

**MAKING SENSE OF CHANGE: SEXUALITY  
TRANSFORMATION AT MIDLIFE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research examines the sense-making activities of women who engage in intimate relationships with women following a significant period of heterosexual marriage. Using data gathered through interviews with 36 women, the study explores how subjects use common cultural ideas about sexuality to frame the stories they tell to explain their sexual histories. The idea that sexuality is something one is born with, rather than a choice is on the rise in the United States. This essentialist view in conjunction with cultural ideas about the timing at which sexuality is supposed to emerge implies that people should be “aware” of their sexuality at adolescence. For many of the women in the study that “normal” timing was not the case. In addition to the essentialist supposition is the notion the sexuality is binary. One is either heterosexual or one is the particular type of person known as the homosexual, a construct created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that continues to be an important part of modern understandings of sexuality.

Women who have spent significant time as heterosexuals and go on to have intimate relationships with women must contend with these cultural understandings as they try to make sense to themselves of a sexual story that seems to lie outside the bounds of that hegemonic narrative. Using modified grounded theory to analyze the collected interviews, four story types emerged. These four story types evinced different levels and types of commitment to the views of sexuality that exist in both the mainstream culture and the gay and lesbian community. They include “Always Knew” and “Retrospective” stories, which demonstrated a close commitment to the dominant narrative. The other two

types - “Shifter” stories and “Left Fielder” stories - were more loosely connected to the ideas of essential and binary sexuality. As these stories emerged additional insights were provided in the form of the women’s discussions of the impact of the social world in terms of lesbian invisibility, lesbian imagery, homophobia, and group or individual support for telling certain types of stories and/or taking on a lesbian identity.

This study builds on, and adds to, scholarship in a number of areas. These include: narrative and identity; the social construction of sexuality; the changing nature of biography as people strive to make the past make sense of the present; and the influence of hegemonic cultural ideas in important areas of social and personal life. Additionally the study provides some insight into how heterosexuality is both a “goes without saying” sexuality route as well as a sometimes problematic achievement.

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## CHAPTER 1

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

The sexological ‘discovery’ of the homosexual in the late nineteenth century is therefore a crucial moment. It gave a name, an aetiology, and potentially the embryos of an identity. It marked off a special homosexual type of person with a distinctive physiognomy, tastes, and potentialities. (Weeks 1985, 92-93)

The trouble is Francie, you’re gay. What you had with Bake wasn’t just a bored housewife having a fling... It was the real thing. You belong on our side of the fence 100 percent... I honestly don’t think a bad marriage ever made a lesbian out of any girl. It just brings out what’s already there. (Kay, in the novel *Return to Lesbos*, originally published in 1963)

The views of 19<sup>th</sup> century sexologists such as Havelock Ellis and Richard von Krafft-Ebing concerning “a special homosexual type of person” made sense to *Return to Lesbos* author Valerie Taylor in 1963 and remain an important part of everyday understandings of sexuality even today. Two important implications that flow from this perspective are that the homosexual (and the heterosexual as well) as a particular and specific type of person has an inherent and unchangeable “true” nature and furthermore that sexuality is binary – one is either one type of person or another. In *Return to Lesbos*, Kay’s is the voice of dominant knowledge, framing and defining Frances’ sexuality for her by deploying the twin themes of essential and binary sexuality. For Kay, sexuality is “already there” and one belongs on one side of the fence or the other. But what does Frances think about it? How does she make sense of her sexual self? Was lesbianism

always “already there”? Does she think she belongs 100% on either side of Kay’s proverbial fence?

Using data obtained through face-to-face interviews with 36 modern-day Franceses, this dissertation examines the stories of women who were in heterosexual marriages ranging from five to thirty years who now have, or desire to have, sexual relationships with women. More specifically, I analyze the sense-making narratives they create and tell about their sexual histories and their understandings of those histories as they reflect (or do not) the dominant knowledge concerning sexuality currently in play. Their experiences and the stories they tell about them have the power to either reinforce the prevailing construct or to trouble the waters of our current common sense understandings of the nature of human sexuality.

Within the existing common sense framework, one is either heterosexual with all the privilege and value that entails, or one is a homosexual, which carries with it the potential of being devalued and stigmatized. This construct, coupled with heteronormativity makes laying specific claim to a heterosexual identity largely unnecessary. It is simply what one is unless and until an identity counterclaim is made. In this view, heterosexuality does not need to be either achieved or explained in the way other sexual identities may require. For the population of women in this study, slipping down the heterosexual slope was often far more complicated and sometimes more conscious than it was for more “ordinary” heterosexual women. The accounts they developed to explain and understand their experiences add to the growing body of work concerning the conscious or unconscious accomplishment of heterosexual identity.

In contrast to the default, homosexuality is very much conceived of as an achievement or even a struggle that can be articulated to self or others in the form of the “coming out story.” According to Plummer (1995) such stories are so common they have become formulaic, with recognizable themes and an expected trajectory of events. One important component of the coming out story formula is the location of the “discovery” of oneself as a gay person in the tumultuous period of adolescence or young adulthood. The idea that adolescence is the appropriate location for the accomplishment of either type of sexual identity comes in part from foundational work in the field of psychology, such as that of Freud (1962) and Erikson (1959). This is not to say that sexuality springs from the head of adolescence new and fully formed, but rather that it is at this point that society “first acknowledges the sexual character of the individual” (Gagnon and Simon 1973, 46). In their view it is at this point that the adolescent achieves a sexual status in the social world. Bodily changes that occur at puberty signal to adolescents and the rest of the social world that the young person is “potentially eligible” to enter into a sexual role in society. Somewhere during this time a person is expected to enter into the heterosexual dating arena with its gendered sexual scripts. Behaviors and internal states of arousal, previously viewed by self and others as non-sexual, become imbued with sexual meaning at this time.

The socially and/or internally acknowledged sexual character of the women in this research was not always as tightly linked to adolescence as the dominant perspective indicates – although for some it was. Others had multiple temporal locations of the emergence of their sexuality in which sexuality materialized as one thing at adolescence and another thing up to thirty years later. Attending to their perspectives on the timing of

the development of their sexuality – whatever and whenever they conceive it to be – calls into question the taken for granted notion that adolescence and the onset of the sexual self are highly correlated one with the other.

The formula of the coming out story also implies that the entire operation is a kind of progression to what is assumed to be a more or less permanent endpoint. If one is announcing that they are a particular type of person with a fundamental sexuality there is the implication of finality. One is homosexual. One has arrived. Coming out stories would not have the meaning or power that they do in the gay and lesbian community if fluctuation between gay and heterosexual identities was commonplace. Adherence to the permanence model on the part of some within the gay and lesbian community makes both personal and political sense. Gamson (1996), for example, discusses the way in which the gay and lesbian rights movement is an example of identity politics. Groups engaged in identity politics base their claims for rights or freedom on their oppression as a class and organize around that oppressed identity. Fluidity of sexuality may undermine such a politic. Groups based on common identity must be able to draw boundaries between those who are part of the aggrieved class and those who are not. Inconsistency in sexual identity makes the drawing of such boundaries problematic. Today someone is in, tomorrow, s/he is out.

Research by Ponse (1980) and Stein (1997) among lesbians also reflects a belief in and desire for consistency in identity within those communities. “Lifelong” lesbians may assume, for example, that women who come out later in life have either been lesbians all along and in denial, or that they are not “real” lesbians now. Similarly, women coming out later in life may have preconceived notions about what lifelong

lesbians are like. The reflections of the women in this study concerning their assumptions about and interactions with some type of larger lesbian community can shed light on a clearly social component of identity acquisition - the role played by larger communities or friendship networks. If it is the case that permanence of identity is valued among a significant part of a given lesbian community, what role does that play in the identity narrative a woman tells herself and the one she relates to others?

Claiming a stigmatized homosexual identity can be significantly more problematic than simply being a “goes-without-saying” heterosexual, but the binary and essentialist framework itself readily accommodates either. Bisexuals, who can be thought of perhaps as having a kind of concurrent sexuality, may have more difficulty fitting themselves into the framework. Bisexual identity does not fit neatly into the binary aspect of the sexuality story, but should they choose to, bisexuals can fall back on the essentialist component, claiming they too have been “born that way” (Ault 1996.) But what about people whose sexuality appears consecutive, now one now the other, rather than concurrent? How are they to make sense of that experience, one that seemingly ranges somewhat far afield relative to the dominant knowledge about sexuality? Are they lesbian, bisexual, straight, or some combination? Were they one before and the other now? What is to be made of their sexual identities?

Over the past decade or so queer theorists and others have been questioning the rigid identity categories that arise from dominant knowledge about sexuality, arguing that they are socially constructed fictions. In this view, “normal” and “deviant” sexuality were created as various institutions battled for primacy in terms of how, and by whom, sexuality would be treated and controlled (Conrad and Schneider 1985). Casting

heterosexuality as the norm and homosexuality as deviant also reflects and recreates a rigid sex/gender system that is dichotomous and non-egalitarian, serving to maintain hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995), inequitable power relations in a particular and privileged type of family form, and the denigration of the female. As such it serves to maintain patriarchy.

Theoretical perspectives that analyze the construction of sexuality from the perspective of power relations are provocative but somewhat limited in terms of a lay audience. Similarly, research into the degree to which sexuality, especially women's, might be fluid and or contingent on various social dynamics has yet to fully make it out of the academic ivory tower and into the mainstream public view. Gay people still announce themselves as being a particular type of person through the mechanism of coming out, surveys still ask what causes homosexuality and whether or not homosexuals can change, and science continues to look for gay genes, gay brains, gay hormone levels, and gay family dynamics. All of these endeavors both grow out of and reinforce the already existing common sense understandings of what sexuality is all about.

Ideas about sexuality as perhaps more complex than had previously been thought are, however, no longer entirely based in the academy. Oprah, arbiter of all that is socially important, has addressed the issue of sexual fluidity on her show on more than one occasion. Similarly, some well-known women in the entertainment industry have come out as later-in-life lesbians following long periods of marriage and/or relationships with men. These include Meredith Baxter, the lovable mom on the 1980s sitcom Family Ties, and Cynthia Nixon of the HBO series Sex in the City. Events such as these bring ideas about sexual fluidity to a wider audience. As with the pivotal moment of the

modern gay liberation movement, the Stonewall uprising, a sufficient mass of people with a similar enough perspective must come together to stake a claim for themselves in the public consciousness and public conversation. It is in that spirit that this research was conceived and executed.

I draw on a number of established literatures as a framework for this research. The debate concerning homosexuality in the culture is both reflective and constitutive of the dominance of particular ideas in the area of sexual identity. Therefore, I provide a brief overview of the continuum of opinion in terms of the issue of homosexuality and the various sources of those opinions. Additionally, inasmuch as the focus of the analysis is the stories the women tell, the literature on narrative and the narrative construction of identity is reviewed. I also draw on the work of symbolic interactionists as it pertains to the social and interactional nature of identity development. Because the stories these women tell of their “comings out” are a major focus of the research, I also provide an overview of the emergence and reification of the coming out tale as a particular story form. Because the subjects of the study are lesbians the research also draws on literature that addresses the shifting cultural representations and meanings of lesbianism. A review of some of the research done with similar populations is also included.

### Homosexuality: The Debate

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Karoly Maria Benkert coined the term homosexual to refer to a particular type of person (Greenberg 1988). He along with other thinkers of the day such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing proffered that homosexuality was, in the words of Krafft-Ebing, “a congenital weakness of the nervous system” (Conrad and Schneider 1985, 184). Karl Ulrichs, perhaps the first “out” homosexual (in his own parlance an

“Urning”) activist, similarly advocated for rights from a perspective of sexuality as made by nature (Greenberg 1988). The “discovery” of *the* homosexual and claims made by Benkert, Krafft-Ebing, Ulrichs and others marks the beginning of the cultural debate concerning how people come to be homosexual and their place in society that continues to the present day.

Historically, medicine, religion, and the criminal justice system have all made claims that theirs is the proper venue for understanding and dealing with the “problem” of homosexuality and the homosexual. More recently the voices of gay and lesbian people, which have always played a role in the debate, have become a more significant part of the conversation. These various groups and institutions have created the dialogic frame and knowledge base that the rest of the society draws on as they develop their perspectives and opinions on homosexuality. The media plays a role as well by presenting and interpreting the debate to the lay public, and not always accurately. This too has an impact on the cultural conversation. For example, coverage of the Kinsey report (1948) included the finding that 10 percent of men are predominantly or exclusively homosexual. This was not, in fact, the finding in his report, but since most people did not read the actual book the media version of the data became the data everybody knew. Even today, over 60 years later, that incorrect piece of media driven data is marshaled as “evidence” in conversations and writing about homosexuality.

As this debate has gone on, and the various institutional claims makers have put forth their perspectives, different issues have taken center stage over time. For example, though executions were few, sodomy was a capital crime in colonial America (Katz 1976) and remained a death-penalty offense in England until 1861 (Weeks 1991.) In this



case the perspective on homosexuality was dominated by the criminal justice system and was, quite literally a life and death issue. In the United States, current areas of contention are no longer life and death issues in that sense. Rather they are issues of citizenship and equality before the law and include practical matters of rights such as gay marriage, domestic partnership, adoption rights, and health benefits. But underlying the questions concerning homosexuality and the treatment of homosexuals lays the fundamental issue raised by Ulrichs and others over a century ago. Is homosexuality something with which one is born, and therefore in some sense natural? Is it something that can be changed? Is homosexuality a choice? These are important areas of inquiry into the nature of sexuality, and they remain contested to the present day.

Many of the positions taken by science, religious organizations, and the gay and lesbian community reflect a notion of sexuality as essential, relatively unchangeable, or both. The motivations of the various groups in taking up this position are clearly different one from one another as are the recommendations and consequences. Still, there is a thread that runs through much of the rhetoric that indicates a belief in sexuality as something with which a person is born. Based on the polling data to be presented below, the idea of the biology and consistency of sexuality that is part of the debate appears to have become increasingly appealing to the general population.

Scientific claims about sexuality have often approached the issue from a position of investigating the causes of homosexuality. This implies the existence of an underlying biological or hormonal essence that can be discovered and explained. The emphasis in studies of this kind is that biology can influence and explain the social and not the other way around. Scientific “breakthroughs” in the 1990s by Simon LeVay (1991) and Dean

Hamer, et al. (1993) received wide coverage in the mainstream press including a cover story in *Newsweek* (Gelman et al. 1992) and an article in *Time* magazine (Thompson 1995). LeVay found differences between the hypothalamic structures of a small number of gay men and straight men, and Hamer argued for a genetic link to homosexuality in men with certain DNA markers on their X chromosomes. More recently *60 Minutes* (Shorn 2006) profiled current research into the biological or genetic factors in homosexuality. The research they presented included twin studies, research into childhood gender nonconformity, and research with laboratory animals. Clearly efforts to find a genetic cause emerge from an assumption that such a “cause” exists and is based in biology.

Many gays and lesbians themselves adhere to the idea of sexuality as essential and relatively unchanging. There is a sense among some lesbians and gay men that the idea that sexual orientation is anything other than intrinsic – that it is a choice – is absurd. Who would choose a “lifestyle” replete with stigma, rejection, and the possibility of criminal sanctions? For these people their sense of themselves is that they must be who they are, because they are. Research into the lesbian community has demonstrated that a number of lesbians hold just such an essentialist view of their own sexuality and are suspicious of those who don’t, believing it undermines the community (Kitzinger 1987; Ponse 1980; Stein 1997).

For example, Kitzinger found some women rejecting the idea that lesbianism is a choice. One woman stated, “if you’re stuck with it, then you just have to put up with it, and live your life with as much dignity as you can” (Kitzinger 1987, 92). Similarly, in her study of politically motivated elective lesbians, Stein (1997) uncovered friction between

the elective lesbians (women who had decided to become involved in lesbian relationships because of a commitment to lesbian feminism) and those who came out prior to the women's movement. She found that the older generation of lesbians was suspicious of the elective lesbians, believing the political lesbians had it too easy and were not sufficiently driven by deep, internal sexual desire to be reliably lesbian over time. Such women could go back to a heterosexual life, accessing heterosexual privilege and avoiding stigma if they chose to do so. Women who believed they were fundamentally lesbian at the core believed they did not have this option and were suspicious and resentful of those they thought did. Such suspicions about the fundamental "stickiness" of midlife lesbian sexuality may influence the reception a woman receives from a community to which she is trying to gain entrance'.

In addition to a deeply felt or understood notion of an enduring sexual self, there is likely some political motivation as well for gay and lesbian people to embrace and argue from an essentialist position. Essentialist sexual identity as a political position is reinforced in Rust's (1992) work on lesbian and bisexual women. She reports a fair amount of antipathy on the part of some of the "pure" lesbians toward the bisexual women. Her findings indicate that some in the lesbian community think of lesbianism as akin to an "ethnicity" and believe that the specific political agenda of the lesbian community will be compromised by the presence of people who undermine the dichotomy between the oppressor and the oppressed. More generally, activists advocating for equality for gay and lesbian people often take the perspective that it is simply wrong to discriminate against people who "can't help it" because they are "born that way". While it is certainly not the case that all gay and lesbian people work from an essentialist

position, the degree to which that position is a potent political strategy is born out by research done by Wood and Bartkowski (2004). In their work on attribution style and public policy they found that respondents adhering to a situational attribution perspective on homosexuality (believing gay people are born that way) had higher levels of support for gay rights and lower levels of gay stereotyping and homophobia than did respondents with a dispositional view (that homosexuals choose to live that way).

Religious perspectives on homosexuality are more complex, but there is a strong theme of essentialism found within this area of the cultural debate as well. For example, members of Dignity, a group for homosexual Catholics, argue that their sexuality is god-given and is therefore to be celebrated as a gift of God to be expressed in appropriate ways (Loseke and Cavendish 2001). Other movements within mainstream denominations, such as Presbyterian “More Light” groups or “Open and Affirming” congregations within the United Church of Christ argue from a similar position.

Evangelical Christian groups, who have weighed in loudly on the issue of sexuality, argue from an essentialist perspective as well, although in different ways. At least some leaders in the evangelical and ex-gay movements argue from a position of absolute heterosexual essentialism. For example, Tom Crouse, pastor of Holland Congregational Church in Massachusetts (Beirich 2006), Stephen Bennett of Stephen Bennett Ministries (Bennett 2003), and Peter Sprigg of the Family Research Council (Cable News Network 2007) have all gone on record as saying that all people are born heterosexual, but that some choose to live in sin. From this perspective, one can choose to engage in homosexual behaviors but that is in opposition to the heterosexual nature which is inherent in everyone and given by God.

The “ex-gay” movement reflects the evangelical position of homosexuality as a narrowly defined and unnatural behavioral choice. Movements such as Exodus International ([exodusinternational.org](http://exodusinternational.org)) are predicated on the idea that homosexuality is a lifestyle choice that can be overcome through prayer and commitment to the Bible as the infallible and inspired word of God. These movements use a support group method, similar in some ways to 12-step programs, coupled with prayer and Bible study (Ponticelli 1999). By participating in these groups, people in the gay or lesbian lifestyle are supposedly able to shed their same-sex desires through willpower, the intervention of Christ, or both.

In 2007, however, an interesting and radical schism in the evangelical movement’s position relative to homosexuality and essentialism emerged. Both Al Mohler, President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Alan Chambers, director of Exodus international, now concede people may be born homosexual (Lindenberger 2007; Simon 2007). This is not to say that homosexual behavior is acceptable. Rather it is to say that there may be no such thing as an ex-gay. Mr. Chambers, himself a man with homosexual desires argues the ex-gay movement does a disservice to gay people by promising to eliminate their desires. He now states that those desires may be a fundamental part of who they are. What these people can do, however, is live a life without expressing those desires, either through purposeful heterosexual behavior or a life of celibacy. Mr. Chambers’ experience as a man with homosexual desires who identifies himself as heterosexual and engages in heterosexual behavior also points up that sexual behavior, sexual desire, and sexual identity are not the same thing.

As is clear, religious views on homosexuality are complex and nuanced but the idea that God makes us who we are runs through much of it. Conservative preachers argue that God makes everyone straight and therefore good, but that some people go against God's creation and engage in the perversion of same-sex sexual behavior. Gay and lesbian activists within various denominations use essentialist arguments about God's creation of them *as* homosexuals to agitate for inclusion. Others argue that perhaps God makes people gay, but such people must refrain from sinful homosexual behavior. Choices about behavior are possible, but changing our fundamental natures is not.

Polls have regularly been conducted in the United States by a variety of organizations since at least the 1970s in an effort to measure popular attitudes and opinions about homosexuality. With some modification in wording and topics, respondents have been asked questions on gay marriage, gay schoolteachers, gay adoption, whether or not they would be willing to work with a gay person, whether or not they have gay friends, and other topics. Areas that have been repeatedly investigated for at least 30 years are the causes of homosexuality, whether or not homosexuality is a choice, and whether or not homosexuals can change.

According to data presented by the American Enterprise Institute (2006), there has been an upward trend in the number of Americans who believe that homosexuality is something with which a person is born. A Gallup poll conducted in 1977 revealed that at that time only 13 percent of the respondents believed that people are born homosexual. Since 2001, the number of respondents indicating this belief has ranged from 38-42 percent (aei.org 2006; Quinnipiac 2009.)

As the number of respondents reporting a belief that people are born homosexual has increased, so too has the number of people reporting a belief that sexual orientation cannot be changed. In a 1998 CNN/Time poll, 36 percent of respondents reported a belief that sexuality cannot be changed. In a CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll conducted in 2001 the number of respondents indicating this belief had risen to forty-five percent (CNN 2007). A 2007 CNN/Opinion Research Corporation poll revealed that for the first time the majority of respondents (56%) reported they did not believe that people can change their sexual orientation. While the wording of the question is slightly different from survey to survey, in all cases it is worded in such a way that “changing sexuality” is always in reference to homosexual people. Heterosexuality is the unmarked norm and people are not asked if they believe heterosexuality is a choice or is changeable. In a heteronormative society it is assumed that heterosexuality is not a choice, but rather that it is “just normal”. Additionally, heteronormativity makes the question of changing away from heterosexuality to homosexuality verge on the nonsensical. Despite this deficiency in the polling design, evidence does indicate that an increasing number of Americans are willing to accept that sexuality is biologically based and relatively unchangeable.

In direct contradiction to this trend, some academic investigations have introduced the possibility that, at least for women, sexuality may be relatively fluid over time and circumstance. In his discussion of gender differences in erotic plasticity, Baumeister (2000) offers three empirical predictions that should hold true if such differences exist. These include greater intraindividual variability for women, a greater impact of sociocultural variables for women, and that women will have lower attitude-

behavior consistency. His meta-analysis of existing sexuality research provides at least qualified support for all these predictions, indicating some fluidity of female sexuality.

Peplau's (2001) argument for a rethinking of the term sexual orientation as it applies to women points up variation in the number of female-female relationships based on differences in sociohistorical context. Such differences include higher levels of economic and political freedom that allow women to live independently of men as well as cultural acceptance of same-sex relationships that co-exist with heterosexual relationships. Additionally, she argues that for many women sexuality is strongly linked to emotionally intimate relationships. Sex, as such, may be only one part of what women seek in relationships. Intimacy and companionship may be as, if not more, important.

The flexibility of female sexuality is further supported by studies with lesbians themselves, such as those by Ponse (1980) and Stein (1997). Both of these pieces of research focused on so-called "elective lesbians", those women who purposefully changed their sexual object choice in response to political ideas and goals. The polling data noted above indicates however that this lively academic debate has not become a significant part of the mainstream understandings of sexuality, which are increasingly trending toward a rather essentialist view.

The idea of a single and consistent sexuality creates problems for those who do not share that experience. There is a framework - the ex-gay movement - for people who have a desire to change their sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual. There is no similar framework, however, for women such as those who volunteered for this research. These are women who have moved from heterosexual to homosexual whether purposefully or not. The dominant framework for people such as these seems to be that



they were lying to others or lying to themselves and that they have been gay or lesbian all along. Alternatively, they are not “really” lesbian now. Both of these ideas reflect the notion of an intrinsic sexual self, which may be in direct contrast to the lived experience of the women themselves.

The women interviewed for this research have lived a substantial portion of their adult lives as heterosexuals and found in their 30s or later that they had developed, discovered, or reclaimed sexual desire for women. Explaining and describing their experiences using culturally dominant narratives about sexuality proved to be difficult for some of the women, but not very difficult at all for others. Which aspects of the dominant framework they incorporated into their stories and which they rejected helps us to understand the power such narratives have even when they are a poor fit for what has actually transpired in a person’s life.

### Identity and Narrative

Humans are tellers of all kinds of stories. The stories we tell provide guides for conduct; they may be cautionary tales or they may be chronicles of the history of a people or group that facilitate a sense of “groupness” and joint experience. They may be stories of heroic achievement or the perils of a life lived badly. Stories we tell about ourselves may be tales of transformation, conversion, discovery, struggle, or survival. Stories are, above all, social. They are such an important type of interaction that Plummer argues, “Story telling can be placed at the heart of our symbolic interactions” (1995, 20). Even if the story we tell is told only to ourselves it is told within the framework, language, and commonsensical understandings of the world in which we live, what Reynolds and Taylor (2005) call “shared discursive resources”. As such, stories can tell us as much

about the social world in which the story and the teller are embedded as they can about the actual events or experiences that are described.

One type of story that has been of interest to sociologists is the identity narrative. Analyses of accounts of identity range from shifting identities evidenced in illness narratives (Riessman 2003; Sparks and Smith 2002), to identity management among the homeless (Boydell et.al. 2000), to sexual identity (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1995). Identity stories reflect the intersection of biography and history, the individual and her constant interaction with the social. Identity narratives are reports of experiences and self understandings that are described and explained from the perspective of a present that gives form and meaning to a past and keeps an eye toward a continuous future. They are also firmly grounded in the shared ideas of the larger social world in which they are told as well as the specific circumstances that give rise to a particular type of telling.

Stories are embedded in and constitute the world in which they are created and reported. They are also constrained by what “makes sense” in a certain time and place. What makes sense is determined, at least in part, by the power relations present in the culture and the hegemonic ideas that permeate it. Some identities are available to be claimed and some are not. Some identities are valued and some are stigmatized. In the arena of sex and sexuality, significant debate surrounds the meaning and appropriate treatment of persons with varying sexual identities and appetites. Simultaneously, however, a great deal of consistency exists in terms of the belief in two genders, dichotomous sexuality, the normality of heterosexuality, and a growing agreement that sexual orientation is intrinsic. Both the debate and the areas of agreement about the nature of sexuality provide a potentially limiting framework for explaining the “event” of

changing sexual object choice at midlife and the sexual identity that emerges. Certain kinds of stories just “make sense” in terms of the structure of ideas that already exist. As will be discussed in Chapters 3-5, some of the women told their sexuality stories solidly within that framework, confident that the story not only made sense to them, but that it would also make sense to me. Other women had stories that fit the existing framework less well. Some of them rejected the dominant ideas concerning sexuality as being inadequate to explain their selves and their experiences. Others seemed disturbed that the mainstream narrative that had always made so much sense to them suddenly seemed to be leaving them out. In all cases components of the dominant narrative were at least used as a point of reference.

The perspectival nature of stories, the conditions under which they are told, and the way they are formed in the telling and retelling makes it difficult to regard stories as slices of objective truth. A person’s biography is subject to change as the present impinges on the past, as a particular motive (Baumeister and Newman 1994) or circumstance becomes paramount, or as an experience becomes or unbecomes what seems to be a pivotal moment. Despite the degree to which stories may be suspect in terms of objective truth, it is important to remember that the stories people tell are not simply texts that exist utterly apart from human experience (Järvinen 2004). They are a report of a set of experiences (real or imagined, wanted or unwanted) that are both described and explained. Those descriptions and explanations are grounded in the actual lives of the people who tell them and reflect their experiences as they believe they were, would like them to have been, or believe they should be recounted in the context in which the story is elicited.

The identities that are claimed or reflected in these stories are social constructions as well. They are not, however, merely social constructions. The identity an individual claims is real for them and is real in its consequences. Green (2002) critiques queer theorists who argue that sexual identities should be treated as mere inventions that result from the fictive notions of an oppressive discourse. He argues that a rejection of categories of sexual orientation because they are not “real” glosses over the way sexual orientation and sexual identity are embedded in social institutions, and the degree to which they are salient in terms of individual and group self-understandings. Whether or not sexual identity categories are “real” and whether or not stories that are told are “true” is not the focus of this research. The focus is rather on what various authors have called “interpretive repertoires” (Taylor and Littleton 2006), “discursive resources” (Reynolds and Taylor 2004), and the “discursive production(s) of identity” (Ault 1996).

In much the same way stories are social, so too are identities. The work of Mead, Goffman, and other symbolic interactionists provides an important perspective from which to approach the study of identity narratives. Of particular importance are Mead’s ideas about the genesis of the self as well as his ideas about the present and its relationship to the past and the future. Goffman’s notions of impression management and stigma are significant concepts for this research as well.

Ezzy (1998) and Järvinen (2004) both use Mead’s concept of the self, as well as his ideas concerning the present and its relationship to the past, in their discussions of narrative and identity. Following Mead, they argue the self can only emerge when a person is both subject and object. One must be able to see oneself as an object through the eyes of the other. As such, there is no self and no identity that pre-exists the social.

Identity, as part of the self, is developed in relation. It is the answer to the question “Who am I?” in relation to others. Questions of identity and presentation of identity like everything else is framed within the shared symbolic system. As has been amply noted elsewhere (Greenberg 1988), a claim of identity based on sexual behavior does not make sense in a culture in which there is no notion of sexuality inhering in a particular type of person.

Mead’s (1959) discussion of the relationship of the past to the present is also helpful in the study of self as presented through narrative inasmuch as the novelty of the constantly emerging present must be made to seem a continuous and perhaps inevitable outcome of that which has gone before. Where we are positioned now in terms of our identities both grows out of our recollections of the past but also re-orientates and reshapes the past. One cannot tell everything about everything that has occurred in a life, or even within a single subset of a life. So a subject must select from experiences and events that provide a satisfactory explanation for where they are now. As the continually emerging present continues its inevitable emergence, new data arise and require an accounting. The past is culled again, cast and recast, re-remembered and misremembered. Some events are discarded and others taken up anew. It is here in the arena of the push for a life that feels consistent and continuous that sociological perspectives of identity meet up with psychological perspectives. As will be elaborated elsewhere, Erikson’s (1959) stage theory of development includes the drive for the kind of continuity discussed above.

Barbara Ponse’s (1980) research provides a good example of “reconstructed biography” in her study of how women support and sustain a lesbian identity. The term biography, in her use, has “three main features: reconstruction, reinterpretation, and

continuity” (193). Reconstruction of biography involves selecting out aspects of the past and past experiences that are germane to the present situation. Reinterpretation is the act of putting new meanings to past events – meanings other than those assigned to those events at the time they occurred. For example, an intense friendship with a girlfriend at age ten may not have been thought of as lesbian at the time it actually occurred but it is now. Such reinterpretation allows for continuity and consistency from the past to the present state of affairs. In this case a woman’s sexual desire for women in the present makes more sense to her if she can also see herself as having desired women in the past. This is particularly true in a social world where the dominant discourse around sexuality is that it has to do with being a particular type of person with a certain fundamental nature.

Goffman’s dramaturgical model and his discussion of impression management also point up the interactional nature of identity. In his formulation, presentation of self is more explicitly performative. We demonstrate ourselves to others in ways self-consciously oriented to how we believe we might appear to our audience. Of particular importance in managing our appearance to others is the presence of a discrediting or discreditable identity.

Kaufman and Johnson’s (2004) use of the concept of “reflected appraisals” in their work on gay and lesbian identities as stigmatized demonstrates the importance of the responses (real or imagined) of others to the way we present ourselves. They argue that without at least some positive reflected appraisals, a stigmatized identity is very difficult to sustain. In the case of gay and lesbian identities the search for positive appraisals may lead to increased interaction with gay and lesbian people or the lesbian

and gay community in an effort to garner support for the identity. If, as Ponce (1980) and Stein (1997) suggest, particular lesbians or lesbian communities are rejecting of women who become sexually involved with women only at midlife, the search for positive appraisals within that community may be problematic.

Other researchers have used Goffman's ideas as a framework for their own analyses of identity narratives. For example, acknowledging that stigma adheres to identities in varying amounts, Reynolds and Taylor (2004) introduce the idea of "deficit identities". In the case of their research, the deficit identity is singleness in a world in which coupledness is the valued norm and singleness conjures images of rejection and undesirability. Similarly, Wetherell and Edley (1998) discuss "troubled" identities, ones that are negatively valued and require "repair" which can be achieved through talk. Finally, Scott and Lyman (1968) develop the concept of accounts, a kind of reparative talk following an episode of untoward behavior. Such accounts can take the form of either excuses or justifications but both are designed to mitigate responsibility for the inappropriate or stigmatized action or identity. What constitutes a legitimate excuse or mitigation, like the designation of stigma itself, is determined by both the parties present in a given interaction and the larger social milieu.

Symbolic interactionist thought also subtly provides the introduction of the concept of power to the area of identity and biography, a project taken up more explicitly by other writers such as Foucault (1990), Gramsci (1971), Butler (1999), and others. To begin, the basis of symbolic interactionists thought is that social life is founded on interactions between persons that are performed within the constraints of shared meaning and symbol systems. Embedded in the idea of shared systems lies the notion of power.

Meanings do not inhere in objects themselves so theoretically the possible meanings are limitless. But only some of those meanings come to be shared. Not all meanings come to make “common sense.” At least one possibility for how some meanings come to such ascendancy is that someone or some group has the power to be the “decider”.

Additionally, Goffman’s *Asylums* (1961) presents the reinterpretation of the biographies of mental patients into the “success story” and the “sad tale” in a way that explicitly articulates the power the larger world (in this case a total institution) has over choice of narratives and their acceptability. For example, the concept of mental illness and mental health that is held by the institution includes the idea that a person cannot be thought to be well until they acknowledge they are sick. The mental patient who sticks to a story about being railroaded and held against his will - no matter how much he believes it – will be unable to successfully navigate his social environment. Once within the total institution, the mental patient can become aware of the accounts of sickness and health that are legitimate within the institution and come to describe his circumstance in a way that is consistent with the framework created by those in power. This need not always be a self-conscious maneuver for freedom on the part of the mental patient. It may just be that the accounts available to him within the institution begin to make sense.

When cultural ideas are absorbed as natural and inevitable, hegemony has been achieved. In his discussion of hegemonic masculinity, Connell (1987) defines hegemony as the ascendancy of one group over another, which is embedded in a variety of social institutions such as religion, the economy, and the mass media. It does not, however mean total ascendancy; “groups are dominated, not eliminated” (184). Such ascendancy need not be accomplished at the barrel of a gun, but violence and physical coercion may



play a role. For example, the ideology of the sex gender system both supports and is supported by pervasive violence against women. It is, however, the insidious disparagement of women and the feminine in law, the family, religion, and the media, however, that cements the “consent” of the dominated. A similar mechanism of virulent and sometimes violent homophobia coupled with the heteronormativity that is present in society’s major institutions sustains heterosexual hegemony.

Foucault (1990) argues that “it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together” (100). As with Connell’s discussion of hegemony as dominance not elimination, Foucault argues that there is not only one utterly ascendant discourse but there is a dominant discourse that reflects and supports power and relations of ruling. All identities and all discourses do not have equal access to power. The powerful determine what counts as legitimate knowledge and who is competent to make knowledge claims. There are dominant ideas within any social and historical period and the stories we tell, of our sexualities or anything else, are necessarily framed by the explanatory choices that are provided for and allowed by those ideas. The debate around homosexuality draws the rough outlines of the framework that has been created by the various claims makers (science, religion, the law, gays and lesbians) and constrains our ability to conceive of or talk about sexuality in alternate ways. The increasing ascendancy of the essentialist perspective in popular discourse, even in the face of increasing evidence concerning the sexual flexibility of women, necessarily sets the parameters of the “legitimate” discourse.

While her discussion is focused on gender identity and not specifically sexual identity, Judith Butler’s (1999) discussion of identity and power is instructive. Butler argues that dominant discourses can create a situation in which a person’s identity is no

longer intelligible. The identity cannot be described or explained within the frameworks that are available. For example the hegemonic idea of two and only two categories of persons in the sex/gender system creates the problem of unintelligibility of identity for the intersexed. Anne Fausto-Sterling (1993) has proposed a five sex system retaining male and female as categories but adding herms (true hermaphrodites), ferns (female pseudohermaphrodites), and merms (male pseudohermaphrodites). Because of the degree to which two sexes “makes sense” to the majority of early 21<sup>st</sup> century American culture, her argument has found only a rather small and exclusive audience. The dominant discourse remains largely unaffected by her suggestions, but she is able to make them. What is also important here is that the primacy of hegemonic heterosexuality and its insistence on a dichotomous sex/gender system has real consequences for the “unintelligible” members of society, in this case invasive surgical procedures.

In addition to the dichotomous gender schema, the ideology of hegemonic heterosexuality includes the primacy of other-sex sexual object choice and links that choice to adequate performance of sex/gender and female/male and femininity/masculinity. Related to this are the ideas of coupling and a particular type of family form, distinct and “complementary” gender roles, and male dominance. So strong is the influence of these ideas on explanations of identity that even identities that are transgressive can serve to support the hegemonic idea. As Judith Lorber (1994) notes, transsexuals and transvestites, while appearing to transgress the gender dichotomy end up reinforcing it by highlighting the boundaries and “switching sides” either temporarily (transvestites) or permanently (transsexuals).

The stories told by the subjects of this research are stories of potential transgression in a number of ways. To begin, they are having (or want to be having) sexual relationships with women, which transgress normal expectations for the performance of the female role. (But remains a viable choice in the hetero/homo binary, albeit a stigmatized one). They may also be transgressing the common sense understanding that adolescence is the appropriate time for the development of sexual identity. They will also be demonstrating a fluidity of sexuality that, while increasingly studied in the academic world, has not yet reached wide circulation in the lay discourse. What is of interest here is to how and whether women claim transgressive identities (I once was this and now am happily that and may be this again) or identities that reflect and support the hegemony of the current sexuality scheme, with its emphasis on dichotomous (and unequally valued) sexuality (I thought I was heterosexual but I was confused and afraid and now that I think of it I did have a crush on my 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher. I guess I've been a lesbian all along). Both types of identity claims were made.

Perhaps the most important aspect of hegemonic heterosexuality for this research is that heterosexuality is the unmarked norm. The achievement of heterosexual identity is not generally thought of as a process that requires explanation. According to Adrienne Rich (1980) heterosexuality is compulsory and is sustained through a variety of social and institutional mechanisms. Recent research into heterosexuality (DeMasi 2001; Hyde and Jaffe 2000) does describe the way heterosexual identity is created and achieved, but to the lay public the questions "how did you become heterosexual" or "when did you first realize you were heterosexual" make little sense. It is other sexualities and identities that require explanations and those are the stories the research is designed to elicit. The

subjects of this research have moved from heterosexual behavior (and perhaps identity) to lesbian behavior (and perhaps identity). Under hegemonic heterosexuality this untoward behavior certainly requires an accounting – if not to others, at least to oneself. For some subjects heterosexuality was a purposeful, and sometimes problematic, identity achievement. The stories they have about “becoming” heterosexual add to the growing literature in that area.

Hegemonic understandings of sexuality and the set of intelligible sexual stories that are the result of those ideas are often male-dominated. This is meant both in the sense of males as the controllers of discourse and knowledge and in the sense of the use of the male body as the norm, the generic human. The male body and male experience are the standard by which other bodies (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Martin 1987) and experiences are judged. For example, Baumeister (2000) and Peplau (2001), both argue that biological causation and early fixity of sexual desires might be more accurate when males are the subjects of research. In their view, research into female sexuality suggests it may be more responsive to context, history, and levels of personal freedom for women in a culture. Both argue that women are much more likely to have fluidity of sexual desire and sexual behavior over the lifespan. Male-based research indicating the relative fixity of sexual desire and of adolescence as the appropriate time for the development of sexuality remains, however, the dominant perspective. It is into this framework that “mid-life lesbians” must fit the stories of their experiences.

Research also indicates that women are more likely to have a bisexuality milestone and claim a bisexual identity than are men (Floyd and Bakeman 2006). Inasmuch as male experience serves as the standard, it comes as no surprise that

bisexuality as a claimable and legitimate identity has found little purchase. Denial of bisexuality as a meaningful identity category reflects and recreates the hegemonic idea of sexuality as dichotomous. Previous research (Ault 1996) indicates some women whose experience is bisexual strive to use models of intrinsic and dichotomous sexuality in discussing their identities, even though such models would seem to be somewhat at odds with the reality of their experiences. The subjects of this research, with one exception, have all had bisexual experiences in the sense of having sexual partners of both sexes. Yet few of them chose bisexual as an identity for themselves, indicating perhaps a lack of information about what it means to be bisexual, or the degree to which bisexuality is a stigmatized identity in both the dominant culture and in the lesbian world as well.

As noted above, Foucault (1990) indicates that “discourse can be both an instrument and effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance” (101) Discourse can be used against power. An example of this might be the strategic use of the essentialist argument by some in the gay and lesbian movement. Activists deploying the dominant ideas of dichotomy and essentialism argue for inclusion in the full range of citizenship benefits that they have long been denied. In this case subalterns use ideas developed by dominants to undermine the privilege dominants have tried to have exclusively as their own. In her work with women claiming a bisexual identity, Amber Ault (1996) discusses the ways in which marginalized groups deploy dominant discourses in their identity claims. She also raises the question of whether identity claims that refer to the dominant discourse (dichotomous sexuality in this case) but tell a portion of the story outside of that discursive structure might not serve to delegitimize the dominant ideology. Some bisexual women in her study adhered to the

idea of two types of sexuality but not to the ubiquitous hetero/homo binary. Rather they constructed a dichotomous structure of sexuality in which there are “normal” bisexuals and “depraved” monosexuals – those whose sexual desires are perversely and fetishistically limited to only one gender.

Ewick and Silbey (1995) argue that stories in which each individual’s experience is uniquely her own and there are no connections drawn to larger social structures are the most likely to sustain hegemony. On the other hand, stories that build bridges between the experiences of individuals and linkages to larger social constructs are the most likely to be subversive. Perhaps the best example of this is the consciousness raising groups of the 1960s and 1970s from which radical feminism emerged and was elaborated. With the writing of *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan (1963) told the story of women’s unspoken dissatisfaction with a female gender role touted as fundamentally fulfilling. By de-individualizing the story of women’s lives and drawing connections between women’s experiences and the larger social world Friedan began the process of telling a subversive story. The constraints on women in the larger culture set the stage for their interaction with each other. In these interactions they were able to tell their stories to each other and see their own experiences reflected in the lives of other women. This telling of tales, one to the other, subverted the dominant discourse concerning the proper role of women in society and undermined the common ideas concerning women’s “fulfillment”. The Wondering Wife group which will be discussed in Chapter 5 may have operated in a similar way but on a much smaller (so far) scale.

Richardson (1990) also discusses the transformative potential of narrative, particularly when stories can help people develop a “consciousness of kind” (129). She

argues that people tell their experiences within the framework of stories that are available to them – what she calls cultural stories. These are stories “told from the point of view of the ruling interests and the normative order” (128). She then identifies a type of narrative she calls a collective story and makes an explicit argument for the political nature of such stories and the sociological importance of presenting them. Collective stories bring to voice those who were previously unvoiced. Presenting these stories allows the development of a previously unformed collective experience. Her argument is explicitly political in that she discusses the possibility of societal transformation in relation to these collective stories. The suppression of stories in which sexuality changes at midlife keeps intact the notion that even if everyone isn’t heterosexual, once you’re in, you’re in. Bringing testimonies of sexual fluidity into the general conversation about sexuality creates the possibility of seeing sexuality in a new way.

Whether reifying or undermining the dominant structure with the stories we tell, we are basically engaged in a sense-making activity. We endeavor to create a tale of ourselves that has continuity and consistency, one that is intelligible and credible to the listener (and to ourselves). One constraint on whether or not a life story is satisfactory and intelligible is “the understandings which prevail in the wider discursive environment, such as expectations about the appropriate trajectory for a life.” (Taylor and Littleton 2006). A fracture in an important area of life like sexuality is outside the parameters of an appropriate trajectory, so biographical work must be done to smooth over the rift and present the life in a continuous way. Swidler (2003) refers to this as shifting cultural frames in which an actor may have to abandon a particular part of their “cultural repertoire” and substitute another to account for a “problem he cannot handle within his

dominant scheme.” The narrative outcomes of these efforts at continuity and consistency in the face of an unanticipated fracture in sexual identity are a major focus of this research.

### Coming Out

Coming out is the commonly used term denoting that a person has taken on an identity as a gay or lesbian person. Definitions of what exactly constitutes coming out vary. For a few (Kennedy and Davis 1993; Vance and Green 1984) it is defined as first consensual same-sex genital contact. For many it is largely an internal process, one that begins with acknowledgment to self that one has same-sex sexual desires, proceeds through a series of “milestones”, and culminates in the acquisition of a homosexual identity (Rust 1993; Cass 1979; Troiden 1988). For others, coming out has a more public and/or political connotation in which people acknowledge to others a gay or lesbian identity (Crawley and Broad 2004; Mclean 2007).

To begin, coming out is a type of identity acquisition. At its most basic level, identity is a series of answers to questions such as, “Who am I?”, “What are the things I believe?”, “Where do I belong?” In the 1950s, Erik Erikson (1959) popularized the idea of identity achievement with the presentation of his theory on the eight stages of human development. In each of the eight stages a person is called upon to complete a developmental task. For Erikson, the task for Stage Five, the adolescent period, is to achieve ego identity and avoid role confusion. Ego identity is finding consistency and continuity in one’s life so far and being able to create a unified self-image. According to Erikson, identity is achieved through commitments and crises. Commitment is achieving stability in important areas of life, such as beliefs, values, interpersonal relationships and



such, while crises are periods in which people actively explore and investigate possible identities to which they might commit.

More recent work in the field of psychology in the area of identity development has put forth that the process continues throughout the lifespan, but Erikson's (1959) formulation in which identity is appropriately accomplished in adolescence remains an important theory. Foundational work in a particular area often retains its power even following changes and improvements by other researchers. The reasons for the tenacity of Erikson's ideas regarding identity are likely twofold. The idea of adolescence as the appropriate time for the development of identity has become part of the zeitgeist and many people find it to be true in their own experience – perhaps in part because they expect it to be so and are told that it will be. The idea of adolescence as the appropriate time for the development of sexual identity specifically is also likely linked to the biological changes that occur at that time of life. While physical and social puberty do not necessarily occur simultaneously, the physical development of secondary sex characteristics and the hormonal changes that occur in adolescence give rise to the social notion that sexual desire and experimentation is likely to occur at around this time. Presumably such desire and behavior will lead to the development of a sexual identity in this adolescent period.

It is important to note that Erikson's ideas were based on research done with males. In a society in which expectations for and treatment of males and females is quite different, it seems reasonable to argue that developmental stages and accomplishments in a life might vary by sex. This is similar to the critique Carol Gilligan (1982) made of Kohlberg's work on moral development, which was also based on developmental patterns

demonstrated by male research subjects. As noted above, work in the field of sexuality and sexual identity (Baumeister 2000; Peplau 2001; Dixon 1984; Stein, 1997) indicates that female sexuality may be less tied specifically to the adolescent period and less fixed over the life span than is male sexuality. Perhaps Erikson's ideas about the development of identity, at least sexual identity, would have been different had the experience, development, and life course of women been included.

Marcia's (1966) elaboration of Erikson's ideas is also interesting when thinking about the experiences of women who appear to make a significant change in an aspect of identity later in life than is usually expected. Marcia argues that there are four possible identity statuses that can emerge in the relationships between crisis and commitment as part of the development of identity. The possibilities he presents are achieved identities (a commitment to an identity or value following a period of crisis), diffuse identities (not in a period of crisis but also not having made a commitment), identity moratorium (currently in crisis but not yet having made a commitment to an identity or value), and foreclosed identity (making a commitment to an identity or value without having gone through a crisis) (Neimeyer and Raeshide 1991). For the purposes of this research, the interesting one of these four is foreclosed identity. Persons in foreclosure are those who have made a stable identity commitment but did not pursue an active project of investigation prior to making that commitment. These people seem to just take on the values and beliefs of their parents or perhaps the larger society. The idea of foreclosure – committing to an identity without investigating other possibilities - calls to mind Adrienne Rich's (1980) argument about compulsory heterosexuality. As Rich might argue, the invisibility and impossibility of lesbianism in the larger culture acts in a way to

create a commitment to heterosexuality prior to investigation. The degree to which the interview subject's stories reflected an experience of heterosexuality as an active choice versus heterosexuality as a foreclosure is an interesting point of analysis.

Models of the process of coming out proffered by Cass (1979) and Troiden (1988) echo Erikson's notion of stages of development. Theories of this type conceive of the coming out process as a series of stages or milestones that a person moves through as they go from initial confusion and partial awareness to acceptance and perhaps pride. More recent work on identity development has criticized stage theories on the grounds of implied essentialism and linear rigidity. It is important to note that milestone theories both reflect and sustain the concepts of essentialism and dichotomous sexuality that can be found in the cultural debate concerning homosexuality.

The model developed by Cass (1979) includes seven stages ranging from Identity Confusion to Identity Synthesis. In Troiden's (1988) model, gay and lesbian people move from an early stage of sensitization involving recognition of same sex attraction into a stage of adolescent identity confusion in which they engage in both heterosexual and homosexual experimentation. Following the confusion stage, gay and lesbian people coming out arrive at the identity assumption milestone in which they truly acknowledge to themselves that they are homosexual. The final stage in this construct is identity commitment, at which time people begin to disclose their sexual identity to others – generally friends, then siblings, then parents. Other stage models follow these basic types of trajectories and have historically implied that these stages begin around puberty and are generally completed by the late teen or very early adult years with the exception

perhaps of coming out to others which is an ongoing decision making process for many gay and lesbian people.

An unfortunate implication of work done from this perspective is that those who have come out in different time frames, or people who have chosen to never make a public admission of homosexuality can be conceived of as somehow developmentally delayed or lacking in the kind of self-affirmation that comes as the result of living an authentic and authentically disclosed life. For example, Eli Coleman's (1985) work on the development of lesbian identity in women who had been heterosexually married for a period of time reflects his suppositions about the appropriate timing of the development of sexual identity as well as coming out to self and others. His conclusions demonstrate both a rigidity relative to the appropriate timing of the coming out process and also an implied essentialism. By arguing that the women in his study were developmentally delayed in coming out he is implying that "the lesbian" was in there all along and that the subjects of his study were just slow to find her.

Writing from a social constructionist perspective within the field of psychology, Horowitz and Newcomb (2001) provide an explicit critique of milestone theories of the development of sexual identity. They acknowledge that such theories may reflect the experiences of some people, but go on to say that they are inadequate to describe the experiences of others. They argue that the implied essentialism, implied inevitability, and circumscribed number of outcomes that are considered healthy or legitimate are inadequate to fully describe the actuality and diversity of human sexuality.

More recent work by Floyd and Bakeman (2006), utilizes a modified milestone approach. In their work, there are important moments in the coming out process but they

do not necessarily occur in a strictly linear way. Their work takes into account the influence of age and historical era on the process of coming out. For example, they discuss the way in which increased availability of information about homosexuality in the culture may allow for people to come out earlier. No longer do people have to assume they are the only one with such feelings and then attempt to ferret out some kind of (mis?) information to discover they are not alone.

Gays and lesbians often refer to the process of taking on a homosexual identity as “coming out to oneself”. Thus it is distinguished from the other meaning of coming out which is the public acknowledgment of homosexual identity to others. Public acknowledgments can take the form of a non-verbal display, a simple pronouncement, or an elaborated telling that has come to be known as the coming out story. For the purposes of this research the focus is largely on the form the story takes in the telling as well as the subject’s recollection and recounting of the process.

According to Plummer (1995), coming out stories are a type of story that have only recently become popularized and formulaic. In *Telling Sexual Stories* (1995), Plummer argues that only at certain times do cultural conditions exist such that particular types of stories can be told. Those conditions influence the form the story takes and each story told contributes to the reification of that form. For example, according to Plummer, coming out stories begin at the beginning and generally follow a roughly linear progression, not unlike the linear models presented in stage theories of the development of sexual identity. The story begins with an unhappy childhood, confusion, feelings of difference and perhaps alienation from others. Next, problems begin to appear, generally in the adolescent period. The problems lead to suspicion of gayness or the discovery of

gayness. Following this period of shame and fear, the gay person begins to address his or her problems often through developing social support from individual gay and lesbian people or the gay and lesbian community. The final chapter in the tale is the achievement of a sense of identity as a gay or lesbian person. In a sense, coming out is conceived of as a process of discovery. This use of the idea of coming out to reflect something hidden and revealed or hidden and discovered creates a push toward a coming out story that conforms to those overarching ideas. Implicit in the story form is the always already existing lesbian, which dovetails neatly with the construction of sexuality as biologically determined.

Clearly this formulaic version of what it means to come out may be problematic for people whose lives and sexualities unfold differently. Perhaps they did not have unhappy childhoods of alienation and difference. Perhaps they did not develop problems concerning sexuality until well after adolescence. Perhaps they do not feel they were lesbians all along. They clearly will have a story of some sort to tell – we all have stories – but will it be an intelligible coming out story?

Coming out as a tale of discovery is only one type of coming out story form. Coming out stories can also be conversion tales. Members of the ex-gay movement, Exodus, use this kind of story form to discuss their former lives of degradation and new lives after being restored to heterosexuality by God (Ponticelli 1999). One of the best known stories of conversion or fundamental change in self is the story form popularized in Alcoholics Anonymous: “Our stories disclose in a general way what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now.” (W., Bill 2001, 58). With this format in mind alcoholics go on to explain their slow death in alcoholism, their “spiritual

awakening”, and their ongoing life in recovery, highlighting the degree to which they are new people with new ways of life. Stories such as these frame the experiences as both conversions and journeys.

Specifically related to lesbian coming out stories, Didi Herman (2005) differentiates between two types, comparing the coming out episodes of *Ellen* and *Bad Girls* (a one-hour drama set in a women’s prison that is produced in the UK). The first type is the one presented in the coming out episode of *Ellen*. In that episode Ellen says, “I’m gay.” Herman calls this type of coming out a claim of identity. Based on the failed efforts at heterosexuality portrayed in earlier episodes, it is clear that Ellen had been a lesbian all along and merely needed to discover and claim it. Many of the women I interviewed – particularly those who told more traditional stories – had this type of identity claiming coming out story. According to Herman, Helen, the character in *Bad Girls* has a coming out story that is a claiming of desire. This character is not a failed heterosexual. She has had several successful and sexually fulfilling relationships with men. She is currently in a relationship with a man named Thomas. Her coming out statement is, “No, let me say it. Thomas is gorgeous; he’s everything you’d want in a man. But I want a woman” (8). This character is not claiming a retrospective identity as a lesbian. She is claiming a current want that is perhaps discontinuous with her previous desires, but does not necessarily invalidate them. Less traditional storytellers in this research tended to have coming out stories more in keeping with this latter type.

One aspect of the present research is an assessment of the degree to which women in the study create accounts that are consistent with any or all of the coming out tropes of desire, identity, discovery, journey, struggle, or revelation. Also of interest is whether

they think of their stories as coming out stories at all. Whether or not they are coming out stories per se, they are narrative accounts of how they got to where they are now. As noted above, such accounts are constrained by internal motivations, reconstructed recollections, and the common sense understandings of the social world.

The subjects of this research, women who “become” lesbian at midlife, have two dominant discourses with which they must contend while framing and recounting their stories. The first is the overarching dominant discourse of the heterosexual sex/gender system. This discourse includes the heteronormativity imperative, the linkage between heterosexuality and being appropriately gendered, homophobia and misogyny, and the twin themes of essentialism and dichotomy. They must also contend with the discourse that is dominant within the marginalized lesbian community. This includes community understandings of what lesbians are like and how they got that way, the meaning of lesbianism, and how to properly “do” lesbianism.

Embracing the coming out stories of people who arrive at “gayness” via different routes might be an important shift for the lesbian and gay community. Having a coming out formula that limits the number of people who can “identify themselves in” reduces the number of people who can consider themselves a legitimate part of the community. The accounts of the subjects of this research – stories of flexibility and change in the realm of sexuality - may also serve to broaden the framework of allowable discourse and intelligible identities extant in our culture today.

### Being a Lesbian

The possibilities for living a lesbian life and the cultural representations of lesbians have changed dramatically over the last 75 years. Prior to the 1950s, women



with same-sex sexual desires were very limited in terms of materials that represented lesbians or lesbian life. The few bits of available written material concerning homosexuality - negative though it generally was – were predominantly about homosexual men. The period of the coming out process in which people seek information from various sources about what they are feeling was largely closed to these lesbians, as there was scant information to find. Prior to the 1950s, Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), and Lillian Hellman's play *The Children's Hour* (1934) were two of the few texts fully focusing on lesbian characters. In both of these works, the lesbian characters live lives of anguish and despair and the lesbian character in *The Children's Hour* commits suicide.

Cultural representations of lesbians began to change in the 1950s and 1960s with the emergence of the lesbian pulp novel (D'Emilio 1983). Writers like Ann Bannon and Valerie Taylor created fictional characters with some of the tragedy of the early representations, but with occasionally mixed, if not entirely happy, endings. Not everyone committed suicide in this era, but finding a representation of how to live a life not overcome by tragedy remained a difficult cultural negotiation. Women experiencing same-sex sexual desire and looking for ideas on how to live a lesbian life still often had to try to fit themselves into stories of “mannish” women coming to tragic ends. Such a feat might have been at odds with their sense of themselves as women and with their aspirations for their futures. Some of the subjects of this research at the upper end of the age range had some awareness of these early and mid-century representations of lesbian life and discussed the impact such images had on them.

The complex meaning of lesbian identity underwent a dramatic shift in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the growth of 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism. The 2<sup>nd</sup> wave of the women's movement consisted of various sub-strands of feminist thought. One political ideology that emerged was lesbian feminism. This brand of feminism explicitly championed lesbianism as a revolutionary feminist act, derogated relationships with men, and called on women to stop collaborating with the oppressor through sexual and emotional relationships (Rich 1980; Stein 1997; Valk 2002).

In 1980, Adrienne Rich published her now famous polemic *Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Existence*. In it, she introduced her idea of the lesbian continuum, a construction of lesbianism in which all women could be included, even those who did not desire genital sexual experiences with women. She included on her continuum a variety of relational intimacies between women and argued that these relationships had been invalidated and made invisible. She also argued that heterosexuality is not a freely chosen preference for women; it is a social requirement backed by a combination of imposed male identification, the invisibility of the possibility of lesbianism, and male force and violence. In her view, almost any woman could (and should) call herself a lesbian and, in so doing, impeach the patriarchy and the misogynist construct that is heterosexuality. Within this framework, it was necessary for all women to come out – regardless of their internally experienced sexual desires. One need not necessarily have had sexual relationships with women, although one should be open to that, but one must stop giving aid and comfort to the enemy through filling men's sexual, reproductive, and emotional needs.

For women to whom lesbian feminism made political sense, the path was clear. They would not have a coming out trajectory consisting of inchoate feelings, a developing definition of those feelings, a slow move into the lesbian subculture, and a gradual coming out to smaller and then perhaps larger circles of friends and family. Rather, these women experienced a trajectory of coming out publicly in the context of their particular community or CR group and then trying to find a way to internalize the feelings that are supposed to go with the identity they had just claimed (Stein 1997).

In her work, Ponse (1980) refers to women who come out for political reasons as elective lesbians. The other two types she identifies are primary and idiosyncratic. She argues that “three modes of biographical reconstruction result in three different resolutions of identity” (193). Primary lesbians are those who report early and lifelong attractions to women. Ponse found that primary lesbians also tended to take a somewhat essentialist view of the cause of homosexuality, offering genetic or hormonal explanations. Elective lesbians are women who come to lesbianism following significant episodes of heterosexual experience. They generally have previously had a heterosexual identity and are now claiming an identity as lesbian or bisexual. These women have a mixed history of sexual relationships and as they construct their biographical narratives they tend to highlight and reinterpret events that would indicate a lesbian nature. They also tend to speak of their heterosexual selves as inauthentic. In doing so, they make the discontinuous continuous and more closely approximate the biographical norms of the community.

Women with idiosyncratic identities are those who have discontinuities in their sexual histories but do not strain to create continuity. They also do not claim a lesbian

identity. While they may believe in biological causation for other lesbians, they discount such for themselves, explaining that they become involved with people regardless of their gender. In this way, idiosyncratic lesbians attempt to tell their stories outside the dominant discourse – refusing to select from the limited menu of identity options. By definition, the subjects interviewed for this study will have had mixed histories in the area of sexuality. Analysis of their stories includes whether their recountings demonstrate a sense of themselves as primary, elective, or idiosyncratic.

The subjects of the present research, with one exception, represent a different group of women than those studied by Ponse (1980) and Stein (1997). The radical brand of feminism that called on women to challenge the patriarchy at every turn and to divest themselves of the internalized misogyny imposed on them by the phallogocentric world is not as salient today as it was 25 years ago. Coming out for the subjects of this research (if they framed it as such) did not, for the most part, come as the result of an overarching political commitment. So they are not elective lesbians in that sense. Those who feel their sexuality is fluid or bisexual might still be considered elective lesbians but perhaps for reasons that are more personal than political. Some of the women in the older age range did reference feminist reading, feminist politics and certain communities of women as important to their process of coming out but, with the exception noted above, they did not report having “elected” their lesbianism as part of a political commitment.

Images of lesbians today are much more varied than images in the past. The tragic story of Stephen Gordon in *The Well of Loneliness* is no longer the quintessential lesbian narrative. Shame and suicide are no longer presented as reasonable reactions to a discovery of same-sex sexual desire. Gone too are the women matrons in reform schools

of the 1950s and the “sisterhood is powerful” lesbians of the 1970s and 1980s with their unshaven legs, masculine attire, and relentless political analysis and processing.

Women today have images of Ellen DeGeneres getting married to Portia de Rossi. They also have the sad, but oddly normalizing, news of Melissa Etheridge’s separation from her partner after several years together. In August of 2009, retired tennis player Billie Jean King completed her journey from “outed” sponsor-less pariah in 1981 to honored American when she went to the White House to receive the Medal of Freedom from President Obama. There are lesbians on *All My Children* and lesbians on *Nip/Tuck*. These examples demonstrate the increasing variability and scope in representations of lesbians or “lesbian” behavior in the popular culture.

The most overpowering recent representation of lesbians in the media can probably be found in the Showtime series *The L Word* (Showtime n. d.) The women on this show are impossibly beautiful and impossibly thin. They are also, for the most part, wildly successful, which allows them to hang around in a coffee shop a lot – discussing relationship woes and displaying cutting-edge hair and fashion. Despite this new representation of lesbian physical attractiveness, femininity, and success, the show does reflect some popular stereotypes of lesbians, which can be found in mainstream culture or among lesbians themselves. For example, Bette and Tina, the “married” couple, have a limited sex life, reflecting what lesbians call “LBD”, or Lesbian Bed Death. The role of heterosexuality in the lives of lesbians is also raised in the Bette and Tina storyline. Tina had only heterosexual relationships prior to Bette, and when their relationship falls on hard times Tina returns to relationships with men. Other characters in the show struggle to accept her but there is a clear sense of their difficulty managing her “betrayal”.

Another conception of lesbian sexuality is revealed in the role of Shane, a young woman who is relentlessly promiscuous and plays a dominant butch role sexually. Another character is a professional tennis player who is extremely closeted. Eventually she comes out and a' la Billie Jean King becomes a wildly popular lesbian icon. Women who define themselves as bisexual are accepted in the group but their bisexuality is negatively judged. A backdrop to the show is the incestuous nature of the lesbian community in which everyone has been with everyone else and friendships are maintained with exes and exes of exes, and so on.

Clearly, contemporary culture offers a wider variety of images to which a woman might be able to relate should she discover she desires other women. There are lipstick lesbians, soccer mom lesbians, lesbian mothers and lesbians who get married. There are lesbians who have a lot of sex and lesbians suffering "LBD". There are lesbian electricians and lesbian talk show hosts. The women's narratives reveal the degree to which they have internalized certain dominant images of lesbians and whether or not they feel they can identify with what the culture says it is to be a lesbian today. Part of the way we make an identity is to look at a group and either compare ourselves out or identify ourselves in. The degree to which the women in this study take on a lesbian identity may well be related to the degree to which they feel they see themselves in other lesbians and other lesbians in themselves.

## **CHAPTER 2 RESEARCH METHOD AND DESIGN**

In this chapter I discuss my research method, methodological approach, and the research design of this study of the sense-making activities of women whose sexual lives diverge from what are considered to be the “norms” of sexuality. Next I discuss how subjects were recruited and provide a description of some general characteristics of the subject group. I also present a brief overview of topics covered in the interview guide (See Appendix) and a description of the interview process. This is followed up by a discussion of how the data were coded and analyzed including some specific examples of the decision making process that went into the development of the categories of stories presented in the following chapters.

### Research Method

Investigating how someone makes sense of their experiences and crafts a story of their life necessitates hearing the story. As Clandinin and Connelly (1994) suggest, “stories are the closest we can come to experience.” Capturing the nuance, feeling, and meaning of the story is best done in a face-to-face interaction and in a way that is sufficiently free and open-ended such that the storyteller can make her own way through her narrative. Fontana and Frey (1994) put this succinctly when, at the end of a discussion of the art of the interview, they state that, “the question must be asked person-to-person if we want it answered fully.” It was not my expectation that the subjects of my research would be able to “fully” answer questions about and explain their sexual life stories in all of their subtlety and nuance, but sitting down and talking with the women was clearly the best avenue by which to gather data, however incomplete.

Qualitative methods such as in person interviews are not necessarily feminist in their application, but can be so if the researcher makes a commitment to a feminist methodology as she develops her research questions and research method. As a feminist sociologist, making such a commitment is important to me in any research endeavor I undertake. Marjorie DeVault (1996) argues that a feminist methodology requires a commitment to three goals. These are; seeking to bring in the locations and perspectives of women (excavation), seeking a science that minimizes harm and control, and seeking research that is “of value to women, leading to social change or action beneficial to women”.

As a feminist researcher, I was comfortable with the topic of my research in terms of excavation, as it would provide women with largely “unvoiced” experiences of sexuality a forum in which their stories could be told. It would also provide a possible counterpoint to the prevailing male-based models of sexuality from which all women (and these women in particular) have been excluded. Additionally, my research was designed to analyze the way ideological constructs extant in the dominant (male) culture can render the lives and experiences of various kinds of “others” invisible or unintelligible (Butler 1999). That said, the conventions of “writing up” qualitative research of this kind do not allow the research subjects to be fully “voiced”. Some women’s stories are told in great detail and some are not. Some are quoted at some length and others are not. Still, even though each of their stories cannot be told in all of their full richness, each of the women was given the opportunity to tell her story to an interested audience, even if it was only an audience of one.



DeVault's second commitment for a feminist methodology is a reaction to the ways women have sometimes been harmed or controlled as subjects of scientific research in the past. Obviously this research was designed to do no harm. All of the subjects were volunteers and were afforded the opportunity to stop the interview at any time. (One woman who became anxious at the end of the interview was offered the option of erasing the interview from the digital recorder if she so desired. She did not) Additionally, some women touched upon areas in which they did not wish to proceed and so they did not. Generally, statements leading up to these conversational retreats implied physical or sexual abuse experiences. If a woman stated she did not wish to talk about certain things, she was reassured that she controlled the interview and could talk about whatever she wanted.

Reducing or eliminating harm was relatively easy while some issues of control were harder. While I think in-depth interviews that explore a woman's experiences and attending to her sense-making analysis are an appropriate method for feminist research I remain aware of the problems of subject and object, researcher and participant that arise in an academic research endeavor. It is hoped that having most of the interviews occur in the subject's own space; the largely unstructured nature of the interview itself; my neat but relatively casual attire; and my willingness to share information about myself mitigated the one-up, one-down dynamic that can occur in research interviews. As noted later in this chapter, I endeavored to be as "true" to the ideas, feelings, and reports of the women as I could but in the process of "writing up" the research the accounts could not be offered to the reader verbatim in their entirety or full richness.

The final slice of practicing a feminist methodology according to DeVault is supporting research that is of value to women and that has the potential to initiate social change and/or social action. It is my firm belief that research such as this is important for women who find themselves outside the straightjacket of our current conceptions of sexuality and sexual identity. Adding their voices to the chorus allows us to interrogate compulsory heterosexuality, dichotomous thinking in the arena of sexuality, the intersection of femininity and heterosexuality, and the way dominant knowledge about sexuality, in the guise of “true” knowledge, impinges on the choices of us all.

Over the course of one year I completed in-depth semi-structured interviews with 36 volunteers in which they were invited to tell the story of their experience. Following transcription, I coded and analyzed the data as the interviews proceeded using a modified grounded theory technique, noting themes and patterns as they emerged (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The interview guide was purposely only loosely structured so as to afford flexibility as themes began to emerge from the transcription. The semi-structured nature of the interview also allowed the women a great deal of freedom to focus on the parts of their stories they felt were most germane.

The unit of analysis in this study was the account itself, the biographical narratives the women created as explanations for themselves and others about what happened. It was not necessary, or even important, that the accounts were “true” in an objective historical sense. Accounts are sense-making devices, so what is important is how the story is created to explain to the teller and the audience what has happened in a way that makes sense within the shared symbolic frame. Even purposeful lies constitute good data to the degree that they call on common cultural symbols, ideas, and devices

that make the teller's tale one that is intelligible to the hearer. The research focused on such ideas and devices and I made no effort to uncover the truth of any reported event or experience. Nor did I challenge any woman on the truth of her claims. Analysis of the accounts that were provided yielded insight into the degree to which they reflected (or did not) the socio-cultural milieu regarding sexuality as it was experienced by the women at various stages of their lives.

### Research Design

As noted above, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were utilized to elicit accounts for analysis. Participants were obtained through snowball technique and friendship pyramiding. I also posted information on a message board that is part of a website that is operated and maintained by a social worker who specializes in working with women who have had the experience of being attracted to women while married to men. (Note: the website and its message board are accessed by women all over the world, not only the social worker's clients.). A notice was also posted on a Lesbian and Gay list serve operating in an Eastern state.

Because of concerns that women who know each other might "contaminate" each other in their sense-making stories, I tried to limit the number of women in a close friendship network to four. This was facilitated by the use of the online message boards. It is possible that there were women who knew each other of which I was not aware. I made an exception to the four in a network rule when, as I was nearing the end of my interviews, I uncovered the existence of a support group for women like those being studied. I ended up interviewing five members of that group which allowed me to explore the influence such a group might have on story making. My findings about the group are

presented in Chapter 5 and, I believe, enrich the project. I made a second exception by interviewing five women from the same city who were not a friendship network. All of the women were acquainted with one of the women (Helen) but were not necessarily acquainted with the others. Additionally, the relationships the Helen had with the others were not all friendships. In some cases they were professional relationships (for example one of the women was her financial advisor). After hashing this out in some detail with Helen, I decided all five women could be used. (Helen had suggested several other women whom I did not interview because they did constitute too much of a friendship network as they were part of the same Mah Jongg club).

I differentiated my subjects into two groups by age. Using the beginning of the modern gay rights movement - the Stonewall uprising in 1969 - as a rough benchmark, I initially planned to separate the women into those born prior to 1970 and those born in 1970 or later. Those born in 1970 or later would essentially be post-Stonewall and those born before would be pre-Stonewall. That point of division did not prove feasible. There were not nearly enough volunteers among the younger crowd. After completing over half of the interviews, there was only one woman in the younger cohort. I changed the point of division to those born before 1960 and those born in 1960 or after and I began an aggressive campaign to recruit women in the newly revised younger age group (of which I had only four at that point). I believe this is just as meaningful a point of division as the previous plan. Women born in 1960 or after would have been no older than nine at the time of Stonewall. So, while not being born after Stonewall – an arbitrary line to begin with - they would have reached adolescence after Stonewall.

The decision to differentiate based on age was founded in the notion that the social world has changed in terms of views, acceptance, images, and so forth, of gay and lesbian people and that such change might impact a person's experiences and how they report them. Clearly the Gay Rights movement has changed the political profile for gay and lesbian people and has been accompanied by increased tolerance – at least in some quarters. At the same time, a trend toward increased acceptance of an essentialist notion of sexuality, as evidenced by polling on this question, may also influence how subjects think and talk about their sexual object choice. More specifically related to this project are the changes in understandings about lesbians and the portrayal of lesbians and lesbian lives in the media. Increased variation in representation of lesbians may play a role in the identity claims subjects are inclined to make. Previous research done with women who have experienced a change in sexual object choice at mid-life (Stein 1997; Ponse 1980) has looked at the impact of the historical and political climate on women's decisions, choices, and claimed identities in the area of sexuality.

Based on these historical and cultural events, women in the pre-1960 group grew up in a somewhat different world than women in the later group. This difference may be reflected in the stories they tell. It is important to note however, that differentiating by year of birth also creates groups that are different ages, raising the problem of age versus cohort effects. Women in the pre-1960 group were, of course, older than women in the younger group and as such had a much wider range of ages at which developing, discovering, or reclaiming attractions to women could have occurred in their lives. It seems reasonable to assume that how people tell the stories of their lives may be related to the age at which the story is told. It also seems likely that what women seek in their

lives relative to relationships, childbearing, and material success varies by age. Due to the design of the study, teasing these effects apart was not possible so definitive claims about age versus cohort effects could not be made.

Clearly dividing the women only by age and/or cohort may well have failed to take into account other important factors that could have an impact on how women frame their stories of sexual history and sexual identity. These include, but are not necessarily limited to: relative lengths of relationships with men and with women; length of time since dissolution of heterosexual relationship (if this occurred); support for a particular sexual identity by friends, family, and other social networks; religious affiliation, and others. Because the project utilized a grounded theory approach, some of these factors emerged during the analysis phase of the research and so are discussed as possibly meaningful components of the stories the women told.

This study was not designed to specifically address issues of race and class, though I suspect these attributes might well have an important impact on tales people tell of their experiences. I did not limit my sample to any one racial or class group, but neither did I create cells specifically designed to capture race and class differences or similarities. Based on the race and class homogeneity of many friendship networks, it was expected that most of my subjects would be white and middle class or above. This turned out to be true. Posting on the website and the listserv might have opened up the possibility of a more inclusive group, but it did not.

#### Recruitment of Participants

This research consisted of 36 interviews with women in various locations in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic States. All respondents were volunteers who initiated contact

after having heard about the research. One woman who was recruited by a mutual friend turned out to be someone I had met socially on a few occasions but all of the others were strangers to me. Several participants were referred to me by friends or colleagues. Some of these became a single individual interview and others then became the start of larger snowballs. As noted above, brief descriptions and a call for volunteers were posted in two locations online. There were at least nine initial referral sources. Again, some of these were just single interviews and some became the start of larger snowballs.

This study design likely sifted certain types of women in and other types of women out. For example, those who volunteered in response to online posts were at a point in their process in which they found themselves looking on lesbian or “questioning” websites. Similarly, those referred by friends or colleagues were at least “out” enough for the people who referred them to me to be aware to some degree of the subject’s sexual life story. Finally, it is likely that women who volunteered already defined this experience as an important event and one that was worthy of discussion and research. Women actively trying to eliminate unwanted sexual feelings for women, or those who had a single secret experience, vowing it would never happen again, would seem to be unlikely to learn of the research and even less likely to volunteer. Those in the ex-gay movement or in reparative therapy would also be unlikely to volunteer as being in a study of this kind might constitute backsliding. Stories of women in these situations would probably be quite different than the stories of those who did volunteer and were subsequently interviewed. Their stories would likely also be both interesting and enlightening, however, for the reasons stated above; they are outside the scope of the current research.

Apart from the initial difficulty of finding women in the younger age group, recruiting subjects was relatively easy. Women who were not eligible or women with whom I could not arrange a meeting were disappointed that they could not participate. As I anticipated, many women were eager to tell their stories. Some felt it was important to participate in a project in which experiences such as theirs were listened to and explored. The women's eagerness to participate, and their view that the research was important, reinforced that the project fit the criteria of a feminist methodology in terms of its value to women.

#### Interview Process and Interview Guide

All interviews were face to face and were completed between March and December of 2008. Respondents selected the locations where the interviews would be conducted. Five were done in the hotel rooms in which I stayed while visiting their cities. Five were done in the women's offices. The rest were done in the women's homes. Any questions they had about confidentiality were addressed prior to the interview. Occasionally a woman would need additional reassurance about confidentiality at some point during the interview and such assurances were provided until the woman's concerns were put to rest. I requested that any questions they had about the research or me personally be reserved until after the interview had been completed but was clear that such questions were welcomed and appropriate.

The interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed. The length of the interviews varied with the shortest being a little less than an hour and a half and the longest being just under three hours. Despite the sometimes-painful material covered, the interviews seemed to be a positive experience for the most of the respondents. Most



women reported having felt very alone during the process of dealing with their sexuality, particularly the early stages. They felt their participation was important if it would add to the literature available for other women going through the same thing.

The interview was structured into several broad areas of inquiry allowing the respondent to tell the story in her own way, emphasizing what she felt was important. Follow up and clarification questions were asked as needed to address areas not covered in the respondent's initial telling. Areas of interest included heterosexual relationships, attraction to and relationships with women, ideas about the nature of sexuality, degree of participation in a lesbian community or friendship network, level of "outness", terminology they use to describe their sexuality, past and current perceptions of lesbians, and how they make sense of this having happened. While I tried to gather at least some data in each of the conceptual areas, I was also mindful of just taking in what the women thought was important in their stories. Because the guide was quite general from the beginning it did not require major modification going forward, although as stories emerged and were compiled some changes were made. For example, I originally asked a question about whether they had a preference that their daughters be lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual. They all responded that they only wanted their daughters to be happy. Pressing on the issue did not yield "better" answers and in one case created some tension in the interview. I elected to stop asking the question.

### Characteristics of the Sample

The homes I visited ranged from a cramped and tiny apartment in a public housing high-rise, to larger apartments, working class homes, middle class homes, and to large and obviously expensive homes in seaside communities or well-to-do suburbs of

various Northeastern cities. As will be noted below, the respondents were skewed high in terms of occupation and educational attainment and therefore were generally also skewed high in terms of income. For some of the women this had not always been the case.

A few of the women looked stereotypically “lesbian”, with the requisite short hair and androgynous attire. Several of the women made explicit reference to their sense of themselves as somewhat gender nonconforming in terms of their appearance and/or their histories as tomboys. A few of the women also discussed the way that embracing a “new” sexuality had liberated them from some of the cultural constraints about what it means to be a proper (heterosexual) woman in terms of both behavior and appearance. They mentioned that being in relationships with women was now preferable because they no longer had to behave in certain deferential ways they considered to be part of heterosexual relationships. Some discussed the freedom they felt at not being constrained by the expectations of heterosexual space that women will not be too loud, too opinionated, too smart, and in general “too much”. Some of these topics will be discussed later in more detail.

Some – both in appearance and in the interview – explicitly rejected the stereotypes of lesbians and wanted to distance themselves from such cultural images. Several of the women reported strong identities as gay women but rejected the word lesbian because of past and present connotations. These connotations included the idea that lesbians are too “in your face”, too masculine, or hate men. I judged some of the women to be quite stereotypically feminine; well coiffed, perfectly made up with conversational styles and mannerisms generally considered to be appropriately female. Interestingly, most, but not all, of the women who fell into this category were women I

will refer to as Left Fielders. Several of these were women who have been with women for shorter periods of time and are less integrated into a lesbian community or friendship network. Whether or not continued exposure to lesbians and/or the lesbian community might change some of these gendered presentations in the future is interesting, but impossible to know.

Demographic data were also collected including age, education and occupation, how many times they had been married, number and ages of children, whether or not they were currently partnered, where they grew up, past and/or present participation in a religious community, and race. They ranged in age from 34 to 73. Relative to the population of women as a whole, the respondents were overrepresented at the upper end of educational attainment. This was particularly true in the category of graduate or professional degrees, a group into which nearly 60% of the respondents fell. Based on this high degree of educational attainment it was not surprising that the interviewees were also overrepresented in the Managerial/Professional occupational category. Seventy-five percent of the respondents reported such an occupational history. Because the educational and occupational attributes were so strongly clustered and skewed, there was no opportunity to assess whether there was any relationship between these variables and the types of stories the women told.

Most of the women had only been married one time, with five having been married twice. Eleven women were still married and of those, five were still living with their husbands. In each of these cases the husbands were aware of the situation relative to their wives' issues around sexuality. All but five of the women had children. One of these was pregnant at the time of the interview. Seven of the women reported having no partner

at the time of the interview, although two of these still lived with their husbands and continued to have limited sexual relationships with them. One of the women was partnered with a man at the time of the interview. Her story will be discussed in more detail in later.

I interviewed two sets of partners, but separately. One set of these had been together for over twenty years and the other set had been together six months. There was an additional pair who were partnered at the time I interviewed the first woman. They had broken up by the time I interviewed the second woman, a little less than two months later.

In general, the interviewees had been in relationships with women for lengths of time ranging from about six months to nearly thirty years. The lengths of time the women were married to men ranged from five (which was the minimum needed to be an eligible subject) to approximately 30 years – although in some cases women were separated from their husbands for a number of years while still being technically married. There were a variety of reasons for these lengthy separations. In some cases financial issues such as health insurance coverage for the children were a factor, in other cases ambivalence about ending the marriage prevented one party or the other from moving forward.

About a third of the women reported semi-active, or very active participation in organized religion. Three of these had ministerial or rabbinical credentials, although only one was currently active in such a religious occupation. In terms of religious affiliation at birth, both Catholics (42%) and Jews (22%) were overrepresented among the respondents and Protestants (33%) were underrepresented relative to the proportions of the various religious groups in the overall population (although not necessarily within the more specific areas in which the women resided.) One woman was raised with no religion.

Almost all of the women grew up in the Northeast or Mid-Atlantic States. Two women grew up in the Midwest, one in the South and three were born and raised overseas. All of the women identified as white/Caucasian with the exception of one woman who responded that her racial/ethnic identification was “immigrant” and another who considers herself white but wanted to use the specifier of Italian-American.

None of these demographic variables seemed to vary consistently with the story types that will be explained below, but it did seem that the length of time a woman was with women and the degree to which she was active in a lesbian community or friendship network might have an influence on the story she told. Obviously the women that were older had had more opportunity to be with women longer and to be part of a lesbian network for longer, so to that extent age may have played an indirect part in the construction of their narratives.

### Data Analysis

All of the interviews were personally transcribed and the material was coded by hand. Because of the unstructured nature of the interviews, the transcriptions required significant reorganization upon their completion. For example, a woman might begin her story with an identity claim – “I’ve always been a lesbian” – and then move onto another topic. Later in the interview the issue of how an individual woman characterized her sexuality might be revisited and a similar (or different) identity claim might be made at that time. In the reorganization process, various responses were clumped together onto coding sheets to facilitate the analysis of each interview as it pertained to the various areas of inquiry. Specific areas of inquiry such as images of lesbians, or whether or not sexuality can change were entered into an Excel document along with various

demographics and ultimately story types. These could then be sorted in various ways so that they could be read for similarities and difference.

In the course of this reorganization and analysis several types of stories or story themes began to emerge relative to how the women in the study made sense of a sexual history that falls outside of the norm. A central purpose of this research was to look at how the components of the dominant story of sexuality and sexual development were or were not deployed by the women to frame their experiences. While the dominant story in the mainstream culture and the dominant story in the lesbian subculture are not entirely the same, or entirely monolithic, there are some common elements. These include: that sexuality is something one is born with and is relatively unchangeable; that sexuality is binary – a person is either heterosexual, or one is homosexual; - that sexuality emerges at adolescence; and that gayness is something that is achieved in a way that heterosexuality is not. The degree to which these dominant ideas were represented in the narratives became a pivot point in the development of the four story types.

Another interesting area that emerged in the stories had to do with how the women referenced the social world. This included the impact that negative reactions by friends and family and negative images about lesbians, and/or lesbian invisibility had on their choices and their explanations about those choices. Some women also addressed the degree to which their stories made them similar to or different from their understandings of what lesbians are or what they are like. These themes emerged in the stories to greater and lesser degrees and became part of the analysis as well. Of particular note was the impact of therapy and therapists on the stories the women told, and to a lesser extent the role played by religious ideas in story formation. Because of their apparent importance,

Chapter 6 is devoted to these social institutions and how they seemed to influence the subject's sense-making activities.

The first type of narrative to emerge, and one that was quite striking, was the story of the "Always Knew" lesbian. These women told stories in which they were born lesbian, had always been lesbian, and had developed their sexualities at the "appropriate" time of adolescence. In these ways, their stories were quite conventional, despite their unconventional nature in terms of having spent many years as (knowing) lesbians in heterosexual marriages. These women claimed an essential and enduring sexuality. In the stories they told, women in this group focused on a variety of areas of their experiences, but spend a great deal of time explaining how and why they had managed to suppress that which they had always known to be true about themselves, and how they achieved the heterosexual life they either desired or felt compelled to live.

The other type of rather traditional story was that of the "Retrospective" lesbian – women who reported they had been lesbians all along, but did not know it until middle adulthood. As these women told their stories they made it clear that they had been born and always were lesbians but that it hadn't emerged for them at a conscious level (or in most cases behavioral level) until after they had embarked on a heterosexual career and lifestyle. They focused on explanations for why they had been unaware of their true selves and often referenced the invisibility and impossibility of living a lesbian life.

In contrast to the more traditional stories of the Always Knew and Retrospective lesbians two types of stories emerged that do not draw as clearly from the culturally dictated narrative about sexual identity. The first of these groups, the "Shifters" is made up of women who explicitly refer to their sexuality as bisexual or as fluid and/or

changeable. This group generally shared the idea that sexuality is an essential part of the self with which one is born, but clearly rejected that it is either dichotomous or consistent over time— at least for them. They reported that their relationships resulted from attractions that inhered in the attributes of the other person, not within a self that was capable of experiencing only one type of desire. One of these women initially entered into relationships with women as a strictly political exercise, committing herself to fully exploring a lifestyle of lesbian feminism and actively rejecting what she considered to be the socially mandated constraint of compulsory heterosexuality. The other women came to this life change for different reasons that will be elaborated later.

The second type of non-traditional storyteller is comprised of the women I call the “Left Fielders”. These women, of course, also know the dominant story of how sexuality and a person’s sexual life are supposed to unfold. Their lives, however, cannot be found in the readily available cultural narrative. Their stories reflect confusion around the idea of an essential sexual self. They had lived their lives believing in an essential sexuality – as “goes without saying” heterosexuals – but now events had transpired that made their sexual desires and behaviors incompatible with what they had always known to be true about themselves. For some of them the construct of sexuality as dichotomous still made sense in the abstract but they could not figure out how to make it apply to themselves in their current circumstance. Their stories reflect a foundation in the dominant narrative, but within the interview, it was clear they were struggling to make it fit in a way that other women had seemingly already accomplished.

The categories listed above are ideal types and very few individual women told stories that fell entirely into one and only one possible category, with no reference



(implicit or explicit) to another story type. Because of the disconnect between their experiences and the available ideas, their stories were often inconsistent, scooting from one type of tale to another. This inconsistency sometimes created difficulty in terms of identifying a story as a particular story type. As the coding proceeded it became clear that most of the stories fit quite neatly into one of the four categories. As is often the case with qualitative research, the criteria for categorizing subjects one way or the other was somewhat subjective. Decisions were made based on coding criteria as well as the overall impressions of the interviewer. Some of the criteria used included the number of times a particular theme or point was reiterated, the number and richness of examples of adolescent lesbianism and other sexuality clues that were offered, what statements the subjects made immediately as the interview started, which question elicited a particular response, and the emphasis placed on certain themes or points. Sometimes the analysis of these factors led to a clear decision about what kind of tale the story was.

For example, Danielle, 47, was fairly easy to categorize as an Always Knew lesbian. Her story is one in which she had feelings for girls that she didn't understand as a preadolescent, became involved with a woman at the age of 15 at which time she began to think of herself as gay, and was married for 22 years without having sex with her husband. She really never thought of herself as heterosexual, although she was aware that to outside eyes she was living a heterosexual life.

Similarly, Alison, 38, was easily categorized as a Left Fielder. She was a woman who was somewhat happily married, had absolutely no recollection of early childhood or adolescent attractions to females and had no idea how this happened or what the future held in terms of sexuality. In the course of the interview she used the word "shocked" (or

a variant of it) no less than 30 times to express her shock, her husband's shock, her friends' shock, and the shock that she would feel if she were to ultimately uncover sexual feelings for girls in her past. For Alison, all was heterosexually well until she met Suzanne and fell in love with her. Now everything is shocking, frightening, and up in the air. For Alison, sexual desire for women came out of left field.

For other subjects the decision about how to interpret their stories was somewhat more difficult. For example, Debbie had a relationship with another girl when they were both in high school. Following her marriage, she became involved with the same woman again and they were together for 13 years. She has been with her current (female) partner for over 20 years. Debbie does not, however, tell a story in which she was always a lesbian and always knew it. Rather she tells a tale that I have categorized as a Shifter story. In her story she fell "head over heels" in love with her husband and had a satisfying sexual relationship with him. While she admitted her relationships with women were probably somewhat more intimate and natural than are her relationships with men she reported she does find men physically attractive and would not entirely rule out the possibility of a future sexual relationship with one, although she thinks it is extremely unlikely. She has come to understand that sexuality is "just fun". She identified as a lesbian largely because of the length of time she has been with women and because her social network is largely lesbian. She does feel however, that her ongoing experience of some level of attraction to men and the feasibility of a sexual relationship with a man puts her experience outside the range of what many, perhaps most, lesbians experience.

Another example of inconsistency can be found in Nicole's story. Nicole – a woman I ultimately categorized as a Left Fielder - is a 45 year-old mother of two who

was married for 14 years to an abusive husband. She married relatively young after having had boyfriends throughout middle school, high school and college. Near the end of her marriage she became involved with a woman and has had several short-term relationships with women over the past ten years. Nicole's story was one in which she really had no idea about lesbians or that she herself was gay – the sexual identity she now claims for herself. While she did report one close attachment to a college roommate she did not report the experience with the same power and certainty of relevance that the Always Knew and Retrospective lesbians did. Additionally, fairly early in her story, she reported that “the marriage was in such a bad place that I was probably vulnerable to anything at that point” – a reference to her being pursued and then kissed by a woman.

Thus her story emerged in the Left Field style. An inconsistency arose, however, in response to a question late in the interview when she was asked specifically about her views on the public debate concerning how people come to be homosexual. In articulating her understanding of that debate her story changed from one of a surprising sexual shift to one in which she had to have been gay all along, although she did not know it, which would make her a Retrospective lesbian. The increasingly prominent cultural idea of biologically based sexuality influenced her answer in that if one is born gay one has to have been gay all along. Because the most consistent theme in her story was her surprise at being involved with a woman, and because her statement about being gay all along seemed to have been prompted by a specific request for her to reflect on the cultural debate surrounding the question of how people come to be homosexual, I elected to keep her in the Left Field category.

Differentiating between the Retrospective lesbians – those who reported having always been lesbians but not knowing it - and the Left Field lesbians was probably the most difficult. On the surface, the stories are quite similar. They didn't know they were lesbians (or could be in relationships with women) and now they do. The basic coding criteria used to differentiate these two types of stories consisted of the number of early examples of lesbian desire or experience, the degree of continued surprise reported by the women, the degree to which the women reported the taking on of a lesbian identity as an easy and clarifying experience, and the emphasis the women seemed to put on the claim of having been lesbian all along. For example, Helen – a Retrospective lesbian – came up with many examples of girlhood attractions, other “proof” of her lesbianism in the form of gender nonconformity, and described a feeling of “oh” upon her first kiss with a woman. For Helen, in that moment everything became clear and she finally knew exactly what she had been all along. She was rather easily categorized as a Retrospective lesbian.

While inconsistencies in the stories led to some difficult decisions in terms of how to think about and group the tales, it is the inconsistencies themselves that point up what is interesting and important about the research. Many people of whatever sexuality can tell the story of their sexual development in a way that reflects the predictable trajectory – I was born gay (or straight), I am gay (or straight) now, and I will be gay (or straight) in the future. Some of the women in this research could not tell the story so easily and so they tiptoed through their choices – lesbian always, bisexual, inauthentic, confused, in denial, trapped, victim of society, etc. – picking from here and culling from there in an effort to put the story together in a way that made sense to the interviewer but also to themselves. As such, their stories were a moving target of who knew what when, the

relationship between desire and behavior, what it means to be a lesbian in the world and to oneself, how one should feel about men, how one should feel about sex, and how one should think about the past and the future. But mostly they were stories of women trying to talk about themselves as sexual beings within a framework that does not readily lend itself to their experiences.

As is always the case with qualitative research and analysis, the stories that are presented in the finished research are mediated through the understandings and decision-making process of the researcher. Experiences of sexuality are by definition intimate, personal, and idiosyncratic and as such perhaps cannot be clustered in any real way. Each one has its own exactly unique unfolding. So it is not in the experiences per se that the similarities and differences can be effectively found. Stories of the experiences of sexuality, however, can be grouped in regard to how they may reflect, reject, recreate, or sustain narrative frameworks that exist in the culture and/or subculture in which the storytellers operate. The uniqueness of each set of experiences, and the imperfect fit of the framework that the culture provides for the stories these women told, made some decisions about categorizing them very difficult. One difficulty was that even though it was not the experiences themselves that were being analyzed or categorized, I did want to honor what the women thought and felt about the experiences and what they meant to them. As noted above, the stories available in the larger culture don't fit their stories well in some cases so they take what makes sense to them and reject other portions. Some decisions about how to group the stories were relatively straightforward while others required days of going back and forth with the data trying to find the "truest" way to talk about the story of an individual woman.

## Limitations

As is well known, qualitative methods of the sort proposed here have both strengths and shortcomings. The strengths include the depth and detail of the data to be analyzed. Each woman had a significant amount of time in which to tell her story and recount to the interviewer what she considered to be the important points. That depth and detail are purchased, however, at the expense of generalizability and predictive power. The design of the proposed research included the use of snowball and friendship pyramid techniques so the findings are limited to the experiences of the women studied and are not generalizable to the larger population.

Grounded theory technique necessitates being open to the data as concepts and categories emerge. It is through the coding and analysis that hypotheses and theory are generated. It is not possible, however, to enter the field with no notions whatsoever. Researchers as well as subjects operate in the world that is under investigation. It is important to acknowledge that and then to attempt to minimize preconceptions and predictions. The reality of the my own experience with managing a stigmatized identity, my familiarity with people who have had the experience of a shift in sexual desire at midlife, and the degree to which that experience is wildly different from my own necessitated a high level of vigilance in this arena.

My identity as a lesbian was known in advance to some of the subjects and assumed, I think, by others. I believe this had potential as both a strength and a limitation. As a lesbian I share outsider status with them as a sexual minority. Sharing that status likely reduced fears the women might have about negative judgments about lesbianism and, I believe, helped me to establish rapport. The degree to which subjects of the

research assumed me to be a “lifelong” lesbian, however, might have been an impediment to the women sharing some of their feelings about their heterosexual experiences. This might have been exacerbated in the few cases where women specifically reflected on rejection or suspicion on the part of lifelong lesbians towards those who come out after a significant period of heterosexual experience and marriage. The degree to which my sexuality was a help or a hindrance in terms of the development of candor and rapport is unknown, but it seems likely there may have been an influence in one direction or the other in at least some of the cases.

A final note on limitations of the study is to reiterate that an area some might suspect is a limitation, in reality is not. That is the area of truth. This research is not designed to assess the degree to which those who recount their stories are tellers of truth. Whether or not they really and truly “always knew” or were “in denial” is not the purpose here. The purpose is to analyze the accounts they give so as to gain insight into how people who have unexpected experiences for which there is little cultural room explain that experience to themselves and others.

## Conclusion

In the end four general story types were identified and this dissertation is organized around them. They are Always Knew lesbian stories, Retrospective lesbian stories, Shifter stories and stories from Left Field. The first two types of stories, those of the Always Knew Lesbians and the Retrospective Lesbians most clearly utilize and closely adhere to important pieces of the dominant paradigm of essential and binary sexuality in a way that Shifter and Left Fielder stories do not. Always Knews and Retrospectives do this in ways that are both similar and different so I present them both in

Chapter 3 in a point counterpoint style designed to highlight and clarify those similarities and differences. Shifter stories took the form of two different subtypes – bisexual and fluid/changeable, both of which are treated in Chapter 4. Left Fielders, whose stories took both “strong’ and “weak” forms, are discussed in Chapter 5. The story typology is set aside in Chapter 6 to take a broader look at the role the institutions of religion and mental health play in the formation of stories about sexual desires and/or identities that change at midlife. We turn now to a presentation and analysis of Always Knews and Retrospectives, women who employed dominant understandings about sexuality to explain their seemingly anomalous lives, beginning with brief presentations of the sexual life histories told by Lisa, who always knew she was gay, and Helen, who learned it later.



### CHAPTER 3 TRADITIONAL TALES OF NON-TRADITIONAL LIVES

#### Always Being, Always Knowing: Lisa's Story

Lisa, a woman in her early 50s, told me a story in which she always knew she was gay. She began to think of the possibility of being with women while in her late teens, spent some time with women she knew to be lesbians, and occasionally visited lesbian clubs. In college, she was involved with a woman with whom she has remained friends (although no longer lovers) and whom she still thinks of as her “soul mate”. But being a lesbian wasn't all right with Lisa. For her, living a gay life was causing real problems. To begin, in referring to lesbians as “those things” her mother had made a clear and unpleasant statement that being gay was not going to be acceptable. Additionally, inasmuch as this was the 1970s, it seemed clear to Lisa that she would not be able to achieve her own dream of a “Leave It to Beaver” family life. Even worse for Lisa, though, was the way that living as a lesbian was negatively impacting her life and behavior in general.

I was very much out of control, I was drinking and having panic attacks and I was a wreck and I thought I was gonna die if I didn't do something so I pointed the finger at the gay thing and said if I could just not do this gay thing I would stop drinking and my life would settle down. It was the gay thing that was wrecking my life.

After identifying that being gay was the source of her problems, Lisa embarked on a purposeful program of heterosexuality. Having decided this was the way to get her life back on track; Lisa sat her “soul mate” down and laid out the plan.

I said to Patti, “Patti, I really think I need to right my life and I, I can't do it, I can't do it as long as I'm gay. So, I need to get a boyfriend and I want to make an agreement with you that you'll get a boyfriend too... You get a boyfriend, I'll get a boyfriend. I wanna get married, have a white picket fence, maybe have a kid, although I'm not too sure about that and will you

do the same thing?” And she said sure. So then, she went off to [Austin], had one experience with a guy, decided that wasn’t for her and never had another one. I went off, got my little [office] job and got married, you know. I picked out somebody, I handpicked this guy who was soft spoken, and he had the blue eyes – I wanted to have somebody with blue eyes, I wanted to have somebody with dark hair, I wanted somebody at a certain height, couldn’t drink, couldn’t smoke, went to church. I wanted somebody with an advanced degree. I picked this guy – worked with him, didn’t know him at the time, got myself fixed up on a, you know, date with him and dated him for two years then of course we got married.

After several years of marriage and having a child, Lisa began “playing with women” again and ultimately left her husband and has been with women ever since. Her early negative ideas of what it meant to be a lesbian and what lesbians are like remained salient for her and were a theme she came back to over and over as she recounted her life experiences. She reported the loss of her “white picket fence” dream with regret, and left the clear impression that it still is the life she would have preferred. Her loathing for large portions of the lesbian community was clearly and explicitly stated, including her absolute aversion to the word lesbian. Lisa reported her sexuality as “gay woman”, a designation with which she had only recently begun to become comfortable after more than 20 years of involvements with women.

#### Always Being, Learning Later: Helen’s Story

Helen, a woman in her late sixties, eagerly greeted me at the door and welcomed me into her warm and comfortable home located on the edge of a medium-sized city on the east coast. Her short grey hair and casual attire gave her a somewhat androgynous physical appearance, although not stereotypically lesbian. As she told her story it emerged that after coming to think of herself as a lesbian she felt freer to dress and present herself outside of the strict gender boundaries she had found confining in her

heterosexual days. She was very interested in my research and happy to be able to tell her story, which she did in an amusing, engaging, and somewhat rapid-fire fashion. Unlike Lisa, Helen did not always know she was a lesbian. Her story is similar to Lisa's in that, for both of them, the lesbian was always there. However, Lisa's story was one in which the highly objectionable lesbian needed to be mashed down, while Helen's tale was one in which the lesbian lay dormant awaiting discovery.

Helen grew up in the 1950s, in a strongly Catholic ethnic enclave in New York City. She reported that as a young girl lesbianism "wasn't named in my environment." In her college years a younger sibling developed friendships with lesbians and Helen recalled believing people have "an absolute right" to be who they are but that she found it "a little disgusting". Following several years as a nun she got married and had her children. She reported that as a young person and as an adult she experienced sexual attractions for boys and men. She did not have sexual experiences with women. Neither was she conscious of having sexual attractions to women. It was in her recollection of her first experience with a woman that the theme of the always already existing lesbian came to the fore. She retrospectively identified attractions to women as well as examples of what she considered to be gender non-conformity and difficulties with both the sexual aspect and social role of heterosexuality.

At the age of 48, Helen developed a friendship with a woman that ultimately became intimate. For Helen, in a single "oh" moment she came to believe that she was and always had been a lesbian - the convent and marriage to a man notwithstanding.

She was sitting down in my basement. I can still see it. And we were talking about something and she bent over and she kissed me. And Jude I can tell you honestly, it was like "Oh, so that's it" and from then on I knew I was a lesbian. I mean it was so – I mean I didn't screech, I didn't

think “Oh my god what is happ...”- it was like, almost like I had known it all – like, “ooohhh”. It’s amazing to me. Amazing and yet, and from that time on I never had a doubt, I never had any, you know, any, any kind of recriminations about it, it was just like so natural.

Following this experience, Helen left her marriage and has been involved with women and an active member of a lesbian community ever since. As is clear from the above, taking on a lesbian identity for both her present and her past was a relatively easy step for Helen. As her story continued, she readily provided a variety of examples of past experiences that gave credence to her claim of always having been gay. She reported several crushes on girls and women while in the convent and one woman in particular with whom she said she fell in love. She also reported that shortly before her “oh” moment she had also fallen in love with a straight woman who lived across the street and was “crushed beyond words” when that woman got a new boyfriend. At the time, Helen did not understand what those feelings were or, in her words, “what I was”. From her post-“oh” perspective, however, for Helen the reality of the present was easily discernable as also having been the reality of the past. For Helen and for other Retrospective lesbians, an important part of the story was about how she had managed not to know she was in love with other women when it ultimately became so clear.

The stories told by Lisa and Helen are illustrative of those told by almost half of the women I interviewed. They are, respectively, the Always Knew lesbian story and the Retrospective lesbian story. Women in these two categories discussed their unconventional experiences within the easily recognizable framework of the story of sexuality that is dominant in both the mainstream and lesbian communities. A cornerstone of that framework is the idea that our sexuality emerges at adolescence and remains relatively fixed across the lifespan. The idea of adolescence as the appropriate

time for this identity achievement is rooted in the fields of psychology, biology, and everyday experience. It just “makes sense” to us that our sexual desires and social sexuality would happen around the time our physical bodies are undergoing the changes of puberty. Additionally, foundational work in psychology such as that of Erickson (1959) and Freud (1962), pinpoints this period as the time when “normal” sexuality is achieved or alternatively goes off the rails. Milestone-type models of the coming out process for gay and lesbian youth (Cass 1979; Troiden 1988; Rust 1993) also serve to reinforce the idea that the proper temporal location for the development of sexual orientation is adolescence. Perhaps most importantly, and probably least scientifically, adolescence does seem to be the time that many, if not most folks identify, acknowledge, and express sexual desires upon which they may or may not act.

As noted by Gagnon and Simon (1973) and others, adolescence is also the time at which sexual desires and behaviors take on a more significant social meaning. As one reaches adolescence, behaviors previously not thought to be sexual may become imbued with sexual meaning. In a heteronormative culture it is expected at this time that the developing sexuality of the adolescent will manifest itself in cross-sex interests, attractions, and behaviors. The shifting meaning of behavior and desire can be difficult for one whose development does not follow the “normal” arc. This was perhaps clearest in the story of Danielle, an Always Knew lesbian. At adolescence her close childhood girlfriends became interested in boys while she did not. Danielle was left both missing the casual intimacy of sleepovers and girls-only space and sensing that something might be wrong with what she was feeling.

...we got to that age where my girlfriends were starting to be interested in boys and I wasn't really even thinking about that, um, and I was used to,

you know, when you're young and you have girlfriends and you're 9, 10, 11, 12, you hug each other, sit next to each other and come to sleepovers and all this type of thing... I think I had a clue when they were starting to be interested in not doing that anymore and I would be sitting next to them – like right next to them – and they would be like – and move away from me all the time. And then I got that uncomfortable feeling like, oh I guess I shouldn't be doing that. I wasn't like doing anything other than just being close, but they were starting to change and I wasn't changing. But I really didn't like consciously *know* - if that's a way to say it, I don't know. But I knew something wasn't right, but I wasn't sure exactly.

Within the gay and lesbian community the importance of adolescence as the beginning of the trajectory of gayness is evident in the construction of the standard coming out story. Clearly – as evidenced by the women in this study – there are a variety of ways and times that people come out and a variety of roads a woman can travel on her way to a life in which she has relationships with women. The standard coming out story, however, as outlined by Plummer in his book *Telling Sexual Stories* (1995), is one that begins in childhood and tends to follow a linear progression. The stories he is talking about, like the stories in this research do not necessarily tell the “truth” of the gay or lesbian person's experience, but rather conform to a model of what is assumed to be the way people become gay or develop a gay identity. Plummer's formulaic coming out story does not preclude heterosexual experiences altogether. Indeed many, if not most (Rosario et. al., 1996) lesbians have at least some heterosexual sexual experience. But a twenty-year marriage is generally not thought to be part of the tale to be told about the achievement of an integrated lesbian identity.

While none of these women (with perhaps one exception – and she was socially heterosexual even if not behaviorally or internally) has lived their entire lives as lesbians, each still told a tale in which their sexual orientation developed, whether they knew it or not, at what is commonly assumed to be the appropriate time. For them, in the stories

they told, their sexuality had also been consistent since then, although as it was for Helen, this might only be clear in retrospect. These women used ideas from the dominant narratives about sexuality to explain their non-traditional lives. In the stories they told, they have always been lesbians even though their actual lives, behavior, and experiences might, to the outside observer, stand in contradiction to that claim. Like many of the women in the study, these women also tended to hold an essentialist view of sexuality as something with which one is born. That said, several of them also proffered that the biological imperative might be stronger for some than for others. This allowed them to take a biologically based essentialist position that still took into account their own extensive experience living as reasonably well functioning heterosexuals.

In their deployment of hegemonic ideas of enduring and binary sexuality, the Always Knew and Retrospective lesbians told stories that were similar in ways that differentiated them from the stories of those I call Shifters and Left Fielders (Chapters 4 and 5 respectively.) Always Knew and Retrospective stories also had differences, however, one from the other. For example, both the Always Knew and the Retrospective lesbians discussed the achievement of a life of heterosexuality but in different ways. Additionally, while women in both groups focused a great deal on the social world - either closely personal, like family and friends, or the larger social milieu - and the impact that it had on their choices about sexuality and relationships, the stories they told about that social world diverged somewhat. Finally, the stories told by the two types of women differed in that they were trying to explain different things. The Always Knew lesbians were accounting for having rejected their “real” identities and living a large portion of their lives in opposition to the people they reported having always known

themselves to be. The Retrospective lesbians were explaining why they had not known who they “really” were in the first place. Despite these differences between the Always Knew lesbians and the Retrospective lesbians their shared foundation remains the same. The overarching story they tell is one in which they are coming out as having been born gay and having been gay all along. In Herman’s (2005) analysis of types of coming out, this would be referred to as a claim of identity. They are not merely making a claim of same-sex desire, but rather a statement about an inherent sexual self. While their behavior might have been inconsistent with the normative ideas of becoming a lesbian, for them their “real” sexuality - known or not – had always been the same. The construction of Always Knew and Retrospective stories allowed the dominant ideology of sexuality to remain intact and accessible as an explanatory platform.

### Telling the Dominant Story

The power of the narrative that sexuality is an essential and inherent part of a person is illustrated in the story of Arlene. Arlene was 42 years old at the time of the interview and was still living with her husband of 23 years with whom she was still occasionally sexual. What was interesting, in part, about Arlene’s claim about her essential lesbianism was that she had not had what she considered to be a sexual relationship with a woman and she was currently involved in a limited sexual relationship with her husband. Her experience and knowledge of herself as a lesbian was quite new – coming as the result of personal exploration in psychotherapy. This resulted in her becoming more comfortable “in my own skin” and more accepting of herself, something she referred to as becoming “self-possessed.” Her discussion of this process made it clear that while her conscious knowledge of her lesbianism was new, her fundamental nature



as a lesbian was not. Accessing the dominant narrative of sexuality Arlene makes sense of her newfound lesbian self by saying, “It’s not that I’m gay now, it’s that I’ve always been gay.” She went on to equate sexuality to race, saying, “I think you’re born that way. I think it’s just who we are. You’re white. How do you end up white?” So despite being 42 years old and being both behaviorally and socially heterosexual, she still told a story of having been born gay and being gay all along. She, like other Retrospective lesbians needed an event or a series of events in adulthood to bring their lesbianism to light. For her it was engaging in therapy as well as gathering information about lesbians and the lesbian community that began her process.

The notion of an essential sexuality was reflected in the statements of other women as well, in some cases with resigned regret. Jamie’s issues around her sexuality had her family life in an uproar at the time of our interview. Her husband was distraught, smoking too much and drinking in his room. Her 15 year-old son was uncertain of his future, wondering if his mother would be moving out and where would he live. Her grown children told her candidly that “you’ve ruined the whole family.” Jamie told a story in which the wreckage was unavoidable however, as she responded to the question about how people end up gay.

You’re gay. You’re just gay. I don’t think anyone – if I could make it go away, I would - if I could turn a switch and never think these feelings again, I would so do it in a heartbeat.

Jamie’s story echoed Lisa’s, recounted at the beginning of this chapter, in that the intrinsic and unchangeable nature of sexuality has thwarted their desires to either live a particular kind of life, or avoid hurting family members they love. Such an accounting is what Scott and Lyman (1968) would call an excuse based on biological drives. Jamie felt

her behavior was in some sense wrong because of its negative effect on her family, but her position that it was caused by her biological nature made her less than fully responsible.

Other women in this group took a somewhat softer approach to the idea that people are born gay and that's all there is to it. They were clear that lesbianism was a trait with which one was born but also made statements about the influence that upbringing and the larger social world have on the way that an inborn sexuality might manifest itself in the world. Several of them also explained their lives as (more or less) functioning heterosexuals by stating a belief that the biological imperative was more imperative for some than for others. Some of these women made explicit reference to the Kinsey (1948) scale or to a more general idea of a continuum of sexuality upon which people fall.

Laura Anne, a woman in her middle sixties and a faculty member at a large east coast university addressed both the heredity/environment issue and the imperative issue when she said,

Well, there's this thing heredity and environment and all of that. I think people are born with um, with a predisposition to be somewhere on this continuum and um, the people at either ends don't have a whole lot of choice. But the people in the middle can sometimes kind of go either way, at least for part of their lives um, and it depends a lot on the kind of pressures around them. And where they are. Um, and I think that on this continuum [*gesturing with her hands*] - and lesbians are here and straight people are here - I'm here, about three-quarters of the way over or two-thirds of the way over. So that I was able to kind of, you know, go this way and that way and um, but that my true self is over here with the lesbians.

Laura Anne acknowledged that she was sort of a "3/4 lesbian" but then went on to reference her *true* self as being over with the lesbians and went on to say that, "I don't think I became who I really was until I came out." Her discussion of how people "get"

their sexuality and what sexuality means was in some ways typical of many of the women that were interviewed.

The complexity of the application of the various sides of the nature/nurture debate that are evident in Laura Anne's story are even more clearly stated in Grace's analysis of how one arrives at a certain type of sexuality. Grace, who told an Always Knew story, had an elaborated three-pronged analysis of sexuality that took nature, nurture and the larger social world into account. As she described it, the development of sexuality had a genetic component, a component of "how you feel inside yourself", and what she called a social history component. Despite the theoretical troika she had clearly spent some time formulating, she didn't really apply it when she was talking about her own sexuality rather than sexuality in the abstract. When discussing her own sexuality and how she made sense of her past she talked about her "natural feelings", her "natural proclivities", and "gravitat[ing] toward who I really am". This language of naturalness – echoed by many of the women I spoke with - seems more in keeping with a simpler idea of an essential self, rather than the complex biopsychosocial construct she offered when explaining sexuality more generally. Grace and Laura Anne were not the only women to have a broad theory of sexuality in the abstract and a more matter-of-fact approach to their own experiences. The subjects of the study were discussing the complicated issue of sexuality with its clamor of often discordant cultural voices. In addition to finding a place to land in the cultural debate, the women in this study also needed to make retrospective sense of their own experiences, which did not fit neatly into the debate as it exists. All of the Always Knew lesbians and the Retrospective lesbians told their personal stories referencing the cultural idea of themselves having been born gay and being gay all along

– abstract analyses of the nature of sexuality in general notwithstanding. Beyond this agreement around the idea of the consistency of sexuality across the lifespan, the stories of the two groups of women diverged in significant ways. The first of these was their discussion of how they became heterosexual.

### Becoming Straight

#### *Heterosexuality as Achievement*

Those who were consciously aware at adolescence or young adulthood of their affinity for relationships with women – the Always Knew lesbians - make up about 40 percent of the traditional storytellers. All of these women had sexual relationships with women, of varying importance according to their reports, as high school or college students. The stories these women told were tales of a conscious awareness of otherness, the possibility or actuality of hostile rejection, and/or an unwillingness to live the life they understood a lesbian life to be. Lisa didn't want to lose her white picket fence, which she perceived as incompatible with living a lesbian life. Grace was exposed to butch/femme roles in the lesbian community as a young adult and found that construct constraining and unappealing. Carla's mother told her she was going to hell.

According to Plummer (1995) signification is the stage in the acquisition of gay identity at which one comes to the awareness of the “possible nastiness, the sordidness, the wrongness of it all” (p 88). This phase is critical because this is the point at which one might turn back and away from the “reality” of gayness. The Always Knew lesbians told stories of such a purposeful turning away. For them there was a disconnect between early awareness and publicly (to whatever degree) assuming a lesbian life. Such a fracture is not in keeping with the standard achievement of lesbian identity as outlined in the dominant coming out narrative. In general the stories told by these women included

highly negative perceptions of lesbians and lesbian life, highlighted the social pressures against living as a lesbian, and, in some cases, included interpersonal conflict (in one case violence) with family members over the issue of sexuality. These themes were deployed as reasons for the women's temporary diversion into heterosexuality and the deliberate suppression of the lesbian self.

As the unmarked norm, it has long been assumed that heterosexuality is just a natural evolution of "normal" sexuality. Only recently has research begun to look at the ways that heterosexuality, like homosexuality, is an achieved identity (Demasi 2001; Hyde and Jaffe 2000). The conscious effort at living a heterosexual life reported by the women in this study provides a different perspective on how one comes to live a heterosexual life. For these women, heterosexuality was not an easy identity to achieve, in fact, a plan had to be made and a strategy executed. In the ways their stories unfolded, it was clear that for them, their purposeful forays into heterosexuality required an explanation or justification as they constituted a significant departure from the standard lesbian sexuality story. The fact that they developed explanations, mostly for themselves but also for the researcher, reinforces the degree to which the dominant story influenced their understanding of their experience and was used to frame that experience.

As noted above, Lisa's heterosexuality plan resulted in finding a mate. Like many of the women, her discussion of the state of her sexuality at the time she was married was filled with conflicting notions. At one point for example, she insisted she had actually been heterosexual during her marriage because she wasn't "grossed out" by her husband – what would seem to be a rather low threshold for heterosexual identity - and she was certain she had been able to love him. In her words she "grabbed myself by the throat,

dragged myself to the right side of the universe. I did it.” At this point in the interview her story was that through sheer force of will she turned herself into the sexual person she wanted to be. The general theme of her story, however, was not the subversive idea that sexuality can change back and forth, or be “dragged to the right side of the universe”. Rather she told a story of having been born gay and despite every teeth-gritting, plan making, husband picking, throat grabbing effort at rejecting that sexual identity and those sexual desires, she was unable to do so. Despite having claimed she was heterosexual when she was married, she rejected the idea that sexuality can change because she tried it and “it didn’t work”.

Other Always Knew women reported similar efforts at living heterosexual lives. Like Lisa, Esther, a woman in her 70s, had a sit-down with her high school lover in which they agreed that when they went off to college, they would start dating boys because they knew “this wasn’t what we were supposed to do”. Despite her plans to turn over a new leaf, Esther ended up having two more same-sex relationships while in college. She went on, though, to have a seventeen-year marriage and three children. Esther said people are born gay and that they cannot change their sexuality. She went on to say that those that think they can are “fooling themselves”. Unlike Lisa, Esther reported never feeling that she was heterosexual. She considered herself to be a lesbian who, to please her mother and so she could have children, “made the mistake of getting married”.

Danielle’s decision to marry and live as a heterosexual is interesting in that it turns on its head the well-worn notion that women turn to relationships with women because of bad relationships or abuse at the hands of men. Danielle told me she never

thought of herself as heterosexual. She had known she was a lesbian from an early age and was in fact involved in a relationship with a much older woman when she was fifteen. That relationship lasted a number of years but eventually her partner's alcoholism and the domestic violence that went with it became too much to bear.

...and this woman beat me. And I ran from it. I remember saying to myself, "What am I doing?" I was not raised in a family like, you know, to be beat. I didn't see violence like that. I don't want to be with a man, but I'm with this woman and she's treating me worse than any man I, or boy I ever...

At this point in her life Danielle met a young man in what could have been a dangerous situation but he was a complete gentleman offering her a ride home and a handshake at the door. As she contrasted his behavior with that of her abusive partner she realized she had to get away. She and that young man were married for over twenty years although the relationship was never sexual. In addition to her view of heterosexuality as a refuge from the volatility of her relationship with her first partner, her relationship with her boyfriend and then husband provided cover for Danielle from her mother's homophobia. That homophobia had manifested itself in a violent physical confrontation when Danielle was still a teenager. For Danielle, heterosexuality was achieved for safety's sake, but it seems it was achieved only socially – never internally or behaviorally.

Unlike a heterosexual identity that need not be explained, for these women, heterosexual behavior and social heterosexuality were conscious achievements. When they told their identity tales their episodes of heterosexuality needed to be contextualized and the reasons made clear. Each of them needed to explain to themselves and others how a woman who had been aware of her same-sex desires since adolescence could be

married to a man for anywhere from seven to twenty-five years. Their stories consisted of a combination of highly negative images of lesbians, intense social pressure, interpersonal conflict or violence over the issue of lesbianism, and a desire to reject what they now have come to see as their lesbian selves. Additionally for some women their dream of having children seemed impossible outside the confines of heterosexual marriage. Several women in all the story categories spoke of marrying because they wanted children. For some having had children helped them to deflect regret through experiencing gratitude for having been married because of the children those relationships brought them.

### *Unconscious Heterosexuality*

Retrospective lesbians did not tell tales of conscious decisions to stamp down their lesbianism and become heterosexual as did the Always Knew lesbians. Neither did they tell stories in which their heterosexual lives were entirely natural or easily achieved. Several of the women, like Helen, explained their heterosexual choices by discussing the degree to which lesbianism and lesbian life were almost utterly invisible. Laura Anne, a woman in her early sixties residing in a medium-sized city in the Midwest told a story in which her true self is entirely lesbian but for a while she was able to “move into this other place but it never fit who I really was and I don’t think I became who I really was until I came out.” Like Helen, Laura Anne reported a world with a dearth of information about lesbians.

...where did you ever see a girl kiss another girl? Did you ever see a girl kissing a girl? Oh my god, no. Never. Anywhere. Never saw it, never heard of it...



As did some of the other women, Laura Anne reported some familiarity with the phenomenon of gay men, in her case through films such as *The Boys in the Band*, but no information that there was an option for women other than heterosexuality. Laura Anne got married and after a number of years began a long-term affair with a woman who was also married (Elaine, Subject #21). Making the move to thinking of herself as a lesbian was hard for Laura Anne but maintaining her identity and lifestyle as a heterosexual was hard too. In reference to her heterosexual life, Laura Anne remarked that it was “like too-small shoes. How do you get out of those too-small shoes?” For Laura Anne heterosexuality was achieved without the conscious effort that was required for the Always Knew lesbians, but not necessarily readily or comfortably. As noted in Demasi (2001), even for heterosexual women, heterosexuality seems largely unconscious, chosen often for social reasons (fitting in through having a boyfriend, gaining self esteem by being attractive to boys) rather than significant physical desire.

Laura Anne’s reference to her “too-small shoes” is a wonderful metaphor for what a number of the Retrospective lesbians reported as having been their experience. Many of them reported a vague sense of something being wrong, something being uncomfortable, something not feeling right in their skin. The women reported this sense of wrongness with confidence that it was evidence of their having always been lesbians even though they didn’t know it at the time. The stories these women told were not stories of having always known they were lesbian and of working to achieve heterosexuality. Rather they were stories in which the women did not know about the possibility of lesbianism, did what they were “supposed to do”, and found themselves living heterosexual lives in “too small shoes”.

Louise's story highlights these themes. For her, lesbians were invisible even though, as it turns out, they were right under her nose. And even though she loved her husband and they are still great friends, being heterosexually married did not feel right for her. In the heterosexual couple world she inhabited with her husband she felt she'd "been dropped onto another planet and I didn't speak their language". Louise grew up in a small working class village in Europe where community life centered around the single industry that provided most of the jobs and the Catholic Church that saved most of the sinners. She reported not even having heard the word lesbian until she was in her twenties. In retrospect she realizes that Charlene, the older sister of her childhood best friend was a lesbian but in the world in which she grew up the idea of lesbians was so farfetched she wasn't aware of this until much later. With no frame of reference for women being in relationships with other women, Louise was not able to recognize and name what she had now come to see as her always-existing attractions for women. Still, she never had a boyfriend and living a heterosexual life held no appeal for her.

I now realize to escape the fact that I knew I was supposed to live this life that just didn't have any meaning for me, which was to marry and you know have the 2.4 kids and have this cute little house and do that whole thing, that just never, ever held any appeal for me, um, and so I became really heavily involved in the church, in the Catholic Church... and then ultimately entered the convent when I was 17.

After a few years in the convent she left and a year later was married. According to her story, she never felt comfortable in the "married couple" scene. She always felt "misplaced". She does not regret the marriage and continues to feel great affection for her ex-husband. They speak daily and spend time together. Despite her twenty-year marriage, Louise does not think she was ever really heterosexual, although she did not know she

was a lesbian, and her explanation for having lived that life was repeated over and over in the phrase “it wasn’t an option”.

These types of accountings are akin to what Scott and Lyman (1968) refer to as an appeal to defeasibility, a type of excuse for what they call “untoward behavior” in which a person may report that they did not have all the facts of a situation or that they did not have completely free will in making choices about their behavior. For Retrospective lesbians, heterosexuality seemed to be the only available option and so that is what they did, regardless of the degree to which it felt comfortable, either at the time, or in hindsight.

For both the Always Knew and Retrospective lesbians, the heterosexual imperative blocked them from being what they now thought of as their real selves. For the Always Knews, heterosexuality had to be achieved because the alternative was unacceptable to them or to others. For the Retrospectives the dominance of heterosexuality as the only option obscured the possibility of a lesbian existence. As they reviewed their histories both groups were able to deploy the reality of a social world in which heterosexuality is compulsory as back story and justification for living lives outside of what they understood to be the lesbian “norm”.

#### Leaving the Lesbian Behind: Suppression v. Repression

Clearly the Always Knew lesbians actively shunned the social and/or sexual aspects of life as a lesbian, but were sometimes less able to avoid the awareness of their desires and perhaps the identity. For them the lesbian within needed to be consciously rejected or, in psychological parlance, suppressed. Suppression is the active and conscious exclusion of thoughts or desires that are unacceptable. It is a social world with

a dichotomous view of sexuality in which one side of the binary is exalted and the other is vilified that gives rise to an understanding of lesbian desires as unacceptable and the necessity of their exclusion. The Always Knew women accomplished this through purposeful commitments to a heterosexual life as outlined above. These women employed other suppression strategies as well. The stories they told of these strategies provide insight into the lengths to which the women would go to avoid the ‘sordidness’ of it all, as well as the ways they could use the primacy of heterosexuality to beat back the lesbian they now knew loomed within.

For example, after having painfully fallen in love with several women, Julia stopped allowing herself to have close friendships with women

I’m also building these walls to say okay, I can’t touch you, don’t touch me, don’t get too close to me, I, you know, there is clearly physical boundaries that I needed, that became excruciatingly difficult and then (*pause*), it just felt like it became so dysfunctional inside of that space that after a while it was like I have to get away from you, I can’t, you can’t be this close to me – you know this is screwing up everything else, you’re making me look at my orientation, you’re making me see a part of me that can’t, can’t be real, can’t be my life....I don’t want women close to me, they create too many problems in my life.

Julia created a safety zone between herself and other women both because the loss of women she fell in love with and could not be with was too painful and because the awareness of her feelings for women became impossible to quell when her relationships with women became too close. For Julia, even friendships with women just created too many problems, raising unmanageable feelings and drawing attention to the lesbian sexual desires she found unacceptable.

Thirty-four year old Carla used a somewhat different strategy. Rather than distancing herself from women, she increased her intimate interactions with men. After a

brief relationship with another woman in high school, Carla purposefully became involved with multiple male partners. She explained that this behavior was aimed at two goals. The first was that if she was sexual with enough men she might find one that felt as right to her as had her early female-female relationship. Secondly, it complied with her devoutly Catholic family's admonition against homosexuality. Despite religious condemnation of premarital sex (which resulted in a pregnancy and her subsequent marriage to the father) her sexual relationships with men were "normal instead of - do you know what I'm saying? At least I'm with a man." After her marriage Carla was able to maintain at least a superficial identity as a non-lesbian by thinking of herself as a heterosexual who just "liked to have flings" (with women). She was also able to have those flings within the context of her marriage and her heterosexual sex life by occasionally bringing a woman into her sexual encounters with her husband. As long as she was married and her husband was involved in the activities she could push being a lesbian away and maintain her superficial identity as a heterosexual.

Carla was not the only Always Knew woman who crafted an identity that was basically heterosexual with a splash of lesbian. Some of the women did this by claiming a sexuality of simply "married". Esther, for example thought of herself as someone who was married, "but sometimes I get attracted to women", while Lisa who was sexually involved with women before her marriage ended thought of herself as "married but playing with women". For these women, it seems the social role of being married – publicly functioning as heterosexuals – allowed them to deny the identity of being the people they later said they had always understood themselves to be.

The stories told by the Retrospective lesbians were not the same as the stories told by the Always Knew lesbians. Their stories were of repression – blocking threatening thoughts out of the conscious mind - rather than suppression. These women did not report on strategies they executed to actively push away the offending feelings and desires. Rather, their stories focused on their analyses of what had disallowed them from consciously having those feelings and desires at all. In their discussions of why or how they did not know about their lesbian selves, the Retrospective lesbians used both active and passive constructions of the events. Active constructions included references to “stuffing it down”, pushing it out of consciousness, and “burying it.” More passive or unconscious constructions included references to lack of awareness, invisibility, not knowing. Most of the women used a combination of these to explain how they had departed from what they now knew to be their “true sexuality”.

At the time of the interviews, the Retrospective lesbians were able to easily identify experiences and feelings from their early lives and used them to support their claims of having always been lesbians. An important part of their stories was how they framed those experiences and desires at the time in such a way as to avoid an understanding of themselves as lesbians. Two main explanatory themes emerged in the repression stories told by the Retrospective lesbians – the incorporation of lesbian desires and behavior into a “normal” heterosexual identity, and the highly negative images of lesbians and lesbian life that allowed the women to compare themselves out of the lesbian world. These themes were not mutually exclusive, many of the women told stories in which both themes were present.

Helen provided a good example of the first story type. She eagerly identified early crushes on girls but was able to incorporate them into a non-lesbian sexuality because she believed “everyone feels this way”. Tara, a forty-two year old mother of four who is still married to and cohabitates with her husband, openly discussed her sexual fantasies. She reported that both while masturbating and while engaging in sex with her husband the subjects of these fantasies were always other women. Like Helen, she was able to deflect what she later came to see as her true lesbian self by incorporating the idea that everyone had similar sexual fantasies. Of course she was also actually having sex with a man. The common cultural construction of lesbians as women who hate men and as women who are hideously repulsed by even the thought of sex with men provided a useful framework for women like Tara. Universalizing her personal fantasy life to include all women and also being sexually active with a man was a dual defense against the encroachment of unwanted information.

Kimberly’s story in this regard was particularly interesting. Her early experiences of crushes on girls were framed heterosexually in that she would develop a crush on a girl and then fantasize about what it would be like to be that girl’s boyfriend. For Kimberly, the heterosexual imperative was so strong and the lesbian so invisible that in order to think about the possibility of intimacy with another woman, she had to turn herself into a man. Like the others, Kimberly believed that in terms of being attracted to women, “everyone is to a certain degree”. Kimberly also reported that there was never an occasion in which she was having sex with a man in which she was not fantasizing about having sex with a woman. In furtherance of her fantasies she preferred certain sexual positions with her husband, which she explicitly described. Kimberly, like others, was

able to separate her desires (lesbian) from her behavior (heterosexual) and operate reasonably well as a heterosexual person in a 13-year marriage.

It is so common for girls (and boys) to have intense attractions and same-sex crushes in adolescence that there are various websites available for teens and parents who wonder what such feelings mean (Dr. Dave and Dr. Dee n.d.; faqs.org n.d.; Westheimer 2007). These sites go to great pains to assure teens that such feelings are normal and do not mean that they are gay. Additionally, girls and women have a fair amount of latitude in terms of being able to be physically close to one another. These constructions of female friendship and intimacy operated in at least two different ways in the stories the Retrospective lesbians told. The first is that the cultural commonplace of intimate female friendship helped women such as Helen, Tara, and Kimberly to divert the taking on of a lesbian identity. They were able to cast their experiences of intense attraction to women and girls as either something everyone does, or perhaps as part and parcel of what it is like to have important and intimate female (non-sexual) friendships. In the gendered world of relationships, girls can write off being “in love” with their best friends in a way that boys probably cannot.

There is an additional feature of the cultural construction of intimate female friendship that may be important. Having had emotionally and perhaps physically intimate relationships with girls ultimately provides the back-story that might be deployed to tell a tale of lesbianism since adolescence. Many girls really do have intense friendships with other girls which may or may not include varying levels of intimate touch. Culturally such friendships are somewhat expected and valued. What is important in the stories these women told is that, for them, those experiences retrospectively



became harbingers of things to come. For example, Peggy still remembers the name of a girl she thought was cute in the second grade and in her story that memory is significant. She had a similar crush on a boy at the same age but does not remember his name. As Peggy looks back on her sexual identity and sexual life this difference in memory (remembering her name and forgetting his) is an important piece of data for her in her construction of herself as someone who has always been a lesbian. Other women had similar recollections, which were used to weld the lesbian present to a now revealed lesbian past.

The second major explanatory theme in stories of repression centered around the malignant social representations or actual treatment of lesbians and lesbianism. These images allowed the women to frame themselves and their attractions for women as far different and far removed from the reviled other. By focusing on how they were unlike what they “knew” to be lesbian, they were able to construct themselves as not lesbians. For example, Jamie, a 44-year-old twice-married mother of four, had a single image of lesbians while she was growing up - the women who lived next door. Cautions from her mother about the possibility of child molestation, the women’s appearance, her own desire for children, and her observation that lesbian lives were lonely lives all led to Jamie being able to compare herself out of being a lesbian.

A lesbian were – to me, the two women who lived next to us growing up that my mother would say, ‘don’t go in their yard because they worked at the Girls Club and I don’t know what they do with the girls all day, but don’t go over there’. And they were both very, very traditional - you know, very butchy, manly... To me, that was a lesbian. And I wasn’t, I didn’t look like them, so I wasn’t a lesbian. I just was attracted to women.

Maureen, a 62-year-old mother of two sons, and Executive Director of an urban non-profit, reported a frightening experience as a teenager when two girls from her

boarding school, who were known to be involved with each other, “disappeared” from the school one night. One day they were there and the next day they and all their belongings were gone. When she later experienced a brief attraction to another girl she “put that away real quick cuz people disappear”. Her fear about what becomes of lesbians caused her to so effectively “put that away” that the even the idea of relationships with women did not surface again for many years. What was originally an active suppression became an ongoing repression. Her conscious experience of a possibly lesbian self disappeared as surely as did the young girls from her boarding school.

The Always Knew lesbians and the Retrospective lesbians told different stories of how they managed to leave the lesbian behind. The former told tales of actively, consciously, and ongoingly denying the known lesbian. The latter told stories of unconscious desires buried beneath an overlay of heteronormativity and homophobic cautionary tales. Both types of stories, however, remain grounded in the central ideas of an essential sexuality, a dichotomous sexuality, and a sexuality that is fixed across the lifespan.

#### Becoming the Lesbian: Reclamation v. Discovery

None of the Always Knew lesbians was currently in a sexual relationship with a man, although two of them were still married, and one of them still lived with her husband. All but one of them were in relationships with women at the time of the interview. How this occurred became the next stop on the journey of their identity narrative. After making and executing a heterosexuality plan that resulted in marriages ranging from 7 to 25 years, each of these women had an experience, a set of experiences, or some other kind of shift that led them back to what they believe to be their original

lesbian selves. A few of the women had intimate relationships with women while they were still married which might have been a part of what drove the lesbian reclamation process. The women reported other factors as well.

For Gayle, it was being pursued by someone she found both attractive and worthwhile. She had had a relationship with another girl while in high school but “felt it was wrong and something to be ashamed of.” They both went off to college and “no one ever spoke of it again.” Additionally, the other girl was, according to Gayle, not the “right person to come out for.” The woman with whom she is currently partnered is apparently the kind of person one comes out for and they have been together for 8 years and have two children. Gayle had “compartmentalized” her lesbianism but having met her current partner, “now I’m in the compartment where I’m in a happy family with a woman.”

For Always Knew lesbian Julia, a forty-nine year old woman with two grown children and one grandchild, the impetus to change came not as the result of meeting a particular person, but rather reflecting on life stages and thinking about her future.

[We] started talking about retirement – this was kind of one of the catalysts that got me going on it, was the idea of spending the rest of my life with a man. And my idea was, because at that point I still wasn’t even allowing myself to think too much about being with a woman, my idea was I can’t do this, I can’t stay married to him, I’m just, as soon as the kids are grown I’m gonna divorce him and then I’m just going to live alone and then I would think well and then I could just go out and pick up a woman every now and again, you know, have these totally you know, underground and nobody has to know anything, you know, *I* almost don’t have to know it, kind of thing.

Julia had since decided the sub rosa lesbian pick-up life is not for her and was in a short-term relationship with a woman at the time of the interview. She still lived with her husband although they no longer shared a room and each openly dated other people.

Julia's story also highlighted the importance of a lesbian community – at first online and then in person - in helping her to really “take ownership of the label”. The importance of meeting other lesbians, having a lesbian community, or at least being able to broaden their perceptions of what a lesbian is were themes reiterated by a number of women. Additionally, as was true for almost all of the women in the study, Julia talked about the importance of therapy in dealing with the changes in her intimate life. Because the subjects of this research discussed the role of therapy in helping them to develop sexuality stories so frequently, that topic will be treated in more detail in Chapter 6.

Rather than stories of a midlife reclamation of an always known lesbian self, Retrospective lesbians told stories of a midlife discovery of the already existing lesbian that lay dormant within. The stories these women told included the event or events that led to their new-found knowledge as well as some explanation for why they had not known the “real” truth sooner. Reflecting the dominance of the framework in which adolescence is the time for the discovery of sexuality, these explanations demonstrated their confusion and disbelief that they did not know this about themselves earlier, at the supposedly “right” time, and provided a rationale for why that might have been.

Helen, you may recall, discovered her inner lesbian self almost instantly upon the occasion of her first kiss from a woman. In describing the profound nature of that experience and the degree to which it made everything fall into place, it was clear that Helen found it strange, or at least interesting, that she did not come out as a younger person – the “normal” timeframe in which to acquire sexual orientation and come out. She, like other women with stories of this type, referred again to a social world that was either overtly anti-gay or at least mute on the possibility of lesbians and lesbian life.

Helen articulated the latter as clearly as any of the women did when trying to make sense of her experience.

Well, I think it makes perfect sense. I think I grew up at a time when being a lesbian, I mean, it just wasn't named for me in my environment. I mean it just wasn't there. So I lived my life - I believe being a lesbian but in a world where that wasn't even named, or, I didn't even know what that meant. I had the feelings, I had the yearnings to be something different than I was acting as and then when the time came I was able to express it. So it makes perfect sense to me. It's living in a, like living in a cage but you're in – you have to be a certain way - but when you're free you just become who you've really been all along.

Helen found who she had really been all along - discovered the lesbian within – when she was first kissed by a woman and she never looked back.

When discussing the discovery of the lesbian within the women told stories that were somewhat consistent with the general format of coming out stories and included some of the important coming out “milestones”. An important part of the standard tale is a sense of difference or discomfort at adolescence. Many of the women who later discovered their inner lesbian did speak of a general discomfort at adolescence or a sense that they didn't fit in but that did not spur them to the next stage of “normal” gay identity development. Instead they seem to have gone into a hiatus or hibernation mode until further events made the reality of their “true” natures impossible to avoid.

Heteronormativity and the pressure both internal and external, consciously and unconsciously experienced, facilitated making a commitment to “natural” heterosexuality because other options did not seem available. Heterosexuality was just what one did.

For example, when Maureen, a woman in her sixties, spoke about her decisions about marriage she focused on two things. The first was that she wanted children and that

at that time marriage was the only way that could reasonably be accomplished. The second was that she did what she was supposed to do.

I went through life, the early part of my life thinking that there were certain things I had to do in order to, uh, be who I was supposed to be and that there was no deviation from that. I was kind of like um, it was never an option that you just didn't go straight into college. I mean that just wasn't part of my understanding of the world. The same as getting married and having, having kids was what you did. That was just the way it was. And, so, um, and I certainly didn't have enough chutzpah at that point, or belief in myself to think that I could do anything differently

For Maureen there was no struggle of "am I or aren't I?" She reported no real crisis of identity at all. Her desire for children, her mother's reaction to innocent children's sexual play, the nighttime disappearance of two girls who were involved with each other, and perhaps most importantly, the absolute impossibility of it all made her default to a heterosexuality she reported she accomplished relatively easily. Interestingly, for Maureen it was not an internal drive or questioning about her sexuality but rather an infidelity on the part of her husband and the dissolution of the marriage around that event that ultimately left her open to reinvestigate her lesbian feelings. Through her participation in a (not specifically lesbian) women's support group and the process of introspection that came as a result of her graduate training in behavioral science and Gestalt Therapy, she leaned that she felt "home...and whole" when she was with women.

Tara had various intimate relationships with girls in high school and college which she found exciting and pleasurable and which she actively sought out. She also reported some relationships with boys including intercourse. When she met her husband Joey she was attracted to him and found in him some of the emotional support and connection that had been lacking in her family of origin. As she continued the discussion of what led her to marriage, she finished up by saying,

I didn't really think of any other choices except that's what you do, you know, you get married, I didn't really take seriously the relationships that I had with girls and women, it wasn't serious unless it was male, I guess.

With the help of a phallogocentric view of what constitutes sex and the privileging of heterosexual sex and relationships over lesbian sex and relationships, Tara framed her early attractions to women as non-sexual, thus averting a crisis in adolescence and young adulthood. Later, however, living her suburban married life she met a woman with whom she had an extremely intense affair. When that relationship ended Tara began seeking out other women – a period of active investigation – in an effort to see if she was a lesbian or simply in love with one woman. Her investigation resulted in unsatisfying short-term relationships with a couple of women but despite that, it also resulted in her settling on a lesbian identity. She has since found a supportive lesbian community and is excited to be “in the energy of women.” In the story she told, the presence of supportive women as she went through this process was invaluable. The solidification of her identity and her involvement in a community that is supportive and nurturing echoes the final step in the standard coming out story.

### Conclusion

All of these women - the Always Knew lesbians and the Retrospective lesbians – developed narratives for themselves in which they were able to account for their unconventional sexualities. Parts of their stories were unconventional indeed. Sitting down with your lesbian “soul mate” and developing a heterosexuality plan, for example, is not part of either the mainstream heterosexist narrative, or the standard lesbian coming out story. Neither is constructing a heterosexual sexual identity predicated on the proposition that all women fantasize about sex with women. Despite the alternative

experiences for which these women needed to account, they did so in a way that was largely in keeping with many of the important themes that are part of the dominant sexuality narrative.

Both the Always Knew lesbians and the Retrospective lesbians made claims about a largely (but not exclusively) biologically based sexuality that emerged at adolescence and remains consistent to the present day. They also provided stories that essentially followed the formulaic framework of the standard coming out story – discomfort, crisis, information and community seeking, and the development of a sense of identity. Of course for these women there was a significant detour from the formula in terms of the timing of it all. As they accounted for these issues in timing – suppressing or repressing their true lesbian selves – they referenced the hegemony of heterosexuality, images of lesbians and lesbian life, familial conflict, and personal life goals (mainly having children) that seemed incompatible with lesbian life. The stories of reclaiming or discovering a lesbian identity and aligning their behavior with that identity came as the result of a variety of crises - divorce, life stage issues, a passionate relationship with another woman, or the like. Most of the women have gone on to be part of a lesbian community, or are working on integrating into one. In several cases this is just a series of friendships with other lesbians or lesbian couples rather than a formalized or elaborated group.

It is no surprise that many of the women in this research told stories in which they selected ideas from the dominant narratives. Despite having unconventional experiences they grew up in a world in which certain ideas about sexuality hold sway. The standard story of sexuality as essential, dichotomous, and consistent, as well as a formula for how



people come to talk about their gayness, is a frame that is hard to resist and hard to reject. It just makes sense. Unlike the women discussed here, other women had a more difficult time adapting the frame to fit their experience or shaping their experience to fit the frame. Those women told more alternative stories of either a bisexual or changeable sexuality or a sexuality that came at midlife like a lighting bolt from left field. It is to the stories of these women that we now turn our attention.

## CHAPTER 4

### SHIFTING SEXUALITIES

The first group of less traditional storytellers consists of women I refer to as Shifters. Shifters comprised approximately 30% of the subjects interviewed. Shifter stories seem to straddle the line between the more traditional stories previously discussed in which the women's sexual stories substantially reflect prevailing ideas about sexuality and the stories of Left Fielders (discussed in the next chapter) which seem to be largely outside the dominant paradigm. Approximately half of the Shifter women told stories in which they identified themselves as bisexual and the other half told stories of a sexuality that is fluid and/or changeable. There were some traditional elements in the stories these women told including references to the essential nature of sexuality and the homosexual/heterosexual binary. Having been exposed to the dominant narrative, they were able to recount its important points. They did not, however, deploy these elements in precisely the same way or incorporate them into their personal understanding of their own sexuality stories in the ways that both the Always Knew and Retrospective lesbians did.

Shifters bring to mind what Ponse (1980) calls idiosyncratic lesbians. These are women who know the dominant narrative of essential and dichotomous sexuality but believe it does not apply to them or their experience as it might for other people. They do not tell stories, like those of the Always Knew and Retrospective lesbians, in which they try to create the continuity the hegemonic ideology requires by explaining away the disconnect between their experiences and their internal desire. Rather they tell stories in which same-sex desire and behavior and other-sex desire and behavior come and go, wax

and wane, based on social circumstances, the attributes of the sexual partner, and for some of them the understanding that some people (especially women) have the potential for sexual fluidity.

Grouping the stories of these women together as Shifter stories is not to imply that their stories are all the same. In fact, the stories in this grouping are probably more varied than are the stories in the other categories. Their stories did not have the same kind of consistency as, for example, the Always Knew lesbians. Despite the individualized ins and outs of each Always Knew lesbian story, the general unfolding of each story was quite similar. They had early relationships with women, they knew they were lesbians, they made a decision to marry and live a heterosexual life for various reasons, and have now returned to their “real” and essential lesbian selves. This kind of generalized trajectory was not so apparent for the Shifters. Neither were the Shifters stories as similar to each other as those of most of the Left Fielders in which the overwhelming theme is surprise and the unreality and incomprehensibility of it all.

It is not surprising that Shifter’s stories dovetail less neatly than the stories of the other groups. Although Shifters knew the components of the dominant, and therefore most comprehensible and consistent narrative, they did not strive to fit their own stories into it, as had the more traditional storytellers. Neither were they so overwhelmed by a shocking turn of events that they were left virtually unable to fit their personal stories into conventional frames, as were the Left Fielders. Most of the Shifters have had significant time to both have a variety of sexual experiences and to develop an elaborated narrative of identity in the arena of sexuality. Eighty percent of the Shifters were over the age of fifty-five. All but one of those had also been involved exclusively in relationships with

women for 20 years or more. It is interesting to note that most of the Shifters also had at least moderate, if not high levels of interaction with a lesbian community or friendship network over a long period of time. It was unexpected that women with such long-term, high-level affiliation with a lesbian community would retain idiosyncratic stories despite the fact that at least for some, failure to present themselves as essential lesbians created problems with partners or others in their social networks.

As noted above one significant point of variation in the Shifter stories was over the designation of bisexual. All of the women (except one) in this study have sexual histories that are bisexual in nature. Bisexual in this context is used only to indicate that they have had sexual partners of both sexes. Of the 36 women interviewed, however, less than half a dozen explicitly identified themselves as bisexual. Acceptance or rejection of the label rested on such things as a woman's personal definition of what it means to be bisexual, timing and levels of desire and attraction the Shifters felt for women versus men, and the social world that surrounded a particular woman. In general, for women who identified as bisexual, their sexuality (bisexual) remained a constant and essential part of themselves regardless of the sex of the sexual partner. For the women who told stories of sexual fluidity or changeability the sex of one's partner, one's life circumstances, or one's social and political milieu could influence sexuality, allowing it to shift and change over time. It is arguable that in this way the bisexual story, while subordinated is less subversive than the story of sexuality that changes.

The sexual identity of bisexual, taken on by approximately half of the Shifters, is somewhat outside the mainstream ideas of "normal" sexuality, but it both reflects and reinforces the dominant narrative. Bisexual is a category of sexuality – albeit a highly

stigmatized one in both the mainstream culture and parts of the gay and lesbian community – that is comprehensible within the prevailing construction of sexuality and is therefore available to be claimed. Those familiar with the Kinsey Scale (regardless of its legitimacy) understand its implication that there is a continuum of sexuality and that some people fall on the extreme ends of the scale – exclusively homosexual or exclusively heterosexual – and that others fall at various places in between. Bisexuality may be a devalued sexuality identification, but it is not shocking or impossible within at least the fringes of the dominant narrative. Like Lorber’s (1994) transvestites and transsexuals who simultaneously transgress and reinforce the gender dichotomy, bisexual sexual identity both transgresses and reinforces the prevailing ideas about sexuality. The existence of a name and category for people who are attracted to both sexes only makes sense in a construction in which there are names and categories for people who are exclusively attracted to one or the other. So, while the stories told by bisexual women are subordinate stories and the identities they claim are subordinate identities, they are not really subversive in the sense of delegitimizing the prevailing paradigm. Women claiming a bisexual identity critiqued and resisted the monosexual labels available to them but told stories in which their experience and identity claims melded the two sides of the dichotomy of sexuality rather than destroying it.

### Bisexual Stories

Olivia told the “most bisexual” of the bisexual stories, in that she is aware that she is attracted to women and men in approximately the same proportion (although she described a much higher level of intensity in her relationships with women versus her relationships with men), that those attractions are occurring simultaneously and in the

present, and that her choice to be monogamous with her current (male) partner closes off an important part of her sexual self. She is the only one of the subjects of this research who was partnered with a man at the time of the interview. As noted above, most of the women who fell into the Shifter category had not had relationships with men for a number of years and so their bisexuality – and least the behavioral and social components - was more historically based than was Olivia's. This does not, of course, make one or the other any more or less "true". Unlike some of the other bisexual women, Olivia was not aware of her bisexuality at an early age so her story reflected a move through a series of sexual identities to arrive at the place she is now.

Olivia was thirty-seven at the time of the interview and pregnant with her first child. She grew up in Northern Europe and had the kind of sturdy, hearty look that is one of the stereotypes that exists about people from that part of the world. She came to the United States as a young adult and had been here about a dozen years. She was the veteran of one 5-year marriage, an intense 3-year relationship with a woman, and had been with her current partner for about 4 years. Her exposure to information about homosexuality and lesbianism was essentially non-existent in her country of origin although pornography – including the requisite "girl on girl action" – was readily available in her home.

She was physically attracted to, and in love with her husband whom she believed had a good heart and soul but was somewhat limited by low self-esteem. Her marriage was initially a happy one and then went into crisis for reasons unrelated to sex and sexuality. Despite the difficulties in her marriage, Olivia remained in love with her husband and committed to the relationship. Olivia first became attracted to a woman she

worked with and was very surprised when she was able to identify the feelings as ones of romantic or sexual attraction. Like many of the women I interviewed, Olivia sought counseling to talk about her feelings. She did not end up in a relationship with the woman to whom she was first attracted, but Olivia reasoned that if she could have feelings like that for one woman she might have them for others. Like the information seeking adolescent in the standard coming out story (Plummer, 1995), She decided to explore this newly found potential inside herself.

Okay, she's not available, but I need to find out why I felt this way um, would I feel this way. I needed to look at it, I felt for some reason I had this drive that I needed to investigate this whole woman thing.

As a result of this exploration, she fell in love with Tamara and had what she referred to as the most intense relationship of her life, which was actually so emotionally intense and volatile that remaining in the relationship ultimately became impossible. Many women in all of the categories of storytellers referenced deep, intense, and intimate connections with women – generally more deep, intense, and intimate than their connections with men. As was the case with Olivia, such connection can be both a blessing and a curse – leading to a life together of great intimacy, or a toxic cocktail of emotional affinity, enmeshment, volatility, and in some cases violence.

After ending her relationship with Tamara, Olivia was resistant to relationships with men because she wanted further relationships with women and because she had come to see herself as a lesbian. At this point in her story she had internalized the dominant narrative that people who desire sexual relationships with women are a particular kind of person – lesbians. So she took on that identity and the exclusivity of female sexual object choice that it implies. In her words,

Initially, after coming out, I was very puzzled and I thought well I must be a lesbian because I'm so much wanting women and, and not guys.

The persistence of her current partner, Mark, eventually wore her down, however, and they have been together for four years. She now thinks of herself as bisexual. She has had multiple conversations with Mark in which she argued that she should also be able to have relationships with women because being monogamous with him had caused her to lose an important part of herself. He rejected that argument. She had one secret very brief affair since she and Mark have been together and had mixed feelings about that – because of the dishonesty and infidelity - but feels her attraction to and desire for women is not a part of herself that she wants to reject.

Olivia was able to recall telltale signs of desire for women from her teenage years. Her family rather openly watched pornography together in the living room and she recalls finding the scenes with women “a lot more enticing”. She also recalled as a teenager talking to her mother about the possibility of having a relationship with a woman because of the failures and frustrations she was experiencing in her relationships with men at that time. Her mother had a very negative response to this suggestion. Unlike the Retrospective lesbians who used such experiences to demonstrate an always-existing lesbian self, Olivia folded these events into a story of an incipient bisexuality awaiting the proper set of circumstances that would allow it to emerge.

Like many of the Shifters of both types, Olivia believed there is a component of genetic predisposition to one sexual orientation or another but that it is stronger in some people than in others. For example, Olivia believed Tamara was much more strongly genetically predisposed to lesbianism than she herself was. She went on to report, however, that Tamara was now in her first relationship with a man, something that



surprised Olivia, and seemed to please her as well. Olivia believed that her own ability to be with women was a thing that was always inside her and that circumstances allowed that part of herself to emerge. For Olivia, people are born with sexual potential for relationships with both men and women - to a greater or lesser degree based on genetics - but the world influences if, when, and how this will manifest itself. As is clear from her story she rejects the dichotomous thread of the dominant story, at least for herself.

Olivia's story, then, was one in which she was a solid heterosexual with no real inkling of lesbian desires, then a lesbian because that's what you must be if you are in relationships with women, and finally a bisexual woman who accepted within herself the possibility of satisfactory relationships with both men and women. The sex of her sexual partner used to influence her sense of sexual orientation, first heterosexual then homosexual, but it does not anymore. Olivia told a story of sexuality that took all her experiences into account, presented them all as equally legitimate and consistent with her sexual self.

The stories told by Rachel and Frieda also demonstrated the degree to which bisexuals saw their sexuality as essential and independent of the sex of their current sexual partners. The stories of these two women also pointed up the difficulty of taking on a sexual identity of bisexual in a lesbian community in which that sexual identity is devalued, stigmatized, and apparently threatening. Rachel and Frieda both solved this problem by dividing their sexual identities into a public identity of lesbian that coexisted with an internal sense of themselves as truly bisexual.

Frieda, a recently retired 59-year-old, was married in the late 1960s and divorced six and half years later. She was very much in love with her husband and she reported

that the divorce, which came as a result of her husband leaving her, was “the biggest trauma I’ve ever had in my life”. Following the divorce she developed some close female friendships, caught up on some feminist reading she had not been able to do while pursuing her professional degree and began “liking myself more”. This led to her considering the possibility of relationships with women and she has only had sexual relationships with women for the past 28 years. She was not partnered at the time of the interview but had recently begun dating someone. She had considered the possibility of seeking out relationships with men but, she said laughing, “it’s just that who knows how to meet men anymore?” She “came out to” herself as bi at the age of thirty and that remained her sexual sense of herself at the time of the interview. In her view her sexuality did not change from heterosexual to lesbian rather it “evolved” so that she was able to add attractions to women to her already existing attractions for men. Frieda was well aware that bisexual is not a valued identity in her community and so in her story she differentiated her internal sense of her sexual self from her public sexual identity. When she discussed her personal sense of her own sexuality, Frieda said, “If you’re talking about my psyche, I say I’m bi”. She also said, however,

I think that coming out as bi within the gay community is a whole other issue, it’s, it’s a coming out – I mean to identify yourself as bi in the gay community is difficult. A lot of people have very negative feelings about it...I think there are people within the community [who] feel it’s a disloyalty... I’ll say I’m a lesbian because it’s not like a disloyalty you know?

Frieda reported that the woman she had recently begun dating admitted being reluctant to date women who identify as bi but that Frieda’s nearly thirty year unbroken streak of being exclusively with women mitigated the sense of threat the woman felt.

Like Frieda, Rachel reported that, in terms of her potential for sexual expression and sexual relationships she was really bisexual but that socially she was a lesbian. Rachel was 65 at the time of the interview and had been with her current female partner for 14 years. She was married when she was very young to a much older man and the marriage was not a happy one. She had other relationships with men, however, that were both physically and emotionally satisfying. Rachel was shocked and not particularly happy about discovering attractions to women in middle adulthood. She knew and liked lesbian women; lesbianism just wasn't for her. After consulting a friend (who is also a therapist) Rachel began to accept the possibility of relationships with women and ended up dating men and women simultaneously for a time. At that time she took on the identity of bisexual. According to her, "I definitely was not born one way or another. I think uh, on the scale, I'm right dead center." Once she began to publicly identify as bisexual within the women's community it was clear to her that "people were put off by it." At the time of the interview, Rachel identified two reasons that she had recently stopped socially identifying as bi despite the fact that "part of my heart knows I still am". The first of these was that, as it was for Frieda, identifying as bi had been a "sticking point" relative to her partner of 14 years.

The second reason that Rachel separated her sense of her own sexual and relational potential from her sexuality in the world is that she no longer felt she wanted to live as a heterosexual. Even though she felt she was capable of having emotionally and sexually satisfying relationships with men as she had in the past, she no longer was willing to be in heterosexual space. Other women in the study reported a similar lack of willingness to be in heterosexual relationships, not because they would not be sexually or

emotionally satisfying, but because how one has to look, how one has to behave, and how power dynamics play themselves out in heterosexual relationships were no longer attractive to the women. It would seem to be a clear case of the law of unintended consequences that the social organization of the sex/gender system, with distinct gender roles, ideas about the performance of femininity, and male dominance serves not to encourage heterosexual relationships for women who might otherwise have them but rather causes them to reject heterosexuality as an option.

The stories of Rachel and Frieda somewhat bring to mind the hapless inmate of Goffman's (1961) total institution. Both women had been in the "institution" of a lesbian community long enough to know that the narrative that told the "true" story of their essential selves was not valued in that setting. Navigating the social world was not entirely impossible if they stuck to their bisexual guns but issues with friends and partners were uncomfortable and ongoing. Their stories demonstrated the power of dominant narratives in both subcultural social worlds and the larger social world as well. In both worlds there is the idea of the true and reliable lesbian which is thought to be incompatible with bisexuality. Both women learned to mouth the party line – which they felt did not really tell the story of who they really were - and for the most part identified themselves publicly as lesbians.

Also of note in the stories of bisexual women, and other women as well, is the relative sense of threat experienced by male and female sexual partners. Rachel reported that during her period of dating both women and men her male partners were not as threatened by her bisexuality as were her female partners and the lesbian community at large. In her experience, "women tend to be concerned, especially for those of us who

have come from the heterosexual world that we will return". Olivia explicitly discussed that her husband was not threatened when she came to him to talk about her same-sex desires, helping her to select an outfit to wear on her first trip to a lesbian bar. Only when her abstract and generalized feelings became specific to the point of falling in love with Tamara did he realize both the magnitude and reality of the threat. Other women also reported husbands who were told about burgeoning interest in women and who supported exploration on the part of their wives – presumably because such exploration was not viewed as threatening. In the case of Ellen, who will be discussed in the next chapter, her husband encouraged the development of a relationship with a woman, paying for the women to go on vacation together and helping her to put together ensembles that the other woman would find attractive.

One possible explanation for these observations lies at the intersection of compulsory heterosexuality, the valuation of men (and relationships with them) over women, and the phenomenon of heterosexual privilege. In response to a probe about her current girlfriend's admitted reluctance to involve herself with women who identify themselves as bisexuals, Frieda responded,

...the only thing I can imagine is that women have this assumption that if you're bi and you meet a man you're going to prefer the man to her, but I don't know why that would be. I mean if you care deeply for a person you care deeply for a person. You might find someone else you prefer more but it could be a man or a woman. Right? I think she had someone leave her once for a man, but she also had someone leave her once for another woman, so, you know. I don't know what would be threatening but apparently it is. I, I think it's part of women's you know lack of self-esteem as women, that the men are somehow better and obviously it's going to attract you more. That's the only thing I can think of.

Another subject in the study, Cynthia, who is also a Shifter, but adamantly not bisexual, provided additional perspective on the devaluation of bisexuality among some

lesbians (even those with substantial heterosexual experience of their own) when she observed that,

“to me, bisexuals, I always viewed them as people who couldn’t make up their mind and wanted it both ways and you know, you only had issues half the time if you were bisexual – when you were in your gay mode”

By this she meant the stigma and social difficulties that can come with living a gay life in a heterosexist world. These remarks echo Stein’s (1997) discussion of the way that “lifelong” lesbians may be suspicious of the level of commitment a woman with extensive heterosexual experience might have to living a lesbian life, with the difficulties that come from being part of a derogated minority. When the going gets tough, women who *can* function happily as heterosexuals might just belly up to the privilege trough, leaving the women with essential lesbianism behind. This suspicion is likely intensified if the woman seems unwilling to stake a strong lesbian identity claim. As noted in the story of Cynthia, even women who have extensive satisfying heterosexual experience of their own can be suspicious or scornful of those who call themselves bisexual because they only have “issues” in their “gay mode”.

Unlike Frieda, Rachel, and other bisexuals, *Always Knew* and *Retrospective* lesbians did not, for the most part, discuss ongoing rejection by the lesbian community. Some experienced suspicion early on that they might just be straight women dabbling in the gay life, an occurrence that has given rise to the well-known lesbian maxim “straight girls will break your heart”. Peggy, for example, encountered significant suspicion on the part of the friends of Trixie, the woman with whom she became involved while she was still married.

they thought she was digging herself an open hole in the ground, you know like to bury herself and it took a long time before – it took a good

long time before they accepted the fact that I was still with her ... They thought I was somebody that was just like a cheap, a cheap thrill or something just testing, or just, you know, just playing a game you know just maybe curious or something like that, you know?

Like Peggy, for whom the distrust ended years ago, most of the women who reported suspicion from the lesbian community early on, stated that such was no longer the case. Always Knew and Retrospective lesbians are, of course, telling stories of an essential lesbian self – one that was either denied or repressed. The story of the lifelong lesbian seems to be the dominant and most accepted story in the lesbian community, at least the communities in which the subjects of this study operated. This story of the always and enduring lesbian self was told by the Always Knews and the Retrospectives, but not by the bisexual Shifters. For at least some of the bisexual Shifters, regardless of their longevity in the community, navigating their social world was made more difficult and their stories fractured into what they knew was true for their inside selves and what needed to be claimed by their social selves. Women who believed themselves to be truly bisexual lived a peculiar kind of closeted existence in the lesbian communities of which they were a part.

It is important to note that for Frieda and Rachel, as well as other women in the study, taking on the public identity of lesbian was more than merely folding up in the face of “biphobia” in the lesbian community. For some it was an important political statement or at least an acknowledgement that they were living an outwardly lesbian life, in a lesbian community, even if their internal orientation was bisexual. As Frieda put it, “I’ll say I’m a lesbian because it’s not a disloyalty, you know?” Sarah, a 58-year-old university professor, had always identified her sexuality as bisexual but said, “politically I’m a lesbian, I am very comfortable with that term.” She went on to say, “I feel like it’s

very important ... to claim that identity and say the word and give people models that I didn't have." These women made a personal and political choice to ally themselves with, and demonstrate a commitment to, a stigmatized group in the belief that loyalty and visibility were an important part of strengthening the community.

### Stories of Fluidity and Change

Unlike Olivia who had settled on a bisexual identity, Bea made sense of her experience by telling a story in which her sexuality was fluid and changeable, depending on the sex of her partner in combination with the internal sense of desire she felt at any given time. As these things changed, her sexuality changed as well. Bea was somewhat mystified by the twists and turns of her sexual history. She put together a story that was complicated for the listener but made sense for her. Like many of the women in the study, she had pieces of other story types within the tale she told, but the overarching theme was that sexuality shifts and changes, even though she thought that was kind of strange.

At the time of the interview, Bea was a 59-year-old self-employed woman who worked out of her home located in the suburbs of a major US city on the East Coast. She was clearly looking forward to the interview and was concerned that the three hours she had allotted for the interview might not be enough time. I assured her that most interviews lasted only 1.5 to 2 hours and we then proceeded to use up all but 2 minutes of the three hours she had set aside. She relished telling her story and provided great detail and extensive quotes of what she and the various other characters in her tale had said, when they said it, and how they felt. Bea is very active in the lesbian community, coordinating a lesbian social group that meets regularly for dinners and other activities.



Bea was married twice, once for 20 years and once for nine. In both cases the marriages ended when she was widowed. Following the end of her first marriage she dated only men. Following her second marriage, she dated men as well, having no desire for women or any inkling that she might. Through a chance series of events she ended up in a ménage à trois with her boyfriend at the time and another woman. While very little went on between the two women, she found herself intrigued and interested and went on to fall for the other woman pretty hard. In Bea's words, "I'm realizing I'm in love with this woman. I really go for her. I go for her sexually which really was an odd feeling." This was followed by a rejection on the part of this other woman and then a period of intense investigation of the lesbian community. Bea went to bars, hung out with lesbians and actively looked for a female sexual partner. She ended up having a few relationships with women and at the time of the interview was in a relationship with a woman with whom she had been partnered for two years.

Bea described her sexuality as fluid but added that her present identification is lesbian. Her discussion of the various categories and how she arrived at her own sense of sexuality and identity was both interesting and complicated. Unlike some of the other women in this category, Bea did not think of herself as bisexual, although according to her understanding of what that meant she might be in the future. She is serially one sexuality or the other depending on both the sex of her partner – and thus her behavior – and also her desires. In her own words:

I think that, I, I, I would still say my sexuality is fluid, but if I'm finding a man that I'm with and I'm - it would depend how I felt. Did I feel like I'm not interested in women anymore? Then I would say I would have had to be heterosexual, which is weird, but, I don't know, I think the other is weird. I think from here [heterosexuality] to here [lesbianism] is weird, so I think from here [lesbianism] to here [heterosexuality] is gonna, you

know, would be a weird transition, but I think it's a possibility and would I say then, now I'm a heterosexual again? Unless I found other attract – still found women attractive and was still sexually attracted to women while I had a boyfriend. Then I would be bisex - I would feel I was bisexual.

When asked about the nature of sexuality - how one gets to be heterosexual or homosexual - she had some difficulty explaining her thoughts on the issue and demonstrated some continued surprise that this lesbian experience and lesbian self had unfolded for her. Like the Retrospective Lesbians, Bea was able to delve into her past to find evidence of early interest in women, but she did not fully incorporate them into the story of her sexuality the way the Retrospective lesbians did. For example, Bea discussed an interest in looking at pornographic images of women but did not marshal that as evidence that she had always been a lesbian like Tara, a Retrospective lesbian, did. Tara had incorporated her recollected desire to look at sexual images of women into her heterosexual life at the time by assuming that all women had fantasies about women, but in retrospect used it as confirmation of her always existing but underground lesbian self. Rather, Bea found her history with viewing pornographic magazines interesting (and somewhat curious) in retrospect but did not report that it indicated she had always been a lesbian. In her view, when she was married she was heterosexual and now that she is with a woman and does not experience current attractions to men, she is a lesbian. She will identify in the future as one or the other or both depending on both the sex of her sexual partners and the sexual desires she experiences at that time.

Bea's story focused on the role that circumstance plays in a person's sexual sense of self. She was convinced that had her first husband not died she would still be married to him and that the emergence of lesbian desires would not have occurred. Like Olivia,

she believed that the potential was somehow always within her, but unlike Olivia, whose sexuality remained constant over time, Bea's changed from one to the other and, given the right confluence of relationship and desire, could change again.

Bea was not alone in her belief that sexuality might be fluid or changeable in response to outside circumstances. Trudy's story for example, referenced the piece of the dominant discourse in which lesbianism can be caused by experiences of sexual or physical abuse either in childhood families or adult relationships. Trudy was a 49-year-old ordained minister from the Midwest. We met in her rather cramped apartment in a desirable neighborhood in a small Mid-Atlantic city. She grew up with a sexually abusive father and married a verbally, but not physically, abusive husband. She reflected on the number of other lesbians she knew who also had histories of violence.

I have heard so many lesbians share violent pasts you know that I just don't feel like we can say they were born that way [lesbian]. What if they had grown up with a really healthy father, what would that have looked like? I don't know. And I don't know for myself. What I do know is that, that experience has profoundly impacted my sense of well-being around who I'm in relationship with...

Trudy did not rule out that some people might be "born that way" but made it clear she thought that explanation was insufficient to cover all cases, including hers. This did not mean, however, that she thought sexuality was necessarily a choice. She believed her sense of safety had been so compromised that relationships with men were no longer possible.

But it's emotional, it's like it doesn't have to do with my genetics, it has to do with my experience. My experiences have, you know, the profound sense of what that has done to my soul and psyche at this point to me, it's not a choice. It, it's how I determine my sense of safety and my own sense of how I thrive best.

With Trudy's story we again see the social construction of heterosexuality – which includes the sexuality availability of women (including children) for men, regardless of consent – as an impetus for women moving away from heterosexual lives. Trudy is included as a fluid Shifter because for her, a specific sexuality was not necessarily present at birth – at least not for her – but rather shifts and evolves depending on life experience, particularly trauma. Trudy did at one time identify as bisexual because it was a “safe way to enter into it”, meaning relationships with women. She now defines herself as a lesbian, although not definitively as having been born that way.

The idea that women become lesbians because of relationships with men is not without its advocates in the dominant culture. The construct that women loving women is about men is the mark of a truly phallogocentric society. It is worth noting that all of the other women in the study, who mentioned abuse at the hands of men, either their own experience or the occurrence more generally, explicitly rejected that as having anything to do with either their own relationships with women or the lesbianism of others. So while there are some consistencies in the dominant construction of sexuality in the larger culture and in the lesbian subculture – essentialism for example – there other points at which the superordinate and subordinate cultures significantly diverge in their ideas. All of the women – with the exception of Trudy –, who referenced this piece of the dominant narrative, rejected it out of hand.

Another of the women who came to her sexual identity through circumstance was Gretchen. Gretchen was the only one of the subjects of the study who, like Arlene Stein's (1997) elective lesbians, came to relationships with women purposefully via a commitment to feminist politics. Through exposure to these ideas, Gretchen decided to

pursue physical relationships with women even though she didn't experience herself as being attracted to women. In her words:

But it wasn't as if, okay I had this tremendous attraction to women so now I'm gonna explore that. It was really more my challenging myself and saying well why am I only assuming I'm a - you know can be with men because I love being with women ... but I didn't have that sort of basic physical feeling and I just thought well alright, I'm gonna challenge that. So I did and I found alright, you know, that I... just could shift that and I sort of, as I said, I felt like um, that I had learned certain behaviors and assumptions and that I could break through that learning.

Gretchen is a Shifter because she was able to challenge and change her sexuality.

She completely identified as a heterosexual in her marriage and in other relationships with men. She did not consider those experiences to be inauthentic or against an essential nature. She was able to push the boundaries of her experience and even her desire, through making a decision and implementing it. Her first encounter with a woman was not particularly satisfying but Gretchen wasn't sure if it was just because of the person or if it was because the person was a woman. Gretchen, an intrepid investigator, stuck with it. She has been with her partner, Betty, for almost thirty years. Gretchen now has a strong lesbian identity that is, in part, political in nature. She is a well-known lesbian activist and business owner in her community. Gretchen believed that if there was no homophobia (and no sexism) more people would be open to relationships with both sexes. Like many of the Shifters, however, Gretchen also believed that sexuality is more biologically based for some than for others.

Bernice echoed this idea of a biologically based sexuality imperative that is more significant for some than for others. When pondering why some people are more exclusively heterosexual or homosexual than she is, Bernice opined that there might be "something in your little body, some little chromosome or whatever you want to call it

medically, that makes you that way.” This remark clearly reflects the prevailing idea on one side of the homosexuality debate, that sexuality is an essential attribute based in biology. Bernice does not think she has that “little thing” however, so her own sexuality story is one that falls outside the controlling narrative with which she is clearly familiar. Bernice, a 65-year old mother of two who was retired from a civil service job, believed that unlike people with the “little chromosome”, her sexuality could change and had changed. She was heterosexual when she was married and is lesbian now. She has been with her current partner for over 20 years and hopes it “lasts another 50 thousand years”. Were something to happen to her partner, Bernice reported that the possibility of a relationship with a man in the future was extremely unlikely, in part because “now my circle is so involved with all these lesbians”, but not entirely out of the question. If such a relationship were to occur, Bernice believed she would switch back from lesbian to heterosexual again. For Bernice and some of the other fluid Shifters, sexuality inheres not in an individual but in the sex of one’s sexual partner.

Fluid or changeable Shifters, in general, rejected the identity of bisexual as being an appropriate description of their own sexuality. Some, like Cynthia (mentioned above), rejected it because of the negative connotations that are attached to that sexual signifier in either the mainstream or lesbian cultures. Others rejected it because, unlike Olivia, they felt that their desires and/or experiences with women versus men were either not simultaneous or not of equivalent intensity. This definition of bisexuality as an even-stein kind of experience allowed many of the women in all of the story groupings to compare themselves out of a bisexual identity even in the face of bisexual experiences and behaviors.

Having described some of the differences between bisexual and fluid Shifters, it is clear there are some similarities as well. Both groups adhered to a greater or lesser degree to the idea that sexuality can be an inborn thing, just that that wasn't so for them. None of them believed in a strictly binary view of sexuality, again at least not for them although they acknowledged that it might be so for others. Additionally, most of the Shifter's had no inkling of same-sex desires until they were in adulthood at which time the emergence of those feelings was often confusing and sometimes unwelcome. Several of the women of both types referenced investigating the issue of their emerging feelings either with friends or therapists, or through searching out materials on sexuality. This period of surprising and perhaps unwanted discovery followed by a period of investigation calls to mind two perhaps interrelated ideas present in the literature on the development of a sexual identity.

The first of these is the psychological notion of foreclosed identity. According to psychologists such as Erikson (1959) and Marcia (1966) identity is achieved through crises and commitments. Crises in this context are not crises in the everyday usage of that term. Rather, they are defined as periods of active exploration during which people investigate the possible identities to which they might commit. Commitment is achieving stability in important areas of life, such as identity. People in foreclosure commit to an identity without the crisis period of investigation. As is the case with many people who grow up in a strongly heteronormative and homophobic culture, Shifters made a commitment to a heterosexual identity during adolescence without a period of investigatory crisis. Later, in adulthood, they found themselves unexpectedly attracted to

women, which then precipitated a period of investigation and exploration, the outcome of which was to develop a commitment to another sexual identity.

The second thing to note about stories of uncomfortable feelings and investigation is that such stories are completely in keeping with Plummer's (1995) ideas about the standard template of coming out stories. Plummer argues that in certain cultural conditions particular types of stories become popular and formulaic. One such story is the coming out tale. An important part of the formula of the coming out story for young gays and lesbians is a sense of otherness and confusion that prompts research into the area of sexuality. Following that research, as well as forays into the gay community, a gay or lesbian identity is accepted and achieved. Thus the formulaic coming out story perhaps reflects and reinforces the crisis and commitment model of identity development outlined above. For the women in this study, the timing of those events was aberrant, but the process of exploration followed by stability and the ability to at least partially fit their story into the commonly accepted formula left them with intelligible stories.

It can be argued that Shifters straddle the line between the Always Knew and Retrospective lesbians and the Left Fielders. The first two groups tell stories that are easily intelligible within the prevailing framework of understanding about sexuality. Always Knews and Retrospectives told stories in which they took on a subordinate and devalued identity and they took it on at a life stage not commonly associated with the development of sexuality. In this way their stories were not the norm, but they used the key components of essentialism and dichotomy as the basic framework upon which to hang their tales.



Shifter stories, as noted, are somewhat intelligible as well. They are intelligible in that Shifters utilize concepts from the dominant ideology about sexuality as a commonly recognized foundation upon which their non-traditional story of sexuality is built. From that foundation, however, their stories diverge. Shifter stories include the idea for example that my sexuality and yours might not come from the same place. I might be influenced by circumstance and you might have been “born that way.” I might be able to change my mind about my sexuality (as did Gretchen) and your sexuality might change as you go from person to person. This is perhaps one of the most subversive elements of the Shifter stories. A significant part of the sexuality debate is whether or not people are “born that way.” Shifter stories imply that it’s not clear-cut, that one side of the debate is not necessarily any more right than the other. Shifters say it might be both and that the whole debate is a little bit beside the point. For both heterosexual and homosexual people in the strongly essentialist camp this story is outside their standard frame of reference, and likely threatening as well.

On the other side of the line that the Shifters straddle are the Left Fielders. Left Fielders have stories that are farther outside the dominant narrative of sexuality than are the stories of the Shifters. For Left Fielders sexual shifts come from who knows where. For the women discussed next very little seems to fit. The hegemonic narrative with its essentialist absolutes and its insistence that people are one or the other provides little in the way of concepts the women can deploy to describe their current circumstance. Instead, as we will see, they utilize other cultural ideas such as soul mates, destiny, that desire, including sexual desire is independent of the sex of the object, and the impossibility of rejecting a love that was meant to be.

## CHAPTER 5 SEXUALITY THAT COMES FROM LEFT FIELD

*“Imagine my surprise! To find that I love you...  
(Holly Near, *Imagine My Surprise*, Redwood Records, 1978)*

The final group of women is made up of those who tell the story of lesbian relationships that come from left field. Eight of the 36 women fell into this category. Of those eight, five told stories that were “strong” Left Field stories and the other three told “weak” Left Field stories. The attributes and experiences of the five “strong” Left Fielders are important, in terms of understanding the stories they tell and perhaps why they tell them. All but one of the “strong” Left Fielders have been with women for less than two years, have weak ties to a larger lesbian world, did not have relationships with women prior to a “life changing event”, and have had only one female sexual partner (with the exception of one woman who when she came out to an old friend, had sex with that friend because the woman wanted to know what “it” was like).

### Strong Left Fielders

Early in my interview with her, Joyce said, “it’s just freaking – it’s just bizarre, bizarre to me. You know? Just, hit me out of left field.” This remark prompted me to call this type of story the Left Field story and Joyce’s tale provides an excellent illustration of the experience of same sex attraction and relationship that comes from out of the blue. Joyce was perhaps the most difficult of the interviews conducted for this research. The loss of the relationship with the first woman she fell in love with was still fresh and Joyce struggled to contain her sadness and her tears as she showed me photographs of the woman for whom she had turned her entire life upside down. At the

time of the interview Joyce was a twice married, once divorced mother of three living in a row house on a quiet street in a small historic city in the Mid-Atlantic region. She was a small, attractive blond who was interested in telling her story despite the painful memories it brought up for her. Like several of the Left Fielders, Joyce participated in part because she thought that studies into this phenomenon were important as they might help other women going through this difficult-to-understand life event.

Joyce was first married at the age of twenty-one. She described it as the kind of marriage where you meet a man, he becomes your best friend, you live together, and then you get married because it's the next thing and you're not even entirely sure why you did it. They divorced after nine years because they were talking about starting a family and being intimate with him had become increasingly difficult for her until she reached a point where "I just could not be intimate with him at all." Following the divorce she dated men. It did not occur to her to date women. She found one man, Charley, with whom she enjoyed being intimate. She feels of all the men in her life he was the one with whom she was most in love. He had some problems maintaining his fidelity, however, and so that relationship wasn't viable.

She got married again at thirty, again to someone with whom she did not want to have sex. But she wanted children – an issue raised by many women in the study, either as a reason to get married, or as a positive part of their heterosexual experience for which they were grateful – and so she married him because it seemed like he would be "a nice husband." She reported that at this point she had absolutely no inkling whatsoever that she might be interested in relationships with women. After a number of years of marriage

and having three children, Joyce decided to return to work and a life-changing event occurred in a Midwest airport. This was how Joyce told the story:

And then I'm getting ready to go back to work after my sabbatical and I um, it was weird, it was like it was meant to be, but I'm flying out to my job in Indianapolis and I was reading that - a book that I just picked up at the bookstore called *The Night Watch* and it's about these two women in the war over in Germany and they are together. I'm like - honest to god - something clicked in my brain and I got off the plane and I'm waiting for the trainer who's gonna get me back up to speed at work, cuz it was the same company, and she walks towards me and I'm like that's why I read the book. And I swear to god, it was just like, I just fell in love with her, from the moment I saw her and it was just like life altering. And um, that was in January - yeah, January I met her and I didn't even know if she was a lesbian, I didn't know, cuz you couldn't tell. Whatever. And just, I was just like, I'm in love with this girl whoever she is...

This quote illustrates themes that were repeated in several of the stories of the strong Left Fielders. These themes include a sense of the destiny of it all, a sense of an utter and unexpected change in their fundamental selves, the popular notion that everyone may have a one and only soul mate, and the force, unpredictability, and intensity of "falling in love". The degree to which love is conceived as a powerful, uncontrollable and potentially damaging force is amply demonstrated by the phrase "falling in love" which implies an out of control and possibly dangerous experience. Other metaphors for love with similar implications of power and potential doom include burning with lust or desire, or being swept off one's feet. Here the elements of fire and water are invoked to reinforce the idea that the power of love is irresistible. While these specific metaphors were not used by the Left Fielders, they are provided here as examples of the cultural commonplace of describing love as a force that is difficult if not impossible to control or resist.

Unlike the Retrospective lesbians with their multiple stories rich in detail, Joyce had only begun the process of developing hindsight into finding latent feelings and other clues in her past that would explain her current situation. She had only one example in which another girl may or may not have tried to kiss her, “and I’m like no, uh-uh. And that was it”. Neither does she have the Retrospective story component of utter lesbian invisibility that blocked her from knowing her “real” lesbian nature. The small Central Pennsylvania town she grew up in, she reported, had no diversity. She only knew “heterosexual relationships and white relationships”. However, a lesbian cousin who had been disowned by her own family came to live with Joyce’s family and Joyce was aware of that woman’s lesbianism. It just didn’t apply to her. In her view, lesbians, like her cousin, looked and acted more like boys than like girls and that was not true for Joyce either then or now. According to Joyce, she was stereotypically feminine as a child, reporting that, “I loved Barbie dolls and girl things.” Her internalization of the popular idea of lesbians as masculine, which was confirmed for her by the presence of her not very feminine cousin, met up with her experience and sense of herself as appropriately feminine so she was able to place herself outside the boundaries of what she perceived lesbians to be. She appeared conventionally feminine at the time of the interview, sporting a blond bob, makeup, and a sweater set. Her perception of lesbians, however, has changed since the days of her cousin and her love affair with Monica and now does include her. For Joyce now any woman could be a lesbian, in her words, “all of a sudden every woman became this beautiful potential creature, you know, that could be lesbian too.”

Vicky, another Left Fielder, found herself falling in love with Robin, her aerobics instructor, her first, and thus far only, instance of feeling attracted to a woman.

I realized that early on that this was a friendship like no other. And that's when I started to get nervous, you know, physically nervous, like, okay, I don't understand this. These butterflies that I feel, I've never felt for a woman before...Um, but that was nerve-wracking, saying what is this physical feeling of I'm interested in her. I want to touch her. I want to hug her. I think I want to kiss her. You know, like holy crap.

The woman went on a trip out of town and then invited Vicky to join her:

So I go down there and we met in the airport and I was like holy crap this is huge. This is life-changing stuff because I love her more than I've ever loved anyone. In, in a way that is different than a way I've ever loved anyone.

Shortly thereafter Vicky left her husband of eleven years and has been with this woman for the past nine months. She does not identify as a lesbian because she has had only one attraction to a woman. Her remarks about her feelings for Robin demonstrate a clear qualitative difference in the feelings she has for her relative to feelings she had experienced in her relationships with men. Additionally, Vicky had the kind of extremely negative reaction to heterosexual sex that was reported by only a very few of the women that were interviewed. According to Vicky,

...the thought of being with a man again sexually really gets me a little nervous in my stomach. I, um, see what I just did, I clenched my fists, I used to do that when I was having sex because it was so painful for me. And, um, the thought of being sexual with a man really is very painful for me. Now that I'm out of it and I realize that sex doesn't have to be painful and you don't have to cry after it every time, and you don't have to go in the bathroom and rip your hair out and sweep it into a towel – now that I realize that sex is something that is so different than what I used to experience, um, I can't imagine being with a man.

Despite the qualitative difference in her feelings and her radically different reactions to sexual intimacy, Vicky does not think of herself as a lesbian. In her mind she

has not reached the critical mass of sufficient partners, or sufficient time in relationships with women that are necessary for her to feel comfortable with that designation. Other Left Fielders echoed this sense that it was difficult to think of themselves as lesbians, although some of them were beginning to, because they had only had one female attraction and/or one female partner. In this way it seems that lesbian or gay sexuality has to be achieved and/or demonstrated often through compiling a number of partners or a lengthy period of time in same-sex relationships. Heterosexuality, as the unmarked norm and default condition does not require this compilation of experience in order for it to be “proven” to be true. Hegemonic heterosexuality is such that one just *is* heterosexual until there is overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Suzanne stated this clearly when she tried to discuss the way that she thinks about her sexual identity. She begins by saying, “I’m not coming to the fact that I’m gay”, rather she just thinks of herself as a woman who is in a relationship with a woman. She went on to say that if her relationship with Alison (subject 32, also a Left Fielder) ended and she went on to have another relationship with a woman, then she would be gay.

Cuz then I’ve made a conscious decision. Then I’ve made a conscious decision to be with another woman, whereas with Alison I really believe it’s just something that happened and it’s amazing and it was meant to be.

So for Suzanne a one-time bolt out of the blue does not make one gay. Even if she and Alison live their lives together for the rest of their lives, Suzanne reported she will likely still believe that Alison “just happens to be the person for me.” The story of being in love with a person who happens to be woman is, according to Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1995), a fairly common form of what they call “resisting naming oneself as a lesbian.”

Joyce moved back and forth on this issue, wondering if perhaps her attraction to women is really just an attraction to Monica (the woman from the airport with whom she had an 18-month relationship that had ended relatively recently). She did take on a lesbian identity but clearly wasn't totally certain. The possibility of her feelings for Monica constituting a singular event lurked like a somewhat academic yet still prickly question in the back of her mind. She reported finding other women attractive – which was not true for Vicky and Suzanne – and had begun to try to make forays into the lesbian community. She is also the woman who had a sexual encounter with an old friend when the old friend wanted to know what “it” was like. It seems Joyce has perhaps begun a journey to achieving a lesbian identity because she has started to gather the data (more than one partner, experiencing attractions) that facilitates taking on that designation. She seems to have begun the process, which was much more elaborated and farther along in the stories of the Retrospective lesbian stories, of what Ponse (1980) calls biography reconstruction in which particular events are selected from the past that seem to be germane to the present. She refers to it as “those are like things I look in hindsight and go, oh, you know? That explains a lot.”

Still it was clear Joyce did not have a story of herself in which she had always and continuously been a lesbian. Rather, she believed that something had happened almost at the cellular level that caused a fundamental shift in who she was and is. She said she felt perhaps her “hormones have shifted” or “maybe there’s some chemistry in my brain that has just kind of shifted around a little bit”. She theorized that maybe she had been “on the brink” and then “something happened as I had kids and whatever and my chemistry changed.” Perhaps it is easier for Joyce to begin to think of herself as a lesbian because



she has framed the change in such a way that she is in some ways disconnected from her past. Regardless of what she was then, her chemistry shifted and she is a lesbian now – although the way she talked about it made it clear that she was not yet totally convinced. She reported that she did not know if she had “settled on any particular” identity but guesses she would refer to herself as a lesbian.

So Left Field women tell stories in which they have found their one true love who happens to be a woman or they have changed at the level of biology or at least at the level of desire. As Vicky (who also referred to this experience as coming out of left field) explained:

My sexuality changed when I met her. So, can people change – I think they can because I think I did. I was heterosexual. I had only been with men. And now I’m with a woman and um, so technically, yeah, I did change.

As noted above, Vicky does not, however, think she is a lesbian. She believes that her attraction to Robin, the aerobics instructor, just has to do with Robin and that she would feel the same way if Robin were a man. (This despite her reported extreme difficulty with being sexual with men). So her sexuality has changed from heterosexual but not really to anything else, at least not at this stage. The fact of being sexual with a woman puts her construction of heterosexuality out of reach, but is not sufficient to give her a new place to land.

These kinds of statements are clearly different than those of Retrospective lesbians like Helen, who’s “oh” moment just allowed her inherent self to emerge. For Helen there was no fundamental change in her being, she just needed an external event to trigger the discovery of her “true” self. Helen and the other Retrospective lesbians had always been lesbians. Their sexuality had not changed, only their behavior had. For the

Left Fielders, their behavior had changed, their desires had changed, and for some their identity had begun to change. For others, their identity had not yet (and might never) change but they were struggling with how to think about and talk about an experience they did not expect, was in some cases unwanted, and that to a large extent did not make sense to them. Having lived the early part of their lives as unquestioning heterosexuals they had fully internalized the construct of heterosexuality as natural and quite incompatible with homosexual desires. The dichotomy that was once so comfortable made their current circumstance one in which they were uncertain and uneasy about what their desires might mean and from where they had come.

As noted above, all of these women have been with women for less than a year and a half and have very little contact with either a larger lesbian community or a lesbian friendship network. It seems reasonable to consider that part of the reason they struggle to tell the kind of “gelled” story some of the women in the other categories were able to tell is that their experience falls outside the dominant narrative – that people have one unchangeable sexuality – and that they have had insufficient exposure to a lesbian world that might help them to construct a framework for their situation. A substantial minority of lesbians has been married and many others have had relationships with men. Exposure to other lesbians who have integrated marriages and/or relationships with men into a lesbian or bisexual identity would likely assist a woman in making a different kind of sense of her experience. The resulting story would, of course, not be any more “true” than the story the woman told in the interview but might contain more components of the other story types, particularly the Retrospective lesbian story.

The one remaining strong Left Fielder, Ellen, has been with her female partner for six years, but, like the Left Fielders already discussed she has had very limited exposure to the lesbian community or a lesbian friendship network, and has had only one female partner. Additionally, all but the last few months of her relationship with her current partner occurred while she was still married to, and sexually active with, her husband and took place with his blessing. She was thus able to incorporate her “lesbian” self into her already existing heterosexual life. Like the other Left Fielders, she does not know what to say about her sexuality. She rejected labels, but said if she *had* to pick something she would pick lesbian. She has begun to make forays into the lesbian community, has a couple of lesbian friends, and has seen many therapists in an effort to figure out what has happened. With the help of her therapist, she uncovered an attraction to a woman she experienced as an adult and one 6<sup>th</sup> grade “infatuation” with another girl. Perhaps over time she will be able to elaborate these attractions and “uncover” more. She remains, for now, a Left Fielder, but seems to be making moves to put together a story that, were the interview to occur one year later than it did might have resulted in her story being classified as Retrospective.

It seems possible that for some of the women in the other categories, Left Field was a stopping point where the story was not yet well formed, awaiting the application of a framework supplied by either a manipulation of the dominant narrative to fit the woman’s experience, or of the powerful story of sexuality that permeates much of the lesbian community. Left Field as a way station is likely not true for everyone. For example Danielle, who was discussed in Chapter 3, reports that she never thought of herself as heterosexual and never had sex with a man. She had a relationship with a

woman when she was 15 and began, at that time, to think of herself as gay. She was never a Left Fielder as her sexual desire for women in adulthood did not come as a surprise to her. Similarly, the split-second nature of Helen's "oh" moment did not leave her enough time to get to left field between her experience of herself as heterosexual and her experience of herself as lesbian. Her retrospective account of her seemingly instant understanding of her various crushes and her gender nonconformity indicated that for her it all made instant biographical sense.

Other women, though, did seem to make a pit stop in Left Field but no longer told a Left Field story. Kimberly – a Retrospective lesbian - for example, fell in love with a woman who had been her friend for a number of years. She found this shocking and very disturbing. She and the other woman – both devout Christians - launched into a vigorous program of prayer trying to find out what was happening and what to do about it. They began an affair, are now both divorced, and have been together for four years. In the early part of this experience, Kimberly would say to her partner, "I'm not gay, I'm just in love with you". This was a significant theme in stories told by Left Fielders such as Vicky and Suzanne. As she now solidly identified herself as gay (because lesbian has bad connotations) I asked her what changed that. To which she replied:

I think time changed that. I think time and, and identification with a group of people that I can now identify with. That I know what it's like to be thought of differently, to be, you know, pointed out - you know, whatever. Suddenly it's like I identify this - with that because that's what I am.  
*(laughs)* You know? How can you not identify with that?

Kimberly's story reinforces the rather common sense explanation that time and exposure to a community helps a person to accept an identity and develop the story that supports it. It also points up the way that stigma or being "thought of differently" can solidify a sense

of “otherness” that may help to gel an identity around the stigmatized trait. Kimberly ended up with an elaborated story of gayness that included multiple early attractions, a set of sexual experiences with men in which she always fantasized she was with women and a sense of herself as a tomboy. Unlike Helen’s recounting of her instantaneous “oh” moment, however, it seems Kimberly’s story took some time to be developed and integrated. Her somewhat subversive story of sexual attraction being a function of who the person is and not the gender of the person, gave way to a more traditional story in which it turned out she was really a lesbian all along.

In a world of compulsory heterosexuality coupled with the notion that people are either one sexuality or another, it is fair to say that probably many of the women in all of the categories were initially surprised at the unexpected and often unwelcome turn of events in which they found themselves attracted to women. The impact and significance of that surprise presented itself at different levels of intensity for some women than for others. Some of the women reported racing to therapists or friends with the frightening news, others went to the library or the Internet, and others just struggled internally. It seems reasonable to conclude, that for some of the women who told *Retrospective*, *Always Knew*, or *Shifter* stories had the interviews been done at the time of the “freak out” their stories might have had a more Left Field flavor.

#### Weak Left Fielders

As noted at the beginning of the Chapter, there are three remaining Left Fielders, whose experiences and the stories of those experiences differ somewhat from those of the women above. These three have been with women from seven to nearly thirty years, they have all had more than one same-sex relationship, and they are all part of a rich lesbian

community or friendship network. This makes them very different from the Left Field lesbians already discussed and for this reason the stories they tell are different but still retain a strong Left Field flavor. These women, for example, do not have multiple and elaborated stories of early yearnings and crushes. They take on gay or lesbian identities but do not seem to have really delved into the whole issue of what it all means and how to coordinate it with the dominant narrative about sexuality

Nicole, whose story was briefly told in Chapter 2, is an excellent example of this type of Left Fielder. Upon being kissed by a woman for the first time, Nicole promptly charged off to her therapist to try to ferret out the answer to the question of whether or not she had been a lesbian all along.

I went through a thing with this with my counselor – was I gay all along and that was what caused the problems in your marriage, or was it a result of the bad marriage that made me gay? ...My counselor finally got on me to the point where it doesn't really matter. You know what you like right now and you can...continue to spend money trying to figure it out (*laugh*) but does it really matter that much?

Nicole took this advice to heart and many years later had still not developed the kind of elaborated sense-making story that the Always Knew, Retrospective, and Shifter women had. Several of her partners and many women in her social circle had been married as well so Nicole found that her marriage and her road to lesbianism had not really been challenged or questioned. Therefore, it did not really require explanation. Her therapy experience and her social circle made the development of a story seem optional, and Nicole opted not to create one. She did adhere to a loose “born that way” ideology. When asked specifically about it she ably articulated the public debate on the matter but did not really claim it as her own story.

Like I said I kind of decided to put it away for myself and not even go there, but um, (*pause*) why you're attracted to somebody is - when they can start answering that question for us then maybe they'll have an answer, you know, to whether you're gay all along or whether you're socialized that way.

Karen's story is similar to Nicole's in some ways, except she wasn't instructed by a therapist to avoid the morass surrounding the origins of sexuality. She freely admitted that she does not take a lot of time in her life with introspection and analysis. For Karen, compiling data to make sense of her experiences didn't seem all that important either in general or in this particular life arena. Her experiences were what they were, unexpected, surprising, and ultimately positive. She is happy with the life she has with her partner of nearly 30 years and, as far as Karen is concerned, that's that,

not being an introspective person to begin with, I never really gave it much thought before or after, it just - that's the life that it was and that's the way it was... I just let it go. Now, is that denial? I don't think so. I think it's just you know - why waste that energy, and so um, make sense of it? It just is.

Karen demonstrated throughout the interview that she knows the stories available in the larger social world but it was not important for her to develop a theory about her own sexuality and then marshal evidence in support of that theory so that it could be easily related to others. Worrying about either the past or the future is, for Karen, a waste of time. In addition to being admittedly non-introspective, it may be that Karen lives a life in which her identity as gay is not sufficiently salient to require a strong narrative explanation. She and her partner of thirty years live in a luxurious home in a seaside community, she is comfortably out to her kids and grandkids, she is a successful professional, and an active churchgoer. Her friendship network is composed of gay and lesbian couples as well as straight people all of whom know she and Sally are together. Her life is such that her "gayness" is just accepted as part of who she is, but not

necessarily as a defining part of who she is. Her identity as gay may be less a core identity which might require explanation and justification than a “thread” or secondary identity (Seidman, 2004).

Both Karen and Nicole could have been put into the category of Retrospective lesbians, but their commitment to fitting their stories into the hegemonic narrative seemed to be different than that demonstrated by the women who ended up in the Retrospective lesbian group. Retrospective lesbians such as Nan, a 46 year-old woman currently partnered with a woman for 14 years following a 10 year marriage, had rich stories of early desires and/or gender non-conformity that they could present as evidence of the existing but repressed lesbian in their pasts. Nan reported attractions to women, both specific and generalized, was intrigued by women she knew to be lesbians, and did not think of herself as conventionally feminine either in the past or today. One of the things she liked about her husband was that he didn’t have a problem with her being “on the dykey side of straight.” She discussed these topics in some detail and reported them in a matter of fact way that made it obvious that she thought these points were clear evidence of the thread of lesbianism that had run throughout her life. It was also clear that she felt her analysis would also make sense to me.

Unlike Nan, neither Karen nor Nicole had such a story. Nicole told of a single early attraction to her roommate in college. Based on the way in which she recounted it, it did not seem to have all that much power either at the time or in retrospect. When asked specifically to identify her first same sex attraction (not experience), she named the woman who first kissed her at the age of 38, not her college roommate. Karen’s only reported early experience was some childhood “doctor” play with another girl. Such



exploration and experimentation is very common among children and had the event of “becoming” a lesbian not occurred for Karen, this event would likely have less power, would probably be interpreted differently, and would perhaps not even be remembered. Järvinen (2004) argues that “the ‘what it was’ is always established through the ‘what it is’” so Karen was able to find a single event, that might be relatively meaningless for someone else and cast it in a light that makes it continuous with the present. This is the nature of all life histories. Karen knows the story that “should” be told, the story that will make her current lesbianism intelligible to others, but having decided not to spend too much time on it, she had developed only a single narrative example in support of her enduring lesbianism. It just isn’t that important.

The final weak Left Fielder, Martha, has an extensive 12-step background and has used the tools of 12-step programs and applied them to this issue. According to Martha everything happens for a reason, life is full of lessons, and one needs to have had each previous experience so as to end up where they are today. Again, the kind of analysis of the whys and wherefores of the experiences are not necessary for Martha as they are for some others – she practices AA acceptance.

Neither Karen, Nicole, nor Martha felt that ferreting out the “truth” of their innermost selves was something they wanted to spend a lot of time on, so staking a strong claim and then dredging through the past to gather the data was not necessary. All three of the weak Left Fielders told stories in which they had learned to allow the discontinuity in their sexual selves to stand and not be bothered by it. When asked about the nature of sexuality and the current debate on the topic, they all ended up making statements about sexuality as an essential part of a person but in a more abstract way that reflected their

familiarity with the dominant paradigm and current debate. They applied their essentialist analyses more to the arena of sexuality in general rather than staking a strong essentialist claim for themselves.

Both types of Left Fielders tell a somewhat subversive sexuality story. The weak Left Fielders tell a story in which spending time uncovering the origins and truth of sexuality is not that important. This is clearly at odds with a culture in which Pew, the GSS, Gallup, and CNN, to name a few, are seemingly always trying to ascertain what people think about sexuality and how people get to be that way, and scientists are trying to uncover whether or not there is a gay gene. Weak Left Field stories are ones in which life comes as it comes, things happen for a reason and it is best to live in the moment. This “it is what it is” framework is not altogether unheard of in modern American culture – self help books exhort us to “live in the now” – but it is generally not applied to such an “essential” part of the self as sexuality. If, as Seidman (2004) argues, sexual orientation may be becoming less of a “core” identity and more of a “thread” identity this *que sera sera* perspective may become more common.

Strong Left Fielders tell an even more subversive story, one in which sexuality is changeable and unpredictable. For them to some degree, sexuality might be located in the other person, not within themselves. One’s soul mate might be a woman or they might be a man, perhaps today one, tomorrow the other. The stories told by Left Fielders are not stories of the slumbering lesbian awaiting (re)birth. Those are stories that tell of a devalued sexuality, but do so within a construct of essential and dichotomous sexuality, that is in keeping with “normal” ideas about sexuality, even sexualities that are stigmatized. Left Field stories are tales in which hormones may shift, or chemistry may

go haywire. They are stories where perfectly normal, everyday heterosexual women go to airports and transform into women who desire other women.

The interviews with the strong Left Fielders were some of the most interesting and in some cases the saddest. Their worlds had shifted for them, often quite recently, in ways they did not expect and could not have imagined. The strong left Fielders seemed to be living with a great deal of uncertainty about who they were, what they wanted, why they wanted what they wanted, what had happened, and what the future held. That kind of uncertainty provides an impetus to create an identity narrative that links the past to the present to the future. Tolerating discontinuity in what is thought to be as fundamental a part of life as sexuality is difficult. The weak Left Fielders – Nicole, Martha, and Karen - have learned to live with it by deciding that it isn't important. For the strong Left Fielders who cannot (or have not yet) come to that decision, it seems likely their stories will take on a new form as they try to minimize the uncertainty of a life outside both the dominant and sub-cultural narratives about human sexuality.

One possible way an identity story can be developed, worked on, normalized, and made ready for primetime is participation in a support group. Christians who don't want to be gay can go to support groups where they are provided with support and strategies to overcome their urges (Ponticelli 1999). Alcoholics can go to AA where they learn the formulaic story in which a person shifts identity from active alcoholic to recovering alcoholic. The importance of having a reference group on hand as one learns a new identity story may best be illustrated by taking a look at women who might have told Left Field stories had it not been for their access to "The Group".

## Being in “The Group”

At a Women’s Center in a small New England city women come together to participate in the “Wondering Wife” support group. An analysis of this group and the women in it may provide an example and some insight into the process of moving away from the Left Field story. The group is essentially two subgroups each of which meets one time each month. One subgroup meeting is an “open” meeting which new women attend following a screening process designed to weed out inappropriate people because the group’s online mailbox “get(s) a lot of emails from you know freaky men and husbands and women trying to pick up other women.” The other group is a more advanced “closed” group for women who are further along in the “process”. The reason for splitting the group into two was that new women coming in, in crisis, took away from dealing with the types of issues facing women who were “right in the middle of it, or towards the end of it”.

Through an online posting I was contacted by and subsequently interviewed Louise, a former member of the Wondering Wife group who had been instrumental in developing the two-group system. She became a new snowball for interviews with other group members, all of whom were at the closed group level. I did not have the opportunity to interview any of the “newbie” group women, as none of them contacted me to volunteer for the study. Including the initial contact, five women in total from the group were interviewed for this research. What Wondering Wife members said about the groups, the necessity of making two groups, and the process of group membership may be instructive in terms of understanding the evolution of a biographical narrative of a shift in sexuality.

Louise, a Retrospective lesbian whose story was told in some detail in Chapter 3, observed that new women tended to come into the group thinking

Oh, my god, this is where I am, what do I do? I'm married, I've got kids, how do I figure this out? What does this mean? How, how do I do it?

Julia, who monitors the online mailbox, gets inquiries from as far away as “South Carolina – women looking for help. Looking for, you know, some support system, who are freaking out.” Several of the women reported specifically that they were not identified as lesbian when they entered the group but merely that they had had an experience – which they found surprising and discomfiting - and wanted to share it with others and ascertain its meaning. Tara reported having a sexual relationship with a woman before joining the group and then wanting to “know is it just this one woman or if...I am a lesbian.” These kinds of feelings and reactions echo those reported by the Left Fielders – surprise, panic, the necessity for research - yet none of the group members told present-time Left Field stories. Of the five, one told a story of being an Always lesbian and the other four told stories that were categorized as Retrospective. Membership in the group highlights the way that a common community might facilitate, and in some cases pressure, the emergence of a particular kind of story about sexuality in transition.

In terms of attributes, members of the support group are not a perfect match with the Left fielders, but there are some similarities. The first of these is length of time in relationship with women. Of all the women interviewed for this study, only eight had been involved with women for less than one year. Three of these were Vicky, Suzanne, and Alison, the strong Left Fielders discussed previously. The other five were all Wondering Wife group members. Interestingly, even though group members had a somewhat stronger sense of themselves as lesbians and as lesbian over time than did the

Left Fielders, most of them were simultaneously more enmeshed in a heterosexual world. Four of the five women were still living with their husbands and two of those continued to have sexual relationships with them. Like Left Fielders, all but one of the group members had low levels of involvement with a lesbian community or friendship network apart from the group and other group members. Their limited contact with a larger lesbian social scene came mainly in the form of group members attending a once monthly lesbian “Ladies Night” at Kudos, a local club. As will be discussed later, they were not always welcome in this venue populated by women that they think of as “lifelong” lesbians. The remaining woman, Julia, has very high involvement with a number of aspects of the gay and lesbian community. She is a member of an online group that discusses homosexuality from a variety of religious perspectives, is a member and officer in a lesbian theater troupe and is, of course, also a member of Wondering Wife. She is the only one of these women classified as an Always Knew lesbian. This is despite not having yet had an adult sexual relationship with a woman.

Most of the women in the group claimed a lesbian identity but reported either that they are not entirely comfortable with it or that it was “complicated.” The Left Fielders who did not outright reject the label of lesbian made similar statements about the complexity of naming their sexuality. Unlike the Left Fielders, three of the women in the group reported encounters or relationships in high school or college. The fact that they took on some kind of lesbian identity and were able to identify early attractions or relationships is what landed them in the Retrospective or Always Knew categories instead of being classified as Left Fielders. For the most part their reporting of this early evidence of lesbianism was delivered with less conviction and richness than it was for

most of the women in the Retrospective and Always Knew categories, an admittedly subjective analysis on the part of the researcher. Another factor that drove their categorization as non-Left Fielders was that they evinced less shock and surprise than those who were classified as Left Fielders. According to Louise, new people come in and they are “just in crisis”. None of the closed group members evinced such a sense of “crisis” although they did discuss the “tragedy” and “devastation” that can go with this situation.

It seems possible that the ability to identify relationships and desires in hindsight and a lessening of shock and surprise are related to group membership. Being in the group may facilitate the direction of biographical reconstruction – focusing one’s biographical tale on particular seemingly important events, and biographical reinterpretation – looking at past events and giving them new or different meanings than they were given at the time (Ponse 1980). As noted elsewhere, everyone engages in retrospective interpretation and analysis as they construct life histories, but it may be that the group aids such reconstruction in terms of both form and focus. Additionally one’s shock and surprise might be reduced if one spends time with others who have had similar experiences. The singularity of the event of sexuality transformation as experienced by a Left Fielder such as Alison, who had never heard of such a thing, is obviously mitigated when one discovers the event is not, in fact, singular.

Another attribute for group members that diverged from the experience of Left Fielders was that most of them had been with more than one partner. For three of the five women, they found at least one of these partners within the group, although none of these relationships lasted. None of them had what they defined as relationships (as opposed to

simply sexual encounters) with women that lasted more than a few months – a length of time that is shorter than any of the Left Fielders. Having more than one partner may have assisted the women in achieving the all-important “critical mass” of partners that Left Fielders such as Vicky, Alison, and Suzanne felt they had not yet achieved. They have not compiled the amount of time with women, however, that the Left Fielders felt might be necessary for the taking on of a lesbian identity.

Clearly the telling of Always and Retrospective stories instead of Left Field stories may have nothing whatever to do with group membership. It is worth considering, however, that membership in the group has been instructive for the women in terms of explaining to themselves and others what happened. The process of identity formation and the subsequent recounting of that identity is a social process that depends in part on the social milieu in which the teller is located (Reynolds and Taylor 2004). Such a milieu provides a template for stories that are acceptable to and understandable for others. Membership in the group allowed the women to hear the stories of others and how they are framed and created a forum for trying out their stories and learning to tell them in a way that made sense to them and to their audience. The stories we tell today are in part based on the stories we have told in the past. Participating in a forum in which one can tell the story multiple times allows the story to grow and unfold, perhaps coming increasingly into line with the story a particular type of audience classifies as a “good” story.

Based on the interviews done with group members, it seems like the acceptable or “good” story for the group was closely aligned with the dominant and familiar story about sexuality extant in the larger world. This familiarity likely made learning and



telling the story much easier. All of the women in the group told stories of the always-existing lesbian - either known or unknown – reflecting the cultural idea of sexuality as an inherent part of the self. They also all rejected bisexuality as an identity although some of them entered the group either believing or hoping that that's what they were. Instead, group members identified themselves in accordance with the cultural commonplace of binary sexuality. Women in the group did not have to learn a new identity story and new story norms from scratch. They merely had to take the most common tale in the larger social world and, with the help of other group members, apply it to themselves. Interview subjects indicated that people generally moved from the “freak out” group to the advanced group in a matter of a few months. The degree to which group story norms agreed with ideas to which the women were exposed in the larger world may have expedited this maneuver from “freak-out” to advanced. By this I mean women entering the group did not need to learn a whole new set of sexuality concepts with which they were utterly unfamiliar. Adapting their own histories would likely have been more difficult for group members if the stories the group found acceptable seemed too exotic or bizarre.

Discussing the stories of the women of the group as similar or different from Left Fielders, Retrospective, or Always lesbians is in no way offered as a causal connection or statement of fact. The juxtaposition is merely to be considered as a possible reflection of the importance of shared resources in terms of story telling and identity formation. As with all the other story categorizations the point is not to find out if so-and-so was really in love with her Girl Scout Troop leader and is accurately recounting that part of her history. It is to ascertain how stories are formed, the degree to which they come to make

sense to the teller, and how they are framed to make sense to the listener as well. The group provided a highly significant primary group for the women in which stories could be taken for a test drive and modified in the telling, and perhaps in the remembering.

Of the women who attend the Wondering Wife support group, Jamie was the most similar in attributes and experiences to the Left Fielders. She did not have relationships with women in her teens or early adulthood and her sexual history with women was quite limited. Her story, however, was told in the Retrospective form in that she reported being in love with her best friend from 1<sup>st</sup> grade through high school and that she was attracted to girls when she went to college as a returning adult student. She reported always fantasizing about women and thought “everyone wanted to sleep with women.”

Jamie spoke in some detail about the group and its importance. She discussed the way the group helped her understand her situation, develop an identity as a lesbian, and frame her previous experiences of attraction and desire. She went on to discuss the way the group helps members develop a plan for the future although she, as yet, has no such “vision.” Her story is illustrative of several of the ways members of the group are both like and not like the Left Fielders and perhaps provides some insight into how attending the group operates in the lives of the members.

Jamie was 44 years old at the time of the interview. An attractive brunette with an infectious laugh she seemed to enjoy telling her story despite her sadness over the effect it had had on her family. She had been married twice and was still living with, and occasionally sexual with her 2<sup>nd</sup> husband, to whom she had been married for seventeen years. She was the mother of four children ranging in age from mid-teens to mid-twenties. Just prior to the interview she had ended a six-month relationship with a woman

she had met in the group (Louise – Subject #30). Her only other sexual encounter with a woman was when she was at a lesbian club in another city at which she time she said, “So I get so drunk and I start making out with the bartender, who’s just like the skeeziest person in the entire world”. Clearly, her sexual history is limited in a way that is similar to the Left Fielders.

Jamie had taken on an identity as a lesbian but was not entirely comfortable with it. She had been attending the group for about a year at the time of the interview. When she entered the group she was

exploring it in my head – could I really be a lesbian...it became that yes, I’m a lesbian. Through, through the group, through the first few months of struggling with this issue.

Her husband believed she was bisexual because she still had sex with him but she rejected this as she felt she was not attracted to men, including her husband, and that being actively sexual with men was not sufficient criteria to think of oneself as bisexual. Further remarks she made about the group made it clear that a bisexual identity was devalued, much as it is in both the general culture and some portions of the lesbian community, as noted in the chapter on Shifters. When asked if she thought there was pressure in the group to take on a lesbian identity, Jamie replied,

I think so actually. There have been a couple women who’ve come in saying, you know, I’m struggling with this idea and I’m, I think I’m bisexual and...I remember certain people in the group would say, yeah, come on, she’s not bisexual, you know, she’s a lesbian, she just, she hasn’t given up on that idea of her husband – and she didn’t want to leave her husband, um, so yeah I think there was that.

The degree to which Wondering Wife members discourage waffling on the issue of whether or not one is a lesbian was made even clearer in a remark made by Tara.

You look at people and you'll say, "she just can't say she's lesbian, but she so is", you know? And people said that to me too, because I would be having really hard issues at home and I'd say, no, I don't even think – I don't think I'm a lesbian, I don't think I'm a lesbian, and at one point Letha (another member of the group) ...started laughing and she said, "you are so fucking lesbian it's not funny."

Louise, who told a Retrospective story discussed in Chapter 3, noted that women will come in saying "I'm bisexual" but that it is "almost inevitable" that in a couple of months they will realize, "yeah, no, I'm really not." She went on to say that women "figure that out" before they leave their marriages.

Jamie also talked about the way that the group not only facilitates coming to claim an identity as lesbian, but may also contribute to the women making practical life changes, such as leaving their marriages. She denied that there was pressure on women to leave their husbands but indicated that going through the process and ending the marriage was the "normal progression." In terms of her own situation and the fact that she still lives with and sleeps next to her husband every night, she said

"Everyone in the group talks about having a vision. Once you have a vision, then you are able to leave [your marriage]. You need that vision. Well, I don't have a vision."

All of the Wondering Wives discussed how important the group was in terms of negotiating a mid-life sexuality shift; the group "got it" in a way that other people, including friends, family, and lifelong lesbians, did not. As Julia put it in reference to her affinity for the women in the group versus the women in her lesbian performance troupe,

And I feel like I identified more with the women from the group because they understand my relationship with my husband. Although there's a lot of lesbians from the [troupe] that I'm great friends with – they don't really get it. They don't understand it when, you know, I mean I, I love my husband, I still love my husband. He's a great guy.

Louise made an even clearer point about the group as a supportive community and juxtaposed that with her sense of difficulty fitting into the larger lesbian community. She believes that the group is its own type of lesbian community because, “the wider lesbian community, if there is such a thing, really struggles to accept women who have been in our position, and it’s been a big problem for a lot of women”. For Louise, even though she did not feel she completely fit into a mainstream lesbian community because her “experiences have just been very, very different that somebody who’s been out for, you know, most of their life”, she had come to the conclusion that there are “different levels of community and lesbian community” and she found the level into which she fit and that was right for her.

This sense of difference and exclusion from the larger lesbian community was mentioned by several of the women in the group and seemed to center around the once monthly “Ladies Night” at Kudos. Women from the group get together and go to the club so that they can be around other women and experience lesbian space. They are not always made to feel welcome. Louise reported that there had been a very nasty discussion thread on an online community in which regulars from lesbian night at Kudos posted “this really hateful stuff about all these married suburban wives who come in and infiltrate Kudos”. She and other women in the group found this thread “just incredibly, incredibly hateful.” Thus the women from the group were explicitly rejected by some “real” lesbians and labeled as infiltrating outsiders, perhaps causing them to feel they did not have an appropriate story of lesbianism to tell. Having the support of a sub-community of married and questioning women who called themselves lesbians facilitated the crafting of lesbian identities even in the face of rejection by at least some members of

the larger lesbian community to which they were trying to gain access. Despite some of the suspicion they perceived as coming from the lifelong lesbians and the hurtful online thread, women in the group talked about the importance of going to Kudos and the excitement of being in lesbian space where they could openly look at and desire women.

Attending Wondering Wife was a mixed blessing for some. The momentum of affiliating with a group of women who are similarly positioned in terms of sexuality issues had led some women to a place they did not expect and they would rather not have been. Some of the women went to the group merely wanting to talk about an experience they had, hoping they would decide they were bisexual, and could walk away from that and stay in their marriages. The power of the identity stories they developed in the group would not allow for that, however, and so they became enmeshed in what seemed to them to be an inevitable process. Tara went to the group initially to talk about her feelings, how she identified, and her past experiences and then the group “uncovered” her personal knowledge and “vision for [her]self for the future.” She went on to say that, “I probably wouldn’t have even gone to the group if I knew this was where I was going to be.” She went on to say,

now my life is so in flux because [the group] brought me to this place... I didn’t want this, I didn’t ask for this...I didn’t want my marriage to end, I didn’t, I didn’t, it’s just progressed – it’s just - ... from everything I know, everything I’ve learned about myself, every place I’ve been...I’m walking down the path with that knowledge and it’s bringing me to a place I didn’t know that I would be.

Arlene referenced the way another group member described the process, saying,

I like the way one of the women in the group says it, “I feel like I’m strapped to the front of a train and there’s no going back at this point. I can’t. I just can’t.”

It seems the power of taking on a new identity and being able to tell the story to sympathetic and similarly situated people creates a certain inevitable and sometimes unwelcome sense of self-discovery and an unwelcome series of events.

Other women, both inside and outside the group, demonstrated narratives in which events seemed to them to hurtle out of control. References to the power of love and finding your soul mate are perhaps not as graphic as the imagery of the train charging pell mell down the tracks, but they are an appeal to a cultural idea of the irresistible nature of true love and overwhelming power of fate. Baumeister and Newman (1994) discuss this style of narrative as a kind of justification in which transgressors turn themselves into victims - in this case of irresistible fate - so as to maintain their sense of themselves as right and good.

There was a high level of intensity in references to the out of control nature of what was happening that was more common (although not exclusive) to Left Fielders and members of Wondering Wives, perhaps because of the recency of the events. Women were upset by the fallout that was happening to their husbands and children in the present and observable moment. Additionally, some women were struggling with having had affairs – a behavior they believed to be wrong. Some of the women perceived themselves as selfish because they were doing what was right for them instead of what they felt was right for their families. In a culture that exalts the selfless wife and especially the selfless mother, such behavior requires an explanation. Here again the idea of sexuality as a fundamental and ineradicable part of who a person really is offered them a position from which they could analyze their objectionable behavior (selfishness) as not being entirely within their control. At the same time, an increased focus on the importance of happiness

and authenticity in life as evidenced by the plethora of popular books such as Martin Seligman's *Authentic Happiness* (2004), Robert Holden's *Be Happy!: Release the Power of Happiness in You* (2009), and *Something More: Excavating Your Authentic Self* by Sarah Ban Breathnach (1998) afforded the women a set of positive counter values to which they could refer.

Group members variously referred to their experiences as a struggle, exploration, discovery, or process. All of those terms surfaced in the stories of the Left Fielders as well. But while Wondering Wives were able to rely on the group and articulate its importance in negotiating this life development, the Left Fielders had no such reference group. With no assembly of women like them, the Left Fielders had no avenue for trying out their stories, had little to no frame of reference for lesbianism within the context of heterosexual marriage, and had no one to help them "uncover" the nature of past experiences. As noted above, the Left Field women and the women of Wondering Wives had some differences in history and experience, but perhaps one of the most significant differences in creating their sexuality narratives was whether or not they had access to a social group that valued, supported, assisted and believed the development of those stories. Left Fielders like Alison had no such helpful affinity group and frame of reference. Instead of being able to talk about the importance of finding women like herself and hearing and telling stories with them, when asked how often she thinks this happens for women after many years of marriage, Alison responded,

I can't imagine this has happened to anyone else in [her suburb] in like decades. I mean I, if it has, I wonder why I've never heard of it happening before to anyone I know. Cuz I haven't. That's why I feel like it rarely happens – like wouldn't I have heard like a friend of a friend or something, something. But I did not know this could happen. Or why it



happens. I mean, I could study this for like the rest of my life. I'm fascinated by it. Really. This - really - it's very surprising.

That kind of surprise was receding into the past for women who attended the "closed" level of the Wondering Wife group, and it is perhaps that attendance itself and the concomitant social interaction and collaborative narrative creation that made the difference.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **THE ROLE OF THERAPY AND RELIGION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SENSE-MAKING STORIES**

#### Introduction: Sense Making and Sources of Knowledge

Only a tiny fraction of women have access to a group such as Wondering Wife that is specifically designed to help them make sense of their experiences. Wondering Wife acted as a primary face-to-face reference group for members in which they were affirmed in their questioning about their sexuality and in which such questioning was normalized. It also served as a venue in which they were able to find and to see women who identified as lesbians that they felt were somehow like themselves. Wondering Wife provided access to a set of ideas and perspectives that both incorporated and countered mainstream ideas about the nature of lesbians. As hypothesized above, it may also have acted as a forum for learning and telling a “good” story about how a woman might come to have relationships with women after a significant period of heterosexual marriage. In that analysis, the “good” stories that emerged from the shared perspective of Wondering Wife members took the form of either the Always Knew or Retrospective story. The story of the always-existing lesbian reflects the dominant ideas about the evolution of sexuality, but the experiences shared and told by the group members to each other allowed them to take into account their circuitous route to finding their lesbian selves. Women may have come with a Left Fielder story, but by the time they reached the advanced group they were well on their way to having uncovered sufficient experiences and desires to think of themselves and tell stories of themselves as lesbians.

Those without such a group can access a handful of books designed for either popular (Abbott 1995; Strock 1998; Cassingham and O’Neil 1993; Fleisher 2005; Jensen

1999) or academic/professional (Diamond, 2008; Larson, 2006) consumption.

Additionally, there are some Internet chat rooms and message boards. These provide information geared toward asking questions and finding answers to the puzzlement that is shifting sexual desires later in life. Such books and Internet resources, while helpful, are likely a poor substitute for membership in a primary group and have only been available since the mid 1990s. Those with neither a support group nor secondary sources of information must rely on information that is readily available in their personal networks of family and friends and in the popular culture. Information the social world presents as “going without saying”, or that originates from a source viewed by individuals as a legitimate claims-maker must somehow be addressed, whether it is accepted or rejected, incorporated into their stories or not.

In Chapter 1 there was a brief discussion of the cultural debate around homosexuality – where it comes from and the treatment homosexuals should receive. Two important voices in that debate come from the institutions of medicine, more specifically psychiatry and psychology, and religion. In this chapter I will address the ways these two institutions impacted the sense-making and story-creating endeavors of the women in the study. Having already briefly addressed these themes within the analysis of the four story types, I will present them here across story types so they can be discussed in a more systematic way.

Mentions of therapy and the role it played in the development of sense-making stories were very frequent. For the most part, experiences with therapy acted as a powerful mechanism in the creation of stories of later-in-life lesbianism and were repeatedly referenced by the women as an important and helpful source of knowledge

and insight into the discovery of their sexual selves. Religion was mentioned far less frequently and the role religious ideas played in the management of identity as a woman in same-sex relationships was more complex. There were few women in the study who considered themselves highly religious or were regular church attenders. Though they were few, their experiences provide insight into managing two identities that are in apparent conflict. Additionally, for some women, not having a large personal stake in religion did not always provide cover from the opinions proffered by large religious organizations as they make their claims relative to sexuality.

### Therapy

From the days of sexologists such as Ellis and Kraft-Ebing, through Freud, Kinsey, Masters and Johnson, and into the period following the removal of homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association, the medical and psychiatric communities have put themselves forward as having a rightful place in the debate about homosexuality – what it is, where it comes from and how it should be treated. These claims makers have not always agreed with one another. For example, the de-pathologizing of homosexuality by removing it from the DSM in 1973 was not without its opponents. Disagreements among mental health professionals in the area of homosexuality still exist, although the mainstream view of homosexuality as a naturally occurring human sexual variant has far and away more proponents than the opposing position.

One such disagreement centers around the issue of reparative or conversion therapy – whether people with a homosexual orientation can, with the help of therapy, change their orientation to heterosexual and function “normally” in heterosexual

relationships. The American Psychological Association (APA), the American Psychiatric Association (APA), the AMA, the NEA, as well as various organizations of counselors and social workers have come out with statements condemning the use of conversion therapy (Robinson 2009). Meanwhile the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH) advocates for reparative therapy, believing that those who are unhappy living as homosexuals should have access to mental health services that will help them learn to live heterosexual lives (narth.com). CNN's Paula Zahn (5/23/06) and MSNBC's Rachel Maddow (12/8/09) have both addressed the topic on their shows. Both of these news reports were largely negative, questioning the utility and pointing up the dangers of this approach to homosexuality. Maddow's interview with Richard Cohen, a leader in the "ex-gay" movement, was much more negative because of the link between Cohen's work and what she refers to as the "Kill the Gays Bill" under discussion in Uganda at the time of the interview. Even perennial pop culture favorite *Law & Order: SVU* has weighed in, airing an episode which reparative therapy is an important part of the plot line (Zakrzewski 2003). George Segal plays a pro-reparative therapy academic and is largely an unsympathetic character. In the end, he is tried and convicted for murdering a man he found in bed with his son, who was secretly gay. Both APAs, as the long-standing voices of authority in the mental health field are able to dominate media coverage, reducing reparative therapy to marginal status at best. Their outspoken dismissal of efforts at homosexual cure greatly reduces the number of people who are likely to access this type of treatment. Additionally, their unwillingness to license those who practice this type of therapy makes practitioners more difficult for treatment seekers

to find. Despite all this they are not able to totally remove this controversial issue from the public dialogue.

This controversy, like those that have gone before, is important for at least two reasons. The first is that it influences how the mental health community and specific clinicians provide treatment to those who seek services. Additionally, the attention it gets in the media and elsewhere reinforces the belief that the perspectives held by those in the mental health field are an important and legitimate part of the public discussion on this issue. When homosexuality moved from sin to sickness, the institution of medicine claimed a legitimate place in the debate. Current issues maintain and reinforce that claim. The perceived legitimacy of the voices of mental health professionals in navigating the waters of sexuality, as well as other life issues, was clearly demonstrated by the women interviewed for this study.

All but four of the thirty-six women interviewed mentioned counseling or therapy, indicating various levels of importance in terms of the role played by mental health providers in their decisions and understandings about their sexuality and experiences. There were no questions in the interview that specifically addressed the issue of therapy yet nearly all of the women made reference to it. Some women were currently in some kind of counseling and some were not. Subjects had sought treatment for a variety of life issues. Some of these were specifically related to shifting sexual desires and some were not. The reasons for which the women reported seeking counseling were not atypical and included “mother issues”, grief, marital and relationship counseling (both in marriages and in subsequent relationships with women), childhood sexual abuse, issues with substance abuse, anxiety, and depression. For the purposes of this research, the most

important area is the intersection of mental health providers with the issue of sexuality in transition and the role therapy did or did not play in the development of a narrative about the events surrounding that shift. It seems reasonable to assume however, that women who sought therapy for whatever reason believe that it has a legitimate role in managing various life issues and that therapists have expertise in the areas of relationships, feelings, and retrospective analysis of life events and their meaning. In this way, women who sought therapy for other reasons, and believed in its legitimacy, have likely been impacted by the prevailing ideas in the mental health field as they pertain to sexuality and are reported in news and other cultural media.

It is important to note that none of the women reported having sought reparative or conversion therapy. Many of the women did seek therapy to find out what was happening and why they were feeling what they were feeling, but none reported specifically seeking therapy to “change them back.” This was true even for the women who said they would go back if they could. Perhaps this is because reparative therapy is clearly the minority view and one must specifically seek a reparative therapist, which can be difficult as there are few practitioners relative to the general population of clinicians. Additionally many reparative therapists are not licensed by the major mental health organizations so if one seeks a therapist through the websites of professional organizations, one will not be referred to a reparative therapist. It also seems unlikely that women who are engaged in reparative therapy would also volunteer for a study of this sort.

Some women reported that they actively sought lesbian therapists believing they would meet with less judgment by doing so. Women found such therapists helpful in

terms of affirming or normalizing their experiences and desires. Tara addressed this specifically when she said,

I think I just have protected myself from this identity for years. And now I'm just okay with it. I'm fine with it. I don't know why. I think it's just having a therapist who's a lesbian and normalizing it for me. Like I'll say something to her like um, I'll say something, um, sexually like a lesbian thing that's something I want to do and I'll - she'll look at me and she'll say that's sounds very loving, that sounds very beautiful, and it – she kind of normalizes it for me so I'm not shameful of my lesbian feelings and so I'm, I'm accepting.

Avoiding conversion therapy and the tendency to seek lesbian affirming therapists likely skewed the therapeutic experiences they reported more toward the positive and impacted the role that therapy experiences played in story development in terms of form and substance.

In 1973 amid much controversy the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. This does not mean that all practitioners instantly changed their views on homosexuality but rather that the governing body of the discipline indicated that the professional view of homosexuality was moving in a different direction. Not surprisingly, the two women I interviewed who sought psychiatric or psychological help before or near the time of this shift saw practitioners with a perspective quite different from most of the professionals a woman might access today. The first of these was Esther, born in 1934, who had experienced significant mental health problems in the 1950s and 1960s. She referred to these episodes as nervous breakdowns, itself a dated term. On more than one occasion, her difficulties resulted in inpatient hospitalization and Electroconvulsive Therapy. As she put it, she was put in a psychiatric hospital and “had shock and then theoretically I got better.” Additionally, one professional told Esther that lesbianism was a case of



arrested development and another informed her that her lesbianism stemmed from her relationship with her mother. At first in telling her story Esther did not link her mental health difficulties to her issues around sexuality but as she elaborated she explained that whenever she had an inpatient stay it had to do with the loss of a relationship or intense female friendship. Needless to say, in retrospect, Esther's experiences were not positive and did not facilitate her eventual arrival at a sense of herself as someone who has always been a lesbian and for whom that is quite all right. She rejected the psychiatric opinion that her relationship with her mother played a role in her lesbianism and so has not incorporated that perspective into her story of her identity.

Cynthia, while in her late twenties and a student at a large university, sought help as a direct result of her issues concerning her sexuality. It was the mid-1970s and the prevailing view on homosexuality was clearly present in her recounting of that experience. Cynthia went to see a therapist seeking the answer to "why did I become gay" and was really struggling, suspecting something might be seriously amiss,

I thought I was schizophrenic. I thought there were two personalities – one masculine and one feminine and um, so [the university]... hooked me up with some kind of I guess grad student or something and I was going to her for therapy. So when I finally – this is how unevolved they were at that time – so when I finally said to her I'm attracted to women and I think I like women her first words to me were – is that why you wear pants all the time? So that was a disaster, that was a – that therapy was an utter disaster.

Cynthia's characterization of the field of therapy in general, and her grad student therapist more specifically, make it clear she has given the "you wear pants" perspective little credence. Her reference to the unevolved perspective in psychology at the time also indicates her awareness that therapeutic perspectives have changed and that she would likely not receive that analysis of her presenting problem today.

In these two brief stories, themes and ideas held by the psychiatric community during that historical period about homosexuality are highly evident. References to Freud's (1962) ideas of arrested development, the theory that relationships with parents give rise to a homosexual pathology, and the notion that gender nonconformity is somehow linked to sexual orientation are all fully present. Many professionals in the field at this time saw homosexuality as a psychological maladaptation or social pathology and not as a naturally occurring sexual orientation as many view it today. Esther and Cynthia had to construct stories about themselves and their experiences in which the perspective of the professionals they sought were rejected in order to arrive at a positive view of themselves as women in relationships with other women. Women who entered the therapeutic milieu later did not have to reject what they heard in therapy. In fact, therapy facilitated and enhanced their ability to make sense of their shift in sexuality later in life.

The idea that people are born gay and that homosexuality is therefore natural is reflected in the reported experiences of women seeking mental health help in the more recent past and/or present. That therapists are familiar with and buy into the idea of gay people being "born that way" was evident in the stories of several women. Subjects described how in the therapeutic setting, therapists helped them to reframe and reinterpret situations from their pasts as they tried to understand their current circumstances. Ellen's experience, discussed in Chapter 5 is one of the clearest examples of this. Ellen reported that while looking back in therapy she was able to identify an attraction she had in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade and was beginning to see that as evidence of early and ongoing lesbianism. She reported that at the time (when she was in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade) she didn't think anything of it but that, "it probably meant something – looking back now." In this example, Ellen

highlights not just how a social setting – in this case mental health treatment – assists with story construction, she provides a clear reference to the retrospective nature of stories and the way they constantly evolve and are open to reinterpretation.

Tara provided another example when she was recounting her experiences in professional therapy as well as in the Wondering Wife group. Tara reported engaging in sexual experimentation with other girls from the ages of ten to fourteen but it wasn't until she began to question her sexuality that the meaning of those experiences needed to be uncovered and became ripe for analysis. Therapy was an important setting in which she could do this.

And um, when I've gone through it in the past with therapy, it was unclear whether it was exploration you know, just being young and exploring each other's bodies, or if it was um, a sexual encounter and I think that it was definitely a sexual encounter.

Obviously without her current circumstance of believing herself to have always been a lesbian it would not be necessary, and perhaps not even desirable, to view those childhood experiences as incipient lesbianism. Her therapeutic milieu enabled or encouraged her to discover a possibly heretofore-unknown adolescent lesbian self. This allowed her to create a Retrospective lesbian story in which she was able to weave her past to her present in a way that made sense to both her therapist and herself. The clinician's perspective was solidly in the mainstream in terms of the powerful ideology in the medical community that homosexuality is a trait, which is inherent in the person and consistent across the lifespan. Having one's therapist take a non-judgmental position on the naturalness of homosexuality and helping one to (re)frame their past in a way that affirms this can be helpful for a person struggling in this arena. It can be an impediment as well, however, as Tara found out when seeking couples therapy with her husband.

According to her, “it’s taken a long time to find a couples therapist that doesn’t just say, you’re gay, you’re not, get a divorce.” Her difficulty in finding such a clinician highlights the prevailing idea of dichotomous sexuality. If one is one thing (lesbian), one cannot be the other (heterosexual) so the only solution is to abandon the “wrong” relationship.

Louise, after spending “years and lots of money” on therapy, realized her lesbianism “was always there.” Arlene and her therapist looked at the history of their sessions together and they too realized it had “been there all along.” Carla’s therapist helped her to come out when he said she needed to “admit who you are.” Elaine went to a therapist for a number of years without disclosing her sexuality but after she did she reported, “With the assistance of a therapist over time – I’m able to define myself.” Like many people, the subjects of this study believe counselors and therapists have a legitimate role in defining and explaining a wide variety of life issues, including relationships and sexuality. As such, the affirmation of such professionals that there is an always existing lesbian influences how people put together the retrospective, ongoing, and continually emerging stories of their identities and their lives. Additionally, part of the interactional nature of stories is that one takes into account the audience’s reaction to the story that is being told. Therapists who adhere to an idea of naturally occurring homosexuality that has “always been there” will likely respond to a story that reflects that perspective by providing positive interactional cues. Such cues encourage a storyteller to continue telling a story with particular themes, or in a particular vein.

Women from all four story-type categories discussed their experiences in therapy both positive and negative. Clearly seeing a mental health professional does not in itself precisely determine the kind of story a woman will tell. The biographies we create are

personal composites of a variety of aspects of the social world. Our friends, our experiences, politics, religion, family of origin, and the media – all of these go into the melting pot. Therapy or counseling is just one of many arenas from which people absorb information, analyze it, and come to see if it fits into the story of their lives. The contrast between the treatment Esther and Cynthia received in the 1970s and the help women received later is important. Changes in treatment approaches and the shifting discourse in the professional therapeutic community influenced how therapy experiences were incorporated or not in the women's stories. This points up the way that powerful institutional-level interests, which may dramatically change over time, can impact the very personal stories we tell ourselves and each other about our lives. The role therapy played in the lives of the subjects and the stories they created about those lives also seems important, however, even if for no other reason than that, unsolicited, almost everyone talked about it as an important part of their process.

### Religion

Alongside medical and mental health claims makers are those voices that come from various mainstream religious organizations. The Book of Leviticus, believed by some to have been written in the 15<sup>th</sup> century BC by Moses himself, provides the foundation for the negative view of homosexuality held by some Judeo-Christian religious groups and denominations. In the King James Version of the Bible, for example, Leviticus 18:22 informs believers that homosexuality is an abomination and verse 20:13 goes on to proffer that the death penalty is a proper response. Theologians argue about the meaning of these passages, but most mainstream versions of the Bible contain these notions of homosexuality as an abominable sin and a capital crime. Like the opposing

sides in the mental health debate, religious perspectives on homosexuality are not monolithic. While Pat Robertson still rails that societies that embrace homosexuality will be consigned to “the garbage heap of history” ([mediamatters.org](http://mediamatters.org)), the Chicago Theological Seminary and others offer classes on Queer Theology, and the Episcopal Church has two openly gay bishops – one gay man and one lesbian. There is not agreement on what “religion” thinks about homosexuality, but, like the fields of psychology and medicine, it is accepted by many that religious voices have a legitimate place in the public discussion about sexuality. As such, religious points of view, to a greater or lesser degree, wanted or unwanted, can become part of the frame of reference for women who discover same-sex attractions at mid-life.

The perceived difficulty in reconciling gay or lesbian identity with religious identity is made manifest in the existence of organizations as wide ranging as Exodus International, JONAH (Jews Offering New Alternatives to Homosexuality), and the Metropolitan Community Church. The first of these, Exodus International, is a Christian-based group designed to help people who are seeking relief from their homosexual desires through a strengthened commitment to, and relationship with, Christ. Their website, [exodusinternational.org](http://exodusinternational.org), does not provide data on membership but does claim to have nearly 250 affiliate ministries and counselors in North America. Exodus’ position is that sufficient bolstering of a true and faithful religious self will result in the elimination of what they call SSA (same sex attractions), which are in contradiction to God’s plan for humanity. JONAH ([jonahweb.org](http://jonahweb.org)) is a smaller and more recently formed group with a similar perspective but one that is based in the Jewish tradition. The clear implication of these groups is that there is an incompatibility between living a life that is religiously

“right” and living as an actively gay or lesbian person. In their view, the way to reconcile this difficulty is to use one (religion) to eradicate the other (gayness).

The founding in 1968 of the Metropolitan Community Church, a ministry whose primary outreach and ministry is to gay and lesbian people also speaks to the difficulty of reconciling religion (in this case Christianity more specifically) and gay or lesbian feelings. The MCC, however, takes the position that neither religion nor sexuality need be foresworn – Christianity and homosexuality can coexist. Troy Perry, a defrocked Pentecostal minister founded the church after “struggling to reconcile his sexuality and his Christian spirituality” (MCC 2005). The MCC has grown to nearly 300 congregations and over 40,000 members (MCC 2005). The MCC is not the only Christian denomination that welcomes gay and lesbian people (to a greater or lesser degree) but it is the only one that emerged specifically from the difficulty experienced by those who want to comfortably accommodate - and make sense of – two important identities long thought to be incompatible.

References to religion and the role it played in developing an understanding about a shift in sexuality were not nearly as numerous as were references to therapy. In the demographics portion at the end of the interview the women were asked if they had a past or present religious affiliation and whether or not they attended church or were active in their congregations. Women for whom religion was significant (either positively or negatively) generally spontaneously made reference to it at various points in the interview prior to the demographic questions. All told, only about one third of respondents reported they were regular attenders or active church members at the time of the interview. About 15 percent said they were not now, but had been in the past –

including 2 women who had been nuns and one woman who had ministerial credentials in an ecumenical church. Approximately one quarter of the women explicitly differentiated between organized religion, which they viewed as incompatible with and not accepting of their sexuality, and a personal sense of spirituality which for them was quite important. One woman reported she was an atheist.

Some of those who reported regular attendance said they did so, not because they thought it was important for them, but rather because they thought it was important for their children or grandchildren. Peggy, for example, went to a Catholic church every week “for the kids.” (the children of her partner’s sister, who live next door). Peggy reported she wouldn’t otherwise go because she “can’t stand the Catholic religion.” Several other women reported highly negative experiences or responses to religion such as Martha who said, “I would never step back into a Catholic church if my life depended on it.” She knew she would not be accepted there as a lesbian. She also was put off by the subservient role some churches assign to women, both within the church and in society in general. Other women who had fallen away from their religions of origin echoed this sentiment regarding how various churches view women. As Maureen put it, “Well the [Episcopal] church hurt my feelings all the time with their language, you know their male language. They just hurt my feelings.” For Maureen the final blow was when the congregation to which she belonged specifically voted to reject a gay pastor even though the denomination, as a whole, allows gay clergy.

Between those like Peggy, Martha, and Maureen, who have turned away from religion and those for whom religion remains an important part of their lives, are those who consider themselves non-religious, or relatively neutral on the subject. In current US



society, however, personal neutrality may not be enough, as religious ideas surround us through media, family, and other personal or casual relationships. As Gayle put it, “I’m not big into church or anything but there’s definitely – whether you want to hear it or not – people voicing their opinions that homosexuality is a sin.” Carla’s story is a good example of this as she could not avoid learning that from her mother’s point of view “you’re gonna go straight to hell”. Clearly Carla’s mother viewed the perspective of the Catholic Church on the issue of sexuality as a legitimate part of her analysis of her daughter’s life choices and felt compelled to share with Carla her unsolicited opinion. Nan, who also did not think of herself as particularly religious, was warned by other family members that her being gay was acceptable to them but she was never to breathe a word about it to her Aunt Iona. Aunt Iona was a good Christian woman who was “really religious” and according to them, she would not be able to handle it. (In fact, when it became necessary to tell Aunt Iona, she managed it quite well deploying the Christian perspective of “judge not” [Luke 6:37], rather than the Levitical suggestion that homosexuals must be “put to death”) In these three cases it is clear that trying to stay out of the religious fray does not necessarily allow one to avoid what various religious groups or religious people have to say.

There were a few women who considered their religion and their faith communities an important part of their lives and for them the intersection of “lifestyle” and religious identity had the potential to be more problematic. Bernice was a good example of this. Bernice, mentioned briefly in the chapter on Shifters, had been with her partner for 20 years and hoped to be with her for “50 thousand more”. After all this time of being with women, her obvious happiness with her partner, and warm acceptance by

family and friends, Bernice remained occasionally uncertain about what her sexuality says about the kind of person she is. She grew up Catholic, although she now attends an Episcopal church. She admitted she is basically a biblical literalist so Leviticus and the other mentions of homosexuality in the Bible (Genesis 19:1-5, Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13, Deuteronomy 23:17, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, 1 Timothy 1:9-10, Romans 1:21-31, Jude 1:6-7 – sometimes called the eight “clobber” passages) are hard for her to shrug off. She’s still trying to “get her hands around” what the Bible says and what that means for her life. She is active in a church that accepts gays and lesbians and has a solid Christian community – of gay and lesbian people as well as heterosexuals - that helps her deal with her conflict between her religion and her “lifestyle”. Bernice lived at the intersection of a Christian story that some say tells her she’s a sinner going to hell, a community of gay and lesbian friends that affirm her and her relationship, and her individual sense of who she is and what makes her happy in her life. That intersection was not always comfortable and Bernice was not alone.

Kimberly had a similar conflict with religion. Kimberly was a lay preacher in her church and had begun a course of study at seminary. She also held a Master’s Degree in education and was therefore a very active part of the church’s youth ministry. When she and her new female partner (who was also an active member of the same church) told the pastor about their relationship they were advised to go back to their husbands. They did not. They were then removed from all contact with the children’s and youth ministry of the church. This last, of course, was predicated on the unfounded belief, held by some, that gay and lesbian people are a threat to children. In a final anti-gay insult, her partner was forbidden to sing in the choir. This multi-pronged rejection by the church was

devastating to the women because their religious life was so important to them. (They were also disturbed about the level of judgment around the sexuality piece and the lack of focus on the fact that they had had an extramarital affair with one another. They believed the adultery was more worthy of condemnation than the fact that the affair had been with another woman.) Kimberly and her partner continued to attend the church but the atmosphere became increasingly unbearable. Like Bernice they ultimately found a new and more accepting church in which they could both be part of Christian fellowship and also be their openly lesbian selves. Not unlike the women who had to “shop” for a positive therapist and therapeutic experience, so too did the religious women have to shop for a religious milieu that held a perspective that was more in keeping with what they felt to be true about themselves.

Clearly the role of religion in the development of the women’s stories about themselves was not the same as was the role of therapy. Therapy in several cases served as an active mechanism of story creation and development in which the therapist, working from his or her own ideas about the formation of sexual orientation as well as the framework provided by the governing bodies of their various disciplines, helped the client to create a story that made sense to them both. That story – of having really been lesbian, or potentially lesbian all along - also had traction in the outside world and became elaborated and accepted as the “real” story. Each time a new “real” story that is just like all the old “real” stories gets put on the pile the framework of “realness” is strengthened. So the mental health community is not only a voice in the overarching cultural controversy around sexuality. It appears for at least some later-in-life lesbians it

is also significantly implicated in the development of an individual woman's individual story.

Religion was much less of a story-helper institution in the lives of the women for whom faith was important. Rather, these women had two identity stories that rubbed up against each other – the identity of being a good person of faith and the identity of being in a sexual relationship with a woman (whether they thought of themselves as lesbians or not.) The faith of their upbringing did not help them create a continuity in their lives, it heightened a conflicted disconnect. These women existed in a state of some kind of identity cognitive dissonance. Their religious reference groups were important to them but the rejection they felt made their identities as women in relationships with women problematic to comfortably sustain and they had to actively work to find a faith location that could include both core identities (Seidman 2004)

Kaufman and Johnson (2004) discuss the need people with stigmatized identities, such as gay and lesbian people, have for what they call positive “reflected appraisals”. Stigmatized identities are hard to sustain and finding communities that are affirming may be necessary if the identity is to withstand the negative views of others – either real or perceived. For this reason gay and lesbian people might seek out a gay or lesbian community of which they can become member and in which such affirmation is available. Bernice and Kimberly did not just need to be affirmed as gay women, they also needed to be affirmed as gay Christians. They sought out new churches to which they could belong that viewed both pieces of their identities favorably. Based on the interviews it seems as if in this case it was important that some of the church members be gay and lesbian but was more important that members of the congregation were

welcoming regardless of whether they were gay or straight. Interestingly neither woman chose an MCC church even though they had reasonably close access to one. I was unaware that this might be important at the time I did the interviews so did not probe on this specific point. It might be the case that as a church founded in 1968, the MCC is a not very well known Johnny-come-lately to the Christian scene, and therefore is not viewed as being as legitimate a church as the Episcopal and Methodist churches the women ultimately chose. Being a member of an MCC congregation may not have supplied a sufficient sense of themselves as real Christians.

The lesbian community itself could not necessarily provide the support needed for managing these two pieces of self they had to juggle. Much as some religious traditions have a negative view of lesbians, so too do some gay and lesbian people have a dim view of religions they perceive as rejecting, as was evidenced in the negative remarks made by some subjects of this research. This rejection of one for the other made some of the highly religious women exist at the uncomfortable intersection of two powerful ideologies that, to some, might appear incompatible.

Kimberly wove her religious ideas more tightly with her sexuality story in an elaborated discussion of how/why people are gay. Her explanation was quite lengthy – and somewhat hard to follow - so cannot be entirely reproduced here but the gist of it was the God makes gay people, specifically Christian gay people. Kimberly's theological view was that throughout history people who consider themselves devoutly religious have tried to claim God for themselves, closing out those who were not like them. In Kimberly's view God is challenging those who believe that God hates gay people by making the most faithful followers – such as her partner and her – gay. As she put it,

“...what I know of God in my Bible, that’s so typical of God to completely contrast the religious people and to say all right, screw you guys, I’m gonna make the most faithful followers now be gay people.” In this way, not only was Kimberly able to craft a story in which her gayness was compatible with her Christianity, it was also a manifestation of it in which she and her partner, and their sexuality, had become part of God’s all inclusive plan.

### Conclusion

Making sense of anomalous experiences can be facilitated or made more difficult as people intersect with the social worlds of which they are a part. From the subjects of these interviews it is clear that mental health perspectives on sexuality, and/or religious points of view were part of the framework to which a woman had access as she tried to contextualize her experiences and tell a story of herself. As was discussed, the roles played were quite different, one from the other.

Therapy acted as a story creation and reinforcement mechanism. Women who went to therapy in a state of confusion, unable to understand what was happening, were assisted in mining the depths of their pasts to uncover the clues needed to make the present and the past continuous. Here the perspective of homosexuality as essential within the disciplines of psychiatry and psychology and the desire for continuity come together in a positive way providing a forum for effective sense-making. As the stories of Esther and Cynthia demonstrate, accessing the same type of services but at a time at which the discipline viewed homosexuality differently undermined the emergence of a story the women themselves found acceptable. Ultimately they had to reject their experiences in counseling in order to come to define their sexuality in a way that felt right

for them. What made sense to their therapists (arrested development, inappropriate gender display) did not make sense to them so those interactions with their therapists did not give rise to collaborative story creation.

Religious views highlighted the difficulty in having two identities that are important to the self but are seemingly incompatible one with the other. Here faith based ideas and choosing a faith community had to be manipulated for the religious women in a way that both identities were confirmed and valued if they were to be able to maintain them simultaneously and in full. Other women chose to reject religion as they felt religion had rejected them. Even those who felt they took little or no position on, or notice of, religion were exposed to the views of religious others either in person or through the media.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

Iris (tearful and distraught) – “Jude, I love women, I’m in a relationship with Stella and I want to be with her forever, but I was married for 20 years and I don’t know what that means. How does this happen? What does that make me? I just don’t know if I’m a lesbian”

Jude (smugly and definitively) – “That’s just your internalized homophobia talking. You have friends that are lesbians and that’s okay with you. You just don’t want to apply the word to yourself. If you’re in a relationship with a woman, you’re a lesbian. Period.”

The above conversation took place about five years ago and besides being a dramatic example of what a friend of mine calls an “empathic failure”, it was the seed of what would become the research focus of this dissertation. My own experience was nearly 100% in line with the dominant ideas concerning sexuality and coming out. My story was one of always knowing, teenage angst, familial and social rejection, extremely limited experience with men, joining “rap groups”, and going to lesbian feminist potlucks. All of that was my story, all of it fit the commonly accepted explanation of sexuality, and all of it made sense to me. As such, I never had to work too hard to tell my sexuality – it was the classic and formulaic coming out story. Through ongoing conversations with my old pal, Iris, and other friends who had experiences somewhat similar to hers, it finally became clear to me that things were not so neat and tidy for everyone in the area of sexuality and sexual identity. Some stories were not so easily told. Faced with the anecdotal data of these women I had to stop universalizing my own experience (and particular cultural and historical location) and begin to wonder about how formerly married women might make sense of arriving relatively late to the



aforementioned lesbian potluck. This wondering became the general question this research was designed to address: how do women make sense of this experience in the face of a dominant narrative which implies such an experience does not often occur?

I organized the sense-making stories of the women I interviewed into four categories based on the way they intersected (or did not) with overarching ideas about sexuality as an essential trait and a dichotomous construction. In so doing, I also addressed other questions and issues such as how people create consistency in the stories of their lives, how social networks might impact people's ideas about their sexuality and the tales they tell, how institutions such as religion and psychology are utilized (or not) in the development of sexuality stories, how ideas about female sexuality are incorporated into women's understandings of their sexuality stories, and how women with "problematic" heterosexuality think about and talk about that identity and experience. Ultimately the analysis shed light on various areas of sociological inquiry, which I will summarize below. It also raised interesting questions and provided tantalizing glimpses into possible directions of future research which will be discussed as well. Lastly, I will return to the story of Iris who, in addition to providing the impetus for this research, also points up some of its potential limitations.

### The Frame and the Fit: Four Types of Stories

In Chapter 3, I introduced the Always Knew and Retrospective lesbian stories. These stories were largely consistent with the dominant narrative about sexuality even though, at superficial glance, the lives they described might seem to be at odds with it. I offered many examples of the women's ability to deploy the dominant tale of inborn dichotomous sexuality. Always Knew lesbians were able to make a claim of having

always been gay but having social or internal impediments to living out that sexual identity. They either rejected lesbian life in furtherance of a planned life of “normalcy”, they married because it was the “next thing you did”, or they succumbed to family rejection and violence, or the threat of it. They made a claim of always knowing they were lesbians and purposefully acting in opposition to their natural selves. All of the Always Knew lesbians had at least some level of physical/sexual contact with women prior to their marriages. These concrete experiences, which were of varying duration and intensity, were offered as data in support of their contention of having always known their true sexuality.

Retrospective lesbians were able to frame their experience within the dominant narrative by citing the invisibility of lesbianism as an option, such that they were unaware of the possibility and reality of lesbianism in themselves. Still, once the reality of their sexuality was made clear to them, they were able to deploy the notions that one is born with a sexuality and that one is either one sexuality or another whether one knows it or not. A few of these women had had brief sexual or physical encounters with girls as teenagers but framed those experiences at the time as being harmless experimentation, or a desire for closeness and friendship that briefly turned physical. They did not report thinking of themselves as lesbians at that time and so did not tell stories that classified them as Always Knews. From the vantage point of the present they were able to look back on those experiences as evidence of their true lesbian natures. This involved what Ponse (1980) would call the reconstruction and/or reinterpretation of biography. Additionally, they marshaled evidence of the degree to which their heterosexuality did not really fit – another thing that only became clear to them in retrospect.

The importance of these two story types is that they highlight the degree to which hegemonic ideas create a frame into which a life must sometimes be fit in order to make sense to the woman living that life. Their stories are consistent with both the mainstream understandings about sexuality and also the essentialist notions supported by at least some in the gay and lesbian community. Always Knew and Retrospective lesbians are, for the most part, easily understood (although perhaps not always entirely approved of) in the gay and lesbian community. Adrienne Rich argued in 1980 that invisibility of lesbianism is part of a purposeful effort to keep women from being lesbians. Some Retrospective lesbians called on that invisibility (although not referencing Rich) as a mechanism by which they were kept from the true knowledge of themselves. Similarly, Always Knew lesbians can be understood as people who temporarily rejected their lesbian selves due to stigma, rejection, the threat of violence, or internalized homophobia. Other lesbians, who may have also experienced life as outcasts, might understand why a woman would try to fit into the heterosexual box until living a life in opposition to their true natures became untenable.

Shifters, covered in Chapter 4, were conversant with the dominant ideas of essential and dichotomous sexuality but the interaction of their sexual biographies with that framework was more complicated. Shifters were disinclined, or not able, to tell their stories fully within that model. Shifters for example, told stories of an essentialism that was more “essential” for some than it was for them. Some of them referenced social pressures to live as heterosexuals as did the Always Knews and Retrospectives. Rather than rejecting their heterosexual experiences as inauthentic, however, they either embraced them as part of a bisexual nature, or made a claim that sexuality is fluid and

can shift back and forth. Bisexual Shifter stories evidenced a sort of essentialism in that the women tended to proffer that all humans are innately bisexual (perhaps some with greater potential than others) but that the social world constrains certain types of choices. Fluid Shifters told stories that were somewhat different, in that people are not necessarily bisexual, but rather that sexuality changes. Both groups embrace the fluidity of desire, but in somewhat different ways.

Left Fielders, whose stories were told in Chapter 5, had tales that were the farthest outside the frame although the strong and weak Left Fielders were different in this regard. Strong Left Fielders could not fit their stories into the dominant paradigm but their inability to do so seemed to reinforce its primacy. They had a clear commitment to the dominant ideologies of “normal” heterosexuality and/or that people are either gay or straight and are supposed to know it all along. No longer fitting into the dominant paradigm, they floundered, not able to find a way to make their experiences make much sense to them. The argument that people want a biography that is consistent and can be told to self and others in a way that makes sense seems to have been confirmed by the stories and demeanor of the Left Fielders. Of all of the interviews these women seemed to be in the most subjective distress. The hegemony of the dominant narrative is clear here. With close, personal, highly relevant data to the contrary, it was difficult to tell a story - or even conceive of one - outside the dominant narrative they had so long embraced. For these women, their personal selves were, at least temporarily unintelligible within the framework of the dominant paradigm they had always believed to be true. Unable to utilize that construct of essential and dichotomous sexuality, they referred instead to

cultural ideas about the power of love, or the notion of soul mates that, for them, shockingly arrived in unexpected bodies.

In some ways the weak Left Fielders had stories that were most likely to undermine the prevailing structure of sexuality and sexual orientation. They reported that ascertaining the meaning of their stories in terms of understanding their sexualities seemed to them to be beside the point. They knew the dominant narrative but didn't consider its application to their own lives to be very important. This disregard for a framework that is so much a part of how we think about sexuality in this age undermines it through abandonment. This is not to say that weak Left Fielders presented themselves as sexuality outlaws, struggling to break through hegemony and get a new view of sexuality on the agenda. Rather, they simply thought worrying about sexuality and how it unfolded was time better spent elsewhere. Their "it is what it is" perspective flies in the face of the idea that it is important to divine a person's "true" sexuality.

### Social Networks and Social Institutions

Throughout the dissertation I have presented information about the role played by various social networks – support groups, friendship networks, and families - in the stories told by the women. I also addressed the role played by social institutions such as medicine - in the form of the mental health community - and religion. The influence of the Wondering Wife group was addressed in detail in Chapter 5, so will not be treated further here. Other women, however, also had access to support groups that assisted them in staking a sexuality identity claim and constructing a story that supported it.

Some of the women in the older age group, for example, discussed attending women's support groups and talked about the importance of these contacts in terms of

helping them find and accept their sexual selves. As noted in Chapter 4, Gretchen, 66, explicitly discussed her exposure to lesbian feminist politics and support groups as the impetus for her to challenge her heterosexuality. Esther, 73, became part of a lesbian feminist writing collective and met a variety of out lesbians and so was able to come out herself. The group was important to her development of an idea of herself as a lesbian as her previous understanding of what it was to be a lesbian was based on Radclyffe Hall's tragic novel *The Well of Loneliness*. By joining the group Esther was able to counter that early unhappy image and come to see herself as a woman who had always been a lesbian. Debbie, 68, also attended groups at the local Women's Center and reported how they helped her come to grips with her feelings for women. In her case the group helped her shift from a sense of herself as heterosexual with a single female attraction, to a more universalized sense of herself as desiring women. While these groups were not directed specifically to deal with the issue of married women in love with women, they clearly provided a supportive environment in which the women felt comfortable talking about issues with their sexuality and their desire for, or history of, relationships with women. Through that talk, women were able to try out different stories, incorporate new information into their stories, and assess reactions to their stories as they emerged.

All of the women who have lived as lesbians for a number of years were integrated into some type of lesbian or lesbian supportive community. This was often just a loosely-knit group of friends, some of whom were gay or lesbian and some of whom were not. In some cases the women belonged to more structured groups such as a lesbian mah jongg club, or hiking group. Having a lesbian friendship network (either formal or informal) did seem helpful for some of them as they tried to "discover" their true natures.

This was particularly true for those, like Esther, who had highly negative images of lesbians. Meeting a wide range of women, with various styles, relationship histories, and personal attributes allowed them to find a place as lesbians (or gay women) that fit for them. As Peggy put it,

when I was younger, and people would say “a lesbian” they would come up with a description that was kind of scary but once you meet lesbians and you see the different people, they’re not scary, they’re just people. You know and there’s all different varieties, you know? I mean – it’s just, they’re just people.

Often these networks included other women who had been married, which also assisted the women I interviewed as they tried to find other lesbians who had stories similar to their own. As was hypothesized earlier, if/when the strong Left Fielders access a larger lesbian network, it may assist them in framing their experiences and developing a way to have their experiences make sense. In one final note about lesbian community, it is important to remember that for some there was a rigidity in the lesbian community or a fear among partners that necessitated taking a public lesbian identity that was at odds with an internal knowledge of the self as bisexual. In these cases social networks of the stigmatized served as stigmatizers, constraining a woman’s ability to socially claim the sexuality she knew to be true for herself.

Family and motherhood also played roles in the sense-making activities of the women I interviewed. You will recall, for example, that negative reactions by their families of origin caused some women to forswear their already acknowledged lesbian selves and embark on an effort at heterosexuality. Women such as these were able to take a retrospective glance at these early experiences and use them as a justification for why they had not lived their whole lives being true to their lesbian selves. For other women

the hurt they caused husbands and children was a source of pain and sorrow. These women often used an appeal to inevitably and the importance of being true to oneself to counterbalance their feelings of guilt and selfishness. In this way the social understandings of mothers and how they should behave influenced how they accounted for their untoward behavior. They countered cultural expectations about the selflessness of mothers with notions of the importance of living an authentic life, casting this as a positive model for their children. Children were also implicated in their stories as they discussed their experience as heterosexuals. Some explicitly mentioned the desire for children as a prime motivator for heterosexual marriage. Others discussed their children as an outcome of their heterosexual experience that made it both necessary and worthwhile.

Many of the women had positive things to say about their husbands, not necessarily as husbands, but rather as fathers and as people in general. Most did not report incidents of either psychological or physical abuse. No woman indicated that it was dissatisfaction with their husbands that *caused* them to move into relationships with women, although some said that had their husbands been more emotionally accessible they might have been able to make the relationships work. In a couple of cases husbands were supportive of their wives efforts to unravel the questions they had about their sexualities. This support sometimes facilitated a woman's move to relationships with women - something the husbands might or might not have actually intended.

One interesting component that a few of the women touched on, but for which I did not have sufficient data to create an in-depth analysis, had to do with women who had affairs with women while they were still married. In some cases the husbands became



aware of these affairs and some subjects touched on their husband's reactions to those affairs. For some of the husbands it seemed easier for them that the extramarital partner was a woman and for others it seemed more difficult.

Some of the younger women, including Left Fielders and those in the Wondering Wife group came out to their husbands and/or children right away – even before having decided what they were going to do about their new found interest in women. This is in contrast to some of the women in the older age group who never officially came out to their husbands or their families – although after 20-30 years of living with the same woman, most of the women assume their families and husbands are aware. These women obviously came to their sexuality shift at a different time in terms of the acceptance of lesbians and so it is not surprising that they chose to just live their lives without announcement. In some cases it seemed the women told their husbands, turning to them as friends to help them with a difficult dilemma, and some husbands rose to the challenge. In other cases women seemingly told their husbands so they could call a halt to the marital sexual relationship. There was insufficient data gathered in this study to fully explore the interaction of family dynamics and story type, but it does raise interesting possibilities for future research.

As with peer and family networks, larger social institutions were also important in the sense-making activities of the women I interviewed. As powerful agents of knowledge, this was not surprising. The most striking were the women's experiences with therapy. Religious ideas impacted the women as well. As noted in Chapter 6, therapy and the therapeutic perspective of a given practitioner had a powerful impact moving a story in one direction or another. For most of the women accessing therapy

since the 1973 removal of homosexuality from the DSM, not only did therapy assist them in coming to terms with this sometimes unexpected change in their lives, it seems it also sometimes helped to direct the story trajectory. Therapists helped the women to “uncover”, define, and redefine early experiences with women as harbingers of things to come.

Clearly, additional things could be learned from speaking with women (or men) who have purposefully sought reparative therapy or other counseling designed to “cure” them of their homosexuality or at least their homosexual behavior. Such therapy would help to form a different story, likely one in which the experience was an aberration, or at the very least, a tendency that was to be resisted at every turn. Unlike those who received treatment from mainstream practitioners who work within the framework of the APA position on sexuality, therapy done by reparative therapists would pathologize their same-sex experiences, perhaps as misplaced desire for closeness with a same-sex parent, or fear of heterosexual relations and relationships. In this case, practitioners would not help clients to uncover early evidence of a fundamental (homo)sexual self. Rather they would work to reinterpret or reconstruct biographies in such a way as to highlight what had gone awry and how it could be rectified. The number of people who seek this type of therapy relative to those who seek help from mainstream practitioners is small, but juxtaposing their assisted biographical reconstructions with those provided by the women in this study would be interesting. Reparative therapy approaches are frequently closely linked with religious ideas and organizations, so future research with this population would yield insight into sexuality narrative construction at the intersection of mental health and religion.

For the women in this study, religion was separate from therapy but was still complicated. Mainstream religious ideas tend to be less supportive of homosexuality than a mental health environment that understands homosexuality as a normal variant of human sexual desire and identity. Instead of helping the women to develop a story and find the evidence to support it, religion often thwarted their ability to embrace their new found sense of sexual self. Women for whom religion was important had to create stories in opposition to the main texts of their religious traditions. They had to negotiate negative messages and find a religious community that was both supportive of their life choices and theologically relevant to them. Having experienced rejection and alienation from religious organizations, either as women with same-sex desires, or merely as women, several of the subjects decided to forego participation in a formal religious community altogether. Several, however, reported having developed an individual spirituality that was important to them and allowed them to have an internal religious life that could co-exist with their sexual desires.

#### Gendered Sexuality: Heterosexuality, Intimacy, Friendship, and Desire

Social constructions of female sexuality and female friendships were implicated in a variety of interesting ways in terms of women's recounting of their experiences. One of these is social understandings of the nature of the intimacy of female friendships. Another is the roles that sexual desire and emotional intimacy are understood to operate in female sexuality. A third is the generalized eroticization of the female body and the freedom women have to view the female form and other women in ways that are desirous if not overtly sexual.

We begin with female friendships. The idea that girls will develop intense crushes on other girls is exemplified in the 1953 sex education film *Social-Sex Attitudes in Adolescence* (Crawley 1953). In this film Mary develops two intense crushes on girls during her high school years. This makes Mary's mother uncomfortable as she feels their "continual intimacy and concentration of affection" is unnatural. Lorne Green's soothing voice-over narration assures Mary's mother that such intense relationships are a normal part of bridging the gap between "antagonism" toward boys and finding one to fall in love with and marry. Many of the women I interviewed – particularly, but not exclusively, the Retrospectives and Always Knews – referenced such crushes or intense attachments to other girls in their teen years. Some of the Left Fielders, such as Ellen, seemed to be beginning the process of uncovering/discovering these attractions in hindsight. Should such projects meet with success, those women might move to a story more in line with the Retrospective format. The social acceptability and indeed expectation that girls have such relationships served the women's understandings of their sexuality in at least two ways.

To begin, girls who had intense attachments to other girls were able to avoid thinking about them as lesbian attachments because they seem to be part of "normal" femininity and maturation and so not at odds with the accomplishment of heterosexual identity. Secondly, such connections provided easy reference points for those looking back to find evidence of a lesbian self that had originated at an early age. In the process of biographical reinterpretation the women were able to take a relationship they may or may not have thought of as sexual or lesbian at the time and make it one of desire in hindsight.

In 2005, the New York Times published an article by Stephanie Rosenbloom on the phenomenon of “girl crushes.” These are intense attractions women in their twenties and thirties, not girls and adolescents, develop for other women. These feelings are not generally experienced as specifically sexual in nature, but, according to the article, they may feel remarkably like the feelings that accompany a new romance. Most girl crushes occur between heterosexual women, so having such feelings does not require defining them as being lesbian in nature. For some of the women I interviewed having an ongoing series of such attachments ultimately became a problem as they began to experience these feelings as somewhat sexual and therefore discomfiting and unmanageable. As noted in Chapter 3, Julia eventually disallowed herself from having close female friendships at all as the intensity of feeling and her pulverization when the relationships were lost became too much to bear.

How the women reflected on and told the stories of their heterosexual experiences was in keeping with other research on the achievement of heterosexuality and the sometimes problematic nature of female sexual desire. For example, several of the women echoed Demasi’s (2001) findings in terms of why they wanted boyfriends; including things such as having someone to do “couple” things with and feeling they needed a boyfriend to fit in socially. Demasi also found that desire for sexual intimacy or emotional closeness with boys was a negligible factor in terms of girl’s desire to fit into the heterosexual dating scene. This theme was reiterated in the stories of my subjects as well. Tolman’s (1994) work points up that desire is a complicated thing for girls as they are supposed to control the sexuality of boys and in so doing end up divorcing themselves from their own feelings of pleasure and yearning. One need not be a sociologist to know

the consequences for young women who evince too much desire. One can ask any high school sophomore. So, from an early age, women may learn that desire is not necessary for heterosexuality, or that desire – especially strong desire – is not, in itself, appropriate. These reports of relative indifference to heterosexuality as an early age may be being deployed to reinforce a claim of a longstanding lesbian identity. It is worth noting, however, that these tales of disinterest are consistent with those of studies like Demasi's in which the subjects clearly identify as heterosexual.

This opens up the possibility that women who experience relatively low levels of desire - in tandem with compulsory heterosexuality – are able to cast their experiences with heterosexuality as somehow normal. Only two women had extremely negative responses to heterosexual sex (and one had no heterosexual experience, at least with intercourse.) Others found it mildly negative, or were somewhat neutral, relatively disinterested, or enjoyed it – either with their husbands or with some other man with whom they had been intimate in their lives. Neither of the two women with strong negative reactions were either Always Knew or Retrospective lesbians. They were both Left Fielders and reported not to know that sex was not supposed to be negative and traumatic until they had sexual experiences with women. One of these women talked to her gynecologist about her marital sexual difficulties, telling her,

I don't know if this is all women but I just do not want to sleep with my husband, I think I need to talk to somebody because I avoid it, it's just horrible, and she's just like, "everybody's like that." You know? That's what she said.

Other women did not have this kind of extreme reaction or receive such bizarre advice, but few of them, speaking in hindsight, seemed overly alarmed that their sexual relationships with their husbands were not particularly satisfying. I expected more stories,

told in hindsight, of highly negative responses to heterosexual sex at least from the Always Knew and Retrospective lesbians. I expected these recollections to be brought to bear as evidence of a “true” lesbian nature, stemming from the stereotype that lesbians are repulsed by even thinking about sex with men. Such was not the case. Rather the stories were of low levels of desire or a willingness to just lay there and let it happen. If it is the case that heterosexuality, and female sexuality within heterosexuality, does not emphasize female pleasure and desire, the lack of it does not undermine the institution; keeping women in relationships that are not sexually satisfying because they are not aware that they ought to be. Constraining female desire in this way may reduce the number of women who consider lesbian relationships because their heterosexual relationships seem to them to be within normal limits.

This separation of female desire from successful heterosexual performance may explain some of the difference in terms of male versus female sexual identity development. Expectations for male sexuality are different. In order to enact appropriate masculinity, men are supposed to like sex, want sex, and “perform” sexually (Gross, 1989; Cooper and Baker 2003; Lorber and Moore 2007; Pascoe 2007). Willingness to “lay there and let it happen” is not part of gendered sexuality for men. It may be the case that after identifying desire for other men, or having low levels of desire in sexual relationships with women, men are less likely to be able to mesh their lack of desire with the cultural expectations for men and sex. This may be related to findings that men develop a sense of themselves as gay earlier and are more rigid in their sexual sense of self (Baumeister, 2000; Peplau, 2001). A sense-making study of this kind into the experiences and story formation of men who have been married and then become

involved with other men would perhaps yield further insight into this area. It would be interesting to see what kinds of stories they tell – Always Knew, Retrospective, Shifter, Left Fielder – or perhaps tales that are totally different.

All of the women in the study characterized emotional closeness and intimacy as being as important as actual sex. In many cases they claimed they were more important. This seemed particularly true (but not in every case) for the women in the older aged group who had been partnered with the same woman for a number of years and had infrequent sex. These women talked about the importance of intimate touch as well as emotional closeness in terms of sustaining the relationship but proffered that sex per se was no longer a super critical aspect of the relationship. Like all of the data gathered in this research, these remarks are framed by cultural understandings about the gendered nature of sexuality, in which women are expected to be focused on intimacy while men are supposed to be focused on sex. There seems to be a parallel here that might be worth noting. As hypothesized above, because of the way heterosexuality is constructed, women can tell a story of successful heterosexuality even if their experience of pleasure or desire is quite low. Similarly, within some facets of the lesbian community successful long-term relationships are culturally framed as not requiring very much in the way of sexual desire or sexual activity. This is the phenomenon of Lesbian Bed Death, a term coined by Blumstein and Schwartz in their 1983 book *American Couples*. While her methods and findings have been heavily critiqued, the truth of her claims is not what's important. What is important is that for some aspects of the lesbian community, it is thought to be true and as such becomes a reference point for telling a certain kind of (non)sexual story.



There is one final note on the importance of emotional closeness and intimacy. The women in this study did not, for the most part, entirely discount the possibility that the emotional closeness they found in their relationships with women was also possible with men. They generally rejected a strict view that gender wholly determines the capacity for intimacy and that men are doomed to a personhood of emotional distance. But they did think such emotional closeness was far less likely to be found in relationships with men, both for themselves specifically and in relationships in general.

Interestingly some of the women who reported active sexual fantasies about women when masturbating or having sex with their husbands were also able to normalize this as part of heterosexuality and female sexuality by universalizing that experience to all women. As Laumann et. al (1994) found in their study on same-sex desire, behavior, and identity, nearly 60% of women admitted to having some same sex desires though only a fraction of these had same sex behavior or identity that went along with it. Demasi (2001) found similar levels of acknowledged same-sex desire in her study with women who identify as heterosexual. These studies indicate that consciously experiencing desire for other women is more the norm than not. There is a permission in society for women to comment on the attractiveness of other women – although this sometimes manifests as envy or critique. Still, women are allowed to say things like, “she is so beautiful” or “I love her shiny hair” or “she has a beautiful figure” in a way that men are not supposed to observe or speak of other men. These feelings and observations are routinely folded into “normal” heterosexuality. Though having a heterosexual sex life in which the fantasy partner is always female is not the same as thinking, “my goodness, she has a lovely complexion”, it does seem that it falls on the same continuum. Additionally, more than

one woman talked about watching girl on girl heterosexually oriented pornography with their husbands or alone. Folding lesbian imagery into heterosexual relationships, or a heterosexual sense of self, was therefore somewhat normalized. One of the women who had watched such pornography with her husband laughed at what she considered to be some men's naiveté in this regard, saying,

They get – for some reason they get really excited about watching two women go at it. So if you're there with your wife or girlfriend and she gets excited too – can you put two and two together? But they don't.

The frequency of acknowledged same-sex desire by women as well as the generalized eroticization of the female body and the marketing of lesbian experience to a heterosexual audience through pornography may allow women to forgive themselves their attractions to women and move forward heterosexually. At least until some event or occurrence causes them to think about these attractions, or sexual thoughts and fantasies in a new way. In some cases this was a nearly indefinable or unexplainable sudden insight that the feelings they had for other women were more than just friendship, appreciation, envy, or a certain tingly feeling. Instead they came to see them as feelings of attraction and desire for either one specific woman or women more generally. In some cases it came as a consequence of developing an intense friendship (perhaps like the "girl crush" discussed above) that became sexual in nature. This last is interesting and seems to have been a frequent stimulus to sexuality change for the women in this study. What is interesting about this phenomenon is that it seems consistent with what has been found by others (Peplau, 2001; Rosenbluth, 1997; Diamond, 2008; Simon and Gagnon, 1973) concerning the role intimacy and emotional connection play in women's sexual desires, behaviors, and identities.

This research was not specifically designed to analyze the women's experiences with heterosexuality. That said, women in this study are uniquely positioned to critique that institution. This is not to say that their observations or analysis are better than those of others not similarly situated, but only to say that their position is unique. Having extensive heterosexual experience and then subsequently having relationships with women gives them a perspective that neither heterosexual women nor lifelong lesbians have. Such reporting of experiences is of course anecdotal and individualized so therefore not generalizable - but might be instructive in terms of how individual women experience their relationships in other and same sex situations. For some of the women heterosexuality was a conscious achievement in a way that it is not for most women. You will recall that Esther, Lisa, and others made specific and conscious plans to carry out a heterosexual future. They were somewhat successful in doing so until they just couldn't do it anymore. Other women were able to look back at a heterosexuality that seemed inevitable and natural, one that would go without saying, and see that it was perhaps not as natural as they might have once thought.

Apart from the desire and sexuality aspect of heterosexuality, as noted previously, the social arrangements that accompany heterosexuality and its gendered nature were also problematic for some of the women. They no longer wanted to participate in those arrangements once the possibility of relationships with women became part of their reality. This resulted in some women who might have otherwise been able to be in sexual relationships with men becoming unwilling to pursue such relationships because of the social baggage that comes with it. For example, as was noted earlier, the construction of heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships in terms of power relations and the

expectations around certain kinds of feminine behavior, rather than being a draw for these women, became a construction against which they resisted. In part this had to do with the interpersonal interactions within the relationship in terms of who had the most “say.” It also had to do with how one is perceived in public, and the requirements of heterosexuality in public, that the women found limiting. Debbie, for example, felt that while she was in heterosexual relationships, perceived as heterosexual, and operating within heterosexual social space, she couldn’t even dance with the abandon she would have liked. In women’s only space she felt like she could dance however she wanted. She also discussed the ways that women are supposed to sit and talk in a stereotypically feminine fashion when socializing in the heterosexual world. Somewhat similarly, Helen found that her husband who was not an overbearing or particularly macho type guy acted differently when with his male friends, needing to posture about his power in the marriage. In these types of cases the gendered nature of heterosexuality, with its complementary and unequal roles, did not serve to strengthen the draw of that institution. Rather it undermined it, as these women came to find aspects of femininity they were expected to fill within the relationship and in the social world constraining.

### Unpacking the Boxes

I return now to the story of Iris, with whom this concluding chapter began. In addition to sharing with me the struggle to make sense of her experience and therefore being the genesis of this project, Iris has also had ongoing influence as the research has proceeded. Specifically, she has provided insights into the limitations of projects such as this in general and perhaps this project in particular. She has done this in several related ways. To begin, she points up the disconnect between ideal types and the usually

messy, muddy social world. In my interactions with her, she also reminds me that making categories reinforces that there are categories and that they are somehow “real”, even though, of course, they are not. This is not to say that the categories are meaningless, but merely to reiterate that categories are social constructions and that other categories are possible and could have been equally useful in analyzing the tales the women told.

I will begin with the issue of the construction of ideal types. Iris has been a sounding board throughout this project and has observed as the story typology has emerged from the data of the women’s narratives. The story types make sense to her and she believes they are meaningful in terms of understanding how women explain their sexual sense of self. In fact, she can listen to the story of a friend or colleague and quickly slide her into one of the four boxes. Here’s the rub: Iris doesn’t think she fits into them. Her story is not quite Retrospective and not quite Left Field. It’s definitely not Always Knew, but it might have some Shifter components. Iris’s sense that the story types don’t fit her serves as a reminder that categories which seem neat and tidy in a research write-up are not so neat and tidy when applied to real people, with the intricacies and minutiae of their lives and life stories.

Regarding the reification of categories, Iris continues to reference the categories she knows I have created as she tries to figure out where her story fits. She is not under the impression that the categories have some kind of long-standing research based existence. She knows that the categories are somewhat made up as she has listened to me rattle on about how they have emerged from the data. Still, she has come to see the categories as somehow meaningful – even though she doesn’t fit. As noted above, she is able to apply the categories to the stories of other women she knows, even if she doesn’t

feel it applies to the telling of her own tale. For Iris, perhaps, my research has become a sort of dominant knowledge writ small, offered to her by someone she has come to see as a kind of sexuality story “expert.”

The mystery that is the story of Iris reiterates what was presented in some detail in Chapter 2 wherein I discussed the difficulty of finding the “proper” category for the stories some of the women told. In those cases, like Iris, the stories the women told had components of more than one story type and I, as the doer and writer of the research, had to weigh and evaluate as carefully as I could where the story would be placed. The categories I created emerged from the data I collected. Had there been other data, other stories, the categories might have been different. Interviewing more women might yield someone whose story did not fit any of the already constructed categories, so perhaps a fifth, or sixth, or seventh category would be required.

Related to the artificial nature of categories and the degree to which people might not actually fit into them, is the understanding that in conjunction with the constantly emerging and shifting nature of stories, people might move from one category to another. Changes in their understandings of their sexualities and how they arrived where they are might change and thereby be reflected in the telling of a different tale. In Chapter 5, I discussed the impact a social network might have on story construction, hypothesizing that membership in the Wondering Wife group might have moved women to a Retrospective or Always Knew story type more quickly than a woman who did not have access to a narrative-facilitating group of that kind. I also hypothesized that strong Left Fielders might be in a sort of story limbo and that as their social networks changed, the number of female attractions or partners increased, a return to relationships with men, etc.

their stories might change as well. This raises the question of whether other types of story shifting might occur. It seems likely that it could although I would argue, based on the perceived need people seem to have to make sense of their lives, the strong Left Field position is likely the most untenable and unstable and therefore the most likely to change.

There are other possibilities, however, it would seem. For example, women like those in *Wondering Wife*, might shift away from an Always Knew or Retrospective lesbian story if once they leave the group they engage with people for whom bisexual is a viable category in a way that it wasn't in the group. Alternatively, they may decide after leaving the group that they have spent enough time trying to figure out what happened and what to do about it and take on a weak Left Field stance in which that analysis is no longer so important.

It seems unlikely that Always Knew lesbians (and perhaps Retrospectives) would shift away from telling Always Knew stories, absent a shocking new, probably external, turn of events. Always Knews are not likely to "unremember" adolescent same-sex relationships although their meaning might change. Women like Lisa and Esther are unlikely to forget the "let's be straight" conversations they had with early girlfriends. Should an Always Knew become involved in a heterosexual relationship in the future, however, it would be interesting to see the way these early experiences might be reinterpreted to create consistency with a new sense of sexual behavior and/or identity. Would they tell bisexual Shifter stories, fluid Shifter? Would they still think of themselves as lesbians with one male soul mate in a mirror version of the stories told by some of the strong Left Fielders? Might they, like the weak Left Fielders, decide figuring out sexuality is not all that important. Similar questions could be asked of other groups

and future research with women whose sexuality shifts the other way, or returning to interview the women who were subjects of this study might yield some insight into how stories shift from type to type.

### Asking the Question

Until Iris voiced her difficulty in making sense of her sexuality, it had not occurred to me that such a struggle for meaning existed. Iris asked herself if she was a lesbian as part of her effort to make sense of what had happened to her. For her, in her cultural milieu, who (or what) we are in terms of sexuality (particularly in terms of the gender of our sexual object choice) is thought to be an important piece of identity. Understanding our identity is an important part of both our personal and social sense of self. Each time such an identity question is asked it adds to the supposition that the question has real meaning and is important enough to ask. My research was Iris' question writ large, in which I asked many women how they made sense of their sexual histories and sexual identities - a question *I* had come to think was important. By asking them, I indicated to them that it was important too. Obviously, by inquiring about sexuality and sexual identity, the interview served to foreground these things and implied they required explanation. The question assumes there is a story to be told and one the interviewer believes is important enough to record.

I began the interview by asking, in the most general way, for the women to tell me their stories in whatever way they wished, talking about anything they wished. Later in the interview I asked the women (in the least leading, most open way possible) what words they use, now or in the past, to describe their sexuality. By asking this, I signaled that they should call themselves *something* – a request some of the women actively



resisted. Several of the women resisted labels – although most did settle on something. This resistance to labels could indicate a couple of different things. Clearly for the strong Left Fielders resistance could be linked to feeling that they didn't really know "the answer". This again reinforces that there is an answer that is important, has an objective reality, and can be known. Additionally, Seidman (2004) argues that as gay and lesbian people have become more mainstream, the reality of sexuality as a core identity - one that operates for people as a defining identity in most aspects of life - may be on the wane. Some women who would prefer to be unlabeled may be reflecting that they do not feel claiming a sexual identity is crucial in terms of really saying who they are.

Finally, it might be the case that people, who become involved in same-sex relationships later in life, have a series of other identities so that taking on the identity of homosexual is not that important. By this I mean that those who know themselves to be homosexual at a young age may have fewer other strong identities that feel truly defining. Adolescence is a liminal time; one is not quite a child and not quite an adult. One is unlikely to be a parent and unlikely to have a defining type of career. Coming out may be the most important - perhaps the only - identity project an adolescent has undertaken. People who come out later in life may have many identities and undertaken many identity projects. Having been married for a number of years, a mother for a number of years, integrated into a network of friends, and perhaps practicing a profession for a number of years might give a later in life lesbian a series of identities by which she has already established a rich and full sense of herself in the world. While there might be some upheaval in these roles (divorce at least, in most cases) it seems likely that at least some

of these social locations would remain, perhaps lessening the need to make a claim of sexuality as the defining piece of who one is.

In the end, I have listened to Iris's story and the stories of 36 other women. I have analyzed the forms their sense-making narratives took and how they are a reflection of the human need for an understandable history and the power of dominant knowledge. I have not answered the question that is in some ways the most pressing for Iris and for several of the other women I interviewed. They wanted to know whether or not they were lesbians and why things had unfolded for them sexually as they had. Those were not the questions this research was designed to answer. Rather, this research was designed to assess how individual people and their stories interact with the dominant discourse within which they assume they should be able to fit their lives. In telling and retelling their stories – to themselves, to others, and on one occasion to me – Iris and all the others have constructed and continue to construct their own answers to the whys and hows of their sexuality and are coming to their own decisions about how to explain it all to themselves and others.

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## APPENDIX A INTERVIEW GUIDE

**Invitation to narrative:** As you know I am talking with women who have the experience of being married and then having relationships with women. I am interested in hearing your story. I would like for you to tell me about yourself and your relationships. I'm interested in what you think about what happened, how it happened, and why. I would like to know about your life before this occurred and after. Please tell me anything you think is important and you may tell the story in any way or order you like. I'll let you know if I need you to clarify something. If I have specific questions afterwards, I'll ask them and you can answer if you wish. You can go ahead and start at any time.

### **Heterosexuality**

- Do you recall when you first wanted to have a boyfriend?
- Why do you think you wanted to have a boyfriend?
- What were your expectations for these relationships?
- What drew you to the men/boys with whom you became involved?
- Was sex an important feature of wanting a boyfriend?
- Did you feel like you were expected to have a boyfriend? Who/what made you feel that way?
- When did you start thinking about marriage? Did you ever play "marriage" or "wedding as a girl? When you thought about getting married what did you think it was going to be like?
- Tell me about your early relationship with your husband, how you met, how old you were, etc.
- Whose idea was it to get married? How old were you? How long had you been seeing each other?
- People get married for a lot of different reasons – looking back on it what were your reasons?
- Did you ever feel that there were pressures on you to get married? What were they? Did they come from your insides, the outside world or both?

- On the whole would you say you had a happy marriage, an unhappy marriage or somewhere in between?
- In general, what were the things you like (d) most about being married and what did you like the least?
- In your marriage, did you have problems/arguments about:
  - Money?
  - Day to day living/household responsibilities?
  - Sex?
  - Parenting?
  - Spending time together?
  - Family/in-laws?
  - Hobbies and interests?
  - Communication and emotional intimacy?
- What do you think were the advantages and disadvantages of being married?
- (If divorced): What was the hardest thing about leaving your marriage? What do you miss the most?

### **Same-sex attractions**

- Tell me about your first experience of having romantic/sexual *feelings* for another girl/woman.
- Who was she? What attracted you to her?
- How old were you?
- What did you think about those feelings at the time?
- Did you think of them as romantic/sexual? How about now?
- Did you act on those feelings?
- Did you tell her about your feelings?
- How did you explain those feelings to yourself?
- What did having those kinds of feelings mean to you?
- Did you have a name for those feelings?

- Did you know anyone else who had those kinds of feelings?
- Did you tell anyone about the feelings you were having?

### **Same-sex relationships**

- Could you tell me about the first time you had a romantic/sexual relationship with a woman?
- How old were you?
- Where and how did you meet?
- What about her made her attractive to you?
- Did you know her as a friend/coworker/etc. prior to you realizing you had developed sexual feelings or did it occur at the time you met?
- How did that realization make you feel?
- How long had you known her before you developed romantic feelings?
- In your current (or past) relationships with women are issues and problems different than they were in your relationships with men, or are they the same? Do you have problems/arguments more or less about:
  - Money
  - Chores
  - Sex
  - Family issues
- Are their differences in communication and emotional style in your relationships with women relative to your relationships with men?
- Differences in level or type of emotional fulfillment?
- How did your sexual relationships with women differ from your sexual relationships with men?
- How knowledgeable were you about sex between women?

### **Perceptions of the gay and lesbian community and their role in it:**

- When someone uses the term “lesbian community” what do you think the term means?
- What kinds of women are in it?

- Do you consider yourself to be part of the lesbian community?
  - What do you do:
    - Visit gay bookstores?
    - Go to gay bars?
    - Work on gay political issues like gay marriage/HIV/etc.?
    - Have you ever gone to a gay march?
    - A gay community center?
    - A gay film festival?
    - A lecture on gay issues?
- What are the best parts of the lesbian community, if there is such a thing?
- Did you get support and a feeling of being welcomed into the community when this happened to you?
- Did you want to be a part of the community? Why?
- Did you get support from individual lesbians? Who?
- Do you have friends who are gay or lesbian?
- Do you feel an affinity for gay and lesbian people?
- When you meet a woman who is a lesbian, do you feel an additional affinity for her?

### **Perceptions of lesbians:**

- What is your earliest recollection of knowing what a lesbian was? Tell me about that image and where you got it? (book, real person, television?)
- At the time, did you think that, that image applied to you? How realistic was that image?
- What are your images and ideas about lesbians today? Where do those ideas and images come from? Do those images apply to you?

### **Sexual Identity and Terminology**

- When you talk about yourself and your sexual/relationship history what word do you use to describe your sexuality? Are you completely comfortable with that term?



- **If they identify as a lesbian:**
  - When did you come to call yourself a lesbian and why?
  - What is your earliest recollection of feelings you would describe as lesbian?
  - What did you think of lesbians before this happened to you?
  - Do you think people can choose to be lesbians? Did you?
  - How do you feel you are like other lesbians? How are you different?
  - Have you always been a lesbian?
  - Do you expect to always be a lesbian from now on?
  - Have you ever wondered if you are “really” a lesbian?
  - Has anyone ever suggested that you are not a real lesbian?
  - What is a lesbian?
  - If you had a daughter, would you want her to be heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual or either way
- **If they identify as heterosexual:**
  - Why do you think that term applies to you?
  - Have you always thought of yourself as heterosexual?
  - Do you think you always will?
  - Do you think there are other heterosexual women who find themselves attracted to women or who consider sexual/romantic relationships with women?
  - If you had a daughter, would you want her to be heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual or either way?
- **If they identify as bisexual:**
  - What do you think is meant by the term bisexual?
  - How does that term apply to you?

- When did you become aware of your bisexuality?
  - Do you know other people who would identify this way?
  - Was there a time when you identified differently? What happened that changed that? What label did you previously use?
  - Was the first experience that you think of as sexual with a man or a woman?
  - Is your current sexual partner a man, a woman, or both?
  - If you had a daughter, would you want her to be heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual or either way?
- If you could make up a term or word to describe yourself in terms of your sexuality what would it be?
  - If applicable: Why don't you call yourself a lesbian?

### **Coming Out and Being Out**

- Tell me the names of your three best friends. What is their sexual orientation?
- Who were your three best friends during your marriage?
- Would you say that some, most, or all of your closest friends are gay or lesbian?
- Tell me about the people in your life who know about this change in you. How did they find out? How did they react? Who did you tell and why? When did you tell them? Did those relationships change – if so, because of you or because of them?
  - Make sure to cover (as applicable):
    - Children? All of them?
    - Mother
    - Father
    - Siblings All of them?
    - Husband
    - Coworkers
    - Friends Do most of them know?

- Religious Community
  - Do you attend church/synagogue/mosque?
  - Does the minister/Rabbi/Imam know?
  - Do other members of the congregation know?
- How did you explain it to these various people?
- Did you explain it in the same way to everyone?
- How did gay and lesbian people in your life respond?
- Who have you not told?
- Why didn't you tell them?
- Have you ever had someone assume or “know” without you telling him or her? How did they find out? How did that make you feel?
- Have you ever had someone tell another person without your permission? What happened? How did you feel about that?

### **Other Kinds of Identity and sense of self**

- Has becoming involved with women made you feel different?
  - As a mother?
  - As a woman?
  - As a friend?
  - As a daughter?
  - As a worker?
  - In the world in general?
  - If yes, tell me a little bit about what feels different and why?
- Has becoming involved with women changed the way you feel about your body?  
How?

### **Miscellaneous**

- Can you tell me about any other significant life events that were going on for around the time this happened? This could be various things, job change, illness, illness or death of a parent, etc.
- Do you think there was a specific event or trigger event that sparked this change?

- Was there ever a moment when you thought you had become a different person than you were before and what was the change?
- When you think about the possibility of relationships in the future, does the sex of the person matter? Can you elaborate on that?
- Before this happened to you did you know of people who experienced a change in their sexual interest as adults? Who were they? What did you think about that?
- How frequently do you think something like this happens to people?
- People have a lot of different opinions about how/why a person is or becomes homosexual. What's your opinion on the matter? Has your opinion changed over time?
- Americans are pretty evenly split on whether or not a person can change their sexual orientation. What do you think? Why?
- What do you look for in a sexual/romantic partner?
- How important was/is the sexual aspect/sexual pleasure in your relationships?
- How important is friendship/companionship/compatibility in your romantic relationships?
- Has this change altered the way you think about heterosexuality and heterosexuals?
- Is there anything that I haven't asked about that you think is important and that I should have asked about?
- How do you make sense of all this?

**Basic demographics:**

- What year were you born?
- Where were you born and where did you grow up?
- Do you have children?
  - Age?
  - Sex?
- How many times have you been married?
  - Length of each?

- Are you currently married?
- With which racial/ethnic group do you identify?
- If you work outside the home, what is your occupation?  
Income range? Has it changed?
- How far did you go in school?
- Do you have a religious affiliation?
  - How often do you attend your church?
  - Do you participate in other church activities?
- Are you currently in an intimate relationship?
  - Sex of partner(s)?
  - Length of relationship(s)?