

2007

# Women's perceptions of different power dynamics in their sexual encounters with both women and men

Genna Blaine Brodsky

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Genna Blaine Brodsky  
Women's Perceptions of  
Different Power Dynamics  
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ABSTRACT

This study explored women's fluid sexuality by asking the following question: Do women who have had sexual encounters with both women and men experience different power dynamics based on their partners' gender? There was minimal literature devoted to this topic. Past research focused on gender differences within relationships, violence used as a resource of power in heterosexual and lesbian relationships, theory written on relational therapy, and articles on female sexual fluidity.

Eleven women from San Francisco were interviewed to explore their thoughts and feelings on how they experienced different power dynamics during sexual encounters with women and men. The interviews and findings were guided by six areas of inquiry including demographics, how gender affects power dynamics during sexual encounters with women and men, what constitutes as sex, participants' sexuality in reference to their sexual orientation and identity, how power dynamics, from a relational perspective, are played out during sexual encounters with women and men and, how participants' cultural backgrounds influenced their sexuality and power dynamics during sexual encounters.

The study found a considerable variation among the participants' experiences on how gender affects power dynamics, definitions of sex, issues of sexual identity, and power relations. All participants' experiences were extremely subjective according to their individual characteristics and the partners in these sexual encounters. Nearly all participants felt there were varying power dynamics during sexual encounters with

women and men. Implications for social work practice, biases and recommendations for future research were considered.

WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF DIFFERENT POWER DYNAMICS IN THEIR  
SEXUAL ENCOUNTERS WITH BOTH WOMEN AND MEN

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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2007

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to first thank the women who participated in my study. Without your stories, willingness to share, open minds, and patience with me, this study would not have been possible. I hope that by telling the participants' stories, this project can help shed light on a topic that promotes and allows all kinds of female sexuality.

With deep appreciation for my thesis advisor, Fred Newdom, for his support, respect, his courage to debate with me, and who calmed the storm before it caused any disaster. I would also like to thank my friend Natalie Ortega, for her support, opinions, work ethic and transcribing abilities.

This thesis could not have been accomplished without the assistance and patience of many people whose contributions are gratefully acknowledged. Without your thoughts, advice, encouragement, support, and most of all your interest in my topic, my confidence to actually work on and finally complete this study would not have been possible.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Despite the fairly recent influence of social constructivist theory, adding much needed complexity to Western society's views on women, permissible roles for women are still generally inflexible. Women are still expected both to be actively seductive as sexual objects and, at the same time, passive in the bedroom. Should women attempt to make these frameworks more elastic, they are seen as promiscuous or overbearing or otherwise characterized negatively.

Many women experience sexual encounters differently with women and men. Some women experiment out of curiosity, some are sexually drawn to the opposite sex or gender, some are sexually drawn to the same sex or gender, and some are sexually drawn to both sexes or genders, and some are in between and might question their sexuality or are more fluid among their labels. There is much fluidity within women's sexuality that accounts for their desire and sexual attractions. However, Western culture does not allow much room for diversity among female sexual orientations or identities. The English language is also limited in its ability to describe or name sexual expression, desires, identities and orientations, which shows and reflects the impact Western culture has on language and expression and the impact language has on culture. Therefore, the three orientations that are conventionally used to describe women's sexuality are, straight (heterosexual), bisexual, and lesbian (homosexual).

However, according to Plante (2006) "the concept of the stable self is connected to the dichotomization of sexual orientation into same-sex and opposite-sex. Because of this narrow construction, we are expected to box ourselves into one or the other" (p. 216). Many women identify as one of the three orientations but do not limit their sexual encounters only to the sex or gender that correlates with their orientation.

Because human sexuality and behavior are such complex constructions, the concepts, theories and resources of power play a significant role in the interactions between these complex human constructions. During sexual encounters women may feel over powered, in power, empowered or anywhere in between. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to investigate women's perceptions of possibly different power dynamics during sexual encounters with both women and men. Because of the large continuum of sexual desire that is expressed within the fluidity of female sexuality, women have a great need of sexual variety, and for the purposes of this study, I explored how this desire correlates with their with experience of power dynamics along with how and if these power dynamics are played out based on the gender of their sexual partners.

Unfortunately, not much research has explored this topic. Therefore, I must ask the question that has not been asked before: Do women who have had sexual encounters with both women and men experience different power dynamics based on their partners' gender?

Also unfortunate, is the fact that there is a major lack of literature related to the power dynamics women experienced who have had sexual encounters with both men and women. The idea that female sexuality can be more fluid than the three conventional sexual orientations has become increasingly common in recent research and literature.



Most of the studies I found consisted of gender differences between heterosexual women and men (Zurbriggen, 2000; Impett & Peplau, 2003; Sprecher, Barbee & Schwartz, 1995; and Hiller, 2005). However, there were few studies that illustrated sexual fluidity among female orientations and identities (Diamond, 2005; Rothblum, 2000). There is also a lack of research on power dynamics among women. There is an influx of literature, however, on theories and resources of power such as money or physical strength from a traditionalist model, which will be further explained in the literature review. Most research written on sexual orientation focuses on identity or coming out, and/or relationships. Few studies have been written on same gender power dynamics, but there has been a great deal written on opposite gender power dynamics (Zurbriggen, 2000; Impett & Peplau, 2003; Sprecher, Barbee & Schwartz, 1995; and Hiller, 2005). This indicates a major gap in the research literature.

Feminists have encouraged researchers to study the idea that gender is more socially constructed while sex is biologically based. However, these ideologies are still not widely accepted and there is still a general lack of clear and consistent delineation between “sex” and “gender” in the discussions of sexual attraction. The literature review illustrates that gender is a fluid concept, although it is conventionally understood that sex (genitals) biologically determines the gender at birth, and that the concepts of both sex and gender are also defined through a process of social construction. Fortunately, some recent literature recognizes the fluidity and flexibility of sexual desire and orientation (Diamond, 2005; Rothblum, 2000).

Recent studies (Diamond, 2000; Rothblum, 2000) have acknowledged the fluidity of sexual identity (a person's self-concept of their sexuality) and sexual orientation but

did not address power dynamics. Overall, there is a major lack of research on different power dynamics among women who have had sexual experiences with women and men. It is usually assumed that the power dynamics between women and men are greater than the power dynamics among women. Therefore, this study will focus on power dynamics by acknowledging women who are more fluid with their sexual orientations and identities, while allowing for their voices and experiences to be heard.

This study consists of interviews with 11 women in which they are asked semi-structured open-ended questions. The women with either a declared sexual orientation or not, have had sexual experiences with women and men, and their experiences and understanding of the power dynamics between these two genders was explored. These interviews took place in the San Francisco Bay Area of California. This study can benefit a variety of mental health professionals including sex therapists, trauma survivors, battered women's shelters, rape crisis centers, clinicians working with trauma survivors, and clinicians working with women in general, especially in LGBTQ communities. The benefits of this study include helping mental health professionals understand the complexities of gender, sex and power in Western culture.

Therefore, it is the intent of this study to promote and increase understanding and acknowledgment of women's sexual desires, and recognize that, as an oppressed population, women need to be heard and understood.

The theoretical framework for this study draws on self-in-relation theory to further understand the variety of female experiences and interactions in relation to their sense of self.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter I attempt to examine the many different concepts that surround the complexities of how women experience different power dynamics in sexual encounters with women and men. Different definitions lead to different concepts and understandings of these concepts. Generally, these concepts are best understood through labeling and categorizing. Therefore, this chapter is dedicated to critically examining and making meaning of the understanding of the concepts that are included in my thesis topic. The main concepts discussed are the differences between gender and sex, sexual orientation and sexual identity, the act of sex and sexual encounters, and theories of power.

#### *What Does Gender Really Mean?*

According to the online World Book Dictionary (2004), *gender* is described as follows: 1) the grouping of nouns into certain classes, such as masculine, feminine, and neuter; 2) One of such classes; 3) sex; 4) (Archaic) to produce (offspring), procreate. Interestingly, gender is viewed as a type of human biological sex. However, sex and gender are more recently understood as two different concepts, although they can seem interrelated. Irigaray (2005) writes, “it is gender that allows us to ‘see’ biological sex” (p. 17). Gender can be defined from two different ideological perspectives, essentialist and social constructionist. According to Plante (2006), essentialism allows us to believe that, at our core (in our essence), everything that is human represents fundamental, innate

distinctions (between men and women). This theory explains the social phenomenon of human interactions according to a more “natural” perspective, indicating that human behaviors and emotions are biological, physical and physiological. Constructionist thinkers view gender differently. Plante (2006) briefly writes that constructionist thinking is “being critical about the ideas and information that we have eventually come to take for granted”, such as women seeking to please, while men are the rescuers or breadwinners. She also emphasizes the importance of “being aware of culture, society, and history, and being aware of the social processes that sustain our ways of looking at the world around us” (p.45-46). The emphasis here is to think more critically about how our gender is influenced by society’s standards. When a man and woman go out on a date, it is socially expected for the man to pay for the date. However, there is no objective reality indicating that the man is biologically determined to pay for the woman’s meal.

To make the distinction between *sex* and *gender* more clearly, Levitt & Hiestand (2005), in their qualitative study noted that “*sex* [is] a construct relating to biological characteristics, [whereas] *gender* [is] a social construct resulting from the assignation [*sic*] of traits and qualities” (p.39). This study examined how gender and power dynamics between “butch” and “femme” genders influence their sexual relationships. Kalichman et.al. (2005) described gender in their study as “...a system of social classification that influences access to power, status, and material resources” (p.300). Plante describes how the assimilation of sex and gender become a predisposition for a person's identity. "After the initial determination, biological sex is seamlessly and uncritically converted into the socially meaningful categorization system, *gender* (italicized in original text). Bodies and biological sex are taken as evidence of indisputable, immutable differences" (p. 77).

Does a person's biological sex determine who has more power, status and material resources? From an essentialist perspective, men are more biologically determined to have more status, power and material resources because they are innately wired to be more aggressive and controlling. From a cultural perspective, men are taught to be more aggressive and are also more accepted for their aggressive behaviors because society places that expectation on them. Through this cultural construct, gender roles can be affected by the culture and therefore, gendered behavior has the potential for being separated from biological sex.

Gender is a multifaceted component of the human being and therefore, cannot be defined in simple terms. However, for the purpose of this study, I will explain certain terms in order to make meaning of the concept of gender. Plante (2006) uses four key concepts: gender assignment, gender identity, gender role (or expression), and gender attribution. *Gender assignment* refers to the gender the doctor pronounces either in utero or after birth depending on the sexual organs of the person. *Gender identity* refers to the person's inner sense of self; how the person defines what gender they feel they are. *Gender role* (or expression) refers to the presentation the person uses to express their gender to the public, such as clothing, attitudes and behavioral traits. *Gender attribution* refers to how other people perceive a person's gender. Plante (2006) describes this term as "making a split-second decision about [another person's] gender" (p. 69-70). With the help of these terms and concepts, we can make more meaning and gain a better understanding of the multifaceted components of gender.

To explain further about the multifaceted components of gender, I want to introduce the terms transgender, intersex, gender bender, gender queer, and other terms

that people identify with to help explain their gender. Kate Bornstein (1994) writes:

And then I found that gender can have fluidity, which is quite different from ambiguity. If ambiguity is a refusal to fall within a prescribed gender code, then fluidity is the refusal to remain one gender or another. Gender fluidity is the ability to freely and knowingly become one or many of a limitless number of genders, for any length of time, at any rate of change. Gender fluidity recognizes no borders or rules or gender (p. 51-52).

Ingraham (2005), explains how gender can be seen “as a division or distinction between women or men, whether this is seen as primarily a bodily difference [essential] or a social hierarchy [social construction], but also refers to the content of these categories, to what we understand as femininity or masculinity” (p. 25). Here, Ingraham (2005) explains how society views gender as binary, or only offering two alternatives, whereas Bornstein elucidates gender as not binary, but fluid.

Throughout this paper, gender is described in binary terms, indicating the two genders of male and female. Since there are competing schools of thought on this, and while, for the purpose of this study I use binary language, I do not share this thinking. For the purpose of this paper, I am interviewing women who have had sexual encounters with "both" genders since most of our society uses pronouns to describe a person's gender based on the assumption that there exist solely these two genders. In order to research how women experience different power dynamics, there has to be a comparison of two entities between men and women.

### *Sexual Orientation and Sexual Identity*

This study examines sexual minority women's unique experiences on sexuality with an emphasis on power dynamics. In the context of sexuality, I will define sexual orientation and sexual identity according to the literature. Limitations include my own biases, in particular on sexual fluidity, along with the limited amount of research viewing this topic. Definitions of "sex" also vary according to the upbringing, conformity/non-conformity and lifestyles of sexual minority women. Therefore, this section of literature review will examine sexual orientation, sexual identity and definitions of sex, while making meaning of the complexities within these categories.

*Sexual orientation* indicates whom we are erotically attracted to, and *sexual identity* refers to the self-perception one identifies with within the context of their orientation. In a longitudinal empirical study of sexual-minority women, Diamond (2000) defined these terms more fully, illustrating that "...sexual orientation [is] generally understood as an individual's essential predisposition to experience sexual attractions for persons of the same sex, other sex, or both sexes. Sexual identity, in contrast, refers to the self-concept an individual organizes around this predisposition" (p. 241). However, Diamond also noted that, "fluidity in identity, attractions, and behavior may occur with different frequencies and for different causes and should be independently assessed" (p. 241). It should be noted that Diamond's sample was overrepresented with 85% White, middle-class women, which calls into question the general applicability of these definitions. Rothblum (2000), in an analysis of the existing empirical research in this field, referred to Garnets & Kimmel (1993) who defined sexual orientation as

...a multidimensional concept that varies in degree and intensity. Sexual orientation is viewed as diverse, with each individual having a unique template of erotic and affectionate identity, behavior, fantasies, relationships and emotional attachments, all of which can change over time (p. 196).

The first researcher to explore this fluidity was Alfred Kinsey (1953) who established that most people fit somewhere on a continuum that describes a person as strictly homosexual or strictly heterosexual, or somewhere in between. In this study, sexual orientation and sexual identity will be used in these contexts reinforcing the fluidity of sexuality.

Although sexuality can be viewed as a fluid entity, labels are used to describe certain orientations and identities solely for the purpose of allowing people to categorize and make sense of each other. The three main sexual orientations are straight (heterosexual), bisexual, and gay/lesbian (homosexual). Each orientation is defined by having sexual attraction and feelings towards the person they prefer or have innate urges for. I use the terms “preference” and “innate urges” to be aware of the fact that not every person prefers to be attracted to and have sexual feelings for those people. Some individuals believe sexual orientation is a biologically innate aspect of our being, and some believe it is socially constructed. It is important to understand, however, that some individuals do not prefer to be sexually attracted to persons’ they are attracted to, and would rather be of an orientation that fits their needs. An example would be of a homosexual person who does not prefer to be homosexual, instead prefers a heterosexual orientation. In this case, a deep need to conform may be the operative factor, which can be influenced by religious belief or social pressure. In a heteronormative society where



heterosexuality becomes institutionalized, the need to conform can be the major influential factor on an individual's sexual orientation preference (Ingraham, 2005). Ingraham further explains how human behavior can also be manipulated by a heterosexist society; "By treating heterosexuality as normative or taken for granted, we participate in establishing heterosexuality" (p. 4).

Whether sexual orientation is biological or environmental, is the subject of an ongoing debate of nature vs. nurture. From a theoretical standpoint, Wilton (2004) makes meaning of sexual orientation using a social science perspective.

Are individuals sexually *oriented*, (italicized in the original text) that is, somehow homo-, hetero-, or bisexual in essence, or do they acquire a sexual *preference* (italicized in the original text) at some point during their life course, in response to circumstance? There are, of course, additional complexities, since human beings are both reflexively self-aware and social, meaning making creatures. Thus it is perfectly possible that an innate, biologically determined sexual orientation may or may not lead individuals to behave in specific ways, let alone to adopt a specific identity based on that orientation (p. 6).

However, the purpose of this study is not to analyze the debate over sexual orientation, but to understand its complexities and fluidity.

To make clear that I am not reinforcing the binary, I note that there are not just two kinds of sexes. There are intersexed people, previously known as hermaphrodites, and transsexual people, who surgically change the sexual organs of their bodies to fit the genders they feel embodied in. Plante (2006), provides definitions for the acronym LGBTQQPA(H).

L=lesbian. G=gay. B=bisexual. T=trans. Q=queer: intended to be an inclusive term for les-bi-gay people; has social and political connotations. Q=questioning. P=pansexual: a person attracted to all sexes, at times, objects, feelings, ideas, concepts. A=asexual: a person who does not experience any sexual attraction; may or may not reject the label or sexual orientation. And (H)=heterosexual (p. 196).

To contribute more to the complexities of sexual orientation, I want to introduce alternatives besides the definitions noted above. Another sexuality lifestyle consists of polyamory. According to the online Wikipedia definition:

polyamory is the desire, practice, or acceptance of having more than one loving, intimate relationship at a time with the full knowledge and consent of everyone involved. Polyamorous perspectives differ from monogamous perspectives, in that they respect a partner's wish to have second or further meaningful relationships and to accommodate these alongside their existing relationships.

Polyamory is usually taken on as a description of a person's lifestyle and philosophy on life, rather than a type of sexual orientation or preference. This concept, which serves as an umbrella term, promotes and allows for additional fluidity among sexual lifestyles. As a bisexual lifestyle endures fluidity, polyamory can be practiced, although it is also practiced among non-bisexual lifestyles (alt.polyamory.org, 2005).

Along the lines of bisexuality, there is a subtype of bi-curious, meaning questioning their sexual orientation and being sexually interested in women and men. Bi-curious people are just curious, and not necessarily determined to become bisexual.

Morgan & Thompson (2006) researched bisexual and bi-curious identities and found that

while there has been limited, but growing, research body on bisexual identity development, there has been even less research on questioning and unlabeled (non-heterosexual) individuals, and to date on people who identify as bi-curious, a potential precursor to adopting a bisexual identity (p. 11).

These authors also defined bisexuality as being characterized by flexibility, fluidity and complexity, which allows for non-conforming notions on sexual orientation. Morgan & Thompson (2007) also conducted research on “mostly-straight” women, indicating that this label needed to be added as a subtype into the spectrum of sexual orientation.

“Results indicated that, on most behavioral variables, mostly straight women fell directly between and significantly different from both exclusively straight and bisexual/lesbian women. Mostly straight women also were generally less same-sex oriented than other “in-between” women” (Morgan & Thompson, 2007). Morgan & Thompson’s research clearly shows the fluid nature of female sexuality.

#### *Definitions of Sex*

I am defining *sex* in this thesis simply because women have different notions and ideas of what sex is for them. My bias is that sex cannot mean one thing (intercourse) to every woman, especially to women who have “sex” only with women. The use of language in this context is very important, because language can cause a misconception of what sex is. Mainstream understanding of sex can be very separate from a sexual minority woman’s perspective of sex. However, I am interested to know more about how sexual minority women define sex because very little is known on this subject.

A sexual encounter consists of different acts of sex (oral, anal, vaginal or other). According to the online World Book Dictionary (2004), *sex* is defined as the act of

intercourse. *Intercourse* is also known as vaginal penetration. Here, language is used to impose power over women, or to define sex from a male standpoint- the penetration of the vagina. Instead of viewing intercourse as, for example, “encompassing of the penis by the vagina”, the words are reversed to suit patriarchal values. By implying that intercourse is viewed as the only act of sex, it excludes other forms of sexual encounters, especially all non-heterosexual encounters. I believe sex consists of becoming sexually intimate with another human being regardless of whether the penis is present or not. From a social science perspective, Wilton (2004) defines sex as “ [an] individual corporeal event involving sensations and/or behaviors coded as erotic within and by the cultural matrix inhabited by the individual and accepted as such by them” (p. 56). Wilton’s viewpoint is comparable to the notion that, to have sex, involves a multiple array of behaviors and sensations of erotic and sexual nature, not intercourse, alone.

Freud is widely believed to have stated that a woman is not a true woman if she has not reached orgasm through vaginal intercourse. The absoluteness of such a position raises the question of how women, heterosexual or not, claim any sense of sexual freedom with such inaccurate and oppressive conceptions. Freud's statements reflect his understanding of the world he lived in, from 1856-1939, which elucidates how socially constructed his conceptions of sex were. Considering the drastic change from Freud's ideas to the understanding of what sex is today, reinforces the idea that "sex" is socially constructed to the culture and era in which people are living.

Sex is such an intimate and individual experience, that only the person involved can truly define what sex means to them. Irigaray (1985) wrote “women’s desire would not speak the same language as man’s” (p. 25). It’s true that women speak the same

literal language as men, however, language does not equally reflect the experiences of both genders. Instead, it is often grounded in male experience and perspectives, and has become the normal way of using words to communicate. Therefore, the English language, being grounded in patriarchal culture, reinforces those norms (Kitzinger, 2005). To compare the use of language to sexual orientation, Ingraham (2005) writes about the normativity of heterosexuality; “Homosexuality is often mentioned in everyday straight talk, whereas the term heterosexuality is sometimes not even understood. Heterosexuals often do not know what they are; they do not need a name for themselves-they are simply ‘normal’” (p. 23). In other words, “normal” is a term used most to describe what is common and acceptable in society. However, the language we use can impact the difficulty in verbal expression, and in a sexual context, what’s “normal” can impact the difficulty in sexual expression.

### *Theories of Power*

Because power is such a central theme to the understanding of this study, I want to discuss power from these four perspectives: traditionalist, social exchange, feminist and lastly, self-in-relation theory. Self-in-relation is the core theory of power I use to make meaning of how power dynamics are played out during sexual encounters. Using these different theories, we derive the sources and complex understandings of power. I attempt to thoroughly explain how these concepts intertwine and to gain a better understanding of how power dynamics are played out during sexual encounters.

### *Traditionalist Theories*

Power is used in many different contexts, and because of this, there is an array of different definitions of power. In Griscom’s, (1992) article, “Women and Power:

Definition, Dualism, and Difference”, she noted that it is not easy to define power. She wrote that “because there is no consistent tradition, there has been no consistency in definition” (p. 390). The concept of power has usually been left to sociologists, but in the context of individuals, the need to study power has become more apparent because the concepts and definitions are not consistent. According to the online World Book Dictionary (2004), definitions of *power* are as follows: 1) the ability to do or act: 2) authority; right; control; influence: 3) a person or thing that has authority or influence, such as an important nation: 4) of or having to do with the use or exertion of power over others. Matching these definitions is the traditional social scientist approach. Henley (1977) in her book "Body Politics: Power, Sex, and Nonverbal Communication", asks,

What do we mean by power? Social scientists usually define it in terms of the ability to influence other persons to do what one wants...when two persons shift back and forth in their ability to influence one another...Power is thus based on the control of resources (p. 19).

Another distinctive part of this definition relies on the capacity to affect the quality of the other person's outcomes.

The ability to influence and control seem to be the most salient aspect of the traditionalist definition. Social scientists use the most traditional or more patriarchal sense of power, where it is viewed as a commodity-something that a person collects or has. However other social observers do not see power as a commodity. Instead they view it as something that a person can *do* and not *have*. Lips (1991) explains in her book "Men, Women and Power";

viewed in this light, power is something that exists only in the context of a relationship; indeed, it is part of the process of that relationship. Power is the process of bargaining and compromise in which priorities are set and decisions are made in relationships (p. 4).

This is a more relational approach where the distinguishing factor between Lips's definition and the more traditional definition, is the ability to make choices in the context of the relationship instead of having power "over" another.

In "Toward a New Psychology of Women", Baker Miller (1976) explains that there are two components of power: power "over" and power "to" (for oneself). Power "over" refers to the domination and control of one person or group over another person or group. Power "to" refers to personal empowerment. Yoder & Khan (1992) in their article "Toward a Feminist Understanding of Women and Power" describe empowerment as having control that one exercises over one's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, in contrast to power "over", which focuses on controlling others. In this paper, I will refer primarily to the relational definition of power as empowerment or power "to" to make meaning of the different power dynamics women experience in their sexual encounters with women and men.

From the traditional model, power is exerted through the use or control of resources. The more individual or personal resources include money, physical strength, physical attractiveness, age, and rank or status. The more institutional resources include race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality. Other resources include knowledge, experience, information and coercion, which can also be embedded as both individual and institutional resources. It is also important to recognize these resources of power

from a cultural context. Harvey, Beckman, Browner, & Sherman (2002) in their article, “Relationship Power, Decision Making, and Sexual Relations: An Exploratory Study with Couples of Mexican Origin”, explored how couples of Mexican origin defined power in intimate relationships. They found that

gender-based power imbalances are potentially more salient for Latina women due to the cultural values of a traditionally *machista* society in which men are defined by their ability to be in control and to assert dominance by being the active sexual partner, the penetrator (p. 284).

Their results indicated that [heterosexual] women wanted to feel more powerful in their relationships with men by contributing to making decisions and attaining economic independence. However, contexts and behaviors that gained power for these women also included feeling attractive, providing (or not) sexual behaviors, and feeling loved and secure (p. 287). Studies show that gender-based power in sexual relationships is frequently imbalanced and that women usually have less power than men (Blanc, 2001. p. 190). There is an importance to gender-based power dynamics because of the social roles and expectations that are placed on heterosexual people, but this is not to imply that other sources such as race, and class are not as important. Finally, the limitations of these studies result from having only focused on heterosexual relations and, therefore, they cannot speak to the power dynamics within homosexual or other sexual relations.

### *Social Exchange Theory*

Another theory of power has been developed to explain the ways in which one person’s ability to influence another depends on their control over resources that the other needs or wants. This is called social exchange theory. Lips (1991) writes that these



“sources can be tangible, such as food, shelter, objects, sex, money, job advancement, awards, honors, grades; or intangible, such as love, approval, acceptance, emotional support” (p. 57). According to social exchange theory, as long as an individual has something the other person wants, neither has complete control over the other. In their article, "Power and Dependence in Intimate Exchange", van de Rijt & Macy (2006), further explain how power in the sexual context is viewed in social exchange theory. “The greater the relative attraction and attachment to the partner, the greater the partner’s power, and thus the greater the sexual effort that must be invested in the partner in order to balance the partner’s power” (p. 145). In a study that examined the balance of power in lesbian relationships and the factors that affect it, Caldwell & Peplau (1984), in their article "The Balance of Power in Lesbian Relationships", used the social exchange theory that predicts, “the partner who was relatively less dependent on the relationship and who has greater personal resources tended to have greater power” (p. 587). It seems almost common knowledge to use power in the context of social exchange or from a traditionalist perspective, but for the purpose of this paper, I will also include feminist theories on power.

### *Feminist Theories*

Sagrestano (1992) writes in her article, "The Use of Power and Influence in a Gendered World", that “power and gender are inextricably linked in our society to the extent that men tend to have greater access to concrete resources and other sources of external power. In addition, men tend to occupy higher status roles than women” (p. 439). Yoder & Khan (1992) seem to agree that women and men exert different power relations stating that desire for power “over” (more likely used by men) or the aim of intimacy or

connection (more likely used by women) are used based on the gender of the partner.

Sagrestano (1992) concurred that

because higher status people are assumed to be more competent and influential, women, by virtue of their lower status, are seen as more easily influenced. These differences in status lead to expectations for behavior that are played out and confirmed, thus maintaining them (p. 445).

Miller & Cummins (1992), in their study of women's perceptions of power, found that "women's definition of power differed significantly from their perception of society's definition of power [social exchange and traditionalist], as well as from the way power has traditionally been conceptualized" (p. 415). Therefore, gender is a vital factor in determining how concepts of power are played out in interpersonal relationships.

However, it is important to not rely solely on the notion that power is a gendered concept (a male form of power as dominating, compared to a female form of power as empowering), because as the research shows, there are several theories, definitions and contexts of power which include a variety of sources, where gender can be used to explain concepts of power, but not as the only source of power. This conclusion suggests that power dynamics are always present in gendered relationships, especially between women and men (Lipman-Blumen, 1984).

### *Self-in-Relation Theory*

So far, I have explored three different theories of power: traditionalist, social exchange and feminist. I will now continue to review a more relational theory of power that was developed by several writers from The Stone Center at Wellesley College called self-in-relation theory. This is also the primary theory I use in my study to explore

women's perceptions of different power dynamics in sexual encounters with women and men. The core definition used in this context is that power is the *capacity to produce a change*. Jean Baker Miller (1991) explains this definition further stating

to move anything from point A or state A to point B or state B. This can even include moving one's own thoughts or emotions, sometimes a very powerful act. It can also include acting to create movement in an interpersonal field, as well as acting in larger realms such as economic, social, or political arenas (p. 198).

Judith Jordan (2004) continues her explanation of power in the self-in-relation context by explaining; "an openness to being affected is essential to intimacy and a growth-enhancing relationship" (p. 33). In this statement, Jordan is indicating that power, as the capacity to produce a change, is used in a relational context for the benefit of the relationship and growth rather than domination or control over someone. Her more in depth clarification articulates that

The capacity to respect vulnerability in each person and the ability to maintain oneself in a state of openness to influence are essential. If we respond to the vulnerability in the other with a wish to contribute to her/his growth as well as to the growth of the connection, we are in the realm of love and mutuality. If vulnerability in the other instead leads to exercise of unilateral personal self-interest, we have moved into a 'power over' paradigm (Jordan, 1991, p. 2).

Therefore, in the context of sexual encounters, I was interested in researching how women experience different power dynamics and under which theory were they defining power. In a sexual context, "the capacity to produce change", as stated by the Stone Center writings, can manifest in many different ways. How do women experience

different power dynamics based on their partner's gender, and which definitions or sources of power are they using in reference to their understanding of power?

To emphasize that power within gender differences is not only binary, but transpires between women as well, studies such as Caldwell & Peplau (1984), Levitt & Hiestand (2005), and Ristock (2003), have shown that power dynamics do exist among women in sexual contexts. In an analysis of a longitudinal study involving 80 in-depth interviews of lesbian women, Ristock (2003) quoted one participant who said

The imbalance of power between a man and a woman is constant just because a man has privilege in society. And so there's always going to be that [imbalance of power], whether he's going to choose to work on it or not. Whereas with two women, I think that the power fluctuates more...there are more variables involved that can change (p. 338).

In a study that examined the balance of power in lesbian relationships and factors that affect it, Caldwell & Peplau (1984), suggested that

being in a lesbian relationship, there is no guarantee of avoiding power imbalances. Even among lesbian feminists who have been sensitized to power...if the partners are not equally involved and do not possess equal resources, there is a feeling of imbalanced power relations (p. 598).

The authors found that although lesbians strongly endorsed an egalitarian ideal of equal power in love relationships, nearly 40% reported an unequal balance of power in their own relationships (p.587). In a qualitative study by Levitt & Hiestand (2005), who interviewed 12 butch and 12 femme lesbian women, they examined how "butch" and "femme" genders influence sexual relationships. The authors found that "while femme

women could increase sexual tension [power dynamics] by demonstrating their power [the ability to choose] to accept or reject butch desire, butch women could increase sexual tension by demonstrating the worth of their desire” (p. 43). However, a participant in this study said that “in a lesbian context, it doesn’t have the same kind of...objectifying feeling that doing some of the same things [does in heterosexual contexts]” (p. 43). Findings from these three resources on lesbian relationships have demonstrated that although power dynamics do exist, they also fluctuate, compared to the literature on the binary genders (women and men) that demonstrate that men are typically more overpowering and women are more submissive. However, because of the comparative lack of research examining power dynamics among lesbians, along with the fact that most studies examined lesbian relationships instead of sexual encounters, there is a limit to the capacity to make solid generalizations on power dynamics in sexual encounters among lesbian women.

### *Summary*

In conclusion, the purpose of this study was to explore women’s perceptions of different power dynamics during sexual encounters with both genders. Literature from Bornsetin (1994), Fausto-Sterling (2000), Plante (2006), indicated that gender is binary as well as fluid, and that "sex" and "gender" are separate classifications both of which are seen from contracting perspectives such as "essentialism" and "social constructionism". Diamond (2000, 2005), Rothblum (2000), Plante (2006), Morgan & Thompson (2006, 2007), illustrated that sexuality is also a fluid term by indicating the large spectrum of sexual orientations, identities, and lifestyles. Henley (1977), Lips (1991), Yoder & Kahn (1992), Blanc (2001), Sagrestano (1992), Cummins & Miller (1992), and van de Rijt &

Macy (2006) have illustrated the many different kinds of power from traditionalist, social exchange to feminist theories, all of which elucidate power from different contexts and resources. Self-in-relation theory (Jordan, 1997, and Surrey & Baker Miller, 1991) provided a theoretical framework in reference to the internalized self-concept of women from a more relational context.

One of the drawbacks of the literature is that it does not fully consider the aspect of race. Of the minimal literature that speaks to the subject of women's sexuality, it is looked at from a fairly narrow frame of primarily White college students.

This previous research provided background material related to the perspectives on either sexual orientation/identity or power differences between male and female genders. However, there is limited research on power dynamics experienced among women during sexual encounters with the exception of Caldwell & Peplau (1984), Levitt & Hiestand (2005), and Ristock (2003) who provide the perspective that power dynamics fluctuate between women and are not as gender oriented as the binary gender studies show. Therefore, the limits to the literature providing the background for this study create a substantial bias in understanding the dynamics I examine.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This study attempted to examine the following question: Do women who have had sexual encounters with both women and men experience different power dynamics based on their partners' gender? This research question called for an exploratory qualitative design to gather information whether women experience different power dynamics during sexual encounters with women and with men because this area has not been investigated. This qualitative design allowed for an emotional sensitivity that captured women's sexual experiences, in order to derive meaning from their experiences. The use of flexible methods in the form of in person interviews yielded narrative data on women's perceptions of different power dynamics in their sexual encounters. According to Anastas (1999), flexible methods allow for intensive interviewing to explore and learn more about a phenomenon that has not been previously studied. This data collection method gives study participants the flexibility to elaborate on individual responses and experiences while at the same time allowing the researcher to clarify any questions that may be misunderstood.

Methods for data collection included an interview guide that was specifically designed for this study (appendix F) and use of an audio tape recorder to record the interviews. The interview guide consisted of six, semi-structured, open-ended questions that allowed me to maximize the quality and quantity of narrative data I collected.

### *Sample*

A non-probability sample of 11 women were recruited for this study. Inclusion criteria for the participants included: 1) participants had to be born with biological female characteristics and identify as the female gender; 2) participants had to have had sexual encounters with both male and female genders; and 3) participants had to be between the ages of 21 to 35. The age range of 21-35 was chosen to expand on previous research that included only adolescents and young adults. This age range was also chosen to speak to the many differences among women's sexual experiences during adolescence as opposed to adulthood. To investigate diverse demographic characteristics, women of color were recruited as well as White women. Bisexuality was not part of the inclusion criteria because of the variety of sexual identities within the sexual orientation spectrum.

### *Ethics and Safeguards*

Participation was voluntary. Participants did not receive any financial benefit for their contribution to this study. However, they may have benefited from knowing that they have contributed to the knowledge of understanding women's sexual encounters with both women and men and the possible differences in power dynamics between the two. They also may have benefited from being able to tell their stories and having their perspective heard.

Confidentiality was maintained, as consistent with Federal regulations and the ethical mandates of the social work profession. Confidentiality was protected and will continue to be protected by coding the information and storing the data in a locked file for a minimum of 3 years. The identities of the participants are protected, as names and other identifying information are disguised in the analysis of the data. Their names will



never be associated with the information provided in the interview. The findings of this study may be used in future presentations and/or publications.

The potential risk of participating in this study was the possibility that the participants may have felt strong or uncomfortable emotions while talking about their experiences. In case the participants needed additional support after their participation, they were given a list of resources for mental health services in the Bay Area. These resources included Women's Centers and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) services.

#### *Data Collection*

I began data collection after I received an approval letter from the Human Subjects Review Committee granting me permission to proceed with my study. I recruited participants by posting flyers in surrounding coffee shops, a women's center, and a women's bath house in the San Francisco area. I also posted flyers and other thesis information, such as the thesis question, on the Craigslist website under "activities", "general" and "women seeking women" in the community and personal classifications. Because a diverse sample was important for the findings of this study, I wrote a specific statement, in the flyer, explicitly soliciting the participation of diverse classes, races and ethnicities. Following their expression of interest in the study by contacting me either by phone or email, I assessed and determined their availability, and eligibility for participating in the study. When they expressed interest by email, I either asked for them to contact me by phone, or continued an email communication to fit their needs, in order to have a more thorough conversation. To encourage more participants, I used the snowball method by asking current participants to identify other women who might be

interested in taking part in this study. After I assessed their eligibility and they agreed to participate, the participant and I set up a place and time to meet for the interview. I emailed the informed consent form, a copy of the interview guide and resources to view prior to the interview. I collected the informed consent form at the time and place of the interview. The informed consent form explained the nature of the study, the risks and benefits of study participation, and the safeguards used to protect study participants. Interviews took place at the participant's preference, in a public setting that had the likelihood of affording a measure of privacy, such as a coffee shop.

I conducted a one-on-one, in-person, 45-90 minute, audio-taped interview with each study participant. My interview guide consisted of six, semi-structured, open-ended questions. I developed my interview questions based on the literature review and research question. The results of my literature review showed that, women's perceptions of the power dynamics during their sexual encounters with both genders are not explicitly discussed or noted.

My interview guide began with a demographic question that asked for the participants' age, gender/gender expression such as female or femme, sexual expression such as identity and/or orientation, race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Though the sample size is very small and could not provide reliable data on subgroup variations, several trends still emerged among the various demographic groupings. These trends indicate the need for further study or exploration.

The interview guide consisted of questions that are grouped into the following six themes: demographics, gender, sex, sexual identity, power in the sexual encounter, and influence of cultural factors.

Based on the information that my literature review produced, I believe these questions will enable me to answer the research question: Do women who have had sexual encounters with both women and men experience different power dynamics based on their partners' gender?

In order to increase the study's validity and reliability, I asked my thesis advisor to review and provide feedback on the clarity, relevance, wording, and flow of the questions included in the interview guide, and incorporated this feedback into my study. To address reliability issues I tested my interview guide with one subject that was not a part of the study. As the interviewer, I met with the participants' in-person and dedicated myself to monitoring my own subjective (verbal and non-verbal) reactions during the interview to prevent impacting my data and results (Anastas, 1999).

### *Data Analysis*

For each interview, I recorded the narrative data using an audio cassette recording device. I hired a professional to transcribe the entire interview. I then entered the results into a spreadsheet to collect and organize my data for each study participant. The spreadsheet allowed me to keep all the data in one place, which made it easier to recognize themes as I analyzed the data. This format allowed me to reorganize the data in order to recognize themes that may not be obvious. In order to enhance the accountability of this study, I created an audit trail to keep complete records of the research, the data, and the coding process (Anastas, 1999).

I completed a content and thematic analysis to analyze the narrative data I collected. Since the processes of data collection and data analysis overlap, I had to make sure to capture my thoughts and reflections thoroughly after each interview. Since the

data from each interview is grouped by question in my spreadsheet, as I analyzed the responses, I looked for similarities and/or differences. The demographic data will be presented in a brief summary, identifying patterns of similarity and variation.

### *Discussion*

Based on the literature review, research question, and my own biases, my expected findings were that participants report more power dynamics in their sexual encounters with men than with women, that their understanding of power is more traditional than relational, and that there is a greater amount of sexual fluidity among the participants in regards to their sexual orientation and identity.

Although unexpected findings are the norm in discussing data analysis, the nature of this study challenges these norms. Based on the literature review, sexual fluidity is found to be a growing concept in recent culture. This growing concept, itself, challenges the easy categorization of sexual orientation, gender and power dynamics, which are reducible to cultural expectations. Therefore, my own bias and expectations, question the normativity of these categories.

There are inevitably limitations and potential sources of bias included in this study even though it has been carefully designed. Limits to this non-probability sample are geographical location and its small size. While the snowball method was useful in obtaining my sample, it could also be a limitation. According to Anastas (1999), the snowball method may indicate bias since the original respondents use personal and professional networks.

My own potential bias also serves as a limitation since I believe that the power dynamics between women are more equal than between women and men. In order to

avoid such bias, I had to consciously be open and accepting of participants' thoughts and feelings that differ from my own. I carefully worded my questions so that I did not ask leading questions or only hearing confirming responses. However, since the interviews were conducted in a conversational style and follow-up questions were not part of the interview guide, it is possible that biases may have crept into the interview.

Although this study's generalizability is limited by the small sample size and geographic bias, the validity of the results depends on replication logic rather than sampling logic. I hope the findings of this study will add a contemporary component to the understanding of choice, power, and sexuality. These findings may benefit mental health professionals working with couples, women in intimate relations, and in particular, women in abusive relationships and LGBTQ communities. Hopefully the findings and questions raised by this study will invite further research regarding the differences of power dynamics among women who have had sexual encounters with women and men and the influence gender has on these power dynamics

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

I think that even though I am comfortable with my own personal sexuality, sometimes I do have these ideas of a woman's sexuality in society and how acceptable it is and I think about that...but I think society thinks differently about women and how they are involved in sexual relations. And I think the portrayal that society puts out there really does affect the woman's psyche to a point where sometimes if you do indulge in these acts, whether you feel comfortable with it, at the time and it was good and it was great, sometimes it comes out and you think about it and there's a sense of guilt to a degree saying, well it's not socially accepted, so it affects me on some level and I'm trying to work on that. And I think I'm getting there. (Number ten)

The quote above illustrates a response of one participant, identified as heterosexual with bisexual tendencies, when asked if she wanted to report any other thoughts about the interview she just participated in. Her response indicates the complexity of women's sexuality and her struggle to understand sexual identity while battling society's standards. Eleven participants were interviewed to explore their thoughts and feelings regarding their experiences during sexual encounters with women and men and how they experienced different power dynamics between these two genders. An open-ended, semi structured, face-to-face interview was used to generate information regarding this topic.

The interview and data analysis followed several areas of inquiry was stemmed from the question the thesis was designed to explore along with the literature review. Five categories with sub-categories will be examined and demographics of participants

and a brief profile of each participant will follow. Each participant will be identified as a number to conceal her identity and to protect confidentiality. The majority of the findings, not surprisingly, indicated that each participant had very subjective experiences that were extremely different from each other's. Another significant factor was how the participants interpreted the interview questions. Each answered differently, according to how they interpreted the open-ended questions. The following five categories of findings also include sub categories for a more detailed understanding. The first category is participants' experiences on how they feel gender affects power dynamics during sexual encounters with women and men, with sub categories of how they feel their partners' gender affects power dynamics, along with roles played out such as passive or aggressive. The second category is what constitutes as sex for them. The third category is how they described their sexuality in reference to their sexual orientation and identity with sub category of the (her)story of their sexuality. The fourth category is how they felt power was played out during sexual encounters with women and men with a sub category of their experiences with the initiation process. Lastly, the fifth category is how they felt their cultural background influenced their sexuality and power dynamics during sexual encounters with sub categories of experiences among women of color and Jewish ethnicity, and Caucasian women with European heritage.

#### *Demographics and Participant Profile*

The subjects' ages ranged from 21-35 with the average age being 26. All participants were biologically female and identified as the female gender. Their gender expressions were female and many identified as femme. Not all participants noted or named a sexual identity, but all did report their sexual orientation. Their sexual

orientations and identities varied on a spectrum from straight but open to a variety of sexual experiences to lesbian. Seven out of the eleven participants were of color or Jewish ethnicity<sup>1</sup>, and the rest were Caucasian. Their socioeconomic status varied, with middle-class being the most common. The following is a brief profile of each participant.

Number one is a 24 year old Chinese American. Her gender expression is femme.

In describing her sexual orientation/identity, she stated:

that's a little more ambiguous. I guess, queer is a good over arching term for it, but I guess anywhere from bisexual to lesbian. I'd say, if I was using bisexual [as a] term I'd define myself more geared towards women than men. For the most part I just use the label lesbian because it's easier for people to understand. If someone was going to ask me what a long-term relationship would be for me, I would rather be with a woman than a man and I know that.

She described her socioeconomic status as working middle-class

Number two is a 30 year old Caucasian with Russian Jewish heritage. Her gender expression is female. Her sexual orientation is bisexual and her sexual identity is lesbian.

She described her socioeconomic status as lower-middle, upper-lower class.

Number three is a 30 year old biracial, Mexican and Jewish woman with European heritage. She described her gender expression as "most of the time femme, female feminine". Although her sexual orientation is bisexual, her "attractions are pretty much overwhelmingly to women". She described her socioeconomic status as working class.

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<sup>1</sup> Although I am discomfited using the term "women of color" to justify the large diversity among the participants, I clumped the Jewish ethnicity and women of color together because I feel they experience White privilege differently in relation to power dynamics.



Number four is a 25 year old Mexican American. Her gender expression is female. Her sexual orientation is bisexual. She described her socioeconomic status as lower-middle class.

Number five is a 34 year old Caucasian who identifies most with her Irish heritage. Her gender expression is femme. Her sexual orientation is bisexual and her sexual identity is queer. She described her socioeconomic status as working poor.

Number six is a 27 year old biracial woman with South Asian and European decent. Her gender expression is female. Her sexual orientation is open heterosexual. She described her socioeconomic status as middle class.

Number seven is a 26 year old Caucasian Jew. In describing her ethnicity she stated: "I don't consider [being Jewish] my race, but it's a big part of my identity". She described her gender expression stating: "relatively feminine woman, not super feminine". Her sexual orientation is bisexual. She described her socioeconomic status as middle class.

Number eight is a 25 year old Caucasian Jew. Her gender expression is female. Her sexual orientation is bisexual. She described her socioeconomic status as upper-middle class.

Number nine is a 23 year old Caucasian female with Czechoslovakian and Italian heritage. Her gender expression is female. She describes her sexual orientation as heterosexual with bisexual tendencies. She describes her socioeconomic status as middle class.

Number ten is a 26 year old Caucasian with German and English heritage. She describes her gender expression as female and gender queer along with dyke and a gay

man trapped in a lesbian's body. Her sexual orientation is bisexual and her sexual identity is queer. She describes her socioeconomic status as lower class with middle-upper class support.

Number eleven is a 24 year old Caucasian with Italian heritage. Her gender expression is female. Her sexual orientation is lesbian. She describes her socioeconomic status as middle class.

*How Gender Affects Power Dynamics During Sexual Encounters with Women and Men*

Few participants felt their own female gender affected the power dynamics during sexual encounters with women and men. Some had difficulty comparing their experiences with women and men, and also felt they needed to have another gender to compare to. For example, they felt that if they knew what it felt to identify and be treated as male, then they would have something to compare these experiences to. Being female is what they know and what is normal for them. Therefore any comparison was difficult for them to grasp. However, each participant had uniquely different experiences on this topic, depending on how many partners they have had sexual encounters with and their sexual orientation. Number six identifies as openly heterosexual and stated:

I mean in terms of comparing being with women and with men, I think that there's a gender dynamic there with heterosexual men and women. [The] men that I generally would engage in sex with, they let the woman be more powerful in a way because I think they want to make sure, I think most men I engage with are fairly progressive and respectful of women, and so they kind of give the power over more to the woman to initiate, um in a way that I think gives women, a woman a certain power and I think that there's just also the kind of overarching dynamic that I think women can get more sex than men and much more easily. Um so I think there's this certain level of a power dynamic there where maybe the woman has more control over how far things are going.

I think with women, like, I think that the dynamic is different, because that dynamic is mapped out more. So then in my experience with women the power dynamic has been more of, well for me at least, my own, what's going on for me is about like the experience level that I feel with, I feel very confident with my abilities with men in bed, but I don't feel that way with women...I have much less experience with women. So I think the dynamic then kind of becomes more like, who I feel less comfortable initiating and I think there's some dynamic that goes on between who's more bisexual or more heterosexual or more homosexual that kind of somehow dictates the power dynamics a little bit or kind of that same dynamic, like how far we're going to go.

In this statement, Number seven, a bisexual, was clearer on how society determines the roles women are supposed to play in sexual encounters and how, even though this influenced her own power dynamics, her dynamics were different with women and men.

I definitely think gender affects my sexual performance or whatever. I know that's the wrong word, but my sexual encounter, I often think about what it would be like to be a man in sexual encounters and I think part of what I enjoy about being with women is that it's more fluid, it's not like, there are these roles that are easy to fall into because it's a little bit different. When there are two women it's not like there is a script. So, um, I don't know, I mean, I feel like the fact that I'm a woman makes me a little more passive, or I feel like that's how I'm supposed to be, but I really enjoy being aggressive. But I feel like it's harder for me to do with men, than with women.

Number nine who identified as heterosexual with bisexual tendencies stated that her gender clearly influenced her power dynamics.

I feel that my gender does affect the power dynamics on the other party, but it depends on the other person... if the person is, no matter whether they're male or female it depends on whether they have more feminine characteristics or more masculine characteristics. I feel being a female definitely affects the power dynamics because people feel a lot more comfortable and also will be more open to express fully what they want to be. You know it's just that mothering aspect of being with a woman, you know, from a woman's perspective. Whereas a man, it's hard to integrate that because we're not raised to really understand men as nurturing, you know so, you're going to be more receptive to a female and the dynamics of that, the power and the control is going to be more fluid.

Number eleven felt her lesbian identity along with her gender affected how her partners treated her in sexual encounters.

I do feel as a female um, females are generally expected to be more submissive, as a lesbian however, and as a masculine lesbian a lot more times I'm expected to be more dominant so in regards to like power dynamics, when I'm having sex I feel like when I'm having sex with girls I'm expected to be more aggressive. When I'm having sex with men generally I feel I'm supposed to be more submissive, so as a female I feel like I'm generally supposed to be more submissive so yeah... I think for the most part guys are into just being dominant over me and like talking dirty and stuff like that, in the straight men situations. And I've like hooked up with gay guys too where even like effeminate gay guys will then want to be a dominant male.

#### *How Their Partners' Gender Affects Power Dynamics*

Participants had more to say about their partners' gender affecting power dynamics during sexual encounters. Each participant had a variety of individual experiences, which indicates that the power dynamic experiences were extremely subjective. Many participants stated that the power dynamics depended upon the individual as well as the gender. Number one stated the power dynamics experienced depended upon her comfort level with her partners' gender.

In regards to power, it seems to be that relationships with women sexually...I feel like they are more equal or they should [be] more equal although that doesn't always happen and because no matter what woman you're with there's always a different dynamic between them. Obviously because they're individuals and I think that for me I guess in regards to power, I feel more open experimenting or trying different things with women than I am with men...I definitely wouldn't let a man, kind of go like do that same things or push my boundaries as far as I would let a woman. Like psychologically in a sexual relationship. I don't know if it's just like this overwhelming fear of having a guy in the patriarchy like take over or something. But I've definitely felt more hesitant or more even like kind of oddly more dirty about things that I would do with men that if I'm in the context of doing the same things with a woman um I'm more open but also more vulnerable with a woman.

However, Number three added:

...plenty of men, even men who weren't necessarily over, over the top macho still, definitely there was just this implicit inherit power dynamic, um, depends on my relationship with them...the thing that women attack each other on is not being feminine enough and that even though, I would like to think I'm above that, and I consider myself a very strong feminist and I look at those things all the time and analyze those roles, that still can kind of get to me, you know. I think that, I'm conflicted about that, both wanting to say, fuck those notions and those standards, but at the same time being insecure about it.

Number five described her expectations of the partners' she's been with.

Well with men I know that they're just stronger. And I like that feeling, even though I initiate I like the fact that they take over a lot of the time and then we just go on. With women I like the rough play too. If they're butch I expect it. Just the energy is slightly softer and that women, even though they're butch, they'll end up showing a little bit more vulnerability, where[as with] men they just don't. It's so hard to get them to show vulnerability. I find also that the guys that are a little bit more willing to be sexual were with women that complained a lot more because I have a high sex drive and they were just like, god do we have to have sex all the time? And I'm like, yeah, it's one of the ways that I express myself. And even guys have had problems with that, which has shocked me, I'm like, you guys are supposed to have a high you know sex drive, you're supposed to be wanting it all of the time.

Number ten felt her experiences of power dynamics during sexual encounters

varied depending upon her comfort level and feelings of wanting to be desired.

I feel like the women I've chosen and been attracted to have been more aggressive than the men I've chosen and been attracted to, the men tend to be pretty passive and quiet um so then I do feel actually more comfortable being more aggressive and maybe that's because I have more confidence that I'm desired by them or more, confidence that I can be desired or that I would be desired or wanted and with women I'm more insecure and less sure of myself...when I started interacting with women it was like everything totally changed and I was so wanting the approval of women especially when I first came out and this was about five years ago, I really wanted the approval and I wanted to know that I was good enough or attractive enough or I'm not quite sure, I just wanted to know that I was desired.

### *How Roles are Played Out Such as Passive or Aggressive*

Similar to the above topics, the participants' experiences with roles played out in sexual encounters all varied accordingly to the participants and their partners' individual personalities. Number nine reported her role depended upon her partners' energy.

I would have to say that it's a mixture of two, [passive or aggressive]. I could be passive and I also could be aggressive, depending on just the energy of that person and just how attracted or drawn I am to them or whether it's just a mutual friend where we just feel comfortable doing that, it's more passive.

Number one felt similarly:

I'm pretty much a big old switch...I can be rather aggressive in both relationships, whether they're with men or with women. [In the] relationship that I've had with a man...I could really be an aggressor or dominant and it was kind of role play and it [was] kind of fun to be masculine or taking on a dominant role...Femme doesn't mean top or bottom. It's very separate from what you do in the bedroom. Femme itself doesn't fully define who I am. Most people I guess sometimes when I tell people about myself I would say I look just like a straight girl, even though I'm gay.

Number two added more directly about certain roles played out.

I act for a lot of men as a teacher. I mean I think a lot of men respond to that role and I take it on easily, so um, I think that that has been more of my dynamic with men as opposed to with women there's for me, a bit more equality of giving and receiving and teaching and learning. I feel that there is, that they're more receptive to being teachers and learners and I feel probably more receptive to them as well, with women.

Conversely, Number six felt differently in stating that her dynamics and roles feel more equal during sexual encounters with men than with women.

I think that with women, um, it tends to me to feel a little more like one person is giving and one person is receiving because, my kind of feeling is that when you're having, when I'm having intercourse with a male, it's like we're both kind of giving and receiving because both like persons body parts are involved, both persons sexual body parts are really involved. ...Somehow to me with women, it feels like, the roles are sort of played out a little bit more, because at some point you might be kind of giving more and thus be more aggressive and more active and the other person is being more passive.

However, Number eleven felt her roles fluctuated more during her sexual encounters with women.

...And you know, sometimes that can be really, really hot (acting like a "pillow princess" where a woman lies there and tells you what sexual things to do to her) and like I'm into that a lot, but with other girls it's more like kind of going back and forth kind of thing, so I feel like, especially when it comes to being a lesbian, like all the times, it's very separated, more boyish, more girlish, girly-girl, I'm going to go down on you, I'm going to fuck you and they're like do your thing. And in a lot of cases like it's happened where it goes even and you know return the favor but sometimes it's not even.

#### *What Constitutes as Sex*

There is a considerable amount of overlap among the participants' definitions of sex. The majority felt that intercourse, use of sex toys, anal and oral sex were considered sex by their definitions. Many participants were aware that their definitions of sex were influenced by what society's definitions of sex are. However, some women added other interactions that constituted as sex for them.

Intercourse seems very ambiguous to me. [I see intercourse as] a heterosexual couple caressing each other. What constitutes sex on a larger scale is a little bit of all these things on your list, but I'd say like for me, [penetration] is what I'd consider real sex. (Number one)

Number three felt similarly, and added another form of sex to her definition.

I think I've been so socialized into the idea that the only real sex is intercourse, and then once obviously having with women, I knew that was sex, but it wasn't penile vaginal intercourse, so that kind of changed that so, um, I guess these days, oral sex, anal sex, intercourse and using sex toys all fall into sex. Sometimes S&M play is sex and sometimes it isn't. [And] I've worked, I've done that professionally and none of that was sex, but, it's funny because some of the same activities...when I was doing it for my own pleasure rather than money, then I would have considered it sex.

Number four felt similarly and proposed some more flexibility. Some acts were considered sex for her, depending on the situation.

[I think] oral sex, anal sex, intercourse and use of sex toys [constitute as sex]. Caressing and fondling, no. Foreplay depends if your clothes are on or not. Kissing, no. I guess traditionally intercourse because you're, I mean there's vaginal either insertion or penetration. So I guess, I mean traditionally mainstream, that's the proper word for it. I mean if you say intercourse, everybody is going to automatically know what you're talking about, as opposed to saying oral sex, you know you say is she doing it or is he [doing] it or is it two, because that may not be intercourse for some people, but for me it is. Um and sex toys kind of threw me off I guess. So I don't, um, maybe case by case.

Number five felt differently from most participants in stating that all forms of sexual encounters given in the interview constituted as sex for her and also added on another form of sex.

Oral yes, anal I don't like doing, but I will do, so that's yes. Intercourse, of course. Sex toys yes, caressing and fondling yes, foreplay yes, kissing yes, all of the above yes. [And] massages. When I'm getting into it and they're feeling pleasure and I'm feeling pleasure being able to give them the massage or they're giving me the massage and I'm feeling pleasure and being taken care of and sensual and sexual. Yep, it can reach that point, definitely.

Number ten felt similarly, adding:

When I say sex I qualify it and say intercourse, I think I'm falling in line more with society's term of sex. However, for me personally that's a really good question because it's sort of unfortunate, or I would like to work on redefining how I use that word. [But the use of sex toys, caressing, fondling and kissing] I would kind of constitute them all as sex.

However, Number six went back and forth in understanding her definitions of sex.

I would probably only say intercourse. If I use the word sex, I would say intercourse. I've used sex toys but I haven't used a dildo, I haven't used a strap on with a woman or something so I don't know what I would call that. I think I would say she fucked me with a strap on, I had sex with her. Yeah, I don't know if I would use that term. I guess, yeah I think I'm pretty, I would say intercourse means sex.

Number eight added another form of sex that wasn't on the interview guide.

One thing I don't see on there is manual penetration. [Manual penetration] is someone using their fingers to penetrate you, vaginally or anally. Intercourse and oral sex is what I think of when I think of sex. I don't have anal sex, but I think it



constitutes as sex. I don't think of [caressing, fondling, kissing and foreplay] as sex. The use of sex toys, I think of as sex.

Number nine also added:

I would have to say it's all of the above [oral sex, anal sex, intercourse, the use of sex toys, caressing, fondling, kissing and foreplay]. Other acts are like multiple partners.

Number eleven stated that her definitions of sex varied depending on the gender of her partner she's having a sexual encounter with.

Oral sex, I feel like it's sex with male or female. Anal sex is definitely sex either way. Intercourse is sex either way, how, like as a lesbian, intercourse as I know it is obviously considered sex. Use of sex toys, yes, with females more so than males. Caressing and fondling, no, that's like foreplay. Kissing, no.

#### *Participants' Sexuality in Reference to Their Sexual Orientation and Identity*

The majority of participants identified as bisexual. Each had unique understandings of what bisexuality means to them. Most women struggle with labels, unsure of whether to use specific terms for their own identity or to describe their sexual behaviors to others. However, some women are completely comfortable with their sexual fluidity. Regarding the focus of this study, every participant's experiences and meaning making of her sexuality differed considerably. Number two explains the complexity of her sexuality in reference to her comfort level.

So the reason I identify as a lesbian, um I am married and I have male lovers. I'm married to a man but I feel like maybe it has something to do with the people I feel most comfortable with and that's the lesbian community. Like I feel more at home there, that that community understands me more than others in general. Um, so let me think, yeah I identify as a lesbian, but it's not by the book true because I sleep with all sorts of genders, so yeah.

Number eleven, also identifies as a lesbian and explains her sexuality by stating:

I do identify as a lesbian, I used to identify as bisexual. I do identify as a lesbian however I do consider myself very sexually fluid in that I'm completely open to a

man being able to provide the same thing for me that a woman can. So I'm open to it and I've definitely experimented with it a lot of times in my identifying as a lesbian. I feel like every time I am with a woman I was more passive sexually and then as soon as I break up with them, the last three times I've gone out and found a very aggressive male and quote unquote dated him for a month and just been like very sexually active in a very aggressive way, with a male just because I feel like you know I wasn't getting that from the female. And so, I do that, but I'm very open to finding sexual happiness with a male, I just haven't experienced it yet, so I consider myself a lesbian. Yeah.

Number ten added more meaning making to her labels and whom she labels herself for.

I mean I guess if I had a choice of identifying as more than one I would identify as a dyke probably more comfortably and a bisexual; a bisexual lesbian. I don't know how society would feel about that, and I want to respect everybody's you know, it's also a matter of respect, because I do feel like changing from like lesbian to bisexual might be kind of a matter of respect um, in my sexuality in myself and for those around me because if I'm going to actively pursue and fool around with men then identifying as a lesbian isn't really um accurate, I don't know, it doesn't really you know other lesbians really find power and strength in that title like I have found a lot of power and strength in that title, so how would I feel if someone was sleeping with a man but identifying that way... I was hoping to one day be able to marry my two identities and bring my different parts of myself together into one piece and feel good about it. So now I've taken on bisexuality, but it's sort of like an older, I feel like it's sort of like an archaic term, but I feel like it's the one that best describes me. So yeah, I think my sexuality is more fluid.

Number four added that her sexual fluidity was more of a stage for her and that she is now grounded in her bisexual identity.

Literally, I guess bisexual. At this point I think it's (sexuality) not as fluid as it used to be because it was more of an experimental stage for me, just within the last few years. I mean it's (bisexuality) at a standstill as far as my own identity goes.

Number five speaks to her understanding of labels and makes a clear distinction between the label she prefers and the label society is more comfortable with.

I'm definitely bisexual, maybe even sexually fluid, because I don't rule out transgender people at all, so. Yeah, I'm just attracted to the person, so, I guess

bisexuality and sexual fluidity, that's part of that box that can be very, you know you move around in. And so, yeah definitely bisexual is the designer label, but queer and fluid is probably more of the way to describe it.

Number seven describes her frustration with the term bisexuality, but uses other labels to make meaning of her identity.

I would say, I mean bisexual is a part of it. So, for me the term bisexuality has always been a little annoying cause I feel like it has a lot of stigma. To me bisexuality means like you're both straight and gay; you're not half of each.

Number eight adds:

I identify as bisexual. And I mean I feel like my sexuality is fluid in that I am attracted to men and women sexually, but I use the term bisexual because I think it has a political connotation and that's important to me. I think the political part of it feels to me like um, refusing to fit into like a binary, like being gay or straight, and kind of saying, you know, like those categories don't feel like enough to me. Yeah, I guess that's the best way I can describe it.

Number six identifies as openly heterosexual and describes her frustration with labels in trying to understand her identity.

Yeah I think [my sexuality] is more fluid, I just think the language that people use is really limiting and so I don't think that it's, I don't even know that it's helpful. I guess defining gender to me, I don't know that much about transgenderisms and that's like a whole other different kind of topic but it seems clear to me now that even trying to use words like heterosexual or bisexual or homosexual are really pretty kind of silly. So even just like thinking about my own sexuality, like you know, makes me start thinking like, is there really a change in anything I want or is it just like being open minded to other things and is it also like thinking about un-conditioning yourself from you know, 25 years of basically being presumed to be heterosexual and just kind of acting and conforming with that.

Whereas Number nine explains her fluidity based on more of the energy and the individual she is attracted to, rather than the gender.

I really am attracted to what makes the person, the characteristics of that person and their outlooks in life and what their belief systems are and what makes them and um, then I may be attracted to them and it doesn't have to mean that they're a female or a male, so. I would say my sexuality is more fluid as far as my bisexual tendencies, just because I haven't met someone that was a) either open to it b)

where I felt comfortable with them and I've had more opportunities with men that have pursued me or also I felt comfortable with them. I have not come across a lot of other bisexual women, but there were times when I've had sexual relations with straight women, so you know, which was just kind of like a shock to both of us. So it all depends on you know that moment of attraction and how things unfold and that's how it becomes fluid, it's nothing planned, it's just very human. I don't think there's more of a preference as long as we're compatible.

*(Her)story of Their Sexuality*

Then I kind of came to terms with the fact that sexuality can just be fluid and you can just do whatever you want and then I went back to identifying as a lesbian because I just feel that's the category that best describes me. (Number twelve)

Consistent with the findings of this study, each participant had a very subjective and unique experience with the history of their sexuality. A common theme was that most women first identified as heterosexual during their early years because they were taught to live in a heterosexual society, and therefore, be heterosexual themselves. Many struggled with labels and external and internalized homophobia, in reference to their sexual behavior. Overall, many participants had gone through several changes throughout their life, so far, in coming to terms with and understanding their sexual identity. Number one explains her struggle with internalized homophobia.

I think what's changed for me is that like even though I had you know a girlfriend in college and I've mostly dated women for the past five or six years, um I guess a lot of internalized homophobia that I've had. Um, which makes me like identify more as a lesbian or you know follow my attraction to women more than I might have in the past. The last girlfriend I had complained that I wasn't gay enough.

Number three explains her struggle with labels along with her fluid sexuality.

I've kind of come to that point that I'm just, I don't think I'm ever going to be completely 100% lesbian, but I still, I've gone through periods where again even if I was with a man I would say I'm a lesbian with a boyfriend because I was so much more overwhelmingly attracted to women than men, and you know I happen to have a boyfriend right now who I'm actually getting married to. I've used the label queer to describe myself as well um and I think sometimes with my self labeling, I don't know why it changes sometimes it's just I'm feeling more like

using one word than another, but I've decided that I've certainly come to the description that I'm not heterosexual. And now it's okay to not be identifying as a lesbian if I'm not. What am I trying to say, [I'm] more identifying with my female relationships and my woman oriented sexuality...the short answer [is] that my social climate has influenced how I've identified my sexuality even though my sexuality underneath has probably remained the same, but how I presented it or identified has been influenced by the context I'm in.

Similarly, Number five describes her struggle with labels.

I came out as bisexual when I was 27. I came out as lesbian when I was 18, but I'd always messed around with boys and girls all growing up. I had my own difficulties and everything with trying to fit in and figure it all out, um I came into it already with kind of a queer sensibility. I already knew if I, even though I didn't verbalize it that I wasn't straight and I wasn't a lesbian, even though I identified from the age of 18 to 27 as a lesbian. And then had some sexual affairs with men during that period, but had to try and keep it quiet...and I got excommunicated for a bit from the lesbian community, it was horrible. And so I returned to the feminist and then I re-entered into the queer community. The second time coming out as bisexual was much better.

Number six explains her sexual fluidity as open minded.

Well, until very recently I would have described, I mean I've always been open minded, but I would have described myself as heterosexual. And I, I guess I would, I just, I think it's a little more, I guess, like now I would say it's just not that straightforward. I have a vision of that being with a man, so I mean yeah I would say, open heterosexual, generally, more regularly heterosexual um but definitely open and exploring. Not exploring to change it, just exploring like I don't have any kind of limit on who and what [I sleep with].

While Number seven describes her security with her bisexuality.

I've always identified as bisexual, not necessarily publicly, but to myself since I was 14 or 15. I mean it's definitely been a process. Before that I guess I assumed I was straight. And I think the thing is the reason why I need to explain [bisexuality as being both straight and gay] like that sometimes is that I think a lot of times, people fear that you'll never be really satisfied by either gender, and to me I could be satisfied by either gender.

Similarly, Number eight reiterates how she thought she was heterosexual in her early years, until she realized her attracted to women.

It's changed, um initially well I thought I was straight until maybe I was fourteen, and then I thought maybe I was a lesbian and I came out as gay and then I realized really quickly that I was still attracted to men. But by the time, by the end of the year I was fourteen I was firmly rooted in bisexuality and identified that way ever since. So there was really only a brief moment in thinking maybe I was gay and I think I got exposed to a lot of those myths that bisexuals are you know, just trying to make up their minds and on the fence and bought into that for a brief second.

Number ten describes her struggle with internalized homophobia and labels. She also explains how her sexuality greatly affected her gender identity.

You know there was very much a time when I was like yeah I think I'm hetero [even though] I knew that I was gay, I could feel that I was attracted to women, but I really wanted to reject that so I was like no I'm hetero, like I'm straight. And I do think it's a huge part to add in that I think that ultimately what I've constantly been struggling with internally is not my sexuality but my gender identity, and I use sexuality in order to more fully embrace my gender identity...a huge part of being a lesbian was coming out as gender queer. I guess through history has gone from identifying as straight to lesbian and now to bisexual and feeling very comfortable even though I think that maybe the term pansexual would be more appropriate as far as um just picking a term, I feel fine with that.

*How Power Dynamics, From a Relational Perspective, are Played Out During Sexual Encounters with Women and Men*

Participants' experiences varied considerably according to their understanding of power from a relational model. Participants had difficulty in understanding how to use the definition of power as "the capacity to produce change" or "the ability to make choices". Therefore, each participant explained her experiences of power dynamics in the best way they knew how, using a relational perspective on power. The majority felt there were differences in power dynamics during their sexual encounters with women and men. Most felt that their sexual encounters with women were more complex than their power dynamics with men. Number one reported an example of how different power dynamics were for her during sexual encounters with women and men.

...Or it'd be in the morning and he'd like hit me with his cock or something or he would tap me and I'd be like don't do that again. That's not cool. I don't care what you watched in pornos, that's not sexy...he actually told me like well girls like it in porn, why don't you? And I was just like, this isn't cool. But with a woman, for whatever reason, you know even if I don't like something as much, I'd be a little more hesitant about hurting her feelings or you know I'm even more hesitant, sometimes, not so much anymore but in the past to ask for what I wanted or push for what I wanted more, but I mean I'm a little more assertive now about what I want but I definitely know those boundaries are a little more flexible with women, I can let them get away with more.

Number three acknowledged a similar perspective in how the porn industry affects certain power dynamics played out with men, and how the comfort level is more prominent during sexual encounters with women.

I'm thinking of a few people in particular who just... disempowered me. I think one of the things that I've struggled with is um, men's attitudes towards women, um, sexism and heterosexism being inherent in so many of these relationships with men. Men who were sort of just more traditional gender role and you know again, to be in relationships with them and to just fight about it the whole time, like I was playing out some bigger social struggle in this relationship. I think maybe because those gender roles, traditional gender roles, all that dynamic gets thrown out the window when it's two women.

The difference between sex with men and women is that men have, still have this power over women, or for me over the way they look at you and the way they judge you and evaluate your body, especially when they're looking at porn and they're looking at these ideal images or you know when their bodies are one way and mine's not, but I don't feel that way with women, because when I'm in bed with a woman, her body is just as imperfect as mine, as opposed to with a man there's a fantasy that he compares you to, or I think he compares you to with the porn ideal or whatever. With women, I don't feel insecure about my body at all. That's the difference. With men I am still worried about whether I'm too fat or if my breasts are not the right size or the way that my vulva looks, but with women it's just not even remotely in the picture, because we have the same bodies, or we're both just as insecure about our bodies, so that kind of throws that out and so I think there's something about that, about being, about having the same body.

Number four felt at first there were no power dynamics played out until she realized during the interview that there was a difference she's experienced.

No, I think I'm at a place where as long as it's communicated you can both be happy or you can both be on your way. There's never really a power struggle, but now you know, thinking about it and um, thinking about the difference between, I think that with men it's more like, how can I say it, it's almost like they present the situation or they present what they want and it's like a negotiation process. So it's like a back and forth, instead of, just, I don't know. Instead of just going in and doing whatever, that it's like, it's almost as if they have that attitude of coming into the situation and ok this is what I want, this is what I want you to do or this is what I need from you, and if you can give that to me ok, and if not then goodbye. So um, and with women, I haven't encountered women with that attitude. So definitely there's a belief from the men that I've seen or dated or been with that their needs will probably come first. So maybe that sense of power that they can demand and that they're entitled. Yeah I mean, they're going to cum, no matter what the situation is going to be, you know and, you're not always going to. And if you do, you're lucky sometimes, you know.

Number five reported not experiencing any difference in power dynamics between women and men.

Um, no. [I don't find a big difference in power dynamics between men and women], not sexually. Yeah I think maybe because I do identify more femme and I do identify as a bottom in wanting to be sexually pleased, but I'm also equally willing to please, and so I expect it both ways. And the difference I see is that people aren't as willing, both men and women, a high sex drive, which I question with my friends, why do I have such a high sex drive, you guys have high sex drive, but why am I being punished for that. No, I don't see much of a difference, because I date butch women and I definitely think they're pretty similar to guys.

Number nine felt the contrary.

Um, [power dynamics are] always going to be different with every single woman regardless, because you can see well with a certain woman, if she's a straight woman, she's going to differ than a masculine woman compared to a feminine lesbian woman, they all act so differently. I've met some lesbians that are more manly than some, completely more manly than some men out there so I know that when I meet that person, I'm like, ok this is how they're going to be...it's a little bit harder [with men], because men always try to portray themselves as being more masculine, they always want to be a man, they're never gay, they want to be a man, but there's always a you know soft side, sometimes the guy just wants you know the woman to take care of him, you know, so sometimes, you have to be a little more aggressive, and I think it's because I seek out feminine men sometimes, but it doesn't mean that I'm limited to that choice, but I find that um, you know sometimes people surprise me.



Number six reported feeling more powerful with men in relation to the power of seduction, in particular because of her comfort level with men.

...when I think about the ability to make choices and who initiates sexual acts, I definitely feel, like I'm so much more confident with men. And so definitely like I just feel that the determination, there's something about the way I feel with a man is that I just feel like we're equal, we come to the table as equal or I come more experienced. I don't feel like I've ever met a man who's made me feel like I'm less experienced than he is. And so in that way, and there's just that dynamic. I think that men find it attractive when women are more dominant because I think many men maybe not have been with, or maybe that's just a stereotype I have about men, but that they have often been with women that aren't that way, so that it's exciting and sexually attractive to them and that is easy for me like I feel like it's easy to initiate. Um when my partner is a woman, I'm thinking about experiences with women where obviously things have happened, um I've um, I'm trying to think, it's definitely different between different sexual partners so um, with, and in obviously different circumstances would just make it easier or more difficult.

Number eight echoed number seven in her description of her comfort level with men.

Well, I just think I probably feel like I have less power relating sexually to women because I'm less experienced with women and I'm more in the heterosexual world so I don't know maybe if I wasn't married maybe that would change. I don't know, maybe that might play into it a lot.

Number ten reported how her communication styles differ during sexual encounters with women and men.

The ability to make choices and the capacity to produce change I guess in that sense I do um, I want to say inhabit, but that's not the right word, I do produce a lot of power because I do feel really confident in bed, I do feel like ok let's try this or let's try that, no I want you to do this to me and I want to do this to you, is that ok? Like I'll suggest things, I'm very communicative. With men I don't think I ask as much as with women. Women I'm much like, do you want me to finger you, and do you want more than one finger? I remember I was going out with this guy and he, the same guy, and he used more than one finger and I was totally appalled. I was just like you ask before you do that, just in my mind, I was just like you don't just do that because you think it's going to work, that's something that you should for sure ask about.

### *The Process of Initiating Sexual Encounters*

Number three explains her common experiences with men initiating sex.

But in terms of power, with who initiates it, I've certainly been on the receiving end of having sex initiated by men that I was not, that's the difference too, I don't think that I would ever have a problem saying no to a woman if I didn't want to have sex with her, I've had a lot of problems with men. I've been pressured into, I've never, it's not the same as being you know physically forced, it's been more like a passive aggressive, a whiny bugging me until I'm give in kind of just subtle pressure rather than over the top pressure from men that I've given in to so many times that I didn't feel good about and it would always leave me feeling like shit, the encounter, and you know talk about power, I mean I just felt like crap.

Number four felt similarly.

[Men] always, they have like a sense of entitlement coming into it knowing what they want to do and what they want me to do. Um, but, I think initiating it is different from the way they're going to come in to the sexual act. I mean I can very easily initiate the sexual encounter but if you're talking about men compared to women, in my experience, I don't know I've met some pretty interesting women, so I guess it would be about equal in my experience. The women who just initiated, I've had many experiences with older women, so they have a lot more experience and they have like things that they're definitely into. They've gone down the road of exploration. They know what they want. They know what gets them off. You know, so it's I guess it would be about equal.

However, number six describes her experience of initiation feeling less powerful with women.

...then the power dynamic as we got further along I started feeling because I know that she's more experienced, I started feeling less able to initiate. And I remember, I kind of said something like I wasn't sure how far I wanted it to go, probably because I was just scared of like not being like good at whatever, so there's definitely, like I think the power fluctuates for me between my perception of the other person, more just like openness and so obviously maybe with her I felt like well she's going to be like judging my performance, maybe I feel less so about that with men in general or maybe it's just a particular partner. I feel like I generally feel like women are going to be judging my performance and thus that makes me feel less powerful.

Although her sexuality was different from Number six, Number nine felt similarly in feeling less powerful with women and more powerful with men during sexual encounters.

I think I've pretty much always been the person who initiates more or has more power in those sexual relationships that I've been in. I think I'm the one who initiates more and that doesn't necessarily mean like I'm the more like assertive or aggressive person, during the whole time, like that the person at other moments could also be assertive, but I just think I tend to initiate things and be more vocal. I think I have a harder time initiating with women. I feel shy. I feel less confident in my sexual abilities. I feel less confident that they're going to be attracted to me. I'm less likely to initiate with a woman. Maybe part of that is socialization just like growing up and like learning how to flirt with men and approach men that feels like really natural and easy whereas, you know, approaching a woman you never know if that woman is also queer or if that woman is also going to be interested in you and I feel like there's more fear of getting rejected. Um yeah I think the fear or rejection fear of not being seen as like queer that they'll think I'm straight.

*How Their Cultural Background Influences Their Sexuality and Power Dynamics During Sexual Encounters*

As consistent with this study, all experiences were entirely subjective and unique to each individual. Seven out of the eleven women who participated were either of color or Jewish. The majority of participants in this category had experiences of power dynamics related to their sexual encounters and/or their sexuality. The most common theme for women of color was the exoticization of their sexuality because of their race. The only overlap found was that most Caucasian and Jewish women felt little power dynamics related to their race. However, the Jewish women's reports on how their cultural background affected their sexuality and power dynamics varied accordingly. Each participant had a great deal to report on this topic. For convenience of

understanding participants' experiences, their stories are divided into two sub categories of "culture and/or familial influence" and "issues of race".<sup>2</sup>

*Experiences Among Women of Color and Jewish Ethnicity*

Chinese American- Number one

*Issues of race.*

My first girlfriend was Indian my second girlfriend was Chinese as well and I never really kind of envisioned myself you know being in relationships with women who were the same race as me, but then um my last girlfriend was White and the power dynamics were really different because of race actually, um, for whatever reason and for socio economic reasons as well because she came from a more underprivileged background and thought that like my middle class background was really kind of um you know extravagant which it was just something that I was used to. She said a bunch of other whacked out stuff that had to do with race that didn't make sense like I was racist against White people, which is really funny.

Mexican American- Number four

*Culture and/or familial influence.*

I've always been attracted to women, but of course being a woman of, in my family and traditionally and religiously, there's really no fluidity allowed. My parents are Catholic and I grew up in the Catholic Church, and there's just no room for it. And then traditionally I mean, Mexican American parents, or Mexican parents are quite I guess sheltered from any other types of sex other than the traditional kind as far as what they teach you.

*Issues of race.*

...in the LGBT community, there's such a diverse group of women of cultures of religions of everything, um I've been lucky enough not to encounter anything like that, where I think you know that somebody's going to use my culture against me, but I did have an encounter not too long ago, that kind of brought it out and it made me really uncomfortable. I was with an older gentleman, in his 40's I guess, and he said something about being his little Mexican slut. Like I thought about it,

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<sup>2</sup> In order to give voice to the different stories and the impact of culture and race, it seemed more productive to organize this section by reporting individual stories without finding similarities or consistency.

and I was like, why does it have to be Mexican you know? Like why can't it just be like his little slut, you know? Because, we met because, well the age thing like, he was interested in being with a younger woman and I was interested in being with an older man, but I never and up until that point, and it was like in the middle of having sex that that came up. So instead of, the throes of passion you say all these things that you can't really be held accountable sometimes.

South Asian/European- Number six

*Culture and/or familial influence.*

... but I think that my identity as a woman, I think that I have found myself to be interesting because of my different background. I always felt like I was so different from other people and that kind of made me more appealing as a woman in the eyes of certain people. So I think my identity as a woman, and of course this has really changed over the last ten years, you know, my awareness of all that has changed. And then, in my definition of sex, I don't know that I think my cultural background influences that. I don't think it plays really into my sexuality either. Um into that whole conversation about defining what that is, but I think it certainly plays out during the power dynamics during sexual encounters.

...but you know having that mixed race with parents coming from different countries and different cultures and I find myself attracted to that again, because once again it kind of equalizes the power dynamics. So in the past, so like right before that, I dated this man who was a White guy and he generally only dated brown skinned women and that was just his thing and there was just like this feeling that doesn't feel quite right, like I just happened to fit, like I happened to be, I guess a cuter and intelligent enough brown woman for [him].

*Issues of race.*

...so there's a clear exoticizing problem, um well I perceive it to be a problem. I don't think I always perceived it to be a problem, so I think that there's that fine line that I'm different and that's exciting to people and um that makes me more attractive to certain men in certain ways or certain women because I'm different from them, um and I think that, but then there's the um, well it's interesting because I think it's really tied into the fact, it's the race dynamic within the, it's the race of the man or the woman is significant to me in this conversation. And I really this I could probably, I don't feel like I have much to say about it in relation to women because I feel that in the last, my more, I don't feel like my race has played a big role in my experiences with women. I feel like, my general like, play sex stuff, like I haven't felt that my race has been particularly of importance or interest. I haven't thought about. Maybe I just don't think about it as much in like that kind of, where it feels like it's just kind of about sex and it's less about who I am as a person, and it's more like, hey, that'll be fun for now, you know.

Mexican/Jewish- Number three

*Culture and/or familial influence.*

I always got the I'm not enough of whatever and I've gotten that a lot from men and I guess I got really tired of that...but I think that, that part of me, for a while there, when I was feeling like I had to choose one or the other I'd rather pick Jewish because you know sexuality was ok, being gay was ok, abortion was ok, all of that was ok on that side and that was, that's still been hard for me, just trying to figure out how can you be Jewish and Mexican at the same time because they don't entirely go together and so much of Mexican culture is Catholic and that's so anti- everything I am.

*Issues of race.*

I had so much internalized racism and homophobia that for the longest time, it was easier for me to come out as bisexual than biracial...in terms of the power dynamics again it's probably been, there have been times I think where some of the power dynamics during sex, or certain ones, when I was talking about relationships, about the fear of rejection about the need for acceptance and approval and having grown up with trying so hard to pass and fit in as being White and so some of that plays into that I think, or just general issues in power of the same kind of insecurities for me of being a woman of being a queer woman of being a minority woman, because I don't think I've ever had any really negative encounters with somebody that I was sexual with, I mean I've certainly gotten all types of comments from strangers about being you know Jewish or Mexican.

White/Jewish- Number two

*Culture and/or familial influence.*

I feel like I've spent a lot of time in my life trying to fight for equality, growing up in the south. It took a lot to stand up for people being equal. And so, so much of it has been fighting against White males and for African Americans in general, or minorities in general that it would be hard to play putting them down [in a dominant sex role], which is what most people want, or what some people want in that role I guess, to make them feel smaller than they are [in S&M play].

*Issues of race.*

Ok, um, so it's one of those things as a White person, I don't have to recognize daily, so it's not something that I have to really think about like that. I mean I should think about it of course, but I don't, it's not in my face all the time, like being a minority... so um I guess, coming out as a lesbian is, I only have one strike against me. You know only one minority that I am a part of at that point.

White/Jewish- Number seven

*Culture and/or familial influence.*

The (Jewish) religion doesn't really talk about homosexuality, and it just presumes that heterosexuality is what you are, so I think it had an effect on me that way. It's not a religion that includes everybody. You can find interpretations if you want to, but it's not explicit. So, there's that. And how I define sex. Yeah, I define sex as between a man and woman. And I don't anymore, but I think part of my struggles with my family and myself about whether it's really ok to be with a woman and to raise a family with a woman, all of that. Artificial insemination. All of that has been influenced by my family's culture.

*Issues of race.*

I mean the first thing I thought about was Judaism, that culture has a male god. It seems male where I grew up. And there is a lot of sexism in the religion and a lot of sex isn't celebrated. And in Orthodox Judaism, men and women have sex through a sheet. So there is a lot of weirdness there, that, and you know, you're supposed to marry within the faith and find a good Jewish man. So there are a lot of subliminal messages that comes from, through that. And race, ummm. I feel like I'm at the elementary stage of understanding of how Whiteness plays into the encounters I have with people.

White/Jewish- Number eight

*Culture and/or familial influence.*

No. I mean I don't feel that connected to my cultural background, so maybe that's why. And I don't feel like Judaism gives you a lot of like negative messages about sexuality and sex the way like maybe some other cultural and religious backgrounds do, so I think I just don't have anything association with like my culture and sexuality at all. Like they just don't seem related to me at all.

*Experiences Among Caucasian Women*

White/Irish heritage- Number five

*Culture and/or familial influence.*

I definitely identify as an Irish woman. And I've noticed the Irish women in my family are pretty assertive, Irish woman looking in history have all been pretty strong, pretty assertive, very private at the same time, but also loud at the same time. I never really thought about it much, I think that maybe it might, just the assertiveness, and the wanting to have fun. I don't know, I haven't seen anything in particular about my Irish or my heritage influencing my sexuality as much, more being American, you know with the diversity, in the whole country and growing up in such a diverse area.

White/Italian & Czechoslovakian- Number nine

*Culture and/or familial influence.*

So I think that the duality of those (ethnic backgrounds) have just resonated with me so I know when to be passionate and extreme and aggressive and I also know how to be just really laid back and loving and tender and just very feminine and just be able to embrace my womanhood from the Czech side. It's like the feminine and masculine. So that's what I would have to say about how it affects my sexuality.

White/German & English- Number ten

*Issues of race.*

Oh yeah, so when I saw that question on race and ethnicity, when I first saw that question I thought oh that doesn't apply to me...but when I first saw privilege and my skin color and identifying as a lesbian, I mean I think that's a huge privilege to be able to out yourself as a lesbian and feel like I have the economic security and the background and the family and all of these things to support me in that choice and feel you know that I've grown up with enough encouragement in different areas to know like, to know that if someone were to fire me for being gay that wouldn't be ok, and so for me to just apply for any job anyways.

White/ Italian- Number eleven

*Issues of race.*

I wouldn't say it's all because I'm White that I wasn't talked to about like having sex or whatever, but I just feel like as a culture of [White] people it's not expressed as much as it is in other cultures. So I think it's definitely affected you know how I am about it. You know I think it's affected a lot of White women like just we don't talk about it as much. I could be totally wrong because I'm not a Black woman you know I'm not a Hispanic woman but yeah just that we don't embrace it as much. The definition of sex, yeah I think it kind of encompasses all of those questions. It's a little more taboo in the White community I think...well I've had sex with two men that were of Hispanic background and I found that they were the most aggressive out of anybody that I've slept with and I guess that kind of answers the question in a way, but I felt very dominated by the Hispanic men as a female.



## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore how women experience different power dynamics during sexual encounters with women and men. This study, therefore, asked the following research question: Do women who have had sexual encounters with both women and men experience different power dynamics based on their partners' gender? This study was exploratory in nature. The sample consisted of 11 women who have had sexual encounters with both women and men, and participated in semi-structured, open-ended face-to-face interviews. The interviews and findings were guided by six areas of inquiry: 1) demographics of participants; 2) how gender affects power dynamics during sexual encounters with women and men; 3) what constitutes as sex; 4) participants' sexuality in reference to their sexual orientation and identity; 5) how power dynamics, from a relational perspective, are played out during sexual encounters with women and men; and, 6) how participants' cultural backgrounds influenced their sexuality and power dynamics during sexual encounters. Several of the study's findings were supported by the literature review. However, because of the lack of literature on this topic many of the findings are considered new discoveries.

A common theme that emerged while discussing sexual orientation and identity was that several women used an identifying label to describe their sexuality that was

easier for other people to understand. In other words, some participants decided to apply labels to their sexuality based, not on their own sense of self, but, rather, on their perception of what would be comfortable and comprehensible for others. Number one wrote:

It's (lesbian or queer) definitely more for other people [to understand]. I guess for me, or anyone who's my friend, or in the same kind of social circle we all kind of have our own personal traits when it comes to sexuality or fluid sexuality but, um, more so for other [people] and when I'm meeting other people and they need a definition for me this is what I give them.

Number five agreed, adding:

I definitely identify as bi now, and I also find it's easier because I have to go into this whole long explanation when I say queer and then people just say bi, I'm like, ok, designer label, bi. So that makes it easier for you, fine. And so that's how I finally came up and said ok I'm bi.

Number ten added:

I feel very comfortable with the label bisexual, because I feel I know what I mean when I that I don't not want to not use it just because I think I'm afraid of what other people are going to think about me. But in the past I felt very fearful of that label.

Some participants used the term "queer" to describe either their sexual orientations or identities. To add to the complexities of making meaning of labels and for the purpose of this study, I feel it's important to briefly address the implications behind the term "queer". This term has several political and sexuality insinuations that have changed over the years. Until more recently, queer has been used as an insult to describe gay or non-straight people. However, within the past decade, the use of the word was detoxified and changed into a term of pride, instead of insult. The more affirmative and positive political meaning of "queer" is now used as an umbrella term to depict all kinds of non-heterosexuality. Consistent with liberation movements that generally pay attention

to language and the political meaning of words, "queer" was re-defined to gain support within the gay rights and other humanist communities.

Another theme related to the participants' sexuality occurred during the telling of the (her)stories of their sexualities. Most participants reported that they first thought they were straight (heterosexual), because they didn't know of any other lifestyle as children, adolescents or young adults; heterosexuality was the "normal" lifestyle. Some only started to gain a better understanding of their sexuality when they were aware of their attraction and feelings for women. Some reported identifying as straight even with their attractions and feelings for women, which may have been a result of internalized homophobia. Overall, all participants needed to go through some in depth exploration in understanding their sexuality and sexual identity.

Several of the participants were currently practicing or had participated in polyamorous lifestyles. Each polyamorous relationship was experienced and dealt with differently as it is an umbrella term for a diverse number of relationships. Number two reported:

And the ability to make choices, especially being polyamorous is something really important to me, like, it's important to me that everyone have all the information at all times. They and I can make informed choices and that's something that I have, that people who are dealing with polyamory honestly have to think more about than if you're in a relationship with one other person.

In reference to definitions of sex, most participants defined sex from a traditional standpoint (intercourse) as the primary act of sex, regardless of their sexual orientation. However, all participants agreed that their definitions were influenced by society's understandings of sex. Number ten reported that she wanted to reevaluate how she used

the word sex, recognizing that her initial reaction to defining sex was that it referred only to intercourse. Number four reported:

I guess [I define sex] traditionally [as] intercourse because there's vaginal either insertion or penetration. So I guess, I mean traditionally mainstream, that's the proper word for it, for sex. I mean if you say intercourse, everybody is going to automatically know what you're talking about, as opposed to saying oral sex. You say, is she doing it or is he doing it or is it two women, because that may not be intercourse for some people, but for me it is.

Another theme I observed was the difficulty participants had in answering certain questions in the interview guide. Many stated they had not thought about these issues prior to the interview and needed time and/or further conversation to gather their thoughts and articulate their experiences. Number eleven stated: "I don't know, because I feel like I just don't know, I think that's why it's so hard to answer that question. Because I just don't know". A commonality among those answering the questions was that there was overlap in answering all three questions related to power dynamics: gender, from a relational perspective, and cultural background. What became apparent was that participants intertwined and repeated their answers until they had time to think about power from these different perspectives.

Another commonality found in relation to the power dynamics themes was that most of the participants of color had further elaboration on their stories related to power, sex and race, whereas most of the White women had some difficulty answering the question. The women of color had stories of eroticization and objectification whereas most of the White participants did not feel their race affected their experiences of power dynamics as much.

A notable observation was that four out of the eleven participants, during the time of the interview, were in long term or committed relationships (such as marriage) with men as opposed to being in relationships with women during the time of the interview. This observation offered a strong affirmation of how fluid sexual identity and relationships could be. Women who live a non- heteronormative lifestyle are also living a privileged heterosexual lifestyle in the eyes of the public. Although there are several ways to speculate about the meaning behind this observation, I've decided to not write about my own speculations based on my understanding of the stigma bisexual and fluid women undergo in queer and non-queer communities. To do that, would be to impose my narrative on their experience and it seems more respectful to let these women's choices speak for themselves. However, it tends to confirm the presence of a fluid sexual lifestyle in these women's lives.

Results of this study suggest that there is much fluidity among the participants' experiences and understandings of their sexuality. The results showed that women do experience different power dynamics during sexual encounters with women and men, and that they are all experienced differently depending on the participants' subjective understandings and interpretations of these experiences.

#### *Implications for Social Work Practice*

Literature is starting to uncover the complexities and flexibilities of women's sexuality and the hope of this study was to participate in the research and advance the understanding of women's sexuality. In order to better understand and work with women and their sexual identities and lifestyles, therapists and social workers need to be more

aware of women's process in better understanding themselves in relation to their sexualities.

As the results illustrate, power dynamics do exist during sexual encounters and as the literature review demonstrated, gender, race, and sexuality among many other things, are sources of power that influence individuals' psyches and perspectives of themselves in the world. This study focused on sexual encounters because sexuality and the acts of sex are not talked about enough in relation to a women's sexual identity. Sexuality is such a major part of a woman's sense of self that it is important that more research and information be shed on this topic to broaden mental health providers' and others' understanding of women's sexuality.

#### *Limitations*

Some limitations to this study consisted on the geography of the participants' location in San Francisco, CA. San Francisco is known to be a very liberal, urban area where non-heteronormative lifestyles are commonly practiced. Another limitation was that there were only eleven women interviewed on this subject matter. Therefore, it is very hard to generalize the experiences of these women to be representative of all women on this topic. An observation that can be seen as a limitation of this study is that participants tended not to have thought about the topic independently of their involvement in this research. Consequently, some of the concepts were new to them and they had little time to think about and deconstruct the issues in the way the study asked them to. Because the study design did not allow the participants a chance to think more deeply about the meaning of the questions, it would be useful, in follow-up research to

re-structure the interview into two different phases to encourage more thoughtful consideration of the concepts.

### *Bias*

It is important to note that my own bias was demonstrated throughout this study, and therefore, influenced the study's design and interview process. My struggle in working with my bias was finding a balance in wanting to promote the idea of fluid sexuality and simply exploring the idea. This bias alone most likely caused me to ask some leading questions in the interview guide. According to the literature review and my bias, I felt that there were inevitably more differences in power dynamics in sexual encounters between women and men. A final bias worth noting was that I have strong feelings on the subject of cultural background influencing issues of sexuality, and I believed that some White participants would not recognize their White privilege as deeply, and that the women of color would inevitably experience power dynamics in relation to their race or ethnicity. This bias may have caused some leading questions in my interview guide as well as my choice of follow up questions during the interview. To correct for this bias, I invited the women to expand on their ideas and define their thoughts when I felt there was a potential for my imposing my ideas on their narrative

### *Recommendations for Future Research*

A thorough search of the literature revealed that there were few studies concerning fluid sexuality and power dynamics women experience in sexual encounters with women and men. In response to the minimal research on these topics, it is increasingly important that there needs to be more research in exploring women's sexuality. This may serve to make more fluid sexual expression understood as perfectly

healthy and may permit women to experience their sexuality more freely, unencumbered by dominant narratives about sexual identity and orientation. This study was designed to be exploratory in nature with the hope that new themes could be later explored with larger, more representative populations of women with a variety of sexual identities, in addition to the opportunity for the participants to think about uncommon questions of sexuality and how much nuance there is to these constructs.



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Appendix A

Recruitment Flyer

# Are you a **WOMAN** who has had sex with women & men?

QuickTime™ and a  
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.



QuickTime™ and a  
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

Would you like to participate in a masters level thesis study on  
sexuality and power?

Women who are between 21-35 yrs old, of all sexual orientations, of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, and from various class backgrounds are sought for this study. Participation involves an audio-taped interview that lasts 45-60 minutes. Confidentiality is assured and participants can withdraw by April 15<sup>st</sup>, 2007.

My name is Genna and I am looking for women to interview for my thesis project for Smith College School for Social Work. If interested, please email [gbrodsky@email.smith.edu](mailto:gbrodsky@email.smith.edu) or call 718-810-6977.

## Appendix B

### Human Subjects Review Application

Investigator Name: Genna Brodsky

Project Title: **Women's Perceptions of Power Dynamics in their Sexual Encounters with both Women and Men**

Contact Address: 216 Santa Rosa Ave, San Francisco, CA, 94112

Contact Phone: 718-810-6977

E-mail Address:

gennablaine@yahoo.com

### **Project Purpose and Design**

The purpose of this study is to explore women's perceptions of the power dynamics in sexual encounters with both women and men. This study will attempt to examine the following question: Do women who have had sexual encounters with both women and men experience different power dynamics based on their partners' gender? This research question calls for an exploratory qualitative design to gather information on the topic regarding whether women experience different power dynamics during sexual encounters with women and with men about which little is known. Flexible methods will be used in the form of in person interviews and will consist of semi-structured, open-ended questions that will allow me to maximize the quality and quantity of the narrative data I collect.

Justification of this study is that little is known about the intersection of power, sexual behavior and gender, as they relate to the research question. The sexual experiences of women, as an oppressed population, are generally not understood or explored, leading to uninformed clinical practice with women whose sexual expression does not conform to more traditionally understood patterns. The study will draw heavily on self-in-relation theory, which can be used to provide an understanding of how women experience power, defined as the ability to make choices.

I hope the findings of this study will add a contemporary component to the understanding of choice, power, and sexuality. These findings may benefit mental health professionals working with Couples, women in intimate relations, and in particular, women in abusive relationships and LGBTQ communities. Hopefully the findings and questions raised by this study will invite further research regarding the differences of power dynamics among women who have had sexual encounters with women and men and the influence gender has on these power dynamics.

This information is pertinent to education, practice and specifically could help social workers understand the complexities of sexuality and power. This research will be used for my MSW Thesis and for future presentations and potential publication. The intended audience will be masters level social work students and practitioners, particularly those who work with LGBTQ women and are interested and women's issues.

## **The Characteristics of the Participants**

Inclusion criteria for the participants will be 1) participants have to be born with biological female characteristics and identify as the female gender. 2) participants have to have had sexual encounters with both women and men, and 3) participants have to be between the ages of 21 to 35. Participants do not have to be limited in terms of their sexual orientation. Therefore, they do not only have to identify as bi-sexual. It is important that participants do not identify as transgender or transsexual, (male-to-female) to prevent complication of the thesis specificities. The desired sample size is between 12 to 15 participants of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, to the extent possible.

## **The Recruitment Process**

I will recruit participants by posting flyers on the craigslist website under “activities” and “general” in the community classification, and also at LGBTQ organizations and women’s centers. Because a diverse sample is important for the findings of this study, there will be a specific statement explicitly soliciting the participation of diverse classes, races and ethnicities. Following their expressing interest in the study by contacting me either by phone or email, I will assess their availability, and eligibility for participating in the study. I will determine their availability and eligibility by phone contact only. If they expressed interest by email, I will ask for their phone numbers in order to have a more thorough conversation. In order to encourage more participants, I will use the snowball method by asking current participants to identify other women who may be interested in taking part in this study. After I assess their eligibility and they agree to participate, the participant and I will set up a place and time to meet for the interview. I will then either hand, email or mail an informed consent form and a copy of the interview guide for them to review before the interview. I will collect the informed consent form at the time and place for the interview. The informed consent form will explain the nature of the study, the risks and benefits of study participation, and the safeguards used to protect study participants. Interviews will take place in a public setting that has the likelihood of affording a measure of privacy, such as a library.

### *The Nature of Participation*

It is important to allow participants to reflect on and prepare for the interview ahead of time, so I will provide them with a copy of the interview guide prior to the scheduled interview. The interview guide will also seek demographic information such as, age, gender expression, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation/identity.

I will conduct 45 – 60 minute interviews with each individual participant at a location that is convenient, quiet and private, such as a library. I will interview participants using a semi- structured set of open-ended questions in order to gather narrative data. I will also audiotape the interviews. I will then hire a transcriber, and they will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement.

### **Risks of Participation**

There can be some risk or discomfort associated with participation in this study. Participants will be asked questions about intimate details of their sexual experiences, all subjects of a personal nature, which may bring up painful or difficult emotions. For this reason, participants will be given the questions in advance of the interview as well as a list of referral sources in the case that they would like to speak with someone about any discomfort after the interview is over. Participants may refuse to answer any questions and may withdraw from the study at any time, up until April 15<sup>th</sup>. If they choose to withdraw, all materials pertaining to them will be immediately destroyed. Confidentiality will be maintained, as consistent with Federal regulations and the mandates of the social work profession.

### **Benefits of Participation**

Participants will receive no financial benefit for their contribution in this study. However, they may benefit from knowing that they have contributed to the knowledge of understanding women's sexual encounters with both women and men and the possible differences in power dynamics between the two. The participants may also benefit from being able to tell their stories and having their perspective heard.

### **Informed Consent Procedures**

After I talk with potential participants on the phone or in person, I will either mail or hand them a copy of the informed consent form for their perusal. Before we begin the interviews, the participant and the researcher will sign two copies of the informed consent form. I will provide the participant with one copy and retain the second copy. I will store it for three years in a secure, locked cabinet separate from other research materials.

### **Precautions Taken to Safeguard Confidentiality and Identifiable Information**

In this study, I cannot assure anonymity because I will be conducting the interviews and will know the identity of the participants. However, I can assure that the data and information that I collect will be kept confidential, as I will take precautions to safeguard identifiable information for the participants. The participant's name will not appear on questionnaires, audiotapes or forms; I will use numerical codes to conceal participants' identifying information. I will keep signed informed consent forms separate from completed instruments or tapes. Anyone transcribing the tapes or analyzing the data will sign a confidentiality agreement. My research advisor will have access to the data after the identifying information has been removed.

I will prepare presentations and publications in such a way that participants will not be identified. The data that I collect about participants will be presented as a group. Any quotes that I use will not include identifying information or the identifying information will be disguised. All notes, surveys, tapes, and informed consent forms will be kept in a

secure, locked cabinet for a period of three years as required by federal regulations. After that time, if the data is no longer needed, I will physically destroy the data.

Genna Brodsky, MSW Candidate, Smith College School for Social Work, February 12th, 2007

Student Signature

Fred Newdom, Thesis Advisor, Smith College School for Social Work

Advisor Signature



## Appendix C

### Human Subjects Review Approval letter

February 14, 2007

Genna Brodsky

216 Santa Rosa Avenue

San Francisco, CA 94112

Dear Genna,

Your final revisions have been reviewed and all is now in order. We are therefore able to give final approval to your project.

Please note the following requirements:

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

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain signed consent 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. I hope your recruitment efforts are successful.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.

Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Fred Newdom, Research Advisor

## Appendix D

### Consent Form

Dear Participant,

My name is Genna Brodsky. I am conducting a thesis regarding women's sexual experiences with both women and men, to learn more about the different power dynamics in women's experiences with these two genders. This study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Social Work degree at Smith College School for Social Work. There may be possible publication or presentation of this thesis. However, any quotes that I use will not include identifying information or your identifying information will be disguised

I am investigating whether women who have had sexual encounters with both women and men experience different power dynamics based on their partners' gender. You are being asked to participate in this study if a) you are born with biological female characteristics and identify as a member of the female gender, b) you have had sexual encounters with women and men, and 3) you are between the ages of 21 to 35. As a subject in this study you are asked to participate in a face-to-face interview. The interview will involve demographic questions, but will primarily focus on your sexual encounters with women and men and whether you experience differences in the power dynamics between the two. The interview will take between 45 to 60 minutes. Interviews will be tape recorded with your consent, and tapes will be coded numerically to ensure your confidentiality. A professional will transcribe the entire interview.

Your participation is voluntary. You will receive no financial benefit for your participation in this study. However, you may benefit from knowing that you have contributed to the knowledge of women's experiences of the power dynamics in their sexual encounters with women and men. It is my hope that this study will help social workers have a better understanding of sexuality and power relations. You may also benefit from being able to tell your story and having your perspective heard.

The potential risks of participating in this study are the possibility that you might feel strong or uncomfortable emotions while talking about your experiences. In case you feel the need for additional support after participating in this study, you will be given a list of resources for mental health services in your area.

Strict confidentiality will be maintained, as consistent with Federal regulations and the mandates of the social work profession. Coding the information and storing the data in a locked file for a minimum of 3 years will protect your confidentiality. Your identity will be protected, as names will be changed in the analysis of the data. Your name will never be associated with the information you provide in the questionnaire or the interview. My thesis advisor will have access to the data, but only after all identifying information has been removed. The findings of this study may be used in future presentations and/or publications.

This study is completely voluntary. You are free to refuse to answer specific questions and to withdraw the interview from the transcription process by April 15<sup>th</sup>. If you decide to withdraw, all data describing you will be immediately destroyed.

Thank you for your participation. If you need to contact me, my phone number is 718-810-6977 and my email is gbrodsky@email.smith.edu

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCHER

DATE

DATE

Appendix E

Referral List

**Gay and Lesbian National Hotline**

[www.glnh.org](http://www.glnh.org)

[info@glnh.org](mailto:info@glnh.org)

**PMB 296; 2261 Market Street**

**San Francisco, CA 94114**

**Phone:** (888) 415-3022 or (888) THE-GNLH

**Fax:** (415) 552-5498

**Mission / Description:** GLNH is a national non-profit organization which provide a vital service to our community by providing nationwide toll-free peer-counseling, information and referrals.

**New Leaf: Services for Our Community**

[www.newleafservices.org](http://www.newleafservices.org)

**1853 Market Street**

**San Francisco, CA 94103**

**Phone:** (415) 626-7000

**Fax:** (415) 626-5916

**Mission / Description:** New Leaf: Services For Our Community exists to help lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning individuals and families of all ages lead healthy and connected lives. We provide professional mental health, support and substance abuse services to strengthen our diverse community.

**The Pacific Center**

[www.PacificCenter.org](http://www.PacificCenter.org)

**2712 Telegraph Ave**

*Berkeley, CA 94705*

**Phone:** (510) 548-8283

**Description:** The Pacific Center, the third oldest LGBT center in the country, provides: Low-cost therapy, Peer support groups, Youth services, HIV services, Phone referrals

*LGBT Community Center*

[www.sfcenter.org](http://www.sfcenter.org)

**1800 Market St.**

**San Francisco, CA 94103**

**Phone:** 415-865-5555

**Description:** Provides a variety of counseling resources for LGBTQ communities and individuals.

Some resources include:

*SAGE center*

1277 Mission Street

(415) 905-5050

2166 Hayes Street  
San Francisco, CA 94117  
(415) 221-4211

*Haight Ashbury Psychological services*

1940 Virginia St  
Berkeley, CA  
(510) 869-4807

*North Berkeley Counseling Center*

## Appendix F

### Interview Guide

#### **Demographics**

1. Could you provide the following demographic information?
  - a. age
  - b. biological sex
  - c. gender expression
  - d. sexual orientation/identity
  - e. race/ethnicity
  - f. socioeconomic status

#### *Gender*

2. Do you feel your gender affects the power dynamics during your sexual encounters with women and with men?
  - Are there certain roles played out, such as passive or aggressive, or other roles? Please explain.
  - How does your partner's gender affect the dynamics played out during a sexual encounter ?

#### *Sex*

3. What constitutes as sex for you? (choose whatever fits best)
  - a. oral sex
  - b. anal sex
  - c. intercourse
  - d. use of sex toys
  - e. caressing and fondling
  - f. foreplay
  - g. kissing
  - h. all of the above
  - i. other acts (please explain)

#### *Sexuality*

4. How would you describe your sexuality?
  - Do you identify as only one sexual orientation, or is your sexuality more fluid?
  - What is the history of your sexuality: Did you always identify with the same sexuality as you have now? If not, what has changed for you?

### *Power*

5. Using the definition of power as **“the ability to make choices” or “the capacity to produce change”**, how do you feel this is played out during your sexual encounters with men and with women?
- How do you determine who initiates sexual acts, or fantasy play?
  - Do you feel your power fluctuates between sexual partners? If so how?
  - Are the power dynamics played out differently when you are sexual with women than when you are sexual with men? If so, how?

### *Race/Ethnicity*

6. Do you feel your cultural background influences your identity as a woman, your definition of sex, your sexuality and the power dynamics played out during sexual encounters?
- **If so**, in what ways do you believe race/ethnicity influences the power dynamics during your sexual encounters?
  - **If so**, in what ways does your race/ethnicity affect your sense of power during sexual encounters?