

IDENTITY, ADULT DEVELOPMENT, AND NARRATIVE:
AN INTERVIEW STUDY OF WOMEN WITH A BISEXUAL LIFE HISTORY

by

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Abstract

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This qualitative study investigates the experiences of eight women with a bisexual life history, through the lens of identity and adult development. These women, aged 30-61, had all spent at least six years since age 20 primarily involved with women, and at the time of the interview were primarily involved with or seeking to be involved with men. Open-ended questions regarding subjects' relationship and sexual identity histories elicited narratives that emphasized over-arching relational and emotional concerns that applied equally to partners of either sex. All subjects made multiple, important changes in their life commitments at roughly age 30, including choice of sexual object, reproducing Levinson's (1978) finding that adults tend to go through a period of change at that age. Sexual orientation identity was fluid, as subjects revised their identifications and their preferences over time. Subjects discussed matters of identification in ways that reflected their characteristic attitudes and relational styles. Subjects offered a variety of commentary on the meanings of their sexual trajectories, ranging from a serendipitous view to complex, psychological and psychoanalytic interpretations.

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Introduction

This study examines questions of identity and sexuality in women who have a bisexual life history. It is an attempt to explore in depth a relatively unusual life course through qualitative interviewing. Through the exploration of some unique lives, I hope to learn something about the nature of personal identity and the ways in which a sense of identity develops and shifts over the course of adult life.

The idea for this study began as an insight into my own life, that the shifts that I have gone through from “straight” to “gay” to “straight” (the need for quotations marks will soon be apparent) could be usefully related to theories of adult development. I was particularly taken with the idea of “life structure”, a concept developed by Levinson (1986), which he defines as “the underlying pattern or design of a person’s life at a given time” and constituting “a boundary – a mediating zone between personality structure and social structure” (p. 4). Thinking about sexual orientation as something existing at the intersection between the personal and the social appealed to me in its felt accuracy as well as intellectually, in that such a conceptualization provides a location for considering complex interactions between culture and history on the one hand, and individual, intimate, subjective experience on the other.

An adult development perspective also seemed to offer the possibility of thinking about sexual orientation as an unfolding story and not an endpoint or outcome (Colarusso & Nemiroff, 1979). This creates conceptual room for change over time in the personal meanings people find in, and create out of, their sexual and romantic experiences. I wondered if I might be able to learn something about the relationship between shifts in

sexual orientation identity and the developmental tasks of adult life, and perhaps the particular challenges women face. For example, I wondered what women might say they gained from having had diverse sexual experiences or from investing in and developing a sense of oneself as lesbian, and how all of this might relate to their senses of themselves as women. I wondered if my subjects would be able to describe their own revisions of their stories at different points in their lives.

As I read the literature on lesbians, bisexuality, and sexual orientation identity, in the fields of psychology and sociology, I saw that I was going to run into varieties of trouble. Immediately, there are complex problems of definition and terminology involved in any exploration of sexual orientation. Researchers have attempted to codify subjects by measuring sexual orientation on multiple quantitative axes: behaviors, sexual attractions, emotional attractions, fantasies, and identifications (and then sorting these into ever finer slices – see, for example, the new classifications proposed by Weinrich and Klein (2002): “Bi-gay, bi-straight, and bi-bi.”). But anomalies persist – women who sleep with men but state they are lesbians, women who sleep with women but identify as straight, women who have never slept with a woman but identify as bisexual – and identity labels multiply – “bisexual lesbian,” “heterosexual bisexual” (Golden, 1987; Rust, 1993). Subjects struggle with these definitions, as they tell and retell the stories of their lives to themselves and others, and try to make sense of multiple experiences and desires, in the past, present and imagined future. The literature on sexuality and sexual orientation is replete with permutations of identification, behavior, and desire that don’t fit on a scale or grid (Peplau & Garnets, 2000).

Individuals try to make meaning out of sexual experience within a discursive field, that includes the pronouncements of experts, the arguments of social movements, day-to-day interactions with family and friends, and much more. Subjects alternately deploy and discard the available definitions of their lives, and in so doing, rework these very definitions. Further complicating matters, encounters between subject and researcher are themselves a communicative field, and constitute yet another opportunity for reworking of definition and meaning (Diamond, 2006). Because one cannot presume to know what a subject means when she self-labels as gay, bi, or straight, I am calling this a study of women with a bisexual life history, and not a study of bisexual women. Whether, and why, my subjects think of themselves as bisexual is itself part of the inquiry.

In taking as my subjects women who have spent some significant part of their adult lives relating sexually and romantically to other women, my project intersects with broad currents of social change in contemporary society. The social position of women and of gay and lesbian people has changed radically over the last forty years as a result of the organized political efforts of some members of these groups. The development of these political movements can, in turn, be linked to dramatic shifts in the organization of social life that mark the modern era. One of the hallmarks of modernity is the increasing centrality of concepts of the self and of personal identity as organizers of experience (Giddens, 1991). The development of the concept of gay or lesbian identity is a particular instance of this larger phenomenon. So, too, is the development of psychoanalysis as both epistemology and clinical practice (Zaretsky, 2004).

Psychoanalysis occupies a peculiar position in the discourse on homosexuality. Its founding principles undo the idea that homosexuality and heterosexuality are binary

opposites and thus argue against the notion that homosexual and heterosexual people are fundamentally different from each other (Freud, 1905). At the same time, psychoanalysis has been central to a discourse that defines anything other than genital heterosexuality as the result of pathological deviations or arrests in development (Schafer, 1995). Freud's complex and contradictory thinking contains both of these arguments. He took the radical position that all human beings are psychically bisexual and at the same time put forward a teleological view in which proper development leads to reproductive heterosexuality (Young-Bruehl, 2001).

In all of these realms – feminism, gay rights, and psychoanalysis – the concept of identity has become the subject of debate. The contemporary women's and gay and lesbian civil rights movements both created and rested upon a clear sense of gays and women as meaningful social groups. That there might be some doubt as to who (or what or how) is a woman, or a gay person, was not part of the agenda, was in fact incompatible with identity politics. Now, the structures of thought on which such certainty rested have been reexamined by the work of critical theorists and the development of queer theory. This literature calls into question the possibility of asserting any unitary or naturalized sexual or gender identity (Butler, 1990). It draws heavily on Freud's insights into the mobility of desire and the instability of identity, and on Lacan's restatement of these principles.

In undertaking this project, I am setting up camp on precarious ground. I wish to explore desire, as subjects who have "crossed the line" experience it. On the one hand, in proposing this project, I am subscribing to this line and suggesting that there is something to say about taking up a position on either side. Here I am saying that it matters whether

one's lover is male or female, that it means something about one's life, one's self. This threatens to place me on a slippery slope toward an essentialism that may be indefensible. At the same time, the fact that the line can be crossed indicates that it is not such a firm line after all. Those who have made a double crossing, or who have made some other sort of move for which there is no readily available cultural narrative, may find that an essentialist perspective, in which one's deepest being can be definitively described as gay or straight, fails to capture their experience.

At a further level of abstraction, I am hoping to use this study as a window into the nature of personal identity more generally. How do people handle multiple identities? Fluctuating or unstable identity has been seen as a mark of psychopathology within clinical psychology. Recently, some relational psychoanalytic writers have asked whether the self is best understood as unitary or multiple, whether it is more accurate to speak of repression or of dissociation, of drives or of shifting self-states (Bromberg, 1996). Lacan's ideas are prominent in critical theory, but largely absent from American psychoanalysis; he emphasizes the intractability of the unconscious (1978). In this view, one's sense of self can only be partial, and one's social and personal identity always a compromise. It is my hope that women who have engaged the problem of identity in idiosyncratic ways will have something to teach me about the allure of the riddle, "who are you?" – and about the pleasures and dangers of trying to answer.

Literature Review

“The term ‘identity’ expresses...a mutual relation in that it connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (selfsameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others.” (Erikson, 1956, p.57)

“[H]omosexual identities are most fully realized...when self-identity, perceived identity, and presented identity coincide; that is, where an accord exists among who people think they are, who they claim they are, and how others view them.” (Troiden, 1988, p. 112)

“[Bisexuality] is an identity that is also not an identity; a sign of the certainty of ambiguity, the stability of instability, a category that defies and defeats categorization” (Garber, 1995, p. 85)

“As far as I can detect, I have always felt bisexual, strongly and equally attracted to men and women. At certain stages in my life, for psychological reasons, I have felt impelled to love and be loved by a man instead of a woman, or vice versa.” (Spencer, 1990, quoted in Garber, 1995. p. 13)

The study of the experience of identity among women with bisexual life histories necessarily intersects a wide range of domains: the concept of identity and the process of identity development, adult development, sexual orientation identity, and bisexuality. In

each of these areas, I look specifically at the literature concerning women. Finally, I consider perspectives that question some of the certainties about the nature of identity.

Identity: Erik Erikson

Erikson (1956) defines identity as a multifaceted concept, encompassing a person's conscious idea of him or herself, the unconscious coordination of various aspects of character, the sense of personal continuity through time, and the way in which a person is viewed by the larger community. Identity emerges as both the stable, reliable, consistent sense of who one is and what one stands for in the world, and also as the way one is known by the world. Erikson positions identity at the interface between the intrapsychic and the social. The concept embodies the idea that the individual can only exist as a part of a community of others. Identities express both a sense of internal coherence *and* a meaningful relation to the outside world. The first is not possible without the second. (Erikson, 1968)

In Erikson's description and analysis of development, identity in the full sense can only come into being in late adolescence. While the formation of identity builds on, and reorganizes, the developmental achievements that have come before, it is at adolescence that biological, cognitive, intrapsychic and social factors come together to create both the need and the demand for the individual to form an identity. This is when the individual is faced for the first time with the questions "Who am I?" and "How do I fit into the adult world?" The answers must draw on a sense of who one has been in the past and what sort of future one imagines, and so identity involves the binding together of the personal past, present and future (McAdams, 1985).

As a sense of personal continuity, identity is concerned with sameness: the way one is the same today as yesterday and will be the same tomorrow. And yet the process of identity formation involves transformations and reworkings of past selves, especially of parental identifications. A person who lives solely according to the dictates of his or her parents is hardly considered to have an identity; such a person has foreclosed on the process of identity formation. Identity is not something waiting to be assumed, a given from society or family, but must be wrought by the individual. But even as identity represents the unique individual, it also refers to the coordination between the individual and society. Living only according to one's own rules, without regard for the expectations of the community or without any social role, constitutes a kind of purposeless drifting. Being unable to find one's place in the world and being overwhelmed by the demand to do so manifests clinically as a distressing state of identity diffusion.

Erikson not only situated the person, the ego, the self in a social context, in a context of wide ranging relationships, of family, work, and the larger community. He also placed the subject in history, in the full history of his life, so that development, growth and change – the transformations of the self – did not only take place in childhood, but extended through the adult lifespan. While identity formation is the central developmental task of adolescence, one's sense of self in the world undergoes continual revisions.

Erikson's developmental framework was taken up by those seeking to articulate women's life experiences. His own focus was the dynamic analysis of the lives of adult men, and his conceptualization of female identity largely rests on the roles of wife and

mother, in other words, an identity defined in relation to another, not to herself, determined by and realized through her reproductive capacity: "...I think that much of a young woman's identity is already defined in her kind of attractiveness and in the selective nature of her search for the man (or men) by whom she wishes to be sought" (1968, p. 283); "The basic modalities of woman's commitment and involvement naturally also reflect the ground plan of her body." (1968, p. 285). But Erikson's ideas of identity development, the negotiation of intimacy, and the need for generativity were taken up by the generation of women scholars creating and being influenced by the political movements of the 1960s and 70s, especially the women's movement. The literature to be reviewed below is based on research on heterosexual women.

Female Identity and Lifespan Development

Erikson's writings on identity inspired a variety of research. One set of studies examined identity formation using a methodology developed by Marcia (1966). Marcia put forth four types of identity status, based on the extent to which a young person has grappled with parental ideas, expectations and values, explored new or alternative possibilities, and, by the end of adolescence, and has made the choices that then form the core of identity. The presence or absence of either crisis or commitment yields the four categories: Identity Achievement, where there has been both crisis and commitment; Identity Foreclosure, where the adult commitments to unquestioned parental standards are made in the absence of a searching or crisis phase, Identity Moratorium, where the questioning is ongoing and commitments not yet settled upon; and Identity Diffusion, where there is neither active struggle nor a clear direction set but rather an avoidance of

the task of identity formation altogether. Extensive interviews exploring a young person's thoughts on occupation, religion and politics and how these were similar or different to those of the parents yielded data that could be reliably rated as representing one of the four identity status types. Construct validity was established through correlations of the identity status categories with other psychological variables.

When Marcia's methodology was tried with female subjects, at first it was not possible to differentiate between the four categories reliably. Questions about sexual values and standards had to be added to the interview in order to be able to assign a young woman to an identity status. Women differed from men in that answers to questions about sexual issues and religion were more predictive of overall identity status than were views on occupation and politics. And, unlike the men, the Moratorium status among women was associated with unfavorable psychological variables, whereas Identity Foreclosure, a "low" status among men, was associated with psychological health in women.

Josselson (1973) sought to explore adolescent identity formation in women through Marcia's identity status interview, a separate clinical interview, and the collection of early memories. She subsequently expanded her study through long-term follow-up, interviewing the women at ages 33 and 43 (1987, 1996). Her subjects were 60 college seniors, randomly selected from college lists at four different institutions, 15 for each identity status.

Josselson's initial clinical interviews suggested that the women rated as Identity Foreclosures as college seniors might be vulnerable to future psychological difficulties. These women were notably idealizing of their parents, even when family circumstances

had been quite difficult. They tended to have restricted peer relationships and to see family life as the only safe haven. They relied on repression as a defense and were often rigid and moralistic. However, long-term follow-up showed that they functioned well and generally accomplished both their marital and occupational goals. Their orientation toward being “good”, which gave them a “little girl” quality as college seniors, led to success and advancement over the years. These women had built a workable identity through identification rather than individualization, and held to this position with relatively little change until their mid 30s and beyond. Revisions, when they came, occurred at midlife.

The identity categories of Achievement and Moratorium varied clinically primarily in terms of their capacity to tolerate the guilt involved in individuation and separation from the family of origin. Moratorium women experienced a sustained crisis beyond the college years in determining their life course. They often sought boyfriends who they thought might give them direction, boyfriends who could substitute for parents, not in the sense of providing the safety that Foreclosure women looked for in their relationships, but men who could provide new identifications, new models for living. Moratorium women were especially focused on their romantic and personal relationships and invested much less in personal achievement. In contrast, Achievement women, the most clearly independent-minded type, looked to their spouses to provide ego support for the occupational paths they had embarked upon. While some of the most conflicted Moratorium subjects were able by age 33 to resolve their conflicts sufficiently to form a self-defined life path, others seemed to give up the fight and to fall into a life much like mother's.

Josselson's findings for all subjects emphasize the centrality of relationships and relatedness to women's sense of identity. Though almost all of her subjects worked, and many enjoyed professional advancement, the significance of work in their lives was most often expressed relationally, in terms of the impact they felt their work had on others. The women valued being skilled and competent, not so much for the pleasure of mastery, but for the possibility of making a positive difference in the world. Personal relationships at work were highly valued, and the women tended to prefer a supportive work environment over status and advancement. All of the subjects felt that their work lives made them more fulfilled people and none saw being a homemaker as a viable life course, and yet nearly all reported that their deepest sense of accomplishment lay in devoted marriages and, if they had them, happy, well-adjusted children. And from the first interview to the last, the women always began their descriptions of themselves and of the changes in their lives with references to the people in their lives.

Daniel Levinson (1978) and those inspired by him conducted another body of research into the identities and development of adult women. In his own 1996 study of women at midlife, Levinson sought to discover whether women's adult development showed similar, age-linked sequences of stability, transition and revision that he had found in his study of 40 high-achieving men.

Levinson compared 15 business women, 15 female academics, and 15 homemakers, ages 35-45, in the early 1980s, through interviews extending 8-10 hours. These interviews led him to describe women as contending with three internalized figures that he names the Traditional Homemaker Figure, the Anti-Traditional Figure, and the Single Successful Career Woman. The first demands of the woman that she marry, have

children, and subordinate any career goals to the needs of her household and her husband. The second figure urges independence, self-reliance, and freedom from the constraints of traditional femininity. The Single Successful Career Woman is successful in name only; she is used by the Traditional Homemaker Figure to threaten the woman tempted to stray off the traditional path. As described by one subject, this woman, with a career but without husband or children, is “cold-hearted,” “grasping,” “cruel”, a “lonely, bitter person, isolated, a complete failure” (p. 91). She renders career success frightening and essentially masculine, insofar as she is not embedded in the intimate relationships that confirm female identity. She is the negative version of the Anti-Traditional Figure.

Levinson concludes that female adult development revolves around the efforts of women to manage wishes for both work and family in a society where work and the public sphere are coded as male and home and family life are the female domain. The gendered split of work and relationships exists internally in women, as represented by the contending “Figures”. Career and family are experienced as being in direct and intense conflict, even as neither one alone is ultimately fully satisfying. The anxiety about achieving marriage and family was often inhibiting; many women worked in jobs but did not have a career in the sense of making an investment in themselves as workers. They were “homemakers whose domestic career had not started yet” (1996, p. 157). Those career women who were still single at 30 expressed an urgent need to marry, and in spite of their achievements, felt that being unmarried and childless made them less than full adults. At the same time, those homemakers who had succeeded in realizing a traditional marriage found it necessary to substantially remake their lives once child-rearing was over.

Levinson argues that he did find age-linked patterns in women's adult development similar to what he found among men. Other researchers disagree. However, intensive biographical interviewing within this tradition report on women's efforts during the first half of adulthood to integrate the life structure components of occupation, marriage and children (Roberts and Newton, 1987). Women's animating vision for themselves in early adulthood most often involved both occupational and relational goals, and the difficulty managing both seems to disrupt the more predictable, ladder-like schema of adult development found in Levinson's male subjects.

The collection of Levinsonian studies of women reviewed by Roberts & Newton (1987) found women's sense of what their lives would be like as they embarked upon adulthood to be general and somewhat vague, and the life structures they created were often consciously ad hoc. Most of the women studied reported a tentative sense of clearly defined identity. Some women had clearly delineated work or family goals, and these women's young adulthood was marked by greater clarity and purpose. But many lacked a definite occupational goal, and held space open in their lives for a husband and family even as they entered the workforce, giving these commitments a provisional quality. As they aged, the efforts to manage both career and family gave their lives a sense of ongoing shifts, rather than the "settling down" of Levinson's male subjects. Like Josselson's subjects, interviewees in these studies articulated a vision for their lives that was relational, even as it included work or career. Women imagined an adult life for themselves in a variety of contexts: with husband, with children, with colleagues.

Other studies of adult women's development also focus on the relative weight of family and career, and on the importance of husbands in women's efforts to define

themselves. For example, in a study comparing the different meanings of a woman's divorce depending on whether she divorced in her twenties, thirties, or forties, Young et al. (2001) note that for two of the age groups, identity issues are especially prominent. Women divorcing in their twenties reported that their divorces were part of a wholesale reorganization of their adult lives; they viewed their early marriages as a mistaken attempt to gain some certainty in life, especially in the face of indecision over vocation, and the divorce as crucial in the establishment of new goals and direction. In a similar fashion, women in their forties described their divorces as part of an effort to recover aspects of themselves that they had suppressed in the interests of their marriage and family, and to rediscover a professional identity or to create one for the first time. Many of these women said they had not pursued a profession earlier because of uncertainty about where their true interests or talents might lie. Women who divorced in their thirties tended to do so after prolonged efforts to solve serious difficulties within the marriages; these women seemed to have the most difficulty establishing a satisfactory balance between their own needs and the needs of others, and were the most involved in struggles over intimacy.

Young et al. (2001) speculate that their data reflect the ways in which the choice of husband can fail to accommodate unfinished identity work among women who are unable to engage this task fully at the beginning stages of adult life. As in Levinson's study, these subjects experienced marriage and vocation as distinct and conflicting pathways to a sense of self. Josselson (1996) reported more successful integration of family and work, while her description of Moratorium women is similar to Young et al.'s

description of women divorcing in their thirties as women in prolonged internal conflict which they attempt to resolve through their intimate relationships.

Sexual Orientation Identity

In the 1970s and 80s, a number of researchers proposed models for the development of a homosexual identity (Cass 1979, 1984, Coleman 1981, McDonald 1982, de Monteflores and Schultz 1978, Troiden and Goode 1980). Although differing as to the number of stages proposed and the specific content of each part of the process, all of these models describe a journey from an initial awareness of same-sex attractions through a series of intermediate steps (seeking out other gay people, initiating sexual experiences and relationships, self-labeling and disclosing to others), to the endpoint of an integrated gay or lesbian identity. These writers wanted to understand how a positive homosexual identity emerges in the face of stigma and shame; the highest level of development in these models is achieved when one embraces one's homosexuality and is open with others about it. It is assumed that once positive identity is achieved, it is essentially permanent. In keeping with Erikson, this model emphasizes a coordination between a central aspect of the individual and participation in a community of like others.

Initially, bisexuality was a footnote in the theory of homosexual identity development, and when specific research on bisexual identity was conducted, both researchers and subjects seemed unsure of whether there even is such a thing. Cass (1979) considered bisexual self-identification to be a foreclosure of the developmental process, although she later revised her theory (1990) to include a separate pathway for bisexual identity. In 1994, Weinberg, Williams and Pryor published the results of a five-

year study of 100 self-identified bisexuals and proposed a four-stage theory of bisexual identity development. In this model, bisexuals traversed similar milestones as homosexuals: “initial confusion,” “finding/applying the bisexual label” and “settling into the identity”, but with the addition of a fourth stage, which Weinberg *et al.* term “continued confusion.” Unlike homosexuals, bisexuals were found to have recurring feelings of uncertainty as to their sexual orientation identity, especially when involved in a monogamous sexual relationship. Though they report dramatic changes in the sexual behavior of their subjects over time, and female subjects in particular, and in spite of the finding of continued confusion, Weinberg *et al.* argue that it is possible to distinguish between bisexuals making a journey *to* bisexuality and homosexuals making a journey *through* it.

Even as the linear stage models of sexual orientation identity development were being elaborated, tested in research and revised, other writers were pointing out the extent to which sexual orientation identities are often contradictory and inconsistent. Blumstein & Schwartz (1976) interviewed 150 men and women with “more than incidental” sexual experience with both sexes, and found that, except at the extremes, there was no discernible relationship between sexual biography and whether a person identified as heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual. Golden (1987) reported a similar phenomenon among college age women, finding “every possible permutation of feelings and activities” within each of the three identity categories. In this view, it is not possible to determine whether a particular sexual orientation identity is an end point or a way station.

Studies of lesbian and bisexual women indicate that the standard model of sexual orientation identity development cannot accommodate the experiences of many women.

In Rust's 1993 study of 400 young adult lesbian and bisexual women, 75% of bisexuals reported having once identified as lesbian, and 58% of bisexuals had changed sexual orientation identities labels two or more times. 40% of lesbians had once identified as bisexual and 20% had experienced a period of bisexual identification subsequent to adopting a lesbian identity. In fact, most of the lesbians who reported ever having wondered if they were bisexual had considered this possibility *after* identifying as lesbian. Behaviorally, most of Rust's lesbian subjects had had sexual experiences with men; 40% had been married or seriously involved with a man and only 10% had no history of heterosexual sex.

Rust's data was collected on women who went through sexual questioning in the 1970s and early 80s, leaving open the possibility that the bisexual behavior on the part of the lesbian-identified women was a matter of social pressure, and that bisexual identifications among lesbian women reflected a wish to keep one foot in the heterosexual world. Further, it may have been that some women who were "really" bisexual felt obliged to adopt a lesbian label in the context of the gay movement and the lack of acceptance of bisexuals within the gay community. Presumably, changes in the current social climate – the successes of the gay rights movement, the prevalence of gay images and stories in mainstream media, and the now-common inclusion of the word *bisexual* in political and social organizations – could make it possible for sexual-minority women to more accurately select an identity label in accordance with their sexual preference.

Diamond (2000) studied sexual orientation identity formation in 80 late adolescent sexual-minority women. She anticipated that increasing social tolerance

would enable sexual minority women to be more accurate and therefore more consistent over time in their self-identifications. Diamond found that 51% had changed identities labels more than once since first questioning their sexuality and that bisexually-identified women were no more likely than lesbians to report identity changes over a two-year period – 25% of both groups made such shifts. She also found that 25% of the lesbians in her sample reported a prior heterosexual romantic-sexual relationship, and 10% of lesbians stated that one of their strongest prior attractions was for a man. This suggests that prior findings of inconsistencies between identity and behavior cannot be attributed to historically greater social sanction of homosexuality. Diamond interprets these results to reflect the fact that most of her subjects experienced bisexual attractions, leaving open the possibility for multiple identities and behaviors over time.

Lesbian Typologies – “Primary” Versus “Elective” Identities

Early sexological and psychological writings sketched out a single type of lesbian: the masculine woman (Young-Bruehl, 2001). Her feminine counterpart was not considered lesbian, but rather a deluded woman who could be easily persuaded to abandon her inappropriate affections. A lesbian was, by definition, masculine, and even hermaphroditic in her biology. In the 1970s, even as stage models of homosexual identity development were being developed, recognition of the diversity among sexual minority women in the permutations of self-identification and behavior led writers to attempt to create new categorical schemes. In keeping with a shift to a more ethnographic, subject-centered approach to the study of sexuality, these writers sought patterns in how subjects think about and describe themselves.

In her ethnography of identity processes among lesbians, Ponse (1974) describes three patterns of sexual orientation narrative. The first group, whom she names “primary lesbians” give a self-accounting in which their historical sense of self and past experiences are consistently homoerotic or homosexual. The second type, “elective lesbians”, have had bisexual attractions and experiences. In their narratives, however, they highlight past experiences in terms of their homosexual implications and describe heterosexual aspects as in some way false. The third group has what Ponse calls “idiosyncratic” identities. While they may identify as lesbians, bisexual, or claim no label at all, they do not attempt to reinterpret past experiences in light of their current identity. In this way, they deviate in particular from the “elective” group in their apparent lack of a need for congruence between current and past behaviors and identity.

The distinction Ponse made between elective and primary lesbians was also found by Golden (1987). Golden identified two groups among the college-age women she interviewed: those who felt they had were “born lesbian” and those who experienced their sexuality as involving a conscious choice. Following Ponse, she described the latter as elective. She found that the elective group could be further differentiated according to whether they experienced their sexuality as essential and unchanging or as fluid and dynamic. Similar to Ponse’s idiosyncratic groups, self-identified lesbians experiencing their sexuality as fluid did not feel a need to explain or justify their heterosexual pasts. An elective lesbian with an essentialist view of her sexuality said “[w]hen I had a steady boyfriend, the real me, the lesbian, was suppressed”; in contrast, another woman stated “Then I was heterosexual, and now I’m a lesbian” (p. 26). Golden further found that the sense of having an essential versus a fluid sexuality can change over time. Some women

said their sexuality had become more fluid and others that it had become more fixed. She described this happening only among elective lesbians; primary lesbians held a determinative view of their sexuality by definition.

Whisman (1994) examined whether and in what way self-identified gay men and women experienced a sense of choice in their sexual orientation. She explored issues of continuity or discontinuity in awareness of homosexual attractions and how this intersected with the experience of choice in sexual orientation identity. Whisman categorizes her interviews as being either determined, chosen, or mixed narratives. Her “determined” narrators recall early awareness of same sex attractions, gender nonconformity, and a relatively unconflicted transition to a gay identity with a lack of a sense of decision, choice or deliberation. “Mixed” narrators describe a felt lack of choice in terms of sexual attraction but agency in the domain of behavior, personal and public identity, and subcultural participation. These narrators engaged in what Ponce called “identity work”: reinterpreting past feelings and behaviors so that they are in line with present identifications.

“Choice” narrators are notable in that they speak of *becoming* gay, rather than *discovering* that one *is already* gay. Both mixed and chosen narratives are marked by a discontinuity between pre-gay and gay selves: both had mostly early heteroerotic feelings that were supplemented or replaced by homoeroticism. However, choice narrators insist on agency in regard not only to their identifications, but in their very sexual attractions. For these subjects, *doing* affects *being*; the discontinuity between the pre-gay and gay self reflects an actual change at the level being. Mixed narrators, on the other hand, see themselves as consistent at the level of *being*; what is discontinuous is self-knowledge.

Whisman argues that based on their history of sexual feelings and behaviors and shared discontinuity in identity, those providing a mixed narrative could as easily, as logically, offer a chosen account. She suggests that the mixed account is the dominant narrative because it serves the political needs of the gay community and because it can assimilate a wide range of experience. In particular, the mixed account effaces the experiential differences between gay men and women. Whisman found that compared to gay men, lesbians are less inclined to believe they were born gay, more likely to have had a heterosexual identity or heterosexual experiences, and more likely to report some kind of experience of choice in their sexual orientation. Indeed, when Whisman asked if someone could “choose” their sexuality, *all* the men understood this as “choose to be straight” and rejected the possibility; the women understood this question to mean “choose to be gay” and most believed this to be possible and possibly even beneficial.

While these typologies – “primary,” “elective,” “determined,” “chosen,” “fluid” – with their focus on narrative and away from norms, serve as a critique of the linear model of homosexual identity, the standard model can still assimilate these studies insofar as those in the categories of “primary” and “determined” do tend to tell the canonical story. These women do report early same sex attractions, gender non-conformity or a sense of “being different”, same sex attractions prior to any conscious questioning of sexual identity, and a stability of attractions over time. However Diamond, in her interviews with women ages 16-23 who endorsed a sexual minority identity of some kind (either lesbian, bisexual, or “questioning”), found that these features failed to differentiate her population (1998). Most of her subjects reported at least one of these experiences, and most did not report all three. She found so-called “primary” lesbians – those reporting all

of the characteristic features – in all three of her identity groups. Moreover, lesbians reporting exclusive same sex attractions were not more likely to report all of the canonical features than lesbians with nonexclusive attractions. Diamond argues that the categories of primary and elective lesbian do not hold up.

While it might be difficult to differentiate between primary and bisexual lesbians using objective criteria, other research indicates that the differences are psychologically important. Burch (1993) found that variations in sexual experience and identity are meaningful for lesbian couples. She labeled the women in her study with a significant history of heterosexual experience “bisexual lesbians”, arguing that what is elective is socially-constructed sexual identity, not sexual orientation (that is, underlying preference). Burch found three contrasts between bisexual lesbians and their primary lesbian partners: the presence or absence on the intrapsychic landscape of men as potential erotic objects, a more or less prominent sense of being deviant or abnormal in the course of developing an identity, and divergences in terms of the sense of self as masculine or feminine. Burch argues that primary-bisexual couplings are common and that these differences are the material for fantasies of complementarity, for bonding, and for personal growth within the relationship. For example, a bisexual lesbian may excitedly imagine her primary partner’s exclusive desire for women, or may admire the ego-strength her partner developed as a “deviant” adolescent. A primary lesbian may pursue a vicarious heterosexuality through her lover’s past, or may find redress for the wound of stigma through the bisexual woman’s preference for her over a man. Each partner may discover in the other different versions of being female and reincorporate these expanded possibilities into her own sense of herself as a woman.

Bisexual Identity

A number of studies have looked at the lives of women who self-identify as bisexual or who report a history of bisexual behavior. Schwartz & Blumstein (1976) sought to describe the variety of motives related to object choice in their behaviorally bisexual subjects. Some subjects spoke of the specific and different emotional needs met by their male and female partners. Some felt that whether they were in a relationship with a man or a woman at any given time was more a matter of chance than choice. For women who were involved in the women's liberation movement, lesbian relationships represented a deepening of their involvement with other movement women and an exploration of new relational meanings, such as trust and non-competitiveness, that they felt were missing from their relationships with men.

Other women had made a conscious decision to experiment based on ideas of sexual libertarianism. These women were less likely to incorporate their homosexuality into a romantic relationship, and more likely to continue their relationships with men. Sometimes these women integrated their homosexual activities into a self-identification as bisexual; other times homosexual experiences were seen as having no implications for future behavior or sexual identity. More than half the women cited falling in love as the most significant motive for all their relationships. Many of the women reported that they tended to infer their sexual orientation identity from the gender of the person with whom they were currently involved, so that they might call themselves bisexual at times, but not while involved in an important relationship (Weinberg, et. al., 1994).

A number of authors have published first-hand accounts by self-identified bisexual women. These accounts represent somewhat different groups of women, with some (George 1993) seeming to draw from more heterosexually involved subjects and others (Hutchins *et al.* 1991) from women with strong ties to the lesbian community. Several major themes emerge from these studies. One is an intense concern with how to describe oneself and how to account for one's self-description. Among the labels used by George's questionnaire respondents were: "bisexual lesbian feminist," "lesbian-identified bisexual," "heterosexual and lesbian," and "heterosexual/bisexual". These subjects seem to be trying to say much more about their sexuality and its personal meaning than can be expressed by an identity name. At the same time, this effort to come up with a label that one can live with speaks to the importance of identity and of finding a place to stand in the socio-sexual landscape.

The contributors to the collection of essays by Hutchins *et al.* (1991) are generally at ease describing themselves simply as bisexual. They work to establish rationales for self-identifying as bisexual, and argue for bisexuality as a "legitimate" sexual orientation in the face of disbelief on the part of heterosexuals and approbation on the part of the gay community. Many of the essays focus on the writer's history of relationships with both men and women, often with a kind of back-and-forth rhythm, and explicitly state that future choices remain open. Clare Hemmings (1999) points out that for bisexual identity narratives, the problematic time frame is the present, in which a monogamous relationship would challenge the assertion of an essential bisexuality. She contrasts the bisexual narrative with the standard narrative of gay identity, in which the problem that the narrator must overcome is the past: past heterosexual behaviors that have to be

managed and re-interpreted as products of social pressure or false consciousness.

Narrators of gay identity reorder the past; narrators of bisexual identity reorder the future, possibly a more difficult enterprise.

The sense of self described by bisexual narrators is marked by dualities.

Bisexuals frequently compare their experience to that of someone who is biracial, or who belonging to more than one ethnic group. In terms of a social self, bisexual narrators describe social alienation – not fitting in as either straight or gay. Dualities are also numerous in terms of an internal sense of self: being both male and female, or of having distinct desires that can be met only by a partner of one sex or the other. The distinct needs assigned to male and female partners can be idiosyncratic: men may be seen as exciting versus women as nurturing, or women may be labeled passionate and men protective, or vice versa. Bisexuals report distinct kinds of sexual experiences with men versus women, and relate these to psychological aspects of femininity and masculinity. While these are often described in traditional gender terms (i.e. women as “softer”, men as “aggressive”), the further meanings attached to these experiences can be quite variable, as noted above, and whether these meanings are viewed as positive or negative varies as well. For example, many bisexual women agree that they experience a greater degree of psychological intimacy with their female partners, but some find this exhilarating while others describe it as claustrophobic. (Weinberg *et al.*, 1994)

Some self-identified bisexuals state that the gender of the other “doesn’t matter”: “it’s the person”, “I do not differentiate” (Weinberg *et al.*, 1994; George 1993). They might say that the biological sex of the other is no more important than eye color, and that it is other attributes of the person that they are attracted to, attributes that they find in

both men and women. These subjects are less likely to have adopted a lesbian identity at any point in time. Women who came to bisexuality through involvement with the gay community, and who have developed a sense of themselves as lesbian prior to relabeling themselves bisexual, are much less likely to experience their bisexuality as gender-free (Hutchins *et al.*, 1991). These women tend to be the most concerned with the legitimacy of bisexuality as an orientation. Their stories are involve finding, losing, and re-finding or reconfiguring a viable sense of self. Former lesbians feel shaped by their prior commitment to and involvement with women, socially and psychologically, and experience new heterosexual involvements as requiring an effortful re-evaluation of themselves.

Sexual Orientation Identity and Adult Development

Research on sexual orientation identity over the lifespan has focused on the life conditions of middle-aged and older gays and lesbians and the particular psychological challenges they face (especially in light of the AIDS epidemic), and on the impact on the life course of social prejudice and of the dramatic changes wrought by the gay civil rights movement. Findings on women include the fact that those lesbians who shaped this identity in late adolescence or early adulthood anticipated being self-supporting and thus made significant investments in their work lives, many in jobs traditionally held by men. Their work histories are less likely to have been interrupted by child-rearing, and they are less likely to have forsaken career opportunities in deference to the career demands of their romantic partners, in the way that heterosexual women often do (Kimmell and Sang, 1995).

The salience of sexual orientation identity as a central component of the sense of self over time has not been reported on for lesbians. Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1995) report on women coming out as lesbian in adulthood, after at least 10 years of heterosexual activity and identity. Their subjects describe a dramatic sense of self-discovery, feelings of being suddenly and newly alive, and of viewing the world with new clarity. These experiences can be seen in terms of the passionate creativity involved in falling in love, where both the outside world and the internal self are felt to be marvelously transformed (Parsons, 1988). While coming out often took place for these women in the context of a relationship, the sense of romance extended beyond the particular relationship to become an experience of autobiographic rupture, both frightening and thrilling.

In an interview study on the significance of homosexual identity among 30 middle-aged gay men, Kertzner (2001) found that homosexual identity organized personal narratives in terms of four themes: the coming out experience; the way in which the outsider experience enriched other aspects of identity, such as vocational identities or personal qualities such as compassion or creativity; pleasure over one's intimate relationships alongside sadness over not having had a family; and for some a sense of being gay as a serious impediment to having lived a more satisfactory life. The strongest finding in terms of gay identity and the life course was that respondents felt their identity as homosexuals decreased in importance over the years, becoming more of a "given." Kertzner relates this to the general finding that adult identity becomes more pluralistic with age.

For another group of sexual minorities, sexual orientation identity took on greater salience over time. Weinberg *et al.* (2001) conducted a follow-up 15 years after their original study of self-identified bisexuals, with 55 subjects who averaged 50 years of age. Most had identified as bisexual for over 20 years and all had been recruited through the Bisexual Center in San Francisco, long defunct by the time of follow-up. This group of subjects had once been highly sexually active with both men and women, but at midlife their activity decreased markedly. A third had become exclusively heterosexual and largely monogamous, while a fifth had become exclusively homosexual. Subjects cited a need to “settle down”, and the demands of family and other roles, as reasons for the change in their sexual activity. None had any involvement in bisexual political activism and only those who were gay-identified continued to be active in sexual minority community networks. Yet 80% continued to identify as bisexual, and to do so more strongly and with greater certainty than they had when they were younger. This sense of identity was grounded in a lifelong experience of dual sexual attractions and subjects no longer felt that monogamous involvements called their bisexuality into question. Of those who no longer self-identified as bisexual, most continued to report bisexual attractions and chose to call themselves “queer” or just “sexual”; only a few, who had had the weakest dual attractions in the original study, identified as heterosexual or homosexual. Weinberg *et al.* argue against the idea of sexual identity as fluid and readily transformable, suggesting that their data shows how subjects feel grounded in a lifetime of physical experience.

Theoretical Critiques of Identity

Erikson wrote about identity in the context of American ego psychology. The strains of thought that characterize ego psychology have been described by one historian as conformist and conservative, growing, in part, from a desire for respectability on the part of the European psychoanalysts who fled Europe for the United States in the 1930s (Zaretsky, 2004). Central to ego psychology is the concept of autonomous ego functions that operate apart from mental conflict, a realm that psychoanalytic treatment can expand, thereby assisting the patient in the task of adapting to the external world. There is a sense of a negotiation in Erikson's concept of identity, between the social world and the individual, as the person seeks commonalities between him or herself and others, and is in turn evaluated by the community. It is an adaptational vision.

Lacan argued that he was restoring to psychoanalysis Freud's original meanings in insisting on the impossibility of certainty as to what constitutes the self, or identity (1978). The ego, which would include all conscious ideas of oneself, is a "mere concatenation of alienating identification" (Nobus, 1998, p.164), and is radically opposed by the subject, which belongs to the unconscious. These alienating identifications begin in early life, with the human infant's attractions to its mirror image, an image illusory in its apparent coherence and coordination. The infant identifies with this image, and out of an original state of discoordination and chaos forms a focal sense of self out of a reflection. Lacan expands the idea of the mirror to include the seeking oneself in the eyes of another, the Other who controls how one is seen. In both cases, self-image is a mirage, not really belonging to the self, since it rests in the eyes of another. Where Erikson views

individual as, ideally, affirmatively embraced by the community, Lacan describes the individual as being subjected and ensnared.

For Lacan, it is in the nature of sexual drive to seek to restore something that's missing, to restore a lost state. This impels the subject to attempt to find restoration in the Other, through becoming the desired object. In developmental language, the child seeks to become that which will seduce the parent, to fill or satisfy the lack that generates the parent's own desire, to bring about pleasure and get rid of the unpleasurable. As a consequence, "the very kernel of our personality is an empty space: peeling off layer after layer of identification in search of the substantial kernel of one's personality, one ends up with a void, with the original lack" (Nobus, 1998, p.175).

Juliet Mitchell (1982) explains that the reinvigorated Freud, as read by Lacan, means that what makes a man or a woman is the difference between the two, not anything inherent in either. Becoming a subject, entering into the symbolic realm, occurs by taking up a position on either side of this division. In this view, all identifications and identities flow from the castration complex, when the boy and the girl both discover their inability to possess the mother. From this point forward, "the girl will desire to have the phallus and the boy will struggle to represent it." (Mitchell, p.7) In this sense, boy and girl both are created in a moment of division; there is no innate masculinity or femininity, only more or less successful efforts to live within this split. Our most basic sense of self – as either male or female – is thus both essential (we are required to be one or other) and precarious (the division point is arbitrary, fictional, and constantly undermined by the fluidity of the unconscious). Sexual difference is a "fantasmatic" "either-or" situation (Rose, 1982, p. 49), and the chronic sense of unease or dissatisfaction with having to live

as man or woman parallels the inherent lack of satisfaction in all desiring. There is no desire without alienation and loss; there is no sexual identity without division; there is no possibility for certainty about who the subject “is”.

Judith Butler (1990) critiqued the concept of identity in feminism and women’s studies, arguing that “the ‘coherence’ and ‘continuity’ of ‘the person’ are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility.” (p. 17) In speaking of “regulatory practices” that shape identity, she points to “identity” itself as a social ideal that does not accurately describe lived experience. In Butler’s analysis, being female, something that would seem to be a “natural fact”, is instead an outcome of culture, and in particular an effect of a cultural system that ties gender identification to desire.

Critiques of Lesbian Identity

The reassessment of gender identity as a theoretical construct has been quickly followed by a reassessment of theories of lesbian identity. The sociological and sexological research on lesbians and bisexual women reviewed above revealed the difficulties in categorizing some women’s sexual orientation. Contemporary theoretical and clinical writing challenge the psychoanalytic theories of female homosexuality.

Until very recently, psychoanalytic writing about lesbians told a unitary story: female homosexuality is the result of a masculinity complex, stemming from a refusal to accept the lack of a penis (Lesser & Schoenberg, 1999). The girl insists that she can be a man and takes on the erotic role of a man toward women. Her sexuality follows from taking a gendered position, the wrong position; in this scenario, being female necessarily

means taking men as love objects. As such, this formula represents the conservative aspects of Freud's writing, where "normal" sexuality, in the sense of what is socially acceptable, is identical to "normative", the outcome of correct development toward proper biological destiny. However, Freud also radically critiques any concept of "normal", most prominently in *Three Essays on Sexuality* (1905). Here he disaggregates the normal into the various components of drive, object and aim and describes their coming together in heterosexual intercourse as only tenuously achieved, through arduous efforts. As Teresa de Lauretis (1994) puts it, in Freud's sexual theory "[t]he normal...is conceivable only by approximation, more in the order of a projection than an actual state of being" (p. 27).

Within contemporary psychoanalytic writing about lesbian and bisexual women, there is great hesitancy to speak of sexual minority women as a group. Lesser (1995) objects that to write of "lesbians" is to participate in a reification of the homosexual-heterosexual binary that she sees as a political, ideological, and historical product, not a universal or natural division. O'Connor and Ryan (1993) cite Derrida in arguing that identity categories are unstable because they are defined by what they exclude, and yet at the same time depend upon the excluded. Homosexuality and heterosexuality are each "not-the-other" and are thus inextricably related, for all that they appear to be opposites. O'Connor and Ryan wish to acknowledge the significance of personal history in the development of sexual preferences, but at the same time explicitly refuse to offer any general theory of lesbian development, calling such efforts overly reductive and suppressive of diversity. O'Connor and Ryan conceive of lesbian identity as entirely an artifact of social norms: "If generalization is appropriate it is in the area of the

structuring of lesbian oppression, rather than in anything supposedly inherent in lesbians.” (p. 272) Likewise, Magee and Miller (1997, 2001) argue that there is nothing specific about the oedipal dynamics of lesbians that distinguishes them from heterosexual women and that sexual orientation in women is not a psychic organization that is stable over time. They believe lesbian identity is formed through the process of coming out, which involves confronting and coping with frightening social prohibitions.

Clinicians and theorists rewriting the psychoanalysis of male homosexuality, such as Isay (1989), Lewes (1998), and Corbett (1993), discuss the developmental trajectory of gay boys and explore the vicissitudes of their object relations as boys with a homosexual object choice. Lewes posits what he calls a “plicate” oedipal complex in gay men, marked by the fact that the object and the prohibitor of desire are both found in the father. Corbett describes the role of passive wishes toward the father in shaping a specifically gay male gender identity. In contrast, lesbian analysts and therapists tend to focus on psychological issues such as fear of loss or rejection, shame, wishes for acceptance and love, and the recuperation of hidden or split off aspects of the self, as these pertain to making one’s way in the world as a lesbian, a world in which one’s desire are either consistently unacknowledged or, if acknowledged, misunderstood (Kiersky, 2001). Recent papers also explore the application of concepts such as mourning or the de-idealization of parents to clinical work with lesbians (Crespi, 1995; Bassin, 2001). Bassin (2001) argues, in her discussion of a case of infertility in a lesbian woman, that “her categorization as a lesbian had to be understood, at certain moments, as a distraction from...her own particular resolution of...the inherently traumatic aspects of growing up human” (p. 75). Within analytic writing, as within sexology and social psychology, the

fluidity of female sexuality and the extent to which women's sexuality is relationally driven is prominent. Frenkel (2000) describes behaviorally bisexual women choosing female partners because the "gratification of their object relationships outweighed their instinctual drive" (p. 332). Crespi (1993) points out that in many lesbians "homosexual object choice is driven predominantly by their emotional 'fit' with women, which does not preclude sexual desire, but rather encompasses it" (p. 23).

Purpose of Present Study

This study aims to address the relatively underdeveloped area of the adult vicissitudes of sexual orientation identity in women. Prior research in female adult development has focused on heterosexual women and has highlighted the centrality of intimate relationships to identity and conflicts between a familial based sense of self and a sense of self that encompasses a work life. Prior research on sexual orientation development has yielded a stage-based model of identity that has been subsequently shown to be of mixed applicability to sexual minority women. Research on bisexuality in women has been limited, and much of the writing in this area has focused on the "validity" of a bisexual identity, or on delineating a stage-based model for bisexuality that is comparable to the model for gay identity. A review of the literature found no research on the salience a lesbian identity across the lifespan. Most research on sexual minority women has studied adolescents and young adults, and no research has attempted to consider sexual orientation identity in women in the context of adult development.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of shifting sexual interests and the interplay between object choice and one's sense of personal identity. Since this is a study of subjective reality, autobiographical interviewing is in order: "[O]ne of the clearest channels for learning about the inner world is through verbal accounts and stories presented by individual narrators about their lives" (Thompson, 1995, p. 12).

Subjects

I recruited 8 women who met these criteria: age 30 and older, have spent a minimum of six years since the age of 20 primarily involved or seeking to be involved with women, romantically and sexually, and are currently primarily involved with or seeking to be involved with men. I did not specify adopted identity label, presently or in the past, since the decision to identify in one way or another was part of the research focus. My intent in setting these age and behavioral parameters was to select for subjects who have spent a sufficient period of time as a lover of women that this aspect of her life collects around it sufficient interpersonal interactions, emotion, time and memory as to comprise a focal point for the experience of identity. I also wanted to ensure that subjects had had enough life experience that the patterns and issues of adulthood could be examined.

I required that subjects be partnered or seeking to be partnered with a man because I was interested in what happens to the "lesbian self" when object choice changes. What is the status of past identities? Further, this trajectory – into a lesbian life

and then away from it – is one that tends to undermine certainty about identity, another area of research interest.

My rationale for interviewing such a select group is this: I am interested in the idiosyncratic identities that I believe develop when people live idiosyncratic lives, and in the ways people understand their lives when their story does not easily fit into available cultural narratives. I believe that the experience of some degree of fluidity in sexuality and identity exists for many people, regardless of preference or history. In particular, many women, of all identities, orientations, and behavioral histories, experience some measure of mixed desire (Lauman *et al.*, 1996). The experience of shifting sexuality could be explored by gathering a wide variety of romantic histories, both hetero- and homosexual. However, a narrow focus on a small subset of women will help to bring out a detailed particularity. In so doing, I followed the grounded theory approach, whereby research starts with “individual cases, incidents or experiences” out of which more abstract concepts may be synthesized (Charmaz, 1995).

Further, I am subscribing to Freud’s method of examining cases in which what is usually concealed by “normality” is exposed (di Lauretis, 1994). Harris (1996) suggests that some people are more “gendery” than others, meaning that gender is the location for them of especially intense expressions of psychic experience. Similarly, for some women, the arena of sexual orientation, of shifting identifications, of bisexuality, holds special interest. To the extent that Freud was correct and that “all human beings are capable of making a homosexual object-choice and have in fact made one in their unconscious,” then something of general interest about the nature of bisexual object

choice can be seen in women who have made this capacity central to their life stories (Freud, 1905).

Recruiting and Interviewing

Subjects were recruited through informal social networks. Initial contact was via email for seven out of eight subjects; in the final instance, initial contact was made by telephone. All subjects were provided with a general description of the study prior to interview, to the effect that I was interested in bisexual life experiences and how these experiences relate to the subject's sense of self. Seven of the eight subjects were interviewed twice, with interviews occurring approximately a week apart, for a total of 3.5-4 hours; one subject felt this was too great a time commitment and was interviewed once for a little over two hours. In total, I conducted fifteen interviews. 12 of these took place in the subject's home, two were in subject's office, one in subject's husband's office.

The purpose of the interview was to gather the richest possible talk from subjects. Therefore, questions were open-ended and designed to encourage the interviewee to tell her story as she saw fit (see interview questions below). The interview was intended to elicit an emotionally rich and lively narrative, by encouraging the respondent to cast her thoughts back and to describe important relationships and important transitional periods in her life. The questions were a general guide, not a definitive list. At the end of the interview, I asked subjects about their experience of the interview.

Before each interview, as part of recording my own participation in the research process, I made notes how on the participant came to be a subject in the study and what I am anticipating from the interview. Immediately after each interview, I made notes on my reactions to the interaction, including, as much as possible, whatever came to mind.

Data Collection Procedures

All interviews were digitally recorded. For the seven subjects who were interviewed twice, I listened to the first interview in the interim and modified and supplemented interview questions in light of the particular issues raised in the first interview. I transcribed all interviews. The recordings, the transcripts, and my pre- and post-interview notes constitute the primary data. In the summaries that follow, certain details have been changed to protect subjects' privacy. All names are pseudonymous.

Researcher and Subject

Because I am a member of the group I am studying, I am inevitably using my own experience as a starting point for generating areas of interest and questioning. I was open about my group membership and told subjects that my aim was to expand my personal understanding of the meanings of a bisexual history. To the extent that one's sense of identity is related to canonical narratives within one's identity community, women with a gay to straight trajectory may have difficulty telling an identity narrative that is felt to be persuasive – she anticipates doubt and misunderstanding in her listener. In this way, my personal membership offered advantages as a researcher.

At the same time, personal investment presents potential risks. The most obvious objection to researcher membership in the group being studied is that perspective and distance is necessary to objective and reasoned analysis may be lacking. From another point of view, however, membership in the community being studied forces the researcher to confront directly what is inevitable in every interview study but is easier to avoid when the subject is more distant – the researcher’s inevitably intimate participation in the research encounter.

Krieger (1985) has written vividly of her efforts to engage with interview data she had collected on the experience of life in a lesbian community in a Midwestern academic town, a community to which she also belonged. Initially, she understood her block against analyzing her data as a symptom of being “too close” to the material and devised various procedures to create psychological distance between herself and her subjects. Ultimately she saw that she first had to embrace and understand her own relationship to the community, and she learned to use her own self-understandings as a guide to understanding her material. She argues that what initially seemed to be an obstacle became a resource for a humanistic research process:

“My task was to uncover what I could with the tool of myself and my personal recognitions...The great danger of doing injustice to the reality of the ‘other’ does not come about through use of the self, but through lack of use of a full enough sense of self which, concomitantly, produces a stifled, artificial, limited and unreal knowledge of others” (p. 320)

In order to ensure that my personal reactions to the interviews expand rather than limit my analysis, I incorporated a structured approach to self-reflection as part of the interview process described above.

Data Analysis

On the topic of analyzing qualitative interview data, Patton (1980) states, “There are no simple formulas or clear-cut rules about how to do a credible, high-quality analysis. The task is to do one’s best to make sense of things.” Wertz (cited in Giorgi, 1985) proposes that:

“...psychological insight seems to occur as a spontaneous upsurge of a largely intuitive character rather than by any following of explicit rules, so that even when its accuracy is obvious, how an insight was arrived at remains a mystery.”
(p. 197)

Thus, Wertz’s recommendations for data analysis are necessarily vague: an “empathetic immersement in the world of description” and “suspension of belief and the employment of intense interest” (p. 238).

However, without setting forth some procedures for data analysis, the transparency of the research project is compromised, a transparency that is crucial to validity. I followed in part the procedures outlined by Gilligan *et al.* (2003) in their “Listening Guide.” This is a method that aims to maximize attention to multiple facets, or voices, of a subject’s discourse. Gilligan *et al.* ground their approach in

relational psychology, emphasizing the idea that the inner world of each individual is developed through a series of relationships – with the self, with others, and with the culture. They developed the method specifically in response to dissatisfaction with methods for coding qualitative data that do not allow for multiple codings of the same passage. The method helps the researcher tune in to multiple layers of meaning in the interview material. As such, it was well-suited to a study of ambiguity and contradiction.

The Listening Guide approach takes cues from clinical methods, by emphasizing staying close to the material and at the same time encouraging the researcher to attend to his or her own responses and making these responses an explicit part of the analysis. This is consistent with efforts to examine the interviews dynamically, with an awareness of transference and countertransference, in terms of interviewer/respondent effects and the joint construction of meaning.

The analytic steps of the Listening Guide are as follows: 1. Listening for Plot and Listener's Response; 2. "I" Poems; 3. Listening for Contrapuntal Voices; 4. Composing an Analysis. The first step is based on an entire passage; the second two steps involve separating out aspects of the text for specific review. Finally, the repeated "listeenings" are considered in relation to one another, to the rest of the interview, and to material from other subjects.

I transcribed all the interviews myself, with all transcriptions maintaining as much fidelity as possible to the speech of the subject, so that hesitations, repetitions, and any striking features of the conversation such as laughing, crying or long pauses are represented in the text. These features of conversation can be crucial clues to

what is and is not being said. Transcribing interviews myself increased my “immersion” in the subjects’ experience and points of view.

Pilot Interview Passage Analysis

Below I analyze a passage from a pilot interview I conducted with a woman in her mid-40s, following Gilligan *et al.*’s (2003) data analysis procedure. In steps two and three, I mark the text, through successive underlining, italicizing, and bold face, extract the portion under consideration, and follow with a brief interpretation of the material.

...I think I had just gotten to this point where I just didn’t feel good about the way that I didn’t seem to be able to make a commitment to a person, and there had been a number of people who wanted to make, I mean, D. [a boyfriend] wanted to marry me. There had been a number of people that – L. [a girlfriend] wanted to essentially marry me, I mean, V. [a girlfriend] wanted to marry – I mean, there were these people who wanted to spend the rest of their life with me and I essentially was not able to say yes. And I felt, you know, that I’m not so sure I felt there was something wrong with me exactly, but I sort of felt like, well, these are all really good people and I – they’ve all loved me and I’ve loved them, it’s not that I didn’t love them. So there must be some – you know, there must be a way in which for whatever reason, maybe because of this whole sexuality issue or whatever other reasons that I just can’t make this kind of commitment, and so I really need to be responsible about how I’m – and I need to learn to live alone, and I need to learn to kind of figure out how to take care of myself. So I bought this house...

Step 1: a) Listening for the Plot and b) Reader's Response

Here the aim is to get a general sense of the story being told, as well as to note researcher responses to the narrative, in order to make explicit one's own thoughts and feelings about the material.

Plot: The speaker is describing a period in her mid 30s when she was single for an extended period, after having had a number of serious, complex, and sometimes difficult relationships with both women and men. Within the larger interview, this is a turning point, and sets the stage for meeting the man to whom she is now married. It is also the temporary fulfillment of a childhood sense of self as destined to be alone in life.

Reader Response: There is the sense of coming up short, of having turned this way and that and not finding a way through. In terms of the larger story being told, it is a time-out, a period of reflection after tremendous busy-ness. I'm struck by the sense of protracted struggle and confusion. The problem of love and commitment is consuming and at this point in the story feels insoluble. I'm somewhat anxious about the speaker's implied theory of her bisexuality – that she is incapable of commitment – as it seems both stereotypical and pathological.

Step 2: I Poems

Working with all the “I” statements in a piece of narrative establishes the psychic landscape of the interview. This step sets aside content for the time being in order to focus on the first-person voice.

I think I had just gotten to this point where I just didn't feel good about the way that I didn't seem to be able to make a commitment to a person, and there had been a number of people who wanted to make, I mean, D. [a boyfriend] wanted to marry me. There had been a number of people that – L. [a girlfriend] wanted to essentially marry me, I mean, V. [a girlfriend] wanted to marry – I mean, there were these people who wanted to spend the rest of their life with me and I essentially was not able to say yes. And I felt, you know, that I'm not so sure I felt there was something wrong with me exactly, but I sort of felt like, well, these are all really good people and I – they've all loved me and I've loved them, it's not that I didn't love them. So there must be some – you know, there must be a way in which for whatever reason, maybe because of this whole sexuality issue or whatever other reasons that I just can't make this kind of commitment, and so I really need to be responsible about how I'm – and I need to learn to live alone, and I need to learn to kind of figure out how to take care of myself. So I bought this house.

I think I had just gotten to this point

I just didn't feel

I didn't seem to be able to make

I mean

I mean

I mean

I essentially was not able to say

I felt

I'm not so sure

I felt

I sort of felt like

I've loved

I didn't love

I just can't make

I really need to be

I'm

I need to learn to live

I need to learn to kind of figure out

I bought

This I Poem rather nicely illuminates the intensity of the internal struggle this woman experiences, as well as her determination to find a way out. She finds herself to be stuck; her voice seems to be skipping in place almost like a scratched record. She is deeply unsure of how she feels, she is trying to figure out her own meanings, and she feels a growing sense of urgency. She is centrally preoccupied with the problem of love.

By the end of the “poem”, the speaker moves decisively out of primarily mental processes and into action.

Step 3: Listening for Contrapuntal Voices

This step in the analysis establishes the multiple facets of the story being told, and ties the material back to the research question. This passage offers insight into the question of what meanings the subject gives to her changing preferences. In the first reading, I focus on the speaker’s interactions with her lovers.

I think I had just gotten to this point where I just didn’t feel good about the way that I didn’t seem to be able to make a commitment to a person, and *there had been a number of people who wanted to make, I mean, D. [a boyfriend] wanted to marry me. There had been a number of people that – L. [a girlfriend] wanted to essentially marry me, I mean, V. [a girlfriend] wanted to marry – I mean, there were these people who wanted to spend the rest of their life with me and I essentially was not able to say yes. And I felt, you know, that I’m not so sure I felt there was something wrong with me exactly, but I sort of felt like, well, *these are all really good people* and I – *they’ve all loved me and I’ve loved them, it’s not that I didn’t love them*. So there must be some – you know, there must be a way in which for whatever reason, maybe because of this whole sexuality issue or whatever other reasons that I just can’t make this kind of commitment, and so I really need to be responsible about how I’m – and I need to learn to live alone, and I need to learn to kind of figure out how to take care of myself. So I bought this house.*

...there had been a number of people who wanted to...D. wanted to marry me. There had been a number of people that – L. wanted to essentially marry me...V. wanted to marry me...there were these people who wanted to spend the rest of their life with me...these are all really good people...they've all loved me and I've loved them, it's not that I didn't love them...I really need to be responsible about how I'm –

This reading speaks of being wanted and wanting in return, of loving and being loved, and yet of not being able to fulfill the promise of love. The tone is bewildered, regretful, and also guilty. There is a sense of missed opportunity, and loss. In the larger context, the speaker makes clear that she feels she treated these lovers irresponsibly by being unfaithful, and by being unable to reciprocate her lovers' desire for a full commitment. This thought is sufficiently troubling that it remains incomplete in this passage.

Second Contrapuntal Voice

This fourth reading focuses on the speaker's own analysis of her dilemma.

I think I had just gotten to this point where I just didn't feel good about the way that **I didn't seem to be able to make** a commitment to a person, and *there had been a number of people who wanted to make, I mean, D. [a boyfriend] wanted to marry me. There had been a number of people that – L. [a girlfriend] wanted to essentially marry me, I mean, V. [a girlfriend] wanted to marry-- I mean, there were these*

*people who wanted to spend the rest of their life with me and **I essentially was not able to say** yes. And **I felt**, you know, that **I'm not so sure I felt there was something wrong** with me exactly, but **I sort of felt like**, well, *these are all really good people* and I – *they've all loved me and **I've loved them**, it's not that **I didn't love them***. So there must be some – you know, there must be a way in which for whatever reason, **maybe because of this whole sexuality issue** or whatever other reasons that **I just can't make this kind of commitment**, and so *I really need to be responsible about how I'm* – and **I need to learn to live alone**, and **I need to learn to kind of figure out how to take care of myself**. So **I bought this house**.*

I didn't seem to be able to make a commitment to a person...I essentially was not able to say yes...there was something wrong...I've loved them, it's not that I didn't love them. ...maybe because of this whole sexuality issue...I just can't make this kind of commitment...I need to learn to live alone...I need to learn to kind of figure out how to take care of myself. So I bought this house.

The strand that emerges from this second reading for contrapuntal voices is strikingly decisive, self-contained, and analytical. The speaker identifies a problem (“something wrong”), considers possible causes (“it's not that I didn't love them...maybe because of this whole sexuality issue”) proposes a solution (“learn to live alone”) and then acts on it (“I bought this apartment”). She links together the question of sexuality to the issue of making a commitment to another person, and implies that there are unresolved concerns about dependency at stake. There is a sense of momentum, of

moving on to the next chapter, of looking forward. This is a voice that stands in contrast to the stuck-ness of the I poem, and the guilty regret of the hesitant beloved, and might be thought of as a determined seeker.

Step 4: Composing an Analysis

At this point, the serial readings are considered together, to see how they illuminate one another, how they relate to similar analyses of the entire interview, and, ultimately, how this interview compares with other interviews.

For the passage in question, I would suggest that the dominant mental state is confusion and the dominant emotions are negative, while what appears more hidden (and might not have emerged but for specific attention to multiple voices) is clarity of mind and a sense of strength. This speaker certainly sees her changing preferences as meaningful in terms of whether or not she is able to make a long-term commitment to a sexual partner, and also as connected to dependency needs. Her consideration of these issues includes a tension between feelings of confusion, guilt, regret and loss, and a less elaborated positive valuation of her experiences.

Methodological Soundness

There are four risks in this study: that the interview material itself will be falsely represented, that I conducted the interviews in such a way that I elicit only the sort of narratives that I am expecting, that I analyzed the data according to my own pre-conceived ideas, and that my findings only hold for my small sample and are

without wider applicability. Because I recorded every interview and transcribed the tapes myself, there is little threat to descriptive validity in this study.

Since it is impossible to control for my personal impact on the study, I have made my subjective interest in the topic explicit, and worked to identify my own assumptions and expectations throughout the course of the interviews and the data analysis. Through the discipline of noting my expectations prior to each interview as well as my immediate reactions to it, I made my own involvement in the research process transparent, and safeguarded, as much as possible, against shaping the interview in any particular direction.

As to interpretation, there is the danger of selecting data to fit the researcher's existing theory or preconceptions and of selecting of data that simply stand out to the researcher (Maxwell, 1996). As with the conduct of the interviews themselves, I am making my analytic procedures visible and transparent, so that the presentation of the data and the analysis does not constrain alternative interpretations. I also reviewed my analyses with my dissertation advisor.

At the theoretical level, the gravest problem is failing to attend to discrepant data or not considering alternative explanations of the phenomena under study (Maxwell, 1996). The literature review is a partial safeguard against this problem, especially as I discuss writings from a wide variety of theoretical perspectives.

I hope that my findings are meaningful beyond the sample group, not only for other women with a bisexual life history, but also in terms of experiences of sexuality and identity that a wide variety of individuals might share. However, this must remain a hope and cannot be guaranteed, and in any event is impossible to prove one way or the other.

My interpretations inevitably remain partial, and must ultimately be judged on whether I succeed in conveying an enlarged, capacious understanding of a complex area of human life.

Interview Questions

Tell me just a bit about your growing up – where you were born, where your family lived, siblings.

What are your earliest memories of romantic or sexual thoughts? What sort of thoughts did you have?

[If early sexual feelings are heterosexual:] When did you first become interested in women sexually? [If early sexual feelings are lesbian:] When did you first become interested in men sexually?

Could you describe the first romantic relationship you had that felt really important and significant to you?

Was there a time you decided you were bisexual or lesbian? Would you say you have a “coming out” story – could you tell me that story?

How “out” were you as a lesbian (or bisexual)? Did you tell your family? Friends? Co-workers? How did they respond? How important was being lesbian/bisexual to you? Did you think of yourself as part of the gay community?

Could you describe your most significant sexual and romantic relationships with women? [if not addressed, ask for length, exclusivity, commitment, why subject thinks relationship ended]

Could you describe your most significant sexual and romantic relationships with men? [if not addressed, ask for length, exclusivity, commitment, why subject thinks relationship ended]

When you were involved with women, did you experience attractions to, or have fantasies about, men? How did you think about those feelings?

Was there a time when you experienced new (or renewed) interest in men? What was this like?

Was there a specific time in your life when you were making a transition away from identifying as a lesbian? Do you have a story that you tell about this time, similar to your “coming out” story?

Did you tell friends/family/co-workers about becoming involved with men? How did they react? Did your social life change when you became involved with men? Your circle of friends?

Do people in your current life know that you were involved with women in the past?

Are you still attracted to women? Are these attractions different than in the past? Do you anticipate acting on them?

Why do you think you were a lesbian/bisexual/involved with women?

Why do you think you are now involved with men?

What did you like most about being a lesbian/involved with women? What do you miss, if anything?

[If not already addressed by subject:] How do you see the qualities of masculinity and femininity in relation to your experiences with women and with men? Have you felt more or less feminine when you have been involved with women versus men? Do you think of the partners you have had in terms of their masculinity or femininity? Has your sense of yourself in terms of masculinity/femininity changed over time?

How do you currently label your sexual identity to yourself, even if it's different from what you might tell other people?

What has this interview been like for you?

Presentation of Data

General Characteristics

All subjects lived and worked in the New York City metropolitan area. All subjects were college-educated; six held advanced degrees. Subjects' colleges and graduate schools were all elite institutions in the East and Midwest. Four worked in non-profits that have a social policy or social welfare mandate; the other four worked in advertising, education, television production, and science. All subjects were white. Subjects' ages were as follows: 30, 33, 36, 37, 38, 49, 50, and 61.

As per the criteria for inclusion in the study, all subjects had spent at least 6 years post age 20 primarily involved with women. Most had been involved with women for much longer than that. The average number of years that subjects spent mostly or exclusively in relationships with women was 13 years, with a range of approximately 8 to 22 years.

At the time of the interview, four subjects were married to men, and had been partnered with these men for between six and 13 years. Two subjects were in serious relationships with men that they expected or hoped would become lasting commitments or marriages. One subject had recently ended a 9-year lesbian relationship and intended to date only men in the future. One subject had recently ended an important relationship with a man and was dating both men and women at the time of the interview.

All subjects had a history of long-term, committed romantic relationships, ranging in length from five years for the youngest subject to 15 years for one of the older subjects. All subjects described having a committed relationship as a central life goal.

Three subjects were parents: one had given birth to children (first in a lesbian relationship and then again with her husband), one was a mother via a same-sex second parent adoption, and one was raising children from her husband's prior marriage. A fourth subject lived with her husband and his children but did not consider herself to be in a parental role; she was contemplating becoming pregnant. Of the four subjects who did not have any children, three intended to; one of these three women had become pregnant via IVF within her lesbian relationship but had miscarried, and one felt very ready to be a mother but lacked a partner. Only one subject did not plan on having children.

Subject Experiences of Interviews

Subjects uniformly reported finding the interview an interesting and positive experience; they seemed emotionally engaged and interpersonal rapport was high. Three subjects asked to hug me at the close of the second meeting. All subjects who were interviewed twice reported thinking about the interview on more than one occasion between meetings. At the second interview, one subject reported a vivid and complex dream that she felt was clearly related to the interview. Another subject began the second interview reading from notes she had made in the interim. A third subject had collected numerous photographs from her life to show me. All subjects reported that they had little occasion to discuss their history of relationships with women or that they didn't know any or only one other person who shared a similar trajectory. All expressed great curiosity about the results of the study.

Subject Narrative Summaries

1. Anne is a 30-year-old lawyer working in public policy. She grew up in New York City and the Hudson Valley, attended college in the Midwest, and law school in New York City. Anne became involved with women freshman year of college and had two five-year lesbian relationships, with one short heterosexual relationship in between. At the time of the interview, she was living alone and was in a year-long serious dating relationship with a man.

Anne's family moved out of New York City when she was eight. Her father's long commute led him to spend more and more time in the city, at the same time, her parents' relationship was probably deteriorating. Her parents officially separated when Anne was 13, but remained friends and her father was a regular presence in the home. He took care of her mother when she had cancer and a severe depression, though he pulled back for a while. Anne's understanding is that "my mother is still in love with my father and my father is not really in love with my mother any more. So I think that my mom was kind of staying depressed to keep him around, to oversimplify it greatly." Because their parents always seemed to get along, the separation was a shock to Anne and her younger brother, but this was cushioned by the continued closeness in the family, never missing a Christmas together.

As a girl, Anne remembers husband and wife games with her best girl friend in second grade, and then crushes on boys beginning in junior high, including strong

obsessions with male celebrities. She also had intense friendships with other girls and one in particular that she now understands as a romantic crush.

In high school, there was a very good-looking, very well-liked boy about whom Anne was “cuckoo”: “[I]n the ninth grade he finally liked me back, and as soon as he liked me back, I was completely repulsed by him, to the point where I stayed home from school for two weeks....[I]n the eleventh grade, we were kind of seeing each other but it wasn’t exclusive and I was just like madly in love with him again and he didn’t really care about me that much any more.” A second experience of being inexplicably disgusted when a boy she liked returned her affections prompted her parents to send her to a therapist. In contrast, a high school summer romance with a boy out of her social class was “totally normal and functional.” Anne doesn’t know what was behind these dramatic swings in her adolescent romantic history.

At the end of high school, Anne became a fan of a bisexual singer/songwriter, attended many of her concerts, and adopted the look of this celebrity and her fans. Anne’s devotion to this celebrity prompted her mother to wonder if Anne was bisexual, a thought which struck Anne as absurd. She vividly describes this interaction, which took place while Anne was on a road trip out West:

“I was on the phone with my mom and I was crying about Ani DiFranco because I was like – I was just at this concert – she says to me – and I remember my mom saying to me, do you think you might be bisexual? And I was like, what? I was like, what! No! Mother! Don’t be ridiculous -- like I was just – but it wasn’t even – I wasn’t even struck by it in some kind of mean- -- you know what I mean, I wasn’t like [gasp] oh my god! I was really just, like, what? I was just, seriously, I can’t believe you just said that, that’s

the stupidest thing I've ever heard. But, when I got to [college], I immediately developed this crush on this girl. And it was like – I've looked back at my journal from the time, and there's no, um, like, oh my god, I can't believe I have a crush on a girl. Like, nothing. Just fact. Huge crush. This is who it is, and it happens to be a girl." Anne attributes her relaxed attitude about having a crush on a girl to the "incredibly gay" environment at her college: "It was weird, it was like – it wasn't weird to me at all that it was happening...everyone there is experimenting with their sexuality like crazy."

By the end of freshman year, Anne had begun a romantic relationship with Sarah, "this very charismatic, attractive person, like everyone loves her." Anne experienced intense sexual pleasure for the first time: "I was, like, oh, this is what people are talking about when they talk about feeling really turned on. Like when they talk about sex, this is what the mean. That's what this feeling is and I've never had it before." During Anne's junior semester abroad, as per the couple's open relationship agreement but causing Anne great unhappiness, Sarah had an affair with Thea. When Sarah had her term away, in revenge, Anne seduced Thea, who was in turn broken-hearted when Anne got back together with Sarah. They were together another two years before Anne forced the break-up: "It really sucked...I was not in it anymore but I was so comfortable in my life with her and I was so afraid of hurting her that I just couldn't. So she ended up having to be the one to say we have to split up, but it she didn't want to – she didn't want to do it."

Subsequently, Anne had a relationship with a man, as well as brief involvements with a couple of women. The heterosexual relationship was unsatisfying, as Anne felt she cared more for him than he did for her. She felt insecure about relating sexually to a

man and he wasn't able to help her to feel comfortable: "It was always in bed at night with the lights off. It was not exciting and I was insecure about it...he did not help me feel comfortable in my body about it." A year and a half or so after breaking up with Sarah, Anne reconnected with Thea, the third point of the romantic triangle from college, and began a five-year live-in relationship.

Anne's relationship with Thea was marked, variously, by shared pleasures, values, and a sense of adventure; by the experience of being quite intensely loved and cared for and of cherishing the other in return; and also by tremendous restlessness and guilt. Thea was giving and attentive: for a birthday present, she carved a set of nesting dolls, each in the image of Anne, wearing one of her own actual outfits. She built furniture for their home together. On the other hand, she was domineering and possessive. Sex was constant in the beginning but Anne's interest diminished and this became a source of tension. Anne struggled with her ambivalence:

"I remember going on some hike and I was like so anxious, it was just all I was thinking about, like I just can't be with this person anymore. And I could not figure out why. But I was just like, I've got – this has got to end, it's like all I'm thinking about is not wanting to be with her, and I just *couldn't* say it, like I just could not bring myself to say it. So – and that was *years* before we broke up." They moved to the West Coast together after Anne completed her graduate program. Finally, Anne left Thea and moved back East. Immediately after the break-up, she began her current relationship with Mark, a man she had had a flirtatious friendship with a couple of years prior.

Anne tried to sort out her distress at the way her prior relationships had ended, and the role of her sexuality on those break-ups: "One of the big, big mysteries to me in

general that applies to both my break-up with Sarah and my break up with Thea is, like, I don't know what role my sexuality has played in the fact that my relationships with both of these women that I was with for so long failed in this kind of bizarre way where I still really loved the person and cared about them so much and they were so wonderful and they made me so happy, but there was this inexplicable urge to get out of it. I don't know whether that's something that would have happened if it was a man too, or not, I have no idea. But both of my very long relationships ended in this kind of way where I was completely unable to explain myself."

Anne sometimes identified the source of her ambivalence as a matter of not being ready to settle down. Although she and her second long-term girlfriend talked about having children and what coast they wanted to live on, "in the back of my mind I thought, I'm never going to do that with you...I'm not ready to be in the relationship that I'm going to be in for the rest of my life."

During her relationship with Sarah, Anne had wondered about the significance of her attractions to men. Although these had always been present, alongside her feelings for women, she didn't know if they were genuine or instead "some kind of weird societal sort of thing that – I wondered if being the object of male, like having men be attracted to me turned me on, but that I didn't actually want to have sex with men, like I wondered if what I really wanted was attention from men." Her experience with a man in between her two lesbian relationships didn't clarify things: "Part of me was, it's not that you didn't feel comfortable with him, that's just an excuse, really you just don't like having sex with men, it's that that's not physically pleasurable to you."

Anne's relationship with her current boyfriend has shown her otherwise. Being with Mark has felt like a new revelation, of why people enjoy heterosexuality, comparable to the initial revelation of sexual pleasure that she experienced when she first made love with a woman. She has remained intensely sexually interested in this man and feels her sex life is much better than it was with either of her female lovers. Anne recounts a sense of discovery – of sexuality, of physical pleasure, and this time, of the male body. She feels an intensity of lustful desire for her boyfriend that is different from what she felt towards her female lovers. In those relationships, she was perhaps more the beloved, the object of sexual attention, her lovers were dominant: "I was never that into their female parts."

Although Anne vastly prefers the quality of sexual experience in her current relationship to her past experiences with women, it wasn't always comfortable. When she first began having sex with her boyfriend, her "hormones went crazy and I starting getting all these hairs." There's also less cuddling, and Anne continues to dress carefully for her man, in make-up and a dress, and tries not to fart around him. Although she hopes that this relationship will be essentially permanent, and although she cannot imagine feeling as sexually satisfied with a woman as she is with this man (and therefore doesn't imagine herself being with a woman again), she continues to experiences attractions to women and reciprocal crushes, and she does not rule out a future lesbian relationship.

Anne never identified herself, to herself or anybody else, as either lesbian or bisexual. She always felt attracted to boys and so lesbian never seemed true. Her social circle has never been predominantly gay and hasn't changed very much with the end of

her gay relationship. She dislikes the term bisexual, as her second girlfriend was scornful women who self-identified as such. Perhaps more importantly, for Anne, bisexual suggests a permanent lack of satisfaction, a perpetual wanting of what one has not got. She sees “bisexual” as both more uncertain and also more settled than she feels. None of the labels feel right, and if someone asks her, “I’ll tell what I’ve told you,” that is, the story of her relationships.

With this lack of identification, it makes sense that Anne did not experience a strong sense of going through a transition, neither when she fell in love with a woman nor when she got together with a man in a serious way and for the first time. But she does identify with the idea of having gone through a transition in coming to a kind of feminist politics. She connects this to her fandom of the confessional singer/songwriter mentioned earlier. As a young woman heading off to college, an angry and fierce attitude felt very important; the politics are still important but she no longer gets mad when a man comments on her appearance in the street. Her political sensibilities had caused her some discomfort with some of her sexual feelings. It had once felt very wrong to feel sexually submissive toward a man, but she doesn’t think of it as wrong any more.

Even though she didn’t identify as lesbian in terms of her sexuality, Anne took on the identity as a “political responsibility.” “I didn’t want to be one of those people who was like, I’m not really gay. But, like, yeah, you are, you’ve been with women for ten years.” Politics also makes her cautious about articulating her own theory of her lesbianism, which is that her mother’s lengthy period of illness – two bouts with cancer and quite severe depression, including hospitalization – was a factor. Anne’s mother became ill right as Anne started college.

Anne thinks that her mother had a difficult time accepting Anne's homosexuality because mother thought her absence might have caused it. Anne's mother did come to terms with her daughter's relationships and was "heartbroken" when Anne broke up with Thea: "she wrote her a letter." She's been circumspect enough not to be too openly pleased that her daughter is dating a man.

Anne is sexually happy in her current heterosexual relationship in a way she finds thrilling and also reassuring, in that it may answer the question that nagged at her for years: "When I was with Thea, I had never really had a sexual relationship with a man, not really. And I was constantly curious about it and wondering about it and thinking about it a lot, and was attracted to men, and I think I sort of felt like I couldn't really commit to being with Thea for the rest of my life without kind of figuring out what that was about. Because what if I liked it so much more? Which is maybe what happened, I don't know."

2. Beth is a 38-year-old woman working in advertising. She grew up in northern California, came East to college and then moved to New York City after graduation to pursue a career in publishing. Beth came out as a lesbian her senior year of college and was primarily to exclusively involved with women for the next 18 years. At the time of the interview, she was living alone, having recently ended a nine-year, committed relationship with a woman, and having decided that she would only date men in the future.

At the time of the interview, Beth was in an active process of change, from being a lesbian to becoming straight. She was gradually letting people in her life know she is interested in dating men and she was experimenting with wearing dresses (her lesbian persona's sexual identity as expressed satorially was femme-y butch slash butch-y femme, a la Marlene Dietrich). (In other words, although Beth felt she had to feminize her look in order to "succeed" as a straight woman and be attractive to men, her current "look" certainly seemed already bisexually appealing.) Her wish to signal her straightness externally resembled a similar change she initiated when she came out as a lesbian her junior year of college.

Early sexual identity was as straight. Early sexual/romantic memories were of "the musician from the band that I loved, that he would move in next door and want to get away from it all and then fall in love with me." As an adolescent, she named and denied her sexual interest in other girls to a friend:

"I was talking to a friend of mine, a girl, and we were talking [about] some lesbians in my class, and she said, I don't know what's the difference between her being

gay and us being gay, and I think I said something like, we don't have sexual fantasies about each other, we're just friends. But at the same time I knew that I kind of was interested in women, like girls – it felt kind of lewd. I had this fantasy of a girl wearing like a short skirt and reaching between her legs from behind and kind of cupping her.”

Beth also remembers feeling intensely jealous when an admired older girl turned out to have a girlfriend, a feeling she expressed to herself at the time as disgust:

“She wrote me a note and she said, we're, you know, we're together. And I didn't really know what she meant and I was really upset, like, I was actually devastated. I'm not really sure what the whole thing was, but I was just very – I was, like, disgusted, I think I was hurt. I was – I think I felt left out. And I didn't feel like I could talk to her anymore.” The intensity of Beth's distress at the break-up of this friendship prompted her mother to ask if Beth might be gay.

High school was marked by the development of bulimia and a period of feeling “unattractive...like a big old mess...that was – I would say that was a super significant thing, of just not getting to be happy, like there was something that just – it's not going to happen.” College wasn't much better, although she felt less like “a leper.” Early intercourse with men was difficult: “It was just so nothing and so unpleasant and there was just nothing there.” It had humiliating associations, brought on yeast infections, trips to the gynecologist, and then distress with penetration of all kinds and a pulling back from dating. Soon after, Beth got together with her first girlfriend, during the cold spring of Beth's junior year (they were roommates and their relationship began as they cuddled together all day in an underheated house):

“We just connected in some way emotionally where I felt like she was giving me the therapy that I needed. And she was so deep and intelligent and I needed it so much...I was kind of fighting the bulimia thing, just total self loathing and she was just a very, very good friend. And when we first – we didn’t even – I mean, it was basically sex but it wasn’t actually penetration or anything, but it was like messing around. And I felt repulsed afterwards, like the next day I just wanted to throw up. I would look at her and be like, she’s not beautiful, but like in bed it was very powerful.”

Beth identifies the problem with penetration as relating to not wanting “people looking in too deep to me,” as something “more spiritual than physical,” of not wanting “to have to not be able to say no.” “I’ve wracked my brain with like, you know, was there abuse” but Beth doesn’t remember anything that explains how her vagina became a “kind of dangerous zone, or like a problem area.” Fear of penetration first appeared when learning to use a tampon and was shared by Beth’s mother.

The fall of senior year Beth became unable to function and took a medical leave from school to work and live with her girlfriend. Beth came out to her parents, made a new set of friends, and changed her appearance: “It’s like I was shedding the straight world and going into the gay world and I wanted to be hot, I wanted to be attractive and there was a look that went along with that.”

Through her 20s, Beth dated women and both thought of herself as a lesbian and had a public lesbian identity. Her mixed attractions were unremarkable to her: “Like, yes, I’m attracted to men, but I’m going to get by just fine with women...it didn’t make me question anything.” But a two-year relationship in her late 20s became filled with the sense “I wish I were in this house with someone else...a lonely feeling...this sadness

about not being in love.” Beth ended the relationship with the thought of dating men because “I’ve exhausted the options.” Instead she quickly became involved with another woman at age 29. This relationship lasted nine years, during which time Beth, with her lover’s help, developed a successful career after years of lack of focus.

Beth’s lesbian marriage was a “good package” with a comfortable lifestyle. It came apart, gradually at first, with Beth feeling constrained and controlled, and then dramatically. Beth panicked horribly following successful fertility treatments. She felt that having a child within a lesbian relationship would be “living a lie,” that “the relationship...represented a safety and protection and like a mask for a togetherness that I didn’t have [and] that also felt like a prison after a while.” The pregnancy ended in early miscarriage after weeks of being in “total shock...sick with anxiety.” A meeting with a couples therapist revealed to Beth her own need for therapy – “it’s me, I need help.”

Beth has found the changes in her life after ending her lesbian relationship both exhilarating and frightening; she feels brave. It was appealing to think how much easier it would be to bring a husband home to her parents but at the same time “I don’t want to be their property again...there’s something separate about being gay.” She fears not being able to “succeed” at being straight, of losing the “cachet” of being gay. The break-up is a rupture on multiple levels. There’s regret, of not having done it earlier, and that the nine-year relationship had been entered into from a position of weakness and depression. Switching gender choice made the loss feel “gargantuan”; she felt “not intact”, “not wholistic.” Beth feels socially embarrassed at being known to have bisexual interests, and internally embarrassed at her fantasies of a Prince Charming, of being swept away.

At the beginning of the second interviewing session, Beth summed up the significance of her experience with women in a few, dense sentences. She theorized that she was a lesbian because as a young woman she was unready to be close to men (traced to issues in her relationships with both her parents), and then “something happened...some kind of switch happened.” Being with women enabled her to “get myself together, love, be loved, have sex, all of that, before I would ever have a chance of a successful relationship with a man.” She gained “the sense that I didn’t need to do anything or change anything about myself...[I’ve gotten] a little bit less self-loathing...and I think I learned how to have sex really well.” Beth tried to parse the significance of gender in her experience of change: “I think what I’m demonstrating is...almost like a psychological issue versus gender issue or like a sexuality issue or sexual object issue. It’s more about me being somewhat broken and wounded and finding comfort in women. And then a life.”

At the end of the interview, Beth returned to this question again – what was the significance in her life of being a lesbian. She wondered how women with a similar history felt about their bodies, and also if they had regrets about having been lesbian. In answer to her own questions: “When I got together with my first girlfriend, I was like fighting bulimia and I was very self-loathing and really was grappling with that. So she was a huge help in that I just felt very beautiful. I think with men I felt – I would feel turned on and everything, but I felt much more invisible and, um, I felt much more sensually towards my own body with women. And the definition of how to be and how to look and all of that just felt like a much more open environment. So I would say I learned to love my body more.”

“Would I do it differently – oh god...we don’t need to answer that one.

[Q: What about a sense of choice?] I could give myself the agency and say, yeah, there was choice involved in that. I wanted to – I mean, there was obviously attraction involved, and there were issues involved to do with men and being overpowered and vulnerable, and I wanted to not be near that, so I chose to open myself up to women and let myself feel attracted and loved and all of that. And I feel like it was a choice to let that in.”

3. Claire is a 36-year-old educator working in television production. She was born and raised in Boston, attended college in the Midwest, and lived on the West Coast for extended periods. At 23, she fell in love with a woman, a relationship that was at the center of her life for 10 years. At the time of the interview, she was in a serious relationship with a man, of a year and a half's duration.

Claire had been living with her boyfriend, Ned, for the past six months, and she had just moved back in to her own apartment. The relationship had come to a turning point a couple of months earlier when, on the same day, Claire learned both that she and Ned were not on the same page vis-à-vis marriage and family (while on a romantic, spring-time European vacation), and that her father had died suddenly. She is at a point in her life when she is very much ready to have a child, and wants to have one with a partner.

Claire is a teacher and performance artist who currently holds a “pretty dreamy” job in educational media, a job she greatly enjoys but sometimes worries she is not fully qualified for. She has worked in a variety of training and administrative jobs in the non-profit world, as well as taught primary school, work that she holds in very high regard but which proved excessively stressful for her. The sense of responsibility for a classroom of children was overwhelming.

Claire's parents divorced when she was young and both remarried when she was in early adolescence. Her mother's new husband had two children close in age to Claire and her brother, who joined their household; her father and his new wife had two children

while Claire was in high school. She grew up very close to her mother, especially in the years after the divorce and before her mother's remarriage.

Claire's earliest memories about sexual feelings are about her father's video porn collection, the source of her earliest masturbation fantasies. She doesn't remember responding to the images of women in his stack of Playboy magazines. These she used as fodder for a dating service game she invented, in which she matched imaginary men with their ideal woman and recorded and filed the details of their dates on index cards. "I know I looked at those pictures and I knew I wanted a body like that, for me, but I don't remember being attracted to them."

From the fifth grade, Claire remembers believing she wasn't pretty enough to get boys to like her. Senior year of high school, she scored "a huge coup" in landing Jim, a boy she was "crushed out on, big time, like obsessively thinking about him." They had been friends; when Claire revealed her feelings to him, he didn't reciprocate. A few months later, over her gift of silk boxers, he kissed her: "He was my first love, first sex, first everything....I feel really lucky to have had him...we were friends...he's really super creative, really sweet, smart, gentle, great guy." They maintained a long-distance relationship through college, until Jim met somebody else and when Claire told him to choose, chose the other girl.

Claire feels that in a certain way, this first love set a pattern for all her major relationships, which "started off with us being friends and me wanting more and saying something and the other person saying 'but I don't feel that way,' and then eventually it happening." Claire feels this way of starting off "a little bit screws you, because I kind of didn't understand how I got him, so it was hard for me to believe that he really actually

liked me.” At the very end of college, she seduced “a football guy who also did theater...and it was kind of a similar thing, like he didn’t feel that way about me, really, and I read him children’s books one night, which was like my hook, and then we started going out.”

Claire was very close with her roommate throughout college, from dorm to communal house to their own apartment alone together senior year: “We slept in the same bed a bunch.” Claire didn’t have sexual thoughts about her, but Claire’s bisexual cousin wondered if the two women were lovers. Claire was “not freaked out by her saying that,” but experienced no interest at all – “I just couldn’t imagine it.” There had been a lesbian at college who had hit on her: “I was not having success with men and I remember thinking, you know, that would be nice, but I’m not.”

After college, she moved to the West Coast, “had a couple little dalliances with men,” then met Erin, the woman she would be involved with off and on for over 10 years. They were first together for a year or so, then parted for two years, then resumed for another five years, then “broke-up broke up” (but still slept together here and there until Claire began her current relationship).

They met in a class: “We lived the same route home, so we walked home together and the next time we walked and stopped and talked on the corner for 45 minutes, and then we stopped and got coffee and I remember one night, like maybe a month into the class, getting back to the apartment where I was living and having just said good-night to her, and pacing around and feeling like, what is going on, feeling very giddy, and not understanding it. And then just really almost stopping in my tracks and

thinking, you have a crush on this person, that's what that feeling is! And I wasn't scared by it."

Claire declared herself but her friend regretfully said she didn't feel the same way. They continued as friends for many months until "one night we were sleeping in the same bed and she asked if she could kiss me." Falling in love with Erin, was a time of tremendous excitement: "I was preoccupied with thinking about kissing her and, like, if our thing was so great already as friends, what could it be like with that added. I was *crazy* attracted to her, I mean like off the charts more than I had ever been to a man, ever. A lot of just fantasizing about – and curious – like how would that be different. And feeling pretty sure I'd be good at it. Which I was!"

"I think there was maybe a part of me that thought, like, is that going to feel – it was an intellectual anxiety, it wasn't emotional, and it – so it was not – I mean, I loved – I loved the difference of it, the soft skin, and just that it was Erin and I loved her so much as a friend already. The turned on factor, it was huge, it was great. And we got no sleep. And I wanted do everything right away! ... We couldn't keep our hands off each other, there was that honeymoon period. And it's nice to think about that because there were a lot of issues that weren't slow to follow."

The biggest issues was that Erin was "the worst possible fit for me relationship-wise because she had ambivalent feelings about me sexually, sometimes I was attractive to her and sometimes I wasn't. And for me it's like the best, most masochistic challenge, like, what was I doing that made me hot that day and not now and how can I possibly – like I had control over it. And I really did think I did for a long time." In return, Erin felt judged by Claire in terms of being less successful professionally. In the beginning, Erin

didn't want children, but spending time together with Claire and their good friends with babies changed things. And yet, "I think somewhere in the back of both our minds we knew it wasn't going to last forever." Claire adds: "Also, I didn't feel like a lesbian, ever."

Because she had "strong attractions to men and had a history of relationships with men, that that was the majority of who I had been with," it felt false to Claire to identify as a lesbian: "it's like I'd switched, and that didn't feel right." The word bisexual seemed "over-used" and "obnoxious", something that it was trendy to call yourself in college. At the same time, it never felt comfortable *not* to identify as a lesbian in the context of a completely open, long-term, primary relationship with a woman. "For the most part I felt like I'm in – totally in love with and completely attracted to this person who's a woman and so I'm – blank." Claire has never felt she fully understands why the label made her so uneasy; she concludes that it was a matter of "internalized homophobia."

Claire didn't want to be "seen in some different way" – by her students, by her young half-siblings – and hiding her relationship from her young students (in a private school with several other openly gay teachers) left her feeling "so shitty." The relationship with Erin also brought about a rupture with Claire's mother, so that moving forward with the relationship meant "real individuation from my mom." Her mother's initial negative reaction was crushing; Claire experienced it as disgust and disappointment, and considered breaking up with Erin. Now she thinks it was more a matter of her mother having to come to terms with Claire's life "just diverging from the

normal,” and is certain that were she to be with another woman, her mother would be entirely accepting.

Claire left the west and her relationship with Erin after a few years and returned to New York. She got seriously involved with a man who was marriage-minded and not ambivalent in his feelings for her. But Claire’s attachment to Erin continued: “I just was not done with her. Cause I really did love him, and he really loved me in a way that she had not, the first volume. And he was a very known quantity to me, like a nice Jewish boy from Boston, but it was certainly not passionate in the way it was with her. And I think I could not help but draw comparisons.” Erin made a trip east and “we had quite an affair, we had an unbelievably sex-filled weekend, just romantic.” Claire confessed to her boyfriend who demanded that she cut off all contact. After spending the whole night on the phone with Erin and receiving no promises from her, Claire did as he asked, but “I was thinking about her all the time... so I broke up with him and then I called her and told her I had done that and it was like, well, let’s give this another try.” Claire moved west again and they lived together for five years: “We had a really nice life together.”

The relationship was unbelievably compelling: “She and I and like a blank room could have a better time than with most people out in the world. I mean, she was just my – she made me laugh and we had – you know, we used to make up songs – we have very similar creative spirits.” But there were big struggles, especially over sex. The relational dynamics between Claire and Erin placed Claire in the position of having to win over, again and again, a highly desirable, elusive beloved. In desperation, Claire read Erin’s diary, in which Erin recorded attractions to other women, women with different body

types than Claire's, and moments of wishing to feel desire for Claire but having none.

Claire was devastated:

“Um, but it just – it caused – when I say pain – you know, pain, just knowing that, like, how can she love me this much, and I know that it's true, how much she loves me and adores me, and yet think these things about me that are so painful and so insulting, rejecting. You know, and what else can I do to make those – her feel those – you know, I can't. What can I do? And yet, like, why won't she then get out of this, if it's – if she's so ambivalent about me.... [H]ow can you have a connection like this, and by that I mean, the love and the adoration and the just wanting to be around the person all the time, and have that not be the thing that you're supposed to be looking for? You know, how can something as simple as not being attracted to the person get in the way of that being a successful relationship!” (Here Claire is referring to Erin's desire for other women.)

Alongside this was the question of identity: “Some inability to accept the idea that I would be in a lesbian relationship for my whole life. There was some, like – but – that's not who I am. And yet, that's what I was very much doing.” (Complete, she points out, with plenty of public affection, participation in a lesbian social world, and becoming part of her lover's family, who lived locally.) She feels that it was “too bold a choice to make,” and it remains “an eternal question that I still ask myself, and I was so frustrated by not having the answer to, always was, how do I know if this is about Erin or if this is about my feelings about women, or being in a relationship with a woman? Because they're one and the same, so how can I pull them apart?” Claire's close friends were away of her struggles around sexuality: “I always described it as it's an Erin thing, it's

not a general thing... Which I think is part of what made it never stand a chance. I think because there was just some level on which I couldn't totally accept it, if I made it such a singular thing."

Claire says she was with a woman "because I fell in love with her," though it seems unlikely to her that she would ever fall in love with a woman again: "It's not in my brain to look for it." (Though there was a "very androgynous, little go-getter type, cute, very flirtatious," someone Claire met at a training program, "kind of a blip, maybe, on the screen.") If she were to feel anything at all, she would have to know the woman is gay, unlike her ex, who was "constantly attracted to straight women who she could never have." But if pressed, Claire identifies as straight: "It would feel wrong for me to say bisexual because I feel like to me that would imply that I am looking for both things, and I'm not." Later she adds, "I can't imagine ever including [bisexual] in the set of characteristics that I would use to describe myself."

Claire is at a crossroads in her life, ready to marry and start a family, but with a boyfriend who is very reluctant. She wonders about having perhaps chosen a man who is too distant, in over-reaction to the intensity of her intimacy with Erin. Her questions for other women with a similar history focus on sex and fantasy – "Do they fantasize still about women, at all, if that's in there. I'd want to know how readily they talk about their sexual history with their partners they've had since they've been with a woman." For Claire, memories of her sex with Erin are like "an additional chamber that I can open up because I had this other set of experiences, and I can add that to what's going on with him," but her boyfriend seems threatened. She wonders in the interview about how she

seems to be “opting for non-commitment because you’re choosing a person who’s expressed that they don’t want to commit. It’s peculiar because it’s all I feel like I want.”

4. Debra is a 36 year old senior manager in a construction firm. She grew up in upstate New York and the suburbs of Boston, and attended a private college in New York State and a graduate program in Maryland. Debra came out as a lesbian senior year of college and was primarily to exclusively involved with women until her late 20s. At the time of the interview, she had just married her boyfriend of six years.

The first interview with Debra took place in the offices of her husband's company; their recent wedding was an expression of family for Debra, her husband, and her husband's two children. All four had worked together on this event. It was held at an unusual location that referenced the couple's shared line of work that had first brought them together, and the party had come off well. The second interview took place in Debra's office.

Debra's earliest memories of sexual feelings are for girls -- husband/wife games with a girlfriend somewhere around 8 or 9, falling in love with her ballet teacher ("I distinctly remember looking down her leotard as she was fixing my feet"), and kissing her well-developed best friend in fifth grade with the awareness that her own interest was intense. Debra had a serious high school boyfriend with whom she had a sexual relationship. She also always had a best friend: "from 9th or 10th grade on it was this woman who I'm sure -- she's married to a man now too, but I'm sure that she's a lesbian -- maybe she's bisexual, I don't know -- she has never dated a woman as far as I know, but even looking at her picture, I'm like, oh, please, come on!"

Debra recounts a series of interactions with others during her college years through which she feels that something in her was recognized by these others as lesbian

and which, in her story, serve as indicators of something essential about her. A close friend would come to visit Debra at her college (which had a large population of lesbians and “tons of women who are lesbians just for those four years”) and some of these women would ask if Debra and her friend were lovers. When this friend had sex with another woman, “that kind of broke the floodgates because right after that she and I slept together, in like another drunken stupor, so that was put in my head as like an isolated incident... I think I was sort of surprised by the whole thing.”

At a summer restaurant job, a bisexual co-worker assumed that Debra was bisexual as well, “so she started talking to me about stuff and I just didn’t bother correcting her. So it was like identity kind of evolved from the outside? Like doors sort of – you know, opportunities sort of presented themselves and then people assuming that I was bisexual.” When Debra met Maggie, the woman she fell in love with her senior year, Maggie assumed that Debra was a lesbian, and Debra soon thereafter experienced identifying as a lesbian “as like puzzle pieces coming together, it made sense, it felt right.”

Debra remembers “sitting with her in our apartment one night and saying to her something like, just a nice romantic dinner, and I said to her, you know, I really think I’m a lesbian, and she fell off her chair laughing. She’s like, you’re my girlfriend! You’ve been my girlfriend for however many – ten months or something. I was like, I know! But I mean I actually really think that I’m a lesbian. I think at that point it was like, oh, it isn’t just that it’s Maggie and it doesn’t matter about her gender. I actually think that even if I wasn’t with her I’d be with women. But she found that quite amusing.”

Identifying as a lesbian did not negate Debra's past involvements with men. "It was more like – oh, there's this whole other side to me." It did provide a new understanding about the significance of her best friend relationships over years: "like my tortured relationship with my best friend in high school, which was clearly a repressed lesbian relationship, it all sort of made sense then."

Maggie was a few years younger than Debra, and when Debra graduated from college, they separated. Following college, Debra moved to New York City and became a part of a lively lesbian community, both in her workplace and her social life. She worked with international women's rights organizations and was involved with community-based voluntary groups. Coming out and changing her appearance initially brought about a painful rupture with her mother, with whom Debra had been very close: "It took her about a year, until she came to visit one time and went out to dinner with one of my best friends from growing up who is straight, and three of my friends who are lesbians, and myself. Just dinner together, all of us, and then everyone was saying good-bye and everyone was hugging and kissing, including my straight friend. And then I took my mom home and we spent the rest of the weekend together. And when she was leaving she said that that was so incredible to see what a supportive group of friends that I had and she basically said that kind of love can't be wrong." Debra has thought for a long time that her mother "probably is a lesbian and she just could never come around to it."

Debra had a "fantastic time" as a young, urban lesbian, with lots of "serially short-term relationships" and nights out dancing with "a whole set of friends who all look exactly like you." In at least a few of her relationships in her 20s, Debra would feel, "Why do you have to like me so much, it's just heartbreaking, I just – can't we just have

it go at the same pace?” Debra dated a lot of women but didn’t experience the same kind of closeness she had had with Maggie, which she remembers as “shocking that you could get that close to another person, without them needing something from you or you needing anything from them. Just purely because you feel like you’re a complement to each other’s lives.”

Debra describes herself as having been “firmly identified” as lesbian. She had two “one-off sexual encounters with two men who I knew very well from my past...it was [a] sort of recreational thing, but I always thought of it as, like, oh, that was weird, I don’t know why I went and did that but I did.” When her older sister got married, Debra experienced jealousy of the affection her family were giving to the bride, and went through a kind of mourning about the fact that she would never marry herself: “Feeling sort of the finality of the identification of being lesbian. But it wasn’t a choice. At the time it really didn’t feel like it would be a different way at any point in my life.”

Debra remains good friends with most of the women she became close to during this period of her life. She describes her group as “incredibly supportive – kind of a self-formed family, with all the attending problems and support that comes with that.” But eventually, “I made a choice to leave that kind of safety net because I wanted to get away a little bit from the insularity of it.” She decided to go to grad school in another city.

Debra arrived at grad school with “a shaved head and a very lesbian wardrobe” yet found herself romantically interested in a close male friend who was a fellow student and co-worker. The friendship was intense; they would have “very intellectual discussions about whether or not we should be together.” In retrospect, Debra puzzles, “Why was I sexually attracted to him, because he’s not really someone that I would

typically – it was more I think an emotional attachment.” She now believes that her attachment to this man involved a wish to heal a man like her father, whose manic-depressive crises marked her childhood. Having strong feelings for this man began the shift in her sense of her sexuality: “That was what sort of opened up the door for me...it’s not necessarily that I can’t feel this close to men...it’s the person that I actually care about.”

After finishing her master’s degree, Debra entered a period of uncertainty. She wasn’t sure where she wanted to live or what she wanted to do for work. She lived for a few months on the west coast, and had brief affairs with a couple of men. One was entirely a “distraction”; she felt greater interest in another man, but both were “sexually boring” and neither fundamentally altered her sense of herself as lesbian. She saw these affairs as primarily situational, due to a perceived lack of opportunity to meet women.

Debra was 29 when she decided to return to New York. She was pessimistic about her dating prospects: “How was I going to meet someone if the vast majority of the opportunities were in bar situations or they’re friends of friends and I wasn’t particularly inspired by anyone.” She was also depressed: “Once I got back to New York I really kind of crashed because I didn’t know what I wanted to do, and then I was back here where – I adore my friends but it really felt like everybody was just stagnating. People were sort of doing the same things they had been doing 10 years before...no one had gone anywhere.”

Debra felt that her circle of friends was excessively focused on the group and the group’s social life, whereas Debra was ready “to focus on myself and my career, and I wanted my friend to be developing in a way that it seemed like they weren’t.” She was

concerned about repeating her parents' pattern: "I always rejected the idea of someone else taking care of me, in part because I didn't want to have the caretaker relationship that my father and mother had, which was one person falls to piece and the other person picked them up." She began therapy and focused on herself.

Debra met Chris, her husband, at work. Although she wonders in retrospect about the role played by her growing interest in having children and the sense that doing so would be more difficult with a woman, she was not in any way seeking a man: "It really had to do with whose path I was crossing and who peaked my interest." Debra and Chris were quickly inseparable, even though the fact that he was a single father in the midst of a divorce also meant their relationship progressed slowly (they didn't spend the whole night together for three years). The feelings Debra has with Chris remind her of how things were with her first woman lover: "Just wanting to be near someone, whether or not you're interacting, without that sense of need, I need your attention, I need you...the baseline is just very much, I prefer to have you around than not...it's just very peaceful and nice." She feels especially compatible with Chris because "we don't need each other."

Debra's husband has successfully integrated into Debra's lesbian social world, which she attributes to his characteristic curiosity and interest in others, and she has integrated the lesbian dimension of her sexuality into their intimate relationship. Debra and Chris enjoy girl-watching together: "We have very different tastes so we're always pointing out women to each other, and he takes endless delight in catching me checking someone out." Debra found Chris to be exceptional in terms of her sexual experiences with men in that he has "an incredible interest in me and my pleasure."

Debra's sexual orientation identity has slowly shifted during her relationship with Chris; for years, she felt like "a lesbian who was dating a man," in part because "my community is a community of lesbians." The transition to "queer" or "a sort of un-identification" has been gradual and partial. Debra does not identify herself as bisexual because to her that implies that you are "looking for both at the same time." Debra believes that if anything were to happen to Chris, she would return to being gay: "I can't see myself ever being with another man, and it's not because he's the be-all end-all, it's because I think that if I were to move on to another relationship in my life, it would absolutely be with a woman."

Debra believes that her sexual interest in women is innate, as evidenced by early memories of same-sex attraction, and professes a serendipity theory about her switch from dating women exclusively to dating both to being married to a man: it was a matter of circumstance. At the same time, Debra believes that her embrace of the lesbian world was related in part to her father's breakdown when she was young:

"Most of my growing up was very tumultuous around issues around my father. And I think that on some level, once I had sort of manifested my sexual interest in women, I think I sort of went into that world and embraced it because of the kind of – it's not safety so much as like, women talk, women process, women are interested in each other's inner emotional life. And my strongest relationships were with women, with my mother, with my mother's sister."

Later, through her therapy, Debra she revised her understanding of her relationship with her mother: "I got really into that space of here's this person that I thought was a saint and I'm furious, *furious*, that she chose to abandon me to take care of

my father.” Debra is interested in the fact that she experiences her husband as being “like my mom but as a caretaker of me, which is what my mom wasn’t...I don’t know if I would find that combination in a woman...somehow I’m able to let him be that caretaker...I don’t know exactly what the difference is but somehow I’m able to accept it from him where I’ve never been able to from anybody else, and I think I didn’t realize that that’s what I needed to work on when I was with women.” She wonders if perhaps when she was with women “I was always trying to be the mother that I didn’t have.”

Debra’s late 20s constituted a crisis that touched on every aspect of her life: “That was a period of time that was – confusion reigned. And it was maybe partly about sexuality, although it really didn’t feel that way. It felt much, much more core...it’s very interesting in terms of the timing that I didn’t know what I wanted to do in my life, I didn’t know where I wanted to live, I didn’t know who I wanted to date. This was all happening at the same time. But I assumed that I would always end up with a woman.” In general, she still feels more comfortable in relationships with women and in the lesbian community. “But that doesn’t preclude being with Chris because I feel very, very much myself with him and he fits in with that community, so it’s sort of perfect for me.’

In addition to her marriage, Debra emerged from several difficult years with a new career in construction, which she loves and contrasts favorably with her previous political work in which “I’d run in and try to fix the horrible ways that people treat each other.’ The construction business is concretely satisfying. She fully recovered from her depression and has not been depressed in five years.

5. Eve is a 33-year-old scientist doing a post-doctoral research fellowship. She was born and raised in the Midwest, attended a private college in the Boston area, and graduate school in New York City. Eve was sexually active with girls in high school but dated men in college, until her senior year when she fell in love with a woman and came out as a lesbian. At 32, she fell in love with a man for the first time; after this relationship ended, she had expected to be with a woman but instead fell for another man. At the time of the interview, she was single and dating both men and women.

Eve feels strongly at odds with the cultural values of the place she grew up. Going away to boarding school for a period of time in high school was a crucial turning point for her in discovering other worlds; “I went from being someone who grew up really sheltered, only being exposed to white people who are straight and got married and had babies to being in an environment where there are artsy people who lived alternative lifestyles, whatever that means, and didn’t conform...it was just a huge transformative experience.” She credits this time away from home as crucial in enabling her to realize that she “wasn’t necessarily straight.”

Eve describes herself as having a strong libido from an early age and a great impatience for sexual experience, such that she went from first kissing a boy at 13 to having intercourse for the first time at 15. Her high school boyfriend orchestrated three-ways with other girls, but Eve didn’t come to think of herself in sexual minority terms until she fell in love with a woman senior year of college: “I didn’t really know if I was gay or just liked women to have sex with.” Eve’s previous sexual relationships had not

been love relations. Her high school boyfriend had been “totally about the physical experience”, and a previous infatuation with a best (girl) friend wasn’t reciprocated. “It was the first time it was reciprocated...it’s different when it’s actually reciprocated, because then you both feel the same weird dream-like fantastical state that is transient, but at the time you don’t realize that. It just feels like everything’s amazing, you have sex 18 hours a day and you forget to eat and you fail classes and you just think about that person and they think about you and they’re going through the same thing.” With this relationship, Eve came out a lesbian and held a view of herself as “a lesbian who likes to fuck men” because “I knew I liked fucking men cause I did a lot of it in high school and then a little bit in college.”

Eve and her college girlfriend, Alyssa, were together for 6 years, during which time Eve went to graduate school. The relationship eventually lost its sexuality and “we didn’t want each other out of each other’s lives, but we also didn’t realize that we could have broken up and stayed friends, like we actually have, at the time, so we just perpetuated this sexless roommate friendship for years past when it should have ended...it was actually the best break-up I’ve ever had because it was mutual.” Eve and Alyssa remained very close friends (and had recently become roommates).

Subsequent to the break-up with Alyssa, Eve dated and hooked up, meeting people through friends or online, mostly women and a few times with a man. She calls these dates “recurrent one-night stands”: “I would hook up with them once a week for a few months.” Not long after the break-up, “I thought I fell in love with this 36-year-old woman. And she did have a purpose in my life; she’s the reason why I found my orgasm finally at 28.” As Eve explains it, “I just watched her have one and said, that has never

happened to me before! So it helped me identify what one was.” She proceeded to learn how to give herself an orgasm (“three months of every day practicing...I’m dedicated, I did a PhD so I was able to focus and figure it out”) and then how to orgasm with a partner. “I was kind of on a rampage for probably a year and a half, but it was only maybe two or three partners the whole time because of the recurrent one-night stand idea. I can’t have sex with a totally random person.”

Eve’s second important long-term relationship was with a young woman, Hailey, who was just coming out. Eve was 30 and doing a fellowship at a Midwestern university. Hailey was 23 and “from a really dramatically Christian background and was shunned by all her friends and her church because she realized she was like hard-core gay.” Eve describes her as “really generous and patient, which are things I need, and I adored her body and it was just very reciprocated and good...I’d have to say the sex was amazing. We were very physically compatible.” Eve bought a condo and expected to be with this woman forever, but the affair ended after a year and a half. In retrospect, Eve thinks she was hopelessly naïve, ignoring the risks of getting involved with a young person who was at a transitional point in her life; “but I fell so hard for her that I didn’t think logically and she was never able to commit to me.”

Eve was heartbroken by Hailey: “It was an incredibly hard and shocking and abrupt break-up.” She went online:

“Just to find random sex, and I thought if it was with a guy I wouldn’t get attached...I found this guy, James, and he was bi and really into queer women in general, and he was adorable, so I met him for breakfast and we ended up having sex the rest of the afternoon and it was great. But we also liked each other, so it was complicated...it

basically kind of morphed into a relationship because we just liked being around each other and it was fun. It ceased to be fun when some of his issues started to come out...But we had a very intense, amazing emotional relationship.”

In contrast to her relationships with her two serious female lovers, this relationship did not have a romantic beginning. “Instead of that fantastical falling in love, dream-like state...we jumped right into bed.” Also, Eve and her boyfriend argued, which she had not done with Hailey; “it was really healthy to actually work with my partner and talk through things.” After 8 months or so, Eve found herself and James to be poorly matched (he turned out to have significant sexual and emotional issues) and broke up with him.

The experience with James unsettled Eve’s sense of her sexuality and sexual orientation identity. She found that she was very drawn to him sexually, and to his penis: “It was weird, I thought only straight people were.” There were difficulties with some of her lesbian friends: “They were fine when I just fucking him, but then when I actually wanted to date him they were like, why?” Eve found this confusing because she understood these women to themselves have acknowledged bisexual feelings in the past. Straight friends were also unsupportive: “People were shocked, someone laughed in my face, another person was like, oh, it’s not gonna last.” It was uncomfortable to be in a relationship where she and her partner could legally marry: “It was weird to have this heterosexual privilege...when my friends or me six months ago wouldn’t have had that.”

The biggest change that Eve’s relationship with James brought about was a view of herself as sexually fluid, or bisexual (she uses the words interchangeably), based on the fact that she had become so emotionally attached to him: “I didn’t think I could fall

in love with a man. I'm still not sure I can, because I haven't probably ever, but I think that's more life circumstances versus the potential. I cared really deeply for James, so I feel like the potential for falling in love with him was there, but it never quite manifested itself for multiple reasons."

After breaking up with James, Eve left a fellowship that wasn't working out well for her and moved back east, starting a "last ditch" fellowship in New York. The experience of her first fellowship was so discouraging that she briefly considered leaving science all together.

The change in Eve's sense of her sexuality in the direction of greater fluidity was further reinforced when Eve fell for Josh, another man, shortly after returning to New York. Her plan had been to seek out women: "It was like, oh my god, it's been a year, and I really enjoy that." But she wound up meeting and having strong feelings for Josh, while several dates with women didn't go anywhere. She is intensely drawn to him, and the sex was excellent, but he wants to date around and Eve doesn't, so she's unsure if anything will develop further. This experience has "completely destroyed my stereotype about sex being better with women all the time."

Both of the men Eve has had strong feelings for had several qualities in common, most notably a relatively feminine personal style ("very fruity", "so, so gay") and a history of sexual interest in bisexual women. In contrast, all of Eve's female lovers have been relatively masculine and "gold star" lesbians (women who have never had sex with men). Eve herself has an ambiguous gender style: "I'm gender-queer, because I'm a little bit conflicted, because I always want to be more butch than I am, but I think I come across no matter what I do, there's something inherently femme about me. I shaved my

head, I still looked femme, or at least somewhat feminine.” Her most recent male partner told her she was the most butch woman he’s dated, and dubbed Eve a “Peter Pan butch”, meaning “not totally effeminate but definitely also not butch.” At the same time, “if I want to be feminine I can and I wear dresses and it’s not a big deal to me. I’m very comfortable in any gender role.” She sees the gender identity of her sexual partners, both male and female, as similar: “if James or Josh were to become trans, they’d probably be a woman I’d be attracted to.”

Eve’s sense of her own masculinity and femininity has fluctuated depending on her partner: “When I’m with women, I feel more butch for some reason, and when I’m with men, I wear skirts more often...I can tell I’m more playing into a feminine role...even in bed, sexually, I’m more passive with men and more aggressive with women.”

Eve strongly identifies with a sense of being unconventional, something she feels she has been since an early age: “I scared the shit out of my parents when I was younger, because I always told them I wouldn’t get married or have kids, and to grow up in [a very conservative part of the Midwest] and by the age of 10 or 11, to say that? My older brother was convinced I was a feminist and that I would definitely be a lesbian.” From an early age, he remembers being “always different than everyone, and weird.”

While dating James, it was important to her to make sure his straight friends knew that she was queer-identified. Although she aligns herself with the gay community, Eve feels she cannot say she is a lesbian anymore, which “is harder for people to swallow because it’s just not clear – when you say you’re not a lesbian or that you’re fluid, it’s harder for people to get and they can’t really put you in a box anymore.” The

invalidation from friends both gay and straight was bad enough; perhaps worse was the excess validation of her parents: “My parents probably had already booked a wedding venue as soon as I told them [that she was dating a man].” Eve does not feel close to her parents. She describes her father as “an asshole” who was verbally abusive, especially to Eve’s mother: “I might hate him.” Her mother is described as “a sweet person who means well” and who provides a kind of “superficial affection.”

Eve finds it hard to no longer fully identify as a lesbian: “I think the thing that distinguishes us as individuals is having these sorts of identities, like being Jewish, being queer, being a woman, growing up in the Midwest, moving to the East Coast....to lose these things just makes our identities a little less clear, a little more opaque and hard to understand. Less distinguished.” But she is getting more used to it, helped in part by realizing that she is not alone in identifying as “pan-sexual or fluid.”

Sexual orientation identity aside, Eve is concerned about her choice in partners. Matches that seemed made in heaven have turned out, in her estimation, to be people who are “just not what’s best for me.” She very much wants commitment but says she has a history of responding to enticing people who cannot commit and who are too emotionally withdrawn. She tries to regulate her involvements: “People that I’m not serious with I tend to sleep with right away to just distance myself emotionally, if possible...it’s not gender specific.” Eve thinks she needs someone who “showers me with affection and emotion, probably because my dad was absent and never gave me affection in a positive way,” but says she is “just not perspicacious, one could say, like very discerning and good at judging characters.”

Eve has both biological and situational understandings of her sexuality and the changes she has experienced. She feels intensely the difference between living in a socially liberal versus socially conservative parts of the country and between gay and straight worlds, even within the same city; her sense of her sexual orientation identity lives within and against these demarcations, and has been developed and sustained through overlapping virtual and 'real life' communities, gay urban spaces, queer media, and, during college, academic queer theory.

Eve presents herself as strongly sexually motivated, perhaps because she saw her father's porn collection at a young age, perhaps because a cousin, who is now very socially conservative, "taught me what fingering was." But perhaps also she is simply innately "super-sexual," always talking to friends about sex, always very open, always very curious. She has found herself to be the higher drive partner in a number of relationships, and was particularly tireless before she learned to orgasm and thus to be satiated.

As a scientist, Eve speculated that perhaps her recent interest in men was due to her biological clock telling her it was time to get impregnated. When she considered her affairs with men in the context of leaving her prior post-doc, she speculated about the life impact of being unsettled in her sexuality: "It's one of the first times that I was actually like, wow, so many of the things in my life that I've taken for granted, I can't anymore, and I can't assume that things will always be the way they are right now, and I can't predict the future. I can't tell you whether I'll date a man or a woman. I can't choose that, I don't think. Because people seem to fall into my life that end up pushing me in a

certain direction. Not cause I'm passive or anything, but I just know what I like and I can't really put a gender on it."

6. Faye is a 49-year-old executive director of a social services agency in New York City. She grew up in the suburbs of New York and attended a private college in the City. She began to explore being with women in college, dated bisexually after graduating, became more involved in the lesbian community, and came out as gay. At 27, she fell in love with a woman and went on to have a child with her. They broke up after 15 years. She and her husband of five years live with their child and Faye's daughter from her lesbian marriage.

Faye has been the executive director of an agency providing services to low-income New Yorkers ever since the agency was founded 20 years ago. She and her husband were high school sweethearts and had stayed in touch over the years but ended contact when Faye had a child with her lesbian partner. After Faye finally ended her very unhappy lesbian marriage, she reconnected with John; they married a year later.

As she began her story, Faye noted that she had "always loved John, and I often would think about ways he and I related to each other as kids. He was always very thoughtful and concerned about what I liked or what would make me happy and then he would surprise me with those things, and we could talk really easily, we were very good friends." During her marriage to Stacy, Faye would think of John from time to time and would wish that Stacy would treat her the way he used to.

Faye went on to provide an in-depth portrait of her father and her early family life. Her father was an Eastern European Jew, born in the 1920s. He was 14 when war broke out, was a partisan, and saw his entire family die: "He was really kind of fearless because he had nothing to lose, he had nothing left." Faye's father was linguistically,

musically, and mechanically talented, but a poor business man, and he and his wife argued about money: “My parents used to fight and yell and I was the oldest of three...when we were little I would go from room to room to put them to bed and to tell them not to worry, that it was going to be okay.” Faye’s father was a charmer who was also clinically depressed at times: “He would come home from work, eat dinner, and at like 6:00 get into his pajamas and go to bed... And in the middle of the night, if he had a bad dream, he would take a shower. It always felt like he was washing away the memories.” Sometimes he was violent towards Faye’s brother. At the same time, he was profoundly loving, loyal, and highly projective: “His deep sense of pride in anything that we did was fierce, it could fill up a room. I always felt so safe, and it’s just very special to know that you are just loved in this sort of blanket way.”

Faye began to seek her father’s counsel when she entered the world of adult work: “I would tell him if I had a problem with a supervisor; he had good insight into people’s behaviors and he was a strategist and he and I would talk.” He taught her essential values and even though he urged conformity as a route to safety, he also taught his children “to do the right thing, to stand up for what you believe in. I think it became really a part of my fabric in terms of my desire to do public work rather than private work.” Faye never came out to her father, fearing “a big bad negative reaction,” though she thinks that in his “heart of hearts” he knew but didn’t want to know: “He would notice things but he would never fully ask.” Faye’s father had heart disease and died when she was 30.

Faye describes her mother as “a dizzy dame,” whose energetic strength vanished into breakdown when she had to take care of herself for the first time in her life after her

husband's death. Her mother ultimately recovered, though she continues to need support. "She's a sincerely happy person, which is kind of sweet... I get a kick out of her."

Faye remembers feeling fat as a teenager and very uncomfortable about developing breasts earlier than other girls; she hid in baggy clothes and felt asexual. She recalls herself as a girl who was unaware of when she was being flirtatious or suggestive because she was not connected to her sexuality. (Her sense of being "just sort of late in connecting with my own physicality" is reflected in her feelings of shock when she learned that other freshman college girls had already had sex, and in still being a virgin "even into college." Kissing and a little caressing was the extent of her high school sexual activity.)

When she was 17, she was a camp counselor and one of her young charges developed a crush on her. This boy was John's youngest brother. On being told that Faye was too old for him, "He said, well, I have three older brothers, pick one! And I was like, it doesn't work like that. He said, but I want you in my family, and I just thought it was so sweet. Well, every time he got picked up, he would have a different brother pick him up, so that I got to meet all three. And I have to say, when I met John, there was like a little connection." Faye went to the prom with someone else, but spent the night dancing with John, beginning a summer romance. Then Faye went away to college.

University was an intellectual and political awakening. "I was kind of dizzy with it – women's right, women's pentagon action, gay rights, unions, I sort of had to experience all of it." Faye became intrigued by the lesbian-identified students she met and had two intense romantic crushes on women friends. She dated some men, was on

and off again with John, and even had a fling with John's brother's girlfriend. But she continued to feel sexually inhibited: "I wasn't very interested in penises. So I thought maybe I'm just not a very sexual person. The idea of men over-powering me was scary to me and having not had the benefit of anybody being explicit with me about sex, I think I was sort of afraid."

The summer before senior year, Faye and John planned to go to California and live together for the summer, but John backed out of the plan; Faye felt quite rejected and broke up with him. That year, Faye "really let myself explore feelings that I had towards women that I just didn't understand." She started a relationship with a fellow (lesbian) student, cut her hair, and came out.

In the first interview, Faye went on to tell the story her lesbian marriage and divorce. At the beginning of the second interview, Faye wanted to go back and say more about the experience of coming out as a lesbian in her 20s. She recalled again that she had been "self-conscious about my body...fearful of boys and sex, as something forbidden." She remembered her father's protectiveness as conveying a confusing message about sexuality, as when he would throw his arm over her shoulder and tell the high school boys who picked her up for date, "No wandering hands," and thus paradoxically highlighting the erotics of Faye's developing body.

Faye describes herself as making a deliberate decision to join the lesbian community after college, drawn to the support of being part of a community, and the intellectual and political networks she found there. Faye describes this period as a "sexual awakening," the time when she finally became comfortable with being a sexual person. She felt attractive and funny for the first time, and suddenly found it easy to get

dates. Her sexual explorations were primarily with women, not counting an affair with a married man and calls to John in between girlfriends. The men were “on the side”, as Faye’s social life came to be centered in the lesbian and gay community.

Faye’s sense of sexual orientation identity involved both gendered style and objects, and evolved over time. When she cut her hair, she was acting against a femininity of “cute girliness” and developing the “tougher” side of herself. Cultivating a more masculine self-presentation also signaled her belonging to the lesbian community, her interest in sex with women, and a repudiation of seeking to attract men. Faye used her lesbian identity as a way to assert herself, to demand that she be taken seriously, both at work and by her family. Faye thinks that, in turn, the confidence she drew from her professional success over the years allowed her to return to a more feminine style.

When Faye was 27, she met Stacy: “I hadn’t really fallen for anybody since John.” Looking back, she notes that John and Stacy share similar physical features and believes this was part of the attraction for her. They dated for two years and then moved in together. While Faye recalled some wonderful times in the early years of their relationship, positive memories were overshadowed by great unhappiness later on. Stacy was very demanding of Faye’s time and emotional energy, and jealous of her friendships outside the relationship: “She really wanted me to herself.” Faye summarizes: “She was a survivor of childhood incest and she didn’t trust people. I thought if I showed her enough love and consistency...that I could save her, help her, make her better, make her happier.”

After four years together, Faye and Stacy went through a crisis in their relationship that was also a turning point in Faye’s relationship with John. When Faye’s

father died, she felt profoundly failed by Stacy, who could not tolerate Faye's grief and pressured her (in part by means of a flirtation with another woman) to "get over my grief and get back to taking care of her and the relationship."

Faye began to doubt that she wanted to make a life with Stacy: "And then I thought, where is John? I was supposed to do that with him. Maybe I should see if he still loves me. So I went to his 30th birthday party, right before he was moving out of town." At the party, Faye and John had a fateful conversation. "I said to him, why aren't we together? We should be together. And he looked at me and he said, because you're a lesbian. And I was like, I don't know, do you really think so? He's like, yeah! You're with women! But I didn't think so."

Faye tried to break-up with Stacy but Stacy begged her to stay with the argument that if she could hurt Faye as much as she had, it meant that Faye must really love her. Faye also felt that she could not survive any further stresses or changes: "John wasn't an option. My father was dead. I had had an ovarian cyst and was recovering from major surgery, and I was recovering from my grief over my father. I was starting this new agency that was taking everything out of me." Faye decided to stay, and threw herself fully back into the relationship.

The years that followed were focused on work: "Through my work I experienced myself as an independent, powerful woman who had the capacity to create situations that could have positive impacts." Faye's developing work identity helped her to be more at ease in her public identity as a lesbian. Her discomfort with a lesbian identity was perhaps due in part to her own mixed attractions and in part seemed bound up with her lifelong friendship with John and his status in her mind as a kind of alternate life. But

another important aspect was the fear of being a disappointment to her parents. As she became more confident in herself through work, she felt less in need of her parents' approval. There was a period of time in her 30s when private and public life all fit together: "Over time I had a sense of calm and when things were good between me and Stacy I felt like I was doing what I wanted to do, I was in the right place, I was with the right people." Faye arranged for the joint purchase of an apartment, and then pushed to have a baby via donor sperm (Faye was determined to have a baby with or without Stacy). Stacy became the child's second parent through adoption.

The relationship between Stacy and Faye deteriorated badly following the birth of their daughter: "To this day I still try to figure out why I stayed as long as I stayed being unhappy." Faye came to realize that she wanted her child to grow up in a happy home: "Stacy and I were not loving towards one another and I just thought, I'm not doing this to my child. I grew up with that and I swore I would never do that to my kids." Faye was helped to leave as well by the growing discrepancy between her success at work and the atmosphere at home: "People would wait outside my office to get my advice on what to do, and then I'd come home and be told, you forgot to buy the milk, you're so irresponsible, what's the matter with you, can't you do anything right." The break-up was extraordinarily painful.

Following her divorce from Stacy, with some trepidation, Faye sought John out. (They had not been in touch with other since the birth of Faye's daughter, when John had visited and brought along photographs of Faye and John as teenagers in love, and Faye had felt guilty because "I wasn't having his baby.") She did not know if he had married in the interim, but it turned out he was recently single. Phone conversations led to a

meeting which led almost immediately to plans to marry; Faye might have slowed things down more if she hadn't wanted to have a baby with John (who hadn't had children yet). A year and a half after her break-up, Faye was remarried, and a year later had her second child.

Ending her life as a lesbian has meant the end of certain friendships and a social life that is increasingly heterosexual. Faye has wondered wistfully if she will ever have a woman again, though she would never be unfaithful to John (she wondered the reverse when she was with Stacy, and was equally loyal). Perhaps it's this sense of sexual loyalty that made it impossible for Faye to fully enjoy the sexy lesbian soap opera, *The L Word*, with John sitting next to her; he thoughtfully left her to it. Occasionally she's learned that a woman of her acquaintance had a history with women, but it's seemed "as if looking back is like crossing a line that is taboo." Sometimes having been with women feels like secret knowledge and a source of power – it means being more than what anyone can see just by looking.

Faye emphasizes throughout her story the sense of the unexpected – how she would never have expected to become a lesbian, and then would never have expected to be married to a man, let alone her childhood sweetheart.

7. Gail is a 61-year-old public policy consultant. She grew up in suburban Pennsylvania and attended college and graduate school in the Midwest. Gail had a girlfriend in high; they broke up freshman year of college. Gail dated men exclusively until age 28. From 28 to 44, she was in two long-term relationships with women, and in the second of these, she had a family. She lives with her husband of 13 years, and her young adult children when they are in town.

Beginning in the 7th grade, Gail attended an exclusive private girl's school where her less prominent family background meant she didn't quite fit in. Gail sought out social opportunities with boys through joining various religious youth groups, though her parents were atheists. But her first significant romantic relationship was with another girl at her school, beginning in the 11th grade and lasting until the two went to college together.

The relationship was a secret (Gail's mother knew but "she just let it be"), and the young women took pleasure from the secrecy. "It was very intense, very adolescently romantic." It was also "a positive way to begin a sexual life – we were very open and intimate and there were no negative consequence." Other things in life were quite difficult – an alcoholic father, who died when Gail was 17, a mother who was "just not that accessible." "It was just an affirming situation...I don't think I had the greatest self-image, so it was a – confirmed something positive." Gail didn't experience any angst about being with a woman; she knew it was socially unacceptable but felt neither guilty nor conflicted. She read *Giovanni's Room* and found it "neat" (not a painful mirror).

Gail and her girlfriend were roommates freshman year at college; they broke up without ever saying so, as Gail sought experiences with men. She thinks the relationships she had with men in college were “not particularly wonderful” and were driven by her need at the time to be validated and to have “the excitement of having a man be interested in me. I wasn’t very discriminating.”

Gail links the loneliness of her childhood to her simultaneous longing for and resistance to belonging to a group: “I always had this pull between kind of being anonymous, an individual person, and being part of a community.” This conflict informed her interest in intentional communities, which she studied during her academic training; it also shaped her experiences in intimate relationships. Throughout her young adult and middle adult years, Gail struggled to “sustain attachment.” Of her relationships with men in her 20s, Gail said; “I always ended the relationships with the men because I stopped feeling particularly – once I got validated for any length of time, they didn’t really hold me much. But I don’t think any relationship would have. It wasn’t a gender issue, it was who I was at the time.”

Later in her 20s, Gail’s relationships improved a bit, were a bit more satisfying and lasted a little longer. When she was 26, she had an important relationship with a professor who was the beloved leader of Gail’s lively and politically engaged graduate program. This young man died suddenly and shockingly. Gail reports that she “just kept going.”

She began to spend time with some of the other students in the program who were women, who had also been students of her boyfriend, some of whom were lesbians, and joined their softball team. “It was just a kind of community of women...it was very

relaxed, we'd have dancing parties, it was a kind of whole different community than I'd been in." Gail didn't make a connection between herself as a woman who had had a passionate, sexual relationship and the lesbians she was meeting: "I just thought that was an intense first relationship and I never particularly thought I would have another relationship with a woman." (In the interview, she comments that it's reasonable to wonder why she thought this.) Her experience with her first girlfriend "just wasn't linked to a whole set of ideas about who I am and what my identity is." As she finished graduate school, she had another unsatisfying relationship with a man with whom she lived for about a year ("same of the familiar pattern of not hanging in there totally").

At 28, Gail fell in love with a woman, A.; they moved to New York and lived together. "That relationship lasted seven years. And then, I'm really revealing my deficits, but then I just again felt – I wasn't – my attachment had dried up. And I couldn't – I didn't – I just wasn't – didn't seem like enough emotional engagement for the rest of my life." Gail had tried to get pregnant via donor sperm during this relationship; the stress and the disappointment when she was unable to do so probably also played a part in things ending. Very soon after the break-up, Gail fell in love again with another woman, B.; they stayed together for nine years and had twins together, carried by B.

Gail was open about her lesbian partnerships, but never in a way that involved claiming a generalized identity. When she became involved with A. after having lived with men, she simply told her family that A. was someone she's "been close to" and that they were going to live together. "I never hid it from anybody I was close to, my

employers – everybody knew...I just didn't have any issues about it. It wasn't a big deal. I don't have this consciousness about coming out, really. It's just who I was at the time."

Gail's sense of sexual orientation didn't exist at "a deep psychological level," but rather manifested in her political life, where she sees herself as engaging identity situationally ("acting as" a lesbian, rather than "being" one). Belonging to the women's community was both "comforting and exciting...it was an important sense of support but also it was consistent with my image of myself as a political person working on change. So it had an extra charge." Gail took parental leave when B. gave birth, forcing her employer to be supportive of gay families, and was on the very forefront of same-sex second parent adoption (Gail and B.'s children were born in the mid 1980s). Gail feels that in taking these actions she was not only creating security for herself and her children but was also making a contribution to a better world. Today, Gail is nostalgic for the time when she was part of a community that had a political purpose, when she had a highly personal link to a cause larger than herself.

While Gail was involved in women's movement to an extent, she found the movement for gay rights much more emotionally compelling. She thinks perhaps it's something about "the idea that people had to live in secret and it was so shameful," and links this to her own experience having an alcoholic father. She finds gay men to be brave – "it was really even harder for them" – and has long had close gay male friends. "Women had some clear battles with bad structures and bad men," but the cause didn't emotionally touch her at the same level. Gail still goes to events hosted by gay rights organizations, but it doesn't feel the same. She never uses the word bisexual to herself, about herself, and there isn't any place in her life in which it's relevant.

Gail's decision to become a mother in the context of a lesbian relationship led her to consult a therapist. She had always wanted to have a child, but was concerned about her own tendency toward low-level depression and wanted to be sure that she had "enough confidence and clarity about what I was doing to not transmit something to kids that would not be good" (shame/guilt over the lack of a father). The therapy was useful, Gail thinks, perhaps because it provided some outside validation for making a choice so far outside the mainstream (it was 1982 when Gail tried to get pregnant).

Gail was determined to stay with B., out of her commitment to their family together. It was B. who made the decision to end it, but Gail says "if I'm honest with myself, I would have decided." Four years of celibacy followed; Gail and B. alternated weeks as 50-50 joint custodial parents and when she didn't have her children, Gail was traveling for work: "I didn't have a lot of time to think about anything." Gail's circle of close friends did not change with the end of her relationship with B., but she lost touch with the wider lesbian social network that her ex-partner had cultivated.

When Gail was 47, she began a relationship with Peter, a man she dated briefly in high school (when they had met on a civil rights picket line). They remained in touch, seeing each other every five or six years, and visiting together as families. Peter's wife died suddenly when his children were in high school and college and sometime after Gail sent him a note that led to their getting together: "So he comes up and he tells me the whole story about her, how she died and how awful it was... he just seemed so emotionally available and unlike any man I knew, able to be present. That was very appealing. I hadn't really thought about it like that." Gail had not felt attracted to Peter when they were both young. "I never thought that his coming up here would – that we'd

be anything more than friends. But, you know, he just sat here on this couch and told me his story and he just seemed very appealing.” Peter moved in and Gail added him to the storybook she had created for her children; when it was time for parent interviews for high school, all three adults attended together as the “parent team.”

Gail’s ongoing co-parent relationship with B. means that she continues to have an identity in the world as a parent in a non-traditional family. The success of this family is something Gail worked hard at and is proud of. “They’ve had to deal with not having a biological father and that’s a definite, real loss, but I think they’ve had other really positive things that have buoyed them. So I don’t feel embarrassed – that’s what I didn’t want to feel. Embarrassed or ashamed or have to need to explain or something.”

Gail describes her sexuality as highly person-driven, rather than cohering around one or the other gender at any point in time. “Any deep attraction happens as a result of knowing somebody and having feelings about that person, male or female. And I don’t see that changing over my lifespan. Same – same in high school as now.” At the same time, during the interview, she was interested to wonder about whether she was drawn in a certain direction at the time she reconnected with her husband. When asked whether she was seeking a man at the time she began her current relationship, Gail pondered: “It’s a good question, I’m not sure. Cause, you know, what did I do? I went and got together with somebody who I knew I had feelings for, you know, from high school.”

Gail did not have a sense of a transition between being involved with men throughout her 20s to 15 years with women, or from that life to being married to a man. Her first relationship with a woman as an adult felt like a change because “I was again partnered and I had a life in front of me that was a trajectory, but it was because I was

married, not because I was married to a woman.” Having sex with a man again after 15 years was intense and wonderful because of the feeling of falling in love.

Gail doesn't experience the relationships she has had with men and women comparatively, in gender terms, either emotionally or sexually. “It's not like sexuality—wise I have strong feelings about one kind of sex or the other, because to me it's pretty continuous.” Any patterns in relationships couldn't be broken down by gender; “if I see patterns repeating, they're more about me. The problems I've had are more what I brought or what I pick in somebody.” She sees all her partners, both women and men, as limited in their ability to be emotionally open (at the same time she feels that typically men are less emotionally available than women). In the past, she might have reacted to the lessening of emotional intensity over the years in the relationship by leaving and seeking someone new, but she never viewed the “wearing out” of her relationships as suggesting that she might be happier with a man or a woman. Gail believes that the endurance of her relationship with Peter has entirely to do with her age, and what she has learned over time about being in a relationship: “I'm at a different stage of my life.”

In taking up the question of whether there was significance or meaning to her bisexual life history, Gail reviewed and considered possible theories: dynamics stemming from having a “cold fish” mother and alcoholic father, opportunities related to going to a girls school, being needier and less confident than some people (such that any kind of sexual satisfaction is positive), or having progressive parents who didn't make sexuality an area of judgment. She rejected all of these (noting that it was typical of her to “always find a negative kind of story”). The important questions have never been about sexual orientation:

“I look at the limitations of each [relationship] in terms of my own – where I was sort of developmentally, not gender, but just how depressed I was or how I felt about myself and my body, what I was willing to settle for, what I needed, how lonely I was. Those kinds of characteristics are so much more powerful than the question of gender. So by getting more comfortable with myself, by being less depressed, by feeling better about myself, I had different choices, and my relationships got better over time. The difference was not so much gender, it was about the quality and the maturity and the breadth and depth of the person. You know, I learned something, thank god! If you don’t learn something over 40 years, you’re really in trouble!”

8. Holly is a 50-year-old administrator. She was born and raised in the suburbs of New York City and attended university on the East Coast. She later took two graduate degrees in education and psychology while living and working in New York City. Holly had a romantic and sensual relationship with a college roommate and came close to having other lesbian experiences during college, but had otherwise dated men. At 22, she fell in love with a woman and was with her for eight years; she started dating men a year or so after they broke up. She was in and out of a relationship with a man throughout her 30s, as well as trying to date other men in between. At 42, she became involved with the man she would marry and she has lived with her with her husband and two step-children for the past six years.

Holly has an older brother and a younger sister. Her brother was severely mentally ill from a young age. Her parents had a very unhappy marriage; her mother was “incredibly uptight” about sexuality while her father was a sexually crude, angry person who “took a great deal of pleasure in flaunting both [my mother’s] boundaries and then later ours, about privacy.” Holly says her home “was unbelievably stressful...it was frightening and it felt very dangerous and we really were not supported. I was pretty depressed by the time I was in my teens.” In high school she had crushes on boys but was quite shy and confused about how to negotiate dating: “I didn’t know how to show that I wasn’t interested in somebody, and I didn’t know how to show that I was.”

Holly went to an elite east coast college in 1977 where she was involved in a number of political groups, including the movement to divest from South Africa and the women’s center. She had her first real boyfriend and then “was kind of promiscuous for

a period of time, all with men... It wasn't about the relationship... at the same time, I was actually feeling hurt sometimes that I wasn't loved by them." Her sexual experiences with men were not particularly enjoyable, aside from assuaging her loneliness and perhaps also the excitement of doing the forbidden. She remembers being romantically and physically attracted to men who were rejecting, and rejecting of men who more emotionally available.

During her third year at college, Holly fell in love with her roommate, Megan. They were very close and would lie in bed together and snuggle. Holly was going to women's groups and getting to know lesbians; Megan and Holly talked about the idea of having sex but Megan didn't want to. Holly isn't sure that she wanted more either: "I just wanted to be close to her." (Frighteningly, Megan broke down emotionally and dropped out of college; Holly suspected she had a history of childhood sexual abuse.) Later, Holly became best friends with someone from one of her women's groups who had come out as a lesbian. When this woman came on to Holly, she said no, but later, when the woman began a love affair with someone else, she wondered, "Maybe I did want that, maybe I do want that."

Not long after graduating from college, during a particularly difficult time in the family, when Holly was living with her newly divorced mother, "trying to find myself," she fell in love with her sister's roommate, Linda: "Completely and madly and passionately in love with her. And she was like me in that she had had some flirtation with being a lesbian, but also was seeing men and was pretty promiscuous. And she fell in love with me." Holly and Linda were together for eight years and lived together much of that time. "For the first time, I felt I knew what it meant to really be in a relationship

and love somebody and they love you back.” Sex together felt wonderful and natural; Holly was orgasmic with a partner for the first time.

Linda was an unfaithful lover and had multiple affairs with both men and other women, but Linda and Holly moved in together and Holly believed they would be together forever. (Linda herself identified as bisexual and always said she would marry a man and have children.) They were open about their relationship to family and friends, and Holly identified as a lesbian: “I never felt like, oh, I hate sex with men. But I did think, I hate men! But then when [Linda] cheated on me, I was like, wait a minute! I think initially I was, like, yeah, women are so much better, in this stupid childish way. Because I’d been very hurt by men.” She reinterpreted having been unhappy in her life and not connecting with male lovers as indicative of being a lesbian. Being a lesbian provided “a niche” in life. Most importantly, “I found this person that loved me and I just loved it.”

Given what she sees as her lifelong struggle to “feel safe being intimate with someone without feeling trapped and smothered,” it’s also possible that the fact that the relationship was lesbian was helpful to Holly. “It didn’t have all the trappings of, in my mind, of oh, maybe this is The One. Because it wasn’t a typical kind of relationship that I would have had the model for.”

Although she identified as a lesbian, Holly found living as a lesbian to be very constraining. She did not feel safe being physically affectionate with Linda in public and the ongoing nature of coming out was burdensome: “You’re always deciding are you going to tell this person or not tell this person. ... I’m too much of a people pleaser to just be comfortable and not caring what other people think. I felt there was an external

judgment on my lifestyle and it was on my mind any time I met somebody new or went somewhere and you had to decide, can you be physical here or not.” Vacationing anywhere other than a gay resort meant having to hide. Holly feels that her life became “ghetto-ized”; she and Linda spent much of their free time doing things with other lesbians, but “looking back on it, they’re not people that I felt that compatible with other than the ability to be a couple around them.”

Together for eight years, Holly and Linda broke up the summer after Linda began graduate school in another state (having turned down a good school where the couple was living). When Linda planned a solo vacation during the only weeks of the summer that Holly was able to take time off work, Holly was suddenly struck with the realization that Linda was selfish and ended the relationship. She tried to date and met a woman she liked and thought was attractive, but was repelled by the idea of having sex with her.

At this time, Holly was in a long-term psychotherapy, focused on untangling the effects of her traumatic childhood. When she found herself unable to become interested in any of the women she was meeting, her therapist asked her what made her think she was a lesbian. Her immediate thought was that all her lesbian friends would be angry at her if she stopped being a lesbian. This therapeutic moment was a turning point for Holly:

“What was blinding wasn’t that was I lesbian or not a lesbian. It was her question, which was why can’t you do what you want to do, instead of worrying about whether your friends will be angry. I was like, oh, is that how people decide what they do in their life? Oh! And that question made me realize right in that session, that I think I’m not gay. I think I want to be with men. I don’t know how to do it and this is going to

be really complicated, now I have to un-come out to everyone, this is so weird! All of that. But I just realized it was this person, not necessarily sexuality in general, and certainly not the lifestyle.”

Holly was 30 when her lesbian relationship ended and 31 when she decided to stop being a lesbian. The social discomfort she anticipated in having to “un-come out” never quite materialized because she made other major changes at the same time, leaving a long-term job and beginning graduate school in psychology. Her friendships with the women she had known while a lesbian gradually attenuated and her new friends were other straight women in her new training program. She began dating men: “The sex part of being with men, that part was pretty easy and fun. But the difficult part was the emotional part. I just went back to the same problem! I was like, oh my god, I don’t really connect with these people.”

Partway through graduate school, Holly began a many-years involvement with Mike, “a person who never pretended to be committed to me and wasn’t... A person with serious commitment and intimacy issues.” Their sexual chemistry was intense: “I felt like after being with him I knew I was straight because sex was no effort. It was absolutely perfectly pleasurable for both of us at all times.” It was also a purely sexual relationship; Holly did not introduce Mike to her family and they didn’t go out together. They broke up and got back together many times and eventually settled into a weekly “sex appointment” while Holly was trying to meet other people and Mike was living with somebody else.

Holly understands her relationship with Mike, and with Linda as well, in terms of Fairbairn’s tantalizing object, so alluring and so disappointing. “His inability to be

intimate and my inability to be intimate – there was still something exciting about that... I feel that was my sexual history, as long as I can remember, I feel that I was confused and that I was always wanting something that I couldn't have. And all the people I felt the most attached to, up until this current relationship [her marriage], were people who I couldn't have and who were very clearly telling me, I'm not really that available. Even Linda was telling me, I'm not really that available." On a broader level, Holly sees her inability to form a relationship with someone available as part of a being stalled in her development. Remaining unhappy in her intimate life represented "punish[ing] my parents by having a failed, unhappy life."

Holly met Scott (and realized her goal of marriage and family life) about two years after ending a psychoanalytic psychotherapy treatment relationship of almost two decades in a dramatic way. She was in both individual and group therapy with the same analyst, and the group therapy effectively recreated the feeling of being mistreated and unseen and having her needs ignored that characterized her childhood. Holly and another group patient openly violated group rules and when the therapist said they must either follow the rules or one must leave, Holly left in a rage. She feels this was a necessary part of her process of growth: "There was something about the way I left that group... I was, like, I'm sick of all this therapy and I'm stuck and I don't want to stay here. I want to go out and be an adult... And I went and I did it, I grew up and I was like, okay, I don't want to spend all my time punishing you and showing you what a bad therapist you are by not succeeding."

Holly knew Scott through her sister. He had two young children who had lost their mother two years before. They were all together at the beach: "I was thinking, oh,

I'll engage the kids so Scott can have some personal time with my sister. But they wouldn't separate from him, so he and I took them to the beach, and I was having a great time with them and he was like, oh my god, my kids never talk to anyone, I can't believe they're talking to you. Finally they went off and were playing and we were sitting there looking out at the ocean and all of a sudden I realized this was a very romantic feeling for me, because he's a really good father and I think that's the best thing. And suddenly I could feel that there was like – we were just sitting there, we weren't talking, and I felt really comfortable and it was nice and a beautiful setting. And then he just suddenly asked me if I would feel very awkward if we went out, like to dinner.” Holly understands that she would not have been interested in Scott when she was younger: “He's so vulnerable. And I don't think I was mature enough to handle it.”

Holly sees her lesbian relationship, her shift to a heterosexual identity, and her marriage as a story of progressive separation and individuation from her parents. In regards to her relationship with her mother, she thinks the fact that her first serious relationship was with a woman “helped me to take a baby step toward separation, but one that would not enrage my mother, who is sort of borderline and so separating from her is not the easiest thing to do.” Her mother's sexuality was highly constricted; she never dated after her divorce in early middle age. Holly sees herself as having partaken of her mother's disgust for her father's sexuality. Her relationship with Linda represented adulthood (a sexually pleasurable, loving and intimate relationship) but also “was very helpful in not stirring up my mother's anger about my separation, because Linda and I could get together with her and it was very nice... it was just like another daughter to

her.” (She notes that while her mother was ostensibly thrilled that Holly was getting married to a man, a very difficult year with her followed.)

Holly’s epiphany in therapy about the absurdity of remaining a lesbian simply because other people might be upset if she dated a man was a second significant step in her individuation. The literalized separation from her therapist catalyzed a third shift. “So that’s the story that I’ve told myself, that it was all about separating from my parents in stages and being able to get rid of the sort of traumatized relationship model that I had in my head and see that I could do it a different way and that it could turn out different.”

Holly thinks of herself as “bisexual in the sense that I’m certainly capable of having sex with a woman and it doesn’t disgust me. But my preference at this point in my life is certainly to have sex with men.” She remains closest to her female friends and notes a stark contrast in the ease of communication among women as opposed to between women and men: “I think you have to work really hard to get men to understand what you’re thinking.” She doesn’t anticipate being sexual with a woman again in her life; but then doesn’t rule it out either. She says of her relationship with Linda: “I really feel like I have never felt, despite everything that happened, so loved, as I did in that relationship. It was just really great... I think that relationship was the one which helped me be able to be in another relationship.”

Data Analysis

Summary of Romantic Histories and Sexual Orientation Identities

The subjects in this study resembled those in other studies of women with bisexual life histories in that the adoption of a lesbian or bisexual identity label was not consistently related to the degree, intensity, or duration of same- or other-sex relationships or attractions that a subject described (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1976; Weinberg *et al.*, 1994; Golden, 1987; Diamond, 2008). For example, a subject who never considered herself lesbian had been passionately involved with another woman for much of her adult life, while another woman who hadn't fallen in love with a woman since college and had been partnered with a man for over six years still thought of herself as gay in important ways.

In light of research that has already documented the repeated and multi-directional changes that women with bisexual life histories tend to make in terms of how they identify themselves (Rust, 1993; Diamond, 2008), I did not request subjects to recount in detail when they adopted any particular identity label. Instead, I asked in general terms how subjects identified themselves at key points in their story. Five women had, at some point in the past, thought of themselves as lesbians. Of these five former lesbians, one thinks of herself as straight (but capable of sexual intimacy with women), one describes herself as "becoming" straight (but with continued mixed attractions), one calls herself bisexual, another, after reading Lisa Diamond's work, calls herself fluid, and one describes herself as "queer" or "not straight". Two women had provisionally described themselves as bisexual while in lesbian relationships; one of

these no longer subscribes to any identity label and the other thinks of herself as straight. Finally, one woman never used any sexual orientation minority label to describe herself and still doesn't.

Sexuality, Life Structure and Age Linkages

The idea that sexual orientation identity might be thought of as a part of the life structure, in Levinsonian terms, was a starting point of this project. A life structure consists of an individual's principle life commitments at any point in time. Levinson (1978) reported that the life structure appears to go through periods of stasis and change, with revisions appearing at predictable points in time, and named these age-linked, alternating periods of stability and revision in the life structure as follows: The Early Adult Transition (ages 17-22), Entering the Adult World (22-28), Age 30 Transition (28-33), Settling Down (33-40), Mid-life Transition (40-45), Entering Middle Adulthood (45-50), and so on. In the current study, with a single subject over age 50, and in light of the small sample size, the periods for which there is the most data are those all subjects had traversed – The Early Adult Transition through the Age 30 Transition.

Six subjects began their intimate careers with women during or immediately after college, during the Early Adult Transition. Another subject first fell in love with a woman in college and in consequence adopted a lesbian identity, though she had already had sex with girls in high school. The eighth subject ended her high school lesbian relationship freshman year of college and was involved with men for the next ten years; she began to have lesbian relationships again at age 28, which then continued for 15 years. Of the seven subjects who were involved with women during college and

immediately after, five of these became involved with men in the vicinity of age 30, while two others continued in long-term lesbian relationships through their 30s.

As in previous Levinsonian studies of women, the Age 30 Transition was prominent (Roberts & Newton, 1987). All eight subjects reported major changes in relationships, jobs, residence, or sexual choices, or all of these together, at age 30 +/- two years. In two instances, subjects reported an important internal shift in regard to sexuality that was strongly felt but not acted upon.

Anne

At age 29, she ended a five year relationship with a woman, moved across country, took a new job, and began her first serious adult relationship with a man.

Beth

At age 29, she became interested in dating men for the first time in 10 years, but did not act on this impulse. Instead, she began what turned out to be a nine year relationship with a woman, and at the same time began a job in a field that would lead to a new, successful career.

Claire

At age 32, she ended an 8+ year relationship with a woman, moved across country, and began a new job.

Debra

Between 28 and 30, she went to graduate school, fell in love with a man for the first time as an adult, lived in three different cities, started a new profession, started therapy, then fell in love with her future husband.

Eve

At 29, she moved to a new town and then fell in love. At 31, the woman with whom she planned to spend her life broke up with her. She subsequently fell in love with a man for the first time, revised her sexual orientation identity, sold her apartment, considered changing professions, took a new job and moved across country.

Faye

At age 31, she experienced a strong desire to leave her lesbian relationship and reunite with a former boyfriend, but did not act on it. Instead, she intensified her commitment to her relationship (leading to both home ownership and a family during her 30s), and also invested significantly in her career.

Gail

At age 28, she began her first adult relationship with a woman, began a new job, and moved to a new city.

Holly

At age 30, her 8 year lesbian relationship ended. At 31, she stopped identifying as a lesbian and began dating men; she also began graduate school.

Subjects over 40 had also made significant revisions during Levinson's Midlife Transition (40-45):

Faye

Left her lesbian marriage at age 42 and soon thereafter began her relationship with her husband, and had another child.

Gail

Ended her nine year lesbian marriage at age 44.

Holly

Had a significant personal crisis at age 40. Met her husband at 41.

Sexuality Changes and the Early Adult Transition

All subjects went through changes in identifications and object choice during the Early Adult Transition. A repeated motif among many subjects, regardless of what sort of shift was taking place at this time, was a sense of inadequacy and discomfort in regard to sexuality and/or a sense of lacking in femininity during adolescence (Beth, Claire, Faye, Gail, Holly). Subjects also reported unpleasant or unsatisfying romantic or sexual

interactions with men as preamble to discovering women (Anne, Beth, Faye, Holly).

Echoing this theme in mirror image was Gail, who attributed much of her heterosexual behavior during her 20s to a need to confirm herself as a woman in the eyes of a man.

Coming into one's own sexually was an important dimension of the Early Adult Transition; for most subjects, this happened through sexual relationships with women. Initial experiences of lesbian sexuality were described positively in the strongest possible terms. For Anne, it meant feeling intensely sexually aroused for the first time. Beth became able to enjoy the feeling of being penetrated. Claire described the beginning of her lesbian relationship as rapturous and the discovery of her own sexual prowess as self-affirming. Holly had her first experience of orgasm with another person.

These revelatory sexual experiences with women were also experiences of falling in love as an adult or near-adult for the first time. For Holly, falling in love with a woman satisfied her yearning to be in a relationship: "This is something I've wanted since I was a teenager but never felt like I found another person that I wanted who also wanted to be with me...I think it felt like finally becoming an adult, and being proud."

Subjects described their desires for women developing in the context of falling in love with a particular woman. For five of eight subjects, love very much led desire; three subjects described feeling a sexual interest in women in advance of a love relation. But even here, love remained central. Eve only began calling herself a lesbian towards the end of college, after she began a reciprocated love relation with a woman, in spite of having had romantic feelings for women and same-sex experiences for years prior. Subjects all talked about both lust and love, physical and emotional attractions, in explicating their choice of identity label.

Falling in love and learning about oneself sexually co-occurred with a separation process. Several women noted the way in which becoming involved with women affected their relationships with their mothers. In some cases, subjects expected that it would be easier to tell their mothers of their new lesbian relationships than to tell fathers but found the opposite to be true. For Claire, going forward with her lesbian relationship felt like an important act of separating from her mother, with whom she had been very close. Debra and her mother went through a painful rupture. Debra understands her mother to be a woman who has denied her own lesbian desires and believes this might have been responsible for her mother's extremely negative initial reaction to her daughter's lesbianism.

Holly thought that being with a woman helped her toward adulthood in that she was in a serious, mutual love relation for the first time. She felt that her mother tolerated this act of separation because she could assimilate Holly's lover as "another daughter." For other subjects, where mother was a weak or distant figure, her reaction to her daughter's sexuality was less important to the story and went nearly unmentioned (Beth, Eve). These women referenced separation themes in the context of sexuality in a other ways. Beth changed her image from "hippie"/California, where her parents made their home, to Easterner/lesbian androgyne; Eve rejected all things Midwestern/narrow-minded/heterosexual. Of all the subjects, only Gail reported something like quiet maternal endorsement, even though, at the same time, her mother was happy when Gail married a man.

Most subjects made references to politics in connection with their experiences with sexual orientation identity. Political interests often began before college, but were

especially prominent in the Early Adult Transition. The specific political arena seemed partly generationally, with the eldest subject having become politically involved in the context of the civil rights and anti-war movements (Gail remembered making out with her high school girlfriend under the blanket on trip to Washington DC to attend demonstrations, and she and her husband had first met in high school on a picket line). Somewhat younger subjects were taken with lesbian-feminism, and the youngest subjects spoke most about gay civil rights. But these divisions were not absolute; Gail, the eldest, had more attachment to gay issues than women's issues, while Anne, the youngest, went through a period of what she thinks of as salutary anger over women's place in the world. All subjects expressed strong support for gay political goals. The subjects who never identified as lesbian nonetheless felt a strong moral obligation to stand with lesbians, as a political act.

When she was 17, Anne went through a kind of enlightenment, seeing "the power dynamics between men and women in society and not accepting them," "see[ing] sexism in the world in a way that I had never really noticed before." Coming to this view made Anne feel strong and "kind of angry in a good way." Holly pointed out the naivete of some of these politics (believing women to be inherently kinder or better than men, for example), but that's precisely how they are developmentally appropriate. They speak to and express some women's felt difficulty making their way into the world as late adolescents and young adults. I believe when subjects talked about politics, they were in part invoking a set of ideas that serve to address a late adolescent narcissism gap among young women. Theorists of young adult life talk of the appropriate narcissism of youth, of the sense that the world is one's oyster or a blank slate on which to make one's mark,

an exaggerated sense of self-worth that is needed precisely when the youth really doesn't know much, a denial of dependency that's needed order to take a giant step into the adult world. But this description seems to hold only a little resonance for young women, even as they recognize and envy it.

Feminist politics offers various kinds of help to young women – an explanation of why launching oneself felt so risky, a necessary anger in order to mobilize the self in the face of these challenges, an expression of strength, a marker of investment in oneself as a young woman, a community of support.

Adopting a Lesbian Identity

During and immediately after college was when all five subjects ever to adopt a lesbian identity did so. Although some of these women went back and forth internally between thinking of their sexuality as bisexual or as lesbian, claiming an identity and living life *as a bisexual* was not something anyone considered or could even conceptualize. Bisexual was only ever used to describe the subject's private view of her sexual preferences, to mean having attractions to both women and men.

It is pertinent to note at the outset of this section that every woman in the study was quite open about their lesbian relationships, with a very few limited exceptions involving circumscribed situations or a particular family member. Couples were openly so with each others' families and were largely accepted as such; all close friends, many acquaintances, and most co-workers knew subjects to be in committed lesbian relationships. Subjects all participated in lesbian community gatherings, particularly the annual gay pride march. Which subjects adopted a lesbian identity did not, as mentioned

earlier, hinge on the intensity, exclusivity or duration of a woman's relationships with or interest in women.

Subjects came to think of themselves as lesbians as a result of the following experiences: a generalization of passion from a single lover to women as a group, and becoming part of predominantly lesbian social networks. Four subjects (Beth, Debra, Eve, and Faye) had both of these experiences, falling in love with women as a group and developing a specifically lesbian social life. Though Holly's sexual attraction never generalized, she too came to think of herself as a lesbian in a politicized context which she experienced as structuring. Her narrative includes relationships to both community and lover.

Debra sums up generalization: "It isn't just that it's her and I don't care, it doesn't matter about her gender. I actually think that even if I wasn't with her I'd be with women." Being with women, for the lesbians, meant being known in the world as a lesbian; the friends and family of self-identified lesbians were more surprised when these women "switched" than were the friends of the women in long-term lesbian relationships who never identified.

The lesbians in the group were the ones who fell in love with being a lesbian, in addition to falling in love with a woman. Beth, Debra, Eve, and Faye all described a positive, valued involvement with the lesbian and gay community (as did one non-identifier, Gail). For Debra, the community was extremely important, as an alternative family and crucial source of support. Debra's lesbian community simultaneously expressed Debra's close relationships with her mother and other female relatives and at the same time provided the kind of support she never felt she actually got from her

mother as a child. Further, observing the loving affection of Debra's lesbian community reconciled her mother to her daughter's lesbian identity. For Beth, a lesbian relationship and the lesbian community constituted a healing environment, in which she dramatically revised her relationship to her own body and recovered from years of bulimia. The lesbian community appealed to Faye socially, intellectually, and politically; she consciously "joined" after years of having relationships with both men and women.

Those who adopted a lesbian identity were also those whose mixed attractions became muted for an extended period. Beth and Debra were both aware that they had had strong attractions for men in the past, but for the period of time that they related primarily to women, their attractions for men faded into the background and felt unimportant. For both, sexual desire was shaped by sexual activity, being by doing. For Holly, lack of interest in men while identifying as lesbian was partly in consequence of living in a predominantly female social world, both because of her profession and because she and her lover were most comfortable socializing as a couple with other lesbians. She wasn't around men very much and didn't think of them.

Refusing a Lesbian Identity

Three subjects – Anne, Claire, and Gail – emphatically rejected an identity as lesbian. Anne and Claire are a subgroup within this group. Both women adopted provisional sexual minority labels while with women but emphasized their internal distance from these labels, and rejected them at the time of the interviews. Both of these women spent their 20s intensely involved with women.

When she was with women, Anne accepted *lesbian* as a description of what she was doing, even as her ongoing sexual attractions to men and curiosity about relationships with men meant that she never called herself gay. Lesbian was something she took on out of political loyalties, as an action in the world and not an expression of inner self. She also felt that it was somehow only honest, in that she had predominantly lesbian relationships for over 10 years; it was an acknowledgment of what she was doing, even if her attractions were strongly mixed. A bisexual identity seemed like a cop-out, used used to avoid the stigma of being gay, or to be fashionable. Moreover, Anne's girlfriend was critical of women who called themselves bi.

Anne did not have a subjective sense of changing internally or externally when she began sleeping with women, nor when she began her current relationship with a man. She remarked that she has always had a feminine appearance, except for a brief period before she had thought of being with a woman (her ani difranco phase). Even that phase is narrated not in regard to other female fans of this bisexual artist, but via stories about her parents and her youthful feminist anger. In other words, the community is not a partner in her fandom affair. In dressing a bit butch she was mimicking her heroine, not signaling her desire to others. She changed her appearance many times over the years (she enjoys changing her hair color and style), but not in concert with changes in sexual object choice (that is, hair length was never used to signal sexual orientation).

During her intensely passionate long-term relationship with a woman, Clair called herself bisexual; once it was over, she returned to thinking of herself as straight. Her lustful feelings for her partner never generalized to other women, in spite of sparks here and there, and an infatuation with Hilary Swank's portrayal of transman Brandon Teena.

This non-identification seemed to be motivated – that is, it took energy – as suggested by Clair’s passing remark, “I don’t know much about being gay,” as if there were very much more to know than what one knows from living just as she had lived for many years.

Both Anne and Clair experienced their non-identification as lesbian as problematic within their relationships. Anne’s uncertainty about her sexuality and her sexual dissatisfaction led her to end her second long lesbian relationship. Claire’s felt inability to fully imagine spending her life as a lesbian added to the painfully ambivalent dynamic between her and her lover. Both expressed guilt toward their lesbian partners. Claire labeled herself as someone with “internalized homophobia”. Anne hated to think that she had somehow led her lover on, or wasted years of her lover’s life. Claire was in touch with a desire for mainstream family life and was embarrassed about feeling this way.

Gail also declined any sexual minority identity, and always had. Across lovers and situations, in her feelings toward and experiences with her male and female partners: “Exactly the same. No difference.” After largely indifferent relationships with men through her 20s, Gail began a committed relationship with a woman at 28, and went on to establish herself in the adult world as a worker, political activist, and parent within a lesbian context. She did not join with a man again until her late 40s.

Like Anne, Gail occupied “lesbian” as a political position, in her case with a high level of investment and sense of fulfillment. Her long-standing certainty that her attractions are to the individual person irrespective of gender meant that, unlike Anne and Claire, she never struggled over the question of identity. She never asked herself which gender she preferred, did not weigh different identity labels against her experiences and

desires. Anne and Clair, in contrast, reported extended periods of time in which they did not feel they could fully commit to the life they were leading.

Facilitating Environments

Seven subjects (Gail excepted) specifically described certain times and places as having given them the opportunity to explore sexual relationships with women, and several wondered if they might even have done so absent this encouragement. For the most part, these environments were colleges and universities, and in one instance it was the performance scene in a gay urban center. Older subjects thought of the time they went to college as particularly conducive to experimentation with lesbianism; the youngest subject seemed to say one would be hard pressed to find any woman at her college who hadn't slept with another woman.

Subjects' families were, on balance, accepting of their daughters' lesbian relationships; there was no disowning, nor particularly even strong disapproval, though several felt the sting of quiet parental disappointment. A few fathers were immediately supportive, and several mothers wanted to be and deliberately worked through their ambivalence about their daughter's sexuality. There were also fathers who responded in a way that reflected poor boundaries, remarking on how sexy they thought lesbianism was, or inquiring into their daughters' experience of orgasm.

Undoubtedly the most important factor common to all subjects, which allowed for a great deal of freedom in terms of sexual identity, was their social class. As young women at elite educational institutions in the 1970s to 1990s, anticipating lives as working professionals, they could expect to be able to shape their own lives to a

significant degree. All of these factors likely contributed to the relative ease with which these subjects embarked on lesbian lives. Nobody reported a sense of conflict in terms of exploring sexual feelings for women, nobody was held back by feelings of guilt or shame. The stigma of homosexuality may still operate strongly in other sectors of the population, but among this group it no longer had the power to dissuade.

Standing Outside the Mainstream – Enlivening, Frightening

Even though subjects lived in urban social spaces in which homosexuality was highly accepted, being gay remains, for these women, a marginal identity. All subjects, both lesbian-identified and not, commented on the experience of inhabiting an outsider position. Several said it had given them a better understanding of what it means to be part of an oppressed group, a knowledge they valued, which they felt made them more empathic people. This outsider experience related to the discussions of politics which emerged in most of the interviews. For one subject, Eve, the heart of her interview was a repudiation of what she perceived as the dominant culture and a concomitant valuing of marginality.

At the same time, some subjects experienced marginality as frightening and alienating. Holly clearly articulated this dimension. For Holly, being a part of the lesbian community came to represent a straitened existence, a situational rather than authentic social life, and meant living with the weight of chronic disapproval from the larger culture. To be outside the sexual mainstream meant feeling vulnerable to violence and always having one's personal life uncomfortably exposed. Beth talked about her unhappiness negotiating her heterosexual work environment as a lesbian, and how it

made relations with her (rather difficult) parents even more difficult. Being a lesbian made life feel unpleasantly compartmentalized.

For others, standing outside the mainstream in one's own life was invigorating, and also held important personal meanings. Although Gail never identified as a lesbian, she valued highly the contributions she made politically from the subject position of lesbian, and had a sense of loss when her connection to activist groups attenuated with her heterosexual marriage. Throughout her work life, Gail has been drawn to the question of community. She speculated that the particular resonance for her of the gay civil rights movement lay in the fact that homosexuality has been a source of shame for so long and that, as the daughter of an alcoholic, she was strongly moved by the bravery needed to confront feelings of shame. Faye made connections between her commitment to gay and gay-related causes and her identification with the values of her heroic father, who had faced the worst oppression and violence.

The Quality of the Age 30 Transitions

Most subjects described the period around age 30 as being one of deliberate, conscious revision. Debra felt she needed further intellectual training and left her job and community for this purpose. Holly described re-assessing her life on multiple levels (emotional, sexual, financial) after the break-up of her long-term relationship when she was 30. Claire believed her long-term lesbian partner would have continued their highly ambivalent relationship indefinitely, which left it to Claire to make the decisive break. Beth says she smothered her desire to make a change in sexual object choice at age 30; she had a strong intention to make a change but was too afraid.

Like Beth, Faye had a thwarted revision at age 30. The death of Faye's father revealed serious problems in her lesbian relationship at the same time as it renewed her longing for her old high school sweetheart, John. Going to John's 30th birthday/going away party led to a fateful conversation, in which Faye imagined an entire alternate life with him, and he pointed to her identity as lesbian as the reason they weren't together. After John left town, and in spite of deep misgivings, Faye re-committed herself to her lesbian partner.

Beth and Faye both chose to continue in difficult relationships through their 30s. These relationships structured their lives as lesbian, an identity they both had embraced, even as both held a private view of themselves as bisexually capable. Within these relationships, they established comfortable homes and lives and, in Faye's case, had a child. But both came to experience their home lives as completely untenable. For Beth, this took the form of panic attacks on finding out she was pregnant within her lesbian relationship (thus committing her to the marriage; in the event, she had an early miscarriage).

These two women, with unheeded stirrings to make significant change at age 30, describe the subsequent years with their partners in rather bleak terms. Occupational achievement was some compensation, especially for Faye. Confidence she gained at work helped her finally to make the essential change at home. When Beth and Faye did finally 'break-out' and undertook the task of forming a new basis for their lives, they experienced joy and elation. Perhaps it is the sense of regret that both Beth and Faye articulate that gave both of their transitions out of lesbian relationships and lesbian identities such energy. The change they made had the urgency of something pent up, and

the joyful quality of the transition to men in these two interviews stands in contrast to the rest. These two subjects felt brave in shifting toward men after 20 years as lesbians.

Some of the subjects who went through numerous changes in core areas around age 30 described the experience in more passive terms, as a matter of responding to new and surprising inner promptings, or because of obscure discontents. At age 29, Anne ended her five-year relationship in a state of some ambivalence. At the time, she had imagined that they might reunite in the future. When she subsequently began a relationship with a man a few weeks later, she expected it to be a brief affair, but it became serious and fundamentally altered her sense of her sexuality. Eve had made a strong commitment to her girlfriend, going as far as buying an apartment for them to live in together; the relationship ended in less than two years. When Eve subsequently fell in love with a man, she was astonished; after him, she intended to date women but met another man, another surprise.

Object choice at around age 30 implicates a vision of family. Interestingly, none of the subjects in this study structured their thinking or decision-making about lesbian versus straight relationships in terms of fertility. The only subject who reflected that it would be easier to have children in the context of a heterosexual relationship was the one subject who did not plan on having any children. The youngest subject, Anne, age 30, imagined that her ex-lesbian partner thought her choice to leave that relationship was in part a desire for a conventional, heterosexual family, and adamantly refuted what felt like an unfair accusation. The two subjects who felt they somehow ought to have changed object choice at 30 went on to either have or attempt to have children in a lesbian context. The dramatic social changes surrounding gay families are evident; the desire for children

was generally envisioned as something that could be realized within a lesbian relationship.

The data supports a vision of sexual orientation identity changes as a facet of adult development. The appearance of so many changes at about 30 suggests that something about time, perhaps the arc of an expected lifespan, is involved. In many contemporary lives, transitions are no longer structured around expected ritual events but around “open process events” (Giddens, 1991), such as self-realization through career or relationship, or the formation of a family. At about age 30, all of these subjects sought to revise their relationships, with varying degrees of success.

Sexual Orientation Identity, Personality, and Relational Patterns

Subjects used identity labels to express meanings well beyond the technical definition of the words. These meanings encompassed both internal experiences and community or group concerns. As discussed, subjects used the term “lesbian” to signal social membership in a community and to describe political commitments, as well as to describe their sexuality and relationships.

The way subjects talked about identity labels also seemed to convey other, more complex and highly personal meanings. Examining the use of identity terminology in this light revealed an entirely different sort of patterning, in which a subject’s attitude toward identity labels was consonant with her characteristic emotional style and with issues she typically experienced in her relationships. Respondents talked about identity in a way that reflected other themes within the interview, themes about internal lives.

Beth, who described herself as having been “broken” at times in her life, felt that the word bisexual was a “freak word,” and that being straight is like “flying in first class.” Her determination to “become straight” was bound up with a sense that it was time to stop simply accepting whatever came her way and instead to seek actively what would make her happy. She felt she had been successful as a lesbian in that she never lacked for interested partners and was somewhat concerned that she would return to dating women as a retreat to a position of safety or as a way of doing what came most easily to her. For Beth, changing objects had come to represent an active stance vis-à-vis her desires as much as it did a particular sexuality.

Gail saw herself as having a characteristic style of attenuated attachment in the context of a life history of committed, long-term relationships (as she somewhat ruefully put it, “I’ve had three lasting commitments”). She has always been ambivalent about community identifications and is always “on the edge” of social networks. While in graduate school, she came to know a group of women who self-identified as lesbians. Even though she had had a passionate sexual relationship with another girl in high school and the beginning of college, she did not make a connection between this and the experience of her fellow graduate students. She has never described herself as either lesbian or bisexual to herself or anyone else, even as she highly valued her involvement in the political cause of gay rights and was a pioneer in the arena of same-sex second parent adoption.

Gail’s experience of her own sexuality is that she responds to the particular person, not the gender; refusing to identify as having a particular type of sexuality expresses this. At the same time, Gail’s combination of non-identification as gay with

strong political involvement resonates with a relational style that joins disaffection with long-term commitment.

Debra, who had one of the strongest self-identifications as lesbian, feels that, at least initially, the identity came to her from the outside, rather being something she sought. She felt that others recognized in her an affinity for women and showed her that she was gay, a process that culminated in a lesbian love relationship during senior year of college that ended with graduation.

Debra sees herself as very independent and wary of being pinned down. Throughout her 20s, her primary relationship was with the lesbian community rather than an individual. She was a “serially short-term relationship person” who was highly involved with multiple, overlapping networks of gay women. She embraced being a lesbian whole-heartedly and cultivated a specifically lesbian sartorial style, but never fell in love with a woman after college. Her relationship with her lesbian community includes ambivalence about those who are too comfortably dependent on the group and not challenging themselves to grow and change. She feels she and her husband are highly compatible in part because “we don’t need each other.” Debra stands in interesting contrast to Gail in that Debra was highly committed to an identity as a lesbian but never formed a long-term attachment with a woman, while Gail was precisely the opposite.

Anne puzzled about identity in these terms: “If you are bisexual, then that means you are always unsatisfied.” This matched rather closely a theme from her interview of longing for someone, but once the beloved’s attention is captured being mysteriously repelled or desperate to leave the relationship. During high school, this pattern was

pronounced enough to elicit parental concern. Anne was “plagued” with dissatisfaction, particularly sexual dissatisfaction, during her two long-term relationships with women; given a lack of experience with men, she wondered if the problem was that she wasn’t “really” lesbian or bisexual. She is both delighted and relieved that her sex life with her current boyfriend is better than anything she has experienced previously but seems to remain vigilant about any waning sexual interest. She wants to be in a committed relationship and thus wants to know “if there is only one sex or the other that’s going to ultimately satisfy me.”

Holly vividly described how identity issues intertwined with character in her account of her transition from being a lesbian to being straight. After the painful end of a long-term lesbian relationship, she dated women but found that she was uninterested sexually. In therapy, she saw that she was afraid to date men because it would make her lesbian friends angry. It was revelatory to understand that she was making such an important decision on this basis. Her abandonment of a sense of herself as lesbian was notable not so much because she realized something about her sexual preferences, but because she realized something important about how she related in general. It was a crucial moment of understanding her own tendency to restrict herself in deference to the imagined attitudes of others.

Clair specifically described experiencing a conflict over identifying herself as lesbian. Even though she was “crazy attracted” to the woman with whom she had a sexual relationship with for 10 years, “off the charts more than I had ever been to a man, ever”, she felt persistently uncomfortable both thinking of herself as a lesbian and being seen as a lesbian by others, and then felt guilty for feeling this way. Having passionate

feelings for one woman never generalized to an experience of attraction to other women, nor did it shape her expectations for her future. Indeed, there was something about gay identity that so entirely didn't match the subject's sense of herself that she off-handedly described herself as "not knowing very much about being gay."

Claire's tangled relationship with identity resonates with something tangled and unclear for the subject in her quest for marriage and family. She knows she wants to marry and have children, but her long-term partners of both sexes have not shared this goal, and she rejected a man who did. In this view, the choice is not between a man and a woman at all, but between someone who shares her life goals and someone who is likely to frustrate them. Her current relationship with a man who is highly ambivalent about marriage and children continues rather than interrupts the pattern.

In sum, subjects had characteristic attitudes toward sexual orientation identity. In effect, they related to the social role as a selfobject as conceptualized in Kohut's work (Laurence Gould, personal communication, 2009), in this case a cultural selfobject. The role is both the self and the other, the self and the group. The role is a part of the self that is also experienced as external to the self. The "not-self" dimension of identity (identity as one is reflected in the eyes of others) is seen in the felt sense of distance that all subjects expressed to one degree or another between a core self and one's sexual orientation identity. Subjects relate to sexual identity as object in ways that are characteristic for them.

Dr. Gould also wondered, in advance of this project, whether subjects might not, over time, develop a specific sense of self as the lover of a woman or the lover of a man. This would mean that relationships with men and with women tap into, or perhaps

construct, different aspects of the self. However, a “lesbian self” cohering around what it feels like to be the lover of a woman did not emerge in these interviews (nor did a “straight self”). Rather, what emerged strongly were repeated relational patterns that held across object choice, some of which are described above. Thus:

- Debra emphasized the importance of independence within romantic relationships – a high school boyfriend would have been someone she would have ended up supporting financially, a series of girlfriends became too attached.
- Anne experienced strong desire for others followed by confusing ambivalence.
- Claire felt that she always started out relationships in a one-down position – by falling in love with friends who at first were unresponsive and only later won over (her pattern of picking partners who cannot not give her what she wants was only just becoming evident to her at the time of the interview).
- Holly understood herself to have been entirely caught up with, in her own words, “the tantalizing, disappointing object,” beginning with men in college, continuing in her lesbian relationship and then continuing and even intensifying in a subsequent relationship with a man.
- Beth felt passive in relationships, always taking what she could get rather than daring to want.
- Gail described herself as someone who has difficulty maintaining attachment.

The (In)significance of Gender

In retrospect, it seems obvious that in telling the story of their romantic lives, subjects would be telling the story of their predominant object relations, and that this story would hold true across the gender of partners. However, prior to interviewing, I had imagined something else emerging – multiple versions of the self, rather than this more unified relational story.

In part, I had been inspired by the question of a colleague and fellow ex-lesbian – what happened to the part of me that was a lesbian? What is its status now that I'm not with women any more? In a larger sense, the question is – what has happened to my past selves? If identity is a matter of continuity across time, an attribute that signals the shape of the future, does a shed identity linger on, like an alternate, unexplored universe? I felt nostalgic about being with women and expected to find more of it than I did in the women I spoke with. (I would now say that this question reveals my own selfobject relation to identity, based, characteristically, in concerns about loss.)

The consistency of the object relational story told across shifts in the sex of the object was striking. And yet some of the stories, alongside the overarching object relation, also seemed to turn on the shift in gender. I came to see the interviews as showing me how people's romantic stories make sense in all of their particulars. Internal object relations, where gender identifications were fluid, were in complex interplay with gendered partners. The significance of gender was its significance in a particular story. Sometimes it seemed to require someone of one sex or the other to open up the next phase of a woman's development. I explore this idea in detail in a later section.

One way in which subjects talked about gender mattering or not mattering was in their description of their sexuality. Several subjects spoke of the importance of the person rather than the gender. Gail said her attraction was always to the person and not the gender, so that which one she was with at different points in her life was chance, a matter of whom she had met and became close to and not any inclination one way or the other. Claire only ever had strong sexual feelings for one woman, making it a matter of the person, not the gender (or even the person in spite of the gender).

Falling in love with one man, then having great sex with another, showed Eve that she could be fully responsive to both genders; previously she had been sure that she couldn't have a complete relationship with a man. Eve came to feel that it was as likely that she would date a man as a woman; thus the controlling factor became the person, not the gender.

Sometimes the question of gender or person was approached in the other direction, so to speak. Some subjects wondered if their lesbian relationships failed not because they themselves weren't truly lesbian or bisexual, but because it wasn't the right relationship, the right person. In spite of feeling her heterosexual relationship to be much better sexually than either of her lesbian relationships, Anne still wondered about this. Claire thinks that perhaps if her girlfriend had been able to fully commit to Claire, Claire might have been able to commit to life as a lesbian.

Gender mattered and also didn't insofar as it both was and wasn't tied to biological sex. The mobility of gender was evident when some subjects experienced themselves and their partners as varying combinations of masculine and feminine, at different points in their lives. Holly felt most feminine with her girlfriend, who taught

her how to dress stylishly. She saw both herself and a male lover as relating to each other in an extreme version of masculinity, in which only sex mattered, while seeing her husband as vulnerably feminine at times and herself in a more masculine role.

Eve described herself as a “Peter Pan butch”, boyish but not masculine. Her girlfriends were all definitively masculine but her boyfriends feminine, such that all her partners, male and female, seemed to fall within a similar range of gendered qualities. If one of her boyfriends were to become a transgendered woman, “they’d probably be a woman I’d be attracted to, if that makes sense.”

Claire spoke about the pleasures of relating sexually to a partner of ambiguous gender, someone who has both womanly curves and the dominant and aggressive style Claire thinks of as masculine. The two loves of Faye’s life, a man and a woman, looked just like each other. As a lesbian, Beth cultivated an androgynous style and partnered with masculine women. As a woman “becoming straight”, she wore a dress to an ostensibly straight cocktail party (and had the ironically amusing experience of being hit on by a feminine lesbian who apparently preferred feminine partners).

Interviews Telling Unique Stories – Falling in Love Once

Perhaps because of the small number of subjects, central aspects of some of the stories told were unique to that interview and not readily captured in categories or themes that appeared across multiple interviews. Two interviews with such singular dimensions were Eve and Faye.

Faye’s narrative focuses on three figures – her father, her lesbian partner of 15 years, Stacy, and her husband of six years, John. These three appear intertwined in her

description of them and in their roles in her story. Faye is struck by the physical similarities between her two partners. During the course of her lesbian marriage, she was periodically strongly drawn to John: in the wake of her father's death and at when her first child was born. When she struggled in her marriage to Stacy, she would think about John, and his thoughtful, care-taking ways.

The question of care-taking is tied up with Faye's relationships with her parents, and theirs with each other. Her father was heroic, charming, smart, deeply protective, unconditionally loving and fiercely proud of his children; he was also seriously traumatized by his war-time experiences, fearful, depressed, and sometimes violent. Faye traces her core values to her father and sought his guidance about work-related issues as an adult. In contrast, Faye's mother, though in some ways the one who held everything together when father was depressed, is needy and child-like, and comes to require a lot of attention, especially after father dies.

One of the things Faye puzzles about in the interview is why she stayed with Stacy for as long as she did, given the persistent and debilitating negativity of that relationship. Though perhaps not consolidated in her mind, she provides a few powerful clues in the course of the interview. Stacy emerges as a repetition figure, of aspects of both of Faye's parents. Faye's father was traumatized, Faye was traumatized secondarily (through knowledge of his extreme suffering and also from living through her parents' frightening arguments), and she fell in love with a traumatized woman. Stacy had been abused and didn't trust people; Faye's best efforts at showing love and consistency could not "save her, help her, make her better, make her happier."

As someone who made Faye feel central and important, Stacy is reminiscent of both parents, of her father's unconditional love, of her mother's neediness. Stacy wanted Faye entirely for herself (and the relationship broke down completely after the birth of their child). In the midst of a crisis early in the relationship, when Faye wanted to leave, Stacy "begged me to stay and she said how she was so glad that I needed her, that if she could hurt me as much as she did, then I must really love her." One of the meanings of the relationship with Stacy seems to be the wish for intense, exclusive dyads.

Faye's husband also comes through as an amalgam of her early objects. (I don't mean that this isn't true of all of us; clearly I believe that it is. But what's notable about the interview is the vividness with which this can be seen.) John represents the idealized aspect. When her father dies, Faye finds herself longing for John. In her story, John is an authorizing figure who supported her same-sex explorations and who respected her lesbian relationship. In Faye's many warm references to "when we were kids together", John represents the good father, home, and childhood. He is the sweetheart of youth, who seemed lost forever. These relationships are sticky for Faye, hard to leave or let go of. She is, as she says, tremendously loyal.

Another dimension of the narrative that gives it the quality of speaking from the unconscious is that it reads a bit like a fairy tale (and like her father, Faye is a good storyteller). The end is predicted in the beginning by a child (John's younger brother tells Faye, then his adored summer camp counselor, that he wants her in his family), there are fateful twists and turns, and a magical return of love. The revival of adolescent passion adds a fantastic sense of timelessness, of being forever young, the erasure of the

generations. In a way, Faye begins her interview with a fairy tale: her father's unlikely, harrowing escape from Eastern Europe.

Faye's interview stands out as a vivid demonstration of how we only ever fall in love once, with our parents, and then in one way or another fall in love with them over and over again through life. At the same time, the interview shows development and change in object relations. Faye's difficult first marriage, in which she confronted her inability to heal the traumatized other, was succeeded by a much happier and more loving one. Both Stacy and John emerge as blended figures. Stacy, a woman, recalls the traumatized, dark dimension of the beloved father, as well as early, sadomasochistic, dyadic relations. John is a facilitating, maternal presence in male form.

Identity perhaps seems some steps removed from this level of analysis and experience. Within Faye's interview, one way lesbian identity functions is as a way to dis-identify with a heterosexual female imago, the Traditional Homemaker of Levinson's (1996) research. There is a weak/helpless representation that is composed of a cultural aspect of femininity and also of her mother's particular personality that Faye rejects via her lesbian identity and her work identity.

Faye tells her journey into and out of sexual orientation identity as a fable expressing a philosophy of life. "Follow your heart," she says.

Unique Stories – Cultural Repudiation

Eve's highlights another dimension of experience common to most of the interviews but giving special eloquence by her – lesbian identity interwoven into a broad rejection of femininity. These have been discussed earlier, and separately, above. Eve

also had the strongest ongoing sexual minority identity, one that encompassed both her gender difference and also her strong libido and strong attractions to both women and men. She lived a public, active bisexual identity. She also had the strongest connections to gay subculture; she made more references to gay and queer books, TV, and internet sites, than anyone else.

For Eve, the gay community was most importantly an alternative community, even an alternative reality. An escapee from the Midwest, Eve's epitaph could have been a very relieved and delighted cry: "I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore." In her account, being part of the gay community means belonging to a completely different culture than her parents. The possibility of losing that community through a relationship with a man was initially upsetting and disorienting, then resolved through reorganizing her view of the gay community to include women who are fluid or bisexual.

Transition, Change, Choice, and Development

Based on her prospective study of 100 lesbian and bisexual women, Lisa Diamond (2008) proposes a model of female sexuality, sexual orientation and identity that has three components: First, an essentially biological level on which sexual attractions to men and/or women lie along a Kinsey-type scale; second, identity, a self-description that is partly situational (influenced by the sex of the current partner), partly historical (accounting for past partners), and always an effort to nail down mixed desires (and thus inevitably problematic); and finally a third axis she calls fluidity – the capacity to explore sexually beyond one's usual set point (and which Diamond also sees as in-born and ties to the strong linkage in women between affiliative love and sexual desire). For

the most part, her subjects' attractions (in her model, their biology) are stable over time, even as behaviors and identifications change significantly. But some of her subjects reported shifts in attractions as well, always connected to changes in partners, and, like Whisman's (1996) work, illustrate how doing can affect one's sense of being.

Diamond emphasizes that simply because the identities, behaviors, and attractions of women are subject to considerable fluctuation and change does not mean that women experience their sexuality as a matter of choice. She describes her subjects as feeling strongly compelled to engage in the relationships they did, and argues that they would have felt it a violation of their truest selves to have denied their desires. In Diamond's model and in her examples from her data, the two change factors that call forth subjects' fluidity are the social environment, chiefly the change from college to the adult working world, and falling in love.

Another perspective to add would be that changes in sexual orientation identity involve development (Settlage et al., 1988). In this view, subjects are on some level seeking to grow, to realize unfulfilled aspects of themselves. Insofar as environments create the conditions for new experiences that release sexual fluidity, subjects do seek certain environments. Insofar as we fall in love with this one and not that one, we are writing our own relational history. In writing, we use the material at hand, which includes male and female people and paternal and maternal objects.

Some narrators' stories highlighted the fluctuation of objects across genders, as the woman grew and addressed central psychological issues through a particular sequence of lovers of both sexes. After coming out senior year of college, Debra in her 20s was a self-described serial monogamist, greatly enjoying her social life as a young,

well-connected lesbian in New York in the 1990s. Wary of dependency, with as-yet unaddressed anger at her mother, Debra never fell in love with another woman again, even as the lesbian community was crucial in helping her transition into a productive adulthood, and her identity as a lesbian was a source of internal confidence and strength.

The man who became Debra's husband entered her life as the perfect mixture of unavailability, such that he didn't arouse her counter-dependency, and maternal care-taking. He was a single father thoroughly dedicated to parenting and protecting his young children; he and Debra didn't spend nights together for years. He was a successful man who loved nothing better than to take care of the people he loves. Though Debra does not herself draw all of the connections I am making her, she was very interested in the fact that she does experience her husband as like her mother, "but taking care of me, instead of my father." She was interested in the idea that she had never been comfortable letting any of her women lovers take care of her, after that first romance in college. In Debra's story, the change from female lovers to a male lover is coincident with a marked change in what she is experiencing emotionally in her relationship.

Sometimes change in external object did not seem to be accompanied by shifts in internal objects. What looked like a big difference on the outside – the end of a long relationship, a switch from lesbian to straight – did not seem to bring about the kind of internal change that was most needed.

There were also instances where the story suggested a particular usefulness or psychological necessity for being with a woman or with a man, but the story-teller did not herself see things that way. This was my experience of Gail's interview. Gail feels that she has always fallen in love with the person, not the gender, and that what has changed

for her over the years is the quality of her relationships. This has improved, not because of switching from women to men or the reverse, but because she learned things over time and through these relationships and she now has a better understanding of herself and of life, such that her current relationship is the most enduring.

But in spite of this, the story that emerges *for me* from Gail's interview absolutely depends on the genders of her partners (though I risk misrepresenting her by interpreting against her own view). When Gail became involved with a woman, she simultaneously made her first full commitment to a relationship. Everything heterosexual before then had been "not so great" (with the exception of her relationship with a young professor who died prematurely, who was noted as different than the others and whose loss was reported with little emotional elaboration). When Gail fell in love with a woman in adulthood, she made a marriage for the first time, suggesting emotional development that facilitated or permitted the formation of a new life structure. She tried to make a lesbian family within this structure, faltered, tried again and succeeded.

Next there is the repeated motif of premature death. Gail's father died when she was 17. The death of her sole promising boyfriend in some way connected to being with women: she began to spend time with lesbians who had also been students of his. Much later, after 15 years of committed relationships with women, she became celibate for four years, by far her longest period of being alone. There was a pause in her external object world between her separation from the mother of her children and her heterosexual marriage. This next relationship is with a man who is the mirror image of herself as a young woman – a man whose partner who died in a car accident – who comes to sit on her couch, to tell her his sad story, and to show himself to be a man capable of emotional

responsiveness. I cannot escape the impression that there was something in Gail's third marriage being to a man who had been through a devastating loss, that represented a shift in object relations that has enabled her to feel more content and, especially, more self-accepting, than before. That is, I read a motivated reparation with a father doubly lost, through alcoholism and then death.

Psychotherapy

All subjects were in or had been in psychotherapy. The details of treatment were not a focus of the interview, however, all subjects brought it up spontaneously and in some interviews therapy was particularly important. Some entered therapy to address specific issues: Faye wanted help coping with her mother after her father's death, Gail wanted to make sure she would be able to convey a positive identity to with a lesbian mother. Debra entered therapy as she approached 30 to address her bouts of depression and fears of recreating her parents' codependent relationship in her own life. Claire was helped to end her long, painful relationship with Erin by a couples' therapist. For several subjects, therapy was a long-term project. Anne had been in therapy much of her adult life, to address high levels of anxiety.

For the most part, problems of sexual orientation identity were not a topic in the therapy experiences reported. Only Eve reported that her experiences with therapy were marred by the therapist's inability to understand her bisexual desires. Claire did spend time in therapy discussing her reluctance to identify as lesbian, and emerged with the somewhat unsatisfying conclusion that she had "internalized homophobia." But in this group, therapy focused on relational patterns and obstacles to life goals, and shifting

object choices seemed not to be specifically analyzed. Thus, Beth's therapy, begun as her lesbian marriage collapsed, was focused on taking a more active stance vis-à-vis her desires in life, not on whether she was gay or straight.

Holly's description of her treatment stands out from the rest in that her therapy focused on transference analysis. She was also the one subject to have a fully elaborated psychological story of her changing sexuality and changing relationships, that integrated dimensions of her relationships with parents, their relationships with each other, the effects of a traumatic childhood, her own sexual capabilities, her strivings toward independence and separation, and so on. Other subjects also put forth pieces of a psychological theory of their trajectories, but Holly's stood out in the number of different elements of her story that she linked together in an overarching narrative.

The Process of Data Analysis

Although I laid out a plan for data analysis prior to beginning the interviews using the Listening Guide (Gilligan *et al.*, 2003), in the event, I did not rely primarily on this procedure for the most of commentary above. Instead, I read and re-read each transcript multiple times (in addition to transcribing all the interviews myself), taking note of passages that seemed especially important, and then formulating my ideas from these notes.

My criteria for deeming a passage important were several. I attended to signals from subjects that what they were about to say was particularly significant to them. Subjects indicated their own heightened interest in aspects of their stories through

prefatory phrases such as, “It’s a funny thing,” or “I especially remember.” In other cases, it seemed that subjects took extra care in narrating certain moments, using vivid language, ample detail, and directly reported speech. I closely attended to those times during the interviews when subjects were openly emotional, as indicated by more rapid or louder speech, or by tears. When subjects summed up their experiences with brevity and eloquence, I understood this to mean that they had given considerable thought to what they were saying and noted that as well.

During the interviewing phase of the study, and subsequently, as I worked with the transcripts, I noted themes that repeated across interviews, as well as ways in which the interviews remained distinct, one from the next.

In addition to following the subjects’ cues, I read the interviews looking for what wasn’t stated explicitly, or even intended implicitly, and interpreted the stories I heard in light of my understanding of adult development, character, and psychoanalytic psychology. As such, some of my comments may contradict what my subjects might say themselves, about their own lives. I do not wish to misrepresent anyone’s life and therefore hesitated to make interpretations beyond what subjects said themselves. At the same time, I came to feel that an interpretative approach was the only way to express what I found most interesting about the interviews. I endeavored throughout to be respectful of my subjects and here remind readers that the conclusions reached are my own.

Further review and interpretation of the transcripts took place during the construction of the interview summaries. Writing these obviously involved interpretation, since my decisions to include or leave out elements were based on my

understanding of the story. I tried to write the summaries such that readers can see the bases for my observations, but at the same time tried to include more material than is explicated in the analysis, in the hope of making room for understandings different from my own.

Although my observations about the interviews are not based primarily on the micro-analytic Listening Guide procedures, I did do close readings of multiple passages in every interview, and wrote out formal Listening Guide break-downs of at least two passages for every subject. For every subject, I rendered two stories of transition: toward and away from romantic involvement with women, developing “I-poems” and contrapuntal voices for each transition. Below, I discuss the results of the microanalysis of narrative passages describing transitions. The insights gained from this procedure were integrated into the thematic and interpretative analyses that I derived from the more global approach of repeated re-reading of the entire interview set.

My Experience Using the Listening Guide:

I-Poems and Contrapuntal Voices in Narratives of Transition

The Listening Guide procedure, as described in the methods section, is a technique for drawing out multiple perspectives from interview material. To review briefly, following a reading for plot, passages are rendered into I-poems, using all phrases that begin with “I”, constructing an interior voice for the passage. The passage is then scrutinized for multiple story lines or perspectives, termed contrapuntal voices. All approaches to the passage are then considered in relation to one another, to the interview as a whole, and to other passages and interviews in the data set.

As I worked with the Listening Guide approach, I became concerned that I was using a linguistic approach without being a linguist. I also felt lost in the close focus, concerned about the length of time each analysis was taking, and unsure about how this level would relate to the themes that had already emerged for me in the course of conducting interviews. These concerns persuaded me to shift to the more global approach described previously. I had completed passage analyses on the first five interviews when I switched to a global approach. After completing that, I returned to the remaining interviews and performed microanalyses on those.

Overall, the microanalyses contributed to and reinforced my sense of the complexity of sexual orientation and identity. The way each subject told her story emerged as highly particular, to her own set of psychological concerns, and told in a representative way. Thus, my principal finding from the microanalysis is represented in the portion of the data analysis discussing identity, personality, and relational patterns.

Another set of observations involved structural aspects of the passages as seen through the lens of the Listening Guide procedures. These thoughts are more limited, given the limited number of passages I worked with in this way (two per subject).

One of the ways the passages varied one from the other was in the extent to which a passage yielded different aspects when viewed as a whole, via the I-poem, or via the contrapuntal voices. Some passages seemed to break apart in interesting and compelling ways, while others seemed to hold more of a single note.

Passages varied from each other in the extent to which they were synecdochal for the main themes of the interview, a world in miniature, or whether they stood more in contrast to the rest of the interview. Sometimes these three levels – the way passages

seemed to be put together, the themes developed within the passage, and themes of the interview as a whole – seemed to relate in interesting ways.

For example, for Beth, coming out at age 20 was an emotional crisis involving both near breakdown and also healing and development. The first of two versions that she narrated of this time seemed particularly dense with meaning, and the microanalysis teased out themes of exile, a lover both idealized and disparaged, and an internal split between enjoying a powerful and positive sexuality and disgust/repulsion.

In the context of the larger interview, Beth's first lover is a critical positive force for growth, and the relationship quickly leads Beth to make a lesbian identification, something that is a central feature of her sense of herself for many years. Beth retold her coming out story during the second interview as one of action and transformation, taking place on the central stage of the body and through the experience of learning to love. In this version, she reflects on the constructive aspects of her identification as lesbian and treats herself with perspective and kindness.

The sense of crisis and collapse that marks her account of becoming a lesbian is also present in her story of the end of that identification, a story that includes health problems, miscarriage, and unbearable anxiety. Both transitions are periods of great distress and also of reorganization and growth, though her account of the most recent period of change was one of those passages in which the different readings seemed to yield a more unitary theme, and was perhaps less over-full with meanings.

Beth's stories of transition refracted broad themes of her experience of herself, including the creation and dismantling of an identity as a lesbian. In contrast, Clair never

identified as lesbian; in accordance with this, her stories of transition focus entirely on her movement into and out of a central romantic relationship.

Claire's story of the beginning of her relationship with her girlfriend is told in a series of straight-forward affirmatives. The central story is of falling truly, madly and deeply in love, and when broken out into I-poem and contrapuntal voices, the story remains just that. This was another passage in which I found it difficult to tease out alternate voices. Similarly, her account of ending this relationship speaks in a unitary voice of the sadness of a failed deep love, of the devastation of the loss, and the feeling that the relationship posed an essential puzzle about self and other.

Clair is someone who never felt comfortable living life as a lesbian, a feeling that was tangled up with the rejecting dimensions of her relationship; Clair's lack of lesbian identification always lent a temporary feeling to the relationship, as did their unhappy relational dynamics. In this sense, the absence of lesbian identification might have served as defense, in the sense of protecting Clair from confronting how unsatisfactory the relationship was for her.

The story of impossible love told in Clair's transitions into and out of this primary relationship with a woman, takes place apart from any experience of group identification, and perhaps mirrors an overly private quality to that relationship. Clair poignantly and perhaps pointedly says that she and her ex could have more fun together in a blank room than either could have with anyone else out in the world. For me, she conjures an image of the kind of all-consuming relationship that is overly steeped in fantasy and insufficiently connected to the rest of the social world. Perhaps it is in this sense that

Clair's inability to imagine herself as a lesbian is significant – a marker, in a relationship of many years, of its simultaneous unreality.

Certain I-poems stood out as demonstrating the power of personality in how subjects told their story, particularly when contrasted one with another. The I-poem rendered from Faye's coming out story is full of verbs of emotion. The core of Faye's story of this transition can be read in the I-poem verbs alone: **I** let myself explore/wanted/wanted/forgot/knew/ trusted/didn't want to tell/felt like I had cheated/felt curious/had cheated/had cheated/honored/didn't have to be afraid/was just really scared/was just scared/had this crush/used to break out in a sweat/was just so enamored/had regretted/wanted to kiss/just couldn't do it/lost contact/always regretted/was facing/had opened/saw/needed to see/imagined/kissed her/opened/just saw/came out.

In contrast, Debra's coming out passage uses verbs like think, guess, realize, know, remember, and tell. She conveys a sense of agency and boldness, a certain confidence that she links to being a lesbian (she was one of the subjects with an especially strong identification). The I-poem of her coming out was notable as a combination of action and thought – meeting, dating, and especially thinking. Likewise, when she becomes emotionally intimate with a man for the first time in a decade, she thinks, resolves, deals, fixes, and saves.

Faye expresses a combination of confusion and knowing, of fear and wanting to hold back, of desire and being drawn forward, and this is what she means when she says she went through a sexual awakening. Faye's excited states of mind, as fore-grounded by the I-poems, connect in the broader interview to themes of being a seeker, of being on a

sexual and emotional journey in life, to her life's motto of following her heart, and to the vividness of her story-telling. The larger analysis of the interview yielded intensely Oedipal themes, and the warmth and breadth of Faye's emotional states animates those themes and scenes

By way of further contrast, here is Gail's I-poem of beginning a relationship with another girl as a teen-ager:

"I went to this girl's school"

I always – I really didn't have – I had to make an effort to find
 I remember joining
 not that I had
 just to meet
 I used to go
 I wouldn't say – I mean, I had – I had – I –
 I –
 I lived
 I think
 I just – I hadn't had
 I really wanted to do,
 I had
 I
 I just
 I never felt
 I – you know, I – I – I didn't have any issues about it
 I didn't feel guilty
 I didn't feel conflicted
 I read
 I thought

I – I'm
 I mean, I was
 I didn't – and I wasn't
 I –
 I – I never said
 I'm
 I never said I'm not
 I think

The “I” of this poem is notably private, as the final couplet emphasizes: “I’m not saying and I’m also not not-saying.” There is an initial search, to find what one has not, that has, perhaps, to do with *joining*, as, perhaps, a way out of emotional constriction. The contrapuntal voices in this passage speak of political movements, delightful adolescent love in a particular time and place, a consent to activity by the subject’s mother, rebellion, boldness, and self-possession. The self in this story is strongly situated in the group – a school for girls, a particular social set, the civil rights movement. In these early beginnings of a love life and a political life, subsequent themes of wanting to be close, to join, to commit, but of relationships unaccountably wearing out, is already present. The passage, which comes early on, strongly anticipates the entire interview.

Holly’s transitional stories explicitly embed her experiences within a web of close relationships. Her description of becoming involved with her husband resolved via the microanalysis into three voices which seemed to represent an inner self, a romantic pair, and a small group of close friends and family. The I-voice contains the sense of change and development that made the romantic pair possible; the social group then embraces this pair. Holly’s recollections of how she met and became involved with her lesbian

partner was similarly embedded in family relations, and included a friend who facilitated the affair.

For another subject, the appearance of her mother in her coming out story is problematic and not integrated into the narrative. When Anne tells of first becoming involved with a woman, she notes a puzzling contradiction between signs that she had a growing interest in women prior to her first lesbian affair, signs that were read and interpreted to her by her mother, and her own lack of awareness of such feelings at the time. One of the contrapuntal voices tells a classic gay identity development story of interest in gay culture and an infatuation, followed by experimentation and falling in love. Another tells of a mother who knows something the subject does not; she doesn't know it so deeply that her mother's question doesn't resonate for her on any level, and this is striking to her in retrospect. The beginning of Anne's sexual life takes place with/through/along side of a conversation about knowing and desire between Anne and her mother.

The I-voice for this passage combines both these dimensions – certainty (the classic story) and puzzlement (what does my sexuality have to do with my mother?). In comparison with passages from other subjects on the transition to becoming involved with women, this one is notable for the prominent place of a parent in the story, and for the frequent use of a negative construction that shows up via the I-poem, adding further to the sense of something unclear, unknown, unsaid (Anne is one of the subjects who never identified fully as either lesbian or bisexual).

Reflecting on the end of both her lesbian relationships, Anne asked, did I leave these relationships because of who I “really” am, sexually, because of who my partner is,

as a person, or because of something about me that causes problems in my relationships? She feels she's repeated something, inadvertently, in the way that she broke up with each of these women, and feels guilty. The I-poem condenses the painful regret and the intensity of the struggle to break free:

I tried so hard not to do what I had done

I broke up

I didn't want to force

I had done a very bad job

I was too scared

I'm not in love

I'm breaking up

I was hanging on

I broke up

I was trying to avoid

What I had done

Not long after, she cried at the thought of her ex still not really over the relationship: "She is in a lot of pain because of me." I cannot help thinking of her description of her mother, still in love with her father, of her mother's illness and depression, of her father first moving in to help and then moving away, making my own connections between her sexuality and issues related to her mother. Late in the interview, Anne linked her mother's absence due to illness and the emergence of her interest in

women. (She feels ashamed of this thought, because it seems to pathologize or delegitimize or betray her lesbian relationships; Beth shares this difficulty, where psychological understandings feel threatening.)

Faye's coming out story includes several images of mirrors. She recalls spying two girls kissing in the rearview mirror of the car while driving around with high school friends, catching sight of herself and her new girlfriend making out in a mirror, and looking at herself after her first short, lesbian haircut. In each instance, she has a sense of alienation – a lack of identification with the girls in the backseat, a dislocation from the experience of kissing a woman, surprise at her own baby butch style, adopted to declare her chosen identity. These disconcerting mirrors serve as possible metaphors for: the gap between inner self and social identity; the impossibility of seeing oneself clearly in general; this subject's specific struggle for self-understanding.

Countertransference

As laid out in my methodology, I spent time before and after each interview recording my anticipations and reactions, as freely as possible, including noting my own feeling states.

Some features of the experience of conducting research – anxiety, self-doubt – are not unique to myself and would be present for me with any subject group. From discussion with colleagues, I understand it is not uncommon to swing between extremes, from deprecation of one's work and ideas to over-valuation. Perhaps the narcissistically satisfying sense I had that I was meeting the most interesting women imaginable can be

understood as part of the swing between hating and adoring one's work. Perhaps this is also one of the risks of studying the group to which one belongs oneself.

Another frequent component of my reaction to my interview subjects was envy. I found myself comparing my own accomplishments and satisfactions in love and work to what I was hearing, and finding myself lacking. I would credit this in part to the particularities of my status as a super-annuated graduate student. I also wonder if envy is predictably provoked when love stories are narrated, or particularly provoked when a woman narrates a love story to another woman. I am thinking here of linkages between sexual love and fertility, fertility and envy (Ellman, 2000).

I had of course worried in advance that I would not be able to perceive my subjects clearly because of our similar life stories, and yet I was surprised at the force of my identifications with my subjects. I recognized myself repeatedly. We shared sexual feelings, sexual communities, relational patterns, family histories, mental health experiences, education and interests, broad political beliefs and specific sexual politics.

At the same time, I was surprised at our differences. Representing another narcissism – of small differences – I had somehow imagined that my subjects would all share my own variant of bisexual narrative, and did not anticipate meeting women who had never felt a lesbian identification. I did not expect to encounter such strong dislike of the term bisexual. I was oddly unprepared to meet women who felt quite open about whether to partner with men or with women, having myself been more of an either/or person at different points in time.

This expectation of similarity and shock at difference connected for me to a problem David Schwartz (1995) discusses in his essay on sexual orientation as fetish,

showing how challenged we are to accept variation in sexuality. Ronnie Lesser (1995) describes something similar in her account of her reaction to the active sex life of a bisexual male patient. When I found it hard to understand, from the inside, how Eve could date women and men at the same time, I attributed the block in part to my own fear of the erotic, here in the form of an erotic life different from my own.

Thinking about the intensity of the negative feelings expressed by subjects about the word concept “bisexual”, and my own discomfort, I imagine that they are both reflections of something really uncomfortable about bisexuality – its instability as an identity and its precarious stance atop a gender division (Garber, 1995). (This is exactly the queer theory critique of bisexuality, that it depends upon and thus reinforces a gender divide).

Bisexual is an unstable identity because in the context of an established couple relationship, one’s social experience is inescapably as gay or straight. Bisexual identity either orders the future (after the end of this relationship, should it come, I might well be with someone of the opposite sex) or, if describing the present, signals a specific type of sexual activity (bisexually dating or having multiple relationships).

Bisexual describes not only the story of my life, but also my unconscious, and I believe it is in the latter sense that it is most unsettling, leading to the strange contradictions I found both in myself and in my subjects. The instability of bisexuality reflects the way that one’s sense of what is male and what female blurs as one approaches the divide. We identify with and desire both genders, we love others as re-imaginings of both parents, and at the same time are required to live as one *or* the other (Mitchell, 1982).

That comfort with bisexuality should be hard-won among a group like Weinberg's (1994) subjects; that women in my study, whose lives can quite accurately be described as bisexual, should reject the term; that I myself could at one and the same time think of myself as bisexual and yet struggle to understand dating both men and women in the same time frame, all speak to me of a deep discomfort with the unpredictability of our unknown selves, which is to say with the unconscious. A professor of mine liked to say that Freud was very hard to retain because it was so challenging to the one's sense of oneself. One could read Freud and feel that one understood profoundly, and yet "forget" the insight the next day.

Even though unstable, bisexuals "exist;" Weinberg found continued salience for bisexual identity in a group of middle-aged men and women who had, years earlier, been members of a Bisexual Center. These subjects had once described wrestling with their claimed identity, such that Weinberg et al posited a four stage in bisexual identity development: "continued confusion"! By middle-age, these previously highly sexually active people had, for the most part, settled into monogamous lives, and none of the heterosexually mated continued any involvement in the gay community. However, they described their bisexuality as a continued identity of a different sort. Where it was once a public, socially coordinated identity (the Center membership), its meaning was described in middle-age in terms of the totality of emotional and bodily experience and the claiming of life as it had been lived, as a form of authenticity.

Reflecting on my countertransference to the research process and product, I return to my motives in choosing this topic. I was inspired by two questions – how can I understand the lesbian phase of my life in terms of the story of my life, and, what

happened to my “lesbian self”? Another way I might say it is that I hoped that thinking about my own history in terms of concepts of adult development and life structure, and exploring the idea of lost, past selves, would prove to be personally useful to me, providing a livable narrative of identity discontinuities.

Throughout the process of transcription, data analysis and writing, I have spent time reflecting on my own reactions to the lives I was imaginatively inhabiting. A measure of this energy has been directed toward making sure I was maintaining a deep sympathy with my subjects. I wanted to be sure that I was not judgmental in my analyses of them and their lives. This suggests that one of the profoundest motives I had for this project was to view my own life with less judgment, with greater kindness, a motive that I shared with at least several subjects.

Conclusion

“All our impulses, from sexual orientation to ethnic belonging, are more and more experienced as matters of choice. Things which once seemed self-evident – how to feed and educate a child, how to proceed in sexual seduction, how and what to eat, how to relax and amuse oneself – have now been ‘colonised’ by reflexivity, and are experienced as something to be learned and decided on.” (Zizek, 1999, p. 3)

“We all want to believe that we know ourselves fairly well, have a good grasp of our motives and goals, and can make reasonable predictions about our future. Therefore, it is understandably alarming and unsettling to acknowledge that one of the most deeply personal aspects of selfhood—sexuality—is neither as known nor as knowable as we may have thought.” (Diamond, 2008, p. 255)

I began this study with a set of very general questions about sexual orientation identity. I wondered about the nature of relinquished identities, about the psychology of being the lover of a man or a woman, about change and development in adulthood, about how women experience and make sense of multiple shifts in sexuality, and about the concept of identity itself.

I thought that women with a sexual trajectory that lacks a culturally dominant narrative (i.e., no guidelines for a “going back in” story as there are for coming out) might bring an important perspective to the concept of identity. I had the idea that

women who had crossed back and forth over the boundary between lesbian and straight could tell me something about the meaning of the boundary. I thought of them/us as cases of “abnormality” that might shed light on processes more hidden among the “normal”.

I have further framed the study by placing an Eriksonian vision of identity, in which life commitments grow out of and express a core self and are affirmed and reflected in a community of others, against a Lacanian view of the self as ultimately unknowable and the community of others as demanding a false conformity.

While the interviews speak clearly of the value of identities, and show that making commitments to others, both singly and via identity communities, is essential in adult development, the interviews also demonstrate the central place of internal object relations in shaping lives, and show that identities such as sexual orientation inevitably fail to represent the complexity of the internal landscape. Subjects described critically important growth taking place through their commitments to others, commitments that for most included adopting a lesbian identity; the inability to make such a commitment meant that some subjects spent years less than fully inhabiting their own lives. At the same time, subjects reported that no sexual orientation identity could adequately represent their diverse loves and desires, and that deeper self-understanding was blocked by reckoning experience in identity terms.

The limitations of the study are quite obvious – eight subjects is a tiny sample. Moreover, these women all belong to the same racial and socioeconomic group and the findings are limited accordingly. As the interviewer, transcriber, and analyst are one and

the same, this dissertation might better be thought of as theoretical rather than qualitative, with the interviews as inspiration rather than data.

Notwithstanding these limitations, I think the data does give support to an age-linked model of adult development. As in other similar studies (Roberts & Newton, 1987), all participants changed more than one central aspect of their lives at ages tightly clustered around age 30, and in particular, they all either changed or felt strongly motivated to change object choice. I believe this uniformity to be meaningful, in spite of the small number of participants.

In Levenson's (1978) original study of men, the Age 30 Transition was not necessarily a time of dramatic change; in some of his subjects what was observed was more of a course correction, or a period of reconsideration before fully committing to the direction of one's life. Perhaps there are forces operating within this sample – social, psychological, a combination of the two – that heightened the tensions contributing to the Age 30 Transition. Perhaps it's something about living a bisexual life. It might be a new phase in the lives of women who postpone having children past their twenties, highlighting the significance of the commitments (or lack of them) made at around 30. Perhaps the ongoing retreat of traditional social expectations and structures means that we face ever more choice about the fundamental shape of our lives (or, at least, the appearance of choice – the paradoxes of socioeconomic life in the kleptocratic capitalism we now live within are far beyond the scope of this paper), leading to an ever greater sense of holding all the risk, and a serious reluctance to assume it. An article in the New York Times speculating about the existence of a new phase of early adulthood that

essentially extends adolescence all the way up to age 30 was one of the most e-mailed magazine articles of the year (Henig, 2010).

The data also spoke to the relationship between sexual identity and the Early Adult Transition. In general, becoming involved with women was linked with sexual learning/awakening and resonated with the sense of growth in life. Speculatively, I would say this sense of growth often involved finding a place for recouping a healthy narcissism and aggression.

For the majority of subjects whose first sexual and romantic involvements were with boys, becoming sexual with women was a revelation and a corrective. (Gail: it was “a very positive way to begin an erotic life.”) In this, they were similar to the women in Kitzinger’s (1995) study, who came out in midlife, and also the lesbian girls in Thompson’s (1995) study of teen romantic narratives. But unlike midlife lesbians, who thrilled to the changes they were experiencing, the transition to or back to men was more ambivalent. Many of these women’s narratives have a somewhat melancholy quality to them, a muted sense of loss – of community, of a kind of closeness and intimacy hard to achieve with men, and worse, of a coherent sense of self – the melancholy of reflecting on past loves. For some, the move toward men implicated them in something they don’t want to be a part of, aspects of femininity, uncomfortable fantasies of submission and dependency. For those for whom a lesbian identity signaled a separation from mother, being with men again carried the risk of identity foreclosure.

In thinking about the relevance of the idea of life structure to sexual orientation identity, I now realize that this could only be a question if there were the possibility of change in object choice. That is, if you consider sexual orientation to be an unchangeable

core dimension of the self, which is how some women and many men do experience their sexuality, it wouldn't make sense to think about sexual identity as a part of life structure. What one would expect to change and develop over adulthood would be the *management* of this identity and its integration into other aspects of identity and of life – in sum, the sorts of things discussed within the classic model of sexual orientation identity development. To consider sexual orientation identity as part of life structure is, perhaps, simply to say that it can come under considerable revision.

As such, this study is old news, but perhaps worth restating anyway. For these women, as has been reported in the research on lesbian and bisexual women in general (and as psychoanalysis holds is true for everyone), sexual orientation identity and sexual and romantic desires for men and for women emerge from a kaleidoscope of variables. The fact of mixed attractions among many sexual minority women and the consequent variability in sexual histories and sexual orientation identities is by now well-established in both the clinical and the academic literature. My small study of this group I hope adds to the psychological portrait of this phenomenon.

Fluid attractions and identifications seem to be far more prevalent among sexual minority women than sexual minority men, and openness to and (conscious) interest in homosexual experience are certainly more common among heterosexual women than heterosexual men (Kinnish *et al.*, 2005; Whisman, 1996; Lauman *et al.*, 1996). Perhaps this diversity of experience among women partially explains a notable difference in the theorizing of gay male and lesbian analysts. Among gay men, one sees more higher-order theorizing on the gay male psyche. Writers such as Isay (1989), Corbett (1993), and Lewes (1998) have little trouble talking about the early childhood psychic

development of gay men as a group. In contrast, O'Connor and Ryan (1994) and Magee and Miller (1997) explicitly refuse formulations of lesbian development. "Lesbian" is a social formation only; there are no common object relations, no developmental story.

The most recent and complete study of the diversity in attractions, behaviors, and identities among lesbian, bisexual and unlabeled women is Diamond's (2008). Diamond set out to investigate variability in women's sexual pathways. Instead what she found was so much ongoing revision that the idea of pathways no longer held. She understands this diversity to be the consequence of women's fluidity, that is, their situation-dependent sexual responsiveness (with romantic love being the most important situation). In this model, people have an essential sexual orientation, somewhere on the spectrum of homosexual to heterosexual, but women, because of their greater bisexuality and greater fluidity, are more likely to experience unexpected, singular, later in life, or double reversals in object choice.

Fluidity obviously greatly complicates the identity development process. A woman might return to a sense of herself as heterosexual, in spite of having had an intense and genuine sexual experience with a woman, and still understand that same-sex experience as neither a phase nor choice, but rather "authentic desires facilitated by the availability of the right person in the right situation." (Diamond, 2008, p. 86) Contra wise, a woman with strongly homosexual desires might, in the context of an emotional connection with a particular man, experience other-sex desires. Identity labels, under these circumstances, say both too much and too little; "unlabeled" proved over time to be the most popular identity among Diamond's respondents.

Diamond integrates a wide range of experiential and identity phenomena found in the psychology of female love and sexuality: women's greater arousability, the "unorientation" of romantic love, the channels linking love and desire, all of which predict nonexclusive attractions, the greater influence of chance and circumstance, more sudden reversals, and more single "counter-orientation" affairs. Further, she grounds all of this in hormonal systems governing proceptivity, arousability, and attachment behaviors.

In Diamond's model, some of my subjects' experiences that might otherwise seem puzzling are entirely explicable. Claire and Holly, with their singular lesbian relationships and lack of general attraction to women, would be seen as heterosexual women whose flexibility allowed them to become sexual with a woman in the context of an intense emotional connection. That one identified as lesbian and the other did not was a matter of how they interpreted their sexual experiences up to that point (and, I would add, whether the lesbian community had something to offer, psychologically, that was needed). Likewise, Debra's continued sense of herself as lesbian and thus her anticipation that she would definitely be with a woman were she not with her husband, might be seen as resting on her underlying homosexuality.

Had Diamond's book been published when I started this project, I might have concluded that the area has been so thoroughly and recently researched and theorized that I wouldn't have anything to add. However, there are places where I feel Diamond's allegiance to a discourse of biology ends up leading her astray, resulting in the characterization of a subject as "attracted to someone who was the wrong gender for her sexual orientation" (p. 183). Though Diamond argues for an approach that integrates the

biological and the cultural, and for a dynamical systems view of sexuality, that “takes seriously the capacity for novel forms of sexual and emotional experience that emerge unexpectedly over the life course,” this is an instance where the tension collapses and the room for “novel forms” disappears (p. 237). As Dimen argues in her discussion of the influence of Darwinism in psychoanalysis, “the idea of Nature informs the theory of human nature which, in that vicious rhetorical circle, recreates a notion of givenness.” (p. 143)

To provide some counter-balance to the weight of the biological, or to expand another part of the conceptual space, I might emphasize the motivated and purposefulness aspects (conscious and unconscious) of making sexual choices. These are the forces that flood the field opened up by the “unorientation” of romantic love. I found that my interviews yielded object relational stories, of diverse kinds. Here I’m speaking in agreement with those subjects who gave the most detailed accounts of the dynamic causes of their sexual story. Debra’s story unfolds as a sequence of cross-gendered transferences, all rooted in a counter-dependent stance, with a maternal father as the figure who helps her to move forward, and to have the family she had begun to want. Holly understands her lesbianism (and also her sadomasochism) in terms of antecedents in her relationships with her parents and consequent object relations.

And though those two narrators stand out for me in the complexity of the dynamic story they had come to, and the sense of integration that this gave to their presentation, other narrators also offered psychological explanations of their sexuality – Faye that she was oedipally inhibited (her father’s warning hand over her shoulder, her fear of sexuality), Anne that she longed for a mother made absent by depression, cancer, and

before that grief at being left by her husband, Beth that she had experienced deep damage that required women to heal. Anne, Beth, and Claire, in their descriptions of the way their uncertainty about their sexual desires interacted with their own struggles to be intimate with somebody, give a view of sexual orientation identity as defense.

I hear dynamic stories in these interviews; I cannot *not* hear them, even when specifically told not to by the woman telling the story. Hearing them so very clearly in an interview asking about experiences of sexual orientation gives me a new appreciation of how thoroughly psychological our sexuality is. Giving attention to relational patterns and transferences helps grasp the experiential duality of fluidity in sexuality, as involving both choice and necessity.

The question of choice is an important one for both major researchers of sexual fluidity among sexual minority women – Whisman and Diamond. They want to make sure that their work is not interpreted to mean that gay women choose to be gay and thus could be induced to choose not to be. For example, Diamond analogizes to change over the course of childhood development to argue that one can change a great deal without choosing those changes. Both writers state that something as central (at least in our culture) to the self as sexual orientation involves both a sense of choice and the experience of compulsion, but don't say why it is so. Understanding sexuality as an expression of unconscious conflict and compromise helps to account for this phenomenon.

Here I turn to the analysts and post-modernists, who, upon review, I am reminded have thoroughly deconstructed the ideas of both sexual orientation and identity (Lesser & Schoenberg, 1995, Domenici & Lesser, 1995) and have offered, through the ongoing

analysis of gender, a model for thinking about “core” aspects of identity in general (Dimen & Goldner, 2002). Adrienne Harris uses feminist postmodernism to reconfigure the psychoanalytic study of gender (2002). She proposes a view in which “Gender can be as core and coherent an experience as any structure of self and subjectivity. But gender can also mutate, dissolve, and prove irrelevant or insubstantial” (p. 91).

Certainly a view of sexual orientation as both real and evanescent reflects what the interviews express about the experience of moving into and out of relationships with women. I think one of the things subjects found unsettling was how easy it was to “return to normal”. One is powerfully constructed by the experience of living life as an out lesbian, as the object of others’ eyes. Every interviewee but one described the uncanny experience of being physically affectionate with a man in public for the first time after living as a lesbian for years. It’s a scene that succinctly expresses the acute difference between a marked and unmarked identity.

I am well aware of the damage that has been done to despised groups, for whom change has come through banding together with like others. I value the creativity of identity-based subcultures, and the emotional value of a community for its members. It is understandable to fear that the post-modern dismantling of gay identity hurts the political cause of gay rights; others have objected on the grounds that that homosexuality does involve meaningful differences in fantasy and that failing to recognize this amounts to an erasure of homosexual people (di Lauretis, 1994; Bersani, 1995). I am also aware of how important a sense of identity is for most people, that for many these identities are indeed experienced as immutable, and that the lack of a sense of identity can indeed be a sign of serious psychological distress.

Perhaps it's the case that identity can be generative, dynamic, and political – in sum, useful – in certain contexts, and an impediment in others. Several analysts have written about identity-based thinking as an obstacle to good clinical work. Drescher reports that his “unconscious attempt to preserve my own gay male identity” prevented him from recognizing erotic feelings between himself and a lesbian patient, leading him to interpret her heterosexual fantasy as a matter of object relational need: “By taking the ‘sex’ out of heterosexuality, both of us may feel safer with each other” (2001, p. 107).

Diamond wants to preserve the idea of a real sexual orientation, a body-rooted primary desire for one sex or the other, or both (she tentatively distinguishes between those people with a persistent awareness of lustful feelings for both sexes from those whose bisexual attractions fluctuate in concert with their particular relationships). I wonder if it's possible to say – well, of course! – and then move on, as unencumbered by this idea as possible. Because it is only then that I find I can be fully open to sexual phenomena that constitute the “norm” in the sense of the most common (as opposed to the normative of prescriptive versions of sexuality).

By seeing sexuality as a matter of symbols, scripts, and scenarios, of shifting identifications and desires, as opposed to the outgrowth of a predictive biology, I can better enter into all the multiple forms of psychosexuality. If I cannot begin to imagine my way into the experience of a bisexual transman (like Max, of *The L Word*, to let you know what's been on my Netflix queue while writing this conclusion), then how can I claim to have a worthwhile sexual theory? And if I don't understand that my own sexuality is fundamentally just as odd as his, I'm not appreciating what it means to have an unconscious.

Given the complexity of sexuality, maybe it's foolish to ask for explanation for the patterns we think we perceive. Yet explanations we do seek, or at least models or theories for why things are the way they are. My interview subjects, of course, wanted good and satisfying intimate relationships. When these were not forthcoming, they asked why. And a biographical interview is a request for an explanation, in this case, an explanation for the subject's bisexuality. While the emphases varied from interview to interview, all subjects discussed and weighed the relative contributions of love, desire (sometimes synonymous with biology), family history, politics, gender (overlapping with politics and family), the particular time and place, the particular woman or man, to their romantic history and their understanding of their sexuality.

When listening to my subjects' stories, as they review and evaluate these different dimensions of their experience, I hear a vivid instance of what Slavoj Žižek (1999), following Anthony Giddens and others, terms reflexivity. This is consistent with Diamond's comment that she was impressed by her young subjects' careful and thoroughgoing self-analysis in arriving at a sense of themselves as lesbian, bisexual or "questioning". So thoughtful had they been at their first interview, Diamond was entirely surprised that a third went on to change their identities in the next two years, and again two years after that, but this truly highlights the dominance of process over outcome.

According to Giddens (1991), the over-taking of more and more of intimate life by deliberation is fundamental to modern life. My subjects' narratives are drenched in the experience of simultaneous choice and compulsion, agency and circumstance, chance and fate, all calling forth much emotion and thought. They offer a view on a highly reflexive experience of sexuality.

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