Stigma and the Negotiation of Identity by Rural and Small-Town Lesbians

Margaret Cooper

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STIGMA AND THE NEGOTIATION OF IDENTITY
BY RURAL AND SMALL-TOWN LESBIANS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of Sociology
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirement for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Margaret Cooper
June 1990
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STIGMA AND THE NEGOTIATION OF IDENTITY
BY RURAL AND SMALL-TOWN LESBIANS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Acknowledgements are the hardest part of the thesis for me to write. I realized that many people had contributed to my own personal development, and thus influenced the thought in my writing. Each one planted a seed with me and each is a part of me. I have a problem finding the words to let these people how much they have truly meant.

My mother was my first teacher in life, spending endless hours teaching me before I ever entered school. I'm sure I was entirely too sensitive as a child and would not have survived as successfully as I did if it were not for the love and security of my mother. My father has always been supportive of my education. As I've grown older, he has become a good friend and confidante. I always hoped to inherit the good hearts of my grandmothers and this drives me today in much of my work and in my life. My father's mother, Lanie Berry Cooper, died during the writing of this paper. I'm still mourning the loss of a grandmother but I have gained a "guardian angel." She had a tremendous sense of justice and humanity that continually inspires me. My
other grandmother, Elizabeth Heady, became ill this spring but is better now. When I was a child, she would write poetry with me and she has always listened to me truly with her heart. I'm sure she nurtured any creativity I might have.

My fifth grade teacher, Linda Copeland, came into my young life, singing words I'd not known before and assured us girls could do anything boys could do. How could I ever tell her she said everything I needed to hear! Years later, she became my friend and that is one of my proudest achievements. She also introduced us to an artist named Jeanne Sexson. I was ten years old at the time but the image of the dynamic Ms. Sexson never left my mind. Eleven years later, I found her and she and I, too, became friends. Some of my most crucial awakenings occurred through conversations with these two incredible women.

Judy Woodring taught at Union County High School. There she saved the lives of many teenagers. My life was one. She was a bright star in a dark sky. In my "memory book," she wrote to me, "Go out and set the world on fire! I'm expecting big things from you." She signed it, "with love." Little did she know that she was the only one I'd ask to sign and that those words would keep me from giving up. Now she teaches at Western Kentucky University and my reunion with her provided me again with my very strong, wise and dear friend.

A sociologist friend of mine once told me that she
aspired to write with the passion of C. Wright Mills. I immediately responded that I would like to write with the passion of Janis Ian. For years, her words and music had a greater impact than could've anyone else's. In June 1989, a dream came true when I met Janis Ian. Since I've met her, I've discovered the woman behind the music to be even more brilliant and sensitive than even I had known. Janis, I admire your passion and your integrity. I believe in you and what you have to say. And one day, I may close this circle. That's my new dream.

I would like to thank the sociology and psychology departments at the wonderful University of Evansville. In particular, I was always greatly impressed with Dr. Barbara Jessen and owe a great deal to her. Several years ago, I gave her a card that stated that much of my success was hers because I had her inspiration leading me on. As time goes by, I realize more and more how true this is.

At WKU, I have been blessed with the three people who served on my committee. Each of these people alone taught me what I'm sure I couldn't have learned elsewhere. Together, they were an incredible team. Dr. Joan Krenzin is one of the most compassionate and fair people I have ever met. She cares about her students in a way that is truly rare. When I began to teach, I learned this from her. I am thankful for her wisdom and kindness. Dr. Aaron Podolefsky is an incredible man with an incredible spirit. He inspires his students to be courageous in their work. I am truly
grateful for this. I'm also sure he is a visionary. I'm just as sure that Dr. Steve Groce, my director, was sent to me straight from heaven. I've struggled with words trying to say how much he means to me but I don't think there are words to describe it. I'm sure I would not be where I am without him. He's inspired me, nurtured me and encouraged me. He is someone to whom I can never express enough gratitude. Many times he solely sustained me. When I was thinking that quitting sounded like a good idea, he'd say to me that "this too shall pass." He was right. However, I don't think it would have had he not been there. I never thought I would be so lucky to work with such a great group of people as Drs. Groce, Krenzin, and Podolefsky. I thank them for their support and the freedom to cultivate my dreams, allowing me to trusts my heart. I also thank them for being good friends to this rebellious soul.

I've had some very good friends who have contributed much to me. I'd like to thank Jean Haders for her support. She is intelligent, insightful and full of potential. I'm proud to say I know her. Dr. Susan Shelby, my great friend and fellow activist, is one of the greatest feminist minds I have ever encountered. My thought has been greatly enhanced by her. Thanks also to Dr. Ann Goetting at WKU. I'm fortunate to have come in contact with her. I would like to thank my housemates, Laura Wellington and Mary Wilder. Many times Laura gave me the emotional support I needed when I had run out of just about everything else. She also seemed
more convinced of my potential than I was and I'm sure this made a difference. I'd like to thank Mary for always believing in me. Most of all, thanks for letting me know and not letting me forget it. Finally, thanks to my two chihuahuas, Pebbles Ian and Pinto Baez, for the long nights they maintained vigil for my word processor.

Saying "thank you" to the women who participated in this study is not nearly enough. I would like to dedicate this effort to you. Each of you is a miracle and your strength is much greater than you know. I have grown from you and I hope you will find this paper true to the experiences you shared with me. Somewhere I realized that all our hearts were united in this project. It is as much yours as mine. Some day, it is possible that you may live in a world without such oppression, that those who come after you will never know of such. Until then, we must persist.

The singer, Melanie, once wrote, "I learned a whole lot about me today---when I thought about you." Once again, it is true.
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STIGMA AND THE NEGOTIATION OF IDENTITY
BY RURAL AND SMALL-TOWN LESBIANS
Margaret Cooper       June 1990
Directed by: H. B. Groce, J. Krenzin, and A. M. Podolefsky
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Fifteen women who identify themselves as lesbians were located through snowball sampling. These women participated in confidential taped interviews and assigned pseudonyms. They were questioned on topics which included growing up gay, family, work relations and friendship associations.

It was assumed that life experiences may differ on the basis of social environments. This study focused on the unique experiences of rural lesbians.

Erving Goffman's book, Stigma, provided the theoretical framework utilized in the analysis of lesbian identity management. It also allowed for a discussion of stigma and its effect on lesbians.

The women in the study began experiencing homosexual feelings during prior to adolescence. Their reactions to these feelings related directly to the amount of stigma that they had internalized. All women in the study developed maintenance strategies that prevented disclosure of their lesbianism. It was found that lesbians often suffer great consequences when their sexuality is disclosed.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Lesbianism is an issue that has not been adequately studied by social scientists (Martin and Lyon, 1972; Brown, 1976; Lewis, 1979). This paper will present lesbianism, not as a mental defect, as suggested by some psychologists (Jackson, 1962), or a mere form of deviant behavior, as suggested by some sociologists (Bell, 1971), but as a viable way of life for many women.

This study, unlike most other research on this topic, will focus on the unique experience of lesbians who are living in small cities. These women are not likely to be "out of the closet," or openly lesbian, since the climate for disclosure is at best, discriminatory, and at worst, physically dangerous. I will use Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective (1959; 1963) as a theoretical framework from which to analyze how lesbians develop and maintain social identities. I will also explore lesbians' public and private relationships to other individuals.

Lesbians often form friendship networks that function in much the same way that families do for heterosexuals (Martin and Lyon, 1972). Many lesbians have played the role of "spinsters" in their families of origin (Boston Lesbian Psychologies Collective, 1987). For those women who do
inform parents of their orientation, there may be acceptance. More likely, there will not be. Many lesbian teenagers have been thrown out of their homes when they were "found out" by their parents (Martin and Lyon, 1972). Many lesbian adults were disowned or otherwise treated coldly by relatives. Sherry Zitter (1987, p. 177) has observed that:

A woman who tells her mother, "I am a lesbian" is defining herself as different from her mother. A mother can feel both abandoned and betrayed by not feeling this special relationship any more.

In addition to family problems, a study by Levine and Leonard (1984) of 203 lesbians in New York City found that seventy-two percent of the lesbians in the sample were at least partially hidden in their places of work while the other twenty-eight percent were completely closeted. Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon (1972) described many instances in which lesbians lost their jobs, were faced with expulsion from school and evicted from their homes upon disclosure of their homosexuality. Lesbians, according to Martin and Lyon (1972, p. 14), develop a dual life. They try to "pass for heterosexuals, complete with imaginary boyfriends; during evenings and weekends with homosexual friends, they let their hair down."

The potential ramifications of "coming out" can be seen in this quote from Sonia Johnson:

I came to understand that "coming out" meant more than "out of the closet."
It meant out of the mainstream, out of social approval, out of the known world into no person's land, out of privilege, out of respect, out of a job, out of parenthood, out of a place to live, out of physical safety, out of the constitution, out of favor with god, out of sanity. (1987, p. 115)

Even the fear of the label "lesbian" has kept women paralyzed. This accounts for some of the invisibility of the lesbian population (Rich, 1980). For these reasons, particularly in socially conservative small cities, most lesbians have chosen not to "come out of the closet."

The experiences of these women are likely to be different from those of lesbians who live in gay communities. Lewis (1979) and Barrett (1989) interviewed a wide range of lesbians as Brown (1976) did homosexual men. Only a few of the respondents in any of these studies were from small towns, but all three researchers acknowledged that their experience was very different although their studies did not go into depth on the topic. Since lesbians in small communities are less visible and less politically active, they are not likely to be studied by researchers. These women's experiences also differ from those of gay men who are the more frequent subjects of study (Vance and Green, 1984). It appears that lesbians who live in small cities are the hidden members of our society. This study will allow some of these women to inform us about their lifestyles, joys and difficulties. It will add to the existing
literature on lesbianism by providing a view of how lesbians develop and maintain social identities as well as how they feel about the roles they must play in the less than supportive environment of small, conservative cities.

Review of the Literature

Feminists have viewed lesbianism not only as a sexual preference for women, but as a political statement (Atkinson, 1978; Eisenstein, 1983). A lesbian, according to Eisenstein (1983, p. 51), is "someone who had withdrawn herself from traditional femininity." She would not fit into the role of a "true woman," meaning she did not get her status from association with a male, but instead is a "woman-identified woman" (Radical Lesbians, 1970). It is the "highest treason" in a male dominated society (Johnson, 1987).

Lesbianism has been a volatile issue for the feminist movement. Some called it "the lavender menace," fearing that the movement would appear too radical for mainstream America if it embraced the cause of lesbianism (Ferree and Hess, 1985). One radical feminist claimed that "feminism is the philosophy, lesbianism is the practice" (Atkinson, 1978, p. 132).

Some feminists felt that heterosexuality was culturally enforced to support male domination (Bunch, 1975). Adrienne Rich (1980) proposed the concept of "compulsory heterosexuality" to explain that heterosexuality was an
institution with penalties for its deviants. Homosexuality is one of its taboos (Johnson, 1987).

Perhaps the best work on lesbianism has been done by lesbian feminists about their own lives (Martin and Lyon, 1977; Millett, 1974; Millett, 1976; Johnson, 1987). Their accounts offer insight that much traditional social scientific research has lacked.

The majority of social science research on homosexuality has been on men (Oberstone and Sukoneck, 1976). Most nonfeminist work on lesbians has been of a quantitative nature, attempting to study the issue of lesbianism numerically. It has not allowed the women's experience to be quoted directly but to be interpreted for the reader by the researcher.

Some work had as its goal defining homosexuality. For example, social workers used Berger's study (1983) in their attempts to deal with a gay clientele. Gramick (1983) analyzed homophobia in the social work profession and the (unsuccessful) attempts on the part of social work professionals to reverse homosexuality.

The idea of homosexuality as a condition that should be reversed is often evident in society and also in research on the topic. Testa et al. (1987) found heterosexual bias in the analysis of homosexual relationships. According to them, researchers often concluded that the heterosexual couples were both happier and more in love than homosexual ones. Morin (1977) also found heterosexual bias in the psychological literature. He felt that researchers should
focus less on etiology and more on the "coming out" process.

Early studies seemed to indicate that homosexuality was a genetic disease. That has since been discredited due to the lack of evidence that homosexuals are genetically any different from heterosexuals (Wilson, 1984).

Much of the work on homosexuality involves its etiology. Some have written that lesbianism was brought on by the women's movement (e.g., Marmor, 1984). According to these authors, feminists strove for dominance, and their attempts led to lesbianism. Actually, the women's movement only made it easier for lesbians to acknowledge their identity. It did not "create" lesbianism (Ferree and Hess, 1985; Bunch, 1987).

Wilson (1984) wrote about Karen Horney's "power envy," a variation on Freud's "penis envy." Horney felt that feelings of inferiority women experienced living in a patriarchal society led to lesbianism. Other psychological theories have treated homosexuals as if they have different personality structures. Keanan (1968) and Saglier and Robins (1973) treated homosexuality as an abnormality. Others have found it not to be abnormal (Armon, 1960; Thompson et al., 1971; Siegelman, 1972). Oberstone and Sukoneck (1976) found no major differences between homosexuals and heterosexuals.

A problem in the studies that assess homosexuality as an abnormality is that they are conducted on atypical lesbian samples, such as therapy clients or prison inmates.
Others have concluded that homosexuality as a clinical entity does not exist (Thompson, 1958; Wilson, 1984). Most sociological studies have treated homosexuality as deviance (Reiss, 1961; Dank, 1971) or homosexuals as a minority group (Kameny, 1971) or both (Hacker, 1971). Some
literature has analyzed the world of the male gay bars and
subculture (Burke, 1969; Humphreys, 1970). Popular books
have been written by homosexual male therapists and
ministers (Perry, 1972; Clark, 1977) with the goal of
assisting other homosexuals in self-acceptance.

Lesbian couples were frequently compared with
heterosexual couples (Cardell, Finn and Marecek, 1981;
Carlson and Steuer, 1984; Schneider, 1986). In many
studies, lesbians were compared with heterosexual women.
Often it was concluded that lesbians were less "feminine" in
the sense that they were less likely to accept the
traditional roles for women (Oberstone and Sukoneck, 1976;
Kite and Deaux, 1987). Other issues found in research on
lesbians included studies on role conflicts of working
lesbians (Shahar and Gilbert, 1983) and age of first
lesbian encounter (Vance and Green, 1984).

Much of what we "know" about lesbianism has come from
studies on women in large cities (Levine and Leonard, 1984).
Some information has been deduced, though not always
accurately, from studies of homosexual men (Vance and Green,
1984) and analyzed statistically. At the other extreme, our
knowledge about lesbianism has increased due to statements
of lesbian feminists regarding their own lives (Martin and
Lyon, 1972; Millett, 1974; Millett, 1976; Johnson, 1987). These women are obviously no longer "in the closet." Not only are their accounts public disclosures of their sexuality, but they include a feminist analysis. These women are aware of and emphasize the political and social implications of their lifestyles.

Somewhere in between the extremes is a huge gap in the literature. This gap illustrates the lack of work that is sensitive to homosexuals' lives. It involves accounts of those who are not out of the closet and sophisticated in political analysis as are those lesbian feminist authors just mentioned. The present study will attempt to bridge this gap by providing a qualitative, in-depth account of lesbians that are still, to some extent, "in the closet." While they may or may not be aware of the political implications of choosing a lesbian lifestyle, they have a unique set of circumstances with which to deal. In this way, they differ from the women who have openly portrayed themselves as lesbians. The experience of lesbians whose identity is relatively unknown and who are coping with life in small cities is far more typical, yet far less studied. This study will address some of the important issues in the lives of these women.
CHAPTER 2
THEORY AND METHODS

Theoretical Perspective

Traditional social scientific theories have long been criticized for reflecting a stunted, inaccurate view of women (de Beauvoir, 1952; Friedan, 1963; Millett, 1970; Martin and Lyon, 1972). Conflict theory focuses on tension and struggle between groups in competition for resources. The basis of conflict theory is the work of Karl Marx (Feuer, 1959; Ritzer, 1983). He was primarily concerned with the exploitation of the working class by the capitalists. Friedrich Engels (1884) expanded this framework to include the relationship between the sexes. The first class oppression, according to Engels, was that of women by men (1884). While conflict theory does acknowledge gender as a variable (Burawoy, 1979; Edwards, 1979; Thomas, 1982), feminists claim that it has taken a backseat to social class (Young, 1980; Hartsocx, 1987). The heavy emphasis on economics is hardly appropriate for this study of lesbianism. Its view can be criticized for being too one-dimensional. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote:

For the Marxist,...her sexuality only
expresses her economic situation in more
or less complex, roundabout fashion...unless they are integrated into the totality of human reality, sexuality and technology alone can explain nothing. (1952, pp. 66-67)

Another sociological theory, functionalism, focuses on the way in which a society maintains balance (Buckley, 1957). According to this theory, society is comprised of parts that function for the stability of the system (Parsons, 1951; Parsons and Shils, 1951; Parsons, 1961). Such a portrayal of society as a set of interdependent structures and systems does not allow for an analysis of individuals' concepts of self, sense of self worth, or the maintenance of social identities. Likewise, all macro-level theories in sociology can be criticized for concentrating on the public aspects of social life even though the "private and invisible sphere of social life may be equally important" (Millman and Kanter, 1987, p. 32).

On a more micro level, the dramaturgical perspective of Erving Goffman analyzes interaction and the way in which people develop the concepts of self and identity through the playing of social dramas. Goffman (1959; 1963; 1966) addressed the issue of "identities" in a way that other sociological theorists did not. It also allows for a micro-level analysis of the issues that the respondents encounter in their daily lives and is, therefore, most appropriate for this study.

Stigma, a book by Erving Goffman (1963), serves as the
theoretical base of this paper. In this book, Goffman analyzes social and personal identities. He believed the term "social identity" was better than "social status," a concept usually employed by sociologists, since it also included personal attributes. The image a person tries to project is her virtual social identity. The actual social identity is the attributes the individual truly possesses. Goffman was interested in how individuals developed and maintained the virtual social identities as well as how they managed separate identities.

An individual possesses a stigma when she, according to Goffman, has "an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated" (1963, p. 5). Since individuals who are stigmatized are as aware of the values of society as are the people who are not stigmatized, they come to develop what Goffman called the "virtual social identity," that is not the same as the "actual social identity." The virtual social identity, for the lesbian, might be putting on a heterosexual face. It might be trying to pass as "straight" by creating imaginary boyfriends, marrying men or merely attempting to appear unattached, although definitely not lesbian. The actual social identity is the one in which the lesbian expresses her true lifestyle preference.

Goffman also added the concepts of "discredited" and "discreditable" to his discussion of stigma. A discredited person is one whose stigma is known. A person who is discreditable is also one who possesses an attribute that is
not socially acceptable. However, this attribute is not part of the virtual social identity and thus is hidden from most people. In this situation, the person may attempt to "cover" by developing an image that may be in contradiction to, or at least not revealing of, the true identity. One way in which these identities may be kept separate is for the person to keep two sets of associates. One set comprises acquaintances, coworkers and friends to whom the individual attempts to project the virtual social identity that does not disclose the actual identity. The other set consists of people who are "in the know." These may be others who possess the same stigma, what Goffman called an "in-group alignment." In this case, those possessing the same stigma would be other lesbians. These might also be called "the own." But these people "in the know" could also be friends who, although they may not have this stigma in common, are aware of it and supportive. These are "the wise" who may be heterosexual but "who find themselves accorded a measure of acceptance, a measure of courtesy membership in the clan" (Goffman, 1963, p. 28).

The emphasis in this paper will be on the "discreditable," who are, in this case, lesbians. The distinction between the discredited and the discreditable with regards to lesbians involves the issue of disclosure. Since these women are all living in geographic areas where revealing their actual identities would not be desirable, they are therefore not "out of the closet."
I will also examine the effects of stigmas on the individual's well-being. This is more commonly known as internalized homophobia. According to Goffman, the difficulty arises because:

the stigmatized individual tends to hold the same beliefs about identity that we do. Further, the standards he [sic] has incorporated from the wider society equip him to be intimately alive to what others see as his failing, inevitably causing him, if only for moments, to agree that he does indeed fall short of what he really ought to be. Shame becomes a central possibility.

(p. 7)

As we will see in the paper, the internalization of stigmas has dramatic effects on women. Some examples are substance abuse problems, low self-esteem, suicidal thoughts and attempts, and what Goffman might see as a "direct attempt to correct what he [sic] sees as the objective basis of his failing" (1963, p. 9), the dating of men. Some even become mothers. Goffman's analysis might conclude that this was "an attempt to correct his [sic] condition indirectly by devoting much private effort to the mastery of areas of activity ordinarily felt to be closed on incidental and physical grounds to one with his shortcoming" (p. 1963, 28).

Goffman wrote, "public school entrance is often
reported as the occasion of stigma learning." People tend to develop a "stigma-theory" to rationalize the "inferiority" of the homosexual and "account for the danger he represents." Some common themes based on these rationalizations are the myths that homosexuals are child molesters who recruit children into the lifestyle and spread AIDS through casual contact. With these and other prevailing myths, lesbians and homosexual men are often the victims of a generalized hysteria. The effects of this are not only psychological or social in consequence but also are life threatening. Many lesbians and gay men may be the victims of violence. The mere threat or fear of such is enough to keep many in the closet.

Since the lesbian is typically aware of the risks of disclosures, she must learn to manage her identities in such a way that the "wrong" people never learn of her lesbianism. This involves such a strategy as "passing" or managing information that is potentially discrediting. Much attention will be focused on passing or strategies to maintain the virtual social identity. These attempts are conducted in situations of mixed contacts, where lesbians interact with those who are not gay or who do not know of their lifestyle.

The major focus of this paper is on how women develop a lesbian identity and how they maintain a virtual social identity. I will include an analysis of how their social world is divided into two regions: those who know about
their lifestyle in one and those who do not residing in the other. I will also examine the acquisition of stigma, its impact personally and later its rejection in favor of the acceptance of a lesbian identity.

**Stigma** (1963) was written before there were conscious attempts by social scientists to remove sexist language. There may be, therefore, several quotes that might seem sexist. Also, I hope that the reader will see such terms as "sickness" or "failing" as merely referring to that as seen by a homophobic society. I hope that this clarification will lead the reader to overlook those terms quoted of Goffman which may be deemed offensive.

**Research Methods**

There are primarily two kinds of methods of research used in the social sciences. The first, and probably better known, is quantitative. The goals of this kind of research may be objectivity through use of numerical analysis. Examples of quantitative research techniques are surveys in sociology and laboratory experiments in psychology (Habbie, 1975; Spence et al., 1983; Adams and Schvaneveldt, 1985; Nachmias and Nachmias, 1987). The other kind of research is qualitative. According to Nachmias and Nachmias (1987, p. 287), qualitative research attempts "to understand behavior and institutions by getting to know well the persons involved, their values, rituals, symbols, beliefs, and their emotions." The techniques used in this kind of
research include in-depth interviews with individuals or
groups, participant observation, detached observation and
informal conversations (Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979; Lofland
215-216) called interviewing an "artful process" that could
be especially helpful in gaining information about sensitive
behavior that may be perceived to be deviant. In these
instances, the interviewer may be able to establish rapport,
gain trust and reassure the respondent that her or his
insights will contribute to the wealth of knowledge on the
topic, possibly even making the world a better place.

Qualitative methods are often used to uncover behaviors
and attitudes that are not easily detectable by quantitative
methods. This can be seen in the nature of responses given
to research questions. For instance, a survey gives the
respondents a choice of answers to a stated question.
Qualitative researchers might claim that the categories
given are more likely to be the categories appropriate for
the designer of the survey, rather than of the respondents
(Sherif, 1987). Martin and Lyon (1972) felt surveys may not
even be likely to include the respondents' true feelings,
thereby forcing the respondent to fit into a category she or
he might not otherwise. They were critical of quantitative
methods in the study of lesbianism when they wrote:

Experience indicates that the questions
are made up generally by heterosexuals
and asked of homosexuals who very often
find them irrelevant to their particular
lifestyle. The questions, for the most part, are unanswerable by the required "yes" or "no" or multiple choice, and their only virtue is that they are easily computerized into instant (misleading) statistics. (p. 2)

With feminist criticism of such studies in mind, I chose a qualitative method, in-depth interviews, for this paper. It allows for respondents to create their own categories rather than merely try to fit into those preconceived by a researcher. The validity of the qualitative method relates directly to the validity of the women's experiences.

Sample and Data Collection

Since random selection would involve drawing a random sample of individuals, attempts at gaining interviewees through this procedure would prove futile. A random sample might not include the number of lesbians desired for a study and, even more significantly, would not likely yield situations in which women would identify themselves to the researcher as lesbians. For this reason, snowball sampling was more appropriate.

The women interviewed for this paper were contacted through friendship associations. Data collection, however, was not an easy task. Initially, I attempted to locate lesbians through gay organizations in several small cities and on university campuses. No respondents were obtained by
this method. In each case, I talked with the groups' leaders, all of whom were homosexual males. They sounded pleased to hear that someone was doing such a study, and often I heard, "Are you sure you don't want to interview men too?" They seemed disappointed that I wasn't including men, since all seemed glad to participate. Each took my telephone number and stated that he would make announcements for me at upcoming meetings to try to get lesbians to call me. I never received any calls from women. One might speculate that the gay men who run these organizations are more open and have male friends who are open also while lesbians tended to be more closeted.

My next attempt was to contact gay organizations in large cities with the assumption that they might be the haven for lesbians from surrounding rural areas. These attempts were also futile.

I also tried contacting feminist organizations since the gay organizations seemed to be representing primarily men. Leaders and members of these organizations tended to respond by saying something like, "Sure, we know plenty of lesbians. Why do you want to know?" I observed suspiciousness of my whole project. This related to several philosophical issues: 1) their feelings that academic work in general had been unkind to lesbians and even inaccurate, 2) a dislike of sociology as a "male" discipline, and 3) most specifically, an objection to the use of a theory by Erving Goffman. One woman called it "old-fashioned." These women refused to participate.
Some friends who were feminists were no more supportive than these women already mentioned. I tended to notice a difference between age groups of women that I don't think was entirely coincidental. Friends over forty were the most suspicious. The women under thirty were less so. I also encountered one woman who, after demanding to know what the theory was about in great detail, informed me that homophobia and stigma no longer exist. She cited "proof" by stating that in a bookstore in a large city seventy miles away were a couple of shelves of books on gay lifestyles. Considering that this was a very large bookstore and that this city's metropolitan area consists of over a million people, a couple of shelves seems hardly indicative of mainstream acceptance of gay lifestyles.

Since these women were also reluctant to speak with me, my respondents were obtained by friends and their friends who after interviewing with me told others that I was okay and that they should speak with me as well. On a few occasions, I was invited to parties and even a lesbian wedding where I had an opportunity to meet more women and solicit interviews. The women I eventually obtained interviews from were, for the most part, much younger than the women who were initially contacted. Only two of my respondents were over the age of thirty. One continually spoke of the necessity of maintaining a "low profile." Younger women, in her opinion, did not understand this due to their less extensive experience from homophobes. The
other woman over thirty spoke of her amazement at the 
relative openness of younger lesbians. The insight of these 
two women might lead us to suspect that the women who 
refused participation had experienced more homophobia and 
that resulted in their being more guarded. This might be 
seen as a sort of "they'll learn their lesson" attitude 
towards younger lesbians. It could also indicate a shift in 
lesbians' perceptions in the acceptability of their 
lifestyle in relation to the time periods in which they grew 
up. The results of this paper could be affected by the fact 
that the women who had encountered the worst cases of 
homophobia and were most likely to be leading double 
lives, or a profound splitting of virtual and actual social 
identities, were not represented in this paper.

The fifteen women interviewed were between the ages of 
nineteen and thirty-eight, with the average age of 25.3 
years. All of the women were born and reared in small towns 
and cities and in the South and Midwest. All of them 
currently live in and around cities with a population of 
50,000 or less in various towns in the central region of the 
United States. None of these women, by the way, considered 
her community progressive in any manner. These cities will 
be assumed to present different life situations for lesbians 
that do the larger, more progressive cities that have been 
the locations of previous studies.

Since a focus of this paper is how lesbians maintain 
virtual social identities that do not disclose their actual
social identities, open-ended interview questions were
directed at this issue. Topics of concentration were
growing up gay, work associations, family, friendship
networks and maintenance strategies.

I conducted in-depth interviews with fifteen women.
All participants were assured confidentiality and assigned
pseudonyms. The interviews were conducted and analyzed
according to the procedure suggested by Schwartz
and Jacobs (1979) and Lofland and Lofland (1984). Rather
than utilizing the statistical analyses of quantitative
methods, the interview data were examined for emergent
patterns of responses and descriptions.

One of the women had recently become involved with the
gay rights movement. Four other women considered themselves
to be feminists. The rest did not show any political
preference although each did identify closely with the goals
of women's liberation. A few expressed interest in the gay
rights and feminist movements, but not from the standpoint
of a participant. All had a fondness for both movements
since they saw these as directly working for their rights.

Nearly one-half (seven) of the women were full-time
students at a midsize public university. Two more were
attending on a part-time basis. These two worked, as did
four of the full-time students. Four worked in grocery
stores or restaurants. Another woman was a counselor and
yet another was a service technician. Of the women who
weren't students, four were factory workers. One was a
teacher and the other was an executive. The level of education obtained ranged from the tenth grade in high school to a master's degree. There was only one at either extreme. Three had high school diplomas. Nine had completed some college and one other woman had a B.A. The B.A. and M.A. belonged to the executive and the teacher, respectively. (see Appendix I)

The women's families of origin might be considered to be primarily working class. Only three of the women had parents who attended college. Fathers' or stepfathers' occupations included: carpenter (6), brick mason (1), service technician (1), coal miner (1), military officer (1), mechanic (1), and fireman (1). Three were small business owners. Seven of the women's mothers were housewives. One of these women dabbled in preaching at the local Pentecostal church. Three were factory or millworkers. Another worked in a supermarket. Two were bookkeepers and two were involved in small businesses with their husbands. Two of the women's fathers were deceased but they were reared with stepfathers. Four women's parents were divorced and they, too, were brought up by their mothers and stepfathers. The number of siblings ranged from none to ten, with the average of 2.33. Five of the women were only children.

Five of the women were divorced from men. One was married. Four of these women had one or more children. One, however, gave up custody to the child's father. Eleven
of the women were currently involved with other women. The
duration of these relationships at the time of the
interviews ranged from three days to almost four years. All
of these women saw their relationships as permanent.

Every woman in this study lived with the assumption
that a more open assertion of lesbianism would threaten her
job, family relationships, custody of children, or most
dramatically, her own life. As we will see in future
sections of this paper, each of these women lived at least a
partially closeted life. In a study by Barrett (1989), one
woman made a statement that seems very applicable to the
situations of the women in this paper. She said, "My closet
has a revolving door." This paper will examine not only how
this is true of many women but also reasons why "closets"
still exist at all.

**Limits of the Study**

For the results of a study to be generalizable, the
sample must somehow be considered representative of the
population in question. Since the sample size of this study
is small, no attempt will be made to say that this sample is
reflective of the entire lesbian population of the United
States (or even of all lesbians living in small cities).
Instead, it will be representative of the responses obtained
from the women who chose to participate in this study. It
is likely that the women who became involved in this study
were more secure about their own identities than those who
did not participate. It is also likely that due to the
concentration of the respondents in the midsection of the
country, the results would not be as applicable to women
living in other regions.

Since all of the women were from Christian backgrounds,
and primarily fundamentalist ones, generalizations can not
be made about women who were influenced by other religions.
Only one woman discussed in this paper was black and,
although she speaks of the black experience of being
lesbian, the paper obviously does not have enough
representation of the experiences of blacks or those from
ethnic minorities. I hope that future studies may be able
to present their experiences. Although this paper has those
shortcomings already mentioned, it was written in a careful
attempt to give an honest, accurate and responsible
portrayal of the women who were my respondents.
CHAPTER 3
GROWING UP GAY

Ever since I can remember, I have never, never, been attracted to men sexually. It's always been women. And that's hard when you're growing up, because it's like, "You're not normal." You know you're not what others perceive as normal. So I guess you could say I had a hard time growing up.
(Anita)

For each of the women interviewed for this paper, there was a time of realization of same-sex attraction. The development of a gay identity began early in the lives of each, ranging from "ever since I can remember" (Anita) and "I think I was born this way" (Carole) to pubescent discoveries for others. In this chapter I will analyze what the childhoods of these women were like and how their growing awareness of sexuality affected their lives. I will analyze their first conceptualizations of not only what it meant to be lesbians but what it meant to be women.

Childhoods

Look back through the research abstracts and you will see years of attempts to
identify, classify, and scrutinize Gay people. Most of the effort went into looking for the causes of homosexuality. It is mostly a foolish occupation. It makes as much sense as looking for the causes of heterosexuality. There are too many causative or antecedent factors and there is no need to identify them anyway. Our "scientific interest" in the causes of homosexuality signals a devaluation of Gayness and a desire to exterminate it. More often than not, we look for causative factors and antecedents when we want to eliminate something or create more of it—rarely is it done in pure scientific pursuit of information that will add to our store of knowledge. (Clark, 1977, p. 64)

The "causes" of homosexuality, according to Clark, are "varied and numerous." He concluded that they are not of interest "unless one presumes it desirable to alter one condition or the other" (p. 64). This also is my position in this paper. The details of the women's childhoods are meant solely for descriptive purposes. I hope that the details of their childhoods will increase the reader's understanding of their lives in the context of this paper.

All of the women grew up in what would be considered small towns or cities in the South and the Midwest. Shannon
Did spend a period of her childhood in a large city but moved often between that city and two very small towns. The largest town, other than the one in this instance, was a city of 50,000 in population and the smallest was a rural area ten miles from a town with a population of three thousand people. All women spoke of their hometowns as conservative and of the residents as holding provincial attitudes not only about lesbianism, but also about women's roles in general. While this produced some amount of conflict for nearly all of the women, their experiences as children were often quite positive. They spoke of the advantages of growing up in a small town:

It was a lot of fun...It was a lot of
nife memories...All the family was nearby
so you just sort of grew up in the clan
kind of thing. (There was) plenty of
emotional support. We all lived within
three blocks of each other, which was
neat. (Justine)

Or, as Jennifer observed, "It wasn't that bad...As far
as school and friends, that was great."

Cindy and Stacy talked about the lack of activities in
their hometowns as being the primary negative aspect. Stacy
spoke of life on a farm. "I didn't go out that much," she
explained. Cindy described her hometown as a "typical small
town." She went on to say:

There's really not that much to do in a
small town...dances and stuff. I went to
visit my cousins on the farm and stuff like that. And play basketball in grade school.

Kate described her hometown as "the kind of community where everybody knows everybody." She stated that she was "right fond of it" until her teenage years. Yet she felt isolated from the rest of the world. She said, "I felt like I was missing something. I felt like I lived out in the woods, that the rest of the world was progressing." Having earlier been satisfied with what she described as a "small, very small coal mining, Southern Baptist conservative community," the confrontation of the perplexing situation of searching for her place in it was not easy. Kate was not alone in this experience. Brenda's hometown was "real religious." In nearly every instance, religion played a significant role in childhood development. Brenda said as a child, she was "really into it" but that later it was to cause her problems. Ruth reflected that her community was well-entrenched in Bible-Belt philosophy. Her impression of it during her childhood was that "everything was a sin. In order to be in the world, you had to be totally miserable, feeling guilty about everything you did." It was enough, she said, to make someone "feel suicidal." She was no more flattering about her hometown:

It was awful. The whole town was really apathetic. It was odd. There was a really weird feeling in the air and you grow up feeling weird. You just think the whole
world is weird. Plus I was different to
start with which made it doubly weird.

While small town life, at least during childhood, was
relatively pleasant for Carole and Robin, Stella said she
planned on "moving to another region of the country."
Barbara complained about her lack of privacy:

It was kind of awkward because no matter
where I went, I came from a large Catholic
family. Everyone knew my mom and dad or
my dad's brothers and sisters. So I could
not go anywhere without being known. That
was part of my problem...I knew the same
people from church and school and never got
outside that atmosphere.

Kate summed up feelings toward her hometown that seemed to
reflect the loss of innocence she, and so many other
women, experienced:

(It was) the kind of community where
everybody knows everybody. That caused
a lot of conflict for me for a long time
because it was the kind of community
where everybody grew up, married people
in the community, lived there and stayed
there their whole lives. A real close-
knit community. At some point, I
realized I couldn't do that. And having
that strong community background, I had a
lot of conflict for a long time about
how I was going to live any other way
than that. I knew I had to.

The family lives of the women interviewed were quite
varied. Five of the women were only children although the
mother of one recently married a man with two children. The
rest had between two and ten siblings, the average for the
whole sample being two. The parents of three women were
divorced. The fathers of two died around the times of their
daughters' births.

Only Sue and Kate, both only children, expressed a
closeness with both parents as children. Although both
spoke of their fathers with much affection, they showed an
obvious preference for their mothers. Sue stated that she
and her mother "were more like sisters than mother-daughter.
And me and my dad were close in some aspects but not in
others." Kate's relationship with her mother was also
extremely close. This even caused some problems with her
father:

My dad and other people said I was too close
to my mother. They didn't feel I should be
that close. They told her that. They told me
that. It didn't do any good as far as either
one of us was concerned. I felt she was all I
had in the world basically. I felt like an
outsider myself and seems like she was the
only one who understood that.

Cindy said that she "wasn't that close to sit down and
talk to either one of them... (But) me and my mom got along
great." Shannon's parents were divorced when she was very
young. She reported being fairly close to her two step-
fathers but not to her own father:

When I was with him, I felt like I was close
to him. But it was more of a superficial
relationship. We never talked about feelings
or anything. It was more like everyday kind
of stuff. And it's still that way.

Her mother and she, however, had a much different relation-
ship. They were close, according to Shannon:

but we were almost so close that it was
hard to get along, because my mom, she
would try to do things for me and she
almost tried to do too many things for me
to where I didn't do things for myself.

Then when I got older, she expected me to
do things for myself and I didn't know
how to do things for me.

Justine's parents were also divorced when she was very
young, as were Stella's. Justine was very close to her
mother, and still is, but hardly knew her father until
recently. Stella was not close to her mother although the
situation is now changing. Anita's father died soon before
her birth. She grew up with her mother and grandmother, to
whom she was fairly close.

Carole and Barbara said that they were closer to their
fathers than mothers, yet Pat described her whole family as "stand-offish." Brenda said:

When I was smaller, I was real close to my dad...They had my sister first and then they wanted a boy and I came along. I was kind of Daddy's boy when I was growing up until they had my brother.

The birth of her brother almost caused Brenda to feel rejection from her family. She was no longer "Daddy's boy."

Both Ruth and Kate expressed great fondness for their grandmothers. Kate spoke fondly of what "influences" her grandmothers were in her life as well as the closeness with her mother. She said, "From an early age, I guess I had a lot of women around me who were big influences on me. I was very woman-identified even at a very early age." Ruth credited her grandmother with saving her from what was almost a ruined childhood. Ruth, who never got along with her mother or stepfather, spent much time with her grandparents, even living with them for periods of time. She developed a closeness with her grandmother that still continues today. However, coming home to a turbulent house with four sisters was never easy:

(My parents) were too busy having babies at the time, it seemed like. There was always a new baby in the house. I always had a hard time with them because when I lived with my grandparents, I always was the center of attention and then I'd go
back to my mom's house and I was just another number, another mouth to feed.

Three women stated that they were not at all close to their families. Two stated that their relationships with their siblings were not any better. Jennifer said, "Me and my parents never got along. Me and my sister always fought. I got along with my little brother; then we always fought." She complained that her family "couldn't communicate." She explained her present relationship with them by stating that when "every now and then" she sees them, "we'll speak." Robin called her whole family "pretty superficial." They do not, in her words, "know how to express what they feel." Barbara also said that while she was close to two of her three brothers, she was not close to her parents at all. Their relationship could be described as lacking not only closeness but also any real substance. She described it by saying, "We talked, not talked, say 'hi,' 'hello.'"

Even those with the best relationships to parents early in life experienced a barrier at some point, and this related directly to these women's emerging identities. This barrier hindered communication and caused doubts on the part of the women as to the stability of their relations with their parents. The superficiality that many women complained of as characterizing their families was often perceived when they felt they could not discuss their developing feelings towards women. Barbara probably best summed up the situation faced by many gay women when she
said of her own experience, "I was sort of the rebellious one. I always, always walked a different path. And they (parents) just couldn't understand why."

The descriptions of their childhoods in general were as varied as the relationships to family members and their opinions of growing up in small towns. Anita said she had a "cushy" life. Pat complained that she grew up in "an extremely sheltered environment." Her mother was "very religious," she said, so Pat "came from a very religious background where everything was sort of hidden." She also felt that her mother was overprotective. According to Pat, her mother was trying to shield her "from anything in the world...or said she was trying to."

Brenda characterized her childhood as "atrocious." She disclosed, "I was raped by my grandmother and my uncle before I was in school. I never told anybody. I lived with that." Sue's and Shannon's childhoods were made more difficult due to frequent moving. Sue explained that it was emotionally difficult to lose friends by moving and, after awhile, lose contact. Shannon said, "It was hard to make friends. Because once I made friends, we'd move and I wouldn't have them any more. It was hard." Kate's childhood was very lonely. She said:

My childhood was very difficult. Because even from a very early age, I knew I was different. I didn't know why I was different. I just knew that I was. It was something that other kids were aware of also
so I was very, very lonely. I was most comfortable when I was at home. I practically had school phobia. I thought of reasons to stay home. I would get very nervous and anxious any time I was around the school building. It was a very threatening place to me because I was so lonely. I was a point of ridicule even at a tremendously early age. And yet, I didn't know why. And other kids didn't know why. I just was very different. I didn't fit in.

While growing up all of the women heard very little directly about homosexuality. Stacy described it as something "you didn't talk about," or as she said, "not in front of the kids." Parents typically expressed conservative views of sexuality. Barbara stated, "You weren't supposed to do it, but you weren't supposed to know what you weren't supposed to do. It was not talked about. It was just not talked about." Kate today still feels embarrassed to talk about "any topic sexual in nature" with her mother.

Shannon's mother was also reluctant to discuss sex with her. But Shannon, as well as the others, learned as much about their parents' attitudes on homosexuality by its omission as they might have had it been discussed. Shannon said her mother related to her that

it was always sex between a man and a
woman... By the time she told me about all that stuff, I already knew. But she never told me about women with women and men with men. Barbara learned that "sex was between two married people, to have children. To continue the family name. Nothing more."

The women also learned quite a bit about their parents' feelings about lesbianism as an alternative when such an option was never presented. Instead, they clung rigidly to the heterosexual model. As Shannon observed:

They used to talk about, you know, "When you get married and have children." I'd say, "I'm never getting married and I'm never going to have children." They'd say, "One day you'll meet the right man and settle down and then you'll want to have children. You just wait and see." I'm like, "Yeah, you wait and see!"

Others also learned through adults' reactions to their proclamations of future relationships with women. Kate said that she told people at a very young age that she would marry a woman and, "When they said I wasn't, I'd say that yes, I was." She told her grandmother, who said, "No, that's a sin. It's in the Bible." Kate thought, "Surely she can't be talking about the same thing I'm talking about." Kate and Ruth both described their mothers' reactions:

I told my mom, "Isn't that really neat when
two women love each other?" And she got really freaked out and said it made her want to throw up. She said it disgusted her and that she knew a lesbian one time and they had to put her in a mental institution, that they put lesbians in mental institutions. (Ruth)

When I was real young, I told my mom I wanted to marry a woman. I asked her if women got married and she tore me apart. She just tore into me with venom just like a snake lashing out toward me. I found out really quick that wasn't a neat thing to do. She said something about two "fruity" women tried to get married before but they had to be taken to a mental hospital because they were just unfit to be in society. (Ruth)

Kane said that she didn't even know what the word "lesbian" meant, but she said, "I got the message... I don't know how strong I identified with that term 'lesbian.' I don't think I did at the time. I was really confused."

When Barbara, as a teenager, realized her feelings about women, she encountered quite a perplexing situation. Her dilemma echoes the experiences of many young lesbians. She said:

I just always felt out of place. I just
always felt like I didn't fit... And of course, I just didn't feel real good about myself, because I was taught the whole time I was growing up, I mean, my mom and dad expect me to grow up and get married and have kids and this and that, and that was just repulsive to me. I mean, that was just "Oh my God!" And yet what do I do with these feelings I have?

Gender Roles

The possession of a vagina, labia, a clitoris, or a penis and scrotum is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for developing a female or male gender identity respectively. (Kessler and McKenna, 1978, p. 3)

Woman feels inferior because, in fact, the requirements of femininity do belittle her. She spontaneously chooses to be a complete person, a subject and a free being with the world and the future open before her; if this choice has a virile cast, it is so to the extent that femininity today means mutilation. Various statements made by female invert (or lesbians) clearly show that what outrages them, even in childhood, is to be regarded as feminine. (de Beauvoir, 1957, p. 456)
Kate Millett (1970, p. 39) wrote of the "overwhelmingly cultural character of gender." She, along with others (Stoller, 1968), was active in distinguishing gender from the term "sex," which refers to one's anatomy and physiology. Robert Stoller (1968, pp. viii-ix) wrote that gender is a term that has psychological or cultural rather than biological connotations. If the proper terms for sex are "male" and "female", the corresponding terms for gender are "masculine" and "feminine"; these latter may be quite independent of sex.

Conditioning, according to Millett (1970), is responsible for the cultural concepts of gender. It is a system for conditioning traditional roles which are aligned on the basis of a person's sex. Conditioning "runs in a circle of self-perpetuation." She wrote that:

The basic division of temperamental trait is marshalled along the line of "aggression is male" and "passivity is female." All other temperamental traits are somehow—often with the most dexterous ingenuity—aligned to correspond...The usual hope of such a line of reasoning is that "nature," by some impossible outside chance might still be depended upon to rationalize the patriarchal system. (p. 43)

Garfinkel (1967) also pointed out that people assume
certain "facts" about gender. One of these is that there are two, and only two, genders. Everyone must then be considered to be a member of one or the other group and this membership is to be considered "natural."

For lesbians, the development of gender identity appears to be more difficult than for heterosexuals. Lewis (1979, p. 22) found that:

For many lesbians, the first manifestation that they do not fit the heterosexual pattern is a rejection of the female/feminine role to which they are geared from birth. This rejection is sometimes manifested in a preference for, or identification with, the only other role visible to them—the male role.

The women interviewed for this paper all, to various degrees, expressed this notion. Even as children, some even before they were consciously aware of same-sex attractions, had difficulty fitting into what they saw as the traditional female role. Apparently, even though these women might not have known what they wanted, they knew what they did not want. For them, it appears that the traditionally female gender role represented more than femaleness. It also represented heterosexuality:

That role is all sex-oriented. It's the dumb housewife image. If you really look at it, that's just the way it is. (Pat)

I remember as a very young child not
identifying with the female role because it seemed like, and this was growing up in the sixties, that the female role was strongly attached to your role as a wife and mother and I knew I couldn't do that. So I felt more identified with the male role. When I was a kid, I would play the boy when we played house. And I wanted my mom to buy me "boy clothes." (Kate)

For Kate, this role rejection was directly linked to her attraction to other girls. She was aware of this attraction at a very young age and reported that she developed quite a "macho" image of herself by age seven. She explained it this way:

"I used to think, as a kid, that you had to be masculine to get a woman. That women liked masculinity and men liked femininity. So I tried to convince every girl on the block that I was a boy. I even took a male name. And of course, it made perfect sense to me. I never understood when people's parents were flipping out."

The other women's responses fell into three categories: 1) taking the male role (like Kate's example), 2) being a "tomboy" and 3) rejecting items of dress and play associated with female children. These responses overlapped in all of the interviews.

"Taking the male role was seen in both play and fantasy."
Cindy said, "Kids would play house and I was the one when my cousins would come over, I'd play the boy. I'd always do the boy parts." This led her to believe later that she might be gay. This also "concerned" her cousins, one of whom later said to her, "We was all worried about you, wondering about you because you always wanted to play the guy." Cindy said she wanted to respond by merely saying, "Take a hint." Anita's childhood fantasies often involved taking the male role. She described them by saying:

I might not have known what it was called when I was real young, I can remember going to see "James Bond" and like when...my imagination would run wild or I would have some kind of fantasy. I'd never fantasize as being one of the women. I was always "James Bond"..."Matt Dillon," you know.

Wolff (1971) found that many lesbians, as children, desired to be boys. She found lesbians were five times more likely to have expressed this desire than were heterosexual women. In a study by Fleener and reported by Lewis (1979), 82% of lesbians sampled had gone through a tomboy phase. In the sample for this paper, all fifteen women told of their "tomboy" experiences as children. Not only did they engage in sports, tree-climbing, etc., many of them chose to play with boys. Robin said, "I was the only girl in my neighborhood my age when we moved here, so that was a lot of fun to hang around with the boys...I used to be a tomboy.
really bad." Barbara enjoyed "getting out and playing baseball with my brothers or basketball, things like that." This led her to conclude after some period of time, "I knew I was different. I just couldn't put a finger on it."

Anita related to the guys so much that she had problems as a child understanding why others perceived her any differently. This created a lot of frustration for her:

I played with the guys. I didn't understand why I couldn't camp out with them and stuff because, you know, there was no difference. And I sure as hell wasn't going to let 'em touch me!

Carole, who is still very active in sports, told of her father who wanted a son:

When they showed me to him in the window, he said, "It's not mine. I have a son." And when I'm the only one, he had a ball glove in one hand and a bowling ball in the other before I could walk.

She added, "He got just what he wanted."

Lewis (1979, p. 23) called the "rebellion against what is seen as being female and restrictive" that coincides with the desire for "those elements of male identity that carry independence...the first rite of passage into lesbian selfhood." The third set of responses involved this "rebellion against what is seen as being female." Carole said that she would "rather take a beating than put a dress on." Barbara
not only disliked the frilly dresses her mother bought for 
her, she also hated the Barbie dolls. "I wanted to burn the 
Barbie dolls!" she laughed.

During the childhood years, the rejection of the female 
role is relatively risk-free. This begins to change in 
adolescence. The world again becomes the dichotomized place 
of girl/femininity and boy/masculinity, now with an 
additional imperative: heterosexuality, complete with its 
emphasis, for girls, on attracting the boys who will become 
their future protectors of social acceptability (Lewis, 
1979). Lewis found that girls then began to lose their 
desire to be boys. Only 2% of her subjects wished to be 
boys after puberty. Most accepted female identities. 
However, most did not succumb to tradition, but sought to 
personally redefine what it meant to be female. As 
teens, sports became an outlet for many of them. Nine 
of the fifteen women in this study played in sports. This 
was enough to cause rumors to start. Two women explained it 
this way:

I played basketball and stuff, and you 
know, when you're an athlete and a woman, 
there's a lot of stereotypes. You know, 
"she's real bullish!" Or "she can really 
hurt that hard for a woman." People 
would say something and my sister heard 
about it and she'd go home and tell my mom. 
She would say, "I heard Stella's gay."

{Stella}
If you were in athletics at that point in time when I was in high school, you were automatically stereotyped that you were gay because you were a big athlete...You were automatically labelled. (Carole)

For Stella, these rumors were instigators of problems at home. The mere label of "lesbian" proved to be a threat to women. It was a warning that they were stepping outside the lines of acceptable gender behavior (Eisenstein, 1983). Carole felt a lot of pressure from peers to disprove the rumors. She said, "It bothered me to a degree...It did put a little more pressure on me as to trying to prove myself not being that way as far as dating and stuff like that."

As teenagers, and for some even into adulthood, a rejection of feminine clothing was also a pattern. This rejection ranged from not wearing overtly feminine apparel to dressing in a way that was considered to be "mannish."

I went through that stage when I had to play a dyke. Yeah, I had to ride a motorcycle and wear men's pants, men's clothes and I didn't wear women's stuff at all. Men's underwear even, you know. You go through this phase and it's one of those things. (Pat)

I don't know why I'm so butch, why I wear men's clothes. It's not that I want to be
a man, because I don’t. Because God knows, if I were a man, I wouldn’t have been with some of the women I’ve been with. (Anita)

For Pat, as with the rest of the women with the exception of Anita and Jennifer, it was just, as she said, a phase. Whether as a child, teenager or adult, it did seem to serve, as previously stated by Lewis, as a "rite of passage." It is crucial to consider, as Anita articulated, that gay women do not want to be men. In fact, none of the women, as adults, wanted to be men. Instead, they had desired male privilege and access to women. They desired the freedom that men had; and every woman in the sample, whether or not she considered herself feminist, found the female role restrictive.

Since adolescents undergo much pressure concerning gender conformity, lesbian adolescents might experience confusion, frustration and ridicule. Sasha Lewis (1979, p. 24) wrote, "The young lesbian realizes that she cannot be a boy, yet also realizes that she cannot be like her female peers and in many cases she feels a sense of intense isolation." Not understanding why such pressure to conform even exists, lesbians then must determine their own paths. For many, as Pat and Kate explained, the lack of role models dramatically increased their problems. The problem was not merely finding good or even adequate role models. It was finding any role models. The lack of visibility on the part of lesbians reinforced their fears of being "freaks."

In 1952, Simone de Beauvoir described women as "other."
Suzanne Pharr (1988) wrote that homosexuals fit into the category of "other" because:

they are defined in relation to the norm and found lacking...If they are not part of the norm, they are seen as abnormal, deviant, inferior, marginalized, not "right" even if they as a group (such as women) are a majority of the population. They are not considered fully human. (p. 58)

The place of the "other" in society is marginal at best. Anne Wilson Schaef (1985) has described women, blacks and other minorities as outsiders who must know much about the White Male System to survive. The White Male System, however, knows very little of women and minorities. Pharr wrote that:

By those identified as the Norm, the other is unknown, difficult to comprehend, whereas the Other always knows and understands those who hold power; one has to in order to survive. (1988, p. 58)

The work of de Beauvoir, Schaef and Pharr all illustrate the reluctance of society to allow the "other" prominent participation. The women in this study complained of the lack of role models. This lack of role models and the "invisibility" (Barrett, 1989) of known lesbians reinforced in these women their lack of worth in society. According to Pharr:

The Other's existence, everyday life.
achievements are kept unknown through invisibility. When we do not see the differently abled, the aged, gay men and lesbians, people of color on television, in movies, in educational books, etc., there is reinforcement of the idea that the Norm is the majority and others either do not exist or do not count. (1988, p. 58)

Harold Brown (1976) wrote of his own adolescence pondering a future as a homosexual. He, too, lamented about the lack of role models. He felt that:

people become, in large part, what they perceive they can become—a perception that depends on their knowledge of what others like them have become. And homosexuals have been a people almost totally without history. (p. 41)

If there could be a positive aspect to having to discover one's own path rather than merely following leaders, it may have been that it produced a sense of independence in these women. It could also be that the lack of a desire to meet the female role requirements might have actually made it easier for lesbians to enter professions that are traditionally male fields. Sue, however, was frustrated that in her field the men make comments to the effect that any professional woman is "considered more of a man than a woman."
In what they perceived as a way to escape the constraints of female roles, two of the women I interviewed had expressed a youthful intention to enter the military. Two more eventually did. Although the army did not satisfy either in her search for identity, both felt their reason for joining involved the rejection of traditional roles. Pat explained:

Why did I join the army? Because it was not a female role. To prove that I was just as good as they (men) were. That I could do anything they could do.

The four women who were actively involved in the feminist movement (Shannon, Robin, Ruth, and Kate) were very aware of the rejection of the female role. They were more in favor of androgyny, on the part of both men and women. The others supported the concept of androgyny in their own lives although not all had considered it a political or social issue.

What Vargo (1987) called "gender inappropriateness" can, in and of itself, be considered, in dramaturgical analysis, to be associated with a certain degree of stigma. Vargo wrote that lesbians, merely by their preference for other women, are also expressing gender inappropriate behavior. Moreover, gender inappropriate behavior may be seen, in the strictest sense, as any visible rejection of the traditional feminine role. This may be the lack of makeup, feminine hairstyle or dress, or any of the behaviors
that might be associated with femininity. More blatantly, this might mean a manifestation of any characteristics traditionally thought to be of a masculine nature. Only Brenda considered herself to be somewhat feminine. The rest did not consider masculinity or femininity to be an issue in their adult lives. Yet this lack of adherence to the role might be an aspect of being "discredited" whereas their lesbianism may be considered to be more hidden, thereby making them "discreditable" (Goffman, 1963). In the case of mere gender inappropriate behavior, omitting lesbianism, it could be said that these women bear "a stigma but do not seem to be impressed or repentant about doing so" (Goffman, 1963, p. 6).

Vargo (1987) felt that a positive self-image for lesbians could not result from acquiring gender appropriateness but in a "positive value of gender inappropriateness if they are to value their lesbianism" (p. 163). Each of the women in this study, to some degree, went through a process of not only acceptance but of appreciation of nontraditional roles. A couple of women had these comments:

I can take any role I want. I'm not going to fit into society's role of what I should be. Whether I was gay or not, I'd never conform. They can stuff it. (Justine)

Who wants to be like that (traditional) whether you're gay or not? Who wants
to be the "Beaver"'s mom? (Pat)

An educator wrote of a conflict that was encountered in teaching children. One of the functions of the school system was, and is, the socialization of children into gender appropriate roles. P.T. Greenleaf (1972) was not without regrets:

Seven years ago, I did not recognize that helping children to adjust to traditional sex roles was contradictory to helping them develop their potential. Yet for children to make such an adjustment, they must severely limit their development—literally shut off parts of their personalities and cut themselves off from many physical and intellectual challenges. (p. 128)

Greenleaf was not alone in raising questions concerning the value of these roles (see also Millett, 1970; Eisenstein, 1983).

To conclude this section on gender roles, it should be reiterated that the women in this study found the traditional female roles to be restrictive and constraining. Beginning as children, they began a journey of self-discovery usually without the assistance of role models or appropriate guidance from individuals they considered as authorities. As adults, each reached her own conclusion on what it meant to be a woman and what it meant to be lesbian. Risking the labels of "deviants" or worse, these
women have chosen roles for which there were no scripts. Consequently, many feminists would consider their androgynous approach to selfhood to be much more well-rounded than those straining to conform to rigidly limited roles. In their paper on the psychological adjustment of lesbians and heterosexual women, Oberstone and Sukoneck (1976) concluded their analysis on gay women with the following:

Are they really more "masculine" in their behavior than their "normal" heterosexual counterparts, or are they more free to develop both their feminine and masculine and, in fact, their human potential? It is possible that, rather than being "masculine," the lesbian woman, by virtue of being an outlaw, has had to develop personality qualities that have been traditionally the domain of the male, such as independence, self-determination, competence, and aggression. [p. 185]

Discoveries

Being sexually excited by that sight of another boy made me aware that I was different, that "there was something wrong with me." I had never met a homosexual man, or at least been aware that I had met one. But I knew what every other
Midwesterner knew in 1942: Homos were mysterious, evil people, to be avoided at all costs. And I was one. Often, when I thought of this, I would break out in a cold sweat. I couldn't be. I shoved the idea aside. When it cropped up, I thought: I must be the only homosexual in northern Ohio. It took me five years to discover that I wasn't. (Brown, 1976, p. 32)

JayCee was my obsession: notes, visits, the phone, borrowing Mother's car to go over to the university at odd hours. Mother's car: her Gordian knot. Mother's voice shouting harsh from downstairs as I reach the landing: "What on earth is the matter with you---are you in love with this woman?" I looked up and saw myself discovered. The accusation convicted me already of madness, obscenity, the unspeakable. The word said aloud, the word I used to whisper to my mirrored self when I was drunk in college, getting drunk so I could do it. Standing in the toilet in beer joints, mesmerized, asking the image softly in dazed and fascinated horror, "Are you queer?"---repeating my own name---"Are you queer?" Leaving the secret there when I went back to the table, lest
everyone was all my friends who were normal. (Millett, 1974, pp. 128-129)

All the women I interviewed recalled their first attractions to other females as having occurred during childhood or adolescence. The nature of these attractions, as well as their initial reactions, depended largely on when they were experienced. This was consistent, to some degree, with the work of Ponse (1978) and Vance and Green (1984) who were able to distinguish two groups of lesbians based on the age of their first attractions. Ponse described "primary" lesbians as those whose "memories of sexual or emotional attractions predate puberty." The second group described was called "elective" lesbians and consisted of women who came to identify themselves as lesbians in their twenties, thirties, forties or later and before this had identified themselves as heterosexuals. Vance and Green extended this model to encompass the variable of age of first sexual relations with women. They assumed the Group 1 lesbians, which corresponded with Ponse's "primary" lesbians, would experience sexual relations with women at a much younger age, likely before seventeen. Group 2 corresponded with the "elective" lesbians of Ponse's study. These women, according to Vance and Green, were likely to have their first sexual relations with women after the age of twenty. Group 2, they found, were more likely to have engaged in heterosexual relations than were Group 1 lesbians.

The women I interviewed could be described as falling
into two groups. The first of these groups consisted of the women who reported they had "always" been attracted to other females or reported these feelings as early as five. All of these women experienced these feelings well before the onset of puberty. Six women fell into this category.

The second category of women realized their feelings about girls or women when, as teenagers, they were physically attracted to other females rather than to males. Seven women fell into this category of awareness which began between the ages of thirteen and fifteen.

Two women described their first feelings as occurring at approximately eleven years old. This made them fall between the two established categories. However, the nature (as in sexual—nonsexual) of their feelings was closer to those of category one.

While there are lesbians who don't recognize their attraction to other women until well into adulthood (Lewis, 1979; Barrett, 1989), none of the women in my study fell into what most closely resembles Ponse's "elective" lesbians. It appears that Ponse's model may then be lacking the category of those whose first awareness was neither as a small child or as an adult with a previously heterosexual identity but as a teen with a sexuality developing apparently along the lines of other teens with the exception of the gender attraction. In another article, Ponse (1984) acknowledged that lesbian activity is not a necessary prerequisite for lesbian identity, or vice versa. Nothing
in my study indicated that the group who experienced homosexual feelings in childhood were any more likely to have sexual relations with women at a younger age. Nor were they less likely to have engaged in heterosexual relations. In fact, all fifteen of the women, as teenagers, dated men and cited "social pressure" as the reason. Six even married men. In fact, Justine is still married and plans to stay that way.

The nature of feelings experienced by the women in category one can probably best be described as "affectional" rather than sexual during their childhood years. Only one was aware of these feelings being overtly sexual. Some common experiences are as follows:

I can remember I was always that way. I never really had any ambition to date any men or go out with them. Now I wanted to go and play football with them. But when I left there, I had other plans. (Carole)

It seems like I've always felt that way. I've never been attracted to men. (Shannon)

Oh, I've been like that off and on all my life but I never perceived it, never thought anything about it, you know. Just these little twinges here and there I wondered about. (Justine)
How did these women, as children, know they had feelings for other girls? Many talked about feelings of infatuation or "crushes" on other females. Shannon recalled her first feelings:

probably when I was five, but I didn't know what it was then. I just knew I was attracted to my kindergarten teacher...because I didn't play with the other kids very much. It seemed like I'd hang around her all the time instead of playing with the other kids. I had a hard time concentrating because I was watching her instead of doing my work or whatever I was supposed to be doing.

Ruth described her first crush as occurring at approximately six years old.

I had a crush on the girl next door. I always wanted to hang around her and stuff. Then as I got older, I wanted to play doctor, stuff like that...

Kate had crushes on teachers and had "girlfriends" at an early age but described her thoughts and feelings as not being fully integrated concerning the nature of her attraction. She engaged in sexual fantasies at age nine, but those were described as:

I remember having sexual thoughts as in thinking about her body. But I didn't think about her body in reference to me. She was married and I thought about her and her
husband. I didn't think about me with her. The next one that I liked when I was ten, I never felt sexual things about her. It was more that I wanted to hug her, or I wanted to impress her and I wanted to make her proud of me. I wanted to make her laugh. It was never sexual.

At fourteen years old, Kate was still adamant that her attraction to females was not sexual. She did not think highly of her fellow classmates' preoccupation with sex. "I was really proud of myself," she said. "Because I didn't think sexual thoughts about _____. I thought my love for her was so pure." Instead, she thought of holding hands and just gazing at her. When at age fifteen, she became aware of being sexually attracted to another girl, she was surprised, to say the least. She said:

I remember in algebra class looking up one day and watching her walk by me and having this flood of sexual feelings. And it really freaked me out because I thought my life just changed at that point.

Still, she didn't know what to do "with her, or anybody."

Ruth, Justine, Shannon and Carole were also not aware of "sexual" attraction at the times of their first feelings. Ruth described it this way:

(It was) more of just wanting, I guess, just to be with her. To cuddle or be close
to her. Or like I'd see pictures of "Lucy" and "Nicky" on TV, how they'd sit on the couch together and stuff like that.

Carole described it as, "I'd look at them and say, 'I like the way she does something. I like the way her hair's done or something.'" Shannon said, "It was more of an emotional attraction rather than a sexual 'I'd like to kiss her,' you know. It was more of an emotional. I don't know, but it wasn't sexual."

Stella was eleven when she first experienced an attraction to other females. While not included in the first category, her story is similar. Here she described a crush on a fellow sixth grader:

I thought she was the prettiest thing. I was just drawn to her, you know. And it wasn't that much of a sexual thing. I was just, "Good God, she's great!"

Anita was the only person in category one to be aware of sexual feelings. She remembered "wanting to jump in bed" with a camp counselor and often fantasized herself as the male lead in romantic films. Her first crush was well before ten years old. The girl "kissed me on the cheek," Anita recalled, "And I just went wild. You know, 'She kissed me! She kissed me!'

Their own reactions to their discoveries, as small children, were actually quite positive. Kate said, "It was something I enjoyed in my head. I kept it to myself." Ruth
though it was "just natural." She said she felt "all women thought like that and they just married men so they could get to heaven." But at this point, Ruth did not believe that heterosexuality was the way to heaven necessarily. She said that she had gotten the impression from her church that to be saved, a person had to be totally miserable. Her childhood reasoning was:

I had it in my head. I thought that all women really liked women deep down. They just married men to be unhappy because that's what you were supposed to do according to the Southern Baptist church to get to heaven. So it made perfectly good sense to me.

This line of reasoning haunted Ruth well into her adulthood. After realizing the social stigma of homosexuality, she had tried to date men. After she married, she was terribly unhappy. However, she said, because of her early teachings, she thought that misery was a part of life ensuring her salvation. "I thought I was being a good person," she explained and this held her to the lifestyle that was causing her unhappiness until she was in her mid-twenties.

Stella stated her first homosexual feelings were very pleasurable, "It just felt good to me. I guess I never thought I would ever act on it." Carole said it didn't bother her in the least. Anita "loved it!" Shannon "really didn't think about it much. It just was."
To the women, their feelings, without the learned stigma attached, were perceived as "natural" or pleasurable. None of them, as children, was concerned when she first discovered her feelings. This indicates that unlike findings of scientists who've suggested that homosexuals have adjustment problems because of their orientation (Saglier and Robins, 1973), problems occur later, if at all, and are the result of: 1) viewing the world and realizing that there seems to be no place for non-heterosexuals; and 2) learning the negative social value of homosexuality, or its stigma.

The point here is that lesbians feel out of place when viewing the social world and realizing that their preferred lifestyle is not even presented to them as an alternative. This seemed to preclude any awareness of what "homosexuality" actually meant in society. For instance, none of the women, as children, consciously identified themselves as lesbians, nor did any of them even know what the word meant. They didn't even hear the labels of "fags" or "queers" in school until much later, and although often applied to them, they did not know what these words meant. Even though the feelings could be identified as sexual as teens, except in Justine's case where it was not until the twenties, a positive acceptance and identification of oneself as lesbian did not occur until the late teens or twenties in the cases of all the women interviewed for this paper. All the women, however, did as they began searching
for their place in the world start to feel "different," "odd," or "strange." Justine attributed her feelings of being an outsider to "the entire unfamiliarity of it." Kate felt so out of place that, at nine years old, she contemplated suicide:

I knew I could not fit into what people wanted me to do. And I knew that at a very young age. I wanted to commit suicide and I prayed a lot that the world would end. And it crossed my mind often through the years. Because I thought there was no way I could ever live that life. And I was terribly unhappy about life, knowing I could not fit in.

Anita began to isolate herself from others and described a very lonely childhood:

I'd get up and go to school and I'd come home and lock myself in my room. Then when it was time for dinner, I'd go eat dinner, then I'd lock myself back in my room. I remember being very lonely and thinking I was the only queer in the world. And I'm not sure that I even knew what it was called back then. You know, I just felt like I was the only person who had those kind of feelings. It was a very lonely type feeling.
For women who fell into the category of realizing attractions during adolescence, this period of feeling "isolated" or "different" predated their discovery. For instance, Barbara realized "something was different...I didn't know what was going on." Pat said:

Early on, I knew something. I knew I was different when I was say eight or nine years old. I just didn't know what was different... I just couldn't put a finger on it.

A divergence between category one and category two, then, may be seen in that the women in group one realized their feelings first then saw themselves at odds with society. The women in category two did this in reverse.

The process of acquiring a negative valuation of homosexuality or internalizing stigma will preoccupy much of Chapter Four, with how it is learned, and Chapter Five, with its impact and effect on the individual women. For the purposes of this chapter, it is important to illustrate how these feelings were changed by the awareness of the social view of homosexuality. Shannon described the change in her own perception as resulting from learning the negative social value of homosexuality. She said:

When I was little, I didn't know there was anything wrong with it. But when I got older, I realized, you know, that society says this is wrong, "I shouldn't be that way," that I had to keep quiet.
Kate felt "everything change. It was very scary. I think the realization that now I was not only different but had dominated every aspect of my life."

Stella said she felt additional pressures due to also being black. She described it this way:

I really thought I was really sick because, I don't know, being black and being gay...things like "It's bad enough that you're black, you add gay to it and it makes it worse for you. You really don't have a chance."

Stella also stated that for the reason mentioned, homosexuality is very unpopular in the black community. "It's really unheard of," she said. "It's like you're trash if you're gay. It's just the worst thing."

Cindy described getting "caught" with a girl at a drive-in in her early teens. She and her sister were both with a couple of other girls and all decided to experiment. A brother of one of the other girls caught them. He reported the incident to the mother of the girl with Cindy. Cindy told the story this way:

Her mother sat down and talked with her on the Bible, you know, it talked about in Romans, it was talking about 'man shall not lay with mankind, woman shall not lay with womankind.' And uh, she said, "Well, I'm not doing that no more." My other sister took that and said, "I'm not doing
that no more."

the girl's sister
said, "I don't understand this," and I
thought, "What's wrong with this?" I
couldn't figure out what the problem was.
"What's the problem?" That really shocked
me a lot.

Cindy was, then, questioning her orientation. She told
of another incident that occurred after she realized the
stigma of lesbianism. This particular incident caused her
to try to deny her feelings for many years afterward. Here
she spoke not only of that experience but her developing
realization of attractions to other girls:

Well, I had guys and boy friends. We used
to write letters and stuff. But I enjoyed
being with my girl friends more than the
guys and I thought, "What's going on here,
you know? What's happening?" And then I
had a cousin to stay over one night and she
and I had always, well, we'd always played
house and stuff, and we were getting older.
She was a year older than I. She was 14
and I was 13 at the time, which is a little
too old to be playing house. But that was
our excuse. She and I were alone one night
and I guess she decided she wasn't going
to do that no more and I made a move on her
and she went and told my sister, "Cindy's
gay." And I said, "I am not." "Oh gosh,
the whole world's going to know!" After that, I shied away for years and I started dating guys and every time I dated a guy, I took one of my girl friends with me because I didn't really want to be alone with them.

During the teen years, four of the women realized their feelings were sexual as well as affectional. (Anita realized sooner, but Justine did not do so until her twenties.) For Ruth, it coincided with the sexual awarenesses of her friends. "You know," she recalled, "the smut talk about the birds and bees. Everybody was talking about it. It got me thinking." Since all the talk was about men and women, Ruth said that although she realized her feelings for women, she still did not know what to do with a woman. "I had no idea," she said. Kate's realization, as mentioned earlier, was a sudden one. She recalled feeling "really strange" around the girl to whom she was attracted. But she also stated that she did not know what to do with her or anyone. Shannon remembered her first feelings this way: "I just remember being attracted to this girl when I was in middle school and thinking how I'd like to kiss her or something."

For Ruth and Shannon, there was a self-imposed secrecy. Shannon even vowed to herself to never tell anybody. She never told a friend until she was eighteen years old. Even then, she didn't make the revelation until her friend had selected an article with the word "lesbian." In response to
this. Shannon and her friend both confessed that that was the topic about which both had "been beating around the bush." They both had "come out" to each other in a parking lot after two hours of failed attempts. Ruth did not tell anyone until her twenties. "Then it was like I had to tell everybody!" she said. Kate came out to her best friend at thirteen. Her method of disclosure resembled that of Shannon's. Kate said:

I told my best friend. I didn't actually tell her. She sort of guessed it and when she guessed it, I sort of told her "right." But I didn't tell her I was gay. I told her that I liked this one person, that this one person was really special to me and we talked a lot about this person," sort of anonymously. And it was a big thing for her to guess who the person was. But finally, at one point, she said "I think it's a woman. It's not a boy. It's a woman." So I told her she was right. Well, she didn't seem too shook up about that.

For a year and a half, Kate and her friend had talked about Kate's "special somebody" along with the friend's boyfriend. Finally, the friend concluded this person was a woman but the disclosure did not stop there. Kate continued:

One day, she told me, "I think I know who it is." We were sitting in science class, and I said "okay." I got really nervous. I can still
feel the butterflies in my stomach just remembering this. And she took the back of my science book and she wrote the name. And I looked and it was right. And I slammed the book closed. The science teacher was walking behind us at the time. But I told her she was right. Actually, she kept saying, "I'm right, aren't I?" And I finally said "yes." She didn't particularly like this individual... but she came to accept it... at the time.

Even at that, Kate did not identify herself to her friend as "gay." It was almost as if they treated the revelation of Kate's attraction to a woman as an isolated event. At the time, it actually was because Kate had been attracted to only ______ for several years.

For Carole, a neighbor made coming out to the first person much easier. He approached her. Her neighbor was a "drag queen"

and he watched me tromp up and down the street in a football jersey. He hollered at me one day and said, "Come over here. I want to talk to you." I said, "Yeah. what do you need?" He had a big pamphlet that had---the magazines that's got two guys. He showed it to me and said, "What do you think about that?" I said, "Well, whatever." He said, "That's what I thought. I've got somebody I want you to meet." And from that
point on...he introduced me to all these women.

Not only did this introduce Carole to the gay community, it helped her in the identification of her own lesbianism. She explained:

I knew what it was because I'd grown up with it next door with this guy and we talked. And I knew that's what it was and I knew having no feelings the other way, that's the only way it could be.

Later, Carole was in the position of having a friend who was not gay hanging around with her and other lesbians. Her friend was totally blind to it. Even though she'd been partying with all of us for a long time, she didn't know. She kept saying, "I want to ask you something." I kept saying, "Look, I'm drunk, and I'll tell you the truth. You better ask me now." She said, "No, no, I can't." I said, "Why?" I said, "You'd better ask me. You want to know if I'm gay, don't you?" She said, "I don't know." I said, "Yeah." ...(later) She said, "I didn't sleep all night."

Cindy wanted to come out to a friend. She had thought about it for some time. This is the story she told:

I had this guy friend, and I thought he was gay because he acted real feminine. And we
were real close, and we talked about any-
thing, and I almost came out to him one
night. I let him go first because he
wanted to tell me something. I thought,
"Oh, he's going to come out to me, and we
can talk." He told me he loved me, and
I thought I was going to die!

She said laughingly that their friendship went down the
drain after that. Note the tentative nature of the
decisions regarding coming out as well as the testing of
others before disclosure. Recall the manner in which all
these women came out to friends. The stigma attached to
homosexual feelings is such that disclosure is a difficult,
sometimes even reluctant, process. Painter (1981) found that
lesbians often would drop words or phrases to see if another
woman showed recognition. This recognition indicated a
mutual disclosure in which no actual confession was made.
According to Painter (1981, p. 73), "Anything is appropriate
as long as the message is: 'I know what you are talking
about, and I want you to know that I know.'" Using the
pronouns of "they" or "their" or referring to one's partner
as "this person," were also, according to Painter,
indicators of lesbianism to other women. This corresponds
to the way Kate spoke, as a child, of her "special
somebody." If other women did not recognize what the woman
who is lesbian was doing, then nothing was lost. If
questioned, she could provide a "plausible-sounding answer,"
thereby encountering only "minimal risks" (Painter, 1981).
This is what Goffman (1963) referred to as information control. The management of outgoing information regarding one's sexual orientation is a skill that was to be perfected by every lesbian over the years. More on this topic and its relation to friends in adulthood and to coworkers will be presented in a later section.

For women who discovered same-sex attractions during teen years, or what will be called category two, it has already been noted that the process differs in that the stage of "differentness" precedes awareness. These women were much more likely to realize that their feelings were of a sexual nature. Of the seven women in this category, only two didn't feel that their first feelings were sexual. Sue's discovery occurred in this fashion:

I was always attracted to my best friend. I mean, you know, children play and experiment and everything but she seemed to get over it and I didn't. I really didn't. I couldn't get over it. And I would get jealous when she would date guys or whatever. That's when I kind of figured something was wrong. I mean, not "wrong." I just knew I was different.

Later she told her friend she was gay. Again, like the others, she did so in a roundabout way, "I didn't really come out and tell her. I just kind of hinted around that it may be a possibility." Her friend was supportive but
"blamed herself," fearing she had "triggered" Sue's feelings towards women. Sue told her, "I didn't think it had anything to do with her really. I mean, it was just when I was first drawn toward those feelings but I don't think she was responsible for the way I am."

When Sue was fifteen years old, two years after realizing feelings for her friend, she began to have sexual thoughts of other girls. At the time, she was playing basketball in high school:

You know how girls take showers together all this and that. I mean, at that time, I knew. I pretty much felt, I mean, it was at least a big possibility because I felt drawn toward the girls, you know, in the shower and stuff. I never acted on anything in any way, but those feelings were there.

Sue, in fact, did not act on those feelings until college. Pat's instance was somewhat similar:

I never realized as a small child. I guess it was when I was 13 or 14...I felt more attracted to females than I'd been with males. And I never understood why. And I never acted on that until I was 23.

Pat, however, did not experience sexual feelings until much later. She described her first realizations this way:
It wasn't really sexual. It was more of a I got along better with them (women). I could relate better and felt that they could understand the way I felt better than boys understood. It's not anything I can pinpoint because it's just kind of a feeling I had that I didn't know. I guess it's because I didn't know why I was attracted to them that I can't really tell you.

She attributed her lack of awareness of the real reason for her attraction to her extremely sheltered childhood and to the religious mother who, she said, tried to protect her from the world. "I've never been exposed," she said. "I didn't know what was going on." She dated men and married for the first of four times at age sixteen. At twenty-three, she met a woman who disclosed her lesbian identity to Pat. Pat's reaction was as follows:

I kind of—-it intrigued me. It didn't scare me off like I thought it would when she told me. And at the same time she told me, if I had any sense, I'd realized I was attracted to her. It took me at least six months to get jarred into that.

Pat's delayed awareness of sexuality was not characteristic of the others. For the rest, it was almost immediate. Barbara, at fourteen, had a crush on her
swimming teacher. Stacy was attracted to a friend. She described the development of the relationship: "We're just friends for about a year and I don't know. I just started liking her...It just sort of fell in place." Stacy told no one except this girl, who was to be her first lover. The relationship did not work out though. The pressures of maintaining a heterosexual virtual social identity eventually got in the way. Stacy explained, "She was like a high school football queen, big shot in school and she didn't want no one to know it. And she thought, 'If anybody knows, I'm going to lose all my high society, so..."

Robin, Jennifer and Brenda also were aware of their sexual feelings between the ages of thirteen and fifteen years old. Of all the women in category two, only Jennifer, Stacy, and Brenda acted upon their feelings soon after they felt them. However, as could be expected, their thoughts concerning these feelings differed from those women in category one. This is due, in large part, to the degree of stigma that had been internalized. While the women in category one initially saw no problem with their feelings and even found them enjoyable, the women in the second category were less than pleased about their discoveries. Only Robin and Pat were not concerned. Of course, Pat was not because she didn't know what it was. Robin felt it was just a phase, because as she said:

I remember reading somewhere that all kids go through stage where they're like, I guess a homosexual stage is what they call
it. I was thinking, "This is okay. I'm going through a stage."... I didn't really think it was weird or anything.

Others described their feelings as "awkward" (Jennifer), "scared" (Sue) or full of "conflict" (Barbara). Stacy recalled her reaction, "First, you know, I heard people talking about it, saying, 'God, that's stupid. People's crazy for being that way.'" She remembered thinking, "Oh, God, I can't be that way." Sue's problem was caused, she felt, by the pressure to be "perfect." She said:

I was scared because, you know, my parents always taught me—I guess my parents always wanted the perfect daughter. I was the only child and I guess they just had this ideal of what I should be—Girl Scout, play in band, play sports, you know, do it all, make good grades. I mean, when I thought I would break that cycle, you know, that was just terrifying to me because I always wanted to please them.

For Barbara and Brenda, their newly discovered sexuality caused a great deal of conflict. They had integrated well the negative social perceptions of homosexuality; and when they found themselves experiencing gay feelings, their first thoughts were something like,
"This can't be!" Brenda found out about lesbianism from women on her mother's softball team:

I started hanging around them, and they were a year older than me, and sorta—I don't think they ever really just ever came out and told me. I think I just always knew. And even when people would say something about it to me, I'd say, "No, they're not." I would tell them they're not, even when I knew.

Brenda's reluctance to accept the sexuality of these women coincided with her reluctance to accept her own. She explained:

At first, I tried to change those two. And when we played softball, I told them how wrong it was, you know, that they were being so bad, even though I knew I was at the time. But I just thought if I could change them, I'd be okay.

Religion played a large role in Brenda's conflict, as it did in Barbara's. Recall Barbara's Catholic background where sex was to be between two married people and only for purposes of procreation. According to Barbara, the mere thought of sex, any sex, was to be suppressed. She described her response to discovering sexual feelings for her teacher:

That's when I came into a lot of conflict.

"This is how I feel, but this is not---"
I'm not even supposed to be thinking about sex. If I do think about sex, why can't I think about sex with a guy? You know, because that's what Mom and Dad are going to expect." That's just what you're supposed to do, or so society says.

She went on to explain how the stigma of homosexuality affected her in high school:

I did everything I could to ignore that (lesbian feelings), which meant for me, in high school, I didn't date. I didn't go to proms...That shoe just didn't fit. And there was no way I could involve myself in a gay relationship even if I found one because that was so wrong to my family, to my church, to everything I'd known. So I just tended to not, or try not, to think anything that was sexual.

Daydreaming

To conclude this chapter, it may help in summing up the women's youthful views of themselves to listen to the futures that they, as children, had imagined. Here are some of their visions:

I never featured myself as having kids or anything. No way, no how. My mom to this day is like, "You need to marry a
rich man." I'm like, "Oh, give me break!"  
(Robin)

I never did picture myself playing "Mrs. 
Cleaver." I always said I never would 
get married. I always said that. But 
of course, things happen.  (Cindy)

I never wanted to get married. And I 
never wanted kids. So here I am, four 
marrriages later and two kids. You know, 
I have to think, "What happened? Some-
body was out to get me!" You know, I 
ever wanted to be married. I wanted 
to be independent and take care of my-
self. And somewhere along the line, 
something got screwed up.  (Pat)

It is interesting to note that not only Pat, but also 
Cindy, married and had a child. Both are now divorced. 
Robin's life has been truer to her vision. She is nineteen 
years old and has recently become involved in a steady 
relationship with another woman.

Some of the women had pondered philosophical questions 
regarding their futures. Jennifer said, "I never 
thought about it" and Stacy saw her future primarily as, "I 
figured I'd probably be working in a sewing place or a small 
place because I figured I'd never move from here." She, in
fact, still lives in her hometown, but she does so with
Jennifer. Others mostly spoke of pondering whether they'd
be with a man or woman. Only Brenda said she wanted to be
married and "have six kids." That, she said, "caused a lot
of problems when I found out that I was gay." Only Justine
envisioned living with both men and women. She explained
that she is "kind of comfortable with everybody." Today,
she is married to a man. She had been married for a few
years when she concluded that she is, indeed, a lesbian.
She does, however, love her husband and has no plans to
dissolve the marriage. By the way, neither does he. She
describes him as "very understanding."

The rest of the women could not see themselves with men
and this led to disturbing questions regarding their
futures as women. In a world with apparently no
alternatives, their dilemmas were serious and distressing:

I guess for myself, I couldn't see a future.
Because I didn't want to be a housewife. I
always considered myself working, doing
something, not like my mom's got at home.
Not that I'm knocking that. I just could
not see myself being really dependent on
anything, but I really couldn't see myself
doing anything else. (Barbara)

I thought I'd always be alone... As I got
older, I remember thinking I'd be alone,
because I remember saying to myself, "I'm
never going to tell anybody this." And
I thought, "Well, if I'm not going to tell
anybody, then I'm going to be alone."
Because I wasn't going to go out and get
married to a man and live miserably. I'd
rather be alone than be with a man. (Shannon)

I tried my hardest not to think about (the
future). I thought I'd always be alone...
I felt really lonely because I felt if I
ever expressed myself, I'd end up in a
mental institution. (Ruth)

I never believed that I could be successful
and gay...I guess I didn't think I could live
a double life like a lot of people. I didn't
think I was that strong. (Stella)

Earlier, Kate was quoted as feeling suicidal at age
due to her fear of the future and her realization that
she "didn't fit in anywhere." She also said:
I used to ask my friends, "Aren't you scared
of growing up?" They weren't scared. They
didn't understand. I saw that my happiness
or the world would end once I grew up. I
always thought as long as I was a kid, I
was safe...When I graduated from high school
and went to college, I was actually surprised
I was still here, that the future could go on.
Barbara later married a man and is now divorced. Kate, Shannon and Ruth, as children, had told others they would marry women. All three are now involved in long-term relationships with women. So is Stella. As a child, Stella said, when she saw visions of herself with a woman, "I didn't want to. Because I thought it was just the worst thing to be gay."

Sue, who is now involved with Stella, felt somewhat the same way. She said:

The vision I had was with a man because, you know, that was the ideal vision. I mean, and those feelings I suppressed. I don't know, I guess occasionally I had visions of being with women but I was trying to block them out, try to shove them away and put the man up there. But it didn't work. I guess I had both, but I tried to suppress one.

Kate also expressed this conflict. She said that she tried to see a future with a man. But, she said, "I could not do it. It made me scared. It made me sick. And so I decided I didn't want a future if that's what the future was."

These people, for the most part, experienced relatively average childhoods that others might see as "normal," even "healthy." Yet these women were confronting tremendous odds. The road to a "successful" adulthood could not be travelled as a homosexual. Why were these women with
potentially bright futures feeling as though they had none? While coming of age is often a trying time, the lives of most other teenagers seem relatively effortless and uneventful compared with the conflicts and obstacles that marked the adolescences of these women. To understand this, we must examine stigma, its sources (Chapter 4) and its impact (Chapter 5).
CHAPTER 4
LEARNING STIGMA

According to Romer (1981), peer groups play a tremendously important role in the lives of adolescents. She wrote that, during this period, females spend their time together sharing experiences, discussing feelings, friends, family, school and boyfriends. The female peer group tends to emphasize popularity, especially with young men. (p. 56)

Romer also emphasized that this was the time that females were encouraged to discontinue activities that were not seen as "feminine." Consequently, adolescence can be a very difficult time for lesbians (Lewis, 1979). This section will focus on how peers and family convey the stigma of homosexuality. Many women stated that they first heard negative messages from peers and the family. Each of these groups will be analyzed as well as their effects on the women interviewed.

Peers

Lesbians and gay men are among those whose "moral careers" are such that they have usually assimilated society's view
of their stigma before they identify
themselves as so stigmatized. A young
boy, for example, may grow up hearing
or even telling censorious jokes about
faggots and queers before he realizes
that it is he at whom they have been
laughing. (Jandt and Darsey, 1981,
p. 13)

In Chapter Three, Stella and Carole both spoke of the
labelling that occurred when they were athletic in school.
Apparently times had not changed a great deal from when
Carole, age thirty eight, was in school to the high school
years of Stella, who is twenty two. In fact, all of the
women, ranging in age from nineteen to thirty eight, heard
the same kinds of messages from classmates. Some spoke of
hearing the labels of "fags" or "queers" even before they
knew what those words meant. Shannon recalled:

I can remember...like other kids calling
people "fags" and stuff. I remember not
knowing what that meant at first. And
then realizing what it meant and that it
was wrong and that it was bad and that
you didn't want to be called a fag.

She also added that when she realized that was what they
might be referring to as a "fag," the effect on her was
devastating. She said:

I think it had a lot to do with my really
low self-esteem...I felt like an outsider.
I didn't fit in anywhere. Because I didn't know anybody else that was. I never did. And it was really hard. I've always been really afraid of being alone.

Shannon's story echoes that of so many other gay women. Sue said of the messages she received from peers:

I heard a lot of only bad things. You never heard anything good about it. Nobody ever said, "Yeah, I want to be gay." Yeah, you heard all these slurs against it. I mean, all nasty things so when you hear that over and over again, it makes you kind of wonder, you know. I guess it's kind of hard until you meet other people in your position. Even though you know you're not the only one, you feel like you're the only one.

Ruth seemed to agree when she said:

I heard it from kids mostly. the word "queer." You hear the word a long time before you knew what it meant. I guess that was the ultimate weird thing you could be. Queers, perverts, murderers, rapists. They were all in the same category.

During this time, Sue, Shannon and Ruth had realized negative connotations associated with the words. For some, the labels were soon after applied to them. Kate said:

In junior high, people were calling me queer, asking me questions. People who were supposed
to be my friends. It sort of gave me a sick feeling in my stomach. It's kind of like when you're a kid and you just did something that was horribly wrong, but you didn't know why or even that it was. But suddenly you're in big-time trouble. I didn't know what was wrong, but there was something beyond my control supposedly was just horrid. What a sick feeling.

Justine said all the talk was enough to turn her "into quite a homophobic by age eighteen." As she said, "You heard nothing good about it." Barbara said she "wouldn't have dared" come out in high school. She had heard too much gossip about others. She recalled, "The high school I went to, every once in awhile you'd hear rumors about such and such being gay, and it was like they were the talk of the school." It had a negative effect on her since she saw it as again demonstrating to her that she would have to live her life in fear of disclosure. High school gossip, according to Barbara, just was "kind of reinforcing what I'd learned; what I'd perceived."

Stacy told of how hard it was to listen while friends spoke of boyfriends. Sue also said:

It's rough when all your friends are dating guys, and they're all happy and everything. And you know, here you are, and you're miserable in your relationship. And you can't tell anybody. "Well, I think I'm gay."
They wouldn't understand. Most of them, I don't think. The people I knew in high school wouldn't understand.

So Sue kept it as quiet as possible. The talk associated with homosexuality was enough to keep Brenda in the closet as well. She "kept it real hidden."

Yet all was not rosy for Brenda. While working at a fast-food restaurant at sixteen years old, a coworker claimed that Brenda had confessed to her that she was gay. Brenda had not, however. But the girl's story was enough to cause Brenda quite a few hassles. She told this story:

So her mom calls the preacher, and the preacher calls my parents. Then the girl and her mother comes. Anyway we had this big meeting in the preacher's office, okay? And here I am, and the preacher's sitting there telling me, "If this is true, you need counseling." And I'm like, "Get me out of here!" And finally, I didn't say anything the whole time, and I just sat there and let them talk. And they talked and talked for an hour and a half, and I just sit there. And they said if I had anything to say, and I stood up and said, "As far as I'm concerned, you can shut the fuck up!" ...They didn't like that too much.

Even though she denied the claims, her parents were suspicious. She said, "They never really point blank asked
me until after that, and we got in the car, and they asked me, and I said, 'No,' and they said, 'Okay.' Although at that time, they "let it go," this incident never really left their minds and their suspiciousness lingered.

Peers also caused quite a few problems for Kate, Jennifer, and Stacy. In Kate's case, she had fallen in love with a teacher. She had made the "mistake" of confiding in friends who later shared their information with others:

I had one friend who I confided in a great deal, and then she spent a lot of time trashin' me and spreading rumors about me...

A lot of rumors. Teachers were turning against me, trying to convince me to quit school, because I was gay.

It didn't help when she went to great lengths to protect the teacher. She tried to make it look as if it were all her fault and the teacher had not participated:

I had this notion of this selfless love, that I would do anything for someone even if it meant losing my reputation. So I tried to keep it quiet. And I told all my friends if they ever say anything, don't say anything about her. "You can say it about me, but don't say it about her." So when it came out, then she tried to protect herself and added more fuel to the flame.

Kate lived in a very small town. Nearly all of both
sides of her family lived in the county. When a rumor began, it didn't end until it had reached everyone's ears. For Kate, the results were tragic. She said:

Basically I was considered disruptive. I was the topic of tent revivals, the preachers telling me my soul was in trouble and they needed to save me. And that I upset the customers too much to eat in restaurants. So I was really scared for a long time. And it caused all sorts of problems with my family which I withstood somehow, but I still get scared at holidays. I have a terrible fear of holidays. Because I think that's when it really hit the fan, when I came home from college for Christmas the first time. It's been years and I'm still scared of holidays.

Even Kate's friends who did not have such malicious intents still did their share of damage. In high school, there were two girls with whom she was very close. One was the girl she'd first confided in back in junior high:

She was the most understanding person I knew. But even in high school, she and my other best friend would invite me to their house to spend the night and preach sermons at me all night about how I was going to go to hell unless I changed and told me I was demon-possessed and that demons were in the
room if they mentioned my name even if I wasn't there. So it was scary. And I felt betrayed every time they did that to me. In fact, I'd get so scared, I'd try to read them and try to figure out when they were going to do that to me so I could avoid it. Because I couldn't trust them. I didn't know when they were going to be okay and when they weren't.

Kate, understandably, still has quite a problem with trust. She added:

It has stuck with me. I wish in a way, I could trust people more. I have known people for a long time that I really don't trust. I'm waiting for them to do something to me. Actually maybe it has saved me a few times.

What was perhaps even more shocking than the behavior of Kate's fellow students was the reaction of her teachers. They not only did not object to the gossip and ridicule hurled at Kate by the other students, but they engaged in it:

There were some who even hid and watched me. Later I would hear things I said twisted into other meanings. Most of them quit speaking to me at all. Before they had liked me quite a bit. Now they told me I should quit school and move on.
The gossip that circulated around the school had spread into the community where Kate faced further ostracism. At seventeen years old, she left the state.

Jennifer and Stacy became lovers when they were in high school. This could be hidden only so long from classmates. Stacy told of the problems she encountered:

At times at school, we'd get in fights like twice a day, three times. I was in the principal's office more than I was in class---on fights. Somebody would walk up to me and say, or I'd be walking down the hall changing classes, and they'd holler out so and so and I'd just turn around and go up to them and hit them. You know, I got a bad temper...and it was none of their business.

As in Kate's case, teachers also became involved in the gossip. At one point, Stacy said that her mother had to step in:

My mom come to school different times and she jumped on Mr. ______, our principal, and she told him. She said, "If you don't step this rumor, I'm gonna bring a lawsuit against the school." You know, because she said, "This is nobody's business." And he kept on saying he would and then Jennifer's teacher told her to stay away from me, that I was a bad influence on her...Then her
teacher came in, the one who said that, in
the principal's office, and mom... stood
up and pointed her finger at the teacher
and said, "You've got no right to say this
about Stacy or Jennifer or anybody."
The teachers had become involved in the perpetuation of
gossip. Under the auspices of "concern," they advised the
teenagers to stay away from each other. Stacy said one
teacher justified her actions by saying that "she didn't
meant anything by it, that she was just trying to help us."

Although Stacy's mother had confronted the teachers and
the principal, she had denied that there was a relationship
between the two girls. "They're just good friends," she had
said. But she knew the truth. After this, Stacy was with-
drawn from school by her mother in an attempt to keep her
away from Jennifer. She was fifteen. Stacy said, "I was
not that interested in school... So they took me out."

In an attempt to get her away from Stacy, Jennifer was
sent to live with relatives in another city where she became
a runaway. Stacy later returned to school but only for a
brief time. She said, "I was getting bad grades. I
couldn't get along with my teachers." So she left with a
tenth-grade education. Today Jennifer and Stacy are both
nineteen years old. They were recently "married" in a
ceremony performed and attended by friends. They live in a
rural area near their hometown.

For Robin, adolescence was a closeted experience. She
was hanging out with boys. "They don't want to hear about that," she explained. Anita asked simply, "Who can you tell?" Shannon didn't tell anyone either. She had considered telling a friend but clues halted her in time.

The following story relates her discovery that her friend might not have been receptive to her disclosure:

We used to have a manager at ______'s where we worked that everybody knew was gay, or they thought she was gay. And my friend used to say things about her all the time. Like if the manager did something wrong, or I don't know, was rude to her one day, she would just say something about, "Well, that dyke, you know, this, this, and this." You know, she would say a lot of bad things about her. When you hear things like that, you get the impression that they feel badly towards homosexuals and they don't accept homosexuals.

Shannon was very disappointed that she would not be able to confide in someone. At the time, her sense of isolation was increased. Now, at nineteen, she lives in a "different world." But leaving the old one behind was not easy:

It hurt a lot at first. I mean it still hurts. I don't know, I don't talk to her much anymore. I've kind of drifted away from those kinds of friends."
Family

There is something compelling for lesbians about the topic of coming out to Mother. Wherever two or more lesbians congregate, sooner or later the conversation turns to coming-out stories, and primarily among them is the question of whether one's mother "knows" (about one's lesbian orientation), and what her reaction was, is, or would be if she were to be told. (Zitter, 1987, p. 177)

Only Justine's family has no idea that she is a lesbian. The families of the rest have at least a suspicion. But disclosure was not always planned and the mention of the issue of homosexuality did not insure a direct path to acceptance. For most women, the path was often studded with denial, anger and even rejection by parents. None of the women feel that they receive total acceptance from their families. At best, their lifestyles are simply ignored by families who refuse to accept them as lesbians.

Those who had experience with parents finding out during adolescence did not seem to be any more likely to find acceptance as adults. Earlier, Brenda talked about her parents' hearing of her supposed lesbianism. This caused them to be more suspicious of her teenage behavior with other girls. Brenda told about a time a friend was
visiting:

It was so funny. We were laying on the bed reading the Bible, okay? And my mom comes up and just because we were laying on the bed side by side! And (my son) was playing in the floor. I mean, "Give me a break!" And she just turned around and went downstairs and I could hear her screaming (to my dad), "______, you don't know what they're doing!" We had never done anything. After that, we did. We kind of rebelled after that.

This does not mean that Brenda's parents see her as a lesbian. In fact, today they choose to ignore the issue and will not accept it. She said that her parents would try to take her son away from her and she said, "My family would completely cut me off...I'd be disowned."

Stacy and Jennifer's parents discovered when they were caught kissing before a ballgame. Jennifer said:

We was in her room getting ready and we started kissing and her mom came in and sort of caught us. That night---that night was a bad night. Her mom and dad left and we left, gone to the ballgame. And we thought of everything to do, leave town, where we was going, what we was going to do.
After the game was over, a meeting occurred to discuss
Jennifer and Stacy. Jennifer went on to describe the events
of that evening:

We started back to the car and her dad was
sitting out there waiting for us. Then
they took us all to her sister's, and so
it was me and her, two of her sisters, a
brother-in-law, her dad and then my mom
was supposed to be there when she got off
work. And we caught it that night. There
was several things said.

Jennifer said that the biggest question the family had was,
"Why?" She continued, "'What caused it?' 'Don't you want
something better in life?' 'Don't you want this or that?'
They couldn't understand it. They still don't."

Since the meeting had been a family affair, Jennifer
and Stacy had to deal with disclosure to several different
people at one time. Stacy told about an incident with her
sister:

My sister took her {Jennifer} in the back
room and asked her some pretty dirty questions.
like what certain things that she done to me...
Mainly the reason she asked that was...she
thinks "that's all y'all's together for."
She got to talking about AIDS. You know,
"You can catch AIDS that way." "You can
catch AIDS with men too," that's exactly
what I told them.
Many women, by the way, expressed frustration over the misinformation regarding AIDS. While each stated that women who are exclusively lesbian are least likely to catch AIDS, each had experienced instances of parents or friends’ paranoia. Stacy revealed, “My mom and I were sitting drinking something. And I asked her, ‘Could I have a drink of your coke?’ She said, ‘Have you got AIDS?’”

Jennifer said, “My parents came down real hard on me, gave me a hard time. They hassle me so much. I couldn’t put up with it.” Statements such as these would lead one to believe that their parents are totally aware of their lesbianism. Although they probably are, they choose not to acknowledge it and even to deny it. Instead, occasionally someone will make a statement that will lead them to believe that he or she is either aware or “testing” them. For instance, Stacy said that in her family, “I’m the only kid who hasn’t had a baby. All my brothers and sisters have a baby. My mom said, ‘When are you and Jennifer gonna have kids?’ One sister would give Jennifer dirty looks and you know, she would look at me and smile and talk to me, but she would just completely ignore Jennifer,” Stacy said. She also told of another sister who “tries to tell me some time that it doesn’t look good for me and Jennifer being together all the time.”

So Jennifer and Stacy never know what to share with their families since they never really know how their parents feel or even what they know. Stacy told of a recent incident which still confuses her:
We were having problems awhile back...My mom told me, "You and Jennifer's gonna get your problems worked out. I can't stand to see y'all fight. You need to be together." And I'm like sitting here. I don't know how to take this. I don't know if she means it, "being together" as being gay or being friends...Then my dad walked up and he hugged both of us and he said, "Y'all better get your problems worked out because y'all gonna have to stick together through this." It just surprises me because they never said anything about any other of my friends when we got in fights.

Kate never directly told her mother that she was gay. She didn't have to since the rumors circulating through her hometown were, of course, heard by family members. Things changed drastically with the mother to whom she'd been so close. Kate remembered her mother's announcement that she no longer "liked" Kate and didn't even know if she loved her any more either. She described a confrontation:

My mother knew about the rumors and she knew about the crushes I had on women. And she confronted me with them. One time she asked me if I was happy being gay and it was something really dramatic she thought she was saying to me.
It is interesting that just as the parents of Brenda, Jennifer and Stacy seemed to enter into denial concerning their daughters’ lesbianism, so did Kate’s. Her relationship with her mother has changed since the days of confrontation:

I was very open about my not wanting to be with men and making sure, to this day, that she knows that I have no intention of doing that. But as far as the topic goes, we never talk about it any more. After some point, she and I did not discuss it any more. But for years, she hounded me about it. After some point, she just didn’t talk about it any more. And I don’t talk about it. It used to be almost like I wanted to share with her so I brought it up, not blatantly, but I would talk about people I liked a lot or something. After some point, I saw that that was just too risky to my life, to tear up my relationship with her and keep me torn up all the time. So I just didn’t talk about it any more. But I don’t mislead her.

Kate’s mother no longer talks about the future as if Kate will be with a man. According to Kate, she doesn’t even insinuate that she wants that any more. Kate doesn’t know if her mother “accepts it, is denying it or what.” It is very important for her not to deceive her mother yet she
knows she shouldn't risk talking about her lesbianism. But it is a sacrifice Kate feels must be made to save her relationship with her mother:

I don't try to throw her off track as far as being gay. But I try to keep her out of my personal relationship because I know she can cause problems for me, and I don't think the problems are necessary. I'd rather not have the problems. So I avoid that from just having learned from experience that it's not going to work any other way. I know a lot of gay people have to live without their families. I don't want to live without my mother. She knows without my telling her, without me talking about it.

Kate's father "always has been in a big denial of it. A few people have said things to him about it and it's made him mad. And his reaction is to get mad at the people for saying it." He and Kate have never discussed it. She said, "I can't see that we will."

Anita was discovered when her mother opened a letter from a girlfriend. Her mother became very upset and demanded that Anita see a psychiatrist. Anita was "pissed off. I was really pissed off about it. It made me mad." The following is the story she told of her visit with a psychiatrist:

We're talking back then even psychiatrists didn't think it was okay, know what I'm
saying? And I'll never forget this---Dr. _______ told me to draw a picture of a man or a woman, right? Well, I didn't want to be there anyway, okay? It was like, "Do what this woman wants so I can get the hell out of here." And I drew a picture of a man, probably because he had short hair and it was easier to draw a picture of a man than a woman. And she, of course, takes the meaning of this... and says, "Didn't you draw a picture of a man because you feel better in a man's role?" And of course, I was just totally denial. You know, what do you do in a situation like that?

That was not Anita's only visit to a psychiatrist. Her mother then took her to one in a nearby large city looking for help. Her mother mysteriously stopped taking Anita, however. Anita said:

I didn't find this out until years later. I filled out all these psychiatric tests, and they talked to me and my mother. This old lady... who was a friend of the family told me this years later that the reason my mother stopped taking me down there was because that psychiatrist told her that I didn't have the problem. She did!

Jennifer was also forced by parents to see a
psychiatrist to try to change her mind. "I was supposed to go back," she said. "But I wouldn't go. I might have if my psychiatrist hadn't been so mean. She gave me a rough time too."

Shannon was so distraught with her feelings that she told her mother she needed to see a psychiatrist. She said that she was having a hard time accepting her sexuality: but not really because I had a problem with women being with women sexually and emotionally or anything else. But that society had a problem with it. And that I didn't want to be alone. So in order not to be alone, "I'll try to change myself."

She laughs now that "it didn't work."

For Shannon, the road to self-acceptance was a particularly difficult one. She disclosed the following: Well, I was having a lot of problems about a year ago, well about a year and a half ago. And at that time, no one knew. I was really depressed, and I didn't hang around anyone or anything, so I didn't feel like I fit. I was tired of...When I first went to high school my freshman and sophomore year, I tried to do everything to fit in with the "in" crowd and a lot of times I was real hypocritical. I would do things I didn't want to do. I'd go out on dates I didn't want to go out on. And I would,
some of my friends would make a joke about some guy being gay and I would just go along with it because I didn’t want them to think I was a lesbian.

Shannon drifted away from her friends and became a loner. The sense of isolation only increased her depression. Then in her senior year of high school, she recalled:

I was real depressed and I attempted suicide a couple of times because I thought "if I’m going to be this way, then I don’t want to live."

All of this time, Shannon’s mother did not know what the problem was. After her second suicide attempt, a therapist suggested that she be hospitalized so, she said, "I wouldn’t hurt myself or anything." Even though she said the hospital stay helped her eventually stop having suicidal thoughts, it didn’t do a lot to decrease her own internalized homophobia:

Well, I talked to one nurse about it. But it was kind of like I never really said, you know, that I was gay or anything. I was kind of talking around the subject. I mean, we both knew what we were talking about but we never said it. And she was the only one I really talked to about it. She helped a lot but the first few weeks that I’d talked to her and stuff, she helped me a whole lot and she...
seemed to be pretty open minded about it but then I don't know, the last few weeks, she really just blew my mind because she'd started talking about God and all this stuff, and I was like "oh, no!"...She asked me if I went to church regularly and then she started talking not, you know, not a whole bunch. But I got the hint, you know, that maybe I should go to church and get saved, that I was going to go to hell.

Shannon's mother was terribly worried. Shannon decided finally that she had to tell her. Just as she had difficulty in talking with her friend or a nurse directly about it, she had trouble with her mother. Her disclosure went like this:

One night I was just really upset, and I just knew I had to tell, so I went downstairs, and I was crying and everything. She'd ask me what was wrong. You know, I just told her that I had to tell her something, and I didn't tell her. She's like, "Well, what is it? Are you pregnant?" "No, but you're going to wish I was after this." And then she asked me all these questions. Finally she came to that. And I said, "I think I am." At the time I knew I was, but I didn't think she could handle me saying, "I know I am." So I just said I thought I
was and left it at that.

It is interesting to note that Shannon was not alone in her concern about others' well-being after the disclosure. Even though she was in great pain, she was worried about whether her mother could handle it so she withheld the full truth. This is quite common among homosexuals (Brown, 1976).

Shannon's mother tried to be open-minded, but Shannon's perception was that her mother was reluctant to believe her. "She was like 'Are you sure? How do you know?" Shannon said:

She was asking me all these questions like,
"Have you ever had any experiences with women?
And if not, how do you know that's what you want?
And since you've never had any experiences with men, how do you know that that's not what you want?"

Shortly after Shannon's disclosure, she was raped by a male friend. After the rape trial she told her mother that she was sure she was gay. Her mother's reaction was again skeptical. Shannon recalled:

I told her that I knew I was (gay). And I'd known all along but "I didn't think you could handle it at the time so I told you I thought I was." And she said, "You don't think it's because of the rape that you've decided for sure to go this way?"

And I told her, "No." She was having a hard
time dealing with it. She thought because I'd been raped that it helped make the decision, but I'd already made the decision a long time ago. She just didn't know that. Shannon said of her mother, "I guess now she knows, but I don't think she believes it." She is making efforts, however, and Shannon has hope that in the future her mother may come to understand. While her mother does not completely accept the lifestyle, she seems much closer now to coming to terms with it than any of the other parents are. However, Shannon recently moved in with her father while attending college. While he was out of town, Shannon was confronted by her stepmother who, after becoming suspicious, screamed Bible verses for two hours to try to convince Shannon she had to change. If Shannon could not, the stepmother said, she was not welcome in their home. Shannon said she would not change and left in the middle of the night. She now lives on her own.

The families of the others did not find out until the women were adults. For the four women who married and divorced, ex-husbands turned out to be dangerous people. The husbands of all four proceeded to tell not only family members but the community as well of the women's lesbianism. Even more strangely, Pat's and Barbara's husbands were never even told that their wives were gay, and neither Pat nor Barbara had been involved with women during their marriages. Pat said that she did not even fully realize that she was
Lesbian when her husband accused her. Pat's response to him was, "Oh, you're out of your mind." Well, he was right. What can I say?" He also told her parents:

They told him he was crazy, that he didn't know what he was talking about it. Of course, she defended it but she questioned it with me. So I just lied my way out of it, like I did everything else with her. You know, "Oh, Mom, come on. You know me better than that." Right.

In Barbara's case, she was confronted by people asking her if the rumors of her lesbianism were true. It was, for her, quite a surprise, but it forced her to finally deal with the issue. She called it the "straw that broke the camel's back." She remembered:

I don't know if he actually knew or if that was just a thing to say to hurt people, or to hurt me, so I had people come and ask me, "Barbara, this is what I've been hearing"...This was in the Fall of '87. I had to deal with it then. It wasn't going to be repressed. It wasn't going to be put away any longer. It had just been bothersome for too long.

As a teenager, Barbara began dating men and avoided any contact with a woman that might have led her to conclude irrevocably that she was gay. Her purpose in dating men was
to convince not only her parents but herself of her heterosexuality. She was more successful in convincing them, of course, than she was herself. She even married:

After high school, I didn't know what to do...If I didn't go to college, I needed to do something. Well, this guy come along, and I think at the time I really convinced myself that I was in love. So I got married. And I was married for about seven and a half years. But even the whole time I was married, those feelings—I knew I was gay. I knew. Here I am, married and geez, "What do I do with this?" For years and years, I thought, "God, if I could get out of this."

After she left her husband and he began spreading rumors, she decided to enter therapy:

In therapy, I just kind of took a look at "What if I am gay? And what's that mean for my life?" And I had a hard time for several months. It was like, "Oh my God! God is going to strike me dead!" I had a real hard time, that I was going to be disowned by society. You know, just all these crazy thoughts. See I was switching from one lifestyle. Even though it wasn't happy, it was what society expected. At least, to society, it looked to be good.
Today two of Barbara's three brothers know that she is gay. The other brother doesn't know, and she is sure, she confided, that "he'd beat me to a pulp." She described him as "too busy being macho." Her other brothers are very supportive, but they have asked her not to tell their parents even though she would like to: "They feel like they have to protect my parents. Protect them against what?" Her brothers are afraid their parents "would actually have a heart attack or that it would split the family up." Their parents are, by the way, in good health. Barbara is appreciative of her brothers' support on one level but is confused by their reluctance to support her desire to disclose to her parents that she is indeed a lesbian:

That's just another area of my life that's repressed. "Don't tell Mom and Dad. Lord only knows what will happen to them." But what about me? I can't tell the folks I work with because I might get fired. I can't tell Mom and Dad because they'll either have a heart attack or they'll disown me or whatever. So where does that leave me?

Cindy and Ruth both had relationships with women during their marriages. Cindy had married when she was very young. She began dating ——— and "ended up pregnant" although she said they never actually had intercourse. She tried to explain her reasons for marrying:

My mother's the old-fashioned type, "give
the baby the name," and I really didn't have no one to---I didn't like staying at home. My family life wasn't that great. So I thought, "We'll get married." So we got married. But I didn't love him. I mean, I cared about him, but I didn't love him.

She stayed in the marriage for five years. Her life with her husband was a very difficult one. Cindy said:

Sexually wise, he never could figure out why he could never satisfy me. I never was satisfied. It bothered him a whole lot.

He went to counseling. This is a young guy, he's supposed to be in his prime...

In the fourth year of her marriage, Cindy and another woman became lovers. She was babysitting for this woman when they began talking about their bad relationships with their husbands. One thing led to another and they became lovers. Internalized homophobia took its toll on the relationship:

She would never admit it to herself. She couldn't. She'd say, "Well, I look at guys." And I'd say, "Are you bisexual or what?"

Well, we both thought we was because we both were married and in a straight, supposedly straight, relationship. And I say, "no," and told her some relationships I'd had with girls, and she denied ever having a relationship with
a girl. Only I'd heard rumors in a small town
that she had.

Awhile after Cindy began seeing "Madame X," as she
called her, they were "found out." Both she and her lover
separated from their husbands. Their relationship didn't
last. Cindy said:

After all that happened, she ended up
going back (to her husband) and then I
decided I wanted a divorce. She said she
did, too, at the time. We got back together,
and when it come down to doing something, she
stayed with him.

Cindy encountered much pressure from her mother, a
non-ordained full gospel minister, to maintain her marriage.
She told Cindy that although her own husband "drank and ran
around, she said she stayed together for the kids, but you
know, that I should for my daughter." Cindy's husband had
become very abusive. "He couldn't figure out how I could be
attracted to her and not him," Cindy explained. "I'm
divorced now and finally coming to realize my own feelings
and quit denying myself."

Even though Cindy's husband told "everyone in town,"
her family chooses to deny it now. She is sure that her
mother suspects and wonders "what's wrong" with her. Her
sister knew about Cindy's relationship with a woman. Cindy
said, "She thinks because of the way my ex-husband treated
me that that's why I done what I did, that I just turned to
someone for affection." Recall Shannon's example of her mother's belief that rape had caused lesbian feelings. It seems that some are reluctant to believe women can have feelings for other women without first having been abused by men.

Also like those before her, Cindy worries that her mother would not be able to handle the truth and is concerned for her well-being. "I can't get my nerve up to tell my mom because my mom's sort of unstable. If I told her, I know she'd cry and bawl forever." Cindy is no more likely to share the truth with her sister who is, according to Cindy, "old fashioned." She also worries about her sister's welfare. She explained that she didn't know how "she'd deal with it emotionally." Cindy concluded, "I'd rather not tell her...She has migraines a lot and I'm afraid she'd keep one for at least a month. She'd blame me for it."

Ruth's husband blackmailed her with the information. He was also very physically abusive, yet threatened that if she left he would expose her lesbianism to her family. It was one of her "greatest fears." When she was younger, her mother had threatened her and she was still afraid:

She asked me if I was gay, or she accused me of being gay, and I just never said anything either way. And they were going to have me committed to a mental hospital and on lithium or thorazine or one of those drugs to get me straightened out.
When Ruth's husband told her family that she was gay, her mother again confronted her. Still Ruth did not say whether she was or not. The story went like this:

"She said I was dead...She just said as far as she was concerned, I was dead, and she doubled up her fist to hit me, but she didn't do it. She walked away, and I didn't see her again.

The experience has left Ruth profoundly hurt. Sometimes she has trouble realizing that her mother is really gone from her life. She describes her feeling as a deep sense of betrayal because, as she said, "your mom is supposed to be the one person in your whole life where if something goes wrong, they'll go and stick up for you. I just felt really betrayed."

Ruth's four sisters also have no contact with her, and she has been effectively eliminated from the family in which she grew up. The family is close, however, to Ruth's ex-husband who landed her in a battered women's shelter before their divorce. He is invited to all holiday and family dinners while she has been warned that she will be shot if she steps on any family property. There is one exception, and that is the grandmother with whom Ruth spent much time as a child. According to Ruth, "She's getting older, and she sort of wants to live and let live, I think. She thinks the main thing is that you're happy, and that that's all that matters."
Ruth's story is the most tragic of all. But like the rest, the parents of Pat, Cindy and Barbara found a way to deny their daughter's lesbianism for quite some time. Barbara and Cindy both kept emphasizing that their parents "have to know," that it is "obvious."

Pat's mother very effectively denied Pat's relationship with another woman that, in Pat's eyes, had to be obvious. At the time, Pat and her two children were even living with her parents. When Pat's lover left her, she "went off the deep end." Her mother said she was crazy and Pat says she "probably was." She said:

She (my mom) didn't know until we broke up, and I couldn't deal with it. I just lost fifty-five pounds in two months and threatened to kill myself, which is stupid to kill yourself over somebody who didn't care about you in the first place. Anyway, she didn't know why I was just acting crazy, and she never knew though. But she had to know. Everywhere _____ went, I went. Everywhere I went, _____ went.

We slept in the same room. Christmas I was at her parents' or her at mine. I mean, we split it up and had to be both places and both had to go. I mean, how she didn't know, I don't understand. And how _____'s parents swore to God they didn't know. Any regular roommate is not going to buy your
daughter's clothes and everything else for
two and a half years. And how they didn't
know.

Pat finally had to explain to her mother what was
wrong. Her mother's reaction was just as Pat feared:
She kicked me out of the house. She told
me I was perverted and sick, and she didn't
want me in the house or around the kids, and
she told the kids I was perverted.

Her mother said that she was protecting the children when
she said, "Now I don't want these kids around a bunch of
lesbians and getting molested."

Pat now lives on her own. Her children live with her
again, and they are aware of their mother's lifestyle.
Things are somewhat better with her mother:

She sees that I'm taking care of the kids.
They're not being molested. Of course,
she doesn't know that I'm in a relationship,
and that's really none of her business,
because it would just cause the children
trouble. She would question them. But
we get along better now that I'm out of
the house.

Pat's mother also seems to be able to ignore Pat's new
relationship. The story sounds familiar:

We live in a two-bedroom house (with two
children.) I don't know how she can not
know. She knows we sleep in the same
bed. But I think she knows, but she doesn't
want to admit it, and she doesn't want to
say anything.

Carole takes much the same view as does Pat when it
comes to revealing things that are "none of their business."
She said that she is sure her parents suspect and at times
has been confronted by their suspicions. Now nothing is
said. Carole is satisfied with the present relationship:

As long as they are staying as cool as
they're staying, I'm not about to bring
the issue back up and open some old wounds...
As long as she (Mother) is staying the way
she is, I don't have any problem. And
she's not having any problem with it. So
why open a fresh wound and start some-
thing that might cause problems?

She believes that being more open "would cause more problems
than it would solve."

Sue and Stella are lovers. Sue's parents discovered
this as they were having an argument while visiting. Sue
said that she might have chosen to tell her mother at
another time but was not ready to do so. She wanted to tell
them over Christmas break, but her mom wouldn't wait until
after Christmas. Sue said, "I knew it was going to ruin our
whole Christmas, and it did. I mean, she approached me with
this like three days before Christmas, and it tore our
Christmas up." When her mother confronted her, her response
was to "laugh...I just started laughing, because I can't hold a straight face with her, and she started throwing cockspoons around and everything."

Sue was in for a surprise from her mother who, she said, "is really liberal. You'd be surprised." Sue was the only woman interviewed who, as a child, received any positive messages about homosexuality and these were from her mother. Sue remembered:

My mom was always like, you know. I don't know, she always supported them (homosexuals) as far as when they'd march on TV or whatever...And when I was real little, six or seven, you know, she would tell me when you would see an incident (of violence) in San Francisco or wherever, she'd be like, "Oh, that's awful" and all this and you know. It was just curiosity at that point because I was little. At probably eight or nine, I'd heard something at school, and I can't remember what it was, but I remember coming home and asking my mom what would she do if her child was, you know, homosexual, and she said, "Nothing. I'll accept them." And I got a big acceptance speech.

This was the same woman who later was throwing cockspoons at her lesbian daughter. Her mother had "started throwing things around and got real hot tempered" and threatened Sue.
saying "Wait til your dad finds out!" Her father also
provided a few surprises. His response to the same question
of what he would do if he had a homosexual child was, "I
think if I had a son, I'd kill him. I don't want no faggot
for a son." However, his first reaction was much milder
than she had expected. Sue said:

My dad came home and he said, "Are you
pregnant? We can deal with it. We can
deal with anything." I was crying at
the dinner table. He said, "Are you preg-
nant?" I said, "No, not hardly." Mom
says, "I wish that was the problem!" I
said, "I don't!"

Sue's mother threatened to tell him if she wouldn't. Sue
told him:

and he just hugged me and said, "Well," you
know. I guess he thought he could fix it.
He thought it was a phase, for real he did.
He just thought it was a phase I was going
through.

After a few months, he realized it was not a phase.

Sue said:

I started getting hit from both of them, you
know, with stupid comments, really homophobic
comments, comments that, I mean, like my dad
told me that he thinks all people—all "faggots"
with AIDS should die.
Another surprise from her father, who was not at all religious, was when he brought out the Bible. Sue laughed as she recalled:

He said, "Not only is this unnatural, but..." and he started quoting quotes from the Bible! He's never read the Bible in his life that I know of. I guess he must've just went through the Bible and picked things out and highlighted them, I wouldn't doubt. And you know, he said, "Animals don't perform homosexual acts." And I'm like, "What's this have to do with anything?" And I just started laughing at him. That really pissed him off. That got him mad. Because I knew he had no idea of what he was talking about.

Sue's family for awhile forbid Stella from entering their home. They said, "We don't want her here because that'll remind us of what we are and your lifestyle." It was very hard for Sue who had to leave Stella alone in the dorm during holidays. This past summer, Sue didn't go home. She believes it gave her parents a chance to think. She said, "If they keep pushing me, they'll lose me." Stella has been invited again to their home, and Sue said her relationship with her parents "went down the tubes, and now it's building back up."

Stella's mother's reaction was to say, "Pray about it, God'll make it okay." Stella said, "I respect my mama, I
really do. And I wish, in a way, that I could change her
because I'm like the perfect child, you know, trying to get
an education." Over Christmas, Stella said that her mother
"got to talking about she really didn't like gays and why.
It was something in the discussion that really hit home for
me and really bothered me."

Sue has visited Stella's home since the family found
out. One sister is very supportive, and her brothers "look
the other way." Sue had an interesting conversation with
Stella's mother who has questions about lesbianism. Sue
told about their discussion:

I think she'd rather talk to me about it
than to Stella about it. She talked to me
for an hour and a half about it. It was
never quoted as being gay. It was "IT,
"your problem." She said, "I think Stella's
had IT." She said, "You weren't like that.
You haven't had IT all your life, have you?"
But at least she talked to me about it.
And I didn't try to avoid her, and I didn't
run out of the kitchen. I figure if they
approach you with it, then give it to them.
Sue and Stella faced added prejudices from both of their
families due to being an interracial couple. Sue, who is
white, had an interesting observation about intertwining
racism and homophobia. She said:

I think Stella's mom has more of a problem
with us being interracial than with us
being gay. And my parents just are the opposite. They have more of a problem with me being gay and being with a woman. My parents would prefer me being with a black man over a white woman.

It should be noted that neither set of parents was happy with their daughters being in interracial or lesbian relationships. Stella said, "I feel like she'd rather for me to have been pregnant in high school than being gay. And because she's white too."

Only Anita, as an adult, openly confessed lesbianism to her parents. She, however, did not feel she did it in a positive way. In the past, she had denied it many times. On this occasion, though, the story was different. Anita was working for her father when the woman who was her lover came in with a man who was a "very well-known homosexual." They talked with Anita for awhile and "didn't bother anybody." Some of the customers spoke with her father informing him that she had been talking to homosexuals. This was her father's response:

My dad fired me. He called me to his house on a Sunday. And he fired me, and he said something about me running around with "those kind of people." And I said, "How can you say that about those kind of people when your daughter is one?"

Anita said that, "I really went the wrong way about telling
them, but they pissed me off." How did they respond? "They cried," she said. "My mother said, 'Well, I was hoping it wasn't true, but I guess I've known all along.'" Her dad no longer will discuss it, but she feels her mom accepts it because "she has no other choice and she knows it."

**Maintenance Strategies with the Family**

Many of the women developed elaborate maintenance strategies to keep their families from discovering their lesbianism. Justine is the only one who is sure her family has no idea. Her mother thinks gays are "rather dreadful." She has said to Justine, "You really don't need to hang around those people, what with AIDS going around and all that." Justine's most effective strategy involves the fact that she is married and can always talk about her husband enthusiastically for her family. While her family is convinced, others are just confused. She laughed when she said that some people "were amazed to find out I was married, which I wondered about. I didn't have any qualms about it. I just wondered. They're like, 'You're married?'"

Robin had the unwanted experience of having someone anonymously call her house telling her parents that a friend of hers was turning her into a lesbian. Robin was seeing this woman; and since she is still living with her parents, they forbade her seeing her then lover. So Robin invented boyfriends. She even found a gay male friend to serve as her date. Her mother was thrilled:
My mom was really getting into this. She makes ceramics, and she made this little picture frame and put little flowers all around it, and she painted it. She even outlined it in gold, and she was ready to put a picture of John and I in there.

Robin said, "They believed me because they wanted to believe me."

When it was time for Robin to produce this young man for her family, the situation became rather sticky. The story went like this:

I was building up to, you know, John this, John that. He was wonderful. He was going to come get me one night at my house some Friday or Saturday night, and his car messed up. He was seeing another guy—a total shit, irresponsible, and all that. So this other guy came and got me, and he was stoned. He was late. And I'm like, "Just get me out of here." But okay, Mike came and got me but, you know, I had a picture of John.

Her family became suspicious because the man in the picture was obviously not the same man who picked her up:

I mean, they knew I was lying about that, and they were always saying shit about "that's not the same guy," this, you know, and that, and "Where were you really gone?" And I'm like, "Leave me alone, you don't
want to know anyway."

Her brothers saw her out with the woman she had been forbidden to see. But like the parents of the others, they also seemed to develop a case of amnesia. The whole issue of homosexuality, for most families, seemed too volatile to deal with for any length of time.

Robin feels guilty for lying to her parents. She thinks they will be angry when they find out that she has been deceiving them. She recounted a movie scene that reminded her of her situation:

Remember that movie "A Torch Song"... at the end of the movie that guy and his mother were into it and she's like, "You're mad at me for not understanding what you've gone through, but you cut me out of your life. How am I to know?" I sort of feel guilty when I think about that because I'm cutting them out of my life. And maybe I shouldn't, but I don't know.

She, however, is not prepared for the consequences of her family discovering her lesbianism. She said she is sure she will be kicked out of her house:

I don't think they would handle it well.
I don't know how they would handle it... I can't afford to find out right now... I'm scared of their reaction---because I'm in the position where they say, "Then, get out of my house." I'll live in the street.
Because I'm paying for my car, and I'm paying for all that, so I mean--they can't find out. It would be hell.

Although Robin is not happy with it, for now her philosophy is, "If you want to live--lie."

Shannon tried to develop a strategy with her father that was a case of omitting information rather than "lying."

Like my dad used to talk and ask me if I'd met any guys or anything, I'd just say I hadn't met anyone I was interested in. I'd say something not saying I didn't like men but I just hadn't met anyone.

She laughed to herself, "And never will, Dad!"

Ruth also "created" boyfriends. "I'd say so and so's cute or something like that," Ruth recalled:

And I'd say that I was dating somebody. They might have come to where I'd lived once or I'd make up stories that I was going out with them. But I really wouldn't. I'd just go out to the mall and walk around.

Every woman dated men. Listen to some of their reasons:

I went with one guy to make my mom happy, to get my mom off my case. She was in seventh heaven. And it kept my very homophobic roommate thrown off. And it drove me absolutely insane...I saw how
happy everyone was at the marriages in the family. And I thought, "Should I keep a man around just to bring him home for Christmas and make my mom happy?"...I wanted so badly to make my mother happy. She and I had been so close. I mean, I made my grades in school to make my mom happy. She was all I had as a kid. Man, just like her and me against the world. Then here I was a teenager, and I was scared, and I thought I'd lose her if I couldn't make her happy, that she'd stop loving me. (Kate)

It made my mother happy at that point in time. She thought I was outgrowing this phase. And I thought as long as I can keep her happy and off my case, everything will go smooth. So I would date...to keep everything down to a level and then go about my business when I got off from school. (Carole)

All my friends was involved, you know. I'm like I just do it because they're doing it. You know, they were always asking me, "Why aren't you dating?" So and so's wanting to take you out." So a lot of times, my friends just picked out guys and I went out. It
just didn't last. (Stacy)

I think some of the guys I dated just to over-
shadow what I was, I mean, just to have them
for show. I'm being honest. There was some
I was close with. And you know, once I
was with them for awhile, I realized that they
were more like a friend or a brother, not like
a boyfriend is supposed to be, not like a
partner. (Sue)

None of the women, with the exception of Justine and
Brenda, found their relationships with men to be pleasurabler
except on a friendship basis. Stacy said, "It just turned
me off. I didn't like it...It just wasn't me." Carole even
stated, "It made me sick." Others weren't so harsh. They
echoed Anita's analogy to the feelings that heterosexual
women would have at the thought of sleeping with a lesbian.
Kato articulated her thoughts in a way that was also
representative of many of the others' feelings:

My relationships with men were very, very
bad because they were like having relation-
ships with people you care nothing about in
that way. I would have good friendships with
them, and I would really like them as friends.
But the minute they started trying to force
me into the role of the girlfriend, they
ruined it. And I became very angry and very
hostile and rebellious. They all thought
I was nuts.

The exceptions to the above statements were Justine and Brenda. But even they are reluctant to even consider themselves bisexual although they have relationships with both sexes. Brenda still dates men, because their "strength" gives her a sense of "security" that reminds her of her father. She is in love with a woman who is involved with someone else. Brenda has no intentions of becoming seriously involved with anyone, man or woman, as long as ______ is still attached. Even though Justine states (\textsuperscript{55}) that she loves her husband very much, she says that they have problems sexually because she feels uncomfortable with him and can't show him affection. Pat had much the same thing to say about relationships with husbands. Her biggest problem was that she "wouldn't sleep with them." The only marriage of her four that was a tolerable one was when she married a homosexual man as a front. In a book by Harold Brown (1976), there was a section in which he had interviewed several homosexual men who were married to women. He came to a conclusion that is probably applicable to these women as well:

The men I have described here should probably never have married, but it is easy to understand how they stumbled into it. If society says that homosexuals are, by definition, effeminate, weak-minded, narcissistic, superficial and worthless, is it not natural that a person would strive---desperately to prove
that he is not one? (p. 129)

All of the women in this paper had encountered pressure from both peers and the family to date men. Most of them still do, to some extent. Cindy said her most effective current strategy is to find something wrong with every man presented to her. That way people think she "just can't find a guy good enough." She plans, however, to begin "dating" a male friend who is homosexual just in case all else fails.

For lesbians, closeness to family members has always been perceived as tentative. There seems to be no point of acceptance but instead a line that never is completely crossed. It is almost as if when the waters are too treacherous, family members will withdraw. While the women longed for acceptance from their families, they also were unwilling to tread dangerous grounds and preferred instead tactics that ranged from simply avoiding the issue to pretending to be what they were not. Some even found themselves willing to marry in hopes of maintaining a relationship with their families that they might have felt could not have occurred otherwise. In any case, lesbians often find themselves able to dedicate energy to self-discovery only after some damage from stigma has already been done. Recall Shannon's two suicide attempts and Kate's suicidal thoughts. Many encountered depression and such psychosomatic illnesses as ulcers and migraine headaches. Nearly all of the women had, at some point,
turned to alcohol or drugs to relieve some of the pressure. Sue had anxiety attacks that caused her to enter therapy. Stella entered counseling because she thought she was "sick."

While it appears necessary for lesbians to develop strategies of maintaining a virtual social identity that indicates heterosexuality, it is not without costs. "Living a lie," as Robin would say, takes its toll emotionally and physically. On the other hand, lesbians are faced with the hazards of coming out. Over time, it is essential to their survival that they must become well-adapted to this balancing act. So many women interviewed referred to themselves as "outsiders." The next chapter will delve further into what it is like to be homosexual in a homophobic society.
CHAPTER 5

GAY IN A STRAIGHT WORLD

To display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when and where. (Goffman, 1963, p. 42)

Some people don't care. They really don't give a shit. When they find out that you're a nice person and that you're not after their bodies, they really don't give a shit. But some people are just really threatened by it, you know. And it's really hard to decide who those people are. (Anita)

This final chapter of data analysis will look at the communities in which the women live and the environments they present for lesbians. We will get a look at how the women manage their relationships with friends, acquaintances, and coworkers. Perhaps most important, we will learn why they must learn to perfect the art of information management.
Making Friends

Ruth called the community she lives in "the land of the lost." Others' opinions about the towns where they lived were similar. Some other comments were:

_________ is very conservative, very closed minded and is living in the past. (Shannon)

There's about six hundred people there and they're all married. I hate it here. I do. I mean, there's nothing to do. They're so uptight, and I'm not just talking about people being lesbian or gay. I mean if you talk about abortion or anything not 'Bible-belt syndrome,' then they don't want to hear it. (Pat)

I do feel isolated, not from just other gay people necessarily but from the rest of the world. I feel like I'm living back in time somewhere. It's like you turn on the TV, and it's not even the same world you see here. I feel tremendously isolated from culture, any kind of progressive ideas. (Kate)

This town's still very back in the dark ages as far as this is concerned. They still look down their noses...They're still not really open to us. The only town real close
is __________, and I still think they're kind of in the dark ages too. (Carole)

These communities obviously can not be considered "progressive" by almost any standard. All are small and heavily influenced by fundamentalist religion and traditional ways of life. In these towns, life as a lesbian can be very difficult. Every one of the women has experienced a sense of isolation. Not knowing whom to trust is always difficult. Yet the women all have friends who know of their lesbianism and with whom they feel close. A good question then concerns how one knows whom to tell:

Somebody that hangs around me a lot. I tell them because I don't like feeling like I'm living a lie. But then again, if you don't get close to people, it's really none of their damn business what you do behind closed doors... (One friend) couldn't handle it if I told her I was gay. She wouldn't like it at all. Because I've heard her make comments about AIDS. (Anita)

I have to know them for awhile, and I have to listen to other things. If they say, an automatic thing with me is if people say "queers," and "homos," right then I'm not going to tell them anything because I hate those two words. Usually you can tell how open minded people are. But when it comes to
this subject, people, even if they're pro-
choice or whatever, the minute you say
"lesbian," they're like "you're going to
attack me or something." (Pat)

The ones I don't (tell) is more they're
always putting it down. They've heard
some of their other friends was and they
were like that makes them sick. So I
thought I better keep my mouth shut, you
know. And there's ones I did tell, they
come out and told they was and we just
ended up telling them. (Stacy)

I think you have to test people a bit. I
notice the way people react to certain
topics. And I find myself if people say
bad things or react strangely to anything
about homosexuality, I won't tell them.
When I was a teenager, I went through a
phase where I wanted to shock everybody.
But I see where that got me---in a lot of
trouble, because everybody ended up knowing.
I wanted to be so open as a teenager. (Kate)

Recall from a previous chapter Kate's experiences from
a friend's lack of trustworthiness. As Sue said, "You just
got to have a lot of trust in people before you tell them
something like that." Confiding in the wrong individuals can be not only risky on a social level but personally very draining. Barbara had told a roommate since she assumed that it would be too difficult to hide. At first, the roommate seemed to accept it. Barbara said:

Then she became real panicked. Her mom and dad didn't like for her to live with somebody gay. Why she told all these people, I don't know...Her friends were just sure I was going to make a pass at her. That wasn't my intention at all. I mean, it just isn't that way...Her friends told her she needed to move out. She listened to a lot of people, and a lot of people told her I was really wrong and that I probably was going to hell for this. And she said she couldn't handle it any more.

Barbara's roommate didn't discuss her confusion but began to act angry and cold towards Barbara. Finally, Barbara recalled:

She went into hysterics by then. "Oh, my God! I can't stand it! You're gay!"

And what her deal was, she couldn't stand what people thought of her living with someone gay.

Barbara "felt crushed by that." Her friend said she would keep in touch, but she did not. After that, Barbara said she "was really careful (not) to tell anybody."
Kate, Cindy, and Sue all had similar stories of friends they discovered were not really friends after all. Anita said she had probably told people she shouldn't have because of rumors she later heard. Pat knew of other lesbians' stories of disclosure to the wrong individuals but said of herself, "So far, I've been lucky. I haven't told anybody who's threatened to ax my family." Stella concluded, "I try to be sociable but not too sociable, because people want in on this and that. You just get sick of lying, you know, so you just have to know where to draw the line."

Goffman (1963) wrote that there are individuals who are "in the know," or know about the person's homosexuality. "The own" were the people who shared the stigma, or were also homosexual. Barbara, Brenda, and Carole chose to share information only with people they knew were gay. "The wise" were people who might be heterosexual but also are "in the know." Sometimes these people are considered just as supportive as those who are gay. Cindy said of her straight friend, "I talk to her about everything. But she's really the only person I talk to." Kate said that her friends are almost like a little group of people. We're almost like our own little group. Primarily women who are feminists or are liberals. Those are the people I don't have to explain myself to. Some of them are gay. I would say the large majority of them are straight... Some of them have asked things like, "Why do gay women do
this or that?" or "What's it like to be gay?" And I actually appreciate that because it means they're trying to understand.

Sue said of her heterosexual best friend:

I told my best friend before I even told my mom and dad. I figured I needed to hear some acceptance before I got shot down...I really knew she wouldn't put me down for it. She'd support me. And she did.

Of course, lesbians are less hesitant to confide in other lesbians or those they suspect of being lesbian. Stacy told of a situation where a mutual disclosure occurred:

One of my friends I went to school with, she, uh, she sort of act like she was and she wasn't so we brought her home one night and we asked her what'd she think about it and she's like, "It doesn't bother me." And she said, "I got to tell y'all something," and she just come out and told us. And we sort of got tickled. She said, "Y'all are too, aren't you?" You know, it was a big joke. We all sat and laughed for thirty minutes.

Developing friendships as a lesbian is to some degree a result of self acceptance since if a woman does not accept
herself, she is unlikely to present herself to another as a lesbian. But this is also a reciprocal relationship since the friendships that develop can also enhance self acceptance. Three of the women who are feminists credited the women's movement with helping them:

That helped me a lot to see that that many people supported gay rights and not all of them are even gay. It helped a lot. (Shannon)

Probably the most important moment for me was when I became involved in the feminist movement. It wasn't a big deal that I was gay. People accepted it and even fought for lesbian rights. After awhile, I didn't have to tell anybody. They knew enough about it that they just assumed I was gay. (Kate)

(At a feminist convention) we were walking around holding hands. But the people on the thing on the panel were looking at us and smiling. I thought it was funny because they had this look on their faces like proud parents. I'm okay when people accept it. I didn't have any problems there, but here... (Robin)

Not all of these friends were lesbians but as Goffman
wrote, were accepted almost as "honorary members." It is important to note that the acceptance is done by the lesbians. Acceptance by heterosexuals is not merely enough. Lesbians must feel confident about the reliability of heterosexuals.

Others credited other homosexuals with helping at crucial times. Anita talked about how great it was to join a ballet team and realize she was "not the only one." Stella found self acceptance at a gay bar:

I started hanging around with a lot of gay people, you know. I had went to the bar. I just met a lot of people, you know, who are just as good as me. They didn't try to take advantage of people like you hear from the straight people, you know, "just sleep with anybody." I felt at home. I felt comfortable, you know, when I was at the bar. I guess at that point I started really accepting who I was, really.

For lesbians, strategies of information management are crucial. It is often difficult to decide in whom one can confide. For some of the women, disclosure resulted in bad experiences with friends and acquaintances. For others, a lasting source of support was found both in heterosexual friends and other lesbians. In cases such as Anita's and Stella's, this support resulted in increased self acceptance.
The Workplace

Only two women were not concerned with losing their jobs if their lesbianism was discovered. Both of these women were factory workers. Yet they feared harassment from coworkers. Brenda told of her work situation:

Even though there's been all the talk, and there's been plenty of it, and they just like me for me. They probably wouldn't agree with it and they probably wouldn't like it and they'd probably still talk behind my back. But as far as it affecting my job, it wouldn't.

Jennifer and Cindy work at the same factory. Jennifer is not afraid of losing her job, but Cindy is not so sure. Jennifer's concerns are more about coworkers who harass her about "looking like a boy." Cindy says that the rumors are currently circulating about her. She said, "There were some guys up at another area, and they were talking about me being gay...I just said, 'Y'all think whatever you want. I know what I am.'" But the workplace presents a difficult situation for Cindy. She told of a recent problem:

I have to lie a lot. And at work, it's terrible. Because I'm catching a lot of heat right now. I talk with the girls and cut up with them, just enough to keep them going...[My supervisor] has been harassing me a lot to go out with him and he's married. I've been getting harassment from him and
he can't figure out why I don't go out.
with him and stuff.

After recently getting involved with a gay organization,
Cindy met a few people from work at gay parties. They have
developed a network where they try to protect each other
and are always ready to pose as dates.

Other women have definite concerns about their
lesbianism becoming known. They said:

It's like people have lost their jobs, you
know, over that. I mean, they might not
fire me for being gay, but they'd find
some other reason to fire me. You know,
and I make good money, and I don't want to
lose my job over it. (Anita)

I'm sure I'd be fired in a minute. They
wouldn't have to give me that as a reason,
but they'd use anything else as a reason.
But I'm sure I'd be fired in a minute if
they thought I was gay at all. (Barbara)

Like if they found out at work, I wouldn't
doubt it if they tried to fire me. Or at
least make my life hell. They would give
me all the dirty work or later hours or
early hours or whatever they think I don't
want, they'll make me do it. (Robin)
That could mean your job. If you lose one job, it's a small enough community, you can be blackballed. (Muth)

I've watched them (students) in classes how when the topic comes up, they change... It's like suddenly they see you in a different light if they even see you as pro-gay. This is a real conservative area, and I don't think I'd be around much longer if I were more open. (Kate)

Carole said that she has learned that, "Keeping a low profile is the only way I've found to keep peace in my life." She is sure that it would cause problems at work: "See a lot of people think if you're gay, you have leprosy. And I think that would cause some people to think twice." She fears her job would be lost.

Like Cindy, Sue already experiences harassment from men on her job, and they don't even know she is a lesbian. Listen to her story:

We already get harassed because there are more men in my field than women. If a man found out about it, they'd be like, "So that's why you're not attracted to me," and "That's why you won't sleep with me."... That's really terrifying to me that somebody in my field would find out.
Carole keeps pictures of a male actor around her office. Her coworkers believe she is attracted to him. She admires him because "he is so faithful to his wife." Sue invents boyfriends:

I used to be sure to bring up the point when I was going out with a guy... Make sure my coworkers knew. Like some of the guys would ask me out on dates, I would say I had a boyfriend some place else or whatever. And I say that to a whole lot of people now... A couple of guys I worked with asked me out and I said, "I have a boyfriend. He's up home." It was a blatant lie. I really don't think it was appropriate as little as I knew them to say, "Get off my case, I'm gay."

A favorite maintenance strategy is to avoid the issue. Ruth said, "I just don't talk about it. They talk about wanting to go out with men and thus and so's cute. I'll just change the subject." There are effects, however, on the women emotionally. Listen to the frustration expressed by these two:

I found myself just not talking about it. I hate this. I really hate it. And I would say things like, "Say I'm going out with this guy Friday night," that kind of talk to throw them off. That makes me uncomfortable and I don't like it. (Kate)
When I hear talk about homosexuals [at work], it infuriates me. A lot of times I keep my mouth shut. That infuriates me that I do that. But if I speak out, it's almost as much as an admission. As a matter of fact, I had one guy at work who heard a rumor ask me if I was gay. And I told him no. I don't remember if I told him I was bi, but I denied it. I really did. And that didn't make me feel good. (Anita)

Avoiding the issue to Cindy, is just as frustrating as lying. She said:

It's not really healthy at all. In a way, it's still denying. But the way this society is, how else can you... I mean, we all have to work and stuff. We can't change everyone's mind.

Just as with friends, there is a testing process of coworkers to determine how accepting they will be of homosexuality. However, lesbians are a lot less likely to take a chance with coworkers. Sue told an interesting story of a coworker when she worked in a park:

There were two women walking on a trail, and I mean, she just real loud got up on the CB and told one of the rangers to look in. She said, "Two lesbians just walked through here, and I think they're going to go make it in the woods!" I'm like, "Jesus!" So I pretty much knew how she felt. Because
she had them kicked out of the park. She had them kicked out, and they weren't doing nothing...She said, "If you're going to go about with your lifestyle like that," she told them to take it elsewhere.

Listening to the homophobia of coworkers is stress-producing for most lesbians. Anita has even become the victim of coworkers' homophobic graffiti. Her anger and frustration are understandable. She explained:

I thought about actually calling a meeting at work and saying, "Look, motherfuckers, I'm gay and I don't give a damn whether you like it or not." But I'd just be adding fuel to the fire, in my opinion. It's none of their fucking business! That's just the way I feel about it. I don't ask them what they do with their wives when they go home at night.

**Homophobia and Violence**

By now, the reasons why lesbians practice information control should be obvious. They risk rejection by family and friends and the loss of income. Anita even fears expulsion from her neighborhood if the truth of her lifestyle were ever revealed. She said that if the people on her street found out that she is gay, she *probably wouldn't be here much longer...What you don't know won't
hurt you. As long as they don't know, we're a lot better off." For many women, religion had been the source of homophobic messages. Researchers have found that religion is often related to the lack of acceptance of homosexuality (Johnston, 1979). All but one of the women had gone to church as children, and every one of these has now left the traditional church due to the messages they received. Each struggled with resolution of religious conflicts. Some were confronted by ministers, as was Kate, or church members. Cindy had a particularly bad experience:

My preacher knew about it, and in confidence, he said, "Well, I'll keep this in confidence," and he went and told his wife. His wife went and told everybody. And then there was a third preacher to come into the picture. They wanted me to get up in church and confess my sins because they said it was the only way I'd get rid of it. They thought it would shame me for the rest of my life. And I would never do nothing like that again. I quit going to church. I'm a religious person and that was hard.

It is interesting to note that all of these women state that they believe in God. Each one has had to come to her own definition of spirituality and has done so outside of the traditional church.

When initially conducting the interviews, I had
neglected to include the topic of violence in my list of questions. I had not realized its significance until I began hearing it repeatedly from respondents. In some ways, it was implied. Ruth had said in her discussion of whom she would or would not come out to, "I have to know the person for a long time, know they wouldn't tell everybody. Because in this place, it would mean the difference between life and death." Perhaps I, at first, did not realize that she meant this literally. Robin insinuated that the reason she would not disclose to coworkers was, "I work with some rednecks. I envision flat tires, eggs all over my car, pretty rude stuff like that." Then I began hearing comments about the Ku Klux Klan:

If I had someone living with me, I'm sure there'd be a lot of discrimination. The Klan's pretty bad in this town. And everybody knows everybody. (Cindy)

The Ku Klux Klan is really big around here. I'm afraid I'll be found lynched somewhere or people I know lynched. (Ruth)

Anita told a story of friends who had a party at a lake:

One of them said, "I'm just really afraid. There's just one way in and one way out of this place, you know. Somebody might come in with machine guns, the KKK." I mean, we're definitely not liked by the KKK.
Anita said, "I'm not saying it couldn't happen, you know. Because there are some really rednecks around here."

There was also a fear of potential violence implied by several women who feared "rednecks in pickups." Each of them told of riding in cars and:

You know, it's like we're going down the road holding hands in the car and here comes a big pickup, it's like "redneck alert!" (Robin)

I won't kiss her in a car. If we drive by a truck and I'm holding her hand, I'll move my hand away. (Anita)

One night we were riding down by ______ Road, and I said I had to quit (holding hands) before we got in town or we'd get killed because we loved each other. (Ruth)

Stacy also said, "At times we got where we couldn't talk to people; you know. We'd see the boys and girls out holding hands, and that's just not fair because if we done that, somebody's gonna---in a town like this, you could get shot at."

Pat and Anita both complained of the lack of resources for lesbians and indicated that they would like to begin gay bars. They were sure the fear of violence would destine their efforts to failure.

I thought about opening a gay bar here.
It would never work. They'd burn it down or close it somehow. (Pat)

A lot of them (gays) wouldn't go out of fear. Fear of being found out or fear that some rednecks might break in and bash everybody's head in. (Anita)

Political issues also came up concerning gay marches. Ruth said that it was too volatile or "dangerous" an issue for even a feminist group to bring up and would be even worse for a group advocating homosexual rights. A couple others talked about gay politics:

I'm convinced they would not have one (a gay march) here. I mean, if they did, even if the police let you do it, somebody would be seriously hurt. And nobody would show up to march. (Pat)

This is a strange town. When I talk about things I want to do, even other political things, people say things like, "Aren't you afraid you're going to get crosses burning on your yard?" or "Aren't you afraid somebody's going to catch you out by yourself some time?" That is a real problem. I don't know how much I think about that. I think I should probably think about it more than I do. (Kate)
The violence was not only hypothetical. A gay male friend of Anita's was beat up. Carole also said:

There are some people in this town I have seen just pull people out of a bar and just beat the crap out of them and wouldn't hesitate to do it again. A lot of them when they get drunk or on drugs, get violent...I don't need this. If I want violence, I'll go home and watch "Die Hard."

Sue and Stella also had friends whose cars were vandalized. Stella said they began avoiding gay hangouts "because of that. We didn't want to go out as much." Sue also said:

People were going out and vandalizing cars...They just smashed in the whole top of their car. They did that several times. You hear really nasty remarks when you're walking in or what. You really have to wonder, one day is somebody going to stop and beat the crap out of you? Are they going to attack your car?

Sue revealed also that she and Stella had been the victims of threats. "I was really scared this summer too when this guy was making really nasty remarks about me and my lover," she said. "He knows. He threatened to smash our car windows in...He really hated us for what we are."

Ruth and Pat are both college students who fear that
awareness by other students may also prove dangerous. Both had been in classes where the issue of homosexuality has arisen. They were shocked and "terrified" at the amount of anger and hysteria on the part of the students. Ruth said nothing but felt conspicuous because she was one of the few students not participating in a verbal gay-bashing session. Even the professor participated, since she felt AIDS was "the wrath of God." Pat had defended homosexuals in a class and then was accused of being a "queer" by one of the students while the rest of the class glared at her. The student who made the accusation followed her around the campus menacingly after that for awhile. She was afraid, she said, because "he's the type who'd rape you just to show you what you're missing."

Other incidents of violence were noted by Stacy and Brenda. Stacy remembered that when she and Jennifer lived in town, "We had people sneaking around our house and peering in the windows and beating on the windows. So I was sort of scared." She and Brenda told the following stories:

Jennifer worked second shift at work and I was going one night to pick her up and oh, I pulled over. Something had happened to the car. I crawled under the car and got back out and this car pulled up. These three girls---I mean, they really beat me. They told me to stay away from her. Her (Jennifer) ex-boyfriend told me, he was threatening, "If you don't you'll get a
lot worse than this." (Stacy)

I had rifles pulled on me one night because I was with a girl...Total strangers, never seen them before in my life. They stuck guns in the window of the car. Oh, they said plenty. I just couldn't do anything. And there I was. They talked for maybe thirty minutes or so with these rifles in our faces. (Brenda)

What kinds of things were the strangers with rifles saying to Brenda? "Mostly they were preaching," she said. These incidents, according to both women, are "fairly typical."

Eight of the women also mentioned the abuses of rape and battering somewhere in their interviews that at first did not seem related to the issue of lesbianism. However, a pattern of violence seemed to be emerging. It seems that possibly when lesbianism becomes threatening, violence is a method to control it. Even when lesbians did not confess homosexuality but were uncomfortable with the role traditionally assigned to women, they seemed likely to have been the victims of violence. There is no way to know how many lesbians have been the victims of rape and battering or how many instances of violence were perpetrated against women for this reason.

The fear of violence naturally alters the life of women in general and lesbians in particular. Shannon stated that she would like to be more open but:
You have to look at how the world is right now. There's a lot of violence against homosexuals. And it (homosexuality) is not accepted. I mean, it is with a minority of people. But the majority it's not. I think it's kind of dangerous for everyone to know.

Pat does not feel it is possible to be more open. She said, "I do believe someone would go as far as to kill someone. Because there are people here like that...I do believe you'd be in actual physical danger if people knew." She has taken karate lessons and carries a gun for protection.

It has altered my life. I watch everything I do. My curtains got to stay shut. My doors got to be locked. I don't put myself in situations like just the two of us walking somewhere.

The Radicalesbians (1970) wrote, "A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion." Considering some of the instances reported in this paper, it is no wonder why. How do these women feel?

Angry. Hurt. Mostly real angry. Because they wouldn't try to understand. And they've never really talked to me. (Jennifer)

Just sit around and listen. I have not heard anything good about lesbianism at all. You know all the slang terms. They're very
depressing...I sit there and take it personally. Overall, I don't care. I just find myself getting mad over it. (Justine)

I get angry. At first, I get angry. And then I think, "Who are they? And why should they say that?" You know, "Why should they judge me?" Then it comes down to you're not supposed to judge and I think, "Turn the other cheek." I pray a lot. (Cindy)

It used to create a lot of sadness because I'd feel like I was missing out. There's a part of my life I can't share with a lot of people. And the longer it goes on, the madder I get. Sometimes I feel real angry about it. I feel real angry sometimes that we just can't live our lives—to be who we are. (Barbara)

Why does such homophobia exist? Most said "ignorance" or "lack of information." Here are a couple of comments from feminists:

Ignorance and fundamentalist religion. They go together. The patriarchy. Don't you think because in a patriarchal household, men should be the head of the household and women should be submissive? And when women step outside that already cutout
role, men see it as a threat to their man-

hood. (Ruth)

White males are the ones who make the laws
and put down the rules. When they think
about two women being together and not
needing them, that really threatens them.
It threatens their position of being
dominant. Being a minority also has a lot
to do with it. (Shannon)

Two other women also saw it as a threat to male dominance
and traditional gender roles. These women did not consider
themselves feminists. Two other women mentioned
fundamentalist religion or the "literal interpretation of
the Bible" as causes of homophobia in their towns. As some
of the women had perceived a link between sexism and
homophobia, Sue and Stella also saw it as relating to other
forms of prejudice such as racism. Stella perceived
homophobia as the most persistent form of prejudice. She
said:

I think the reason why, and I hate to
really be like this, I don't think gays
will ever be accepted by this society
as a whole. It will always be socially
acceptable by this society as a whole to
say, put down a gay than a black or
Mexican. You know, I can't change the
color of my skin but "you (gays) can
change the way you feel. You don't
have to sleep with this woman or these
women." So I don't really see that
changing.

Sue's observations concerning homophobia were particularly
profound:

I really believe in the thing that people
fear what they don't know. Some of my
friends, and they are my friends, but
they just had these really weird ideas
about gay people until they knew that I
was. And they knew me a long time before
they found out and they know that it can be
average everyday person. People have
a hard time. To me, it's the same as
white people fearing black people or vice
versa. People fear what they don't know.
Without people being educated on the topic
and realizing we don't all wear chains
and leather and hang out in bars preying
on each other...Yeah, there are some out
there, but there are a lot of just simple
everyday people that you would never guess
are gay, and they lead productive lifestyles.
People have preconceived notions. It's
a prejudice. People pre-judge other people,
and until that quits, I don't think homo-
phobia will go away, just like racism or
anything else.

While all have encountered such tremendous obstacles, each has developed a positive self image. All but Brenda say that they totally accept their lifestyles and themselves. In fact, none of the women would change her orientation if she could. To sum up how most lesbians experience self acceptance, Barbara's story may be said to speak for many women:

I'm tired of wondering what people think.
I'm tired of caring. I'm tired of thinking, "Well, I'm going to be rejected." Or "I can't do this because it's not what society wants." I've got to do what's right for me...

In essence, I felt like I had just always denied myself. I was always doing or being, or trying to be, what somebody wanted me to be or what society said I should be. To be a good Catholic girl. And I just could not do that any longer. A person can just do that for so long. It's kind of like lying to yourself all the time. And I didn't have a lot of self-worth. How could I?

I wasn't even telling myself the truth.

Self acceptance is truly the first step towards liberation. Ruth described it as "like taking a big breath of fresh air and having the world lifted off your shoulders." According to the women in this paper, they "wouldn't be happy any
other way." Despite heavy oppression, these women have learned that their strength will sustain them. To conclude this section of data analysis, it is appropriate to quote Suzanne Pharr, a lesbian author and activist, who wrote:

Individually, we are also miracles of survival. In the face of society's homophobia, we constantly assess our safety and determine how visible we can be at any moment. We ask ourselves: How much of my self can I put forward in this moment? Is my friend trustworthy? Will this stranger physically attack me? What will be the response if these people know? Homophobia causes us to engage in a juggling act of our identity in order to survive. And yet we do and most of us manage to maintain sanity and health. (1988, p. 67)
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

But what about the homosexuals who have stayed put in small towns? It is much too easy to say, "Let them move to the cities." Some cannot; others, rooted by temperament or background to the securities of rural life, have chosen not to. But whatever the reason the small-town homosexual remains in his community, he has a hard time of it. If he conceals his nature, he will remain unfulfilled; if he comes out, he will be looked upon as a freak. (Brown, 1976, p. 89)

For this paper, fifteen very strong, brave women were interviewed. They entrusted me with their experiences and had faith that you, the reader, would treat their stories thoughtfully. The honesty required must be appreciated. I hope that the reader, as well as the academic community, will benefit from their insights.

In the beginning of the data analysis section, the women shared stories from their childhoods. We saw both the positive and negative aspects of growing up in small towns. Many of them described experiences as "tomboys," and even at
an early age, were rebels where gender behavior was concerned. These children had no problem with this but were forced by others to "wear dresses" or "play with dolls." Some did these things willingly but rejected traditional femininity when they saw it as representing heterosexuality. Most rejected the traditional female role, because even as children, they could not foresee themselves in the future portraying a heterosexual female. Some, in childhood fantasies, already perceived themselves in lives with women while others tried to repress these feelings once a certain degree of stigma had been internalized.

At the onset of adolescence, much more pressure existed from both peers and adults to abandon "tomboyish" behaviors. There was also much pressure to date men, a pressure to which all succumbed but few enjoyed. In fact, self fulfillment of most of the women was delayed until after a somewhat destructive period of repression.

The age of discovery of lesbian feelings varied from "always knowing" until well into adolescence. Acceptance of these feelings was not immediate due to intervening stigma. The women who first realized their lesbian feelings as small children experienced much less initial conflict than those who first encountered them during adolescence. They described early feelings as "pleasurable" or "natural." Those who learned of their lesbianism later were more likely to be afraid of their feelings since they had already internalized some degree of the stigma associated with
homosexuality. After this stigma was acquired, all of the women experienced some difficulty in self-acceptance.

The acquisition of stigma is the key in the analysis of the phenomena. Before this, the young lesbians had no difficulty with their feelings and were even pleased by them as heterosexual children might be with theirs. It was only after they had repeatedly heard derogatory and frightening comments about homosexuality that they encountered conflict concerning their orientation. They had heard messages from family, peers, teachers and the church implying that homosexuals were mentally ill, morally bankrupt and/or condemned to hell. Some feared disclosure would land them in mental institutions. For many, it did result in trips to psychiatrists' offices. Ruth had heard it equated with rape and murder and was frightened to perceive herself as such a criminal. For all of the women who grew up in environments where religion was a focal point of life, the threat of eternal damnation was perhaps the most threatening as well as the most persistent and pervasive. Every one of the women had to leave her original church, some after much harassment by ministers and congregations alike. Yet all profess a faith in God and have had to work out conflicts on their own. Not surprisingly, most of them do not have high opinions of traditional church settings. Pat's response was typical:

I tend to look around and think, "You could never come here with your 'other' and sit and feel like you were normal because people
would be watching you.* It bothers me some. If they found out, no matter what kind of person I was, they'd tell me to leave...I mean, I believe in God but I don't believe you have to go sit with a bunch of hypocrites to prove that...I do take the kids sometimes because I think they need some kind of religious instruction. But I don't think they need to learn to hate, and I think that's what they learn sometimes in church.

The religious messages that caused Pat to come to that conclusion also caused conflict in all the women, by their own admission, unnecessarily:

When people tell you you're going to hell for being gay, there's a part of you in the back of your mind that questions that and you're scared, because you don't want to go to hell. But you don't see any other way to be. It's not like you're just making this stuff up. It's just the way you are...I realized for the first time that God was not condemning me, that Jesus Christ was not condemning me, but that a lot of people who never lived outside the woods were condemning me. And once I realized that, I started seeing things differently.

(Kate)
I still have a problem with, you know, "Am I going to burn in hell for the rest of my life?" Then I have to question, "Is there really a hell?" and I start saying all this other stuff. It causes a lot of trouble because you think, "Well, this is what it says in the Bible," but it doesn't really say that. There is nowhere they can actually show me that it says, "Lesbians will burn in hell." And I think God is a forgiving and just god. I don't think that he's gonna—if I live my life right and I don't cheat people and I don't kill people or hurt them or steal and I do the best I can, that he's going to send me to hell for loving one person. (Pat)

I don't go to church, but I believe in God, that there is a god...if I go to hell for being gay, I'm not sure that I think that that's right because it's not something I have any control over. Because I've been this way ever since I can remember. Isn't it just as big a sin to be something you're not as to be what you are? (Anita)
I still have my value system, and I still believe that God's involved in my life. But I really don't believe God is going to strike me down for being gay. I tend not to believe that we have a god that rules the earth like that. He deals with us as individuals, I believe. He wants us, it's my opinion, to help each other out, to be peaceful on earth. So I don't buy the institutional deal where you go and sit in a pew and you deem what is right and what is wrong and only those people in a church are doing right and wrong.

(Barbara)

Stacy responded to her parents this way when they used religious homophobia:

They sit and told us, "Don't y'all know you're gonna rot in hell for this?" And we said, "It's no different than y'all gonna rot in hell for things you've done." Because Mom and Dad had done some pretty bad things.

The process of the resolution of these conflicts was much the same as realizing that the messages about homosexuality were created and transmitted by people who were not sensitive to homosexuality and were themselves homophobic. This homophobia had become institutionalized and its effect
then so hard to eliminate. However, once the women, all on their own, discovered this, their self pride was well on its way to developing. Justine felt that the eradicating of myths and degrading messages was essential. She said:

You don't have any opportunity to examine yourself because you're too worried about going to hell. Or too worried about going insane. It's not fair. But if you can have the time and don't have the social pressure with labels to examine yourself, you can come to a logical conclusion...

She said she felt "priests and psychologists have done more to mess people up." They are, she feels, "too heavy on stressing the anxiety, that you're an evil or you're going to go to hell, which is absolutely ludicrous."

These women were all relatively closeted due to the conservative nature of their communities. As Goffman (1963) suggested, they are "discreditable." They had to engage in information control with family, friends and coworkers in an effort to maintain a virtual social identity that suggests a heterosexual identity. One way in which this was done was "passing," or trying to appear straight. Such strategies included dating men, marrying, inventing boy friends or playing along when others spoke of attractive men. Other strategies involved various attempts at the omission of discrediting information.

It may appear that lesbians approach disclosure with
total caution. While this to some degree is true, they did manage to create lives where they could be themselves at least some of the time. Essential for the creation of this safer realm of life are people who are in the know. These are the people with whom lesbians don't put on a show of heterosexuality and can portray their actual social identities. These women demonstrated that those in the know did not necessarily have to be homosexual. While some felt more comfortable with those they knew were lesbians, others' closest friends were understanding heterosexuals. While there seems no way a heterosexual could be entirely empathetic to the experiences of a lesbian, most appeared to be respectful of the other's experiences and provided a source of support.

The internalization of stigma seems almost inevitable considering the heavy anti-gay indoctrination that occurs in our society. For lesbians, the results can be very dramatic and even tragic. It appears that a more open social attitude about homosexuality will result in less internalized homophobia on the part of gays. The enlightenment of a society would be, literally, a life-saving occurrence for many homosexuals. The women in this study could have been spared the months and years of suicidal feelings and depression, substance abuse, bad relationships and religious fears. It would also allow homosexuals to leave the closets where now sit bombs readying for explosions. The stress of living a double life
should never be overlooked. As Pharr (1988) wrote, lesbians truly are "a miracle of survival." Their persistence also says that women-identified women can lead productive lives even when those lives are made difficult by others. The very existence of lesbians says much about the strength of women to live outside of their traditional roles.

There has been some research on the topics of rape and battering as social controls of women (Riger, 1981; Riger and Gordon, 1981; Herman, 1984). By this, they mean that the fear of rape keeps many women at home or with men for protection and that battering a woman keeps her in a submissive role. The results of this paper indicate that violence can also be seen as a means of social control of homosexuals. The threat of violence is as effective as the actual abuse. As Anita told me, "Whether or not it would happen, the fear is still very real." Its effects on the women in this paper were life-altering. This fear keeps homosexuals from disclosing their identity publicly. It keeps them from being affectionate with their lovers in any potentially dangerous situation, which likely includes every aspect of their public lives. By violence, homosexuals in general are kept in their closets. Specifically lesbians are, as are all women, subject to rape and battering simply because they are women. However, it appears they may be more likely to be abused by men who are threatened by their lesbianism or their apparent lack of interest if their lesbianism has not been expressed.
The link between violence and lesbianism is one of the most crucial areas that I would suggest for future research. Violence is not only a tool to keep them, as women, submissive but silent and closeted as homosexuals. The fear of violence limits their lives. The results of violence leave a trail of damage.

Another area that should be researched further is the role of sexual preference in gender identity. This topic was touched upon in this paper but needs to be expanded with both broader samples than this one and more in-depth studies on rural lesbians such as those in this study. It would also be very interesting to do research on the influence of Southern culture on lesbians since it seems apparent that, like nearly everything else, there would be some distinct differences attributable to culture between lesbians from the South and those women who live on the coasts. It appears sometimes that Southern culture may be seen as representing a separate reality, and perhaps this is even more true for lesbians.

Finally, it is my opinion that the research on lesbianism need not be merely academically oriented and descriptive. It should, instead, be activist oriented since homophobia, like racism, anti-Semitism, and sexism, is a form of prejudice bred out of ignorance and the secrecy that surrounds it. Several women in the paper made the link between homophobia and other forms of prejudice. The relation between these forms of oppression needs to be
further examined and researched and such theories of common oppression expanded. Suzanne Pharr's comments are helpful in this analysis:

It is virtually impossible to view one oppression, such as sexism or homophobia, in isolation because they are all connected: sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, ableism, anti-Semitism, ageism. They are linked by a common origin—economic power and control—and by common methods of limiting, controlling and destroying lives. There is no hierarchy of oppressions. Each is terrible and destructive. To eliminate one oppression successfully, a movement has to include work to eliminate them all or else success will always be limited and incomplete. (1988, p. 53)

Researchers should not fear ruffling the feathers of traditional social science. All great theories and ideas have come about only by taking a step further than the rest before. It is undoubtedly true that most of these also met with controversy from somebody. However, acting with conscience may be the only way to eradicate the kinds of oppression described in this paper. Sociologists need not fear the feminist theory, either. Since feminists are notable for their commitment to women, we often find their work on lesbians to be the most passionate, dedicated and liberating. It is my hope that as more researchers are
willing to take a step towards the abolition of homophobia as a goal, the individuals whose lives are affected will eventually be the ones to reap the benefits.

Robertson (1987) wrote that there are about as many substantially homosexual people in the United States as there are blacks or people sixty-five or over—and they, obviously, all have to be somebody's child, parent, cousin, co-worker, teacher, neighbor, friend or fellow worker. (p. 243)

All of the women in this paper and several authors (Brown, 1976; Rich, 1980; Barrett, 1989) complained about the sense of invisibility of homosexuals. Stacy and Jennifer said that they thought they were the only lesbians in their county. All felt that this lack of visibility that was only natural to a homophobic society was detrimental to all homosexuals. While the issue is still shrouded in secrecy, many lives are affected directly or indirectly. In the conclusion of her interview, Shannon emphasized:

We're supposed to be what—-one in ten? But I think there are a lot more. I mean, how can they tell when people don't come out?... People don't realize. They think it's the guy down the street, you know, a person in a different social class or something, that it's not one of their own...If it's one in ten, think how many members in your family
are homosexual.

Until the issue of homosexuality comes out of the closet and we, as a society, become unafraid to discuss it, the horror stories will continue. It is just as crucial for rural America to understand the urgency of Kate's message:

I'd like to live in an area where I could be more open. I grew up in this area and I don't know that I want to leave. It makes me feel angry, helpless sometimes. It drives me nuts to think about these kids going through it in these towns around here, and nobody can help them. It's a shame that people have to go through these things to learn about themselves. It's a shame we can't just start on the same thing as everybody else and accept ourselves and have our friends and family accept us. It would be great if we could skip all this crap in the middle, going through all these nightmares.

Kate, as many other rural lesbians, does not want to leave the region where she was reared. Although changes may have occurred within selected communities in large cities, so much more work needs to be done outside of these areas. Since rural lesbians, particularly as children, have little access to these havens. Most can not even conceive of their
existence. As the quote by Brown (1976) in the beginning of this chapter suggested, many lesbians do not want to leave their homes. Nor should they have to. A Southern woman interviewed by Martha Barron Barrett (1989) appropriately stated:

No matter how "open" Dayton, Boston, and other places I've been were to lesbians, those places never filled my other needs. My home is cleaner, more beautiful, and more laid back. Crime is lower, and there's a sense of neighborliness that doesn't exist anywhere else I've been. I guess it's called Southern hospitality. And then there's the magnolia trees in every yard, and the azaleas blooming in spring and camellias, and the fields so ripe with cotton that it looks like a layer of snow. And I'll be damned if any amount of prejudice is going to keep me from where I belong. (p. 159)

So what of the lesbians in the small towns? They are deserving of the social activism that has yet to free them but gives them hope. Homophobia can not be declared dead until the lesbian is safe in her rural hometown. In conclusion, consider the following:

Homosexuals have won a certain degree of acceptance in the large cities. But the final victory for homosexual freedom will have to be won in the small towns. It is
easy enough to grant acceptance to a group of people one sees oneself as never having to associate with. It calls for a greater degree of understanding, for a true change of mind, to welcome such a group of people into the intimate society of a small town.

(Brown, 1976, p. 107)
## APPENDIX I

**DEMOGRAPHIC DATA ON THE 15 WOMEN IN THE STUDY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CODE NAME</th>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>EDUCATIONAL LEVEL</th>
<th>OCCUPATION</th>
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<tr>
<td>Anita</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2 yrs. college*</td>
<td>service technician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carole</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>H.A.</td>
<td>teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>high school graduate</td>
<td>factory worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stacy</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10th grade</td>
<td>factory worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cindy</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>high school graduate</td>
<td>factory worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3 yrs. college</td>
<td>factory worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justine</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2 yrs. college*</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1 yr. college**</td>
<td>counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stella</td>
<td>22</td>
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<td>restaurant worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>restaurant worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pat</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>29</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shannon</td>
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<td>none</td>
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<tr>
<td>Robin</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2 yrs. college**</td>
<td>grocery worker</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* attends college part-time
** attends college full-time
APPENDIX II

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

First of all, let me assure you complete confidentiality. Your name will not be used, nor will any information that would identify you. If you feel that any of the questions are too personal, you are free to not answer them. You are also free to discontinue the interview at any time.

Demographics
1. What is your age?
2. What is your educational background?
3. What is your present occupation?
4. Are your parents still living? What were their occupations? Did they go to college?
5. Do you have any brothers and sisters? Tell me about them. Are they older or younger than you?

Growing Up
1. Where did you grow up? Tell me about your hometown. What was it like growing up there?
2. What was your family like?
3. Were you close to your parents growing up? Why or why not? Were you close to siblings? Why or why not?
4. When do you recall your first feelings about other girls or women? Were these feelings sexual? What were they like? How did you feel?
5. When did you come to the conclusion that you were lesbian? What were the circumstances? How did that make you feel?
6. What kind of future did you, as a child, envision for yourself with regard to career, family, friends and lifestyle? Did you see yourself as being with a man or woman? How did you see yourself?
7. Who was the first person you told? Why? How did he or she react?

Friends/Present Day
1. Who knows today about your lifestyle? How do you decide whom to tell?
2. Do you worry about being "found out"? Why?
3. Are there resources for gays in this town? If so, tell about them. Where do you go when you need support?
4. Tell me about your friends. What were their reactions when you told them? Are most of them gay? Describe their lifestyles.
5. Do you have a best friend? Tell about him or her.

Work
1. Do your co-workers know? If so, how did they find out? How did they react? Did it change your work relations? If they don't know, how do you think they would react? Do you take precautions to keep them from finding out? Why? What are these?
2. Does your employer know? If so, how did she or he react? If not, do you worry about this person finding out?
3. Are there strategies you use at work to keep others from finding out? What are these?

Family/Religion
1. Do your family members know? If so, how did they find out? What was their reaction? If not, do you worry about them finding out? Why or why not? Do you do anything in particular to keep it hidden? What? Why?
2. (If they know) Did your relationship to them change after they found out? How?
3. Is your family religious? Did you ever receive religious messages from them about homosexuality or about your role as a woman?
4. Do you consider yourself religious? Why or why not?

Relationships
1. Are you presently in a relationship? If so, for how long? What do you look for in a relationship? How do you deal with your partner's family?
2. (If applicable) Do you and your partner keep separate friends or have the same friends? Why?
3. Do you have children? Does your partner? If so, how do you deal with the situation? How do they? Do you want children?
4. Have you had relationships with men? Describe these.

Other
1. Have you experienced discrimination because of your lifestyle? Describe.
2. Do you perceive potential discrimination if you were more open? What kind of discrimination do you think might occur? How does this affect your lifestyle?
3. How do you perceive your community's reaction to
4. Are you involved in the feminist or gay rights movements? If so, describe your involvement. If not, what are your feelings about these movements?
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