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Emily Brennan Russell
“Like Straight People Do:”
An Exploration of Issues
Lesbian Women Encounter
During Their Coming Out
Process

ABSTRACT

A qualitative, flexible research method design was used to obtain data from a focus group, to investigate how lesbians experience a change in internal self and object relations in the process of coming out. More specifically, the research investigated: 1) what internal/external object representations are affected by coming out as a lesbian; 2) what are the internal issues of identity change; 3) what are the interpersonal issues of support; 4) what internal/interpersonal issues of “losses/gains” exist while coming out? Five adult lesbian women between the ages of 25 and 29 participated in this focus group study in Northern California.

The major findings of this study suggest that coming out is a complex internal and interpersonal process. The narrative responses from these five women indicated a process of first recognizing homosexual feelings as a child, suppressing these feelings, and having these feelings resurface as a young adult. Several of the women stated that the coming out process resulted in pain/hurt for their mothers, which in turn, seemed to cause shame/guilt related to integrating their lesbian sexual orientation.

In developing an identity the participants described working through homophobia embedded from important internalized objects. In this process, a new consciousness allows them to come to terms with their own internal homophobia and their important object’s homophobia, by being “true to the self.” The internal world of self and object can interact

synergistically to support the transition to an expressible and expressed lesbian identity. It may be critical for clinicians to recognize the importance of internalized object representations that contribute to conflict in developing a cohesive sense of internal as well as interpersonal self. It might also be essential for clinicians to be attuned to the joy and process of being “true to the self,” since the participants in this focus group discussion indicated this as a crucial part of coming out as a lesbian woman.

“LIKE STRAIGHT PEOPLE DO:” AN EXPLORATION OF ISSUES LESBIAN
WOMEN ENCOUNTER DURING THEIR COMING OUT PROCESS

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2009

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The present research focused on whether lesbians experience a change in internal self and object relations during their coming out process. This research was guided by the following theoretical assumptions: 1) sense of self (and internal self-representation) derives from the internalization of interaction with important objects (initially mother, then parents, then family, then broader social network); 2) interpersonal relationships derive from and include real interactions with other people and can result in internalized object representations; 3) internal self and object relations, rooted as they are in early developmental experiences, can have benign/encouraging/loving qualities; they can also have rejecting/critical and punitive qualities; 4) change/growth/transformation in the self can evoke positive or negative reactions in relationships (both interpersonally and internally); 5) being “true to self” may require change, even abandonment, in important object relationships.

Using a qualitative flexible methods design, the research questioned: 1) what internal/external self and object representations are affected by the participants’ coming out as lesbians; 2) what are the internal issues of identity change; 3) what are the interpersonal issues of support; 4) what are the perceptions of internal/interpersonal “losses and gains” as a result of the coming out process.

The internal and interpersonal assumption of heterosexual identity through the course of development may impact the process of coming out as a lesbian. During a

child's development, the option of a lesbian identity is not usually provided by family systems or society (Gair, 1995, p. 107). The normative assumption of heterosexual identity causes lesbians to discover their own sexuality through questioning many assumptions (Crespi, 1995, p. 24). Crespi (1995) interprets this process in her exploratory paper relating lesbians' integration of self, as they establish a positive lesbian identity, to the process of mourning aspects of heterosexuality. She describes how clinicians need to communicate their awareness of lesbians' mourning process by encouraging and facilitating a full expression of feelings, in the same way clinicians would with clients grieving similar losses of the self, and personal relationships (Crespi, 1995, p. 22). This research, therefore, paid particular attention to the ways in which the participants were speaking directly or indirectly about grief and mourning as a part of their coming out process.

By using a qualitative flexible method design to explore the recollections of lesbians' experiences of coming out, the data from this research might help clinicians in working with this population. The data were derived from the narratives of participants in one focus group. The findings emerged out of subjective narratives. The data from this study may demonstrate how coming out as a lesbian affects relations with the self and with important others. The research may contribute to a better understanding of lesbian identity development by social work clinicians and by therapists in other disciplines.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will provide a theoretical and empirical framework for better understanding the internal and interpersonal consequences of coming out as a lesbian. It will examine aspects of object relations theory and self psychology that address internal/external self and object representations. It will then look more specifically at previous research that focused on internal issues of identity change, at interpersonal issues of support and, finally at the perceptions of internal/interpersonal “losses and gains” as a result of the coming out process.

Internal/External Self and Object Representations

The literature presents theoretical assumptions that guide the investigation of internal/external self and object representations. A sense of self (and internal self-representation) derives from the internalization of interaction with important objects (Berzoff, Flanagan, & Hertze, 2008, p. 334). Interpersonal relationships derive from and include real interactions with other people and can result in internalized object representations. Internal self and object relations, rooted as they are in early developmental experiences, can have benign/encouraging/loving qualities; they can also have rejecting/critical and punitive qualities (Berzoff et al., 2008, p. 123). A change/growth/transformation in the self can evoke positive or negative reactions in

relationships. And being “true to self” may require change, even abandonment, in important object relationships (Berzoff et al., 2008, p. 123).

Berzoff et al. (2008) depict the meaning of a cohesive self by writing, “Contemporary ego psychologists assume that the ego has successfully accomplished its organizing and synthesizing functions when individuals experience themselves as coherent, functional human beings with enduring sense of personal identity” (p. 65).

Coming out as a lesbian presents a challenge to this cohesive sense of self.

Acknowledging one’s sexuality as a lesbian may be a difficult process due to the fear of change and potential loss of prior internal identity as well as change and potential loss in interpersonal relationships. Object relations theorist, D. W. Winnicott (1965), describes the need to be valued and accepted by significant others as inherent to human nature. If significant others (external objects and internalized object representations) devalue the individual, painful distortions in self and object representations can follow (Berzoff et al., 2008, p. 124). Mohr and Fassinger’s (2003) article on self-acceptance and self-disclosure of 489 lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) participants found that interpersonal contact was desired even though negative consequences were feared. They write:

Because sharing one’s LGB sexual orientation can lead to rejection in a culture that values heterosexuality over homosexuality, it makes sense that the avoidant LGB individuals in our sample were especially unlikely to come out in their everyday lives. (Mohr & Fassinger, 2003, p. 490)

Crespi (1995) interprets the idea of assumed heterosexuality by acknowledging that lesbians (and gay men) must “discover” their sexuality by questioning the normative identity (p. 24). D. W. Winnicott (1965) develops the theory that optimal individual development occurs within a protective “holding environment.” In contrast, he suggests

that “aloneness becomes painful or intolerable if the inner world is too crowded with threatening, controlling figures who offer neither safety, comfort, nor peace” (Winnicott, 1958). Since heterosexuality is the normative sexual identity in our society, lesbians’ identities emerge through a unique process of psychological development (Cass, 1996, p. 227).

The initial internal embrace of a lesbian identity – the internal coming out process – may be discouraged, even prohibited, by significant family members and friends. What had been relied on as an interpersonal “holding environment” may become threatened, hostile and/or rejecting as the lesbian discloses her newly discovered/owned identity. Cass (1996) recognizes the struggle to form a lesbian identity by illustrating the stages of identity formation. The stages include the following: “Stage 1 – Identity Confusion, Stage 2 – Identity Comparison, Stage 3 – Identity Tolerance, Stage 4 – Identity Acceptance, Stage 5 – Identity Pride, Stage 6 – Identity Synthesis” (Cass, 1996, p. 232). Although individuals may not negotiate these stages in a linear fashion, this model provides a way of understanding the coming out process whether the environment is supportive or not.

In the process of coming out, lesbians may begin to grieve the loss of their prior sense of self. Crespi (1995) explores this process by writing,

Just as it is necessary for heterosexuals to mourn aspects of their homosexuality, as a part of the normal developmental process, it is necessary for lesbians to mourn aspects of heterosexuality in order to allow for a more integrated self and to establish a positive lesbian identity. (p. 20)

Cass’s (1996) stages of identity and Crespi’s (1995) conceptualization of mourning complement the ideas of object relations and self psychology theorists.

Gardner (1991) uses psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut's theory of self psychology to describe the child's need for admiring and mirroring in the formation of a cohesive sense of self. In her article Gardner (1991) describes the importance of support and acceptance in the developmental process.

The child also has a need for closeness, contact, acceptance, and support from an omnipotent, idealized source of calmness and strength. Kohut called this the *idealized parent imago*. When the child is permitted to merge with the idealized calmness and strength of parental selfobjects, these idealizing needs are transformed into ideals and values, idealized goals, and respect and admiration for others. Transformation of the idealized parent imago also leads to the capacity for self-soothing, self-comfort, and self-regulation, particularly in regard to affects and tension states. (p. 478)

Self psychology illustrates internalizations of selfobjects, such as parents and other important relationships, as the child successfully "transmutes" an internalized sense of self and self competence. If the selfobjects fail to give the child empathic responses, the child will be unable to develop a cohesive sense of self, consequently developing narcissistic pathology. Nicholson (1993) describes this developmental failure as occurring, "when self-esteem has been taxed for long periods of time or after a series of failures that shake self-esteem" (p. 31). The development of a fragmented self can result from unresponsive childhood selfobjects. According to self psychology, individuals who experience rejection or abhorrence from important internalized objects, may become frightened by human intimacy and detach from interpersonal relationships to avoid further rejection and loss.

Internal Issues of Identity Change

Acknowledging a lesbian sexual orientation can become a process that is not easily decided due to fear of rejection and loss. Several authors have attempted to interpret this by describing an initial period that precedes the integration of the self with a lesbian identity (Cass, 1996; Coleman 1982; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Minton & McDonald, 1984; Troiden, 1988). In order to fit into society's standards the individual must first assume or "try on" the majority heterosexual identity because this is what she learned she "should" be (Cass, 1996, p. 233).

At some point, a homosexual individual may recognize a feeling of being different, leading her to question the expectation of heterosexual identity. Minton and McDonald (1984) describe this process as, "the first phase of homosexual identity formation which involves experiences of an erotic, emotional, or social nature that serve as bases for viewing the self as possibly homosexual" (p. 96). Minton and McDonald (1984) believe that this is an egocentric stage most often arising during adolescence when the presence of feeling separate, isolated, or nonconforming to gender norms contributes to the possible awareness of homosexuality (p. 97).

Minton and McDonald describe a heightened awareness of other lesbians, which contributes to further questioning. At the time of this increased awareness some may find relief, while others may be subjected to more anxiety associated with societal rejection of homosexuality (Minton & McDonald, 1984, p. 98). Cass (1996) describes this as "Prestage 1," which, depending on the individual's support system, needs, and personal traits, can lead to her first attempt at acknowledging a "different" sexual orientation, in comparison to the norm (p. 234). Questions that could arise during this period may include; "Does this mean I may be a lesbian?" "Am I really heterosexual?" "Who am I?"

The conflict begins the process of questioning the internal self as well as the interpersonal self and how she relates to the larger society. Cass (1996) finds that the purpose of this stage is to make meaning of behaviors, actions, and feelings associated with homosexuality, and as a result being impacted by “labeling” in negative, ambivalent, and/or positive ways (p. 234).

Coleman (1982) describes a similar stage entitled, “Pre-Coming Out,” and he explains that children as young as age three form gender roles. At this age the child has begun to figure out what values are held by their family and society. As they grow up, many children develop a personal self structure that understands homosexuality to be wrong (Coleman, 1982, p. 32). Any same-sex attraction becomes unconscious and the internal conflict sometimes manifests through behavioral problems. Coleman (1982) illustrates three ways this conflict can be resolved by homosexual children:

Some individuals decide to commit suicide and are successful. Others hide their sexual feelings from themselves and others, continuing to suffer from lowered self-esteem and depression. A healthy resolution to this stage is to face the existential crisis of being different. This means breaking through defense barriers and acknowledging same-sex feelings. (p. 33)

Troiden’s (1988) homosexual identity development model includes a comparable stage he labeled as “Sensitization.” Troiden’s (1988) model maintains that an initial stage is characterized by feeling marginalized, feeling different from same-sex peers (p. 106). He uses research from Bell, Weinberg, and Hammersmith’s (1981) study in which lesbian and gay individuals report childhood feelings of being different. By interpreting this study as well as similar data, Troiden (1988) established his “Sensitization” stage, concluding that lesbian and gay individuals “recall exhibiting an objective difference –

gender-inappropriate interests and behavior – that has been shown to correlate with adult homosexual preference” (p. 107).

McCarn and Fassinger’s (1996) identity phase model represents concepts borrowed from racial/ethnic minority identity literature. They identify the issue of difficulty in having dual identities as a person of color. Since the lesbian community is recognized as predominantly White, there is a lack of support for lesbian or gay people of color (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996, p. 513). McCarn and Fassinger found three areas of attitude that each of their phases encompass. They did this by integrating multiple identity models for gay and lesbian people of color, with gender and gay and lesbian models. The attitudes include, attitudes towards self, other lesbians and gays, and nongays (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996, p. 522).

The development of consciousness about these attitudes towards the self and others, while forming an identity as a lesbian, contributes to what McCarn and Fassinger refer to as an initial phase of “Awareness.” The individual is aware that her feelings are different from the heterosexual norm. They go on to say, “The previously held assumption that all persons, including the self, are heterosexual is called into question” (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996, p. 522). Within this identity framework there is an internal self, where the individual integrates her own attitudes and beliefs, with awareness of the external environment’s attitudes and beliefs.

All five of the identity models described an initial phase, where the individual identifies a new feeling of difference from the “norm.” The models also go on to describe stages of integrating a sense of self as a homosexual within a predominantly heterosexual environment. Minton (1984) depicted this process during his third stage

when the individual evaluates societal norms and achieves a “positive” gay identity (p. 99). Cass’s (1996) model divides this integration between a stage of “Identity Pride,” and “Identity Synthesis,” where the individual learns to self-identify, accept her homosexuality, and integrate this with aspects of the self and society. Coleman (1982) titles this final stage as “Integration” of public and private identities within one self-image (p. 39). Troiden (1988) includes a final stage of “Commitment,” where the individual simply adopts a homosexual identity as a way of life (p. 110). Finally, McCarn and Fassinger (1996) final phase includes, “Internalization/Synthesis” of a full self-acceptance and desire for women, creating a sense of internal consistency (p. 523).

Interpersonal Issues of Support

Family and social networks can assist or inhibit the process of coming out. The five developmental theories all depict a period of time where a lesbian or gay individual feels different or separate from others. As Gair (1995) illustrated in her article, describing the development of shame in LGB populations, a lesbian identity is not often resembled or mirrored by caretakers (p. 108). Berzoff et al. (2008) describe how individuals internalize messages from important figures in their lives, designated as “object relations.”

Object relations does refer, in part, to the complexity of external relationships with others, but it also includes the whole internal world of relations between self and other, and the ways in which others have become part of the self. (p. 122)

Internal acceptance as well as external acceptance from family and the larger society become major factors in coming out for lesbian women. Morris, Waldo, and Rothblum (2001) surveyed 2,401 lesbian and bisexual women nation-wide to study the

predictors of outness among this population. They found that identity developmental issues and awareness of the larger community affect the degree to which lesbian and bisexual women are out (Morris et al., 2001, p. 69). The research suggests that lesbians' internal and interpersonal relationships are important factors in lesbian identity and disclosure.

D'Augelli, Hershberger, and Pilkington (1998) studied patterns of sexual orientation disclosure from young adults ages 14 to 21 to their family members. They found that disclosure by the age of 21 did not produce positive outcomes for many of the participants. Subjects reported that only half of the mothers and siblings, while only one-quarter of the fathers, were accepting. Ten percent of the mothers were rejecting, and in many cases family members verbally or physically abused the young adults after disclosing their sexuality (D'Augelli et al., 1998, p. 367). Data from D'Augelli et al. (1998) illustrate how coming out can result in LGB people being devalued by their family because of a rejection of their sexual orientation disclosure.

Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, and Sanchez (2009) illustrated comparable results, in their study with LGB youth coming out to their families, by finding that higher rates of family rejection were linked to poor health for LGB adolescents (p. 349). Some major findings in this study included: LGB young adults who reported higher levels of family rejection during adolescence were 8.4 times more likely to report having attempted suicide, 5.9 times more likely to report high levels of depression, 3.4 times more likely to use illegal drugs, and 3.4 times more likely to report having engaged in unprotected sexual intercourse, compared with peers from families that reported no or low levels of family rejections (Ryan et al., 2009, p. 346).

The effects of rejection from families and external environments within a lesbian's life can make it difficult to form and/or maintain a cohesive sense of self. Liddle's (2007) article addresses lesbians' identity development in their personal life and within communities. She describes how lesbians "may have to integrate their lesbian identity into other existing identities" (p. 62). Liddle (2007) describes how lesbians coming out in young adulthood may already be in a career that is hostile towards lesbians, and have to choose not to disclose their sexuality on the job, or change jobs completely (p. 62). There can be a constant need for lesbians to consider their identity disclosure within multiple environments. Lesbians encounter the choice to come out on a daily basis within daily interactions. A heterosexual woman may not be challenged with these issues on a daily basis, since normative identity is already assumed.

At times, a lesbian identity is simply not supported, and at times it is ignored or depicted as deviant (Peterson & Gerrity, 2006, p. 50). Gair (1995) states that the absence of a nurturing environment in the home or culture may result in ignoring the possibility or existence of a lesbian identity (p. 111). She describes a process of forming "false-self" defenses by writing, "Many lesbian women may not feel fully entitled to a fulfilling love relationship. This is caused by inadequate parental and societal responses to the needs of the true self, contributing to the formation of defenses" (Gair, 1995, p. 115). On the other hand, if a lesbian has adequate mirroring or a "good enough" community to support the growth of her identity, she may be able to integrate a healthy sense of self with the external environment.

For instance, Hershberger and D'Augelli (1995) in their study of the impact of verbal abuse, threat of attacks, and assault on LGB youth's mental health, found that

family support significantly decreased stress and psychological problems (p. 72). Ryan's et al. (2009) Family Acceptance Project found that LGB youth from families with no or low levels of rejection are at lower risk for depression, suicidality, illicit substance use, and risky sexual behavior, compared to LGB youth from highly rejecting families (p. 350). Lastly, Luhtanen's (2003) study, investigating predictors of well-being in lesbians/bisexual women and gay/bisexual men, examined both family support and LGB culture, and found that both were significantly related to higher self-esteem and life satisfaction (p. 96).

Identifying oneself as a lesbian becomes a fundamental and essential part of an individual's core being (Laird, 2003, p. 184). Wright and Perry (2006) expand on this by writing, "Youth begin to self-disclose their emerging identity to others and to form social relationships with people around their new identity" (p. 86). By accepting one's homosexual identity the individual begins to attach her self to experiences and individuals who help make sense of her feelings and behaviors (Laird, 2003, p. 184). When homosexual identity is accepted, as an integral part of the self, expressing this identity becomes more natural (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001, p. 97). Support becomes crucial during this process for lesbians as they find internal representations and external supports to mirror their identity. The internal world of self and object can interact synergistically to support the transition to an expressible and expressed lesbian identity.

The risks of psychological distress are associated with the internalization of punitive interpersonal relationships within the self and environment. Relationships become a powerful source in defining a sense of self as well as how the self relates to others. For example, adolescents who have attempted suicide say that a cohesive

relationship with a parent or peer was the most essential protective factor in their life (Kulkin, 2006, p. 102).

Parental support is essential in the healthy normal development of an individual. Feeling internal solidarity allows the individual to manage frustrations and disappointments while maintaining pride and pleasure in success (Mitchell & Black, 1995, p. 160). Goldfried and Goldfried's (2001) examined how the presence and absence of parental support affect LGB individuals and suggest that family support is significantly related to psychological self-esteem (p. 683). Lesbians without a familial or social holding environment may have difficulty in developing a healthy sense of self.

Internal/Interpersonal Issues of "Losses/Gains"

As discussed above, family research data indicate that the coming out process may inherently entail a combination of losses and gains - both internally and interpersonally. Among the positive aspects of coming out was the increase in self-esteem resulting from acquiring a group identity. Walters and Simoni (1993) had 93 lesbian and gay men between the ages of 18 and 46 complete a survey that included the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. The results of the survey indicated that a highly developed group identity among this population was significant in coming to terms with homosexuality, and that internalizing positive interpersonal relationships led to an increase in self-esteem (Walters & Simoni, 1993, p. 97).

An online survey given to 553 lesbian and gay men researched positive aspects of coming out and found similar results. Belonging to a community was the most common positive aspect mentioned by lesbians and second most common aspect for gay men

(Riggle, Whitman, Olson, Rostosky, & Strong, 2008, p. 212). The study also demonstrated that coming out to oneself involves self-reflection and insight, which the participants found to be a personal strength (Riggle et al., 2008, p. 213). The process of coming out is a self-defining process, which is likely to cause increased introspection (Meyer, 2003, p. 688). Meyer's (2003) findings support Cass's (1996) "Identity Synthesis Stage" which emphasizes that accepting and disclosing a lesbian identity can strengthen the internal psychological experience (p. 247). Cass (1996) defines synthesis as, "accounting for self as lesbian or gay (as) an integrated part of the whole self and (reinforcing) self-esteem and position in the world" (p. 247).

Coming out becomes a continuous process over time, where lesbians discover who can be trusted in their social environment (Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum, 1994, p. 241). In the National Lesbian Health Care Survey given to 1,925 lesbians, Bradford et al. (1994) found that some positive aspects associated with being out were less fear of exposure, receiving mental health services, and positive coping skills (p. 241). Jordan and Deluty (2000) gave a questionnaire to 305 lesbian women in a relationship in order to investigate positive and negative emotionality and relationship satisfaction after disclosing their identity. The study shows that women who widely disclosed their lesbian identity had a higher satisfaction with their relationships (Jordan & Deluty, 2000, p. 156). Jordan and Deluty (2000) suggest that disclosure may be a factor in having social supports, and that without disclosure the individual is unable to express aspects of the relationship to support systems (p. 160). Thus, disclosing a lesbian identity can help integrate a sense of self-with-external-relationships.

Ryff and Singer's (1998) article describes health as a state of well-being as opposed to a state of ill-being. Their review of theory and research suggests that a person's sense of purposefulness and connections to others contributes to positive self-regard and well-being (Ryff & Singer, 1998, p. 10). Losing connections to others following a person's sexual orientation disclosure may cause psychological problems. Meyers (2000) writes, "Studies demonstrated that social stressors are associated with mental health outcomes in LGB people, supporting formulations of minority stress" (p. 691). Zera (1992) describes how the gay and lesbian teens not only struggle with Erikson's developmental tasks of adolescence, but also simultaneously struggle with self-identifying as a homosexual and growing up (p. 850). Within a society that signifies homosexuality as something abnormal, lesbians may have more difficulty in achieving identity, self-esteem, and social skills.

Isolation from peers and teachers contributes to risk factors such as internalized homophobia, suicidal ideation, substance abuse, and depression (Kulkin, 2006, p. 96). For adolescents who do not have protective relationships, they may form internal protection in the form of defenses. Mitchell and Black (1995) illustrate psychoanalyst Heinz Hartmann's idea of defenses being used for both adaptive and maladaptive functions by writing,

If humans, like all organisms, are intrinsically designed to fit into their environment, this must also be true of not just their physical but their psychological self, Hartmann reasoned. Conversely, the natural environment must be, by design, specifically suitable to humans' psychological existence. (Mitchell & Black, 1995, p. 38)

Coleman (1982) describes the possible development of defenses by saying, "if acknowledged, same-sex feelings would mean rejection and ridicule; consequently,

individuals protect themselves from awareness through defenses, such as denial, repression, reaction formation, sublimation, and rationalization” (p. 33).

Iwasaki and Ristock (2007) examined the meanings and sources of stress in a sample of lesbian and gay men. Of the 30 participants several of them agreed that a major source of stress was the process of coming out, including issues of how and when to come out to people in their lives (Iwasaki & Ristock, 2007, p. 308). Being concerned with societal views and attitudes adds to the stress of disclosing one’s sexual orientation. At the same time, trying to fit into the normative heterosexual identity contributes to further stress. For example, one participant in Iwasaki and Ristock’s (2007) study describes a source of stress as the difficulty in feeling forced to fit into a heterosexual lifestyle (p. 311). It may be possible for lesbians and gay men to hide their minority status and accept the dominant culture, while feeling rejection within that culture (Lewis, Derlega, Berndt, Morris & Rose, 2001, p. 65). However, the process of trying to fit into a “perceived” heterosexual identity and simultaneously feeling different may cause anxiety for lesbians.

Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1995) write that most women who self-identify as lesbian previously identified themselves as heterosexual. More recently, Land and Kitzinger (2005) focused on the heterosexual presumption lesbian women encounter within their daily conversations. After analyzing 150 recorded phone calls from five lesbian homes in England, the author’s found that, with the callers’ presumption of heterosexuality, lesbians face the difficulty of choosing how and whether or not to reveal their identity as a lesbian (Land & Kitzinger, 2005, p. 409). “Managing” a lesbian

identity is a dilemma many lesbian women encounter, and this may be more complicated in the coming out process.

If positive coping skills are not brought to or developed during the coming out process, some lesbians may rely on drinking as a coping strategy. It has been reported that lesbian and gay men abuse alcohol at higher rates than the general population (Bradford et al., 1994; Cabaj, 2000; Hughes, 2003; Park & Hughes, 2007; Rathbone-McCuan & Stokke, 1997). In her comparative study of lesbian women's versus heterosexual women's substance abuse, Hughes (2003) found that lesbian women are at higher risk of abusing alcohol (p. 1753). More recently, Park and Hughes (2007) results examined lesbian identity development and alcohol use, and they found data that showed a correlation between stress related to a "stigmatized identity" and higher rates of alcohol consumption (p. 373).

There seems to be a choice during the coming out process between conforming to assumed heterosexuality, hoping to lessen anxiety and stress from society, or choosing to take on an identity that is socially unacceptable, hoping to find support within important relationships and/or finding strength within the community. The first choice may seem safer to some individuals, diminishing the risk of losing family and friends. The latter choice of joining a community may be perceived by other individuals as bringing positive aspects to identity as well as interpersonal gains (Lewis, et al., 2001; Riggle, et al., 2008; Walters & Simoni, 1993).

Summary

This review examined the phenomenon of lesbian identity and the complexities that contribute to the struggle and pleasure of forming such an identity. The literature presents a framework for thinking about what occurs on an internal and interpersonal level for lesbian women coming out. The fear of rejection from family and the larger society may create internal turmoil during the coming out process. Developing a healthy sense of self is a challenge faced by lesbian women because lesbian identity is not acceptable by societal standards. Several studies and theorists described the “assumption” of a heterosexual identity and how it appears to elicit a period of recognizing oneself as “different” in the process of forming a lesbian identity.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative, flexible research method design, applied to data obtained from a focus group, was used to investigate how lesbians experience a change in internal self and object relations in the process of coming out. More specifically, the research questioned: 1) what internal/external object representations are affected by the participants' coming out as lesbians; 2) what are the internal issues of identity change; 3) what are the interpersonal issues of support; 4) what internal/interpersonal issues of "losses/gains" exist while coming out? Since there is limited research on this topic, an exploratory study using qualitative methods was chosen. The design of this study was approved by the Human Subjects Review Board of the Smith College School for Social Work (Appendix A).

Obtaining the Sample

The target size for this sample was 10 to 12 adult lesbian women between the ages of 25 and 35. Since the investigator's primary language is English, the participants needed to be able to write, read, and speak in this language. Participants had to have email available and accessible. The sample excluded participants receiving mental health treatment for serious psychological problems. This was assessed during the recruitment process by asking the participants if they are currently receiving treatment for any serious psychological problems. Participants seeking a therapeutic group were referred to other

services. The purpose of the focus group was to consider research questions with the sample and did not provide treatment.

A non-probability convenience approach was chosen for the sample selection. There was contact with Caitlin Ryan, a Smith School for Social Work alum, who does research related to coming out at San Francisco State University. She provided a list of community organizations to contact. There was contact with the San Francisco LGBT Community Center by email, and there was contact with the Lesbian Health and Research Center at the University of California, San Francisco. An email was sent to local LGBT professional businesses, community centers, and magazines (Appendix B). A recruitment flyer was sent to these organizations to promote the focus group study (Appendix C). The participants contacted the investigator by email to volunteer for the study.

After receiving contact, the participants were asked a list of questions by email regarding inclusion criteria (Appendix D). Individuals who fit the inclusion criteria received an email asking them to participate in the study. Information pertaining to the date, time, location, the presence of an audiotape, and an informed consent form was emailed to the sample. It was not possible to obtain 10 to 12 participants for the focus group study. Although a larger focus group was desirable, the study was completed with five participants.

Data Collection

A qualitative flexible method design was used to explore the recollections of lesbians' experiences of coming out. The data was derived from the subjective narratives

of participants in one focus group. Subsequent to identifying the sample, the focus group was held at the San Francisco LGBT Community Center, on February 21, 2009. The informed consent form (Appendix E) was reviewed and collected at the beginning of focus group. The participants were informed that the focus group would be approximately three hours long and a sound recording device (audiotape) would be used to transcribe the responses for data analysis.

After filling out the consent form, an “ice breaker” activity was presented. The participants each took a piece of starburst candy. Each color represented a different question, which included: what is your favorite childhood toy? What is your favorite movie? If you could have lunch with any famous person dead or alive, who would it be? And if you could travel to anywhere in the world, where would you go? The participants went around in a circle and answered the question their piece of candy represented, while providing their name and where they are from.

Following the exercise, the participants were given a brief demographic survey including, age, race, current city and state of residence, where they were born, how long they have been self-identified as a lesbian, relationship and/or marital status, and whether they were in a previous heterosexual marriage/partnership (Appendix F). The investigator collected the survey. The participants were then asked to write a brief narrative of their coming out experience, where coming out is defined as “acknowledging your sexual orientation to yourself and/or others.” They were told that the purpose of the assignment was to have them think about their experience before any other discussions took place, and that the narratives would be collected at the end of the focus group. Following the initial writing exercise, there was a discussion that relied on a series of

open-ended prompts designed to obtain data related to the central research questions (Appendix G).

Data Analysis

Subsequent to the focus group, data was transcribed for thematic analysis. Transcripts were reviewed to identify themes related to the central study questions, including self and object representations, internal/interpersonal relationships, identity changes, interpersonal support, and losses/gains. Reemerging themes were identified and presented as findings, with an emphasis on their similarities and differences among participants. Illustrative quotes were used to demonstrate these themes and patterns.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter includes the findings from one in-depth focus group interview with five lesbian women between the ages of 25 and 29. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore lesbians' experience of internal and interpersonal changes while transitioning into a lesbian identity. Specifically, the study questioned: 1) what internal/external object representations are affected by the participants' coming out as lesbians; 2) what are the internal issues of identity change; 3) what are the interpersonal issues of support; 4) what internal/interpersonal issues of "losses/gains" exist while coming out?

As a theoretical framework, this research relied on five assumptions: 1) sense of self (and internal self-representation) derives from the internalization of interaction with important objects (initially mother, then parents, then family, then broader social network); 2) interpersonal relationships derive from and include real interactions with other people and can result in internalized object representations; 3) internal self and object relations, rooted as they are in early developmental experiences, can have benign/encouraging/loving qualities; they can also have rejecting/critical and punitive qualities; 4) change/growth/transformation in the self can evoke positive or negative reactions in relationships (both real and internal objects); 5) being "true to self" may require change, even abandonment, in important object relationships.

Theoretical literature and empirical research indicate a fear of rejection and loss, gaining increased introspection, positive self-esteem from group identity, and achieving a “positive” gay identity, as experiences encountered by lesbians during the coming out process. Although there is some research on homosexual identity development, there is little research on lesbians’ internal/interpersonal changes and experience of losses/gains while coming out. The findings for this qualitative study are presented within four categories, including internal/external self and object representations, internal issues of identity change, interpersonal issues of support, and internal/interpersonal issues of “losses/gains.”

Participant Demographics

This sample was comprised of five self-identified lesbian women. Three of the women identified as Caucasian, one participant identified as mixed racially (Caucasian and Latina), and the fifth woman identified as Lebanese. Three of the participants were 25 years old, two were 26 years old, and one participant was 29 years old. Although all five of the participants currently live in the California, Bay Area, their place of birth varies. Utilizing the demographic survey (see Appendix F), the participants reported their place of birth as follows: one participant was born in Arlington, VA; one participant was born in Ridgewood, NJ; one participant was born in Wayne, MI; one Participant was born in Philadelphia, PA; the final participant was born in Philadelphia, PA and grew up in Alabama between the ages of 5 and 18.

Three of the participants were single. One was in a monogamous relationship and the fifth participant was in an open relationship. One participant was in a previous

heterosexual marriage for four years, while the rest have never been in a heterosexual marriage or long-term partnership. Lastly, the participants reported how long they have self identified as a lesbian as follows; 3 years, 5 years, 6 years, 7 years, and one participant first identified as bisexual for a year and a half, and as lesbian for 7 months.

Major Themes

This section contains data from the focus group related to the central study questions, including internal/external self and object representations, internal issues of identity change, interpersonal issues of support, and internal/interpersonal issues of “losses/gains.”

Internal/External Self and Object Representations

The participants were asked questions in reference to what internal and external relationships were affected by coming out as a lesbian. The questions they responded to included: When did you first come out to another person? And who was this person? Most of the women described first coming out to a person they trusted would accept their lesbian identity. However, one participant, Christen, first came out to her parents who she did not trust would have an accepting response and who, indeed, did not have an accepting and/or comforting response.

One participant, Sarah, who had been out for six years, described coming out to her second cousin who she had suspected was also gay. She expressed to the group, “I think it was easy for me to come out to him, because I felt so bad for him, that I wanted to let him know your not the only one.” Another participant, Annie, who had been out

for a year and five months, first came out to her therapist. Annie came out to her therapist after having several conversations about the possibility of being bisexual or lesbian. Following these conversations she came out to one of her closest friends. Annie's experience is similar to Sarah's in that they both disclosed their sexuality to someone they trusted would accept their lesbian identity. Annie explains that coming out to her friend felt different than coming out to her therapist, for the reason that it was in her personal life.

It felt like all of the sudden everything was moving fully, for the first time. It was crazy. I remember being SO scared to tell him. And he wasn't a bad guy, at all, he is one of my best friends. But I was just so nervous about his reactions. And he was so loving about it. That really helped.

Mary, who had been out for five years, and Jolene, who had been out for seven years, both came out to a close friend while they were in college. Similar to Annie's explanation, Mary described her friend as being "great, she was great about it." Jolene explained her friend's reaction in the same way by conveying, "she was great and really positive."

In contrast, Christen, who had been out for five months, described coming out to her parents who were not "great" or "helpful."

The first people I actually came out to were my parents, which was probably not ideal in retrospect. My dad just, fortunately for him he had to leave the country, like the next day. So he was just silent and went to Asia. My mother had the reaction of, you know, 'What did I do wrong? This is going to be so hard for you.'

One major theme that existed throughout the study was the importance of the biological mother's reaction to the participant's disclosing her identity as a lesbian. Several of the women stated that coming out to them resulted in pain/hurt for their mothers, which in turn, seemed to cause shame/guilt related to integrating their lesbian

sexual orientation. For example, Mary explained a comparable experience to Christen's experience of coming out to her mother, by sharing, "she was crying and saying all these really painful things, like, 'what did I do wrong?' or 'where did I go wrong?'" Afterwards Mary's mother attempted to send her to an "anti-gay group," and she described feeling "somewhere inside of me I was like, they are right, I need to go get it fixed." In her experience of coming out to other family members everyone was "great" and she expressed, "it was really only my mom that was like, the tough one, and yea we still struggle with it."

Several women described feeling true to themselves even when important people, including their mothers, were rejecting. Christen, who had come out to her mother five months prior to this study, accounted for the complex feelings involved.

My mother is clearly hurt and she clearly doesn't want this for me. And we, yes it's religion, and it's cultural, 'southern female,' but my mother's my best friend. We've always shopped together and bought purses, and make up. And she cannot relate to this 'new' me. And so not only does she mourn the fact that I'm this, possibly, unacceptable sexually defiant to her, but also she's losing a daughter and a friend. And I just feel like I just hurt everybody, and I kind of wish I could take it back... I just feel like I've done something very selfish and hurtful. And I hate that, because it's really, it shouldn't be that way. I'm being true to myself.

In response to Christen's comment, Sarah, described her experience as differing from Christen's by saying, "I wish I had the courage to do it, so I'm the opposite there." Sarah shared,

My mom, the biggest fear, is just to hurt her so much. I hate seeing my mother cry, I, that, like, kills me, so I don't want to do that to her... And if I lose my mom, like that is, my mom and my sister are my life. I do love my dad, but I know he is going to disown me. If he does, I can, it will hurt like hell, but I can go on. If I lose my mom I don't think I can go on.

In addition, Sarah expressed that since coming out to other important non-relatives, she feels more “real.” She goes on to say, “It’s kind of like, ‘yay,’ I can finally do it and not be scared.” Similar to Sarah, Annie described feeling more relaxed after coming out to important people in her life. She shared,

Right away the relaxed stuff started happening. There was still a whole lot of mess, ok? I’m not saying, like, it’s perfect. But there was a part of me that was like, I could take a sigh, I could take a breath. In a way I think that I was never able to before.

Mary and Jolene, who have both been out for over five years, described the same sense of being true to one’s self. Jolene expressed, “I just, I feel good about myself and who I am.” Mary, when describing her experience after coming out, shared, “Just feeling like I was starting to understand myself, made me feel really creative and really, um, I got a lot of affirmation from my friends in college. So, I felt supported.”

Comparable to Mary, most women said that acceptance and encouragement from some important others was critical, even when or particularly when some others were rejecting. For instance, Jolene described how scary her experience of first disclosing her sexuality to her mother and friends had been.

My overall sense of needing to be liked by others and wanting to be accepted and not wanting to be seen as different, and just wanting to be normal... I just wanted to be swept under the love and normalcy of my friends family, and I kind of, like, became their extended, I became the other daughter in three of my friends families. So it was nice, so I had, like, these three other families.

Another participant, Sarah, illustrated a similar experience when she shared, “I left L.A. because that’s where my family is. So, I miss my friends, a lot. But, I’m lucky on the friend’s side. I have a LOT of friends and all of them are supportive.”

Internal Issues of Identity Change

Participants were asked two main questions regarding their identity as a lesbian woman. The first question included: When did you first begin to think that you were a lesbian? The second question was: When did you first identify your sexual orientation? All of the participants reported having same-sex attractions as a child. They described a process of suppressing any homosexual feelings until they reached young adulthood. As a result, the participants identified themselves as heterosexual until they acknowledged a lesbian identity. Although the age that the women identified their sexual orientation varied, all five women reported a period of time when their lesbian feelings resurfaced.

In response to Mary's revelation of having a "crush" on her teacher another participant, Christen, described having similar feelings.

I had a crush on one of my teachers in high school. I had various crushes on women throughout high school but I did not think of myself as a lesbian. It seems so ridiculous now that I think about it. I just didn't consider that as an option. So I just thought in my head that I was straight but I was fantasizing about other women.

It wasn't until five years later Christen began to acknowledge her lesbian identity, which she explains as "getting real with myself about who I am."

One participant, Jolene, illustrated a comparable experience when the same-sex feelings of attraction she had were not connected to an identity or word. She expressed "that because I was not a part of a group that was mirrored, then, it was like they didn't exist." She developed a heterosexual identity, which she found allowed her to suppress the same-sex attraction feelings she possessed. Mary agreed with this particular explanation of the confusion about her internal sexual thoughts and feelings and the absence of a language for them in her interpersonal world. She shared, "I think a lot of it

was suppressed and there wasn't a term or word or group for it because it wasn't supposed to be talked about. It didn't exist."

Two participants first recognized that these feelings existed at age 12. Both Annie and Sarah acknowledged same sex feelings at this age and immediately suppressed them until years later. Annie didn't come out until over 10 years later while married to a man.

I guess my first idea, first real idea, and then being like, oh what the hell? I was 12 and then it got way suppressed again until I was 18 or 20. And then pretty much throughout my 20s I was struggling with things... It seems crazy, you know? It's like, what the heck? I was 12 when I was like, holy cow look at her boobs!

Sarah described a similar process, stating "Even though I knew when I was 12, I never said it out loud. And I always said, 'no it will go away.' And I was very straight."

In response to the second question, when did you first identify your sexual orientation, four participants reported a moment when they began to accept their identity as a lesbian. One participant, Annie, first identified herself as bisexual. Annie illustrates the longevity of her process by saying, "although I had all these feelings during puberty, it's really only been in the last couple years that I've actually said it to myself." Sarah told the group about her experience of knowing she was gay as a child and not being able to admit to herself until she was 20 years old.

It was when I was 20, which is when I really, it wasn't the first time I said it out loud, but it was the first time I said it out loud and said ok I have to, now actually, like, I am. Before I said it when I was 15 to a cousin, but I never acted on it. Even when I met gay people, prior to being 20, I never told them I was gay... The thoughts in my brain, no one can see them, but once it's out it's out. And I can't take it back.

In reaction to this story Christen expressed how scary the shift is to say, “I’m a lesbian.” She conveyed to the group, “Growing up in Alabama and being such a straight girl... You know I was so ‘femme’ and it’s just so scary to think that my whole identity is in flux.” Mary and Christen named the fear of accepting their identity as internalized homophobia. Mary expressed:

Internalized homophobia, I think that is exactly what it is. Somewhere in me there is a part that still isn’t totally convinced that this is who I am going to be forever. And that’s because it is scary. It’s scary that I know my mom doesn’t accept me.

Interpersonal Issues of Support

The participants answered three questions regarding interpersonal supports in their lives: Who was a support during your coming out experience? Did you seek social support? And the third question asked the participants to list two of their most important relative supports and two of their most important non-relative supports. Four of the participants described at least one significant relative support, and all five of the participants had at least one significant non-relative support.

Mary described how her gay uncle became a support for her, “My mom’s brother is actually gay. And he is my godfather and we are really close. So he has been a really big support, family support, as a relative.” Sarah explained how only two of her relatives know that she is gay. She described how talking to her gay cousin has been a support for her.

It feels kind of good when I’m talking to a family member about it because it’s just, you know, we can connect a lot because we’re not just gay. We are gay and Lebanese and from the same family. So he’s been really great. We try to help each other out.

Annie expressed to the group how her younger sister is a support.

She doesn't always understand what I'm talking about, but she tries so hard to be very loving and supportive. So it's not the same as talking to someone who is more knowledgeable, I guess, within queer culture or the process of coming out, and all of that. But still she is one of my support people.

Jolene explained that recently her family was being "really cool." She expressed how there was a period of time where she didn't allow her mother in her life. Jolene expressed how her mother was hurt by this and decided she didn't want her daughter to not be in her life. She described how the rest of her family is "fine."

My family is fine. My brother's been fine. In the beginning he went back and forth. Actually, this is funny. We were at a wedding and he was like, 'You know I've always wanted a brother so I could check out woman with them, but now I have you.' But yea so he's fine. I feel grateful, their cool.

All five of the participants described having a non-relative and/or social support. Two of the participants, Jolene and Mary, came out after joining a college sports team where there were other lesbian women on the team. Mary expressed how she met her first girlfriend on this team, and how other woman found their relationship as a support.

Social acceptance was really important to me, now that I think about it. I really liked it when people were affirming and liked to see us out together and having fun. We had a couple girls come up to us and say, 'Thank you, I feel the same way. I'm really glad that someone had the courage to just be who you are.' So social acceptance became really really important.

Jolene also described how the sports team, along with all the other lesbian women athletes, became a huge support while she was in undergraduate school.

Two participants, Annie and Sarah, described how a local LGBT community group became a support in helping them make friends. Sarah expressed how she felt after joining this group, "I feel like my life changed so much in just two months. I didn't think

it could possibly be that great.” In response to this comment, Mary described how Alanon has become a social support for her.

Oddly enough this has become a community. It’s friends and family members of alcoholics. I have a sponsor. It’s like a 12 step program. She has actually become a phenomenal and amazing support. She’s an older straight woman but very very liberal. She has been amazing, as far as, talking to me about stuff with my mom and stuff with my girlfriend. Whatever is going on in my life, she’s just been a really big support. And just the whole community, the 12-step community has been bringing really awesome people in my life too.

Christen, who recently disclosed her sexual orientation to her unsupportive family members, described finding an older gay man as one of her only supports after coming out. Although she describes him as, “somewhat of a support,” she expresses wanting a larger gay community as a support.

What I would really love is to eventually have some sort of support system, maybe as I get more involved in the community. Or, you know, have another relationship, or build a friendship base, or whatnot. I would love to just, like straight people do, to have friends to go, ‘Oh my god, I had the worst date last night.’ Or ‘Oh my god I’m so into this girl.’ I would love to actually have that real support. Not to have somebody to say, ‘I accept you as a gay person, but I don’t want to hear about it.’

It is noteworthy that the participants extended support to each other after being asked who was a support in their lives. For example, in response to Christen describing difficulty in building community, the participants more easily referenced what was helpful for them in building community. Christen asked the group whether they had a community of friends similar to “how straight people do.” In response, Sarah described a local support group she attends and invited the group to an event taking place the following night. After this discussion Christen, who originally asked the question, expressed, “It’s good to know that there are people out there.”

Internal/Interpersonal Issues of “Losses/Gains”

In order to get the participants to address their experiences of both losses and gains they were asked if they experienced any internal changes in their mood or affect after coming out? Each of the five participants described a fear of rejection from family and friends. Jolene began the discussion by describing a fear of not wanting to be different or “weird.” She explained her experience of being afraid to come out to not only her family, but also her friends who acted as her “family by choice.”

I became their other daughter in three of my friend’s family. So it was nice, I had like these three other families, I kind of like, ushered myself into. And I just really feared being like yea well ‘Jolene is fucking weird.’ You know just that extreme sense of, I’m weird, I’m different, I’m going to be rejected. Not just from my own biological family, but from my friend’s family and my friends.

Christen described a similar fear of being rejected by friends in her life. She recounted recently moving to the west coast and how she was not out to her friends and family on the east coast. She has a desire to be liked and she felt that everybody loved her as a, “super ‘femme,’ straight, southern girl.” This role “worked” while living in the south, because she did not date anyone in high school or the beginning of college.

In the south, I feel like woman aren’t supposed to be sexual at all, and much less a homosexual. And so I just didn’t date anybody. People really liked me this way. I was this virgin, southern Baptist, the epitome of all that is pure and good.

She expressed being afraid of losing this internal identity and her fear of rejection and being disliked by people in her life.

As Christen ended her discussion of her experience by saying, “There is just a lot of fear there,” Sarah began to share her experience by saying, “So my story is...” Sarah shared her narrative of how she first told her sister she had a girlfriend. In her story, Sarah described an experience of feeling both scared and angry.

I remember the more questions she was asking me, the more I was getting mad. I was getting mad to a point where I was like, calm down, in my head. I was like, calm down, because I was going to go off on her. And because I was like, to me, in my head, if my sister doesn't accept me, then I'm fucked. Like, what am I going to do? You know? I'm not out to my parent's, by the way. Their never going to accept it, I already know. Um, but she is my only sibling, so if she wasn't going to accept me, it was the biggest fear of my life.

Sarah continued to describe how her fear became strong enough for her to consider the possibility of ending her life. She felt her options were, "get married, be straight, or just end it." She expressed that her girlfriend was a support at this time in her life. Sarah told the group that most of the time she feels angry, "angry that people won't accept me." With the exception of her parents and sister, she doesn't have a fear of other's not accepting her lesbian identity. In contrast with Jolene and Christen's fears of being rejected by their friends, Sarah shared, "If you don't want to accept me, leave. I don't care, I don't need you. But then when it comes to my sister and my parents, I can't, I can't say that, I can't do that."

Mary described feeling, "a lot of anxiety." Similar to Sarah, Mary's experience of rejection was specifically related to her mother. Mary described feeling the responsibility to take care of her mother's feelings.

If anyone ever asks me, like, what I'm doing in California, or who I live with, I'm just praying my mom is not in the room. Because I want to be honest and say, 'I live with my girlfriend.' But I don't think I could do that if she was in the room, because I'm afraid for how that is going to make her feel. And, um, I don't want to make her uncomfortable, even though it makes me SO uncomfortable, to lie.

Annie described comparable feelings of anxiety when she was first coming out. Her experience differed from the other women in the group, since she was simultaneously divorcing her husband. She shared the hostility and harassment she received from her husband after she came out.

Once it came out of fantasyland and into reality, he just exploded. And he actually outed me to my sisters. I think I was the most scared to tell them out of anyone... We've been through so much together that I was just really really frightened to have the possibility of them rejecting me.

The women's description of losses included not only emotional and psychological loss, but also – at times – losses characterized by abuse, threats, and harassment. For instance, Annie feared being rejected by her siblings, much like Sarah expressed feeling afraid of her sister's reaction. Annie described how her ex-husband wrote a "horrific email that was so graphic" to her sisters. Annie's ex-husband wrote this email after she came out to him, and he continued to harass her by not leaving her apartment. She expressed that her husband had "flipped out." Jolene shared a similar experience of her father "blowing up" after her mother "betrayed" her by disclosing her lesbian identity to her father. Jolene described her father as "very verbally abusive and made a lot of horrible comments to me about it." Annie, who has been out for a little over a year, expressed feeling afraid of her husband, in contrast to Jolene, who has been out for seven years, expressed accepting her father's "process."

One finding that contributed to the participants' fear of rejection or loss was that all five participants come from families that practice organized religion. The participants identified these religions as the following: Jewish, Catholic, Baptist, Christian, and Druze. Mary shared how she thinks religion contributed to suppressing her homosexual feelings.

I think religion played a really big part in it too. I was brought up very very Catholic. And the main thing I wrote about was coming out to my mom, which was just a horrific experience. Because she is very very Catholic

Four of the participants defined similar fears of coming out to parents with religious and/or cultural values that do not accept homosexuality. For example, Sarah, who identifies as Lebanese, shared with the group that in her culture she is expected to marry a man who practices Druze. She described the fear of her parents' disowning her as "not so much religious, it's cultural."

In discussing the gains, the women reported both "gains per se" and "gains in response to loss." For instance, Mary shared her positive experience with the group by saying "I actually got really creative and that was really positive thing that came out. I felt like this weight was lifted and I started writing and doing music a lot more." In response to Mary, Christen described her experience as both frustrating and positive.

I'm very frustrated and have a little anger towards my parents not taking it very well. Because a part of me, while I'm scared and blah blah, I'm very excited that I'm finally making an honest statement about myself. I'm being honest with myself.

Similarly, Annie accounted her experience as,

I have to really relate to what you said, at the same time of having anxiety, or fear, or anger, also, this feeling of like, 'right on,' you know? Fuck what you all think, this is just me, you know? More power to you if you are cool about it, then I want you in my life. I don't know it helped me really make more definitive boundaries about who was allowed to be close to me anymore. It was also really empowering! So it's definitely a mixed bag.

Jolene shared comparable experiences,

I would go through periods of anger and periods of just, like, just sadness. And then just periods of being incredibly joyful too, because it was also really exciting, like, finding myself. And feeling attracted to a person and being able to express that.

Lastly, Sarah described, "feeling more real" after coming out to her friends. However she continues to "wake up every morning with anxious feelings," because she was not out

to her parents. Mostly, her joyful feelings existed within the community of friends she made or kept since coming out.

Summary

The findings suggest there are a multitude of feelings involved in the coming out process. In particular, these feelings are related to the fear of being rejected by important people (internalized objects) and the pleasure of gradually assuming a new sense of self. The narrative responses from these five women indicated a process of first recognizing homosexual feelings as a child, suppressing these feelings, having these feelings resurface as a young adult, and, then, fearing rejection and gaining a sense of self while coming out as a lesbian woman. The findings indicate that the fear of rejection from the mother was particularly complex. Several of the women stated that coming out to them resulted in pain/hurt for their mothers, which in turn, seemed to cause shame/guilt related to integrating their lesbian sexual orientation. Possible implications of these findings will be further discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore lesbians' experiences of internal and interpersonal changes while transitioning into a lesbian identity. Specifically, the study questioned: 1) what internal/external object representations are affected by the participants' coming out as lesbians; 2) what are the internal issues of identity change; 3) what are the interpersonal issues of support; 4) what internal/interpersonal issues of "losses/gains" exist while coming out?

Participant Demographics

The demographic survey indicated that only one participant had been in a previous heterosexual long-term relationship. This finding may signify that this is a sample of women who do not have a notable interpersonal heterosexual history. It is, however, noteworthy that the women did indicate having same sex attractions as a child that were suppressed until young adulthood, and that they included heterosexuality as a part of their internal sexual history.

The participants' range of how long they have disclosed their lesbian identity to themselves or others was between 7 months and 7 years. The age range of the participants (25 - 29) suggested to a homogeneous sample. However, the wide span of lesbian disclosure seemed to enrich the focus group discussion due to the participants' differences in experience as out lesbians.

Internal/External Self and Object Representations

In discussing the initial coming out experience most of the women chose benign objects to come out to. However, Christen described coming out to her parents, who were not benign nor were they accepting of her lesbian identity. She was not able to embrace her newfound lesbian identity as joyous, and she expressed a sense of regret for hurting her mother. This is consistent with object relations theorist D. W. Winnicott's (1965) discussion of individuals needing to be valued and accepted by significant others as essential to development. As with Christen, if significant others devalue the individual, painful distortions in self and object representations can follow. One possible consequence of non-support or rejection in the coming out process is an exacerbation of internalized homophobia. Mary illustrated feelings of discomfort in disclosing her lesbian identity in her mother's presence. Christen illustrated feeling that homosexuality was "wrong" and needed to be "taken back" when her mother's reaction was so negative.

A major finding in this sample was the importance of their mothers' reactions to their coming out. Distress and rejection by the mother seemed associated with more internal conflict. Several women discussed an "internalization" of the rejection and consequent shame. Mary said, "they are right, I need to go get it fixed," after her mother attempted to send her to an "anti-gay group." Since the process of coming out for some women includes working through their own homophobia as well as the homophobia of internalized objects, the mother's interpersonal reaction seemed to carry a formidable weight. For Mary, the self began to be filled with doubt, and her lesbian identity became more ambivalently engaged. The relationship between the mother and daughter

following the disclosure of a lesbian identity may be resolvable for most, but for some it may not be. It seems that the mother's expression of "what did I do wrong?" or "where did I go wrong?" can contribute to conflict in the coming out process and, in some instances, can result in a self that is experienced (by the self) as a "disappointment," and a sexual identity that is ambivalently held (by the self).

Internal Issues of Identity Change

The findings on identity change and development reflected the literature on homosexual identity development. The women identified an initial period of "trying on" a heterosexual identity, presented by the authors previously reviewed (Cass, 1996; Coleman 1982; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Minton & McDonald, 1984; Troiden, 1988). For instance, Sarah described herself as "very straight" after questioning a lesbian identity at age 12. Sarah's experience is illustrative to Coleman's (1982) description of young children understanding homosexuality as wrong and consequently forming a heterosexual identity.

Most of the women expressed a process of suppressing their same sex attraction at a young age. Mary thought, "A lot of it was suppressed... because it wasn't supposed to be talked about," while Annie described being 12 when she first realized her same sex attraction, but found that "it got way suppressed until I was 18 or 20." For these women suppression may have been a healthy defense in early adolescence when it was not safe for them to be a lesbian. This is illustrative to Coleman's (1982) description of the possible development of defenses in order to protect themselves from feelings of rejection (p. 33). In addition, since adolescence is inherently a period of identity change

and exploration, forestalling choices can be seen as adaptive and normative (Erikson, 1968).

Internal Issues of Support

The findings indicate it is ideal to have both relative and non-relative supports while coming out as a lesbian woman. In addition, lesbians may seek out community-based supports. These community supports may be particularly helpful when family and friends are not available or receptive. Most of the women in the study utilized community-based supports, such as, organized sport teams, LGBT community centers, and/or an individual support in connection to a community-based organization. Jolene described feeling support from a newfound community, which she called her “family by choice.” Sarah moved away from her biological family and joined a local LGBT community where she felt “my life changed.” These findings are consistent with Laird’s (2003) explanation of lesbian identity development. Laird (2003) discussed the process of accepting a lesbian identity and thereafter attaching her self to experiences and individuals who help make sense of her feelings and behaviors (p. 184).

Serendipitously, it seemed clear that the women in this sample, by self-selecting into the study’s focus group, were looking for more support. The focus group study presented an opportunity for the women to discuss the need for additional support; this seemed true whether family and friends were generally supportive or not.

Internal/Interpersonal Issues of “Losses/Gains”

For most of the participants in this study the process of gaining a lesbian identity was positive. Even for those who expressed fear of rejection and possible rejection from friends and family, the process of coming out included being “true to the self.” This is consistent with the Riggle’s et al. (2008) study demonstrating the beneficial effects of self-reflection and insight (p. 213) in the coming process. In addition, it illustrates, Cass’s (1996) “Identity Synthesis Stage,” which shows that acceptance and disclosure of a lesbian identity can strengthen the internal psychological experience (p. 247).

The data indicated that there was considerable mourning of previously owned heterosexual identity. Jolene expressed feeling anger and sadness, as well as joy, after coming out as a lesbian. Christen described losing her identity and role as a feminine straight girl. She found that this identity “worked” for her and was scared to lose this identity for fear of being disliked by people in her life. These findings are congruent with Crespi’s (1995) exploratory paper relating lesbians’ integration of self, as they establish a positive lesbian identity, to the process of mourning aspects of heterosexuality. The findings are also consistent with the literature explaining the existence of psychological stress forming from losing a heterosexual identity. As the literature suggests, these stressors may lead to depression or to unhealthy coping strategies, such as alcohol abuse (Bradford et al., 1994; Cabaj, 2000; Park & Hughes, 2007; Straussner & Zelvin, 1997). Clinicians may want to be aware of these stressors, as well as the possible need to grieve the previously owned heterosexual identity, while working with lesbians developing their lesbian identity.

Implications for Clinical Practice

Clinicians working with lesbian women coming out need to be aware of the complex interactive changes in internal and interpersonal experiences involved in this process. They need to be attuned to important role played by internalized objects, particularly the mother, in the process. For instance, Christen described coming out to her parents as, “not the best idea,” indicating some insight and the possibility of not internalizing the negative reaction. She expressed some insight about her “bad judgement” and was able to own being “true to myself.” By questioning her own judgment and emphasizing that it might be more important to be true to herself, she is indicating strengths that could be reinforced by a clinician.

Another participant, Annie described first coming out in therapy following a lengthy period of questioning. Clinicians might need to be patient with clients who are questioning their sexuality. For Annie, once she was able to come out in therapy, she was more easily able to come out to individuals in her personal life. It seems as though she needed to develop a comfort over time in disclosing her identity within her therapeutic relationship first.

As demonstrated by the literature and reinforced by the focus group discussion, the process of coming out can be one that is difficult to internally navigate. Feelings of rejection and a sense of losing a previously owned identity contribute to internal and interpersonal stress. Clinicians might need to be especially empathic with lesbians who are experiencing distress due to rejection when coming out. However, even within their empathic attunement, clinicians should expect some re-enactment within the transference/countertransference of the rejection.

Several women in this study discussed suppressing their same-sex attractions, as a child, in order to adapt to their surroundings. It may be helpful for clinicians working with LGB youth to recognize and, at times, to discuss with LGB clients this process as an indication of healthy adaptive functioning. Of course, it is essential for clinicians to be attuned to the joy in the process of coming out of and being “true to the self.” As the participants in this focus group discussion indicated, this as a crucial part of coming out as a lesbian woman.

The data illustrates that the internal self can gain newer and/or fuller dimensions by acknowledging and identifying as a lesbian woman. The internal self may simultaneously experience a loss of the “default”/assumed heterosexual identity encouraged by objects representations. The encouragement to embrace a heterosexual identity and the discouragement to recognize a lesbian identity can contribute to internalized homophobia. In developing a lesbian identity the lesbian can begin to work through the homophobia internalized from important objects. As she works through her own internalized homophobia and the internalized homophobia of internalized objects, she can gain a new consciousness. She can begin to experience an internal world of self and object interacting synergistically to support the transition to an expressible and expressed lesbian identity.

The interpersonal self interacts with other people about the process of coming out. This process may be particularly stressful if family or friends are not supportive or available. On the other hand, this process may allow the interpersonal self to flourish in the process of seeking supportive/encouraging social interactions. This flourishing could

occur by staying engaged in the process with family and friends and helping them with it, by seeking new affirming relationships, or by doing both.

This focus group discussion placed particular importance on the mother's reaction to the daughter's coming out. It seems that, if the mother's reaction is one filled with disgust, hurt, pain, and rejection, the process of integrating a lesbian identity becomes more complicated. The lesbian's interpersonal self may need to act out the mother's negative reactions with other important objects and social relationships. It may be essential in the establishment of a treatment alliance for clinicians to recognize the critical importance of the internalized mother in developing a cohesive sense of internal as well as interpersonal lesbian self.

Research Limitations and Future Research

Limitations to this research are that the sample size was small, and participants may have self-selected because they were in need of more support. Although this is an interesting finding, it also suggests a sample that is not representative of all lesbians and it underscores that the findings are not generalizable. Another limitation may include bias in the analysis and interpretation of the data. As a self-identified lesbian adult woman, this researcher attempted to stay as neutral as possible while analyzing the data. However some biases may have affected the process.

Lastly, due to time constraints a larger and more diverse sample size was not possible.

This study provided a good foundation for further investigation, though a more thorough selection process and/or a larger sample could contribute to future research on the

exploration of lesbians' experience of internal and interpersonal changes while transitioning into a lesbian identity.

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Appendix A

Human Subjects Approval Letter

January 19, 2009

Emily Russell

Dear Emily,

Your final set of revisions has been reviewed and all is now in order. You have clarified the areas where we had questions and we are glad now to give final approval to your study.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Bruce Thompson, Research Advisor

Appendix B

Recruitment Email

To Whom it May Concern,

My name is Emily Russell and I am currently going to graduate school for a Master's in Social Work, from Smith College. I am living in San Francisco while working on my clinical internship. I am also writing a thesis in order to graduate in August of 2009. For my thesis project I am conducting a one-time focus group to explore lesbians' coming out experience, at the LGBT Center in San Francisco. I am looking to recruit participants for my study and was wondering if I could post my flyer at your center or send the information on your email list serve. I would greatly appreciate your help! I attached my flyer to this email, thank you for your time.

Emily

Appendix C

Recruitment Document

Share with others and learn about others' coming out experience as a lesbian woman!!!!

Are you a self-identified lesbian between the ages of 25 and 35?

Do you think you would benefit from exploring your coming out experience with other lesbian women?

If you have answered YES to these questions, you may be eligible to participate in a study to explore the internal and interpersonal pleasures and challenges of coming out as a lesbian.

You and 10 to 12 other self-identified adult lesbians will have the opportunity to share each other's coming out experience!

Come join the focus group, meeting one time only on, February __, 2009 1pm-4pm, and have the potential to learn something new, while defining significant relationships and exploring your identity. Benefit from contributing to research on lesbian identity and feel empowerment!

Please contact Emily Russell at erussell@smith.edu

Appendix D

Recruitment Questions

Please answer yes or no to the following questions:

1. Do you self-identify as a lesbian woman?
2. Are you between the ages of 25 and 35?
3. Do you write, read, and speak English?
4. Do you have email available and accessible?
5. Are you currently receiving treatment for any serious psychological problems?

Appendix E

Informed Consent Form

Dear Focus Group Participant,

I am a master's graduate student currently attending my second year at Smith College School for Social Work. I am interested in exploring the coming out processes for lesbians. The study I am conducting involves research regarding the experiences of lesbian identity formation. The purpose of this research is to build on previous research concerning lesbian identity. I am using the data collected in order to complete my degree by writing a master's in social work thesis.

You are being asked to participate in a focus group in order to contribute to qualitative research pertaining to lesbian identity formation. At the beginning of the focus group you will be asked to fill out a brief demographic survey including your, age, race, current city and state of residence, where you were born, how long you have been out, and relationships and/or marital status. You will be asked to write a brief narrative of your coming out experience. After the writing exercise you can share your story or decide not to share at this point. The purpose of the assignment is to have each member think about her experience before any other discussions take place. Following the initial writing exercise, guided questions will be asked to elicit further group discussion.

The focus group will be no more than three hours long. A sound recording device (audiotape) will be used to transcribe the responses for data analysis. I will also take notes during the group that will be included in the data collection and analysis. Information related to date, time, and the location of the focus group will be provided to you by email. The informed consent form will be administered at the beginning of the focus group. The group purpose is for research only and will not provide you with group therapy. However, if you are interested in these services a list of references will be available.

Minimal risks from participation are anticipated. Potential risks for being involved in the focus group may include discomfort in remembering painful experiences and feeling anxious from learning something unanticipated.

Potential benefits involved in participating in the focus group include learning something new, defining significant relationships, exploring identity, benefiting from contributing to research on lesbian identity, and/or feeling empowerment. You will not receive compensation for participating in the study.

Since this will be a group experience, one hundred percent confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. The nature of the focus group challenges complete confidentiality because of

the other group members involved. You, as well as the other participants, will be asked to respect each other's confidentiality by not discussing other individual's personal information outside of the group. I will protect the material by keeping the data separate from the Informed Consents, and my research advisor will be the only other individual with access to the data. When I disseminate my thesis material, the data will be presented as a whole, and brief illustrative quotes will be carefully disguised. Any identifiable information, along with the written narratives, will be deleted from the transcription. The notes, audiotapes, and information will be kept securely in my possession for a minimum of three years and will be destroyed when no longer needed.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at anytime, however the data contributed before withdrawal will be impossible to separate from the recorded discussion. You may choose to refuse to answer any question without penalty. There are no stipulations for withdrawing from the study. You are welcome to contact me by phone or email before and after the focus group. If you have any concerns about your rights or any aspect of the study, you are encouraged to call this researcher or the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Signature of Participant _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____ Date: _____

Researcher Contact:
Emily Russell
erussell@smith.edu

Appendix F

Data Collection Instruments

Demographic and Background Data:

Age: _____

Racial Identity: (e.g. Caucasian, African American, Latino etc.)

Current City and State of Residence:

Place of Birth:

Relationship Status:

How long have you been self-identified as a lesbian?

Have you been in a previous heterosexual marriage? Or in a long-term heterosexual partnership?

Appendix G

Guiding Questions

Following an initial ice breaker exercise, the participants will be asked to write a brief coming out narrative, where coming out is defined as “acknowledging your sexual orientation to yourself and/or others.” They will be given ten minutes to complete the writing. At this time they will have the choice to share their narratives, in order to create discussion between group members, for approximately thirty minutes. After this discussion, the participants will be prompted to further discussion by four categories of descriptive questions, and two related rating questions. These descriptive/prompt questions will be used flexibly by the investigator to guide the discussion in the direction of major study interests: 1) what internal and external relationships were affected by the participants’ coming out as lesbians? 2) What was lost and what was gained from this process? 3) What internal sense of self or identity shifted or remained? 4) Who was a support in the process and what relationships were challenged when coming out? Descriptive questions encourage open-ended responses to elicit stories from the group, while rating questions ask for differential meaning to their experiences (Jordan & Franklin, 2003, p. 147). Questions number one and two were adapted from Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1995). The categories and questions include:

Descriptive:

- 1.) Internal/External Relationships: When did you first come out to another person? Who was this person? Why did you come out to this person first? How was this person a significant relationship in your life? Tell us about your first lesbian relationship: How did you meet her? How did you become involved? How did you feel about it? What happened to that relationship? (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995, p. 97)
- 2.) Identity: When did you first begin to think that you were a lesbian? Was there something particular that happened that made you think you might be a lesbian (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995, p. 97)? When did you first identify your sexual orientation? Describe your experience after coming out? What were your actions, behaviors, and/or feelings when you first came out? What were the actions, behaviors, and/or feelings when you first came out to individuals in your life? How were these relationships affected or unaffected over time by revealing your sexual orientation?
- 3.) Support: Who was a support during your coming out experience? Did you seek social support (i.e. LGBT support groups)? List two of your most important relative supports and two of your most important non-relative supports. Describe the significance of these supports.
- 4.) Loss/Gain: Did you experience any internal changes in your mood or affect after coming out? If yes, what were these changes? Do they still exist? Was there

someone or something that negatively impacted your coming out experience? If so, describe the person and/or situation that negatively impacted your experience.