transition from heterosexuality to lesbian identity, there was a period when participants felt that they were between two worlds, the world of marriage and family on one side, and lesbian life on the other, and many participants attempted to straddle both worlds. One of the changes participants experienced, during this period, was the exchanging of the role of "wife" for the role of "same-sex partner." Along with leaving behind the role of wife came the loss of the

socially-accepted, and thus legitimate, partnership status expected of married women in the Western world. Divorce added to the woman's loss of status, by replacing the label "wife" with the label "divorcee," a less favourable position in the eyes of society.

However, the label "lesbian" carries even less social status, because lesbians are seen as either invisible or as illegitimate members of regular society. Thus, my participants were stuck between a rock and a hard place as they attempted to negotiate the path between their legitimate roles as wife and mother and the stigmatised roles of either divorced single person or partnered lesbian. Not surprisingly, the experience was one of attempting to live in two opposing worlds: the legitimate world composed of acceptable and known roles, responsibilities and privileges, versus the socially prohibitive and unknown world of post-divorce lesbianism.

At first, some women attempted to straddle the two worlds, by exploring their emerging lesbian feelings within the bonds of marriage. For two participants, this meant actually engaging in lesbian social life or sexual liaisons, while still married. Both of these women felt that it was necessary to try to stay with their husbands for the sake of their children, and both attempted to work out a viable solution to their conflicting roles and needs with their husbands. For example, Louise had only recently moved out of her marital home when I interviewed her. She described the three years that she spent attempting to straddle marriage and family by day and lesbian social life by night as very difficult for her, for her husband, and for her children:

[I was] going out and staying out until three in the morning [I. wow] and then coming back and trying to operate the next day, whatever work I was doing, cause I was always working, and it, and it was very upsetting for [husband], I would show up really late at night, because he knew that I was becoming sexually active with people, and, he worried about me, he was worried, that I'd be, beat up on the street.... it was very difficult for me, that, coming, and leaving, separating, and sometimes, [daughter] was just three, and sometimes she'd be screaming, and I'd think "oh this is not the person I am!"

Similarly, when a trial separation did not seem to be the answer for Marta, whose husband was willing to have a non-sexual relationship with her, she agreed to live with him and the children as a family, while exploring her lesbian attractions on the side. However, the stability of this arrangement soon disintegrated, and after much hard work and counselling, she realised: "I had to take a step in another direction, that meant giving up, this protection, of this ideal family." Thus, the attempt to straddle both worlds proved to be very difficult, if not impossible.

Once participants found that they could not function as lesbians while retaining their heterosexual (family) status, they began to work out new ways of being. I have called this work *breaking new ground*, because none of these women had any kind of map that they could use to help them get to where they were going. For example, on her first walk along Church Street, the main avenue of Toronto's gay district, Diane found herself reflecting upon her somewhat conservative values in light of glitzy store window advertisements and behaviour that seemed outlandish and strange to her. Like a stranger in a strange land, she worried about what all of this might mean to her, in terms of the social requirements for being a gay woman. Eventually, she came to realise that there

were “weird” and unusual heterosexual people who she did not feel it necessary to emulate; therefore she could *be herself* as a gay woman.

Participants made a number of discoveries as they broke new ground. Louise recognised that not all lesbians were feminists. She also found that patriarchy, gender stereotyping, and gender differences existed in the gay community as well as in mainstream society. Iris discovered that being a lesbian did not ensure that one would find a perfect mate. Another province of discovery was the territory of same-sex relationships.

Same-sex Relationships. Entering into a lesbian relationship for the first time was an exciting milestone which created a host of challenges, issues, and novel experiences with it. The stories of the first relationship were as varied as there were women to tell them. Some described the experience as being swept up in whirlwind of emotions, while for others it felt like coming home. For some women, their first lesbian relationship was primarily about sex. Other women described it as more of an emotional connection, or a matching of the minds. A few participants experienced a brief and exciting affair. For one, the heady days of lust and first love turned into a lifetime commitment. To give a flavour of the essence of these stories, the following excerpts describe Iris’s first date with a woman, followed by Dawn’s summary of her first lesbian relationship:

[Iris] My first date, ever with a woman, it was, the most perfect date, anyone could ever have wanted, or asked for, it couldn’t have been better. It was all

about, for me, just, being with this woman, and feeling an attraction to her, and for her, and then going on a date, and it was very romantic and, just getting to feel, her essence, and, having, and finally being able to act on that attraction, and feel it, and be with her and do all these wonderful things in an evening, and then spend the night with her, um... [I. I'm hearing romance, like]. It was just, so beautiful. Yeah! It was big time romance.

[Dawn] My relationship with [first lesbian partner] did develop. We became sexually involved of course, and, you know, were together for, it wasn't a long time, it was a year and a half, but, it was, actually, overall a wonderful relationship. So that was, and she, of course, as part of that was a big support to me [referring to her transition and other family issues].

The same-sex issues that participants dealt with were: gender roles and division of labour issues; emotional connectedness; and relationship deterioration. Several participants experienced differences in gender roles and division of labour. Iris commented to me that the way that gender roles play out differently in same-sex relationships allows for a more complex set of sexual interactions between two partners:

With a heterosexual relationships, the roles are very defined. [I. so it's the roles then, that actually, um, do the teaching?] To some degree [I. uh-huh?] and when you have two women together, it's, different [I. right, right] and you get into all the kind of gender identity things [I. yeah]. Yeah, [slight laugh] so it gets more complex, and, a lot more interesting.... if you have any kind of fantasy life, being lesbian or gay is the place to be. [laughter]

Several of my interviewees took pains to describe specific changes in their role as partner, a change that might best be described by the phrase "from wife of him to equal partner." Although I don't wish to give the false impression that all same-sex relationships are purely egalitarian, by and large, participants encountered vastly more egalitarian partnerships in their lesbian relationships than they had experienced in their marriages to men. Generally speaking, during their marriages, participants lived and

worked according to traditionally gendered divisions of labour that saw husbands spending the bulk of their energies on their labour-force work, while wives were responsible for family and domestic work. Therefore, some participants had to let go of beliefs around division of labour gender distinctions that no longer fit as they redefined their roles as partners. With respect to old roles, Vivian found it very difficult in the early days of their relationship to allow her partner an equal share in the household duties, and in more general terms, to relate to her partner on an equal footing. Even after 13 years together, Vivian is still inclined at times to put the responsibility for decision making, and what might in more traditional terms be considered “husband’s work,” onto her partner. However, she said she is learning that their relationship need not be bound by heterosexual traditions and expectations. She feels that being an equal partner has given her the opportunity to test different aspects of herself, as she stated:

...little things like, that you, you, automatically think that, your husband will take care of, like the maintenance in the car, uh, fix the lawnmower, uh, if you want hardwood floors, you put down the hardwood floor, [partner] and I, have done more and, talk about growing and learning? [partner] and I put all these hardwood floors down, in the other apartment, when we had the townhouse, we cut a hole in the wall and made a kitchen door, between the dining room and the kitchen, we, built those two decks out the back, we, ah, do all the Christmas lights. [I. I get a sense that you are doing things that you, never dreamed of?] Oh God no, because that was, that was the male’s role, that’s what the male does, and especially being my ex-husband, he was a carpenter [I. oh, wow] and so it was like, “clean up my mess, and hand me the hammer” type thing.

As well, she has come to recognise emotional and nurturing aspects in her partner that she would not have seen within her former traditional context. Her new perspective has made for a very rich and loving relationship between her and her partner.

Several participants commented on the bond that they had attained in their intimate relationships with women that surpassed the emotional connectedness that had existed in their relationships with men. For example, Jean observed: “with a woman, there’s a closeness there, that isn’t there with a man,” and Iris said: “it was a connection that I hadn’t been able to make before with a man that I was able to make with her,” were quite common. Dawn, who had had a close, intimate relationship with her husband said that she felt a closer connection to women. Similarly, when Marie realised that she could have the intimate connection in a same-sex relationship that she had been missing in her marriage, she suddenly had a framework for comparison that allowed her to make the claim that “there was no going back!” Vivian suggested that her intimate bond with her partner was the reason why, after 13 years, they were still able to enjoy living together, working for the same company, and spending their entire day together. She talked to me about the joy she experienced working with her partner:

We are together, basically 24 hours a day. I follow her on the line, and she will be a few minutes late and I’ll be a few minutes early and, we’ll meet at stop lights, and we’ll kibbutz back and forth, and we meet, at the end, and I bring her a thermos of coffee and we’ll have coffee and a cigarette at the end, and, we, we just have fun together, and, every little thing, and I said to her the other day, I said, “do you know something, I think I’m in love with you, would you like to go out?” you know?

Along with the greater intimacy and connectedness that participants experienced with their same-sex partners, there were also challenges and problems. Most of the issues that participants faced in their relationships were similar to those that they had dealt with in their heterosexual life. Examples included finding a partner who was compatible

psychologically as well as sexually, negotiating differing tastes and conflicting points of view, and the repetition of unhealthy, old patterns in new relationships. In addition, Louise described the experience of an abusive lesbian relationship, which suggests that the threat of abuse exists in all relationships.

A number of issues were unique to their same-sex relationships and break-ups, such as co-parenting, which will be taken up in “Shifting Motherhood.” Another subject that came up for some couples was how far each partner was out of the closet. Problems occurred when partners disagreed on being out, because this issue was bound up in the expression of couplehood and because it was so closely tied with family and social interactions. Thus, for some participants, like Jean, differences of opinion on the topic of being out put a heavy strain on her relationship with her partner. In a similar and probably related manner, internalised homophobia was common issue in participants’ same-sex relationships. For example, after discovering that Marie was involved in a new relationship, her ex-partner attempted to put an end to the relationship by convincing Marie that lesbianism was morally and spiritually wrong.

Lesbian relationship break-ups were also novel experiences for the women in my study. All but one participant did not remain in their first lesbian relationship. Several felt that these unions might have been doomed to failure simply because they were *coming out* relationships. It seemed that the host of variables involved in coming out, at

any time of life, but particularly at mid-life, alongside the pressures involved in coming out were not favourable for developing stable long-term relationships.

When I asked participants what these break-ups had been like for them, most said that breaking up with a woman had been qualitatively different from breaking up with a man, in large measure, because of the intimate connection they experienced with female partners. For example, quoting from a film she had seen, Alice said that breaking up with a woman “tears your heart.” Regarding the difference between heterosexual and same-sex splits, Alice explained:

[Breaking up with] men, for me, it’s, there’s an emotional, component there, that’s difficult, and, well, just difficult. But it’s not impossible, because, you know, like I always thought in the back of my mind, “well, it’s okay, this is hard breaking up.” But breaking up with my girlfriend? Oh, Jesus, that, and I was the one that left, and that just, oh man, I didn’t know if I was going to survive. *Nothing* has touched that!

Another aspect of breaking up, related to emotional connection, was how participants negotiated the post-break-up relationship. A number of participants stated that they remained close to past partners. Some continued to live with their ex-partners for a period of time following the break up. For example, Dawn’s ex-partner continued to be a friend who has been a “big support” in her coming out process. After breaking up with her partner, Jean continued to live with her partner. This was a novel experience for her, as she describes in the following:

I’d never stayed friends with an ex in my life! It was like “you’re out of my life, you’re gone” and, I said, this time, because it was her, I would try, “and be your friend, I don’t know if it will work, but I will try.”... We actually, we started to get along very well, you know. I was very caring, if she needed a hug, I was

there. There didn't have to be any strings attached, and I found out that, "yeah, I can be your friend."...It was something new for me. I'd never done it before.

In summary, although many of the issues and challenges that participants faced in their same-sex relationships were the same or similar to those that they had dealt with in heterosexual partnerships, there were many novel experiences, particularly in areas pertaining to gender roles and division of labour issues, intimacy and relational connectedness, and relationship deterioration.

Strength, Support, Therapy. Participants made use of different types and different sources of support during their transition from heterosexuality to lesbian life. This category describes these different kinds of support and the degree to which they were helpful. The main types of support that participants relied upon were their own belief systems, friends and relatives, and therapy. When asked how they made it through their transition, most participants referred to their own belief systems as important sources of support. For example, Jean and Vivian felt confident that the events in their lives had a purpose in the grander scheme of things. Diane, Marie and Louise talked specifically about their connection to religion, which was both a source of support and comfort and it played a role in leaving heterosexuality. For a couple of my participants, their church or synagogue provided a background against which they were able to remove themselves from dogma, without leaving behind their spirituality. For example, as she worked through what it meant to her to be both Christian and homosexual, Marie began to reflect upon where the shame and confusion was coming from:

I've had to look at that whole thing too, and think how much of this is about me and God, and how much of this is about me and all those people and I realised an awful lot of it was about me and all those people.

Dawn and Marta were supported by their own personal growth. As they experienced the ups and downs of this transformation, they discovered personal strengths and courage within themselves.

Although a personal belief system was important in negotiating changes, the majority of the meaning units coded into this category shed light on the support received from other people. Lesbian partners played an important supportive role, particularly in the early stages of this transition. Vivian described her partner as "a solid rock" who gave her strength and courage. Marie and Dawn also described their partners as important members of their support systems. Outside of partners, those who provided the greatest support tended to be other lesbians and gay men. People who understood what it was like to be gay in a heterosexist society, who had themselves faced stigma and dealt with homophobia, were the first to offer acceptance, understanding and support. Whenever possible, participants sought out this type of understanding, throughout their transitional process and afterwards. As Iris pointed out, "I just like being around other people who I know identify as gay and lesbian."

Generally, participants received some support from their connections in the straight community. Louise, who at one time had attended a very conservative mainstream church, found a new place of worship that was much more open and

accepting. She and her partner were given the opportunity to do a presentation to other members of the congregation about their relationship:

We talked to our congregation about being a lesbian, and what that's about, and we had all these old people listening to us and it was wonderful! They had great questions, they really like us, and it's a small fellowship, but we're out, and it's nice, we're safe there.

However, the type of support that participants found within their heterosexual communities was unpredictable, slow to change, and conditional.

In some cases, families were able to be supportive throughout the separation and divorce process. For example, very often sisters were non-judgemental and supportive. In the main, however, families were unable to comprehend the coming out process, and in their attempts understand it, they said and did things that were hurtful to the woman in transition. Those women who did not find support and acceptance within their own circle of friends, family, or communities headed to the library or bookstore to search for narratives that resonated with their own experiences. Several participants mentioned a favourite author, or a book that had been of some help to them. However, overall, the number of publications did not seem to match the number of questions that these women had.

Finally, several participants engaged therapists for support and guidance. Some women sought out therapy when their marriages were in trouble, some looked for therapists to help them and their families deal with separation and divorce, and others went into therapy as an aide to the transition and coming out processes. With regard to

the latter, topics and issues that women dealt with in therapy included self-esteem and self-concept, informing their children and coming out to friends and family, and dealing with homophobia. Therapy modality was not discussed. Most therapists were women, one was a gay man, some were lesbians, and some were heterosexual. Although some participants looked for lesbian therapists, whether or not the therapist was a lesbian seemed to be less important than the therapist's ability to communicate acceptance and understanding, and her or his ability to foster self-exploration and self-growth. The worst therapy session was described by Louise:

I went to [a university counselling centre] and, and the woman who saw me was quite, homophobic [I. oh!] and, she wasn't very receptive, [I. no] and I was, trying to come out. I was trying to say, "this is what I think I am" and she said, "no, no, you're not."

Just before the end of her marriage, Iris had a similar experience with a marital therapist who suggested that they ignore the issue of her sexuality in marriage counselling sessions. This type of therapist response made it difficult for participants to work through their thoughts and feelings at this tumultuous time in their lives. Therapist responses and actions that participants interpreted as helpful included: accepting clients' sexuality; working on issues that were deemed important by the client; and concrete suggestions about reading material and community services and activities.

Participant/Research Summary. "Breaking New Ground" was a metaphor that came to mind during my interview with Vivian. It captures the sense of adventure and risk entailed in this transition, and hints at changes in our way of life as we straddled and

then crossed the bridge that spans the worlds of heterosexuality and lesbianism. When I thought back to that period in my life and recalled my first reading of a gay magazine, Diane's recollection of being a stranger in a strange land resonated with me. Because I found some of the material in the magazine disturbing to my conservative sensibilities, and not representative of my experiences, at first I wondered what I was getting myself into. Ultimately, like Diane, I recognised that entering a new culture does not necessarily mean adopting every viewpoint that exists within that culture. However, the experience made me conscious of the way that others might stereotype and judge us in a similar way to my own judgement of gay lifestyles when I first looked at that magazine.

"Breaking new ground" also captures a sense of action and of accomplishing something difficult on one's own. I like the way Marie put it:

This has been, a, journey, that I wouldn't, ever trade. I mean it's been, hell. A lot of it has really been horrible, you know, the emotional, part of it. But I'm really, grateful today, that I'm here, that I can be honest about, where I am and what I am, and I'm not ashamed of it.

During such a transition, one's support network plays an important role. As Dawn said, "You can't do this by yourself. If you do, my heart just goes out to you." The category "strength, support, therapy" highlighted the need for information, understanding and acceptance as participants proceeded through their experiences of leaving heterosexuality at mid-life. Like my participants, my own support system was made up of my partner, my partner's lesbian "family," my sister, and close friends we shared at the university. As well, I was fortunate enough to find an lesbian-friendly and supportive

therapist during the period of my separation and divorce. These people helped to calm the tempest of my own transitional journey.

Leaving Heterosexuality—Relational Transformations

The experience of transformation, described in the previous section, is made up of meaning units that delineated the processes involved in taking on a lesbian identity and coming out to others. Another aspect of leaving heterosexuality at mid-life that was important to participants can be explained in terms of the changes that participants underwent in their significant roles, specifically the role of wife and the role of mother. Thus, this section collates participants' accounts of their "relational transformations" under the rubrics "Leaving the Marriage" and "Shifting Motherhood."

Leaving The Marriage

Although leaving the marriage coalesced with leaving heterosexuality and women's identification as lesbian or gay, these women had been married anywhere from 10 to 29 years. Therefore, leaving the marriage was a significant event on its own, one that had a major impact on them personally, and on their extended families. The meaning units that emerged as descriptive of this event and its effects were captured by the following three first order categories: "Gaining the Courage to Leave," "The Process of Leaving," and "Relationship with Ex-husband."

Gaining the Courage to Leave. This category emerged from participants' accounts of how they faced up to truths about themselves, and the courage it took for them to leave their marriages. Nearly every participant experienced a slow, dawning realisation that she was unhappy, or unfulfilled in her marriage. Some women would have left their marriages eventually, even if they had not acquired a lesbian identification, whereas others thought they would probably still be married. Under "Reflections on the Marriage," I noted that many participants felt something had been missing in their marriages all along, and that they described feelings of restlessness, loneliness, or unhappiness with no apparent basis. Several women experienced a concomitant recognition of their own needs, and a further realisation that their needs were not and could not be fulfilled within the marriage. Gradually, it occurred to Jean that the resentment she felt towards her husband was not all his fault, that it had as much to do with her unmet needs as it had to do with his faults, and that she wasn't being fair to her husband by staying with him under those circumstances. The idea that began to dawn in Marie's mind followed a friend's query about her sex life. After her friend questioned how she could have sex with her husband when there was no intimate connection between them, suddenly something shifted for her:

It lit a fear inside of me. [I. ah] It put a finger on something, that nobody had ever touched before, and it was like somebody put a finger on it, and it lit up, and it was like this glaring thing in me, and it was all of a sudden, it was about *me*! And I was so afraid of it, I backed off, and I avoided this woman like the plague.

She continued to be “tortured by” this fear until the first time she had sex with a woman, when she experienced “making love,” as opposed to what she described with her husband as “the sex act.” Louise began to realise that she could not be herself in the early days of her marriage when she felt her creative energies sapped and when her “life went dull.” Later, this feeling culminated in coming to terms with the fact that she had little in common with this man. Next came the thought that perhaps she did not have to stay with someone she did not love. Thus, these were some of the emerging thoughts that fuelled participants’ courage to leave their marriages.

The spark that ignited this fuel was usually a particular event that changed the woman’s perspective. Such events included a romantic or sexual encounter with another woman, a serious illness, a suicide attempt, and an eye-opening university course. In addition, some participants talked about ways that they might have unconsciously construed events to make it easier for them to leave. For example, Jean recalled getting to a point where she no longer cared if she did things that annoyed her husband, and in retrospect she thought that perhaps she had been unconsciously trying to push him to leave her. In the same way, Louise recognised in retrospect: “I was trying to build up this kind of litany of blame, to give myself permission to leave, you know?” Similarly, Alice re-evaluated her last argument with her ex-husband as an event that she exploited to give herself permission to leave him. In one way or another, these women found the

courage to leave long-term relationships, and they began setting out on journeys that were perhaps bound to create much disruption and unhappiness before reaching a calm plateau.

The Process of Leaving. Armed with courage, many participants set out quite optimistically to change their family dynamic, hopeful that they could soothe the pain of loss for their families, and maintain good relationships with their husbands. However, divorce turned ugly very quickly. This category highlights salient aspects of participants' narratives about their experiences of separation and divorce.

A few participants disclosed their lesbian stirrings to their husbands. Others chose to leave the marriage first. Either way, once divorce was a certainty, husbands, whether or not they had attempted to be supportive of their wives' transition initially, reacted in pain and anger. Often, they became quite hostile and angry confrontations were common. Marie, whose husband was reasonable and understanding when she first talked to him about her lesbian stirrings, pointed out, "that's where, the existing issues in our relationship came to the forefront."

This was an incredibly difficult time for participants and their families. Different strategies were used by different women to get through this period. Like tearing off a bandage, some women left their husbands as abruptly as possible. Alice, whose husband had become increasingly verbally abusive, described her leaving as follows:

I didn't know what I was going to do. I had no idea, but I just, knew that this is not, what I want. Had he been a different, man, it probably would have been a longer process for me to leave, um, or not, who knows, that's a moot point. But it was just, it was destroying me, so I took my dog, and I went to my mother's.

Other women left and then returned, making several attempts to salvage the marriage before finally leaving for good. For example, Marta talked about her struggles with leaving:

I had mixed feelings about it. On the one hand, I wanted it to work, because I had these kids, and I generally liked him and I couldn't, quite imagine, what life would be like in a non, sort of, family? ...and, [husband] didn't want other people to know, he didn't want us to talk as a couple with our friends about it, or anything, he wanted it kept, his words were always "discrete" [I. yeah] uh, so, I said okay, I would, uh, give it one more try, and, cause you know, I didn't want to stay with [female lover] and this had been the second woman I had been involved with, and, so you know, maybe this wasn't really what I wanted...

Still other women continued to live with their husbands in the marital home long after they had agreed to separate, either for financial reasons, or for both partners' emotional readiness, or both.

Participants also talked about how they made it through the experience of leaving the marriage. Supportive relationships and therapy were important. Parents, who were aware of their daughter's unhappiness in the marriage or aware of some kind of abusive behaviour on the husband's part, in many cases provided their daughters with emotional and practical support. Other participants, whose parents were not able to make sense out of the divorce, were less likely to receive support from their parents at this juncture. Getting through this period for some participants meant resolving practical issues. For example, Vivian negotiated a cost-effective living arrangement with a friend, in order to be able to move out and get an apartment, while Louise focused on custody and legal issues.

After their divorce, the financial picture changed drastically for several of my interviewees. For the first time, a woman whose smaller income had served as extra money for her household now became economically self-reliant. Often they had little formal career training, and they found that they had to make their way in a socio-political climate where much of their previous work, raising children and/or volunteer work, was not valued. For some, this meant continued economic dependence on their ex-husbands, while they went back to school or attempted to establish themselves in the workforce. For others, it simply meant a serious reduction in their financial resources and lifestyle. Two participants said that their continued financial dependence on their ex-husbands made it difficult for them to come out to their families due to the potential threat of losing financial support. For many women, the post-divorce financial struggle was not mirrored by the quality of life of their ex-husbands whose incomes were significantly greater than theirs. Louise, who lives in an apartment, with her two children, described what this inequality meant to her:

We sold the home, and I, finally had what I needed, to get away, which was money, and I've spent so much of it, [I. yeah] but one of the things I that I bought was a car, because mine was, really, really on its last legs. He's come away from it, um, he made great investment, bought a house, and he rents out, two, parts of it, and um, he's just, doing fine, you know, and here I am, struggling to make ends meet. ...He's pretty supportive, you know. [I. he is eh?] He gives me money monthly, and ... well, we don't make the same amount of money, I mean, women don't make what men make. [I. I guess that's sort of the bottom line about it all, right? is the social inequality, that still exists?] I mean with his job, he could afford to take his equity and put it into this other place, because he *knew* he could go and get the plumbing fixed, or the roof fixed, or [I. I know] and take out another loan or whatever, because he has the income [I. yeah] whereas I didn't!

Nearly all of the mothers in my group worried about how their children would cope with the family break up. In the words of Dawn: “I never worried about how my daughters would deal with my sexual orientation. I knew they would be *devastated*, by, what this meant for *the family*. We’re a very close family, a very strong family.” In fact, Dawn’s children were shocked and frightened by the break-up of their family. Similarly, Louise reported that one of her daughters was quite angry with her at first, and Diane’s step-daughter turned against her. Eventually, children of my participants adapted to their altered family constellations, and as Diane pointed out, children seemed to react positively to their mothers’ increased self-confidence and happiness.

Thus, the process of leaving the marriage was difficult, no matter how confident participants were at the outset. Each person navigated this rough terrain in her own unique way, depending upon her personality, characteristics of the marital relationship, support from others, emotional strength, and financial resources.

Relationship with Ex-husband. Participants’ concern about their relationships with their ex-husbands did not remain in the past, as I had anticipated. All except three participants mentioned their present relationship, or lack of relationship, with their ex-husbands. The three who did not describe their current interactions with their ex-husbands had described them as either emotionally or physically abusive during the marriage, while with the exception of the marriage break-up, none of the other

participants mentioned physical or emotional abuse. In general, participants spoke with concern about what their husbands endured through the divorce process, and four participants have remained friends with their ex-husbands.

In terms of what their ex-husbands went through, most participants experienced a period of feeling guilty. Several of these had arrived at a place of distanced sadness, whereby they no longer felt bad for leaving, but they felt sad for what he had endured. Referring to what she thought her husband had experienced, Jean said that her husband had continued to love her until the “bitter end” of the marriage, and that she had burst his bubble. About her present relationship with him, she said: “Now, I mean he can’t stand the sight of me, but I still wouldn’t like it, if anything bad happened to him, because, you know, we did a lot of, good stuff together. He’s the father of my kids”.

Thinking back to her marriage, Marie recalled that her husband always seemed content, despite anything she might have felt to the contrary. Thus, she felt he was perhaps unprepared for their separation, and because of that he reacted with shock and confusion when she began to talk to him about her unhappiness in the marriage. About their current relationship she said: “He’s not a bad man. I don’t hate him, you know. I like him a lot better as an ex [slight laugh] than I did a husband.” Similarly, Louise felt that the rupture of the marriage had been devastating for her husband, but at the time of the interview they were okay with one another—not good friends, but “we would help each other out”.

Two participants, Dawn and Marta seemed to have had particularly close relationships with their husbands. Their description of what their ex's went through indicated that they seemed to share their ex-husbands' pain around the loss of these relationships to a great degree. Having come through the dark hour of divorce, Marta described her current relationship with her husband as: "We're best friends. We worked things through, and, we now do things, the two families together." Dawn and her ex-husband, who has since remarried, also continue to share a strong bond and a close connection. An interesting discovery that Dawn made, during this process, was how hard it was for some close friends and family to accept their new family constellation. As she described it:

The hardest part, for me, was not, the coming out. It was not, the impact on my family. It was, how others viewed, the alternative that we presented in terms of [ex-husband] and I maintaining a very strong relationship, and our family unit staying strong. The *resistance* we had to that [I. really!] was phenomenal! That was the hardest part, and it's only recently that that's become much easier, because, time, has passed and people are realising we aren't crazy!

Participant/Research Summary. Having been married anywhere from 10 to 29 years, it was not an easy decision for us to leave our marriages. Over time, we gradually came to terms with our own needs, and the impossibility of meeting those needs within the confines of our marriages. The catalyst that got us moving was usually a triggering event, such as a romantic or sexual encounter with another woman, a serious illness, a suicide attempt, or an eye-opening university course. In my case it was cupid's arrow that

speared the lesbian within me and I found myself intensely attracted to a sister graduate student who I had known for five years.

However supportive our relationships with our husbands had been, once divorce became a reality, all husbands *initially* reacted in pain and anger, and many became quite hostile. This was an extremely difficult time of transition. Strategies that we used to get through this period included: leaving the marriage as abruptly as possible; making several attempts to salvage the marriage; or continuing to live together after the separation. In my case, my ex-husband and I agreed that I should move out fairly quickly.

The need for support, both financial and emotional, was greatly increased when we moved out on our own, although the amount and type of support that women actually received varied considerably. Given my own experience of moving too quickly on the situational and financial aspects of the divorce, I would encourage women in this situation to get good financial advice and not to rush into any decisions.

Most of us experienced pain for others, particularly our children and our ex-husbands, that transcended our own pain over the loss of the marital relationship and family break up. We lived through a period of intense guilt feelings for causing this pain. Most of us continued to have some form of contact with our ex-husbands. Mine is very minimal, which saddens me. Two participants maintained close relationships with their ex-husbands. One of these observed how difficult it was for her extended family to accept this alternate family constellation. I wonder if such resistance may be a product of

the way our society constructs family, both in terms of what type of family units we endorse, and in terms of the lack of role models for alternate families.

Shifting Motherhood

Eight of my nine participants were mothers. These women were of an age when lesbians didn't have children. Prior to the lesbian baby boom of late (Weston, 1991, p. 168) lesbians were pretty much at the opposite end of the continuum from mothers on the "normal life" and reproduction scale. For many women of my age it just wouldn't have been conceivable that they could be both a mother and a lesbian. Thus, if a woman wished to, or felt compelled to answer the maternal call, she paid the price of disowning her sexuality, or at least some aspect of her sexuality. This section focuses on the impact that this transition has had on the identity of mother for the women in my study. It encompasses three first-order categories: "Mothering and Shifts in the Mother Role," "Children's Coming Out Process," and "Children and Mom's Lesbian Partner."

Mothering and Shifts in the Mother Role. Participants' talked about their role as mother in terms of three different aspects: 1) the experience of being a mother; 2) negotiating the potentially conflicting roles of mother and lesbian; and 3) mother as teacher and role model. Some participants talked about their perception of the mother role—being a mother. For three participants, being a *stay-at-home mother* was central to the task of motherhood. Jean said that she and her husband had both been "latch-key" kids, and the effect of having parents who worked from the time that they were quite

young was that they both wanted their children to have someone there when they got home from school. All of the participants who talked about being *stay-at-home moms* said that this had been important to them at the time, and that they could not have had the opportunity to stay at home with their children if their husbands had not made enough money to support this traditional arrangement.

The mothers who worked outside the home during their children's early years also talked in terms of the importance of being actively involved both as mothers and as members of the labour force, whether the latter was due to the necessity of earning a wage, or whether it was due to the importance that participants attributed to their careers.

Nearly all of the women I interviewed experienced motherhood as a chosen occupation, and their role of mother was seen in terms of achievement as opposed to something that happened to them. Therefore, the following description by Iris highlights the significance of the mother role for many participants:

The biggest, uh, most influential thing in my life was having my child. In my mind, there's nothing that tops that experience, at all, and there hasn't been an experience that has outweighed it's meaning in my life. Raising a child has been the pinnacle [I. yeah] it's been the best, it's been great. Coming out, uh, runs a close second [laughs] for sure. I mean those were the two really big ones, I would say, that have, changed my life.

Clearly, being a mother was an important aspect of participants' sense of self.

Much of the discussion centring on motherhood focused on experiences of negotiating motherhood within the context of a lesbian identity. Participants struggled with the seeing themselves as mothers who were no longer part of the heterosexual norm.

One very difficult aspect of this picture was their perception of themselves as not being as capable as they once might have been of protecting their children from pain. In particular, participants anguished over the pain that they were creating in their children's lives around family break-ups, and they worried about not being able to protect their children from pain and fear. This struggle induced feelings of guilt and shame in some participants. In her words, Dawn put it as follows:

We live our lives, minimising risk, in our children's lives, protecting them, *not* wanting to hurt them. [I. mmhm we're there for support, yeah] If I ever hurt them, the, the guilt, that, you know [embarrassed laugh] what I felt, in terms of, of, of that, was *horrific*!

Participants also described conflicts between their attempts to make their way in the lesbian community and being a good mother. For example, Louise's inner battle between loyalty to her children versus striving to fulfil her own needs (see "Between Two Worlds") led to tremendous feelings of guilt, and terrible arguments with her husband. Moreover, some of the practical difficulties that were incurred by attempting to divide her time so as not to upset the family applecart included babysitting dilemmas and sleep deprivation.

Iris's response to the dilemma of being a nurturing mother on the one hand, and following her heart on the other, was to separate her role as mother from her identity as lesbian as much as possible, and if the two aspects of her identity came in conflict with one another, she attempted to put her son's welfare as a priority. In her words:

I'm very selective of the people I introduce him to anyway. I, only introduce him to people, that, I think he, [slight laugh] they're worthy of meeting him, so

um, he certainly was exposed to lesbian and gay, uh, people, and he knew, that the people were lesbian/gay [I. yeah] and, he didn't know I was ... I've made a very clear choice in my life. I don't want to live with anyone, so, um, you know, I don't have a U-Haul out the back, [I. right (laughing) like all the other lesbians] so, yeah, I don't want to live with anyone. So, as I said, I have a son, and that's my priority.

Despite horror stories and significant fears to the contrary, none of the women I interviewed lost custody of their children. A large part of the reason could be that most of the children concerned were at least in their early teens at the time of separation and divorce, and therefore, more readily able to make their own decisions. Although most of the children remained with, or moved in with, their mothers some lived with their fathers. However, all of my participants reported that they maintained positive relationships with their children, despite serious fears to the contrary.

An additional reason for the success that these participants had in maintaining their children's loyalties might just as well have been the work that they put into the task. A strong sense of commitment to motherhood rang in my ears as I interviewed these women. They worked hard at maintaining their relationships with their children. They did a tremendous amount of researching, in order to discover ways to help their children deal with their own transition; they worked out effective co-parenting relationships with their ex-husbands; and they were flexible and open to their children's needs, as they themselves straddled the gulf of two worlds.

Another aspect of mothering that was described unanimously by participants was the importance they placed on being a teacher and role model for their children. Issues

that participants deemed important in this context were: helping their children through their own process of sexual identification, whether that be straight or gay; teaching sons non-sexist values; modelling independence and the importance of a strong belief system to their daughters; and opening the minds of their children as well as other members of their family to homophobia and racism.

Three participants speculated on the possibility that one or more of their children could be gay. These mothers were committed to providing acceptance and supporting their children through the terrain of sexual orientation identification, whether or not their children ended up being straight or gay. For example, when Jean was asked by a friend what she would do if her son was gay, she said, “I’d tell him to be careful, and that’s all” and “hopefully he knows he can come to me.” Another participant, Marta, was happy that her son felt that he could talk to her about the issue of sexual orientation, and Diane put her commitment to supporting her son’s future choices on paper.

Within the context of values and teaching, Vivian, who described her life before her transition as very traditional and conventional said that she now challenges her family’s traditional gender role stereotypes. She recounted a recent conversation with her in-laws when she confronted them about their practices of dressing daughters in pink, and only buying dolls for their girls and trucks for their boys. She said:

...that’s not fair! You, from when, you are, taught, when you are a little girl, it’s inbred into you that you are a female and that’s a male, and the two, get together, but that’s not the case [necessarily]. Bring up the individual, but don’t bring up the, the gender!

Other participants talked about their commitment to teaching their children about different cultures and about the negative effects of homophobia, racism and stereotyping. For example, Dawn took her youngest daughter to the Pride Day parade as “a way of sort of broadening her world, as a responsible mother, wanting to expose a child to other cultures.”

At least half of the women I interviewed espoused hopes for their children, particularly for their daughters, that they would learn by their mother’s example that they have the right to live by their values, despite what people around them might say or do. For example, Marie described her vision of being a role model for her daughters:

I’ve shown them that it’s, it’s okay to be, true to yourself, even it’s not popular, you know? To live up to, your own personal , standards and opinions, like, the things that are, in your heart [I. mmhm] your own convictions [I. mmhm] to live up to those, even if it’s not a popular thing [I. right] and even if there’s controversy.

Participants hoped that their children would learn from this process, which virtually involved the whole family, that life requires courage, because sometimes life requires one to make difficult choices.

Children’s Coming Out Process. Children’s acceptance of their mother as a lesbian seemed to involve a Coming Out process of their own. After their initial reaction to their mother’s coming out narrative, children began a process of coming to terms with their mother’s identity. This process involved a range of reactions, from ambivalent tolerance to full acceptance of their mother’s lesbian orientation, as far as they were

capable of understanding it. The acquisition of full acceptance appeared to be a slow process that occurred over a fairly long period of time.

Mothers who were out to their children talked about how their children were dealing with having a lesbian mom. They speculated on their children's thoughts and emotions about coming out as a child of a lesbian, and they talked about their concerns vis-à-vis how their children might deal with homophobia. One concern that some of the moms had addressed directly with their children was the children's fears around coming out to their friends. When her oldest daughter indicated that she was afraid of what her friends might think, Marie told her, "Tell people if you want to. You don't have to."

Similarly, Iris made a pact with her son:

I said, "don't worry, I won't, at all, ever be out, at school, or in front of your friends, until you say, it's okay," [I. wow] and he still, to this day, doesn't want it to happen. [I. he's 15 ½] Yeah, and he knows, he knows about homophobia, he knows what it's like, and I know too, so, you know, that's his choice, I'm not going to make his life more difficult. [I. so, wow] I know at some point, that will change [I. yeah] and, I won't do anything to disrespect his position.

According to other participants, children who were able to talk to their friends received support from them, as they came to terms with their mother's sexual orientation. For example, Dawn talked about how her youngest daughter "survived" such upsets as finding out that her mother had spent an evening in a bar by discussing them with her friends. Her daughters' friendships were important in helping them work through this period, as she described:

The girls turned to their friends, spent a lot of time talking with friends, and that was, for the most part, I think really positive. I have to say, I don't think they

experienced anything that was terrible, at least that they, that they defined? [I. right] In no way remotely awful, their friends were very supportive, and in some cases, completely understanding, [I. yeah] and then you know, they have friends whose parents have broken up.

Similarly, Marta said her sons' friends were important variables in her sons' "coming out process". She believed that her 23 year-old son's friends and girlfriends have always seemed to be comfortable in their home. It seemed to her that they did not appear bothered by the fact that Marta was a lesbian. About her younger son, aged 19, she said that he tended to be much more open about his mother's gay identity. She felt that his way of showing his acceptance was that he would not remain friends with anyone who did not accept his mother as a lesbian.

Participants worried about their children's exposure to homophobia and harassment. For example, Marie felt that as her children moved from childhood to adolescence and the teenage years, they were more likely than ever before to experience homophobic reactions from their peers. Other mothers noted that their young children were aware of homophobic language, such as "fag" or "queer" that was being used in public school yards. None of my participants disclosed to me any specific acts that had been perpetrated against their own children, but the fear of such events existed for most of these women.

Children and Mom's Lesbian Partner. Most of my participants were currently involved in committed relationships at the time of our interview. These women were concerned about the relationship between their partner and their children. More

specifically, they felt that it was important that their children come to accept their partners and they also hoped that their partners would develop caring relationships with their children. With regard to acceptance, most believed that their children had accepted their partner from the outset, or that they had come to accept her, or else that they seemed to accept her. This acceptance did not happen by chance, however, nor was it an easy road to travel. Rather, most participants struggled with their longing for harmony, while doing a number of things to foster their children's acceptance of their loving partnerships. In some cases, that meant holding back their natural inclinations to be close to their partner until their children got used to the idea. For example, in the following passage Dawn described her children's attitude towards her partner in the beginning, and how she responded:

They were very respectful, but [youngest daughter] said to me, very clearly, uh, "it's okay for you to go" and she used the term, "so you're gonna, are you gonna have a sleepover, at [partner's house]?" She used the term "sleepover," but she said, "I don't want, to wake up to [partner], in our house." Now, I'm very sure, that at this stage that would be different [I. yeah] for [youngest daughter], but at that time, of course, I respected that.

For others, fostering acceptance meant acting in ways that encouraged a more family-centred atmosphere. For example, Marie's children have grown to really like her partner. She described how difficult this experience was for her, and how she worked towards change:

I was *so uncomfortable*, you know! I was afraid how [partner] was looking at me, or if she was touching me, or, you know, it was like "stay away!" you know? [I. laughs] It was ridiculous, and it was driving me crazy, you know? And I finally just, had to just stop doing that, and that was, probably the hardest, and

so, it finally got to the point where, I just, took a leap of faith, and um, just started acting lovingly towards her, when they were around. And, you know, I would hug her, I would kiss her, or, touch her, or put my head on her shoulder, or whatever. And my kids are totally, totally fine with that now. Like it's not at all abnormal. I mean my, my 13 year-old, she'll come and, sit between us, and she wants us to both hug her!

Marta also described her son's evolving comfort level, suggesting that the evolution was not over:

I don't think he's nearly as comfortable as he wants, everyone to believe he is [I. okay, yeah]. The reason I can say that, is because I can see his body language, less, far less so now, but, you know, years ago, when he would be Mr. "Everything is Okay, this is, not an issue, we don't have to talk about it", and, my partner or I would put our arms around each other, or kiss each other, and you could just see him cringe [I. right, yeah]. It took quite a while before he was comfortable with that? [I. yeah] And even now, I think he's only comfortable within limits.

According to the experience of Vivian, the one participant who had a grandchild, the relationship between one's lesbian partner and one's grandchildren may be quite different from the relationship between one's lesbian partner and one's children. Vivian described her 7-year old grandson and her partner as good friends, who related very well to one another. In contrast, her partner's relationship to her son, although positive, was not as close. She was not sure if this difference was due to the fact that Vivian's grandson had grown up with two grandmothers, or whether it was the result of differences in the nature of the parent-child versus grandparent-grandchild relationships.

Another concern, and one that sparked a lot of uncertainty, was participants' partner's role vis-à-vis their children. When Vivian entered into a relationship with her current partner 13 years ago, her son was going through a difficult time. She recalled that

at that time she hoped that her partner, who had been instrumental in fostering Vivian's self-growth, would be a parent-figure to her 20 year old son, and save him from further trouble. She struggled with her wish until she finally came to realise that her partner was not able to fulfil that role in her son's life.

Louise was another participant whose hopes for a certain type of relationship between her children and her partner were dashed. Initially, she thought that her partner would take on a parenting role, like the ones she had read about in a parenting book for lesbian mothers. However, she eventually came to the unhappy conclusion that her partner did not see her role as a co-parent to her children. As Louise put it:

[Partner] doesn't want to parent my kids at all. She doesn't want to be really near them ... she loves them, and if I have a structured time, like "let's go apple-picking with the kids" like, "let's do something really fun," but she can't come here, and hang around with my kids, in, their pyjamas still, and their hair undone.

Some partners, like Marie's partner, developed more of a step-mother relationship with the children, while still others took on the role of a buddy. On the whole, however, there was much uncertainty regarding the role of women's partners with respect to their children. It seemed that there were no role models for co-parenting or other types of relationships between partners and children and very few books on the subject. Thus, these mothers were once again breaking new ground, this time in terms of constructing different constellations of families.

Participant/Research Summary. The overall picture of these lesbian moms shows a group of women from diverse walks of life, who seem to be maintaining their identity

as mothers, role models and caregivers while undergoing a unique transformation in their senses of self and sexuality. Certainly, my own experience bears witness to the struggle that they encountered in negotiating the precarious roles of lesbian lover and mother. In many respects, I have felt that, beyond attempting to complete a PhD, I have had two major missions over the past five years: 1) creating a home with my partner within a society that questions our right to do so every step of the way; and 2) doing everything in my power to encourage a positive relationship between my three adult children and my partner, including endless discussions with her about the constituents of her role. The latter remains unclear.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Why Now?

A question that I did not ask most of my participants directly, but one that emerged later in the analysis was: “why did you make the transition at this stage of your life?” On further reflection, the answer to this question seemed to have been a multi-faceted interaction of the acquired heterosexual values of family upbringing, the desire to have children and the timing of motherhood, maturity, emotional readiness, and life experience. As discussed in the section “Values, Morals, Religious Beliefs,” most of us grew up in families where conventional, traditional, and conservative values reigned, and at a time when the average Western woman was expected to marry, have children, and spend most of her energies on home-life. Throughout most of our lives, we followed familial and cultural dictates without question; we accepted the Western notion of family as composed of two opposite sex parents and children. Given that women in this culture are raised to please and to nurture, to be caring and empathic, we do not readily go against family, tradition, and social sanctions just to please ourselves emotionally or sexually.

Furthermore, heterosexism and intolerance towards homosexuality, corollaries of conventional conservative values, would have created hostile grounds that forestalled the development of a lesbian identity. Thus, it is unlikely that many young women under such conditions would have even recognised same-sex desires. Moreover, those who

were aware of sexual or romantic feelings towards other women would have conceptualised those feelings within the dominant paradigm. In the 1700s and 1800s that would have meant socially sanctioned girlhood crushes that did not have much of an impact on the patriarchal system of the day, because most women did not have the economic means to live independently, or to create and sustain same-sex households (Faderman, 1981). Thus, the label “lesbian” did not exist because there was no need to separate women who loved other women from the rest of society when virtually all women were required to marry and procreate. In the 20th century, “lesbian” was inaugurated as a word that connoted deviance from the norm, abnormality, and perversity.

Identity

The most significant finding of the present research study is that it challenges current notions of sexuality as solid, stable and binary. Postmodern deconstructions of sexual identity contend that neither sexuality nor identity are anything more than socially constructed knowledge categories whose meanings can and do change over time and place (Kitzinger, 1995; Foucault, 1976/78). Moreover, constructionists make a clear distinction between behaviour, or sexual acts, and the social meanings we attribute to certain behaviours, which include “sexuality” and “identity.” Thus, from a postmodern perspective, women who leave heterosexuality at mid-life are not suddenly waking up to their “true” sexual identities. Rather, by consciously acting on sexual or romantic feelings that they had either not experienced or not attended to previously, they are

making a radical departure from prescriptive norms. To illustrate, if sexuality is solid and binary, then a woman who leaves heterosexuality at mid-life obviously must have been a lesbian all her life. She just did not know her “true” identity until now. Furthermore, she can be gay or straight, but not both. If, however, sexuality is fluid and multifaceted, then a woman who leaves heterosexuality at mid-life may (or may not) have experienced a heterosexual identity at one time and a lesbian or bisexual identity at another time without any disruption in her sense of self. The women who participated in the present study experienced themselves as heterosexual prior to their transition and they experienced themselves as *not* being heterosexual after their transition.

Therefore, the present research study supports an emerging theoretical view that sexuality, particularly women’s sexuality, is fluid and changeable. Groundbreaking work has been done in this area by Letitia Peplau and her colleagues (Peplau & Garnets, 2000; Peplau & Spalding, 2000; Peplau, Spalding, Conley, & Veniegas, 1999; Wayment & Peplau, 1995). In 2000, Peplau and Garnets presented a review of empirical findings regarding women’s sexuality and sexual orientation that served to challenge models of women’s sexuality that had been used to pathologize lesbian sexuality. Peplau and Garnets describe research evidence that rejects illness models and inversion models of homosexuality and that challenges biological models of women’s sexual orientation. They further suggest that “if women’s sexuality is not primarily determined by biological programming but is instead responsive to social contexts, then theories about women’s

experiences must be social psychological in focus” (2000, p. 332). In considering alternate models of women’s sexual orientation, they include Baumeister’s theory of “erotic plasticity” (Baumeister, 2000, as cited in Peplau & Garnets, 2000) which predicts that there may be differences across gender in “the degree to which a person’s sex drive can be shaped and altered by cultural, social, and situational pressures” (Peplau & Garnets, 2000, p. 332). Peplau and Garnets describe evidence from Baumeister and other researchers that lends support to the idea that women’s sexuality may be more plastic, malleable and shaped by cultural and situational forces than men’s sexuality, which may be more biologically driven. Peplau and Garnets suggest that further research is needed to understand women’s sexuality.

In a society that constructs sexuality as solid and binary, a woman who suddenly finds herself experiencing romantic or sexual feelings towards another woman at mid-life may be called upon to define her identity as different, whether or not she experiences herself or her sexual identity as different. This self-ascription of constructed categories (e.g., lesbian/gay/bisexual) may not change *her* as much as it changes her position with respect to the cultures she inhabits. I think this is why it was difficult for two participants to pin down a label for their sexual identities. Because identity and behaviour are two different things, these participants, while recognising that they were behaving in new ways (e.g., relating sexually and romantically towards women instead of men), did not conceive of their identity as having changed all that much. In other words, they did not

locate their own position within the cultural milieus they inhabited as changed. The other participants, most of whom seemed to be more aware of the political and social ramifications of their sexual behaviour, did articulate a perceived change in their identity. These women seem to represent the emergence of a kind of postmodern consciousness. Like those who identify as bisexual, butch-femme, transgender, or transsexual, women who leave heterosexuality at mid-life are one of any number of groups of people, defined in terms of sexuality, who call into question current constructions of sexuality and gender as solid over time, dichotomous, and binary by the very fact of their existence.

Labelling Sexuality. Particular labels mean different things to different people. Associations with the word lesbian are varied, circumscribing a wide range of positive and negative connotations. Imposed labels can spell derogatory name-calling and homophobia. For a woman who has been used to fitting in as a member of the heterosexual majority for the bulk of her life, the label signifies the potential for many losses. These include the loss of friendships and family support, the loss of her job and her place in the community, and the loss of socially sanctioned heterosexual privileges, such as marriage to her partner and public displays of affection that most heterosexuals take for granted. However, claiming a label and gaining comfort in the use of hot or controversial descriptors can be part of a growth process. These things can indicate to the individual how far she has come in her own struggle with self-acceptance and

homophobia, as well as signifying to others her sense of responsibility towards the lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender communities.

Neither any of my participants nor I have taken on the label “bisexual.” Given the lengths to which many of us had to go just to leave heterosexuality and take on a lesbian identity, our reticence to label ourselves bisexual—which carries even less social currency than lesbianism in both heterosexual and same-sex cultures—might be expected. As a binary social construction, sexual orientation structures sexual activity into an orderly, predictable patterning of human behaviours. I suspect that if people felt a greater sense of (social) freedom to choose sexual partners, there would be more “out” bisexuality in the world, existing non-self-consciously alongside those who were decidedly homosexual, or decidedly heterosexual.

The Experience of Transformation

While the above discussion argues for a different way of looking at sexuality and identity, the act of leaving heterosexuality at mid-life was experienced by my participants, and by myself, as transformational in self and in our relations with the world. Like Neimeyer (1998), I believe that inasmuch as it is important to address and pay heed to the socially constructed nature of psychological concepts, it is also important to consider these concepts from an experiential perspective. From the latter viewpoint, this transformation did, in fact, entail changes in the way we perceived our identities. Given current constructions of sexuality and identity, it didn’t matter whether or not we labelled

ourselves “lesbians”; most of us recognised that the kind of attraction that we were experiencing towards another woman (or women) had implications in terms of our place within our social networks, families, and communities. It meant that we were no longer members of the heterosexual norm—we were “different” from our sisters, mothers, and female friends and we often found that we could not count on old support networks to help us through this period of change.

The experience of leaving heterosexuality was heralded by a restlessness during our married years that, in retrospect, seemed to answer the question “why me?” Because we had tried so hard, for so long, to be good daughters, wives, and mothers, we often did not give too much thought to our own personal needs. When we did begin to examine our own needs, during times of marital discord, or as a result of higher education or world travel, or within our careers, the road to self discovery led us “off the beaten path,” and eventually, away from heterosexuality. For example, most of my participants came to recognise two things: 1) they had unfulfilled needs for sexual and/or emotional connections and more egalitarian relationships that could no longer be pushed aside; and 2) their needs could not be met within the boundaries of heterosexual relationships. Following these recognitions, my participants (and I) began the process of claiming our space in the world.

Motherhood also probably played a significant role in the timing of this transformation. Until fairly recently, motherhood and lesbianism were mutually

exclusive concepts in our society. Furthermore, most of us were mothers who *chose* motherhood. Thus, considering the significant financial and emotional resources that both raising children and leaving heterosexuality entailed, it is unlikely that we could have even contemplated a lesbian identity at the same time that we were considering becoming mothers.

The experience of coming to terms with a non-heterosexual identity was in some ways similar to Cass's (1984) model of homosexual identity acquisition. Most of us experienced a period similar to Cass's first stage, "identity confusion," when we began to perceive our lesbian attractions and sexual encounters as not falling within heterosexual bounds. As well, Cass's second stage, "identity comparison," is similar to my participants' descriptions of their internal battles over their behaviour versus their identities, and certainly my participants and I experienced some, if not all, of the criteria for stage three, "identity tolerance," and stage four, "identity acceptance." However, the criteria that Cass included in stage five, "identity pride," and stage six, "identity synthesis," were not reflective of the experiences of my participants, nor of my own. Moreover, for a few participants, the overall transition departed from the Cass model to an even greater degree, and most of us experienced a more celebratory evolution in self and community than the Cass model would suggest. As well, Cass's model does not reflect the degree to which, in the beginning, we found ourselves bereft of an adequate language with which to describe the powerful emotions and experiences that our mid-life

transition generated. Thus, the experience that I have described as “owning her lesbianism,” while similar to Cass’s (1984) model of homosexual identity acquisition, seems to include a number of particulars unique to older women and mothers, and perhaps unique to the current social climate with respect to queer sexualities.

In Search of Intimacy and Equality. Women’s intimacy needs and capacities have traditionally been defined in terms of theories of development that are based on male models and norms (Mencher, 1997; Miller, 1991; Surrey, 1991) as well as on unquestioned heterosexist assumptions (Kimmel & Sang, 1995). As a result, women’s experience of intimacy has often been pathologized, through the use of such terms as *fusion* or *merging*, as the loss of relationship boundaries (Burch, 1982; Pearlman, 1988). In the past decade, this negative perspective on women and intimacy has shifted as theories of self development have begun to recognise feminist analyses of extant theory and with the emergence of the Stone Center’s self-in-relation model of self-concept (Miller, 1991; Jordan, 1997), both of which suggest that the traditional model of self development that places emphasis on autonomy and individuation has failed to recognise the importance of the development of intimacy in relationships. Moreover, although intimacy is considered to be an important component of couple relationships, the research to date has failed to operationally define intimacy in a consistent manner and the findings remain inconclusive regarding the components of intimacy, as well as the relevant associations between intimacy and healthy relationships.

For all of the participants in the present study, intimacy was an important aspect of our interpersonal relationships. This point was made repeatedly during the interviews, whether the topic under discussion was friendships, family relationships, or sexual partnerships. Intimate relationships with women were central to our life narratives, beginning with close relationships with our mothers, or with other mother-figures, followed by the development of intimate connections with friends and female mentors. By contrast, our relationships with men were mediated and limited by gender distinctions and, for many of us, these relationships tended to be lacking in intimacy.

Intimacy in sexual relationships with men was notably absent from the experience of participants in this study. In general, descriptions of marital sex involved a sense that it was lacking in an emotional connection, often leaving women feeling as if they were participating in a sexual act that was devoid of love making. Thus, similar to the findings of Charbonneau and Lander (as cited in Kimmel and Sang, 1995), many of us discovered that our first sexual experience with another woman was more emotionally fulfilling as well as more sexually intense than our prior sexual relationships with men.

One way of making sense out of the experience of leaving heterosexuality at mid-life might be considering the process as a search for intimacy. As well as a stronger emotional connection during sex, intimacy appeared to be related to all aspects of lesbian couple relationships. For example, several participants described a much closer bond with their current lesbian partners than what they had experienced with their husbands.

As well, in my own experience with my lesbian partner of five years, our close, intimate partnership has been strikingly deeper and richer than the kind of intimacy that I recall having shared with my husband of 23 years. In our relationship, events and experiences are shared beyond the concrete level of who, what, when, where, and why. Similar to the way that women relate to one another in any close relationship, we attempt to understand the other's feelings and experiences as we negotiate the joys and trials of a partnership. This process is best explained by what the Stone Center defines as "mutual empathy," the subjective inner experience of mutual attunement between self and other (Surrey, 1991). If, as Stone Center theorists propose, a greater capacity for empathy is currently fostered in the development of self-concepts of women than of men in our society, then lesbian relationships would be expected to contain a greater degree of mutual empathy than heterosexual (or gay male) relationships. Future research into lesbian relationships may hold the key to a better understanding of intimacy as well as women's needs and capacity for intimacy.

Another way of conceptualising the mid-life transition from heterosexual to lesbian partnering might be "finding equality." As noted previously, many participants described a number specific changes in their role as partner that seemed to be reflective of the statement, "from wife of him to equal partner." In the main, participants encountered vastly more egalitarian partnerships in their lesbian relationships than they had experienced in their marriages to men. Most participants had lived and worked according

to traditionally gendered divisions of labour whereby men spent the bulk of their energies on labour-force work, while women's roles and responsibilities revolved around family and domestic work. When they found themselves in lesbian relationships, there was a significant shift in the division of labour, creating more egalitarian partnerships that some women had difficulty getting used to at first. The greater degree of shared household labour in these lesbian relationships seems to be consistent with recent findings which suggest that equal sharing of household responsibilities may be more common in same-sex relationships than in heterosexual relationships (Peplau and Spalding, 2000).

Coming Out

The literature on coming out is fairly extensive. However, little has been said about women coming out at middle age. Like lesbians who come out at younger ages, mid-life lesbians have to deal with homophobia, loss of friends, family and jobs, and stigma. As discussed under the category "How the World Receives Us," the world does not receive us too favourably. More often than not, initial reactions from straight friends, co-workers, and family members of my participants were on the negative end of the spectrum of reception. Beyond these issues, however, it appears from both the current literature, as described previously, and my own investigation that there are some specific issues that women are faced with when they come out at mid-life. Examples of such concerns include: the loss of "heterosexual privilege," the fear of custody losses, coming out to children of different ages and genders, and coming out to husbands.

Heterosexual Privilege. What are the unspoken privileges of heterosexuality in one's immediate social circle? Varying degrees of acquired social status, emotional security, and financial security were some of the privileges that participants described that I included in the category "Marital Expectations." Legitimacy is yet another important privilege that society confers upon us when we pass through specific rites of passage. Heterosexist values insist that couples are composed of one of each sex. Same-sex couples are seen as foreign and treated with uncertainty at one end of the continuum all the way to invisibility at the other. Similarly, families are composed of a mother, a father and any number of children. Single parent families and other family constellations notwithstanding, this is the picture most people think of when they think of the word family. Two moms or two dads are just incomprehensible. Therefore, if she leaves her socially sanctioned family unit, a woman places herself squarely outside the norm and finds herself on new ground, without the roadmap of ordinary rites, rituals and celebrations. Moreover, the price to be paid for such truancy cannot be predicted ahead of time. The price may vary considerably as discussed under the categories "Coming Out" and "Breaking New Ground." Therefore, women who leave heterosexuality later in life are not just making a change to some internal aspect of themselves—there are grave ramifications that extend beyond the personal.

Similar to Lynch and Murray (2000), my participants and I were very concerned about, and very careful in, how we came out to our children. Some participants feared

losing custody of their children if they were to tell them why the family was no longer living with daddy, or who that lady was with whom they lived. The experience was a highly emotionally charged and difficult one. Children's reactions varied across age and gender, suggesting that individual methods of support should be tailored to the age and gender of the child.

Coming out to our husbands was also very difficult, on the one hand, because of custody fears, and on the other hand, because this signalled the end of the marriage. This experience required a great deal of courage, which my participants mustered in a variety of ways. Research in the area of family therapy might indicate methods of support for families to deal with this difficult period.

A coming out concern that all lesbians share is the anticipation of their mother's reaction. The relational model (Kaplan, Gleason, Klein, 1991; Rosen, 1997) makes an appropriate lens from which to view the issues that emerged for these women with respect to their mothers. From the perspective of relational selfhood, mother-daughter relationships encompass a mutual need for support, empathy and acceptance, accounting for the emotional bond that my participants described between their mothers and themselves. Moreover, it is almost unthinkable for a woman to eschew her heterosexuality, one of the basic expectations handed down from her mother. Such a transgression of maternal expectation almost inevitably culminates in a rift between mother and daughter.

Coming Out at Mid-life. Coming out was the largest category in this grounded analysis, and therefore, a central focus in my participants' accounts of leaving heterosexuality at mid-life. Three issues seem, in retrospect, to be of particular importance to the process of coming out as a mature, previously married, woman: 1) coming out as a lesbian after a relatively lengthy period of marriage; 2) lack of supportive social network and, for some women, isolation from other lesbians; and 3) the experience of coming out to older children. Those participants who had been married for close to, or more than, 20 years described poignant accounts of negotiating marriage break ups which were inevitably connected to their experiences of coming out as a lesbian. The support available from the psychological community was sparse and somewhat unpredictable.

Social networks, established over a lifetime of heterosexuality were not very welcoming of mature women's shift to lesbianism. This issue was exacerbated for a number of women in the current study, particularly those women who did not live in the city, because of their relative isolation from any lesbian community. As mature women, most were not as likely as women in their 20s to head out to lesbian bars or social clubs.

Finally, coming out as a mother of adult children was a unique experience, because these women had to cope with and support their children through their own coming out processes at a time when the younger ones were forming identities and the older adult children were forging ahead with their own lives, and probably not expecting drastic changes from their parents.

Given the aforementioned issues, participants' experiences of heterosexism and homophobia at mid-life suggest that psychology has two roles to play: 1) from a social psychology perspective, minimising homophobia and challenging power imbalances in heterosexual relationships and 2) from a therapy standpoint, helping mid-life lesbians and their significant others negotiate the transformational processes that they may experience.

Families

When I asked participants how their transformation had changed them, they did not answer with respect to internal changes as much as they described changes in their social roles and relationships. Whereas self-change was described in terms of increases in qualities that they already seemed to possess, such as gaining courage and strength, and qualities that seemed to be a product of their own transformative actions, such as empowerment, the major focus of transformation was relational.

Two significant changes in social roles occurred with respect to intimate sexual/romantic relationships and motherhood. The book *From Wedded Wife to Lesbian Life: Stories of Transformation* (Abbott & Farmer, 1995) is a collection of brief narratives by women who have left heterosexuality, and it was the first book I came across in my own search for others like me. The title of this book nicely captures the change in social roles that my participants and I experienced following divorce, when we became involved in same-sex relationships. Marriage afforded us heterosexual privilege and security. Moreover, as wives, we were provided with a place in the social structure.

Divorce was ugly, fraught with our own pain and guilt and our ex-husbands' pain-induced hostility. This was a time when women and their families needed sound financial advice, a great deal of support, and, often, therapy to help them through their transformation.

My participants and I discovered that creating, maintaining, and leaving same-sex relationships entailed many of the challenges of heterosexual relationships, but they included new issues, such as heterosexism and closets. Negotiating a loving, intimate relationship within a homophobic society takes skill, patience, and courage. Moreover, the tension between the need to be recognised as a legitimate couple and the couple's need for privacy and safety can be a constant source of strain on a lesbian family, particularly if there is a significant difference in the degree to which each partner is out of the closet.

Women together tend to manage these difficulties through close intimate connections, which in the past have been pathologized by the label "fusion" (Burch, 1982; Mencher, 1997; Surrey, 1991). This type of intimacy is commonly noted in the lesbian community when women break up. Whereas most heterosexual break ups involve a physical split, often women whose intimate and/or sexual relationship breaks up continue to remain close friends, possibly even remaining in the same household. Such capacity for connection suggests a possibility for better post-divorce relations in the larger society. Further examination of lesbian families might be useful in answering the following questions. Can heterosexuals learn from lesbian "divorce"? Might lesbian

families become role models for the way that our society constructs family, both in terms of what type of family units we endorse, and in terms of negotiating relationship deterioration?

Another area of concern for lesbian families is parenting. With respect to women who leave heterosexuality at mid-life, an important question is, “what is the role of the lesbian co-parent?” The main reason for the diversity that I found in my participants’ accounts of their partners’ roles vis-à-vis their children appeared to be the idiosyncratic nature of the lesbian partner’s role as parent in our present society. There is no blueprint, no analogy, no role model for the lesbian co-parent to follow when she arrives on the scene as partner of a mother whose children are in their teens, or older. In addition, the differences in relating to children may be due to other possibilities, such as the point at which the children are in terms of their acceptance and their own “coming out” process, and whether or not both partners have children.

Finally, a common theme in queer family relations is rejection of these families by their own families of origin (Weston, 1991). Weston points out that lesbians whose mothers have rejected them often seek nurturance from mother figures in the LGBT community and for these people, “family” often consists of the network of their chosen queer kin. Most of my participants talked about developing such support networks. My partner and I continue to socialise with our chosen “family.” Therefore, despite the current zeitgeist of acknowledging diversity, at the present time there is still a need to

develop “chosen” families. This is because even long after we have come out to most of the people in our lives, and even if they seem to accept us on the surface, the only place where many of us feel unconditionally accepted is within the lesbian or gay community. We all need to experience that affirmation of our loves and lives that we, as same-sex couples and families, feel in the company of other lesbian and gay families. We need to be able to “let our lesbian hair down,” and not censor every loving word or caress. We need to feel free to talk about, complain about, or praise our relationships without wondering what filter the other person is using to listen and judge our words. Thus, there is still a need for a greater understanding of diversity in the broader culture and a role for psychology both in terms of research, in order to formulate a broader understanding of the experiences and needs of diverse identities and families, and clinical practice, as a source of support for individuals and families who are faced with these issues in their personal lives. It is also important that we recognise the potential role of families and friends in assisting more positive transformations, especially in light of the fact that many people of lower socio-economic standing may not be able to take advantage of therapy. As a discipline, psychology can sponsor awareness of different types of families through public education campaigns.

Reflections on Method and Process

The process of engaging in a participant-observer style of research that included taking a hermeneutic and grounded approach to the data was an intense experience,

simultaneously time consuming, energy draining, exciting, and highly rewarding. One of the rewards of doing this work was the rich pool of information that I uncovered in the process. It is unlikely that this rich source of material could have been derived from a deductive or quantitative methodology that ensues from traditional, positivistic empiricism. Keeping well grounded in the data at every stage of the grounded analysis and testing my own assumptions by situating my experiences and reflections into (the abductive-inductive process of) the hermeneutic circle of constant comparison, I was able to freely utilise data from entire transcripts, instead of being constrained by a limitations in quantity, or priori assumptions about the data.

From the feedback that I received from my participants, all of whom are looking forward to receiving their copies of the written work, I believe that they too found the process of being interviewed both interesting and enlightening. Utilising a person-centred style of interviewing, I was very much engaged in the unfolding of participants' subjective experiences of events. I feel quite confident that my empathic approach and interest allowed my participants to open up and talk freely about their experiences to a large degree. At the same time, my empathy and enthusiasm for a subject dear to my own heart may have kept them from considering certain aspects of their experience. For example, in describing their families of origin, most of my participants did not spend much time talking about their fathers. Similarly, reflections on their experiences with the other men in their lives were less evident in the interview data than reflections on their

experiences with women. Whether or not these particular examples reflect a response to my interviewing style and/or my own particular interests cannot be known. I merely suggest them to exemplify the supposition that there may be gaps in the data as a result of participants' deference to their perceptions of what I wanted to hear and that were based on my enthusiasm and empathic responding.

Another potential limitation of the present study was the homogeneity of the group of women I interviewed. As previously noted, all of the participants appeared to be white. I did not ask specific questions about ethnicity, socio-economic status, or ability. According to their unsolicited disclosures regarding schooling and careers, socio-economic status appeared to vary across participants. However, on the whole, they seemed to represent a fairly homogeneous group of white, able-bodied women. It is possible that some categories or patterns did not emerge in my data because of this homogeneity. In particular, dual minority status did not come up for any of the participants. Moreover, many of the resulting categories were related to the experiences of mothers. Women who were childless by choice were not well represented by this research study. Future research should address these potential gaps by focusing on women from different racial and ethnic groups and women who are childless by choice.

Given the limitations of this study, it is also important to recognise that it does begin to fill a void in the literature. Up until this time, there has only been one published work emanating from a psychological perspective on the experience of making the

transition from heterosexuality to lesbian identity in mid-life (Jensen, 1999). The present study differs from Jensen's research in that this work is centred on women who left heterosexuality during their mid-life years and the sample is Canadian. These results are more focused on the experience of the transition itself than Jensen's results; the results of the current study are also structured around a broader perspective on coming out, self-in-relation, and family. As well, the results of the present study, although very similar to Jensen's findings in highlighting themes of identity, socialization, the importance of role models, and heterosexism, are less tied than Jensen's data to explanations for why ostensible lesbians would identify as heterosexuals. Instead, results of the present study suggest that sexuality is much more fluid than present conceptualisations, particularly in the field of psychology, permit.

The dearth of information in the psychology literature about women's experience of making the transition from heterosexuality to lesbianism and about lesbians coming out at mid-life suggests that the present study's findings shed new light on a number of psychological constructs and processes. More specifically, these results serve to: highlight current constructions of sexual identity and challenge the notion that sexuality is a stable and binary phenomenon; unravel some of the processes involved in women's self and relational transformations; specify components of the coming out process that may be more relevant to mature women than to other groups; and address some of the issues currently faced by lesbian families in Canada.

There are a number of avenues of inquiry that emerge from the present findings for future research. These include: 1) the inclusion of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies in further studies concerning the complexity and fluidity of sexual identities and the interaction of these complexities with women's experience of relational selves and life transitions; 2) studying identity, coming out, and familial issues that pertain to other populations, such as members of ethnic minorities, lesbians of colour, and lesbians with physical or mental disabilities; and 3) a broader analysis of the issues that lesbian-headed households face in the current social climate, including the impact of heterosexism, sexism and homophobia on such families and on their families of origin.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Ad

HETEROSEXUAL TO HOMOSEXUAL TRANSITIONS

A lesbian, clinical psychology doctoral candidate, I am currently doing a study on identity and change in sexual orientation for my dissertation. If you are a mature woman (39+) who has experienced a transition from heterosexual to lesbian (bisexual?) life, I am interested in your story.

For more information, please call Sharon at 905-726-3236.

Appendix B: Research Study Description Form

My study explores identity and coming out in mature Canadian women. In particular, I am looking at the transitional process of shifting from a heterosexual identity to a homosexual or bisexual identity at mid-life as well as the effects of this significant life change on women's relationships with others. I am currently inviting participants from the Toronto and surrounding area through word of mouth and small local ads to take part in an interview with me. Participants--women who have made this transition--are asked questions that relate to the following topics: self-definition and labelling of sexual orientation; the ways in which the shift from heterosexuality to non-heterosexuality has affected them; and the impact that such a redefinition of self might have on their everyday life.

As a psychotherapy researcher, I am concerned with the role of self and identity in the healthy and adaptive functioning of human beings. I am also concerned with shedding the biases and stereotypes of the past that have been associated with gay and lesbian people. Therefore, by participating in this study, you are aiding research that is aimed towards gaining a better understanding of self and identity and towards generating knowledge of the issues faced by women who have made the transition from heterosexuality to homosexuality/bisexuality in our culture.

As a participant in my study, you will be asked a number of questions about yourself and your experiences as they relate to your life transition in an interview that will last approximately 2 to 3 hours. The interview will be audiotaped, and it will take place in a research room at York University, unless this is inconvenient for you, in which case I can arrange to bring a tape recorder to your home. I expect to conduct only one interview. However, a follow-up phone call may be needed for additional clarification and to clear up any uncertainties that occur in transcribing or analysing the tapes. You are also welcome to call me. If you would like to see my initial draft and to scan it for any concerns around confidentiality, I will send you a copy. As well, you are welcome to offer your suggestions regarding my write-up, with the understanding that my interpretations of the data remain intact.

Although I am interested in hearing as much as possible about your experiences, in fact you are in control of how much you tell me. If at any time you do not wish to continue talking about a particular subject, this is entirely up to you. If you tell me that you don't wish to discuss a particular topic any further, I will respect your wishes.

The interviews will be transcribed by me. To ensure your privacy and to maintain confidentiality all identifying information will be removed from your transcript. When not in use by me, your transcript will be kept in a locked cabinet along with the audiotape (until it is destroyed at the end of this research project) and the information that I require to contact you.

The analysis consists of segmenting the transcripts, dividing them up into meaningful units for analysis. These units will be compared with the units of analysis from each of the other transcripts in order to locate common patterns and themes that fit together on different levels to form a whole. This whole will be a conceptual understanding (or theory) about shifts in identity and their effects on interrelationships in women whose lives have been transformed by a change in their sexual orientation.

I expect this to be an interesting experience for you, and hopefully one that is personally satisfying as you tell your story, and know that through your narrative and that of my other participants, together we will be creating a greater understanding of self and sexuality.

Sharon Armstrong, M.A.
Psychology Department
York University
Email: sday@yorku.ca
Phone: (905) 726-3236

Appendix C: Interview Guide

To Begin:

Casual conversation to decrease stress of being interviewed and to begin to establish rapport.

(5-10 minutes)

Explanation of procedure and obtaining informed consent to the taping and participation in the project.

(5-10 minutes)

Explanation to participant of the purpose of my research and my research focus, and time to answer any questions that the participant has about the study (basically a summary taken from pages 1-3 of proposal).

(5-15 minutes)

Followed By:

Although I am interested in hearing as much as possible about your experiences, in fact You are in control of how much you tell me. If at any time you do not wish to continue talking about a particular subject, that this is entirely up to you. If you tell me that you don't wish to discuss a particular topic any further, I will respect your wishes. *Turn on tape and begin interview.*

(interview: approx 2 hours)

First Prompt/Question:

Are you most comfortable identifying yourself as lesbian, or another other (sexual) identification (such as homosexual, bisexual, gay, or other)? (NB: this may already be known from phone call; if so just verify that what you were told on the phone is an accurate description of sexual orientation for the participant).

I would like you to describe your experience of making the transition from a heterosexual identity or lifestyle to a homosexual, lesbian, or bisexual identity or lifestyle.

If first prompt is unclear to participant, the following question(s) will be asked:

1. Can you tell me what this experience has been like for you?
2. Describe to me in your own words what it was like to make this change in your life?

Questions to be asked if not spontaneously discussed by participant⁴:

1. Would you say that you have changed, or that your sense of self has changed?
2. If yes: In what way (or ways) do you see yourself differently now?
3. Has your behaviour changed in any way?
4. Describe how you see yourself and how others see you.
5. What has been difficult for you in this experience and how did you cope?
6. What have been the rewards?
7. Does the expression "coming out" fit for you in terms of letting others know about your current sexual identity?
8. Have you come out to significant people in your life (friends, family members), and if so what has this experience been like for you?
9. How has this impacted your relationship with other people in your life, such as family members or friends?
10. Have there been any changes in the way that you relate to others? (Describe)
11. Have there been any changes in the way that other people relate to you? (Describe)
12. How has coming out (or not coming out) affected your current experience of your identity (your sense of self)?
13. In what ways could this experience have been made easier for you? (Therapy?)
14. What might you have done differently?
15. What would you tell another women who was heading towards a similar change in her life?

⁴ NOTE TO THE READER: All of these questions were not asked of every participant. They were used only as a guide for me to ensure that the experience of leaving heterosexuality at mid-life was described as fully as possible by each interviewee.

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

I am a PhD candidate in Clinical Psychology at York University in Toronto, Ontario, and I am conducting research for my dissertation, proposed title: "From Heterosexuality to Homosexuality: Mature Women in Transition." My supervisory committee consists of Dr. Shaké, Toukmanian, Dr. Sandra Pyke, and Dr. David Rennie. The research consists of obtaining interviews, and performing a grounded analysis on these interviews in order to gain an understanding of the experience of transition from heterosexuality to homosexuality in mature women (i.e., women over the age of 30 years), including an understanding of the issues and challenges faced by women who experience this type of life transition.

As a participant in my study, you will be asked to describe yourself and your experiences as they relate to your heterosexual-to-homosexual life transition in an interview that will last approximately 2 to 3 hours. The interview will take place in a research room at York University, unless this is inconvenient for you, in which case I can arrange to bring a tape recorder to your home. I expect to conduct only one interview. However, a follow-up phone call may be needed for additional clarification and to verify my understanding of your experience.

Your story (or your descriptions of your experiences) along with the stories/descriptions of the other participants will make up the data for this research project. In the final written presentation of this research, the interviews will not be printed as whole, individual stories. Instead, short excerpts of your experiences (stripped of potentially identifying information) will be printed. These excerpts will be part of a mosaic of voices that will highlight the over-arching themes and common experiences that I unravel in this process. Every attempt will be made to ensure that the results are reported in a manner that demonstrates a fair and honest reflection of what you have told me.

The benefits to you of participation in this study include telling your story to an interested individual, which can prove illuminating to you in the retelling, as well as the opportunity to collaborate in the building of a shared public understanding of this transitional experience and in the creation of a statement of the issues that are important to lesbians and bisexual women today.

You may have concerns about sharing details about your private life with me, a stranger to you. Confidentiality is a primary concern of any research study, and as a lesbian researcher, I am also aware of the risks and problems associated with being outed. Thus, confidentiality issues will be carefully addressed and I will take all possible measures for ensuring that your privacy is maintained. To this end, all identifying information such as

names, specific dates, and identifying locations will be removed from transcripts of the audio-taped interviews. The audio-tapes, along with the transcripts and my log of contact information will be kept in a locked cabinet. At the completion of this research project, after I have successfully defended my dissertation, the original tapes will be destroyed. After this research is completed, I plan to keep the transcripts for my own future research. The same guarantees of confidentiality that I have described in this consent form will be maintained.

Your participation in this research project is entirely voluntary, and you may abandon your participation at any time. If you choose to discontinue your participation, all records and data pertaining to you will be destroyed.

Although I expect the interview process to be an enjoyable one for you, some coming out stories include painful events. If at any time during the interview you find it difficult or painful to answer my questions, please let me know, and we can discontinue discussion of that topic for the moment, or completely. Furthermore, if you have unfinished issues that you would like to discuss further with a therapist, I can provide a list of therapy resources.

By signing below, you are indicating that you have discussed the research project with me, and you have read and understood the terms and conditions of this research project, and that you agree to participate.

Thank you for your participation. Results of this research will be made available to all participants upon request.

Signature

Witness Signature

Name

Witness Name

Date

Date

Further questions may be directed to myself, Sharon Armstrong at: Psychology Department, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, Ontario, M3J 1P3; or by telephone at: 905-726-3236.

Appendix E: Participant Profiles

All names were changed to protect the privacy of participants. Profile information is based upon demographics and other information obtained at the time of the interview.

JEAN

Jean was a 51 year old woman who had been living as a gay woman for eight years. She had recently broken up with her lesbian partner of several years. She had been married for 15 years when her marriage went “on the rocks” as she described it. She had two sons, aged 18 and 22 who lived with their father most of the time, and who also stayed with her for periods of time. She worked as a secretary in a medical office.

VIVIAN

The only grandmother in the group, Vivian was a 51 year old woman with an infectious laugh who was living with her partner of 13 years. She had been previously married for 18 years and had one son, aged 31 (the father of her grandson). Having spent several years during her marriage working in a traditional occupation for women, she had been working as a bus driver for approximately 14 years at the time of our interview.

ALICE

At age 41, Alice was my youngest participant. She had identified as a lesbian, or queer, for the past six years. She described her relationship status as single. She had been married for 10 years, and had no children. During her marriage and afterwards, she had held a number of occupations that could be described both in terms of traditional male and traditional female types of work. At the time of our interview, Alice was a graduate student in the social sciences.

DIANE

At 44 years of age, Diane, who was currently single, described herself as a gay woman, who was also comfortable with the terms “lesbian” and “dyke.” She had two sons, aged 9 and 13. After the break up of her 11 year marriage, her children both remained with her. Subsequently, however, her older son moved in with his father. Diane works in a medical office.

MARIE

Marie was a 44 year old woman with five children, four daughters and one son, who range in age from 2 to 20. She had identified as a lesbian for three years. Currently in a lesbian relationship, Marie and her partner were living in separate homes at the time of

the interview. Marie had been married for 20 years and divorced for one year. Her daughters were living with her. She worked in an office.

DAWN

Dawn, who had been married for the longest period of any of my participants, 29 years, was 54 at the time of our interview. She identified herself as “queer, lesbian, or gay,” saying that she had learned to become increasingly comfortable with these labels over the four years of her non-heterosexual self-identification. Her marriage had ended four years previously, and she noted that she retained a good relationship with her ex-husband. She had three daughters, ranging in age from 21 to 29, who had pretty much moved out of the house for school, and/or to start their own lives. Dawn’s occupation was social work.

LOUISE

Eschewing the term “gay” for women, Louise, who was 42, said that she had identified as a lesbian for four years. She had two daughters, aged 6 and 12, who lived with her. Her divorce had only recently come through in the past year before our interview; she remained in her marriage for approximately the first two years following her self-identification as lesbian. She and her lesbian partner of two years lived in separate homes. Louise’s occupation was in the teaching profession.

MARTA

At 55, Marta was my oldest participant. She was living with her lesbian partner at the time of the interview. She had been married for 22 years, and she had two sons, aged 19 and 23 who stayed with their mother after the divorce. Like Louise, she did not use the term gay because of the common assumption of male gender that people make when they hear “gay.” Marta had identified as a lesbian for nine years. She worked in the areas of social work and political change.

IRIS

Iris was 46. She had identified as a lesbian for eight years, although she described herself as probably always being a lesbian. She was comfortable calling herself gay, lesbian or queer. She was single at the time of our interview, and prior to that, she had been involved with a few different women. Her 16-year marriage had ended approximately eight years prior to our interview. She had one 15 year old son who lived with her. Iris worked in the mental health field.