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## **Authorities on Ourselves: Being Lesbian in Heterosexist Culture -- Can Personal Meaning Inform Social Work Practice?**

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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Sue Cover Wright entitled "Authorities on Ourselves: Being Lesbian in Heterosexist Culture – Can Personal Meaning Inform Social Work Practice?." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Social Work.

A. Elfin Moses, Major Professor

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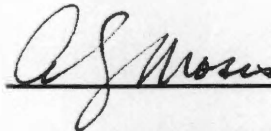
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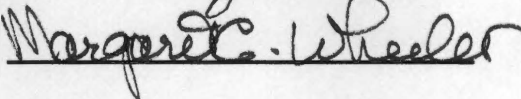
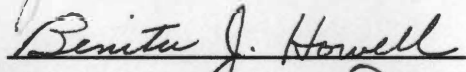

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A. Elfin Moses, Ph.D., Major Professor

We have read this dissertation

and recommend its acceptance:



Accepted for the Council:



Associate Vice Chancellor

and Dean of the Graduate School

**AUTHORITIES ON OURSELVES:  
BEING LESBIAN IN HETEROSEXIST CULTURE - - CAN PERSONAL  
MEANING INFORM SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE?**

**A Dissertation  
Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville**

**Sue Cover Wright**

**December 1991**



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This research would not have been possible without the participants -- the women from Knoxville, Tennessee -- who were willing to risk possible exposure to contribute to this project. Their strength, hope and belief that social reality can be changed was a source of continuous inspiration for me. They shared their homes, their experiences, and their lives with me. Some of these participants read parts of my manuscript and gave me valuable feedback. I will always be grateful to all of them.

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## ABSTRACT

This study was designed to explore the social reality of lesbian women. Its theoretical base lies in the social constructionist theory that the social context interacts with personal experience to create social meaning. Professional social science literature presents a confused account of lesbianism. Clinical studies have diagnosed and labeled lesbianism as a disease, a dysfunctional personality disorder, or poor social adjustment. Recent studies viewed them as an oppressed minority group. Few studies have gone to the source and asked the women to define themselves -- what it is like to be lesbian in our culture; what their experience means to them; what strategies they use to arrive at positive, workable ways of living in the world.

This study used a qualitative research method, unstructured interviews, to gain access to the participants' perceptions of social reality. A subsequent focus group interview provided some evidence for validity of the original findings. The sixteen women in the interview portion of the study were residents of Knoxville, Tennessee. The six focus group members were also Knoxville residents. There was a wide range of ages and occupations. Interview data were analyzed using grounded theory to identify categories of meanings and to generate an emerging theory about the daily realities of the participants.

Three steps were identified in the social process of how lesbians construct a social reality: (1) lesbians observed straight behavior toward and about gays and lesbians, (2) lesbians made decisions about the meaning of these observations, (3) lesbians made decisions about how to cope and how to act based on the constructed meanings. This process was seen as a feedback loop, with each step overlapping the others.

In observing straight behavior, lesbians noticed the ways straights joke, spread rumors, and refuse to acknowledge the existence of, or speak of, lesbianism. They often observed from positions of hiddenness, in situations where they were assumed to be straight. The attribution of meaning was not an open process between straights and gays but a tacit process where each side made guesses and assumptions about the other. Lesbians saw straights creating social pressure: pressure to act straight; pressure to conform to stereotyped gender roles; and pressure to participate in social rituals that had little or no personal meaning for them. Lesbians felt that refusal to respond to the pressure would be followed by painful consequences such as social and personal rejection, name-calling, threats or termination of employment. Most of the participants noted positive experiences, as well.

Lesbians expended much energy coping. They spent time predicting how they would be treated and on preparing themselves based on these predictions. They

decided how they were going to dress, when to hide and when to be open, whether to conform to stereotyped gender roles and whether to "pass" as straight. They sought support in the forms of literature, music, and art, and in friendship groups.

The study findings have implications for social work practitioners. Knowledge of lesbian social reality is essential in the effective practice of clinical social work as well as in the reforming of social institutions.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this work is to explore the social reality of a minority group -- a group of lesbian women who live in Knoxville, Tennessee. This work is not only about the women in the study, it is about the social context in which they find themselves. It is about the social processes that transpire between the group members and their social context. The study of these processes can perhaps reveal some truths about ourselves and our world that might otherwise remain below the surface of our social awareness.

Professional social science literature has presented a confused account of lesbianism -- an account that has proved limited in practical understanding. Traditional social science has not identified exactly what the experience of being lesbian really is; what issues and concepts are salient for understanding this reality; what problems and struggles are a normal part of being lesbian in our culture; what strategies are used to arrive at a positive, workable way of being in the world.

This study goes to the primary sources to allow the voices of those who have lived the experience to define their own world. The purpose is to reveal the social realities of individual women within our culture who identify and describe

themselves as lesbian -- their common satisfactions, activities, and problems.

The aspect of experience that is of particular interest is how these women negotiate their social context, how they manifest themselves, given the knowledge that certain aspects of their identity are labeled as socially negative, or stigmatized.

This research identifies, defines, and describes some of the life experiences that have been relevant to the lesbian participants in the course of negotiating their social realities. For purposes of this study, social reality was not seen as a unitary, objective quantity, but as a relativistic set of phenomena that is socially constructed by the individuals within the particular social group. Social reality, in this sense, is a consensus of reality, based on the individual group members' collective subjective experiences of the external world, combined with their personal internalized beliefs and constructs. Specifically, the study focused upon (1) lesbian observations of common patterns of social behavior in the external world around the concept of "gayness" or lesbianism; (2) how lesbians attribute meaning to these observations; (3) patterns and processes used by lesbians to cope with the actual and imagined responses of others within the social context; and (4) how lesbians act toward the external culture, completing the circular social construction process.

A case is made that experimental social science that tests relationships among

discrete variables has been unable to define the key complex socio-cultural aspects or variables that might provide understanding of this particular social phenomenon. Therefore, this study approaches the phenomenon from a different perspective, asking questions that are more easily explored using a qualitative method. Open-ended interviews were used to gather data. The primary data source consisted of interviews with individual lesbians. Data were analyzed using a systematic technique called grounded theory. This analysis generated "local theory," i.e. theory which, though substantive, was still closely related to the reality of daily life (Moses and Martin, unpublished). Local theory served, then, to link the daily realities of lesbian lives to practical knowledge about how their reality is socially negotiated.

As with any qualitative study, the goal was to paraphrase, or decode the targeted social reality, then encode the investigator's understanding of the meanings of what was observed. Agar (1980) enjoins the social scientist to view those being studied as the authorities on who they are. He allows the participants to define themselves, rather than forcing their social processes to fit into the specific pre-selected theoretical framework of a typical quantitative study. It was the intention of this project to select a piece of everyday reality that came to light through data analysis and use it to gain insight into the complex social processes involved in the patterns of interaction between the lesbian and her

social context. This piece was analyzed in detail to identify and elaborate the common patterns that outline the processes of social negotiation.

It is important to note that in discussing the links between theory and everyday experience, Holloway (1989) and others (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Lauer and Handel, 1977; Morgan, 1983) have pointed out that the grounded theory approach reunites theory and method through a process similar to a feedback loop. Theoretical concepts are developed through methodological analysis. These concepts then inform methodology by providing guidelines for further data collection, which further refines the concepts and develops the theory. Morgan (1983) supports the idea that what is observed and discovered about an object is as much a product of the interaction between the scientist and the object of investigation, the protocol and technique through which it is operationalized, as it is of the object itself.

One additional aspect of the research process requires mention here. When past theoretical conceptualizations have been inadequate, it is especially important to utilize whatever strategies are available to avoid past mistakes. Social work educators and practitioners are currently proposing feminist theory as an appropriate framework for the study of women's experiences in society and for the development of intervention strategies to alter those experiences in a positive way (Bricker-Jenkins & Hooyman, 1984; Freeman, 1989). To further my primary goal, therefore, this project will utilize current feminist research

perspectives. They avoid the biases of conventional research designs, laying the groundwork for the development of gender-fair research approaches.

Specifically, feminist paradigms are those which avoid the manipulateness, the objectification, and the differentiation found in traditional human sciences experimentation.

Feminist research alternatives have generally been described using the following criteria: (1) observation in the natural environment, with an emphasis on how reality is experienced by the observed, rather than on manipulation of variables in a research setting; (2) an emphasis on relatedness, i.e. how aspects of the phenomena are connected to each other and the context, rather than on differentiation, i.e. how they are separate; (3) the observed as participants in the research, rather than as "subjects;" (4) the avoidance of simple cause-effect descriptions of [what are very] complex social relationships; (5) paying attention to the special concerns of women; and (6) an awareness of the interaction between politics and research (Hyde, 1985). Although feminist theory, per se, was not a focus here, special attention was given to meeting these research criteria.

Chapter 2 presents a review of the relevant literature. The literature review includes historical background, philosophical assumptions and an overview of theories about lesbian identity formation and related topics. For purposes of this

study, the concept of identity formation is reconceptualized using theories of social construction, and those are reviewed. Because of the historical tendency to see lesbians as a clinical entity, the literature review includes techniques for working with lesbian clients. Also included is a summary of empirical research on lesbians, and a critique of this research. Chapter 3 contains a detailed description of the research method used in this project. Chapters 4 and 5 describe and develop the substantive theory as it emerges from the interview data. Chapter 6 discusses the findings of the focus group data and compares them to the earlier findings. Chapter 7 reviews and summarizes the project findings and assesses or discusses them in terms of their implications for social work research, social work practice and their contribution to our understanding of our own life experience.

To summarize, this research deals with how the lesbian individual interacts or "dialogues" with heterosexist society to construct her social world. It identifies life experiences, events, activities, and other variables that help define this social phenomenon. A qualitative approach to the question was chosen because it was the most appropriate methodology and yielded the sort of data that could provide complex, multi-layered understandings of a social phenomenon and its implications for our own lives.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Beginning in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, psychiatry, as a branch of medicine, began to focus on the identification of mental illnesses and pathologies, and upon their cure. Paralleling the moral and social thought at the time, any aspect of human behavior that was seen to differ from a narrowly-defined "average or normal" was likely to be perceived as pathological. Because homosexual behavior was seen to differ from the norm, it was considered to be an illness. Causes and cures were sought. The pathology label was further solidified by early research on homosexuals which used seriously disturbed patients in mental institutions as subjects. Results were then generalized to all homosexuals.

Over these years, the medical-scientific tradition became firmly linked to the underlying assumption that homosexuality represented a pathological process or mental illness. At that time, doctors were the only scientists writing about it. This was the reality of early research and it created a legacy that has influenced all further developments. So, until recently, much of the clinical literature has served to perpetuate the discrimination and stereotyping reflected in our social institutions and popular culture. This study will review this literature in order

to trace the evolution of how scientific authorities have viewed the question of what it means to be homosexual, and, where it is specifically addressed, what it means to be lesbian.

This emphasis on clinical literature is relevant to this research for several reasons. It represents the body of scholarly literature to which this work will contribute. This same literature has structured the therapeutic context in which lesbians have found themselves. It also has played a part in forming the social context in which lesbians have been embedded. It has helped to reinforce social stereotypes and has also promoted more egalitarian attitudes. The clinical literature contains a multitude of topics from identity formation, to couples issues, to a variety of lifestyle concerns. Those articles are selected for this review that seem most germane to this research.

A broad overview of the clinical literature reveals an unsystematic collection of theories, opinions, and practice wisdom which is difficult to organize. However, in an effort to obtain some order, a general format has been imposed. Three themes or threads may be identified which run from early medical texts to the present. One theme consists of traditional clinical theories. These theories are variously labeled as medical, psychiatric, and psychological. A second thread may be described as "atheoretical approaches" to treatment -- those clinical strategies which have evolved out of practice wisdom and are not linked to any



specific traditional clinical theory. The third theme includes sociological theories about deviance and labeling. There are no practice approaches associated with the third theme.

The first part of this review will present and develop the three themes as they have evolved. A second part will look at the three themes as they have been transformed in current clinical theory. Feminism provides a unifying background for these modern paradigms. A third section will outline theories of social construction. For purposes of this study, identity formation will be reconceptualized using the principles of this theoretical framework. The social construction of identity is the theoretical scheme that provides an ideal framework for this study. This reconceptualization will review the development of social constructionist theory, then will show how the theoretical framework has been applied to lesbian identity formation, and why it is relevant to this research.

A fourth section of the literature review will focus on previously published research. This research reflects the same biases as the early theories, and, also, the same push toward more constructive formulations. This review will contain an overview of quantitative research on homosexuality, and will also review qualitative studies. Empirical research on homosexuality has been strongly criticized. These criticisms will be summarized and evaluated in section four.

## **Part One - Background Themes**

### **Traditional Treatment Theories**

Discussion of treatment theories will be limited to those theories that have historical significance, either (1) in addressing homosexual identity formation as a phenomenon of interest, especially those that specifically address working with lesbian clients, or (2) those theories that have been important in the formation of overall attitudes of practitioners toward lesbian clients. Such attitudes are important here because, as mentioned earlier, they must be at least somewhat reflective of prevailing social mores, and so have been internalized by lesbians within our society. The relevant theories will include psychoanalytic, social learning, and family systems approaches and applications.

### ***Psychoanalytic Theory and Applications***

#### **Theory**

The psychoanalytic literature was the first widely read (though not the first) attempt to present a systematic theoretical approach to homosexual identity formation in general and lesbian identity formation in particular, and is based primarily on the work of Sigmund Freud. As with many clinical formulations, the focus was on etiology and cure. This focus on cause is consistent with the disease or medical model which has been historically employed, not just for

physical illness, but in dealing with women, homosexuals, and other disadvantaged groups. This model equates the aspects of the individual which differ from accepted social norms as symptoms of underlying pathology, illness or defect. Essentially, Freud believed that homosexuals failed to develop a mature adjustment to relationships. He saw them as "fixated," or stuck, at the Oedipal Stage of emotional development which he thought began at about age 4.

To oversimplify for lesbians, this means that the mother figure, and later an older woman, is the object of love. The child fails to make the "normal" transition from love of mother-object, to identification with mother and love of male object. This theory focuses primarily on the individual personality and defines all pathology as failure to negotiate some psychosocial developmental task -- as a fixation or "sticking" at a particular stage of development. In psychoanalytic therapy, according to this model, emphasis is placed on seeking the causes of the pathology. Change to a heterosexual lifestyle is seen as a sign of a healthier, more mature adjustment -- or of becoming "unstuck."

The work of Charles Socarides (1972) is a modern representative of the traditional psychoanalytic explanation of the origins of homosexuality: "the following unconscious constellation produces female homosexuality: (1) an aggressive dominating mother is the sole educator of the child and the father has a 'weak personality;' (2) the child hates the mother and is incapable of splitting

off the preoedipal ambivalent attitude toward her... "(p.53). This view of female homosexuals as "mother fixated" has led to the traditional psychoanalytic perception of lesbian couple relationships as re-enactments of the mother-child relationship. Proponents of this heterosexist approach are still active in the psychotherapeutic community, although much less visible and less accepted, for instance, The National Association of Social Workers and The Council for Social Work Education both prohibit heterosexism.

### **Applications**

Traditional applications of psychodynamic theory involve attempts to change lesbian clients into heterosexuals (Freud, 1955; Socarides, 1968,1972). These applications are widely considered today to be negative and ineffective and will not be mentioned further. Effective modern approaches to treatment of specific, well-defined problems using any form of in-depth psychodynamic therapy with homosexual clients are not widely reported (Stein, 1988). The psychoanalytic articles that do exist usually review the evidence against the pathology theory of homosexuality and then provide an alternative schema for therapy. Most focus on strategies designed to improve the client's overall social and sexual functioning by making unconscious strengths available to the client (Herron, et al.,1982).

Identity Formation or "Borderlines Revisited." Silverstein (1988) reworks

the diagnostic category Borderline Personality Disorder. He makes the point that this category has come to carry a list of symptoms so diffuse that it covers an ever-expanding segment of people. Gay people have traditionally been disproportionately represented in this category. This is especially problematic, since it is a relatively serious diagnosis and one which is considered difficult to remediate.

The traditional theory states that certain problems experienced in early childhood (18- 36 mos.) can lead to severe personality disorders in adulthood. The mother is usually blamed for these problems. The belief is that the child does not develop firm psychological boundaries between self and others. Mother causes this by withdrawing love from the child when the child attempts to separate, and by overgratification when the child clings. The withdrawal of love produces abandonment depression in the child, and this depression is carried into adulthood.

Silverstein suggests that one reason gays are unjustifiably over-represented in this diagnostic category may be found in cultural variables, rather than in personal pathology. He believes that environmental stressors can influence behavior to such a degree that the likelihood of this diagnosis increases. To oversimplify, recent changes in social norms brought about by the women's movement, gay liberation, and Kinsey's research provide the individual with

more choices in terms of behavior, identity, and gender. The individual must create order out of this diversity and build a personal psychological structure to replace the formal social and religious rules that used to be imposed by a rigid social system. Failure to create such a personal structure can lead to identity confusion and disorientation. Defenses are created to prevent breakdown. These defenses are often similar to the symptoms of Borderline Personality Disorder. Early experiences may also play a part in that they may limit the individual's capacity to deal with internal conflict and ambiguity.

Couples. Lindenbaum (1985) presents a psychodynamic view of separation-individuation in lesbian couples. His view is an elaboration of how individual pathology becomes manifest in the couple relationship. He claims that in a female dyad, there is an unconscious tendency to re-create the intimacy experienced in the mother-child relationship. This tendency derives from an incomplete or immature identity-formation process. The resulting intensity leads to merger and then, out of fear of loss of self, a reactive separation or an end to the relationship. The author suggests that developing a competitive side to the relationship might allow the partners to remain individuated, and therefore, capable of growth and intimacy.

Other Applications. Herron, et al. (1982) view psychoanalysis as a treatment method capable of alleviating many of the problems of everyday life. According to this scheme, the therapist determines what homosexuality means to

the particular client, and seeks to help the client bring lifestyle and personal identity into full expression. Clients then can explore past and present life experiences to develop deeper understanding of their behavior and gain access to previously unconscious sources of strength for change. Part of this process could be learning to enjoy sexuality, whatever the orientation. In other cases, sexuality would not be a focus.

Kwawer (1980) cautions that an analyst's view of homosexuality (i.e., as pathology, or not) can be a function of counter-transference and can have an effect upon the interpretations used in the analytic situation. Seeing homosexuality as pathology, even subconsciously, could provide the analyst with the "reasons" he/she needs to be critical or condemning of the lifestyle.

Kirkpatrick and Morgan (1980) present a psychodynamic approach which theorizes that homosexual feelings in women originate in early interactions between female child and mother. These feelings are potentially available to all women, and may become conscious and active under a variety of circumstances. They emphasize the power of sex-role expectations and reaction to male privilege in a male-dominated society.

## *Behavioral/Social Learning Theories and Applications*

### **Theory**

These theories are based on observations of primitive cultures and animal populations, and view homosexuality as a normal variation in sexual behavior, which is only one aspect of personal identity. Anthropologists Ford and Beach (1951) observed that 64% of the 76 societies and cultures they studied displayed homosexual activities. These activities were considered normal and socially acceptable in these cultures. The researchers believed the context or environment had a great influence on choice of sex partner, and that most animals, including humans, are innately bisexual. Kinsey, et al. (1953) confirmed these impressions when they found that approximately 33% of males in their American sample, and 13% of females, had homosexual experience.

Behavioral theorists point out that it is problematic to see such a large percentage of the population as "deviant."

Behavioral approaches have led to the development of social learning theories of homosexuality. According to learning theory all humans have a pool of sex drives which may, depending on experience and circumstance, be conditioned to develop into either heterosexuality or homosexuality. Several different ways for this to happen are proposed. Money (1961) suggests that while specific learning experiences may vary between individuals, there is a universal "critical period"



for the imprinting of sexual orientation. The critical period, however, has never been identified and this theory has been criticized in its application to humans. Some theorists (Green, 1974 a, b) emphasize the importance of parental and peer group influences, while others focus on early sexual experiences (Feldman and McCullouch, 1971). None of these proposals has been supported by experimental evidence.

### **Applications**

The social-learning model theoretically accepts lesbianism as a normal variation of human sexual behavior. Therefore, change or cure is not emphasized. However, when the model has been used to enforce societal norms, it has led to extreme abuses in treatment of homosexuals through the use of such counter-conditioning strategies as severe electrical shock to the genitals when the subject showed signs of arousal toward same-sex stimuli (Hyde, 1985).

### ***Family Systems Theory and Application***

#### **Theory**

In this study, identity formation is a contextual concept with multiple interlocking pieces. For this reason, among traditional clinical theories, systems theory is one of the most useful for understanding the power of contextual

meanings in the development of personal identity. The systems perspective moves away from linear cause-effect thinking and toward a circular notion of causality. That is, instead of A influencing B, A and B are in dynamic interaction.

Causality is a reciprocal concept and is to be found in the relationships between individuals and between systems. Symptoms are seen within a framework of "contextual relativity," that is, a particular behavior or event can only be understood in context (Becvar and Becvar, 1982). Because the disease concept of homosexuality is a linear, cause-effect concept, it is not useful to systems theorists. Instead, a systems theorist would be more likely to focus on how homosexual behavior affects and is affected by the context in which it exists.

Systems theory is still subject to some of the same biases that exist within the cultural context. Feminist family theorists have identified some of the biases that specifically influence approaches to lesbian and other female clients, and have re-interpreted the theory to compensate for some of these problems. These changes will be described in a subsequent section. The systems approach to conceptualizing individuals and families is not a unified perspective, but a collection of perspectives. Each practitioner must select the framework of concepts that helps give his or her particular world meaning. Several concepts related to identity formation are particularly important in order to understand the applications described in the next section. Individuals are believed to fall on a continuum in terms of their ability to see themselves as separate from their

emotional context, i.e. their ability to distinguish "self" from "other." If they are unable to make this distinction, they are seen as more emotionally dependent on the context. Their behavior is "reactive," that is, controlled by the emotional forces around them. A high level of chronic anxiety accompanies this state.

More "differentiated" persons are less vulnerable to pressures in the environment and can operate more independently. They have a better sense of who they are as opposed to what others want them to be. They have healthier "boundaries" around themselves and can define their own emotional limits (Bowen, 1985).

### **Applications**

In order to be consistent with the systems model, we would expect the family therapy literature dealing with treatment of lesbians to focus upon the individual in the context of relationships and the larger society. Since the family systems model espouses avoidance of blame and negative labels, we would expect that trap to be avoided in any available applications. The existing literature utilizing the family-systems approach to therapy with gays and lesbians falls into either the social work case study format, or into a more theoretical explication of the dynamics and approaches thought to be most useful.

Identity Formation. The lesbian individual, in the context of a homophobic

society, is constantly bombarded by evidence of personal devaluation by important others. In the face of societal anxiety or phobia, it is a challenge for her to develop a non-anxious, non-reactive, positive sense of self. In fact, the constant interface between her self and a strongly negative social structure may be sufficient to produce chronic anxiety in a relatively well-differentiated person. Therapy from a systems perspective would promote reduction of anxiety through the formation of healthy boundaries between self and society, and by helping the lesbian client develop a positive sense of self, not defined by the context. The goal would be for her to be able to function within the context of social pressures, and to remain connected to society in a non-anxious way (Krestan and Bepko, 1980).

Couples. A major systems focus has been upon the lesbian in couple relationships. These analyses identify systematic differences between heterosexual and lesbian couples. According to these studies, many lesbian couples present themselves for therapy with an issue of too much closeness in the relationship. They describe themselves as feeling "smothered" or stagnant. Level of differentiation and boundary issues are the concepts identified by family therapists which apply to the treatment of this phenomenon, usually called "psychological merger," in lesbian couples. Aspects of personal identity development are a factor in that the well-differentiated, non-anxious person is

less likely to "fuse" with a partner.

Psychological merger occurs in all relationships. It refers to the experience of closeness or union at moments of sexual or emotional intimacy. Merger is a problem only when it is not a transient state but an almost permanent one. These merged partners present themselves as unable to think, act, or feel separately from each other without triggering anxiety, fear of betrayal, and rejection in the other. Some couples also describe extreme distance as a reaction to fear of loss of self (Krestan and Bepko, 1980; Burch, 1982).

The tendency of lesbian couples to be more likely to merge than heterosexual couples is variously attributed to three factors. First, gender differences in psychological development may cause women to have more permeable ego boundaries than men. More permeable boundaries result in greater capacity to relate, but also a greater pull toward merger (Burch, 1982; Roth, 1985). Second, women are socialized to suppress aggressive and competitive desires in order to avoid hurting others (Gilligan, 1982). Third, they are socialized to believe that self-expression, especially expression of differences or disagreement, will result in social isolation (Miller, 1976).

The social environment of the couple may also contribute to merger. When couples attempt to define their bond, and meet with no response or an invalidating one, they may rigidify their couple boundary to ensure couple integrity, thereby

developing an increasingly closed couple system (Krestan and Bepko, 1980).

Social patterns that invalidate couple bonds include lack of a wedding ritual; lack of legal protection in mutual ownership of property; lack of family recognition as a couple; and potential for automatic loss in custody battles over children from past marriages, to name a few (Roth, 1985).

Therapeutic strategies are identified which are designed to promote differentiation of the individual within the couple. They include role modeling by the therapist of a non-anxious, self-aware presence; uncovering differences and disagreements as real and not destructive; alignment by the therapist with individual efforts toward individuation; teaching the client to say "no," set personal limits, and come to terms with the limits of the other; encouragement of feeling expression; teaching active listening skills; and development of separate projects and goals for each person (Krestan and Bepko, 1980; Burch, 1982).

### *Atheoretical Approaches to Treatment - Practice Wisdom*

#### **Theory Rejected**

Until the mid-twentieth century, lesbian and gay identities were regarded as diagnostic categories. This had an impact on what was written about them and on the scientific view of what it meant to be lesbian or gay. Two separate groups of social scientists took exception to this mainstream view: some clinical

practitioners and certain sociologists who were studying deviance. The sociological developments will be discussed elsewhere in this chapter.

Some clinical practitioners found that their practice experience with lesbian and gay clients did not match the existing theoretical frameworks. Along with this observation came the realization that the traditional theories were homophobic and, therefore, not helpful for guiding practice. These practitioners began to publish articles pointing out the weaknesses of traditional theories and began to share the practical knowledge or "practice wisdom" they had gained specifically from working with gay and lesbian clients. In fact, the majority of currently published practice techniques is a mixture which could be loosely described as atheoretical and humanistic.

Atheoretical approaches share an emphasis on avoiding stereotypes and judgemental societal attitudes. They focus on various practical aspects of identity formation and other lifestyle issues. They usually provide background information about homosexuality, and explore the impact of homophobia on clinical work. They outline unique aspects of lesbian identities, some problems associated with these aspects, and useful therapeutic interventions. The most important issues include identity development, establishing and maintaining lover relationships, problems resulting from a greater tendency within the lesbian subculture to meet the therapist socially outside of therapy, family

conflicts (both nuclear and family of origin), alcoholism and other addictions, special problems of minority, adolescent, disabled, and older lesbians, bereavement, unique issues relating to parenting, and problems for a woman in our society who is not paired with a man. Many cite case examples (Moses and Hawkins, 1982; Anthony, 1985; Coleman, 1987).

### **Applications**

Identity Formation. Most of these articles review the "coming out" process - the development of homosexual identity -- within an adult developmental context. For instance, typical developmental issues which may surface in young adulthood with lesbian clients can include separation from parents, development of social support networks, exploration of career goals, and establishment of intimate relationships. When problems arise, therapeutic intervention strategies must address these young-adult issues as well as the lesbian coming out process, in order to help the client integrate sexual orientation with developing adult identity (Browning, 1987).

Erickson (1963) has stated that integrating adult sexuality into the personality, and learning how to fit into society's norms and values are fundamental aspects of identity development for anyone. The coming out process represents the evolving sexual identity of the lesbian client which must be



integrated with other aspects of her identity. This integration may go hand-in-hand with the maturation process, or the therapist may find a lack of congruence between overall maturation level and level of resolution concerning sexual orientation (Browning, 1987).

Several theorists have developed stage models which attempt to incorporate aspects of both developmental and coming-out processes. Cass (1979) has presented a theory of lesbian identity development over six stages: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. Numerous other stage models have been developed (See Lee, 1977; Shively and DeCecco, 1977; Coleman, 1982; Kaplan and Rogers, 1984; Minton and McDonald, 1984).

These models, though not specifically therapy models, suggest that the coming-out process can break down or get "stuck" at any point. Strategies for working with lesbian clients who are stuck at different points in the process are suggested. These strategies include cognitive restructuring, avoiding a negative identity label, self-disclosure, meeting other lesbians, and habituation to lesbianism. Progress is measured through behavioral indications of success or failure to achieve self-acceptance (Sophie, 1986). The models provide guidelines for therapists about the normal issues faced, and steps required, for lesbian clients to achieve positive identities.

Couples. This literature identifies various aspects of lesbian relationships, stresses and problem areas, social pressures, and issues around establishing a sense of self within the relationship. Relationship aspects include patterns of sexual exclusivity, role-taking, status differentials, the female-associated emphasis on communication, communication problems, and issues of attachment vs. autonomy. The effects of the lack of well-defined roles and role models, as well as a general lack of societal support are explored (Moses and Hawkins, 1982). Most articles include suggestions for therapeutic interventions, a cautionary look at counter-transference issues, and the impact of the sexual preference of the therapist.

In treating couples, clinicians must have awareness of the changes that normally occur in an evolving lesbian couple relationship. Because both partners value relating and emotional closeness, most beginning relationships are experienced as especially close and bonded. Difficulties develop later as the need to be separate evolves. In heterosexual relationships, the woman often carries responsibility for the relationship, and the man distances. Heterosexual therapists may be uncomfortable with the closeness and view it as pathological. The lesbian therapist can validate the closeness without being fooled by it. She can push each couple member to confront her own aloneness and to tolerate periods of not feeling loved as a way of promoting separation (McCandlish, 1982).

## Sociological Theories

### *Sociology of Deviance*

Sociological theories of deviance are primarily concerned with understanding the social processes through which certain individuals or groups come to be seen as "different" from others. These theories focus on what traits or factors are used to single certain people out, how they are treated, and how social norms are established and enforced. Until recently sociologists have left the study of sexual behavior to psychiatrists. Recent sociological perspectives on lesbianism emphasize the influence of institutions and laws that discriminate against lesbians. They identify the stereotypes that lead to unpleasant interactions between lesbians and others. They see lesbians as norm-violators -- that is, as minority group members.

Deviance is viewed as a natural part of social life (Scott, 1972). "Deviance is not a property *inherent* in certain forms of behavior; it is a property *conferred upon* these forms by the audiences which directly or indirectly witness them. The critical variable in the study of deviance, then, is the social audience rather than the individual actor..." (Erikson, 1981, p.27).

Allport (1954) listed traits of minority group members that result from victimization. Among these were "insecurity; 'haunting anxiety'; denial of membership in the 'out' group (passing); clowning -- that is, affecting traits

ascribed to the group such as limp wrists, 'screaming queens', and 'diesel dykes'; slyness and cunning; identification with the dominant group (self-hate); aggression toward one's own group; militancy; and over-achievement" (p.139).

Also among these traits were the presence of guilt and shame.

Deviance theory is particularly salient to this study, not only because of its historical importance in the development of non-pathological understandings of homosexuality, but also because it is the first well developed non-clinical theory to address what happens at the interface between the individual and the social context -- a major concern and focus of this work. Erikson (1981) has described the function of such processes: "without this ongoing drama at the outer edges of group space, the community would have no inner sense of identity and cohesion, no sense of the contrasts which set it off as a special place in the larger world (p.30)." Ideas about the *function* of social deviance - the processes by which persons become identified as deviant , and how deviance preserves *stability* of cultural norms and rules - exemplify the circular notions of contextual interactions integral to modern conceptualizations of homosexuality upon which this study will be based.

### *Labeling Theory*

Labeling theory developed out of the study of social deviance. It stresses the

role of social definition, or collective rule-making, in the creation and maintenance of "deviance" (Lofland, 1969; Shur, 1971). According to this view, gayness is deviant not because it is immoral or pathological, but because society has decided that gay behavior is a violation of social norms, is undesirable, and has placed a negative label on the behavior. This negative perception is passed around and generally accepted. Members of society then interact negatively with the gay or other member of a labeled group, based on the label (Rubington and Weinberg, 1981; Moses and Hawkins, 1982).

Goffman (1963), in his work on labels and stigma defined a stigma as "the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance (p.i)." He formulated a special set of concepts bearing on "social information"-- the information the individual directly conveys about himself: "passing," "covering," and techniques of information control.

Labeling theory views socially disapproved behavior as neutral behavior to which a negative label has been attached. The focus has been on interpersonal processes -- interpersonal reactions and responses to organized social control (Fein and Nuehring, 1981). The intrapersonal processes that constitute the subjective response to one's own stigma were not considered until more recently (See the section on social constructionism in this chapter for a review).

According to labeling theory, there are two types or stages of deviance.

Primary deviance refers to the behavior or act itself. A person can engage in a homosexual act, for instance, but not be labeled homosexual. Secondary deviance occurs when the individual is (or knows he or she could be) socially rejected or punished on the basis of having committed a specific act. In fact, the punishment doesn't even have to occur. If the individual becomes aware that she *could be* punished because her behavior is deviant, and begins to call herself "lesbian," she is a secondary deviant. Furthermore, her behavior may change to accommodate the label. She may start acting like "other lesbians" (Moses, 1978; Moses and Hawkins, 1982).

### *Undeveloped Applications*

In general, sociologists do not develop knowledge about human nature for the specific purpose of practical application. However, sociological theory does influence our understanding of social processes. Theories about social stigma, deviance and labeling have played a part in the planning of community change strategies and in liberalizing of public policy.

## **Part Two - Current Approaches**

Like the background theories, current approaches to clinical practice with lesbians may also be divided into three separate threads: feminist family

systems; feminist practice wisdom; and theories of social construction.

### Feminist Family Systems

#### **Theory**

Feminist family therapists view the traditional family systems approach as extremely useful in terms of the understanding it provides the practitioner. However, feminist practitioners have identified weaknesses in the theory. The weaknesses originate primarily in the omission of certain contextual issues related to power inequities based on gender.

Feminists acknowledge that the traditional approach avoids the "pathology" trap of other treatment theories by viewing symptoms not as pathology, but as behavior designed to stabilize a dysfunctional system. Therapy focuses upon the system as a whole, not upon the "sick" individual. But critics have pointed out that the notion of "dysfunctional family" implies a certain "right" kind of family. This implication has made it less likely that practitioners of this theory would apply its concepts to alternative types of family units, such as gay families.

And, in fact, the record on publications about gay families is not very good. There are no articles about gay families in the most recent volume of *Handbook of Family Psychology and Therapy* (L'Abate, 1985). The same is true of most other mainstream collections of work on evolving systems theory and practice.

What has been written has been confined to isolated articles in major journals, to edited volumes on therapy with gays, and to feminist and alternative publications. Mainstream family therapists either don't see gay clients or don't write about them. MacKinnon and Miller (1985) point out that the use of the terms "family" and "marital" therapy seems to exclude gays.

Feminist critics point out that it is difficult to apply the systems perspective to women's issues because there has been no acknowledgement of the power differentials based on gender and sexual preference that exist in relationships . The systems approach has ignored larger system issues of power inequity and unequal access to societal resources. As evidence of this omission, the critics point out, there is little written on sexual abuse, interpersonal violence, incest, and court-ordered family treatment (e.g. Goldner, 1985; Luepnitz, 1988; McGoldrick, et al., 1989). These omissions in systems thinking are labeled "anti-humanistic" by critics (Sheridan, 1980; Erickson, 1988).

### **Applications**

Feminist family systems practice represents an amalgam of traditional systems theory and feminist principles. Hare-Mustin (1978), one of the first clinicians to practice using the combination, notes, as have many other critics, that traditional gender roles are unwittingly reinforced by family therapists who



assume that such traditional roles are the basis for healthy functioning. She suggests that assimilating feminist principles into practice could result in a shifting of task assignments to correspond to personal strengths and preferences, rather than traditional gender roles, an examination of how decisions are made within the family or couple unit, and the avoidance of stereotyped expectations of therapeutic outcome.

Hare-Mustin (1978) and others point out that feminist therapy strategies are often linear, clear-cut, cause- effect interventions and as such, may be incompatible with, or at least difficult to incorporate into, circular systems thinking. Open, honest and direct techniques are encouraged rather than the manipulative, indirect strategies of some family therapies. Feminists have stressed that family therapy techniques must take into account the special issues of lesbians and women in general, even if these special issues necessitate interventions of a linear, rather than circular nature. For instance, in incest or battering situations, the safety of the woman and child should come first, even if every effort is made to avoid blaming the batterer (Libow, et al.,1982; Rothberg and Ubell,1985).

Couples and Families. Various models for working with gay and lesbian families have been developed (DiBella, 1979; Osman,1979; Baptiste,1987). Most focus on similarities and differences between gay families and heterosexual

families and stress the need for the therapist to be sensitive to personal biases against the gay lifestyle and against gays as parents. Smalley (1987) has defined co-dependency as it is manifested in lesbian relationships and has identified useful therapeutic goals and tasks.

Roth (1985) has explored contextual stress related to unequal resources, stage differences in coming out, and level of individual identity development in lesbian couples. Hall (1987) has identified the complex of factors - social, cultural, and psychological - that shape lesbian sexual expression. She believes the complexity of the issue renders behavioral sex therapy models (such as Masters and Johnson, 1979) ineffective. She offers specific techniques that illuminate and help to neutralize contextual stressors.

Roth (1985) has argued that male and female socialization issues, and the underlying power differentials, are of primary importance in the counseling of gay couples, since they represent what might be described as "unmitigated maleness" and "unmitigated femaleness." Thus, any impact of gender socialization can be studied in these couples in its undiluted form. Whether the focus is on sexual behavior, distance regulation, or other issues, the study of socialization effects on gay couples could provide information about homosexual identity formation in the context of these relationships. On a wider scale, this study could address the role of socialization in the development of male and female identity.

## Feminist Practice Wisdom

### **Issues**

In terms of this study, feminist practice wisdom contains the available practice wisdom concerning the impact of heterosexist culture on the individual lesbian, especially on how personal identity is influenced by a negative, unsupportive social context. Feminism here provides the basis for analysis of the social context. This analysis identifies embedded heterosexist contextual pressures, including those that may be imposed by a therapist, either intentionally or unintentionally.

Primary attention is given to the effects of socialization on the individual lesbian, on her personal identity, relationships and sexuality. Although atheoretical in the clinical sense, this literature takes the position that social stigma, rather than individual pathology, lies at the root of many problems presented in clinical settings (Bardwick and Douvan, 1978; Hammersmith, 1987; Nichols, 1987; Vargo, 1987). Some articles provide guidelines for separating psychological problems from lifestyle concerns. The best examples explore the complex inter-relationship between individual issues, female socialization and the social context (Riddle and Sang, 1978). Thus, they represent a continuation of the atheoretical tradition found in the background literature on homosexuality.

## **Applications**

Sensitizing therapists to the realities of lesbian life is a goal of this literature. Acceptance or tolerance of alternative life-styles is not sufficient to qualify therapists to work with lesbians (Escamilla-Mondanaro, 1977). Therapists must also be knowledgeable concerning the lesbian subculture, societal pressures, and the "political" meaning of lesbianism. The use of the term "political" focuses attention on the symbolic rejection of male power and dominance in heterosexual relationships that lesbianism represents. The training received by most psychotherapists has not prepared them for this work. These authors stress that the reality of lesbian existence within heterosexist culture is not a reality shared by straight therapists. Therefore, remediation must begin with the therapist herself (Hall, 1978; Riddle and Sang, 1978; McCandlish, 1982; Cabaj, 1988).

Assessment of Sexual Orientation. Sexual orientation is seen as an aspect of identity formation. The debate about how to measure sexual orientation is ongoing. This concern is related primarily to worry over methods of subject selection for studies using objectivist paradigms. Past experience has raised questions about how one determines who belongs in a homosexual sample and who belongs in a heterosexual sample, since individual behavior is so variable.

Recent literature avoids the assessment models that define sexual orientation

in terms of two components: (1)the gender of the individual's choice of partner, and (2) the gender of affectional preference. New models propose multiple components of identity including current relationship status (in contrast to historical patterns), self-identification, ideal self-identification, acceptance of current identity, physical identity, gender identity, sex-role identity, sexual orientation identity as measured by behavior, fantasies, and emotional attachments, and identity history (Shively and DeCecco, 1977; DeCecco, 1982; Coleman, 1987). Nichols and Leiblum (1986) have offered "identity and social role" as an orientation model. In this model are such major components of lesbian identity as self-labeling, living patterns, socio/sexual behavior as an "outsider," rejection of traditional roles for women, and rejection by a homophobic society.

In current practice, most models view sexual orientation as composed of six parts: historical and present gender of partner preference for sexual activity; historical and present gender of emotional attachments; and historical and present content of erotic fantasies. Each person may be placed as a point on a continuum as follows: exclusive homoerotic, predominant homoerotic, ambisexual homoerotic, ambisexual bisexual, ambisexual heteroerotic, exclusive heteroerotic. In clinical practice, each component must be explored in helping a client to clarify his or her own identity (Moses and Hawkins, 1982).

Identity Formation. Because socialization strongly affects the formation of female identity, and shapes relationship processes between women and others, the effects of socialization can lead to various problems that present themselves in clinical settings. Generally, females are expected to assume a social role which includes being emotionally sensitive, supportive, caretaking, non-competitive, and unassertive. Three examples of this socialization that have particular significance to lesbians are: defining oneself in terms of others; valuing male characteristics as more socially desirable; and viewing sexuality as being for procreation rather than pleasure (Bardwick and Douvan, 1971; Riddle and Sang, 1978; Vargo, 1987). Moses (1978) examines the issue of visibility and risk-taking in the management of lesbian identity. She states that the more lesbians believe or fear that a closeted identity will be discovered, the more difficulty they experience in coping with identity issues.

In the process of forming self-concepts, women are caught in a bind. To be gender appropriate, women must behave in ways identified with a one-down status; accepting that status makes development of a positive self-image difficult. Lesbians are in a double bind: they are already gender inappropriate in their sexual preference for other women. Their self-image cannot come from being gender appropriate if they are also to value their gayness. As a result, lesbians suffer from gender-role confusion, isolation, and feelings of being very different from other women. Vargo (1987) explains that, in order to feel good about

themselves, lesbians must learn to value gender inappropriateness, at least in the area of sexual preference.

Some women encounter pitfalls along the way to developing a positive self-image. They may assume the characteristics of the exaggerated cultural female stereotype in order to cope with social rejection. They find it difficult to resolve the dilemma that authenticity or honesty about self often results in rejection. They have trouble developing effective social support networks (Hammersmith, 1987). The possible effects of a negative self-image on relationships, especially intimate ones, are outlined: denial of the meaning of the relationship; venting of internalized homophobia, i.e. dislike and devaluation of female partners; holding back of affective and sexual responses; lack of commitment to the relationship, and so forth (Riddle and Sang, 1978; Vargo, 1987; Nichols, 1987).

Recent theorists have pointed out the considerable variation in how the term "identity" is used in the theoretical literature. Some theorists use the term "identity development" to represent a conscious phenomenon (Koertge, 1984; Troiden, 1985). Others see it as an unconscious process, and see sexual orientation identity as determined by the gender to which one is "really" attracted, regardless of self-awareness (Cass, 1984; Sophie, 1986). Self-labeling is also thought by some to be the crucial process. It is thought to occur after conscious awareness of incongruence between sexual orientation and the

societally-accepted norm (Minton and McDonald, 1984; Chapman and Brannock, 1987). Faderman (1984) has stressed the political influence of gay rights, and especially the radical feminist movement, on lesbian identity development. She sees identity development as an interaction between the woman and her political awareness that heterosexuality is detrimental to women's freedom.

Interpersonal Conflict. How women handle interpersonal conflict is an aspect of how they function in social contexts. Carol Gilligan (1982) has analyzed the impact of sexist culture on the ways women handle conflict. She describes the male mode of conflict resolution as the application of moral principles to situations in order to produce right/wrong judgements. Female strategies develop out of the notion that a woman's sense of self is embedded in relationships.

Women take into account the particular people involved in the conflict -- their needs and vulnerabilities. They seek solutions that involve the least damage to individuals and their relationships. A consequence of this mode of conflict resolution is that relationships tend to be preserved. Some ways of resolving conflict, however, may result in an individual woman's needs suffering because others are perceived as more vulnerable or needy than self.

Couples. Practice literature applies these principles in work with lesbian couples. Feminist practice wisdom suggests that lesbian couples often experience disillusionment when they have to face society's homophobia and the resulting



social isolation. Whereas a heterosexual therapist may downplay societal pressure and thereby risk losing empathy, the lesbian therapist may idealize the relationship, over-identify with the couple, or become invested in the outcome. Relationship problems may also come from unresolved developmental issues and family scripts, and these issues must not be overlooked.

Fusion in couple relationships may be related to socialization and identity formation issues. Being "appropriately" female means attending to others before self and not asserting one's own individual needs, and two women following those rules together may well become involved in a circular process of orienting self toward the other. Therapeutic work from this viewpoint would involve helping each woman to learn a balance between her need for autonomy and her need for intimacy (Peplau et al., 1978; Riddle and Sang, 1978; Vargo, 1987).

Interestingly, though these practitioners use circular or systemic concepts, they do not identify with family systems therapy. Instead, they see circularity as a feminist concept.

Brown (1986) addresses the issue of sexual dysfunction in lesbian relationships. She attributes many of these problems to internalized oppression or homophobia which causes the lesbian to view her sexuality as all bad (dirty) or all good (as a reaction to stigma). She recommends therapeutic strategies that confront and redefine this internalized oppression, as well as abolishing the

culturally-derived definitions of sexuality and forms of "lovemaking."

### **Part Three - A Reconceptualization of Identity Formation**

#### **Social Constructionist Theories and Applications**

The roots of constructionist thought can be traced to the ongoing epistemological debate between the empiricist-objectivist viewpoint and the phenomenological-subjectivist school of thought about the nature of knowledge. Constructionism attempts to move beyond the dualism to which both of these traditions are committed. This theory proposes that the study of social process could become the avenue for understanding the nature of knowledge itself. It attempts to explicate the processes by which people come to describe, explain and account for the world and themselves (Gergen, 1985).

In their landmark work, *The Social Construction of Reality*, (1967), Berger and Luckmann built a theoretical bridge between subjective consciousness (a way of knowing exemplified by psychoanalytic case studies) and the reality of everyday life (the focus of objectivist research). They rejected both phenomenological and objectivist approaches to epistemology, preferring, instead, a dialectical approach between the two. They used as a model the simultaneous experience of 3 dialectical moments in social reality: (1) externalization - humans construct social order; (2) objectification - humans

experience this constructed society as objective reality; and (3) internalization - humans are molded by the constructed society - they experience it as "self."

The theory operates under the following assumptions as presented by Gergen (1985):

(1) What we take to be knowledge about the world is not a product of induction (subjective experience) or of building and testing hypotheses. Theoretical categories cannot be induced or derived from observation in a de-contextualized way, if the process of identifying observational attributes itself relies on the existence of pre-existing categories.

(2) The process of understanding is not automatically driven by forces of nature, but is the result of cooperative activity of people in relationships. Ethnographic studies yield examples. Conceptualizations of psychological process, emotions, motives, memory, identity, self, vary markedly from one culture to another.

(3) The stability of a given form of understanding is not dependent upon empirical validity, but upon transient underlying social processes. A particular perspective, thought to be fact, may be abandoned when its social viability ceases (see also Kuhn, 1970).

(4) Descriptions and explanations of the world are socially negotiated by people and are integrally connected to all sorts of other human activities.

If this framework is applied to mental processes, there are far-reaching consequences. The mind becomes a kind of social myth (Coulter, 1979); the "self" is removed from the psyche (wherever that is) and becomes an entity of social discourse. Contemporary views on such matters as motivation, emotion and cognition are no longer the result of deductive proof, but are relative matters for cross-cultural and historical comparison. Psychological process becomes a derivative of social interchange. "Psychological research itself is placed in the uncomfortable position of a research object" (Gergen, 1985, p.271).

Mahoney (1991), a psychotherapist who describes himself as a cognitive constructivist, has applied these principles to his theory about how people develop personal realities. Cognitive constructivism emphasizes the proactive nature of perception, learning and knowing; acknowledges the primacy of tacit processes (those beyond our awareness) over explicit processes; and views learning, knowing, and memory as "phenomena that reflect the ongoing attempts of the body and brain to organize their own patterns of action and experience (p.95)."

Mahoney sees the human mind, not as a blank slate upon which experience records itself, but as co-creator or "co-creator of personal realities to and from which we respond" (p.100) (see also Hayek, 1978; Kelly, 1955). The "co" simply emphasizes an interactive interdependence with the social and

physical environment. Our social/symbolic selves are always in process of being constructed. Existence is not fixed, but is an ongoing pattern of recursive activity. Mahoney provides models for understanding how we attribute meaning to experience, how we structure a sense of who we are in the context of our life experiences, social and physical forces.

### *Social Construction of Lesbian Identity*

Essentialists view homosexual identity as a fixed personal characteristic which is unchangeable unless through some drastic means, such as aversion therapy. They believe or proceed as though homosexuality were inherent in the biological, psychological or social essence of the person (DeCecco and Shively, 1984; Richardson, 1984). Essentialists see homosexual identity as a general state of being (the person), state of desire (sexual orientation), form of behavior (sexual acts), and/or a personal identification (sexual identity).

Theories about homosexual identity have shifted away from essentialist viewpoints. The shift has come after much confusion over which of these constructs is actually *essential* to the homosexual category (Richardson, 1984). Social constructionists point out that no clear link has really been established in theory or research that essentially connects homosexuality with any of those components (Bell and Weinberg, 1978; Ponce, 1978). Richardson (1981)

points out that "...many people engage in same-sex sexual acts without necessarily identifying as homosexual. Alternatively, a person may not have actually engaged in same-sex sexual acts, although they would define themselves as homosexual" (p.73) (also, Hencken, 1984). These theorists believe that research actually reveals a diversity in sexual behavior that cannot be accounted for by essentialist theories. They agree that gay self-definitions have played a positive role in homosexual identity development by providing a means of counteracting the effects of stigma. For now the label may be needed, but it will eventually be eliminated (Hart, 1984).

Social constructionists see the phenomenon of homosexuality as an historical and cultural invention -- i.e. that the category "homosexual" has only existed in certain societies at certain periods in history. Thus, while for most people, identity as homosexual or heterosexual is experienced as a central and stable aspect of self-identity, we cannot *assume* this to be the case (Plummer, 1981; Richardson, 1987).

Such aspects of identity as heterosexuality, homosexuality and bisexuality are creations of the interaction between an individual and society at historically specific moments (Herek, 1985). The individual, immersed in a particular social context, actively selects and ascribes meanings to personal experience. He or she is seen as the interpreter of his or her own acts and feelings. These are eventually integrated into a relatively stable self-image (Hart, 1984; Minton

and McDonald, 1984; Richardson, 1984). However, sexual identity is changeable and can be modified by the individual across time and experiences.

Kitzinger (1987) has examined the process by which lesbianism is socially constructed. She identifies traditional psychological theory and research on lesbians as an example of Berger and Luckman's (1967) Steps 1 and 2: (1) externalization -- humans constructing social order, i.e. people developing theories that enforce (and disguise) social control and moral judgement; then (2) objectification -- using "scientific research" to define these negotiated theories as objective reality. Empirical-objectivist research becomes the social process required to make this moral judgement acceptable to society by presenting it as established by science. Then, (3) internalization -- the "scientific" theory is accepted by the average member of society as "fact," and the "facts" mold or change his or her internal reality. So, translated, the concept evolves from "lesbianism is immoral because society says it is;" to "lesbianism has been 'scientifically' proved to be a disease or illness;" to "I think lesbianism is wrong/bad." This is a circular process in which society reifies its own projections, and the process has nothing to do with objective knowledge or fact.

Kitzinger and other feminist social constructionists believe that because this process is tacit, operating outside of our explicit awareness, objective knowledge, as we define it, is impossible. They suggest that, as a first step, we

must understand this. Then, to gain any knowledge at all, the only alternative is to engage in a *dialogue* with the phenomenon of interest or subject of study. It is in asking the participant about his or her own reality, and, then, by comparing and contrasting this information with one's own reality, and that of society, that some sort of useful or valid knowledge can be acquired. Social constructionism offers no "truth through method." It does offer a method of investigation that, while yielding useful data, owns up to its limitations.

### *Applications*

Although constructionist theory has been well developed at this point, it is elaborated only on the most abstract level. Although it contains the seeds of a scientific revolution in its ability to reframe the major problems of science, the application of these new theoretical understandings to specific human processes remains unclear. Constructionists believe that negative categorization leads to stigma, discrimination, and a narrowing of future options for the individual. Ideally, sexual orientation should become relatively unimportant in defining the individual self, enabling people to engage in relationships with either gender. In a clinical setting, such a viewpoint would allow the client to take charge of his or her own life choices rather than becoming permanently defined by a category. The theory would also identify the social restrictions and stigmatizing life events



they have experienced as located outside themselves, rather than as a consequence of their "deviance."

In terms of mental process, there has been some theoretical framing of such constructs as "self." Troiden (1985) has developed an interactionist framework for defining such constructs as self, self-concept, identity, and homosexual identity. Such theories are useful, yet the exact processes involved in their formation within the individual, and the relationship of those processes to the social context remain undefined (Suppe, 1984). Plummer (1981) has developed the "identity construct model." His goal is to describe the process of personal development wherein individuals construct and maintain a particular sexual identity. He questions whether sexual desire itself may be a social construction.

Richardson (1987) has proposed certain clinical implications of social construction theories of identity, which she presents as a therapeutic dilemma. She notes that labels give order to chaos, security to confusion. Many clients express high anxiety over needing to know "who they really are." They want a label that gives meaning to their feelings and experiences. On the other hand, labels are destructive. They restrict where other choices are possible. They control and limit variety. The therapist must not promote labeling so soon as to prematurely close possibilities, yet, to label too late may prolong suffering.

## Part Four - Research

### Empirical Studies

Empirical research has not supported the traditional theoretical perspective that lesbianism is pathological. Lesbians have not been found to be more pathological than heterosexuals. In fact, lesbians do not differ in traditional psychological terms from heterosexual women in any consistent ways, other than choice of sex partner (Freedman, 1968; Hopkins, 1969; Siegelman, 1972; Marmor, 1980). Absence of psychological disturbance among lesbians is even more remarkable considering the social pressures exerted upon them (Oberstone and Sukonek, 1976; Larson, 1982).

Such findings have gradually led to a move away from the focus on psychopathology and toward research on "alternative life-styles." Issues of living as a minority group member have become the subject of some current studies. Social and sexual relationships, and general patterns of affiliation have been described through the use of questionnaires and interviews (Saghir and Robins, 1971; Chafetz, et al., 1974; Cotton, 1975; Schafer, 1976).

Identity formation. Identity formation has been explored largely through the use of questionnaires. The results are arranged into theoretical formulations that are usually described as "stage theories" (Chafetz et al., 1974; Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982). Recognition of one's lesbianism is linked to self acceptance in

these models (Belote and Joesting, 1976). Along similar lines, Elliott (1985) has developed an empirical examination which compares the coming out process in men and women. He finds similarities in events leading to identity formation, but differences in relative importance of these events. In an effort to point out the weaknesses of stage theories, Sophie (1986) examined stage theories of identity using six different theories as a framework. She has compared these models to the lives of fourteen respondents to a questionnaire. She pointed out that the lives reflected in the questionnaire are not always consistent with the theories. She faulted the linear nature of the theories as well as her own methodology for this inadequacy.

Couples. In the search for pathology, lesbian couple relationships have been studied and compared to heterosexual relationships. As expected, no significant differences in terms of satisfaction or overall adjustment have been found (Sang, 1977; Latham, Lindquist, and Ramsey, 1987). Differences between heterosexuals and lesbians have been found in such lifestyle variables as power issues (Caldwell and Peplau, 1984; Sang, 1984); desire for couple-member equality ; sex roles (Cardell, Finn and Maracek, 1981); and relationship quality (Cardell, Finn and Maracek, 1981; Peplau and Cochran, 1981).

Patterns of couple relationships that do not follow the heterosexual model have been identified and described (Bell and Weinberg, 1978; Tuller, 1978).

The "best friendship model" is an alternative proposed by several researchers (Harry and DeVall, 1978; Peplau and Cochran, 1981). Studies have compared gays and lesbians on several variables including gender differences (Peplau and Gordon, 1983); values (Peplau and Cochran, 1981) and especially the value continuum of dyadic attachment versus independence (Peplau et al., 1978; Jones and DeCecco, 1982; Lynch and Reilly, 1986). In a similar vein, couple sexuality has been examined on the continuum of exclusivity versus openness (Harry and DeVall, 1978; Peplau et al., 1978).

Lifestyles and Roles. The characteristics of lesbian sexual behavior and sex life have been researched, including the effects of internalized homophobia on this behavior (Hedblom, 1973; Califia, 1979). Raphael and Robinson (1980) have described the lifestyles and relationship patterns of older lesbians. Albro and Tully (1979) have investigated how homosexual women function within the heterosexual macro-culture.

Stereotypes regarding gender role and appearance have been examined in depth. Berger et al. (1987) studied the ways homosexuals apply these role stereotypes to each other by exploring whether or not lesbians and gay men can detect each other in social situations. They found that their subjects scored no better than chance at predicting who was homosexual and who was not based on appearance alone. Shachar and Gilbert (1983) have investigated role conflicts

and coping strategies of lesbians in working situations (also, Hall 1972).

### Ethnographic Studies

Sonenschein (1966) advocates the anthropological study of homosexuality. Traditionally a research problem for psychology, it has been overlooked by anthropologists, even as an aspect of life in so-called primitive societies. He suggests that anthropologists focus on defining the status and content of homosexual culture. He sees ethnographic approaches as well suited to the study of homosexual social organization, economics, communication, norms, world-views, myths, demography, social and cultural change. He states that he expects an anthropological approach to reveal a different picture of homosexuality -- a nonclinical, non-pathological one.

There are a few examples of ethnographic research in the literature. As a participant observer, Elizabeth Barnhart (1975) described an Oregon community of lesbian separatists. She focused on the countercultural values of the group. Cassell (1977) also used the participant observer approach to study the urban feminist social movement in New York City. She joined feminist groups in the NYC area. In her book, *A Group Called Women: Sisterhood and Symbolism in the Feminist Movement*, she devoted a chapter to the lesbian subgroup that she discovered in the course of her work. The chapter deals with

"coming out" and with the relationship between feminism and lesbianism. Wolf (1979) has offered an ethnographic description of an urban lesbian-feminist community. Lockard (1985) defines the lesbian community she studied as a network with a shared group identity, cultural values and norms. Kus (1985) has used a grounded theory methodology to identify four stages of "coming out."

### Constructionist Studies

Research based on social construction theory has evolved only in the past fifteen years. Ponse (1978) examines the construction of lesbian identities. She stresses the diversity of meaning and the significance of individual attributes to homosexual identity and categorizes four possible combinations of hetero/homosexual behavior and signification. Quinlan (1983) discusses the meaning of "being a lesbian," the wide variety of lifestyles, relationships, and political philosophies that can be found in the lesbian community.

In a particularly provocative study, Fein and Nuehring (1981) analyze data from an ethnographic study to identify some of the psychological consequences of being stigmatized. The method of analysis used by the authors is not elaborated. They describe "a breakdown of the person's system of interpretation and valuation, which may lead to reality shock; and a *reconstruction* of those systems that takes into account the stigmatized characteristic" (p.3). Reconstruction is associated with the sequelae to stigma including identity

reconstruction, changes in affiliative patterns, and revisions of long-range plans and goals. Key elements identified in the reconstruction process are: the master-status character of the stigma, i.e. a status that takes precedence over all others; the wide-spread knowledge of stereotypes associated with a given stigma; and the actual and imagined responses of others. The intrapersonal processes described may occur in conjunction with any stigma acquired after normative socialization has occurred.

### Critique of the Empirical Research

Empirical research on homosexuality has been criticized on numerous counts, which fall under the general heading of "heterosexual bias." Heterosexual bias is defined as "a belief system that values heterosexuality as superior to and/or more natural than homosexuality" (Morin, 1977, p.629). Bias can be detected in the research questions asked, since these reflect the assumptions and the value system of the researcher. Bias also has been identified in the methodologies, definitions, instruments, and sample strategies, as well.

Questions. The questions asked in studies between the years 1967 and 1974 have been tabulated (Morin, 1977). Sixteen percent of the studies were devoted to diagnosis and assessment of pathology, i.e. the study of homosexuality as an illness. Thirty percent of the studies were devoted to the causes of

homosexuality. Some of these studies openly state that the purpose of the research is to learn how to prevent homosexuality. Only 8% of the studies were of heterosexual attitudes toward homosexuals.

Twenty-seven percent of the studies focused on the mental stability of homosexuals. These studies assumed that the label "homosexual" is a unitary concept, when it is actually a heterogeneous, non-clinical population. Given this fact, one wonders about the application of such research. If a given sample of heterosexuals was found to be passive-aggressive, would all heterosexuals be considered passive-aggressive?

The biases reflected above have declined somewhat in recent times. From 1979 - 1983, only 1% of studies were devoted to questions of diagnosis, 15% to causes, 9% to adjustment, and 19% to attitudes (Watters, 1986). The number of special topic questions, especially relationship and lifestyle issues, showed a significant increase.

Operational Definitions. Underlying conceptual confusion has been documented by examining the operational definitions used in 228 recent articles on homosexuality (Shively, Jones, and DeCecco, 1984). "Sexual orientation" was conceptually defined in 28 of the studies and was operationally defined in 168. In 196 studies respondents were identified only on the basis of the settings in which they were found (gay bars, meetings, etc.). Such terms as "gay" and



"homosexual" were used interchangeably although they do not connote the same idea. It was uniformly impossible to determine the theoretical frameworks used for analysis.

Sampling. Sampling problems follow from the failure to agree on definitions. Homosexual samples have been defined on the basis of (1) sexual histories, (2) erotic behavioral responses to same-sex objects, and (3) self-reported identity. It is not possible to tell whether a sample group of "homosexuals" or "heterosexuals" contains individuals who are and have always been exclusively one or the other. Is one homosexual experience enough to rule a subject out of the heterosexual control group? Is that subject likely to admit to it? Results obtained from different sample sources are not comparable to one another methodologically. There may be no such thing as a "representative sample" in this research.

In addition to these sampling problems, generalizations have been based on inadequate sample numbers -- sometimes as few as 1 or 2 persons (Loraine, Ismail, Adamopoulos, and Dove, 1970; Margolese, 1970). Other generalizations have been based on samples of emotionally disturbed subjects, prisoners, and dishonorably discharged military personnel. Even recent research has relied on small samples of predominantly young, white, middle-class subjects.

Instrumentality. In some studies, known deficiencies in research

instruments are ignored. One example is the widespread use of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) in the investigation of adjustment in homosexuals. Of special concern has been the "MF" scale, a scale originally designed to measure male heterosexual adjustment. This scale has been widely viewed as unsatisfactory in the literature and it has never been normed on a homosexual sample. Most authorities on use of the MMPI stress that it should not be used as a sole diagnostic tool, but should be used in combination with other evidence. In other studies, insufficiently standardized instruments have been devised by the experimenter, and used with little evidence of pretesting.

Objections have been raised about other types of instruments. Questionnaires and surveys often assume that respondents are aware of and can accurately report about psychosocial issues in relationships. In addition, the effects of social desirability pressures have not been measured (Sophie, 1986).

Ironically, due to the documented male bias present in most adjustment scales, lesbian samples have often come out looking better adjusted than heterosexual female controls. These results have been attributed to a greater number of androgenous individuals in the lesbian population, but it must be noted that lesbians are not a homogenous group to whom results can be generalized and that lesbianism does not represent a personality style (Watters, 1986). Such studies generally represent a focus on deficiencies rather than on strengths.

Methodology. An examination of methodology also reveals gender bias. Parlee

(1981) has noted that control groups in psychological research reveal the outline of the investigator's biases. For instance, using heterosexuals as controls in experiments establishes heterosexuality as the "norm" or standard by which others are compared. Thus, heterosexist bias becomes an integral part of the research methodology itself.

Gender bias has been documented by Morin (1977) and by Watters (1986). Between 1967-1974 there were four times more studies of homosexual males than of lesbians. From 1979-1983, the ratio had dropped to 3 to 1. Such inequity reflects the belief that homosexuality is more "serious" in males than in females. In fact, women are largely ignored in research -- men are considered to be definitive .

Another methodological problem involves the use of inadequately documented classification schemes, such as the division of male homosexuals into "insertors" and "insertees;" or "active" versus "passive" (Keiser and Schaffer, 1949; Oliver and Mosher, 1968). Other studies have used no control groups and no tests of statistical significance, yet have drawn experimental conclusions.

### *Other Problems*

If experimental approaches have struggled, other approaches to this research have only begun. This work shows more promise, particularly the work of

Quinlan (1983), Kitzinger (1987) and Fein and Nuehring (1981). They begin to look at lesbians as a minority group, to recognize the effects of oppression, and to acknowledge the legitimacy of allowing the group to define itself. In these studies, however, the use of unidentified or sketchy data analysis methods presents problems of validity of the interpreted results. Kitzinger is a notable exception to this trend.

The purpose of this study is to provide a systematic look at the particular phenomenon -- lesbianism -- which does not repeat historical flaws. The effort here is to stay away from the experimental approaches, but also to provide results that may be examined for reliability and validity using an accepted methodology -- one that can be explained, understood, and, under the appropriate conditions, replicated. A further purpose of this study is to provide a view of the phenomenon of interest that is somehow unique -- that uses a slightly different lens or approach. This can be accomplished in a number of ways, but is particularly facilitated by asking different research questions.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH DESIGN

According to theories of social construction, the concept "lesbian" is not viewed as a fixed and unchangeable personal characteristic, but rather as an interactional social process in which the concept is defined or negotiated. Research into this process has been sparse, but has yielded some interesting preliminary concepts. Fein and Nuehring (1981) have defined key concepts having to do with the process of reconstructing identity within the person. Other concepts involve how the individual changes in response to the acquisition of a stigmatized label. These variables include "the degree of wide-spread social knowledge about stereotypes associated with a given stigma within a given society;" and "the actual or imagined responses of others."

Other variables are identified by Quinlan (1983) as she discusses the concept of "what it means to be lesbian." Through her examination of the wide variety of lifestyles and relationships, she identifies how individuals attribute personal meaning to the label. Kitzinger (1987) and others (Hart, 1984; Richardson, 1984; and Herek, 1985) propose theories about how the individual, immersed in a particular social context, actively selects and ascribes meanings to certain activities and feelings, and how these meanings evolve and change over time.

Such ideas are so new that their explication merely reveals the extent of missing information. They hint at new ways of connecting theoretical and descriptive knowledge, but the area is unmapped -- it is largely unexplored.

Berger and Luckman's theory (1967) is useful in organizing one's thinking through reviewing the process of social construction and its three admittedly oversimplified subprocesses: (1) people constructing society based on contextual needs; (2) people imposing the structure on themselves and each other; and (3) people changing to fit the social structure. This must be seen as a circular, interactional process in which the social structure, though relatively set, is changed over time to fit people's needs, just as people change over time to fit the social structure. Although the process generally takes place outside of our awareness (see Kitzinger, 1987), the study of stigmatized identities has become an opportunity to raise the process to a conscious level.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This project focuses narrowly on a segment of the larger process of constructing a lesbian identity. In general, this focus involves Berger and Luckman's third step, internalization: people changing themselves to fit the social structure. Using those variables that have already been identified and

discussed above, the general problem for research is: **How do lesbians negotiate with the social context, given the knowledge that certain aspects of their feelings and actions are categorized or labeled as socially disapproved or stigmatized?**

Because the precise focus of the research grew out of the data (Spradley, 1979), results of the analysis have yielded these more detailed questions: **How do lesbians make decisions about applying (or not applying) the wide-spread social knowledge of stereotypes to themselves? How do they view the behavior of heterosexuals toward them? How do they attribute meaning to this behavior? How do they cope with the actual or imagined responses of others? What sort of strategies do they develop for relating to heterosexuals? What aspects of lifestyle and interpersonal relationships reflect these strategies?**

### **Research Approach**

A qualitative approach seemed particularly well-suited to this research problem for a number of reasons. There was ample evidence that quantitative studies have encountered difficulties specific to the methodology itself as outlined in Chapter 1. A lack of agreement about operational definitions was particularly

noteworthy since it demonstrates that no one really knows who fits into the category "lesbian" or "homosexual." When these sorts of critical questions are unresolved in the literature, a "back to the drawing board" approach seems called for. In other words, it seems appropriate to devote more attention to descriptive approaches that can help define basic concepts.

This particular research problem, therefore, lent itself to a qualitative approach through which the people in question were allowed to define the situation in which they found themselves (Marshall and Rossman, 1989; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Because this research was exploratory, focused unstructured interviews provided the type of conceptual, processual information deemed most useful at this stage. The interviews were unstructured in that they seemed more like conversations than formal interviews. At the same time, they were focused on the specific research question. The interviews yielded a pool of complex, inter-related data that were analyzed using qualitative methods, but which could later be segmented and analyzed using quantitative methods, as well.

This approach provided an opportunity to discover the reasons why existing theory has not matched either practice wisdom or personal experience in this field. When such discrepancies exist, it is important to broaden the scope of the study to include contexts, settings, and the participant's own frame of reference (Marshall and Rossman, 1989). This strategy provides an opportunity for the research process to incorporate previously unknown linkages and processes



"...to uncover and understand what lies behind a particular phenomenon, give intricate details of phenomena that are difficult to convey using quantitative methods" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p.19).

Because of the need to identify theoretical principles and patterns from individual experiences, this researcher utilized a specific methodology designed to provide a systematic approach to interview data. Grounded theory, the specific method of data analysis employed in this study, lent itself to certain principles deemed useful for this particular study: the informant as authority; the investigator as learner or student; the focus on contextual issues.

Grounded theory refers to a process applied to data which is based upon the use of inductive reasoning. Findings constitute a theoretical formulation of the reality under investigation, rather than a set of numbers or a group of loosely related themes (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The strategy involves a particular usage of the *constant comparative analysis method* which generates theory from data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Chenitz and Swanson (1986) have defined grounded theory as "a highly systematic research approach for the collection and analysis of qualitative data for the purpose of generating explanatory theory that furthers the understanding of social and psychological phenomena" (p.3). Mullen (1986) describes the process of grounded theory as a means of "building conceptual bridges between

real-life situations and formal theory" (p.177).

A goal of the theory is not only to provide relevant theoretical frameworks that aid in understanding phenomena, but to "produce theoretical accounts which are understandable to those participants in the area studied and are useful in giving them a superior understanding of the nature of their own situation" (Turner, 1983, p.348). The theory must explain basic patterns that are common in social life. Moses and Martin (Unpublished) describe the product of grounded theory as "local knowledge." The method is designed to discover and create understandings that are contextual and processual, grounded in the "lived experience" of the participants and comprehensible to them (p.11).

Martin and Turner (1988) elaborate the process of grounded theory. The investigator is encouraged to remain close to the data -- describing their major features and concepts before proceeding to more general theoretical statements. After an adequate stock of data descriptions have been accumulated, the researcher may begin to perceive and hypothesize relationships between them (p.3). The refinement of the categories and their inter-relationships gradually leads to development of the theory (see also Spradley, 1979).

Charmaz (1983) has outlined four elements of grounded theory methodology:

- (1) The method stresses discovery and theory generation rather than logical deductive reasoning. Data collection and analysis proceed simultaneously.

(2) Data, rather than a preconceived theoretical framework, shape both process and product of research.

(3) Traditional quantitative laws of verification are not followed. However, a specific strategy is utilized for determining validity of findings.

(4) Grounded theory assumes that making theoretical sense out of social life is a process. This means that the inquiry is open-ended and ongoing. (p.111)

Chenitz and Swanson (1986) state that grounded theory "makes its greatest contribution in areas in which little research has been done, especially when the relevant variables have not been identified" (p.7). This study will focus on the lived experience of the participants, and upon the evolution of theory from this experience, not upon any pre-existing theoretical frameworks.

### Theoretical Sampling

The notion of representativeness is at the core of all sampling procedures. In a grounded theory study, the sample is not selected from the population based on certain pre-selected characteristics or variables. Chenitz and Swanson (1986) have stated that "the initial sample is designed to simply examine the phenomenon of interest where it is found to exist" (p.9). Study begins with a general idea of the substantive area to be explored and the development of open-ended interview and/or observation schedules. Observations can be of documents as well as of

people interacting (Mullen, 1986).

The accumulation of additional data is then guided by a strategy called *theoretical sampling*. Theoretical sampling means sampling aimed toward the development of the emerging theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Theoretical sampling is *not* the same as "selective sampling" -- a frequently used method in qualitative analysis. Selective sampling involves a "calculated decision to sample a specific locale or type of interview according to a preconceived but reasonable initial set of dimensions (such as time, space, identity) which are worked out in advance for a study" (Schatzman and Strauss, 1973, p.39).

Theoretical sampling is also not the same as that used in quantitative research, nor is it subject to the same rules (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Mullen (1986) has outlined the differences between theoretical sampling and statistical sampling according to the purposes and strategies involved. The purpose is to discover concepts, hypotheses, and their inter-relationships, not to verify existing theory. Adequate sampling is judged by its ability to "saturate" categories, not by its ability to accurately reflect certain preconceived attributes of a selected group. Data collection stops when new categories and related aspects stop appearing in the data.

Because the process of theoretical sampling is controlled by the emerging theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967) have stated that "beyond the decisions concerning initial collection of data, further collection cannot be planned in

advance of the emerging data" (p.47). Charmaz (1983) also notes that "because the researcher develops theoretical categories through an analytic process, he/she cannot know, in advance, what he/she will be sampling" (p.124).

Strauss (1987) has defined theoretical sampling as the means "whereby the analyst decides *on analytic grounds* (italics his) what data to collect next and where to find them" (p.38). The researcher jointly collects, codes, and analyzes the data and decides what data to collect next, in order to further develop the theory. Research may begin with a partial framework of "local concepts" designating a few principal or gross features of the structure and processes in the situation to be studied (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Theoretical sampling can lead the researcher into varied sites which may be substantively very different from the initial sample.

According to Conrad (1978), the researcher is an active sampler of theoretically relevant data as she identifies the central variables of the emerging theory. Thus the researcher must continually analyze the data to see where the next theoretical question will lead. Decisions for further sampling are guided by the need for more comparisons (variety) to develop the emerging themes (Mullen, 1986). Theoretical sampling, then, is based on the need to collect more and more data in order to examine categories and their relationships and to assure that representativeness exists within the category. The full range and variation

that is possible in each category must be sought. Sampling produces this range. It also develops the categories, their relationships, and interrelationships (Chenitz and Swanson, 1986).

As an inductive technique, theoretical sampling exemplifies the inductive logic of the grounded theory approach. Because grounded theorists systematically build their theoretical frameworks out of their observations, theoretical sampling is part of the progression of the stages of analysis. It becomes necessary to use theoretical sampling when the analyst's present data *do not exhaust* the theoretical category the researcher is developing. More data are needed to fill out, saturate, or exhaust the category. The researcher thus samples whichever groups or events will provide relevant material for the category. A comparison group is chosen only for its theoretical relevance.

The need for theoretical sampling occurs when the conceptual categories that were inductively constructed have sufficiently developed and are abstract enough that the researcher can construct specific questions about them. Theoretical sampling becomes a means of checking out hunches and raising specific questions. It also provides a way to expand the scope and depth of a category (Charmaz, 1983).

After the emergence of the basic theoretical framework, the researcher turns to maximizing the differences among the comparison groups. The focus on

differences at this stage stimulates refinement of theoretical properties and delimits the scope of the theory. This process continues until all critical variables and their interrelationships have been saturated (Conrad, 1978). Elaborating differences demands that a rich mix of processes, people, interactions, and structures be generated. This provides the widest possible range of variation in the phenomenon of interest and the people under study (Dobbert, 1982). A strength of grounded theory is that a strategy is provided that helps one prevent poor sampling decisions, while remaining mindful of the need to retain flexibility.

### *The Interviews*

The completed study consisted of 16 focused, unstructured interviews lasting from one to one and a half hours each. The purpose of the interviews was to have the participants reflect on the processes they use to interact with the heterosexist cultural surround. The interviews allowed the researcher to trace these processes as they were developed by the participants, and as they manifest themselves in current situations. The researcher was particularly interested in accounts of situations, responses and interpretations of those situations, and how the participants negotiated with negative and hostile others. Also of interest was how they understood and interpreted these events within themselves and with

other lesbians. In a sense this provided a description of how each woman creates her own way of being in the world. The interview questions were not site-specific. The interviews, instead, elicited an account of how the participant *experienced* various sites and situations, rather than relying upon direct observation by the researcher. The research was more concerned with what the participant *thought* was happening than with an objective description of what was happening.

The in-depth interviews were more like conversations than formal, structured interviews. The researcher began with general open-ended questions which helped reveal the participant's perspective -- but then allowed the participant to structure and frame her own responses. The interviews were audio-taped with full knowledge of the participants. The researcher took some written notes, but directed full attention to the conversation. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Analysis began with the initial coding process. Permission to utilize human subjects was obtained from the appropriate University of Tennessee authorities.

### *The Participants*

Theoretical sampling guidelines (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) instruct that sampling direction be dictated by the evolving theory. This sampling method calls for both a minimization and maximization of



differences between comparison groups and requires that this criterion be satisfied by the final product. According to the principles of theoretical sampling outlined above, demographic information does not determine the pattern of participant selection in the initial research stages. Instead, the sampling thus far had been directed at saturating the theoretical categories of interest.

Demographics are relevant, however, and are discussed here in order to set the stage for future sampling decisions. A comparison group for further study would be chosen only for its theoretical relevance as established by how the theory itself has unfolded.

The participants for this study were residents of Knoxville, Tennessee.

Knoxville is a city of 174,000 people located in the northeastern section of the state. Two of the busiest interstates in the country intersect there. Two institutions have shaped its growth -- the Tennessee Valley Authority and the University of Tennessee. Located beside the Tennessee River, Knoxville is a busy modern city, yet retains a relaxed small-town atmosphere. The participants were drawn from a number of sources. Some were located through contacts with the women's community in Knoxville. The initial contacts served as participants, themselves, and then recommended further contacts through friendship and support networks. Most of the participants were residents of the Knoxville area. The only prerequisite for participation in the study was that each participant be

(or have been at some time) self-identified as lesbian. There were no constraints regarding age, relationship status (single/ coupled), class, or race.

From an ethical standpoint, it was essential for the researcher to reveal her research intentions to the participants before gaining access to the data. At issue were not only the usual concerns about confidentiality but also the fear of exposure experienced by a stigmatized group. This openness may have limited access to information to some degree, but was necessary due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter.

The following method of describing the participants, while it does not provide the sort of fascinating profiles that would be most helpful in understanding the data, does provide for the protection of identity that is essential to this sort of research. The participants are described below only in terms of ages, occupations, social class, and relationship status.

Names and Ages. Participants were randomly assigned false names for identification purposes and all demographic information was linked to the coded names. The names were: Kaye, age 28; Marsha, age 38; Anne, age 34; Celia, age 35; Leslie, age 50; Susan, 31; Sara, 42; Darlene, 24; Faye, 32; Betty, 39; Alice, 28; Annette, 27; Abby, 55; Linda, 45; Rebecca, 43; and Julia, age 49. There were 4 participants in their 20's; 5 were in their 30's; 4 were in their 40's, and 3 in their 50's.

Occupations. Three of the participants were nurses employed in Intensive Care Units. Other occupations included: school psychologist, mental health counselor with children, social worker with adolescents, X-ray technician, chemical dependency counselor, student/ musician/ opera singer, hospital social worker, student (2), author, professor, and a social worker in private practice. One person was unemployed and involved in community action and organization.

Class and Religion. Three of the participants grew up in lower class homes. Two of these were from poor Appalachian backgrounds with Southern Baptist religious affiliations. The other was from a lower class Knoxville, Tennessee family of similar religious background. Three participants were of lower middle class background. One of these was from a Catholic home, the other two were Southern Protestant. Ten participants had middle class parents. There was one participant from the southern upper class.

Religious affiliations varied from Seventh Day Adventist (1), to Jewish (2), Catholic (1), Episcopalian (1), Southern Protestant (5), and None (6). They represented nationwide origins including Maryland, California (2), Florida, Indiana, and Tennessee. Twelve of the participants owned their own homes. Four lived in apartments or rented homes.

Relationship Status. Thirteen of the participants were in committed relationships at the time of the interview -- three couples were part of the

study. Five participants had been in a relationship for 5 years or longer. Three were single. One participant is currently married, and has children. She identified as lesbian before her marriage. Six of the women had been married and 3 of those had children of various ages.

### Data Collection and Analysis

The concomitant collection and analysis of data is an essential strategy of grounded theory research. Data for a grounded theory study are analyzed according to what Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss (1987) have called *the constant comparative method of analysis*. This method consists of a series of systematized steps. Analysis begins with the first one or two interviews. The early data are compared for similarities and differences in a systematic fashion. Subsequent interviews become informed by analytic questions and hypotheses about categories and their relationships that have been derived from the initial analyses. A key process in the generating of grounded theory at this point is memo writing. Charmaz (1983) describes memos as "the elaborations of ideas about the data, codes, and categories" (p.120). Memos connect coding with theory writing. The memo tells what the code is about. It raises the code to the conceptual level of a category, to be treated analytically. Memo writing takes place throughout the research process starting with the first interviews or observations. Memos delineate properties of a category, major patterns,

relationships with other codes and categories. As data accumulate, earlier memos are refined and polished.

Analysis moves from comparison of incident with incident to comparison of incident with properties of the category that resulted from initial comparisons of incidents. Further refinement of the categories and their interrelationships gradually leads to development of theory. The theory is delimited as a smaller set of higher level concepts emerges. When the theory is satisfactorily integrated, it may be presented in discussion form or as a set of written propositions (Conrad, 1978; Spradley, 1979).

Toward the end of the study, theoretical memos are sorted and organized to facilitate writing of the report. Abstractions are formulated to explain underlying details and complex relationships among the data. Inconsistencies are exposed and explained (Mullen, 1986). Data collection never ceases because coding and memoing continue to raise fresh questions that can only be addressed by the gathering of new data or the re-examining of previous data.

Charmaz(1983) describes the way literature is used in a grounded theory study. Researchers may use knowledge of the literature to expand and clarify the codes or categories and to sensitize themselves to ways of exploring the emerging analysis. In any case, the literature is not used as a source or measure of truth but as a means to generate questions and comparisons. It is important to the

grounded theorist to determine how the range of meanings evolving out of the phenomena of interest both converge and diverge from those meanings found by other researchers.

### Testing Validity : The Focus Group

A second data source was a *focus group*. The focus group is a research instrument developed for obtaining a particular kind of information. It is sometimes used in marketing research and in the evaluation of human services delivery systems. The focus group is typically composed of 5-12 participants. The participants are selected because they have certain characteristics in common that relate to the topic of the focus group (Krueger, 1988). In this case the focus group was conceptualized to provide a way of validating the interview findings. In other words the findings themselves were viewed as a product which was then presented for evaluation and discussion by focus group members.

In the focus group, the researcher creates a permissive environment that nurtures different perceptions and points of view, without pressuring participants to vote, plan, or reach consensus. Systematic analysis of the discussions allows the researcher to identify trends and patterns in perceptions. Discussion provides insights into how a product, service, or situation is perceived (Krueger, 1988).

The researcher uses pre-determined, open-ended questions that promote in-depth discussion of the events or experiences of interest. The context of experience and the salient components of the experience are identified by the direction of the open-ended questions. There is no pressure for consensus. The researcher's attention is directed to understanding the thought processes used by the participants as they consider the issues under discussion (Krueger, 1988).

For purposes of this study, a focus group of 6 participants was selected using the same criteria for selection as that used to select interview participants. The group discussion was used as a source of data and as a tool for assessing the validity of the developing substantive theory, much as if the theory were a product. Using the detailed procedures outlined by Krueger (1988), the key concepts from the substantive theory were presented for group discussion. The discussion was taped and transcribed. It lasted one and one half hours. Details about the participants and findings from the group discussion are presented in Chapter 6.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS:

#### HOW LESBIANS VIEW ATTITUDES OF STRAIGHT SOCIETY

##### **Introduction**

Like everyone else's, lesbian women's sense of social reality can be considered to be the result of ongoing negotiations between the social context and the individual's evolving internal restructurings. In this study, it is assumed that lesbian social reality is reflective of a complex process which includes: the individual's sense of herself and what part of this sense of self she is willing to show others; her sense of what to expect from the social context in response to who she is and how she acts; and how she has learned to cope with what she has learned from both family and other social contexts.

While all of us learn from social interactions, lesbians face some specific and unique constraints and contextual issues which have become clarified through the data. Two themes which arose from the data are, first, the consistent and careful monitoring of straight behavior and attitudes. Second are the specific efforts that lesbian women make to figure out, on the basis of their observations, how to behave around straight people. Humans generally monitor the behavior of others



in order to maintain appropriate social interactions. Such monitoring is generally deemed to have survival value. Lesbian women in this study showed some consistencies in the kinds of monitoring they did, often shared the same realities, and were very clear about the fact that they do this kind of monitoring and rely on it, in part, to make decisions about how to behave.

Lesbian women do not rely solely on their observations of, and expectations about, straight attitudes in order to determine what to do or how to be. The women in the study differ with regard to the outcome of the interaction between what they expect from straights and what they are willing to do to conform, and what they believe they need to do to preserve their own sense of integrity. In a culture in which being lesbian places an individual at risk for public censure and for self-derogation, the resolution of the conflict between conformity to other's expectations and maintenance of personal integrity becomes an important issue.

This chapter addresses how lesbians in this study view straight society. "How lesbians view straight society" actually has two meanings. The first is literally how lesbian women see it, the second, how they interpret or understand what they observe. Sometimes, perhaps most often, lesbians observe from positions of secrecy and hiding; they view "from the closet, through the crack in the door where they can see, but not be seen; hear and not be heard." When they do this, they gain information and lose presence, visibility, authenticity. They become

spies operating among potential enemies. They stay protected but remain unknown and separate. How lesbians view straight society, that is, the viewing process itself, when seen from this perspective, undoubtedly affects the views lesbians hold. It probably has the most impact in terms of how these women finally assign meaning to what they have seen.

The two major themes, how lesbians view straight attitudes, and how they decide to behave around straight people, have evolved into a three-step preliminary model which retains the complexity of the process, while providing some insight, as well. The steps include what lesbians observe straights doing, what they think these observations mean, and how lesbians respond, cope, and make decisions about self-presentation. Chapters 4 and 5 together describe a three-step feedback loop in which there are no really discrete stages. Instead, there is continuous repetition and overlap so that straight behaviors are observed by a lesbian who is already coping and making decisions about self-presentation. Her coping strategies may in turn influence the straight behaviors observed, her interpretations, and so forth.

Observing the behaviors of straights is the first step in describing the lesbian view of straight society and of straight society's attitudes toward them or people like them. This observation involves watching how straights talk about, talk to, look at, approach, avoid, or act toward gay men and women. The observations are

not so much about the objective behaviors of straights -- they are about how these behaviors are seen through lesbian eyes.

The particular observations selected to report here are germane to the ways lesbians think straights show their discomfort with gays. These ways are variously described as "disclaimers," as "having a need not to know," and as "don't talk about it," "don't do it" rules. These observations are ranked by lesbian observers in terms of level of hostility, with the worst described as "threats and interference." Other straight attitudes are mentioned, including what lesbians believe straights think and how negative straight attitudes can be transformed into positive ones. The "invisible observer" -- the unidentified, hidden lesbian -- watches straights talk about gays when they assume all the listeners are straight.

Assigning meaning to straight behavior is the next step in the model. Spence (1987) has noted that the need to impose order, rationality, causality on the fabric of life, to bring meaning out of chaos is central to human nature. We search for ways to interact with our environment that turn happenings into meanings and we organize these interactions by putting our reactions into words. In fact, we project meanings onto happenings without being aware of it, and as a result, happenings are almost never seen apart from meaning. Mahoney (1991) calls this same process "tacit personal contracts" about meanings. In the data, this process was reflected in the way the observations of straight behavior were

seen and described by lesbian participants. In fact, from the data alone it was difficult to decide whether the behavior itself pointed to a specific meaning or whether a preselected meaning colored a particular observation. Mahoney (1991), in his outline of a cognitive constructivism model, suggests that preselected meanings may indeed occur. He describes not only the function of feedback loops such as those mentioned earlier, in the building of personal reality, but describes a *feedforward mechanism* which serves to prepare the individual for some selective subset of possible experiences. The sense of its applicability here is that a particular event or happening is not interpreted or given meaning by itself, but enters an ongoing process of reality construction that already has a form and shape of its own.

Mahoney (1991) uses cognitive constructivism to develop a model describing how people are always constructing "working models of themselves" and their worlds (p.178). He uses the term "personal realities" to describe the outcome of this process of making meanings. According to Mahoney, a subcategory of this active process of interpretation and meaning assignment involves interpreting certain events in terms of either prescriptive (positive) or proscriptive (negative) meanings -- the "do" and "don't" rules for action. His model fits the pattern or processes described by the study participants who saw the meaning of straight behavior as socially proscriptive -- one must follow certain rules, or

else certain consequences would occur. In Mahoney's model, consequences for rule breaking could be anything painful, emotional or physical. When the consequence is too painful it is perceived by the individual to threaten the integrity of her personal reality and sense of self. The proscriptive meanings assigned to observed straight behavior that are discussed in this chapter include pressure to conform socially, pressure directed at gender role differences and pressure around social rituals.

A final portion of Chapter 4 sets the stage for looking at coping. This portion looks at responses of lesbian participants to the assigned meanings they have given to straight behavior. These responses are primarily feelings and thoughts. Decisions about behavior are discussed in Chapter 5. The feelings and thoughts which revolve around the experiences of loss and rejection are described here -- painful consequences for rule violations.

In discussing straight attitudes with the lesbian participants in this study, it became apparent that some of the terminology that is generally believed to be correct was not the common usage of this particular group. The word "heterosexual" was rarely used -- they were called "straights." The word "homosexual" was never used to describe either lesbians or gay men. The women in the study seemed most comfortable describing themselves as "gay" or as "gay women." They were almost as comfortable with the word "lesbian" although

several said that word had been difficult for them at first. They referred to their male peers as "gay men." I will reflect this usage in my discussion.

### **What Straights Are Observed To Do**

#### **Manifesting Discomfort**

The experiences and stories of the study participants contained numerous examples of lesbians observing what straights do in reference to gays. As a general rule, straights are believed to be uncomfortable with and unsupportive of gay lifestyles and to manifest their discomfort or negative attitudes in a number of ways. Certain behaviors are identified by lesbians that they believe straights use to handle or show this discomfort. These include "disclaimers," "having a need not to know," "don't talk about it," "don't do it" rules, or even interference and threats.

**Disclaimers.** Straights are viewed as attempting to distance themselves from gays through the use of jokes and disclaimers. An exemplar of a disclaimer is described by Linda, a mental health professional in her late 40's, when her straight friends were seen to talk about gayness comfortably *only* if it was not applied to *them*-- a sort of "not me" defense, a way of distancing oneself from the subject of gayness. These friends considered themselves to be literary,

artistic and liberal in other ways. In fact, however, when Linda told one of them about herself, the woman "freaked out" and said, "Well, I'm not, I'm not," as if, somehow, Linda's lesbianism might imply something about her own sexuality -- sort of "guilt by association." It seems to be a common experience that straights take another's gayness personally, as if someone else's being gay means something about their own preference and that they must make some sort of statement of record to differentiate or distance themselves from "it." In a recent popular movie, a character commented, "I don't know about you, honey, but I'm definitely 'out to lunch' when it comes to queers" (Deitch, Desert Hearts, Film, 1985). The disclaimer is often presented objectively, as in "I'm only trying to clarify...". Whether it is meant to or not, a disclaimer conveys a negative attitude to the lesbian observer.

The Need Not to Know. Before elaborating the "Need Not to Know," another piece of data related to the matter of "knowing" provides an interesting preliminary. It seems that whether straights know or don't know about a particular lesbian's identity is seen as a matter of some weight in determining how straight behavior is perceived. This is because we make a lot of decisions about our behavior and the meaning of other's behavior on the basis of what we think they know about us. So, straights were seen as divided into those who know and those who don't. Each of these categories is then divided further into those who are "okay with it" and those who are "not okay with it." The category of

straights who don't know is actually divided into those who probably would be okay with it and those who probably wouldn't. It is not clear how such attitude predictions are made and some lesbians in the study indicated that they had predicted incorrectly on more than one occasion. Predictions will be discussed further under coping.

Not only is the straight world divided up into who knows and who doesn't, there is difficulty at the boundary between the two. Much energy is focused on deciding when it is time for someone to know. It would be interesting to learn what happens on the straight side of this interaction. Do straights sometimes know someone is gay and have difficulty deciding how to make the gay person aware of this? Does this secret hover between people in an uncomfortable way? How do people bridge this gap?

Among straights who don't know, there are some who appear to the lesbian observer to work actively to remain in the dark, sometimes using nonverbal cues, a phenomenon that could be described as "*having a need not to know*." They don't ask obvious questions. They don't pick up on hints or nonverbal cues that most people would catch. They steer the conversation away from relationship issues, or change the subject if gay topics come up.

For instance, Rebecca, a divorced social worker in her early 40's, told her mother -- who had indicated she hoped that someday Rebecca "would be able to



have a good relationship with a man" -- that "there are other ways I can get that experience besides marriage." Rebecca had been in a lesbian relationship for some time. Her mother didn't ask what those ways might be, or whether her daughter had had any meaningful relationships. This was a "don't tell me about it" experience for Rebecca. An attitude about homosexuality was conveyed to her by her mother's omissions -- what she *didn't* do or say. Although the oblique reference could have been about cohabiting with a man, Rebecca, who kept the secret about her own gayness, felt her mother distancing from the issue in a way that did not invite disclosure.

Don't Do It. Lesbians learn about attitudes from behaviors of straight people who know, too. Sometimes straight discomfort is so extreme that relationships are ended or changed in a painful way. Often, straights are seen as attempting to enforce certain social rules which can be described as "don't talk about it" or "don't do it" rules. In an example of the "don't do it" rule, Annette, a college student in her late 20's, described the behavior of a lifelong friend who, upon learning Annette was lesbian, suggested that she "could be celibate." The friend further stated that she "loved (Annette) in spite of her sin," and that she would not reject her. The "could be celibate" comment was certainly a fairly direct suggestion to Annette that she needed to change and not act on her lesbianism. In Annette's opinion, such a message at best conveyed lack of acceptance, at worst,

judgement and condemnation. This same friend was "afraid to go in Annette's bedroom," as well, further contributing to a nonverbal communication that there was something wrong with Annette. Yet, the friend, in contrast to Annette, felt that she was being tolerant and accepting of Annette.

Sometimes "don't do it" rules lead to loss. In fact, most lesbians report the loss of at least one close straight friend, who simply vanished without an explanation or left the friendship with a negative, rejecting message. Kaye, a young woman in her mid-20's, tells the story of her best friend throughout high school, who, upon learning of Kaye's gayness, not only dropped completely out of Kaye's life, but wrote Kaye's parents a letter telling them their daughter was gay.

Marsha, age 38, described the reaction of a religious friend upon her learning that Marsha was gay. The friend said, "I just can hardly stand to even see or think about you anymore because I know what's ahead for you...I can't stand to think of you in hell...Please just read the Bible -- promise me you'll read the Bible...I know you're a lost soul...I just can't stand to be with you." Marsha stated, "I've learned to avoid talking to these people about myself (the churchgoers) because I know the position the Bible takes."

Don't Talk About It. Those straights who know can enforce the "don't talk about it" rule. Linda's disclaiming friend is an example of the "don't talk" rule.

So is Marsha's religious friend. Kaye reports that her mother is "sad" that she is in a lesbian relationship and that her mother is uncomfortable with it. This is communicated in that her mother "ignores it mostly," -- she doesn't act cold or treat her daughter differently, she just never asks "how are you two doing?" or other such questions. In fact, this is a common phenomenon for many lesbian women that straights do not ask such obvious questions as "What did you do this weekend?" or "How was your vacation?" Sometimes "don't talk about it" is not seen as judgemental or critical, but as a sign of disappointment about who or what the lesbian is. This will be discussed further below.

Interference and Threats. Straights who know are perceived to interfere in lesbian relationships in more hostile ways by labeling them negatively or actively and directly trying to change them. Kaye's "friend" writing the letter was an example of this. In another example, Alice, who was having problems in her love relationship, was hospitalized by her parents when they learned that she was involved in a lesbian relationship. She was certainly upset at the time because the relationship was breaking up, but the intention of her parents was revealed when Alice learned that her parents had asked the psychiatrist (a family friend) to help her become straight. From this, she perceived that her parents and doctor viewed the relationship as a symptom of emotional illness. Leslie, who went to Catholic schools, tells the story of a Catholic nun clinical psychologist who tried to "cure" her of her attraction to women when she was in college. "She

definitely viewed my preference as an 'emotional illness.'"

Rebecca, who attended a women's college in the sixties, told about observing the reaction of her college administration to a lesbian student. After much controversy, it was decided that the student "would be better off living off campus," which nobody else did in those days. This separated her from the other students -- presumably with whom she might develop relationships.

How lesbians view straight attitudes involves the observation of certain heterosexist behaviors, including name-calling, threatening, and putting down lesbians. This can come in the form of jokes, in everyday conversation, or in more purposeful actions. Some of the examples in the data involved situations where the lesbian had decided to reveal her sexual preference to someone, or her preference had become known in some way. Alice reported telling a male acquaintance that she was lesbian and his reply was "God, you slut." He got angry and put her down; he tried to get her to "confess" it to one of his friends so they, she thought, could ridicule her. Annette reported her experience in telling a male friend who professed to be liberal and feminist. He proceeded to pursue her sexually in order to prove, in her opinion, "that he could have anyone he wanted."

Actually, it is difficult to know what his behavior actually meant to him, but it is clear that it conveyed an attitude of disrespect to Annette.

### The Invisible Observer

Another key concept in the social process of observing what straights do involves the idea of the lesbian as hidden, the *invisible observer* of heterosexual behavior and attitudes -- "invisible" because those around her assume she is straight. Everyone in our society, is inducted into the socially constructed and agreed-upon heterosexual world through their socialization as children. That socialization tells them that all lesbians are butch stereotypes, so lesbians who don't fit this physical stereotype are assumed to be straight, especially if they have been married or have children, unless they have actually "come out."

There is also permission in the heterosexual culture to make racist, sexist and heterosexual jokes, comments, and to spread rumors, especially to people one knows. So it is easy enough for a lesbian to watch this process in action. Some exemplars of how straights are seen to do this involve observations of people who were simply "operating as usual" and had no idea about the sexual preference of the unidentified-lesbian observer. In these cases, the lesbian observer is usually known to the straights around her as part of the group, but her lesbian identity is not known. She watches the action around her without revealing her stigmatized status to the group. For instance, she may observe her friends or co-workers making fun of gays, or spreading rumors about who is gay. Leslie, a 50 yr. old medical technician, tells a story about a young female worker whose

brother is gay. Although she says she loves her brother, the young woman makes fun of him and other gays. In the course of a conversation, her brother had inadvertently revealed to his sister that a particular doctor who works at the hospital with her is gay. As Leslie watches, the worker gathers her peers around her and "comes out" for the doctor. Leslie hears comments like "Ugh!" "Why, I would never have guessed!" "God, how terrible." "He's so nice, I can't believe it."

Throughout the day, Leslie, the invisible observer, sees her co-worker telling more people. She watches as people giggle and whisper among themselves. She watches as they point the doctor out to each other. This is a process that other lesbian observers can report having experienced at some point in their lives. Alice, a 28 yr. old nurse, confirms this same process when she states that if she took her partner to an office party, the whole hospital would end up knowing about her. "I would not be as respected as I am now. Some people think its a disease..."

Observing as Children. Much of what straights are observed to do in regard to gays was learned by lesbians in this fashion, beginning in childhood, when most lesbians remember being taught that being gay was wrong. Some participants reported hearing these negative injunctions against gays as children and having little or no response to them. Others report that, even as small children, they were aware that these attitudes were about something that they might actually

*be.*

The effects of such experiences were often compounded by peer behaviors such as insulting and name - calling. These insults were not directed at the invisible child observers, but were directed at gays in general, or just toward other children who were seen as misfits or different. One woman reports, "When I was growing up, one of the worst things you could call anybody...was a 'queer.' I got the impression that they were perverse -- right up there with child molesters and dog fuckers."

A common and disturbing example of quietly watching negative attitudes, reported by participants, was the observation of, or awareness of, straights preaching in churches about "unnatural passions" and how all gays will burn in hell. Even if the child did not relate this directly to herself at the time -- and some did -- each participant found that she had to deal with this experience in some way at a later time, when awareness of her sexuality surfaced. Faye, a nurse in her late 20's, stated that when she was young, she wasn't able to "take things with a grain of salt" like she can now. "When they (preachers) screamed at me, and said I'd burn in hell...well. I still carry that around. Sometimes when it's dark and rainy, I wonder if I'm going to hell." Leslie, who has lived with her current partner for nine years, stated, "In my Catholic milieu, all passion was unnatural, unless sanctified by holy matrimony, so, one infers ...". In assessing the impact of such experiences, Leslie commented, "I've known several lesbians

who have opted for a straight life because they couldn't deal with the old sin/guilt tapes; also, I have known at least one lesbian who said she couldn't help being a lesbian but knew she would go to hell when she died because of it."

### What Straights Think

"What straights think" is a subcategory of what they do, and what they think, like any other behavior, conveys straight attitudes to the lesbian observer. The most important idea contained in this section is that lesbians believe or expect that many people in straight society think in terms of stereotypes and misconceptions. This is a belief that is based on certain specific behavioral observations. Lesbian participants believe straights don't recognize the similarities that most human relationships share. They see straights, then, as not only thinking in stereotypes but as caught up in how "different" gays are from them.

Some of the study participants believed that straights focus only on the sexual aspects of being gay, not the relationships or the attributes of the individual as a person. Participants cited examples where lesbians are believed to be nymphomaniacs, and the like. Other participants reported examples that supported the idea that straight attitudes are stereotyped and negative, that straights see gays as poor role models for children, and as inadequate parents. In



fact, participants believed that many straight people think all lesbians are child abusers and that lesbians will approach straight women for sex.

Alice states "people look at the sexual part...they picture two women having sex...that's horrible...they don't think of it as a relationship....like a straight relationship...they just picture the sex." Also, "they think lesbians are nymphomaniacs...people have misconceptions. They don't want their kids to grow up around lesbians, gay men. They want a man and woman for role models. Some think a lesbian will molest a kid." Faye said that when she was young, she thought all lesbians were freaks -- that "lesbians were masculine women who didn't fit in, lonely ... destined to a sad sort of life..."

Lesbians sometimes learn what straights are thinking because it is directly shared. Sometimes straights theorize, even openly with lesbian informants, that lesbians are miserable and unfulfilled. Examples of the behavior used to communicate such thinking would be for someone to say "you just haven't met the right man!" Or, "she can't be happy because she doesn't have a man..." Alice has been told numerous times "...you haven't been with the right man." She replies to this indignantly, "I've met plenty of guys...that's not the issue." People think we're not happy because we don't have a man..."

The data show that most of the participants spend some time deciding what other people are thinking. They sometimes seem to base their assumptions on

past experiences with straights, usually as an "invisible observer." At other times the assumptions are based on thoughts that are obviously and openly expressed by straight people . Sometimes there is little actual evidence, other than the presence of the stereotypes that all members of society know about, and supposedly believe. For instance, many lesbians are aware that Department of Human Services will not allow gay couples to adopt children. The highway department in some states won't allow gay organizations to "adopt a highway" -- examples of institutionalized negative attitudes toward gays that verifies the idea about gays as poor parents and poor citizens. From this sort of evidence, as well as from generalized media messages, T.V., movies, and so forth, lesbians can, and do, infer much about what straights think.

### Transformations

The lesbians in this study had a particular way of seeing positive straight behavior. They all could relate numerous examples of negative attitudes happening on an almost daily basis. They related positive observations, as well - special friendships, support from employers, etc. However, these were usually seen as exceptions and as attributable to the individual straight person having somehow liberated him or herself from the constraints of the dominant socially constructed view of gays. A revealing example of how this liberation is

seen to occur was related by Abby, a 55 yr. old writer, as she described her relationship with her children. One son, who was in the Navy when she "came out" would "call me at 3 o'clock in the morning to tell me what an abomination I was...I asked myself 'what am I doing accepting collect phone calls?' I stopped accepting the collect phone calls." However, after much time has passed, the feedback from her children, who are now adults, is that she has given them a "role model for reaching for your dreams." They tell her she is "an incredible symbol of strength" for them. They remain a close family.

This is an example of how a straight relative evolved or freed himself from the socially- constructed perception of lesbianism. It is real to Abby because she saw the transformation take place over time. In another exemplar, Kaye indicated that when she "came out" to a particular friend, the friend was just as accepting of her as before. Her next question to the friend was "Why? Why are you okay with it?" She was, in a sense, asking about what transformation had occurred that caused her friend to be liberated from the dominant socially-constructed view.

There are other forms of positive response. Alice reported that some straight friends seem to "understand, " and some have lots of questions. She explains that she "...can't be totally isolated ... there are a few people who know, in fact, there are some straight women who are so interested in it (lesbianism) they want to experiment with it. They are interested in the sexual part, also the softness and

caring part. Its not the same with men. They don't have the emotional bond, or even the sex -- nothing caring, just routine."

Negative cultural attitudes have been well documented in the clinical literature. However, more recent writings suggest a possible parallel transformation in progress within the literature as well. For instance, Mercer (1986) exposed the cultural "hidden agenda" when she analyzed the social construction of "diseases" peculiar to oppressed groups. See also Szasz (1974) who criticized the "disease concept" of homosexuality. Pearson (1975) also criticizing the stigmatizing effect of disease models, comments that in earlier writing "conformity is elevated from a social accomplishment to the status of 'health.' Nonconformity is disqualified as 'sickness'" (p.48).

Observing the behaviors of straights is the first step in the way lesbians participate in the social process of constructing their own realities. The next sections examine how lesbians give meaning to these actions and thoughts of straights, and how they respond and cope, based on these socially-constructed meanings.

## **What Lesbians Believe These Observations Mean**

The second step in constructing how lesbians build a sense of reality in the heterosexual context is about what the lesbian believes the observed straight behaviors mean. According to theories of social construction (see Kitzinger, 1987), the lesbian first observes certain behaviors; next, she decides what the behaviors mean. She then internalizes and personalizes these meanings so that they become part of both her internal structure of self and her own personal sense of reality. So, there are several pieces to this construction of how lesbians view straight attitudes. There is the piece about what straights do and think, and there is another piece about what this means to lesbians. For example, a straight person can be observed changing the subject in a conversation, or looking uncomfortable, but then a meaning, such as "don't associate me with the topic of lesbian"-- the disclaimer -- is attached to this behavior by the lesbian observer.

It is important to note that the meanings discussed here are not the responses of one person, but represent agreement among the study participants. Gergen (1978) writes that "social actions appear to carry little in the way of intrinsic meaning; the conceptual categories or meaning systems into which they are placed appear primarily to be products of social negotiation. The fact that a given

stimulus pattern falls into the category of 'humor,' 'aggression,' 'dominance,' or 'manipulativeness,' for example, depends not on the intrinsic properties of the relevant pattern but on the development of a community of agreement. (p.1346)" Further, the attribution of meaning in this study is not a process where meaning is openly negotiated between straights and gays. Instead, it is a covert, unspoken dance where each side makes moves, watches the other, guesses what is going on, then reacts, responds, and essentially constructs a social reality based in part on these guesses and assumptions. It is not clear whether lesbians and straights even occupy the same reality at all, or if they ever "check out" these assumed meanings directly and openly with each other.

This section returns to the data to learn how lesbians attach meaning to the straight behaviors they observe. The data are organized here to reflect a more abstract level of meaning than can be automatically inferred from the observations themselves. Lesbian participants seemed to see the behaviors as socially coercive and designed to push them to conform to heterosexist expectations for women.

Mahoney (1991) has written about the complex processes by which people assign meaning to life experiences. His model posits that personal reality is based upon the meanings we assign to events in our lives, rather than upon the events themselves. He does not go as far as radical social constructionists who

believe that the self, and its view of the world, owes its form entirely to the surrounding social order. He does see the social embeddedness of our personal reality constructions that are formed in a complex of interactions between the individual and the social context. A part of the process of meaning assignment involves the perception of certain events as either prescriptive (positive) or proscriptive (negative) -- the "do" and "don't" rules for action. Mahoney stresses the survival value of culturally-transmitted prohibitions because they serve to constrain behavior and maintain the social order. Breaking the rules leads to pain -- whether physical, emotional, or symbolic, and the message "don't do it again" is clear. Usually the pain is tolerable, the person readjusts and life goes on. But sometimes the pain is such that it disorganizes the personal sense of self and reality. Lesbian participants in this study found this level of pain to be socially coercive and described it in those terms. Mahoney notes that negative (proscriptive) rules seem to be more powerful and are used more often than positive (prescriptive) rules. Negative rules specify fewer behavioral options, but convey more information about what is expected -- don't hurt anyone, don't steal, don't lie, and so forth.

Mahoney's model, when applied to the research data, broadens one's understanding about the way lesbian participants give meaning to their observations of straight behavior. Social conformity is called for, and consequences will occur for breaking the rules. The coercive aspect of this

process for study participants seemed to be defined by those situations in which the "rules" did not allow the lesbian to "be herself" in some poignant way, thus setting up a forced choice between two negative outcomes -- following the "rules" and not being oneself, or breaking the rules which led to pain. The painful consequences experienced most were various forms of rejection or social disenfranchisement. According to the participants, coercive social pressure was directed at being lesbian, at gender roles, and around social rituals.

### Pressure to Act Straight

Seventy-five percent of a sample surveyed by Chafetz, et al. (1974) reported they felt pressure to act like a straight female on some occasions -- on the job (56%), with families (25%), and when they attended social events with straight people. Albro and Tully (1979) found that 68% of their lesbian sample felt most fearful of rejection by their families. Half reported attempting to present themselves as heterosexual in public. Many, however, did not try to appear either heterosexual or homosexual. The pressure was usually experienced as a message that some part of them, the lesbian part, needed changing, correcting, or hiding.

According to study participants, the pressure was centered around lesbianism itself (I like you, I hate what you do), or could involve rejecting the



whole person (I hate you). These participants didn't see much difference. For instance, when Annette's friend suggested celibacy as a way to conform, Annette found her behavior to be "patronizing." "I would *rather* she reject me completely than love me in spite of 'my sin'." In fact, Annette makes the point that even though her friend says she is not rejecting her, that if her friend rejects her lesbianism, she rejects *her*. The rule here was "don't be lesbian or don't act on it." The consequence was, "or else I will reject you, not be your friend," or (worse) be patronizing and forgiving.

Sometimes, as mentioned earlier, pressure to act straight means that it's against the rules to talk about being lesbian. When Linda's friend "freaked out," that is what it meant to Linda. In her words, the pressure to act straight meant that "to talk about it was to be too careless." She shouldn't have said anything. The painful consequence was "or I will freak out." Another lesson about talking was learned by Alice, when the psychiatrist hired by her parents wanted to change her sexual preference. She certainly wished she hadn't told them. The rule was "don't tell us about it" and the painful consequence was "or else we will label you sick and try to make you change." Susan jokes that the "don't talk about it" rule is like the "neutron lesbian" phenomenon originally described by lesbian comic Kate Clinton. In other words, there is the sense that the fact of lesbianism is so horrible that if you tell, like a bomb, there might be dire consequences, as in,

"Don't tell your father, it will kill him." (Implied: and it will be your fault!)

Even when "don't talk about it" is seen, or even appreciated, as evidence of the loss experienced by the straight friend or loved one who must give up her own hopes and dreams for her gay loved one as a heterosexual (marriage, children, and so forth), the impact is heavy for the lesbian who experiences herself as "disappointing" or "letting others down." Gershon Kaufman (1985) describes the impact of this interpersonal transaction. "When [an individual's] native temperament disappoints a parent or someone else who is significant, the ground is laid for the genesis of shame. The [individual] cannot help but experience this sense of being a disappointment, and feel deficient for being the cause of it" (p.62).

There is another aspect to the "don't talk about it" rule. Something very important and negative is conveyed in a situation where someone "knows" about a particular stigma, the lesbian knows that they know, yet no one ever brings it up or discusses it. Edwin Friedman (1985) discusses the impact of "the secrets that everyone knows ...far more significant than the content of any...secret...is the ramification of its *existence*(his italics) for the emotional process..." (p.76). It is like the cancer patient, who is so obviously suffering or frightened, and yet experiences only unrelenting cheerfulness from her friends. For significant others to ignore one's obvious need for comfort, for closeness, for affirmation, is

a powerful message. The net result is a message that something is so wrong with the stigmatized person that the other can't deal with it at all.

Social pressure to act straight comes in many forms. Betty, a medical social worker in her late 30's, describes a social experience where straights came to a mixed, gay and straight, party "in order to see the lesbian couples that might show up." This seemed to Betty to be the same category of behavior as that exhibited by straights who go to gay bars to "see who's there." There was a sense of being violated and of being an object of possible ridicule or prurient interest. She "didn't know how to act," but certainly did not feel comfortable acting gay.

There is also another meaning contained in this example. It is that when a straight person enters a social situation, straight society enters, as well. That is, all the social rules, pressures, and possible painful consequences, enter with that person. This has a tremendous impact because gays don't know which set of social rules to conform to -- straight or gay. Meanwhile, for the most part, it is assumed by lesbians that straights don't even know (at least consciously) that there are two sets of social rules to worry about. For example, Rebecca tells about a situation in which she and her partner were visiting her partner's friend. The friend was straight, but was "okay with us acting like a couple." (This meant that some touching and verbal references to their relationship did not cause too much discomfort). The friend wanted to come visit Rebecca and her partner and bring her new boyfriend. Rebecca and her partner objected that if he came (he is

very conservative) they would have to "act straight" in their own home, and they were not willing to do this for a whole weekend. The straight friend's response to this objection was, "I had never thought about how that would affect you."

Although in the past, psychiatrists have played the role of rule enforcers, recent research suggests that this attitude on the part of counselors and therapists is not as common as it used to be. Albro and Tully (1979) report that most of their sample found an accepting attitude on the part of their therapists, although some lesbians did report that the counselor had attempted to "cure" them or had been unaccepting. It is interesting to note that ministers were the least accepting counselors - 29% were measured to have a negative attitude toward their gay clients.

### Pressure Directed at Gender Roles

For at least some of the participants, coercive pressure to conform in some way preceded their awareness of being lesbian and was directed toward other ways that these women were "different" from their peers. The differences were identified mainly in the area of gender roles. Gender-role differences were reported in patterns of thinking, interests, feelings, and choices of activities. For example, Linda mentions that, as a child, she was not interested in playing "dress up." She also said she was more interested in girls and didn't want to talk

about boys with the other girls. She thought talking about boys was "dumb." She does not describe specific pressure or rejection around this early difference, but says she was aware of "being different from everyone she knew."

There were other examples of how pressure was directed at gender role differences. Some involved pressure from parents and authority figures. For instance, Alice, who came from an upper class Southern family, wanted to go to the barn and ride horses, but her mother didn't want her to. Instead, her mother "wanted me to be in beauty pageants. She felt like all my interests were not feminine. She did not want her daughter not to be feminine. She didn't want me playing softball. She wanted me to wear lipstick. She wanted me to wear makeup. And go to a beauty pageant every month. It was because she (mother) was a beauty queen, and she really got involved in it. And I went.."

These experiences were common among study participants who reported various examples of being "tomboys" as children. Some reported having athletic interests and abilities, or a less interest in boys than their friends. Whatever the "difference," those behaviors that did not point directly toward heterosexual lifestyle choices (as defined by that particular family or group) were devalued by those around them, whereas, gender role behavior that pointed directly toward a heterosexual lifestyle choice was encouraged and rewarded. Some behaviors, although not rigidly gender role appropriate, were socially approved and were

discovered by some participants with much relief. One example was the experience of going camping with the girl scout troop -- no pressure to dress up or wear make-up. Another was playing softball.

Perhaps there is a clue here about how lesbians begin to divide the world up into "straight" and "gay." It seems to begin with the sense of differentness -- of "other people are not like me." Then, when the lesbian label is acquired, that simply and clearly defines the boundary. Leslie states that she believes "gender role differences *do* contribute to a sense of being different among lesbians."

These data support the idea that many heterosexuals and some gays confuse gender role behavior with sexual preference, and apparently this confusion gets played out through rules and painful consequences that are aimed, not at the sexual preference per se, but at the lack of gender role conformity that is evidenced by some lesbians. Kus (1985) indicates that "Lesbians...often recount...a type of childhood characterized by assertiveness, a desire to compete equally with boys, a keen interest in sports, and the bucking of traditionally 'feminine' trappings of dress and behavior..." (p.183). He further states that, "...the sense of 'difference' felt by the gay and lesbian child long before entering the coming out process is not to be minimized and should be considered a legitimate aspect of a 'gay reality'..."(p.189).

### Pressure around Social Rituals

The coercion theme comes up again when lesbians discuss how they perceive the role they are expected to play in social rituals, as women in our culture. Study participants seemed to feel that they do not fit in and are isolated or disenfranchised from other women and from some aspects of social activity. How intentional this isolation felt seemed to depend upon the individual lesbian and her personal experience. Some described much inclusiveness among their straight women friends, while others experienced intentional exclusion by straight women. One example involved feeling pressured to be a part of "woman talk." Faye stated, "sometimes I am more frustrated around women who are men-oriented that I am around men...I feel like I'm from Outer Space...I feel...weird being around these people who are discussing cosmetic issues, and I want to scream 'I'm different' ...'this is not me'...'I don't even know why I'm here...' In these situations, she found herself discussing dresses, cosmetics, and how to attract men.

Straight social rituals, such as showers or weddings, were particularly observed to create situations where lesbians felt they didn't fit in. This feeling of "not fitting" seemed to have something to do with the knowledge that her sexual preference had removed the lesbian participant from the possibility of ever being the focus of such rituals. Some of the study participants discussed the unfairness of being expected to give shower and wedding presents to others when they would

never have such social approbation directed toward their own relationships.

The issue for lesbian participants seems to be about lack of reciprocity, as well as not belonging -- one's very attendance providing a sense of support and approval, all the while knowing the same would never be returned. Participants reported they are continually invited to be a part -- and expected to be a part -- of these social rituals; but the obvious (to them) lack of reciprocity is never acknowledged. They are never congratulated upon the forming of a committed relationship, there are no showers or gifts given by straight friends. "I get so tired of...being expected to participate in heterosexual rituals...without any recognition of my own. Without their recognition of any of *my* rituals." "...I get tired of giving bridal presents and shower presents...expected to contribute to all these baby showers and stuff...when my own special events (are) completely hidden. " (We are) not given status like a heterosexual couple...no insurance, no benefits. You don't have the same privileges. No extra tax deduction..." Along the same lines, many lesbians perceived straights, through social rituals, as trying to influence or make all women follow a certain formula in terms of social goals: to grow up, get married, have children. "It's like it's the only way to be," says Rebecca.



### Danger/Death - Most Painful Consequences

According to Mahoney's model, proscriptive rules carry either symbolic or real survival value. In other words, obeying the rules is important for the survival of the organism. Study data illustrated that, in the experience of the participants, some painful consequences were more survivable than others. Abby told the story of participating in a demonstration for gay rights. The responses of some straight observers -- physical threats and emotional abuse -- led her to the conclusion that "some straights wanted gays dead." She described threatening phone calls..."that brought existence into focus because... someone might shoot one of us tomorrow."

On occasions when lesbians have described being called names, or threatened, this has meant not only a deep form of rejection, but has been perceived as a message that means they are seen as "less than" other women, perhaps less than human. Being treated badly means more than lack of respect. It is experienced as truly life threatening in some cases. Gershon Kaufman (1985) describes the impact of such experiences, "Expressions of disgust or contempt communicate unambivalent rejection...the sneer and the raised upper lip are facial signs of contempt. The look of contempt...can be a most devastating inducer of shame. To be marked, ridiculed, or laughed at is to be held in such contempt that one is not fit to belong" (p.21).

This kind of rejection -- the sense of being a social outcast -- is also the experience of those women, who, like Faye, were threatened by church members with burning in hell -- with eternal death and damnation. Especially when these experiences occurred in childhood, participants reported a sense of isolation from the religious community. These are not always Christian experiences.

Abby, who had grown up in a Jewish community, had raised her children, taught Sabbath school, and so forth, found that no one would speak to her after she "came out." The meaning of this experience for her reflected a sense almost of death -- she described herself as "profoundly isolated and disoriented." In fact, some Orthodox Jewish families sit *shiva* (the mourning period for the dead) for lesbian members.

### **How Lesbians Respond to these Meanings**

The third step in constructing how lesbians view the attitudes of straight society concerns their responses to the meanings they perceive. As stated earlier, how lesbians view attitudes of straight society conceptually involves three major ideas (1) what straights are believed or are observed to do, (2) what lesbians believe these observations mean, (3) how lesbians respond to, and cope with, these perceived actions and attitudes. These steps are most meaningful

when viewed in juxtaposition to the stages of social construction of reality outlined by Berger and Luckman (1967). First, reality is invented and defined by people in order to fit their specific social needs of an historical moment. In this case, lesbians are seen by the social majority as "bad, wrong, and sinful." Next, this reality is established as objective fact -- for example, "science has proved that lesbians are bad." Finally, the social individual integrates the reality -- "/ think lesbians are bad." But such a process, especially the third step, contains a dilemma for the lesbian member of society. She cannot accept the logical outcome of the process and continue to function with any degree of self respect. What do lesbians do about this? How do they respond? How does the individual lesbian formulate a reply to society?

The responses of study participants to these questions are divided into two sections. The first section is about how lesbians respond or react to the meanings they have socially constructed. The second section is about how they cope with the meanings. The data reveal that the constructed meanings, in a sense, provide a guide or context for response or reaction. As Mahoney suggests, the response is linked to the assigned meaning, not to the observed behavior itself. It is only if the meaning is known that the response can be understood. For instance, in an example discussed earlier, Alice believed her parents weren't proud of her and couldn't brag about her to the relatives. This resulted in her feeling mistreated or disrespected by her parents. She believed they saw her behavior as reflecting

negatively on them -- as being socially negative. The consequence of her perception of this meaning was that she rejected or distanced herself from her parents . She described herself as "not close to her parents." She stated, "I've always had a strong inclination to be myself. I resented my family..."

She *could* have decided that her parent's attempts to change her meant that they loved her very much, that they only wanted the best for her, and that they knew what was best for her. In which case, she might have responded by trying harder to be what they wanted her to be. But this was not the meaning she ascribed to their behavior and thus her response makes sense.

The data in this section involve responses to the rules and painful consequences described above. These responses represent some of the thoughts and feelings and internal struggles of study participants. These data lay the groundwork for looking at strategies for coping and making decisions about self-presentation.

### Responses to Painful Consequences

Reflection. Being rejected can sometimes cause the lesbian individual to focus reflectively on past rejections and to compare the experiences. Alice talked about being rejected by her family for having different ideas and interests. Linda talked about not fitting in with her peers as a child because of different interests.

Early rejection experiences seemed to be an important part of learning to cope.

Perhaps part of this process involves drawing on ways one has coped in the past -

- what worked, what didn't.

Frustration. Sometimes when lesbians feel rejected, they talk about being tired of being mistreated and not having the same rights as other people. They compare their social situations to those of other women, and see themselves as being treated less well, as having fewer social rights and privileges than other women. "I'm tired of not having my rights. I think I should have the same rights as other people," says Alice.

Fear. Understandably, as the study participants saw it, the rules and painful consequences designed to bring about social conformity create fear of loss, not only loss of personal relationships, but also fear of loss of security and personal respect. Presumably, a lesbian can choose to act straight, not act straight, or remain asexual, but whatever decision she makes, there are consequences to be weighed. If she chooses to act straight, she finds that along with social acceptance comes a nagging feeling about "pretending to be something you're not." There is a reluctance about deceiving others or "not being oneself." Lesbian participants who choose to adapt sometimes struggle with this issue in terms of "selling myself out," and the feelings of poor self esteem that come with it. On the other hand, lesbians who choose not to adapt risk open rejection and social isolation,

but do feel more internally congruent. Either way, a sense of not belonging remains, either not belonging to society or not belonging to oneself. "It feels like a 'no win' situation," says Rebecca.

For instance, in Leslie's example, when straights passed information among themselves about the doctor who was gay, the consequences of this social process were perceived to be so negative and painful that any level of dishonesty could be justified in order to protect oneself from exposure to the same sort of destructive process. After witnessing such a process, the level of trust between the lesbian observer and her straight peers was nonexistent -- and the straights didn't even know it! In a similar instance, Alice complained about the dilemma of taking her lover to staff parties. In her opinion, the validity of which is enhanced by Leslie's experience, to take her lover would initiate a sequence of events, much like that described by Leslie. The net result, she believed, would be a complete loss of professional respect for her. Given this sort of imagined consequence, she usually made a choice either not to go or to go by herself. To take her partner would risk her reputation. She reported being "bothered" by such problems. Others report anger and humiliation from having to adapt to such pressure.

When lesbians fear rejection, they sometimes choose not to act straight. Abby indicated that she prefers to "get her sexual preference clear at the outset" of relationships, both personal and professional, so that she will not be

"blackmailed" by the fear of discovery at a later time. In a way this helps her to trust the responses she does get from straights, since they are fully informed. But fear of loss remains an issue. Many of the women who make this choice, like Abby, have had to look outside the standard work settings for ways to support themselves, as writers, small business owners, and so forth, in order to avoid open confrontations with institutionalized prejudice.

Losing Trust. When lesbians fear loss, they lose trust in straights. However, according to study participants, they try to make distinctions among straights based on how much trust they can put in each individual, rather than lumping them all into one group. For instance, they trust people who, they have reason to believe, do not utilize gossip or use the grapevine communication process to ruin reputations. Marsha notes that some straight friends seem to be trustworthy, because "they ask me questions" and talk to her about her lesbianism. So if they are talking to her directly, she can assume that maybe they're not talking behind her back. At least it gives her an opportunity to assess their attitude about her directly.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented data concerning how lesbians interact with straight culture in constructing their own social reality. It elaborated on how straight

behaviors are observed by lesbians and what sort of meanings are attached to the behaviors. This process was characterized as a dance where each individual made certain moves that created responses in the other, but in which the different realities are never openly discussed or checked out.

Straights were observed to use "disclaimers," to make certain everyone knew they weren't gay. They were observed to become anxious and negative around this process. Straights were divided up into categories according to those who "knew" about a particular lesbian's identity, and those who "didn't know."

Lesbians were observed trying to predict which straights would be "Okay with it" or not. The "need not to know" was defined as the active avoidance on the part of straights of the reality of one's lesbian identity. The impact of social rules and painful consequences about gayness was explored, including rules such as "don't do it" and "don't talk about it." The consequences for failure to follow the rules - the rejection, loss and shame were examined -- losses of friendships, as well as loss of status and respect. Threats, interference and prejudice were discussed.

The lesbian role as an "invisible observer" of straight behavior was described as a major source of information about straight behavior and attitudes. It was noted that not all experiences with straight culture are negative ones and some attention was paid to how straights can transform into positive, supportive individuals.



A second process in the social dialogue was described -- how lesbians attach meaning to the behaviors they observe. This attribution of meaning went beyond the more obvious meanings of the behaviors themselves to examine more abstract concepts, using the Mahoney model. These included pressure to act straight, pressure directed at gender roles, pressure around social rituals, and third level painful consequences. How lesbians think, feel and struggle with these meanings was outlined. The coping strategies will be further elaborated in Chapter 5.

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS:

#### COPING AND SELF PRESENTATION

##### **Introduction**

Lesbians make decisions, in ongoing negotiations with the social world, about how to act around straights. Each lesbian searches, as many people do, for ways to be safe, as well as authentic. The problem is that the range of acceptable options for lesbian behavior is perceived by lesbians as even narrower than it is for non-lesbian women in our culture.

While there are a few atypical media models (such as the women of Cagney and Lacy, *China Beach*, *Crimes of the Heart*, and *Thelma and Louise*, that depict women as pro-active, multi-dimensional personalities) these models are still heterosexual. These women may find strength in bonds between them, but the bonds are not sexual, although they may be passionate, and they are usually preempted by the formation of a bond between a man and woman. If the bond between any of these women were portrayed as lesbian, their actions and experiences would immediately become suspect, or worse, irrelevant to "real life."

Lesbians are left with the task of negotiating about self-presentation with a culture that provides no options other than those offered by traditional stereotypes, and for most lesbians, the butch lesbian stereotypes are as irrelevant to an authentic presentation of self as are straight female gender-role stereotypes. In addition, the negotiating is done in an atmosphere that doesn't always feel safe. If she makes the wrong decision about how she acts, she could pay a high price.

In spite of this, sometimes lesbians take risks. Sometimes they observe from hiding and having done so, decide when, where, and with whom to become more fully known. Most humans hide when they feel vulnerable. Most lesbians have felt vulnerable during some, if not all, of their contact with the straight world and they feel vulnerable about an aspect of self that for many is "core." For lesbians, making decisions about how to cope with this vulnerability can be a consuming occupation in certain situations and relationships. This chapter examines how lesbians make decisions about coping and self-presentation.

Lesbians who cope by hiding, or who only reveal themselves to other lesbians, certainly have many of the same negative experiences as lesbians who are open. But there are also differences. Those who have chosen self-exposure are interactive with the straight environment *as lesbians*. Self-revelation not only feels more authentic but provides increased opportunities for receiving

important feedback about the culture that can enhance the decision-making process. Self-revelation has a certain "act as if" quality about it -- the sense that the lesbian is not just accepting reality as the culture presents it, but that she is actively creating her own reality -- one in which being lesbian is safe and valued.

Chapter 4 began an analysis of a three-step model describing how lesbian participants in this study view attitudes of straights. This view of straights derived from observations of straight behavior and from attributing meaning to the observations. The meaning then created the context that guided responses. The model is really a collection of overlapping and repetitive patterns, which the researcher has broken into steps in the hope of providing some insight into the social processes involved in how lesbians experience social reality. The final step in the model concerns how lesbians respond to and cope with the social reality they have constructed. Chapter 4 introduced some thoughts, feelings and struggles in terms of responding. Chapter 5 is about how lesbians take action. These actions fall into two large categories, developing coping strategies and making decisions about self - presentation.

Coping strategies are not focused just on survival, although that is an issue at times, but on strategies for dealing with the heterosexist portrayal of the lesbian as bad. Some of the strategies in the data involve anticipating what sort of

treatment to expect in certain situations and then preparing oneself mentally and emotionally based on those expectations. These strategies are called "learning to predict" and "learning to self-limit." Other coping methods concern learning how to separate oneself from the heterosexist framework or way of seeing the world - finding different sets of values and a different reality that provide more support and affirmation.

The issue of self-presentation has to do with the information one conveys to others about oneself -- how and what one chooses to communicate. The choices one makes ultimately can influence how one is treated by others and how one feels about oneself. In an atmosphere of social coercion and pressure to conform, making decisions about self-presentation is not just a matter of self-expression, but involves weighing social consequences, often choosing between two negative options, and learning how to take care of oneself. Lesbian study participants struggled with appearance issues, such as whether to look like the lesbian stereotype or not and how closely to follow rules concerning gender roles. In learning to take care of themselves, participants struggled over whom, when and how much to tell. They learned how to stand up to prejudice and criticism. Sometimes they learned how to "pass" or get by without being detected -- how to hide or act straight.

Albro and Tully (1979), in their study on self-presentation, found that "although lesbians do feel isolated, are concerned about the criminality of their

sexual activities, and desire social acceptance, they are unwilling to make an active effort to appear heterosexual in order to enhance their acceptance. Many however, reported feeling obliged to present themselves as heterosexual in some situations, especially when with relatives, at work, or in public" (p.343). The data from this study confirm the basic notion that lesbians don't want to act straight. It also agrees with Albrow and Tully that there are some situations where acting straight is necessary. This study goes much further, however, in identifying exactly what lesbians are doing when they're not acting straight -- what some of the struggles, choices and decisions are that help lesbians cope with the pressure to be heterosexual.

It is important to remember that the concerns and coping strategies identified here are those relevant to a small number of lesbian women who live in Knoxville, Tennessee. They may or may not be common to other lesbians in other parts of the United States. Other data suggest generally that these are common concerns. So, although these results must be seen as limited in applicability at this point, they do reflect the social reality of the study participants.

## Developing Coping Strategies

A key set of responses in the data involves how the lesbian participants develop strategies for dealing with the expectation that others are going to be negative about or toward them. These strategies involve such activities as learning to predict the responses of others, learning to self limit, making clear distinctions between how others feel about them and how they feel about themselves, finding places where they do fit in, finding a lesbian "family" (friendship group), and learning how to take care of themselves in situations where they are seen as bad.

Learning to Predict. This strategy involved predicting the kind of response one might expect from an individual straight person or group before actually "coming out" or being discovered to be lesbian. Sometimes, the decision not to come out is based on a gloomy prediction. For instance, Marsha's experience taught her that the church was a predictable source of negative social attitudes, so she learned to avoid church and religious people. She states, "I've learned to avoid talking to those people about myself. At least, not standard Christians..." Sometimes lesbians decide to come out, even if they expect a negative reaction. Interestingly, several of the participants said that they were not particularly accurate in their predictions and that often their experience proved them wrong.

The very people they expected to be negative were positive, and those from whom they expected support were not supportive. Predictions about straight reactions were variously made on such evidence as political stance (liberal/conservative), appearance (how closely they resemble the stereotyped gender role), how they treat other minorities, religious affiliation (liberal/fundamentalist), education level (higher or not), amount of life experience, and especially, level of awareness of their own personal problems and vulnerabilities.

Julia, a college professor in her late 40's, told a typical sort of story of coming out to her AA group. It was mixed straight and gay. Beforehand, she had predicted to herself that three of the straight women in the group would react negatively. This prediction was based on their appearance (make-up, very feminine looking, traditional female interests) and general presentation as gender role conformers, in Julia's opinion. Two other straight women she predicted would be comfortable with the knowledge. This was based on general liberal attitudes of these women and the appearance of a less conventional lifestyle. However, after she came out, she reported that the three feminine-looking ones were just as warm and supportive as before. The two liberals "have not spoken to me since -- or made eye contact or touched me."

This story illustrates several points. That attitude prediction is an important aspect of attitude measurement, though not a particularly accurate one. It is an



activity that many lesbians seem to use at the junction between themselves and heterosexual society. Another point is that attitudes and the accuracy of the prediction, are judged by such behaviors as willingness of straights to make eye contact, engage in conversation with, and initiate appropriate physical contact (hugging at an AA group). And that these observations are particularly salient when a straight individual passes through the boundary between not knowing and knowing. The felt absence of such behaviors in a context *where they were formerly perceived to be present* conveys a strong rejecting message to the lesbian.

Learning to Self Limit. Another coping strategy involves setting limitations on one's behavior in order to avoid rejecting experiences. Setting limitations includes such activities as "choosing not to go" or "choosing not to take your partner." In the data, these choices were directed at such activities as office parties, homeowner's associations, fund-raising organizations or social clubs, especially those where heterosexual couples participate together. One of the difficult aspects of this strategy is that it results in straights making false assumptions about the lesbian -- that she is single, or not interested in work relationships, and so forth.

Making Distinctions. Another strategy involves making a distinction between how others feel about one and how one feels about oneself. This was an important distinction because there was a feeling that the possibility always existed for the

lesbian to feel ashamed about her identity or her life, if she allowed others to determine how she ought to feel. By using this strategy, it is also possible to decide not to feel ashamed; even to develop another, competing feeling, pride. For example, Marsha says, "I've made a conscious decision that...unless I'm in obvious jeopardy, I'm going to be as nonchalant and open as I can be. For instance, with my family or with anyone...I act as normal as I am... I just relate to it (gayness) as if it were the most wonderful thing in the world. I hold my head high -- I refuse to be judged by you..."

A part of the process of making distinctions involves learning not to care what others think of you or learning not to place much importance on it. Marsha said, "I think I just got weary watching how I phrased things, of having to guard everything I said, to judge just how much I could reveal... It finally occurred to me that most of the people I work with -- we like each other, but its not a tragedy if they don't like me. So...why do I need to put out this much effort to guard myself against somebody who isn't that important to me?" Anne talked about realizing that she has control over her own feelings and doesn't have control over other people's feelings. Some women have not learned how to make distinctions, but realize that, for their own sanity, it would be helpful. Kaye says she "still cares too much about what people think." It's something she wants to work on.

Staying Aloof. This strategy involves developing only superficial relationships with straights. The consequence of staying superficial is that straights " don't know you as well as other gays do," according to Betty. One doesn't reveal as much to them. It is almost as if straights become irrelevant to life. They are not considered to be a part of one's social world. If one keeps them at arms length, they have less power to hurt. For example, Annette says, "What I do with straight people...when I see them making (gay) jokes, (I tell myself) they're ignorant or scared, or don't have it together. I write most of them off." Kaye, too, states, "there are some (straight) people I have to decide I can't get any closer to because I don't trust them with that information.. I pay attention to how they talk about other people -- how judgemental they are. "

Discussing the impact of this fear of loss and rejection, Warren (1974) has stated, "...Even when straight people are unaware of others' being gay, and thus, do not stigmatize them, the fear of discrediting leads to gay people staying aloof and distinct from the lives and involvements of others...There is the nagging fear of exposure, to which is added the constant interactional schizophrenia of those who pretend to an identity that they do not have or leave unsaid an identity that is fundamental to them... "(p.163).

Naming Ignorance. Sometimes study participants believe that straight behavior reflects a high level of ignorance and misconceptions. Data examples

are cited that document how straight society applies cultural stereotypes to lesbians. Such examples involve behaviors such as thinking lesbians are nymphomaniacs, poor parents, unhappy, unnatural, and so forth. Lesbian participants are convinced that such behavior means that straights actually *believe* the well-known stereotypes. And to some participants, believing the stereotype is an ignorant thing for straights to do.

Finding a Fit. This strategy concerns seeking out social situations where lesbians may fit in, such as joining a women's commune or other "alternative lifestyle" setting; getting involved in certain sports (softball, soccer, riding); or playing music. Most participants are very aware that, depending on their individual talents and proclivities, there are settings and activities where they "fit in" fairly well, and those where they do not fit.

"Finding a fit" is also done with individual straight people -- finding people you fit in with. This means identifying those straights who do accept you for who you are -- people who can be positive and affirming. This identification process was done in a variety of ways. Marsha reported her clues: "some people ask more questions -- like how do we deal with the kids, how do we fight, deal with money, etc." Alice also reported that she uses curiosity and questions from straights as a sign of openness to her lifestyle.

Sometimes finding a fit with an individual straight woman has led to more

than satisfying curiosity. Some participants reported that they found that some straight women find lesbian relationships interesting. Some of these straight women were interested in experimenting with the lesbian lifestyle. Usually, however, contrary to the stereotype that lesbians are out to "convert" straight women, straight women are more likely to have initiated such experimental relationships, at least according to the participants in this study. In fact, the lore among lesbians is that these relationships were to be avoided because they were usually painful. Several participants indicated that they wanted nothing to do with such relationships. They saw them as a way to get hurt, rather than as the road to acceptance.

The Lesbian Family. Developing a lesbian family or friendship group is a strategy used both at work and at home. In describing survival techniques in a work setting, Susan, a college student in her early 30's, notes, "One thing that has helped me deal with the straight world -- and I really only do that at work -- is that there are other lesbians present there...they are mostly good, strong, caring people that you would like to have in your life." Abby described her joy at first experiencing the sense of warmth and family among the lesbian community in San Francisco. "They were family...they were so warm and wonderful to me."

Other participants described either wanting or having close relationships with other lesbians in the Knoxville community -- relationships that in many ways substituted for the close family ties that could not be maintained because of

family disapproval or because of simple lack of knowledge among birth family members about the lesbian aspects of their lives.

### **Making Decisions about Self-Presentation**

Goffman (1963) defines self-presentation as that special set of concepts that relate to "social information" -- "the information the individual directly conveys about himself [sic]"(p.i). In this study, making decisions about self-presentation is an aspect of getting along in heterosexist society. The lesbian woman must make certain decisions about various aspects of how she presents herself socially. Making decisions about self-presentation is an active process that seems to develop and change over time for most individuals. A great deal of conscious thought and energy appears to be devoted to this issue over a long period of time. The overall process of making decisions about self-presentation seems to be composed of a number of different subprocesses: deciding whom to use as a model; deciding about one's relationship to the stereotype; locating oneself vis a vis both lesbians and non-lesbians; determining what you want to achieve in certain situations, and learning how to take care of yourself in a potentially hostile environment. Each of these subprocesses will be examined to the degree that it has been revealed in the data.

## What Lesbians Make Decisions About

### *Whom to Use as a Model*

Making decisions about self presentation involves gathering information about role models. Positive role models are not to be found in the straight milieu, but are reliably found in lesbian music, writing and culture. Most study participants remarked on the scarcity of successful role models -- women who have negotiated their way in creative and successful ways between the need for safety and the need for self-expression.

There is a vast array of self-help literature identifying famous and infamous lesbians, describing their lives and lifestyles. There are books by and about the lives, experiences, and relationships of lesbian women. There is feminist writing, both scholarly and popular. Study participants indicated that lesbian music, art, writing and culture is easy to obtain "once you know where to look." Most reported doing some research at some point in their own lives -- gathering information about how other lesbian women have worked at this never-ending process of deciding who they are and how they present themselves.

Linda stated that, as a teenager, she would "go to the library... and read about... (gay)...authors and their lifestyles." She spent a lot of her spare time in the library and reading. She admired the writing, personalities, and lifestyles of these artists. She did not specifically seek out lesbian art and culture, but found,

instead, mainstream literature produced by gay authors. Kaye reported looking up words like "gay" and "lesbian" in the dictionary and encyclopedia in an effort to find out if "that's what I am." In fact, almost every participant reported trying to "look it up" in the dictionary or encyclopedia. Most also reported they have found both pain and comfort from lesbian writings, art, and music. The pain comes from the knowledge of painful experience shared -- the comfort from the validation of lifestyle, experience, and feelings. Meg Christian, for example, is a musician and poet frequently mentioned by participants as a role model, a source of comfort and validation. One of her most famous songs humorously captures the issue of role models:

#### ODE TO A GYM TEACHER

##### *Chorus*

She was a big tough woman  
The first to come along  
That showed me being female meant  
you still could be strong  
And though graduation meant that we  
had to part  
She'll always be a player on the  
ballfield of my heart.

I wrote her name on my note-pad  
And inked it on my dress  
And I etched it on my locker  
And I carved it on my desk  
And I painted big red hearts with her  
initials on my books  
And I never knew till later why I got  
those funny looks.

##### *Chorus.*



Well, in gym class while the others  
Talked of boys that they loved  
I'd be thinking of new aches and pains  
The teacher had to rub  
And when other girls went to the prom  
I languished by the phone  
Calling up and hanging up if I found out  
she was home...  
*Chorus.*

...So you just go to any gym class  
And you'll be sure to see  
One girl who sticks to teacher  
Like a leaf sticks to a tree  
One girl who runs the errands  
And who chases all the balls  
(One girl who may grow up to be the  
gayest of all.)  
*Chorus.*

(from *Meg Christian: I Know You Know*, Olivia Records, LF 902, 1974)

There are two points here. The words of the song capture the universal need for good strong role models. But in a wider sense there is validation that the song is sung by a woman who not only lives a life like mine, but who dares to write and sing about it -- who dares to say the words openly and publicly without shame or fear. According to the study participants, this sort of shared experience has provided them with a sense of support to feel what they feel and be who they are.

### *Appearance*

Making decisions about self-presentation involves issues about appearance. These include deciding if one is going to look like the lesbian stereotype or not.

This means deciding what the stereotype is, then deciding how closely one is going to resemble it, when, and under what conditions. Other appearance issues include comparing oneself with other lesbians and non-lesbians; dealing with stereotyped gender role appearance issues; and figuring out what one wants to achieve by one's appearance in certain situations.

The Stereotype. Goffman (1963) addresses the issue of deciding how closely one wishes to resemble the stereotype when he states that "the stigmatized individual exhibits a tendency to stratify his [sic] 'own' according to the degree to which their stigma is apparent and obtrusive...it is in his affiliation with, or separation from, his more evidently stigmatized fellows, that the individual's oscillation of identification is most sharply marked" (p.107). For study participants, the lesbian stereotype, although varying in description, is universally seen as the most obtrusive example of self-presentation. For some of the participants, the stereotype is something to aspire *toward* -- something to look like or affiliate with. But this is interesting because it is not what negative or stigmatizing stereotypes are usually *about* -- they are supposedly about *what not to be*, according to the wider culture. But, as Goffman would predict, some lesbian participants don't see it that way. Marsha states, "I do want to look like the stereotype... I like the freedom that is emerging more now -- like taking back of neckties." In contrast, other participants wanted to avoid the stereotypical appearance, opting instead to develop some sort of personal style.

For Kaye, the stereotype is something to avoid. She says "the kind of stereotype I try not to be is the overweight, short, straight hair, ugly blue jeans, wide belt, button down shirts, no make up...and so forth."

So, what Goffman (1963) says is sometimes true, that "the stigmatized individual may exhibit *identity ambivalence* when he [sic] obtains a close sight of his own kind behaving in a stereotyped way, flamboyantly or pitifully acting out the negative attributes imputed to them" (pp.107-108). But sometimes this is not true and the stereotype can become a desired goal, or even a weapon. For instance, some study participants made a "political" decision about appearance.

For them, self-presentation became an opportunity to make a political statement about stereotypes. For Celia, her position about the stereotype involved learning and doing what was "politically correct" in terms of appearance and behavior.

This meant acting out the stereotype in a purposeful way. She identified the politically correct clothing. For instance, in the 1970's and 80's, this involved wide leather wristwatch bands, blue jeans, and tee shirts -- she "went to bars and the coffee house instead of Jimmy Buffet concerts." It was also politically correct to assume the attitude that straight people were "a bunch of shmucks that didn't know where the real music was" (Celia, age 35, currently lives with her husband and children. She identified as lesbian before her marriage).

Making decisions about self- presentation based on political beliefs may

involve looking and acting the stereotype in its extreme form, using self-presentation to express anger or disagreement toward social pressures by finding a radical style of dress and doing different things with your time. Although each of these examples reflects differing attitudes and styles it seems clear that being lesbian means having a personal struggle with the social process of stereotyping. Whether the outcome is to accept, accentuate, reject, or avoid it, it *must* be addressed in some way. It is as if one must develop an answer to the dominant culture. A popular song written by Sue Fink, though light-hearted, depicts lesbian anger and defiance at the stereotyped image:

#### LEAPING LESBIANS

Here come the lesbians  
Here come the leaping lesbians  
We're going to please you, tease you  
Hypnotize you, try to squeeze you  
We're going to get you if we can  
Here come the lesbians

Don't go and try to fight it  
Run away or try to hide it  
We want your love and that's our plan  
Here come the lesbians

Don't look in the closet  
Who's creeping down the stairs  
Who's slipping up behind you  
Watch out better beware

Icy fingers feeling, stealing  
Reaching out from floor to ceiling  
You can't escape, you're in our hands  
Here come the lesbians

Inside your heart is racing  
When you see our shadows chasing  
Here come the lesbians  
Here come the lesbians  
The leaping lesbians  
(Sue Fink & Joelyn Grippo, 1977)

An important aspect of this process of making decisions about the stereotype involves forming in one's mind a picture or specific knowledge of what the stereotyped image is. Interestingly, this picture varied with the individual participant. For Marsha, it was a woman "dressed in comfortable clothes, somewhat tailored, with less lace, and so forth." For Kaye, it involved wearing bell-bottomed (out of style) blue jeans, wide leather belts, and buttoned down shirts. For Leslie, it was a woman dressed in high style clothing with short, spiked hair. Do these variations represent membership in lesbian subcultures - or possibly age and experience differences? It might be interesting to see how closely these stereotypes match the ones that straight people have. It is worth remarking that these women never, or rarely, seem to check out the stereotypes with straights.

Making decisions about self-presentation involves locating oneself vis-a-vis other lesbians, as well as non-lesbians, in terms of certain appearance issues.

This process includes monitoring what other lesbian women in the community are wearing and what the current attitudes are about such issues as wearing

dressess. Several participants mentioned that in the past they did not even own a dress and would never wear make up, but that now, a lot of their lesbian friends are doing both occasionally, so they , too, own a dress and wear make-up sometimes. On the other hand, Annette stated, that she didn't want to be perceived as "buying in" to gender-role stereotypes by looking too much like straight women are supposed to.

### *Gender-Role Issues*

Social pressure to conform is directed at gender roles as well as sexual preference. Therefore, self-presentation involves making decisions about, or taking a personal position on, gender-role behavior and appearance. This involves being aware of what heterosexual women are doing or are expected to do with behavior and appearance and then deciding whether or not to take this into account when deciding on self-presentation. The larger issue here revolved around whether to meet cultural requirements for appropriate gender-role appearance, or to deviate from the cultural expectations in some way.

The decision may be different depending on the setting. Lesbian participants stated that they might conform more in one arena than another. For instance, there might be more gender role pressure to conform at work for some women, than in other settings. However, this did not always mean the lesbian employee

would conform. It just meant she had to think about it more. Linda, for instance, who is a mental health professional in a school setting, reports wanting to dress "comfortably" at work and other places. She prefers not to wear the dresses, heels, and lipstick expected of "professional women." She "can't imagine putting on stockings and heels every day." The data suggest she has spent a lot of time thinking about this issue, especially in considering the consequences of not conforming to cultural gender-role expectations.

Sometimes there were reasons to conform that seemed more persuasive than others. For instance, Annette stated "when I was working at a school with little girls with Down's syndrome, and the whole issue was to get each child as much in the mainstream as possible...for me to look out of place would have harmed my students, so I had to really struggle with how much I conformed, so as not to stick out." Linda said that when she was in college she worked as a resident counselor. She "knew it would be a problem if it were learned that I was lesbian," so she went to some lengths to hide this fact.

This process of deciding what sort of image to present is certainly not exclusive to lesbians. Heterosexual women also experience pressures to look and act according to prescribed roles. The difference seems to be that lesbians believe they have more at stake -- more to lose than heterosexual women -- if they choose not to conform.

It is not clear how lesbian identity and gender-role issues are connected, but they appear to be overlapping in the stereotyped or stigmatized view of what lesbianism is. In other words, the dominant social perception of "lesbian" is not clearly distinguished from the dominant social perception of untraditional gender role identity. In fact, women with untraditional gender role appearance are sometimes thought to be lesbian or are even called lesbian when they are not. For lesbian participants, this confusion -- and they are confused -- translates into a belief that to look lesbian is to be lesbian in the eyes of straights. It would be interesting to discover how non-traditional appearing straight women see this issue, since obviously they do not view themselves as "coming out" when they don't conform. It would also be useful to explore whether there is any sense of diminishing concern for appearances and image with age, in both straight and gay women.

Making decisions about gender-role appearance overlaps dealing with social pressure or the level of coercion or hostility in the environment toward untraditional appearance. In fact, looking different is perhaps more dangerous than being different. A high level of hostility in some situations toward nonconformity of any kind -- whether it is related to lesbianism or not -- does become a factor in self-presentation, although it does not always mean the lesbian will conform. What seems most relevant here is that it is important to be able to assess the level of hostility so that a good decision can be made. The prediction



doesn't really have to be accurate. It is better to err on the side of caution for some lesbians than to risk negative consequences.

### Learning to Take Care of Oneself

Learning to take care of oneself is an aspect of making decisions about self-presentation. It has to do with taking certain actions which help one feel safe in a potentially hostile environment. There are distinct facets to taking care of oneself including assessing the quality of specific relationships, identifying and developing specialized social skills, learning how to handle prejudice, and assessing the costs of openness vs. hiding.

### *Relationship Quality*

Taking care of oneself involves assessing the quality of specific relationships. The idea here is that one decides how open one is going to be with a straight person, based on the quality of the relationship. Quality of relationship is measured by how well one is known by the other. Decisions about self-presentation were made based on how close, intimate, or comfortable one was or wanted to be with the other person. For instance, for Kaye, it was "difficult to lie to or hide from people she really cared about." On the other hand, it was easy to lie to or hide from people she didn't care about. Other participants confirmed the

general rule that the better or closer the relationship, the more open the self-presentation.

The issue about sharing personal information is obviously not unique to lesbians. Questions about closeness and intimacy concern most people. The concern, however, becomes intensified by the weight of the lesbian label. In fact, the lesbians in this study seem to feel that not acknowledging the label somehow blocks normal intimacy. Kaye says, "There are some people that I have to decide I can't get any closer to...because I don't trust them with that information..." Perhaps the distinction of the lesbian version of this experience is best outlined by Goffman (1963) who states that "where an individual could keep an unapparent stigma secret, he [sic] will find that intimate relations with others, ratified in our society by mutual confession of invisible failings, cause him either to admit his situation to the intimate or to feel guilty for not doing so" (p.73).

### *Standing Up For Oneself*

Taking care of oneself involves knowing how to handle prejudice. One way of standing up for oneself involves using reason and logic. Marsha, a nurse, was told by a work colleague that she had been afraid of Marsha because she was lesbian. Marsha replied to the colleague, "you know, if somebody said, 'I just love nurses,'

we would all take it as a compliment. They wouldn't go around saying, 'you need to watch out for her, she likes nurses!'" Standing up for oneself can mean confronting people with their prejudice. Rebecca says that sometimes, when somebody makes a derogatory statement directed at you, "you just have to go nose to nose with them."

### *Sharpening Skills*

"Hanging Out." Taking care of oneself involves developing specific interpersonal skills. These are not skills unique to lesbians at all -- they are simply everyday coping skills that are identified as particularly salient to coping with the special issues that come up within the lesbian experience. One of these skills is deciding whether and how to fit into conversations where people are just "hanging out" talking about heterosexual subjects -- for instance, conversations about "what you did last Saturday night," or discussions about what couples fight about. An example of this skill described by Darlene, a 20 yr. old college student, was to find common threads of experience. What couples fight about, for instance, is very similar for both straight and gay couples. Keeping your mouth shut was a skill used by Leslie who explained she "always kept her mouth shut at work during these sorts of discussions."

Managing Anxiety. Another useful interpersonal skill is managing anxiety.

Anxiety, of course, could arise around the issue of one's lesbianism for any number of reasons. Two common ones mentioned by the participants in the data were recognizing one's own identity and revealing it to others or having it discovered by others. Managing this anxiety becomes a key part of taking care of oneself and ties in with the issue of self-presentation. For example, as evidence of their lesbian identity surfaced, most participants report they experienced very high anxiety -- associated mostly with fear of rejection. The challenge came in dealing with the anxiety.

Susan described the day "it hit her." "In my primary relationship, there was a lot of emotional attachment (low anxiety) and to have that sexual involvement even become a possibility for me...freaked me out." There was a sudden awareness of "this is the way it's supposed to be -- I was supposed to be sexually involved with a woman." In her first experience of dealing with fear of rejection, she described telling her therapist about this new awareness, "I was sweating bullets. It was very hard." She further reported that at work during this time she was lucky that her face didn't reveal feelings because she felt like she was coming apart, but "no one could tell." Susan is currently working on an advanced degree, and lives with her partner of 7 years.

There is another way managing anxiety ties in with self-presentation. As awareness of one's lesbianism surfaces, one is faced with a decision. Either one's self-presentation changes in order to remain consistent with what is going on

inside, or remains the same as before, and is inconsistent with changes in awareness. Other participants, like Susan, found that anxiety was managed best by "not revealing" it -- by maintaining an external appearance of calmness.

Developing Inner Resources. Another aspect of developing social skills may be described as developing inner resources. The most important inner resource identified in the data was developing a sense of self. This means that, almost like a blind person develops other senses to make up for the lost one, so the lesbian might have an extra well-developed sense of who she is as a survival tool and this might manifest itself in several ways. It might appear in learning how to "make peace" or work through conflict with others. According to Anne, the way this skill is useful to her is in learning how to negotiate with parents about social expectations, for instance, "parents who want you to get married and have children," when this is not a personal goal or choice. Anne is 31, and is from a middle-class Jewish family.

A clear sense of who one is was cited as helpful for taking care of oneself in deciding what to reveal about oneself to others and this was again linked to self-presentation. The participants feel that self-presentation involves much more than just revealing one's lesbianism. It involves revealing the "whole person." Anne said that people think "we are who we sleep with" -- that lesbians are seen only as one dimensional. To her, effective self-presentation should challenge the

stereotype -- should provide an opportunity for others to experience the lesbian as a whole person. This item differed from other self-care items because assessing the environment was not mentioned as a crucial factor in determining level of openness. Rather, this item concerned deciding what aspects of self to reveal *once you decide to do so*, independent of social pressure not to reveal. On a personal note, Anne said she gave up the defensive approach -- often manifested as the "I'm a lesbian, and if you don't like it, you can go to hell" routine -- and opted for a gentler more realistic presentation of who she is. For her, this change meant she was taking better care of herself.

### *Openness vs. Hiding*

Taking care of oneself involves weighing the costs of openness vs. hiding and making choices concerning these issues. One of the costs of hiding is that you don't always know what people believe or know about you. Not knowing can be anxiety-provoking and lesbians will engage in conversations with each other about "I wonder if 'so -and-so' has 'figured me out' -- he (she) looked at me funny or treated me differently today." 'Evidence' is accumulated on the side of "they know" or "they don't know." For instance, Leslie says, "I'm not out at work, at least-- probably I'm out behind by back." She cites evidence that everybody at work may know. "They don't ask questions." Then, when they do ask

"where are you and (her partner) going on vacation, they ask about the pair of us, like they know we're a couple," she worries.

Making decisions not to be open leads to another negative consequence -- that some aspect of self-presentation might suddenly give away one's secret without one's knowing it -- how one looks at a lover or talks about her, inadvertent blushing when gay topics come up, and the like. This is an aspect of hiding that involves having a stigma that is not readily visible to others. It creates a situation in which hiding the stigma becomes a possibility and then, if this path is chosen, the possibility of unintentional discovery becomes an issue.

Fear of discovery then predisposes the lesbian to scan the environment constantly for evidence that this has happened. So, not only does she scan for cues about levels of potential hostility toward gays, she also is impelled to scan for cues that her identity has somehow been discovered without her knowledge. And most of this is nonverbal! She scans for looks, expressions, behaviors, et cetera.

Goffman (1963) states that if an individual chooses to try to "pass," that she must "pay a high psychological price...a very high level of anxiety, in living a life that can be collapsed at any moment" (p.87).

There is an aspect of this issue of openness that appears to be related to power relations in interpersonal interactions. It is about trying to figure out how one can have some control over how one is treated. If one is open about being lesbian,

especially in a hostile environment, then it is guaranteed that one has controlled who knows and when they know (they *all* know), but one may get treated poorly. If one chooses to hide, then one gets treated better (as a non-gay), but one cannot control who knows and when they know.

### **Developing Personal Strategies for Hiding**

In making decisions about public presentation, another aspect to emerge from the data involves developing personal strategies for hiding. Of course, this category only becomes operative *once the decision is made that hiding is necessary*. Major types of strategies mentioned in the data include "trading off," using "disguises," lying, and learning how to control others' responses.

Trading Off. An example of one such personal strategy for hiding involves "trading off"-- a process in which the individual conforms in some areas of social interaction, hoping that she may then earn the right to be non-conformist in some other area. In a sense, she trades off one type of behavior for another. For example, Linda states that she is extremely competent in her job, and that she also knows how to interact in socially appropriate ways on the job. This, she feels earns her the latitude to dress in a "comfortable way" at work, which is not according to the stereotyped "professional woman" gender role.

Acting Unconcerned. There is another strategy that is used when the woman's non-conformity attracts attention. For instance, Linda indicates that she "acts



unconcerned." This seems to be a method of controlling the responses of others, at least in part, by controlling one's own responses. Thus, if one appears to be non-anxious, or unconcerned, the other person is more likely to let certain unusual things pass without remark. This idea, then, is creating behaviors that influence the responses of others by controlling one's own responses. This seems a distinct or different process from that described by Goffman (1963), in which the stigmatized individual attempts to use hostile bravado to over-compensate for the desire to "cower" away from mixed social situations. This technique appears in the data to be subtle and proactive, rather than the reactive one that Goffman describes.

Disguises. Another strategy involves using "disguises" -- using other less stigmatized "differences" to hide the lesbian identity. So that being a "yankee," at least, in the South, or an athlete might be a good cover for one's lesbian identity. Sara calls this "valuing differences." By this apparently she means "valuing" in the self-concept sense of finding value in all the ways one is different from the norm, but possibly also "valuing" in the functional sense -- the differences serve a useful function in the hiding process. Goffman pinpoints this process when he describes a "passing" strategy in which "those who pass...present signs of their stigmatized failing as signs of another attribute, one that is less significantly a stigma" (p.94).

Lying. At least one participant mentioned the strategy of lying. This takes many forms, as the situation requires. Some of the participants talk about their partners and change the pronoun from "she" to "he" in heterosexual company. Lying can involve being seen dating men. It can involve telling people you are going out with men when you are not. For instance, Alice mentions telling her parents that she is dating men or that men are part of a camping group. She says she justifies this because it's "really none of their business" what she is doing anyway. In fact, she chooses to lie to her parents about her activities -- not because she wants them to think she's not lesbian (they already know) but because "she has her own life" and it's "none of their business."

Another common lie is to deny membership in the rejected group. An individual may deny being lesbian, if asked directly. Another form of lying is to engage in lesbian behavior, while at the same time avoiding thinking about the label and avoiding applying it to oneself -- sort of lying to oneself. Faye describes this. One evening, while in high school, she "played around" with her best female friend. She states, "We never talked about it...we just never discussed it...we continued being friends for years."

Not Acting on It. Several participants indicated that, once they knew they were lesbian, they had to make a decision about whether to act on their preference or not. Some reported quite a struggle with this decision and cited

such issues as the belief that it was immoral, or that the social pressure was simply too strong. This led them, as a coping strategy, for at least a period of time, to choose to remain asexual. In *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence*, (Curb & Manahan, 1985), an ex-nun states, "perhaps I became a nun because in my day little girls had two options: grow up and marry a daddy facsimile or become a nun. Being a bright child and knowing subconsciously that I was gay, what could I do?" (p.5)

Costuming. Costuming can be a strategy for hiding because you can choose a certain look based on how you analyze the demands of the context. In this and the other example, the participant adapts her appearance to create an impression about herself -- an impression that is, in essence, misleading. It is misleading for several reasons -- (1) it is experienced by the participant herself as externally imposed, therefore not an honest expression of self, and (2) it deliberately causes others to make untrue or incorrect assumptions about the sexual preference of the participant because of their own prejudices regarding gender-role stereotypes.

In discussing personal presentation and information control, Goffman (1963) says that "when (the) differentness is not immediately apparent ...the issue becomes that of managing information about (the) failing. To display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in

each case, to whom, how, when, and where. It is not that he [sic] must face prejudice against himself, but rather , that he must face *unwitting acceptance* of himself by individuals who are prejudiced against persons of the kind *he can be revealed to be* .(italics mine) He is receiving and accepting treatment based on false suppositions concerning himself" (p.42).

Assessing. Another way of developing personal strategies for hiding involves assessing the effectiveness of the various strategies. The criterion mentioned by the participants is that the strategy must work with heterosexuals (so they won't guess about the lesbian identity,) but it must not work on other gays. This idea is not clear. It is not known whether the strategy itself cues other gays about the lesbian's identity, or that the identity is clear in spite of the strategy to hide.

## Summary

Chapter 5 provided a description of the third step in constructing lesbian reality -- how lesbians act upon their perceived world. A key set of data responses involved how lesbians develop coping strategies for use in the heterosexist context. A second set of responses included issues around making decisions about self presentation. As lesbians build their reality in the world, the responses and coping strategies feed back in a circular manner, influencing the heterosexist context.

It was poignant to note the amount of thought and energy expended by the stigmatized lesbian individual to cope with the pressures of an oppressive culture. Coping strategies included learning to predict the responses of others, learning how to self-limit, making distinctions between how one feels about oneself and how others feel about one, finding people and places where one fits in, and finding a lesbian family. The emphasis was on finding a way to value oneself and on finding a different reality that provided more support and affirmation than the heterosexist world.

Making decisions about self-presentation contained several facets including finding good role models, deciding about the stereotype and about one's gender-role behavior and appearance. There were also a set of responses around learning how to take care of oneself. Self-care involved managing relationships, managing anxiety, standing up for oneself, and weighing the risks of openness vs. hiding. Self-care sometimes meant developing strategies for hiding.

## CHAPTER 6

### FINDINGS:

#### THE FOCUS GROUP

##### **Introduction**

The purpose of the focus group was to provide data which, when viewed in relation to earlier findings, would either confirm, broaden and enhance those findings, or provide contrast and disagreement with the earlier theory. This procedure was intended to provide a test of validity for the earlier findings, not to generate completely new categories of data at this point in the research process.

The focus group lasted one and one-half hours. There were six participants, who ranged in age from 35 to 55. On the whole, they were more educated than the average member of the original participant group, and they were older, but they came from a similar variety of social backgrounds. They are presented here using the same strategy for identity protection as before. They are described in terms of age, occupation, social class, and relationship status.

Names and Ages. Participants were randomly assigned false names for identification purposes and all demographic information was linked to the coded names. The 6 group members were Rachel, age 36; Sandra, age 36; Lucy Ann,

age 35; Cecilia, age 38; Karen, age 49; and Laura, age 55.

Occupations. Three participants are students working on advanced degrees - a Ph.D. in Physical Education; a Ph.D. in English; and a Ph.D. in Exercise Physiology. One participant is a middle-level manager in the Oak Ridge, Tn., nuclear industry. Another is an assistant professor at a Tennessee university. The sixth group member is a mental health professional at a local agency in Knoxville.

Class. Three of the participants grew up in middle class homes in the South - Oak Ridge, Tn.; Morristown, Tn.; and Alabama. Three were of lower class background from North Carolina, Mississippi and the Kentucky mountains. Religious affiliations varied from Jewish (1), to Episcopalian (2), Southern Protestant (2) and None (1).

Four of the participants owned their own homes, the other two rented a house together.

Relationship Status. There were two couples in the group. Rachel and Sandra had been in a relationship for approximately 2 years. Lucy Ann and Cecilia were in a 5-year relationship. Lucy Ann had been married in the past but had no children. Karen is in a 10-year relationship. She had been married but has no children. Laura is in a relationship of less than a year. She had been married some years ago and has adult children.

The earlier findings from the participant interviews were presented to the group in the form of specific questions. Each question contained a short summary of the findings followed by a question about whether these findings matched the experience of the focus group members, or not. Focus group members were encouraged to agree or disagree, not just with the earlier findings, but with each other and to provide illustrations from their own experiences to back up their opinions. The atmosphere was comfortable and friendly and the discussion open-ended.

Data from the focus group were analyzed using the grounded theory method of selective coding. The focus of analysis was on finding clusters of concepts related to existing categories. These were then compared and contrasted to the earlier findings. As the group examined the first step in the model -- what straights do -- exemplars occurred which fit clearly into existing categories. An interesting variation of "the need not to know" category emerged from the data and was called "subliminal awareness." Subliminal awareness was the label attached to the observation by lesbian participants that some straights have a tendency to pick up on something "different" about the lesbian, but do not identify the lesbian label. Instead, they have a tendency to put the lesbian into some other known category. For instance, participants, especially couples, reported being perceived by straights as looking alike, when there was no physical resemblance



at all. Other facets of the concept were examined including the roles of attention level and subliminal cues.

Other themes from the earlier data also appeared in the focus group. The concept of interference and threats came up in exemplars about getting fired. Among six group participants, four told stories about losing jobs because they were lesbian. This was especially remarkable given the high level of education and competence represented in the group. Exemplars occurred of the concept of transformations. Group participants identified a variety of positive experiences in interactions with straight friends, loved ones, and employers.

Exemplars related to step two of the model, the meaning of the observations, focused primarily on pressures to conform directed at acting straight and gender role. These data supported the applicability of the Mahoney (1991) cognitive model. Again the data describes a socially coercive process in which rules for behavior are clearly drawn and there are serious consequences for not conforming. In an elaboration of earlier data, focus group participants spent some time analyzing the reasons behind this perceived social pressure, especially the pressure they experienced from straight women. Although pressure around social rituals was not specifically discussed, the group tended to speak in even stronger terms than had earlier participants about the power of the social coercion process in their lives. Exemplars of the concept of painful consequences dealt primarily with defining the source of greatest danger -- here labeled

"portrait of a bigot." The group as a whole contributed to the portrait, each group member adding her own opinion.

The third step in the model, coping and self-presentation, also provided more evidence to confirm the earlier data. Included for discussion were such concepts as making predictions, staying aloof, concerns about appearance and the stereotype. There was an excellent discussion on openness vs. hiding. The focus group findings are presented here under headings that correspond to those in Chapters 4 and 5, to facilitate comparisons.

When lesbians get together in a group to talk about what it is like to be lesbian, to share experiences, air differences, identify commonalities, a bonding happens. Even though there are personal differences, individual realities, the bonding is about the shared experience of struggle, the feelings of loss, anger and frustration. It is about the mirroring of one another -- "another like myself." In fact, the focus group itself could be viewed as an opportunity to view a lesbian coping strategy in action, the bonding together in a group for mutual support, although that was not the original intention of this research. Although these women did not all know each other at the outset of the session, a bond quickly formed. It is not clear how or whether this may have influenced the data, but it probably altered the normal focus group process in some way. The group itself may have provided an outlet for the anger and frustration that these women don't

usually get a chance to express -- at least not in an official forum. If they did bond around common feelings of anger and frustration, this could account for the data being slightly more angry and "political" than the earlier results. It is also noteworthy that from these focus group data it would not be at all apparent how well-assimilated and accepted, how unusually competent and successful these particular women actually were in their dealings with straight society.

### **Findings**

An overview of the group findings reveals a pattern of multiple interlocking concepts

similar to earlier chapters. Because the group interview was directed toward further exploration of existing concepts, it was not surprising that similar overlap and complexities occurred. It was interesting that although the invisible observer concept was not specifically discussed, it was clearly present, especially in the data on disclaimers and in the discussions about gender conformity.

## What Straights Do

### *Disclaimers*

In the earlier findings, lesbian participants believed that straights showed discomfort with the gay lifestyle by using "disclaimers," a strategy for making certain that other people knew they weren't lesbian. In the focus group an exemplar with a similar pattern appeared. Rachel told the story of a situation at work in which a male employee had a pornographic picture of a nude woman on his wall. He shared the office with a female employee. The female employee told Rachel that she was "worried that people would think the picture belonged to me" and she didn't want people to think she was a lesbian.

This exemplar contains the element seen before where an assumption is made that one must disassociate oneself clearly and actively from being lesbian because otherwise people will think one is, if one so much as brings up the topic or even sits in the same room with a picture of a nude woman. This exemplar goes further in that it also reflects the speaker's ignorance of what being lesbian really entails. Certainly, lesbianism is not automatically associated with pornography -- most lesbians do not sit in offices with pictures of nude women on their walls. In fact, this is much more typical of male sexual behavior. The employee's fear seems farfetched until we apply the concept discussed later under pressure to conform to gender stereotypes. This concept suggests that people in

P.E. departments are more likely to impute the lesbian label onto any unusual or suggestive behavior. This exemplar also links with the invisible observer concept, in that the employee assumed Rachel was straight and would probably share her view.

### *Knowing vs. Not Knowing*

The Need Not to Know. Patterns similar to the earlier data were described by focus group members around issues of "the need not to know" and the "don't talk about it" rule. For instance, Sandra stated that at work she dresses conventionally but doesn't really hide who she is. "The ones that don't want to acknowledge it (her lesbianism) don't, because they just block it out," she says. She agreed that these people seem to have a "need not to know," because her lesbianism is relatively obvious, she thinks, yet these people don't seem to (want to) know about it.

Don't Talk About It. Lucy Ann described an example of the "don't talk about it" rule. In her university setting, "we are all lesbians and everybody knows it, but they don't want to believe it. Nobody will admit it." Karen described her mother enforcing the "don't talk about it" rule. "The closest she ever came to it (talking about it) was when she was talking about visiting me, my brother and sister, and she said "I don't want to interfere with you and your spouses." That "spouses" was a key term for Karen in understanding the way her mother saw her

relationship with her partner. But it was never mentioned again. This exemplar contains some of the same elements as those mentioned earlier in which straight individuals revealed by some clue that they were aware of the stigmatized identity, but were unable to speak of it.

Don't Do It. An exemplar occurred in the focus group data which was similar to the earlier data about being urged not to "do it" or "act on it." Karen, a college professor, described a conversation with another professor about ordaining gay ministers. The professor opined, "Well, I guess it's okay if they're not *practicing* homosexuals."

Subliminal Awareness. A new aspect to this general category of "needing not to know" was revealed in the focus group data. They revealed the idea that straight people will become aware of something different about the lesbian person, but won't be able to identify exactly what it is -- a sort of subliminal awareness. An exemplar was described by Sandra. "There are several people working in my department. They always get these two women mixed up....they're both lesbians...they don't look anything alike, but [people] always mix them up." Karen and Sandra both described several occasions where "people have picked up on 'something' and thought their lovers were their sisters." Karen laughed, "There's no possible way anyone could really think that LM and I were from the same gene pool. Its impossible."

After identifying this concept, the participants spent some time trying to explain it or theorizing about what straights are actually responding to. There was agreement that there must be nonverbal cues and there was speculation about what these might be. Comments included: "People can tell we're not on the same playing field." "We've stopped engaging in the submissive behaviors that make us attractive to men." Laura believed that most straight people do pick up on "something". They notice that "you are not engaging in the kind of foot-shuffling behavior that is required..."

Focus group members seemed to fall into two opposing groups -- those who believed that the need not to know made straight people so blind that "you could kiss in the McDonald's parking lot and no one would notice," and those who thought that "subliminal awareness" would operate to make straights aware of lesbians most of the time. The researcher intends to pursue this in further research to determine whether the particular lesbian's position on this issue affected her degree of openness.

In discussing the differing positions, a unifying theory was suggested -- that level of attention, or "focus," might be an important variable. In their words, "if one is looking for it one will see it, if one is not looking for it, it could 'hit one in the face' and one wouldn't see it." There was some suggestion that the degree to which a straight person had a need not to know could influence the amount of focus

or level of attention payed to subliminal cues about sexual preference.

Another theory suggested involved the idea of "receptors" as an explanation for subliminal awareness. The thought here was that some people have "built-in receptors" for the sort of subliminal cues required to "pick up on who is lesbian," and other people do not. Further, "even if they have a receptor," said Sandra, "they might pick up on something, but they don't know what they picked up on. They might think you and your lover are sisters, or they try to put you in some other *known* category, such as 'strong women,' 'manhaters,' 'sisters,' and so forth." She noted that in her experience, "people are pretty good at twisting things around so it fits into their frame of reference and what they want to believe".

Another point about this data is that, just as straights theorize about lesbians, lesbians also theorize about straights. What is going on here is that the focus group is trying to account for and/or predict straight behavior toward them. Most of their theories tend to be as derogatory of straights as straights are of lesbians.

### *Threats and Interference*

Firing lesbians. Consistent with the earlier group's concept of threats and interference, four out of the six focus group participants reported that they



believed they had lost a job because they were lesbian. They had either quit because of ongoing harassment or were asked to leave. These were all educated, competent individuals. Some had been school teachers, one was a mental health practitioner, and one a government employee. Each reported that she was never told directly it was the lesbian issue. For instance, the government employee was told that she "couldn't relate well to farmers." The teachers thought they were probably seen by supervisors as too feminist or outspoken. But all four reported harassment and negativity from straight employers and felt convinced that the lesbian issue was the real one. Note that the fact that the lesbian issue was never openly discussed and the fact that these women were in the role of invisible observer in these situations led to assumptions about causes which may or may not be accurate. The assumptions are not tested, but they affect subsequent lesbian/straight interactions.

### *Transformations*

The idea of transformations was not specifically discussed by the focus group. However, exemplars of positive interactions with straights suggested that such positive experiences were at least considered to be exceptions to the rule much as the exemplars in the earlier data were. Sandra described surprise at the support from her supervisor when her partner was called up for military service to the Middle East. "She hugged me and said 'take as much time as you need. I know we've

never discussed this, but I understand.'" Lucy Ann, too, reported that when her partner's mother died, her supervisor allowed her the time off she needed without question. Each group member, in fact, cited examples of such exceptions to the rule: dear friends, supportive family members and understanding employers.

### What the Straight Behavior Means

#### *Pressure to Conform/Gender Roles*

Pressure to conform was a theme in the focus group data just as in the earlier findings. Participants reported their perception of similar patterns of pressure to follow social rules and the consequences for not conforming. The group data focused primarily on pressures about acting straight and about gender role, and did not specifically address social rituals. In a variation from the earlier data, straight women were singled out as an important source of pressure to conform. Cecilia described a way that this happens. She told about her next door neighbor, a straight mother of five, who talks about her children as follows: "My other little girl is my *real* little girl...she likes to have her nails painted, she wears bows, she likes to play with her dolls." This mom was "worried about the other two because they were "tomboys." Group members commented that this sort of talk, especially in front of the children created a strongly coercive message about

how little girls, and big girls, should act. Group members also suggested that this sort of talk is common in their experience. It is also assumed to be clear evidence even if it is not directed at them, personally. The need to stay invisible leads to a failure to clarify and a missed opportunity to educate.

In another exemplar, straight women in a college Physical Education Department were seen to "over-react" to lesbians. This is a department where many of the women were known to be lesbian. The straight women were seen as working harder than ever to look and act straight - wearing feminine clothes and make-up. Examples were cited, including the coaches of a local basketball team, who "clomp around the gym in high heels." This particular example was discussed at some length by the group with emphasis on the inappropriateness of such dress in that setting -- which pointed to its real purpose -- to look feminine and "straight" in spite of common sense, practical considerations, the sacrifice of personal comfort, and the damage done to the gym floor! There were two points here. The group criticized lesbian women trying to look straight for over-dressing, and straight women for being afraid to look lesbian.

The group spent some time developing theories and speculations about why these women act the way they do. The main theme seemed to be directed at the power issues related to gender. An exemplar was Karen's statement: "Heterosexual women are in a real power trap...they have spent their lives

manipulating those ...to whom they've given power...trying to make sure those guys treat them well. It takes a great deal of skill, energy and intelligence to do this. Then they see lesbians 'step out of the game.' We're not playing, and [to them] its not fair..." Rachel agreed, "They bought the clothes, ruined the hose, learned to walk in high heels, ruined their bodies, faked orgasms, etc. Then we step off the field, and it makes them furious. They want to pull us back in the game."

Some members of the group saw this phenomenon of social pressure as related to "the need not to know." "If a heterosexual woman were to become aware or accept the fact that there is another viable alternative or choice out there, she might have to make choices for herself that she is not ready to make." So, she works hard to keep "being straight" as the only reality. In general the group members seemed to see straight women -- at least the ones that pressure them - - as even more powerless than themselves. Although resentment was expressed at the pressure exerted on them, they seemed to take an essentially sympathetic position toward these women.

In reviewing these data, it seems to the researcher that a new issue or concept is at least inferred and deserves further exploration. As these individuals struggle with issues of how or whether to conform to straight society, they seem to be operating between the constraints of *two* cultural systems. They are not

only reactive to the pressure from their straight sisters, they also appear to be making some judgements about how one should be lesbian. So far, in this study we have seen some of the benign, supportive aspects of gay culture, i.e. the lesbian family, and finding art, literature, and so forth, but is there another, darker side to this constant effort to find a balance between the two cultural systems? Is there a sense of enforcement or pressure to conform to certain rules within the gay and lesbian culture, as well? This is suggested in the disapproval these participants voiced about the hiding strategies of the lesbians in the P.E. department.

### *Danger/Painful Consequences*

As with the earlier participants the idea of living in danger was very real to focus group participants. The group also suggested there were levels of fear and danger. Being harassed or fired was mentioned as certainly scary, but, as Lucy Ann put it, "what is really scary are the neighbors next door who are the redneck kind of people who would kill us. I mean, literally, I fear for my life. Now that is a real thing to worry about."

Portrait of a Bigot. The group agreed that some people are scarier than others. "People that live with their blinders up are the ones you need to worry about." They are not willing to admit "there is variability out there." They are rigid, see everything as black and white, right and wrong. It's a conservative

lifestyle. Other group members added to the description: "inflexibility"; "one way to be." "It makes life comfortable because they don't have to make any decisions. They are uncomfortable with their own lives." "The kind of person that would step on you because they're so painful inside."

The group offered further depictions of the sort of people that scare them. Cecilia describes the next door neighbors in further detail. The woman is in her late 20's, quit school in the 7th grade, got pregnant, got married, had 5 children. Her husband is physically abusive to her, the children and the dogs. They have no money, no phone. The neighbor woman says her favorite children are the boys. She dislikes two of the girls who act like tomboys. She is always worried about them. So, the scariest people dislike women, enforce stereotyped gender roles in their own lives, are violent, uneducated, and disenfranchized by society. The description was reminiscent of a quip quoted by Mahoney (1991) from an unidentified source, "There are two kinds of people in the world: those who believe that there are two kinds of people, and those who do not" (p.110).

### Coping and Self-Presentation

The data on coping and self-presentation are divided up under several headings in order to facilitate comparison with the earlier data. The major headings include Coping Strategies and Self -Presentation. Coping Strategies

includes the following concepts -- making predictions, staying aloof, and a new concept that enhances the category, called "explaining why people hate us." Many of the earlier concepts were not covered, although, again, this was probably because of time.

Self-presentation includes exemplars about appearance, stereotypes and mixing gays and straights. This last concept contains an elaboration of the earlier discussion on how the social rules change in mixed situations and how the lesbian participants respond to such social shifts. The final sub-heading, Learning How to Take Care of Yourself, contains exemplars which enhance the openness vs. hiding debate.

### *Coping Strategies*

Making Predictions. The exemplars from the group around this concept were more cynical than the earlier data. Actually, predicting straight reactions was only touched on by the group under the theme that "people are two-faced." This meant that one can't trust straight reactions even after one knows what they are. Karen spoke for the group, "Most people are too nice to say, 'Oh my God, you're a lesbian, get away from me...!' They say 'I'm okay with that.' Then they never speak to you again. What you see may be very different from what is. " It seemed that the group as a whole saw it this way, even though they did admit to spending

some time predicting what sort of response they might get from various individuals on "coming out," the point seemed to be that it didn't really matter, because one couldn't always tell what the real response was anyway. This was a new facet of the earlier theory.

Staying Aloof. The focus group members reported that, much as the other participants, they tended to be reticent with straights, especially at work. They maintained what they described as "superficial but pleasant relationships." Some talked about the pain of not sharing more, especially when the relationship quality was good and not particularly superficial. Karen described a situation with a straight friend of some years to whom she wanted to come out. "It was very difficult. I just couldn't do it. So there was always that distance between me and her." Why didn't she tell? "I was a public school teacher, very much in the public eye. My straight friend's husband was the mayor. I wanted to be able to put them on the witness stand and have them be able to say 'No, she has never told us that she's a lesbian.'"

Explaining Why People Hate Us. Focus group members demonstrated a coping strategy not seen in the earlier data, but probably related to the female bonding discussed in the introduction to this chapter. This involved a sort of emotional group bonding around a discussion of various theories about "why people hate us." The theories reflected the same sense of social coercion described before.



Interestingly, although the focus group members clearly did not trust certain individual straight people, they blamed society as a whole for the problems they face, rather than individuals. Reasons people don't like us included: "We are not available to men -- we don't want them in our private space." "Its against the rules for our reality to even exist -- it challenges the patriarchy." "If men's power comes from controlling women, then they lose their power with us. If it comes from within, we're not a threat. If you define your power as who you control, that's when it becomes threatening, and our society is based on that." "When you step away from the game, it is a powerful move. It makes people mad. If you don't want to play, there must be something wrong with you." Although the theories expressed here were interesting and important, the bonding gained in the talk seemed to provide comfort and a sense of belonging, perhaps a sense that "we all have a shared reality."

### *Self-Presentation*

#### **Appearance**

The group discussed various aspects of costuming -- experimenting with and selecting a "look;" corporate costuming; dressing for comfort; issues about being true to yourself; body types; conforming; and looking "feminine." Group members brought up many of the issues already found in the earlier findings. Lucy Ann mentioned experimenting or evolving through a series of "looks," from

conforming during her marriage, to very "butch" when she first "came out," to a more comfortable appearance, currently. Sandra discussed her "corporate image" at work. "Everybody complains - they all buy...those suits, pumps, etc...its like a uniform. It's the corporate culture -- it's more than the lesbian issue. Nobody looks that way at home."

In terms of modifying one's appearance, or fitting in, an interesting concept was developed that could best be described as "figuring out what one can get away with in terms of dress." For instance, a large muscular woman must decide whether to offset her masculine appearance by curling her hair, etc., whereas a small feminine woman could "shave her head and still look feminine." This resembled the idea of "trading off" described in an earlier section under learning to disguise yourself. These data provide an interesting contrast to the attitudes toward the P.E. coaches discussed earlier. The coaches came under fire from the focus group for trying too hard -- but clearly the group supports some kinds of disguise or efforts to conform.

Concern was expressed by the group over portraying oneself as other than who one is. Rachel stated that she felt she got a teaching job under false pretenses. "I wore a dress to my interview...but I didn't want to continue to play that kind of game..." On the other hand, as with some earlier participants, she stated that she doesn't avoid dresses completely. "I dress up sometimes...I've got

dresses and skirts I'm very comfortable in..."

In deciding to conform, Lucy Ann stated one of her reasons, "I'm sick and tired of going to McDonald's and having them say 'Can I help you, sir?'" Then she adds, "Unfortunately, I let what other people are thinking influence me." So, this group mentioned the same struggle about caring what other people think.

### **On Stereotypes**

The group responded to the stereotype that lesbians hate men. "That makes me so mad. I do not hate men. I hate the trip they're on. I hate what society has forced them into." Some even stated, "I think straight men are easier to deal with than straight women." This information confirmed the basic ideas found in the earlier data.

The group did not discuss the struggle over whether to look like the stereotype or not -- but this struggle did seem implicit in talk about how the gay women in the P.E. department dress up to look straight. On P.E. teachers, in general, Rachel commented humorously: "People think P.E. teachers are mostly lesbian -- and they are! There's a reason for that stereotype." Another group member, Sandra, making fun of the stereotype said, "Yes, all female athletes are lesbians. So are all 'Yankees.' The only straight women left are 'Southern Belles.'" (Two of the women really laughed at this, since they are in

relationships with "Southern Belles".) So, in an elaboration of the earlier data, perhaps joking about the stereotype is a mechanism for dealing with it.

### **Mixing Straights and Gays**

The earlier data suggested that when a straight person enters a gay setting, straight rules and culture enter as well. Gays feel socially constricted because they don't know which set of social rules is operable. The focus group confirmed this theory and embroidered it. According to the group, the level of disruption caused by the presence of a straight person would depend on several issues: (1)

How "socially powerful" the person was -- could this person ruin my career?

Do they travel in my social circles where they could tell all my straight peers about me? and (2) How much the straight person had "bought into the rules." In other words, does the person have a strong "need not to know" or "just don't tell me about it" approach to homosexuality.

Even if social powerfulness were not an issue, several group members felt that the presence of a straight person would change their behavior. Karen said, "I would feel compelled to explain or educate -- to sort of be a representative for all lesbians." In contrast, Lucy Ann stated, "I would not feel like it was my job to educate them -- you can't learn about a culture from having someone tell you about it." Lucy Ann, Cecilia and Karen all felt they could potentially be offended

by the presence of a straight person in a gay setting and might feel threatened. "If I felt threatened, I'd probably leave."

### Learning to Take Care of Oneself - Openness vs. Hiding

On Being Open. Much of the focus group discussion revolved around work issues and openness -- apparently this is the arena that causes these participants the greatest concern. A familiar theme cropped up here -- the idea of "acting like everything is okay." Sandra talked about "being matter of fact" -- not really saying "I'm lesbian," just being herself. This is like Marsha in the earlier data talking about "being as normal as I am." Sandra stated, "My brother is the only male that ever comes up in my conversation...so its pretty obvious... about half the people I meet are open to it." Rachel described a more dramatic openness, she took her partner to a military function: "I came out to everybody-- just like that-- boom."

On Hiding. Every group member admitted to hiding upon occasion. Several discussed getting male friends to act as escorts to social functions. They described lying, acting straight, going alone or deciding not to go. Karen told about deciding not to take her partner to a banquet at her university. Her partner said "I don't feel comfortable doing it ...we don't know the territory down there...don't know the lay of the land." Karen revealed worries about tenure and job security.

Laura described hiding as particularly irritating and costly. "There was

always some office party that you had to go to and then hiding was not taking my lover to it, so there shot my Saturday night. Coming alone is sort of making a statement but its also conforming because you're not telling them something they don't want to hear." Even asking to bring a "friend" was considered by the group to be hiding -- "not to mention that you don't have to ask to bring your husband."

Lucy Ann and Cecilia discussed another dilemma of hiding. They are both finishing up degrees and are job hunting. "Do we not say anything about it and deal with it later? Do we let them know on the front end, so we can feel comfortable about the institution from the beginning? But then, we take the risk of not getting hired because we've been too open." Karen summed up the group concerns: "We hide because we fear we won't be promoted; we fear we'll be fired; we fear we'll be killed. We fear that (it) will interfere with our ability to relate positively to the folks around us."

What you Lose When You're Open. Painful consequences equaled loss. Losses identified by the group were in some cases predictable from the earlier discussion and uniformly reflected the earlier data. They included jobs, promotions, respect, and control. Karen: "I lose a promotion. I'm an assistant professor in a department with fairly conservative people. They vote on whether I get tenure and promotions." Other departments at her college may be more accepting, she says. When she was a public school teacher, she would have been

subject to criminal prosecution, "It's against the law in the State of Tennessee for a teacher to be a 'practicing homosexual,'" she quotes.

Sandra talked about how being open can lead to loss of control over information about yourself. She said if she were completely open, "I wouldn't know...their feelings about it...wouldn't get a chance to explain it. I'm left with whatever they think about it. You don't have an opportunity to discuss it one-on-one...find out what they think, work it out." Rachel talked about loss of respect and credibility, "You lose a valuable interaction with certain people...people you thought were your friends all of a sudden aren't. It might be a problem at work from a teamwork standpoint. Personally, they (work people) aren't important in my life and I don't care. Professionally, I may have to depend on them sometime and that may damage my credibility."

Rules about Openness (Weighing the Risks). As the focus group discussed openness vs. hiding, it became clear that they had developed a set of rules or guidelines pertaining to this issue. These are summarized:

- (1) Don't be open with young people -- they are too insecure about their own sexuality.
- (2) Don't come out to students.
- (3) Don't be open with people who have power over you, if you can't predict a favorable reaction.

(4) Don't tell anybody who doesn't have as much to lose as you do. Don't be more vulnerable to them than they are to you.

(5) Even if you are open, don't confirm it verbally, where you can be quoted.

These guidelines are contained in the data collected from the earlier interviews, but did not materialize in this clear and concise form.

### The Way They'd Like It To Be

The focus group members did not discuss what it would be like if the world were an ideal place in which there were no stigmas, except to say that they would quit hiding and just act like other people -- hold hands in public if they felt like it. "Then I could just worry about taxes and overdrawing my charge cards, acid rain, etc., like other people. Forget all this hiding and fear, act like I feel."

Karen put the responsibility back on herself, "I wish I could get to the point where I could finally say, 'this is who I am and if its a problem with you, fuck you, and I'll see you later,' but I'm just not there yet -- maybe after I get tenure." Rachel stated, "If I had my way, I would go with a real short, butch haircut and just be comfortable with myself."



## Summary

Data from the focus group paralleled the earlier findings and were organized similarly to facilitate comparisons. Exemplars were given which fit into each of the three steps of the model -- what straights do, what lesbians think it means, and how lesbians cope and make decisions about self-presentation. Exemplars about what straights do fit into the existing categories and also broadened those categories. There were examples of disclaimers, the "need not to know" and the "don't talk", "don't do" rules. The "need not to know" was expanded to include issues about subliminal awareness on the part of straights, and the roles of attention level and subliminal cues were explored. Interference and threats were found in the form of "getting fired" and transformations among straights were documented, as before.

Meaning came in the form of coercive pressure to conform in the areas of acting straight and gender role. In fact, the focus group was more vehement than the earlier participants about the negative impact of these coercive social processes. Exemplars about self-presentation added to the concepts about making predictions, staying aloof, and concerns about appearance and the stereotype. The issues of hiding and openness were expanded.

Although the focus group covered a large cross-section of the earlier concepts, the time limitation of the session precluded discussion of some

important ones. Most notably, exemplars about the coercive aspects of social rituals were missing. However, there was no evidence to suggest that these concepts were not valid. Further evidence of their applicability to the lived experience of these women must be sought in future research.

In general, for the concepts that were mentioned, the findings were surprisingly similar to the earlier data. This result was suggestive of two things. That replication of the original findings is possible; and that for the population of lesbians living in Knoxville, Tn., these research findings are a valid reflection of their lived experience.

## CHAPTER 7

### SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

#### **Summary**

This research was designed to add to clinical social work knowledge about the social reality of lesbian women. Specifically, it was designed to answer the question: How do these women dialogue with the wider culture in an effort to define themselves and their world? The clinical literature on lesbians and on homosexuality in general, presents a conflicting picture. Lesbians are depicted as morally corrupt, psychologically disturbed, and medically sick. They are also seen, variously, as a minority group, as stigmatized or oppressed individuals, and "just like normal folks." With such conflicting theoretical positions, it is easy to understand the difficulties with definitions, constructs and measurement experienced by quantitative researchers in the past.

Because of these historical research problems, this researcher chose to approach the question from the standpoint of the women themselves -- to ask them for their own sense of reality; to ask how they perceived their world. As a means of acquiring such information, 16 lesbian women participants were interviewed in a focused, unstructured way. The data were analyzed using

grounded theory methodology. The interviews were coded and analyzed, gradually yielding a complex, interrelated list of categories and concepts which became a theoretical outline of reality as experienced by the study participants.

A model emerged containing three primary areas of social process, which contributed to how these women constructed their reality: (1)the observations by lesbians of how heterosexuals behave vis-a-vis the issue of homosexuality, (2)the meanings that lesbians attributed to these observed behaviors, and (3)the coping strategies used by lesbians and how they make decisions about self-presentation in the heterosexist world. The social process of reality building was seen as circular with observation, meaning attribution, coping and self-presentation going on simultaneously. For purposes of discussion, the three steps were presented separately, but the overlap, repetition and concurrence were apparent.

### Observations of Heterosexist Behavior

This portion of the social construction process involved a recounting by the participants of what they saw straights doing in reference to homosexuality. The consistent and careful monitoring of straight behavior was a major theme in the data. Negative types of behavior were observed to communicate personal discomfort ranging from disclaimers, being called immoral and sick, to threats

and interference. Straights were divided up into "those who know" and "those who don't" and this was seen as a factor in determining what they did and in assessing and interpreting it. Lesbians found themselves learning not to talk, to keep secrets about themselves and their lives in order to make others comfortable. They found themselves being threatened and being fired. From hiding they heard straights saying derogatory things about lesbians. They were treated as if they didn't belong or fit in. They were sometimes loved and valued and perceived this behavior as a sign of cultural transformation. The point was made that lesbians are often all too familiar with what straights do, because they have been, at some point, members of the heterosexist culture, themselves.

Viewing these findings in light of the clinical literature, it is striking the degree to which the earlier theory and research on lesbians was reflective of the same cultural attitudes that the research participants believe still exist. Of the early research, it could be said that these investigators might as well have based their research questions and findings on "public opinion" rather than "scientific fact." Recent research has moved away from cultural influences to some degree, toward a more humanistic approach. The findings in this study suggest, however, that the public-opinion has lagged behind research and clinical writing in terms of understanding the lesbian experience.

### Attributing Meaning to the Observations

How lesbians assign meaning to their observations of straight behavior was a key portion of the social construction process. "Key" because meaning was difficult to separate from the events themselves and because meaning determined response and coping. Gergen (1978) and others stress that assignment of meaning is really a collective process, whereby individual lesbians use past experience of the context combined with internal constructs to develop a community of agreement about the meaning of particular observations. Furthermore, much of this process was tacit, never openly discussed between straights and gays.

From the lesbian perspective, social coercion was the organizing concept for understanding straight attitudes. The theme of coercion involved such categories of experience as pressure to act straight, pressure around gender rules, and pressure around social rituals. In the lesbian view, social expectations were enforced through painful consequences such as social rejection, loss of jobs, status, relationships, and so forth.

Assignment of meaning has been widely studied by cognitive constructivists who apply the principles toward the understanding and treatment of traditional clinical problems. The social negotiation of collective meanings has been elaborated by social constructionists who apply their principles to understanding how personal reality becomes socially defined. How culturally-based coercive

processes shape the personal reality of oppressed individuals within the wider cultural context is relevant to the ecological model of social work practice. To date, however, the literature falls short of making the connection between sociological theory and clinical practice when applied to lesbian clients.

### Coping and Self-Presentation

Developing strategies for coping and self-presentation was the third aspect of the social construction process revealed by the data. Coping strategies involved such behaviors as learning to predict the responses of others, learning not to care what people think, making distinctions between how one feels about oneself and how others feel about one, and so forth. Such strategies are seen as adaptations to the heterosexist world that allow the individual lesbian to maintain a sense of worth in the face of cultural messages portraying the lesbian as bad.

Another aspect of coping involved making decisions about self-presentation - how to be or portray oneself within the hostile context. Decisions had to be made about such issues as whether or not to resemble the stereotype, how closely to approximate expected gender-role appearance, learning how to take care of oneself in difficult situations, standing up for oneself, and the development of extra-refined social skills. Decisions had to be made about openness vs. the hiding of lesbian identity, as well.

Certainly, it may be argued that the issues discussed in this section are faced by all members of our culture, at least to some degree -- the worries about how much to reveal, the cultivation of the ability to "get along," to "fit in," and so forth. In fact, we all have a fear of social rejection and we work to prevent it. *It is what is at stake for lesbians compared to others* and its salience and pervasiveness that makes these social processes distinct and important. Lesbians must cope with the issue of conformity within the lesbian sociocultural system and how this operates to catch the individual lesbian in a bi-cultural limbo between the opposing demands of two very different cultures.

The clinical literature has dealt with the concept of "adjustment" in lesbians, which may be roughly equated to some of the concepts described here. In fact, much of the research has to do with "how they act." Until recently, however, the context in which these behaviors were embedded was either viewed as a vacuum (the objectivist view) or seen as benign and supportive. The use of heterosexual control groups reflects this bias. Only recently has the impact of the oppressive macro-culture begun to figure in the research paradigm. The findings of this study suggest going a step further and devoting research energy toward the study of the heterosexist culture itself and how to change it, and toward the rehabilitation of its victims.



## **Implications**

An understanding of how lesbians construct social reality has implications for social work practice and policy. First, it provides a guide for practice and reinforces certain directions already established; second, it suggests directions for institutional change; and third, it provides a model for the study of other socially-oppressed minority groups.

### **Guide for Micro Practice**

Recent developments in clinical social work practice have seen a shift towards support for gay lifestyles. This change follows modern clinical social work mandates for empowerment of oppressed populations. As Kitzinger (1987) puts it, "lesbians once discovered to be unhappy are now proved to be personally fulfilled, once discovered to be incapable of true love, are now proved to have more egalitarian and satisfying relationships" (p.151). "Coming out" as a lesbian is now seen to contribute positively toward mental health. "Closeted" gays are viewed as "pathological nondisclosers (whose) option to pursue a meaningful life wanes" (Ehrlich, 1981, p.134). This reversal is, of course, welcomed, but the findings of this research suggest that this liberal humanist view will not always lead to good clinical practice.

In light of the findings in this study, the atheoretical feminist and feminist systems theories, which are both part of the liberal humanist tradition, represent the most useful of existing theoretical frameworks for clinical practice with lesbian clients. These approaches focus on salient and practical therapeutic issues and activities such as resolving couple conflict, healing family relationships, improving self-esteem, and supporting changing gender roles. Further, they see oppression as an organizing principle in understanding the lives of these clients and they establish personal empowerment as a goal.

But the social realities revealed in this research suggest that the clinical literature minimizes or ignores certain critical therapeutic issues. First, the findings specifically point to the experience of shame with its profound effects on the self-concept and on behavior. Not only must lesbians cope with the personal shame of disappointing significant others because of who or what they are, but they must also face the knowledge that their existence is (or could be) a source of family shame.

Second, descriptions of grief are seen throughout the research findings. The lesbians in this study experienced deep and ongoing grief at the loss of close personal relationships. The literature suggests that most lesbians adjust to being lesbian in a progression of stages moving toward more comfort as self-acceptance grows. Although this may indeed be the case, it does not take into account the ongoing grief experienced and expressed by the participants in this study, many

of whom were quite comfortable with their identities.

Third, the bi-cultural aspects of lesbian existence have not been fully explored in the clinical literature. Balancing the need to be a functional member of the oppressive macro-culture, while at the same time finding a positive identity and acceptance in the lesbian subculture is an ongoing emotional struggle for participants in this study, sometimes draining energy and stifling self-expression. As a source of stress, this bi-cultural component of being lesbian has not been investigated.

In addition, results of this study make it clear that the macro-culture in which the lesbian finds herself embedded is far from sharing the new-fashioned liberal views espoused by some clinical practitioners. In fact, it is unlikely that the practitioners themselves uniformly share this view, since they are members of the culture, as well. With this in mind, it also seems clear that to counsel a lesbian to "come out" for her own personal fulfillment could, in fact, reflect a lack of appreciation on the part of the straight therapist, of the strongly oppressive elements still remaining in our social structure. In addition, many lesbians are unable to throw off the effects of oppression, and must not only deal with their own internalized homophobia, but now must feel guilty for having it. Their straight therapist may appear to be more liberated than they are. Finally, the heterosexual therapist must never forget that, no matter how convinced she

may be of her own liberal attitudes, she, as a member of the heterosexist culture, remains a representative of that oppressive culture.

### Institutional Change

It is not the intention of this investigator to discuss the myriad ways that lesbians and homosexuals experience institutional oppression, although a case could be made that they remain one of the most oppressed groups in our society. Instead, it is important to focus on the implications of the research's specific findings. The women in this study are active contributing members of society in the sense that they work, pay taxes, and behave like responsible citizens. It is difficult to perceive them as fringe members of society. To view them superficially, institutional oppression is not obvious -- most have adequate living spaces, food to eat, and so forth.

The most observable indicators of oppression in their lives appear to be related more to their being women than lesbians -- the problems with low salary levels, restriction from certain jobs, and so forth. And yet, in the study findings, we are confronted by painful descriptions of the struggles just to get along at work or in the world -- the over-arching awareness of coercive social expectations, the daily struggles with decisions about dress, appearance, behavior, who "knows" and who "doesn't know." There is a consuming string of

thoughts and feelings about how each woman will manifest herself in any social situation; a continuous monitoring of the environment for signs of danger or hostility or dislike.

Such a permeation of consciousness with fear must stifle creativity and spontaneity, replacing it with carefulness, watchfulness and control. A lesbian who chooses to hide on her job because of heterosexist prejudice not only must deny the truth about her life and her relationships, she must appear heterosexual. Not only must she appear heterosexual, but according to Adrienne Rich (1980), her job depends on pretending to be "a heterosexual woman, in terms of dressing and playing the feminine , deferential role required of 'real' women" (p.73). In addition, she must maintain the appearance of being available to men.

Heterosexist oppression occurs at the boundary where being lesbian encounters straight culture. Chapter 4 reveals some of the ways prejudice occurs in everyday life. This oppression also has taken the form of witch burnings and patriarchal control of law, theology, science, and economics. It takes the form of silence. There are numerous scientific works on gender issues and the sociology and politics of women that do not mention lesbian existence, for example, the psychonoanalytically-based book *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, by Jean Baker Miller (1976). It is this oppression that keeps

lesbians psychologically trapped, draining their energy in an effort to lead the sort of double life required by the macro-culture -- fighting against isolation, blocked access and options, and outsider status.

Adrienne Rich (1980) suggests that "heterosexuality, like motherhood, needs to be recognized and studied as a political institution..."(p.70). She enumerates some of the ways patriarchal culture institutes and enforces heterosexuality;

(1)by denying lesbians their sexuality --making it shameful by means of legal punishment for lesbian sexuality; the use of negative pseudo-lesbian images in media and literature; the destruction of documents relating to lesbian existence -- the autobiographies and poetry known to exist but unavailable to the public;

(2)by forcing patriarchal sexuality on women -- by means of rape; by active opposition against abortion; by idealization of heterosexual romance in art, media, advertising; by psychoanalytic doctrines about frigidity and the concept of vaginal orgasm;

(3) by controlling and robbing lesbians of their children -- by means of seizure of children from lesbian mothers by the court; the patriarchal construct of father-right and "legal kidnapping;"

(4) by confining and controlling gender-role behavior and free movement -- by means of "haute couture," "feminine" dress codes; by harrassment of non-conformers in the streets;

(5) by depriving women and lesbians of creativity and knowledge -- by

means of campaigns against midwives, female healers, independent "unassimilated" women; by the definition of male pursuits as more valuable than female ones; by erasure of female traditions; by the "Great Silence" regarding lesbian history and culture.

Members of the focus group in this study remarked on the pain they had experienced in dealing with some heterosexual women and they identified an issue that may be key in understanding the effect of heterosexist oppression: that those heterosexual women, in the experience of the group members, were "not ready to acknowledge that they have a choice about who they are going to be, or even that there is another legitimate, viable way of being." The assumption is that most women are innately heterosexual, but this assumption remains tenable only if lesbianism is written out of history, catalogued as a disease, or seen as an anomaly (Rich, 1980). The point here is not that a heterosexual choice is unacceptable, but that there has been a failure to acknowledge the variety of forces that serve to impose and maintain heterosexuality as the only acceptable choice. As Adrienne Rich (1980) says, "the failure to examine heterosexuality as an institution is like failing to admit that the economic system called capitalism or the caste system of racism is maintained by a variety of forces, including both physical violence and false consciousness" (p.79).

### Model for Further Study

This research must be considered a preliminary effort. Many existing categories of data remain unsaturated and the findings only open the way to more questions. There are two questions that are of particular interest to this researcher -- the issue of the tacit process between straights and lesbians, and the larger issue of the bi-cultural system and how lesbians experience pressure from their own culture. Do straights really feel the way lesbians think they do? Is there a "correct" way to be lesbian? Are there consequences for not conforming?

Theoretical sampling decisions must be made, also. Of particular interest to this researcher would be to look more closely at diversity within lesbian society -- specifically the effects of race and age, length of time since coming out, the effects of being in a long-term stable relationship or not, the influence of the particular friendship group, to name a few.

Grounded theory research is relatively new in social work and its usefulness is as yet unproven. This study provides an example of how certain research problems or situations may lend themselves to this particular approach. The research question itself required a method that would yield complex, processual data. In addition, the existing research literature provided a confused account with no clear directions for new research. Under these conditions, a holistic



approach using the grounded theory method, reveals not only the social reality of the population of interest, but provides the sort of contextual information necessary to understand that reality as it is embedded in the surrounding culture.

This research strategy would be especially useful in looking at the interactional contexts of oppressed groups, individuals, families and small groups, both in clinical settings and in organizations. This method is especially helpful in unraveling the complex, often subtle, social structures, rules and networks that underlie human existence.

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