LESBIAN IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

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This thesis and the research study on which it is based is my own work
The views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and not of the College

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ABSTRACT

Lesbian identity and community

This thesis is concerned with lesbian identity and community, with a specific focus on lesbians' own experiences, their accounts of the decision to identify as lesbian to themselves and possibly to other people, and their 'explanations' of their lesbianism.

Studies of lesbians by feminist social scientists since the 1970s have provided a major corrective to the earlier medically-orientated literature which pathologised lesbianism. Challenging the demonisation of lesbians, they presented lesbianism as a politicised choice or as one of a range of equally valid sexual identities, and proposed typologies based on women's own accounts of their lives and experiences. However, as these studies were mostly based on a small number of informants, drawn from homogeneous social groups in terms of age, social class and education, their utility as generally applicable models or frameworks for understanding lesbians' experiences was compromised.

Informed by feminist theory and methodology, this study seeks to test the validity or limitations of these earlier typologies. Focus groups were conducted with five groups of women in order to establish what lesbians themselves considered to be the key aspects of their identity. These topics were further explored in interviews with 65 self-identified lesbians from a wide range of backgrounds in terms of age, education, occupation and location, to examine the similarities and differences in the life-stories of women who wish to engage in relationships with other women, or who are doing so or have done so.

Lesbians' accounts of their decisions about their 'sexual' identity and their own explanations of lesbianism demonstrate how both heterosexual hegemony and (ironically) also lesbian subcultural 'norms' may restrict their choices in various aspects of their lives.

The intention of this study was not only to provide an academic review of the accuracy and utility of earlier studies of lesbians' lives, but also to give lesbian women a voice, as a political act. It found that lesbians' accounts of their lives can indeed be classified into various categories on the basis of women's differing explanations of their lesbianism, as earlier studies had proposed. However, these studies were overly rigid and simplistic, doing scant justice to both the complexity of lesbians' experiences and their own explanations of their identity.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Lesbians have become culturally visible in Britain in the 1990s, as they have never been before. They have featured in the mass media as key figures in soap operas, in films on general release, and in specialist programmes (Cottingham, 1996). Lesbian characters have appeared in most of the British soap operas including *Emmerdale*, *Eastenders*, *Brookside* and *Family Affairs*. This so-called 'Popular culture's romance with lesbianism' (Marshment and Hallam, 1994: 143) resulted in six million viewers watching the televised adaptation of Jeanette Winterson's lesbian novel *Oranges are not the Only Fruit* in 1990, which received such widespread critical acclaim that it was soon repeated (Howes, 1993). Images of lesbianism now appear with some regularity in fashion magazines, since the August 1993 edition of *Vanity Fair* devoted its front cover to a cross-dressed k.d.lang being shaved by supermodel Cindy Crawford. According to Hamer and Budge, this represented a high point in the media designation of lesbianism as commercially and socially 'chic' (Hamer and Budge, 1994; Cottingham, 1996). All of this mainstream coverage, combined with what Weeks (1991) sees as a massive increase in public tolerance towards homosexuality (and one assumes he includes lesbians in this) since the 1960s in Britain, suggests widespread social acceptance and destigmatisation of homosexuality.

However, there are limits to this toleration of alternatives to heterosexuality. The full social and legal acceptance of lesbians in society has not yet been realised, and the social policies of successive British governments continue to marginalise lesbians and to deny them the same legal rights as heterosexuals enjoy.

Several European countries, such as the Netherlands and Denmark, have enacted 'registration of partnership' laws (Waaldijik, 1994) which give same-sex couples legal recognition and legitimation through civil ceremonies, thereby allowing them to share the same rights and privileges as heterosexual couples regarding tax, social security, pensions and property. In the United Kingdom government policy, especially under Conservative rule, has consistently discouraged any alternative to the heterosexual family (van Every, 1991). The most notorious example of this illiberalism was the passing of the Local

Government Act (1988), which included the infamous 'Clause 28', which made it illegal for local authorities to intentionally promote homosexuality or to indicate to schoolchildren that lesbian and gay families are anything other than 'pretend' family relationships (Colvin and Hawksley, 1989). A further piece of legislation from that time aimed at exercising social control over lesbians was the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act (1990) which tightened control over the kinds of women eligible for donor insemination from clinics providing 'treatment services'. Such clinics are required to hold a license from the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority. The Act made it the legal responsibility for such clinics to take into account the welfare of any child born as a result of donor insemination, with specific reference made to the 'child's need for a father' (Gooding, 1992). Although Saffron (1994) argued that the wording used by the licensing authority enabled it to avoid discrimination against lesbians, thus making it legally possible for lesbians to receive donor insemination, Steinberg's (1987) earlier study of doctors' willingness to provide donor insemination to lesbians had found that most of those interviewed were unwilling to do so, even before the Act was passed.

The above brief examination of some of the issues affecting lesbians in Britain in the 1990s paints an ambivalent picture. On the one hand, lesbianism appears to have become culturally acceptable, fashionable and destigmatised, yet on the other hand, some new legal restrictions against lesbians (and gay men) have come into force since the 1980s. In 1980 Ettorre suggested that lesbianism was regarded as posing a threat to society because it exposed the contradictions which existed in people's beliefs about biology, culture, ideology, sex and about women and femininity. There is ample evidence to indicate that this is still true today, in that lesbianism continues to exist in a society that is heterosexually hegemonic and male-orientated. As such, lesbians are placed on the periphery of a heterosexual society by their rejection of traditional, dominant sexual ideology.

In order to exist in a society that marginalises and legally abuses them, lesbians themselves have constructed, like many other minority groups, an identity, community and hence a culture of their own. McIntosh (1968) and Foucault (1979), with others, have argued that homosexual identities represent historically constructed categories, arising from personal and social experience and influenced by intimate relationships, friendships and community networks. The politicisation of lesbian identity and the founding of social venues for lesbians to meet each other have facilitated the development of lesbian networks and

lesbian solidarity. The emergence of lesbian feminism in the late 1960s and the wealth of writings which followed in the 1970s created a lesbian identity which for the first time attempted to differentiate itself from gay male identity. The notion of the 'woman-identified woman' (Radicalesbians, 1970) which emerged in this period was not just based on a sexual preference, but on feminist politics arising from critiques of patriarchy and feminist attempts to raise women's and men's consciousness of misogynistic practices. Although lesbian feminism remains one of the prime markers in the construction of modern lesbian identity, the political homogeneity of lesbianism has been attacked by those women who believed that lesbian feminist politics did not sufficiently acknowledge 'difference' amongst lesbians, in the form of cultural background, ethnicity or class. As a result, since the 1980s various theoretical works have problematised the notion of lesbian identity, with some proposing that academic discourse on lesbianism should be about sexual practices rather than identity (Stein, 1992).

Much academic research on lesbianism from the late 1960s and 1970s, whether psychological such as Hopkins (1969) and Wollf (1972), or from a sociological perspective like that of Gagnon and Simon (1973) and Schafer (1976), unproblematically accepted the dominant heterosexual definition of lesbian, without exploring lesbians' own definitions. To those who do not identify as lesbian, the definition of 'lesbian' may be relatively simple, for example the dictionary definition of a lesbian as a 'female homosexual' who sexually desires relations with other women. The 1989 Oxford English Dictionary defines 'lesbian' as: 'Of a woman: homosexual, characterised by a sexual interest in other women. Also pertaining to homosexual relations between women'.

Some contemporary sociological researchers still accept traditional theories and definitions of sexuality, which often originate in the work of sexologists in the late 1800s. By proposing that sexual orientation is due to an 'internal condition which may be latent or unknown' and sexual preference as 'pattern of sexual/affectional desires of which the individual is aware, much like any other preference or taste' (Whisman, 1996:40), as Whisman does, is to suggest that those women who claim to have had a lesbian orientation from birth are in some way more 'authentic' lesbians than those who make a conscious decision to enter into relationships with other women. Some researchers have therefore defined in advance of data collection the terms to be used in their studies rather than allowing informants to generate their own definitions. This study has not constructed an *a priori* definition of lesbianism; it was left to individual informants to define it for

themselves. Lesbianism may be defined differently by individuals and diverse groups of lesbians, varying with personal social context. In a society characterised by the hegemony of heterosexuality, lesbian may be defined in purely sexual terms by the majority, but this may not be true for lesbians themselves. This study also problematises the definition of 'sexual orientation' as an innate characteristic of an individual, as some lesbians may feel a freedom of choice about whether to label themselves as lesbian and their capacity to make a conscious choice about the orientation of their sexual partners.

The main purpose of this study is to seek individual lesbians' own explanations and thoughts on whether lesbian identity exists and, if so, what it is. By securing informants from a variety of backgrounds, with a range of life experiences and of various ages, the study examines how individuals negotiate and construct, and re-negotiate and re-construct, the meanings that they attach to the label of 'lesbian' and how their identity may be affected by other people's perceptions of them. Previous empirical research undertaken by Schafer (1976), Ponse (1978), Ettorre (1980), Markowe (1996) and Whisman (1996) led each of these authors to construct their own typology of lesbians, which may now appear to be unduly narrow in scope, not least because of the homogeneity of their informants. This study is concerned with testing out such typologies using a larger, more diverse, contemporary cohort of lesbians.

The topic of lesbian identity is of personal interest. I have suspected for a long period of time that there is no longer one single all-pervading 'lesbian identity' nor one 'lesbian community'. Rather, there exist 'lesbian identities' and 'lesbian communities', as lesbians are not a homogeneous group and therefore may be no more likely to share the same views, beliefs, or concerns as any other group of individuals. This suspicion has led me to seek out other lesbians to discover what their beliefs and perceptions are on this subject, as a way of exploring my own identity. The researcher is said to be the most important tool in the research process (Taylor and Bogdon, 1984). Those of us whose subject matter is close to our own experiences can probably expect our own beliefs about the world to permeate and shape our work (Du Bois, 1983). My research is no exception.

My identity as a white, non-disabled, lesbian, feminist and working class woman means that I cannot be a neutral figure in my research. I will therefore provide some autobiographical details here to indicate to the reader what were my beliefs and prejudices and the assumptions that I held at the inception of this study.

My route to higher education was not a traditional one. The decade after I left school was a troubled and dislocated period, which mostly came to an end when I returned to study. A one-year residential course in Women's Studies at a Further Education College at the age of twenty six preceded a Bachelor of Arts degree, in which I majored in Women's Studies. This doctoral study began when I was thirty years old. I grew up in a mining village in South Yorkshire. My parents, like many who lived in that area, were proud to call themselves working class. Like other families, they had a strong local identity, and were well acquainted with successive generations of many local families, most of whom appeared to stay within the area where they were born. I am the first of my extended family to leave South Yorkshire to move 'South', the first to have gained a degree and, to my knowledge, the first woman to 'come out' as a lesbian. All of these matters, especially the latter, have caused much bewilderment and some distress to my family,

From an early age I was aware that working class expectations of women's roles, seeing them predominantly as wives and mothers, were far too restrictive for me, and that I was not going to fit well in a world where the norms of heterosexuality and femininity were, and still are, at odds with my self-image.

As a child I could not understand why girls had to marry boys, rather than other girls. Later in my teens, when my knowledge of such matters was a little more advanced, I still could not conceive why my claiming an alternative sexuality to the norm brought such hostility from my family and those close to me. In my early and mid teens, there were very few strong, positive role models of lesbians, which would have offered an alternative to the heterosexual hegemony that appeared to envelop me. From the age of fourteen, when I first dared, perhaps naively, to declare openly my feelings of 'difference' from other girls, I have met with countless instances of overt, and more often covert, homophobia. Having been a lesbian for the last nineteen years, and being therefore a member of a marginalised group, I have lived within a heterosexual culture without ever taking for granted feelings of inclusivity.

This thesis has partly developed from my own experience of social injustice, and therefore it stands as my personal contribution against such injustice. It is also intended to 'give a voice' to some of those lesbians in society who have had research 'done on them' but who have traditionally had little say in deciding what are the important issues to women like themselves, who feel that they are not included in a society where the norm of

heterosexuality remains dominant, and who have had little impact on social policy. It is intended that this study will be for and about lesbians, rather than merely 'on' them. It also seeks to examine and reflect on the perspectives and paradigms that have been prominent within the academic study of sexualities, and to offer empirically based research that may refine and extend this work. Finally, the research process has been used as an opportunity to understand my own experiences, which is something that until quite recently was not seen as a legitimate endeavour for academic research (Kirby and McKenna, 1989).

My criteria for women to be included as informants within this study were simple: that they self-identified as lesbian or were willing to have their name passed on to me by someone who believed them to be both lesbian and willing to participate in the research project. Unlike Gagnon and Simon (1973), I did not exclude women who could not demonstrate that they were sexually active exclusively with other women, nor did I expect informants to have regular or repeated genital sexual activity with women (Bieber, 1969; Saghir and Robins, 1969). Likewise, nor did I exclude women who claimed that they had ideological reasons for their lesbianism, such as radical feminism, as some researchers have previously done (Defries, 1976). Within this study 'lesbian' is used to denote those women who defined themselves as 'lesbian', 'gay', 'dyke' or 'queer', and 'lesbian identity' refers to whatever meanings the individual attached to her lesbianism, regardless of whether she understood her lesbianism to be a social, political, sexual or emotional identity, or some or all of these. The terms 'lesbian identity' and 'sexual identity' will therefore be used to mean labelling oneself as lesbian. The careful usage of words relating to lesbianism is important and definitions need to be made clear, as the emphasis of this study is not to seek the 'real' lesbians in order to locate the 'truth' about lesbianism, but rather it is intended to examine the way in which women construct and make sense of their lesbianism, and the kinds of stories that they tell in explaining it.

As the literature review which follows will indicate, in my view too many academic works on and by lesbians have based their assertions on evidence obtained from a small coterie of women intellectuals and professionals known to the author. I have actively sought to extend my circle of informants beyond my own networks. Despite its manifest limitations, this work has been written with a wider audience in mind, of lesbians who may identify with my informants, or who may find that these accounts resonate with their own lives and experiences.

This thesis will address why and how some women identify themselves as lesbian, and the meaning that they attach to this. Drawing on empirical research, this thesis will question how lesbian identity is negotiated, constructed and interpreted throughout women's lives, asking whether a shared sense of identity can or does exist between these women.

This chapter, Chapter One, sets out the main issues to be addressed by this thesis and includes a statement of my main research questions. It has included a brief personal biography which indicates my own personal biases and experiences, including an explanation of why I embarked on researching this subject.

Chapter Two contains a review of the literature on theories of sexuality, which have informed current thought on lesbian identity and community. The origins of modern theories regarding women's sexuality, especially lesbian sexuality, are charted in a brief historical examination of the period from the latter nineteenth century to the 1920s, a time in British history where 'homosexuality' first became problematised and thus perceived as 'deviant' by intellectuals, which in turn influenced public perceptions of homosexuality. The literature review then proceeds, organised in sequential decades from the 1920s to the 1990s, covering both political and social issues as they relate to lesbians, together with the major theories of homosexuality which I consider particularly relevant to modern understandings of lesbianism. In order for the reader to understand the construction and development of lesbian identity, the section for each decade will briefly highlight the main political and social issues affecting women in general, explaining their relevance for lesbians' lives. A critical review of the significant theoretical texts published in that decade, selected on the basis of their relevance for the study, is generally situated at the end of each section, set within a sketch of the socio-political context of the time in which they originated.

Chapter Three examines the decisions I made in planning the approaches and methods used for gathering data within this study, drawing upon the literature on research methodology, including work by feminist researchers. Throughout this chapter I aim to articulate my personal experiences during the research process and to recount the practical and ethical dilemmas I faced when conducting the research. This exposes my own thinking to critical scrutiny, enabling others to assess the validity of the material I gathered.

Chapter Four provides a preliminary analysis of the data collected, presented under the main themes identified as relevant to this study by my informants and in the literature on lesbian identity and community in Chapter Two.

Chapter Five returns to the models of lesbian identity and community discussed earlier. Here I interpret my findings in relation to the previous literature, highlighting the similarities and differences between mine and these other research-based studies in relation to theoretical issues regarding lesbian identity and community.

The final chapter, Chapter Six, summarises the main findings and identifies the principal contribution of the thesis to this body of literature. I then proceed to make suggestions for further research which I believe would extend our knowledge of this subject. This concluding chapter also includes my reflections on the research process, identifying what changes I would make with hindsight, and assessing what I have learned as a social researcher in the course of undertaking the project.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

> ...[W]hen a subject is highly controversial and any question about sex is that, one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold... (Woolf, 1929:7)

The subject of this study could be considered to be controversial, even today, both within academe and within the wider society. Contemporary discourse in the field of sexual politics may perceive lesbianism as simply one among other alternative sexualities. However, there are still those who regard it as a 'perversion' or the antithesis of the 'one true' sexuality. In order to situate the current views of 'expert authorities' of various kinds (mainly academics) relating to this subject, it seems pertinent to examine how these perspectives have emerged and developed over the decades. Historians claim that work published in the latter half of the nineteenth century provided many of the ideas which informed the construction of modern-day theories of sexuality (Brecher, 1969; Weeks, 1985; Bristow, 1997). In the Western world scholars in various academic disciplines have sought to extend and refine these early theories, include sociologists (Ettorre, 1980), psychologists (Wollf, 1972), social psychologists (Markowe, 1996), anthropologists (Lockard, 1986), psychoanalysts (O'Connor and Ryan, 1993) and more recently queer theorists (Smyth, 1992), who have all contributed to our understanding of sexual identities. This literature review will summarise and evaluate the most relevant of these theories, in chronological order from the late nineteenth century to the present day. The sources reviewed here have been selected as promoting our understanding of sexuality in both academic circles and the wider society. They have also become incorporated into lesbian subcultures through the transmission of information and ideas between its members through word of mouth, books (both academic and popular), magazines and lesbian and gay films. Hence, these theories have played a significant part in lesbians' lives, often helping women make sense of their experiences and to confirm their understanding of their own sexual identity, in the face of public hostility.

However, academe does not operate within a vacuum; ideas, debates and knowledge derive from a variety of sources, and it is to alternative sources as well as to academe that I turned in order to identify contemporary theories about lesbian identities. I have yet to locate a book which combines a social history of women's lives, including lesbians', which also charts the progression of academic analyses of lesbian sexuality. I have therefore decided to present this literature review in such a way as to incorporate both a social and cultural history of women in general and lesbians specifically, while at the same time recording the development of academic theories relating to heterosexuality and homosexuality. Although nowadays books on women's history are plentiful, many include no information on lesbians, nor on how the social and political changes affecting women in the wider society have specifically affected lesbians' lives. Indeed, lesbians are largely invisible, except from specifically 'lesbian' studies. Therefore, rather than solely examining academics' attempts to explain sexual orientation, this chapter will also sketch the political and social activities and historical contexts within which these works came to be written, in order to understand how much literature on women came to ignore lesbian issues.

As later chapters on the empirical data collected for this study will show, the oldest of my informants is now aged over 80. It therefore seems appropriate that this review should cover the decades from the 1920s onwards, reflecting the times which they experienced, in order to clarify how my informants may have been influenced by the social, cultural and political issues of the day, and to assess their relevance for lesbians' lives and experiences. For each decade, this charting of the wider socio-cultural context will be followed by a review of contemporary publications relating to lesbian identities. As a starting point, I need to examine the theories of sexuality which emerged in Western Europe in the latter half of the nineteenth century and which, historians suggest, were pivotal to modern-day understandings of sexual identity and behaviour.

2.2 The historical construction of lesbianism

Foucault (1976), Weeks (1985) and Bristow (1997) agree that the Victorian age, although traditionally perceived as a sexually repressive era in which sex was firmly located in the private sphere, was actually a period when sex and sexuality became topics of general debate. One stimulus to this debate was the state's attempt to regulate sexual disease and 'immorality' in the mid-nineteenth century. Parliamentary Commissions were formed to

examine such contemporary problems as the birth rate, fertility, public health and prostitution. Two separate pieces of legislation were passed which would primarily affect women, especially those from the working class, but would also have far-reaching consequences for homosexuals.

The first was the Contagious Diseases Act of 1864 (amended in 1866 and 1869) which resulted from the Government's concern at the high number of members of the lower ranks of the armed forces who were found to have venereal disease. The Act permitted police officers and medical practitioners in certain garrison towns and naval ports to notify a Justice of the Peace if they suspected a woman of being a prostitute, following which prostitutes and suspected prostitutes could then be detained and medically examined, against their will if necessary, at certified hospitals, for up to three months. Any woman refusing to undergo medical treatment or attempting to leave the hospital could be imprisoned for up to two months (Hollis, 1979; Mort, 1987). Such state intervention was not without its critics. A movement consisting of male and female educated middle-class protesters emerged, of which Josephine Butler was the most famous. They argued that the law was unjust in punishing women but not men, and that the prostitutes were the real victims of vice, and men the cause.

Until this time prostitution had been largely ignored by those in positions of power, seeing it as 'relatively integrated into the culture of working class life'. It now became a focus of much concern, with prostitutes labelled as 'immoral pollutants' (Mort, 1987:77) and blamed for causing the decline of whole working class communities, as well as being a source of both physical and moral contagion for middle and upper class men (Davidoff, 1982). This furore highlights the class and gender divisions which were evident in social relationships of the Victorian period. Major debates over sexual morality, including women's right to sexual autonomy and their equal political, legal and social rights, raged throughout the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, in what was to become popularly known as 'The Woman Question'.

This concern focused on key areas of women's lives including marriage, birth control, and sex. Feminists campaigned for marital reform and sex education, and the issue of women's right to sexual pleasure was also discussed by some feminists and men, although it remained a controversial subject (Bland, 1995; Caine, 1997). Campaigns by feminists in the latter half of the nineteenth century sought to oppose the traditional and patriarchal

ideologies which dominated the Victorian period, in which the family was seen as society in miniature, with the adult male of the household as its head.

Trafficking in young women who were abducted for the purposes of prostitution was another cause of widespread concern amongst feminist campaigners. Under British law juvenile prostitution was not illegal as the age of consent for girls was 13. A Criminal Law Amendment Bill on the issue of juvenile prostitution and attempts to raise the age of consent were put before Parliament repeatedly from 1883 but they all failed. Josephine Butler, who had campaigned tirelessly for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act, headed the campaign for the passing of the Criminal Law Amendment Act. Along with members of the Salvation Army, Butler gained the support of W.T Stead, editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* and supporter of feminist causes. Stead undertook his own investigation of prostitution by purchasing a thirteen year old girl in order to highlight the ease in which young girls could be procured for the purposes of prostitution. His findings were presented in a sequence of articles in the newspaper, which caused uproar amongst its readers. Following a demonstration in Hyde Park attended by a quarter of a million people, including feminists, trade unionists, socialists and evangelical priests, a bill was forced through Parliament almost immediately (Bland, 1995). The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 was formally entitled:

> An act to make further provision for the protection of women, the suppression of brothels and other purposes. (David, 1997:17)

It was applauded by feminists and socialists alike. However, newspaper editor and Member of Parliament, Henry Labouchere, successfully proposed a last-minute amendment to insert a clause headed 'outrages to public decency'. It formally became law on 1 January 1886. Section 11 read:

> Any male person who, in public or in private, commits, or is a party to the commission of, or procures, or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency shall be guilty of misdemeanour and being convicted shall be liable at the discretion of the court to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years, with or without hard labour. (Criminal Law Amendment Act, [1885] (48 and 49 Vict.c. 69; sec.,11) cited in David, (1997): 17-18)

Popularly known as the 'Labouchere Amendment', this was seen as a reaction against the abolition of the death penalty for buggery, which had been in place between 1533 and 1861 (Stewart, 1995). The buggery laws had only focused on anal sex, leaving all other homosexual acts outside the remit for prosecution. However, the 1885 Act made all homosexual acts between men illegal, further driving homosexuality into the underground world of vice and immorality due to homosexual men's fears of blackmail.

Although feminists largely welcomed the passing of the Act, it had negative effects on some women's lives. Vigilante groups put pressure on landlords not to lease property to 'suspect' women, which included those who were believed to be prostitutes, those living with other women and those who lived alone. As result, many women found it difficult to rent property (then the most common form of tenure), including not only women working as prostitutes and those women living in lodging house brothels, but also 'any women living with other women' (Bland, 1995:101). By the turn of the century there were three main topics of feminist debate:

> ...[T]he campaign around sexual danger, the discussion of (heterosexual) pleasure, and the development of a new lesbian identity. (Bland, 1995:251)

Those who professed expert knowledge of sexuality at this time (who were almost all men) became popularly known as sexologists. Writers such as Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis had a profound influence on both 'expert' and lay thinking, with their analysis of male and female sexual behaviour, their theories of the physiology of the reproductive organs, and their categories of sexuality. For the first time variants of sexual behaviour were described, in particular male and female homosexuality.

Sexology is the study and classification of sexual identities, behaviours and relations. It emerged as a discipline in Britain, Europe and North America from the 1860s, alongside other new sciences of that time, including anthropology, sociology, criminology and psychology, all of which were concerned with the classification of populations and people. The word sexology was translated from the original German *Sexualwissenchaft* (literally 'the science of sex'), by the German historian, researcher and physician, Iwan Bloch (1872-1922) (Bristow, 1997). Sexologists such as Karl Heinrich Ulrich (1825-95), Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840-1902) and Havelock Ellis (1859-1939) are all credited as being pioneers in attempting to provide classifications of sexuality by tracing its aetiology, examining and naming fetishes, and allegedly constructing pathological stereotypes such as the pervert, the sadist, the masochist and the female and male homosexual. Their 'data' comprised a combination of anthropological, historical and biological information, together with the classic psychoanalytic 'case study', which allowed individuals' sexual experiences, thoughts, fantasies and dreams to be recorded and used to provide evidence of sexual phenomena. The main theories of some of these principal sexologists will be

reviewed in chronological order, in acknowledgement of their significance for later generations of homosexual women and men.

Karl Heinrich Ulrich (1825-1895) was, like Bloch, German, a legal officer and himself a homosexual. He is credited as being one of the first and most influential of the sexologists to have developed speculative theories on the putative causes of homosexuality, as early as the 1860s (Bristow, 1997). Throughout his life he campaigned in Germany for the transformation of state legislation as it related to homosexuality, publishing 12 volumes on homosexuality between 1864 and 1879 (Weeks, 1985). According to Bristow, Ulrich was the pioneer of congenital theories. These theories replaced the previous characterisation of homosexuality as a moral failing from which anyone could suffer, to a congenital theory which proposed that homosexuality was a psychosexual condition which was beyond individual choice.

Ulrich invented two terms, namely Uranian and Dionian love, to describe what later became known as homosexuality and heterosexuality. Uranian desire is expressed by Urnings, people who love their own sex. Ulrich believed that Urnings were born with the bodies of men but with the mind and sexual drive of women, making them a third sex who were neither fully men nor fully women, but rather people whose sexual bodies were of one sex while their minds were of the other. Dionings was the name Ulrich gave to people who experienced opposite-sex attraction. He constructed an elaborate system of permutations of Uranian and Dionian desire, devising the term 'Uranodionings' for people who desired both sexes. However, he knew very little about female sexuality, concentrating on male homosexuality.

Ulrich's work is credited as offering a new stage in Western conceptions of sex, due not only to his primary belief in the naturalness of same-sex love, but also because he proposed that all sexualities are rooted in a principle of sexual difference. Thus, Urnings were either masculine or feminine and thereby active or passive in their sexual behaviour. Ulrich was the first to identify two different but complementary forms of homosexuality.

In 1886 Richard von Krafft-Ebing published his work *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Most of his work consisted of the presentation of four broad categories of sexual variation, including fetishism, sadism and masochism. Unlike Ulrich, his section on homosexuality, which he termed *antipathic sexual instinct*, included many case studies of women. Krafft-Ebing was professor of Psychiatry at the German University of Strasbourg, and later at Vienna, and

was a psychiatric consultant to the courts in both Germany and Austria. *Psychopathia Sexualis* mainly consisted of illustrated categories of sexual variation with case studies, derived from his own patients, from the criminal courts and early medical literature. Although he initially asserted that homosexuals manifested a diseased condition of the central nervous systems, in later editions of his book he placed more emphasis on congenital causes, somewhat oddly stating that this was a hereditary 'taint'.

Krafft-Ebing may have been more positive about homosexuality than many of his contemporaries, but his theories have not served the interests of lesbians and gay men. Little was known in his day about homosexual women, which he referred to as 'inverts', since female homosexuality was not illegal in any European country at that time:

> The chief reason why inverted sexuality in women is still covered with the veil of mystery is that the homosexual act so far as woman is concerned, does not fall under the law. (Krafft-Ebing, [1886] 1903:395)

He drew a distinction between what he saw as 'true' inversion, those women he believed were inverts due to a congenital condition, and those who became inverts because of environmental factors. Nevertheless he not only believed that sources of female homosexuality could be identified, but also proposed that homosexual women could be identified by their physical characteristics which he suggested were similar to those of males:

> ...[O]f the feminine qualities only the genital organs; thought, sentiment, action, even external appearances are those of the man. (Krafft-Ebing [1886] 1903:397)

Krafft-Ebing remains one of the best known theorists of homosexuality within this period - one of the most 'famous and assiduous courtiers of sexuality' (Weeks, 1985:63). However, for many, Krafft-Ebing's work 'represented an unmitigated disaster' for the history of sex research. Describing his work as 'weird and barely credible', Brecher believes Krafft-Ebing to be responsible for:

> [A]n untold proportion of the confusion which continues to surround the subject of sexual variation today. (Brecher, 1969:52)

Contemporaries such as Henry Havelock Ellis continued to categorise female 'inverts' by their physical characteristics. Ellis published seven volumes of his work, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, between 1896 and 1910, of which Volume 1, Part Three, consists of his

works on homosexuality, which he named *sexual inversion*, echoing Krafft-Ebing. This work proved to be one of the most highly acclaimed but controversial writings on the subject of homosexuality. Unlike his German counterparts, English-born Havelock Ellis had initially trained in medicine and became known as a psychologist, healer and counsellor (Brecher, 1969). For him *sexual inversion* was the sexual instinct 'turned by inborn constituted abnormality towards persons of the same sex' (Bland, 1995: 262). Havelock Ellis created a further argument for homosexual law reform by stating that any disorder associated with inverted sexuality was caused by societal attitudes towards it, rather than the homosexuality itself (Stewart, 1995).

Although both Robinson (1976) and Weeks (1981) claim that Havelock Ellis was a progressive sexual radical whose work on moral categories provided the basis for all sexual theorising to date, his views on the nature of female sexuality, especially lesbianism, were less than progressive. Despite championing the cause of male homosexuality and questioning the prevailing perception of a link between effeminacy and male homosexuality, his case studies of 'female inverts' concentrated on those women who had committed murder or suicide, or who were said by Havelock Ellis to have hereditary psychological problems. He continued, as Krafft-Ebing had done, to confuse gender and sexuality by seeing lesbianism and mannishness as inextricably linked, equating lesbianism with transvestism.

Building on Krafft-Ebing's earlier tentative theories of female inversion, Havelock Ellis suggested two distinct types of *female inverts*. The *true invert*, whose inversion was seen as congenital and therefore inevitable, demonstrated 'traces of masculinity' in her behaviour and frequently adopted 'male attire' (Ellis and Symonds, 1887:87). The *pseudo-invert*, on the other hand, did not possess a biological predisposition to homosexuality, was not considered masculine or 'mannish' but was rather plain in the face and 'not very robust and well-developed' (Ellis and Symonds, 1887: 95). She was seen as suffering from a weakness of character, resulting in her being seduced into pseudo-homosexuality under certain environmental influences which, Havelock Ellis suggested, included sex-segregated environments.

Havelock Ellis, who had previously argued that male sexual domination and female sexual submission were inevitable, did not support the movement for women's suffrage, believing that the political sphere was no place for women and that their true destiny lay in

motherhood (Bland, 1995). According to him, such political activism amongst women resulted in an increase in female homosexuality:

> The Women's Movement has involved an increase in feminine criminality and in feminine insanity...in connection with these we can scarcely be surprised to find an increase in homosexuality, which has always been regarded as belonging to an allied if not the same group of phenomena. (Faderman, 1985: 242)

However, not all sexologists of the period were as opposed to women's interests as he was. The British homosexual and socialist Edward Carpenter, who was known for promoting women's rights, was on good terms with many famous feminists of the period.

Carpenter examined homosexuality from a more sympathetic perspective, using his work to appeal for homosexual law reform. In *The Intermediate Sex* (1896), he continued to advance the theories earlier proposed by Ulrich, by similarly claiming that homosexuals belonged bodily to one sex but mentally and emotionally to the other. He suggested that male homosexuals could be described as '...of feminine soul encased in a male body' (Carpenter, [1896] 1916:16). However, he also believed (like Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis) that there were extreme cases of homosexuality in women, using terms remarkably like Krafft-Ebing's to describe them thus:

> ...[A]s the extreme type of the homogenic female, we have a rather markedly aggressive person, of strong passions, masculine manners and movements,...sensuous rather than sentimental in love, often untidy, her figure muscular, her voice rather low in pitch. (Carpenter, [1896] 1916:19)

In 1905 the Austrian doctor and founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, published his work *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality.* In it, he questioned popular opinions about the 'sexual instinct' which sexologists had claimed existed in human beings (although some had claimed that it was less developed in women). Influenced by Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis, Freud questioned the widely accepted belief that sexual instincts were absent until the time of puberty, claiming that sexual urges existed in the human from birth. Male and female homosexuals had what he saw as 'contrary sexual feelings'. Unlike his contemporaries, Freud believed that the human impulse for homosexual eroticism was one of many muddled and disordered sexual urges, proposing that all humans are born with the capacity for homosexuality, but most humans learn to repress these feelings during the socialisation process. According to Freud, male and female homosexuals have suffered some form of trauma which arrested their development. Their homosexuality therefore represented a stunted form of sexuality, which could not be treated or changed as

it was neither a sickness nor a condition. Like Krafft-Ebing and Carpenter, he too called such people 'inverts', but identified three distinct types of invert, rather than the two proposed by Ellis. For Freud, those who entered into exclusive same-sex relationships were *absolute inverts*, those who entered into relationships with either sex were named *amphigenic inverts* and those who embarked on same-sex relations as a result of environmental factors were labelled *contingent inverts*.

However, unlike his contemporaries, Freud suggested that inversion was not necessarily innate but could be part of a normal development. Arguing against classifying inverts as degenerates, he claimed that 'inversion is found in people who exhibit no other serious deviations from the normal' (Freud, 1905: 49). In questioning both the innate and acquired theories of inversion, Freud disagreed with Havelock Ellis's (1897) theory that inversion was often accompanied by mental and physical signs of hermaphroditism, proposing rather that the male invert's character traits were not generally those of the opposite sex. However, he agreed with earlier sexologists by proposing that in the female invert this could well be true:

> [F]or among them the active inverts exhibit masculine characteristics, both physical and mental, with peculiar frequency and look for femininity in their sexual object...(Freud, 1905: 57)

He ended his essay on inversion by admitting that:

> It will be seen that we are not in a position to base a satisfactory explanation on the origins of inversion upon the material at present before us. (Freud, 1905: 59)

Contemporary historians suggest that Freud's theories were ignored or dismissed in the early 1900s and did not become influential until the 1920s (Faderman, 1985; Weeks, 1985). He has been credited with offering a new liberal discourse about sexuality, although subsequent interpretations of Freud's theories relating to inversion, especially the notion of 'arrested development', have been utilised by psychoanalysts to advocate the medicalisation of homosexuality and the need for 'treatment' of lesbian and gay individuals.

Contemporary feminist historians are divided in their assessment of the implications of sexology. Faderman (1985), Jeffreys (1985) and Jackson (1987) regard the sexologists as anti-feminists whose theories challenged the work of Victorian feminists, seeking to enforce a 'new regulatory mechanism of male supremacy' which would ultimately result in the 'stigmatisation of women's love for other women (and)...extreme fear and hatred of

same-sex love' (Jeffreys, 1985:194). In contrast, while Smith-Rosenberg (1985) and Stanley (1992) may have reservations about the way the sexologists' theories have been used against the interests of feminism, they nevertheless believe that sexology had a positive effect, in that it provided lesbians with a language of identification, thus giving them the means to communicate their identity to other like-minded women.

2.3 Lesbianism in the 1920s

The 1920s saw the emergence of the sex manual. The concepts and theories of Havelock Ellis and other sexologists were disseminated to the general public in this popular form, as their authors believed that the original technical studies would be too complex for them to understand. The rationale behind their publication was the prevention and cure of sexual maladjustment, in the form of celibacy, spinsterhood and lesbianism, which represented continuing threats to marital happiness and social order. This innovation in British culture was seen by many to be a positive development in that it initiated a new epoch of sexual frankness, helping to end the sexual repression of the Victorian era (Rowbotham, 1973).

Of the numerous sex manuals published in the 1920s, one author was to prove especially influential and popular: the Dutch gynaecologist, Theodoor Hendrik van de Velde (1873-1937). His publication *Ideal Marriage* (1928), aimed at a readership of married heterosexual couples, was considered at the time to be one of the most honest and frank accounts of human sexual relations. The author himself stated that the manual was to be for the sole benefit of heterosexual couples and it related entirely to 'natural' sexual behaviour. He stated he would not discuss the 'perversion' of homosexuality at any length in his book, as he did not want to be responsible for opening the 'hell gate realm of sexual perversion' (Brecher, 1969 : 89-90).

In the same year as *Ideal Marriage* was published, Marie Stopes' work *Enduring Passions* also appeared. Stopes' work was also directed at the legally married, but unusually dealt with lesbianism at some length. However, she was unsympathetic to it, expressing concern that women's independence may lead to an increase in lesbianism. Stopes also warned women against 'intense' female friendships, believing that it may lead them to abandon their husbands in favour of women:

> If a married woman does this unnatural thing she may find a growing disappointment in her husband and he may lose all power to play his proper part...No woman who values the peace of her home and the love of her husband should yield to the wiles of the lesbian whatever her temptation to do so. (Stopes, 1953 [1928]: 29)

According to Hamer (1996), the 1920s witnessed the emergence of a small lesbian subculture. Although geographically, socially and culturally diverse, it does, however, seem to have primarily served a small number of upper class individual women in theatrical, literary or artistic circles, such as the actress Tallulah Bankhead and the writer Radclyffe Hall. Only these women could afford to move freely and openly within the homosexual community without suffering from being labelled 'inverts' or 'abnormal', which had both been adopted as popular terms to describe both female and male homosexuals in this decade (see Section 2.2 for the origins of these terms). Indeed, the lesbian community centred on the shared sexual proclivities of its group members, rather than representing a fully formed sexual identity (Jivani, 1997). Thus few role models or opportunities to meet other women with similar tastes and interests existed, outside these privileged cliques.

In 1928 two novels featuring lesbian characters were published in Britain. Both were to become infamous within English society, were examined by the Home Office under the suspicion of corrupting public morals, and one was eventually seized and became banned in England (Ferris, 1993).

The novel which provoked the most notorious literary prosecution of the decade was Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928). This was the first lesbian novel to be written by a self-acknowledged lesbian, and became one of, if the not the, most well-known lesbian novels of all time, often referred to as the 'Lesbians' Bible' (Hennegan, 1982). Hall fully espoused the earlier sexologists' theories, clearly showing the influence of the works of Krafft-Ebing, Carpenter, Ulrich and Ellis in her book. These theories had become so well accepted in Britain in the 1920s as 'common sense', that psychiatrists, writers such as Hall, and the general public accepted the assertions that 'inversion' was immutable. Hall, who attached the label of 'invert' to herself, also refers to the principal lesbian character in her book, Stephen Gordon, as an invert. Stephen Gordon utters the memorable words 'I'm some awful mistake, God's mistake' (Hall, [1928]1982: 237). While Hall's work appeared to legitimate the sexologists' findings and did not challenge the notion of lesbianism as 'abnormal', Hamer (1996) argues that Radclyffe Hall has been widely misread. She asserts that the book emphasised women's autonomous sexual desires, strongly insinuating that it was social disapproval which made sexual acts between women 'perverse', rather than any inherent feature of the acts themselves. *The Well of Loneliness* did, however, provide lesbians with some evidence that other women like

themselves existed. Although the only sexual activity portrayed in *The Well of Loneliness* is kissing, in England of the 1920s the subject of lesbianism itself was considered indecent.

The Well of Loneliness was Hall's fifth novel, and was reviewed favourably in the *Daily Telegraph*, which called it a 'sincere' work. However, the *Sunday Express* reviewer, James Douglas, disagreed, declaring that:

> I would rather give a healthy boy or a healthy girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel. Poison kills the body, but moral poison kills the soul. (Ferris, 1993: 109)

In November of that year *The Well of Loneliness* was banned in England. In the summing up of the subsequent court case, the judge claimed that this book contained 'horrible vile unnatural and filthy practices' (Ferris, 1993: 112-113).

Compton McKenzie's book *Extraordinary Women* (1928) was also widely considered 'immoral', and was greeted with horror by book reviewers, none more so than the reviewer for the *New Statesman*. The reviewer, who refused to identify themselves in the article, entitled *The Vulgarity of Lesbianism*, suggested that lesbianism was becoming widespread in society, blaming the earlier Suffragette Movement for what s/he believed to be increased sexual activity between women:

> ...[N]ow it is comparatively widespread social phenomenon, having its original roots no doubt in the professional man-hating of the Pankhurst Suffragette Movement. (Anon. New Statesman 25/8/1928: 45)

McKenzie's novel featured a description of one woman undressing in front of another. This was considered vulgar, and was far more sexually explicit than anything depicted in *The Well of Loneliness*. However, the reviewer objected more strongly to the portrayal of two women falling in love with each other. Suggesting that the novel ought to be banned, s/he nevertheless believed that the book had performed a public service by exposing the 'social disease' of lesbianism:

> [I]t forces one to realise that Sapphic love besides being abnormal must lead to situations far more intolerable than any which could be created by the least admirable kind of 'normal' sex relations. The social behaviour of his women is horrible, disgusting, humiliating...If (the book) does not prove, it at any rate suggests, that women cannot fall in love with women and remain sane decent human beings. (New Statesman 25/8/1928:45)

Home Office officials, under the leadership of the Home Secretary, Sir Archibald Bodkin, found the book to be 'nauseous'. He believed the novel to be dangerous inasmuch that:

> [W]omen who have not healthy home surroundings are apt to be curious about this disgusting subject and curiosity might lead to practice. (Ferris, 1993: 111)

However, eventually the Lord Chancellor was consulted, who advised that an action against the publisher would be unlikely to succeed, since the book did not justify unnatural vice (Ferris, 1993: 111).

The 1920s were, according to Weeks (1985), the first time that a homosexual identity was articulated in Britain. However, if one assumes that lesbians are included within this, it appears that only professional or elite women with the necessary financial means, social networks and personal courage were able to enter into any form of lesbian subculture and hence articulate their sexual identity. In the 1920s lesbianism also became an issue of public concern, exemplified by the way female homosexuality narrowly escaped being made illegal in 1921. Lesbianism had never been a criminal offence in Britain because, it is said, Queen Victoria refused to sign the necessary legal documents, since she could not conceive of such behaviour (Stewart, 1995). An attempt to introduce provisions which would make acts of gross indecency between women illegal failed to be passed. The amendment to the bill, which was to include gross indecency between female persons as a misdemeanour and therefore punishable in the same manner as an act committed by males, was opposed by a great many Members of Parliament, who believed that making lesbianism illegal would court publicity which might well lead to a rise in the incidence of such 'abnormality' in women. Lord Desart proposed:

> You are going to tell the whole world that there is such an offence, to bring it to the notice of women who have never heard of it, never thought of it, never dreamt of it. I think that is a very great mischief. (Hyde, 1972:200)

2.4 Lesbianism in the 1930s

According to Haste (1992) and Ferris (1993), in this period sex within marriage was much discussed, despite growing legal regulation of sex and sexuality, and the proliferation of popular manuals and books continued. One of the most widely read sex manuals of the decade was Dr Helena Wright's *Sex Factor in Marriage* (1930). Wright, who worked as a gynaecologist, believed that women were ignorant of their own bodies and their sexuality, due to the internalisation of guilt associated with the subject of sex. Her book, which was seen as one of the most honest accounts of female sexuality published in this decade, was deeply critical of some of the moral values articulated in other manuals (Brecher, 1969).

> The false idea that intercourse undertaken for a reproductive purpose is more meritorious than intercourse performed purely as an expression of love, is dying. It never had any foundation in reason and science. (Brecher, 1969: 180)

According to Weeks, the social regulation of homosexuality provides the conditions in which lesbians (and gay men) can develop their own consciousness and identity (Weeks, 1981). Lesbians had by the 1930s begun to create their own subculture, with distinctive dress styles and meeting places. One such meeting place for lesbians in the 1930s was the 'Forum Club', situated in Knightsbridge, London, which opened in 1930. Although not advertising itself as a lesbian club, it did, however, serve an all-female clientele (Hamer, 1996). Like other private clubs, its membership comprised exclusively of professional women. There was little opportunity for working class women to frequent clubs or bars, unless they happened to live in major cities where clubs for homosexual men would sometimes allow the patronage of lesbians.

By the 1930s dress style became an important indicator of women's sexuality. The assumptions of the *true invert* and the *pseudo invert* made earlier by the sexologists were appropriated by lesbians themselves, who by this decade had adopted stylised forms of dress, either masculine or feminine attire, which acknowledged their preference for 'butch' or 'femme' identities (Faderman, 1991; Jivani, 1997). While theorists did not differentiate between male and female homosexuals, believing that the sexual malfunction of both sexes was attributable to the same origin, lesbians and gay men had quite different social roles, behaviours and styles, and also differed significantly in the opportunities they had to meet with others who shared their sexual preference, with women having fewer venues available to meet other women, and without the same disposable income as men.

The history of gendered relationships and the traditional expectation of appropriate emotional and physical behaviour shown between people of the same sex resulted in men's 'close' friendships being regarded suspiciously by the wider public. Men's ascribed social roles did not permit intense or close emotional ties with other men, unlike women whose ascribed social roles positively encouraged them to have emotional attachments to other women, with displays of physical affection perceived as part of women's 'nature'. Dress codes, such as pinkie rings worn on the little finger of the left hand, were used by lesbians and gay men alike as a discreet way of drawing attention to their sexuality, thus allowing some women a limited form of acknowledgement in a generally closed and limited subculture (Stewart, 1995: 195). However, a life fully organised around their lesbianism

was not yet possible for most women. For many, economic restraints placed on them at this time also limited their sexual and social freedom. Thus many women who were emotionally or sexually attracted to women were also living a double life as married women. Faderman (1991) suggests that a 'bisexual compromise' was evident amongst many women with lesbian inclinations in the 1930s, who, whilst refusing to deny their feelings, were nevertheless dependent upon their husbands for their economic support. This led some married women to have discreet sexual and emotional relations with other married women.

The 1930s was a contradictory decade. Although the sexologists had for the first time questioned women's relationships and attachments with each other, implying that sexual relationships amongst women were more widespread than had hitherto been imagined, and the case of Radclyffe Hall had brought the 'invert' into public view, it appears that the general public believed that female inversion was so rare that as long as it was not given any positive publicity, it did not pose a significant threat to the majority of women. An alternative theory could suggest that there was a belief amongst the general public that all 'lesbians' were as easily identifiable as Radclyffe Hall: an attitude which would allow those women who dressed and behaved conventionally to publicly distance themselves from such 'abnormality'. However, discreet lesbian liaisons between women began to be portrayed in popular novels published in the 1930s. G. Sheila Donisthorpe's *Loveliest of Friends* (1931) featured married lesbian characters (Faderman, 1991: 103).

Unlike Hall's *The Well Of Loneliness*, in which the lesbian character is a confused soul by virtue of her innate inability to be 'normal', who is portrayed as a pathetic and hence harmless creature, the caricatures of lesbians in the novels of the 1930s generally show them as selfish, vicious and obsessed with sex. An extract from Donisthorpe's (1931) *Loveliest of Friends* exemplifies the change that the caricature of lesbians had gone through within novels. This describes lesbians as:

> ...[C]rooked, twisted freaks of nature who stagnate in dark and muddy waters, and are so cloaked with the weeds of viciousness and selfish lust that, drained of all pity, they regard their victims as mere stepping stones to their further pleasures...(Donisthorpe, 1931:234)

The image of lesbians as evil is said by Faderman (1991) to have mirrored the general disapproval of lesbianism during the 1930s, with many heterosexual writers portraying similar lesbian characters as Donisthorpe's to an eager public. Such portrayals certainly did

not aid the case for acceptance of lesbianism, but satisfying and rewarding sexual relationships between women were so remote from the general public's perceptions that most married lesbians remained undetected.

The fictional media of contemporary novels and plays supported the generally held belief that lesbians were 'neurotic, pathetic and absurd' (Faderman, 1991:101). Of the many novels published in the 1930s and in the 1937 play by Lillian Hellman, *The Children's Hour*, lesbian self-loathing and suicide were common features. This play is based on two main characters, Martha ('the lesbian') and Karen (the object of Martha's desire). The two women, who live together and run a school for girls, are portrayed as close friends. When they are accused by one schoolgirl of being lesbians, a court case ensues which results in the women being found not guilty, but their reputations are ruined. After the court case Martha openly declares her lesbian love and desire for Karen. Karen, who appears to be genuinely fond of Martha, attempts to dissuade her from voicing her passion, telling her that she is 'tired' and 'sick'. The play ends with Martha going off into another room and a gun shot being heard. Martha had, of course, committed suicide (Rapi, 1994: 37-41).

The Children's Hour provides an example of the restricted range of 'roles' permitted to lesbians by both dominant theory and by the general public's perception in this decade. Firstly, Martha is portrayed as obviously unhappy about her sexuality. Secondly, Karen tells Martha she is 'tired' and 'sick', which could read as an acknowledgement of the sexological studies which had come to be accepted as 'common-sense' theories by the 1930s. Thirdly, Karen is portrayed as the object of Martha's desire, but she dissuades Martha from attempting any form of seduction; thus 'good' is seen to triumph over 'evil', as according to prevailing morality lesbians cannot live happily ever after.

[1] The play was later to be made into a film and released in the United States, but censored and drastically changed to omit the lesbian theme, replacing it with a heterosexual love triangle; the original title was also changed to *These Three* (Faderman, 1991:103). In 1971 a version for radio was said to be more honest in dealing with the theme of lesbianism (Howes, 1993).

2.5 Lesbianism in the 1940s

In 1947 Wright's *More About The Sex Factor In Marriage* was published, the sequel to her 1930 book, *The Sex Factor in Marriage* (discussed in Section 2.4). This book was as

pioneering as her previous book, as Wright was the only one among her contemporaries to recognise the role of the clitoris in female sexual arousal and orgasm (Campbell, 1980). She was aware that many women experienced no pleasure from penile penetration. Acknowledging the clitoris as a site of sexual sensation, she proposed that women should learn to masturbate in order to become familiar with the experience of orgasm, giving detailed instructions on how this could be achieved.

Wright and other later sexologists' attempted to alter the general public's knowledge of sexual relations, asserting that women had a right to share in sexual pleasure, and that men needed to be informed of their role in bringing this about. However, despite these advances in acknowledging women's sexual desires, sex was still ultimately defined in terms of the penetration of the vagina by the penis. Thus 'having sex' remained synonymous with heterosexual coitus.

The war years, which gave many women greater autonomy in financial and sexual matters, also provided lesbians with a new sense of freedom. Before the war there had been a small metropolitan lesbian subculture based around a few lesbian meeting places, but most of these were located in large towns and cities and remained hidden from view, even amongst lesbians themselves. For many lesbians chance meetings with others like themselves were often the only possibility for women to become part of any lesbian social network, and to form relationships with other lesbians.

Jivani (1997) suggests that lesbian relationships were common in the war, especially within the services. There are few factual records of lesbians' lives during this period, or even any acknowledgement of the important part lesbians played in the war. Indeed, in a book entitled *Dear Laughing Motorbike*, which is concerned with women welders during the Second World War, the author acknowledges that a 'common language of heterosexuality' silenced lesbians (Jolly, 1997:44). However, she does not go on to address this issue herself, just like other authors concerned with women's history of this period (Lewis, 1984: Roberts, 1995). During the war 460,000 women enlisted in the Auxiliary Territorial Service, the Women's Auxiliary Air Force and the Women's Royal Naval Service (Hamer,1996: 139). Jivani (1997) and Hamer (1996) claim that many lesbians entered the services because of the appeal of transgressing gender distinctions by wearing a uniform, the opportunity thereby afforded to work in an all-female environment, and the chance to escape from the constraints of their home communities. For those women who

already identified as lesbian, service life was enjoyed because of the lack of expectation of 'feminine behaviour' and also because they were positively encouraged not to marry. Women who had not previously self-identified as lesbian and had never questioned their sexuality, or who thought of themselves as heterosexual, had the opportunity to experiment sexually with other women and to form romantic attachments, something that had generally been impossible for the majority of lesbians in the previous decade.

The increased opportunity to engage in lesbian relationships while in the services did not escape the notice of the authorities in the armed forces or the Government. In 1941 the Government established the Markham Committee with the purpose of examining the alleged lack of sexual morality in the women's services. In a War Office report on the *Auxiliary Territorial Service*, lesbianism was discussed under 'issues of social and moral welfare'. It stated that lesbianism was unusual in the Auxiliary Territorial Services. However:

> ...[A]s cases arose they were usually dealt with by posting (one of the women would be re-located elsewhere) and only a few promiscuous lesbians had to be discharged from the service ... (Hamer, 1996: 141)

There appeared to be little action taken against women who were suspected of being lesbians, either in America or in Britain (Faderman, 1991; Hamer, 1996). It could be that the social dislocation of the war meant that lesbianism was simply more tolerated than it had previously been, or alternatively the morale of women was perceived as so important, that witch hunts against lesbians could be counterproductive. However, given that the lesbians in the services had been brought up in the homophobic 1930s, they were perhaps adept at avoiding identification as lesbian by those who did not share their sexuality.

Three factors are evident when examining lesbians' lives or activity in the war. Firstly, lesbians who had not yet discovered any other women like themselves were given the opportunity to meet other lesbians in a supportive and friendly environment, where sexuality could be more openly discussed amongst women. War also brought women from their home towns to large cities where anonymity permitted them to pursue a lesbian lifestyle. Secondly, mutual recognition between lesbians was made easier through the wearing of uniforms, which led to further butch and femme distinctions in dress style. Lastly, and most importantly, the war brought lesbians together in large numbers for the first time, which enabled lesbianism to be seen as a lifestyle choice rather than an individual pathology.

In 1948 an American study was published which has been credited as revolutionising the study of sex (Brecher, 1969: 10). *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* was based on an extensive study by Pomeroy Wardell, Martin Clyde and Alfred Kinsey. Alfred Kinsey (1894-1956) was originally a biologist who became head of the Indiana University's Institute of Sex Research. Kinsey's team used quantitative methods and statistical evidence to analyse the interviews of over 5,000 male participants, all of whom were volunteers recruited from colleges, prisons and the team's own personal networks, making it the largest and most methodologically sound study of sexual behaviour undertaken by the 1940s. It changed conventional notions of human sexuality, especially homosexuality, by challenging and undermining the concepts of 'natural' and 'normal' sexual behaviour, thereby contributing to the destigmatisation of homosexuality (Weeks, 1985). In order to expand on these claims it is necessary to examine the aims and findings of the study.

The major aim of the study was to catalogue and analyse respondents' answers to questions about the variety of ways in which men reached orgasm, or what Kinsey's team termed 'sexual outlets'. This included analysing respondents' accounts of their past and present sexual experience and behaviour through auto-eroticism and with other people of one or both sexes. The data showed that men experienced orgasm by six different methods: nocturnal seminal omission, masturbation, heterosexual intercourse, heterosexual petting, homosexual intercourse and contacts with animals and other species (Brecher, 1969: 113). This study also provided data on virginity, fidelity and frequency of heterosexual intercourse and homosexual intercourse. In order to categorise the sexual behaviour reported by respondents, Kinsey's team formulated what is now known as the Kinsey Heterosexual-Homosexual Rating Scale. This enabled them to distance themselves from the moralistic categorising used by previous sexologists such as Krafft-Ebing. (see Section 2.2 for the work of Krafft-Ebing.) Indeed, true to his scientific training, where value judgements have no place, Kinsey is reported as stating: 'Biologically there is no form of outlet which I will admit as abnormal. There is no right or wrong biologically' (Pomeroy, 1966: 77). The Kinsey Scale consisted of a continuum of sexuality of various degrees or points on a scale from 0 to 6:

0: entirely heterosexual,
1: largely heterosexual, but with incidental homosexual history,
2: largely heterosexual, but with distinct homosexual history,
3: equally heterosexual and homosexual,
4: largely homosexual, but with distinct heterosexual history,

5: largely homosexual, but with incidental heterosexual history and
6: entirely homosexual. (Kinsey et al., 1948)

The analysis of data on male homosexuality revealed that, using the scale of 0 to 6, four per cent of the informants were exclusively homosexual, eight per cent almost exclusively homosexual and 37 per cent had some homosexual experience at some point in their lives.

Publication of the study was greeted with shock by both the American and English public (Haste, 1992) as it highlighted the disparity between the official 'norms' of sexuality regarding homosexual behaviour and individuals' actual sexual conduct (Gagnon, 1977). Kinsey himself believed that the study had exposed the narrow way in which sex had previously been conceptualised in the medical profession, amongst sexologists and the public as a whole, who had all believed that virtually all individuals engaged in the same heterosexual forms of sexual behaviour.

> The publicly pretended code of morals, our social organisation, our marriage customs, our sex laws, and our educational and religious systems are based upon an assumption that individuals are much alike sexually... (Kinsey et al., 1948: 197)

However, Kinsey ultimately disagreed with classifying men in terms of 'homosexual' or 'heterosexual' categories, instead proposing that men's behaviour could be best understood by perceiving *behaviour* and *reactions* as homosexual, rather than *individuals*.

Although this book broke new ground in its explicitness, honesty and absence of moralising, the study has its limitations. Homosexual experience was defined as physical contact with another male to the point of orgasm. Sexual contact which did not result in orgasm was therefore not included as homosexual activity. The study did not include those men who through choice would have preferred a relationship with another man but whose circumstances did not permit this, neither could it include those men who did not admit to having sex with another man. It is therefore questionable whether the study's prioritisation of the orgasm did not weaken the research findings.

The Kinsey study is important in representing homosexuality as being part of a broad spectrum of sexuality. Kinsey's team conceptualised the ambiguous nature of sexual behaviour as a result of empirical research and therefore the study was unique in representing sexuality as a sexual continuum rather than two fixed polar points.

2.6 Lesbianism in the 1950s

Throughout the 1950s sex was widely regarded as coterminous with marriage. Powerful constraints and social pressures were placed on young women to remain virgins until marriage. The stigmatisation surrounding illegitimacy and venereal disease, and continuing restrictions on access to reliable contraception for unmarried adults also acted as controls on sexual activity before marriage. According to Wilson, marriage remained the only acceptable domain for the expression of (hetero) sexuality: 'It is impossible to overemphasise the importance of marriage as a central and organising idea' (Wilson, 1980: 88).

The dominance of a pro-family ideology, combined with the powerful representation of heterosexuality and marriage by the popular media, resulted in many lesbians finding it difficult to resist the pressures to assume what was considered to be their 'natural' socio-biological roles as wives and mothers. During this decade women were simply 'expected' to marry, and practical alternatives to the nuclear family were not perceived to exist. According to Jivani (1997), many lesbians 'submitted' to heterosexuality by marrying, although for many their marriage was a facade, with their sexuality barely concealed under a superficial respectability. Jivani also suggests that some lesbians who had entered into sexual relations with other women for the first time during the Second World War began to question their sexuality in the climate of all-pervasive heterosexuality which dominated the 1950s.

For those women who managed to avoid marriage, access to social contact with other lesbians was not as easy as it had been during the war. An informal lesbian network did exist, but still mainly in large cities and often centred in drinking and social clubs. Clubs such as the Gateways which opened in Chelsea in the 1950s did offer some a social space in which lesbians could behave as they wished. This club, which was exclusively lesbian, became one of the most fashionable places for metropolitan lesbians to frequent.

The 'mannish' clothing adopted by some lesbians in the 1920s continued to be worn; however, unlike the 1920s, the 'butch' lesbian was now accompanied by the 'femme'. Faderman (1991), Hamer (1995), and Jivani (1997) all suggest that the feminine, heterosexual-looking lesbian was not a frequent sight until the 1950s and was then seen to complement the traditional 'butch'. Whereas the sexology literature from the early 1900s had stated that the pure female invert typically felt like a man (Davis, 1908), the 'femme'

was considered to be an imperfect deviant, but as pathological as her butch partner (Caprio, 1954). Caprio described the 'femmes' as 'effeminate tribadists' (Caprio, 1954:18), quoting Richmond (1925) to suggest that this pathology was due to their foolish naivety:

> The feminine type of lesbian is the one who seeks mother love, who enjoys being a recipient of much attention and affection. She is often preoccupied with personal beauty and is somewhat narcissistic...She is the clinging vine type who is often thought and spoken to by her elders as a little fool without any realisation of the warped sexuality which is prompting her actions. (Caprio, 1954: 19 quoting Richmond, 1925)

In 1951 the defection of Burgess and Maclean, two homosexual spies, from Britain to the Soviet Union was the catalyst that altered many people's perception of homosexuals in Britain, and proved to be a landmark in lesbian and gay history. Both the British and American Governments attempted to eradicate communists, communist sympathisers and lesbian and male homosexual staff as representing an unacceptable security risk. The risk arose from the illegal status of male homosexuality and the stigmatisation of male and female homosexuality, which made homosexual men and women vulnerable to blackmail. By the early 1950s both the United States and British governments associated homosexuality with communism and saw both as potentially leading to treason (Wilson, 1980:101).

In 1954 The Wolfenden Committee was established by the government to examine the 'social problems' of homosexuality and prostitution, an interesting conjunction (Jivani, 1997). Three years later its published report suggested that homosexual behaviour between consenting male adults over the age of 21 should be decriminalised. However, it was to be another decade before the Wolfenden Report's recommendations were implemented (Horsefall, 1988).

Homosexuality was viewed by psychologists and psychiatrists in the 1950s as a curable defect of psychological and moral health, rather than being determined by biology. This medical model of homosexuality provided justification for attempts to 'cure' lesbians and homosexual men, and therefore supported the recommendations of the Wolfenden report, which suggested that homosexuals, especially those in prison, should be offered treatment (Jivani, 1997). Throughout the 1950s treatment was available to both self-identified homosexual men and women, in both the private sector and through the National Health Service. Treatment for lesbians and homosexual men often consisted of emetics, hormone replacement therapy and electro-convulsive shock treatment (Jivani, 1997). That some

lesbians and homosexual men voluntarily sought such treatment for their homosexuality is not as shocking as it might first seem. The 1950s represent a decade of repression for both male and female homosexuals; many had been pushed into marriage by social pressures, and those who remained unmarried faced the prospect of others finding out about their sexual behaviour, leaving them vulnerable to being stigmatised, if not threatened by blackmail or dismissed from their jobs (Weeks, 1981). Thus, for many, treatment which would render them 'normal' was accepted as preferable to spending their life as society's scapegoats, which had been their experience in the years of McCarthyism.

Lesbians were less affected than homosexual men by *The Wolfenden Report.* However, lesbians, were still considered to constitute a social problem. The Sexual Offences Act of 1956 made it possible for women to be charged with sexual assault on another woman, and although this did not criminalise lesbianism, it was seen by many as likely to bring further social sanctions against lesbians, as they represented a violation of the ideal of heterosexual womanhood (Edwards, 1981).

In 1953 the second of the pioneering reports into sexual behaviour by Kinsey, Pomeroy and Martin was published, this time dealing with women's sexuality. *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female,* based on interviews undertaken by the research team with 6,000 women, offered new insight into the sexual behaviour of women. As in the study of male sexual behaviour in 1948, the majority of respondents were volunteers drawn from a variety of sources including colleges, prisons and informal networks. As in 1948, this work catalogued women's sexual activity based on a large-scale scientific study, attempting to divest it of moral connotations. Like its predecessor, it challenged accepted ideas of what was natural or unnatural by developing the notion of sexual behaviour as continuum rather than a dichotomy.

The study revealed widespread differences between males' and females' sexual experiences, including identifying only a small portion of women as exclusively homosexual (Kinsey et al, 1953: 469). 13 per cent of women, compared to 37 per cent of men, reported having reached orgasm through same-sex sexual activity. Men and women with homosexual experience also differed in their numbers of same-sex relationships, women having experienced lesbian relations with one or two women on average, while the earlier study found most men have had a sexual relationships with more than 12 men, and

some had as many as one hundred (Kinsey et al., 1953: 474). This challenged received wisdom.

Kinsey and his team suggested that male psychologists, whom he credited as being the source of this inaccurate information, had relied too heavily on the belief that women invest more emotional interest in other women than men do with men, leading to the assertion that women's emotional interest in other women would eventually result in them forming sexual relationships. Kinsey's team claimed that although many women were regarded as typically affectionate, in a way that was not common among men, this did not actually reflect any 'psychosexual' interest and rarely led to sexual activity. Indeed, their findings showed that while 28 per cent of all females had experienced homosexual response, 50 per cent of males in the previous study had similar experiences (Kinsey, 1953: 474-5). This research also found a higher prevalence of orgasm among women engaging in homosexual behaviour than with women engaging in heterosexual liaisons:

> It is generally not understood either by males or females who have not had homosexual experience, that the techniques of sexual relations between two females may be as effective or even more effective than the petting or coital techniques ordinarily utilised in heterosexual contacts...it is of course quite possible for males to learn...heterosexual relationships could however become more satisfactory if they more often utilised the sort of knowledge which most homosexual females have of female anatomy and female psychology. (Kinsey, 1953: 468)

Although the work of Kinsey's team did not find favour amongst the majority of his contemporaries in the 1940s and 1950s, their reports have since been recognised as challenging the medical and legal hegemony of sexual theory, promoting the development of new understandings of sexual behaviour and sexual deviance. Their work showed that homosexuals were not a distinct group, in that everyone was potentially capable of homosexual behaviour. Kinsey found no evidence to suggest that there was a single cause of homosexuality and considered that it was therefore not a unitary condition, but he still sought a biological explanation (Weeks, 1985:119). Despite the deficiencies of Kinsey's study of female sexual behaviour, in ignoring variables such as race and socio-economic status, it has remained an authoritative account in terms of sample numbers, of women's sexual behaviour. The sample cannot be considered representative of the population of the United States and therefore findings cannot be generalised, but as it did represent the largest survey of its kind at that time and used reputable methods, its findings were widely regarded as valid.

The 1950s has since become regarded as a period of reaction, following the relative social and sexual freedoms of the war years, for women and for lesbians, in which the forces of conservatism were largely triumphant. Viewed by many as 'conservative', the decade was seen by some to be one of the most damaging in the history of sexuality:

> Few tears will be shed for the 50s. Cynical, meretricious, selfish...The Tories imprisoned homosexuals and prostitutes - and pacifists. But they allowed the striptease joint and the drinking club to multiply. (New Statesman, 1960 quoted in Wilson, 1980:7)

2.7 Lesbianism in the 1960s

According to Weeks, by the 1960s:

> ...'[P]ermissiveness' had become a political metaphor, marking a social and political divide...Those who were chief advocates of the 'permissive society' would rarely have used the term; while for the defenders of 'traditional' (and largely authoritarian) values 'permissiveness' became an almost scatological term of abuse. (Weeks, 1981:249)

According to Haste, the debate about sexuality and morality sprang from the state's loosening of controls over private morality and individual choice. In 1959 the Labour Party had put sexual morality on their political agenda in a bid to capture the 'liberal voter'. Roy Jenkins MP had proposed that in a civilised society people would be free to construct for themselves the moral code by which they wanted to live. He specifically targeted the 'brutal and unfair' laws on homosexuality, the 'puritanical restrictions' on censorship (including the Lord Chamberlain's powers to censor books, plays and films), the divorce laws and the 'harsh' and 'archaic' abortion laws. Although these proposals did not become official Labour Party policy, Haste suggests that they changed the prevailing sexual discourse into one where sexual reforms became linked with 'liberty', 'social justice' and ultimately 'progress' (Haste, 1992: 182-184).

It is not clear whether the major legislative reforms relating to sexual behaviour which took place throughout the 1960s were a direct result of the discourse opened up in the political arena, or whether the increasing eroticisation of social life was led by members of the public themselves. However, sexual explicitness in the form of advertising, the open sale of pornography in major British cities, and sexually descriptive detail in books became increasingly common (Haste, 1992).

The portrayal of sex by various forms of the media became a site of struggle between the advocates of a more 'permissive' society and the defenders of 'traditional' values. The liberalisation of the censorship laws began with the 1959 Obscene Publications Act, which relaxed the censorship of books and magazines unless they were deemed 'likely to deprave and corrupt' (Evans, 1993:71). The subsequent Obscene Publications Act of 1964 and the 1968 Theatres Act further relaxed this legislation, leading to portrayals of nudity of a kind which had been previously banned, for example in such films as *Hugs and Kisses* (1967) and Ken Russell's *Women in Love* (1969), based on the D. H. Lawrence novel.

This increasingly explicit portrayal of sexuality was not universally acclaimed. In 1964 a campaign was established by Mary Whitehouse to curb the portrayal of sex on television. She led both the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association (an innocuous title for a small but influential organisation based on extreme reactionary values) and the Moral Re-armament Association, attacking the 'liberalism' of the popular media, especially television. Seen by Whitehouse as 'the enemy within the home' (Tracy and Morrison, 1979: 61), television was threatening to undermine the morals of children by showing scenes portraying homosexuality, extra-marital sex and violence. In 1962 the then National Secretary of Moral Re-armament group suggested in a speech that television was fostering an increase in the taste for sex amongst its viewers which would result in them wanting limitless amounts of sex-to view, thus de-stabilising the nation as a whole:

> If you soften the people of a nation limitlessly by feeding them with sex, you may so reduce the power to say 'No' that there are certain other things to which they will be unable to say 'No', such as dictatorship and tyranny. (Wilson quoted in Tracey and Morrison, 1979:62)

Although the 1960s were perceived by some as the 'permissive' era, closer examination of the social and political factors which influenced life in this decade leads us to question this widespread assumption. Wilson (1980) proposes that:

> The 'permissive society' was in a sense the creation of conservatives and of a mass media that was both conservative and prurient...(Wilson, 1980: 106)

Attitudes towards sex in the 1960s became more flexible as legislative changes promoted a political rhetoric rooted in a liberal tolerance of personal freedom. The dominance of the Church of England was being challenged by falling membership and the declining influence of Christianity over public morality. The Bishop of Woolwich in 1963 advocated that morality should become the responsibility of the individual and should take

precedence 'over the received doctrine of the supernatural', a statement which was said to have enraged the more traditional thinkers within the Christian faith (Haste, 1992: 192). Other spiritual groups such as the Quakers rejected the traditional approach of the Christian church to morality, believing that rigid doctrinal constraints were no longer appropriate or relevant. In a pamphlet published in 1963, titled A *Quaker View of Sex,* the belief was advanced that sexual expression in a variety of forms was not morally wrong as long as 'love' remained at the centre of sexual relationships. Published four years prior to the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, which decriminalised homosexual acts between men as long as they were over the age of 21 and the act took place in private, this publication defended homosexual men and homosexuality, in liberal terms. However, the same publication was hostile to lesbians, who were seen as women whose maternal instinct was frustrated. They were accused of being 'a menace to their friends' and 'spreading unhappiness wherever they go' (Weeks, 1981: 261; Haste, 1992: 193).

Hamer (1996) proposes that one of the most important years for lesbians in this decade was 1963, when two lesbians, Esme Langley and Diana Chapman, founded the *Minorities Research Group*. Hamer identifies the MRG as the first 'explicitly and dedicatedly lesbian, social and political organisation in Britain' (Hamer, 1996: 166). One of its major aims was to undertake and encourage research into homosexuality, especially female homosexuality. Langley and Chapman believed that by widely disseminating information to universities, employers, and social or educational workers, where expert opinions were formed and disseminated, members of society would become more enlightened about 'the misty, unwrapped world of feminine homosexuality' (Hamer, 1996:166).

By March 1964 the MRG still only had 36 members but had begun to publish its own newsletter, *Arena 3.* It was only distributed to members, as the MRG's founders feared they would be prosecuted for 'corrupting public morals' if they were to disseminate it through public outlets (Hamer, 1996). The publication included short stories, book reviews, reading lists and members' debates, one of which focused on the alleged causes of homosexuality. The concept that women could 'choose' their sexuality was not widespread in Britain in the 1960s. Two main positions on the cause of homosexuality were articulated. One of the arguments, which was adopted as 'common sense' knowledge, was that homosexuality arose from an innate or genetic imperfection. The alternative view saw it as a result of environmental influences which led children to 'deviate' from the 'normal' path of heterosexual development. Although these debates were confined to

individuals within the lesbian and gay subculture, it shows that members of the MRG were clearly influenced by the traditional dominant sexological and psychoanalytical theories, leading certain lesbians themselves to suggest that 'we have long known that divorce, or having only one parent alive, has been the childhood pattern of many homosexuals' (Hamer, 1996: 177).

Scientific articles and books on female homosexuality published in English between 1940 and 1968 amount to less than ten per cent (100) of the total of 1263 publications on homosexuality (both male and female) published in this period (Schafer, 1976: 50). Schafer argues that the primary reason for the dearth of material specifically relating to lesbianism is that, sex research, like science generally, is primarily undertaken by men, who are more likely to be interested in the 'homosexual desires and fears of their own sex than in those of women' (Schafer, 1976:50). Although the subject of male homosexuality had been investigated quite exhaustively in previous decades, it was not until the 1960s that studies concerned solely with lesbianism started to appear. However, it tended to construct lesbianism within male models of homosexuality, and from a medical, psychoanalytic or psychiatric perspective (Faraday, 1981:113). Lesbians were depicted as perverted, inverted, masochistic, immature, pathological, sick and deviant, with homosexuality continuing to be viewed as a clinical condition (Klaich, 1989; Sang, 1978; Ponse, 1978).

Although essentialist arguments, that 'sexual deviancy' was inherent in individuals, continued to be influential amongst clinicians and theorists in the latter half of the 1960s, a new sociological perspective on homosexuality began to emerge. This was social constructionism, which was to provide the basis for new definitions of sexual identity. Unlike essentialism, social constructionism does not assume sexual identity to be a simple, unproblematic matter. Rather, constructionist theories view sexual identity as the developmental outcome of a complex process of social labelling and self identification (Kauffman, 1990). Instead of seeing sexual categories as unidimensional or mutually exclusive, as essentialism claims, constructionism proposes that sexual categories are fluid. Unlike psychological, psychoanalytic or other essentialist theories, sociologists clearly differentiated between homosexual behaviour, homosexual roles, categorisations and identities (Weeks, 1996).

It could be argued that the new sociological theories which emerged in the 1960s were influenced by the changes taking place in the United States. In the US, homophile movements became more militant from the mid 1960s onwards. Some homosexuals began to argue against research into the causes of homosexuality, refusing to participate in such studies, in the belief that homosexuals themselves were the real authorities on this subject, who should acclaim their sexuality rather than being defensive (Kameny, 1965; Ebreo, 1965). Some lesbians also began to challenge the previous informal policies of lesbian and gay groups which promoted discretion and assimilation (Willer, 1966). American lesbians and gays started to make analogies between their own position as homosexuals and racial and ethnic groups, claiming a culture of their own, and proclaiming the celebration of difference (Epstein, 1987). Although this new wave of lesbian and gay radicalism was not evident in Britain until the following decade, the writings of American radicals could well have influenced the new theories of the American, Lemert (1967), and British-born McIntosh (1968), as well as others who took a more holistic and liberal view of deviancy and homosexuality.

Two sub-disciplinary schools within sociology have dominated work within social constructionism, namely symbolic interactionism, as used by Becker (1963) and Goffman (1963), and labelling theory, as exemplified by Lemert (1967) and McIntosh (1968). The work of Erving Goffman and Howard Becker has been instrumental in shifting the theory of deviance from being viewed as a quality inherent within the individual person or act, to that of a 'historically specific status created by social censure' (Irvine, 1996: 223). The primary assumption of the interactionist approach is that homosexuality does not stand in isolation from the reactions of a society which stigmatises or has the potential to stigmatise it.

Interactionist perspectives explore the meanings people attach to their identities and experiences, and are predominantly concerned with how the individual interprets and understands human behaviour (Blumer, 1969). The intellectual precursor of the interactionist perspective was Max Weber who conceptualised 'Verstehen' (German for 'understanding') as a technical term for empathy. Weber argued that in order to understand people's behaviour, we must have some sense of how people interpret their own experiences and use them as a basis for action (Raymond, 1967).

Following this tradition, Becker proposed that deviance was not a simple quality that was present in some kinds of behaviour and absent from others. Rather, he proposed that it is a quality inherent in the interaction between those who commit supposedly 'deviant' acts and those who respond to such acts. This interactionist analysis of deviance defines lesbians and gay men simply as 'rule breakers', rather than innately deviant or flawed individuals. Proposing that lesbians and gay men were 'outsiders' who had merely been labelled as deviant by authoritative 'experts' of various kinds, Becker further suggested that the 'deviant' identity, in this case homosexuality, became the primary or defining identity, used by the 'outsider' to create a distinct social world separated from those who do not share their marginalised status (Becker, 1963: 36-38). The interactionist approach therefore proposed that homosexuality is not an individualistic phenomenon: rather, it needs to be seen as an interactive phenomenon. As Schur (1980) suggested, the primary cause of 'deviance' can be seen to be the societal reaction against it, where the meanings of behaviour and its place in the social order is a result of the process of reaction.

Labelling theory is like interactionist theory in that it is also primarily concerned with human interaction. It focuses on the labelling of individuals by others and examines how the social consequences of this labelling affect the individuals' definition of self, leading them subsequently to redefine their own identity. Labelling theory as applied to homosexuality was further theorised by Mary McIntosh, whose article 'The homosexual role' was published in 1968. This paper challenged the medical and 'scientific' labelling of homosexuality as deviant, suggesting that 'deviancy' was being used as a mechanism of social control to articulate a firm boundary between permissible and impermissible behaviour (McIntosh, 1968:34). She saw this operation of social control as taking two forms. Firstly, in proposing that a clear-cut, recognisable division between 'good' (heterosexual) and 'bad' (homosexual) behaviour exists, she argued that individuals could not easily or unwittingly drift into deviant behaviour. Thus any slight shift into the area of deviant behaviour would necessarily entail a wholesale move into the 'deviant' category. Secondly, she argued that the label of homosexuality is used to segregate the 'deviant' person from all others, thus resulting in the construction of deviant practices, with individuals' justifications for such practices only being acceptable amongst other 'deviants'. McIntosh utilised Durkheim's theory of the relation between social structures and individual behaviour to suggest that the creation of the 'deviant', 'bad' and 'despised'

homosexual group, with all the consequent social and legal sanctions imposed upon its members, effectively:

> [K]eeps the bulk of society pure in rather the same way that the similar treatment of some kinds of criminals helps keep the rest of society law-abiding. (McIntosh, 1968:35)

McIntosh criticised the effects of the practice of social control, suggesting that individuals who are labelled homosexual may have a tendency to remain fixed within their deviance. She argued that cultures which polarised people as distinctively different from each other created social categorisations which homosexuals themselves may have supported as a way of foreclosing the possibility that they might 'shift' back into heterosexuality. She further argued that this encourages homosexuals to espouse 'deviancy' theory, as they perceive it to legitimate their sexuality without rejecting the norms of the wider society (McIntosh, 1968:35).

McIntosh suggested that rather than sexual unorthodoxy or 'deviance' being perceived as a quality inherent in individual behaviour, it should be regarded as a social 'role' (and traditionally a male role) which, she argued, could be traced back to the late seventeenth century in Western Europe. According to her, the homosexual 'role' does not exist in all societies where men engage in sexual activity with other men. Using anthropological studies, she showed that in certain societies, such as the Aranda of Central Australia, sexual relations between males are seen as a part of a varied sexual pattern, where men and boys are expected to engage in sexual relations with other males. However, such relations are not defined as 'homosexual', as men are not expected to only have sexual liaisons with other men. Thus she proposes that the dichotomising of sexuality within Western society is intentionally manipulated to place people in superior or inferior positions within society.

According to McIntosh, those members of society who are in the superior position (heterosexuals) then construct a set of expectations regarding the behaviour of those who are considered to be inferior (homosexuals). The expectations of non-homosexuals affect the self-conception of those who see themselves as homosexual; this includes the expectation that the (male) homosexual will be effeminate in manner, that sexuality will be primary to all of his relations with other men, and that he will be attracted to boys and men and probably willing to seduce them (McIntosh,1968: 36).

McIntosh's use of labelling theory to analyse the homosexual role and societal responses to it challenged the dominant medical and psychiatric categorisation of homosexuality. This had concentrated on the individual sexual behaviour of the homosexual, without studying homosexuality in terms of the social categorisations which shape the homosexual experience, and thus ignoring the development of complex cultural and subcultural forms relating to sexual identities. However, McIntosh herself failed to differentiate between male and female homosexuality. By concentrating largely on the emergence of what she believes to be a (male) homosexual identity, she failed to problematise her own theory. She did not take into account the possible differences between a male homosexual role and a female homosexual role, nor considered whether factors such as 'race', gender and class may have affected individual homosexuals' experiences in differing ways.

Sociological challenges to deviancy theory such as this were not common in Britain in the 1960s. Clinical or psychological perspectives continued to dominate theory. Works such as Kenyon's *Studies in Female Homosexuality* (1968), and Kremer and Rifkins' *The Early Development of Homosexuality: A Study of Adolescent Lesbians* (1969) persisted in their preoccupation with manifestations of innate lesbian 'deviant' behaviour. Both works proposed that lesbians had more in common with homosexual men than they did with heterosexual women, failing to note that lesbians frequently conformed to prevailing norms of femininity or womanhood. Neither did these studies question the power differentials between homosexual and heterosexual women and the widespread negative portrayal of homosexuality which, it could be argued, led to the social invisibility of most lesbians in Britain in the 1960s.

Although legislative changes brought some benefit to women in the 1960s (such as the 1967 Abortion Act and divorce law reform), women still remained largely subordinate to male authority, both in the public and private spheres (Coote and Campbell, 1982; Holdsworth, 1988). A steady stream of feminist writing was published which challenged the social subordination of women between what was considered the 'first wave of feminism' (see Section 2.2 for earlier discussion of first wave feminism) and the contemporary feminist movement, which included the social movement known as the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM). The exact year in which the WLM emerged in Britain is difficult to assess. Sheila Rowbotham (1983) considered that it began with the first Women's Liberation conference held at Ruskin College in Oxford, in 1970, while Angela Neustatter dates it to 1968. According to Neustatter, women came together in this

year to consider ways to fight against both the discrimination and oppression of women that they perceived as rife in society (Neustatter, 1990:3).

A social movement is defined as a group of people who have a purpose which will bring about change and whose influence is: 'spreading in opposition to the established order in which it originated' (Gerlach and Hine, 1970: xvi). Social and political change is said to result from social movements, which are initiated by those people who attempt to deal with:

> [S]ocial problems that have been generated by contradictions and inequalities in the ways different aspects of life are organised. (Sherif, 1976:266)

Women's Liberation can be seen to fit the definition of social movement as it is generally accepted that it arose from perceptions of the social inequality of women and individuals' personal discontentment, which eventually led to collective action (Coote and Campbell, 1982). However, its original aims were not clear. Its members knew what they were opposed to, including inequality in the workplace such as unequal pay and sexual harassment, and the predominant view of women as sexual objects in advertising, rather than knowing what they were in favour of (O'Sullivan, 1996).

Women's Liberation in Britain was influenced by other social movements in various countries including, by general agreement, the civil rights movements in the United States, Britain and Canada in the form of the black rights movement, the anti-Vietnam movement and political student movements in Britain and Europe. Its adherents questioned the exercise of patriarchal authority in their daily lives, including male dominance of the medicalisation of childbirth and women's traditional sociobiological roles as wives and mothers (Coote and Campbell, 1982). However, the major influence on the British Women's Liberation Movement was the feminist campaigns in the United States in the late 1960s.

In the following few years in the United States 'new feminists' began to publish large amounts of campaigning material in the form of articles and pamphlets. Coote and Campbell identify the first manifesto of Women's Liberation drawn up by the Redstockings of New York in 1969 as an early influential document. In a novel adaptation of Marxist theory, they are credited as being the first to name women's oppression as a 'political condition', making the relationship between men and women a 'class' relationship (Coote and Campbell, 1982: 6).

> After centuries of individual and preliminary political struggle, women are uniting to achieve their final liberation from male supremacy...Because we have been so intimate with our oppressors, in isolation from each other, we have been kept from seeing our personal suffering as a political condition. This creates the illusion that a woman's relationship with her man is a matter of interplay between two unique personalities, and can be worked out individually. In reality, every such relationship is a *class* relationship, and the conflicts between individual men and women are *political* conflicts that can only be solved collectively...Men have controlled all political economic and cultural institutions and backed up this control with physical force. They have used their power to keep women in an inferior position. *All men* receive economic, sexual, and psychological benefits from male supremacy. *All men* have oppressed women. (Redstockings Manifesto [1969] in Redstockings, 1975: 82) (Italics are in the original.)

The 1960s saw the emergence of the Women's Liberation Movement in the United Kingdom, which was to provide an 'immeasurable difference to lesbian visibility and confidence' in the 1970s and beyond (Brown, 1998:30). Another important movement, the Gay Liberation Movement, which originated in the United States in the late 1960s, was also to play a major part in challenging traditional gender roles and theories on sexuality. The GLM was said to have sprung up in parallel with the Women's Liberation Movement in America in the late 1960s and Britain in the 1970s. Commentators on lesbian and gay history are united in their agreement that the most significant event in contemporary history of homosexuality was the Stonewall Riots which took place in New York in 1969 (Weeks, 1977; Faderman, 1991; Cruickshank, 1992; Power, 1995). These riots resulted from a police raid on the Stonewall Inn, a regular haunt for gay men and lesbians. Such raids were not uncommon, but the resistance which met the police was. Rioting in the streets surrounding the Stonewall Inn continued for three days, an event which has been accepted as the symbolic birth of the gay movement and the discourse of Gay Pride. The New York Gay Liberation Front was established in the immediate aftermath of the Stonewall Riots which, like other civil rights groups of the 1960s, rejected the stereotypes that had been forced upon them:

> We reject society's attempt to impose sexual roles and definitions of our nature. We are steeping out of these roles and simplistic myths. WE ARE GOING TO BE WHO WE ARE...Babylon has forced us to commit ourselves to one thing-revolution. (Altman, 1971:105) (Capitals are as in the original.)

The American revolutionary model of the New York Gay Liberation Front, with its statements of gay pride, was to be adopted by the London Gay Liberation Front when it formed in 1970.

2.8 Lesbianism in the 1970s

The basic premise of the Women's Liberation Movement was that women were oppressed legally, economically and culturally, with fundamental changes in social policy, law and attitudes necessary to redress their unequal status in society. The WLM emerged from grass roots activism, with women meeting in small groups, later to become known as Consciousness Raising (CR) groups, which allowed for the:

> [C]ollective exploration of personal experiences and emotions in turn leading to the necessity of struggle for personal and social change. (O'Sullivan, 1996:14)

CR groups became popular in most large cities, many members of which attended the first British national Women's Liberation Conference held in 1970 at Ruskin College in Oxford. Women from around the country gathered together, from which a set of demands were produced, which included: free contraception and abortion on demand; 24 hour childcare; and equal pay and education. Other demands added later included an end to violence against women and to discrimination against lesbians, and the right to a self-defined sexuality, all of which were perceived as necessary to achieve legal and financial independence for all women (Coote and Campbell, 1982).

The WLM, from the 1970s onwards, offered many women the chance to meet with others who shared both similar experiences and different ones, allowing them to perceive their identities as women, mothers and workers in a new positive light. Their individual feelings of disillusionment and discontent became linked with a political struggle, as women began to contest male-defined notions and concepts about their lives. Feminists recognised that public policies could be shaped by personal experiences. By connecting issues of the personal with the political, the WLM became a unique political movement which has been credited with changing contemporary political thinking (Humm, 1989). A newly acquired language was shared among women, the concept of patriarchy becoming one of the key words to the members of the WLM, representing the totality of oppressive and exploitative relations which affect women (Humm, 1989). Throughout the years of the WLM various definitions of 'patriarchy' were offered, the following being a typical one:

> A system originating in the household wherein the father dominates, the structure then reproduces throughout society in gender relations. (MacKinnon, 1982: 528-9)

The WLM is thus credited as proposing the notion that patriarchy is ubiquitous and that women's experiences have been traditionally devalued through public and private divisions of traditional politics.

In the 1970s feminism continued to develop its appeal to women of all backgrounds seeking to change their lives. Its success as a social movement can be attributed to the use of theory and grassroots activism around specific campaigns. However, as second-wave feminism grew, various splinter groups were formed based on members' political and theoretical allegiances. Trotskyist, Marxist, Radical and Socialist feminist groups were formed, although the latter two groups were seen to dominate in both numbers and the output of theoretical writings in the 1970s and 1980s (Coote and Campbell, 1982; Segal, 1987; Neustatter, 1990). The difference between radical and social feminists centred around theoretical perspectives for understanding women's social and economic position and these differences were to later threaten the unity of the women's movement.

> The difference between Radical and Socialist feminists were to do with priorities. Radical feminists saw men's oppression of women as the fundamental power differential governing society, while Socialist feminists believed that sexual politics was secondary to class politics. (Studzinski, 1994: 15)

One of feminism's early achievements was to focus attention on the position of women. Feminism produced narratives, both from scholarly theoretical works and through activism. From the beginnings of the second wave movement, feminst writers from various perspectives of feminism became popular. Rowbotham (1972; 1973) and Mitchell (1966) reassessed socialism and psychoanalysis, while the radical feminist Kate Millett argued that ideological indoctrination was the cause of women's oppression as much as economic inequality, that patriarchy operated in all areas of economic and social structures and was as a result a fundamental part of heterosexual relationships (Millett, 1977). Feminist theory underpinned the action-based campaigns which were prominent in the 1970s. One of these was against domestic violence, when male violence became the focus of much feminist activity. In 1972 the first refuge for battered women opened in Chiswick, West London. Until this time domestic violence had not been publicly discussed and it was not until feminists publicised that '...men regularly beat up women in the privacy of their homes' [that] 'the public had to face the fact that domestic violence was widespread and often severe' (Coote and Campbell, 1982: 36). In 1976 the first Rape Crisis Centre was established in North London, followed a year later by Reclaim the Night demonstrations in many of the large towns and cities in Britain including London, Leeds, Manchester, York

and Newcastle. Women marched through the streets, picketed sex shops and publicised violent attacks on women, claiming that as women they had the right to walk the streets in both the day and night without fear of potential attack by men. By the late 1970s issues such as these were amalgamated in one large campaign, Women Against Violence Against Women. The ideas, activism and theories of feminism were successfully disseminated through women's publishing presses such as Virago and Onlywomen Press and a series of local and national newsletters.

According to Humm, it was radical feminist activism which highlighted the connection between women's roles, sexuality and violence and other forms of oppression such as the sexual division of labour (Humm, 1992). Radical feminism emphasised gender inequality and male domination within the family as the basis of violence against women. Practical support for women who lived with violent husbands or partners was provided in the form of self-help groups (Coote and Campbell, 1982). Radical feminism also sought to publicise the effects of pornography and the resulting harm to women (and men). According to Smart, the presence of an active women's movement directly influenced legislation. She proposed that the legal changes concerning abortion (1967, and the 1970s defence of the same Act), equal pay (1970; 1974) and domestic violence (1976) would not have been implemented had it not been for the pressure put on the government and other authorities by members of the WLM (Smart, 1984: 130-131).

Members of the WLM were not the only ones who were attempting to explore sexuality from a hitherto unknown theoretical perspective. In 1970 the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) emerged in Britain. It is credited by Weeks as being one of the major contributors to the perception of the 1970s as the 'turning point in the evolution of a homosexual consciousness' (Weeks, 1977:185). The GLF appropriated the term 'gay' to replace 'queer' and 'homosexual', two terms which they repudiated as the term their oppressors used. Three concepts were primary within the GLF: coming out, coming together and identifying the roots of oppression. The GLF named three types of oppression of gay people: persecution, which included the legal oppression of gay men concerning the age of consent, but also included such non-legal oppressions as 'queer bashing'; discrimination in employment, housing and child custody; and liberal tolerance, by which they meant the supercilious acceptance of homosexuality by the media, psychiatrists and other medical professionals. The GLF was closely aligned ideologically with the WLM, in that the radical

lesbian and gay organisation similarly challenged the stereotyped roles of men and women:

> The oppression of gay people starts in the most basic unit of society, the family, consisting of the man in charge, a slave as his wife, and their children on whom they force themselves as ideal models. The very form of the family works against homosexuality. (London Gay Manifesto, 1971 quoted in Weeks, 1977: 196)

Epstein suggested that lesbians and gay men in the 1970s increasingly came to conceptualise themselves as a legitimate minority group, claiming for themselves the same rights as minority ethnic groups. He thus claimed that lesbians and gay men took an essentialist perspective of their 'gayness', believing themselves to be innately different from heterosexuals (Epstein, 1987:12). However, members of the GLF often attacked essentialist ideology. According to Power (1995), some women members of the GLF who leafleted the Gateways Club, one of the most famous lesbian clubs in Britain at this time, entered into heated debate with the lesbian owners while handing out leaflets. Mary McIntosh, a member of the GLF in 1970, was one of these who argued that the owners of the Gateways Club promoted essentialist theories of lesbianism in their belief that lesbians were indeed 'sick' and by their promotion of discretion and assimilation with the wider heterosexual culture. One of the owners of Gateways objected to the GLF's insistence on embracing gay pride, rather than pursuing discretion:

> You've got a nice scene here, you don't need to do things on the street, you can come here and be yourselves in peace and you don't have to tell the public and children what you're doing, it's much better to be discreet and it's nothing to be proud of, there's nothing wrong with your lives as long as the Gateways is here. (Power, 1995: 120)

The GLF's ideology was also opposed to existing homophile organisations such as the Committee for Homosexual Equality (CHE) and the Albany Trust, believing both to be unnecessarily bureaucratic. Indeed, fundamental differences between the GLF and the CHE were obvious. The CHE was primarily a campaigning group, but also provided support and a social outlet. It attempted to become somewhat more radical in the early 1970s, changing its name from the 'Committee' to the Campaign for Homosexual Equality in 1971 (Sanderson, 1988). However, the CHE had always been a reformist organisation, based on the premise that reasoned lobbying would eventually gain for homosexuals access to the same rights as heterosexuals. In contrast the GLF was transformationalist in using direct action to deconstruct notions of sexuality and gender (Brown, 1998). The GLF and CHE could therefore be seen as ideologically aligned with two groups within the

WLM with very different theoretical positions, namely radical/lesbian feminists and liberal/socialist feminists.

Although the ratio of men to women members in the GLF was five to one, Power asserts that women 'were involved in the Gay Liberation Front from the first meeting onwards' and took part in all aspects of the organisation's work, including demonstrations, the printing and distribution of the weekly newspaper *Coming Out* and various sit-ins (Power, 1995). However, by late 1971 women within the GLF had started to withdraw, some establishing autonomous lesbian groups and others joining the more radical groups of the WLM. Two of the most frequently cited explanations for women's withdrawal was either that they believed that the GLF was not radical enough, or that they believed that gay men within the GLF promoted sexist assumptions (Epstein, 1987; Power, 1995).

The lesbian membership of the WLM increased. However, in the early 1970s, many heterosexual members of the WLM in both America and Britain attempted to resist the overt presence of lesbians. Women's liberation in the United States and in Britain had begun by demanding sexual freedom for women but, according to Caine (1997), had done so in heterosexual terms. Lesbians on both sides of the Atlantic believed that they were being marginalised within the WLM, as they were in the wider society, arguing that their sexuality should be recognised as legitimate within the WLM.

During the 1970s, when the WLM was at its height, some lesbian feminists believed that total commitment to women as a political group would provide the foundation for an economic and political strategy resulting in the empowerment of women (Overall, 1988). The choice to give primacy to women in personal relationships was perceived as of great political significance by some lesbians, who believed that heterosexuality itself oppressed women and should be recognised as such (Humm, 1989).

In 1970 a group of lesbian feminists calling themselves Radicalesbians coined the term 'woman identified woman', proposing that lesbianism could be a 'political' choice for all women, regardless of their sexual desires and feelings (Humm, 1992:163). In their paper *The Woman-Identified-Woman* the Radicalesbians asserted that lesbianism was the only 'logical political act', arguing that feminism logically required a lesbian sexuality. Radicalesbians suggested that the word 'lesbian' was invented by men to:

> [T]hrow at any woman who dares to be his equal, who dares to challenge his prerogatives...who dares to assert the primacy of her own needs. (Radicalesbians, 1970:18)

Lesbian feminism was perceived by many feminists as challenging heterosexual feminists to confront and question their own sexual identity. In Johnston's work, *The Lesbian Nation* (1973), she argued that while heterosexual feminists could understand the basic logic of choosing women as sexual partners, in affirmation of a 'powerful sisterhood', they remained hostile to the ideology of lesbianism in refusing to confront what she claimed was the staple nuclear unit of oppression, namely heterosexual sex. Instead of confronting heterosexuality, she suggested that non lesbian women were committed to the 'reform' of men and all the institutions of male oppression.

However, while lesbian feminists continued to gather support, other lesbians argued that the politicisation of lesbianism represented a negative rejection of lesbianism rather than a positive sexual attraction towards other women. Lesbians such as Nestle (1987) proposed that erotic relationships between women were important in challenging heteropatriarchal beliefs and the heterosexual ideology that women were emotionally and sexually dependent on men.

By the mid to latter half of the 1970s a rift occurred between, on the one hand, heterosexual feminists and lesbian feminists and, on the other, within the lesbian community, some of whose members believed that the only way they could protect themselves from patriarchal constraints and further the cause of women was to separate themselves from male society. Thus some lesbian feminists began to organise themselves into groups and lived, worked and engaged socially only with women, denying all access to males of whatever age in their public and private lives. To such lesbians, separatism was considered the ultimate and most logical step in their challenge to patriarchy, in the belief that:

> Separatism is to feminism what fundamentalism is to Christianity. It is the centre, the beating heart, the essence. (Dixon, 1988: 69)

However, identity politics, which had emerged as a dominant feature within the lesbian community in the 1970s, continued to cause conflicts among its members, particularly those of different 'race', class and sexuality. Black feminists accused white feminists of disregarding the importance of their black identities and experiences (Lorde, 1980; Mays, 1981). Jewish feminists accused other feminists of not addressing the problem of anti-

Semitism within the movement (Klepfisz, 1981). Those lesbians who supported butch and femme role-playing, or other sexual and social roles, which the majority of lesbian feminists saw as 'anti-feminist', accused the lesbian feminists and the women's movement in general of being a 'moralistic force' which had contributed to the 'misery experienced by sexual minorities' within the movement (Califia, 1981:522). These conflicts eventually led to fragmentation. The last WLM conference to be held in Britain took place in 1978.

The WLM and the GLF are therefore credited as largely responsible for the shift in lay perceptions of homosexuality and lesbianism. Gay identities became a cause for acclamation and 'gay communities' replaced traditional 'deviant subcultures' (Epstein, 1987:19). By the mid 1970s the concept of lesbian identity first started to appear in both theoretical and empirical studies of lesbianism for academic audiences (Cass, 1984). As a result, the number of published articles and their diversity of themes relating to lesbianism grew. These themes included: problems of adjustment in identifying as lesbian (Hammersmith and Weinberg, 1973); the management of lesbian identity (Moses, 1978); homophobia (Laner and Laner, 1979); and the study of lesbian lifestyles (Albro and Tully, 1979). However, only Ponse (1978) studied the relationship between the lesbian community and lesbian identity.

The *Journal of Homosexuality* was founded in 1974 by American theorists of sexuality and clinicians who questioned the traditional medical model of homosexuality. Many of its articles were written from a sociological perspective. Unlike the writings from the previous decade, (see Section 2.7), they did not propose that lesbians were innately different from heterosexual women. Many sociologists were coming to regard homosexuals as the victims of unjust discrimination. Researchers began to utilise individuals' recollections of past events to explain the development of their respondents' current identity, claiming that stages of homosexual development were evident.

Most stage theories of identity formation dealt only with the isolated individual, starting with the assumption that the individual is heterosexual, who then proceeds through various stages before finally adopting a lesbian or gay identity, which was then viewed as 'stable' (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1979). As many of these identity formation theories used gay male samples (Plummer, 1975) or mixed male and female samples, they suggested that homosexuals, whether male or female, enter and proceed through the same stages of identity formation, and therefore encounter the same problems and experiences (Cass,

1979). Ironically, they resemble the psychiatric works of Kenyon (1968) and Kremer and Rifkin (1969) in making the naive assumption that the experiences of gay men and lesbians are similar. Few studies exclusively investigated the lesbian community, and of these only one major study, that of Ponse (1978), dealt explicitly with the relationship between lesbian identity and lesbian community at any length. (This will be reviewed shortly.) Few theorists have attempted to establish the relationship between the progression of identity formation in the individual lesbian and the interaction process that occurs between lesbians within lesbian environments. While some theorists identified what types of problems are encountered by lesbians in the management of their lesbian identity, with the exception of Moses (1978), these have tended to be concise, offering no authoritative account of how lesbians' participation in the lesbian community affected their lesbian identity (Schafer, 1976; Albro and Tully, 1979). The dearth of literature dealing with lesbians in relation to their wider worlds may be due to the history of this area of research, which has generally concentrated on isolated, 'deviant' individuals. It may be that members of lesbian groups protected their interests by denying research access by heterosexual researchers.

The next section of the literature review will focus on two studies from the 1970s which have been particularly influential for this project. Both concentrate on notions of 'identity' and 'community', are based on empirical data, and have similar number of informants to my own study. The two studies of lesbianism were by Siegrid Schafer (1976) and Barbara Ponse (1978). Schafer's *Sexual and Social Problems of Lesbians* was carried out in West Germany and published in the Journal of Homosexuality (1976). Ponse's American study, *Identities in the Lesbian World* (1978), was one of the largest studies of lesbian identity in this decade to utilise sociological theory. Both viewed the lesbian individual in a social context, in terms of her relationship with other women, in lesbian communities and in the larger society. Their research differs from previous studies in that they aimed to examine how women developed a lesbian identity for themselves in relation to the norms of the lesbian community through empirical research, rather than basing their evidence on previous theories.

Both of these studies had relatively large numbers of respondents for research which is based on a stigmatised community. Schafer's (1976) study consisted of 151 respondents while Ponse's (1978) had 75 respondents. Schafer's (1976) respondents had a restricted age range (18 to 40 years old). She used homosexual organisations, advertising and the

snowball method to distribute nearly 500 questionnaires. However, she only achieved a response rate of 31 per cent, which is considered rather low in quantitative research of this kind, when it explores a topic of considerable interest to those being studied. Ponse (1978) recruited respondents through the same methods as Schafer (1976). She achieved an age range of 16 to 76, but as four-fifths of her respondents were between the ages of 20 and 40, their profile is similar to Schafer's. This was not only true for age, but also in terms of respondents' educational level, social class and ethnicity. Both sets of respondents were primarily white and well-educated professional women.

Both studies paid considerable attention to the process known as 'coming out', which is an abbreviation of the phrase 'to come out of the closet', commonly utilised by lesbians and gay men to describe the process by which one starts being honest about one's sexuality, both to oneself and to others (Stewart, 1995: 54).

> The phrase coming out, as used by gay people, has three meanings: to acknowledge one's homosexuality to oneself; to reveal oneself as homosexual to other gay people; and lastly to declare one's homosexuality to everyone and anyone. (Hodges and Hutter, 1977: 13)

The process of coming out has been featured by theorists as a complex dilemma for many lesbians and gay men (Stewart-Park and Cassidy, 1977; de Monteflores and Schultz, 1978; Moses, 1978; Albro and Tully, 1979). Schafer regards it as essential to an identity as lesbian (Schafer, 1976:50), leading her to propose a framework or model for the coming out process among lesbians. This is an 'identity construction framework', in which lesbians proceed through a number of stages, leading to confirmation of their sense of self as lesbian, and acceptance of it as their 'authentic' identity. She identified three distinct stages experienced by the women in her study.

- From the first interest in a woman to the first suspicions that one is lesbian;
- From the first suspicion of being lesbian to the first sexual intercourse with a woman; and
- From the first sexual intercourse with a woman to the certainty of being lesbian.

(Schafer, 1976: 51-53)

According to Schafer, the first stage in the coming out process starts with the individual becoming aware that they have a 'particular interest' in other girls or women, which she calculated as occurring at an average age of 14.5 years. This 'interest' was defined by respondents as originating from emotional desire or attraction to other females, rather than from sexual or physical attraction, and it is interpreted by respondents as making them

different or setting them apart from other females. The second stage of the coming out model is said to evolve some 3.5 years after the first initial reaction. This stage consisted of women questioning their emotional attraction to other females, leading them to suspect that they might be lesbian. Respondents then proceed to 'test' their suspicions by engaging in what Schafer terms as their first 'sexual intercourse' with another woman, at an average age of 20 (Schafer, 1976: 51). The third and final phase of this model consisted of individuals becoming certain that they were lesbian, which according to Schafer normally took place within a year of their first 'sexual intercourse'. However, she stated that this 'certainty' did not result in respondents' unproblematic acceptance of their lesbian identity. Rather, it was generally accompanied by a 'phase' of denial, during which some respondents engaged in heterosexual activity.

Schafer's stage model showed that all her respondents shared certain common experiences leading to self-identification as lesbian. Lesbian identity was said to originate with respondents' admission that they somehow felt 'different' from other females, although at the time they would not see this as a substantial indicator of their sexuality. This was confirmed by other researchers in the 1970s:

> Many lesbians remembered feelings of uniqueness and complete isolation upon first discovering their lesbianism. (Albro and Tully, 1979:34)

However, although Schafer found the coming out process to be sequentially ordered, it was by no means a simple unproblematic matter. Many of her respondents experienced two bisexual phases before attaining a stable lesbian identity. The first phase occurred in stage one, where respondents engaged in the same behaviour as heterosexual girls. Schafer explained this as being no more than 'confusion' on the part of the respondents, who had not yet begun to identify themselves as lesbian. The second phase of bisexuality occurred in the third stage, even though respondents had by this time self-identified as lesbian. Such behaviour results from respondents' inability to link their sexual behaviour with their sexual identity, thus, incongruence existed between, on the one hand, their emotional interest in women and realisation that they were lesbian, and on the other, their sexual behaviour with men. However, Schafer believed that such incongruous behaviour was a necessary and intentional defence strategy utilised by women to reassure themselves that they had made the right choice in self identifying as lesbian.

Most of Schafer's respondents had experienced sexual relations with males before they did with females, with only a few women reporting having experienced heterosexual relations after any homosexual experience. The younger women were those most likely to have experienced the two bisexual phases, as unlike those women who had no prior heterosexual experience, they needed to have 'repeated unpleasant heterosexual experiences (in order to) let them realise their homosexual orientation' (Schafer, 1976:55-56). Schafer's explanation for women aged over twenty engaging in incidental bisexual behaviour was that such behaviour allowed them short-term relief from the isolation of lesbianism and thus a 'path out of deviance for the homosexual woman' (Schafer, 1976: 77). In total, 36 per cent of Schafer's sample had sexual relations with men in the 12 months preceding the study. She explains this high incidence of bisexual behaviour as being due to respondents' low self esteem and feelings of vulnerability. Sexual relations with men were sought by respondents as a way of 'strengthening their femininity' and 'proving their normalcy' (Schafer, 1976: 58). The third stage is said by Schafer to be the most problematic. Respondents experienced feelings of isolation and feared that they would not meet other lesbians like themselves, as they had not had any contact with the lesbian community. She claimed that the whole process of coming out as lesbian generally took place without any influence or support from the lesbian subculture or community, leaving individuals facing isolation by being separated from other lesbians, within a predominantly heterosexual society.

Coming out has been identified by most theorists as being highly problematic and stressful to lesbians. Stewart-Park and Cassidy (1977) highlight the problems that many women face:

> When we come out of the closet - that is admit publicly that we are lesbian - it's rather like out of the frying pan and into the fire. None of us enjoys living in the closet. It implies first that we are ashamed of our sexuality; secondly it isolates us from each other; and thirdly, it makes it difficult to have an honest relationship with anyone... (Stewart-Park and Cassidy, 1977:1)

Schafer's study highlighted the complex nature of the process of disclosing one's sexuality (coming out). Half of her respondents reported being open about their sexuality, believing that being 'out' was the only way to challenge prevailing myths about lesbians and lesbianism. However, two fifths admitted that they would only come out under certain conditions and within certain environments. Under half of all respondents, 44 per cent, had disclosed to their mothers and only 32 per cent had done so to their fathers. Most

respondents reported being secretive, especially within their work environment, where one seventh of respondents said that they had faced difficulties at work including lack of promotions, disciplinary transfers and dismissals (Schafer, 1976: 60).

Ponse's (1978) study, like Schafer's, identified a series of phases within the coming out process. She constructed a five-stage model, calling this process the 'gay trajectory'. It consists of:

- The individual has sense of being different from heterosexual people; these feelings are identified as emotional/sexual attraction to other females;
- The individual understands the lesbian significance of emotional/sexual feelings;
- The individual accepts these feelings and comes out to herself;
- The individual seeks lesbian community; and
- The individual becomes involved in a sexual-emotional relationship.
  (Ponse, 1978:125-128)

The 'gay trajectory' is not unlike Schafer's model, albeit with more phases. However, unlike Schafer, Ponse examined individuals' coming out process in relation to the lesbian community, and it is this aspect of her study I wish to examine now.

Ponse regarded the lesbian community as being important to lesbians, suggesting that it serves two crucial functions, namely protecting the individual and validating her identity, something unavailable to lesbians in the wider (heterosexual) world. She also saw an individual's identification with the community as a prerequisite for its acceptance of them. Unlike in the heterosexual world, members of the lesbian community did not view woman-to-woman sexual activity as leading unequivocally to the assumption of lesbian identity (Ponse, 1978: 149). Rather, individuals who sought the acceptance of the lesbian community had to embrace certain of its norms in order to be perceived by their peers as authentic lesbians. 'Authentic lesbians', according to Ponse, were those who were seen to have embraced one of the two acceptable dominant 'lesbian stories' which provided individuals with their own account of how they came to have a lesbian identity. Possession of such as 'story' secures the acceptance of the lesbian peer group that an individual is committed to her lesbian identity. This produces conformity and cohesion amongst community members.

The two accepted lesbian stories were termed by Ponse the *biographical reconstructionist* story and the *biographical reinterpretations* story. In *biographical reconstruction,* the individuals' life events are presented within a time frame so that they are seen to progress

from the past to the present, with the past seen as directly causing the present state of affairs (Ponse, 1978:158-9). However, although most accounts fitted one or other of these two types, some of Ponse's respondents told a third kind of story, which Ponse did not name, but which was dismissed as 'inauthentic' by members of the lesbian community. (This will be described in detail later.) Ponse saw these stories as characteristic of three groups of lesbians, which she named as *primary lesbians*; *elective lesbians* and *idiosyncratic lesbians* (Ponse, 1978).

The *primary lesbians* were, according to Ponse, those individuals who believed their lesbianism to be innate. They felt they had a different genetical or hormonal constitution from heterosexual people, believing that they were born homosexual. These women have had little or no heterosexual experience, and their lesbian activity and their lesbian identity were congruent. All respondents in this lesbian category used a biographical reconstruction story, where childhood recollections of behaviour or personal characteristics were seen as early indicators of their later lesbianism in their teenage or adult years. *Primary lesbians* typically said that although they were always lesbian, they were unable to recognise or articulate this until they were older, due to a lack of knowledge about sexuality or lesbianism. Their descriptions of their emergence of lesbian identity are said by Ponse to be 'congruent with the gay trajectory', in that they pass through each stage in the coming out process (Ponse, 1978:160).

The *elective lesbians* differed from the *primary lesbians* in that individuals identified themselves as lesbian at a later time in their lives, possibly in their twenties or later, but like the primary type, they also believed that their lesbianism was a result of genetic or hormonal differences. These *elective lesbians* had typically experienced 'extensive heterosexual relations' prior to lesbian relationships. They had used a biographical reinterpretation story, claiming that their present lesbian identity was, and always had been, their 'true' sexual identity. Past events which were incongruous with a lesbian identity were reinterpreted, therefore bringing the *elective lesbians*' biography into line with the 'gay trajectory'.

The third and final group of lesbians were the *idiosyncratic lesbians*. These were feminists and bisexual women who differed from the other categories of women, in not insisting that they had always been lesbian but may not have realised it at the time. Some of the women identified as lesbian, but stated unequivocally that they had been heterosexual in the past.

However, not all women within the this category defined themselves as lesbian, even though Ponse reported that all experienced meaningful lesbian relationships. Rather, they believed that no-one was innately heterosexual or homosexual, reporting that they themselves formed relationships on the basis of desired personal qualities, irrespective of their biological sex. The women in this group therefore did not proceed through the five elements of the gay trajectory, as members of the previous two groups had.

Ponse also found that within the three groups of lesbians who were visible within the lesbian community, four combinations of sexual identity and sexual activity were evident. Within the primary lesbian group, lesbian identity and lesbian activity were the norm, as it was in the elective group, although some elective lesbians may have experienced sexual activity with men. In relation to the idiosyncratic group, Ponse found that lesbian sexual activity without lesbian identity was common. She also suggested that women who neither identified as lesbian, nor had sexual activity with other women, were also part of the community, as heterosexual friends of community members.

Both Schafer's and Ponse's respondents appear to be homogeneous groups, with their respondents sharing similar class, educational and ethnic backgrounds. The findings of both studies may well have been different if they had included a more diverse sample of women in terms of their age, class, educational qualifications and geographic location. Ponse's 'gay trajectory' model suggests that awareness and participation in the lesbian community precedes individuals' own acceptance of lesbian identity. However, her study did not include women who lived in rural areas, where the lesbian community may be inaccessible, and therefore her assertion that the community precedes individuals' own acceptance of lesbian identity may specifically relate only to this study rather than to lesbians generally.

Schafer's model is also exclusionary due to the limitation of age within the group of respondents. Older women who have gone through some transformation from heterosexual to lesbian are ignored by Schafer, whose estimate average age for each of her stages begins at 14.5 years and ends at 20 or 21. Schafer's findings cannot therefore underpin generalisations about lesbians' process of coming out. Neither can they be seen to be representative of any woman who has taken an identity as lesbian in later life, or who has previously been married. Schafer's focus on age limits suggests that the 'normative' or dominant model of lesbian identity applies only to women who first discover their feelings

of lesbianism at a young age.

Ponse's (1978) study was important in that it provided a basic analytic framework which was developed by later researchers. Her study was also one of the first to challenge the notion that the lesbian community invariably had a benign impact on individuals, proposing rather that such communities demand conformity and commitment from members to group norms. Thus the lesbian community may well threaten, as well as support, the development of lesbian identity.

2.9 Lesbianism in the 1980s

By the 1980s the Conservative government's aim of making the family unit responsible for many of society's ills was apparent. Although no explicit official policy on lesbian and gay issues was ever articulated in the early 1980s, the government reinforced the ideological power of the heterosexual married couple in a nuclear family by its rhetoric and economic and social policies. By upholding such families as the only 'proper' family type, homosexuality was regulated and discrimination against lesbians and gay men continued (van Every, 1991/1992). As the example below shows, some prominent members of the Conservative Party had a deep hatred of homosexuality, believing as Bill Brownhill did, that lesbians and gay men were endangering society:

> Those bunch of queers that legalise filth in homosexuality have a lot to answer for...I would put 90 per cent of queers in the ruddy gas chamber. (Brownhill, (1987) quoted in Studzinski, 1994)

Although government ideology and such individuals' rhetoric may have challenged lesbians and gay men, within the media lesbians appeared to have made some social gains, becoming more publicly visible. *Out On Tuesday*, a lesbian and gay magazine and political programme, was launched on Channel 4 on Valentine's Day 1989. This was the first lesbian and gay series to be commissioned by and screened on mainstream television anywhere in the world (Hamer, 1996). It could be argued that this positive media visibility of lesbianism led to greater acceptance by the general public. However, commentators have suggested that the 1980s can best be described for lesbians and gay men in Britain as a decade of confusion and conflict, engendering a 'right-wing political and social backlash' from which they have never recovered (Studzinski, 1994; Jivani, 1997).

There were three major social and political events in the 1980s that could be viewed as affecting lesbian culture or the general public's perceptions of lesbians. These were the controversy in some lesbian communities over certain sexual activities between lesbians; the debate over lesbian mothers; and changes in British law which directly challenged the acceptability of lesbian lifestyles.

The controversy over lesbian's sexual activities could be perceived as having both positive and negative effects on some lesbian subcultures or communities. In the 1980s a growing number of texts concerned with lesbian sex started to appear for both academic and non-academic audiences. American lesbian writers originated 'lesbian sex manuals', which were to become increasingly popular from the 1980s onwards. Prior to the work of Califia (1980) and Loulan (1984), lesbian sex, or what lesbians did (or could do) in bed (or elsewhere), had received little attention from lesbian historians, factual writers, or theorists, with the exception of tentative introductions to sex in Abbot and Love's (1973) American publication *Sappho Was A Right-On Woman.* As we have seen, sex manuals for heterosexual couples have been popular since the 1930s.

Califia (1980) was the first to address the issue of lesbian sex in this format, arguing that her book *Sapphistry: The Book of Lesbian Sexuality* was much needed amongst lesbians, in order to explode what she saw as the myth that 'two women know exactly how to please one another sexually...' (Califia, 1980:xii). She further suggested that the politicisation of lesbianism in the 1970s had resulted in lesbian sexual acts being dismissed as unimportant in relation to political action by some lesbian feminists within the women's movement:

> ...[W]e are not simply arch-feminists. We are women who think about touching each other, who undress each other and explore the sensual possibilities of our own and our lover's bodies. (Califia, 1980:xiii)

Loulan, an American lesbian counsellor, published her work *Lesbian Sex* in 1984. Like Califia, she saw sex manuals as an effective way of combating the dictatorial attitudes that had existed within the women's movement. Although both books achieved high sales amongst lesbians, with Califia's book reaching a third edition by 1988, not all lesbians viewed the sex manuals as a liberating force. Some feminists opposed them, believing that such publications emulated the inequality apparent in heterosexual intercourse and that the authors' suggested use of sex toys such as vibrators and dildos represented symbolic

worship of the phallus, thus replicating heterosexual sex (Strega and Jo, 1983; Jeffreys, 1995).

By the mid 1980s the debate over lesbian sexual practices had become heated within some of the larger lesbian communities. Discussions over sado-masochism and other related matters caused rifts within lesbian groups. As in the previous decade, the subject of bisexuality continued to cause splits within lesbian and feminist communities, some lesbians claiming that being bisexual was nothing more than a political cop-out, and detrimental to the lesbian community, leading to many bisexual women remaining silent about their own sexuality:

> By the early 1980s, those active feminists who believed themselves to be bisexual often identified publicly as lesbian - and kept quiet about other aspects of their sexuality. (George, 1992: 51)

Throughout the 1970s some lesbians and gay men believed that social attitudes towards homosexuality, which have traditionally been hostile, had begun to change, with sexual diversity becoming more generally acceptable. In the *British Social Attitudes Survey of 1983*, 63 per cent of respondents were reported as not approving of homosexual relationships. In 1985 this rose to 69 per cent (Airey and Brook, 1986: 152), and by 1987 the figure reached 74 per cent (Jivani, 1997:195). This unexpected rise in public disapproval was said to be due to the increase in the numbers of gay men with HIV or AIDS and the subsequent vilification of homosexuality in the tabloid press.

In the 1980s aspects of British law continued to deny lesbians and gay men the same civil rights as heterosexual people. Lesbians and gay men are still viewed as 'abnormal' and are therefore intentionally not acknowledged in British law.

> Laws are devised and applied within a framework which assumes both the superiority and normality of heterosexuality. (Gooding, 1992)

Perhaps one of the most controversial and intentional means of excluding lesbians and gay men from the same legal rights as heterosexuals is found in employment law. Under the 1977 Employment Equality Act there is no protection in law for lesbians and gay men; in effect, one can be sacked simply for being lesbian. The act only refers to discrimination on the grounds of sex, not of sexual orientation. The most widely publicised example of this debate about restriction in employment is the British Armed Forces, which became popularly known as the 'gays in the military debate'. Known lesbians and gay men are banned from employment in any sector of the armed forces, regardless of position or

occupation. This issue has had widespread publicity for the last few years and has been regularly challenged by individuals and lesbian and gay pressure groups. However, the Ministry of Defence's justification for the ban on lesbians and gay men was, and remains, that by accepting lesbians and gay men in the armed forces, it would undermine the trust and morale to the detriment of their fighting efficiency (Guardian, 8/3/97), although the armed forces of various other countries have no such rules (Hall, 1995).

The 1980s saw the Conservative government initiate various acts which operated to the detriment of lesbians and gay men. The most infamous of all these was Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988. For many lesbians and gay men this act was the pinnacle of:

> [W]hat can only be described as an obsessive demonisation of lesbians and gay men on the part of certain sections of the Conservative Party. (Brown, 1998: 26)

Section 28 prevents local authorities from:

> a) intentionally promoting homosexuality
> b) publishing material with the intention of promoting homosexuality
> c) promoting the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship. (Colvin and Hawksley, 1989: 65)

Although no prosecutions have ever taken place under this Act, it has had the effect of creating an atmosphere where homophobic councils and council officers who fear legal challenge have denied the validation of lesbians and gay men. The Act's opponents suggest that Section 28 represents the legitimation of existing homophobia and assisted the government who had sponsored the initiative, to put prejudice into practice (Stacey, 1991). Lesbians and gay men attempted in various ways to get the clause removed from the bill, by petitioning and demonstrating. Indeed, the Anti-Clause 28 March (as it was known) in Manchester 1988 was the largest gay march ever held in Britain. However, this resistance was to no avail and Section 28 of the Local Government Act passed into British law on 9th March 1988. Many letters from public figures, lesbian and gay pressure groups and the general public were received by the government departments, asking ministers to explain why it had been passed, and challenged the subsequent denial of civil liberties for lesbian and gay individuals. Many of the replies, such as the following one by a Mr N Cook, from the Department of Environment, refused to accept that the government was guilty of discrimination against lesbians and gay men, arguing that the government was acting on behalf of parents, who were worried that their children may be 'seduced' into homosexuality.

> ..[T]here was real concern that local authorities were targeting some activities on young people, in schools and outside in an apparent endeavour to glamorise homosexuality. Not unnaturally, parents have become increasingly worried about public money being used in this way to influence the attitudes and behaviour of impressionable young people...(Letter to Department of the Environment from Leicester Women's Centre dated 25/3/1988, quoted in Colvin and Hawksley, 1989:79-80)

However, many lesbians and gay men believed that Section 28 represented a blatant example of institutionalised homophobia, ending a decade which had witnessed the demoralisation of the lesbian and gay communities. Lesbian and gay groups mobilised and demonstrations protesting against Section 28 took place in many major cities in Britain. Other responses included the formation of two new joint lesbian and gay protest groups, the Stonewall Group and Act Up. The Stonewall Group, named after the Stonewall Riots in 1969 in the United States (see Section 2.7 for earlier discussion of the Stonewall Riots), was set up in 1989 as a British lesbian and gay lobbying group shortly after the passing of the Act, with the objective of 'trying to construct a civil rights agenda' (Healey and Mason, 1994:5). The Stonewall Group believes in the philosophy of integration, and in working with the government and other organisations in an attempt to persuade both the government and the wider heterosexual hegemonic society that lesbians and gay men deserve the same legal and civil rights as heterosexuals. The Stonewall Group resembles the 1960s Campaign for Homosexual Equality group, in representing the 'respectable face' of lesbian and gay politics (Jivani, 1997:3), espousing a liberal agenda on the politics of sexual orientation.

ACT UP was the abbreviated name given to the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power, which was originally founded in New York to campaign around issues of AIDS and HIV, and now has a Europe-wide membership. ACT UP became established in Britain in 1989, and also later in France and Holland (Duyvendak, 1996:426). ACT UP differs from Stonewall in being a radical direct action organisation, which as such is anti-establishment. ACT UP has covered such issues as the provision of condoms in prison, needle exchanges for intravenous drug users and the representation of 'People with AIDS' (PWA) in the media. The slogan 'ACT UP, fight back, fight AIDS' has become well known and used on posters and demonstrations (Stewart, 1995:3).

Although the 1980s was certainly a period of renewed political activism in Britain, there were few theoretical writings which deviated from the subjects which had been popular in the previous decade. Sociological and social-psychological perspectives on stage theories

continued to be written, amending and extending the theories produced in the 1970s (Troiden and Goode, 1980; Cass, 1984). However, these did include some useful sophisticated critiques of previous works, which questioned whether such stage theories applied to all lesbians (Sophie, 1985/6) or drew on new empirical research in order to show the weaknesses of earlier writings (Corbett and Morgan, 1983). By the late 1980s studies produced in both the United States and Britain had broadened their scope to examine the discrimination and particular forms of homophobia experienced by older lesbians (Kehoe, 1988) and lesbian and gay youth (Martin, 1988; Plummer, 1989).

Two British studies from the 1980s are particularly relevant for this study, both dealing with lesbian identity. One was written from a sociological perspective and used a mainly qualitative approach to the data analysis and the other was from a psychological perspective, which utilised quantitative analysis. Ettorre's *Lesbians, Women and Society* (1980) concentrated on lesbian identity. Kitzinger and Stainton-Rogers (1985) and Kitzinger (1987) also offered theories on lesbian identity.

First we will look at Ettorre's *Lesbians, Women and Society.* This was one of the largest studies of lesbians to be undertaken in the 1980s, based on information from 201 questionnaires and interviews with 60 participants. Her study encompassed women from the age of 25 to 55, but only two were aged over 50. Participants were solicited through two National Lesbian Conferences and the lesbian organisation Sappho, in whose magazine Ettorre advertised her research. She sought to examine homosexuality and its social implications for women, arguing that there had consistently been more concern by social scientists for homosexual men than lesbians, leading her to want to 'offset the existing male bias by emphasising the effects of homosexuality on women' (Ettorre, 1980:2). Her book was written from a perspective of lesbianism as a social phenomenon rather than a sexual preference or problem, and with a readership of 'real' people in mind rather than the 'intellectual elite', in order that more people would gain an understanding of how lesbians lived (Ettorre, 1980:5-7). Although Ettorre's work includes chapters on lesbian consciousness and the emergence of feminist political consciousness, my interest here is in her theoretical proposal of two 'types' of lesbians. This typology exemplified the polarisation of ideas on lesbianism and sexuality in the wider society.

Ettorre proposed two discrete groups, which she named as the *Sick, but not sorry* and the *Sorry, but not sick*, identified by the way they viewed their lesbianism. After initially using

the full terms she abbreviates them to *Sick* and *Sorry*. The former believed their lesbianism to be a purely sexual identity, and reported themselves as having been 'born lesbian'. Ettorre described lesbians of this type as 'placidly accepting traditional images of lesbianism', arguing that they colluded with the dominant sexual ideology as they did not embrace any political stance around their lesbianism and were uninterested in feminist politics (Ettorre, 1980: 27). However, although the members of this group of women saw their physical desire for other women as primary to their lesbian identity, Ettorre suggested that their emotional feelings towards women were often developed before their sexual feelings, which is contradictory. Other characteristics of this group included their willingness to ghettoise themselves by only mixing socially with other lesbians in lesbian bars, clubs and discos. Ettorre once again suggested that contradictions existed in that, although they were ostensibly apolitical, the very practice of entering into such lesbian ghettos represents the active questioning of the social norms associated with traditional feminine behaviour.

The latter type, *Sorry, but not sick*, rejected both the common public conceptions of lesbians, as well as the traditional theoretical stereotypes of lesbianism. Their sexuality was seen as a choice influenced primarily by political, social and emotional factors, rather than resulting from an inborn sexual attraction. They were said to 'reject society's stereotypes and the illnesses, perversion or disease syndrome of the *Sick'* (Ettorre, 1980: 99-100). Unlike the former group, Ettorre suggested that the *Sorry* type were more politically aware, emphasising their commitment to women within a male-dominated society (Ettorre, 1980:88).

Ettorre argued that her two types of lesbians clearly showed how there is more to the acquisition of a lesbian identity than merely engaging in same-sex behaviour. The adoption of a lesbian identity may not be a predominantly sexual matter, but could be rooted in political or social conditions, or presumably some or all of these. Ettorre also found differences between the two types of lesbians' accounts of their decision to come out to others, group contact and in their definitions of lesbianism. The *Sick* type were less likely to be open about their sexuality to others outside the lesbian subculture, which Ettorre attributed to their privatising their lesbianism. 75 per cent of the *Sick* lesbians had disclosed their lesbianism to associates such as family members or workmates. However, 98 per cent of the *Sorry* lesbians had come out within some or all of these settings. 25 per cent of the *Sick* type remained completely closeted, compared to just 1.8 per cent of the

Sorry lesbians (Ettorre, 1980:111). According to Ettorre, being 'closeted' includes not just hiding a relationship, but hiding a whole way of life, which she believed to be a universal experience amongst lesbians: 'the closet is familiar to all lesbians at some point in their lives' (Ettorre, 1980: 40).

Ettorre believed that both the *Sick* and the *Sorry* lesbians, recognising the dominance of the heterosexual male ideology within society, were thus aware that as lesbians they would be regarded as marginalised members of a subcultural group. However, she believed that the two types typically reacted differently to the lesbian subculture/community. The *Sick* lesbians had a tendency to reject the group experience of the lesbian community and therefore were more likely to remain closeted. This, she suggests, was due to their belief that their lesbianism represented personal deviance, sickness or maladjusted identity, and as such was not a legitimate alternative to heterosexuality. On the other hand, *Sorry* lesbians generally de-privatised their sexuality by viewing their lesbianism as a social, as well as a personal, identity. They were therefore more likely to see their lesbianism as a meaningful alternative to heterosexuality, leading them to seek out others who shared the same consciousness. According to Ettorre, group contact was important to individual lesbians as it helped them to obtain and maintain a strong sense of self as lesbian, gave them the knowledge necessary for acceptance into lesbian groups, as well as equipping them with a vocabulary for explaining their social situation to 'outsiders' (heterosexual people, or those lesbians outside the individuals distinct lesbian group). Only 5.9 per cent of *Sorry* lesbians reported that they did not or rarely mixed with other lesbians, whereas nearly a quarter (24 per cent) of all *Sick* lesbians reported that they did not mix or rarely mixed with other lesbians (Ettorre, 1980:76-77). Ettorre also found differences between the two groups of lesbians regarding the definitions of lesbianism that they favoured, when asked 'How do you define lesbianism?' summarised in Table 2.1. In this table Ettorre used the answers from the 201 questionnaires.

Table 2.1 *Definitions of lesbianism given by respondents in Ettorre's (1980) study.*

Definition of lesbianism	Sick, but not sorry lesbians	Sorry, but not sick lesbians
A sexual preference	35	25
A counter-identity for women	3	3
A total way of life	37	53
An alternative way of life for women	24	14
Not applicable	1	6
Total	**100**	**101**

Differences between the two 'types' of lesbians were also found in those who maintained a religious orientation after self-identifying as lesbian. Ettorre found that 46 per cent of *Sick* lesbians maintained religious orientation after self-identifying as lesbian whereas only 23 per cent of the *Sorry* lesbians did so. Ettorre proposed that these figures further exemplified the tendency amongst the *Sick* type to maintain tradition, even though tension existed between such traditional religious ideology and their lesbianism, whereas the *Sorry* type were reported as generally rejecting tradition, showing that their personal ideology had shifted after self-identifying as lesbian and had thus developed a potential political base for their lesbianism (Ettorre, 1980:16).

Ettorre's study is limited in both its geographical location (as all interview respondents were based in London at the time of data collection) and the middle class bias of her respondents. This limited diversity restricts the range of different experiences and accounts she was likely to gather from her respondents. By collecting data from lesbians who were either members of the Sappho organisation, which Ettorre herself suggested was a lesbian organisation with a 'somewhat traditional view of lesbianism' (Ettorre, 1980:96), or women who had attended lesbian conferences in the 1970s, who by implication were likely to be politically aware, it could be argued that her main finding, that two types of distinct lesbians existed, was probably a foregone conclusion.

Ettorre also failed to analyse fully the past experiences and marriages of her respondents, in relation to their perceptions of their lesbianism and their sexual practices. She did briefly examine respondents' previous heterosexual feelings, stating that 73 per cent of all lesbians reported previous heterosexual feelings and 67 per cent had experienced heterosexual sex, but she did not state whether there were any marked differences here between the *Sick* and the *Sorry* lesbians. She asserts that the initial attraction of lesbians to other women was typically experienced at the age of 13 years, with the first lesbian sexual experience following 8 years later at the age of 21. This appears to be a crude generalisation which did not take into account how other factors she had previously examined, such as religious affiliation or respondents' previous marriage(s), could have affected these figures. However, this study yielded a clear classification of lesbians into two highly distinct and opposing identities, which provided a foundation for further studies such as Kitzinger's.

Kitzinger's (1987) work *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* was principally concerned with offering a critique of 'gay affirmative research', arguing that it depoliticised lesbianism and undermined radical feminist theories, in using existing psychological theories together with a liberal humanistic ideology to portray lesbianism as a personal lifestyle choice, rather than a political identity. Kitzinger's book explored the content of scientific endeavours to construct lesbianism from the early sexology period of the late nineteenth century through to the 1980s, examining the operation of liberal humanistic ideology in the construction of identities, politics and heterosexuals' attitudes to lesbianism. My interest in this work is based solely on one section of the book, namely the empirical research undertaken by Kitzinger which resulted in her findings of seven lesbian identity account clusters. This work is based on excerpts from lesbians' biographies. Originally part of a PhD thesis, it was first presented as a journal article in 1985 with co-author Stainton-Rogers which proposed five distinct variants. In the *Social Construction of Lesbianism* (1987) Kitzinger added two more identity accounts and presented this and her earlier findings in a chapter on lesbian identity within the book. The first (1985) and the second study (1987) appear to have used the same data and therefore the same respondents. As the journal article does not give sufficient statistical and methodological information to enable the reader to critically examine the research findings, material from the 1987 book will be cited here. Information provided there states that snowball sampling was used to gather 120 participants from academic contacts, a lesbian counselling service

and feminist groups. The women were aged between 15 to 73, with two-thirds aged between 20 and 50 years old. All of the women came from three Northern towns and the London area. All 120 women had taken part in a semi-structured interview which explored their identity as lesbians. Statements that the women made about themselves were taken from these interviews and supplemented by other items added by the author in relation to lesbian identity, sexual and emotional experience and political beliefs, in order to construct a Q-sort pack, which was then distributed to 41 selected respondents who had earlier taken part in the semi-structured interviews. Respondents were asked to distribute the Q sort item along a scale of +5 (most strongly agree) to -5 (most strongly disagree), with a central neutral category (0) (see Appendix 1 for list of Kitzinger's Q-sort items). All 41 of the previously selected respondents defined themselves as lesbian, and ranged in age from 17 to 58 years. Kitzinger acknowledges that the sample was strongly biased towards white middle class respondents. Using quantitative content analysis seven separate lesbian identity accounts (or types of life-story) emerged, which Kitzinger labelled as:

i) Personal fulfilment
ii) Special person identity
iii) Individualistic identity
iv) Radical feminist identity
v) Traditional identity
vi) Factor vi and
vii) Factor vii

The last two were not included in the journal article as they were considered by the authors to be 'interpretationally problematic' (Kitzinger and Stainton-Rogers, 1985: 167), but they were added later to the 1987 book. Kitzinger interpreted her data here, explaining the basis for allocating respondents to one of the seven categories of identity account.

The first account group, *personal fulfilment,* consisted of five women who had all previously been married. Kitzinger suggested that all had an identity which depoliticised lesbianism and removed it from the political arena, proposing that to these women their lesbianism was merely a 'private and personal solution' to their previous heterosexual identity which had been viewed as unfulfilling by the respondents (Kitzinger, 1987: 102).

The second group, *special person*, contained just two women, although six other respondents shared certain of its characteristics. Respondents placed in this category were said to believe that lesbianism was not an essential identity in that they did not perceive any hormonal or genetical reasons for their sexuality, believing that they had simply fallen in love with someone who just happened to be a woman, and if the next 'special person' in

their life happened to be a man, they would then enter into a heterosexual relationship. Kitzinger proposed that this account allowed women to present what she termed as their 'deviant lesbianism' in a morally unimpeachable light, as they utilised the 'culturally approved rhetoric of romantic love' to fit the morality of the dominant heterosexual order. Such participants thus perpetuated and reinforced this rhetoric. Respondents using this account were, according to Kitzinger, afraid to invest 'too much in a lesbian identity', as their bisexual account allowed them to withdraw from relationships with other women when they felt under threat (Kitzinger, 1987:103).

Two women were placed within the *individualistic identity* account, whose characteristics were that they viewed their lesbianism as a personal sexual orientation and were reluctant to identify themselves as members of an oppressed group, believing that their sexuality was 'innate' and 'natural' and therefore as 'normal' as heterosexuality. Kitzinger suggested that their view reinforced the concept that sexuality was an intrinsically personal rather than a political matter (Kitzinger, 1987: 111-112).

The fourth identity account was the *radical feminist* identity. Four women were allocated to this group, on the basis that they were said to have played an active part in creating their sexuality rather than viewing it as innate. The account was firmly located within a political context, leading Kitzinger to regard it as fundamentally challenging patriarchal definitions of women and the dominant social system in general.

The fifth account, the *traditional* identity, was situated within a personal, rather than a political context, characterised by the two respondents' feelings of inferiority to heterosexual people.

Factor vi and *Factor vii* are two identity groups added in the 1987 publication, with only one woman in each. *Factor vi* resembled the *special person* account in being basically bisexual, but based on sexual attraction rather than romantic attachment. *Factor vii* was a mix of two identity accounts, with the respondent fitting within the 'individualistic' identity when interviewed, but later changing to a radical feminist account when completing the Q-sort.

Neither publication provides much detail of the study's methodology. However, it is clear that the statements on the cards given to participants in the quantitative stage of the experiment did not allow participants to diverge from the five choices offered (Strongly

agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree). This did not allow participants to place their answers in a personal context or to qualify their responses.

Further criticism of this study concerns the way that women's accounts were categorised. Although Kitzinger (1987) stated that some accounts overlapped to a large extent with others, only 17 women were placed within seven accounts, resulting in the majority of the respondents not being placed within any identity account at all. Obviously Kitzinger needed more than the seven accounts she constructed, or alternatively needed to explain and discuss where such accounts could potentially be placed and how this would affect her findings. Only in accounts *Factor vi* and *vii* does she suggest that certain accounts overlapped with others. Although criticism can be made of both versions of this study of lesbian identity accounts, Kitzinger did offer a larger variety of accounts that lesbians could potentially give to explain their lesbianism, representing an advance on the theories earlier proposed by Ettorre (1980).

2.10 Lesbianism in the 1990s

This next section focuses on legislation affecting lesbians in the 1990s. Section 28 was clearly still having a detrimental effect on lesbians' and gay men's lives, even though the Act was passed over 10 years earlier. Various empirical based studies including those by Elliot and Kilpatrick (1994), Mason and Palmer (1996) and Rivers (1996) have all concluded that homophobic bullying (or hate crimes), especially against lesbian and gay youth, is still common (see Section 2.9 for earlier discussion of Section 28.) Two reports published in 1998 cite Section 28 as a contributory cause of inadequate protection from homophobic bullying in schools, with both accusing the government of failing to incorporate lesbian and gay issues into equal opportunity policies. These reports were published within a few months of the Education Secretary launching a scheme known as *CHIPS* (Childline In Partnership with Schools) which aimed to provide peer support in schools for and by children who have or are suffering from bullying or other victimising behaviour (Teeman and Northmore, 1998).

A four-year study conducted by staff at the University of Luton of the experiences of 80 lesbian, gay and bisexual school children who were bullied at school reported that 80 per cent had been called names, 69 per cent had been openly ridiculed by pupils and occasionally teachers, and 59 per cent had been punched or kicked. Half of these respondents said they had contemplated suicide as a result of being victims of

homophobia. It was also reported that 40 per cent of respondents had attempted suicide, with nearly a third attempting it more than once (Rivers, 1996: 15-22). These figures are similar to those cited in a report commissioned jointly by the Terrence Higgins Trust and Stonewall, and published as *Playing it Safe* (1998). Based on an independent survey of teachers in England and Wales, it examined issues relating to homophobic bullying, including the effects of Section 28 of the Local Government Act (1988), which prohibits local authorities from 'promoting' homosexuality or its acceptability. It was reported that 56 per cent of teachers stated that they had difficulty in addressing the needs of lesbians and gay pupils as a result of Section 28, as they had not received any clear guidelines on how to handle issues of sexuality, and were unaware of what constituted the 'promotion' of homosexuality.

According to the executive director of Stonewall, Angela Mason, Section 28 has had a catastrophic effect on school policies such as bullying, sex education and equal opportunities, as staff in schools became wary of implementing policies which would benefit lesbian and gay youths, believing that this might be seen as 'promoting' homosexuality. She argues that, as a result, teachers are not addressing issues of sexuality amongst pupils. Of a total of 289 teachers studied who reported providing information on equal opportunities policies in the schools where they worked, only 25 per cent made any reference to sexuality (Mason and Palmer 1996).

The passing of Section 28 of the Local Government Act (1988) can also be seen to have threatened those lesbians (and gay men) who were parents, by labelling lesbians and gay headed households as 'pretend' families (Colvin and Hawksley, 1989). The following section will concentrate on governmental legislation and guidelines which have had negative consequences for lesbians who wish to have children either through donor insemination or through adoption and fostering. Prior to the 1990s there was no legal restriction on who could receive donor insemination. Private clinics were free to offer to any woman who wished to pay for the possible conception of a child in this way. However, in 1990 the Conservative government introduced The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act, with the aim of restricting donor insemination to certain categories of women. (See Chapter One for an earlier brief discussion of this issue.) The Act included a clause which specified that any private clinic in which donor insemination was defined as a 'treatment service', and which provided 'to the public or a section of the public for the purpose of assisting women to carry children', could only provide this service if they were licensed by

the Human Fertility and Embryology Authority. In order to gain a license, private clinics would have to fulfil certain criteria, one being that the clinic must ensure that:

> [A] woman shall not be provided with treatment services unless account has been taken of the welfare of any child who may be born as a result of the treatment (including the need of that child for a father). (Gooding, 1992: 124)

This statement perpetuated the ideology that a father is of vital importance to the family unit, and that lesbians with children would never be considered as 'acceptable' families. Once again, state legislation legitimated the conservative ideology that mothers and lesbians were two discrete groups.

> The lesbian mother presents a threat: she challenges the dominant ideologies of gender, motherhood and family which together are felt to contribute towards the instability of society. (Romans, 1992:99)

The Conservative Government continued its quest to ensure that lesbians (and gay men) should be excluded from parenting, turning its attention to local authorities' fostering and adoption services. Although there is no legislation which states that lesbians (and gay men) cannot foster children, in 1990 the government attempted to regulate fostering services to exclude lesbians from becoming foster parents. According to Campion, it was the increasing visibility of lesbianism in the media and open lesbian parenting to which the government objected. Campion proposes that members of the public and the government could 'cope' with lesbian and gay people as parents and foster parents, but only as long as they remained discreet.

> ...[A]ny suggestion of openly gay or lesbian adults as parents seems to produce a huge outcry - somehow, having children brings parents into a public arena where their personal lives can be justifiably criticised. All the age-old arguments come flying forth: homosexuality is sinful, perverted, unnatural. (Campion, 1995: 177)

In 1991 the adoption of children by lesbians and gay men also came under the scrutiny of the government. The Adoption Law Review Discussion Paper No.3 included a section on lesbians and gay men, reporting arguments put forward during an earlier process of consultation:

> The question of adoption by lesbians or male homosexuals, whether living with a partner or not, is controversial. There is one view that such applicants should not be excluded from consideration if they can satisfy an agency that they can provide a home in which the child's interests would be safeguarded and promoted. Others take the view that placement with a lesbian or male homosexual could never be in a child's interests and could never provide a suitable environment for the care and nurture of a child. Views would be welcome. (Department of Health, 1991: 19)

The government's harassment of lesbians and gay men was supported by the tabloid press which, according to Sanderson (1995), began to 'hound' lesbians and gay men who had either fostered or adopted children, as well as attacking Labour-run councils which had allowed adoption and fostering by lesbians and gay men. Tabloid newspapers ran stories suggesting that 'political correctness' had taken over from 'common sense', resulting in heterosexual people being discriminated against in the fostering and adoption process. However, such reporting was not new; as early as 1990 the tabloids had criticised both individuals and Labour-controlled councils, using language that was homophobic in its intent. Reporting on one case of adoption of a young boy by a lesbian couple, but failing to provide the reader with all of the details and facts behind the case, *The Daily Star* stated:

> Labour-controlled Newcastle council has taken him from his loving foster mother, and allowed him to be adopted by two LESBIANS. Since six weeks old, the boy has been looked after by foster mum Helen Grant...But for some incredible reason the council has now handed the poor little mite into the care of two sexually maladjusted deviants. (The Daily Star 9/10/90. cited in Sanderson, 1995: 216. Capitals as in original)

The above two examples of actual and proposed legislation highlight the previous Conservative government's concern that lesbians should not be viewed as desirable or acceptable parents. This view has also been further advanced in relation to child custody cases, where lesbian mothers have often experienced homophobic treatment by judges presiding over the child custody court case. Although within English law there is no presumption that lesbian and gay parents' wishes in child custody cases will be overridden purely on the basis of their sexuality (Hanscombe and Foster, 1982), courts have continued to take into account what Bamforth terms the *reputation* and *corruption* arguments commonly used against lesbians and gay men, in other contexts (Bamforth, 1997). The *reputation* argument is based on the belief that a child living with a same-sex couple will suffer ostracism from his/her peer group, will be stigmatised in the same way as his/her mother(s), and will suffer discrimination from wider society. As a result, those who utilise the *reputation* argument propose that the child's welfare is not best served by it living with lesbian parents, as the discrimination or potential discrimination that the child faces will result in her/him becoming distressed. However, research has shown that the children of lesbian or gay parent(s) were as popular amongst their peer group as the children of heterosexual parents (Golombok, Spencer and Rutter, 1983; Green, Mandel, Hotved, Gray and Smith, 1986), and that the children of lesbian mothers did not report feeling stigmatised (Green et al., 1986).

The *corruption* argument is one which continues to be used by judges and other individuals who believe that children are at risk of becoming homosexual if exposed to lesbian and gay role models, as they will be unable to adopt an appropriate gender identity for their sex and will participate in inappropriate gender role behaviour. These arguments have also been dismissed by research which has reported that children growing up in lesbian or gay headed households showed no difference in the formation of their gender identity from children growing up in heterosexual households (Green et al., 1986). Their gender role behaviour was not significantly different (Gottman, 1990) and neither was their sexual identity formation (Huggins, 1989). However, disregarding this evidence, a judge presiding over a child custody court case in 1991 (to cite only one example of this view) obviously believed that the child in question risked corruption if its mother and her lesbian partner had been 'militant' lesbians:

> Let me say categorically, and I want to state this as [a] matter of principle: what is so important in cases is to distinguish between militant lesbians who try to convert others to their way of life, where there may well be risks that counterbalance other aspects of welfare and are detrimental to the long-term interests of children either in relation to their sexual identity or corruption, and lesbians in private. In this case, I am dealing with two lesbians who are private persons who both do not believe in advertising their lesbianism and acting in the public field in favour of promoting lesbianism. It is their personal relationship...so it is a wholly different kind of case from that of the militant lesbianism, where the risks which a judge has to assess in the balancing exercise on the question of sexual identity may be so much greater. (B v.B: [1991] 1FLR 402 cited in Bamforth, 1997: 50-51)

The above section has covered some of the issues dealing with legislation affecting lesbians in the 1990s. The overriding message from the examples used in this section on legislation concerning lesbianism is that lesbians (and gay men) are only tolerated if they keep their sexuality hidden from others, especially children (Bamforth, 1997).

In the 1990s essentialist beliefs about homosexuality were once again proposed within the scientific community, with some American researchers claiming that they had found new evidence of the presence of a gay gene in homosexual men and women (LeVay, 1993; Hamer, Magnuson, Hu and Pattatuci, 1993). Another study published in the journal of the American *National Academy of Sciences* (1988) reported strong evidence to suggest that a physical difference existed between lesbians and heterosexual women. Its authors claimed that the inner ears of lesbians work more like those of men, and thus lesbians inner ears had undergone 'masculinisation', due to hormone exposure before birth, suggesting that

the studies findings were consistent with the 'biological origin of lesbianism' (Pink Paper 8/4/98: 2).

Further 'new' theories regarding lesbian identity were proposed in this decade. Poststructuralism and postmodernism, although evident in academic texts of the 1980s, gained appeal amongst some lesbians and gay men in the 1990s, as did Queer theory. Poststructuralist theorists propose that all previous theories, including feminist theories, have been too restrictive and culturally specific to account for the diversity of lesbian identities (Echols, 1984; Harding, 1986). Fuss (1990) attempts to locate lesbian identity within poststructuralist theory, insisting that notions of lesbian unity and identity serve only to constrain feminist discourses on lesbianism, further alienating the lesbian subject from hegemonic institutions. Unlike other theories, poststructuralism avoids the usage of 'individual identities' within its framework, suggesting that 'subjectivity', which is understood as the 'ways in which we understand ourselves as subjects positioned by discourses or ideologies' (Stacey, 1995: 65), is more useful in exemplifying the ways in which thoughts, feelings and actions are both produced and limited by external constraints.

Within the complex model of poststructuralism, any notion of fixed identity is problematised, with *lesbian* regarded as a behaviour imbued with a multiplicity of meanings which are fluid across time and culture. However, poststructuralist theory bears some similarity to social constructionist theory, in suggesting that the meaning of lesbian has undergone constant change throughout history. The word *lesbian* would therefore mean very different things, encompassing, for those who identify as such, different experiences when placed within varied socio-historical contexts.

Poststructuralism, when understood in the context of existing feminist theory, proposes that if categories such as *lesbian* are deconstructed, this would promote fuller understanding of the repressive effects of phallocentrism as a source of women's sexual oppression. It therefore proposes that being a lesbian merely provides some basis for mutual recognition, but does not guarantee it, suggesting instead that a multiplicity of lesbian identities co-exist. Poststructuralist and postmodernist perspectives have therefore questioned earlier notions of lesbian identity. Although these theories have gained some popularity with those concerned with issues of lesbian and gay identity, they seem inadequate in relation to the totality of women's everyday experiences. Identities are fundamentally important in structuring the ways people relate to each other and adapt to

their social environment, and therefore lesbian identities are just as important as other identities in this respect. Markowe (1996) suggests that poststructuralist and postmodern theories are not particularly useful to lesbians in that reducing lesbianism to a behaviour denies its impact in the individual and would also 'be likely to make social/political organisation more difficult' (Markowe, 1996: 197).

Queer theory is said to be associated with the emergence of queer politics in the 1990s, which was seen by some to be a new paradigm in the lesbian and gay movement. It emphasises the fragmentation and fluidity of identity (Stewart, 1995; Richardson, 1997) and resembles poststructuralism in questioning conventional notions that lesbian identity is homogeneous amongst all women identifying as lesbian. Queer theory can be seen to be the radical version of 'gay', positioning itself against separatist identity definitions (Butler, 1990; Sedgewick, 1993). As it is still a relatively new social theory, a certain vagueness exists about its defintions and usage. Like other proponents of particular theories, queer theorists do not all hold the same views and beliefs, but to a certain extent all call into question the stability of the heterosexual/homosexual hierachy, thus rejecting rigid binarisms of a dichotomous model of sexual desire (Fuss, 1991). Queer theory challenges conventional notions of the categories 'sex', 'sexuality' and 'gender', and problematises the binarisms of such categories as man/woman and heterosexual/homosexual. It further questions the assumptions of the conventional consistency model of the organisation of sexual identity by disputing the inference that biological sex, sexual object choice and sexual identity all line up monolithically (Sedgewick, 1993: 27). However, while queer theory can be seen to have questioned the use of identity by pointing out its use of boundaries and over rigiditity, Esterberg believes that its utility lies only in providing concepts and that 'it cannot help us to understand the very real concerns of ordinary lesbians...' (Esterberg, 1997: 29).

Two important empirically-based studies were published in the 1990s, one of which uses a sociological approach and the other a social psychological approach. Whisman's (1996) American study *Queer by Choice* compared the construction of lesbian and gay male identities, examining individuals use of stories based on their life experiences to establish and maintain their identity. Markowe's British study *Redefining the Self* (1996) also examined lesbian identities, focusing on the coming out process. This differed from most previous studies in that she utilised data collected from heterosexual men and women to

offer what she believed would be a wider view of lesbianism. For the purposes of this study, only Whisman and Markowe's findings relating specifically to their lesbian samples are examined.

Whisman's study, based in New York City, originated from a debate that started in 1992, when the states of Colorado and Oregon were having referenda on whether to grant civil-rights protection to lesbians and gay men. According to Whisman, heated debates erupted between a right-wing Christian organisation called The Report and lesbian and gay activist organisations. The right-wing group used the argument that civil-rights protection is only given to minority groups on the basis that the discrimination they suffer is as a result of their 'difference', which they are unable to change. For example, African-Americans are unable to change the colour of their skin and therefore under this argument they should be granted legal protection from discrimination against them due to their colour or culture. The Report group argued that lesbians and gay men should not be afforded legal protection as their homosexuality was not innate but 'chosen'. However, a year earlier two separate preliminary research reports had suggested that homosexuality was biologically based. Some lesbian and gay organisations used this information to proclaim that lesbians and gay men were 'born that way' and therefore should qualify for legal protection. Whisman did not state whether the civil-rights protection was actually granted. However, she decided to do her own research into whether lesbians and gay men believed themselves to be 'born that way' or whether they 'chose' their sexuality. Her sample consisted of 39 lesbians and 33 gay men, solicited through advertisements in various lesbian and gay publications, leaflets in lesbians and gay venues and organisations, and the snowball method. The lesbian respondents ranged in age from 18 to 60, although only six of them were over the age of 35. Some, but not all, of the respondents had religious backgrounds including Catholic, Jewish and Protestant. They were reported as being predominantly white, middle class and well educated. Whisman began her study on the belief that there existed two main theoretical views of homosexuality; that one is either born lesbian or alternatively one chooses to be lesbian. She proposed to collect data from people who believed that their sexuality was either innate or chosen, and then to examine the effect that these two opposing beliefs had in the lesbian and gay subculture and to those who were potential lesbians (or gay men).

Whisman found the *born that way* argument to be the dominant and most acceptable theory within the lesbian subculture. This essentialist concept was perpetuated by lesbians

who gave accounts of their lesbian lives which originated in their childhood. However, other women believed that their lesbian identity was socially constructed, and that they had freely chosen to be lesbian. Using themes which had emerged from her semi-structured interviews, Whisman analysed respondents accounts' of their lives, comparing them to discover how they helped individuals to gain and maintain an identity as lesbian (Whisman, 1996: 9). Analysis of respondents' biographical accounts suggested three, rather than two, types of account given by lesbians when telling their stories. She labelled these as *Determinist*, *Mixed* and *Choice*. According to Whisman, women could be placed in one of the three groups depending on whether their accounts presented evidence of, or attempted to present evidence of, their lesbianism as an innate characteristic, or alternatively whether they reported that they had any affiliation to feminism. Respondents who were placed within the *Determinist* category recalled a continuos sense that they were homosexual from an early age. The women in this group all believed that they were born lesbian and had 'no choice in their sexual orientation', although they believed they could choose whether to act on their sexual orientation and engage in sexual relationships with other women, or to repress their sexual feelings for other women. According to Whisman, three primary identifying characteristics were evident in all of these women's accounts: all had early awareness of homoerotic feelings; all reported gender non-conformity in childhood; and all believed that they had neither chosen or sought their sexual orientation (Whisman, 1996: 35-38).

The second group were labelled as *Mixed* because respondents' accounts combined aspects of both determinist and choice characteristics by stating that they had always been lesbian, but had been unaware of this until they were older. Women allocated to this group usually had experience of heterosexual relationships in the past, but viewed these as 'mistakes'. Unlike the former group, they did not experience continuity of their lesbian selves, but wherever possible minimised the importance of their past heterosexual experiences in order to give primacy to their present accounts of their lesbianism. Whisman proposed that the primary characteristic of this group was the shared belief that they were born lesbian.

The final category, which Whisman named *Choice*, was split into two further sub-categories of *Bisexual* and *Feminist*. Unlike members of the previous two categories, these women presented no evidence of early or innate homosexuality. Respondents placed within the *Bisexual* category were, according to Whisman, likely to have had and to continue to have sexual relationships with both men and women. All within this group

regarded their sexual orientation as bisexual, and refused a label of lesbian even though they may have been in a long-term monogamous relationship with another woman. The women within the *Feminist* group were all said to have undergone a transition from a heterosexual to lesbian identity as a result of having strong feminist ideology. Whisman suggests that, unlike the women within the *Determinist* and *Mixed* categories, women within this category embraced their discontinuous past and avoided defining their previous heterosexual identity as a mistake. Feminists further differed from the *Determinist* and Mixed groups as they were said not to experience their sexuality as an orientation. According to Whisman, women within the *Choice* category, whether belonging to the sub-category of *Feminist* or *Bisexual*, were often perceived by members of the other two categories as having a bisexual orientation:

> Those who offer the chosen accounts...are probably bisexually orientated, whether they know it or not, and the various stories they tell are just different ways of representing that. (Whisman, 1996:82)

According to Whisman, a hierarchy exists within the lesbian community based on individuals' stories of their lesbianism and whether these fall within the *Determinist*, *Mixed* or *Choice* account category. Women who gave a *Bisexual Choice* account faced more social isolation than women from the other account categories. The women who received the most support from other women were those women who gave a *Feminist Choice* account of their lives. Although these women were numerically in the minority, and were not regarded as 'real' lesbians by the *Determinist* and *Mixed* account members, it was proposed that they had a strong and reliable friendship network comprising other women who considered themselves to be both lesbian and feminist. Members of this group differ from all other groups, including the bisexual respondents, in that they used their sexual preference to shape their sexual orientation. The *Determinist* and *Mixed* group members, on the other hand, shared an underlying lesbian orientation, and a lesbian preference, while *Bisexual Choice* members chose to extinguish their feelings for men and to express their feelings for women in their sexual preference. Whisman believed that women within the *Bisexual Choice* account could choose a lesbian preference 'precisely because they have a bisexual orientation' (Whisman, 1996: 56), although she believed that theoretically an individual's sexual preference would automatically align with their sexual orientation, as sexual orientation was considered by her to be an innate characteristic within individuals and therefore unable to change:

> [Sexual orientation]...is an internal condition which may be latent or unknown. (Whisman, 1996: 40)

whereas sexual preference was defined as

> ...[A] pattern of sexual/affectional desires of which the individual is aware, much like any other form of preference or taste. (Whisman, 1996:40)

The Feminist members therefore did not fit this theory as they had nurtured their political and emotional preferences for women into a sexual preference, and had thus decided or chosen to become lesbians even though, according to Whisman, their sexual orientation was firmly heterosexual (Whisman, 1996: 63).

Markowe's (1996) *Redefining the Self* investigates lesbians' coming out process, using a social-psychological approach. She explores three main issues:

- the experiences and perceptions of lesbians in coming out;
- heterosexual women's and men's attitudes towards homosexuality; and
- women's perceptions of communicating with family and friends on topics which were perceived as difficult to talk about. (Markowe, 1996)

She distributed 20 questionnaires to participants in the first phase of data collection and used these and her own experiences of coming out to construct themes for a further phase of data collection, based on interviews with 40 self-defined lesbians who all attended one lesbian group in London and were aged between 21 and 63. She also collected data from 15 heterosexual men and 15 heterosexual women between the ages of 18 to 60, in order to gather information on heterosexuals' perceptions of lesbians, as well as a further 20 female respondents, whose sexuality was not specified, aged between 20 and 54, who gave their views on the problems of communicating with family and friends. However, as stated earlier, I am only concerned here with the analysis of lesbian respondents' accounts.

Markowe's analysis of lesbians' accounts of coming out led her to propose two distinct groups of lesbians. These were: the *always* lesbians and those with a *heterosexual background*, although within this latter group, a further sub-group could be identified consisting of women who first perceived their lesbian identity in political terms. She then explained the differences and similarities of the coming out process for these two groups by constructing case studies based on selected respondents' accounts. The *always* lesbians did not view their sexuality as something which they could have chosen, and many were first able to label their feelings as lesbian in their teenage years. These women generally identified as lesbian prior to embarking on a lesbian relationship and experienced isolation

due to the potential threat of their lesbian identity in what they experienced as a homophobic society (Markowe, 1996: 112-115).

Using case studies from this group, Markowe proposed five main stages to the coming out process:

- initial lesbian feelings;
- awareness of the word 'lesbian';
- understanding of the word lesbian;
- seeking information about lesbianism in order to make some initial contact with other lesbians; and
- identifying as lesbian, and disclosing this information to others (coming out). (Markowe, 1996)

These stages also applied to the lesbians in the other groups, all of whom had heterosexual experience prior to identifying themselves as lesbian. There were few differences between women with previous heterosexual experience and women who had 'always' been lesbian, the only significant one being that those who had heterosexual relationships in the past had at some point had to re-evaluate their identity. Markowe proposed that this re-evaluation was prompted in the first instance by individuals' 'unsatisfactory heterosexual relations together with awareness of lesbian feelings' (Markowe, 1996:163). Those who had heterosexual experiences in the past also included those women who chose their lesbianism as a result of their feminist beliefs. These women defined their lesbianism as putting women first in all aspects of their lives, rather than them believing that their sexual relationships with women resulted from an innate lesbian sexuality. The reason why some feminists become lesbian while others remain heterosexual is due to 'situational rather than dispositional attributes', such as opportunity, choice and knowledge (Markowe, 1996: 177). Women who came to lesbianism through feminism were said not to have encountered the same threat posed by lesbianism as the former group as they were protected within a feminist environment which was perceived as largely supportive. However, Markowe acknowledged that within the larger context of society, homophobia may well still be present, which has to be encountered and addressed by these women.

Although Markowe identified two distinct types of lesbian, she found more similarities than differences in their experiences of coming out. Most gave definitions of lesbianism which included something other than sex, including love, politics and a general emotional interest in women. Almost three quarters of the 40 respondents had told a parent, family member or a friend about themselves in a direct manner. However, almost a third of the

sample said that they would not disclose their sexuality to people at work. Markowe suggests that her research supports Ettorre's (1980) study which suggested that there are two types of lesbians (see Section 2.9). However, she believes that distinctions between those who believe their sexuality to be innate and those who have chosen their sexuality are not always clear. The main criticisms of the study concern her failure to give sufficient information to the reader, on methods of data collection, the demographic details of informants and general statistical information. Although she made the claim that similarities were more apparent than differences amongst lesbians belonging to the two groups, she did not give exact numbers of how many women belonged to each group, giving only the first names of those women whose accounts she used to formulate the case studies, thereby not stating which respondents were not included and why.

2.11 Summary

Throughout the twentieth century there have been many definitions, theories and images of lesbianism. What is a lesbian? Why is she a lesbian? Who can be described as a lesbian? These are all questions that theorists over the last century have asked and have attempted to answer. It is generally accepted that some women have sought out other women as companions, romantic partners and lovers throughout history, although repression, omission and distortion by relatives, historians, biographers and publishers, has resulted in a lack of factual information about women's same-sex relationships within history.

The origins of lesbian identity can be traced back to the late 1800s and the work of the sexologists, who constructed categories of sexuality and named variants of sexual behaviour. Their work resulted in a dominant discourse about sexuality which relied on the theory that homosexuality was congenital in origin and led homosexual women to possess the characteristics of the opposite sex, with the result that lesbianism and masculinity became inextricably linked. These theories point to an essentialist belief in the biological nature of homosexuality.

Although these biologically based theories were refined and, with the emergence of psychoanalysis were questioned, the relationship between gender and homosexuality as a biological innateness was not challenged until the 1960s, when Mary McIntosh argued for homosexuality to be viewed as a social role rather than an inborn condition (McIntosh, 1968). She applied labelling theory to the question of homosexuality and thus focused on the effects and social consequences of labelling individuals as 'deviant'. Utilising

anthropological evidence, she proposed that homosexuality as an innate condition could not exist, as a homosexual role does not exist in every society, and where it is in existence, the role may vary over time. By studying homosexuality in terms of social categorisations which were seen as shaping the homosexual experience, attention was paid to the development of complex cultural and subcultural forms relating to homosexual identity.

From the 1970s onwards there have been many different theories of lesbian identity. Schafer (1976) proposed that the coming out process was universal amongst all lesbians, and that certain key stages existed which lesbians must negotiate if they were to achieve a stable lesbian identity. Ponse's (1978) and Ettorre's (1980) studies suggested that there was more than one type of lesbian identity: that some women believed their sexuality to be innate while others believed they had made a conscious choice about their sexuality. Kitzinger and Stainton-Rogers (1985) named five types of lesbians, a further two being added by Kitzinger in her 1987 work. Markowe's (1996) study, concentrating on the coming out process affirmed Ettorre's earlier claims that two types of lesbians existed, whilst Whisman (1996) claimed that women either believed themselves to be born lesbian, became lesbian after realising they were latent lesbians or made a conscious choice about their lesbianism.

Chapter Three

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter reviewed the literature on lesbian identity and community, identifying both its contributions to our understanding and certain gaps and limitations. It ended with a statement of the research problem which this thesis will address. The purpose of this chapter is to describe and justify decisions about the methodology chosen to investigate this problem. I examine the relevant literature on a range of research methods which might be appropriate for this study, and evaluate the guidance offered for dealing with ethical issues and feminist research in their application to my data collection. I then go on to describe my process of information collection, covering such issues as securing access to the women whom I hoped would participate in this research, as well as ethical considerations and my post-hoc reflections on the experience of data collection.

Like the rest of this thesis, this chapter is written in the first person, as I offer a frank account of events, both prior to and during data collection, and include my own thoughts and feelings during the whole research process. In describing the study's participants I decided to use the word 'informants', rather than 'subjects' or any similar term, as I believe the latter denotes a hierarchical relationship between the researcher and those being researched, implying a perception of them as merely commodities. I have attempted throughout the research process to carry out research without recreating the dichotomies of power that have traditionally been regarded as customary and acceptable within social science research.

3.2 A consideration of quantitative and qualitative approaches in sociological research

There are two principal approaches to research inquiry within the social sciences, one based on quantitative methods of data collection and the other on qualititative methods. Quantitative research has its philosophical foundation in positivism. This philosophy can be traced back to the work of Auguste Comte (1798-1857), who is regarded as the founder of sociology. He believed that the social sciences should adopt the paradigm and methods of enquiry which had proved so successful in the natural sciences (Gould, 1969). Various

schools of thought exist within positivism, but all similarly reject speculation and instead emphasise positive 'facts'. In this respect positivistic methods employed within the social sciences share a unity of method with the natural sciences (Dooley, 1995). Positivism has its basis in the belief that there exists one objective, underlying reality, capable of being discovered. Society, according to this approach, can be explained scientifically according to rational logic and law. Positivism therefore seeks to explain and predict, and may be used ultimately to attempt to control the social world (Gilbert, 1993).

The principle of verifiability is central to positivism. A concept is perceived to be meaningful only if it can be measured empirically. Using measurement or observation, a scientific theory or explanation can either be refuted or verified (Hessler, 1992). Proponents of positivistic approaches, following Comte, claim that the social sciences can and should make use of the methods and instruments of the natural sciences such as mathematics; the use of such methods enables a truly 'objective' reality to be discovered.

The use of quantitative methods is appropriate for hypothesis testing research. This involves seeking to test theoretical propositions using five main stages of analysis:

i) the deduction of a hypothesis from the theory;
ii) an expression of the hypothesis by proposing a relationship between two specific variables;
iii)testing of the hypothesis, usually in the form of empirical inquiry which will generate data to be analysed;
iv) an examination of the outcome, which will generally either confirm the theory, refute it, or indicate that the theory needs to be modified;
v) if theory is modified, the revised theory is then tested by repeating the whole procedure, until it is seen to be stable. (Robson, 1993)

One common form of data collection employed by sociologists who favour the use of quantitative methods is the survey. This method has been used successfully to formulate national data sets collected on a regular basis, such as the Census or General Household Survey. It has also been used for large-scale studies such as that by Wellings, Field, Johnson and Wadsworth (1994) to provide information on the sexual inclinations and habits of the general public. The survey method, regardless of the data collection techniques used, depends upon the use of standardised approaches to potential informants, posing to each of them the same questions in the same way and in the same order. The aim of such uniformity is to generate data which hold independently of the setting and the interviewer. In order to gain reliable results a hierarchical relationship between the researcher and informant is perceived as necessary, in which the person seeking the

information takes control of the interaction (Bryman, 1992). According to the prevailing precepts for research of this kind, detachment between the two parties involved is necessary to safeguard against the possibility of contamination. This is said to occur when the researcher does not control her/his emotions and values, which may influence the responses elicited, with the outcome that the research may not be objective and value free, and therefore not 'truly scientific', which is the main intention of quantitative research (Sarantakos, 1993). Of course, any face-to-face interview requires some rapport to be established in order to motivate the respondent to co-operate, and even postal questionnaires may be answered untruthfully or in a way in which the informant chooses to present themselves. Therefore the supposed scientific objectivity of positivism does not withstand scrutiny, even when judged in terms of its own criteria of 'good science'. Indeed, critics of quantitative research have proposed that there can be no such thing as truly 'objective' research, as personal biases will always impinge on the research process, whether this is concentrated in theory formulation and interpretation, development of design, data collection or analysis (Babbie, 1979).

Jayaratne (1983) notes the criticisms made of quantitative techniques by feminist researchers, that much traditional quantitative research appears to be inconsistent with feminist values. These criticisms include the argument that exploitative relationships are inevitable within quantitative research, because respondents (informants) are seen as 'objects' of study, who may be deceived and manipulated by the researcher for the benefit of the research product. This, in turn, is due to the lack of communication and empathy for the research participants by the researcher when collecting such data (Jayaratne, 1983: 110).

In contrast, qualitative research methods produce results that are not obtained by numerical procedures or any other methods of quantification (Bouma and Atkinson, 1995). They have their origins in interpretive sociology. Max Weber's (1864-1920) conceptualisation of interpretive sociology was one of the significant contributions he made to the methodology of the social sciences. It argues that a proper sociological understanding of behaviour has to include consideration of the meaning that social actors give to what they and others do (Weber, 1949). Interpretive methods use various approaches, but all repudiate positivism, with its assumption that there exists some underlying reality capable of being discovered. Rather, interpretive sociology seeks to understand daily life and activities from the viewpoint of the people being studied. Reality, rather than being something that can be

measured or explained by the rationale of law and logic, comprises whatever the individual participant thinks, feels, and says that it is, which will shape their perceptions and hence their actions (Dooley, 1995). Interpretive methods are used to view events through the eyes of the people being studied, thereby enabling the researcher to gain insight into what people think and to appreciate their view of the world (Bouma and Atkinson, 1995).

Unlike quantitative research methods, qualitative methods rarely commence with the testing of a hypothesis. Instead, qualitative data are analysed through conceptualisation. Theories and concepts arise from the enquiries that the researcher has carried out and are as likely to emerge from, as they are to precede, data collection. The researcher may wish to generate an academically informed portrait of a group or community, or may wish to explore 'cause and effect' relationships, as in quantitative research, but through comparison or observation of a very different kind from that used in quantitative research. There are four main steps within the qualitative research process :

- gaining access to participants or to the field of study;
- category definition and observation;
- the recording of data;
- the analysis. (Dooley, 1995)

These four stages can be undertaken in a variety of ways. After gaining access to a field of study or to a group of participants, the recording of data could precede the category of definition, thereby utilising an inductive approach. Unlike the conduct of quantitative research, the phases of data collection and analysis also need not be rigidly separated. Within this approach, data collection can be followed by analysis, the outcomes of which can then be used to decide what data should be collected next. This cycle can be repeated several times (Robson, 1993). Alternatively, the researcher may gather as much data as they can within the field setting, and then withdraw from it to commence their analysis.
Many data collection methods can be used to generate qualitative data, depending upon which research strategy has been employed. More than one method may be used, in order for the researcher to gain a more holistic view of the setting under study, although where several methods are used simultaneously, their data analysis should be handled separately (Stern, 1994). For example, appropriate methods of data collection for a phenomenological research strategy could be taped naturalistic conversations or observation, although other data sources could include phenomenological literature or philosophical reflections (Giorgi, 1970; van Manen, 1990). In contrast, the generation of

grounded theory might include interviews, participation and the keeping of a research diary as appropriate data sources (Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Although different qualitative research strategies may employ a range of data collection methods, all of them aim to collect data in a way which seeks to cause the minimum of disturbance to the natural setting of the participants or to the environment in which the researcher is observing. One of the tenets of qualitative research is that the researcher must take into account the nature of the participants and their environment in order to understand the meanings they attach to perceptions and actions. Unlike the premise on which the use of quantitative methods is based, objectivity is not necessarily perceived as an ideal principle within the research process. Rather than seeing detached 'scientific' data as contaminated by the building of a relationship based on mutual respect, in qualitative approaches empathy between the researcher and the people being studied is positively encouraged (Bouma and Atkinson, 1995). The inclination of qualitative researchers to become personally involved with participants in the research process is seen by quantitative researchers as threatening the reliability and validity of the data obtained in this way. However, proponents of this approach regard these factors as strengths, in providing richness and depth to their conclusions, if not generalisablitity. Feminist methodology provided me with answers, in relation to many of these issues.

3.3 Feminist methodology

Since the 1970s traditional research methodologies have been subjected to sustained criticism by feminists. This process is said to have started with feminist historians, who were attempting to reconstruct women's history (Mies, 1983: 118), but feminist scholarship in a wide range of academic disciplines, in the social sciences and humanities, has also criticised earlier work (Du Bois, 1983; Harding, 1987). For example, Harding criticised traditional epistemology, believing it to have excluded women as agents of knowledge (Harding, 1987: 3). Du Bois argues that both the epistemology and methodology of social science research was, prior to the feminist critique, rooted in an androcentric framework, leading to the marginalisation of women's experiences.

> ...[T]he perspective and the modes of study have remained masculine, those of the dominant culture - with all its myths and beliefs and prescriptions about who women are...The androcentric perspective in social science has rendered women not only unknown, but virtually unknowable...(Du Bois, 1983: 106-107)

Klein argues that much of the large body of knowledge on women in the social sciences before the 1970s consisted of a narrow extension of traditional male-centred research, resulting in women being 'added' to the existing knowledge about men, rather than leading to a fundamental re-think of the nature of research-based knowledge (Klein, 1983: 90). Feminist researchers such as Oakley supported Klein's view and challenged traditional research by conducting research based on women's own experiences. Oakley's pioneering study of women and childbirth in the early 1970s even criticised the dominant methods of conducting qualitative research at that time, especially interviewing in which the interviewer sought to remain detached from and uninvolved with those being studied. She argued that this was inappropriate within feminist research, claiming that interviewing works best when the relationship between the two parties is

> ... [N]on hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship. (Oakley, 1981: 41)

Although social science traditionalists believe that feminists pay too much attention to experience and mistakenly utilise this as a legitimate validator of research information (Hammersley, 1992: 192), most feminists suggest that it is indeed a legitimate political act to draw on one's own experiences of sexism (Oakley, 1981), homophobia (Stanley and Wise, 1983) or racism (Hill-Collins, 1991) in conducting feminist research. This use of direct experience is known as feminist standpoint epistemology (Harding, 1987; Stanley and Wise, 1991). Feminist scholars also recognise that acknowledgement of the validity of their own personal experience is necessary if they are to challenge the notion of objectivity as a prime objective in the research process. Feminist researchers argue that all research is biased, but they seek to expose their own value-position. Far from being rigorously excluded from the research process, their own personal values and beliefs will shape the questions asked and the interpretations that are generated. They argue that they are better equipped than men to understand, identify with and interpret women's experiences, due to their shared oppression within patriarchal society (Oakley, 1981; Finch, 1984). Far from contaminating the research process through lack of objectivity, their shared experience of womanhood is seen by feminists as offering reflexivity and the capacity to empathise with the women being studied, which will ultimately benefit the study in providing insight and richness. However, merely being of the same sex as one's informants does not necessarily mean that all women researchers will be able to empathise with them. Differences based on age, class, sexuality and ethnic origin lead to diversity of

experience, which informs both the researcher's and the informant's orientation, values and expectations in life (Gelsthorpe, 1992). This realisation amongst feminist researchers has led to the proposition that:

> You do not have to be a member of the group studied in order to do the research but it is the rare researcher who can do full justice to a research question if there is no experiential basis from which to begin. (Kirby and McKenna, 1989: 105)

Feminist research rejects the dichotomies of the knower and the known, and criticises the objectification of informants by researchers (Du Bois, 1983: 12). Informants have sometimes been perceived as simply commodities by researchers, which Reinharz sees as both unnecessary and immoral. She suggests that in extreme cases research is conducted on a rape model:

> ..[T]he researchers take, hit and run. They intrude into their subjects' privacy, disrupt their perceptions, utilise false pretences, manipulate the relationship, and give little or nothing in return. When the needs of the researcher are satisfied, they break off contact with the subject. (Reinharz, 1979: 95)

Alternatives to the traditional role of the researcher as the 'knower', and therefore the more powerful party in the relationship between the researcher and the researched, have been sought by feminist scholars. Smith (1977) suggests that feminists should embrace the notion that research becomes a dialogue between the two parties, breaking down power differentials and fostering relationships based on mutual respect, and co-operation. Acker, Barry, and Esseveld (1991) suggest that interviews are one data collection method where unequal power relations can be eliminated by encouraging the interviewee to take the lead in deciding what to talk about. Like Oakley (1981), they found that 'offering' information about oneself or responding to questions asked by informants created relationships with them as 'something which existed beyond the limits of the interview situation' (Acker, Barry, Esseveld, 1991: 141). This next section seeks to explain and justify the decisions that I made regarding my methodology and the forms of research methods used within the collection of data.

3.4 Research design and philosophy

A major consideration of this research was not just to do research *on* lesbians, but *by*, *on* and *for* lesbians. This virtually ruled out the use of quantitative methods. As noted earlier, within positivism the hierarchical relationship between the researchers and those being researched is seen as unproblematic (Bryman, 1992). According to the prevailing precepts

for research of this kind, in order for studies to be perceived as 'scientific', detachment between the two parties is required (Sarantakos, 1993). However, as I myself identify as lesbian, as do most of my friends, I had no desire to dissociate my personal identity from my research project. I required a methodology that would both allow me to draw on my own personal experience as a lesbian, and would acknowledge that some of the potential informants would be drawn from my own social network. I was also concerned that the chosen methodology would have to reflect that I was already a member of the group being researched. Since I intended to remain within a local lesbian social network when the research was completed, I needed to approach the research in a way that would allow for mutually respectful and reciprocal relationships through direct personal contact, to facilitate a sense of shared experience, trust and confidentiality. It was recognised before the onset of data collection that the pursuit of objectivity and detachment would not be prime objectives within this particular study, therefore a decision was made to use qualitative techniques of data collection, whose strengths were identified in section 3.2.

Decisions about a choice of methodology for this study was influenced by consideration of such qualititative approaches as ethnomethodology and grounded theory (see Section 3.2 for earlier discussion of this). I decided to use a combination of approaches in order to elicit the data I required. To set the research in a social and historical context where I could explore the issues, concerns and problems that some lesbians face in the 1990s, I needed to have an understanding of their everyday lives, and the way that lesbian networks or communities function effectively outside hegemonic heterosexual social and cultural norms. For this reason I was influenced by the ethnomethodological approach. Symbolic interactionism offers an understanding of the ways in which individuals and the wider society influence individual women in constructing a lesbian identity for themselves. It can also illuminate how interactions with others may change an individual's own sense of self in relation to her identifying as lesbian. Grounded theory offered an approach which made it legitimate for me, as a lesbian, to research other lesbians. I wanted to ensure that my own ideas about what was important were not imposed on informants, but rather they would be encouraged to propose their own ideas, interpretations and explanations of lesbian identity. I also decided that I would not define the term 'lesbian' or attempt to establish criteria which women would have to fulfil for them to become informants in this research. Rather, self-definition and their own interpretation would be left to informants, using a variety of methods to establish contact with them.

Informed by these three theoretical bases for using qualititative methodology, the framework for the research is a consciously feminist one, which has been adapted to offer a lesbian-centred 'take' on the research process.

I did not consider guidelines on research ethics from mainstream research books to be sufficiently rigorous to safeguard potential informants within this study, and therefore sought further guidance in the literature to inform my investigation of lesbians' lives. According to feminist researchers Kirby and McKenna (1989), minority groups face a risk within social science research, because of the way in which researchers have intentionally or unintentionally used the data they have gathered on them to maintain oppressive relations and to affirm the views of the most powerful members of the population, in order to serve their interests. Mies likewise argues that research has been an instrument of dominance used in the legitimation of power elites, but arguing that it 'must be brought to serve the interests of dominated, exploited and oppressed groups' (Mies, 1983: 123).

As my study embraces feminist ethical concerns, I have attempted throughout the research process to follow the precepts of feminist scholars. This entails assuming full responsibility both for my actions as a researcher and ultimately for the welfare of informants during their participation in the study, and to protect their identity after the research is complete:

> Ethics begins and ends with you, the researcher. A researcher's personal moral code is the strongest defence against unethical behaviour. (Neuman, 1991:437)

Taking Neuman's statement as my first principle and most important guideline, I will now state some of the ethical principles that I sought to follow, and explain how these were put into practice.

At the inception of my research, and prior to embarking on data collection, I contemplated why and how I was going to undertake my study. I spent many hours noting down my reasons for undertaking this research, my own personal values and how these would affect my study. This exercise led me to review the research that had already been undertaken on lesbians, what methods other researchers had employed and the consequences of using such methods. Unlike certain other researchers who have studied 'homosexuality' such as Kinsey (1948; 1953), Humphreys, (1970) and Wollf (1972), I belong to the minority group which I wish to study. Therefore using my own personal experience as a lesbian, I decided that a fruitful activity would be to consider what I myself would require from a researcher

who asked me to participate in a study of lesbian sexuality and identity, in order to work out my own ethical standpoint. The following list was recorded in my research diary, simply headed 'I wouldn't like it if...'

- If she were a he
- I didn't know if she was straight or lesbian
- I had never heard of or seen her before
- She didn't tell me the purpose of her research
- She didn't share the general interests of lesbians (she was going to research something that would result in a negative portrayal of lesbians - lesbians shouldn't be mothers, lesbians are not well adjusted as adults, lesbians have low self esteem etc).
- She didn't explain the research methods she was going to use
- She wouldn't spend time answering my questions before and after the data collection
- She didn't say anything about confidentiality or anonymity
- She wouldn't let me see a transcript of my interview
- She treated me in a patronising way
- She wouldn't disclose any personal details about herself
- She didn't treat me as an equal
- She wasn't very friendly

(Research Diary, 5/11/95: 3).

This list, which became my guideline of 'what not to do' as a researcher, has proved very beneficial during the study. Identifying as a lesbian and as a feminist led me to seek to uphold feminist principles, which in effect meant that many ethical decisions were already made for me.

As the discipline of sociology has continued to evolve, so has researchers' awareness of their ethical obligations to their informants, irrespective of their favoured research tradition. There are three principal ethical concerns: *informed consent*; the *right to privacy*; and *protection from harm*.

For a person to give their *informed consent* to participation in the research project, s/he must have been provided with sufficient information about its nature and their part in it. The researcher must therefore provide information about the nature of the study, the purpose of the research, and any other details necessary for the informant to be able to make an informed decision about whether to participate. The *right to privacy* centres on protecting the identity of the individuals or groups studied. This will include not disclosing the names, addresses or other personal details about informants. The data collected would also need to be securely kept, to safeguard their privacy. *Protection from harm* includes

both physical and emotional aspects. It is generally accepted that it is the researcher's responsibility not to place the informant either intentionally or unintentionally in any physical danger, nor to cause any emotional trauma as a result of participation in the study (Punch, 1994: 83). Several professional associations within the social sciences have published ethical research guidelines or codes. However, they may contain ambiguities. For example, although informed consent is a fundamental ethical consideration, which would appear to rule out covert research, this practice is considered by some to have a place within social science (See, for example, Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education, 1997). However, feminist research has a political foundation to empower informants and research ethics issues have been extensively debated, leading to a re-evaluation of the relationship between the researcher and informant. Trust, and empathy between the two parties are valued, and deception and exploitation are generally seen as inimical to feminist research ideology and methods.

The above sections have described my process of reviewing various research philosophies in order to identify an appropriate methodological approach for this study. To provide an insight into the overlapping activities of planning, data collection and analysis necessary for this study, Table 3.1 shows my activities over the 15 month period of data collection. This will be followed by a full account of the research process, beginning with the issue of securing access to potential informants.

3.5 Access issues: seeking potential informants

Gaining access to subcultural groups for research purposes, especially those consisting of lesbians and/or homosexuals, is likely to be difficult, as they are a hidden and stigmatised population (Plummer, 1981). It is also suggested that the way in which researchers establish themselves and their project influences the

> ...[P]attern of events that occur in the field, the degree of access that they are given, and the relationships that they establish with their informants...(Burgess, 1982:15-16)

With these two factors in mind, the overall objective of the informal initial phase of the research process was to establish contact with other lesbians whom I did not already know. This would widen my own lesbian network, which I hoped would result in my gaining access to a larger number of potential informants within the local area. I also hoped to gain acceptance within the local lesbian community as the 'lesbian who was also doing the research', thereby securing what

Riemer (1977) calls a 'face value trust' and starting the important process of establishing mutual respect and reciprocity between myself and potential informants. This was important, in the light of my own criticisms of earlier studies of lesbians for their homogeneity.

I considered various alternative ways of achieving this objective. I could have distributed leaflets to local lesbians at the two lesbian and gay bars and the one night club in my local community, to inform them of the research project and request them to participate, printing my telephone number on the bottom. However, I decided against this for two main reasons. I know from my own personal experience of being 'targeted' in this way, that I have never replied to any requests from unknown people for participation in research projects when they are advertised in leaflets in lesbian and gay newspapers and magazines, and local lesbian network newsletters. I therefore thought that it would be unlikely that many other lesbians would actually do so. Secondly, printing my telephone number on leaflets appeared to be a risky method of seeking to establish contact. Some heterosexual people occasionally use the two local lesbian and gay bars, and I was aware that homophobia comes in many forms, including obscene phone calls. This was experienced by researchers Stanley and Wise after their telephone number was used as a contact number for a lesbian group:

> [T]he calls were frightening not only because they constituted an assault on us at a psychological level, but also because we feared for our safety from sexual or other violent attacks on a physical level...(Stanley and Wise, 1991: 274)

Although they put this experience to good use in writing about it, I had no desire to share it as part of my research process. After talking to friends about this problem, a solution was found. We decided that I should not distribute any written material with my telephone number or address on in public venues. Rather, the initial phase of data collection would involve my spending more time participating in the social interactions of one of the local lesbian and gay pubs.

I spent a great deal of time and energy on establishing myself within the local lesbian bar. Prior to this informal phase of data collection, I explained my plans to other lesbians within my friendship network, in terms of what topics I intended to examine, how long I thought the data collection would take, how the information obtained in this way would be treated, issues of confidentiality and anonymity, and what I would do with the research findings. We agreed that anything that they said to me in private would remain confidential, and any remarks that I noted down would be treated as anonymous. We also agreed that I would be open about my research to all lesbians with whom I came into

contact, and that my friends could also inform their friends and acquaintances who I was, and that I was researching into lesbian identity. This was perceived as necessary to establish my credentials, and in order to make sure that no one individual or group of lesbians felt that they had been deceived by not knowing that I was a researcher:

> It is essential that as a participant who is also a data gatherer, the researcher recognises the obligation to inform those in the setting about the research. (Kirby and McKenna, 1989:78)

My friends and acquaintances (many of whom are themselves graduates in social sciences or women's studies), whom I will call the original 'collaborators' in my research, also suggested possible areas of study and assisted me in trying to anticipate potentially sensitive issues. Discussion with them helped to refine my approach to potential informants. They agreed that my credibility as a lesbian and as a researcher would be subject to checking by potential informants, and that I needed to be willing to be 'interviewed' myself by women who had concerns about the research project. This was deemed necessary if I was to gain support and acceptance from those lesbians whom I would be seeking to use as participants in the research project.

In order to develop relationships with the social groups which included potential informants, I decided to spend up to four evenings a week at the local lesbian and gay bar. I chose this one particular bar, rather than the other local one situated less than half a mile away, as it had a larger lesbian clientele. I had previously frequented this pub but generally only three or four times a month. I thought it important to spend as much time as possible in the pub at this point, as I envisaged that many contacts with potential informants would be initiated there. I already had a number of lesbian friends and contacts who were willing to become participants in the project, but I wanted to extend beyond my own personal social network. I had met many of them since I had been in the town as a direct result of my attending college there, and therefore most were current or former students, offering limited diversity in terms of class, educational background and age.

By becoming 'visible' and getting my 'face known' in the local lesbian and gay bar, I hoped that it would benefit both myself and potential informants in two ways. First, it would allow both myself and informant(s) to assess one another at first hand. This was important because:

Table 3.1 The research process: data collection and analysis

Time (months)	Planning	Data gathering	Analysis	Outcome
0-3	Literature review/ Talking to lesbian friends/ Observation of lesbians in bars and clubs	Research diary used to record progress, initial ideas and observable patterns of lesbian identities		
3-7	Literature review/Initiated contact with other lesbians for informal chats Used issues from 'chats' to construct themes for focus groups.	5 focus groups (5x5 individuals) conducted	Analysed issues arising from 'chats' Analysis of focus groups	Common issues noted Theorising(testing evidence against theory). Further theorising. Pattern emerged:4 dominant narrative accounts apparent but this left other stories unclassified. Started writing up data analysis. Affirmed theories with revision
7-15	Constructed semi-structured interview schedule incorporating themes from earlier data collection Further reading. Added further questions for clarification Further clarification of theories needed. Interview schedule re-worked in order to test theories	Conducted Interviews: 1-20 21-30 31-60 5 further interviews undertaken to explore the proposed additional categorisation	Analysed interviews Analysed interviews	

> One's trustworthiness is not confined to what one says...but also to how one acts and who one is. (Reinharz, 1983:177)

By entering in to the 'natural setting' of the local bar, I became both the observer and the observed. I believed that this would balance to some degree the power imbalance between myself and potential informants. In this way they had a chance to see who I was, and to get to know me. I saw this as preferable to my attending the pub at a later date in order to ask women for interviews in pursuit of my research, without their knowing who I was, where I was from or even whether I was who I claimed to be. In effect, it was hoped that this would help to break down barriers and assist the potential informants to ask questions and find out about me, as I wished to find out about them, in a setting that was safe and comfortable. As Taylor and Bogdon point out:

> The casual exchange of information is often the vehicle through which observers can break the ice. (Taylor and Bogdon, 1984: 37)

Secondly, by entering into a particular setting as both a participant and a data gatherer, I hoped that I would be able to observe and experience the various ways that people interacted with each other and with me, which would allow me to sink into the background, thus allowing me to become part of that environment, rather than taking a position in the foreground as the 'lesbian researcher' which may have altered its natural setting. In this way, I was able to note the norms of this particular environment and to see at first hand how it was structured and who were the key players. It also enabled me to note who were part of groups and who were not, as well as offering evidence on the age range of patrons and other such observable 'facts'. By this time I had began to keep a research diary, even though I had yet to determine exactly which data collection methods I was going to employ or even the number of informants that I hoped to achieve. The research diary was a useful way of registering what was happening in the bar as well as recording the development of my own thoughts and experiences.

3.6 Research diary

A 'research diary' is a:

> ...[R]ecord of the experience and reflections of the researcher that relate to the focus of the research. (Kirby and McKenna, 1989: 49)

I decided to keep a research diary in order to record the development of my thinking throughout the research process and to note down initial conceptualisations, the documentation of observable patterns, interesting links and notes on what I already thought I knew regarding the research subject, and what I thought I needed to know. The research diary proved to be valuable in providing a record of information that I would otherwise have forgotten. It also allowed the research process to be observed self-critically and for my justifications of discussions to be recorded, before I forgot, during the entire data collection phases. It also served as a notebook for my thoughts and feelings during the initial phase of observation.

I did not take notes while at the pub, but I wrote them down when I got home, or (if I was alone) when I left the pub and got in to my car. For example, the notes from one Saturday night's attendance at the bar provided information on the groups that formed, the distinction of age that determined the membership of the small groups, and how one became known as 'a regular'. The notes taken after leaving the pub for this specific evening read:

> Pub very busy tonight, standing room only just inside the bar - mainly women in the pool room. Two or three female couples, rest in groups of 4 to 6. Older women (35+) sat separately and some distance away from the larger groups of younger women (teens and 20s). Older women seemed to prefer to spend their time talking only to their partners rather than moving from table to table talking to other women or being part of a big group as the younger women were. When last orders came (11pm) bell was rung, but the doors were locked and curtains drawn as usual, and then they carried on serving, like they do on Friday and Saturday nights. I asked one of the women in the group, who I didn't know, why they bothered to ring the bell when they always served after time, she told me that it was just to get rid of the 'odd straight' that may have walked in by accident, and was so interested in the proceedings that they hadn't walked back out again. I know from my own experience that anyone can stay after time and that you only have to have come to the pub a few times to be known as a regular - so why did the older lesbian couples leave straight after the bell was rung, although everyone else remained for at least another 30 minutes? Still 10 to 15 women in when I left at 12.30 am. (Research Diary 6/1/96: 5)

The basic principle of research, that of honesty, worked well in the months of familiarisation preceding the formal phases of data collection. Since I had already become a 'visible' face within a lesbian network, my contact with other lesbians expanded rapidly into social contexts beyond my initial meetings at the bar, in an informal 'snowballing' process. I was frequently invited to parties, lunches, social gatherings and various lesbian and gay pubs and clubs, by both pre-existing and new friends. The majority of such

invitations were accepted as I wanted to build upon my existing networks and to meet other potential informants.

3.7 Fitting in: testing the researcher

This section reports on the strategies I adopted and the problems I faced when meeting lesbians I did not already know, during this initial phase of the research. There are within any subcultural group certain norms to which members of the group must conform in order to be accepted (Hebdidge, 1979). The clientele of the local lesbian bar was no exception. The norms of dress within lesbian culture favour short hair, rather than long; trousers and jeans, rather than dresses and skirts; shirts and jackets, rather than blouses and coats; and trainers or flat shoes, rather than court and high heeled shoes. Of course, this 'look' may differ slightly depending on the social context but is generally regarded as the standard dress code within lesbian social circles.

Like many other researchers, I was concerned about what to wear when in my role as lesbian researcher. As Peters (1997) notes:

> What to wear is not just an issue of vanity; the presentation of self is very important to a researcher's acceptance. (Peters, 1997:57)

As I had for many years worn what I believed to be acceptable clothing within lesbian social circles, I decided that the only modifications I would have to make to my dress would be to put a little more effort into looking tidy. I have to admit that I am not the most fashion-conscious of lesbians and generally do not pay much attention to what is 'in' or 'out'. However, I believed that my 'look' would pass lesbian inspection. Unfortunately I subsequently realised that this was ill-founded. I had insufficiently reflected on how other lesbians, whom I had not met before, might perceive me. Being used to being an 'out' lesbian within my own circle of acquaintances, and having been happily and firmly sure of my own sexual identity for some considerable time, led me to be complacent about my image. I thought it was obvious enough to strangers that I was lesbian, for two reasons: first, the setting where I met lesbians whom I did not know was in lesbian and/or gay bars and clubs, and therefore I felt it would be generally accepted that I was definitely a lesbian. Second, my general lack of feminine attire and make-up was, so I thought, an obvious indicator of my sexuality. Unfortunately I missed one ambiguous aspect of my appearance which suggested that I may not appear to be who I and others said I was: I wore my hair was longer than most lesbians, leading women who did not know me asking if I was

'straight'. The hegemony of subcultural norms and the need for conformity in order to ensure acceptance appears to be as strong amongst lesbians as in other subcultural groups.

It is understandable that potential informants would wish to 'test out' researchers to see if they can be trusted. According to Morris, Woodward and Peters (1998), informants need to feel secure with the researcher before they are prepared to make personal disclosures. As other qualitative researchers have found, 'tests' became part of this research process, with informants not only testing me in relation to my physical appearance, but also in less obvious ways such as my knowledge of lesbian sub-cultural norms and language use. Other tests of my authenticity as a 'real' lesbian were also used. Some of these centred around the terminology used by lesbians and gay men, which evolved out of the common usage of polari, a British underground slang particularly associated with gay men, but also used by lesbians to pass messages to each other about sexuality and identity or just to gossip. Its use allows lesbians and gay men to talk openly to each other when other non-lesbians or non-gay men are present; 'straight' people are excluded from the conversation by not being able to understand it. The following conversation provides an example. It took place at a local mixed lesbian and gay pub, between myself and a potential informant, to whom I had been introduced by a mutual friend. She appeared to be ambivalent about my friend's endeavours to explain my research, not knowing whether she wanted to participate in it. After we had talked for a little while, she said :

> Informant: Look at all the aunties, it's like a meat rack in here tonight. Is it always like this?
> Me: Yes, all the aunties come in here to mince.

The informant said that there were a lot of older gay men (look at all the aunties, aunties = older gay men); it's like a gay male sex cruising area in here tonight (meat rack = cruising area for male sex). Is it always like this? Following my informant's lead, I also replied in the same language: Yes, all the aunties (older gay men) come in here to mince (behave in a camp way, strut, be sexually provocative). My reply seemed to please her, and she told our mutual friend that I was 'alright' and told me that she would be happy to be interviewed at a later date, and gave me her telephone number.

> It is not enough that the researcher says she belongs to as a member of the community. (Kirby and Mc their community, it is important that the interviewees identify the researcherKenna, 1989: 70)

The most common method used by actual and potential informants to test my authenticity as 'one of them' was through the use of direct and indirect questions on issues of sexuality and identity. Throughout all the data collection phases I was often asked questions which tested me out as a lesbian. I answered all questions honestly, as I believe that the feminist researcher has a responsibility to attempt to create and maintain a sense of equality within the research process. This can only be achieved by the willingness of the researcher to share experiences with her informant, rather than taking up a detached or powerful position (Acker, 1994). Often the questions appeared to be asked out of simple curiosity or innocent interest, but they served to test my personal knowledge of lesbian films and books. For example ' I was just saying to X [name of friend], I can never remember the name of that older woman that was in *The Killing of Sister George*. Do you know?' (Research Diary, 6/1/97: 42). Sometimes individuals seemed to be trying to elicit whether I was open-minded by saying something that they thought might shock me, or by asking questions in such a way as to get me to express my own opinions or political beliefs, to ascertain 'where I was coming from'. Taylor and Bogdon (1984) suggest that potential participants need to establish whether the researcher is someone to whom they can express themselves '[w]ithout fear of disclosure or negative evaluation' (Taylor and Bogdon, 1984:37). This appeared to be the intention of more than one informant, who asked me questions relating to my beliefs on lesbian sexual activities. The most frequent questions dealt with lesbian identity and appeared to seek confirmation that I was a 'real' lesbian by asking me to verify what they had heard from someone else. 'X said that you've never been married or anything. Have you always been a lesbian, then?' (Research Diary 17/5/96:18). Throughout all the data collection phases I remained willing to answer honestly any questions that were asked of me, although this often led to dilemmas which I will discuss more fully later in this chapter (see Section 3.11).

3.8 Data collection

By the time I was ready to begin my next phase of data collection, the conversations and informal 'chats' I had previously had with many other lesbians had produced much data on issues which appeared to be important to lesbians. A written record was kept of all the themes arising in conversations with the different women whom I encountered in my research settings. By the end of several weeks a clear pattern was emerging, which suggested some common concerns and problematic areas that lesbians had experienced in their personal transitions to self-labelling as lesbian. These were: how they felt when

recognising they were 'different' from other girls/women; their own experiences of the 'coming-out' process (when the individual first acknowledged her lesbian identity to another person); their first emotional and sexual experience with someone of the same sex; the importance of lesbian friendship networks; and forms of discrimination of which they may or may not have had personal experience, notably homophobia.

Having established what lesbians themselves saw as important issues, the next stage was to discover whether these experiences were of similar importance to other lesbians of various ages, backgrounds and experiences. This arises from my self-imposed task of testing the stability of the typologies used in earlier studies of lesbians for a more diverse group of informants.

By the time I was ready to begin the main phase of data collection, approximately three months after my first regular visits to the local pub, I had gathered 30 offers of participation from women from my own social network, and from contacts and acquaintances at the local bar and night-clubs. I considered this number to be sufficient to enable the formal data gathering phase to commence, as I intended to continue networking during all of the data collection phases.

As the next research phase I decided to ask lesbians to offer their thoughts and feelings on certain key issues concerning lesbianism. However, I also wanted to enable women to bring their own experiences, thoughts and feelings into the research, regardless of whether these were of common importance or not. I therefore decided that both inductive and deductive approaches were necessary, in order to verify the original themes and to allow for further contributions by other women. One possible research method was to develop a self-administered questionnaire, which could be distributed through various pubs and clubs. It could include questions on the themes that had previously emerged from the networking phase, asking lesbians to say whether they agreed or disagreed that these were important aspects of their lives, and inviting them to propose other topics that they thought important to them as individuals. However, this option was rejected after consideration, for three main reasons. Firstly, as Neuman (1991) and Robson (1993) point out, self-completed questionnaires may be very efficient in terms of researcher time and effort, but they have certain disadvantages. One is the inability of this method to allow for complex questions, forcing informants into giving simplistic answers (Neuman, 1991). Robson also identifies the researcher's inability to check on the veracity of responses. My main aim was to find a

data collection method that would allow informants to engage honestly and be able to convey as much information as they thought necessary. Questionnaires can also be irrelevant or time-consuming for the respondent, and the researcher has little or no control over who completes them. The usual low response ratè for questionnaire surveys, combined with concerns about the representativeness of respondents and the potential difficulty of distributing them led me to decide not to user questionnaires. Most importantly, simply ticks against a series of pre-set statements would not provide the kind of detailed information I sought nor allow informants to add their own comments.

3.9 Focus groups

I decided to utilise a data collection method which would provide a diversity of informants in terms of age and background; which would allow informants to control their own input; and in which complex answers could be accommodated. For this second phase of the study I therefore decided to use focus groups.

Focus groups are discussions designed to elicit people's perceptions and perspectives within a defined area of interest, in a permissive and non-threatening environment (Krueger, 1988). As a socially-oriented research procedure, they allow people to be influenced by others and to offer their observations after listening to debate. This may result in the production of ideas or information that might not be elicited by either questionnaires or interviews, and for some statements to be challenged by other members and hence refined. Robson (1993) criticises questionnaires for their inability to handle informants' complex answers. By contrast, focus groups provide a rich source of data, expressed in informants' own words, and they allow participants to qualify their responses. Focus groups are relatively effective, cheap and quick to set up (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). They also enable research participants to be collaborators rather than the objects of research, thus embracing feminist values. Finally, they allow informants to add depth, meaning and detail at a very personal level of experience. However, they have several drawbacks. Firstly, although focus groups are an informal way of collecting data, in that a group of people meet together and discuss certain themes or subjects, the setting in which the meeting takes place will always be artificial, in that it has been purposefully constructed and therefore lacks the naturalism of a group of women chatting in the bar. Secondly, although I was not asking focus group members particular questions, and sought to facilitate the group rather than leading it, there was still the possibility that the members

may seek to elicit my approval, by saying what they thought I or other members might want to hear. Finally, the practical aspect of managing focus groups could be a disadvantage of this method. People could all decide to speak at once, resulting in people not being heard or smaller conversations breaking out between individuals. Members of the focus group could also start to discuss themes which I might think irrelevant to the aim of the group. However, even after I had noted all the potential drawbacks of this data collection method, I still decided to go ahead with it, keeping in mind the need to alleviate these potential problems if and when they arose.

Unlike many other forms of research, such as ethnographic studies, where groups or individuals are to be studied in an overt manner, I did not have to negotiate access with 'gatekeepers' in order to reach those whom I wished to study. However, I did have to negotiate access afresh with each new individual participant in the study, and had to pass various informal 'tests' laid on by potential informants throughout the study. (see Section 3.7 for earlier detailed discussion of this subject.)

I decided to tape record the focus groups. This offered the advantage that all the information was recorded (barring mishaps), which left me free to listen to what informants were saying, and allowed me to have prolonged eye contact with them, signalling rapport and interest in their comments. It would also allow me to watch both my own and others' body language, which aided my assessment of how successful the focus groups were in terms of generating rapport and interest amongst group members. Also, it provides a verbatim record of the event, for later analysis and re-analysis, as fresh ideas emerged. Having decided that the advantages of using a tape recorder far outweighed the disadvantages, I left the decision as to whether each focus group's discussion was to be recorded to its participants. Some people do not like to be recorded; they may feel inhibited by a tape recorder being placed in front of them. Given the nature of my research, I was also concerned that some women would feel that the focus group was not in those circumstances as confidential as they would like. Although I informed all members that only I would listen to the tape, and then would make a transcript of it, there was always the possibility that the tape might be accidentally overheard by someone, that it might fall into the wrong hands, or that they just did not want intimate details of their lives recorded.

After I finished producing each transcript, I destroyed the tape, unless any member of the group wanted to keep it for themselves. This option was offered to all focus group

members, but all trusted me to dispose of it. Copies of all the transcripts were offered to those involved, with the opportunity to edit or delete their own contributions. I wanted to ensure that informants not only felt that they 'owned' their own words, and could correct errors, but that they had this opportunity to reflect on the experience of being researched and to decide whether they did want to be part of the study.

Five focus groups, homogeneous by age, were established, each of which was invited to discuss the themes that had emerged as those most salient to lesbians from the literature review, and my informal interactions in the pub. These were lesbian identity, 'coming out' and the lesbian community. In practice, members of the groups also raised other issues. Both my themes and their issues were subsequently used to inform the construction of the semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix 3). Each focus group lasted between two to three hours, and followed the same pattern.

A main criticism of the snowball technique, which I used for the initial phases of the project, is that researchers tend to secure participants who are very similar to themselves in terms of age and other socio-demographic factors. Although my primary method of finding women to participate in focus groups was through my personal network and the women I had met when spending time at the pub, I decided not to have focus groups comprised of just my friends and acquaintances. Rather, I decided to approach individual women with whom I had previously made contact, explaining my research and asking if they would be willing to participate in a focus group with several of their friends or acquaintances. I deliberately sought a mix within each focus group of women I knew well and those who were only acquaintances or whom I had not previously met, so that groups were not composed of close friends who would attempt to 'help me' by intentionally agreeing with each other, or only talking about issues that they may have thought were important to me. As Stewart and Shamdasani point out (1990), it is necessary to achieve a balance of topics between what matters to group members and the researcher's objectives.

I had other concerns, too, about the management of the focus groups. Stewart and Shamdasani urge that 'The researcher must be sensitive to establishing an environment in which these individuals feel comfortable in talking' (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990: 217). This was both important, given the sensitive nature of the topic, and necessary, if informants were to feel able to express their opinions and experiences freely without pressure to reach consensus with other members of the group. In order to pre-empt

problems, I decided to bring together women of a similar age, as research has shown that ageism is an enduring form of discrimination which operates in the lesbian subculture, as elsewhere, against both younger and older lesbians (Bayata, 1978).

As I did not want the focus groups to take place in a formal setting or any other environment where its members might feel ill at ease, I decided against using rooms within the College, where I was on 'home territory' but which might have intimidated participants. I therefore decided to hold the first one in a room in the local lesbian and gay bar, where all the members of this group were regular patrons. Its members, all women in their forties, were recruited through my friendship network, and followed the pattern just described.

At the beginning of each focus group I informed the members of confidentiality and anonymity, and promised that if I subsequently quoted their words, I would not use their names. I offered each member a copy of the transcript, inviting them to delete or change anything that they wished. I further reminded members that they were free to withdraw at any time if they wished. New themes for further exploration arose in each focus group. The issues resulting from the first focus group included: issues of coming-out; heterosexual marriage; childhood experiences; legal inequalities for lesbians; familial problems due to other family members' non-acceptance of lesbian sexuality; custody battles for retaining children after coming-out as lesbian; generational differences between lesbians; and the position of lesbians within a sexist society. These themes were recorded in the research diary and were raised later in the second of the focus groups.

The second group, which was recruited in the same way as the first, comprised women in their twenties. The location for this focus group was also the same as the first, as was the procedure. Again, members raised new issues, in addition to those raised by the first group. These women spent more time discussing the difficult process of coming out to family and friends, and also homophobia. They were less inclined than the first group to discuss sexism or the legal restrictions on lesbians in Britain. Also, whereas all members of the first focus group had been married, none of the second group had, hence it was not something they wished to discuss. This second group discussed other salient issues, including dress codes amongst lesbians; issues of personal safety at school and at college when they decided they were lesbian; to whom they would or would not disclose their lesbianism; and changes in their identity and self-image since the transition from labelling themselves as heterosexual to lesbian.

Three further focus groups took place. Two were held in women's homes, and one in the pub. All followed the same pattern as the first two, with some issues discussed by each group, and others unique to one or other group. Continuing the pattern of seeking homogeneity by age, one comprised women in their thirties; one women in their sixties, and one women in their forties. Although both the first and last group consisted of women in their forties, the first's members had all been married and had children, whereas the last group consisted of both women who had previously been married and those who had never married.

As stated earlier, one of the major aims of this study was to have diversity of informants with regard to socio-demographic factors. Table 3.2 shows that although members of the focus groups resided in three different areas, the majority came from Gloucestershire. Although the desired level of diversity could not be achieved regarding this factor, I planned to invest more effort in further data collection stages to achieve greater heterogeneity regarding the geographical location of informants. The focus groups did, however, contain both previously married and never married women, as well as those with and without children. This was perceived as important, as factors such as marriage and motherhood may well affect informants' experiences and feelings towards their sexuality. Table 3. 2 shows the number of ever married informants and those who had children, for each of the five focus groups.

A measure of heterogeneity was achieved in terms of focus group members' educational qualifications, based on whether or not they had a degree. As Table 3.2 shows 10 of the 25 informants had a degree or postgraduate degree, and all but one of the focus groups had both women with and without degrees as members.

Table 3.2: Information about focus group members

Focus Groups	Geographic location of focus group members			Number of members ever married	Number of members with children	Numbers with educational qualification at degree level or above	Age range of individuals within each focus group (in years)
	Gloucestershire	Hereford and Worcester	West Midlands				
Focus Group 1	5	0	0	5	5	0	41-49
Focus Group 2	3	2	0	0	0	2	20-26
Focus Group 3	5	0	0	0	0	4	31-39
Focus Group 4	5	0	0	1	1	2	60-68
Focus Group 5	0	0	5	2	1	2	40-48
Totals	18	2	5	8	7	10	-

The age range represented in the focus groups was women in their twenties to women in their sixties. Although a wider age range would have been preferable, there were difficulties in getting access to both younger and older women, mainly due to the nature of my own social network and to the wider circle of acquaintances to which its members could introduce me, given that the local lesbian and gay pub provided the basis for selection of most of the informants. I decided that it would not be wise to approach youth clubs or other places which provided recreational facilities for women below the age of 18 to find new informants. The reasons for this included the possibility that youth leaders or others working with young people may have considered my research controversial, and/or might fear legal reprisals due to Section 28 of the Local Government Act of 1988 which prohibits local authorities from promoting homosexuality (see Section 2.9 for earlier discussion of Section 28). Even though my research would not constitute grounds for fearing such legal reprisals, one of the effects of Section 28 has been continuing confusion in the interpretation of the Act, which has resulted in the staff of both local authorities and voluntary agencies exercising great caution on anything to do with homosexuality (Colvin and Hawksley, 1989). Hence the potential disadvantages far outweighed the possible advantages of seeking to include younger women in the study. It was hoped that further heterogeneity of informants would be gained in the semi-structured interviews which would be the next stage of data collection.

3.10 Semi-structured Interviews

The information gained from the focus groups was analysed in order to inform the next phase of data collection. I considered various alternatives which would allow me to examine whether the views expressed by lesbians through the focus groups were equally salient for other lesbians, but I also wanted to discover whether there were any differences. I decided to use semi-structured interviews, as this would allow me to both ask particular key questions while allowing for informants to voice their own concerns, thoughts and feelings (see Appendix 3 for a copy of the interview schedule). Also, it would address the limitations of the focus groups, which had been recruited through my personal and local networks.

Informants were sought in the same way as the previous phase of data collection, by utilising the snowball technique. Although there are obvious deficiencies of this technique in securing diversity, I decided to ask willing friends and acquaintances to make initial

contact with other lesbians, and then pass on, with the potential informant's permission, their telephone numbers, in order that I could make direct contact with them, explain the research and request their participation. I was aware that I could it would be more difficult to gain informants below the age of 30 and above the age of 50, as most of my friends and acquaintances were in the their thirties and forties. I therefore, particularly emphasised the need to identify women who were older or younger. I also sought further diversity regarding geographical location of informants and therefore emphasised that I would be willing to travel to informants' homes throughout England and Wales. Similarly, women who had been married and /or who had children were underrepresented within my own social network, and I therefore placed emphasis on securing access and interviews with women who had experience of one or both. Although I had not set a maximum figure for the number of interviews I wanted to carry out, as I wanted to ensure that I had reached a level of diversity regarding socio-demographic factors as well as diversity of women's experiences, I initially thought that 50 interviews might be sufficient. However, 60 informants eventually participated in this phase of data collection, aged between 18 and 80 and from 14 different areas in England and Wales. (Fuller details of this phase of data collection are given in Chapter Four.)

The criteria for the selection of women to participate in this phase of data collection were intentionally kept simple, and followed the guidelines laid down by Kirby and McKenna (1989). There were three criteria. First, informants had to self-identify as lesbian, or to be willing to have their name passed on to me as being a lesbian by someone whom I had previously met. Second, they had to be English speaking, as I am monolingual and felt it was inappropriate to use an interpreter. Third, they had to be willing to participate in the research. Initial contacts with women were made in the same way as the focus groups, followed up by either a letter or telephone call, asking individuals to select a time and venue for the interview to take place. All women who volunteered who were geographically accessible were offered a face-to-face interview, and those who were geographically inaccessible were offered a self-completion question sheet and self addressed envelope.

Women invited to be interviewed were offered the choice of one of four alternative interview formats: they could tape their own interview or write their answers on an open ended question sheet, posting each back to me, or they could be interviewed by myself, either on their own or with a partner or friend(s) also present. All the face-to-face

interviews followed the same format of questions and follow-up probes, as seemed appropriate. The interviewee's consent was sought for our conversation to be taped. The advantages of taping interviews far outweighed any possible disadvantages, as the interviewee does not have to slow their conversation down, or wait for the researcher to catch up, neither does the interviewee have to keep clarifying what she has said in order for the interviewer to check that it is all noted down correctly. Also, the interviewer is free to give the interviewee encouraging eye contact, to promote rapport. There are disadvantages to tape recording interviews, the main one being the time it takes to transcribe the interview. My transcribing took a total of 960 hours, over six months. All but two of my informants agreed to having their accounts recorded. The two women who chose to have me write their answers instead were going through a legal process at the time. To be publicly recognised as lesbian could threaten their chances of success in this process.

The face-to-face interviews proved more successful than the other two methods, (which were informants either tape recording their answers to the interview schedule or writing them down) and in terms of generating useful data for my purposes. The main benefit of the interviews was that this method of data collection gave interviewees the chance to tell their stories at their own speed, with my intervening only to check or clarify points where necessary. I did not seek to prevent subjects straying from the research questions, even though this increased the length of the interviews and made it more difficult for me to restructure the question format. It proved clearly that the potential benefits of allowing subjects to rethink their past experiences or to provide background information far outweighed the disadvantages. Measor suggests that allowing informants to 'ramble' may be both time-consuming and sometimes difficult for the interviewer to control, but the benefits to be gained from doing so are substantial (Measor, 1985:67).

While I was still 'recruiting' potential informants to interviews, I was asked several times by couples if they could be interviewed together. I had no objection to this, as I understand that some lesbians need to feel that their relationships are accepted and supported by other lesbians. The decision to interview couples together was a political one as, following the recommendations of Kirby and McKenna, I sought to challenge the 'structurally imposed isolation, invisibility and silence' (Kirby and McKenna, 1989:123) of those women who remain on the periphery of a heterosexualised society. By agreeing to interview couples together, I gained further insight into the complex dynamics of interviews but it raised new ethical issues. When women said that they wanted to be interviewed together with their

partner, saying that they had 'no secrets' from one another, I gave them a copy of the interview schedule, and explained that I could not guarantee that other issues would not arise during the interview, as the discussions often went off in unexpected directions. I did not want the couples to disclose information that the other partner did not know, which could generate conflict later.

Interviewing couples proved to be more difficult than interviewing women on their own, with a qualitatively different kind of interaction from the rapport that I had with lone individuals. On two separate occasions when interviewing couples, a negative reaction by one partner became apparent after the other had made remarks or disclosed information about them without their consent. My role as a researcher was made difficult by this, as I did not want to intervene within their private relationship, but neither did I want to continue with the interview as if nothing had happened. Simmel (1950) argues that the third person can benefit from conflict between two others, by deliberately or inadvertently getting one partner to make greater disclosures on the other's behaviour. Lee urges caution on the part of the interviewer in attempting to engage in 'repair work', to ensure that they 'do not make the situation worse' (Lee, 1993:111). The following is an extract from my research diary which records how I dealt with one such incident:

> X told me something about Y's past, that Y obviously did not want disclosing. X realised her mistake and fell silent. Y was embarassed and upset. I stopped the interview, asked if they were both okay, and said that I would leave them to talk for a few minutes while I went outside for a cigarette. When I returned I reminded them that the interview was confidential, and suggested to them various alternatives, including stopping the interview and giving them the tape, resuming the interview and sending them both the tape and transcripts for them to delete the comments that had resulted in this situation, or carrying on with the interview and giving them the tape at the end of it and letting them have the time to decide whether they wanted me to have an amended version for my study. (Research Diary 10/8/96:25)

The above resulted in an amicable decision, and both were happy to continue with the interview.

Interviews were used to explore further issues arising from the focus groups and to enable me to gather new insights into the experiences, thoughts and perceptions of lesbians. The interviews can therefore be seen to be both inductive and deductive in their approach. Throughout the interview phase, which lasted approximately eight months, I frequently revised the interview schedule. Initially I used a sequence of questions, although as I became familiar with the interview schedule it became less necessary to read the questions

out from it. As the interviews progressed and I became more confident in my role as a researcher, I often adapted the questioning to suit the circumstances of the individual interviewed. I wanted to remain alert to learn, rather than to confirm existing ideas that I had gained from the literature review. Therefore I sometimes decided to use an informant-led approach, whereby the informant talked at length about issues that she felt were important to her, even if these were not part of my set questions. If I had only been interested in gathering information on the questions that were in front of me, I would have missed the opportunity for women to explain more fully, in their own words, issues that although they may have not seemed relevant at the time later proved to be useful in offering insight into the 'prime markers' (Anderson and Jack, 1989) of women's lives.

After the first twenty interviews, patterns began to emerge from women's accounts of their experiences and feelings regarding their lesbian identity, as they had done in Whisman's (1996) study described earlier (see Section 2.10). In later interviews I sought to clarify this. After analysing most of the interviews, I compared the narrative accounts of lesbians' lives of my study with those given in previous studies. At this time I had conducted 60 interviews, as well as talking with 25 women in the five focus groups. The dominant narrative accounts of informants within this study largely fitted the models identified in earlier studies of lesbians' lives, but some 10 per cent of informants' accounts could not be allocated to one or other of these categories. In order to confirm my ideas relating to this latter group, I decided to select and interview five more informants who were perceived by me to 'belong' to one of the dominant narrative accounts that had emerged as a result of the analysis of data collection. I constructed five new personalised interview schedules, which were briefer than the earlier ones, and which concentrated on certain areas of their lesbian lives. I hoped these would assist me in deciding whether I had secured all the information that I needed.

3.11 Research dilemmas

Throughout the research process I sought to observe the precepts of feminist methodology on researching women, which generally worked well. I built up rapport with my informants, in the ways that Oakley suggested (Oakley, 1981). I profited from trading on my identity, as Finch (1984) also did. I attempted to create equality between myself and informants, as recommended by Kirby and McKenna (1989). I attempted to construct a situation that resembled those in which people naturally talk (Taylor and Bogdon, 1984)

and I learned to listen (Anderson and Jack, 1989), and, to the best of my ability, I remained non-judgmental as people informed me about their feelings and experiences. I tried to foresee problems that I might encounter within the research process. However, I did not anticipate two problems, which both surprised and worried me, and to which I found no solution within feminist research texts. Both of them I believe arose as a direct result of getting 'close' to my informants.

Any interview which is concerned with topics of a sensitive nature may elicit distress in the informant (Brannen, 1988: 59). During the interview phase of data collection, some informants disclosed personal information about their past experiences, which included experiences of having been a prostitute; being the victim of violent attacks from former partners, including one woman who had suffered intense and prolonged physical violence at the hands of her lesbian partner; rape; incest; sexual and verbal harassment; drug and alcohol abuse; and past psychiatric problems. The disclosure of this personal information had not been anticipated by me and probably rarely by informants themselves. It follows that the sharing of this information within the interview process can make the interview stressful and emotionally distressing for both informants and researcher. Their disclosure placed me in the role of unsuspecting confidante. This posed a dilemma, as I am not professionally trained to deal with these issues, and certainly had not at the outset sufficiently anticipated that these issues might arise during the research: had I done so, I would have ensured that I was better equipped to deal with them. There is a dearth of material available to guide the researcher on how such matters may be dealt with, both during the interview and afterwards. One notable exception is Brannen (1988). She proposes that, when faced with such distress, interviewers may instinctively want to help, but should question their motives for doing so. I, as a researcher, lesbian and feminist, found myself in this situation, and wanted to help the informants. However, I felt powerless to do so, and all I could offer informants was a sympathetic ear. Informants appeared to find my listening skills acceptable. Some thanked me for taking the time to listen to their stories, and appeared to leave the interview without any obvious or outward signs of distress. I, on the other hand, had not infrequently gained information that left me feeling deflated and sometimes upset. Having stated to informants that the interview was confidential, I was unable to have a confidante of my own and could not turn to friends and colleagues for support because of the issue of confidentiality. I therefore had to find an

alternative way of giving vent to my feelings and thoughts resulting from these stressful incidents.

I eventually discovered that by writing suitably anonymised accounts of stressful interviews such as these in my research diary, and detailing the issues that had caused distress to the informants and stress in myself, I was able to distance myself from these events. The research diary thus became my confidante, providing an outlet for my stress, without jeopardising confidentiality and anonymity, as informants' names were replaced by a number.

The second dilemma I faced as an interviewer was likewise one on which I found little information or guidance in research methodology texts. On three separate occasions, from three different informants (in one case) or potential informants (in two others), I received invitations of a sexual nature. The first invitation surprised me, and the second shocked me. By the time I had received my third, I was worried that I had committed some terrible mistake and that I had 'obviously' misread not only the texts on how to do feminist research, but also the sexual signals given off by some of my informants as well. I searched through feminist texts in order to ascertain where I had gone wrong, but found no answers.

With hindsight, as a researcher, I do now feel that these 'informal' invitations can be explained. I do not think that I was giving out some subconscious sexual message to these informants, although while this was happening it did cross my mind, nor do I think that at any time I used my research as a vehicle for flirting with informants. Quite simply, feminist research methods which propose rapport, reciprocity, equality and intimacy are in effect attempting to build a closeness between two people, which the majority of people only experience within close friendships or intimate sexual relationships. It therefore does not seem surprising in retrospect that some individuals might then decide, subtly and generally inoffensively, to proposition the researcher. After all, the researcher is very attentive, polite, and interested in them and their views; is sympathetic when it is required, easy going, and willing to spend time with them. Also, much of my data collection took place in leisure venues, where alcohol was being consumed, thus creating a social environment where 'pick ups' are quite commonplace. Given all these characteristics, but in different circumstances, many lesbians would probably find these personality traits quite attractive, especially when the interviewer shares the same sexual identity and, by her own admission,

was single at the time. I believe that because neither feminist research methodology texts nor 'mainstream' ones mention this issue, it appears not to be a common problem.

With the exception of Blackwood (1995), who reports on a relationship she formed with a female research participant while carrying out an anthropological study, I have yet to find any text that deals with sexual relations between researchers and informants, and how to deal with attraction between the two parties. Given the ethical dilemma that this poses for the researcher, and the harm it could cause to both parties as well as to the reputation of researchers in the social sciences, this neglect appears to be a great oversight in research methodology texts, whether from a feminist perspective or not. This is something that obviously needs to be examined and debated.

3.12 Reflections on the research process

On reflection there are three aspects of the data collection process, which with hindsight I might well have handled differently. Firstly, semi-structured interviews proved to be the most fruitful method of collecting womens' accounts of their sexuality, and their thoughts and feelings surrounding this subject. In retrospect I would not have issued postal questionnaires for use with self-taped interview schedules as these did not generally yield information of the same quality as the interviews and often left gaps in my knowledge of the informants' feelings and thoughts, because I was unable to probe to fill them.

The second criticism of my own work is my lack of foresight and sufficient effort in locating and gaining access to informants, in both focus groups and interviews, who manifested a greater diversity of class background and age than my own social networks, especially women over the age of 60 and under the age of 18. In retrospect, I believe I could have tried much harder to find women of these groups. However, the study did gain sufficient diversity of informants in age to compare with the other major studies, reviewed earlier (see Chapter Two for information of the age range of earlier studies). An acceptable level of heterogeneity was achieved in terms of informants' geographical location, previous heterosexual experience and motherhood, three factors which I considered important if this study was to provide new information on lesbians' lives and their experiences of lesbian identity.

Finally, I did not foresee how time-consuming transcription of interviews would be and similarly how much time I would spend driving around the country to interview women,

often spending an entire day on one interview, and the whole of the next day transcribing it. I did seek advice regarding voice-recognition software, but was reliably informed that at that time it could not provide a sufficiently accurate transcript to be worth the effort and would also raise further concerns of confidentiality. I therefore believe that, apart from arranging interviews with an eye to geographical propinquity, the time spent on transcribing was necessary, given that I had promised informants that no one but myself would ever hear the taped interview.

3.13 Summary

Text-book accounts of research in general and qualititative fieldwork in particular do not sufficiently prepare the researcher for the reality of data-gathering. Qualititative research can be both frustrating and confusing, but it does generate a rich account of people's thoughts, feelings and experiences. This seemed to me at an earlier point in planning the project, and still does now, to offer the only way of eliciting the kind of information needed to answer the research questions. The use of a carefully planned phased programme of data collection, using a range of qualitative methods, enabled me to proceed judiciously. The success of the strategy in securing full and reflective accounts of lesbians' lives and diverse experiences can be judged from the following chapters, on analysis (Chapter Four) and interpretation and discussion (Chapter Five).

Chapter Four

Analysis of the study's findings

4.1 Introduction

The data presented in this chapter are taken from the transcripts of interviews and focus groups and information from self-administered questionnaires. Details of the numbers of informants for each of these data collection phases are presented below in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1. Number of informants for each data collection method

Data collection method	**Number of informants**
Focus groups (taped)	5 groups x 5 informants
Self-administered questionnaires (taped)	3
Self-administered questionnaires (written)	2
Written semi-structured interviews	2
Taped semi-structured interviews	58
Total	**90**

Just under half of all informants were living in the county of Gloucestershire (where I lived); the others were from thirteen different counties of England and Wales, and resided in a variety of cities, towns, rural and semi-rural areas. Most of the informants were English, although other nationalities included Scottish, Welsh, Irish and Russian. Many of the informants had experienced higher education, with 40 informants (44 per cent) having a degree and 22 (24 per cent) of those having a postgraduate or professional qualification. 66 (73 per cent) of the informants were employed, working in a variety of jobs including nurse, teacher, social worker, cleaner, lecturer, cook and writer. Nine (10 per cent) were unemployed, ten (11 per cent) were students and five (5.5 per cent) were retired. Their ages ranged from 18 to 80, with almost 20 per cent aged over 50. Informants included those who had previously been married, and those with children. (See Appendix 4 for informants' demographic details.)

The number of informants and their age range in this study is comparable with the five main studies of lesbian identity discussed at length in Chapter Two. Schafer's (1976) study, which had the largest number of participants, is based on questionnaires completed by 151 women. However, their age range was narrow, comprising of women between the ages of 18 to 40 years. Ponse (1978) had a smaller number of respondents (75), but their ages ranged from 16 to 76, with four fifths aged between 20 and 40. Ettorre's (1980) study was primarily based on 60 interviews, encompassing an age range of 25 to 55 years. However, only two participants were aged over 50. Whisman (1996) and Markowe (1996) both studied non-lesbian as well as lesbian women. Whisman's study had 39 participants, whereas Markowe's had 40. Whisman's informants had a slightly wider age range than Markowe's, with participants ranging from 16 to 60 years, whereas Markowe's respondents consisted of lesbians aged between 21 and 63.

Although in this study attempts were made to secure a diverse group of informants, there is a very large bias towards white lesbians, with only one informant who self-defined as black. Informants were not specifically questioned about disability, class or religious affiliation, but some volunteered this information. Three (3 per cent) women reported having a physical disability, twelve (13 per cent) considered themselves 'working class' and eighteen (20 per cent) reported past or present religious affiliation, including Catholics, Quakers, Anglicans, Evangelists and a Muslim (see Appendix 4 for details).

Given that one of the driving forces behind this research was my concern at the narrow social groups represented in earlier studies of lesbian life, the diversity I did achieve is less than I hoped. (See Chapter Three for earlier discussion of homogeneity of informants.) I would have liked to have included more black women (and other women who suffer racism as a result of their heritage), more older women (over the age of 50) and also younger women (under the age of 18), and more women who have physical impairments. It is therefore impossible to generalise from this study about the experiences of all lesbians. Indeed, I think it unlikely that any empirical study would ever be able to show this, not least because homophobia makes many lesbians decide to remain 'in the closet', so that no reliable information even on the number of lesbians exists, let alone on their socio-demographic profile.

Although this research focuses on lesbian identity, not all of the informants within this study did self-identify as lesbian. During the semi-structured interview phase of data collection, five women

identified themselves to me as non-lesbian; four stated that they were bisexual and one self-identified as heterosexual. However, despite their apparent failure to meet any minimum definition or criteria for being 'lesbians', these womens' accounts were included and analysed the same as other informants (see Chapter One for a discussion of the inclusion of non-lesbian informants). Through the use of the snowball technique, their names were given to me by women who self-identified as lesbian and who sincerely believed that these five women were also self-identified lesbians. Only when interviewing these women did they state that they were not lesbians, but admitted that they had all 'passed' as lesbian amongst friends and acquaintances, and were thereby accepted as such by other women. As all of these women had been or were in 'lesbian relationships', I therefore decided to include them for three main reasons. Firstly, as stated in the Introduction, the purpose of this research is not to locate the 'truth' about who are or are not the 'real' lesbians. Secondly, all had similar experiences, in their earlier relationships, to the majority of other informants. Finally, it was hoped that by including these womens' accounts I would gain further insight and understanding into the complex nature of labelling and the social interaction which takes place between lesbians. In each of the following sections, which deal with a separate theme, I will state whether the women who identify as non-lesbian have been included within the analysis.

In the interests of confidentiality and to maintain anonymity, once their interviews had been transcribed, all informants' names were replaced by the allocation of a number between 1 and 90. When using direct quotes I have deleted the names of people and places and have disguised other recognisable features of their lives, as is usual in sociological research of this kind.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine informants' accounts of issues relating directly or indirectly with their sexuality. This chapter will present informants' accounts in a straightforward way. The next chapter (Chapter Five) will review this material in relation to the earlier typologies, as set out in the literature review (Chapter Two). This chapter reviews topics which, by general consensus, featured prominently in informants' accounts of their lives as lesbians. They are arranged under four main headings: Coming out, labels, 'who do you fuck?', and the lesbian community.

'Coming out' focuses on women's experiences of the process of identifying their sexuality, and the disclosure of this information to others, including family members, colleagues and friends. It also

examines the major problems and concerns these women encountered as lesbians, and how they dealt with them. 'Labels' is concerned with issues resulting from labelling oneself as lesbian, exploring the multiplicity of definitions of female homosexuality held by informants. 'Who do you fuck?' examines women's experiences, thoughts and feelings in relation to sex and sexuality, and investigates whether any relationship exists between informants' sexual conduct and their sexual identity. The final section deals with the issue of the 'Lesbian community', seeking informants' own definitions of what 'community' means to them, whether they feel it actually exists, and if they believe they are part of a lesbian 'community'.

4.2 Informants' accounts of coming out as lesbian

'Coming out' is generally understood amongst lesbians to mean the acknowledging of one's sexuality to oneself and others. The decision to come out is rarely straightforward: women have to decide whether they should conceal their identity as lesbians, believing that they may be subject to discrimination, or should disclose this information to others. Such disclosure of one's sexuality involves a variety of considerations including aspects of personal, social, relational, familial and professional circumstances, and requires lesbians to make decisions about the degree to which they feel that they can be open about their sexuality. Coming out is therefore the refusal to hide a central aspect of one's identity. The decision to start thinking of oneself as lesbian and the deliberation over whether to inform others takes place within the social context of a predominantly heterosexual society. Coming out is therefore only an issue in a society where the public expression of any sexualities other than heterosexuality is suppressed or discriminated against.

Disclosure of one's sexuality may have different significance for women of different ages, class backgrounds and ethnicity. Many women may have to struggle to integrate their multiple identities. Women of colour may feel that they face both the homophobia of the black community and the racism of white lesbian networks; similarly, white working class lesbians may feel that their lesbianism cannot be taken out of the context of their class. There may also be a political dimension to this process. These factors are of crucial importance to individuals in deciding how, where, when, why and to whom they come out.

This section deals with informants' accounts of coming out to themselves, friends, family, employers and work colleagues. It examines the differences and similarities between lesbians regarding age, any previous heterosexual experience and marriage, their religious affiliation,

occupation and educational background. The aim of this section is to ascertain how these factors may affect lesbians' decision-making about whether and how to come out, and to whom. In order to place informants' experiences within an appropriate socio-historical context, I have grouped women of a similar age together for the purpose of analysis, which will allow for the examination of similarities and differences in women's accounts, and will also allow for comparisons between age-groups.

All 90 informants from all phases of data collection were allocated to one of five age groups: 18 to 30 year olds; 31 to 40; 41 to 50; 51 to 60; and 61 to 80. The number of informants in each group vary. Table 4.2 shows the number of informants within each age group.

Coming out to oneself is generally understood to mean the process which culminates in a woman consciously considering herself a lesbian. I have therefore excluded the four self-identified bisexual informants and the one self-identified heterosexual woman from this analysis. The average age of coming out to oneself for these informants was 28.8 years, based on 85 informants' accounts.

Table 4.2 *Number of all informants within each age group*

Age group	**Number of informants within that age group**	**Number of informants within age group as a percentage of all informants**
18 to 30	25	28%
31 to 40	27	30%
41 to 50	22	24.5%
51 to 60	9	10%
61 to 80	7	7.5%
Total	**90**	**100%**

The first stage of analysis showed a major difference between the age groups concerning the age at which women came out to themselves. In the 18 to 30 age group, the average age at which this occurred was 16.3 years, whereas for the 31 to 40 age group it was 21.2 years. For informants between the ages of 41 to 50 the average age was 35.1, compared to 37.1 years for the 51 to 60 year olds. Informants between 61 and 80 were on average aged 32 years old, lower than the previous two groups. Therefore the youngest group of informants acknowledged their sexuality on

average four years earlier than the rest. This was not unexpected, since it is generally believed that social attitudes have become more liberal in matters of sex and sexuality within the last couple of decades. The oldest of this young group was born in 1967 and the youngest in 1979, resulting in them reaching the age of 16, the legal requirement for consensual heterosexual sex, in 1983 and 1995 respectively. There seem to be two explanations for the difference in coming out patterns between the age groups: the availability of role models, and whether informants had previously been married.

Role models play an important part in providing lesbians with positive portrayals of others who appear to feel, behave, think or act like they do. As all but one of the informants appeared not to have lesbian mother(s), role models for lesbians were necessarily sought outside the domestic arena. Those informants who acknowledged their sexuality before the age of 30 appeared to benefit from a greater and more varied selection of role models than the others, but these interviews clearly reveal that role models were actively sought and found in a variety of forms. Although a few had older lesbian friends, most did not at that time know of any other women within their friendship circle who identified to themselves or were 'out' to others as lesbians. However, most were aware of role models in the media. Many young lesbians reported the positive effect that television coverage of lesbian images has had on their own sexuality, having seen at least one episode of Channel 4's *Out On Tuesday* which ran from 1989 to 1990, or the subsequent series, *OUT*, which was broadcast weekly over a couple of months in the summers of 1991 and 1992. These were magazine-style programmes aimed at lesbian and gay viewers, which covered both serious and humorous issues concerning lesbian and gay lifestyles and politics. For many of the informants within the youngest age group, such programmes made visible lesbian images that had largely remained invisible or taboo within their family and close friends. For some women, television coverage of lesbian issues and images in these programmes offered them the positive affirmation that they required in order to recognise and accept their identity as lesbians.

> I was sat watching TV, and I turned over and there was this programme about the Lesbian and Gay Mardi Gras, and I just sat there totally gobsmacked. It was unbelievable. I just sat there and thought 'yes, yes, that's me, I'm one of them!' (Informant 5)

Other sources of lesbian images were cited by young women who were either currently going through the process of recognising their sexuality or were seeking further information in order to do so.

> I used to spend hours going through the papers and magazines to see if I could find anything about lesbians in them. I did find a couple of articles. One was on a problem page, that one was really good, it was Marjorie Proops or Dear Deidre, I can't remember which, but someone was asking for advice because they thought they were gay, and the Agony Aunt was really good, she was really positive, she gave out the number for the Lesbian and Gay Switchboard. (Informant 9)

The growing number of novels available featuring lesbian characters was also mentioned by some of the younger informants.

> I discovered Women's Press in the library. I didn't realise that there were so many books that had lesbian characters in them. I was forever in there, I couldn't stop reading them. The dykes in the books were always strong, really cool. It was such a relief to find that not everyone thought that lesbians were strange, sad women. (Informant 6)

Media images of lesbians played an important and effective role in assisting many young lesbians to identify and affirm their sexuality. Older women do not appear to have benefited as much from the availability of such models, especially those between the ages of 51 to 60, which may explain why they were older (on average just over 37 years old) when they came out to themselves. The women from this age group, born between 1937 and 1946, would have reached the age of 16 between 1953 and 1962. It appears that there was a dearth of available role models for women coming to terms with or identifying as lesbian, in an era where diversity of sexuality was neither accepted nor publicly visible.

> I didn't know anything about it, I never even heard the term lesbian until I was in my twenties and I'd been married for a while by then. No, homosexuality wasn't discussed in the 40s and 50s, well not by anybody I knew. (Informant 84)

However, while the experiences of the two age groups mentioned fit logically with the explanation given for the use of role models, one group, namely the 61 to 80 age group, does not fit this pattern, inasmuch as these informants did not come out at a significantly later age than the 51 to 60 age group. In order to find a possible explanation, an analysis was undertaken of whether they had previously been married. Table 4.3, on the next page, shows the percentage of informants within each age group who had ever been married. Whereas for the other age groups, their average age for coming out was higher for each successive group, as was the proportion of members who had ever been married, the oldest age group did not show this. Rather than the majority of informants ever having been married, as expected, given their high average age of coming out, in fact only three out of the seven informants (43 per cent) had done so. This analysis of marriage patterns thus largely

but not wholly explains why the age of coming out does not uniformly increase for each successive age group. However, as the numbers of informants in each cell is small, these interpretations cannot be regarded as securely grounded. It was hoped that the reason for this deviation from the pattern by one group could be explained by grouping together the informants who came out at a similar age, rather than grouping informants by age at the time of data collection. The analysis of the ages at which informants became aware of their lesbianism is based on 70 informants. It does not include six women who said that they had always known that they were lesbian and therefore did not give an age, the four self-identified bisexual informants and the one self-identified heterosexual informant, four women who gave contradictory answers and five informants whose written or self-taped accounts did not provide enough information.

Table 4.3 *Number of ever-married informants by age group*

Age groups	**Number of informants**	**Number ever-married**	**Ever-married informants as a percentage of all within age group**
18 to 30	25	2	8%
31 to 40	27	7	25.9%
41 to 50	22	13	59%
51 to 60	9	8	88.8%
61 to 80	7	3	42.8%
Total	**90**	**33**	**-**

Table 4.4 overleaf, shows the number of informants by the age at which they came out, which ranges from under twenty years of age to over sixty. Of the 22 (17 per cent) of informants aged 20 or under when first self-identifying as lesbian, the majority reported that they had never considered themselves heterosexual.

> I never thought of myself as heterosexual, I knew I wasn't that. (Informant 5)

Neither have they had a long term emotionally committed heterosexual relationship and have had little, if any, sexual experience with the opposite sex. Most of the women who acknowledged their lesbian sexuality in their teens felt uncomfortable or 'disturbed' when first recognising or

attempting to clarify their feelings about their sexuality, many reporting that it took them a couple of years for them to acknowledge to themselves that they were lesbian. All were aware of the endemic disapproval of lesbianism within the wider society, and this, combined with stereotypical images, misinformation and the perceived threat of potential parental hostility and fear of rejection from friends and family, were the main factors for the time lapse between acknowledging their sexuality to themselves and disclosing it to others.

Table 4.4 *Informants' average ages of coming out by age group*

Age group	**Number of informants**	**Average age (in years) at which informants became consciously aware of their sexuality**
20 years and under	22	17.4
21 to 30	26	24.7
31 to 40	14	36.7
41 to 50	7	43.1
51 to 60	0	0
61 to 80	1	64
Total	**70**	-

The majority of informants waited on average three to four years after coming out to themselves before disclosing this to parents. Frequently they came out to siblings or close friends first, many reporting that they chose to tell other people before their parents in order to discover how people would deal with their disclosure, hoping that from this they could then either gauge likely parental approval or disapproval and, if necessary, rethink what they were going to say to their parents. Coming out to their mothers was reported as the most traumatic aspect of disclosure. The majority of informants experienced some hostility, although for most, an initially hostile response from their mothers generally turned to acceptance at a later date. Almost all of the women lived with their parents in the family home at the time of disclosure, and many were financially dependent on them.

The majority of those coming out under the age of 20 were still under 30 when data collection took

place, although two informants who came out as teenagers were aged 65 and 80 at the time of the study. These two have had a disproportionate influence on the low figures mentioned earlier, although their accounts of coming out as lesbians when teenagers provides a stark contrast to the other informants' accounts. The two women had few role models available to them, and neither did they ever come out to their parents. The older woman had been married twice, and was one of the three women within this age range who had previously been married. For the older woman, now aged 80, the most logical explanation for her marriages, even though she knew she was a lesbian at the time, is simply that she was a product of the time she lived in. Little was known about homosexuality by the majority of people, and the subject was rarely discussed. The informant accounted for what appears to be her ambiguous sexuality by stating:

> Unless one was sufficiently aware and willing to confront the norms of the time, then many women could hardly bear to acknowledge the truth about their sexual preferences, and spent their lives in an emotional shadow-land. (Informant 53)

Although this particular informant knew that she was 'definitely gay', she did a balancing act between living a conventional middle class life and leading a secret life as a lesbian. Eventually the pressure of leading a double life proved too much for her and she married. However, although the marriage lasted for over 20 years she found it neither emotionally nor sexually fulfilling:

> I started to have relationships with other married women. Due to the economic dependence of women in the 50s and 60s, we never thought of actually leaving our husbands. (Informant 53)

Although most informants came out to their mothers, few mention coming out to their fathers, or refer to paternal reaction to their coming out. On the few occasions when fathers are mentioned, it is often to highlight their negative reactions.

> There were endless rows. My dad beat me up a couple of times because he couldn't cope with it. He's quite an aggressive chap anyway, so I suppose it was challenging his own bit of space and masculinity I guess. I...my dad decided he had to change me, and the only way a man can change a woman is by trying it on..well that's what he thought. Obviously I was horrified by this and moved out the next day. (Informant 43)

While the majority of lesbians first faced hostility from their mothers, which was later replaced by acceptance, two women found their mothers initially very accepting but a short time later very hostile:

> I told my mum I was gay, and she was very good, she was very accepting at first...Later we had about two weeks of my mum screaming and shouting at me, telling me I was mad and

> that I should see a psychiatrist, and that I was a disgrace to the family. It culminated in her not being able to look at me without crying and screaming and just shouting at me that I was a freak and abnormal, and that I was the most shameful thing that had ever happened to the family. (Informant 18)

This informant comes from a Catholic family. Other informants from families with strong religious affiliations also encountered hostile reactions when they came out to them.

> I told my family. They are very religious, so as far as they were concerned I'm off to hell, and apart from all the religious stuff, that it's a sin and I'll eventually be punished. They've never actually met anyone gay before me and they're really homophobic. (Informant 45)

Without exception, all informants with religious parents who came out within this age range faced intense and prolonged hostility after disclosing their sexuality. Two informants decided not to reveal their sexuality to their mothers, as they anticipated a hostile response. One such informant no longer has any contact with her parents following hostility from her family, as a result of its religious commitment.

Of the 26 informants who came out between the ages of 21 to 30, the majority had considered themselves heterosexual at some earlier point in their lives. Approximately a quarter of them had wondered whether they might be bisexual, while making the transition from a heterosexual to a lesbian identity. Their feelings during the discovery of their lesbian sexuality ranged from excitement and happiness to bewilderment and frustration, because they were unclear how to assume a lesbian identity or to have a lesbian life. Within a year, the majority felt both relieved and happy at their new-found identity, and their only feelings of frustration arose from the belief that they had wasted some of their life being heterosexual. Those coming out at this stage in their life were more likely to live independently from their parents and none reported being financially dependent on them. Most did not report feeling frightened or being fearful of rejection when considering disclosure to their parents. Rather, they expected that their parents, particularly their mothers, would be 'disappointed' in them.

> I meant to tell her for a long time...but, I just couldn't, I had this awful dread that she would be...not annoyed...but that she would be disappointed in me...(Informant 11)

One of the major differences between informants within this group concerned the issue of coming out to their own children. The few women who had children prior to becoming lesbian considered disclosure to their children to be a far more important matter than disclosure to their mothers or other relatives or friends.

All but one of the seven women who came out between the ages of 31 to 40 had considered themselves heterosexual at some point in their lives. Most had not disclosed their lesbianism to their parents(s). Some parents were already dead and others were believed to be too old to be concerned about their daughters' sexuality, leading informants to decide that it was futile to disclose to them. All but one reported that they had become happier and more self-confident since becoming lesbian. None had considered themselves bisexual during the process of transition from heterosexuality to lesbianism.

There were two major differences in the accounts of coming out reported by women who were aged between 41 to 50. Two individuals differed greatly from the rest of the five informants. One informant reported feeling horrified when 'discovering' her sexuality, which is in marked contrast to the positive feelings that the other six held. The other informant was the only woman within this whole study who remains married, and expects to continue married, after having acknowledged her lesbianism. Only one woman was over 50 when she came out. Like many of the women aged between 31 and 50 when they came out, she also had been married, in what appeared to be at the time to be an emotionally fulfilling long-term relationship which ended when her husband died. This informant came out to herself and her family at the age of 64.

Whether to come out as lesbian or remain closeted appears to be an issue which, as informants' accounts have shown, has to be constantly re-negotiated, in a variety of different situations. The workplace appeared to be one of these situations. Data from 89 informants have been analysed. This includes those who self-identified as bisexual, as they faced the same issues as the lesbian informants in that they also had to decide whether to disclose their sexuality at their places of work. The discussion on coming out at work which follows is organised under three sub headings: fear of discovery; loss of career opportunity; and stress. Wherever appropriate, informants' own words are quoted. They had a variety of jobs and a range of academic qualifications, working in a range of work settings. (See Appendix 4 for the demographic details of informants.)

The majority of informants, irrespective of age, class and educational qualifications, generally feared being identified as lesbian by colleagues. In response to the potential threat of being 'outed' at work, many women reported that they felt unable to relax in the company of colleagues, and constantly censored their own conversations, participating in workplace social interactions at a minimal level in order not to pass on any information that might reveal their sexuality. The

informants who felt most ill at ease at work were those working as teachers, nurses, paid carers, childminders, or in any job where intimate physical contact with young or vulnerable people was part of their everyday work. This comprises over a quarter of all informants. These women gave much consideration to 'coming out' to their work colleagues, each of them having to assess the situation they were in, in relation to the 'danger' represented by the client group, any religious beliefs of the clients, the geographical location, and their assessment of the likelihood of homophobic reactions from colleagues.

> Well, I know it probably sounds like an old fashioned idea, but with the caring profession you have to get very close to people, washing and whatever...I'm sussing out the people that I work with. I think that generally the people that I work with will be understanding...but I don't want to risk it. They might think 'she's a lesbian, she might abuse them'. I can't risk it. (Informant 65)

Another informant, a teacher at an inner city school, also had to take into account the religious background of its pupils and the possible repercussions of coming out for her career.

> I'm not out at work because my work is largely with Muslim children, and we all know what Islam thinks of lesbians. (Informant 36)

Six informants were teachers, all having worked in education for over five years. None was generally 'out' to the majority of colleagues at school, all claiming that they were especially careful around parents, for fear of reprisals. Some had been 'out' at various levels in some schools they worked at in the past, but at each new school they had to reassess the situation and take into account the culture of the school, and the views of the head and other members of staff. They also had to consider the geographical location of the school; many informants decided against disclosing their sexuality in small village schools. Those who were 'out' in previous jobs risk being 'outed' by former colleagues if their new colleagues encounter them at conferences or other national events. One teacher, who had previously been comfortably 'out' to some of her colleagues at her last job in a city school, had to re-negotiate the possibility of disclosing her sexuality in the new school in which she had just started teaching.

> I've been out at work where it's been safe. When I was at school in X I felt quite safe and a lot of the staff knew there, but at this school I wouldn't say anything because I know it would be really, really awful. It's a small area and a small-minded school. (Informant 74)

For the majority of informants their identity as lesbians affected their social life as well as their work life. Social interaction with work colleagues is generally viewed as both pleasurable and

desirable. However, most informants, regardless of age, found informal interactions with colleagues to be threatening rather than pleasurable experiences, fearing colleagues' and employers' discovery of their identity as lesbians. The majority reported that they preferred not to interact socially with colleagues, believing that it would only be a matter of time before they would be subjected to questions about their home life and partners. The women in this study expected this questioning to be intrusive, placing them in a situation where they would either have to lie, and conceal their living arrangements, or answer honestly, which would mean disclosing their sexuality and facing the consequences.

Over 55 per cent of the employed lesbians remained isolated at work, through their need to protect their sexual identity rather than through choice, which resulted in them not joining in social activities with work colleagues.

> They (work colleagues) go out once a month, usually to the pub, sometimes for a meal. I don't go, I always make some excuse. It wouldn't be too bad, but they take their wives, husbands, partners whatever along, I just can't be bothered to have to sit there and lie, I'm sure they think I'm some poor little spinster, who lives all alone. If only they knew, that would get them talking. (Informant 41)

A few informants were friendly with colleagues and would on occasions meet them socially; however, they often found it hard to relax and had to remain vigilant about disclosing their sexuality.

> I get on really well with the people at work. I mean, if I was just going out with them at nights, just as friends, then I would tell them, but because they're work colleagues, I've just got to be a lot more careful. (Informant 65)

Those informants who are out in the rest of their lives may disclose their sexuality to one or two colleagues, but these tend to be people that they have known for some time, and whom they believe to be open-minded and can be trusted to respect informants' confidences.

> I have told X, she was fine about it. I knew she would be. She understands about these things. She's divorced and has just taken up with a new man. She's not one of these old-fashioned dinosaur types. She's the exception rather than the rule, though, at our place. (Informant 9)

They are also often the same colleagues who have disclosed personal information to informants including such matters as pregnancy, miscarriage, marital problems and past experiences of illnesses. The informants often 'come out' as part of a process of reciprocal disclosure.

> I'm only out to one woman at work. It feels okay, you see I've known her for a while and we get on well. I suppose I felt safe coming out to her, because she had come out to me in a way, she has MS, not very advanced, she was diagnosed not so long ago. She told me about it, and asked me not to mention anything to anyone else, nobody knows. So you see it was safe to tell her, she's not going to tell anyone else, I suppose it was a mutual coming out, really. (Informant 56)

Informants rarely came out to managers, senior colleagues, heterosexual men and heterosexual women younger than themselves, as these people are considered less likely to empathise or to react positively to this information.

> I work with nurses who are much younger than me, and a couple of male nurses, they're all very straight. Working in a hospital which I consider a very homophobic environment and female patients, coming out would be professional suicide. (Informant 54)

> I wouldn't come out to my boss, I don't know what he would do with the information, he's a bit funny around me as it is. (Informant 50)

The effects of not being able to join in social events or talk freely with colleagues often leads informants to believe that they are 'not themselves' at work, being less outgoing, less tactile and generally less able to behave in an unselfconscious way. Even those who were open about their sexuality still implemented strategies for dealing with some heterosexual colleagues.

> I have to slightly censor my behaviour around heterosexual women, particularly at work, just occasionally I have to think, I mustn't touch her because she might misconstrue it, I mustn't be particularly friendly with her because she might misconstrue. (Informant 85)

As a result some informants experienced a loss of confidence, reporting that they became more introverted and diffident at work than in their social and family life. The lack of self esteem and confidence exacerbates the isolation they feel at work. This isolation is often intentionally constructed in order to protect their identity as lesbians and serves to minimise potential homophobic reactions from others, but it carries the price of isolation for much of their working lives.

> Work just seems to be something that I have to do rather than enjoy doing. It's not as if I don't like my job, I would if I could be myself...y'know?, if I could be out...but...when you're watching everything you're saying, when you're constantly feeling that someone is trying to hint at something, even though they're probably not...I guess I just don't feel that I'm part of it, I don't feel that I'm one of them...I suppose I go to work and come home and that is that, I'm not really there, I'm invisible, I feel I don't really exist. (Informant 35)

While isolation threatens many lesbians' self-esteem and confidence, other factors are cited as exacerbating the burden faced by lesbians working in a predominantly heterosexual environment. Many believed that their career prospects would be harmed if they came out at work, feeling that disclosure of their identity might both directly and indirectly affect their promotion chances.

> I want promotion, and that means getting on well with people, and people liking you and respecting you. I can't afford to be out, if people think you're odd and don't respect you, you don't get promoted...so I'm still in the closet. (Informant 62)

Informants who already have got promotion, or are in managerial positions, often remain closeted through fear of losing respect from both their peers and also from their managers.

> I am the boss, but I don't tell them (co-workers) anything, I'm sure they talk about me behind my back, but I never hear anything. It's easy really because there are a lot of part-timers, so sometimes I don't see them for days. I'm not out to my bosses, though. I think they would probably get rid of me, I organise play schemes in the school holidays and they would probably think that it was dangerous to have a lesbian in that position. (Informant 58)

Some informants who are 'out' in most aspects of their lives find that they cannot envisage working in an environment where they are unable to be out as lesbians. For this reason they have refused offers of promotion, have changed jobs, or remained in a job where their qualifications are not adequately recognised.

> I know it's stupid to be still working in the wine shop. I know that I should be using my degree, it took long enough to get it, but at least I can be me there, I've got no one hassling me, or trying to dig the dirt. There's not many places where you can be out at work. I won't stay in the job forever, but I can't cope with any hassle right now, so it will do for now I suppose. (Informant 29)

Despite the high average educational level of informants (almost half of whom have a degree and a quarter have a higher degree or professional qualification), only eight per cent of informants are at middle managerial level in their profession, and barely two per cent have attained senior managerial level by their late forties. (See Appendix 4 for further details.) This could indicate that the threat of being known as a lesbian, and the day-to-day stresses arising from concealing their identity, may lead informants not to seek promotion. Of the two women who are at senior managerial level in their work, one is 'generally out' and the other is out to a 'few people'. However, these two women are very much in the minority in terms of their academic qualifications, career experience and willingness to disclose their sexuality at work.

Most informants reported stress as a result of working in an environment uncongenial to lesbians. Many would have liked to be able to 'be themselves' at work, but believed the potential benefits to be outweighed by the likely disadvantages. Their coping strategies to maintain adequate working relationships with colleagues, such as declining to fraternise or not seeking promotion, leave lesbians feeling that they were not working to the best of their ability and were less happy in their jobs or careers than they might otherwise be. Over a third believed that legislation outlawing discrimination in employment on the grounds of sexuality would benefit them, by encouraging them to feel safe enough to come out at work. However, few believed governmental action would be forthcoming in the near future, resigning themselves to maintaining what appeared to be a daily balancing act as both workers and lesbians.

Eighty-nine informants (98 per cent) had experience of paid work, either part-time or full-time, at some point in their lives, although at the time of data collection, only 66 (73 per cent) were actually in employment. The remaining informants were students or recent graduates who had yet to find employment, or they were unemployed or retired, but had previously worked. All of these people were therefore represented in this section. Two (2 per cent) had been dismissed from jobs as a direct result of their lesbianism, both members of the Armed Forces who had been formally discharged as a result of them having a 'character defect' (i.e. lesbianism). One other woman (1 per cent) had claimed constructive dismissal from her last employment, on the grounds of the homophobic abuse she had experienced from (male) co-workers. She had lost her case at an Industrial Tribunal. Two (2 per cent) informants were at the time of data collection on sick leave from work, both diagnosed by their General Practitioners as suffering from 'nervous stress'. Both women worked in jobs where employees are subjected to 'security checks' which entails personnel officers checking on their 'personal lives'. Two informants were self-employed and so were not subjected to much of the stress reported by informants who had co-workers; however, even these women had previous experience of working with others and so were included within this section of data analysis.

Informants' accounts have revealed that coming out is a process rather than a single act, in that it involves not just an acknowledgement of sexuality to oneself, but possibly also to family, friends and colleagues. All informants reported coming out to at least one person, and each individual's experience differed due to differences in their social context and personal circumstances. For younger informants (aged 18 to 30) coming out to parents was considered to be one of their most

traumatic disclosure experiences. For those informants who were mothers, whether to come out and how to do so to their children was a major concern. Although coming out is reported as being a universal experience within this study, seven major factors can be identified which affect informants' experiences of this process. These are:

- prior heterosexual identification;
- previous marriage;
- the age at which women came out to themselves;
- the decade in which women came out;
- the availability of role models;
- being a member of a family with religious beliefs and
- whether they have children.

4.3 Labels

> If you're poor/ then you're a dyke/ if you're rich/ you're Sapphic// but if you're neither one nor the other/ a lesbian, a lesbian is what you'll have to be//...(Hakim, cited in Wittig and Zeig, 1980)

Labels matter to most people, in that they represent a way of using language to describe one's identity and hence to validate one's existence. However, identities which have been stigmatised by the wider society often assume great significance to those individuals who exist within a culture that does not socially and/or legally acknowledge or respect their identity (Goffman, 1968). Homosexuality has been imbued with various degrees of approval, tolerance or vilification, depending on time and culture. Some labels remain true to their original usage but most change, depending on circumstances and context.

This section analyses informants' accounts of the different uses of the various terms, labels or words that women use to describe their own sexual identity, both to themselves and others. Labelling based on sexuality and sexual identity may elicit both positive and negative responses. Some labels are used as a basis for rigidly categorising people, permitting others to contain and dismiss certain individuals or groups. (See Sections 2.2 and 2.7 for a discussion of labelling.) However, such labels can also be reclaimed by members of the stigmatised group, offering them the freedom to repudiate one set of meanings in favour of another, and even to celebrate their attributed inferior status. (See Section 2.10 for an earlier discussion of this.)

There were four terms used by informants in this study, all of them in common usage: lesbian, gay, dyke and queer. Although their connotations may differ from their original usage in the English

language, this section is concerned solely with the meaning that informants attached to them. (Precise definitions and historical meanings are given in the glossary of terms in Appendix 5.) This section is based on 84 informants' accounts of the term they preferred or used most frequently when talking about their sexuality or informing others of it. They were also asked to define their preferred term and to explain what it meant to them. Table 4.5 shows these preferences.

Table 4.5 *Informants' preferences for terms to denote their sexuality*

Label or term used by informants	**Reported preferences for this term as a number and a percentage of all informants**
Gay	34 (40.5%)
Lesbian	33 (39%)
Dyke	3 (3.5%)
Queer	2 (2.5%)
Use more than one term	6 (7%)
No preference	2 (2.5%)
Do not like or do not use these terms	4 (5%)
	Total: 84 100%

Informants who expressed a preference for one term over others regarded some as generally more acceptable and less offensive than others

> I prefer the term gay...I guess gay is the least offensive. (Informant 21)

> Gay sounds more pleasant, it's a more acceptable word to use when you talk to others. (Informant 43)

Another reason informants gave for using the word 'gay' is that it does not appear to be as 'shocking' and 'distressing' to non-lesbian members of society; these informants also believe that an assimilationist approach to homosexuality is more useful than a radical approach, when interacting with heterosexual people. (For an earlier discussion of assimilationist versus radical approaches to sexuality see Section 2.7.)

> I think gay is more acceptable, people seem more comfortable with it. I also feel that when hetties are trying to be a bit more inclusive, I should try and meet them halfway with this softer word. (Informant 68)

Other informants disliked certain words because they had heard them being used in a pejorative

way in their past, often before they had identified their sexuality themselves. The word 'lesbian' was particularly disliked.

> Somebody wrote 'lezzie' on my trainers when I left them in my desk one lunch time at school. I've hated the word lesbian ever since. (Informant 6)
>
> I don't like queer, that's what we used to call people who weren't all there...y'know, 'queer as a nine bob note'. (Informant 52)
>
> Dyke seems to be a word of abuse, it's the sort of thing straight men shout at women. (Informant 21)

Other informants appeared to choose a particular label, not because they prefer one word over another, but because they believe some words carry certain connotations which they do not espouse. Informants who disliked 'lesbians' as a label generally fell into this group.

> Whenever I heard the word 'lesbian' I always think of really political fat women who go to Wales on walking holidays. I know it's not right, and it's a stereotype but that's the image it conjures up, and that isn't me, so I don't call myself a lesbian. (Informant 25)

Although many women appeared to use a label or term because it somehow appeared safer, or represented an alternative to others that they disliked, some based their choice on whether the word had previously been used by others as a derogatory label.

> I prefer the term 'dyke'. It is a term my mother wouldn't use, so it hasn't been tainted for me in any way. (Informant 52)

There were also some lesbians who made the decision to use a certain label or word, as a way of reclaiming it and using it in a positive way.

> I think it is important for me to actually own the word 'lesbian'. I think it has been used as a derogatory word for women who love women, but I also think it can be used in a very positive and political way. (Informant 22)
>
> I prefer the term 'dyke' because there is something empowering about using a word yourself that in the past has been ridiculed and used to label people in an offensive way. (Informant 61)

Others stated that the label they used for themselves indicated far more than their sexuality.

> I like 'lesbian'. It sort of rounds it up to say what I am. (Informant 34)
>
> I'm a woman first and foremost. I'm also someone who has relationships with women, only women, so I use 'lesbian', because that word seems to be a political word, the others are not. I suppose I am political, and so 'lesbian' says all that. (Informant 55)

Choosing a word to describe their sexual identity was therefore a complex process for informants. Much depended on their past experiences of hearing the word used, and whether this was in a positive or negative context. Much also depended on their political views, whether they considered themselves feminists, and on their age and their background. A few informants, especially in the oldest group, refused to use labels or words to denote their sexuality, seeing them as simply not useful, and indeed possibly derogatory.

> I am a woman and a person first and foremost and do not like labels. (Informant 48)
>
> It's a form of categorising our lives, and what that leads to is stereotyping, pigeon-holing. (Informant 12)

Using the age of informants as a variable, further analysis was undertaken to ascertain whether the preference or dislike of certain terms was equally distributed throughout the various age groups. Five age groups were used in this analysis: 18 to 30; 31 to 40; 41 to 50; 51 to 60; and 61 to 80. The term 'gay' was most popular in the 18 to 30 age group, with 60 per cent of informants claiming that they preferred or used this term more often than any other. In the 31 to 40 age group 'gay' was used by just over 40 per cent of women, and in the next two older age groups the use of this term fell to 18 per cent and just over 22 per cent, indicating that the use of 'gay' was less popular amongst women over the age of 30. However, this did not hold true for informants aged over 60, just over 42 per cent of whom preferred or used the word 'gay'.

I also analysed each age group to see if a similar pattern emerged for use of the second most popular term, 'lesbian'. Analysis of the use of this term revealed a very different pattern, with 'lesbian' increasing in popularity for informants over the age of 30 and notably being absent as a preferred term amongst the 61 to 80 year olds. While only 16 percent of the 18 to 30 year olds used or preferred the term lesbian, over 40 per cent of 31 to 40 year olds did so, increasing to over 54 per cent of informants aged between 41 and 50 and reaching a peak of over 66 per cent of those women aged between 51 and 60. Analysis therefore revealed marked differences between the age groups regarding their preference for using the two most popular terms. Two possible explanations emerged. The first centres around the academic qualifications held by informants at the time of the study. (See Table 4.6.) A second explanation related to the socio-historical position of informants from the various age groups in relation to their knowledge and experience of feminism and lesbianism.

Table 4.6 *Number of informants with academic qualifications at degree level or above.*

Age group	Number of informants with one or more degrees/ professional qualifications	As a percentage of all informants within their age groups
18 to 30	8	32%
31 to 40	12	44%
41 to 50	11	50%
51 to 60	7	77%
61 to 80	2	28.5%
Total	**40**	-

The above table shows the number of informants with degrees in each age group. Analysis confirmed a relationship between informants having a degree and the term that they used or preferred. The best educated group, in terms of the percentage of women within the age groups who held a degree, were those aged between 51 to 60, most of whom used or preferred the term 'lesbian'. Furthermore, the 16 per cent of members of the 18 to 30 age group who had degrees unanimously declared that they preferred or used the term 'lesbian'. However, this explanation does not explain why the 28.5 per cent of women with degrees in the 61 to 80 age group do not use the term lesbian. Equal numbers either used the word 'gay' or refused to use any term whatsoever. The socio-historical position of informants in relation to their lesbianism was therefore analysed, seeking patterns and explanations.

Generational differences between informants appear to have influenced women's use of language to denote their sexuality. Those women who reached adolescence or early adulthood in the late 1960s and early 1970s, who are now in their mid to late forties, were more likely to use the label 'lesbian' than other informants. These women were also more likely to be the members of the two age groups with the highest proportions of members with degrees, the majority of whom had entered university between the ages of 18 and 20. For these women, their higher education had taken place between 1960 and 1973, an era of heightened political consciousness which appears to have influenced them in this respect. The majority of those informants who were undergraduates in the late sixties and early seventies came from middle class backgrounds and were economically privileged. They graduated from university as professional, middle class women. All of those who

used 'lesbian' as a preferred term had some experience or knowledge of feminism. They sensed that feminism had an impact on their lives. Unlike the informants who are now between the ages of 18 and 30, they saw feminism as something that was 'real' in their lives, rather than something that their mothers did. The older women, those between 60 and 80, had also lived through the feminist decade, but at that time they were in their thirties and forties, and had grown up in the less liberal and much more constrained context of the 1950s, where non-heterosexual sexual acts were illegal between men, were perceived as an abomination and where discourse about sexuality of any kind was stilted, if discussed at all. The significance of socio-historical context regarding informants' labelling of their own sexuality is also apparent in their own personal definitions of lesbianism. Informants were asked to define lesbianism. Their answers fell into one of seven main categories consisting of:

- those who thought it was primarily a sexual definition;
- those who thought it was primarily emotional;
- those who believed it to be both emotional and sexual;
- those who believed it to be a relationship preference;
- those who believed it to be political;
- those who thought that any definition would have to encompass several of those already listed and
- those who said it could not be defined.

For most women, having or desiring sex with women was either the most important or one of the main components consistent with someone who labelled themselves 'lesbian'.

> Well, I suppose it is a woman who is sexually attracted to other women. (Informant 47)
>
> Being a lesbian is being sexually active, attracted to other women, it's definitely about sex. (Informant 79)

However, while the sex of one's partner was seen as important for many informants, the majority questioned whether this alone was the primary defining characteristic of the label 'lesbian'.

> I don't think it is as simple as sleeping with another woman, because you can be heterosexual and not have sex and still be heterosexual, so it has to be more than that. (Informant 43)

Other informants began by stating that, in their experience, sex with women was fundamental to their definition of lesbians, but then acknowledged that there was more than one element.

> To me a lesbian is a woman who sleeps with other women, and not as a general rule with men, that's all it means to me, it's simply sexual...but then...although I could have sex with

men, I wouldn't, couldn't have a relationship with one, so I suppose it's emotional as well. (Informant 25)

While the majority of women did cite the desire to have sex with other women as important in defining lesbianism, sex in itself was perceived as far too narrow.

I would say that the optimum line of being a dyke is about having the propensity to fall in love with women rather than men. I think that, y'know, straight women have sex with dykes...so defining lesbianism by sexual practices is far too limiting, it also has to be emotional. (Informant 45)

Many women therefore suggested that emotional preference was as important as sexual preference, albeit to a greater or lesser degree.

I define lesbianism as essentially the experience of desiring sexual and emotional closeness and intimacy with another woman. (Informant 68)

I would say lesbianism was an attraction between women, a deeply emotional attraction, that's what it means to me, it doesn't necessarily have to be physical. (Informant 37)

Although citing sex as an important factor in defining lesbianism, the majority of informants believed that emotional preference or feelings were also important, often believing that the two together were the necessary basis of lesbianism. Informants who mentioned either just sexual, or sexual and emotional, aspects comprised just over 69 per cent of the answers to this question. The remaining 30 per cent of the 84 informants addressing this question gave various answers. Some believed that being a lesbian was essentially a political matter.

It's the way you live your life, you can't define lesbianism on who you sleep with, or anything like that, it's the way you live your life, it's a recognition of how you see life differently to straight people, how you relate to other people, whether they're gay men, lesbians whatever. It's about lifestyle, difference, how you relate to the world, it's everything really. (Informant 23)

Lesbianism definitely has a political meaning for me. I think being lesbian in a heterosexual society definitely does have a political dimension, because it's resisting heterosexuality and the norms that society tries to impose on us. (Informant 22)

Most informants attempted some form of definition, but some found it impossible to settle on any one definition.

I'm not sure it doesn't just boil down to who you have sex with. But then I don't know what it is to be a lesbian, it's too complicated, sexuality is too fluid, too changeable, too exciting. I don't know, if you think about it, to be a lesbian is a nonsense really. (Informant 61)

Other informants likewise believed that attempting any definition was futile, or stated that they would never attempt to define it.

> I wouldn't attempt to define it. I have an anti-definitional position. I'm more interested in the woman-identified bit rather than the genital activity bit, but I can't define it, I wouldn't want to, it serves no purpose. (Informant 55)

Like the findings reported earlier on informants' use of words or labels, analysis of their definition of 'lesbian' also revealed differences between age groups. Once again, the same five age groups were used: 18 to 30, 31 to 40, 41 to 50, 51 to 60 and 61 to 80. The results indicate that both the terms used and the definitions given by informants were linked to their age group. Those women who define lesbianism primarily in sexual terms are generally the same as those who cite the word 'gay' as their preferred or most used label. They comprised the majority of the 18 to 30 age group. 40 per cent of them used a purely sexual definition, and a further 20 per cent stated that sexual relationships with some emotional aspects were the main defining features of lesbianism. Fully 60 per cent of informants in this group saw sexual acts and behaviour as a major factor in defining lesbianism. In the 31 to 40 age group, the figures were similar, with the emphasis equally on sexual aspects (30 per cent), and sexual/emotional ones (30 per cent), giving the same composite figure of 60 per cent.

The 41 to 50 age group were markedly different in their definitions of lesbianism. Only 12.5 per cent thought that sexual acts or desires were the most important factor, with 50 per cent believing that the emotional element, combined with a preference for female company, was more important. 25 per cent of this age group gave political factors as an important aspect of sexual identity; they were the only women to do so. Along with the 51 to 60 age group, these informants were more likely to prefer the label lesbian to any other.

In the 51 to 60 age group, a quarter thought sexual acts and desires most important, but 50 per cent thought sexual and emotional factors combined were more important.

The 61 to 80 age group showed an equal three-way split between those who defined lesbianism as a relationship preference, or as an emotional preference, and those who felt that any adequate definition would comprise many factors, including a spiritual dimension. This appears to be consistent with the analysis of labels, which indicated that half of all 61 to 80 year old informants did not use any labels to identify themselves, and were generally unwilling to nominate the

importance of one aspect over any other. While members of the 18 to 30 age group generally gave a sexual definition, the majority of the 41 to 50 year olds gave a primarily emotional definition, although over 12 per cent believed that their political views were consistent with labelling themselves as lesbian. Members who proposed this linkage were the only women to do so; no other women from any other age group made this claim.

As stated earlier, informants who are now in their mid to late forties experienced a particular era in women's history by reaching their teenage or early adulthood at the time of the new Women's Movement. The impact that feminism had on these women may well be one factor leading them to regard the emotional and political components of lesbianism as far more important than sexual acts or desires. Throughout the 1970s, sexuality became a major issue that was earnestly debated within the Women's Liberation Movement (see Section 2.8 for a review of the literature on this issue). Women who were in their late teens and early twenties at this time may have been more open to the influence of the new ideas about sexuality that were emerging through the second wave of feminism. Unlike the informants now in the 51 to 60 age group, they were less likely to be married, and more likely to be still in full time higher education and therefore freer to engage then with the politics of the women's movement. The emerging importance of the socio-historical positioning might also explain why the women within the 61 to 80 age group, who did not cite sexual acts or desires as important factors in their definitions, may not have done so simply because they reached adulthood in an era that still considered women's autonomous sexuality to be intrinsically deviant. Unlike the younger age groups, sexual experimentation, whether heterosexual or homosexual, was firmly discouraged through familial and social sanctions.

It is also possible that these older informants were reluctant to give sexual definitions during an interview situation. This may be due to their recognition that the contemporary preoccupation with sex in our society is linked with the cultural dominance of youth. This generated the false presumption that older people are not perceived as sexually active, and either do not participate in, or have little interest in, sexual acts or desires, once they reach their sixties and beyond. Alternately, they may find it impossible to overcome the modesty and reluctance to discuss sexual matters which characterised their young adult life.

4.4 'Who do you fuck?'

> The most basic, and also most difficult, aspect of studying sexuality is defining the subject matter. What is to be included?...Which behaviours, thoughts or feelings qualify as sexual -

> an unreturned glance? any hug? daydreams about celebrities? fearful memories of abuse? (Tiefer, 1995: 20)

This section explores the implications of the labels and definitions used by informants regarding lesbianism. The analysis in the previous section indicated diversity both in women's definitions of lesbianism and the labels or terms they used to describe their sexual identity. Not all informants privileged sexual and erotic encounters with other women as primary when talking about themselves as 'lesbians'. It therefore appears necessary to analyse the relationship between informants' sexual conduct and their sexual identity in order to understand whether sexual relationships with other women are seen as important in claiming a lesbian identity, or whether one's sexual conduct is of relatively little importance to sexual identity. The analysis of this section is based on the answers given by informants to four questions:

1) Have you ever been heterosexually married?
2) Have you previously considered yourself heterosexual or bisexual?
3) Since identifying as lesbian, or since entering into same-sex relationship(s), have you had sex with someone of the opposite sex?
4) Do you think you will have a heterosexual relationship in the future?

The analysis is based on responses from 90 informants who answered all or some of these questions, including the four informants who self-identified as bisexual, and the one informant who identified as heterosexual, all of whom had also experienced sexual relationships with women. This section will therefore examine informants' past, present and possible future relationships with men to understand the implication of this for their sexual identity.

The majority of informants (58 or 64 per cent of the total number of informants) stated that they had some previous heterosexual experience and over a third (33 or 37 per cent) of these had been married. The 51 to 60 age group had the highest number of both previously married women (8 or 89 per cent within this age group) and those who had some sexual experience with men (as these were the same women). The 41 to 50 age group had the second highest proportion of women previously married (13 or 59 per cent) with 18 (82 per cent) having experienced sexual relationships with men. In the 31 to 40 age group 17 women (63 per cent of this age group) had experienced sexual relationships with men, and 7 (33.5 per cent) had been married, and in the 18 to 30 age group only 2 (8 per cent of these) had been married and 12 (48 per cent) had previous heterosexual experience. The 61 to 80 age group show a similar pattern to the 51 to 60 age group,

with 3 (43 of this age group) having experienced marriage, and the same women had had sexual experience with men.

The correspondence between previous marriage and heterosexual sexual experience indicates that women within the 51 to 60 and the 61 to 80 age groups only experienced sexual relationships with men if they had also been married, whereas this was less true for the women in other age groups. Members of the youngest group (aged 18 to 30) were five times more likely to have had a sexual relationship with a man than to have been married.

These figures indicate the prevalence of previous heterosexual relations amongst informants, and show a consistent pattern of difference by age groups. It could be argued that women in the older age groups were more likely to only enter into sexual relations with men if they were married, as sexual relationships before or outside marriage were more difficult before the advent of reliable contraception. Until the late 1960s there was also a general consensus of societal disapproval of sexual activity between unmarried people. However, in order to test whether their previous sexual experience with men has any bearing on the present sexual conduct of informants, an analysis was undertaken of informants' heterosexual activity since identifying as lesbian or entering into same-sex relationships. Most informants (79 per cent of the total number of informants) reported that they had not had sex with a man since identifying as lesbian or since entering their first lesbian relationship. Irrespective of their previous experience of heterosexual sex, informants' answers and reasons given were similar. Few women envisaged having sex with a man in the foreseeable future.

> No, I wouldn't want to now, or ever again. (Informant 11)

> I couldn't deliver the goods anymore, I don't know how I ever did. (Informant 86)

Others who had no previous sexual experience also refused to contemplate sex with men, believing that they would not find it in the least enjoyable.

> You must be joking! I can't think of anything more repulsive. (Informant 5)

For the minority of women who had had sex with a man since identifying as lesbian or entering into a same-sex relationship, many thought, with hindsight, that this had been a mistake and did not wish for further heterosexual liaisons. Further analysis revealed that the reported reasons for having sex with men varied between age groups. In the 18 to 30 age group, six or (24 per cent) of

informants had heterosexual experience, either after identifying as lesbian or after having had a lesbian relationship, and all had done so before identifying as lesbian, and were not in lesbian relationships at that time. They offered similar explanations for their sexual encounters with men, such as in order to 'make sure' that they were lesbian or to 'test' whether their sexual preference might have changed from women to men or to both.

These two following accounts are typical, with both women choosing a sexual male partner with whom they had previously developed a friendship and whom they believed would be discreet about their brief sexual liaison.

> I told him that I was gay. It didn't bother him at all. I decided I ought to sleep with him to make sure. Strange things you do when you're young! (Informant 23)

> I had a fling with a guy when I was at college. Well, actually I was Lesbian and Gay Officer at the time... It wasn't really a relationship, it was..we slept together a couple of times. I was single and I thought 'well, I've been gay for years now' and I thought 'Well, I'll try it'. And we slept together the first time and I was too drunk to remember what had happened, so I slept with him again sober, and then I thought 'this is why I'm gay!' (Informant 18)

Seven or (26 per cent) of the 31 to 40 age group had engaged in sex with men after acknowledging to themselves they were lesbian. Unlike the younger age group, half of these women had done so because they were still married to their male sexual partners, although they had begun to think of themselves as lesbian. The others had heterosexual experiences in what they mostly described as 'one-off' incidents. One woman who self-identifies as bisexual also had sex with a man while between relationships with women. All of these women but one had previous heterosexual experience. This informant, who had identified as lesbian from her early teens, had no previous heterosexual experience and had never been married. She had sex with a man on one occasion, nine years ago, and does not intend to ever have a sexual or emotional relationship with a man in the future. Unlike the majority of informants, she consciously decided to have sex with a man after a lengthy period of identifying as lesbian and did so, not to 'test' her lesbianism, but 'out of curiosity'. In her mid-twenties at the time, she worked with women colleagues who were all heterosexual, and although they knew she was a lesbian urged her to 'try it out'. This sexual encounter proved to be not as bad as she expected.

> I mean it was alright, I can't say it was a disgusting experience...I was curious to see what it was like, I mean it wasn't terrible, I can't say that, but then I was drunk, terribly drunk, but I made it into work the next day and the girls asked me how it was, and I told them, and they

> said 'Would you do it again?' and I said 'No'. I mean there was just nothing,...nothing there really. (Informant 62)

In the 41 to 50 age group 5 (23 per cent) of these women had a sexual relationship with a man after coming to regard themselves as lesbian. All had previous heterosexual experience, and all but one had been married. One woman who identified as bisexual had not had sex with a man since entering into her current relationship with a woman, which is now of several years' duration. Two women stated that they had sex with men as a way of combating loneliness after the breakdown of a lesbian relationship.

> After my first *[lesbian],* violent relationship, I had a brief affair with a man. It was sex and comfort, and it was there at the time. That was 17 years ago. (Informant 60)

Neither of the women said that the relationship involved any emotional commitment, or that they had subsequent sexual relations with men. Of those women in the 51 to 60 age group, none had sex with men after identifying themselves as lesbian or since entering into same-sex relationships.

Only 1 (14 per cent) informant aged over 60 had any heterosexual experience. She had been married twice and had had several male lovers since first identifying as lesbian in her teenage years. These heterosexual sexual experiences were intentional inasmuch as the informant consciously sought out male lovers, and also married. (See Section 4.2 for informant 53's reported reason for marrying.) However, her history of heterosexual activity appears to be partly due to situational constraints. She was in her early twenties in the mid 1930s, and although she had acknowledged to herself that she was lesbian from her teens, she had become increasingly aware that it was not possible to live as a lesbian in this era unless one was 'quite rich and independent'. Her first marriage was used to test her feelings for men, in what appears to be a half-hearted hope that she would discover that she was heterosexual.

> Sometimes by enjoying sex with a man, women including myself can persuade themselves that they are heterosexual. (Informant 83)

Like other informants who engaged in heterosexual activity since identifying themselves as lesbian, she did not find it as offensive as she had first expected. However, she continued to prefer relationships with women, feeling that heterosexual relationships were never as 'satisfying'. After the death of her first husband, she entered into a second marriage in the 1940s and started to meet other women who were married but who, like herself, self-identified as lesbian. She describes relationships with other married women throughout her second marriage, explaining that they all

shared an unspoken understanding that they could not leave their husbands because of financial and social constraints.

To sum up the preceding section, across the age-range the majority of informants' sexual relations with men took place within marriage. For those women who had sex with men outside of marriage, these were generally brief isolated incidents which the informants stated that they did not wish to repeat. All informants over the age of 50, with one exception, had not had sexual relations with men since identifying as lesbian or since their first lesbian relationship. Those who had some previous heterosexual experience were more likely to have had sexual relations with men after identifying as lesbian. However, whereas 18 out of the 22 informants (82 per cent) between the ages of 41 and 50 had previous heterosexual experience, only five (23 per cent) had experienced heterosexual sex since identifying as lesbian. Those who saw themselves as 'lesbian' in preference to 'gay' or 'dyke' were less likely to engage in heterosexual sex after identifying as lesbian. As discussed earlier, women who used the term 'lesbian' were more likely to think of their sexuality as having a political dimension, rather than just reflecting a sexual or emotional preference. This seems to result in them having less social contact with men than the majority of informants, and/ or having few male friends within their social network.

To ascertain whether those women who had previously had sexual experiences with men were more likely than those without such experience to have a relationship with a man in the future, informants were posed the following question: Do you think you will have a heterosexual relationship in the future? Most women said that they thought it was highly unlikely that they would, although many refused to deny the possibility completely as they did not 'know what the future might bring'.

In order to relate informants' past experiences to their current circumstances, their answers were ranked, starting with the 25 informants (28 per cent of the total number of informants) with previous heterosexual experience but who had not been married; the 33 women (37 per cent of the total number of informants) who had formerly been married and therefore had heterosexual experience; and finally, the 32 informants (35.5 per cent of all informants) who had experience of neither marriage nor sexual relationships with men. For the first group, there were three main reasons why they thought they would not enter into a heterosexual relationship in the future. These were: emotional reasons, sexual reasons and their intention to remain in the relationship that they

were in at the time of the study. The women who gave emotional reasons for not entering into a heterosexual relationship in the future suggested that they were not emotionally attracted to men, generally believing that men rarely had the requisite skills to maintain an emotionally mature and fulfilling relationship.

> I have lots of male friends, but they are such hard work in relationships, because they are such babies. (Informant 28)
>
> No, in the sense that I feel it is extremely unlikely that I would meet a chap that will be able to meet what I feel are now mature emotional needs. (Informant 61)

Other informants reported that, whereas they had in the past been able to relate to men on a social and emotional level, they no longer found them physically or sexually attractive or as appealing as women.

> No, I'm not turned on by men's bodies, and in my experience having sex with a woman is like eating a beautiful peach or cream cake. In comparison, having sex with men is like eating cardboard. Why eat cardboard when you can eat cream cakes? (Informant 86)
>
> ...at the end of the day I don't find them sexually attractive. (Informant 18)

Some women believed that the lesbian relationship that they were currently in would endure, and felt so emotionally attached to their partners that they could not contemplate any other relationship, whether heterosexual or lesbian.

> No, I don't think I will, because I'm in a relationship that I'm totally committed to... If she and I parted, I would be totally devastated and couldn't see myself in any sort of relationship. (Informant 24)
>
> No, because I am with the lover I have been with for 12 years and I want her only. (Informant 30)

Those women who had previously been married and had engaged in sexual relationships with men were more likely to rule out having a heterosexual relationship in the future. These informants tended to be in their forties or older. Three main issues were evident: sexual, emotional and political. The first two echo the previous group's comments.

> No, not on an intimate basis. I find sexual intimacy with men dull and slightly repulsive. (Informant 52)
>
> No, my experience tells me that they are like having another child, without them ever being able to grow up. (Informant 89)

A small number of women, all in their forties at the time of the study, cited political reasons as their main reason for not considering a heterosexual relationship in the future.

> I wouldn't have a heterosexual relationship ever. I just think it keeps the system going. I think heterosexual relationships are all perverted because they play on the power thing. Even if they try to be equal, I still think sexually they're not. (Informant 51)

A few women retained the possibility of returning to a heterosexual relationship in the future, although they thought it highly unlikely.

> Well, I don't rule it out, although I think it is extremely unlikely. I try to live life in a way that I take on whatever experiences come my way and I explore them, so on that basis, on a prior basis, I cannot say that it would never happen, but it is extremely unlikely. (Informant 55)

> I can't see it happening somehow, but having said that, I don't know what the future holds for me. (Informant 23)

Women who had neither been married, nor had any sexual experience with men, did not expect or desire to have a relationship with a man in the future:

> I won't, it's not a possibility, I can't ever see myself wanting to, it's just not possible. (Informant 5)

> I wouldn't ever, I wouldn't know how to. I would have to change everything about me. I'd have to have a brain transplant. (Informant 2)

Two informants, who had never been married but had previously had sexual relationships with men, differed from other informants in that they said that it was possible that they would have sex with a man in the future, although both stated that this would not be in the context of a 'heterosexual relationship'.

> Yes, quite possibly...well, I don't know about a relationship. I might have sex with a man. I do quite fancy a bit of sex with them, but I wouldn't do it whilst I was in a lesbian relationship. (Informant 49)

> I don't know whether it would be a heterosexual relationship, but I could have a relationship with a man as a lesbian. You know, my lesbianism, though I define it as an attraction to women, feels like it goes through all parts of my life, and I can't imagine a simple sexual relationship with a man changing that. (Informant 68)

These two women differ from the other informants in that their sexual desire does not appear to be as exclusively channelled towards women. Their desire is not seen as being linked to their sexuality or identity as lesbians, unlike the other informants, who cite their lack of emotional, social, intellectual or political interest in men as a major factor of their lack of sexual desire for

them. It therefore appears that their potential sexual conduct with men would not challenge their notions of sexual self, unlike the majority of informants. Sexual behaviour is perceived by these two informants as outside their lesbian identity, so that heterosexual encounters would not threaten it. However, for most informants, the congruity of their sexual and emotional desire underpins their sense of self. This was highlighted by one informant who feels her identity as a lesbian to be threatened by her unintentional sexual fantasies.

> When I had this relationship with X, I did consciously accept that I was gay and that was the way it was going to be. I would rather be lesbian, but I still have sexual desires in my sleep about men, so I don't suppose I'm a lesbian now. (Informant 42)

Only six (6.5 per cent) of all informants thought it likely that they would have a heterosexual relationship in the future. All had prior heterosexual experience with men, one had been married previously, and one is currently married. Three of these women self-identify as bisexual even though they are 'passing' as lesbian amongst friends; indeed, one of the women was in a lesbian relationship at the time of the study. One self-identifies as heterosexual, even though her last two sexual relationships have been with women. These women differ from the other 84 informants in the belief that they 'probably' will have a heterosexual relationship with a man in the future. Their accounts were scrutinised for similarities between them.

One was aged between 18 and 30, had experience of previous heterosexual relationships and had 'come out' as a lesbian twelve months before taking part in this study. Like many informants, at the time of the study she was in a relationship with a woman, and intended to remain within it. However, unlike other informants, she believed that if it did end, it was likely that her next relationship would be with a man. She often felt 'confused' and 'unsure' as to whether she had become lesbian because she was attracted to one particular woman (her present girlfriend), or whether she was attracted to women in general. Three informants who self-identified as bisexual, one aged between 21 and 30 and the other two aged between 31 and 40, all gave similar reasons for stating that they would probably have a heterosexual relationship in the future. Two were in a relationship with each other, which had already lasted for several years. Although they had no expectation that it would end, they thought it would be 'less than honest' to pretend that they were not bisexual. While the majority of these women's friends believed that they were lesbian, rather than bisexual, the women themselves stated that they could not discount the possibility, however slight, that they might have a heterosexual relationship in the future, even though both of them had

had more relationships with women than men. The informant who was not in a relationship with anyone at the time of the study stated that although she preferred relationships with women, she felt that she could not discount the possibility of a heterosexual relationship in the future.

The informant who self-identified as heterosexual, who is aged between 31 and 40, appeared to have much the same experience as the women who had identified as bisexual. Like them, her significant relationships in recent years had been with women. However, unlike them, she had previously been married and had relatively more sexual experience with men than women. She reported that she could not imagine herself only having sexual relations with one sex. A fifth informant was aged between 51 and 60. Unlike those informants who intended to have a heterosexual relationship which included sexual activity, she had no intention of having sexual relations with a man, even though she is currently still married. She has had only one relationship with a woman, which broke down several years ago. However, she continues to self-identify as lesbian, and intends to maintain this identity, even though she did not expect to have another lesbian relationship. Her circumstances are quite different from all other informants in that she has chosen to stay within her marriage while identifying as lesbian. Unlike most women within this study, this identity is known only to herself and a couple of her closest friends. Her husband and her adult children have no knowledge of her past lesbian relationship. She regards it as inconceivable that she will have a lesbian relationship in the future, as she interacts socially only with women she believes to be heterosexual. She also stated that to be 'open' about her sexual identity at her age would be far too upsetting for her children and her husband to cope with. Although she does not have a sexual relationship with her husband, and has not done so since beginning her one and only lesbian relationship, she remains very close to him emotionally. The final informant who thinks that she is likely to have a heterosexual relationship in the future has self-identified as lesbian for approximately a year. She has had heterosexual relationships in the past which she reported as being 'unsatisfactory', yet believes that she will have a heterosexual relationship in the future as she still feels an occasional sexual attraction to men.

While these six women share the common belief that they will 'probably' have a heterosexual relationship in the future, they do not appear to have much else in common. Some have had emotionally committed relationships with men and some have not. Some stated that they found sex with women to be more enjoyable than sex with men, yet still believed that a sexual relationship with a man was a possibility.

The preceding analysis of women's past, present and possible future lesbian and heterosexual relationships reveals wide variations in their sexual behaviour and desires. This appears to validate the concept that lesbianism is multifaceted; different dimensions of behaviour, preferences, emotions and fantasies need to be acknowledged when examining sexual identity. These informants' accounts have revealed that there is no simple relation between sexual orientation, sexual conduct and identity. Women who have never had a sexual relationship with anyone, women who have had sexual and emotional relationships with both men and women, women who have only ever had sexual and emotional relationships with other women and women who consciously desired to have sex with men, all labelled themselves as lesbian.

4.5 The lesbian community

According to these informants' reports, their sexual identity appears to be composed of many dimensions, leading to no overall simple definitions, categorisations or typologies. It appears desirable to analyse informants' accounts of their friendship and social networks, in order to fully understand how they perceive and define their own sexual identity within their respective social mileux. Women's answers to two questions were analysed:

1) Do you feel part of the lesbian/ gay community? (Why?/ Does it exist?)
2) Do you see yourself as belonging to any particular group of lesbians?

It was hoped that analysis of their answers would reveal whether informants felt that they were influenced by other lesbians and, if so, how this affected their various behavioural patterns as revealed in the previous sections. By examining the concept of the lesbian/gay community, it was hoped that other potentially important aspects of lesbian identity may be detected, resulting in a clearer account of what it means to be a lesbian in the 1990s.

The following analysis is based on 82 informants' thoughts on the concept of the lesbian community and their membership of such a 'community'. When the women were asked if they thought that a lesbian/gay community existed, 75 (91.5 per cent) of them said yes, and 7 (8.5 per cent) said no. However, for the 91 per cent who believed it existed, their interpretations of the term community varied. Four distinct interpretations could be identified. The first suggested that the community comprised the lesbian/gay pubs and clubs that existed in cities and most large towns, generally referred to as the 'scene' by informants. 41 (50 per cent) of informants believed that this

was the core of the lesbian community. 25 (30.5 per cent) of these informants interpreted 'community' to be a group of lesbians and gay men who were friends or who met regularly as part of their social network. Six women (7.5 per cent) stated that while they knew the community existed, they were not sure what it actually was, and three (4 per cent) thought that 'community' was simply a word used to describe all those people who identified as lesbian or gay.

> There is a community, but I'm not sure what it consists of. (Informant 11)

> I feel I belong to it because of the label. (Informant 17)

When asked if they were part of the community, 60 informants (73 per cent) said yes, they thought they were, citing a variety of reasons. One of the most popular views, given by 25 informants (30.5 per cent), was that the community comprised all the people who attended lesbian and gay pubs on a frequent basis.

> We're always there, we go at least four times a week, often more. We wouldn't be part of it all if we didn't go to the pub so regularly. (Informant 1)

18 lesbians (30 per cent) provided an alternative interpretation, proposing that they were members of the 'community' because their closest friends were lesbian or gay. Although they did not spend as much time in pubs and clubs, or on the 'scene', they still kept in contact with their lesbian friends on a regular basis.

> Yes, we don't go out as much now, but I still feel part of it in terms of the people that I know and see. (Informant 82)

10 women (12 per cent) said they belonged to the community because they were members of political lobbying groups such as Stonewall or lesbian and gay social groups, or regularly read lesbian lifestyle magazines or newspapers such as Diva or the Pink Paper.

> Yes, because I know what's going on, although I'm not out and because of my work pattern, but I get Diva and Kenric and all that, and I joined Stonewall, so I would say yes. (Informant 47)

Seven (8.5 per cent) informants said that they believed they were part of their lesbian community because they did all of these.

> Yes utterly, because it's in me. I go to clubs and bars, I see all my other gay friends, I read anything and everything relating to us...I like joining all the groups including the lobbying ones, it's in all part of my life, really. (Informant 9)

For the seven informants (8.5 per cent) who thought that 'community' was a concept rather than a reality, two primary reasons were given. The first was that they personally did not believe in the existence of a lesbian community, although they did acknowledge that many lesbians constructed a fictitious community as a way of trying to establish a sense of self.

> I don't think there is a lesbian and gay community, I really don't. I think we find solidarity in strength when we need to, because we're all members of an oppressed group whether we like it or not, but as far as being part of a community, absolutely not... (Informant 61)

Another liked the idea of a lesbian community, but doubted its existence.

> No, I haven't found it yet, well, I don't believe it exists anymore, because I certainly haven't been able to find it. It's like the Yeti - if you can't see it, it doesn't exist. I think it's something that we all would like to see, so we talk about it. (Informant 26)

So 'community' can be a fictitious concept arising from women's need to find their 'true self' or consists of those who identify themselves as lesbians or who organise themselves into social and political groups. For some women, community can also be seen as a spatial concentration of lesbian residences:

> Yes, I feel I am part of the community, there's about 9 or 10 of us live around here. (Informant 62)

However they defined 'community', most informants believed that it did exist and that they 'belonged' to it, or were 'part of it', regarding it as a valuable source of social and personal support.

> Yes, the community exists. If I've needed support in the past, then that's where I've gone. Although pubs and clubs are not my scene, I've gone to them when I've needed the support, just to be around other lesbians, just to feel supported. (Informant 39)

For some, the community is seen as useful inasmuch as it acknowledges and legitimates lesbian identity, and provides positive encouragement to sustain a sense of the lesbian self. It thus provides an alternative social network to mainstream culture, in which lesbians often find themselves concealing or suppressing their sexual identity.

> There's a kind of 'homeness' with lesbians that I don't have with straight friends. I don't have to worry what I say or explain things about my sexuality, I don't have to apologise for being who I am. (Informant 36)

> I think the community exists because I need to feel that. I've noticed at college, whenever I've had a bad time at the college, I go to the local lesbian and gay pub and have a drink, and then I feel alright. (Informant 49)

Most informants saw the community as serving a useful purpose, but others were more ambivalent. Some agreed that it existed and enjoyed participating in it, but also identified negative aspects of it:

> There's too much back-biting and it's far too cliquey...We should be able to unite when it counts over issues such as the age of consent, but I feel we shouldn't have to like each other just because we're gay. (Informant 25)

Other informants also acknowledged that the 'community' was not one singular unified entity, but rather comprised many and various groups of people.

> I think community is far too strong a word. 'Fragmented groupings' is more correct, sometimes fighting fragmented groupings. I find that I can belong to some groups and feel part of the community, but that's only one part of the community. (Informant 80)

> I feel part of the lesbian community but I don't feel part of the gay community. In the 80s when there was a women's centre here in X, I used to go along to that. There was a lot of hostility from the gay community to the lesbians from the women's centre, they saw us as feminists and man haters and couldn't get beyond that. (Informant 22)

> I do feel part of the lesbian community, not so much the gay community. In reality, my life rarely touches with gay men. (Informant 68)

The community therefore assumes various forms. While some women believe that it comprises lesbians and gay men who organise themselves into social or political groups, others perceive the community to be anyone who labels themselves as lesbian or gay and acknowledges their sexuality to others who share that label. A few informants believe the community to be any place where lesbians reside in a safe space, free from heterosexist rules and norms, while for others the community is nothing more than a fictitious concept which is constantly re-invented by lesbians themselves in order to fulfil their need to find their 'true selves' and to be accepted by others in doing so.

The notion of the community as a source of social support was explored. Informants were asked to say whether they felt that they had been influenced by other lesbians in the community when first coming out. 74 (90 per cent) found the community to be 'welcoming' and 'a place to be out and proud in'. (Informant 45) It offered them safety, security and access to social events and other lesbians. Many thought that without the community they would not have had the opportunity to meet other lesbians, some of whom later became their girlfriends or partners, or close friends. However, while the majority found the community helped them to construct friendship networks, eight women (9.5 per cent) found it intimidating, hostile or inadequate in meeting their needs,

leading them to feel that they were not part of it. For these few women, the community was a closed subculture of customs and learned norms. They felt that anyone who wished to join the community must first learn and adopt its customs pertaining to clothing styles, appropriate behaviour and language, if one is going to be accepted by other lesbians already within the community. In this aspect it is no different from other subcultures.

The feeling of oppression lesbians experience within the wider society often leads them to seek a social space separate from heterosexuals. Finding and joining the community ideally offers lesbians of all ages freedom from heterosexist constraints, discrimination and abuse. However, informants' accounts reveal that, rather than lesbians achieving a discrimination-free space to be themselves within a community that is a 'wonderful union of like-minded people...all celebrating their gayness' (Informant 54), the community may be experienced by some lesbians as constricting and manipulative, resulting in conflict between an individual's sense of self and other lesbians' notions of what constitutes appropriate behaviour and appearance for lesbians.

61 (75 per cent) of informants reported feeling varying degrees of tension when first attempting to enter the community. Some women reported being accompanied to a lesbian/gay pub, club or social event by another lesbian friend, and feeling excited anticipation at what they thought was going to be instant identification with other women based on their shared sexuality. However, some reported excitement turning to dismay when they realised that their dress and presentation of self differed from others'.

> I used to go into gay bars dressed like I am now. There was no one else dressed like me, I used to feel the odd one out. (Informant 40)
>
> I looked like Thora Hird, sat there in my usual, and what I thought were acceptable casual clothes. They were all wearing dog chains and leather. I absolutely hated it, it was like the Mary Whitehouse experience. (Informant 81)

For these and a few other informants, the shock of finding themselves to be so inappropriately dressed resulted in their 'choosing' not to join what they saw as the lesbian/ gay community that they had previously aspired to join. Others, who were more determined, or perhaps more adaptable, began to learn the norms of the sub-culture, knowing that external appearances were of great importance in being identified and accepted as lesbian.

> I wanted to fit in so I did change my appearance. I put away the high heels and skirts and wore what the others were wearing, the jeans and things. I just wanted to be part of it. (Informant 34)

> I didn't expect them *[Lesbians]* to look differently, but once I had arrived and noticed that there was a way of looking, I adopted that look. (Informant 49)

39 of these women (47.5%) who said that they belonged to or were part of the community said that they had changed their appearance to gain entry. Some felt that they were not judged to be acceptable until their 'image' was considered appropriate.

> Other women didn't talk to me, I felt very isolated and different, because I'd bought into this heterosexual way of looking, it took a long time to get my image right. (Informant 23)

15 (18 per cent) of those women who aspired to be part of the community admitted that they had their hair cut in order to secure acceptance.

> When I first came out I had the hair cut, I definitely had the hair cut. I mean, you fall into it so easily, the thing is you're quite vulnerable and naive at that age anyway and people can influence you so easily. (Informant 43)

> It wasn't until I had my hair cut that people in the pub talked to me. I'd been going in for a couple of months and people were really unfriendly and hostile and everything. ..Anyway I had my hair cut really short like the rest of them, and then when I went in the following week they were really nice to me, they said hello, and chatted to me and were really friendly... (Informant 6)

Although most women who wanted to belong to the community did adapt their clothing styles, some women reported that their clothes were not the only thing that had to be changed.

> I changed the way I dressed, the way I spoke, even the way I looked at life. It was a case of 'out with the old and in with the new'. (Informant 27)

> I had a tattoo last year which I probably would not have done, but I noticed there were lots of lesbians with tattoos. (Informant 83)

Although these informants reported modifying their appearance in order to secure acceptance within the lesbian community, it is worth noting that this is not one homogeneous subculture, but rather an overlapping series of subcultures, each with slightly different norms and codes.

> I dress depending where I'm going and what particular sub-section of the lesbian community I think I will be spending time with. (Informant 61)

This informant's acknowledgement of the existence of sub-sections within the lesbian community implies that she is aware of the many lesbian subcultures which co-exist, each with differing rules and norms. For example, these include groups of professional lesbians who meet regularly in a bar after work. Their dress norms may be very different from those of lesbians who have formed their

own group based on sporting hobbies, and who may dress in a very casual manner in trainers and sports wear.

The lesbian subculture differs from other subcultures such as 'youth' groups in that lesbians constitute a minority in British society, whose 'differences' from the majority may be used as a basis for rationalising social oppression. It therefore appears important to lesbians themselves that they conform to the rules of the various sub-sections of the lesbian subculture in order to achieve a measure of unity in the face of the dominant wider culture based on heterosexual hegemony.

> The women at the pub have definite standards as to what you are supposed to wear and how you're supposed to speak, and you soon learn the rules. (Informant 25)

Some women who have belonged to the community for a long period still experience pressures to conform to its dress code.

> I do actually prefer masculine clothing usually, but sometimes I would like to wear a dress or a skirt. But if I were to strut into the X on a Thursday wearing a little black dress, people would fall about laughing. Even if they didn't laugh they would pass comment, which would humiliate me. Sometimes I resent this and feel trapped. (Informant 25)

Although most women were generally pleased to become part of the community, some still felt that they were expected to sacrifice their personal dress style in return for the support they received from other members. Others expressed concern that they were constantly having to negotiate boundaries, both within and outside of the community. Those women who work or interact socially amongst heterosexual people often felt that they had to have two different clothing styles.

> Sometimes I don't wear my lesbian look and that's because I'm too shit scared of homophobia at work or when I'm on my own in the street. (Informant 61)

Moving between the wider heterosexual culture and the lesbian subculture also appears to be stressful:

> I wear to a certain extent what is considered conformity for lesbians. I think it's a bit of a tension, really. I have to keep within boundaries of being a lesbian, but I also have to transcend boundaries, because I'm a teacher and an older woman, so I'm constantly trying to keep within boundaries as well as transcending them. (Informant 36)

Further analysis compared informants' accounts by age group. This indicated that those informants between the ages of 18 and 30 were more likely than older women to want to join the community, defining it as pubs and clubs. These young women were also more likely than others to have acknowledged their sexuality recently (defined as from one to eight years ago), and they appear to

be more open to the influence of other lesbians regarding their dress, language and behaviour for the first couple of years after entering the lesbian community. In order to adapt to it, they report recognising the need to conform. Most resigned themselves to this, seeing it as 'the price you have to pay' (Informant 25) for membership. For these women, the desire to meet other lesbians appears to be paramount in finding a sense of self and maintaining their identity as lesbians.

Informants aged between 31 and 40 at the time of the study also reported a high level of participation within the community, which they also defined as pubs and clubs. They talked knowledgeably about issues of conformity within the community, but were somewhat less likely to conform to what they saw as the community's expectations than the younger women. It also appears that these women, as they reach their mid to late thirties, are also more likely to start to seek alternatives to the 'scene', attempting to find venues where the clientele are generally of the same age as themselves, or to establish smaller groups of close lesbian friends.

The responses of the three groups of informants aged between 41 and 80 show similar patterns. They are generally less likely than the younger women to want to enter into the community. This affects their acceptance of conformity, most stating that as they have got older, they have decreasingly conformed to what they see as the expectations of the lesbian/gay community. Those few women who acknowledged their lesbian sexuality after reaching the age of 40 were more inclined to aspire to become a member of the 'scene', acknowledging that they will have to conform to some extent to achieve this, but they are still less likely to feel as constricted by these pressures as the younger informants apparently did.

The older women and those coming out in mid-life may acknowledge the existence of the community in its many forms, but they have more self-confidence and a far greater sense of freedom from the oppressive need to conform. Those women who came out in their forties and beyond were more concerned to relinquish past attachments to persons or ideas and to re-focus their energies on integrating their old sense of self with their new identity, rather than seeking to adapt to a consensus of lesbian style and behaviour proposed within the community. Most of the older women who had acknowledged their sexuality many years before simply did not seem to need the community as much as the younger women did, as they already had personal support networks in place, and as they were not seeking acceptance in any new lesbian space, they had no need to acquire new values.

> I think my age and maturity means that my sense of who I am, my place in the world is fairly secure. I have done all that forging a sense of who I was and how I presented myself to the world, so I'm not easily influenced. (Informant 55)

However, for a few of the women who did come out in later life there appeared to be a dearth of social groups for them to join. The concentration on a youthful clientele by lesbian/gay bar and club owners, combined with ageism and heterosexism within the wider culture, compounds the isolation that these women feel:

> Starting so late in life and not having a partner means that I'm a bit isolated, really. There doesn't appear to be anything I can join. There's nothing for older women like myself, is there ? (Informant 84)

Informants' accounts show that the younger women, predominantly those between the ages of 18 and 30, appear to need and desire acceptance within the community more than older informants. As a result of this, they are more likely to conform to its perceived norms and codes of behaviour and dress style. However, the age at which informants came out as lesbian appears to affect their participation in the community, with older informants finding few lesbian social networks available to them. It is therefore not possible to clarify whether women who are chronologically older but 'newer' in the sense of coming out as lesbian are more or less likely to conform to the norms and values of the lesbian community, as other younger informants reported.

4.6 Summary

The analysis of informants' accounts of their lives showed a diversity of thoughts, feelings and experiences surrounding identification as lesbian. Within the four themes: 'coming out', 'who do you fuck?', 'labels' and 'community' there emerged patterns of similarities and differences amongst informants. 'Coming out' was clearly an extended ongoing experience through lesbians' lives, rather than one isolated incident, as the same dilemmas reappear whenever new acquaintances are made. Several primary factors appeared to affect the transition to self-identification as lesbian. These included the individual's previous experience of heterosexual relationships; their experience of marriage; whether they had children; any religious affiliation of their birth family; the age at which they came out; and the availability of positive role models in their everyday lives, including media images.

Informants' accounts of sexual experiences with both men and women showed that those who engaged in sexual activity with men after identifying as lesbian were in the minority; they tended to have had previous heterosexual experience, only engaging in sexual activity with their male

partners while married and before fully accepting and acting on their lesbian identity. Most informants did not regard themselves as likely to want a heterosexual relationship in the future, for four reasons: lack of emotional interest in men; lack of sexual interest in men; the belief that heterosexual relations were intrinsically unequal power relations; and the desire to remain within their present lesbian relationship. For the small minority of women who believed that they might have a heterosexual relationship in the future, four of the women did not identify as lesbian, and the two who did reported that such a relationship would not incorporate an emotional commitment.

The lesbian community was identified as both a place of support and solace from the wider hegemonic heterosexual culture, but also as a place where rules and mores were evident. Although the majority of women believed the community existed, various definitions were given. The younger women reported more desire to join the lesbian community and were also more likely to be willing to conform to its existing rules and mores. Older women were more likely to find alternate sources of support outside commercial lesbian venues and were therefore less likely to feel the pressure to conform to any standards of behaviour or dress than the younger lesbians.

The next chapter (Chapter Five) will review the findings from this chapter in relation to the findings of other research on lesbian identity and community (previously discussed in Chapter Two). The following chapter will offer an interpretation of the findings contained here and discuss any similarities and differences between this research and other studies.

Chapter Five

Interpretation and Discussion

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter presented the data from the interview phase of the study, organised under four discrete topics: 'Coming out', 'labels', 'who do you fuck?' and 'community'. It offered a preliminary analysis of the material, focussing mainly on differences associated with variations in age-groups and marital or sexual history. The purpose of this chapter is to compare these informants' accounts with the findings and conclusions of the earlier studies mentioned in the literature review (Chapter Two), in order to examine how far these informants' experiences fit the 'types' or 'models' they proposed. I will then seek to explain the reasons for any similarities or differences, by reviewing the theoretical literature in relation to these dominant themes.

The major studies of lesbian identity and community reviewed in Chapter Two tended to cover similar topics, but generated somewhat different conclusions. For convenience, these are presented in summary form in Table 5.1 overleaf.

5.2 Definitions of terms

All of these earlier studies used terms such as 'types', 'models', 'account types' or 'groups' to classify informants' accounts. In order to determine the most appropriate term for this concept of categorising informants' accounts in my study, I will firstly examine each of these terms as used by these and other social theorists.

Ponse (1978) favoured the term 'groups' in her study when presenting the various accounts of coming out and lesbian identity. 'Group' is an important sociological concept because of the complex role which groups play in social life. Group membership is seen as being an important part of individuals' social identity. Although groups may have many features, the most broadest definition employed in the literature is a 'plurality of people with shared norms' (Reading, 1977). American sociologist Albion Small in 1905 defined 'group' as 'any number of people...between whom such relations are discovered that they must be thought of as together' (Mitchell, 1968:85-6).

Table 5. 1: Summary of findings from previous research in relation to the four themes presented within the analysis chapter.

Author	Coming out	Labels	'Who do you fuck ?'	Community
Schafer (1976) ***N= 151*** ***Age range: 18 to 40*** ***Research method: Self-completed questionnaires***	Three stages in the coming out process which are commonly shared by all lesbians	No information	Two phases of bisexuality are prominent in accounts of coming out. Over a third of sample had sexual relations with men while self identifying as lesbian.	The lesbian/gay community plays no part in individuals' self-identifying as lesbian.
Ponse (1978) ***N= 75*** ***Age range 16 to 76*** ***Research method: Interviews***	Five elements to coming out common amongst all lesbians. It is not necessary for the stages to be sequential	Three groups of lesbians evident amongst sample: Primary, Elective and Idiosyncratic. Two acceptable biographical stories evident: biographical reconstruction and biographical reinterpretation	Four combinations of identity and activity: 1. lesbian identity and lesbian activity; 2. Lesbian identity without sexual activity; 3. Lesbian sexual activity without lesbian identity; 4. Heterosexual activity and heterosexual identity	The lesbian community protects the lesbian individual and validates her identity, both of which aid lesbians' maintenance of that identity. The community offers authenticity to individuals

continued.....

Whisman (1996) *N= 39* *Age range: 18 to 60* *Research method: Interviews*	Three separate narrative/biographical accounts	Three lesbian models of narrative accounts: Determinist, Mixed and Choice	'Determinist' and 'mixed' biographical accounts have congruency between sexual orientation and sexual preference. 'Choice' account does not and these women are more likely to engage in sexual relations with men.	'Determined' and 'mixed' account biographical accounts are the most used and acceptable biographical accounts within the lesbian community.
Markowe (1996) *N= 40* *Age range: 21 to 63* *Research method: Interviews*	Five main stages in the coming out process starting with initial lesbian feelings and ending with individuals' identifying as lesbian and disclosing this information to others	Individuals' understanding of the labels 'lesbian', 'gay' etc is important to their identification as lesbian.	No information	Community important in that it contributes towards positive reinforcement of lesbian identity, but it also politicises lesbian identity

Alternatively, 'group' can be defined as a social system which involves regular interaction among members and a common group identity. Such groups may not necessarily be recognised by those outside the group. While there is some debate about how much interaction needs to take place between individuals to justify the label 'group', Johnson (1995) proposes that one of the most important features is the members' sense of shared identity and the phenomenon of individuals seeing other members as 'insiders' and non members as 'outsiders'.

Although 'group' may appear to be a useful term to use, there are certain drawbacks in using this collective term to describe the variety of women who identify themselves as lesbian within my study. Firstly, there is no evidence to suggest that lesbians share the same norms and values other than at a minimal level. Neither is there evidence that all lesbians know of other women who identify as lesbian, or have regular interaction with them, which would exclude them from achieving a group identity; rather, isolated individual lesbians may see their identity as a purely personal matter rather than a matter of affiliation.

Ettorre (1980) proposed that there existed two 'types' of lesbians. According to sociological definition, a 'type' is a model, often based on empirical research. 'Model' as used by Whisman (1996) could refer to either a 'normative model' or a 'static model'. A 'normative model' is where certain conditions are given for achieving a stated objective, in this case identifying as lesbian. Whisman (1996), like Schafer (1996), Ponse (1978), Ettorre (1980) and Markowe (1996), all espouse the 'static model', believing that once an individual has identified as lesbian, this identity remains stable. However, 'model', whether 'static' or 'normative', does not appear to be a useful term in this context, because lesbian identity is not invariably stable, and we do not have longitudinal studies of lesbians to check, only retrospective accounts which may include bias or revisionism and may not identify 'former lesbians'.

There are a further two sociological terms which none of these theorists have used but which may well be useful when describing the varied accounts of informants' identification as lesbian, namely: 'stereotypes' and 'ideal types'.

'Stereotype' in the sociological sense means the tendency for a belief to be widespread within social groups or society. This term may be used to denote the rigid over- simplification and widespread acceptance of a belief that is applied to both a category of people and to each individual within it, even when there is factual evidence to the contrary.

However, the word stereotype is often regarded as something undesirable because of the role that it is said to play in oppression based on such individual characteristics as age, sex and sexuality (Allport, 1954). For this reason, I decided not to employ stereotype as a descriptive term for informants' accounts as it can be a crude, reductionist way to characterise people who are perceived as 'different' from the norm.

The concept of the 'ideal type' is closely associated with Max Weber, the German sociologist (see earlier discussion on Max Weber in Section 3.2). His 'ideal type' is an abstract model which is said to enable us to see aspects of the real world in a clearer, more systematic way, when used as a standard of comparison. Johnson (1995) suggests that the identification of 'ideal types' involves identifying their essential characteristics, in an exaggerated form that is unlikely to actually exist in the real world. However, the discrepancy between the 'ideal type' and the real world is not perceived as a problem, as the purpose of the 'ideal type' is to describe and explain the world, and to provide points of comparison. 'Ideal types' are only ideal in the sense that they are abstract and not in the sense that they are desirable or necessarily good (Johnson, 1995). However, I also rejected this term in favour of 'different stories'. 'Different stories' is a less clinical term to use than any of the others, and is a description that informants themselves might use. This appears to be good feminist practice as it does not rely on the objectification of women; rather, it allows women to prioritise for themselves what they see as important in their lives (Minister, 1991).

5.3 Different lesbian stories

Although there were ninety informants within this study, only eighty one of the transcripts (which include informants who self-identified as bisexual, and the heterosexual informant) contained sufficient information to examine the women's stories and compare them with the three predominant 'types' suggested by Ponse (1978), Whisman (1996) and Markowe (1996). These 'types' have their origins in the presumption that some lesbians believe their sexuality to be innate, while others choose their sexuality. According to Whisman all lesbians fall within one of these three account models, which are: women who believe their sexuality to be innate and claim that they have always been lesbian; women who also belive their sexuality to be innate, but differ slightly from the above in that they claim that they did not realise that they were lesbian until they were older and lastly, those women who belive that their lesbianism is not innate, but something that they have freely chosen. The two 'dominant' identity accounts are widely accepted not just by

theorists, but also by the majority of lesbians themselves, thereby making them acceptable as 'authentic' within the lesbian community (Ponse, 1978; Ettorre, 1980; Whisman, 1996) Both accounts are very similar, as they rely on the belief that lesbians do not choose their sexuality. The third account is referred to more briefly by theorists, some of whom suggest it is perceived as an 'inauthentic' account within the lesbian community, because it does not rely on the two acceptable 'stories' recognised as lesbian identity accounts within lesbian communities or subcultures (Ponse, 1976; Whisman, 1996).

I decided to devise my own stories of lesbian identity, based on informants' own words. I then compare these stories to those categories proposed by the theorists. The first story I have constructed examines the coming out process of those women who propose that they knew they were 'different' from their female peers before reaching puberty. As they believed that their sexuality had been predetermined, they perceived their lesbianism as inevitable. I have therefore labelled this story the *Destiny story*. This story is the most prominent one in all of the four theorists' work, making it appropriate to examine in some depth the concerns and problems these women faced in the process of identifying themselves as lesbian.

This story is constructed from nine transcripts of women who, although differing in terms of age, class, ethnicity, educational background and occupation, all gave similar accounts of the process of forming an identity as lesbian. Their ages ranged from 26 to 66 years at the time of the interview. Informants who offered this kind of account of their lesbianism did not believe that they had any choice in the matter of their sexuality. They did not use words such as 'choice' or 'decision'. Rather, they firmly believed that the only 'choice' they had regarding their sexuality was either to accept or to deny it, and consequently whether to come out as lesbian or remain closeted. Either way, informants believed that they would have still been lesbian, as this was one aspect of their self that was immutable.

The reported age of their first lesbian feelings, which were generally described as being 'physical', ranged from women who stated that they had 'always' had feelings for other girls to one woman who stated that she was aware of her feelings at 9.5 years of age. The age at which the informants reported initially acknowledging their lesbianism to themselves ranged from five years to their early twenties. The following conversation was typical of this story:

Q: When did you first decide that you were a lesbian ?

A: It wasn't a decision, I didn't decide.

Q: Did you choose to be lesbian ?

A: It wasn't chosen, it was just the way it was.

Q: So it wasn't something that you decided or chose? Was it something that you gave in to?

A: Well, of course, yes. (Informant 5)

Women using this story believed their sexuality to be innate, drawing on 'evidence' from their past to show that their lesbianism is an internal condition which has always been, and continues to be, stable:

> I've always known I was a lesbian, I only ever liked boys as friends. (Informant 76).
>
> I had my first crush on a girl when I was 5, I've never fancied men at all. (Informant 72)

That most of these women felt 'different' from other girls provides confirmation for them that their sexuality is 'innate':

> It wasn't something I particularly wanted to be. I just knew that I wasn't like other people. (Informant 4)
>
> I was always a tomboy, identified totally as a boy, and all my friends were boys; I even saw myself as an adult being a man. I hated girls, girls' things and clothes. (Informant 79)

However, some women assumed that others of similar age felt the way they did, and thought their attraction to other girls was perfectly 'normal':

> I presumed everyone felt like me, I never felt particularly different. (Informant 3)

For these women, awareness that their feelings were regarded as 'unnatural' only came with awareness of social disapproval:

> I felt fine. Later, in X..., I heard the word 'lesbian', realised it was not acceptable and that I was it. Then I felt like shit, and very frightened. But I never stopped falling in love with girls...(Informant 79)
>
> Once that I recognised that I was a lesbian, there was a certain amount of confusion about not knowing what to do about it and realising that it was not really accepted within society. (Informant 22)

From adolescence onwards, informants reported that they began to realise that their 'difference' centred around their attraction to others of the same sex. They became increasingly aware of words such as 'lesbian', which they then began to associate with their own feelings:

> I knew what a lesbian was, in the playground talk of lezzies and all that sort of stuff. I knew what it was and knew that I preferred women to men. (Informant 12)

Some tried to talk to others of their feelings of difference, but found that they were not taken seriously.

> At one point I tried to say 'Mother, I'm not like other people', to which she said 'Oh yes you are!'. At that point I gave up and thought I'll just get on with it, it wasn't a discussion we could really have. I mean, it was obvious I wasn't like other people. (Informant 13)

Informants actively sought to attach meanings to these labels, through seeking information about lesbianism in newspapers, books and television. They may also at this time have become aware that lesbians were seen by others as a joke, taboo or something unnatural. The negative associations surrounding lesbianism led to their becoming socially isolated. At this time they did not generally know of any other lesbians, and may well have been the recipients of homophobic abuse.

> At school I learned to survive loneliness and found tremendous comfort in reading and learnt not to need people very much. (Informant 4)

> In school my life was made terrible...I got a pair of trainers one year. I was about 14/15, and I tell you I absolutely treasured those trainers. I put them in my desk at school and when I went back after lunch break someone had chiselled 'lez' on my desk and then got my trainers out and with a compass had scratched 'lesbian' out on the leather...(Informant 62)

By their early teens these women had become more certain of their lesbianism:

> I think by about 13 I became aware of the positive side of identifying as lesbian, that is actually feeling attracted to other women as opposed to just feeling uncomfortable by men's sexual interest. (Informant 68)

However, societal, familial and especially peer group pressure often resulted in them becoming involved with boys, even if only for a short time:

> I had boyfriends, just for cover, but, kissing was always a revoltingly slobbery affair and I hated the whole business. (Informant 79)

> Just conforming to things. When you're surrounded by a whole load of people aged 11, 12, 13 ish, you go through that phase of so and so fancies you, will you go out with my mate and all that crap...which I did, I went through all of that, but I always knew...(Informant 3)

As they became more socially isolated, informants began to realise that other social sanctions existed against lesbians. Being aware of widespread disapproval and fearing rejection from family and friends, they often 'passed' as heterosexual or lied either directly or through omission:

They *[lesbians]* were not on telly, in the bible etc., except in a negative way. For all intents and purposes (role models even, God forbid) lesbians didn't exist, except for this little live wire of connection in the dictionary and what a sparse, poor definition was found there anyway. The point I'm making is - how difficult it is to feel good, or feel able to own, explore, develop when the language, the culture around you puts a big no and veil of silence on the subject. (Informant 68)

I heard it (the word lesbian) at school, I imagine. Yes, it was at school, there was a girl at the senior school that everybody used to call lesbian and I would happily join in. I think I had feelings of embarrassment or fears of being found out myself, I suppose. (Informant 47)

> I knew this was something I could not share with people for fear of being ostracised, or worse still my mother finding out! (Informant 52)

The need to find other girls or women who shared the same feelings became increasingly important to them, as they attempted to make sense of their feelings:

> I never met any other lesbians for hundreds of years. I did know of one woman, lots of gay men but only one woman, she was on the fringe, but she was the only lesbian in sight. (Informant 5)

However, the limited information that they had gathered on lesbians often included aspects of the stereotype, such as male dress style and mannerisms, which distinguished them from heterosexual women. Informants often believed these to be true.

> I often thought that I recognised lesbians. Short hair and non-feminine attire. I was usually wrong. Lesbians seem to look more feminine than I expected. (Informant 20)

The first meeting with other lesbians appeared to have been important inasmuch that it influenced how they began to think of themselves as lesbians. Their first meetings with other lesbians both contradicted and reinforced their widely believed images:

> I do remember going to a really crap...there was this women's disco in X...it was an absolute smoke-filled hell-hole. I have this memory of it being dark and dingy. But just being among lots of women and being a teenage dyke watching, I remember being really excited watching women dancing together and kissing and all that sort of thing. (Informant 72)

Many informants had few opportunities to meet other lesbians, not least due to the fear of significant others (including family and friends) recognising them in lesbian settings and the possibility of potential social sanctions as a result. For some women leaving their home environment was the only way they could feel safe meeting other lesbians:

> When I got away from home to X..*[name of University]* I was just comfortable around other people, which was enough for me to find out who I was. I didn't feel comfortable until I

came to University. All the time I was living at home I just couldn't actually admit it, not even to myself really. There was a release when I came to university, hundreds of miles away from my family. (Informant 46)

Meeting other lesbians provided such individuals with much-needed emotional support:

I started to subscribe to a London-based organisation for isolated lesbians and they published a monthly newsletter and I got a lot of support from the woman who ran the newsletter. I feel having the support got me through a very difficult time. I did feel very isolated and alone. And her support in saying yes, there were other lesbians out there, and one day I would meet other lesbians and I would have a relationship, that was very important to me. (Informant 22)

Coming out to significant others, especially family members, was traumatic. Most informants did decide to disclose their lesbianism to their parents, as living a 'double life' (knowing they are lesbian while at the same time letting others believe them to be heterosexual) was very stressful:

I lived a wee double life for a while, when I was at college in X..*[name of town]*.I used to have like my friends and the ones I used to go to school with and all this... but then I used to have little nights when I went to gay pubs in Y..*[name of home city]* on my own. (Informant 3)

I felt quite deep emotional despair when I had one private closeted infatuation after another...I felt undermined in my self-esteem, as I knew the world was not recognising me for what I was. (Informant 68)

Alternatively, some informants simply refused to continue to lie about something which they saw as a central aspect of their identity:

I physically faced up to them with it...I thought Oh Fuck it! Enough is enough, this is stupid. So I drove up to X..*[parental home]* that morning. I was hysterical by the time I got there, just blurted it all out. They knew, both told me they knew. I mean I'd been with M...for three years for Christ's sake, they'd come and stayed with us, they knew exactly what was going on, but neither of them chose to say anything. Mum's just the 'it's there, but don't mention it' type'. (Informant 5)

Many feared their parents' reaction, expecting it to be hostile or negative:

I felt a heavy weight of fear - of disappointing people's expectations - my mum's, for example. (Informant 68)

Some informants who described feeling 'settled' with their lesbianism (often those who had met a potential partner) reported wanting to share their happiness with other family members. Their families' support often came as a surprise:

> She *[mother*] said that she had to get used to so many things about me, it was just another one, and as long as I was happy it was okay. (Informant 72)

However supportive at the time of coming out, some parent(s) subsequently reverted to homophobic sentiments:

> When I first told her, she was really supportive, and then six months down the line she was in a mess and was like 'What have we done to make you gay?' (Informant 2)

This next section examines the stories of those women who also believed they were 'always lesbian', but unlike the *Destiny story*, they did not claim that they 'always knew'. Both Ponse (1976) and Whisman (1996) described the characteristics of this group of women at length, both agreeing that they were very similar to the *Destiny* group. Ponse (1976) named this story the 'elective' account, and Markowe called it the 'mixed' account. I have named it the *Neo-destiny* story as the one mentioned above appears to be the only major difference between this and the *Destiny story*.

42 informants ranging in age from 18 to 80 years of age were classified within this story. Differing slightly from the *Destiny story*, these informants reported in equal numbers that they first felt either 'physically' or 'emotionally' attracted to other girls/women, rather than only reporting 'physical' feelings, as the informants telling the *Destiny story* had. Like the informants using the *Destiny story,* they claimed that they were also born lesbian. However, unlike them, they did not claim continuous knowledge of their lesbian identity. Instead they used what Ponse termed 'biographical reinterpretation' or what my informants claimed was 'hindsight' into their developing lesbian identity. They said that although they were born lesbian, they were not aware of this until they were older, claiming that in retrospect, they could now see that they had always been attracted to girls or women.

> I was born a lesbian but just didn't have access to the information or experience that I needed to know that. (Informant 86)

> As a teenager I couldn't be any different *[from heterosexuals]* because I didn't know how to be. But I always knew ...(Informant 63)

Many informants retrospectively interpreted their lives to claim that they preferred boys' activities when younger. This retrospective 'knowledge' is used to suggest that gender atypical behaviour was an earlier, but ignored, indicator of their later lesbian selves:

> I remember at a very young age feeling different to other girls and not relating to them very well. (Informant 33)
>
> The first time I remember thinking about it was..yes, in childhood when I was teased..y'know for playing with the lads and not the girls... (Informant 49)

For informants this construction of a retrospective account allowed them to select what they perceived to be important parts of their past, emphasising them as evidence of their 'real' lesbian selves. Women recounted how, during adolescence, they started to become aware of their feelings towards girls, even though members of their peer group were becoming interested in members of the opposite sex. Some blamed themselves for neither recognising nor acting on their 'true' sexuality earlier, given what they believed to be the lesbian indicators which had been present then.

> I can remember going to the cinema with a group of girls when I was in the fourth or fifth year, we went to watch 'Love Story'. I quickly cottoned on that they were looking at Ryan O' Neil and I was looking at Ali McGraw, thinking 'God, isn't she lovely'...(Informant 41)
>
> Yes, I had crushes on girls in my teens, you sort of blot it out, you think 'I mustn't be like that, I've got to grow up'. (Informant 66)

Informants using the *Neo-destiny story* recognised their lesbian feelings much later than those using a destiny account, and were more likely to be aware of societal disapproval of lesbianism.

> I had huge hang ups about it *[lesbianism]* the way my parents had brought us up, very traditional and very conformist and the fact that it would completely and utterly throw that over...(Informant 67)

Many women using this story resembled those who used the *Destiny story* in that they also reported the influence of the media on their sexuality. Positive images of women, the use of role models and sport icons were perceived as having a positive effect on their progression towards adopting a lesbian identity. For many women this was the final stage in the process of recognising or acknowledging their sexuality:

> At 18 I saw Martina Navratilova on the telly and her book came out that year as well, and I bought it. I was told Navratilova was a dyke and probably about 16/17 I liked the idea. (Informant 43)
>
> I think I first recognised it *[her own lesbianism]* was when I saw Margaret Lockwood in 'The Wicked Lady' and I just thought she was the most marvellous person that I had ever clapped eyes on...It was the first time I had ever seen a woman in men's clothes and I thought it was the most amazing thing. (Informant 54)

Like those women using a *Destiny story*, dominant stereotypical images of lesbians were widely believed, with informants often being taken by surprise at the 'normalcy' of lesbians when meeting them for the first time.

> It wasn't what I was expecting because I'd read Radclyffe Hall's 'The Well of Loneliness' and I thought it would be all melancholic dykes smoking endless cigarettes and older women going around seducing the younger ones, so I thought it was going to be like that. (Informant 45)

> I can't remember my first proper visit, but I do recall how anti-climatic it was. I was expecting a shining Mecca for exotic, interesting and attractive men and women. Instead it was more like the Queen Vic in Eastenders, full of ordinary, average people, who happened to be gay. (Informant 25)

Many of these informants had previously been married. It could therefore be suggested that they had, at some point in their lives, been heterosexual. However, using retrospective interpretation, they saw their previous relationships as being 'forced' mistakes, and their previous 'heterosexual' relationships were fraudulent, thus dismissing any idea that they identified as heterosexual in the past.

> I just got married...well, I was 29. I wasn't exactly in the first throes of youth. I got married because I was expected to. (Informant 36)

> I always knew that I was gay...but there were certain problems at home so I used marriage to get out. (Informant 81)

> I was actually married for nearly twenty years before I was divorced. I was aware of being attracted to women really...I always knew that I was attracted to other women. (Informant 82)

> I got married at 18 because that's what people were doing. I knew at the time that it didn't feel right...I really didn't know any better, and there was nobody I could ask, nobody I could talk to, so I went through with it and got married...(Informant 70)

As previously noted (see Section 5.3), these two stories account for the majority of the lesbians studied by Ponse (1978), Ettorre (1980), Whisman (1996) and Markowe (1996). These theorists have also proposed that another category of lesbians also existed, those who saw their lesbianism as chosen. All four theorists suggested that some women 'choose' their sexuality. Ponse (1978) calls them 'idiosyncratic' lesbians, including in this group women who labelled themselves as bisexual and women who considered their lesbianism to be as a direct result of their feminism. Ettorre also included in her two 'types' of lesbians women who perceived themselves to have chosen lesbianism as a result of their feminist ideology, but she only very briefly referred to

bisexual women within the category of 'marginal areas of lesbian practice', therefore not including them in her 'sorry, but not sick' lesbian 'type' (Ettorre, 1980: 134). Whisman, like Ponse, categorised bisexual women and feminists together, believing that they shared both the same narrative account and the way they viewed their sexuality. She referred to this as the 'choice' account. All these theorists see these women's stories as very different from those of women who believed their sexuality to be immutable, but they saw little difference between the feminists' accounts and the bisexual women's. In order to investigate this claim, I have separated the two stories so that each may be examined independently.

The *Feminist* story differed from the previous ones in its link between ideological reasoning and labelling oneself lesbian. It also differed in that these women accepted their past heterosexual identity and did not attempt to reconstruct their personal biographies to produce congruence between their past heterosexual selves and their present lesbian selves. Seven informants ranging in age from 29 to 52 years of age were placed within the feminist story. Their earliest lesbian feelings were described as 'intellectual' and/or 'emotional'. A time gap of between one and four years existed between informants' first feeling that they had the 'potential' to be lesbian, to the actual decision to label themselves as lesbian or to embark on a lesbian relationship. All of the women within this story had either been active within feminist groups prior to identifying themselves as lesbian, or had mixed socially with other lesbians and feminists, often for many years prior to identifying themselves as lesbians:

> I was involved in a consciousness raising group that went on for many years, got involved with a number of campaigns; various abortion campaigns... (Informant 89)

> I was at X *[name of university]* I absolutely hated it...it was an alienating experience, a very male dominated university...I went there in '69 and somebody who was a lecturer in that department, who knew people within the women's movement, said they were going to set up a group and I kept asking 'when is it starting, when is it starting?' and I joined it as soon as it started in 1970...I was 21. (Informant 85)

All these women reported that they had established intellectual, political and emotional relationships with women long before showing any sexual interest in other women.

> All my best friends were always other women, and I saw men as sort of slightly tedious and irrelevant. (Informant 85)

Informants reported a gradual awareness of the possibility of identifying as lesbian. The decision to become lesbian was considered to be an 'intellectual' or 'emotional' 'choice' rather than a purely sexual choice:

> It was almost like an intellectual decision,...I could see that for three years I had spent the vast majority of my waking life concerned with feminist issues...working with women, spending my social life with women...I put it altogether at some point one weekend while X *[name of husband]* was away...and I just thought this makes no sense whatsoever - I spend my time with women, enjoy their company...it doesn't make sense for me to continue to define myself simply as someone who is heterosexual...so I suppose it was a culmination really, of sort of putting my feet in and then jumping in a bit deeper and being involved intellectually...politically and emotionally. (Informant 89)

The transfer from heterosexual identity to lesbian identity generally took place without the informants identifying as bisexual, or going through any type of bisexual 'phase':

> I've never considered myself bisexual, I suppose I was heterosexual and I accept that, but I became lesbian, and that was it, nothing in the middle. (Informant 55)

Becoming lesbian was also a slow process. Three of the women reported that changes in their personal situations and circumstances helped clarify their feelings for women and aided them in making a conscious decision to become lesbian.

> Basically I had gynaecological problems that led to me having a hysterectomy. What happened was, it had come to the point where it was clear that I wasn't ever going to have children. I suppose after the event, I realised I'd been carefully hiding a little bit of myself away, that I had something to hold on to just in case I needed to relate to a man for some reason, in case I wanted children. Once that was removed and it was clear that I wasn't ever going to have children, there was this sense of 'I don't have to bother, I don't have to relate to men, I can do without them, they have no purpose in my life'. (Informant 55)

> ...[A] series of circumstances and life events all happened in same period. I was coming up to 40, and a very close friend died of cancer at the age of 43, and my brother had this huge heart attack at 37...and my husband had an affair at the time my second child was born...and all of these things happened over a period and caused me to rethink my life and where I was going for the second half of it, and that was what was the stimulus for a whole conjunction of things. (Informant 85)

When the informants finally reached the decision to commit themselves sexually to women as well as emotionally and politically, the transition from heterosexual identity to lesbian identity appeared not to have been in the least traumatic:

> ...[H]aving made that decision, it felt entirely consonant with my political values and therefore felt very comfortable and it wasn't painful or problematic. (Informant 85)
>
> I mean, it was almost a sense of relief that 'oh well, at last I can get all the bits of myself in the same place', that my ideology, my emotions and my eroticism all match up. (Informant 55)
>
> ...[S]cales fell from my eyes when I kind of thought 'this doesn't make sense to spend the amount of time with a group of people and to say that these people couldn't be my partners'. (Informant 89)

However, all of these informants all agreed that the sexual aspect of a lesbian relationship was the last feature to fall into place, three of the seven women giving this account reported that after identifying as lesbian they remembered incidents from their past which could call into question their previous statements, that they had not thought of women in a physical or sexual way prior to realising their emotional and intellectual potential for a lesbian relationship:

> ...I don't think I even knew the word lesbian until I was in my late twenties, but I'd certainly had the common crushes on older girls at school and also a couple of relationships in which, if I'm honest looking back, what I was really interested in was the mother of the relationship rather than the bloke I was going out with...but I'd not had any sexual experience with women. (Informant 89)
>
> There was one I fancied...when I was extremely heterosexual...and I stayed at her house once ... she was very beautiful...(Informant 85)

However, unlike informants within the *Neo-destiny* story, these three did not use these experiences as evidence to suggest that they had always been lesbian. Rather, they viewed their 'crushes' as being a 'normal' part of growing up, or alternatively proposed that they did not have the knowledge or opportunity at that particular time to act on their feelings.

> ...[G]iven the current climate where lesbianism is not a hanging offence, those relationships might have become emotional and sexual, and life could have been different. But I didn't have the perspective in those days to acknowledge it as anything more than a school girl crush... (Informant 85)

Therefore, although informants within the *Feminist* story had a similar experience of 'crushes' on other girls/women when younger, to the informants within the *Neo-destiny* story, these 'experiences' were not retrospectively privileged in the same way.

Bisexuality had no place in these informants' lives. They identified themselves as heterosexual in the past and lesbian currently and in the future. However, one informant did report that prior to

entering into a lesbian relationship she did consider the possibility that she might identify herself as bisexual, even though this was short lived:

> I saw myself as in a sense, open to relationships with either sex; it was only later that I saw that as not likely or particularly defensible. (Informant 89)

Those informants classified as *Bisexual* within this story, had experience of both opposite-sex and same-sex relationships. They rejected the label of 'lesbian' but claimed that they were or had been in 'lesbian relationships' at the time of the study. Denying that they were born lesbian, they argued that everyone had the potential to develop feelings for, and therefore to enter into relationships with, the members of either sex. The first 'feelings' for women that they remembered were reported as being either sexual or sexual and emotional. Four women ranging in age from 26 to 44 years of age fell within this story. All reported that they had uncritically assumed a heterosexual identity in the past, or believed themselves to have been heterosexual:

> I always thought I was heterosexual. (Informant 42)

> I started off straight... (Informant 35)

> ...[A]ctively heterosexual but without being consciously aware. (Informant 56)

> I assumed I was heterosexual until I was 19...(Informant 57)

Bisexuality was not perceived as a viable option until they were older, either because they did not fully understand their own feelings in relation to their sexuality, or alternatively they did not know of this label which they could use to help them articulate these feelings:

> ... I'd had relationships with blokes, and knew it wasn't all that there was but wasn't able to verbalise that I wanted to have anything sexual with a woman ...(Informant 57)

> I'd always kind of known that there was a possibility that I wanted to sleep with women, but it wasn't until I was older, probably 23 or 24 that I knew this was called bisexuality. (Informant 56)

Informants reported going through what they often referred to as a 'phase' of mistakenly conceptualising themselves as lesbians, even though they did not feel that this entirely suited them or fully explained their complex feelings surrounding their relationships with both women and men:

> I made a decision that I must be lesbian, and I was going to be lesbian, but I was never really happy with that...(Informant 42)
>
> After I'd had my first sexual experience with a woman...I went through a phase of calling myself lesbian, as opposed to bisexual, that didn't feel one hundred percent right either. (Informant 56)
>
> I started identifying as lesbian... (informant 57)

Labelling themselves bisexual was not easy for informants, as they had all tended to mix socially with lesbians and gay men rather than heterosexual people, and believed that within lesbian and gay social circles bisexuality was stigmatised. As a result, informants reported 'passing' as lesbian in order to avoid being ostracised:

> The lesbians I was around at the time weren't happy. They saw bisexual as a kind of sitting on the fence, you know, 'you're only bisexual because you're not a lesbian yet'. (Informant 57)
>
> When I was 29 I got into a relationship with a lesbian who was quite political and against people who labelled themselves as bisexual and so I didn't label myself as bisexual. (Informant 56)
>
> Calling myself lesbian was more comfortable then because I socialised completely with other women, and they didn't call themselves bisexual. (Informant 35)

Although all of these informants eventually labelled themselves bisexual, this was often a long process as they sought to make sense of their own relationships and sexuality within a society which they believed dichotomised sexuality into heterosexual or homosexual.

> It was like putting the pieces of a jigsaw together. I knew that sexually I related to women and that was incredibly important and I thought that, I believed I was a lesbian, and some days I was really proud of it and other days I just thought no, this is not who I really am. It wasn't until I came out of the relationship with this straight woman and went into another relationship that I then started the ball rolling about being bisexual...(Informant 57)
>
> I felt very mixed up. I was quite happy being in a relationship with this woman, but all sorts of confusions about what am I going to do about this man I'm living with, and how to be some sort of feminist, and being interested in women's issues, but knowing that I wasn't heterosexual and really wasn't lesbian either... (Informant 56)

All the informants reported that they were still wary of identifying as bisexual, and continue to 'pass' as lesbian in certain circumstances and situations:

> To most people now when I first come out, I come out as lesbian and then after I've known them for a bit I come out properly, as bisexual. Although I guess I've kind of changed my circle of friends. (Informant 57)

> When I first started talking about it *[sexuality]* I initially said that I might be bisexual because that seemed the easiest way when talking to straight friends, then a couple of years later when I met more and more lesbians I started identifying as lesbian, and now that I'm in the safety of a lesbian relationship I feel safe to identify as bisexual... (Informant 56)

They also reported that they felt angry and bemused about the reactions they have had in the past from lesbians who indicated that they regarded bisexuality as an 'inadequate' or an 'inauthentic' sexuality. Informants suggested that lesbians did not understand the complexities of labelling oneself bisexual and were prejudiced towards them due to their own dishonesty about their sexuality:

> The whole thing is really complicated, it's very complex. I mean Loulan [*author of 'Lesbian Sex'*] said she made no apology for not addressing bisexuals, but then wrote about 'lesbians who sleep with men' but they still identify as lesbian rather than as bisexuals... (Informant 56)

> I mean a lot of lesbians I know, I mean it probably sounds arrogant to say, but I think they probably are bisexual, but they don't say, either because they just won't or daren't. (Informant 57)

Two informants in particular believed that their sexuality was widely misunderstood by both heterosexuals and lesbians.

> I was given a model of bisexuality by my father and by some friends when I first came out (as bisexual). They all explained that there was this long line or curve, and at one point there was heterosexuality and at the other there was homosexuality, and bisexuality was somewhere in the middle swinging backwards and forwards between the two. (Informant 56)

The model of bisexuality mentioned in this quote was probably the Kinsey scale of sexuality (Kinsey et al., 1948; 1953) (see Section 2.5 for an earlier discussion of this). However, these two informants believed that their own bisexuality was too complex to be explained adequately by this model. Rather, they felt that although they had the potential to engage in sexual relationships with either sex, their sexuality was much more stable than the Kinsey model suggested. One informant reported that she took account of emotional, social and sexual factors as well as the social situations she found herself in, in making choices about sexual relationships.

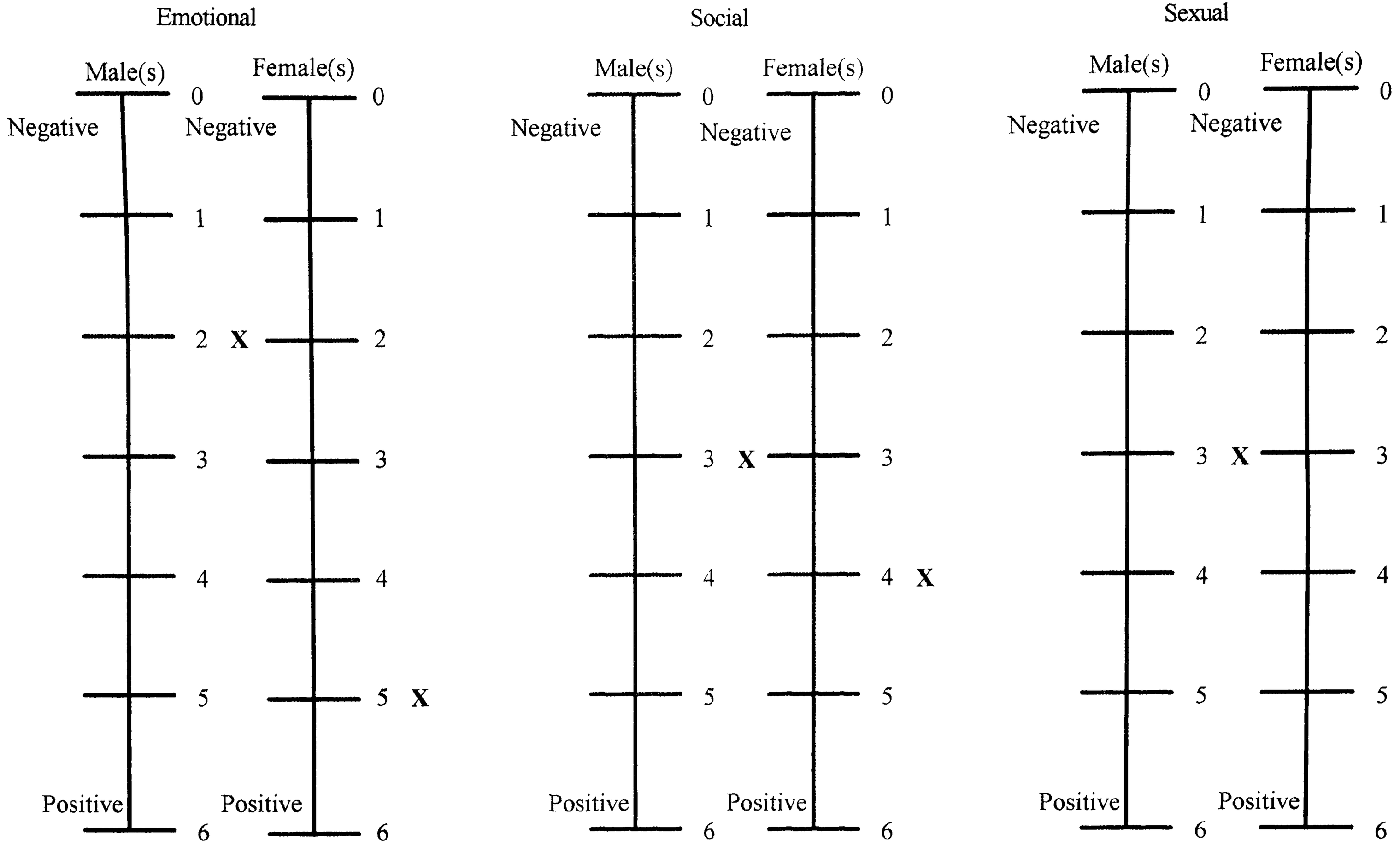
> I think that it's more like railway tracks. I think there are two railway tracks, a heterosexual one and a homosexual one. On my heterosexual railway track I'm about a third of the way along, which means I'm about a third emotionally, sexually and socially capable of having a relationship with the right man if he happened to come along, but I'm quite a long way on the lesbian track. (Informant 56)

According to this informant, her bisexuality is a multi-variable. Although this individual was in what she termed as a 'long-term monogamous lesbian relationship', and therefore can be said to be living a lesbian lifestyle, she still considered herself bisexual as she felt she had the potential to relate to men socially, emotionally and sexually, although her feelings for women were stronger at the time of the study. An interpretation of this informant's suggestion that her bisexuality can best be described as 'railway tracks' is presented overleaf in the form of a diagram (see Diagram 5.2). This shows the strength of the informant's feeling for both men and women in relation to the emotional, social and sexual aspects of relationships. The three 'railway tracks' consist of a gauge which measures the informant's preference, the lower numbers representing her negative feelings and the higher numbers positive feelings. For example, the emotional 'railway track' shows that the informant had a stronger emotional preference for women, with her strength of feeling marked at five on the scale whilst her emotional feelings for men have been registered at two. According to this, she is therefore more likely to seek emotional relationships with women than men, as these are seen as more fulfilling. The other two aspects of relationships also show similar results, with the informant preferring women socially and sexually.

Another informant also felt that her bisexuality involved more than just sexual attraction and desire. She argued that bisexuality was an 'ability' to relate to either men or women at any given time, rather than an actual practice of relating to both sexes all of the time, regardless of circumstances:

> I think it's helpful for me to arrange my sexuality in my head. My sexuality is a bit like a thermometer really or something like that, because I think over time where I am as a woman who relates to women continues to change. I'm quite glad that I know...because y'know the idea that sexuality is a scale and it goes from one stage to another, and when you reach that stage you're there for the rest of your life more or less?. Well, y'know, I don't believe in that, and I don't want that, I want to be freer. (Informant 57)

Diagram 5.2: An interpretation of one informant's own experience of bisexuality



5.4 Summary of stories

The main characteristics of each of the four stories is presented in an abbreviated version below.

Destiny story

- Informants believe that their sexuality is innate and claim that they were aware of their 'difference' from their peers in childhood
- First reported attraction to other girls was said to be physical
- Only three of the nine women using this story have had any heterosexual experience, and only one informant was previously married. Marriage and heterosexual experience was not seen as indicative of their 'true' sexuality.
- One woman reported having a sexual relationship with a man after many years of relationships with women

Neo-destiny story

- Informants believe their sexuality to be innate, but unlike informants using the Destiny story, they claim that they did not realise they were lesbian until they were older, often from puberty onwards. Not necessarily any early awareness of 'difference' from their peers
- First reported attraction to other girls or women was said to be either physical or emotional
- 19 of the 42 women using this story have had heterosexual experience, and 17 have previously been married. Like women within the Destiny story, marriage and heterosexual experience was not seen as indicative of their 'true' sexuality
- Eight women have had sexual relations with a man since identifying as lesbian

Feminist story

- Informants did not believe their sexuality to be innate, nor did they report feelings of 'difference' from their peers when younger; rather, they believe they chose their sexuality
- First reported attraction to other women was said to be emotional or intellectual
- All seven women using this story have had heterosexual experience and 6 have previously been married. Unlike the Destiny and Neo-destiny stories, heterosexual experience and previous marriage were accepted as indicative of their sexuality at that time
- No women within this story have had sexual relations with men since identifying as lesbian

Bisexual story

- Women using this story did not believe that their sexuality was innate, and did not claim that they felt 'different' from their peers in childhood. They refuse the label of 'lesbian'.
- First reported attraction to other women was said to be physical or emotional

- All women using this story have had heterosexual experience, and none have ever married. All accept that their past relations with men are indicative of their bisexuality
- Two of the four informants using this story have had sexual relationships with men since entering into relationships with other women

Table 5.3 shows that these four stories, which examined the experiences of informants prior to identifying as lesbian and the process that they went through to reach this identity, only account for 62 (75.5 per cent) of the 81 informants' used for this analysis, leaving 19 (23 per cent) of informants whose stories differed from these.

Table 5.3 Number of informants within the four stories

Stories	**Number of informants**	**As a percentage of all informants' accounts**
Destiny	9	10.9%
Neo -destiny	42	51.2%
Feminist	7	8.5%
Bisexual	4	4.8%
Total	62	75.6%
Unclassifiable	19	23.4%
Total	**81**	**90%**

(For details of other informants' accounts see Table 5.4. The remaining nine informants did not provide enough information that could be used to include them within this analysis.)

5.5 The Non-conformists' stories

The 19 informants whose accounts did not fit within these four stories did, however, all self identify as lesbian. Their transcripts were examined closely to investigate whether any common patterns or features could be identified, and to establish why their individual accounts could not be located within the four stories identified by the 'classic' theorists and by other lesbians.

The following offers an interpretation of their accounts, using wherever possible their own words. It suggests that these informants do share certain characteristics in the stories they tell. This has resulted in identifying a further two categories, which I term *Non-conformist* stories. I have decided to call them the *Sudden discovery story* and the *Combined story*. (See Table 5.4 below for the

number of informants within the two further stories.) Together, these account for all but one of the 'unclassified' stories, this one being the story of the one heterosexual informant. (On reflection, it poses no problem for this analysis that a self-identified heterosexual cannot be classified in this way.)

Table 5.4: Number of informants within the two non-conformist stories

Further stories	**Number of informants**	**As a percentage of all informants accounts' (N=81)**
Sudden discovery	12	14.6%
Combined	6	7.3%
Total	**18**	**22.2%**

The *Sudden discovery* story is the name I have given, on the basis of their shared characteristics, to the accounts of 12 women, ranging in age from 22 to 55, who came to self-identify as lesbian. All had previously identified as heterosexual, and all or some of these former heterosexual experiences had been within 'meaningful' relationships. None of the informants claimed either that they were 'born lesbian' or that, in retrospect, their 'true' identity was always lesbian. They therefore did not fit within the stories of *Destiny* or *Neo-destiny*. Their stories differ from those of others, in that there appeared to be no obvious reasoning behind their transition from a heterosexual identity to a lesbian identity. The informants themselves reported that they could not fully understand the transformation of their emotional and sexual feelings from men to women, offering no logical explanation of why they came to identify themselves as lesbians, and reporting that they felt 'surprised' when they 'discovered' they were lesbian. However, many can recollect a particular incident or moment when they first had 'lesbian feelings', or first thought of themselves as lesbian:

> I would say I was previously heterosexual until 31st December 1983 and then I became a lesbian. It was an incident that happened...it was with a very good friend of mine who was a lesbian, I was very close to her, but I knew that I regarded myself as straight. Anyway, this was about a year and half after a very bad experience I had with blokes, I'd actually been raped by two blokes and she was trying to show me that there could be some sort of trust with two people just touching, and she was only stroking my hand really and that was it. I just fell totally in love with it, with being touched by a woman, it just changed everything, it did. It was a very dramatic change, overnight really, literally. That was how it was, and that's when I knew I was a lesbian. (Informant 19)

Another informant, who also appeared to have decided overnight that she was a lesbian, had previously been married three times, at the ages of 17, 26 and 29. She had become close to a friend's daughter over a three year period, describing that she saw her as a 'kid who I was fond of'. The young woman was the same age as one of her eldest sons, and she stated that, although she liked spending time with her, she did not realise her true feelings for her until they sat talking one night:

> ...And something just touched me and I suddenly felt all strange, I thought I was coming down with some sort of bug or something. That night I couldn't sleep and found myself writing this letter to her at four in the morning. I told her all the reasons I couldn't be gay, and how I couldn't do this to her and I didn't want to confuse her and everything. She got my letter and came round. We talked and then I said 'I suppose I'd better get you home'. It was nearly midnight by this time, and off we set in the car...And then I said 'I have to talk to you' and we stopped the car, but then found that nothing would come out of my mouth, but anyway she got to understand that I'd fallen in love with her. (Informant 59)

Another informant reported that she had become physically attracted to women, although she did not know why:

> I first felt physically attracted to women in the last months of my pregnancy, aged 28. I can honestly say that before that I had never felt drawn to women other than in friendship. The attraction I felt totally confused me, where had these feelings materialised from ? I really don't know. I put it down to a change in hormones and got on with my life. (Informant 54)

However, she did act upon these feelings, but not until twelve years later. After separating from her husband, she started to feel attracted to her next door neighbour, which resulted in the two women having a 'one night stand', culminating in her deciding immediately that she was a lesbian:

> After consuming a large amount of whiskey, we made love, my initiation as a lesbian. Short-lived, intense, we remain good friends and still neighbours...I have never looked back since. (Informant 54)

Most of these women had many years of heterosexual experience. Two had experience of relationships with both men and women in the past but had not labelled themselves as lesbian at the time. Only later did they eventually decide to self-identify as lesbian, although they reported being unsure as to why this happened at that particular moment :

> At university I met a woman that I had a relationship with, but at the same time I was seeing two guys and then overseas, at one point I was seeing two women and two guys, then about 1990 I started telling people that I was bisexual, and then about four years ago I decided to come out as lesbian. Why did I come to this conclusion ? I don't know really, my

> experiences, my cock ups with men, the fact that I'd been raped, a number of things I suppose. (Informant 11)
>
> Well, I had a fling with one of my friends in the summer and then a fling with a bloke, but that didn't work out well, and then, then I had another couple of flings with women and then sort of met X really and then I just decided I was a lesbian. (Informant 6)

Another informant also expressed her surprise when she 'discovered' that she was lesbian.

> It dawned on me three years ago, that's all I can say, I hadn't been particularly thinking about it..it just dawned on me. (Informant 84)
>
> I got cancer, no big deal, I had a lumpectomy and then radiotherapy, you know all the trimmings. I was also offered counselling, I didn't want it but in the end it was easier to accept. I don't know what happened, we had been talking about my husband, who had been dead quite a while by then...and we hadn't been discussing sexuality or anything like that...Anyway, I came home one afternoon, after I'd been to see this counsellor, this woman, and I was puzzling over what we'd been talking about...my husband and what have you, and I can remember it exactly. I'd come in and was doing a few bits in the kitchen, and I was stood in the kitchen, with one hand on the sink and a dishcloth in the other, and I was mulling things over and all of a sudden out of nowhere, I said aloud, I was completely on my own, but I said aloud 'I'm, gay !' For all these years I've wondered why nothing fits, why I've always felt slightly at odds with everything, and it's because I'm gay' and that was it. (Informant 84)

Since this 'discovery' she has remembered incidents from her past which she believes may explain her sudden 'impulsive decision that I was a lesbian':

> It wasn't until much later, after I told the counsellor, that one day that it all started to come out, and I remembered things in the past that I'd totally forgotten about, that I'd totally blocked out. I've learnt since that this is quite common, blanking things from your mind. (Informant 84)

She continued:

> I, at the age of 24, had fallen in love with this woman, she lived next door and she felt the same way too. We never had an affair, it was 1954, both of us were married and both of us had young children and we were naive and we didn't know how to proceed, and so we decided it was best if we stop before this became unmanageable, although I don't think either of us knew what unmanageable was. The fact that we were in love was never mentioned again, although we stayed good friends until she died. (Informant 84)
>
> Something must have triggered that long forgotten encounter of many years ago, and I suppose over several weeks of talking to the counsellor and then going home and thinking about why I was happier around women than men and why although my husband had been a patient good man, our sex life had never been anything to write home about, it just came out, over forty years later. (Informant 84)

Although the informant utilised past experiences to offer an explanation of why she suddenly decided to identify as lesbian, she, unlike the informants within the *Neo-destiny* story, did not maintain that she had always been lesbian but had remained ignorant of this until later in her life. However, she did report that at the age of 24 she was aware of her 'love' for her next door neighbour and friend, but they made a decision not to pursue a lesbian relationship at the time as it would not have been 'practical'. Like other informants in this category, her story suggests that certain factors may precipitate the decision to become lesbian. Those factors include: the capacity to perceive themselves as lesbian through learning of alternatives to heterosexuality; and having the freedom to enter into relationships with women (through either separating from their male partners/husbands, being single at the time, or financial independence); and also having access to women who are potential partners (as either life partners or sexual partners).

The informants within this *Sudden discovery* story are unable to express their experiences in a way which matches any one of the 'authentic' accounts described earlier. However, they do identify as lesbian, and can give honest and plausible accounts of their experiences and decisions. Neither Ponse, Ettorre, Whisman, Markowe nor Schafer appear to have interviewed women whose experiences match these women's. Their biographical histories relating to sexual identity, marriage and sexual behaviour are like those of other informants. As previously mentioned, all twelve had past heterosexual experience, like the informants within the *Feminist* story, but their 'conversion' was not the result of political activism. Three of the women (25 per cent of this group) had previously been married, with one woman intending to remain within her marriage at the time of the study (8.5 per cent). Four (33 per cent) had engaged in heterosexual activity since identifying as lesbian, and for three it took place while they were still married.

The six women within this second additional story, which I have named the *Combined* story differ from other informants in that, although they appear to embrace some features commonly presented in the 'authentic' 'stories' when describing their process of identifying as lesbian, they cannot be placed within any singular story already proposed, nor into the *Sudden discovery* story. Rather, all their accounts exhibit characteristics or features of more than one story. One informant in particular illustrates how complex and sometimes contradictory women's biographical accounts can be, and it is her account that I will now examine in depth, to demonstrate the features which made me create this grouping and led me to place her account in it.

This informant could easily fit within the *Neo-destiny* story, as her experiences resemble those characteristics listed by Whisman (1996) for women who use a 'mixed' account (see Appendix 2). However, she does not claim any previous knowledge of her lesbianism but, using a retrospective interpretation, is well aware that there were incidents in her past which could, if she wished, be used to suggest that she had always been a lesbian. However, she also reports feeling 'asexual' for much of her childhood and teenage years, which according to Whisman's (1996) criteria is one of the most notable features of the 'Determinist' model (see Appendix 2).

> I think actually, looking back, that I was asexual to all intents and purposes for a long, long time. (Informant 88)

Like many informants within the *Destiny* and *Neo-destiny* stories, she reported feeling that she did not fit within the prevailing stereotypical notions of femininity in teenage girls and women, reporting gender atypical behaviour.

> I didn't like the dressing up bit, I didn't like make-up...(Informant 88)

She did not have a boyfriend until she was in her twenties, and then it did not appear to be a particularly close relationship. Rather, she reported that she wanted to be 'normal', and believed that having a relationship with a member of the opposite sex would offer her some form of normalcy:

> I knew I wanted to be reassured that I was normal I suppose. I mean, I didn't articulate it anything like this in those days, but looking back you kind of sense things with hindsight. (Informant 88)

However, she also reported by this time she had decided that she wanted a career which she believed would be jeopardised by marriage. She realised she did not want to be someone's 'wife':

> ...I remember my boyfriend's best friend got married whilst we were dating...and obviously we went, my boyfriend was best man, and it was all huge fun, but I remember thinking, God save me from this...(Informant 88)

The informant could easily, with the above evidence, claim that she had always been lesbian but was not aware of it until she was much older. She, like other women in the *Neo-destiny* story, reported a lack of interest in men, a determination not to get married, and concern that she did not feel 'normal'. However, unlike most women in the *Destiny or Neo-destiny* stories, she had the opportunity to enter into lesbian relationships, as she came into contact with a number of women whom she described as 'closeted' lesbians. Nevertheless, she reported no romantic or sexual

interest in these women, which directly opposes Whisman's (1996) assertion that a notable feature of the *Neo-determinist* model is women's early ignorance of lesbian existence, which can change when they encounter other lesbians, thus presenting the possibility of lesbianism for themselves. The informant stated that she decided not to mix socially with these women as she feared that people would believe that she too was a closet lesbian, although she did not believe this herself.

> I'm sure a lot of them thought I was because I didn't have boyfriends, but it wasn't that I consciously was or wasn't, I was just doing my own thing. (Informant 88)

Over a twelve-year period the informant had one long-term relationship with a married man, and a couple of brief affairs with other men. However, although the opportunity to have lesbian affairs appeared frequently, the informant continued to have no interest in women, either sexually or emotionally. At the age of 34 she met a female colleague who was to eventually become her future partner. They developed a friendship over a period of two to three years, with the informant reporting her admiration for her colleague:

> I can remember being terribly excited because I was ever so impressed by this person and thought she was terribly important and very, very clever and it wasn't in any sense sexual, it was just admiration for this woman. (Informant 88)

While she acknowledged her admiration for this woman, she continued to have brief sexual encounters with men. During this time her colleague started to be more open about her own feelings of attraction to the informant,which she largely ignored. At this time she also started to become influenced by the political theory of feminism:

> I'd started to mix with a lot more political women and I'd been teaching sociology and reading feminism...so I was beginning to move into a more conscious political awareness about feminism, even if it was an intellectual one...(Informant 88)

Eventually the informant's colleague explicitly stated that she wanted a relationship with her. The informant refused, telling her:

> I'm not a lesbian, people think I am because I am not seen in public with men...it's very nice of you, I think you're a wonderful person, I really like you as a friend but nothing more. (Informant 88)

The informant continued:

> I got up, stepped outside the door to drive home, and the minute I got in the car I knew I had made a big mistake. I've never had such emotions, it was incredible and I'm a person who all my life has had to be well liked by other people, so I have always done what I feel is right, not what I want to do. (Informant 88)

The informant admitted, just like the informants within the *Feminist* story, that for her the most problematic feature when contemplating a lesbian relationship was the sexual side of the relationship:

> I couldn't see through the physical situation. First of all, I couldn't conceive of myself making love to a woman...but inside something was saying to me 'don't be stupid, do it'. (Informant 88)

Eventually, after much contemplation, the informant did embark on this relationship:

> What happened is that we did give it a go and it was absolutely fantastic and it felt so right. It felt as if somebody had lifted a ten ton weight off my shoulders, it was the first time in my life that I felt completely myself. And the expression I know lots of people use, and it was certainly true of me, was that I felt like I'd come home....I feel as if I've been a more honest person since then. I wasn't being deliberately dishonest with myself, I just didn't know where I fitted into the scheme of things...(Informant 88)

This informant drew on a combination of 'typical accounts' to tell her story, including *Destiny*, *Neo-destiny*, and *Feminist* stories. In this, she is typical of the others in this category. By stating that she had little interest in men, and felt different to other girls and women, her account resembles that given by women within the *Destiny* and *Neo-destiny* stories. Later in the interview she also stated that, at about the same time as feeling great admiration for the friend who was later to become her partner, she started to become interested in feminist theory. The development of an intellectual and emotional relationship with another woman, is something which informants within the *Feminist* story identified as an important foundation for self-identification as lesbian. However, at the end of her account she reverts to resembling those women in the *Neo-destiny* story in reporting that entering into a lesbian relationship felt like she was 'coming home', and that for the first time in her life she felt as though she was being honest with herself. However, throughout the interview, the informant never stated that she always believed herself to be innately lesbian and neither did she clearly propose that the influence of feminism led her to self-identify as lesbian. It would therefore be inappropriate to constrain this informant's account within any one of the stories with which she shares some, but not all, characteristics.

This particular informant's account shows that research which is concerned with 'fitting' individuals within a 'type' can be a complex process, requiring the researcher to decide what she believes to be the 'important' features of someone else's biographical account and experiences, constructing a hierarchy of their statements in order to attempt to formulate a 'logical' explanation

for the process they went through in order to identify as lesbian. This *Combined* story provides an example of how women's lived experiences may well be too 'messy' for them to be neatly placed within just one category.

5.6 Comparisons of this study's findings with the 'classic models'

The preceding review of women's stories of their lesbianism in relation to the main theoretical 'models' or 'types' shows that real life can be more complex than they allow for; many stories could fit more than one story. As described in this Chapter, two further stories were therefore added to the 'classic four' identified from earlier studies, to allow for the complexities of and subtle differences between women's accounts.

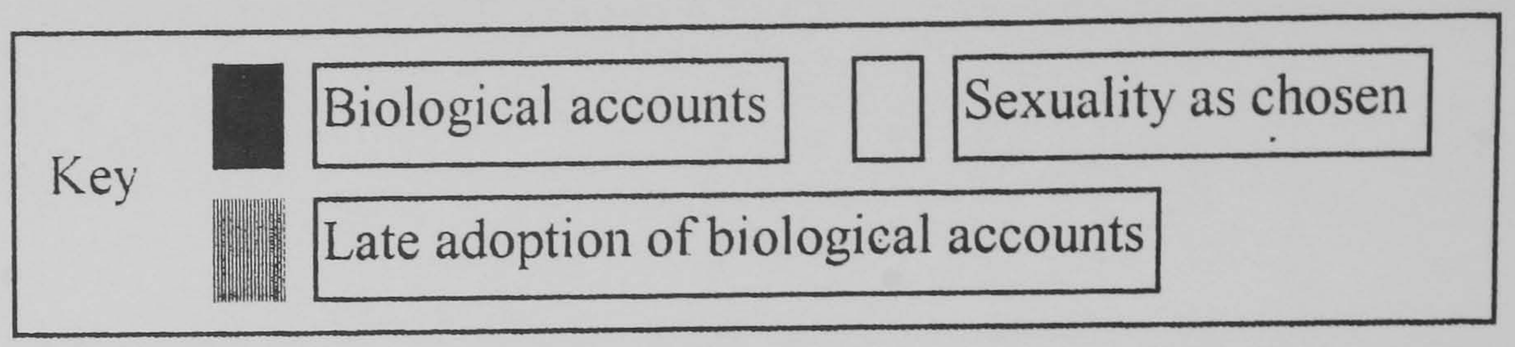
The classic theorists' models and the stories provided by the lesbians interviewed for this study differ quite substantially. Table 5.6 shows that all theorists were able to separate their respondents into distinct categories based on the accounts that they gave of their lives. All theorists believed that a category comprising of respondents who believed their lesbianism to be innate (see top line of the diagram) was easily distinguishable from those who believed their sexuality to be a matter of personal choice (see the bottom line of diagram). With the exception of Ettorre (1980), the theorists also categorised those women who, like the first group, believed their sexuality to be innate, but did not adopt this explanation until later in their lives. Only Whisman (1996) appeared to have any difficulty in interpreting her data. The arrows from her *Mixed* to the *Determinist* account highlight Whisman's belief that that some respondents who gave a *Mixed* account could just as easily have given a *Determinist* account.

The interpretation of women's stories in this study did not result in such easily distinguished categories. The informants in this one appeared to tell a more complex story of their lives than the respondents in these earlier studies. The arrows leading from one story to another represent the possibility that the stories that women gave of their lives could potentially have been interpreted in several ways.

As in Whisman's study, women who gave a Neo-destiny story told similar stories to those women within the Destiny story. (This is represented in the diagram by the arrow leading from the Neo-destiny story to the Destiny story.) The Bisexual story, which Ponse (1978) and Whisman (1996) suggested was no different from the Feminist story, did appear to be similar in some respects

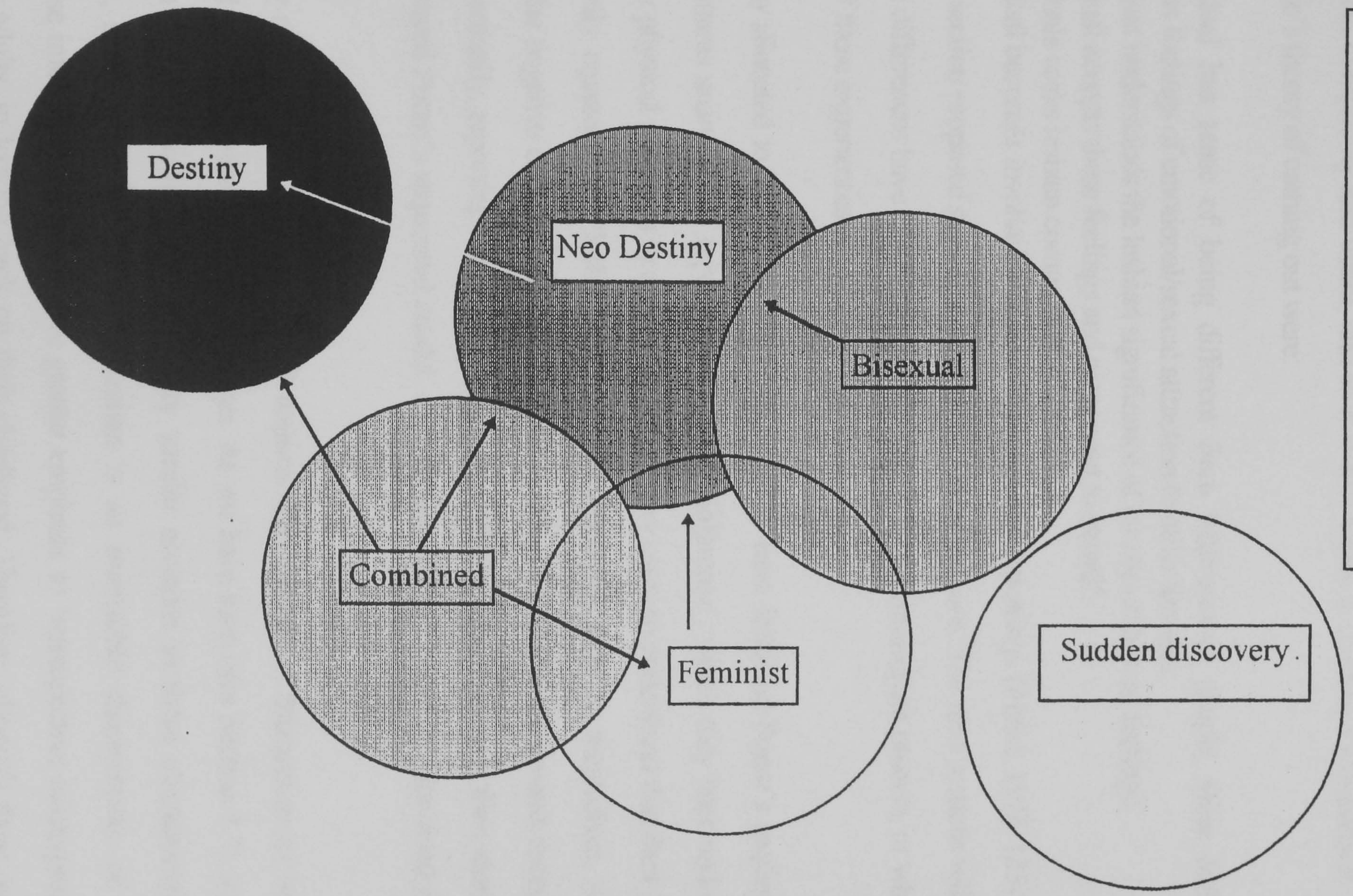
within this study. For example, women from both stories viewed their sexuality as chosen. However, two of the informants using a Feminist story and all women giving a Bisexual story, proposed that with hindsight they could recall experiencing an attraction to other girls or women when they were younger, before entering relationships with women. However, neither the holders of the Bisexual or the Feminist stories attempted to prioritise these past feelings in the same way as women using the Neo-desterminist story. The informants giving a Combined story often gave accounts that made it difficult to allocate them to one story rather than another, manifesting characteristics which could lead to their accounts being allocated to any of the Destiny, Feminist or Neo-desterminist stories. Therefore this study has revealed significantly different findings, in terms of the stories that lesbians tell of their lives, from these previous studies. Although earlier theorists have generally agreed that individuals' stories can be fitted into one of three main groupings, this study has suggested that lesbians' own stories of their lives are far more complex, making it impossible to force a substantial minority of their stories into the pre-existing typologies. This section has discussed one aspect of the findings from previous studies in relation to the four themes presented within the analysis chapter, namely 'fitting into the scheme of things ' (see Table 5. 1 for the four themes). The other three themes: 'coming out', 'who do you fuck?' and 'community' will now be briefly discussed, and the differences between the findings of this and previous studies will be examined.

Diagram 5. 5 : Summary of the classical studies of lesbian identity



Types of explanations based on informants' accounts	*Ponse (1978)*	*Ettorre (1980)*	*Whisman (1996)*	*Markowe (1996)*
Biological accounts/ Born that way/ Essentialist view	Primary	Sick, but not sorry	Determinist	Always
Late adoption of explanation/ Essentialist view	Elective		Mixed	Lesbians with heterosexual background
Non-biological/ Sexuality as chosen	Idiosyncratic	Sorry, but not sick	Choice	Political

Diagram: 5.6 :Diagram of my interpretation of women's stories



5.7 Coming out

Schafer (1976), Ponse (1978), and Markowe (1996) all identified a common framework of stages in the process of coming out as lesbian to themselves and others. Ponse and Markowe identified five distinct stages, while Schafer proposed three stages. All three theories were similar in that the stages commenced with individuals having initial lesbian feelings and ended with them accepting their lesbian identity. However, it was Ponse's theory regarding lesbian identity stages which offered the most complexity and detail, and so it is this which is used as a comparison. The five stages of Ponse's theory of coming out were:

- the individual has sense of being different from heterosexual people, these feelings are identified as feelings of emotional/sexual attraction to other females;
- the individual understands the lesbian significance of emotional/sexual feelings;
- the individual accepts these feelings and comes out to herself;
- the individuals seeks lesbian community;
- the individual becomes involved in a sexual/emotional relationship. (Ponse, 1978: 125-128)

The previous section proposed six different stories used by lesbians. The next sections will explore whether these differences have any bearing on the stages in the coming out process, or whether the universality of these experiences outweigh any differences.

Those women allocated to the *Destiny* story appeared to have followed Ponse's sequence fairly closely. Informants unanimously reported feelings of 'difference', which they later understood to be due to their physical attraction to other girls. When they came to understand that their 'feelings' were commonly equated with 'lesbianism', they attached this label to themselves, often also internalising the negative evaluation of this sexual variant. All of these informants accepted their lesbianism eventually, reporting the importance of the 'lesbian community' in their stories. They therefore followed Ponse's sequential model, culminating in them becoming involved in lesbian relationships.

As previously stated, Ponse believed that all women who thought of themselves as being born lesbian would go through the sequence of stages. As we have seen (see Section 5.3), informants placed within the *Neo-destiny* story gave very similar accounts to those characteristic of the *Destiny* story, sharing the belief that lesbianism is an immutable characteristic of the self. However, these informants' accounts give greater emphasis to 'retrospective reinterpretation' or 'hindsight' as adults, in looking back on their childhood. Therefore, although these informants

believed that they were 'different' from other girls due to their physical and/or emotional attraction to women, this identification took place in adulthood, rather than childhood as in the case of the *Destiny* story. This would result in women passing through Ponse's stages two and three before stage one. Although most women did go through the stages sequentially, this was not necessarily in the same order as those in the *Destiny* story. Previous analysis also showed that not all informants within the *Neo-destiny* story successfully completed stage five, as one woman who identified as lesbian reported that she had never had an emotional or sexual relationship with another woman.

Ponse asserted that the accounts by the Feminist and Bisexual women, which she placed together under the term of 'idiosyncratic' lesbians, did not follow the gay trajectory, as they did not perceive their sexuality to be innate. However, biographical accounts by informants belonging to both stories appeared to include, albeit to a lesser extent than informants allocated to the *Determinist* or *Neo-determinist* stories, the standard stages of the gay trajectory. Women within the *Feminist* story did not universally experience stage one, as they had all identified as heterosexual prior to coming out as lesbian, reporting gender-typical behaviour in childhood. However, they did to a certain extent pass through stage two, but rather than acknowledging feelings of emotional or sexual attraction to other women, they identified within themselves the potential for becoming lesbian. This was possible as they already had in place an emotional and intellectual bonding or attraction to other women. Thus, as stated earlier (see Section 5.3), for them, their sexual attraction towards other women occurred as a direct result of their acknowledgement of feelings. Members of the *Feminist* story also went through stage three, in that they accepted their feelings and came out as lesbian. However, stage four, which comprises seeking a lesbian community, may be replaced by a feminist community, or may not be necessary, as informants generally appeared to have a supportive network prior to identifying as lesbian. Stage five of the gay trajectory had been completed by all informants within this story, who were either in relationships at the time of the study or had previously had lesbian relationships.

The informants who self-identified as bisexual appeared to go through some of the stages of Ponse's gay trajectory. As they reported identifying as lesbian prior to identifying as bisexual, it could therefore be suggested that stage one was experienced by them. However, like the *Neo-destiny* story, this was more likely to have taken place in adulthood rather than in their childhood years. If from stage two onwards, 'bisexuality' was substituted for lesbianism, all of the informants could be said to have successfully completed stages two, four and five, although stage four would

have been generally a more negative experience for these informants than women within any other category.

No informants within this category experienced stage one of Ponse's gay trajectory for two main reasons. Firstly, as all informants had identified as heterosexual, they did not experience feelings of difference from other heterosexual people. Secondly, the prime characteristic of this *Non-conformist* story is the apparent lack of a logical story behind the transference of their emotional and sexual desires from men to women. However, although informants did not report passing through stage one in their biographical accounts, there is evidence to suggest that stages two and three were completed and to a lesser extent stage four, although some individuals had not experienced a lesbian relationship at the time of the study and therefore had not completed stage five. The members of this story did not proceed through these stages in a sequential or even a similar patterned order, some women going from first awareness or attraction to other women to a sexual/emotional relationship (stage five). Only after successful completion of these stages did women understand the lesbian significance of their feelings (stage two) which resulted in them accepting their feelings and thereby coming out to themselves before seeking a lesbian community (stage four).

Despite the complex and contradictory nature of the biographical accounts given by women within the combined story, most proceeded through the stages in a sequential order, although the first stage was missed by all informants but one, who later included this stage by utilising a retrospective interpretation of her lesbianism.

Although those women allocated to the *Destiny* story progressed through the stages as proposed by Ponse, women in the other categories either did not pass through each stage or did so in different sequences from the others. It cannot therefore be proposed that all lesbians commonly share a coming out process in precisely the way that Schafer and Ponse suggested. Further differences in the coming out process were also found between this study and previous ones. According to Ettorre (1980), respondents' religious orientation affected which 'type' of lesbian they were. For her, women who maintained a religious orientation were more likely to be part of the *Sick, but not sorry* type, as they generally held traditional beliefs which were at odds with their sexuality. However, Whisman (1996) argued that religious affiliation had no bearing on the process of coming out.

Table 5.7 also reveals that the proportion of bisexual informants who claim to have a religious affiliation also appears to be disproportionately high (although only four informants in all were placed within this category). No informants within the *Sudden discovery* story, nor any *Feminist* informants reported any religious affiliation. These findings are similar to Ettorre's. It could therefore be argued that women who have an essentialist view of their sexuality are more likely to have traditional beliefs. Alternatively, it could be argued that lesbians who have religious beliefs utilise the dominant lesbian narrative of being 'born that way' in order to feel more comfortable with their sexuality, as it allows them to claim that they had no choice in their sexuality and thereby to abdicate responsibility for the incongruence between their lesbian life and traditional religious beliefs of homosexuality.

Table 5.7 Percentage of informants' by story who reported past or present religious affiliation

Stories	**Number of informants' who reported religious affiliation**	**As a percentage of each story**
Destiny	6	66.6%
Neo-destiny	9	21.4%
Feminist	0	0%
Bisexual	2	50%
Sudden discovery	0	0%
Heterosexual	0	0%
Total	**17**	-

5.8 'Who do you fuck?'

Analysis of the past and current sexual relationships of informants within this study reveals major differences from the findings and theories proposed by both Schafer (1976) and Whisman (1996). According to Schafer (1976), two phases of bisexuality are prominent in individuals' accounts of coming out. However, in this study 'phases of bisexuality' were less prominent than she suggested. Those informants who could be perceived as having a 'bisexual phase' did not often consciously choose to engage in sexual relations with men after identifying as lesbian, but did so nevertheless, because at the time many were still married or in long-term relationships with male partners, and had yet to inform them of their intention to leave these relationships (see Section 4.4 for

informants' accounts of this). Few women appeared consciously to desire sexual relations with men; those who did engage in sexual relations did so for specific reasons, these often consisting of lack of access to other lesbians, and engaging in heterosexual relations at the time of personal crisis. (See the accounts of informant 60 and informant 83 in Section 4.4 for examples of the reasons for having sexual relations with men.) Schafer reported that over a third of her sample had sexual relations with men while self-identifying as lesbian. However, comparative figures for this study show that, out of the 81 informants, only 18 reported having sexual relations with men since identifying as lesbian. This is a small proportion compared to Schafer's study, especially as one self-defined heterosexual and four self-defined bisexual women were included within this analysis.

The other major difference between this study and earlier ones centres on Whisman's suggestion that those lesbians who gave a *born that way* account of their lesbianism, which in this study are allocated to the *Determinist* and *Neo- determinist* stories, are the only two groups that demonstrate congruency between 'sexual orientation and sexual preference' and therefore between sexual activity and sexual identity. According to her, women within the *Chosen* account (which consisted of 'feminists' and 'bisexuals') were the most likely of all lesbians to engage in sexual relations with men after identifying themselves as lesbians, as their sexual orientation was basically bisexual.

> Those who offer the chosen account..are probably bisexually orientated whether they know it or not. (Whisman, 1996: 82)

Table 5.8 overleaf shows the prevalence of previous heterosexual relations amongst informants by story. The findings for the *Destiny* story are similar to Whisman's, in having a lower marriage rate, lower figures for previous heterosexual experience and they were less likely to have had sexual relations with men than women in the *Neo-destiny*, *Sudden discovery* and *Combined* stories. However, none of the members of the *Feminist* story reported any sexual relations with men since identifying themselves as lesbian, and were the only category to remain so exclusively committed to women. This somewhat unexpected finding could be due to those informants within the *Destiny* story believing that they have always been lesbian, therefore any sexual contact with men would necessarily be seen as taking place after identifying as lesbian. However, this does not explain why Whisman's assertion that feminist and bisexual women are more likely to engage in heterosexual relations due to their 'bisexual orientation' is not borne out in this study. Even though all *Feminist* informants had previous heterosexual experience and the majority had previously been married,

these two factors were not related to post-lesbian heterosexual activity. Any potential explanation would need to take into account the definition of sexual orientation and bisexual orientation used by Whisman.

Whisman's argument appears to rest on her assertion that sexual orientation is innate and therefore predetermined (see Section 2.10 for Whisman's definition of sexual orientation and sexual preference.) She thus suggested that women who are not 'essentially' lesbian do not have a lesbian sexual orientation and by implication are therefore more likely to engage in opposite sexual relations. Whisman's essentialist perspective of sexual orientation does not allow for a multifaceted approach to individuals' sexuality. Within an essentialist perspective, the choices which individuals make in response to the varied situations they encounter are not considered legitimate reasons for the social construction of a sexual orientation based on a multitude of factors such as emotional, intellectual, political and sexual feelings and desires. These were all reported by feminist informants within this study as being pivotal to their identifying themselves as lesbian (see Section 5.3 for feminists' accounts of their lesbian identity.) However, by embracing essentialism, Whisman perceives 'Feminists' as inauthentic lesbians, as they have not always identified themselves as lesbian. For her, even when members of a 'born that way' category do not have congruence between their sexual activity and their sexual identity, they are still the more 'real' or authentic group of lesbians, thus she continues to maintain the lesbian hierarchy which proposes that those who 'always knew' are the only authentic lesbians.

Contrary to Whisman's assertion that sexual orientation is somehow fixed within the individual from birth, the sexual orientation of the majority of the individuals within this study has significantly changed over their adult lives. Table 5.8 clearly shows that although 50 informants had previous heterosexual experience, only 18 informants have had sex with males since identifying as lesbian. There is no simple relation between sexual orientation, sexual conduct and lesbian identity, whether one uses a predetermined or social constructionist definition of sexual orientation.

5.9 Community

The lesbian community was regarded as a positive and safe space for lesbians to meet, enabling them to form networks with other lesbians when first self-identifying as such, by all theorists

except Schafer (1976), who suggested that it played no part in individuals' process of self-identifying as lesbian. The community was perceived by informants within this study as embracing all aspects of lesbian social life. It was not one single community, but rather comprised several lesbian subcultures. It could consist of friendship networks, pubs and clubs, geographical areas or membership of political groups. Lesbian communities were regarded as valuable sources of social and personal support, with almost two thirds of informants stating that they were part of what was generally labelled as 'the community'. This matches the findings of Ponse (1978), Ettorre (1980), Markowe (1996) and Whisman (1996). Many informants found protection and validation of their lesbian identity within it, but some women found it intimidating and threatening to their sense of self. For them, the lesbian community was a minefield of learned customs and norms, which potential members had to adopt if they were to become accepted. While many women did conform to what was described by informants as codes of 'behaviour', 'dress styles' and 'language', differences between age groups were apparent. Ettorre (1980), Whisman (1996) and Markowe (1996) made no reference to lesbians' age as influencing participation in lesbian subcultures. In this study, however, it was found that those aged under thirty and those who had only recently self-identified as lesbian were more likely to conform to the subculture's norms, as they craved acceptance within lesbian subcultures. Women aged over 40 were more likely to seek alternatives to bars and clubs, often meeting with small groups of lesbians whom they had known for a long time. As women grew older they were less likely to attempt to conform to any lesbian 'codes' and did not perceive themselves as needing or desiring validation for their lesbian identity. The findings of this study therefore broadly confirm those of previous studies, except that age influenced informants' orientation towards the lesbian community.

This chapter has compared the findings of this study with similar previous studies, finding many similarities but also marked differences. More wide-ranging differences have been identified between informants within this study, arising from the ways women have chosen to negotiate and experience their lesbian lives. Within this study a variety of lesbian identities have been explored and discussed, and the stories that lesbians tell of their lives have been reported in their own words. This has resulted in a more complex typology than the previous versions. This could be as a result of the deliberate strategy of seeking to interview a larger and more diverse group of informants than earlier studies achieved. If this is so, a major objective for the study will have been achieved.

Table 5.8: Number of informants who reported heterosexual experience and previous marriage within each story

Story	Number of informants within each story	Number of women by story with previous heterosexual experience	Number of women by story who had been previously married	Number of women within each story who had heterosexual sex since identifying as lesbian
Neo-destiny	42	19	17	9
Sudden discovery	12	12	3	4
Bisexual	4	4	0	2
Combined	6	5	2	2
Heterosexual	1	1	1	1
Destiny	9	2	1	1
Feminist	7	7	6	0
Totals	**81**	**50**	**30**	**19**

Chapter Six

Conclusion

6.1 Summary of the main findings of the study

This thesis included two analysis sections. In the first analysis, in Chapter Four, four themes emerged: coming out, labels, 'who do you fuck ?' and community. The second analysis section, in Chapter five, consisted of a comparative examination of aspects of women's biographical accounts, or 'stories', from this study with those of other published theorists' writings on lesbian identity.

The first analysis provided evidence that a fair measure of diversity had indeed been achieved between this study's informants. In the section on 'coming out', it was found that although this was a process which all lesbians had some personal experience of, several factors could be identified which affected informants' accounts. These factors included: prior heterosexual identification; previous marriage; the age at which individuals acknowledged, decided or accepted their feelings for other women; the decade in which this took place; and the availability of role models.

The analysis relating to 'labels' examined the relationship between the labels that women attached to themselves and the definitions of their lesbian identity that they favoured. Again, diversity was apparent, with younger lesbians generally favouring the notion that lesbianism was primarily a sexual preference and practice, while older lesbians saw emotional bonding and companionship as either more important than or equally important as the sexual and erotic components of lesbianism.

The sexual components of lesbian identity were further examined in the section entitled 'who do you fuck?', where the relationship between informants' sexual conduct and their sexual identity was further analysed. It was found that women who had only had sexual experience with women, those who had past sexual experience with men, those who had no sexual experience with either sex, those who stated that they were lesbian but no longer desired to have a sexual relationship with another woman, and women who desired to have sexual relationships with both men and women, all identified themselves as lesbian. It was also discovered that those who refused a label denoting sexual identity or who proposed an alternative label such as bisexual or heterosexual had, or were experiencing sexual relationships with women. Analysis of women's past

heterosexual experiences indicated that informants did not always treat past sexual acts with men as necessarily significant or indicative of their 'true' sexual identity, and neither sexual desire nor emotional attachment were ultimately necessary for some women to engage in sexual acts with men. It was therefore evident that those informants who had past sexual encounters with men did not see these as posing a threat to the maintenance of their identity as lesbians. The implication of this for definitions of lesbianism are interesting, indicating greater subtlety and complexity in informants' own minds when compared with definitions given by some theorists within academic literature.

The fourth and final theme to emerge from the first section of data analysis was concerned with informants' concepts and experiences of what is commonly known as 'the lesbian community'. Although the majority of informants believed that the lesbian community existed in some form, there was a disparity between women's views of what this actually consisted of. It was found that for them community comprised various and diverse sub-sections or subcultures rather than one distinct uniform community. Younger women and those newly 'out' were more likely to desire entrance to and acceptance within these lesbian social groups. These subcultures were identified as a place of solace and support from the wider heterosexual hegemonic culture, but were also viewed by some as constraining, manipulative and authoritarian by those lesbians who disliked the rules and mores which were experienced by informants as being both obvious and subtle.

The second analysis consisted of closer examination of women's biographical accounts or their 'stories' relating to how they came to regard themselves as lesbian or to enter into lesbian relationships. Influenced by previous literature and theories of lesbian identity, this chapter attempted to compare individuals' 'stories', attributing them to the various 'groups' or 'types' of identity accounts that had previously been proposed. Throughout the chapter, I discussed the process of grouping women's accounts and proposed new 'categories' of identity accounts, interpreting these as I continued to discover differences and similarities between their 'stories'.

The major findings for this second part of the analysis differed considerably from the previous conclusions reached by the four theorists. I concentrated on the subject of lesbians' personal narratives, the 'stories' that women gave of their identity as lesbian. All these theorists identified two principal kinds of biographical account that women who identified themselves as lesbian gave. They either believed themselves to be 'born' lesbian, leading them to give a biological account of their identity, where congruence would be found between their sexual conduct, their feelings and desires and their lesbian identity; or they suggested that they had 'chosen' their sexual

identity, making a disjunction apparent between their past sexual experience and their present sexual identity, and even in some cases between their present sexual activity and their self-label of lesbian.

However, this study has identified more than two alternative biographical accounts or types of personal narratives. In Chapter Five, five differing biographical accounts were distinguished: *Destiny*; *Neo-destiny*; *Feminist*; *Bisexual*; *Sudden discovery* and *Combined*. Each of these accounts told a different story, although some similarities were discernible. The *Destiny* and *Neo-destiny* stories relied on essentialist notions of lesbian identity, which have traditionally been accepted as the dominant account by both academics and lesbians themselves. This study found that although more women gave a *Neo-destiny* story than any other, these women did not always articulate total congruence between their past sexual conduct and their present lesbian identity, although individuals often attempted to minimise this inconsistency. Those women who gave a *Destiny* story were fewer in number, and although this type of account is said by theorists to feature consistency between individuals' past and present selves, this was not found to be true in all cases. The dominance of these two groups within the lesbian subculture is probably not merely numerical; indeed, within this study they comprised barely half of all informants. Rather, it may be ideological, in that their personal narratives which embrace lesbianism as an immutable characteristic of the self serves to construct unity and minimise difference between lesbians. These two biographical accounts were challenged by the remaining three stories, especially the *Feminist* and *Bisexual* stories, as the essentialist notion of the heterosexual/homosexual binary favoured in the *Destiny* and *Neo-destiny* stories are challenged by such women who label themselves lesbian but acknowledge that they have not always done so. The existence of the other two stories, *Sudden discovery* and *Combined*, clearly show that biological accounts of sexuality cannot encompass the full range of sexualities nor identities.

The dichotomy between heterosexuality and homosexuality is so strong within Western culture that those women who cannot present their personal narrative in such a way as to maximise consistency and continuity are often rendered by lesbians who can do so, and also by some theorists, as in some way less 'authentic' lesbians. Fortunately, this study was not concerned with discovering 'authentic' or 'real' lesbians, if such a thing exists. Otherwise a great many women who did not give a biological account of their lesbianism would have been excluded from this study.

Within the five stories identified, only the *Destiny* story remained detached from any other account type. The other four stories were clustered together, overlapping with others; the demarcation between these account types was fuzzy rather than clearly defined. Personal accounts, especially those in the *Combined* story, highlighted the contradictions in individuals' own stories, although this in no way suggests that informants were not giving an accurate or truthful account of their experiences, desires and feelings, as most lesbians attempted to present their personal biographies in a logical way. Rather, this shows that most individuals' experiences are far too complex for simple theories based on essentialist notions of sexuality and identity to explain them adequately.

The concept of lesbian covers a wide variety of individuals' experiences. To be a lesbian may therefore not be an essential identity, as we do not all share the same experiences or thoughts. Rather, it could usefully be perceived as a label which draws people together and where individuals may hopefully find the freedom to construct or reconstruct their sense of who they are.

6.2 Reflections on the methodology

Like most researchers, I have learned from the experience of conducting this study and with the benefit of hindsight I would change some aspects of how it was conducted. I would have liked to have included more women from ethnic minority groups, and women who have a variety of physical dis/abilities in order to explore what, if any, differences there might have been in their experiences, compared with the white, able-bodied women who made up the majority of my informants. However, it is perhaps indicative of lesbian social networks and of patterns of discrimination within wider society as a whole that some women are less able to participate within lesbian networks or communities due to barriers of discrimination that are still firmly in place. I would also have liked the opportunity to conduct a sequence of interviews with a chosen sample of informants, which would have allowed for further clarification and detailed examination of some of the issues that arose in the course of this study. However, this would have added to the already large amount of time that was spent on the data collection, and it would have relied on informants giving up even more of their leisure time.

6.3 Suggestions for future research

We now know that a greater diversity of experiences and biographical accounts exist amongst women who label themselves as lesbian or as non-heterosexual than the 'classic' studies suggested. In order to fully understand the construction and reconstruction of lesbian identities, further research on women's changing perceptions of themselves in relation to their sexuality is

necessary. This could probably best be achieved by a qualitative longitudinal study, involving a series of interviews over an extended period, to chart personal change over time. It would be interesting to see how individuals' ideas, thoughts, feelings and sexual behaviours change as their circumstances may change. It also appears necessary, given the findings of this study regarding sexual activity and the relationship (or lack of relationship) between sexual activity and sexual identity, that further research on women's sexuality is undertaken. However, such research may well need to disregard the predetermined sexual categories which appear to be still dominant within Western culture, to liberate informants from the enduring constraints of regulation and stigmatisation concerning their sexual behaviour.

This study has shown that informants' accounts of their lesbian lives indicate greater subtlety and complexity in identifying as lesbian than some previous academic literature has implied. Personal narratives, which are central to how women construct their sense of self, may be influenced by a great many factors. Such narratives may not appear to be clearly demarcated from each other but may consist of some characteristics which are primary to other narrative accounts. Such accounts are therefore complex and cannot be fully understood if they are presented as uniform or universal.

This study also draws the conclusion that lesbian sexuality, identity and orientation may be based on a multitude of factors such as political, emotional, and sexual feelings or desires, as well as knowledge of lesbianism, social opportunity and the ability to form bonds with other women. If we are to understand the complexity of lesbians' lives we need to embrace a more multifaceted approach to sexuality, rather than attempting to explain diversity within biological, essentialist theories which minimise and constrain individuals' accounts. This is necessary if women are to be able to participate within lesbian communities, at the same time as celebrating their difference from other lesbians. It has to a certain extent embraced post-modern perspectives in suggesting that flexibility of identity exists and that sexuality can be a fluid evolving process open to change. However, for some women the notion of a lesbian identity provides a stability that is very much welcomed, and therefore I do not propose that discarding it is either appropriate or particularly useful.

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Appendix One: Kitzinger's (1987) Q-sort items for accounts of lesbian identity (pp: 94-5).

1. Being lesbian gives me a sense of freedom
2. I have enjoyed sex with men
3. My relationship with my mother helps to explain why I am a lesbian
4. I don't think it's necessary for me to tell everyone that I'm a lesbian
5. I usually see myself as either 'butch' or 'femme' in my relationship with women
6. I get on well with men
7. I find the idea of sex with men repugnant
8. If I had a choice I would never have chosen to be lesbian
9. I have been deeply in love with a man
10. I came to lesbianism through feminism
11. I have never been very 'feminine' in the conventional sense
12. I always felt different from other girls
14. I would like to think I would be faithful to my lover
15. I feel an affinity with gay men
16. If you truly love somebody then you put them first, before job, before politics, children, everything
17. I find it hard to feel sisterhood for aggressive women
18. I am/have been deeply in love with a woman
19. Unless you have had, and rejected, sex with a man, you can never be certain that you are a genuine lesbian
20. I find my lesbianism difficult to come to terms with
21. I would prefer to have been born male
22. Sometimes I wonder whether I really am a lesbian
23. Any woman who has sex willingly with a man, and enjoys it, thereby stops being a lesbian
24. I think that all lesbian relationships contain an element of mother/daughter.
25. I enjoy sex with women
26. You cannot choose to be a lesbian; if you are, you are.
27. The best thing about being a lesbian is the sheer joy of love we share; sex is secondary
28. I feel good about being 'different'
29. Sex with a woman is more physically satisfying for me than sex with a man could ever be
30. If a woman has never enjoyed sex with a woman, she cannot know she is a lesbian
31. Part of my pleasure about being a lesbian is the way it shocks people and makes them disapprove
32. There was nothing in my childhood that predisposed me to be a lesbian
33. I would be a lesbian whatever my political and ideological beliefs
34. I believe I was born a lesbian
35. Even if I never had sex with a woman I would still be a lesbian
36. Being a woman is very important to me
37. My relationship with my father helps to explain why I am a lesbian
38. My underlying sexual orientation is bisexual
39. If I loved her I would stay with a partner even if we were sexually incompatible
40. I don't like my sexuality being categorised and labelled
41. I am not interested in a long term monogamous relationship
42. Being a lesbian is much more than having sex with a woman
43. My relationships with women are more equal than I had with men
44. I think I would regret it if I never had children of my own
45. I feel angry towards heterosexual women
46. There are times when I feel my lesbianism is unnatural
47. Basically I dislike men
48. Being a lesbian has enabled me to grow up
49. Sexual enjoyment is essential to any enduring relationship
50. I find masculinity (hairy chests, hard muscular bodies) somewhat repulsive
51. I enjoy the sensuality of the female body
52. There are things that I don't like about my sexuality

53. Being a lesbian has enabled me to feel at home with my body
54. I dislike 'macho' behaviour
55. However hard I try not to, there are times when I feel ashamed that I am a lesbian
56. I feel uncomfortable in the company of men
57. I think that lesbians shouldn't have children
58. Whatever happens, I will never change my mind about being lesbian
59. Many lesbians I meet don't live up to my idea of what a lesbian should be
60. I feel most relaxed and comfortable with just women around me
61. I think I would have a happier life if I were not a lesbian

Appendix Two: Whisman's (1996) criteria for categorising Determinist, Neo-determinist, Feminist and Bisexual informants

Determinist model
Individual is aware before puberty of lesbian feelings
Lesbianism is seen as a compulsion rather than a choice
Individual has early awareness of homoerotic feelings
Identity never changes
Respondents generally recall gender non-conformity in childhood

Neo-determinist model
Do not believe that they became lesbians at the same time as they discovered it
Those who discover their lesbianism later on and who therefore experience discontinuity minimise this difference
Individuals may have felt asexual at some point in their lives due to discontinuity

Feminist model
Choose lesbianism see it as a possibility for every woman
Lesbians in feminist context are conscious of their differences from other lesbians
Few recall gender non-conformity on the same scale as determinist or neo-determinists
More likely than other models to believe they have bisexual potential

Bisexual model
More heterosexual experience than individuals within Determinist model
More likely to have had and continue to have heterosexual relations

Appendix Three: Semi-structured interview schedule

***********************Personal Background****************************

Age?

Are you in paid employment? Job title?

Have you ever been married (heterosexually)?
Have you ever previously considered yourself heterosexual or bisexual?
- When was this and for how long?

At what age did you decide/ recognise/admit that you were a lesbian?
- How and why did you come to this conclusion?
- Was there anything in particular that helped you decide or recognise?
- How did you feel after deciding/ recognising that you were a lesbian?

At what age did you have your first lesbian relationship?
- Was this a long term emotionally committed relationship/
- Are you still in this relationship?
- If you are still not in this relationship, how many lesbian relationships have you had since?

Who was the first person that you disclosed your lesbianism to?
How did they react?
- Is there anyone who you would not disclose to?
- Why?
- Are you generally open or 'out' about your sexuality?

************************Your Observations and Thoughts*********************

How do you define lesbianism, what do you think it is to be a lesbian?
What term do you prefer; lesbian, gay, queer, dyke, any other(s)?
- Why?

Does your lesbianism have any political meaning to you?
- If so, in what way?

How do you recognise a lesbian ?

Do you feel influenced by other lesbians or images of lesbians in the way you dress, how you look, how you behave?

Were you ever influenced by other lesbian/s?

What do you think of the categories 'butch' and 'femme'?
Do they have any relevance to you personally?
- In what ways are they relevant?

Can you remember the first time you went to a lesbian/gay pub/bar/club or social gathering, how did you feel?

Do you feel part of any lesbian/gay community ?

Do you see yourself as belonging to any particular group of lesbians?
- This can include any political/pressure groups, lesbian and gay organisations, social clubs, discussion groups etc.

**********Your Experiences and Relationships**********

Do you think you will ever have a heterosexual relationship in the future?

- What makes you think that?

Since identifying yourself as lesbian, and/or since engaging in same-sex relationships, have you ever had sexual relations with someone of the opposite sex?

- If yes, was this a sexual and emotional relationship?
- Are you in a relationship with a man at the moment?

If you have ever had relationships with men (sexual or sexual and emotional) do you think your relationships with women have been, or are fundamentally different?

- In what ways have they been different or similar?

Do you think your personal character would be any different if you were heterosexual?

- If yes, what differences would there be in your personal character ?

Have you ever experienced homophobia, physical/verbal or sexual ?

- Why do you think you were physically/ verbally or sexually attacked ?
- Where did this take place
- Was this by a stranger, family member, partner, friend, etc?

Appendix Four: Statistical information about informants

1. Geographical location

Area	Number of informants	As a percentage of all informants
Gloucestershire	49	54.4 %
West Midlands	10	11.1 %
Avon	6	6.6 %
Sussex	6	6.6 %
Hereford and Worcester	5	5.5 %
London	3	3.3 %
West Glamorgan	3	3.3 %
Yorkshire	2	2.2 %
Derbyshire	1	1.1 %
Wiltshire	1	1.1 %
Dorset	1	1.1 %
Somerset	1	1.1 %
Nottinghamshire	1	1.1 %
Unknown	1	1.1 %
Total	**90**	**100%**

2. Employment status

Employment	Number of informants	Percentage as total of informants
Employed	66	73.3%
Unemployed	9	10%
Student	10	11.2%
Retired	5	5.5%
Total	**90**	**100%**

3. Occupation

Employment	Number of informants	As a percentage of informants
Working with children and/or vulnerable adults (teachers, paid carers, social workers, health visitors and nurses)	25	27.7%
Various forms of skilled employment: cooks, administrators, sales assistants, lifeguard.	18	20%
Lecturers	10	11.1%
Managers: various levels	10	11.1%
Full -time students	10	11.1%
Unemployed	9	10%
Retired	5	5.5%
Self-employed	3	3.3%
Total	**90**	**100%**

4. Ages

Age group	Number of informants	Average age
18 to 30	25	25.3
31 to 40	27	35.1
41 to 50	22	43.6
51 to 60	9	53.5
61 to 80	7	68.1
Total	**90**	-

5. Past and present religious affiliation of informants (where given)

Religion	Number of informants	Past affiliation	Present affiliation
Catholic	5	3	2
Quaker	5		5
Evangelist	3	3	0
Church of England	2	1	1
M.C.C. (Metropolitan Community Church)	2		2
Muslim	1		1
Total	18	7	11

Appendix 5: Glossary of terms

Butch: A term used to refer to lesbians who appear to be overtly masculine in dress and characteristics. It is also used by some to mean a specific type of lesbian identity which rejects conventional femininity by purposefully adopting masculine attributes. 'Butch' is also said to be a term to describe strong-minded and assertive lesbians as well as being used to describe the counterpart to the 'fem' or 'femme' of a lesbian couple.

Bisexual: A term used to refer to a person of either biological sex who is erotically attracted to both women and men. Although bisexuality was 'discovered' in the 1860s by Sexologists such as Karl Heinrich Ulrich, it did not appear within medical literature until the early 1900s. People who label themselves bisexual often believe that they are caught within the middle of the heterosexual and homosexual binary and are not accepted by either heterosexual or homosexual people. Lesbian feminists and bisexual feminists have a long history of debate within the Women's Movement, and there continues to be widespread distrust of bisexual women amongst many lesbians, who see them as occupying a different political position in relation to men.

Dyke: Originally seen as a term of abuse, the word dyke was reclaimed by lesbians in the 1970s and used as a positive term to describe themselves. Although the origins of the word 'dyke' remains unknown, many dykes themselves claim it denoted 'strong, independent, self-defined women', and was used by women in the 1970s and 1980s to denote independence from men. However, others claim it is used by women who prefer to take on a male-role in partnerships with other women. Dyke remains popular today.

Femme: Sometimes also spelt 'fem'. Term used both in Britain and the United States to refer to lesbians who are overtly feminine and the counterpart of the 'butch' lesbian.

Gay: Although gay has had many meanings throughout history, including meaning cheerful and used as a name for male and female sex workers, it is now widely accepted as referring to people who engage in same-sex relationships. Although homosexual men accepted and used this term from the 1970s onwards, lesbian feminists in the 1970s, 1980s and today see gay as referring primarily to men and refuse to use the word, preferring lesbian instead.

Lesbian: One of the longest standing terms used by academics and the general public to define women whose emotional and/or sexual relationships are primarily with other women. The word 'lesbian' is said to refer to the Greek island which was the home of the poet Sappho. The first use of the word is generally accepted as being 1883 in a reference in a periodical *The Alienist and Neurologist*, when it was first used by the medical profession to denote a form of pathology. The term lesbian remains popular as a label for homosexual women, and was widely used both prior to and during the time of the Women's Liberation Movement. It is currently still popular within feminist scholarship and with women who believe their relationships with other women have a political dimension.

Queer: Two major common uses of the word 'queer' exist in the English language. The first term has been used pejoratively and generally means an individual who is viewed by other(s) as a fool, odd, or strange. The second usage of 'queer' has been chosen as a word of self-reference amongst lesbians (and gay men). Similarly to 'dyke', the term queer has been reclaimed by some as a positive term to describe their sexuality. Queer came back into vogue in the 1990s alongside 'queer politics' and 'queer theory', although for many

women the common and first usage of the term still conjures up images which make them uncomfortable about using this word to describe themselves.

Scene: Generally accepted as the term used for bars, clubs and other commercial lesbian and gay venues where lesbians (and gay men) can meet. It is also sometimes used as to describe any area where there is heightened lesbian activity.