THE DYNAMICS OF MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF
IDENTITY FOR LESBIAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate

School of The Ohio State University

By

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The Ohio State University
2003

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ABSTRACT

Developmental theorists have focused increased attention on non-heterosexual identity. This scholarship, however, often groups together gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity. It also typically considers sexual orientation as distinct from other dimensions of identity; and identity development theories are studied independent of interpersonal and cognitive development.

The purpose of this research was to explore lesbian college students' perceptions of their sexual orientation identity and how other dimensions of identity, such as race, culture, social class, gender, and religion, interact with their sexual orientation. Utilizing narrative inquiry methodology, data was collected through in-depth interviews with a diverse sample of ten traditional-aged lesbian college students at a large, public research university in the Midwest. The content of the narratives was analyzed using the constant comparative method; elements of the narratives' form were considered as well. The results were considered in relation to constructivist-developmental theory, scholarship on multiple dimensions of identity, and queer theory.

The results suggested that the construction of lesbian identity, considered in relationship with other dimensions of identity, depends on a relationship between contextual influences, meaning-making structures, and the content of identity. Meaning-making structures that emerged from the narratives ranged from: (1) unexamined satisfaction with external meaning making; and (2) gradual dissatisfaction with

insufficient external definitions; to (3) tentative internal meaning making with the possibility of retreat; and (4) appreciation for an internally defined identity. Meaning-making complexity contributed to the role of contextual influences in the construction of lesbian identity. For instance, the capacity for self-authorship facilitated the ability to maintain a peaceful co-existence between sexual orientation identity and other identity dimensions. The results also suggested that the content of lesbian identity might contribute to development of complex meaning making.

Regardless of whether identity was externally or internally constructed, the participants were most aware of interactions between sexual orientation and gender. Sexual orientation typically contributed to a more complex understanding of gender. Consistent with queer theory, the participants challenged the causal relationship between biological sex and gender. Interactions between sexual orientation and identity dimensions such as race, culture, religion, and social class greatly varied among the participants.

DEDICATION

To my parents --- thank you always for your constant and

remarkable love and support. I am so very fortunate . . .

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

"I count myself in nothing else so happy as in a soul remembering my good friends."
---Shakespeare

One of the many benefits of writing this dissertation is that it brings me face-to-face with how lucky I am to be surrounded by very good friends, an abundantly loving family, and kind and generous colleagues. Remembering these terrific people and acknowledging their help in the completion of this project truly makes me happy.

I am incredibly grateful to Susan R. Jones for her commitment to this research and always to my professional development. As my advisor and professor, you modeled for me what it means to be both rigorous and caring as a teacher. The high standards and integrity that guide your own work served as my exemplars at all stages of this project. The immense time and careful attention that you gave to my study allowed me to feel as if we were partners in this endeavor. And your genuine happiness when I was feeling good about my work, and your gentle encouragement when I was struggling, caused me to feel completely supported at all times. I could not have asked for a more ideal learning environment -- during the completion of my dissertation, as well as all four years of graduate school. I am extraordinarily lucky to have you as my mentor, teacher, colleague, and friend. Thank you.

Thank you also to my dissertation committee. Mary Ann Sagaria, thank you for challenging me to stretch myself, even when I was resistant to doing so. Bob Rodgers, thank you for always encouraging me to believe in my abilities. Debra Moddelmog,

following our first conversation about my study I knew it would be my good fortune to have you on my committee. Thank you for your willingness to venture into the Student Affairs program and for creating a safe environment for me to explore scholarship previously unfamiliar to me. Although not on my dissertation committee, I always appreciated the support of Len Baird and Helen Marks, both of whom showed much interest in my work. Many thanks also to my "long-distance committee member," Marylu McEwen. Your kind encouragement after reading early drafts of my dissertation proposal boosted my confidence in this work, and your invitation to present my research with you was truly an honor that made me feel welcomed into the profession.

My study and my sanity also improved as a result of wonderful classmates. The more frazzled I grew in the last month of writing, the more I knew Jen Gilbride-Brown would be at my side offering help. Thank you, Jen, for thoughtfully engaging with my work, asking hard questions, offering terrific insights, and showing great enthusiasm for my ideas. And, of course, thank goodness for your computer wizardry! I've heard you speak about the importance of "seeing each other through." Thanks, Jen, for seeing me through. And thank you, Emma, for patiently letting your mom spend so much time with me and for reminding me through the joy in your daily accomplishments to keep this project in perspective. And Colin, I loved your scrumptious dinners as a treat after working!

Allen Delong, thank you for all of the time you put into my dissertation while working to complete your own. The insightful questions you asked (always framed in the most encouraging way possible) helped me understand that I needed to take my work to a higher level. But above all, thank you, Allen, for four years of wonderfully honest

conversations; kind, unwavering support in all aspects of my life; and for understanding, without judging, my tendency to turn inward when deeply engaged in work. My graduate school adventure was greatly enriched by your friendship from day one.

Thank you also to the Mini-Cohort: Dan Oliver, Chris Shaffer and Allen Delong. I guess when friendships develop over a post-modern dinner party accompanied by live accordion music, Abba, and professional wrestling, they're meant to last. Thanks for your good humor and enjoyable evenings where some healthy cynicism could creep out. Nancy Tussing, your deep kindness and wise advice provided me with much needed support at precisely the right times. Thank you for genuine conversations, many dinners, and a fresh perspective on the trinity! Yan Wang, your kind remarks about my work were always a much appreciated ego boost in the midst of writing. And, Kathy Hill, thank you for all of the guidance you gave me since my first year in school, as well as for your feedback on my early thinking about this project. I appreciate the integral role you played in helping me get to this point.

Several other friends also provided wonderful support getting me to and through the dissertation process. One of the very special constants in my life has been my dear friendship with Mabel Freeman. Mabel, thank you for supporting me in countless ways as a mentor, teacher, and friend through the many twists in my life and for wisely guiding me back to graduate school. Your dedication to college students made me want to be part of the student affairs profession. And your unabashed joy as I started to find my place in the profession meant the world to me. Thank you for always opening your heart and home (and office!) to me.

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Thank you, Dianne Landrum, for your friendship since our first quarter as Ohio State undergraduates. I am so lucky that you have graced my life with your abundant kindness, patience, and humor. I will always be grateful for your generous support during my first year of graduate school and took to heart your wish that I repay you by educating future college students as best I could. Your wish inspired me to follow my heart when I selected my research topic so that I would commit my energy to it and try to make a difference. Thank you, Dianne, for sticking by me through the dissertation process and always.

Kim Bush, thank you for adding much laughter, love, and friendship to my life. Thank you for reminding me through the constant care you give to friendships that connections with people should not be sacrificed for work. Admiring the deep compassion you show toward friends and strangers, even in the face of looming deadlines, was one of the lessons I took away from the dissertation process. Thank you also for your very valuable contributions to this research, from identifying participants to carefully reading my work and providing critical feedback that improved the quality. And, of course, thank you for sharing with me the very sweet and super fetcher, Jordan.

Jill Vollman, Katie Morgan, Karen Laymance, and my dear pal, Bernie McKay, your friendship and tremendous laughter, made my decision to leave the law firm a difficult one. At the same time, the incredible enthusiasm you each showed me when I told you about my decision (or the hours you spent with me as I agonized over my decision) alleviated many of my concerns about this new path. Your immediate encouragement gave me confidence that I was heading in the right direction. And your continued encouragement throughout graduate school always came at the most

giving to others. And, to the clients whom I had the privilege of visiting each week, especially Frankie, Doug, and Paul, thank you for teaching me about the value of a grateful attitude and an appreciation for life.

Several people also provided important help throughout the dissertation process in ways that made a big difference to me. Thank you Marge Gutilla and Patience Whitworth for your thoughtful help at the early stages of this research. Your insights definitely improved the quality of the study. Thank you Ryan Poirier, MK Sagaria, and Brett Beemyn for your important help identifying research participants. Dana Derose and Lisa Ellinger, thank you for patiently and pleasantly accommodating my many last minute interview room scheduling requests and time changes. Eric Reasoner, thank you for saving me with a computer printer when I called you at the end in "crisis." Cricket Nardacci, many thanks for your super assistance with transcribing when I needed it most.

Words cannot express how deeply grateful I am for the love and support of my wonderful parents. Thank you, Mom and Dad, for the overwhelming love you have always given me through my many different life adventures. And, of course, thank you for enduring my daily phone calls while working on my dissertation, patiently listening to me as I went on and on (and on?) about timelines, deadlines, and sleepiness. Trust me, these calls kept me sane (and hopefully, they didn't have the opposite effect on you!). Thank you, and I love you.

Many thanks also to my brother, Alan Abes. Thank you not only for your generous financial support during graduate school that often eased my worries, but also for always caring about me and watching out for me. You're a darn good big brother, Alan. And, of course, thanks Grandma for being so thoroughly happy for me even

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Abes, E. S., Jackson, G., & Jones, S. R. (2002). Factors that motivate and deter
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    5-17.

Jones, S. R., & Abes, E. S. (2003). Developing student understanding of HIV/AIDS
    through community service-learning: A case study analysis. *Journal of College
    Student Development, 44*, 470-488.

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Education
Program: Educational Policy & Leadership

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

What tyranny could exceed a tyranny that dictates to the human heart, and that
attempts to dictate the public career of an honest human body? (Jordan, 2001, p.
468)

I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself
and present this as a meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of
myself. But this is a destructive and a fragmenting way to live. My fullest
concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of
who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow
back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of
externally imposed definition. (Lorde, 1984, pp. 120-121)

Late adolescence is an especially active time of identity exploration and formation

(Erikson, 1959/1980; Josselson, 1987; Marcia, 1966). In particular, traditional-aged

college students often experience significant identity development, presumably because

college provides opportunities for questioning who one is and who one wants to become

(Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Waterman, 1993). Sexual orientation identity is among

college students' many developing aspects of self. In fact, many gay, lesbian, and

bisexual students "begin or accelerate explorations of their identities during college"

(Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 90). Difficulties constructing an identity that

is not heterosexual, in the face of potential and actual discrimination, sometimes cause

obstacles that detract from students' success in college and potentially hinder other

aspects of psychosocial development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). A comprehensive

understanding of non-heterosexual identity is therefore necessary to best educate

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these students. Yet, much of the scholarship in this area does not differentiate between the development of gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity (e.g., Cass, 1979, D'Augelli, 1994). This study focused on the identity of lesbian college students, an understudied group.

Research that attends to lesbian college students infrequently considers the influence of other identity dimensions on the construction of sexual orientation identity (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Indeed, much of the identity development theory applied in the context of higher education "plucks" out one aspect of college students' identity (e.g., Cass, 1979; Cross, 1995; Helms, 1995), thus providing only partial glimpses into students' life experiences, social realities, and energies. To more deeply teach college students, and to provide a college environment most conducive to developing the whole of the student, faculty and student affairs professionals must understand students' own perceptions and definitions of the multiplicity of their identity. Thus, to offer a perspective that considers the multiplicity of identity for one group of understudied and sometimes silenced college students, this research explored lesbian college students' perceptions of their sexual orientation identity from a multidimensional perspective, including race, culture, social class, gender, and religion.

Theoretical Framework

A combination of theories and models shapes this study, guiding the development of the research questions and the collection and analysis of the data: social constructionism, lesbian identity development, the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000), queer theory, and Kegan's (1982, 1994)

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constructivist-developmental theory. A social constructionist perspective on identity presumes that identities are not biologically determined, but rather, shaped by social, cultural, political, and historical contexts and thus subject to change (Gergen, 2000; Omi & Winant, 1994). Theories of lesbian identity development suggest that lesbians progress through different stages in the process of understanding the nature and meaning of their sexual orientation identity. While these theories do not suppose uniform development (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Sophie, 1985-86), they do not account for the influence on development attributed to other dimensions of identity, such as race, culture, social class, gender, and religion.

Recognizing the relatively homogenous samples upon which theories of identity development are based, including lesbian identity, Jones and McEwen (2000) developed the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI). The MMDI offers a framework for exploring the relative salience of multiple identity dimensions and the influence of context on the fluidity of multi-dimensional identities. The MMDI informed nearly all aspects of this research. In conjunction with the MMDI, a queer theoretical perspective was utilized to more deeply probe the construction and fluidity of sexual orientation identity when considered in relationship with other dimensions of identity. Queer theory suspends the classifications of lesbian, gay, bisexual, masculine, and feminine (Pinar, 1998); challenges normal with regard to sexuality and gender (Britzman, 1997; Warner, 1999); and dismantles the heterosexual-homosexual binary (Tierney & Dilley, 1998).

Kegan's (1982, 1994) constructivist-developmental theory was utilized to explore whether lesbian college students' meaning-making capacity influenced how they perceived their sexual orientation identity, including how they described the relationship

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between their sexual orientation identity and other dimensions of their identity. Kegan's theory simultaneously considers cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development to describe a sequence of increasingly complex meaning-making capacity.

Theories of Lesbian Identity Development

Much of the existing scholarship on identity development extends from the psychological research of Erik Erikson (1959/1980). Erikson described eight stages through which identity develops over the life span. Each stage is distinguished by a psychosocial "crisis" that must be resolved by balancing the internal self with the external environment. The fifth stage, which Erikson labeled "identity versus identity diffusion," marks the transition between childhood and adulthood and is a call to resolve identity.

Several theories of gay and lesbian identity development have evolved from Erikson's work. Despite some variation among these theories, most describe sequential or cyclical stages or phases that start with an individual's awareness of being different from others and progress toward integration of one's sexual orientation into his or her overall sense of self. Only D'Augelli (1994) proposed a non-linear, social constructionist model of gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity development. These developmental models include both theories of gay and lesbian identity development in general (Cass, 1979), and lesbian identity development in particular (McFarn & Fassinger, 1996; Sophie, 1985-86). Of the studies of lesbian identity development, few concentrate on college students (Stevens, 1997; Swarthwout, 1995). A shortcoming of the developmental theories of lesbian identity is the lack of attention to the influence of multiple dimensions of identity,

such as race, social class, gender, and religion, on the meaning lesbians make of their sexual orientation identity (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Developmental theories of lesbian identity are generally based on racially homogenous samples of white women (McCarn & Fassinger) and thus exclusive of varied experiences.

A Multidimensional Perspective on Lesbian Identity

Limited research exists on the relationship between lesbian identity and other dimensions of identity, such as race, culture, social class, gender, and religion. Much of the research that does explore such relationships considers race, culture, and sexual orientation (Chan, 1989; Espin, 1987; Esterberg, 1997; Loiacano, 1989). These studies documented the struggles of lesbians with multiple minority identity dimensions to integrate their identities into a cohesive whole, often a result of perceived racism and heterosexism within conflicting dimensions of their identities. Narratives by lesbians of color revealed similar struggles as those described in the empirical work (Smith, 1982; Trujillo, 1991), and expressed a longing for the power associated with such integration (Anzaldua, 1999; Lorde, 1984). A few studies considered the interaction between lesbian identity and gender, exploring lesbian feminism (Stein, 1997) and the social construction of gender (Weston, 1996). Esterberg (1997) explored the relationship between social class and lesbian identity, revealing inner-conflicts in how some lesbians grappled with their identities as they negotiated both privileged and non-privileged identity dimensions. The relationship between religion and lesbian identity has been explored primarily through personal narratives (e.g., Balka & Rose, 1989; Beck, 1989a; Luizzi, 2001).

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Within this body of literature, only one study considered relationships among lesbian college students' multiple dimensions of identity. As a small component of her grounded theory study of critical incidents in the lesbian identity development of college students, Stevens (1997) explored the influence of race, social class, religion, and gender on lesbian identity development. Stevens's study, however, is limited by its racially homogeneous sample and limited participant discussion of religion and class. In-depth research on lesbian college students' perceptions of their sexual orientation from a multidimensional identity perspective is needed.

Multiple Identity Dimensions of College Students

A natural point of departure for studying lesbian identity from a multidimensional perspective is the research on multiple dimensions of identity among college students. Only a few studies have considered the relationship among dimensions of identity for college students, including Jones (1997), Kiely (1997), and Stewart (2001). Jones (1997) explored the multiple dimensions of identity of a diverse group of women college students, concluding that context influenced identity construction and that difference and privilege mediated the salience of various dimensions of identity. Her study led to the development of the first model of college students' multiple identity dimensions. Expanding on Jones (1997), Jones and McEwen (2000) developed a conceptual model of students' multiple dimensions of identity, including race, sexual orientation, culture, gender, and social class, each of which was considered a social construction. Their Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) describes the dynamic construction of identity and the influences of changing contexts on the relative salience of multiple

identity dimensions. It is fitting to use the MMDI to study lesbian identity from a

multidimensional perspective. Not only does the model provide a rich understanding of

the relative salience of identity dimensions and the fluidity of multi-dimensional

identities, but it also is a valuable tool for exploring how the interaction of multiple

identity dimensions contributes to the complexity and fluidity of each of the individual

dimensions, including sexual orientation.

<center>Pushing the Multiplicities of Identity: Queer Theory</center>

While the MMDI is helpful for studying lesbian identity from a multidimensional

perspective, the construction of lesbian identity and the nature of interactions among

identity dimensions might become even more apparent when considered from a queer

theoretical perspective. Queer theory disrupts notions of normal with respect to sexuality

and gender (Britzman, 1997; Tierney & Dilley, 1998; Warner, 1999) and dismantles the

heterosexual-homosexual binary (Sedgwick, 1992). Queer theory also suspends identity

categories based on the suppositions that identity is performed and therefore unstable

(Butler, 1991) and comprised of fluid differences rather than a unified essence (Fuss,

1989). Categories are insufficient because identity is "continually assumed and

immediately called into question . . . with multiple and contradictory meanings" (Fuss, p.

98).   Queer theory's perspective on identity provides fertile ground for exploring the

construction and perceptions of lesbian identity when multiple dimensions of identity are

simultaneously considered.

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Lesbian Identity Within Constructivist-Developmental Theory

Given the complexity associated with negotiating fluid and sometimes conflicting dimensions of identity, the meaning lesbian college students make of their sexual orientation identity is likely influenced by other domains of their development. Kegan's (1982, 1994) constructivist-developmental theory provides a useful analytic approach for further probing the construction of a multidimensional identity. Constructivist-developmental theorists study the transformation in how people construct meaning, and consider cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions as part of a single mental activity rather than separate entities. Constructivist-developmental research describes the interrelationship among these three domains and the progression of each from simple to complex. Kegan's model consists of five orders of consciousness, each of which integrates cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal development, representing increasingly complex ways of making meaning (Kegan, 1994).

The third order of consciousness is most prevalent among college students (Baxter Magolda, 1999). The third order is characterized by making meaning through concrete relationships and referent groups to which one's own interests are subordinated in favor of group loyalty (Kegan, 1994). The identity of a person who makes meaning at the third order is defined by her relationships, and no process exists for negotiating among these relationships when they conflict with one another. Fewer college students make meaning at the fourth order (Baxter Magolda). The fourth order is characterized by the ability to author one's own life. A self-authoring person develops a personal ideology that coordinates and integrates multiple values and beliefs, allowing for personal

authority over one's own identity (Kegan). Existing research on lesbian identity does not consider the relationship between meaning-making structures and identity construction from a multidimensional perspective. This study initiates that important area of inquiry.

Purpose and Design of the Study

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore lesbian college students' perceptions of their sexual orientation identity and how dimensions of identity such as religion, race, culture, gender, and social class interacted with their sexual orientation. The focus of this study was on students' own understanding of their identity, rather than on externally imposed definitions. Although the primary focus was sexual orientation identity, the purpose was not to "pluck out" one aspect of identity for study (Lorde, 1984), but rather, to consider interactions among identity dimensions for a diverse group of lesbian college students. At the same time, I recognize that the dimensions of identity I chose to study represent only a few of the many aspects of the participants' identities. For instance, I did not consider aspects of identity such as disability and age. Although this study focused on identity as multidimensional, it does not purport to portray the whole of each participant's identity.

Guiding Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

(1) How do lesbian college students describe and make meaning of their sexual orientation identity?

(2) Do lesbian college students' multiple dimensions of identity, such as religion, race, culture, gender, and social class, influence how they describe and make meaning of their sexual orientation identity?

(3) Which dimensions of identity are most salient for lesbian college students? In what ways, if any, do dimensions of identity influence the salience of other dimensions?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is its potential to expand theoretical possibilities by examining how dimensions of identity, such as race, culture, social class, gender, and religion, mediate how lesbian college students make meaning of their sexual orientation identity. By doing so, this research has the potential to add diverse perspectives to existing theories of lesbian identity development based on homogenous samples. By considering the relationship between the construction of lesbian identity and constructivist-developmental theory, this research also has the potential to explain how meaning-making structures interact with sexual orientation identity construction, including construction from a multidimensional perspective. The results are not limited to lesbian identity, but open doors for continued explorations of relationships between self-authorship and development of multiple identities. Expanding theory in these respects will better enable faculty and student affairs professionals to create contexts that foster the development of a diverse population of lesbian college students.

Research Design

The epistemological assumptions guiding this study were grounded in subjectivism, which assumes multiple realities and the mutual construction of knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Subjectivism was well-matched with this study because it

allowed me to understand lesbian identities through the meanings the participants made of their identity rather than attempting to fit their identity into fixed categories. The theoretical framework was constructivism. Constructivism "assumes the relativism of multiple social realities, recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aims toward interpretive understandings of subjects' meanings" (Charmaz, 2000, p. 510). A constructivist approach enabled me to understand how the participants made meaning of their sexual orientation identity in a comprehensive and multidimensional manner.

Methodologically, narrative inquiry was utilized to gather and analyze lesbian college students' stories regarding their sexual orientation. Narrative inquiry allows for studies of human experience through the stories people tell (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Riessman, 2002) and is frequently cited as especially appropriate for studies of identity (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997; Lieblich, et al.; Riessman). Stories were gathered through three in-depth semi-structured interviews with each participant. Numerous approaches to narrative analysis exist (Lieblich et al.; Riessman). The approach to narrative analysis that I used was predominantly categorical-content, with some attention to the form of the stories (Lieblich et al.). This combined analytic approach, which relied on the constant comparative method of data analysis, enabled me to explore themes derived from the content and to a lesser extent the form of the stories within and across the participants. These themes formed the basis of the construction of individual narratives for each of the participants, as well as the underlying story that spanned the individual narratives.

Definition of Terms

I use a few important terms throughout the dissertation that warrant clarification. As used in this study, *identity dimensions* are socially constructed aspects of identity, the meaning of which changes depending on cultural, historical, and social factors (Jones & McEwen, 2000; Weber, 1998). They are social identities, which are "constructions of self that relate the person to some collective group or category" (Deaux & Ethier, 1998, p. 301). Dimensions of identity discussed in this study include race, culture, social class, gender, and religion. *Identity salience* refers to the extent to which participants perceived dimensions of their identity as important to their sense of self (Jones & McEwen, 2000). As used in this study, *interactions of identity dimensions* refer to relationships among dimensions of identity. The participants perceived certain interactions; they did not perceive other interactions. Intersections among identity dimensions refer to one type of interaction. I use the term intersections to describe the participants' perceptions of the inseparability of dimensions of identity.

My use of *meaning-making structures* is grounded in Kegan's (1982, 1994) constructivist-developmental theory. A meaning-making structure refers to "the organizing principle we bring to our thinking and our feelings and our relating to others and our relating to parts of ourselves" (Kegan, 1994, p. 29). Structures refer to how people organize meaning, not the content of the meaning. When I refer to a participant "making meaning" of her identity, this calls attention to her reliance on a particular structure for doing so. I frequently refer to the participants' *constructions of identity*. I

broadly use construction to refer to the processes of shaping, understanding, and negotiating identity. As discussed in Chapter 5, meaning-making structures influence the process of identity construction.

Explanation of Language

Realizing that language constructs reality, my choice of language as I told the participants' stories was an important consideration. It is therefore necessary that I explain my use of the word "lesbian." Throughout the dissertation, I typically refer to lesbian identity. While most of the participants described their sexual orientation as lesbian, a few preferred gay, queer, or dyke. One participant identified at the time of the study as bisexual despite her stronger attraction to women than men. When I told each of the individual participant's narratives, I used the language that she preferred to describe her identity. However, I typically used the word lesbian when I discussed the participants in the aggregate; when I discussed the literature on sexual orientation identity; and when I discussed the findings in relationship to existing literature. Despite the many shortcomings of my choice of language, my use of the word lesbian was intended to include all of the participants.

Conclusion

I initially designed this study anticipating greater understanding of the relationships among lesbian college students' multiple dimensions of identity. The participants' willingness to generously share rich stories from their lives not only offered insights into these relationships, but also provided a broader understanding of the

complexity of the identity construction process.   It is my hope that the privilege I enjoyed of conducting this study with ten women eager to share their struggles and successes contributes to educational theory and practice that foster lesbian college students' ability to negotiate this complex process.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature relevant to the theoretical

perspectives upon which this study was based. This chapter begins with an overview of

Erikson's landmark theory of identity development, followed by a review of several

theories of gay and lesbian identity development. The chapter then examines the

scholarship on the relationship between lesbian identity and other dimensions of identity,

such as race, culture, social class, gender, and religion. Research on the multiple identity

dimensions of college students is then reviewed, followed by an overview of some of the

basic tenets of queer theory. This chapter concludes with a review of Kegan's

constructivist-developmental theory and its utility for understanding how lesbian college

students make meaning of their sexual orientation identity.

Perspectives on Identity

Erikson's Theory of Identity Development

An abundance of scholarship on identity development extends from the work of

Erik Erikson (1959/1980). In his description of identity, Erikson stated that individuals

have an internal relationship with themselves and external relationships with others.

Identity "connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (selfsameness) and a

persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others" (p. 109). The most apparent characteristics of a growing sense of identity are "a feeling of being home in one's body, a sense of 'knowing where one is going,' and an inner assuredness of anticipated recognition from those who count" (pp. 127-128). Such a sense of identity is repeatedly lost and regained, but with time, "more lasting and more economical" methods of maintenance and restoration develop (pp. 127-128).

Erikson described eight stages through which identity develops over the life span. Each stage is distinguished by a psychosocial "crisis" that must be resolved by balancing the internal self with the external environment. The first four stages occur during childhood to form the basis of identity. The fifth stage, which Erikson labeled "identity versus identity diffusion," marks the transition between childhood and adulthood and is a call to define the self and resolve identity. This fifth stage is most frequently referred to when examining college student identity development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Erikson explained that resolution of identity is essential to adulthood and is dependent on achievements such as wholeness, autonomy, differentiation of self from others, separation from family, and making commitments in career choice and relationships.

Although influential, Erikson's work has been critiqued for its over-reliance on samples of white, middle-class males (Josselson, 1987) and exclusion of non-heterosexual identity (D'Augelli, 1994). For instance, in his discussion of the sixth stage of identity development, intimacy versus isolation, Erikson spoke only to the development of intimate relationships between men and women. D'Augelli (1994) argued that the result of privileging heterosexual relationships is that gay and lesbian

identities are considered deviant. These limitations to Erikson's scholarship reflect the time period in which he conducted his research and do not detract from his work as foundational for more recent scholarship.

Identity as Socially Constructed

While Erikson's theory describes interaction between the environment and identity, a social constructionist perspective on identity focuses even greater attention on the relationship between external factors and identity formation. Rather than focusing on the stages of identity development, a social constructionist perspective considers identity as socially, historically, politically, and culturally constructed (Omi & Winant, 1994). In the context of sexual orientation identity, one of the tenets of social constructionism is the absence of "objective, culture-independent categories of sexual orientation -- no one is independent of a culture, a heterosexual or a homosexual" (Stein, 1992b, p. 340). Beyond this response to the dominant essentialist position, social constructionism also theorizes on how the meaning of sexual desires are constructed and produced (Stein).

Gergen (2000) expanded on the concept of socially constructed identities, suggesting that identities are relational and as people develop numerous relationships in an increasingly complex society, it becomes "difficult to recall precisely to what core essence one must remain true" (p. 150). Rather than being committed to a single, fixed identity, Gergen explained:

> Selves have become increasingly populated with the character of others. We are not one, or a few, but like Walt Whitman, we 'contain multitudes' . . . All the selves lie latent, and under the right conditions may spring to life . . . one's identity is continuously emergent, re-formed, and redirected as one moves through the sea of ever-changing relationships. In the case of 'Who am I?' it is a teeming world of provisional possibilities. (pp. 71, 139)

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To varying degrees, Erikson's theory of identity and a social constructionist perspective have guided the formation of theories of gay and lesbian identity development. Two of these developmental theories, which are among the most widely cited, are described in the next section.

Theories of Gay and Lesbian Identity Development

Cass's Stage Theory of Gay and Lesbian Identity Development

Cass's (1979) six-stage model of lesbian and gay identity development is often the starting point for research in this area of inquiry. Consistent with Erikson's research, movement through Cass's six stages depends in part on the person's attempt to resolve inconsistencies between perceptions of the self and others. At each stage it is possible to experience identity foreclosure where development is stalled. Recognizing that not all people will experience precisely the same developmental path, Cass intended her model to describe a general pattern of development rather than a precise formula. Cass (1984) empirically tested her model using a sample of 103 men and 63 women and surmised that developmental approaches are likely different between the two sexes.

The six stages in Cass's model are as follows:

(1) Identity Confusion: This stage begins with the person's first awareness of gay or lesbian thoughts, feelings, and attractions. The person typically feels confused and experiences turmoil. Reactions to this confusion are mixed, often with positive reactions leading to further development and negative reactions leading to foreclosure.

(2) Identity Comparison: In this stage, the person accepts the possibility of being gay or lesbian and examines the wider implications of that tentative commitment. Cass

described several approaches used to address this new realization, including seeking out other gay and lesbian individuals to learn what this status means; having a private gay or lesbian identity while maintaining a public heterosexual identity; or trying to change or inhibit gay or lesbian behavior.

(3) <u>Identity Tolerance</u>: The person acknowledges that he or she is likely gay or lesbian and seeks out other gay and lesbian people to combat feelings of isolation. The nature of this interaction with others who are gay and lesbian often determines how the individual feels about his or her sexual orientation identity.

(4) <u>Identity Acceptance</u>: At this stage, the person attaches a positive connotation to his or her gay or lesbian identity and accepts rather than tolerates it. There is increased contact with other gay and lesbian people, with whom the individual prefers socializing. The norms of social groups influence the manner in which the person presents him or herself in heterosexual society. Some people choose to pass as heterosexual; some disclose their identity to selected heterosexuals; and others may be more public about their identity.

(5) <u>Identity Pride</u>: The person dichotomizes the world into heterosexuals and homosexuals, and becomes immersed in the gay and lesbian subculture while minimizing contact with heterosexuals. The person acquires a sense of pride in his or her identity and becomes angry with heterosexual society, often resulting in public and vocal activism.

(6) <u>Identity Synthesis</u>: The person integrates his or her sexual identity with all other aspects of self, and sexual orientation becomes only one aspect of self rather than the entire identity. The homosexual and heterosexual worlds become less dichotomized, and people are judged individually rather than based on their sexual orientation.

D'Augelli's Social Constructionist Theory of Gay,
Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity Development

Adopting a social constructionist perspective, D'Augelli (1994) proposed a theoretical model of gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity development. Introducing his model, D'Augelli stated that gay and lesbian identity development models that extend from Erikson's work reinforce the heterosexist belief that "'normal' development is heterosexual and that deviations from this identity are 'unnatural,' 'disordered,' or 'dysfunctional'" (p. 314). D'Augelli (1994) relied on a human development perspective, which considers identity to be a social construction and recognizes that people shape rather than passively receive their life circumstances.

The major characteristics of the human development perspective and the way in which D'Augelli applied them to sexual orientation identity development are: (1) *developmental change occurs over the entire lifespan*: the development of sexual orientation is a lifelong and changing process conditioned by social, family, and personal expectations; (2) *developmental plasticity*: humans are responsive to environmental factors and physical changes and therefore "sexual identity may be very fluid at certain times in the life span and more crystallized at others" (p. 320); (3) *interindividual differences in the development of intraindividual behavior*: individuals are unique in their development and development is influenced by external factors; and (4) *individual impact on development:* individuals have the power to direct their own development, although many obstacles often stand in the way of gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity.

In addition to these four characteristics, D'Augelli offered three factors that influence the identity development process: (1) personal subjectivities and actions,

including personal meanings about sexual orientation identity and sexual behaviors; (2) interactive intimacies, including parents, family, peers, and partnerships; and (3) sociohistorical connections, including social customs, policy, law, and cultural concepts. Based on the assumptions of the human development perspective, D'Augelli proposed the following model that involves six non-linear, content driven processes: (1) exiting heterosexual identity (2) developing a personal lesbian-gay-bisexual identity status; (3) developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual social identity; (4) becoming a lesbian-gay-bisexual offspring; (5) developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual intimacy status; and (6) entering a lesbian-gay-bisexual community.

Theories of Lesbian Identity Development

Lesbian Identity Development

While Cass and D'Augelli proposed models of gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity development, a few models specifically address the development of lesbian identity. Sophie (1985-86) tested stage theories of gay and lesbian identity development created in the 1970s and early 1980s, including Cass (1979), to determine their applicability to lesbian identity development. She used qualitative methods to study 13 self-identified lesbians ages 18-40, all but one of whom were white. In general, she found great variation in the order and timing of events predicted in the stage theories; and some predicted events did not occur at all. For instance, variation existed in whether self-definition preceded or followed contact with other lesbians; disclosure to others occurred at different times; and differences existed in the timing of self-identification as a lesbian and entering into a lesbian relationship.

Sophie explained that stage models described the development of these women fairly well only because of their generality, but that broad theory did not adequately represent the specifics of each woman's development. She suggested that the most significant shortcoming in the developmental models is the presumption of linearity. Linear development occurred at the early stages of development. Beyond those stages, the women's development moved in many directions, including the abandonment of a lesbian identity. Based on her findings, she proposed four general developmental stages: first awareness, testing and exploration, identity acceptance, and identity integration. Sophie explained that the notion of a fixed identity should be replaced by the recognition of fluidity in sexual identity. She concluded that the development of lesbian identity is sensitive to prevailing societal attitudes toward homosexuality and the availability of supportive people.

McCarn and Fassinger (1996) proposed a model of lesbian identity development that "posits a dual nature of lesbian identity as an *individual sexual identity* that results in *membership in an oppressed minority group*" (p. 509, emphasis in original). After reviewing several identity development models, McCarn and Fassinger proposed a model that distinguishes between these two processes of lesbian identity development. The "individual sexual identity" and the "group membership identity" developmental paths each have four phases that are "reciprocally catalytic but not simultaneous" (p. 521). Rather than presuming linearity, the developmental process is conceived as "continuous and circular" (p. 522) in which new issues are raised with new relationships and new contexts. McCarn and Fassigner also distinguished their developmental model from

others in that it does not assume disclosure as evidence of developmental advancement, except to some extent as the last phase of group identity. They de-emphasized disclosure because of differences in environmental pressures.

The four phases of "Individual Sexual Identity" development and "Group Membership Identity" developmental branches are the same. Although development through these branches does not necessarily happen simultaneously, each process may influence the other. The phases are generally defined as follows for "Individual Sexual Identity" development:

(1) awareness: "a general feeling of being different or awareness of feelings or desires that are different from the heterosexual norm" (p. 522);

(2) exploration: actively examining questions arising in the first phase; "involves strong relationships with or feelings about other women or another woman in particular" (p. 522); involves exploration of sexual feelings but not necessarily sexual behavior;

(3) deepening/commitment: "deepening of self-knowledge and the crystallization of some choices about sexuality" (p. 522); and

(4) internalization/synthesis: "fuller self-acceptance of desire/love for women as part of her overall identity" (p. 523).

The phases are generally defined as follows for "Group Membership Identity" development:

(1) awareness: "awareness that heterosexuality is not a universal norm and that people exist who have different sexual orientations" (p. 524);

(2) exploration: a woman defines her position in relation to the reference group in terms

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of attitudes and membership; "characterized by active pursuit of knowledge about lesbian/gay people, in terms of both the group as a whole and the possibility of one's belonging in the group" (p. 524);

(3) deepening: "deepening awareness of both the unique value and oppression of the lesbian/gay community . . . involves a commitment to create a personal relationship to the reference group, with awareness of possible consequences involved" (p. 525); and

(4) internalization/synthesis: internalization of identifying as a member of a minority group and synthesizes it into her self-concept. Politicalization is not necessary in this phase but social awareness of her own oppression is necessary.

<u>Lesbian Identity Development of College Students</u>

Two studies explored the development of lesbian identity in the context of college students. Stevens's (1997) grounded theory study explored the critical incidents that eleven undergraduate women who identified as lesbian, ages 19-26, perceived as significant to the development of their lesbian identities. In general, the "incidents and transition periods created a progressive, cyclical, and infinite depiction of lesbian identity formation" (p. 261). Stevens identified three broad primary components of identity development: (1) differentiation: "when the women first experienced challenges to their pre-conceived notions of homosexuality and changes in their perceptions of self" (p. 261); (2) incorporation: the women claimed a lesbian identity and "incorporated this identity into their perception of self and frequently felt consumed by it"; and (3) integration: "the lesbian identity became one aspect of a larger, more holistic sense of self" (p. 261). Individual differences existed in this general process of development, including the age at which they identified as lesbian, the length of time it took to identify

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as lesbian, the role of critical incidents, and the manner in which they defined their lesbian identities.

Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, Swartwout (1995) explored the lesbian identity development of college students in relation to Cass's model of gay and lesbian identity development. With a sample of 135 self-identified lesbian students from 23 diverse colleges and universities, Swartwout explored the relationship between Cass's (1979) stages of lesbian identity development and developmental issues as described by the adapted Penn State Lesbian/Gay Life Course Questionnaire (D'Augelli, 1991). Using analysis of variance, Swartwout found a significant relationship between stages of development and the participants' willingness to disclose their sexual orientation. She also found a significant relationship between stages of development and the women's use of tactics to disguise sexual identity, such as failing to introduce a partner or changing a pronoun for a partner. The findings were consistent with Cass's model in that participants in the later stages of development were more likely to disclose their sexual orientation than those in earlier stages. Interviews with nine of the women supported these findings.

Lesbian Identity From a Multidimensional Perspective

A shortcoming of the developmental theories of lesbian identity is the lack of attention to how other dimensions of identity, such as race, social class, gender, and religion, interact with the meaning made of sexual orientation identity. Although Stevens (1997) and Swartwout (1995) considered some of these identity dimensions, they relied on relatively racially homogeneous samples of white women. Limited research and personal narratives outside of the developmental context described relationships between

lesbian identity and other dimensions of identity. Without purporting to be an exhaustive review, some of the research and narratives are reviewed in this section.

<u>Race, Ethnicity, Culture</u>

Much of the scholarship on the relationship between lesbian identity and other dimensions of identity considers race, ethnicity, and culture. A few studies were conducted in the late eighties that examined the relationship between race and sexual orientation. The results of each of these studies suggested that lesbians and gay men with a minority racial identity, desired to integrate their race and sexual orientation identities and felt more whole when they did so. Integration of their identities infrequently occurred, however, often a result of heterosexism within their racial group and racism within their sexual orientation group.

Espin (1987) studied how Latina lesbians integrated their ethnicity and sexual orientation in the process of identity formation. She surveyed sixteen Cuban lesbians living in the United States, ages 23-45, representing a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. The respondents expressed a desire to integrate their lesbian and Latina identities, but were able to do so with varying degrees of success. Although they regretted their decision, most respondents chose to associate with Anglo lesbians more than with heterosexual Latinos, because they were more comfortable with their race among Anglo lesbians than they were with their sexual orientation among Latinos. Although racism and heterosexism caused the respondents to choose between their identities, most felt more whole in situations where they could integrate their identities. As one of the respondents stated, "eating black beans and rice while speaking in Spanish with other Latina lesbians makes those beans taste like heaven" (p. 48).

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Loiacano (1989) surveyed and interviewed three black lesbians and three black gay men, ages 25-51, all but one of whom had at least a bachelor's degree, in a large metropolitan area regarding the integration of their racial and sexual orientation identities. The results suggested difficulty maintaining and integrating their dual identities. Specifically, the participants struggled to find validation with a predominantly white gay and lesbian community at the same time that they lacked support within the predominantly heterosexual black community. They sought out opportunities through which they could integrate these dual identities, primarily organizations for black gay men and lesbians.

Chan (1989) surveyed nineteen Asian-American lesbians and sixteen Asian-American gay men, ages 21-36, regarding the factors that affected their decision to identify with their race and sexual orientation identities. The surveys were distributed at events sponsored by organizations for Asian American gay men and lesbians. Chan found that the participants struggled to incorporate their dual identities. When required to choose, most of the respondents identified more strongly with their sexual orientation than their race, but preferred to acknowledge both aspects of their identity. Several of the respondents had not come out to their parents and found it harder to come out to Asian Americans than to white Americans because of Asian American cultural values that defined traditional roles for men and women. At the same time, a majority of the respondents reported that they felt stereotyped or unacknowledged in the predominantly white lesbian and gay community. Most of the participants believed they would feel more complete if they could simultaneously identify with both aspects of their identity.

More recently, Ferguson (1995) studied the relationship among racial, gender, and lesbian identity. Ferguson surveyed 181 self-identified African American lesbians regarding their racial, womanist, and sexual orientation identities, as well as their personal and collective self-esteem. The participants ranged in age from 18-72, with a median age of 45. The results revealed that higher personal self-esteem tended to be correlated with having encountered an event that caused the respondents to realize for the first time the meaning of identifying as black or as a woman. However, attitudes about their lesbian identity were not related to self-esteem.

Ferguson suggested that it might have been possible that "the consequences of openly committing to a lesbian community within the African American community may cause lesbians to diminish the importance of a lesbian identity to their self-esteem" (p. 150). For some women in the process of developing racial, ethnic, and gender identities at the same time as coming out as a lesbian, the effects of racism, heterosexism, and sexism may impact their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral transitions relative to developing any one of their identities (Ferguson). Ferguson surmised that many of the African American lesbians in her study might have been in a "continual recycling process in which they retain ties with all three social identities and communities, but to greater or lesser degrees" (p. 150).

Esterberg (1997) used interviews and surveys to study the relationship between racial and lesbian identity. Her sample included 120 self-identified lesbian and bisexual women in a college town, ages 20-54, 43 of whom were interviewed and 77 of whom completed surveys. Four of the women interviewed and 15 surveyed were women of color. Most had a college degree. Her findings revealed the influence of racism and

white privilege among lesbians (Esterberg). Most of the white women gave little thought to their race, while a few were concerned with how they perpetuated racism. The women concerned with racism also considered themselves activists with regard to their sexual orientation. All of the women of color were aware of the relationship between their race and sexual orientation. Some connected on an individual basis with other lesbians of color. Others stressed the importance of also connecting with white lesbians since the lesbian community is so small. One African American lesbian felt disconnected with heterosexual African American women because of what she perceived as conflicts between her lesbian identity and her identity as a black woman. Yet she was uncertain whether she was experiencing heterosexism or classism because she was perceived by other black women as middle class since she was a graduate student. Commenting on how white privilege and racism influenced lesbian identity, Esterberg stated:

> Although many of the white women felt strongly about challenging racism both among white lesbians and in the wider community, they did not need to incorporate into their core selves a specific racial identity and they could, without penalty, simply not think about race much at all. . . .   When White women had difficulty making connections with others in the lesbian community, they did not wonder if that difficulty was connected to their race or ethnicity, but instead looked to other reasons. (p. 107)

Other than Ferguson (1995) and Esterberg (1997), the research described above relied primarily on surveys based on small samples and therefore offers a narrow perspective on the integration of multiple identities. In addition to that limited work, several narratives authored by lesbians of color more richly portray themes of racism and heterosexism. Many of these narratives grew out of the political work of The Combahee

River Collective, which was founded in 1975 as a chapter of the National Black Feminist Organization to break the silence about homophobia among black people (The Combahee River Collective, 1995).

Acknowledging the difficulty for black women to explore their homophobia, Smith (1982) explained: "heterosexual privilege is usually the only privilege that Black women have. None of us have racial or sexual privilege, almost none of us have class privilege, maintaining 'straightness' is our last resort" (p. 171). Despite their lack of privileges, Lorde (1984) railed against the rejection of lesbians by black women who considered identifying as a lesbian to be a white woman's problem and black lesbians to be "a threat to black nationhood . . . consorting with the enemy . . . basically unblack" (Lorde, p. 290). More recently, Collins (1991) argued that Black lesbians have been silenced about black lesbian relationships because Eurocentric male thinking has categorized Black lesbians as the "ultimate Other . . . by which other groups measure their own so-called normality" (p. 194). Collins explained that Black lesbians fall significantly short in terms of Lorde's mythical norm: "white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure" (Lorde, p. 116).

Trujillo (1991) theorized that Chicana lesbians struggle to integrate their dual identities because they are perceived as a threat to the Chicano community. "Their existence disrupts the established order of male dominance, and raises the consciousness of many Chicana women regarding their own independence and control" (p. 281). Chicana culture teaches that women's sexuality must conform to repressed and passive behavior, and women are often taught to dislike their bodies (Trujillo). To integrate their

race and sexual orientation identities, "A Chicana lesbian must learn to love herself, both as a woman and a sexual being, before she can love another" (p. 282).

Trujillo (1991) further explained that some Chicana women have also been socialized to believe that they must be connected to a man and be a mother in order to be a complete woman. Chicana lesbians also face potential rejection by the largely Catholic Chicano community. The existence of Chicana lesbians is a challenge to the cultural norms and is often perceived as selling out to Anglo culture. Coming out as lesbian is often painful for Chicana women who fear the loss of family and community (Trujillo).

Anzaldua (1999), a self-described chicana dyke-feminist, discussed the theory of mestiza consciousness. Genetically, a mestiza is defined as a Chicana with both Native American and European descent (Anzaldua). Most simply stated, Anzaldua's theory of mestiza consciousness refers to the ability of a Chicana to bring together her multiple identities into a new, integrated identity. Anzaldua explained:

> That focal point or fulcrum, that juncture where the mestiza stands, is where phenomena tend to collide . . . In attempting to work out a synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That element is a new consciousness - a mestiza consciousness. (pp. 101-102)

Commenting on the difficulty of integrating her multiple identity dimensions, Anzaldua stated:

> Being a mestiza queer person . . . is having and living in a lot of worlds, some of which overlap. . . . .each world with its own peculiar and distinct inhabitants, not comfortable in anyone of them, none of them 'home,' yet none of them 'not home' either. (p. 528)

Integrating multiple identities necessitates a heightened appreciation of ambiguity (Anzaldua, 1999).

<center>Gender</center>

While most of the scholarship on the relationship between lesbian identity and

other dimensions of identity has focused on racial and ethnic identity, a few studies have

considered the relationship with gender identity (Stein, 1997; Stevens, 1997; Weston,

1996). Stein's research built on the theories espoused by lesbian feminists of the 1970s.

Lesbian feminism emphasized the connection between gender and sexual orientation and

encouraged a social constructionist perspective on lesbian identity (Stein, 1992a). It

emerged out of radical sectors of the 1970s women's movement and sought to transform

lesbianism from a medical condition into a collective identity, and produced the most

visible lesbian culture that had existed to date in the United States (Stein). A classic

product of lesbian feminist scholarship is Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality

and Lesbian Existence" (1980), which defined lesbian identity in terms of politics rather

than sexuality. Rich introduced the concept of a "lesbian continuum," which includes all

women who resist patriarchy. A vocal lesbian feminist, Faderman (1984) equated lesbian

identity with politics, arguing that women chose to be lesbians as a critique of

heterosexual and patriarchal norms. Lesbian feminism was criticized in the late 1970s for

its failure to consider differences among lesbians attributed to race, social class, and

ethnicity, which caused "communities of intimacy" to become "communities of

exclusion" (Stein, 1992a, p. 559).

Using a feminist framework and life history methodology, Stein (1997) examined

shifts in the social construction of lesbian identity from the 1970s through the 1990s to

understand how lesbians made sense of their lives from a historical context, in particular,

the influence of lesbian feminism on identity. She interviewed more than forty self-

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identified lesbians, including a cohort of women born between 1945-1961 and a cohort born between 1961-1971. Women of color comprised 20 percent of the sample, and 30 percent of the sample identified as working-class. Among Stein's findings was a "de-centered" sense of community among lesbians in the younger cohort that does not hinge on a connection between lesbianism and feminism (p. 185). Several lesbian organizations and projects exist, but there is no dominant logic or center to these projects. Lesbians coming of age in the 1990s located themselves both inside and outside dominant culture, felt loyalty to diverse lesbian organizations and projects, and often were aware that race, class, and gender complicated their identities (Stein).

Some of the college students in Stein's sample who were familiar with poststructuralist and postmodernist theories of gender and sexuality suggested that cross-gender practices such as drag are "subversive acts that undermine the illusion of a coherently gendered self" (Stein, 1997, p. 193). Many of these women who rejected gender binaries identified with the "indeterminacy and irony at the heart of the queer project," yet did not fully embrace a queer identity as they integrated some form of feminism into their lives, realizing that women continue to lag behind men in terms of equality (Stein).

Studying multiple influences on the construction of gender, rather than the role of feminism, Weston (1996) compiled a series of forty narratives exploring various perspectives on the intersection of lesbian identity with gender. Weston was less interested in studying "genders" than she was in the process of "gendering," whereby women negotiated in the context of social constructions the meaning of their gender. To produce these narratives, Weston interviewed women who identified as lesbian or gay.

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One-third of the participants were women of color; more than one-third came from a working-class background and almost half of the latter were employed in what Weston described as working-class jobs. Several of the narratives specifically addressed the intersection of race, ethnicity, and class with perceptions of gender because "gender is about race is about class is about sexuality is about age is about nationality is about an entire range of social relations" (p. 125). Among the issues explored by these narratives were the meaning of masculine and feminine, the role of butch/femme dynamics, as well as androgyny, and the influence of power structures on the construction of gender as a result of race, class, and sexuality.

<div align="center">Social Class</div>

One empirical study examined the intersection of class with lesbian identity. Esterberg (1997), described above in the context of my discussion on racial identity, found that social class intersected with lesbian identity in mixed ways. For instance, differences existed among middle-class lesbians in how they perceived the interplay between their multiple identities. One lesbian felt conflicted between her lesbian identity and her middle-class status. This woman believed that identifying as a lesbian was a statement against oppressive systems and appreciated the transgressive nature and marginality attributed to her lesbian identity. Some lesbians in Esterberg's study who had the opportunity to live a middle-class life chose not to do so as a statement against classism and women's place in the class system. Yet, some of the affluent and middle-class lesbians who raised themselves out of poor or working-class conditions were bothered by the intentional downward mobilizing of other lesbians. Some of these

women felt rejected within the lesbian community because of their class status; others felt it was their responsibility to help other people of lower economic statuses improve their economic situation.

<div align="center">Religion</div>

While it does not appear that empirical work has been conducted on the relationship between lesbian identity and religion, several personal narratives discuss the intersection of lesbian identity with different religions, such as Judaism (Balka & Rose, 1989, Beck, 1989a) and Catholicism (Liuzzi, 2001, Maher, 2001). These narratives described both the conflicts and comforts associated with attempts to integrate religious beliefs with lesbian identity. Prevalent were issues of invisibility -- e.g., *are* there many Jewish lesbians? (Beck, 1989b); immorality -- e.g., the view of some Christian traditions that one can accept the homosexual but not the sinful behavior (Liuzzi); and multiplicity of minority statuses -- e.g., why the temptation to pass as a "heterosexual gentile"? (Rich, 1989, p. 90). Similar to the narratives on the integration of race and ethnicity with lesbian identity, many of these narratives described the strength associated with integrating religious and sexual identities. Describing this struggle, a lesbian rabbi, who compared the compartmentalization of religion and sexual orientation with the history of Jews hiding when worshipping to avoid persecution, offered the following hope:

> I dream of a time when there will be no need for a separate gay and lesbian congregation. As I seek wholeness for myself, an integration of all aspects of myself, I pray for such wholeness for my people as well. . . . It is my deepest hope that there will come a time when they and I will come out into the light of day and feel unthreatened, able to reveal the *totality* of our identities, able to be safe and valued in a world they know will fully accept us. May this day come speedily and in our time. (La Escondida, 1989, p. 227)

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<u>Multiple Identity Dimensions of Lesbian College Students</u>

Within the body of literature on the relationship between lesbian identity and other dimensions of identity, only one study considered the identity of college students. As one aspect of her grounded theory study of critical incidents in the lesbian identity development of college students, Stevens (1997) explored how race, social class, religion, and gender interacted with development. Stevens's inquiry into the relationship between racial and lesbian identity revealed differences between white women and women of color. Consistent with the results of Esterberg (1997), white women did not connect their race with their sexual orientation. Differences existed between the two lesbians of color in Stevens's study, one African-American and one Asian-American. Sexual orientation was not a salient identity dimension for the African American participant who faced negative attitudes toward her sexual orientation at the historically Black institution she attended. Her family was her only source of support, but they did not understand her sexual orientation. That participant considered her lesbian identity development to be stalled. The Asian American participant considered her sexual orientation to be her primary identity. She believed that identifying as a lesbian helped her understand her racial identity. Yet, she had not told her family that she was a lesbian out of fear they would consider it an insult to the family name.

Sexism influenced the participants' perceptions of their lesbian identity (Stevens, 1997). Some participants indicated they had to develop a positive view of being a woman before they could love another woman. Some of the participants, especially white women, grappled with how identifying as a lesbian would affect their already

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marginalized status as women. Sexism also influenced the participants' focus on physical appearance. Previously socialized that the physical appearance of a woman is important, they struggled with stereotypical images of lesbians. Some searched for other lesbians who looked liked them physically; others drastically altered their appearance to look like other lesbians (Stevens).

The participants engaged in little discussion about their religious and social class identities; Stevens therefore questioned the reliability of the results regarding these two identity dimensions. In general, the participants perceived social class to influence whether the option to identify as lesbian was available as a result of differences in opportunities for exposure to people different from themselves and access to higher education.   Religion was the most difficult aspect of identity to integrate with lesbian identity. Most of the women in Stevens's study set aside organized religion when they identified as lesbian, often struggling with issues of morality. Some then created their own belief system to help them resolve moral issues (Stevens).

While providing a basis for further inquiry, Stevens's work focused only briefly on interactions of multiple dimensions of identity and is limited by its homogeneous sample. In order to understand the identity of lesbian college students from a more diverse perspective than that offered by existing developmental theories, in-depth research on college students' perceptions of the relationship between lesbian identity and the other multiple dimensions of their identity needs to be conducted.

College Students' Multiple Dimensions of Identity

Research on multiple dimensions of identity among college students provides a basis for studying lesbian college students' identity dimensions. Research on students' multiple identity dimensions is limited as it is a relatively new area of scholarship (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Much of the research on college student identity either has focused on broad conceptualizations of identity that do not consider, or only briefly consider, specific identity dimensions (e.g., Chickering & Reisser, 1993), or, as with scholarship on lesbian identity, has relied on single-dimension developmental models, such as race (Cross, 1995; Helms, 1995) or ethnicity (Phinney, 1990).

Some of the research on college students' multiple identity dimensions is informed by Reynolds and Pope's (1991) Multidimensional Identity Model. Based on case studies from their experiences in counseling, the Multidimensional Identity Model suggests four identity resolution approaches for individuals who belong to more than one oppressed group. Reynolds and Pope defined oppression as "a system that allows access to the services, rewards, benefits, and privileges of society based on membership in a particular group" (p. 174). These four identity resolution approaches were created from a two-dimensional matrix. One dimension considers whether an individual relates to a single oppression or multiple oppressions. The second dimension considers whether an individual actively or passively identifies with one or more oppression. Although the Multidimensional Identity Model is valuable for drawing attention to multiple identities, it focused specifically on multiple oppressions, rather than identities in general.

Several years later, two studies focused on interacting and intersecting identity dimensions of college students (Jones, 1997; Kiely, 1997). Primarily using quantitative

methods, Kiely (1997) studied the development of gender identity of women college students in relation to other aspects of identity including racial identity, social class, and family influences. Among her findings was that it was more common for Black women than White women to understand themselves as having multiple aspects of identity. Jones (1997), using grounded theory, explored the multiple dimensions of identity of a diverse group of women college students, and how the construct of difference mediated the identity development process. Among her conclusions were that context influenced the construction of identity and that difference and privilege mediated the salience of various dimensions of identity.

Expanding on Jones (1997), Jones and McEwen (2000) developed the first conceptual model of college students' multiple dimensions of identity, including race, sexual orientation, culture, gender, and social class. The Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (Jones & McEwen) illustrates the dynamic construction of identity and the influence of changing contexts on the relative salience of multiple identity dimensions. The model offers a snapshot of one person's identity at a particular point in time. It demonstrates that particular identity dimensions may be more or less salient at different points in an individual's life depending upon a range of situations.

The model portrays dimensions of identity as circles that "intersect with one another to demonstrate that no one dimension may be understood singularly; it can be understood only in relation to other dimensions" (pp. 409-410). At the core of these intersecting identity dimensions is an inner-defined personal sense of self, incorporating "valued personal attributes and characteristics" (Jones, 1997, p. 383). The relative salience of each identity dimension to the core sense of self at a particular point in time is

indicated by the proximity of a dot located on each identity circle. The model illustrates that identity dimensions "may be experienced simultaneously as well as more or less salient than other dimensions" (Jones & McEwen, p. 410). Surrounding the core and identity dimensions is the context in which a person experiences her life, such as family background, sociocultural conditions, current experiences, and career decisions and life planning. Interaction between contextual influences and dimensions of identity determines the relative salience of each dimension to the core (Jones & McEwen).

<center>Pushing the Multiplicities of Identity: Queer Theory</center>

While the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity is valuable for studying interactions of lesbian identity with other dimensions of identity, the nature of these interactions might become even more apparent when lesbian identities are considered from the especially fluid perspective of queer theory. Queer theory has its roots in the work of Foucault (1978), who studied sexuality as an effect of a matrix of discursive and political strategies. Queer theory suspends the classifications of lesbian, gay, bisexual, masculine, and feminine (Tierney & Dilley, 1998). Rather than grouping together these classifications into one identity category, queer theory recognizes sexual and gender identities as social, multiple, and fluid (Britzman, 1997).

Queer theory does not wholly reject the concept of identity, but instead, disavows the notion of a fixed identity (Fuss, 1989). Queer theorists suggest that identity is fluid and embrace a concept of a "fictitious" identity that must be "'continually assumed and immediately called into question'" (Fuss, p. 104, citing Gallop, 1982, xii). Queer theory challenges the notion of a fixed identity in several respects. Butler (1991) stated that

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unified essential identities do not exist because identities are constructed and

reconstructed through performance and therefore always shifting. Speaking specifically

to lesbian identity, Butler explained:

> It is through this repeated play of this sexuality that the "I" is insistently
> reconstituted as a lesbian "I" . . . if this "I" is a site of repetition, that is, if the "I"
> only achieves the semblance of identity through a certain repetition of itself, then
> the "I" is always displaced by the very repetition that sustains it. . . . The
> repetition and the failure to repeat, produce a string of performances that
> constitute and contest the coherence of that "I." (p. 18)

Butler therefore considered identity categories to be "invariable stumbling blocks" and

"sites of necessary trouble" (p. 14).

Whereas Butler spoke to the performance of identity, Fuss (1989) challenged the

notion of a fixed identity by suggesting that identity has "multiple and contradictory

meanings" (p. 98), because it is comprised of "differences" (p. 102) rather than a unified

essence. Fuss explained that the failure to study identity as difference implies a unity in

identity that overlooks variations within identity, such as race and class. Even when

identities are considered as multiple identities, these multiple identities are often

considered to compete and conflict with one another as "an atomic identity, fractured and

disseminated into a field of dispersed energy . . . the subject as a highly charged

electronic field with multiple identity particles bouncing off each other, combining and

recombining" (Fuss, p. 103). Differences should not be seen as the competing space

between identities, but instead, the space within identities (Fuss).

Queer theory also interrogates and disrupts notions of normal with respect to

sexuality and gender (Britzman, 1997; Warner, 1999). In doing so, queer theory critiques

heteronormativity, which refers to the ways in which heterosexuality is considered

normative (Sedgwick, 1992). Heteronormativity promulgates a heterosexual/homosexual binary that structures the social arena by privileging heterosexuality and relegating homosexuality to the status of the silenced "other" (Tierney & Dilley, 1998). As part of the interrogation of normal, queer theory espouses that the meanings of sexuality and normalcy are created through discourse and perpetuated through power. As a corollary to this principle, discourse can be given new meaning through a reversal of its terms or values, a reversal which can act to resist power. This concept, referred to as "reverse discourse," suggests potential for transforming discourse rather than only being a passive recipient of dominant structure (Butler, 1997; Foucault, 1978).   Although only a brief review of a complex perspective on identity, these general principles challenge the framework of traditional student development theories.

Lesbian Identity Within Constructivist-Developmental Theory

Managing ever-changing relational identities, negotiating dual and triple identities, and identifying differently than what is often considered the norm are challenging tasks even for the most sophisticated and developmentally mature adults. College students in the midst of development from adolescence to adulthood could find these tasks daunting. Other domains of development likely influence college students' understanding of their sexual orientation identity. Robert Kegan (1982, 1994) proposed a theory of human development that explains why people often find themselves "in over their heads" as they face the mental demands of modern life. Kegan's constructivist-developmental theory provides a useful analytic approach for exploring how lesbian college students make meaning of their sexual orientation identity when considered in relationship with other dimensions of identity.

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Constructive-developmental theorists study the increasing complexity through which people construct meaning. Constructivism refers to the idea that people actively construct their reality rather than passively absorb it. Developmentalism refers to the idea that people evolve through qualitatively different stages of increasing complexity according to regular principles of stability and change (Kegan, 1994). Constructivist-developmental theorists consider cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions as a single mental activity rather than separate entities. Constructivist-developmental research describes the interrelationship among these three domains and the progression of each from simple to complex forms (Kegan, 1994).

Kegan's developmental model, which consists of five orders of consciousness, is grounded in subject-object theory. Subject is the most complex way a person constructs meaning. A person *is* her most complex way of making meaning and therefore cannot reflect on the subject. Object refers to an individual's prior ways of making meaning. A person is able to have perspectives on and regulate these prior ways of making meaning. Each of the five orders of consciousness that comprise Kegan's developmental theory is a "temporary plateau" along an evolution of consciousness. Each of these sequential orders is increasingly complex, with the subject of the previous order as the object of the subsequent order. Each order represents the organizing principle or structure of how people make meaning rather than the content of the meaning (Kegan, 1994).

People construct meaning through interactions with the environment. Therefore, the environment influences the pace through which people move to more complex ways of making meaning. The sequence of stages, however, does not change. Although people use their most complex stage most frequently, they daily call up and use less

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complex stages. When the environment demands mental structures that are beyond a

person's order of consciousness, the person is "in over [her] head" (Kegan, 1994)

Educators must therefore prepare students for these complex mental demands (Kegan).

Most college students make meaning at the third order of consciousness (Baxter

Magolda, 1999). The third order is characterized by:

> the mental capacity that enables one to think abstractly, identify a complex
> internal psychological life, orient to the welfare of a human relationship, construct
> values and ideals self-consciously known as such, and subordinate one's own
> interests on behalf of one's greater loyalty to maintaining bonds of friendship, or
> team, or group participation. (Kegan, 1994, p. 75)

Cognitively, the subject of the third order is the ability to think abstractly, hypothetically,

and deductively, while the object is concrete referents. Intrapersonally, a person is able

to distinguish between one's needs and oneself and to identify enduring qualities of the

self. This is a product of the ability to internalize others' points of view and internally

coordinate more than one point of view, which enables the person to hold values and

ideals. Third order individuals make meaning through shared realities of others who are

external to the self. Personal loyalties to others define the individual. At the third order,

people are responsible *to* their roles rather than *for* their roles (Kegan, 1994).

Interpersonally, the subject of the third order is mutuality; the object is point of

view. Mutuality allows a person to interact with others based on shared feelings rather

than on the basis of having one's own needs met. A person at the third order is able to

subordinate her own interests to the interests of the relationship. Kegan (1994) noted:

"this bringing inside of the other's point of view, this co-construction of the self, . . . is

the triumph and limit of the third order" (p. 126). The triumph is the ability to become

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part of society; the limit is the inability to stand apart from this co-construction to reflect and act upon it. At the third order, no procedures exist for arbitrating between referent groups when there are conflicts between them (Kegan).

Few college students make meaning at the fourth order, although educating students to develop this capacity is an important goal of higher education (Baxter Magolda, 1999). In the fourth order of consciousness, the values, abstractions, and interpersonal loyalties that were subject in the third-order are taken as:

> objects or elements of its system, rather than the system itself; [the person] does not identify with them but views them as parts of a new whole. This new whole is an ideology, an internal identity, a *self-authorship* that can coordinate, integrate, act upon, or invent values, beliefs, convictions, generalizations, ideals, abstractions, interpersonal loyalties, and interpersonal states. [The person] is no longer *authored by* them, [the person] *authors* them and thereby achieves a personal authority. (Kegan, 1994, p. 185, emphasis in original)

People who make meaning at the fourth order have values about values and relationships with their relationships. That is, they have systems by which they can choose among values and relationships when they conflict (Kegan).

Cognitively, the subject of the fourth order is ideology (relation between abstractions); the object is abstractions. The person maintains an abstract set of values that prioritize group memberships. Intrapersonally, the subject is self-authorship; the object is subjectivity. Identity formation is more enduring than in the third-order because the internal self is the source of belief rather than external conditions (Baxter Magolda, 1999). Baxter Magolda explained that the "ability to relate to one's intrapersonal states, rather than being made up by them, makes it possible to see onself as the maker (rather than the experiencer) of one's inner psychological life" (p. 56). Interpersonally, the

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subject is institutions (relationship-regulating forms, multiple-role consciousness); the object is mutuality and interpersonalism. People have the ability to reflect on their relationships rather than being defined by them.

In one of the first proposals to integrate Kegan's theory with the process of identity development, King and Baxter Magolda (2001) suggested that identity development be conceptualized as a process that moves from third- to fourth-order meaning making. Specifically, to capture the similarities among theories of racial, ethnic, and sexual orientation identity development, King and Baxter Magolda recommended the construction of an integrated model of identity development characterized by increased complexity in epistemological, interpersonal, and intrapersonal capacity. While innovative in approach, their recommendation was conceptually rather than empirically based.

Although fourth-order meaning making is not prevalent among college students, it is conceivable that lesbian college students, many of whom have likely wrestled with contradictory and complex issues related to their identity, might be more apt to make meaning at this complex order. This supposition is consistent with Fassinger's (1998) suggestion that some lesbian college students might develop cognitive complexity more rapidly than their heterosexual counterparts as a result of negotiating identities considered by the dominant culture to be non-normative. Similarly, Brown (1989) explained that lesbians and gay men develop the capacity to live "biculturally," simultaneously participating in both heterosexual and lesbian and gay experiences, and therefore learning to live with ambiguity Yet it is also conceivable that some lesbian college students lack the complexity to live biculturally and negotiate multiple dimensions of identity.

Exploring the influence of Kegan's orders of consciousness on lesbian college students'

perceptions of their multiple dimensions of identity provides a richer understanding of

how lesbian college students construct their identity.

Conclusion

This chapter brought together a range of perspectives on identity, from

developmental stage models of lesbian identity to queer theory; from a conceptual model

of multiple dimensions of identity to personal narratives describing the emotional

consequences of negotiating multiple identities; and from Erikson's identity development

theory to constructivist-developmental theory. This range of literature from multiple

disciplines provides a broad but connected basis for exploring the complexity involved in

the construction of sexual orientation identity.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research design of this study. Five

elements comprised the research design: epistemology, theoretical framework,

methodology, research methods, and data analysis (Crotty, 1998). Each of these elements

is described in this chapter. My personal subjectivity also shaped the study and is

therefore described as a sixth design element. The chapter concludes with a discussion of

efforts I took to enhance the trustworthiness and ethics of this study.

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this research was to explore lesbian college students' perceptions

of their sexual orientation identity and how dimensions such as religion, race, culture,

gender, and social class interacted with their sexual orientation identity. Three research

questions guided the study:

(1) How do lesbian college students describe and make meaning of their sexual

orientation identity?

(2) Do lesbian college students' multiple dimensions of identity, such as religion, race, culture, gender, and social class influence how they describe and make meaning of their sexual orientation identity? If so, how?

(3) Which dimensions of identity are most salient for lesbian college students? In what ways, if any, do dimensions of identity influence the salience of other dimensions?

Research Elements

Epistemology

This study was grounded in a subjectivist epistemology. An epistemology is a theory on the nature of knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). A subjectivist epistemology assumes that the researcher and participants mutually create knowledge rather than discover truth (Denzin & Lincoln). That is, "The investigator and the object of investigation are assumed to be interactively linked so that the 'findings' are *literally created* as the investigation proceeds" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111, italics in original) Guided by these epistemological assumptions, I was cognizant as to how my perspectives interacted with those of the participants.

Theoretical Framework

Within the broad spectrum of epistemological assumptions are a host of theoretical frameworks that guide the data collection and analysis processes. A constructivist framework guided this study. Constructivism "places priority on the phenomena of study and sees both data and analysis as created from the shared experiences of researcher and participants and the researcher's relationship with the participants" (Charmaz, 2002, p. 677). The mutual construction of knowledge that occurs

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in a constructivist study requires a close relationship between researchers and participants in order to elicit from participants their own stories in their own words (Charmaz, 2000). "Constructivists study how participants construct meanings and actions, and they do so from as close to the inside of the experience as they can get" (Charmaz, 2002, p. 677).

Constructivism grounded in subjectivism was a natural fit for this study because the purpose was to understand lesbian identity through the meanings the participants made of their identity rather than discovering an objective meaning into which their identity can be categorized. Constructivism allowed me to understand the participants' identities in a comprehensive and holistic manner as a result of the trusting relationships I developed with the participants; the many probing follow-up questions I asked them during their interviews about the meaning of their responses; and the attention I focused on how my own perspectives interacted with those of the participants.

<u>Methodology</u>

This study utilized narrative inquiry methodology. Narrative inquiry is concerned with understanding the wholeness of human experience through data collected in the form of stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Lieblich et al., 1998). Witherell and Noddings (1991) conveyed the richness of stories for portraying human experience, stating:

> Stories can join the worlds of thought and feeling, and they give special voice to…the power of emotion, intuition, and relationships in human lives. They frequently reveal dilemmas of human caring and conflict, illuminating with the rich, vibrant language of feeling the various landscapes in which we meet the other morally. (p. 4)

Considerable variation exists in approaches to narrative inquiry (Riessman, 2002). Indeed, the term narrative has been understood in several different ways. Taking a

narrow approach, Labov (1982) defined narratives as a retelling of experience that maintains the temporal ordering of events as they actually occurred and consists of certain elements, including character, setting, and plot. Riessman explained that narratives are often more broadly defined as an "amalgam of autobiographical materials" comprising the entire life story (p. 697). For purposes of this study, I adopted a third approach described by Riessman that falls between these two extremes. In this approach, narratives are neither discrete units nor entire lives, but rather, "evolving series of stories that are framed in and through interaction" (p. 698). They are "extended accounts of lives [that] develop over the course of interviews" (p. 698). Regardless of the approach adopted, narratives are "meaning making units of discourse" typically understood as a way for people to make sense of themselves and the society in which they live (Riessman, p. 705).

Narrative inquiry is frequently cited as well-suited to studies of identity because stories provide revealing glimpses into people's inner-selves (Lieblich, et al., 1998; Riessman, 2002; Ritchie & Wilson, 2000). "Narratives are a particularly significant genre for representing and analyzing identity in its multiple guises in different contexts . . . The approach enables investigators to study the 'active, self-shaping quality of human thought, the power of stories to create and refashion identity" (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997, xiv). Identity stories are "created, told, revised, and retold throughout life. We know or discover ourselves, and reveal ourselves to others, by the stories we tell" (Lieblich et al., p. 7).

Research Methods

Sampling Criteria

Purposeful sampling was used to obtain information-rich cases for in-depth study (Patton, 1990). Sampling strategies included sampling for maximum variation and snowball sampling. Sampling for maximum variation entails identifying diverse criteria for constructing the sample and important common patterns across variations (Patton). Snowball sampling depends on locating information-rich key informants and asking them whom they know who would meet the research criteria (Patton). "The chain of recommended informants will typically diverge initially as many possible sources are recommended, then converge as a few key names get mentioned over and over" (p. 176).

Criteria for sampling included (1) traditional-age lesbian undergraduate college students (ages 18-24) who attended The Ohio State University at the time of the study; (2) variation in race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and social class; (3) variation in the extent of involvement in Ohio State GLBT student organizations; (4) variation in the extent to which the person is "out" to others about her sexual orientation; (5) variation in age and year in school; and (6) variation in college majors.

The initial criterion, "lesbian" college students, bears further explanation. I used the term lesbian to describe biological women who are physically and emotionally attracted primarily to other women. When I described the study to potential participants, I explained my use of the term lesbian and invited them to participate if they considered themselves to meet this description even if they use other terms to identify their sexual orientation. This description included women who identify as bisexual, as long as they considered their primary attraction to be to women. The definition excluded individuals

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who identified as transgender. I decided to exclude transgender students because these gender identity considerations could not be adequately addressed within the scope of this study.

It is also important to understand the context of the university that all of the participants attended. Ohio State is a large, public research institution located in Columbus, Ohio. Ohio State has an active Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender (GLBT) Student Services office, as well as several GLBT student organizations, including a confidential peer support group, a GLBT social organization, Jewish and Christian GLBT religious organizations, and an organization for GLBT students of color. Columbus has several gay and lesbian bars and other establishments, many of which are located in a gay-friendly neighborhood a few miles from campus. There are a few bars primarily frequented by lesbians, including many college students.

I did not intend to achieve maximum variation along each of the criterion because doing so would have resulted in a sample size too large for this study methodology. Instead, I took each of these factors into consideration as I identified the sample so that it would be reasonably diverse. Although the sampling criteria targeted differences among various identity dimensions, which was necessary given the purpose of the study, I did not consider participants to be representative of their race, class, religion, or gender. Doing so would have essentialized identity characteristics and ignored the influence of interacting identity dimensions (Stein, 1997).

The criteria also targeted students of various comfort levels with their sexual orientation. I felt it was important to take such differences into consideration on the premise that comfort levels could be influenced by the particularities of identity

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dimensions. I took variation in involvement with GLBT student organizations into consideration, believing this might target students who incorporated their sexual orientation identity into their lives in differing ways. I considered differences in age and year in school, believing that these variations might be related to differences in cognitive complexity, which could influence how the participants made meaning of their multiple identity dimensions. I considered a variety of academic majors on the premise that the courses in which a student enrolls could affect how she thinks about her identity.

<u>Sampling Strategies</u>

I utilized several strategies for identifying potential study participants. I relied on informants who recommended names of women who might be interested in participating. Informants included lesbian undergraduate students whom I knew; residence hall staff; GLBT student organization advisors; instructors of courses focused on gender and sexual orientation topics; and directors of various Offices of Student Services at Ohio State, including GLBT Student Services, Women's Student Services, African American Student Services, and Hispanic Student Services. When I explained the purpose of the study to these individuals, I emphasized how important it was to me that I contact only students who would feel comfortable being approached by me. I did not want invitation letters to be upsetting or considered an invasion of privacy. I sent invitation letters via email to all of the people that the informants recommended (Appendix A). Attached to the invitation letter was an interest form to complete and return to me if they were interested in participating (Appendix B). The interest form requested information that would help me

determine how they matched with the sampling criteria. The invitation letter explained that I would identify the participants after collecting and reviewing all returned interest forms.

I reached the greatest number of people through e-mail listservs. I sent an e-mail describing the study and inviting participants to several sources, including two GLBT student organization listservs and listservs for the GLBT Office of Student Services, Women's Student Services, Hispanic Student Services, and African American Student Services. This e-mail included essentially the same content as the invitation letter sent to recommended participants (Appendix C). I sent the e-mail directly to the student organization chairperson and/or advisor and the directors of the student services offices, who then forwarded the e-mail to the listserv. It was important that I used e-mail to identify participants because the internet is the only affiliation that some students have with Ohio State GLBT opportunities. In the e-mail message, I asked students to contact me if they were interested in participating and explained that I would then send them an interest form via e-mail to compete.

I also spoke about the study to an undergraduate Queer Theory course, as well as at a meeting of an Ohio State GLBT student organization. After speaking, I distributed a written description of the study and an interest form to complete. The content of the written description was essentially the same as the invitation letter. I also gave the students the option of e-mailing me if they were interested in participating and explained I would then send them an interest form via e-mail.

As a result of these various sampling strategies, I received 17 interest forms. The pool of potential participants was fairly diverse along all aspects of the sampling criteria,

except social class and racial identity. Only three participants of color expressed interest in the study. Based on the sampling criteria, in particular my interest in variation along the criteria, I selected eight participants, including the three women of color. I e-mailed these eight women, asking if they were still interested in participating. All eight agreed to be in the study. I sent the women whom I did not identify for the study an e-mail expressing my appreciation for their interest.

I then cast a wider net to identify additional women of color who were interested in participating. I re-contacted several of my initial informants, and contacted additional informants, including academic advisors and mentors in the Department of Athletics, an African American lesbian who formerly worked in Ohio State's Office of Gender & Sexuality Services, and a college-age lesbian from Columbus who did not attend Ohio State but was familiar with the social scene. Based on their recommendations, I posted flyers in an African American cultural center on campus and in bars frequented by lesbians (Appendix D). Two names of potential participants of color emerged from this group of informants. I e-mailed letters of invitation to these two women, and both agreed to be in the study.

Sample Size and Demographics

Ten participants were involved in this study. Keeping in mind that "there are no fixed rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry [and that] the validity, meaningfulness, and insights . . . have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected, " (Patton, 1990, p. 184), I wanted a sample size that would provide "reasonable coverage of the issues studied" (Patton). I knew it would not be possible for me to sample until I reached saturation or redundancy (Patton) because there would be a multitude of

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combinations of interacting identity dimensions I could explore. It was important to me that the sample be large enough for variation, but small enough that I could spend sufficient time with each participant to develop a trusting relationship and further insights into her identity beyond what was shared through formal data collection (Chase, 1996; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Demographically, the sample included women between the ages of 18 and 23. Most of the participants identified as lesbian or gay; one identified as queer and one as a dyke. Five of the participants were of-color; 5 were white. In terms of religion, there were two Jewish participants, one Agnostic; one Pagan; one Agnostic Pagan; one Christian, one Catholic; and three who did not identify with a religion. Nearly all of the participants identified as female; two as androgynous. Most of the participants described themselves as middle class; one as temporarily poor; one as working class; and two as upper-middle class. A variety of academic majors were represented, such as Psychology, Women's Studies, Wildlife Management, and Sports & Leisure Studies. There was much variation as far as the extent and nature of their involvement with GLBT organizations on campus and their social life at the gay bars.

Introduction to the Participants

The ten study participants were a delightful group of women, each of whom deeply engaged in this study. They thoughtfully and willingly shared personal aspects of their lives, revealing their hopes, fears, struggles, and successes. They were a diverse group of women in respects that went well beyond the variations intentionally sought out through the sampling criteria. They brought a range of life experiences and perspectives to this study. Out of respect for all that they offered, I developed a remarkable sense of

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responsibility to tell their stories with an integrity that portrayed their complex and

evolving identities. The ten distinctive stories of these women are presented in the next

chapter. Table 3.1 provides but a brief demographic introduction. The words used to

describe dimensions of their identity reflect the language they used during the interviews

or told me that they preferred. All names are pseudonyms selected by the participants.

Name	Description
Angel	22 year-old 4th year-junior; lesbian; female; biracial (African American and White); Wiccan; grew up poor/working class in southern Ohio; Wildlife Management major
Amy	23 year-old 5th year senior; gay; tomboy; biracial (Trinidadian and White); religion has never been important; grew up upper-middle class in Toronto; Nutrition major
Beth	18 year-old first-year student; lesbian; female; white; Jewish; grew up middle class in a Chicago suburb; Women's Studies and Sociology major with a Jewish Studies minor
Billie	18 year-old first-year student; lesbian; androgynous; white; religion has never been important; grew up upper-middle class in rural Illinois; Business major
Carmen	19 year-old sophomore; bisexual; gender is between female and male; half Puerto Rican/half German with a strong connection to her Puerto Rican heritage; Christian; grew up middle class; military child who frequently moved; Wildlife Management major
Gia	21 year-old junior; gay; female; white; academically interested in religion but not personally religious; grew up working class in Cleveland suburb; Women's Studies major
Jacky	21 year-old 4th year junior; dyke; androgynous; black; Agnostic Pagan; raised middle-class, now temporarily poor; military child who frequently moved; Political Science major
Jordana	19 year-old sophomore; lesbian or lesbian with a bisexual fetish; female; Latina; Agnostic; grew up middle class in Pittsburgh; considering Elementary Education major
KT	22 year-old graduating senior; lesbian; female; white; Catholic in search of a different Christian denomination; grew up middle class on the Ohio/West Virginia border; Sports & Leisure Studies major
Leah	22 year-old 5th year senior; queer; female; white; Jewish; grew up middle class in Columbus, OH; Psychology and Speech & Hearing Science major

Table 3.1 Description of Participants

In-Depth Interviews

After the sample was identified and prior to data collection, I met with each participant in an informal setting (usually over lunch) to discuss the purpose of the research and the nature of her involvement, as well as to allow her to ask questions. These initial meetings not only clarified the purpose of the study for the participants, but also allowed us to start building trust and rapport. During this initial time together, we decided when the first interview would take place.

Data was then collected through three in-depth semi-structured interviews with each participant. Consistent with narrative inquiry methodology, the interview questions were open-ended, broad, and designed to elicit stories (Lieblich et al., 1998). The protocol for the first interview was field-tested with two students who met the sampling criteria for this study. Neither of these students was identified as a study participant. I twice revised this protocol based on the responses and feedback provided by these two students.

I used the same interview protocol with each participant for the first interview. During that interview, I asked broad questions about aspects of their lives that have shaped their sense of self, as well as broad questions about their sexual orientation identity (Appendix E). The initial questions were very general, and I asked more probing questions as the interview progressed. The questions were designed such that the participants shaped the nature of the specific topics discussed. For instance, some participants immediately discussed their sexual orientation identity; others brought it up

only in response to direct questions. I asked questions about other dimensions of identity, such as race or social class, only if the participant discussed these aspects in the stories she told.

In the second interview, questions focused more specifically on the participants' race, culture, social class, religion, and gender, including how these aspects of their identity interacted or did not interact with their sexual orientation identity. Some of the questions during the second interview were the same for each participant; other questions differed by participant, depending on unique issues discussed during the first interview (Appendix F). During the first part of this interview, we separately discussed race, culture, social class, religion, and gender. Each participant determined the order in which we discussed the dimensions. As we discussed each dimension, I asked a few questions about how the dimension is a part of her life before asking about its relationship with sexual orientation.

During the latter part of the second interview, I provided the participant with a copy of the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000) and explained the model to her (Appendix G). I then asked her to map her identity onto the model, including the core, social identities, and context. I chose to include the model in the interview because completing the model provided the participants with time to silently reflect on their identity prior to further interview questions, and because the model challenged them to think more deeply about the relationships among their identity dimensions. I included the model in the second part of the interview so as not to influence their initial descriptions of their identity. Each participant took about ten-fifteen minutes to complete the model. One participant took the model home to complete

because she wanted to give it more substantial thought. I then based the remainder of the interview questions on the completed model. After the participant described her model to me, I asked several questions about relationships among the dimensions, as well as whether or not she felt the model described how she understood her identity.

The third interview served two purposes. First, each participant commented on an essay I composed that analyzed her responses from the first two interviews in light of the study's research questions. This process served a member checking function by providing the participants with an opportunity to discuss whether my analysis portrayed how she understood herself. A truncated sample of one of the essays is attached as Appendix H. During the latter part of the third interview, I briefly described basic tenets of queer theory with the participants, including the fluidity of identity, the inadequacy of identity categories, and the effects of the heterosexual-homosexual binary. I then asked questions about whether or not those tenets related to how they understood their identity. I decided to ask these questions about queer theory based on themes that emerged from the first two interviews that tied into queer theory notions, especially themes related to normalcy and identity categories, and that queer theory might further illuminate. My explanation of queer theory, and the questions during the latter half were generally the same for each participant (Appendix I).

All interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. I transcribed all of the interviews for the first two rounds of interviews, usually within 48 hours of completing the interview. I hired a transcriber to assist me with transcription of the third round of interviews. Interviews took place at a mutually convenient time and location on campus. The interviews lasted between one and three hours. Most of the interviews during the

first two rounds lasted between 90 minutes and two hours. Most of the third round

interviews lasted approximately one hour each. As soon as possible after many of the

interviews, I wrote a journal entry describing my reaction to the interview.

<p align="center">Data Analysis</p>

No uniform approach exists for analyzing the data in a narrative inquiry study.

Some approaches to narrative analysis focus on the content of the narrative, others on the

form. Lieblich et al. (1998) created a model that includes four analytic approaches: (1)

holistic-content: analyzes the content of the narrative as a complete story; (2) categorical-

content: analyzes discrete parts of the stories in terms of how their content illustrates

themes and categories found in and across stories, using the constant comparative method

(3) holistic-form analysis: analyzes the complete story as one unit in terms of how it is

structured, such as whether it is a tragedy or comedy or how the plot progresses; and (4)

categorical-form: analyzes discrete stylistic or linguistic characteristics of defined units of

the story. Lieblich et al. (1998) explained that these four options represent the extremes,

especially in terms of separating form from content since the two often are related rather

than dichotomous. It is not uncommon to use an analytic technique that combines one or

more of these approaches (Lieblich et al.)

I relied primarily on the categorical content approach to data analysis. While no

precise analytic procedure is attached to the categorical content approach, the constant

comparative method is typically utilized (Lieblich et al., 1998). This analytic approach

allowed me to compare themes within and across the participants' stories. Consistent

with the constant comparative method of analysis, I developed codes and categories from

the data, continuously returning to the transcripts to compare them to emerging categories

<p align="center">63</p>

(Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Coding involved two levels: open and axial (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding entailed reviewing the interview transcripts line-by-line and focusing on the actual words of the participants. The words of the participants were then grouped together into concepts that represented the same phenomena. Axial coding entailed grouping together similar concepts into more abstract categories. I performed open and axial coding separately for each of the participants. Thus, I went through the process of open and axial coding ten times, once per participant. Throughout, I continuously returned to the transcripts to ensure that the categories were grounded in the data. I used the results of this inductive analysis to construct much of each of the participant's individual narratives. To generate the underlying story that spanned the participants' narratives, I then compared the concepts and categories that emerged from the narratives to understand the similarities and differences in how they made meaning of their sexual orientation identity.

While I primarily relied on content analysis, I also considered to some extent the form of the narratives. Lieblich et al. (1998) encouraged that form be considered in studies of identity because "the structural aspects of a narrative are more attuned to the deeper levels of personality, less easy to manipulate, and perhaps more revealing" (Lieblich et al, p. 168). Likewise, Reissman (2002) explained: "Analysis in narrative studies opens up forms of telling about experience, not simply the content to which language refers. We ask, 'Why was the story told that way?'" (p. 697). Consistent with these admonitions, I considered aspects of identity the participants did not discuss; relationships among dimensions of identity revealed through stories but not apparent to the participants; and the extent to which issues related to sexual orientation were

emphasized or not in the participants' stories. Considering these structural components illuminated issues not revealed through a content analysis only. The results of this structural analysis were also integrated into the individual narratives and the underlying story that comprise the results of the study.

Researcher Subjectivity

In addition to the five research elements described above -- epistemology, theoretical framework, methodology, data collection methods, and data analysis -- my subjectivity was a sixth research element because it influenced all aspects of the research process. For instance, epistemologically, this study assumed that the participants and I mutually created knowledge. Speaking to this mutual construction, Fine et al. (2000) explained: "we co-produce the narratives we presume to 'collect'" (p. 123). As a co-producer of the narratives, my identity is part of the study. It is therefore important that I not only discuss aspects of my identity with the participants and in the written product, but that I also "push the multiplicities of my identity" to reflect on how my identity shapes the study (Merchant, 2000, p. 17). As Fine et al. stated: "We have a responsibility to talk about our identities, why we interrogate what we do, what we choose not to report, how we frame our data, on whom we shed our scholarly gaze, who is protected and not protected as we do our work" (p. 123).

I am a white, middle class, well-educated woman. I am growing increasingly aware that these dimensions of my identity have shaped my sense of self and my

perspectives. But I also realize that I am not at all times cognizant of my economic and racial privileges. I continue to reflect on these aspects of my identity to better understand how my privileges influence so much of my life.

I am also a Jewish woman and identify as lesbian. These two dimensions of identity are currently the most salient to my sense of self. Growing up as a Jewish person in a small Midwestern city, I felt different from my peers and from much of the culture in which I lived. Even as a child, I enjoyed being a little different from many others and consistently considered my religion to be a positive aspect of my life. Then in my early thirties (two years before beginning this study) I learned about another way I am different from many people. It was then that I first identified as lesbian. For several years prior to that time, I was interested in issues relating to gay and lesbian dignity and actively supported my gay friends, but it never crossed my mind that I might not be straight. When I came to this realization, I was fortunate to enjoy a relatively easy transition in my sexual orientation identity. I attribute this relative ease to my comfort in standing apart, in certain respects, from other people; my prior interest in sexual orientation issues; and an incredibly supportive group of friends and colleagues.

I did not conduct this research to better understand myself, but instead, to better understand issues very important to me. I suspect that part of my interest in this area of inquiry is also related to my compassion for some people who are often marginalized or who have faced hardships in their lives. I feel a strong concern for lesbian college students, some of whom silently struggle with identity issues often not easy to discuss because of societal discrimination. It is therefore important to me to better understand and to enable others to better understand how they make meaning of their identities.

Whatever the precise reason for my interest in this area of inquiry, I am aware that my identity shaped the study design and interview questions, as well as the analysis. I was very aware that I could not impose my own identity story onto the stories of the participants, but knew that it was impossible to separate my perspective from the research. Indeed, my identity was an important part of this constructivist study. To acknowledge the intertwined relationships between the participants and me, I often referred to myself in the composition of the narratives that comprise the findings. I did not want to pretend that I was absent from the construction of the stories.

I am also aware that my identity shaped data collection and analysis in ways in which I cannot be aware. For instance, Chase (1995) urged researchers conducting narrative inquiries to listen for the gaps during the interview process and encourage further narration. My ability to hone in on certain gaps is limited by my own identity. For instance, I might have been limited in my ability to uncover some of the silences in the narratives about race and social class because I was deafened by my own privilege. Or the scope of my limited experiences with different religions might not have enabled me to always know what to listen for. Even though I shared some commonality with the participants in terms of sexual orientation, the different ways the multiple dimensions of our identity interacted with our sexual orientation caused us to be different from one another in that respect as well.

My subjectivity, biases, and privilege also influenced the written product. No matter how much member checking I included, I was privileged as the researcher to ultimately retell the narratives, represent the participants, and decide what is included and omitted from the final product. When constructing the narratives, I thought about how as

a researcher I spoke for the participants (Fine, 1994). Fine referred to this realization as working the "self-other hyphen," which is "the hyphen that separates and merges personal identities with our inventions of Others" (p. 70). By failing to work the hyphen, researchers preserve the social order and obscure the researcher's privileged position (Fine). For instance, I tried not to be lured into including what I found most interesting because it was different from my own experiences and preconceived notions. I also was cognizant of trying not to exclude details because I did not understand their significance because of the limits of my identity. In order to minimize the extent to which I "othered" the participants, I communicated with them throughout the entire research process about my assumptions and how I was understanding and representing their identities. Although I acknowledged through this constructivist study the mutual creation of knowledge, it was important to represent the participants as true to their intended meanings as possible.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of a qualitative study is frequently compared to the reliability and validity of a quantitative study (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified four criteria for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined a credible study as one where the "constructed realities of the participants match the realities as represented by the researcher" (p. 286). The techniques I used to ensure credibility were triangulation of methods, member checking, prolonged engagement, and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba).   Triangulation

of methods involves using multiple perspectives to collect and analyze the data (Lincoln & Guba). The purpose of triangulation is not to uncover truth by ensuring that all data and interpretations align, but rather to judge the accuracy of the data and explore different perceptions (Lincoln & Guba). Various sources of information that I used included interviews, reflexive notes, and a peer debriefer.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) considered member checking to be "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). Member checking allows the participants to review the data and my interpretations of the data to determine whether these accurately portray the meanings they intended to convey. I used member checks at various stages throughout the study. I asked the participants to review and, if necessary, make corrections to their transcripts. After the second round of interviews, I wrote individual essays describing and interpreting each of the participant's responses during the first two interviews in light of the research questions. Each participant read her essay and we then discussed it during the third interview, during which time she corrected and clarified my interpretations where necessary. Each participant also reviewed the narrative I wrote about her as part of the findings of the study and again had the opportunity to correct and clarify my interpretations.

Prolonged engagement is the "investment of sufficient time to achieve certain purposes: learning the 'culture,' testing for misinformation introduced by distortions either of self or of the respondents, and building trust" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 301). Although prolonged engagement was originally intended for fieldwork, I hoped to emulate its purpose by spending sufficient time with the participants to develop rapport and trust. Prior to the beginning of data collection, I met with each participant

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individually to discuss the study and begin relationship building. I also shared information and stories about my identity and other aspects of myself, including my sexual orientation, during these initial meetings in order to start building trust. I emphasized that I would not ask them any questions they could not ask of me. I also occasionally met with several of the participants throughout the study on an informal basis, usually for lunch. I maintained frequent e-mail communication with the participants throughout the course of the study. These efforts helped build rapport and deepened understanding of the participants.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined peer debriefing as "a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (p. 308). The peer debriefer for this study was a current doctoral student in the same program as me and was familiar with the literature on college student identity development, as well as qualitative research methodology. By bringing to the study much knowledge in this area, a few years of student affairs experience, and fresh thinking, she pushed me to think more deeply about the data.

Transferability

Transferability allows the reader of the research to determine whether the results of the study apply to his or her unique context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability is accomplished through thick description (Lincoln & Guba). Thick description requires using sufficient detail and depth in the data that the reader is able to determine the context in which the data is situated and whether the results are transferable to a particular situation. To achieve thick description, I asked very broad questions during the

interviews and continuously encouraged the participants to think deeply about their responses. I then wrote their narratives in a manner that portrayed a rich picture of each of the participants.

Dependability

My primary strategy for achieving dependability was the use of an inquiry auditor who reviewed the data collection and analysis processes and substantiated the findings. The inquiry auditor reviewed the transcripts, my coding procedures, and the study findings to authenticate my work. The inquiry auditor was a current doctoral student in the same program as me with many years of student affairs experience. At the time of the study, he was in the process of completing his own dissertation using qualitative methodology. As part of the process of authenticating my work, he analyzed the data from perspectives different from my own and raised several interpretive issues I had not previously considered.

Confirmability

Closely related to dependability, confirmability is intended to establish that the findings emerge from the data rather than from my own biases and motivations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). My use of an inquiry auditor and a peer debriefer was the primary way I satisfied the requirement of confirmability. My own personal story and interpretive lens was reflected in the research, and I therefore attempted to make them explicit where appropriate. To facilitate this process, I kept a journal of my personal reactions to the data, noting biases of which I am aware and, to the extent possible, introspectively searching to uncover biases not immediately apparent to me.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were of the utmost importance to me at all times. As an initial matter, I ensured that the names of the participants and all information they shared with me during the study remained confidential. Each participant reviewed the narrative that I wrote for the study findings to ensure she was comfortable with the way I discussed her identity. Procedures for ensuring confidentiality were explicitly stated in a Statement of Informed Consent (Appendix J) that each participant signed prior to data collection, as required by The Ohio State University Institutional Review Board. The Statement of Informed Consent also made explicit that participation in this study was voluntary. I gave the participants the Statement of Informed Consent when I met with them informally prior to the start of data collection so that they did not feel compelled to quickly read and sign it.

I also realized that the nature of the information the participants shared with me was sensitive and that they were taking risks by telling me information that is of a personal nature. It was important that I treated each participant with great respect and remain non-judgmental. I tried to create an atmosphere in which the participants did not feel obligated to disclose information they were not comfortable discussing. I spent ample time with each participant discussing the voluntary nature of her participation and her right to discuss with me only what she is comfortable discussing.

At the same time, I encouraged the participants to be as open with me as they were comfortable since candor was important to the quality of the research. I realized that telling life stories could be a cathartic experience, sometimes pleasant, other times painful. It was important to me that I not blur the boundaries between researcher and

counselor. I made this distinction clear throughout the course of the study when I felt it was appropriate. In the interest of the participants, I made arrangements with a counselor from the office of Counseling and Consultation Services at Ohio State to be available to consult with me in the event I was concerned about the welfare of any of the participants.

Conclusion

My intention as I designed and carried out this study was always to honor the participants' identity stories as central to this research.   I utilized a subjectivist epistemology and a constructivist theoretical framework because these elements of the study design allowed me to understand the meanings the participants made of their sexual orientation identity. Narrative inquiry, as the research methodology, enabled me to ask broad interview questions that encouraged the participants to discuss in-depth how they perceived their identity. This methodological approach then provided me the opportunity to analyze and generously reconstruct the participants' stories into both individual and encompassing narratives that attempt to portray the richness of their identities.   These narratives are presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter is to tell the story of ten lesbian college students'

perceptions of their sexual orientation identity and how other dimensions of identity, such

as religion, race, culture, gender, and social class, interacted with their sexual orientation.

This story is presented first by telling individual narratives for each of the ten study

participants. Through these narratives, I attempt to portray the central content of the

many stories that each participant shared about her multidimensional identity. I also

introduce through the presentation of the narratives a pattern of structural meaning-

making development that spans from external to internal constructions of identity. This

pattern is described in more detail as the story then continues through the presentation of

underlying themes illuminating relationships among the ten narratives. These

relationships are found in the content of the participants' perceptions of their identity as

well as the meaning-making structures through which they construct their identity.

Narratives of Identity Construction

The purpose of the ten narratives presented in this section is to portray the ideas

central to each participant's story about the meaning she made of her sexual orientation

identity and the other dimensions of her identity that interact with sexual orientation. My

analysis of the participants' interviews shaped the construction of the narratives; they are not intended to be interview summaries. To portray how each participant perceived her identity, I discuss in each narrative only the dimensions of identity she described as important to her sense of self, rather than every dimension about which I questioned her.

The themes that emerged from each of the participants' interviews guide her individual narrative. These themes typically involved the issues with which she wrestled or believed she had resolved as she constructed her identity. Not only do the themes differ for each participant, but so too does the thematic cohesiveness of each narrative.

The narratives focus primarily on the content of the participants' descriptions of their identities. While analyzing the data and composing the narratives, however, it became clear to me that the content of the participants' descriptions of their identity could not be separated from the meaning-making structures that guided identity construction. Specifically, it was apparent that, regardless of the particularities of their identity dimensions, some participants constructed their identity by relying on externally defined expectations while others internally generated their sense of self. Still other participants were making a transition between these two meaning-making approaches. To demonstrate the relationship between the content of each participant's description of her identity and the meaning-making structure that guided how she constructed her identity, each narrative concludes with a brief synopsis that highlights the influence of external or internal meaning-making. Further analysis of the relationship between the participants' narratives and meaning-making structures is offered at the end of the chapter.

The order in which the narratives are presented represents development from external to internal constructions of identity. Including a synopsis of the meaning-making structure at the end of the narratives, as well as sequencing the narratives in the order of increasing complexity, highlights the underlying theme across the participants' stories that content and structure are inseparable components of the construction of lesbian identity.

It is important to note that no judgment is attached to differences in the complexity of the participants' identity constructions, and that all of these young women have already accomplished the challenging task of defining their sexual orientation in a manner that defies the dominant culture. Likewise, variation in the length of the narratives does not in any respect reflect differences in the participants' engagement with the study. No matter the length of the narrative, it was impossible to adequately portray in these brief narratives the incredible richness of the participants' evolving identities, as well as the participants' thoughtfulness and candor, qualities I quickly came to appreciate and respect.[1]

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[1] The narratives include generous quotations from the participants' interview transcripts. I typically omitted placeholders, such as "like," "um," and "uh," and occasionally corrected small grammatical errors when these aspects of the participants' diction detracted from understanding the meaning of the quotations.

Amy: I'm a Proud, One-of-a-Kind Person

Amy, a proud Canadian sporting a tattoo of the national flag on her arm, was a self-assured and direct 23 year-old graduating senior Human Nutrition major from Toronto. Offering perspectives that revealed both her humor and intelligence, her interview responses were always refreshingly frank and spiced-up with colorful language. From the beginning, Amy exuded much confidence during the interviews. Not sure what she "was getting [herself] into" by participating in this study, Amy admirably risked going out of her comfort zone to think about aspects of her identity in ways she had not previously considered. She attributed much of her confidence to her lengthy involvement with field hockey. "A loud leader on the field," Amy was proud to have been a very successful varsity field hockey player throughout college, as well as an accomplished member of the Ontario national field hockey team. Her involvement on both of those teams allowed her to encounter a diverse array of people and experiences, which she described as being the most important source of education she could receive. Much of her understanding of herself and others was grounded in this valuable education.

A self-described "non-conformist," Amy welcomed Toronto's diversity and valued her international travels, which also provided her with an appreciation for differences among people and the importance of individuality. She especially valued her individuality as a biracial woman, half Trinidadian, half white. Amy's Caribbean culture was very important to her, and she talked with much enthusiasm about Trinidadian festivals and food. Taking great pride in her unique upbringing, Amy was terribly bothered when people assumed she was a "run of the mill" African-American person

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because of the color of skin. She enjoyed being her own person with little concern for

what most others thought of her and had "little need for long-term connections with

people" other than her family, close friends, and her girlfriend.

   After meeting lesbians for the first time through her involvement with field

hockey, Amy realized a couple years prior to the study that she might be gay through a

brief relationship with another athlete.   After a year of exploration, during which time

she sometimes "acted like a straighty in tight black pants and a hot pink shirt," and other

times drove around the city at night looking for the gay bars, she came out as gay to her

parents and most of her friends, who were very accepting. Amy identified as gay rather

than as a "lesbian" because "I'm all eeww about the word lesbian. I don't know why. I

have no idea." Being gay was "not a big deal" to Amy, except to the extent that it shaped

her social life. She never had any interest in GLBT organizations or "political issues"

and had a hard time relating to people who did, believing they often take themselves too

seriously. Going to meetings and discussing issues was just not for her. She would

rather "enjoy herself than sit around and listen to other people talk." "No offense to

you," she quickly added!

<u>"I'm a bar lesbian"</u>

   Identifying as gay was not something that Amy felt was very important to whom

she was as a person. For Amy, the crux of what it meant to be gay centered around how

it affected her social life. She explained:

> Apart from me hanging out at gay bars and liking chicks . . I don't think I've
> gotten any personality from being a lesbian. . . . I'm just gay, I happen to like

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girls. . . . I'm not hanging around straight bars anymore. But now I go to gay bars. I have gay friends . . . but yeah, that is pretty much it. I can't really think of other facets of my life that have changed.

In fact, Amy, who firmly believed that "lesbians and alcohol just naturally go together," had trouble relating to people for whom identifying as a lesbian extended beyond their social life. This was mostly because she did not want to get involved in or discuss political or other serious issues. She explained:

You find the people who participate with [GLBT groups] are the same kind of people that are like save the world, the same people who are like let's tie-dye our socks. They all hang together. Those people in [the campus GLBT organization], they're at all of those functions. And I'm not that person. I refuse to be anywhere near, like I don't relate to those people at all. . . . I'm not like one of those people with the signs . . . I don't go with the burning the bra, and all that.

Somewhat jokingly and realizing she was making a generalization, Amy explained her theory that: "There's only two kinds of lesbians. There are bar lesbians and there are coffee shop lesbians." People who participate in GLBT groups are typically coffee shop lesbians "who like to sit around and talk." Amy, who considered herself to be a "bar lesbian," explained they "are more fun-loving . . . not concerned with the issues, but more concerned with themselves."

Although she didn't talk about it to the extent that she did her social life, Amy also explained that identifying as gay was "comfortable and centering." She observed:

I feel like becoming a lesbian, realizing that I'm gay, has made me more comfortable in my skin. Now I know who I am. I don't reserve myself at any point or juncture. I don't make reservations and try to contain myself. . . . I'm myself now, I felt like something was missing and I was curious about something. I feel more at peace and centered. . . . I can honestly say I wish I had known that I was gay the whole time.

As a result of reading an initial draft of my interpretations of her interviews, Amy realized that she often presented herself in a light-hearted manner that did not reflect her

deeper self. Instead, her presentation reflected her general "theories about lesbians," which she acknowledged may or may not be true. She was very much bothered by that realization because she did not want people to think that all she cared about was drinking and dating. She made clear that while she did not talk about the importance of "centering" nearly to the extent that she did her social life, it was important to her that others understand that there was a reflective side to her identity that extended beyond her typical "comical nature."

"I parade myself around like I am one of a kind"

It was apparent through her stories that Amy prided herself on being unique. Whether it was by making other people laugh, dancing on the tables at a lesbian dance club, or skipping through the streets, Amy liked to stand out instead of conforming to other people's expectations. One of the implications of her desire to be unique was that she did not believe that aspects of her identity, such as her sexual orientation, race, and social class, affected how she thought about whom she was a person. Explaining her desire to be one of a kind, she explained:

> I don't put myself into one group of people. I consider myself one of a kind and that's it. I'm me. I'm my own class, group, genre, everything, like that's how I look at things. . . . I don't seek to relate to other people. I don't because I'm me, I'm myself, . . . I'm comfortable with being one of a kind. And I'm actually very proud of it, because I parade myself around like I am one of a kind.

Because she preferred to be one of a kind and connections with other people were not a primary concern, Amy did not let other people's expectations influence how she thought about being gay or how she behaved as a gay person. For instance, Amy felt that some of her Trinidadian family members disapproved of her sexual orientation because it did not meet their cultural expectations. Yet she did not care what her relatives thought

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and therefore brought her girlfriend, a white woman, to Trinidadian family gatherings, despite the potential for criticism for being gay. She explained: "I'm not that close to other people . . . and I don't really care. I was like, whatever, it's who I am. There's always going to be someone that will accept me, so I really have that outlook."

Enjoying being different from others also allowed Amy to reject her mother's suggestion that being gay adds to her "list of strikes." She explained:

> Like socio-economic status, being a woman, being gay, being black, you know. My mom would say they're all huge strikes against me. Like if you're black and you're a woman and now you're gay. . . . Why do you have to stand out so much, blah blah blah? But I'm like, that's me.

Rather than viewing her race, social class, and gender from a negative perspective, Amy explained that she laughs at "stupid people" who would discriminate against her based on these aspects of who she is as a person.

While Amy believed that her desire to be different allowed her not to be defined by her race, class, gender, or sexual orientation, it was Amy's desire to be different that also caused her to focus attention on her race and culture when other people assumed she was a "run of the mill" African American, instead of biracial. Other people's failure to realize that she was biracial, and that she was half-Caribbean, not half-African American, was one of the few issues about her identity about which she got angry. She emphasized:

> I'm not African American in any way shape or form. . . . People only see that [I'm black], that's all people see. I'm not mixed to anyone on the street. It's not really an issue except for the fact that I know that everyone stereotypes me.

Being stereotyped was an affront to Amy's sense of individuality.

<u>"Old tired lesbians sipping on their whiskey"</u>

Listening to Amy tell her stories, it was apparent that not only did she pride herself on being a non-conformist without concern for what other people thought of her, but that she also had clear-cut, unwavering opinions about her sexual orientation and other aspects of her identity. Sometimes as off-the-cuff remarks, such as "religion is hooey" or "boys are stupid," Amy shared these opinions often as her initial responses to my questions about her social class, race, religion, and gender. For instance, while she acknowledged that this might not always be the case, Amy had a generally unwavering opinion about the social class of lesbians, many of whom she considered to be poor. She observed:

> I think lesbians are poor in general. . . . The ones that are wealthy, they're few and far between. You usually see lesbians who are bar flies, UPS delivery workers, or the lesbian that's the construction worker. You see the lumberjack. You never see the lawyer or the doctor in these bars. You know you never see the professional lesbian. You do at [a fancier club], but like that's not a bar . . . I think it's because the lesbians I'm in contact with are young. They're all just out of college or in college. And then the other ones you see at the bars are the old tired lesbians that are really gross and old in their forties and fifties and sipping on their whiskey.

She was also of firm mind that sometimes it would be foolish for gay people, including herself, who were trying to rise to a higher social class not to pass as straight when it was in their best interest. For instance, she explained that when interviewing for a job, she has no qualms about passing as straight:

> I can turn off my gay switch. I mean if I'm going to a job interview I don't need to be oh hey, I'm gay. Nobody in their right mind should do that. If you are walking around doing something and you know people have a problem with being gay and you're openly trying to get a job and you know the person hated gay people, like don't do it . . . if you're smart.

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Amy believed she could achieve a higher social class status than the lesbians she saw in

the bars, and planned to do what was in her best interest to enable this to happen.

Amy expressed equally strong opinions about racial dynamics. Although she

wanted people to know that she was biracial, not African American, she explained that

people should not intentionally segregate themselves by race because doing so

contributes to racism. She stated:

> You can do activities that are based on race, but I don't do that kind of stuff
> because I don't really feel as if it's merited. . . . You shouldn't be coddling
> yourself with people of your own race because you feel slighted by the world. . . .
> You should be around whoever you feel comfortable with. And if it's the people
> of your race, I *guess* that's fine. But it's only contributing to segregation and like
> racism. You're only adding to the problem.

At the same time she frowned upon intentional racial segregation, Amy preferred to hang

out only with other gay people because her interests were typically different from those

of straight people. Ever since she identified as gay, she had not had much contact with

her straight friends. Explaining that she had little in common with her straight friends, she

stated:

> I have a whole different clientele of friends. Like all my friends, all my straight
> friends, I don't really talk to anymore. . . . Everybody is looking for a boyfriend
> and looking to get married. And that's something I don't really relate to. . . . So
> me and straight people don't really have much in common, you know.

Amy's steadfast opinions shaped, in combination with her confidence and desire to be

unique, the meaning she made of her identity.

External Meaning-Making Through Opposition to External Perspectives

Amy stated on several occasions that she was a non-conformist with little regard

for what other people thought of her. But at the same time, it was important to her that

people were aware she was different from them. Rather than defining herself through an internal perspective as she suggested, she defined herself in opposition to an external perspective. By doing so, she was still making meaning through that external perspective rather than an internally generated sense of self. She was most comfortable when she was different and stood apart from others.   Her understanding that she was either part of a group or in opposition to a group coincides with the "either-or" perspective that shaped many of her strong, unwavering opinions about aspects of her identity.

<u>Angel: Fear and Desire to be Her Own Person</u>

Angel, a 21 year-old junior Wildlife Management major grew up in a small conservative town in Southern Ohio with her mother, whom she considered her best friend, as well as her older sister. Together, they were "the three musketeers." They lived in a small apartment; her mother worked several jobs to pay the bills; and Angel "knows what it is like to have the electricity shut off and have to do homework while it is still light out." A mature woman who often spoke from a perspective beyond her years, Angel appreciated all that her mother did for her and was proud that she was raised without a sense of entitlement and with an appreciation for hard work.

Surrounded by only a few close friends other than her mother and sister, Angel "chose to be a weirdo" in high school as she and her friends dressed in "Goth" clothes and practiced Wiccanism or Paganism, a religion she became interested in through the movie *The Craft*. While Angel enjoyed being "different by choice" in high school, she was lonely much of her childhood as a result of being different for a reason she did not choose -- being biracial. A light brown-skinned woman with an African American

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mother and White father, Angel believed that people did not like her because of her race, causing her to have few friends. These experiences with loneliness and financial difficulties continued into college and consumed much of her energy. Angel though was a strong and determined woman working to take control of her life and to make herself happier. In fact, she took important steps near the end of the study, deciding to move out of the residence halls, in which she was unhappy, and into an apartment with a good friend, as well as assuming a leadership role in a campus GLBT organization.

As Angel told me stories about her life, her sexual orientation was not at the forefront of her mind. Instead, she talked about her family life and childhood experiences. Although Angel identified as bisexual in high school, her sexual orientation was not a big concern for her. Most of her friends also identified as bisexual and this was rarely a topic of conversation among them as they were more interested in witchcraft at the time. Angel was not interested in dating while in high school and therefore did not give much thought to her sexual orientation. Her sexual orientation first became important to her in college, when she chose to identify as a lesbian instead of bisexual, because she wanted to start dating and considered for the first time the potential for discrimination and estrangement. Angel had dated a couple of women, as well as a person she thought was a woman but later learned was a transgendered man, but hid these relationships from others. Although she was proud of her sexual orientation, she had for the most part come out only to other GLBT people. She feared that straight people would not like her because of her sexual orientation and worried because "ignorant people are scary." She was most nervous about telling her mother and had no immediate plans to do so.

<u>"It's painful to be in there, but it's painful to come out"</u>

The central theme underlying Angel's story of her sexual orientation was that identifying as a lesbian was another reason for people not to like her and therefore something she had to hide from the people who mattered most to her. As a result of hurtful behavior toward her as a child because of her race, she considered being different as a lesbian to be another reason for people not to like her. Explaining the connection between her attitude about her sexual orientation and having been shunned as a biracial person, she stated:

> The way that I was discriminated against when I was little because of my race, I could be discriminated against by people who race isn't an issue with, because of my sexual orientation. . . . This is another way that I'm a minority and this is another way that I'm different from people. This is another reason for people not to like me and for people to attack me.

Angel described this feeling as being:

> squooshed in [a closet] and having the door locked and you don't know if you can come out. And it's painful to be in there but it's painful to come out. . . . I mean it's hard to live with people everyday, and say, if they knew, they would hate me . . . and my life would be miserable.

She therefore often wished she were straight and came out to very few people, even though she wanted to do so. She explained: "Every so often I just sit there and just wish I wasn't [a lesbian]. Maybe I'll just marry some guy and have kids . . . life would be so much easier . . . if I was straight."

Angel was especially scared to come out to her mom because she was afraid her mom would not be accepting, just as she was not accepting of her decision to practice Paganism. Her mom did have gay friends, but Angel suspected that she might disapprove of her own daughter being gay. Angel had a lesbian relative, and her grandmother told

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her that the relative was not an appropriate topic of conversation; other family members reinforced that notion. With tremendous sadness, Angel stated in a matter-of-fact tone: "One of these days I'm going to be estranged from my family. Just at some point in time it will happen, it's like an inevitable thing."

I asked Angel if she thought her mother's refusal to discuss her lesbian relative might be connected in any way to their African American culture. In response, Angel, who felt more connected to her African American than white heritage even though she "wasn't raised stereotypically black, but was just raised," stated that she had no reason to believe that her family's silence was related to their race. She observed: "It seems like there is less tolerance of gay people in the black community. That's something I've heard. It's not something that I've experienced because I'm not part of a large black community."

As with her perception of her race and sexual orientation, Angel also considered her religion to be another reason for people not to like her because it was different from the norm. She explained that being Pagan "is another thing I have to keep quiet about. . . . I can't say anything about this because these people might not like it." Yet, at the same time, she explained that she was proud of her religion and felt connected to its principles, especially the connection with nature. Angel, who chose Paganism for reasons unrelated to her sexual orientation, felt lucky that her chosen religion did not condemn being gay. She observed:

> I kind of got lucky with religion, because the religion I affiliate myself with doesn't have anything bad to say about homosexuality. As far as sex goes, you can do whatever you want, as long as you're not hurting anybody. That's kind of

the general rule. A lot of religions are very, no, you can't do that, so it makes people feel really bad about it. I don't have to feel bad about it because my religion says it's okay.

Yet, she still hid her religion out of fear that people would not like her because of it.

Because of the hardship that Angel endured as a lesbian and as a biracial person, she observed that she grew increasingly compassionate toward other people. She commented: "I've been where I've not been accepted, so I will pretty much accept just about anybody, because I know what it feels like to be shunned."

"We're the same as straight people except we aren't straight"

Although Angel's sexual orientation was a hardship for her, she was also insistent that being a lesbian was not that big of a deal to her and did not dictate her behavior.   In fact, it angered her when people considered "gay to be a lifestyle," insisting that it was just one of several characteristics of herself that she could not change and that need not influence her identity. She emphatically stated:

> People talk about oh, we have to do gay things and live this gay lifestyle. It's *not* a lifestyle. I mean if it's just the way you are, that's the way that you are. There's no need to make a big issue out of it, you know. People say oh, we're so different from straight people. No we're not, we're the same as straight people, except we aren't straight.

Describing herself as a non-conformist, Angel adamantly stated that she was not concerned with societal expectations for lesbians, and that her sexual orientation guided, not dictated, how she thought and acted. She explained:

> As far as I'm concerned, society can kiss my butt. I'll do what I want. So I kind of pick and choose in the category whatever I feel comfortable with, because if I don't like it, I discard it. . . . My life and what I do is not defined by my sexual orientation. I do whatever I want, whether or not that's supposed to be like, lesbians don't do that. I don't care, you know. . . . Just like if I want to do something that's not considered a quote unquote lesbian thing, I do it if I want to do it.

Following up on Angel's explanation that identifying as a lesbian did not dictate her behavior, I asked how she felt about the use of the label "lesbian" to describe her sexual orientation. Her response indicated that the label helped simplify how she made sense of herself by providing a degree of guidance on her thoughts and behaviors. She observed:

> It's kind of nice to have a label. . . . It doesn't dictate the way that I think. . . . But at the same time, it kind of gives me a way to think, because even though I can say, oh, I can be attractive to men, if a man flirts with me, I will usually automatically ignore that, because I'm a lesbian. . . . People might think it's bad to box myself in, but I don't think that I have too much of a problem with it, because it helps me, like having these labels, and having these categories helps me figure out who I am.

Angel's insistence that gay is not a lifestyle and not something that dictated who she was as a person carried over to how she made meaning of other aspects of her identity. Explaining that she is a "non-conformist," Angel stated that being biracial is not a lifestyle that dictated what she did and with whom she was friends. Instead, her race was another aspect of her identity she did not choose and that need not define her sense of self. Likewise, Angel explained that she was not confined by expectations about acting in a masculine or feminine manner:

> I do feminine things, and I'll say that I like being feminine, but I don't think that there should be any situation where somebody says, you should do this because you're a girl, you should do this because you're a guy. And I think as far as choices people make in life, it shouldn't matter what gender they are.

Angel was less interested in gender labels than sexual orientation labels. Again, responding to my inquiry about how she felt about the use of labels and identity categories, she explained that categories are pointless because behavior does not always coincide with expectations associated with categories. She stated:

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I don't mind having a category, but I think having a category is kind of pointless, because . . . so many people mix it up anyway, what difference does having a category make? Lots of people who are supposed to be male do feminine things, and lots and lots and lots of people who are supposed to be female do masculine things.

Not realizing that she recognized the socially constructed nature of gender categories,

Angel observed: "Human beings made up these words. Human beings made up their

meanings. Human beings can change what they mean."

Angel attributed this tenuous relationship between her sexual orientation, race,

and gender and the meaning she made of her identity to being a non-conformist, as well

as to growing up in an environment where these aspects of her identity were not

emphasized. She explained:

All my friends were gay or bisexual, all my friends were Pagan when I was in high school. So, just because I was in an atmosphere where that was okay. It would have influenced me differently as someone who was in an atmosphere where that wasn't okay. So, like I could say sexual orientation, race, or gender are important, and someone else could say sexual orientation, race, or gender are important, and they scale them the same way, but they're still different.

Although Angel perceived herself as a non-conformist, it was apparent that she greatly

worried about the negative implications of being different from the norm.

Desire for an Internally Defined Identity Reigned in by Fear of Abandoning External Definitions

While Angel stated that she defined her own identity, her stories suggested that

she was actually very much bound by what she perceived to be the expectations of others

with whom she wanted to fit in. She simultaneously longed to define her own identity

and feared standing out as different. For instance, at the same time that Angel

emphatically stated she was a "non-conformist" proud of her sexual orientation and

religion, she hid from many others that she was a lesbian and a Pagan. She viewed these

aspects of her identity in a negative light, fearing that people would not like her because

she was different. With regard to her gender, however, Angel was more comfortable

moderately challenging labels and stereotypical expectations, perhaps because doing so

did not cause her to stand out from others.

<u>Billie: Finding Her Place in the World</u>

Billie, an 18 year-old white woman who grew up in an upper middle-class, non-

religious family in rural Illinois, was a thoughtful, sensitive, and athletic first-year student

who came out as a lesbian the summer before she began college. Eager to discuss this

recent and exciting change in her life, Billie was among the first people to volunteer to

participate in this study, looking forward to having another person to talk to about this

new development in her life. She squeezed the interviews in after a day of classes and

rigorous practices for the varsity crew team on which she was a successful first-year

athlete. Billie showed up for her interviews fresh from practice, wearing baggy jeans and

a sweatshirt, her hair pulled back, and feeling tired and thirsty!

Billie, who knew that she was attracted to women since junior high school,

explained that coming out as a lesbian transformed her from a shy woman uncomfortable

with herself into a confident and social woman who feels "liberated." Pride flags and

posters decorated Billie's bedroom, and she quickly made friends in college with other

gay and lesbian students through a campus GLBT social organization. For Billie, one of

the most wonderful aspects of identifying as a lesbian was that it allowed her also to

comfortably identify as "androgynous." Considering herself neither masculine nor

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feminine, she enjoyed the freedom "to be emotional like a woman," but at the same time was more comfortable in men's clothes, was proud of her "strong, muscular body," and jokingly described herself as "a lady's wo-man." As a result of her demanding practice schedule, Billie found herself with less time to enjoy her newfound social life as a lesbian once her team was in season, but then started to date one of her teammates. Billie was very comfortable and happy with her sexual orientation, except that it has caused a strained relationship with her parents, especially her disapproving father. She believed though that her relationship with her parents got a bit better every day and emotionally expressed that she was "hopeful that everything is going to work out for her in the future."

<u>"I found my place as a lesbian"</u>

Liberation and confidence were the dominant themes in the stories Billie told about her sexual orientation. Billie enthusiastically explained that once she came out as a lesbian, which was just months before her participation in this study, she experienced a major metamorphous:

> I really became a totally different person. I just blossomed. It was really a liberating moment. I was so much happier. It was amazing. . . . it all came together, and I got confidence. I was able to do things better and more efficiently.

Identifying as a lesbian allowed Billie to become more comfortable with all aspects of herself, especially her "tall and muscular body," which she previously used to her advantage to intimidate classmates who teasingly asked if she was a boy or girl. As a lesbian, she was now proud of her appearance and physical strength. She was also proud of her inner-strength. After having taken the time throughout high school to think deeply

about who she was and who she wanted to be, Billie had new strength to take care of her own needs rather than "always trying to make others happy."

Part of the strength that Billie felt as a lesbian was a result of "having found [her] place in the world." To better understand how her sexual orientation provided her with a place to call her own, I asked Billie how she felt about having the label "lesbian" attached to her identity. She explained that using lesbian as a label to describe her sexual orientation provided her with a sense of who she is and where she fit in with others. She stated:

> I myself have no problem with labels. . . . I think it's like trying to figure yourself out. . . . It's just a part of it that I don't really have to worry about, because I don't have to think about it . . . I figured that part out. . . . If I find myself uncomfortable with, you know, how I label myself to that point, then I'll rethink it. But it took me a while to find my place. So I'm comfortable in that place for now. I don't want to be changing it, basically. My security. . . . I don't really have to worry about what am I, or who am . . . I feel like I have a place in the world.

"I found my place as androgynous"

For Billie, one of the most liberating aspects of identifying as a lesbian was that it allowed her to more comfortably express her gender identity. She identified as "androgynous," a word she discovered when taking a gender quiz on the internet. Billie explained that when she found the gender category androgynous, "I found my place . . . it fit me. . . . it explains me really well." Billie defined androgynous as being "in the middle between masculine and feminine" and explained that "I lean a little closer to the masculine side, although physically I don't mind being a girl." Not questioning the role of social norms in constructing the definitions of masculine and feminine, Billie explained that identifying as androgynous allowed her to dress how she felt best about herself (in guy's clothes), and express what she characterized as both masculine

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characteristics (showing off her muscles and taking care of her girlfriend) and feminine characteristics (being emotional and crying).

Billie emphasized that she identified as androgynous not because she believed that she needed to fit into a lesbian stereotype, but rather, identifying as a lesbian allowed her to feel more comfortable as androgynous. Explaining that her sexual orientation allowed more freedom in how she expressed her gender, she observed:

> I don't really think that in a heterosexual relationship that being androgynous would really work out. . . . I like the more femme kind of girls, of course, because I like to be the masculine role. So, it's kind of the way that it works out.

Billie did not feel that she had to look a certain way because she identified as androgynous. Instead, it was more important to her that she be comfortable with herself and offered as an example: "I'm in my guys' clothing, but I have painted toenails. So someone would be like why are your toes painted? It's just one of those things where I don't care. I just do what I want to do, be comfortable." Billie explained that she has become a stronger person as a result of her comfort with the relationship between her sexual orientation and gender. She stated:

> I'm thinking for myself and I'm strong. And even though my family isn't really okay with it, I've become very strong and very okay with it. . . .I don't feel like I'm hiding anything. And I definitely act like myself and the way I want to.

Strength and self-confidence are qualities that were dear to her and that have deepened since coming out about her sexual orientation.

"I go with the flow"

Although Billie truly valued the comfort she enjoyed as an androgynous lesbian,

she was still not comfortable in situations where expressing this identity caused attention

to be drawn to her. Rather than standing out in a crowd, she preferred to conform to her

surroundings. She explained:

> When you go out of your comfort zone, and you find yourself with all these other
> people that don't know you and the kind of person you are and are going to judge
> you by the things that you do . . . I like to be inconspicuous. . . . I just go with the
> flow of what's going on. . . . . I like to be comfortable in the situations that I'm in,
> and if I feel like I'm being singled out, I'm not really comfortable with having a
> lot of attention on me.

Illustrating this idea, Billie recounted the following story from a recent athletic banquet

she attended where she wore a skirt even though she typically wore guy's clothes so that

she would not stand out from her teammates:

> If I would have worn what I wanted to wear, it would have been like, dress slacks
> and a button-up shirt, and I would have matched all the [male] varsity coaches. I
> would have been more like the guys in the room. I knew that everyone else was
> going to wear a skirt. I would feel like I would be a sore thumb sticking out. I
> would feel like everyone in the room would be like, oh there's the lesbian!

Billie did not feel that she was compromising her identity by not being true to herself in

all situations. She knew that she could again express herself as she wanted when in her

comfort zone.

"I wasn't tolerant of people who were intolerant"

Because Billie felt for so long that she did not have a place in the world, she was

sensitive to other people who also felt different and unconnected. For instance, she

explained that because she did not feel like she fit in with others, her high school circle of

friends consisted of the few racial minorities in her predominantly white school: "I

wasn't tolerant of people who were intolerant. . . . I definitely had a burden on me. . . . I

felt a connection with the people who also felt that they had burdens of being a different

race."

Billie was also sensitive to some of the privileges she had that other people did

not share. For instance, Billie realized that as a white lesbian she did not share the same

"double burden" as did an Indian lesbian friend of hers. She observed:

> I don't have problems, I don't worry about it at all. I don't need to. . . .I definitely
> think it's easier for me because I don't have the pressure of being a different race.
> And then having almost like a double burden if I were. I find it easier.

Billie also realized that growing up in an upper-middle class family facilitated her ability

to understand her sexual orientation. She appreciated having the financial support to be

able to take advantage of many opportunities, especially athletics, where she could learn

more about herself. She also appreciated having had the time, since she did not need to

work to earn money during high school, to think about her identity. She explained:

> I definitely know that I'm privileged in the way that I grew up. . . . Having the
> ability to not work all the time because my parents give me what I need to survive
> and I can go out, find different opportunities and ways to meet people. . . . I
> definitely had a lot of time to sit and think about my sexual orientation. I
> definitely thought about it a lot. I would see it on TV and be like, I really like
> watching that. And then I would go and be like, why do I like that? I'm not
> supposed to.

Having been unhappy for so long because she was uncomfortable with herself made

Billie more sensitive to aspects of her life where she had been fortunate.

Unexamined Satisfaction with External Meaning Making

Delighted to have found an identity where she fit in with others, the label

"lesbian" provided Billie with an externally defined identity, which she had not

considered the need to challenge. Accepting externally created definitions of masculine and feminine, the label "androgynous" also provided her with a way to fit in without having to challenge stereotypical gender roles. While Billie was personally comfortable as an "androgynous lesbian" and explained it was "normal" for her, her desire to fit in with others caused Billie to perform her identity differently depending on the environment. Generally open about her sexual orientation and comfortable with her gender, she disguised both when they drew attention to her.   Conforming her identity to the environment did not bother Billie because she could again be her true "normal self" when she returned to comfortable surroundings.

Carmen: Am I Normal, Abnormal, Lesbian, Bisexual, or Straight?

Carmen, who initially suspected that I might be a fundamentalist Christian intent on preaching that her "sexuality is a sin," was a pensive and sensitive 19-year old sophomore Wildlife Management major. Once she decided that I was "legit," Carmen deeply engaged in this study, giving much thought to her identity during and between the interviews. As I asked questions about aspects of her identity about which she had not previously given much thought, Carmen would often look at me in disbelief, quietly chuckling as she considered how she would ever answer the questions. But she then proceeded to carefully and thoughtfully respond, on occasion taking more time at home to think through her responses.   A daughter of military parents who divorced when she was young, Carmen lived in several different countries before settling in Sandusky, Ohio. Until she was nine years old, Carmen, who identified as half-Puerto Rican and half-German, was raised by her Spanish-speaking grandparents, a time of her life that was

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very dear to her.   An easy-going woman most comfortable in men's khakis and sweaters with pony-tailed hair in a baseball cap, Carmen was a serious student who also enjoyed playing sports and pool with her friends.

Carmen had dated women since junior high school and hung out at the Sandusky gay bars during high school. Her father and Grandmother disapproved of her sexual orientation, and this led to an argument that caused her to move out of the house and in with her girlfriend during her senior year of high school. Her relationship with her family had since improved, although they still had their struggles. At the time of the study, Carmen identified as bisexual, since she was also attracted to guys, but was giving much thought to and very much wanted to figure out whether she was in fact bisexual, or whether she might have been either a lesbian or even straight.   Questions from ex-girlfriends about her sexual orientation and interests in both men and women made figuring this out a challenge for her.   While she was still trying to understand her sexual orientation, about which she was very open, she acknowledged that "it's not the only thing I think about, but it's the predominant thing that makes me do just about everything I do."

"I don't just like girls. I don't just like guys."

The overarching theme of Carmen's story of the meaning she made of her sexual orientation was her desire to figure out into which category she fit, either lesbian, bisexual, or straight. Yet at the same time, she wished she did not have to choose a label. Carmen acknowledged that participating in this research project caused her to deeply think about which category most appropriately described her identity. At the beginning of the study, she was fairly confident identifying as bisexual because she was attracted to

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both men and women. By the end of the second interview, she began to think that maybe she was using "bisexual as a crutch" that allowed her "to feel more normal." She began to question whether or not that crutch would make her as happy as she might otherwise be if she identified as lesbian. By the end of the third interview, however, she made it clear that it was still possible that she was straight. None of these labels was quite the right fit.

While Carmen explained that she wished identity labels did not matter to her, she very much wanted to figure out whether she was straight or gay. Figuring this out would make her feel secure knowing she had made the best decision for her. She stated:

> Deep down inside, it would bring clarity, and it would make things easier. And it would . . . make me feel like I knew what I was doing. Whether I was with a guy, and I chose to be normal, or whether I was with a girl, and I chose to be abnormal, it would make me think in my head that I knew I was doing the right thing, or that what I was doing was best for me. So, as much as I want to be, you know, I'm bisexual, it doesn't matter, I could be with a girl or a guy. But the clarity would be nice. . . . As much as it's a label, it's also something that eventually I'll believe in, if I do choose one way or the other, I'll believe that I did the right thing.

Although she identified as bisexual, Carmen did not like bisexual as an identity label. This was not only because both gay and straight people gave those who identify as bisexual a hard time, but also because bisexual meant different things to different people and therefore could not accurately capture who she was, especially since whether she was attracted to men or women was not always the same. Identifying as bisexual was like trying to fit one moving target into another moving target. Carmen explained:

> There's two sides to being bisexual. And like – there's *many* sides. Because you can like guys more, or you can like girls more. Or you could just be with a guy, and that's what makes you on that side. Because to my friend, bisexual to her means that she's totally in love with guys, and it's just cool to kiss girls. . . . And to me, that's like – you're just really stupid and confused, and maybe you don't need a boyfriend, maybe you need to experience other things. . . . The only

reason why I [say I'm bisexual] is . . . people look at me and they say, okay, so you're straight, and I go no, I'm not straight. Oh, so you're gay. No, I don't just like girls, I don't just like guys. So that's why I would say, I'm bisexual.

Carmen did not express a similar concern that the term lesbian or straight have varied meanings and would therefore be difficult to neatly fit herself into.

Yet, at the same time that Carmen very much wanted to figure out which category best fit her, she also complained that it that bothered her when other people expected her to choose an identity category. To whom she was attracted, which "is not a choice," varied:

[My ex-girlfriend] and my dad want me to choose, and I like whatever I like. . . . If I was really trying to be something for a reason, then why wouldn't I try to be straight and be normal. . . . I'm trying to be myself . . . not fit into anything.

"I want them to think that I'm normal"

Carmen's story of her struggles to find an appropriate identity label was infused with discussions that reflected her simultaneous feelings of normalcy and abnormality, as well as what she perceived as an intentional choice between being normal or abnormal. Pondering "whether I was with a guy and chose to be normal, or whether I was with a girl and chose to be abnormal" acted as a refrain throughout her story. Framing her sexual orientation identity in terms of this decision was a reflection of Carmen wanting to fit in with society's perspective on normal at the same time that she wanted to be her own person comfortable defining her own norms. She explained: "I really do think I'm normal, but I recognize that other people don't think that I'm normal, and I want them to think that I'm normal. I don't want to be a big weirdo." Carmen went on to explain that people did not recognize her as normal because she is different from the "average" person. She stated:

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I *do* think I'm normal, but in certain ways, I recognize that I'm not normal as far as statistical or the average person is. That makes me abnormal. But I think I'm more normal. . . . I think we're obsessed with like average, the average person. I think it does bring us down to think of the average person as normal.

Carmen's struggle to figure out whether she was straight, gay, or bisexual was a result of wanting to be her true self, a person she internally considered normal, but was tempered by her concern about social norms. If society considered it normal to date women, Carmen thought that perhaps she would be more likely to identify as lesbian. She enjoyed dating guys, not only because she finds some attractive, but also because it made it easier to do "normal relationship things." In fact, Carmen sometimes chose to pass as straight while identifying as bisexual so that others considered her normal. She explained that if people first got to know her, thinking she was straight, they wouldn't think she was abnormal once they learned that she was bisexual:

> The biggest reason why I don't want [new people to know I'm not straight] is because I want them first to see me as a normal person. And then if they take or if I take the initiative to know them, then I already know that they already think of me as normal, and then I think they'll be more or less accepting. And that's how I've made all my friends. Because I was able to somewhat disguise my sexual identity. I've allowed them to view me as normal, and still as like bisexual. . . . . I guess [wanting to be normal] influences me like when I want to look straight.

But at the same time that Carmen worried about being judged as a "weirdo" and choses to sometimes pass as straight, she also stated that "it's not at all [important to be normal]. Like, not at all. I really just want to be myself. And as long as I'm happy, I don't really care about what others think."

These contradictory but sincere feelings that framed Carmen's story about her sexual orientation were echoed in how she described her gender identity. At the same time that she "just wants to be myself and it shouldn't matter," typically wearing men's

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clothes and exhibiting masculine mannerisms, she also acknowledged that she worried about what other people thought about her gender expression. If it were up to Carmen, her gender would have been the least important aspect of her identity. She explained: "I don't really think about my gender without taking into account the social norms." Social norms caused gender to be one of the aspects of her identity that she thought about most because other people called attention to it because it often did not fit stereotypical expectations.

Indeed, Carmen struggled to find the right words to describe her gender, a struggle that was caused by the meanings associated with gender labels. She defined herself as being "in the middle between masculine and feminine." She equated her feminine side with passivity and masculine side with strength, and considered her masculine side to be her "better side that got [her] through everything as a strong woman." While she was more comfortable with male mannerisms and wearing men's clothes, she at times intentionally looked more feminine. To do so, she straightened her long, curly hair and wore women's clothes, and enjoyed the compliments she received.

As Carmen struggled to fit herself into either masculine or feminine, I asked her reaction to abandoning gender categories or the possibility of adopting a third category between feminine and masculine. She replied: "I think that would be awesome. I think that would be great. As a matter of fact, if we just got rid of masculine and feminine, and just used that other word, that would be very cool." Still, a third category seemed to be an impossibility beyond the scope of her structured thinking.

<u>"I don't see why the two really need to come together"</u>

Without realizing it prior to the study, Carmen had given much thought to the relationship between her sexual orientation and her race, culture, and religion. These relationships, similar to her perceptions of normalcy and abnormality, reflected inner conflict between wanting to be her own person and resigning herself to the expectations of others. Specifically, at the same time that Carmen did not allow her family's criticisms of her sexual orientation that were grounded in their race, culture, and religion to alter how she thought about herself, she also accepted that her sexual orientation must be kept separate from these other aspects of her identity.

For instance, Carmen, for whom her race and culture were very important, was aware that her Puerto Rican family did not approve of her sexual orientation. Although she typically was very concerned about what other people thought about her, Carmen neither thought less of herself nor was uncomfortable with her sexual orientation as result of her family's attitude. Instead, with some disappointment, she accepted that they were entitled to their opinions. Carmen's father also questioned why she would want to be gay when it added to the "strikes" she already has against her as a Puerto Rican woman. Carmen rejected his attitude, explaining that she knew she was a good person:

> My dad feels, I've already struck out like, because [being gay] is another thing. I guess in some people's eyes it makes me less, less of whatever I should be. So, in those people's eyes, it's ignorant, but they believe certain things. . . . I'm going to be very successful. I already am successful. I'm a good person.

Carmen's ability to stand up to her family's negative perceptions is related to the deep thought she was giving to the process of becoming her own, independently thinking person.

Yet at the same time she was trying to think for herself, Carmen resigned herself to believing that her sexual orientation and race and culture will unlikely be integrated. For the time being, she was satisfied maintaining them as separate aspects of her identity. She explained:

> When I'm around a bunch of Puerto Ricans, I'm not going to be like, yeah I'm gay. . . . If we're getting together, if the focus is more towards being about my culture or doing something with that aspect of my life . . .then I guess the two are separate there. . . . I can't change everybody's mind. I can't make people see, like eventually I hope like when my kids' kids are alive it's not such a big issue. And I don't see it happening, I'd like to hope for it . . . Not that I don't think I can make a difference with a few of my relatives or family members opinions or anything but, I don't see the two like, I don't see why the two really need to come together.

While she stated that the two don't have to come together, it was hard for her to understand why they cannot.

Likewise, Carmen, for whom religion was important, explained that she did not allow her family's insistence that she would go to hell for being gay influence her attitude about her sexual orientation. She considered it hypocritical to use religion, which teaches the importance of loving everybody, as a basis for disapproving of gay people:

> God made me this way. . . . like even if it is a flaw, . . . it's a flaw that He's created. . . . I just don't think that because I love different that He doesn't want me to follow his religion or anything like that. . . . I think it's bogus that people try and say that I can't like be religious and be like bisexual or whatever. People try and question my relationship with God . . .the only person that should be concerned with that is me and God, like our relationship is whatever I want it to be. . . . I see [my grandma] hating on me because I'm gay, and I'm just like, shouldn't you love everybody? Like your religion says that you should love everybody and everybody is equal. . . . I feel like they try and force their religion on me, . . . and make me feel like less of a person because I don't fit their standards or whatever. And I try and throw it back on them and be like, if you really were that, you'd be accepting.

At the same time, Carmen was uncertain that she could be religious as a gay or bisexual person. Indeed, the prospect of likely not being straight in combination with

uncertainty of whether she will ultimately have a man or woman partner caused a complicated and tentative relationship between her sexual orientation and faith. Carmen was raised to be religious and wanted to eventually have faith in her life (She preferred the term faith to religion because faith implies guiding principles more so than religion which implies worshipping.) Faith was not important to Carmen now, because she was young and had so much else to learn about, especially her sexual orientation. But she knew it would be very important to her in the future. As a bisexual person, however, she was not sure she would be able to have faith even when she is ready to do so because Christianity doesn't accept gay people:

> I'd like to have religion in my life, but I think it's difficult just because some religions just aren't accepting of my lifestyle and stuff like that. . . . Christianity, they don't accept it, it's not like viewed as normal I guess. It makes it harder for me to relate to that, like equate that in my life.

Carmen explained that gay and religion don't go together just "like gay and Republican don't go together." If her partner is a woman, she assumed she would not have faith because most gay people, including her friends, oppose religion since it does not accept them:

> If I do settle down with a girl, like chances are she's probably not going to feel the same way I do about religion. . . . If my girlfriend wasn't into it, I guess I wouldn't want to devote myself to it. If I was with a guy, like sure I'd get married in a church and all that good stuff. I'd probably want him to be semi-religious. I don't know, it's weird.

However, being with a woman would not necessarily exclude having faith, as this would also be somewhat dependent on whether the woman were butch or femme:

> I'm sure if I ended up with a femme girl, and she was Christian and stuff like that, sure I'd guess we would go to Church and we'd try to lead like decent lives and everything according to the Bible or whatever. But if I settle down with a butch

girl, chances are she's not going to feel comfortable, or the Church isn't going to feel comfortable. Finding the right fit is going to be harder in my life I guess.

As a result of how she understood her sexual orientation and gender, Carmen was aware that her identity was still evolving and uncertain.

Gradual Dissatisfaction with Insufficient External Definitions

Carmen's struggles to understand her sexual orientation identity were grounded in the conflict between her gradual realization that her sexual orientation did not neatly fit into externally defined categories and her inability to conceive that she was not bound by those categories. Simultaneously relying on identity categories and realizing the limitations of these categories grew terribly frustrating for Carmen. This internal conflict made it difficult for Carmen not only to understand her sexual orientation identity, but also to realize the possibility of integrating her sexual orientation with her racial and religious identities and to escape stereotypical gender expectations. Still guided by external standards, she sadly resigned herself to the fact that she cannot be gay with her Puerto Rican relatives or be Christian if she dates a "butch" woman. Her growing frustration with insufficient external standards suggests that she might be on the cusp of transitioning toward a more complex way of understanding her identity.

KT: Unpacking Stereotypes and Backpacking Strength

A thoughtful and mature 22-year-old woman who grew up on the Ohio-West Virginia border, KT was a hardworking, goal-oriented person, proud of her educational accomplishments. She graduated while the study was in progress with a degree in Sports

and Leisure Studies and would soon be starting a master's degree program, preparing to be a physical education teacher. KT loved to work with children and considered herself a teacher at heart. Always dressed in bright, sporty clothes with a chic, short haircut, KT arrived at every interview eager to engage with our conversations. Yet she was often a bit tentative, telling me that she had not considered these issues before, but then marveling at how interesting this research project was to her. All the while, KT deeply considered each question and thoughtfully articulated each response. Clearly, she had done more prior identity work than she realized!

KT, a white woman raised as a devout Catholic, realized she was a lesbian at the end of high school. Her parents accidentally found out, causing her to discuss her sexual orientation with them sooner than planned. Not only did her parents refuse to believe that she was a lesbian, but her mother displayed immense disapproval, telling KT that as a lesbian she could no longer be professionally successful, perceived as feminine, or practice Catholicism, each of which was important to KT. Her mother's negative reaction has been a source of great distress for KT, who not only wanted her mother's approval but also believed that her mother deserved to know the truth. KT had not discussed her sexual orientation with her parents since high school and absolutely hated not being open with them about her life. Living a dual life was getting harder because she lived with her girlfriend, Elle, and the two had just bought a house together. She hoped to talk with her parents soon, but had no immediate plans to do so, thinking perhaps she would wait until after completing her master's degree. Despite this

agonizing situation with her mother that was constantly on her mind, KT personally

enjoyed identifying as a lesbian. She loved socializing at gay bars with the "lesbian

community" where she felt she could be her "true self."

<u>"I have the ultimate backpack"</u>

As KT reflected on some of the most significant times in her life, she focused on

those that strengthened her character. "Choosing to be a lesbian" was perhaps the most

significant of those times. Much of what it meant to KT to be a lesbian was wrapped up

in the strength and confidence she gained and continued to gain as a result of being

honest with herself instead of living an internal lie. It was not KT's sexual orientation

per se that was the source of strength, but rather, her *decision* to identify as a lesbian. In

the face of her mother's disapproval and societal discrimination, choosing to be straight

seemed to KT to be an easier option in many respects, and she was proud of herself for

not taking the easy way out. The strength that KT gained as a result of this difficult

decision allowed her to "do things in life and just have the confidence to do them and

accomplish them, and have a direction of what I want to do in life." KT compared

choosing to identify as a lesbian to having the "ultimate backpack." She explained:

> Being a lesbian has like, you have an ultimate backpack, and you always have it.
> And you just keep going with life, and I don't know, it's just, it's great, it just
> makes me so happy. I love it. . . . What would be in the backpack? Some of my
> confidence, some of my direction, some of my goals. Everything you need. If
> something fell apart in front of you, you could always reach in your backpack and
> get it. It's pretty cool, I like my backpack.

Because choosing to identify as a lesbian gave KT so much strength and confidence, she

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considered it to be at the very heart of who she was as a person. She explained: "If someone wants to know me . . . one hundred percent KT, it's important to me that they know I'm gay."

<u>"I need to see things to believe them"</u>

Strength and confidence did not immediately follow KT's decision to identify as a lesbian. At the time that KT initially became aware of her sexual orientation, everything she knew about what it meant to be a lesbian was based on stereotypes and negative comments she heard from other people, especially her mother. Although dating women felt right to KT and she was "hooked after her first kiss," these stereotypes made her feel like she chose an identity that negatively defined and limited other aspects of her life, rather than one that allowed her to be the person she wanted to be. At some point during college, it became important to KT to be her own person as a lesbian rather than a stereotype. But before she could even consider that possibility, she first had to figure out whether or not the stereotypes were actually true. Explaining that she "needs to see things to believe them," the stereotypes that were previously etched in KT's understanding slowly started to erode as a result of seeing positive images of lesbians and meeting lesbians who did not fit the stereotypes.

KT's first hint at the strength she would feel as a lesbian surfaced as she started to overcome some of the negative connotations she associated with being a lesbian. Attending her first citywide Pride celebration the summer after her fourth year in college, where she "felt like she died and went to heaven," played a pivotal role in this process. She explained with great enthusiasm:

> It was the best because we all could walk down the street holding hands and showing our affection and no one was discriminating . . . . And by seeing how the city allows us to have one day to show who we are, it just made me realize that it's okay to be gay and there's a lot of support that I find in this city particularly. . . . I was so proud to be with my girlfriend that day. . . . I think I realized that day that, you know, it will be okay for me to be gay.

Soon after Pride weekend, KT came out to more of her friends and co-workers about her sexual orientation and felt more confident about herself than she had since high school.

KT not only had to conquer her perception that being a lesbian was something that most everyone "looked down upon," but also had to overcome many stereotypes related to the relationship between her sexual orientation and her religion, gender, and social class. In fact, KT told me that before she and I discussed how identifying as a lesbian has affected how she thought about these other aspects of her identity, we had only "scratched the surface" about what it meant to her to be a lesbian. Stereotypes caused KT to fear that identifying as a lesbian limited her choices in terms of her religion, social class, and gender. She was working very hard to learn whether or not these stereotypes were true. As she gradually learned that her lesbian identity did not dictate these other aspects of her identity, she became stronger and more confident.

KT was raised in a Catholic home and had a deep faith in God, another important source of strength for her. She stated: "My happiest times have been when I had God in my life." Based on negative comments from her friends and her mother, and to a lesser extent from religious protesters at the Pride parade, KT believed the stereotype that identifying as a lesbian precluded her from being religious. She explained:

> My mother told me I can't be a lesbian [and Catholic]. I still want to be in touch with God. I want to go to church and do those things that I've grown up with. I still want to be accepted through God. And I felt that because of my mother I couldn't do that.

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At the same time, KT rejected the Catholic Church, because she felt it did not support her

sexual orientation. She explained: "I realized that I really didn't want to be Catholic

anymore. It was the rules that they had, I didn't believe in them." Reconciling her

religion and sexual orientation was among KT's most challenging struggles.

Very much wanting God in her life again, KT actively sought out reading material

that helped her understand that her mother's interpretation of the Bible need not be the

only correct one. She also dated a religious woman and through that relationship saw that

being a lesbian and religious were not mutually exclusive. Starting to realize the

stereotype that governed her thinking might not be true, KT became hopeful that she

would eventually have religion in her life again. She cast her desire for integration as a

future goal though, as she still maintained a degree of uncertainty about whether or not it

would really work out. Some of her uncertainty was related to her gay friends' negative

attitudes about religion. Not wanting to discuss controversial issues with her friends, KT

described herself as a "religious closet case":

> None of my friends go to church . . . Knowing that I want to go to church and find
> a church, I really keep that a secret because everything that they say about
> religion is bad. They'll bring up something the protestors will say at Pride or
> something like that. And how, you know, well God says it's bad, why do you
> want to go to church? So they'll bring up something like that. But I keep it a
> secret. I'm in the closet about religion. I haven't met any of my close friends that
> want to go to church. . . .So I don't really like to talk about religion period. I just
> keep it a secret. . . . But I believe in religion, I believe in a higher power.

Still, she believed that as she grows more confident, she would be able to be a Christian

and a lesbian as long as she found an accepting church. It was more important to KT to

find a church that accepts her as a lesbian than to remain Catholic. She explained:

> I want to go to church but I want to find the right church that accepts who I am. . . . Just a Christian religion where they believe in gays and lesbians and they support them. And they're able to talk and maybe see stuff in the Bible about that. So it doesn't make you feel like you're a leper. That's what I'm looking for.

Although KT believed she would find an accepting church sometime in the future and for the time being remained "in the closet" about religion, she also explained that identifying as a lesbian caused religion to be the aspect of her identity that had the most influence on her sense of self. Identifying as a lesbian has increased her desire to have God in her life because she needed this second source of strength.

KT also relied on concrete examples to help her learn that the stereotype that lesbians typically inhabit a lower social class was not true. Based on comments from her mother and exposure only to lesbians who were college students, KT used to believe that being a lesbian and being an upper-class professional woman were mutually exclusive. As a result of her relationship at the time of the study with a woman in "corporate America," KT had attended parties at nice homes owned by lesbians. Seeing these professional women allowed KT to realize that identifying as a lesbian would not preclude her from achieving her professional and financial goals. She explained:

> I guess a lot of stereotypes come from when you're a lesbian you just kind of find your women and just do whatever. But . . . I've now seen the upper class of lesbians, where they have the money and everything. And it shows me that lesbians can be whatever they want to be, and they have the ability to be in corporate America or they have the ability to become professors. . . . it's great because I know I can still be who I am and be successful.

While KT was starting to realize that identifying as lesbian need not dictate her social class, she still feared that others would perceive her as lower class because of her sexual orientation. She was tentatively starting to believe that not all people will judge her in that way, but was still concerned that her career could be hurt if other people

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assumed that because she was a lesbian she could not be a professional person. In this

context, KT spoke to the pressure she felt teaching in elementary and secondary schools:

"You almost have to be perfect in the schools as a teacher. So I don't want to be

portrayed as a lesbian because I don't know where they stand, and I'm scared to death

I'm going to get fired."

KT was also working to unlearn the stereotype that all people assume lesbians are

masculine women and therefore unprofessional. Even though she considered herself "a

feminine woman who can be a little butch sometimes," KT assumed many people would

think that because she was a lesbian she was also masculine. It was important to KT to

always be professional in all aspects of her life, and she associated being professional

with being feminine, not necessarily with being a lesbian. This perception, which again

was based on what others told her, was especially troubling as a physical education

teacher and coach: "As a woman, I find that it's very hard to get that coaching job

because if you're not portrayed as feminine in some ways, they assume you're a lesbian,

and won't hire you." By meeting professional, feminine lesbians, she was coming to

realize the possibility of being perceived as a feminine lesbian. Notably, observing how

one of her lesbian college instructors defied gender and social class stereotypes opened

up for KT the possibility that she too could do so.   She explained:

> [My instructor] is so cool. She dresses so cool, she has short hair, but yet she's
> extremely professional. She's my idol. . . . I've never seen anyone who, I know
> she's a lesbian, but she's my teacher, and she's professional, and she has all those
> qualities. And she was so smart. . . . She's just a person I want to be like.

Like her instructor, KT wanted her sexual orientation, gender, and class to come

together so that she could be the person she considers herself to be. At her job at a health

and fitness club, KT felt that these aspects of herself come together, and this made her extremely happy: "They see me as professional, they see me as a woman, and they see me as a lesbian. I have the best of both worlds there." As these aspects of her identity eventually come together for her, and once religion is added to the mix, KT believed she would become an even stronger person, with a bigger and nicer "backpack filled with strength."

On the Path to Internal Meaning Making by Learning of Multiple External Definitions

During much of college, KT understood her sexual orientation identity from an external perspective, either stereotypes, her friends' attitudes, or what other people, especially her mother, told her. Many of these external perspectives caused KT to believe that identifying as a lesbian precluded her from being religious, feminine, and an upper-class professional. She recently realized these external perspectives were not allowing her to be the person she wanted to be, and started to tentatively question and challenge other people's expectations. But to begin this process of tentative questioning, she needed to see examples of people who defied stereotypes, thus continuing to rely on external definitions. Rather than abandoning external perspectives in favor of internal meaning making, KT began to realize there were several external definitions from which she could choose rather than only one set way to be a lesbian. Still, intentionally learning there were multiple ways to be a lesbian allowed KT to start defining her identity in the way that she wanted and was an important step as she began to transition toward an internally defined sense of self.

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<u>Beth: Empowerment Through an Integrated Identity</u>

Beth, a white, 18 year-old first-year student who grew up in a middle-class home in suburban Chicago, was a fast talker with a great deal to say! She thought deeply about her identity, called herself a "diversity queen," and rattled off a long list of identity-based organizations of which she was an active participant, including the modern abolitionist movement. Her daily calendar was packed with meetings, and her winter and spring breaks were filled with social action trips to Israel and El Salvador. Much of her identity interests and involvement stemmed from her religion. Beth was raised as a Conservative Jew and strongly and actively identified with Judaism, both from a religious and political perspective. She then explored Reform Judaism because it was more progressive in terms of sexual orientation and gender equality. She was quite excited about designing a major and minor that combined Women's Studies, Sociology, and Jewish Studies because "how cool is that!"

A curly haired, freckled-faced redhead comfortable in jeans and a sweater, Beth simultaneously identified and came out as a lesbian the summer after her senior year of high school. She never considered herself to be straight but also did not want to identify as a lesbian by "process of elimination." She officially identified as "undecided" until firmly concluding that she was a lesbian after much thought and frequent consultation with friends. Calling her coming out story the "easiest in the history of the world," she told her accepting friends and family immediately, some of whom while on her way to the Chicago Dyke March. She quickly became involved in GLBT student organizations when she began college and added with renewed fervor sexual orientation issues to her palate of identity-based politics.   Her religion and sexual orientation also fueled her

feminism, and in one breath, Beth rapidly fired her identity as a "Jewish lesbian feminist

activist." A few months after identifying as a lesbian, Beth began dating a Jewish

college student with whom she had been friends for many years. This relationship added

new excitement and learning to her already highly involved and active life.

"Judaism is the first filter"

Judaism was immensely important to Beth and was often the "first filter through

which [she] views the world." Although Judaism was "not the only defining aspect" of

her identity, Beth's religion shaped who she was as a person more so than any other

aspect of her identity. Being a lesbian was also very important to her identity, but she

explained that it defined less of her than it might otherwise because of how important it

was to her to be Jewish. Suspecting that she might be a lesbian caused Beth, who actively

practiced Conservative Judaism, to reexamine her commitment to that branch of Judaism,

which was less forward thinking on homosexuality than the Reform movement. Before

she could deal with the possibility of being a lesbian, Beth first had to reconcile adhering

to Reform rather than Conservative Judaism. She explained her dilemma choosing

between the tradition in which she was raised and a more progress denomination:

> Reform was dealing with gay rabbis . . . Conservative's dealing with some of us
> believe women can read Torah, some of us don't. . . . They're several decades
> behind. And I was like, I don't know if I can align myself with this movement that
> yes, in fifty years will probably be at the place where I am in my life, when
> there's this other one that's there now. But then again, there's a connection to
> tradition and everything else, and like to my personal traditions, just how I was
> raised. I think that was a big struggle. Until I dealt with being a Conservative
> Jew, I couldn't deal with my sexuality. . . .It was just an issue of would it be
> outside forces telling me that I could or couldn't do anything.

Once she came to terms with that struggle, she was more ready to figure out that she was

in fact a lesbian instead of "undecided."

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Although she had to reconcile her religion with her sexual orientation, Beth explained that growing up Jewish, and therefore different from the norm, caused her to be more prepared than she might otherwise have been for being different from the norm as a lesbian. She explained that her previous experience with religious difference increased her comfort with her sexual orientation:

> When the gay thing came about, it was a similar feeling, and I think I was more prepared for it, because I'm prepared as a minority in other ways. I have friends who are white, Christian males who when they came out didn't know how to respond to not being in the majority . . . to be explicitly like a minority was a whole new thing. Whereas like me or my friends who have non-Christian religions . . . it's like, yeah not everyone's like you, that's how it is, whatever.

Beth considered both her religion and her sexual orientation to be "central things that define me and [without which] I would be a completely different person."

In fact, Beth was trying to figure out the extent to which she was defined by her religion and sexual orientation. Being part of the "Jewish community" and the "lesbian community" was important to Beth who "defines [herself] in terms of the communities and organizations in which [she] is a part." Yet, she explained that being surrounded by other Jews and lesbians also allowed her to figure out which parts of her identity were shaped by these aspects of her identity and which were inherently her. Understanding the difference was important to Beth who "likes to believe that I define my own identity rather than relying on the expectations of others."

<u>"Empowered as a Jewish, lesbian, feminist, activist"</u>

Identifying as a lesbian was "empowering" for Beth and fueled her political activism. While Beth supported gay rights throughout high school, her interest in these issues increased once she identified as a lesbian. She explained: "I think [being a lesbian]

shapes my political views. . . . My political views aren't that widely focused. They're all kind of pro-Israel, pro-gay rights . . .religion in general. How it affects women, how it affects gay people." Beth was not only involved in organizations that support gay rights, but also considered identifying as a lesbian to be a "de facto political statement." She explained:

> If I walk down the street holding a girl's hand, I know that it's a political statement. I am willing to make that political statement . . .not a big statement. I'm not going to go have sex [in the middle of campus], but will I hold my girlfriend's hand in public? Yeah, definitely.

Beth did not identify as a lesbian for the purpose of making a political statement, but was aware that she unintentionally made such a statement as a lesbian and considered doing so to be empowering.

Beth explained that she also found it empowering when people recognized that she did not fit stereotypes about the appearance and behaviors of lesbians. She did not intentionally defy stereotypes, but "has not chopped off her hair and eats meat." In some respects, this empowerment counteracted what she referred to as the "false exoticness" that is associated with being a lesbian where "people find you more interesting and credible as a lesbian, which is a product of homophobia in the general consciousness."

But Beth felt most empowered when her sexual orientation was integrated with other important aspects of her identity. Beth stated that her religion and sexual orientation were not necessarily related to one another: "I don't know if they're tied to each other as they are so strongly tied to the core of me. . . . Sometimes one is more prominent based on where I am or what I'm doing." However, she also expressively spoke at length about the sense of empowerment that she felt as a Jewish lesbian. Beth

passionately defined herself as a "Jewish, lesbian, feminist, activist. . . . All that

synthesized is the primary thing that defines me." She explained that these four aspects

of her identity were closely connected, and the influence they have on one another shaped

her sense of self. She commented: "Thinking about one without the other would be like

losing a part of myself, like not having my arm or your hair."

Beth detailed the relationship between these four aspects of her identity. Strongly

identifying with Judaism influenced Beth's feminism. She explained:

> Gender is a big issue in Judaism right now. . . . .Movements in Judaism are kept
> separate solely because of their views on gender. . . . .I think because it's such a
> prevalent issue in Judaism it becomes a way of defining myself.

Identifying as lesbian also influenced Beth's feminism by allowing her to more clearly

see the sexism inherent in heterosexual relationships:

> As a lesbian, I think you're a lot more aware of being a woman and of sexism. . . .
> Because you're not out to attract a guy, you notice a lot more of what is passed off
> as he's just flirting . . . which is really pretty overt sexism.

Identifying as Jewish contributed to the importance of activism in her life. She

explained:

> You know, that paradigm of If Not Now, When? If Not Me, Who? You hear it a
> million times a day, for my whole life, Jewish pre-school, Sunday School,
> Hebrew School, [the synagogue youth group], wherever, at Hillel now . . . . That
> really I think affected the way I think. . . . the idea of following what you believe,
> being strong, independent, doing whatever you have to do in some cases, but
> maintaining some kind of moral standard while doing what you have to do has
> stuck with me.

Reading and relating to "an amazing and a half book" of short stories about Jewish,

lesbian, feminist, activists, caused Beth to feel greatly empowered by the combination of

these multiple dimensions of her identity. She enthusiastically described the book and

the positive influence it had on how she thought about her identity. It caused her to consider her multiple minority statuses to be an empowering rather than unfortunate aspect of her life:

> The stories were about very strong women, so empowering, such an empowering book. . . . I know I keep using that word empowering, but there's no other word. It went from viewing, I had a few friends who were both gay and Jewish in the past, and I kind of saw it as wow, that's really like how unfortunately divided, like separate they are from mainstream society. You know, they're minority in that sense. And anything else they do, it's going to be judged against that or it will draw them further into minorityville. And this kind of shifted my perspective just in, Jewish lesbian feminists, activists, what an amazingly empowered group. What a cool thing to be.

Thus, while Beth sometimes experienced her dimensions of identity independently, she also very much valued their integration into an empowered sense of self.

Although Beth clearly gave much thought to her identity, she also realized that she was young and that her identity was rapidly changing, often a result of new experiences. Thinking ahead to an exciting and busy month, Beth observed:

> I'm eighteen and a half, I'm still developing a lot of these ideas. . . . Three weeks from now my opinions, priorities, whatever, may shift. Especially this month they may shift because I'm taking a Women's Studies class, because I'm taking a psychology class, I'm going to a GLBT conference, I'm going to a diversity conference, visiting with my girlfriend . . . actively working with [a black-Jewish dialogue organization]. [All of these] . . . will probably bring out different parts of me.

Given Beth's immense interest in her identity and the politics associated with her identity, no doubt her sense of self was a fast-moving work in progress.

Internal Meaning Making as a Deliberate Goal

It was important to Beth that she construct her identity from an internal perspective, but she was not sure whether or not she was actually doing so. Beth liked

that she naturally defied stereotypes associated with lesbians and did not want her sexual orientation to dictate how she thought and acted. Always trying to distinguish between internal and external perspectives, she tried to figure out which of her personal traits were innate and which were products of identifying as a lesbian, as a Jewish person, and as a woman. Acknowledging that she defined herself through the identity-based organizations in which she participated, she compared herself to other members with similar identity characteristics to understand the relationship between her sense of self and her sexual orientation, religion, and gender. Moving toward self-definition, much of which entailed integrating these dimensions of her identity without becoming a stereotype, was integral to her growing sense of empowerment.

Jordana: Renaming and Reclaiming an Identity

Fairly conservative in appearance, and often donning a cheery turquoise and yellow knit cap, Jordana was a quick-witted, delightfully quirky 19 year-old sophomore with a complex, inquisitive mind. Secretly wanting to be a film-maker, she was steeped in pop culture, keenly observed the humor and pain of human nature, and deeply reflected on her own place in the world. An animated story-teller with a loud infectious giggle that often rose to high crescendos, Jordana candidly shared her hopes and fears, often softening her voice to a quiet sigh as she acknowledged all that she has worked through to at last be happy. Initially embarrassed about telling me extremely personal information that she had previously shared with only a couple of other people, Jordana, who immediately introduced herself to me as "not your average lesbian" began her first interview a nervous wreck! But once she started to tell her stories, she expressed a

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freeing sense of relief. And between each interview, Jordana talked to more and more people about issues she had been hiding for years and felt better about herself than she ever had before. The better she felt about herself, the more stories she told and the louder she laughed!

A Latina woman whose parents speak only Spanish, Jordana knew she was a lesbian or bisexual in high school, and came out to her younger sister, with whom she was very close. It was not her sexual orientation that tortured her so much, but instead, that she had been dealing with a sexual fetish since she was a young child. While there are many different types of sexual fetishes, she described her particular fetish as causing her to be strongly attracted to a particular body part that is not typically associated with a sexual response. She considered this body part attractive on both men and women, and therefore described it as a "bisexual fetish." Always feeling like a "freak" because of her fetish, she became very introverted, allowing only a few close friends and her sister to get to know her, and expending much emotional energy "obsessing" over a woman in high school, which she now realizes was "a cry for help." She did not have a close, communicative relationship with her parents, in part because she felt that a cultural difference separated them. Jordana, who grew up in Pittsburgh, came to Ohio State because it was far from her parents and she wanted that independence to become her own person.

Upon arriving at college, Jordana immediately explored her sexual orientation identity, attending GLBT student organization functions and conferences, and socializing with other GLBT students. She also made several friends through GLBT websites and chatrooms. The summer after her first year of college, Jordana, after much debate and

agony, told her aunt in Guatemala about her sexual orientation and fetish, an experience she described as "spiritual." Her aunt's generally positive reaction gave her the courage to then come out about both to her mother over winter break of her sophomore year. Her mother, who subsequently told her father, handled the news much better than Jordana expected, and their relationship was slowly improving as a result. Jordana began her participation in this study soon after telling her mother and during the study came out to most of her friends about her fetish and sexual orientation. Jordana knew she still had many difficult conversations ahead of her with her parents, and much work to do to overcome how pained she felt for so many years. She very much wanted to eventually live a happy life, and this came through clearly in all that she said and did.

Jordana's religious principles were the impetus behind her decision to face her fears about her sexuality. Jordana, who was not raised in a religious home and chose to identify as Agnostic after much exploration of various religions, developed her own set of guiding principles grounded in morality and especially honesty. This set of beliefs caused her to come out truthfully about her sexual orientation and fetish. Elegantly, Jordana explained the connection between honesty, love, and religion:

> I came out because I just didn't feel at rest. I have strong beliefs that when you do the right thing, you feel right. And being silent did not feel right. . . . I believe in honesty. When you are completely honest, when you speak honestly, it's like your soul is speaking. . . . In order to feel love, you have to face your fears, which get in the way of happiness, and cause all of the negatives in the world. When you face fears it is easier to give love and get love, and love is the best thing on earth. I believe if there is a god, it's the closest you can get.

"Without categories it's like you're nothing"

Much of the meaning that Jordana made of her sexual orientation was influenced by her conflicting attitude toward identity labels. Indeed, an overriding theme of her

story was her "desperate search" to find an identity label into which she fit, despite her distaste for the baggage associated with labels.   Much of Jordana's struggle was a result of her fetish, which she described as bisexual, because it caused her not to fit neatly into any identity label. Even though she felt more emotionally and physically attracted to women, her bisexual fetish prevented her from being an "average lesbian." She explained the inadequacy of labels to fit her complicated identity:

> My fetish thing in particular made me question my sexuality completely. I thought, maybe I'm not anything. . . . . My sexuality totally freaked me out, because my fetish is bisexual . . . but I kind of like women more. So that totally confuses me, and to this day, when people ask me, what are you? I say, lesbian—I always kind of hesitate. Because I'm comfortable with the label, I feel like I fit into it, but I don't quite fit into it. I feel like I have a whole thing I have to explain to them, you know, to be completely honest. It makes me have to lie in a way. That's what I hate about the label, it makes me have to lie. And the same to say I'm bisexual would be a lie too, because I don't relate to that label.

Indeed, throughout the course of this study and as a result of much deep personal reflection, Jordana used at least three different labels to describe her sexual orientation: lesbian, bisexual, and lesbian with a bisexual fetish. The latter was her most recent label and one she developed because she believed it best described her sexuality. She announced: "I feel so like—triumphant lately. I found my label, you know? Lesbian with a bisexual fetish! I just want to say it with all this pride!"

Finding a suitable identity label was important to Jordana because categories offered a way to organize the world and provided a safety net, defense, and insight into others like her. Comparing identity categories to inner tubes, she vividly explained the security they provide:

> Without categories it's like you're nothing. It feels like you totally took away my inner tube, you know, and we're just all floating here. Like what keeps you afloat, what you hold up when people try to be like, you defend yourself with it.

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You can use it to hit other people, you can be like, my color is the same as your color; let's go over here. All the gay people are the color yellow, and all the straight people are the color blue, and they all go with them. And when you do talk with them, it's like, you know, I'm acknowledging you as a blue. You're acknowledging me as a yellow. . . . It's important. I wish it weren't, but it is. You have to be secure with it; you have to totally have your defense up in it. You have to have it. If someone tries to put you down, you have to have something ready to say to them or something. . . . [Not having categories] would be very cool, but then weird. I can't even see it. Everyone would be like whooaaa! I don't know, we're paddling in the water!

Finding a category was also important because she spent much of her life lonely and feeling like an outcast because she did not fit into a category. After not having a neat box into which she fit, she longed for the security she believed was associated with the label.

Yet at the same time, Jordana explained that she doesn't "even like the labels because so much baggage comes with them." Her distaste for labels was related not only to the loneliness she experienced as a result of not fitting neatly into a label, but also to her increasing ability to think independently. She explained that trying to fit into a label was an attempt to make others happy rather than herself:

I've always tried to please, I wanted to fit in somewhere, you know, and I was afraid that by saying what I am, like I wouldn't fit in somewhere. But I'm not happy trying to fit into these things, I've come to realize very clearly, pretty clearly that I'm not happy, and I had to be who I am. I just can't pretend anymore. It's getting in the way of a lot of my life.

Jordana's growing resistance to labels coincided with gradual rejection of the concept of "normal." She explained that, by grouping people together, labels assume a normal that does not exist.

"There is no normal"

Another of the themes underlying the story Jordana told of the meaning she makes of her sexual orientation was her process of initially believing she was abnormal,

then investigating variations in sexuality, and then eventually concluding that there was no normal. At the same time she was developing a complex understanding that normal is a fiction, she still somewhat longed to be normal. At the start of college, she believed that only two options for normal existed and, because of her fetish, she did not fit into either one of them. She explained the difficulty of not fitting into either the straight world or the lesbian world:

> I wanted to be an average lesbian so bad because I felt like a freak for so long. Like I don't fit in the straight world, and then I come here and I'm like I'm going to fit in the gay world because that's the only other option, you know. There's two options. And I don't fit in there. . . . It was like a blow. It's like, oh okay, great, like my two options, and I don't quite fit into either. Now what, you know?

Curious to understand more about variations in sexuality, Jordana sought out opportunities to learn about these differences, such as attending unfamiliar sessions at GLBT conferences and talking with her friends about sex, and concluded that "everyone's sexuality has its own fingerprint." Once she decided for herself that there is not one definition of normal, she felt "liberated" even though she knew others would still probably consider her abnormal. She described the difficulty of being one of the few people to realize there is no normal:

> Normal makes me angry a little bit. Because it's what I've been trying to reach, and I couldn't reach it, you know? And it was a liberation when I realized, there is no normal! And then you come to realize, everybody doesn't know that! Evidently I know it, but not everybody knows it, and now I have to go and convince the world that there is no normal, and that's really difficult. Especially when they think they're normal or something.

While Jordana realized that she might not be able to change society's views of normal, she also realized "I can only start with myself."

Still, while Jordana's desire to be normal gradually gave way to her realization

that there was no normal, she still occasionally longed to be normal and fit in with others.

She commented:

> I don't fit in under any group and any label perfectly. And it's nice, it's
> something that's always bothered, like I guess it bothers me sometimes that I'm
> so alone. I guess I like when someone can put me, sometimes it's real nice to
> have a little box.

Jordana's ongoing process of understanding her sexuality was marked by this underlying

tension.

"Gender is so complicated"

Wrestling with the meaning of identity labels and normalcy in terms of her sexual

orientation caused Jordana to consider the same with regard to her gender identity. Just

as Jordana decided there is no normal sexual orientation, she reached the same conclusion

for gender, and again, with some hesitancy. Jordana approached this new understanding

of normalcy by giving much thought to gender performance as it related to sexual

attraction and behavior. She pondered the many meanings and relationship possibilities

involved with butch and femme:

> Gender is so complicated. There's what you appear to be outside, and then people
> make a big deal of it when you're having sex . . . kind of like the one that's more
> the masculine one, the more feminine one during sex. . . . I was really confused
> about that. Like really confused! Because I didn't know who I, what role I would
> play. . . . I think I would be the butch one. But I'm not butch. I don't like that
> label, like – because I'm not a – I'm not a man, but – and I don't feel like I'm a
> man. . . . .And then they say that there's femmes that are butch, and then they'd
> say there's butches who are femme, and that confuses me, a little bit. And it just
> makes it just seem all more complicated then everything. And then there's like
> the butch lesbians that like the butch lesbians. And the femme lesbians that like
> the femme lesbians. And the femme lesbians that like the butch lesbians. And it
> all gets mixed up, and then it's like – what is normal, you know? It's so

ridiculous! . . . . Like I don't know, is that valid, or is it invalid? Or is it all valid, and what is masculine, and what is feminine? And it makes you question a whole bunch of things. And it's like whoa! There really is no normal!

As part of the process of concluding that there is no normal gender, Jordana first struggled to determine whether identifying as lesbian required that she be more masculine. When she first identified as lesbian, she felt threatened by "butch lesbians" and questioned whether she was supposed to feel more butch. She then became more aware of a variety of gender identities among lesbians, including "butch, gender queer, transgender, feminine, and really feminine." Even though she still felt some pressure from other lesbians to be either more butch or more feminine, she felt comfortable being in the middle between really feminine and butch, leaning toward more feminine. At the same time that she announced that she "reclaimed being a feminine lesbian" she also hesitantly stated that being in the middle, neither really feminine or butch, "sucks, but doesn't really suck." Her hesitancy mirrored her tentative rejection of sexual orientation identity categories.

"My lesbian Latina friend"

Just as Jordana believed that she "reclaimed" being a feminine lesbian, she also spoke to the importance of reclaiming what it meant to be Latina rather than feeling bound by a set definition. Jordana struggled with my questions about her Latina identity, unsure how to differentiate between Latina influences in her life and influences unique to her parents. The more we talked, the more she realized that what was most important to her was that she was starting to define for herself what it meant to be Latina. Jordana explained that she felt neither Latina nor White, having been raised in a Spanish-speaking home but greatly influenced outside of the house by American culture. While she was a

"culturally unique person" who did not fit into a box, she was beginning to understand that she could choose to identify as Latina. When she realized as we were talking just how important this self-definition was to her, Jordana energetically exclaimed:

> What is a Latina? I think me! But there's like that stereotype of what a Latina is. Like this religious girl who has a big booty and wears tight pants and has long hair . . . That's not me. I'm not Jennifer Lopez. . . . I feel like I've reclaimed Latina as my own thing.

Although Jordana did not feel that she neatly fit into either lesbian or Latina, she was "happy and comfortable" when her best friend called her his "lesbian Latina friend." Consistent with her simultaneous desire to fit into an identity label and to shun labels, Jordana explained that she enjoyed being called a "lesbian Latina" because it both set her apart as unique and provided her with a "comfortable box instead of always feeling alone."

Although Jordana's Latina identity interacted with several aspects of her life, including her relationship with her family, she did not think that identifying as Latina was especially important to her sense of self. She believed that she did not give much thought to her race and culture because she spent so much time dealing with her sexuality. Yet one of the ways that she was very aware of her race was that she realized some of her Latino relatives might eventually reject her as a lesbian. But the very high value she placed on being honest overrode this concern. It was important to Jordana to live a truthful life even if this meant not being accepted by people who were important to her, although this was a disappointing prospect to her. Eventually, she would like her family to better understand one another and, at a young age, was taking the lead on facilitating that process.

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<u>Tentative Internal Meaning Making with the Possibility of Retreat</u>

After having been unhappy for many years because she felt vastly different from others, Jordana was thrilled with her recent realization that she was not bound by external definitions of her sexual orientation identity or confined by fixed labels. She was relieved to learn that she could describe her identity any way she wanted and that "normal might not even exist." At the same time, choosing to define her identity from an internal perspective was scary and sometimes lonely territory, and Jordana still longed to fit in with others. Her tentative abandonment of labels and external definitions extended to the meaning she made of her gender and racial identities as she "reclaimed" what it meant to be a feminine lesbian and a Latina woman. Yet she also retreated from these reclamations, especially with regard to her gender. She struggled to understand how she fit into externally defined perspectives on masculine and feminine roles in a lesbian relationship, while at the same time acknowledging the shortcomings of these perspectives.

<u>Gia: Distaste for Rules, Conformity, and Boxes</u>

"My involvement with the lesbian community is lacking . . . but I have many different experiences that have shaped my identity." This brief note that Gia wrote to me, hoping I would identify her to participate in this study, gently and precisely conveyed how I would find her during the interviews. Always understated, Gia communicated a great deal through the insights that she sometimes nervously shared with me, often underestimating how powerful her words were and how much she had to say. A

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thoughtful and polite woman with mature life experiences, Gia was proud of who she was and was working to figure out who she still wanted to become, not realizing all she already accomplished.

Soft-spoken and often wearing grunge jeans and tee-shirts with a pierced chin and lips, Gia was a white, 22-year old junior women's studies and sociology major. Gia grew up in suburban Cleveland in a loving, working-class family, to whom she attributed her confidence, non-conformity, and kindness. Tragically, her mother passed away when Gia was a young teenager and her father became very ill soon afterward and was no longer able to raise her. Gia then moved in with the family of her best friend, whom she was also dating, and they became her legal guardians. She and her girlfriend fought constantly while living together, and Gia reflected that much of the fighting was because she was angry and unhappy after enduring such sadness with her parents. She graduated early from high school and "spent a couple of years partying" and working part-time jobs before deciding she was ready to go to college. Gia was the first in her family to attend college and appreciated how fortunate she was to have this opportunity. Financially independent, Gia worked several part-time and full-time jobs to pay her way through college. She and her two successive girlfriends relied on each other to learn how to live independently as adults. Based on her life experiences, Gia proudly "embraces her working-class status" and was keenly interested in social class issues.

A diehard Cleveland Browns fan, Gia described herself as having grown up as a tomboy, playing football, Nintendo, and Ninja turtles with her brother, with whom she was very close. With crushes on her women teachers and especially on Mary Tyler Moore, she was "always pretty sure [she] was gay" and "messed around" with girls since

she was a young teenager. Gia had been comfortably out about her sexual orientation for many years, and being gay had never been a big issue to her.

<u>"I'm all about going against the grain"</u>

Gia, who described herself as having grown up poor or working class, attended a parochial school where most of the students were more economically well off than she. Rather than being upset about having less money than her classmates, Gia "embraced [her] social class and going against the grain." She explained:

> Growing up I was lower-class, not popular at all, not even close. And I really couldn't stand popular girls, and I started thinking about conformity and trying to be like everybody else to feel better. . . . And I just got made fun of all the time, and I hated them. And I think that I just turned that into well let's just go the other way and just be this way. And just completely turn against them and everything that they represented. . . . I'm all about going against the grain.

Not only did Gia become a self-described non-conformist, but she also became academically interested in issues related to social class and did not aspire to achieve higher than middle -lass status because she "doesn't want money to change me."   As part of her tendency to non-conformity, Gia explained that she did not like "rules that tell people how to live their life."

Continuing along the same line, Gia explained that she did not like the use of the word "normal" and avoided identifying in a manner typically considered normal:

> I consider my life normal, I guess. And there's people out there who just think it's anything but. . . . Whatever I think is normal is normal for me. I hate to define normal, because it's just one of those words that is bad. If I think about what would stereotypically be considered normal, white, Christian, and middle class. I guess I want to run away from that. I can't stand that stuff, and eeww—I can't deal with it. But, yeah, so whatever normal is, I steer clear pretty much.

Gia's appreciation for non-conformity and desire to steer clear from normalcy that she

developed as a result of her social class extended to her attitude about her sexual

orientation.   She explained: "I embrace sexual orientation even more because it's looked

down upon in mainstream culture."

"It's just natural for me"

Although Gia embraced her sexual orientation just as she did her social class,

identifying as working class was much more interesting to her than identifying as gay.

The stories that Gia told about her life focused on the hardships she endured as a result of

her mother's death and father's subsequent illness; the adjustment to living with a

guardian; her struggles to make it on her own financially; her wavering decision to go to

college; and the ups and downs of two of her close relationships. In fact, although she

discussed these two relationships in some detail, she never mentioned that she had dated

these women. Gia never emphasized any issues related to sexual orientation when

discussing these women but, instead, the dynamics of the friendships as they taught one

another how to adjust to college. Having dated women at a young age was not a pressing

issue to her.   Talking about her sexual orientation almost seemed to be a distraction from

more pressing stories.   In fact, Gia stated:

> I'm probably the worst person to do this interview because my, well my sexuality
> --- well of course it's a really big part of my life, it's there, but I don't really think
> about it that much. And you know, all these other things in my life have just
> really really just taken over. And [my sexuality] kind of is in the background.

Gia went on to explain that her sexual orientation is "not like everything I am . . .I

just love women . . . It's just natural for me." She did not allow her sexual orientation to

influence any other aspect of her identity and attributed this attitude to several factors. As

a result of not having strong parental influence as a teenager, Gia did not have people

telling her that it was wrong to be gay. And since she was financially independent, she did not have anyone holding control over her. Also, when she was younger, her parents instilled confidence in her, which she believed contributed to her comfort with her sexual orientation.   Gia also explained that because she was not religious, she did not have to worry about religion making her feel bad about being gay. She observed: "A lot of people have problems with their sexual orientation because of their religion. But because I didn't care much [about religion] I didn't feel like I was breaking any rules. I didn't feel bad, or guilty, or unnatural."

"I try and get away from the boxes"

Gia was much more interested in talking about her gender, race, religion, and social class than she was her sexual orientation. Enthusiastically, she explained that she "loves talking about these things" and had been looking forward to the interview where we focused on these aspects of her identity much more so than the interview where sexual orientation was the primary focus. Gia's distaste for mainstream normalcy and imposed rules, as well as her relative indifference to what people think of her, emerged in her stories about how she constructed each of these aspects of her identity. This was especially so when she discussed her gender.

Consistent with her distaste for rules and conformity, Gia did not allow "irritating" gender expectations from other lesbians to influence how she portrayed her gender. Not liking to be told to act in a certain way, she was angered by other lesbians' comments or criticisms that she acted too feminine. Commenting with disgust that "all these people think they're feminists and then they make fun of people for being feminine," she recounted the following story:

> I went to this party over the weekend at a friend's of mine house and there happened to be quite a few lesbians . . . There was just these you're not manly enough type stuff going on and it was pissing me off. Because I was laughing about something really hard, and [an acquaintance] walked past . . . and she's like, you're laughing like a girl. I'm like because I *am* a girl. And it just pisses me off when people are like that, like you're not masculine enough, and it's just stereotypes. And even lesbians do it, and even my friends do it, and I think it's ridiculous. Who are you to tell me I'm not masculine enough, or I'm too feminine. . . . it just irritates me to no end, it really does. I really try to do whatever's comfortable for me, if that's masculine, it's masculine; if it's feminine, it's feminine.

Also consistent with Gia's distaste for rules and conformity, she liked that she did not fit neatly into either masculine or feminine categories and resisted "identity boxes."

Describing her gender, she explained:

> I have a little mix of masculinity, a little mix of femininity. And I've always enjoyed that about myself, because that's just how I am. I'm a woman . . . and then that leads to my gender, which is kind of a mix of both. . . . .I don't know what the category thing is, putting everybody into little boxes. . . . I try to do the opposite of that. I try and get away from the boxes, the categories. . . . I identify as lesbian or whatever. I'm not afraid of the feminine things about me.

Even though Gia did not like categories, she explained that she did not intentionally defy them, but portrayed her gender in a way that was comfortable for her.

Also consistent with her distaste for rules, Gia, who was academically interested in religion but not personally religious, was drawn to Eastern religions, such as Buddhism, because they allow for freedom in how people choose to live their lives. She explained: "You kind of define yourself and whatever is good for you is good for the universe or your being, your spirit. That's what I really like. I think it's the rules, I don't like rules, I don't. I don't like having to do things." Although she attended parochial schools most of her life, Gia was turned off by Christianity because of "all of its rules." She went on to explain: "It's a set of rules. It's rules and laws. And I just, I think that

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people use religion to argue things that they don't even know what they're arguing about." She was especially bothered by Christianity's intolerance of homosexuality, noting the irony that "the religion is supposed to teach people to love everyone." Whereas she found "so much negativity in Christianity," in Buddhism, "everything's positive, you know, if you love yourself you can do whatever you want."

While she avoided gender and religious conformity, Gia was aware that she was part of "mainstream culture" as a white person. While she knew she cold not change her own race, she could work against racial discrimination. Once Gia learned about white privilege in a women's studies class, "it just really struck something in me." She went on to explain: "It's so true. You don't even pay attention, and why should the masses of white people want to change things when they're in power. It's ridiculous to me that race is even still an issue. And it's really upsetting." Gia believed that part of the reason that she was so tuned into issues of white privilege was that her half-brother was biracial (African American and white), and she was bothered by the way people treated him differently because of his race. Although Gia was concerned about white privilege, she acknowledged that she does not give specific thought to her privilege as a white lesbian.

While Gia was focused at the time of the study on school and consumed by her demanding work schedule, she hoped eventually to become involved in some way in combating discrimination, likely with a focus on social class. She anticipated that being gay would always be a small part of her and not something on which she will focus.

<u>An Internal Construction Arrived at Through Anger with External Standards</u>

Gia, who did most of her identity work in the context of social class, internally defined and embraced the meaning of her social class identity after being angry with wealthier high school classmates who teased her. Gia defined herself in ways that did not fit into what she considered to be "mainstream culture." While she attributed this approach to identity construction to her social class, it became the dominant way she made meaning of most dimensions of her identity. As she constructed her sexual orientation identity, gender identity, and religious interests, she therefore gave little thought to or explicitly rejected external constructions or imposed rules.

<u>Jacky: The Politics of Multiple Non-Normative Identities</u>

Jacky, a "black gay female Agnostic Pagan, liberal, communist, socialist," was a keenly inquisitive, academically and politically driven 21 year-old junior political science major. Always responding immediately to my requests for interviews, Jacky greatly enjoyed talking about issues related to her complex identity. She was sharply aware of her lack of multiple privileges, as well as the privileges that she did have, and the numerous reasons for people to discriminate against her. Living with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), Jacky was always on the move during her interviews. But it was her mind that moved the fastest, often segueing into political commentaries, peppered with a low-pitched, ironic laugh, about the issues we were discussing. Jacky spent a great deal of her time researching various political and identity-based issues on

the internet, reading in-depth about all sides of an issue. Personal discrimination fueled her politics, especially discrimination based on her sexual orientation as she felt that she bore the brunt of this every day.

Jacky knew she was gay since junior high school, never having had any interest in men, and has been comfortable with and open about her sexual orientation, including to her family, since her first year in college. An "in your face activist," Jacky, typically dressed in jeans and a tee shirt with closely cropped hair, and identified as a dyke rather than as a "conservative, gender bound, lesbian." Jacky had been in a relationship with a white woman, also a dyke, since her first year of college, and the two challenged and pushed each other's politics. Over the course of this study, their politics were especially focused on the lack of domestic partnership benefits because this policy caused them to be "temporarily poor." Not having the option to marry her girlfriend ignited her political fire. Fed up with conservative politics, the two were considering moving to a commune following Jacky's graduation.

"The personal is political"

For Jacky, "the personal is political," and politics were a very important part of her identity. Always cognizant of constant discrimination based on her sexual orientation, she stated: "Sexuality is the biggest part of my identity that affects me as far as discrimination. . . . I feel that constantly every single day, day in and day out. Every detail of my life, I deal with that." Jacky became even more politically aware once she identified as gay. Explaining how sexual orientation discrimination fueled her politics, Jacky explained:

It doesn't make me feel sorry that I'm gay or anything like that, but it makes me wish I could be more, like able to change the system. . . . I'm black, gay, and female, and leftist .. . and I'm not a Christian. I've got quite a few strikes against me, but yeah I guess it's, it makes me want to, like I follow politics that much more . . . and it's made me more leftist. . . . I guess once I got past the . . . accepting, yeah, I know, I'm gay. I was more interested in like what are some like gay rights issues . . . like it got more and more political . . . And it helped me shape my opinions and my politics and my point of view, and who I am.

Because of the nature of her politics, Jacky described herself as a dyke rather than a lesbian, explaining that dykes are less gender bound and conservative than lesbians:

Being a lesbian is . . . more conservative, more mainstream, like acceptable almost. . . . Dyke is more in your face, political, angry activisty, less socially acceptable. . . . Or more masculine qualities on one hand, not necessarily a masculine woman, but just someone who embraces more, you know, letting yourself get angry . . . saying yes I have power, I'm a powerful person, I'm not afraid to have an opinion and hold it strong and forcefully. As opposed to more like staying within traditional . . . gender roles and also being gay.

Many of Jacky's friends were also dykes or lesbians because she believed that most gay men are usually too politically conservative since they have male privilege and most straight people don't understand gay politics.

At the time of the study, the most important thing for Jacky in terms of making meaning of her sexual orientation was becoming more informed about how it related to other aspects of her identity and how these relationships influenced her politics. During much of the study, Jacky's construction of dyke was most influenced by its intersection with her social class. Jacky's girlfriend, Sydney, with whom she lived, had large medical expenses and no health care benefits. Both were financially independent from their parents, and Jacky assumed responsibility for paying part of her girlfriend's expenses. Jacky wanted to marry her girlfriend and include her on domestic partner benefits. Not

having the option to get married or access to domestic partner benefits caused Jacky and her girlfriend to be "temporarily poor." As a result of this situation, Jacky became "even more politically leftist, if that's possible."

"Thinking about them all at the same time makes smoke come out of my ears"

Jacky was quite academically and politically interested in her numerous "non-normative" identities: "My favorite word in women's studies class was intersectionality. I can do intersections. I got that down. . . . I'm a black gay female Agnostic Pagan, liberal, communist, socialist. It's fun to list all of that and scare people." Yet, while Jacky frequently used the word "intersectionality," she typically thought about these different aspects of her identity as independent from one another, commenting with a laugh: "I can't think of them all at the same time because it just makes smoke come out of my ears!" The intersection of her sexual orientation and social class was a recent exception. Certain situations occasionally caused Jacky to perceive her identity dimensions as intermingling, typically when she was discriminated against and could not determine which aspect of her identity triggered the behavior. She explained:

> I guess [dimensions of my identity] are not completely parallel, some of them do cross or confound, but I think of them more as I'm a lesbian, I'm black, I'm a pagan, atheist, whatever. But then sometimes it will be like I'm a black lesbian and that's an issue. Or I'm a pagan lesbian and that's an issue. . . . So I think it's situation related. . . . .I think about it more, these are parts of me, and it just happens to be that they're all like not the norm. And they are in one person, and that causes my brain to fry sometimes. But then sometimes, I guess I'll make the analogy to discrimination. Most of the time if I'm discriminated against, I can tell if it's for a certain reason, like this person doesn't like me because I'm gay, this person doesn't like me because I'm black, or whatever. And then there's the times when I'm not quite sure why the person doesn't like me, or why I'm getting treated in such a way, or whatever. And I think that's when it becomes confounded or intermingled.

When Jacky perceived that a particular aspect of her identity was the source of discrimination against her, that aspect became most salient to her sense of self. Relative salience was therefore fluid, sometimes changing by the week, even if only slightly. Jacky explained that that there was a "range of saliency" along which each dimension of her identity moved closer or further away from her inner sense of self, depending on the nature of the discrimination she was experiencing. For instance, her race moved along this range over the course of the study, at one point coming in as close to her inner sense of self as she believed it ever would. The movement was caused by how infuriated she was about current arguments against race-sensitive affirmative action and "reeling over the craziness." Jacky, who was "not raised in Black culture," explained that race typically was not an aspect of her identity to which she gave much thought, because "it's very rare that somebody overtly discriminates against me because of my race. So I don't think about it as much." She explained that her religion probably had the greatest range along which it moves; and sexual orientation typically fluctuated the least, most always the aspect of her identity with the greatest influence on her sense of self.

Indeed, Jacky talked at length about her sexual orientation, social class, religion, gender, and race when describing herself to me. And, with the exception of her social class and sexual orientation, she typically discussed them independent from one another, except when I pressed to her to think about whether they related in any way. With identity-based issues typically always on her mind, Jacky began each interview talking about the issues most pressing to her that day. When she was especially struggling financially, she led with social class; when she was exasperated by arguments against

affirmative action, she led with race; and when she was frustrated with her struggles to quickly write a paper for a course because of her ADHD, she led with disability.

Other than sexual orientation, Jacky generally typically experienced discrimination based on her gender more so than any other aspect of her identity. She attributed this to her professional interests in computers, still a male-dominated field. Although it was not a pressing matter to her, Jacky characterized her gender as androgynous, explaining that she had both masculine and feminine qualities:

> I have feminine qualities, I have masculine qualities. If I were a guy, I'd be a feminine guy. As a girl, I'm a masculine girl. And just, it's kind of odd to me. But, I mean, I'm definitely, I don't know, really I'm androgynous. I don't fit into the boxes very well. . . . I don't really perform either gender.

Along the same lines, Jacky, again using the language of gender performance, explained: "I think I pretty much consider myself a woman, but everyone tells me maybe I was born a man, but gender is performance . . . and I've never really picked up on those social norms." Jacky always considered herself to be an "extreme tomboy . . . just a chick who likes drums and computers."

Religion was one of Jacky's greatest academic interests and something that she enthusiastically discussed with me. Jacky, who was raised in a Catholic home, questioned Catholicism prior to knowing she was gay and left the church for reasons not related to her sexual orientation. However, homophobia in the church did not go unnoticed by her, and a homophobic remark by her confirmation sponsor strongly contributed to her distaste for Catholicism. She recounted the following story from her confirmation retreat:

> There was this lesbian couple walking down the street and we drive by and my [confirmation] sponsor looked out the window, and she goes I just can't stand

how those people walk around in public like that. And that just, that was the nail in the coffin for me.   I was that's it, this is my sponsor who is supposed to be this pillar of morality or whatever, and I was like no, I can't do that. So that pretty much was it for me and Roman Catholicism. . . . That moment riding back in that car, and I'll probably remember that for the rest of my life.

After much research, Jacky learned about Paganism and felt an immediate connection with that religion. She considered herself an "agnostic Pagan who's an atheist when in a bad mood." The "core belief" that attracted Jacky to Paganism was feeling "a connection with everything . . . God is the universe and the universe is God." As an agnostic Pagan, she "believes in God, but [she's] not sure how many." Although Jacky gave much thought to both her sexual orientation and her religion, she rarely thought of the two together. Jacky explained:

> I'm gay, and I'm a pagan. I'm not necessarily a gay pagan or a pagan gay person. Like it's, they're two separate, they're not against each other or anything, but they're two different parts of my identity. . . . Usually if I'm thinking about one, I'm not thinking about the other. . . . When you find something about queer paganism, it's very gay male paganism. There's not a bunch of, usually when it is about lesbians it's about Dianic, we worship the goddess, usually it's not so favorable, like talking about the most rabid, man-hating lesbians, blah blah blah.

Although Jacky spoke at length about her social class, which she characterized as "temporarily poor," she observed this was the one area of her life in which she was privileged. Although she was currently struggling financially, she realized she was fortunate to be a college student and to have the opportunity for a career.

While Jacky explained that she thought about dimensions of her identity as independent, she was very cognizant that she simultaneously lacked privilege along multiple dimensions of her identity, unlike some other GLBT people.   In particular, she was aware that not only did she lack privilege as a dyke, but she lacked privileges with regard to her race, gender, and religion. It angered Jacky when minorities were not aware

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of the privileges they do have and was especially bothered by many white gay men, who focused only on their lack of sexual orientation privilege and did not realize they were privileged in other ways. She stated with frustration in her voice:

> They are the social norm of humanity, like white, straight, Christian, middle class, male, except they're not straight. And that's like the only thing, and it's like even though they're gay, they're still operating in that framework of I've got all these other 26 privileges and I can pass as straight if I need to or whatever, and that annoys the piss out of me.

Thus, it appears that even though Jacky believed that she thinks about dimensions of her identity independently, they closely relate in terms of lack of privilege.

An Internal Construction Arrived at Through Examination of Multiple Perspectives

Through her politics, Jacky internally defined her identity. Guided by her inquisitive mind, she researched and critically examined multiple perspectives about her identity, including her sexual orientation, religion, social class, gender, and to a lesser extent, race. Based on this critical examination, she then decided for herself how she understood her identity. Identity labels did not influence her self-understanding. At the same time that she labeled herself a dyke, she explained that she relied on labels only to communicate to others how she defined her identity rather than to guide the meaning she made of her identity. Indeed, she rejected gender labels nearly altogether because they did not fit how she understood her gender.

Leah: The Quest for an Ideal Life

Leah, who was born and raised in Columbus, Ohio, was a bright, academically focused 23-year-old graduating senior with a quick sense of humor. Typically

conservative in her dress and behavior, Leah was an accomplished leader in the campus GLBT community, providing leadership for a queer Jewish student organization, as well as a peer-facilitated discussion group that offered a confidential and supportive environment for GLBT students. Facilitating this discussion group led to her decision to enter a Ph.D program in counseling psychology immediately after graduation. Not only had Leah given much thought to her own queer and Jewish identities, but she was also completing a senior honors thesis about the conflict between sexual orientation and religious identity. I had to challenge Leah during our interviews to think more deeply about her identity as her stories have become "almost routine" to her, having told them "so many times before." She definitely met the challenge.

Although uncertain of her sexual orientation in high school, Leah came out as bisexual, as it was easiest for her to identify in the same way as her girlfriend at the time: "If she would have said I'm a lesbian porcupine I would have been, oh yeah, me too." She then came out as a lesbian during her first year in college and at the time of the study identified as queer, a label she infrequently used because she felt many other people were not comfortable with it. Except with her parents, who were uncomfortable with her sexual orientation and to whom she had to come out twice, four years apart, Leah believes she had at last "integrated [my] sexuality into [my] life." Leah was also working to integrate her religious identity into her life. Raised in a white, middle-class, culturally Jewish home, she developed a strong interest in her Jewish heritage following a high school trip to Israel. She pursued this interest in college, much to the bewilderment of her parents. She was disappointed and frustrated that her parents were not more interested in her identity. Enjoying a "healthy relationship" with her girlfriend, with

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whom she shared an off-campus apartment, enabled Leah to invest energy in her personal and academic identity work.

<u>"Can I lead a normal life?"</u>

Although Leah felt that her sexual orientation was at last integrated into her overall sense of self, she wasn't always sure that was a possibility. But even more pressing to her, she wasn't sure if she could ever be "normal" as a lesbian. Indeed, the crux of Leah's story about how she constructed her sexual orientation identity was her successful quest to determine if she could "lead a normal life as a lesbian." Although Leah's stories about how she understood her sexual orientation were peppered with the word "normal," she had never given thought to what it meant to her to be normal. Patiently enduring my multiple questions asking her to define "normal," she explained "Normal . . . it's my ideal, for me. I guess normal and ideal are interchangeable, but it's really ideal. My idea of normal isn't really necessarily society's idea of normal, but it's my own, what I envisioned way back." In general, Leah envisioned "Just being in a relationship, having a house, having children, having a job."

Romantic relationships and involvement in the GLBT community facilitated Leah's search for normalcy. When she first identified as either bisexual or lesbian, she feared that her sexual orientation precluded her from having a "real" relationship and love, and therefore from being normal. She explained that when she began to date her first girlfriend, she started for the first time to feel normal:

> I felt like kind of a normal person finally, like I could flirt with someone and they would flirt back, and it would turn into a relationship, or turn into dating and turn into a relationship. And I was like that's a natural progression of things. And

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that's another fear I had a long time, will I ever find . . . real love, a real relationship . . . I felt so normal all of the sudden kind of. Normal within this minority, but still normal.

After that brief relationship ended, Leah entered into what she described as her "first long-term relationship." This relationship became intermingled with her new involvement with a campus GLBT student organization, and her life became full of "gay drama." Being at the center of gay drama was discouraging to Leah, who explained: "I just wanted a normal life. I want to relax, I want to focus on school. But I was with these [lesbians] who were like 'you were looking at her in a flirty way.' Oh leave me alone! I was not!" Once that drama-filled relationship ended, Leah then entered into a new, "healthy relationship" through which she at last figured out for herself that she could identify as lesbian and lead a normal life. She reflected on her prior relationship and realized the problems with that relationship were not related to her sexual orientation:

> You wonder, wow, is this stuff a function of us being gay, a gay couple, like is this normal for all gay couples? So [the new relationship] kind of gave me that, what was normal, what wasn't normal. . . . And so it made me realize the things that weren't a function of the fact that we were gay or anything, it was just because . . . .we were incompatible.

Now "integrating sexual orientation into [my] life" rather than having it as the biggest issue allowed Leah to feel normal. That is, she could just be "a person who happens to like girls, rather than Leah the gay girl." And she realized: "I could have what would contribute to my normalcy as I saw it. . . . I just have to go about it differently."

"Peaceful co-existence"

Just as Leah invested significant energy in integrating her queer identity into her life, she also worked to integrate her Jewish identity. Leah was raised in a culturally, but

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not necessarily observant, Jewish home. As one of only a few Jewish people in her high school, she often felt "ashamed" to be Jewish and frequently wished she were not because it made her different from so many other people. When she came to college however, identifying as Jewish provided Leah with a sense of community for which she was searching and for which she was not yet ready to find with other GLBT people. Inspired by a high school trip to Israel, Leah quickly became involved in the campus Hillel and took a strong personal and academic interest in Judaism as a religion and culture.

Leah's process of embracing Judaism occurred at essentially the same time that she was in the process of coming out as a lesbian and gradually becoming involved in the campus GLBT community. Leah described these processes as parallel more so than intersecting; but these parallel processes related. For instance, Leah explained that her experience of being different from the norm as a Jewish person made it easier for her to adjust to being different from the norm as a gay person. She observed:

> I have always grown up knowing that I was different from people in some way. With the whole Jewish thing, it helped me . . . have a bit of an easier knowing, or feeling that *different* thing again. It was a familiar feeling. I was like I'm not like everyone else. So when I felt different because I was Jewish growing up, it kind of primed me in such a way that it wasn't as hard for me to feel a little bit different because I was gay.

In fact, Leah explained that in some respects her "coming out" process as a Jewish person paralleled her process of coming out as lesbian. Both were identities not immediately noticeable to others and that can be hidden. Her quest to overcome the shame of being Jewish and to integrate Judaism into her life paralleled that same quest with regard to

identifying as lesbian. While being different from the norm as a Jewish person made it

easier for Leah to be different from the norm as a lesbian, this prior experience did not

ease her search for normalcy as a lesbian.

It was important to Leah that her religion and sexual orientation, both aspects of

her identity that were of much importance to her, "peacefully co-exist." She observed:

> I choose Judaism to be one of the most important parts of my identity. I mean I
> can make that choice. Whereas the whole sexuality thing, it's important, and you
> know it's a big part of my identity, whether I choose to or not. So, the fact that
> something I choose and something I have really no control over can peacefully
> co-exist is very very important.

She clarified the nature of the relationship, explaining: "I don't know if you would call it

an intersection so much as just kind of a parallel type of thing. . . . They're definitely two

very separate parts of my life." Although it was not as important to Leah that her religion

and sexual orientation intersect with one another, she acknowledged that participating in

a queer Jewish student organization was also one of the few times when the two

dimensions intersected. She also anticipated the two intersecting when she eventually

has a religiously officiated commitment ceremony.

Leah was aware and appreciative that she had a relatively easy time achieving

peaceful co-existence between her religion and sexual orientation. Through her

experiences facilitating the GLBT peer support group, Leah was concerned about a

general "distaste for religion" among many GLBT students. She appreciated that Reform

Judaism, which accepts gay relationships, was typically exempt from this criticism. She

explained her relative ease identifying as a Jewish lesbian:

> People groan when you say religion in the GLBT community because a lot of
> people have been burned by their religion. But Judaism is kind of a special case,
> especially Reform Judaism. Most Reform Jews don't speak ill of their experience

of being Jewish. . . . If you say it very generally that you're a religious gay person, you get this weird response. Now, for some reason . . . people are like, oh you're Jewish, that's so cool. . . . So I've never really felt scoffed at because I'm a Jewish lesbian. But if I were to say generally that I'm religious and I'm going to religious services right now, I have a feeling I would get weird looks.

Just as Leah had not experienced criticism from other gay people about her religion, she experienced only one occasion where a Jewish person challenged her for identifying as a lesbian. This experience made her more sensitive to other people's struggles to integrate their religion and sexual orientation, but did not cause her to question their co-existence in her own identity and the importance of both to her overall sense of self. Leah recounted this incident:

> I talked to this one girl, she's Orthodox, and she said you do what? I lead this group for GLBT students. GLB what? Gay, lesbian. And she was like what? And I was like you know, gay people. And she's like you can't be both at the same time. And I was like I am. She's like you can't be Jewish and gay. But I was like I am. She's like then you're not Jewish. I was like yes I am. Then you're not gay. Yes I am! It was beyond her conception that I was a gay Jew. . . . She was afraid of me. I was foreign to her. I was impossible. And it opened my eyes . . . .and it made *me* feel a little conflicted, though not about, I mean like of course I'm happy with both my sexuality and my religion and all these things, but it made me feel this really sucks that there's people in my community, in both of my communities that don't like me because I'm religious or don't like me because I'm gay, and that's just stupid. This is so dumb.

Leah was very confident that she can simultaneously maintain both identities that were typically parallel and occasionally intersected.

"Maybe it's the part of speech"

For both her queer and Jewish identities, it was important to Leah that she decide for herself the meaning of her identities, rather than allowing others to define them for her. For this reason, she preferred to describe her sexual orientation and religious

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identities using labels that were adjectives rather than nouns. In terms of her sexual orientation, she preferred queer to lesbian. She did not like lesbian as a label in part because it wrongly implied that she fit certain characteristics, and through its use, she revealed these characteristics to others. Explaining the difference between queer and lesbian, she observed:

> Queer just means that I think in a different way than the dominant heterosexual paradigm. . . . .I know a lot of people who identify as queer who might be in straight relationships. That's why I like it because it is kind of this umbrella term . . . I also don't like the nounness of [lesbian]. I don't like that it's a noun. *A* lesbian. I don't like it, you don't call someone *a* gay. I'm more comfortable with gay, with the adjective. . . . You're kind of leaving it to the imagination I suppose. I mean you're not giving away. And . . . you're not putting yourself into a category that a lesbian would evoke. It's just more general. . . . Maybe it's just the part of speech that it is.

She went on to explain that her preference for descriptive rather than concrete labels extended to her preference for how she identified her religious or spiritual identity: "It's like I don't like to be called a Jew. *A* Jew means that there's some stereotype someone has of a Jewish person and you're one of those. You're not really an individual person, you're *an* example of a stereotype."

To further probe her thinking about identity labels, I asked Leah for her reaction to abandoning labels as an alternative to "umbrella labels." Explaining that this notion did not sit well with her because it negated the hard work she put into understanding her sexual orientation identity, she stated:

> Once we figure out that we're not straight, we struggle so hard to figure out what it means to be gay. . . . I feel like I spent so much time and energy figuring out what it means to be this, and then to say forget that, it's hard to do away with boundaries, once you've kind of defined yourself within them. . . . I think that there's a difference between, when you're forming an identity sometimes you need guidelines to understand, . . . trying to figure this thing out, what do people do, what does it mean to do this. So during the formation, yeah, I needed it then.

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> Now that I've figured out what it entails, I don't necessarily need those anymore but it's hard to just shed them. It's hard to, I mean, not even as an outward thing, I don't care what other people know or think, but as an internal, just shedding, I would love to . . . but I don't know, for some reason it makes me uncomfortable.

Leah therefore identified as queer, and was glad to understand how that identity fit into her overall sense of self.

Appreciation for an Internally Defined Identity

Underlying Leah's story were her efforts throughout college to learn that she was able to define her identity from an internal perspective. Among her greatest fears when she initially identified as a lesbian was that her sexual orientation would be the defining aspect of her life and would define her in a way she did not want. She set out on a quest to determine if she could decide for herself the extent to which her sexual orientation defined her sense of self and what it meant to be a lesbian. Learning she was able to do so, as well as practice her religion as she wished, was a significant achievement that brought her contentment. In the process of internally defining her identity, she selected the language she used to define her sexual orientation and religious identities, rejecting language that imply fixed characteristics.

Themes Underlying the Narratives: The Content and Structure of Identity

The individual narratives tell a story of ten distinctive women eager to make sense of who they are and determined to construct an identity that corresponds with whom they desire to be. In her own way, each expended much effort working through this process. For some, it was a relatively smooth process; for others, it was one wrought with

hardship and anxiety. No matter the number of twists each woman's path took, all encountered conflicts and tensions concerning their identity along the way.

To illustrate the underlying story of how the participants understood and negotiated their multiple dimensions of identity, this section describes a few themes that speak to the content of the participants' descriptions of their identity, as well the meaning-making structures that guided their identity construction. The content-based themes center around a broad pattern of identity dimension saliency and relationships and highlight the impossibility of capturing these distinctive women in one coherent story. The structure-based theme describes how identity construction moves from an externally-defined identity to one that is internally defined. While the structural story represents the participants as a whole, it also elucidates the nature of the many differences among the participants' perceptions of their mutlidimensional identity.

Self-Perceptions of Identity: The Content of the Narratives

A Range of Possibilities

Among the most striking qualities of the ten narratives when considered together was the array of possibilities among the participants' perceptions of their identity. Varied perspectives on the meaning of sexual orientation identity were prominent. For instance, for Billie and KT, identifying as a lesbian was a source of liberation and strength; for Angel, a source of hardship. For Beth and Jacky, identifying as a lesbian or dyke was fuel for their political fire; for Gia, being gay was a relatively unexamined natural part of her identity. The assortment of perspectives on the interaction between sexual orientation

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identity and race, culture, social class, gender, and religion also stood out. For instance, Leah was greatly relieved that her religion and sexual orientation "peacefully co-existed"; Amy didn't use "sexual orientation and religion in the same sentence." Carmen resigned herself to what she perceived as an unfortunate separation of her Puerto Rican culture and her sexual orientation; KT never considered having a culture that could affect how she thinks about being a lesbian. Jordana was befuddled by butch-femme roles in relationships; Beth was focused on gender as a source of activism. Gia's working-class status pushed her sexual orientation to the backburner; Billie's economic opportunities allowed to her to explore her sexual orientation.

Clearly, the narratives represented ten distinctive young women shaping (and being shaped by) the meaning of their sexual orientation identity.   The numerous ways in which these women understood their sexual orientation illustrated that the meaning they made of their lesbian identity was unique and continuously evolving. Other than what they described as their attraction and love toward other women, identifying as a lesbian (or gay, queer, or bisexual) allowed for a range of possibilities rather than a fixed characterization.

A Pattern of Identity Salience and Interactions

Just as the participants described their sexual orientation in varied ways, their stories resisted a tightly constructed, coherent theme weaving together the interactions of their multiple dimensions of identity. Still, a very broad pattern, built to some extent on the premise of variation, surfaced. This pattern speaks to the nature of the interactions that occurred and that did not occur as the participants worked to construct their identity.

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While this story emerged with some consistency, I tell it with some hesitancy as it should be read as only one perspective that both simplifies and complicates the nuances within and among the individual narratives.

    <u>Sexual orientation identity as most salient and shaping.</u> Across the narratives, sexual orientation was generally the dimension of identity most salient to the participants' sense of self. Sexual orientation identity then tended to affect how the participants understood other dimensions of their identity more so than these other dimensions influenced how they understood their sexual orientation.

    For instance, sexual orientation identity contributed to heightened examination of gender identity. Jordana wrestled with masculine and feminine gender roles in a lesbian relationship; and Billie expressed much comfort with her ability to assume a masculine role in a lesbian relationship. Sexual orientation identity contributed to several of the participants' increased concern about their potential to achieve a high social class in the future. KT was concerned about whether or not she could have a career as a professional; and Amy carefully considered whether she might end up a "bar fly" like so many lesbians she saw. And sexual orientation contributed to a reexamination of religious beliefs and practices. Beth, for instance, wrestled with practicing Reform rather than Conservative Judaism as a lesbian; and Carmen put her Christian identity on hold until she figured out whether her sexual orientation would allow her to comfortably attend church. Yet, both the white participants and participants of color perceived their lesbian or bisexual identity as having little effect on how they understood their race or culture. Contrary to the general pattern, the few perceived interactions between race, culture, and sexual orientation entailed the racial or cultural identity of some of the participants of color

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influencing how they understood their sexual orientation identity, rather than sexual orientation influencing racial or cultural identity.

The participants perceived their sexual orientation identity as interacting only with those other dimensions of identity that were also relatively salient to their sense of self. Although the saliency of these other dimensions differed among the participants, gender was often among the most salient (and most interacting) and social class among the least salient (and least interacting). The saliency of race, culture, and religion varied significantly (and were the most varied in the extent of interactions). The factors contributing to the differences in relative saliency differed, and occasionally could be attributed to sexual orientation identity itself, as did the nature of interactions. The factors contributing to the relative saliency of these dimensions of identity, as well as the nature of the relationships between these identity dimensions and sexual orientation, are detailed below.

Gender: High saliency and frequent interactions. As a result of their sexual orientation identity, gender was among the most salient dimension of identity. Identifying as lesbian or bisexual contributed to heightened attention to gender expectations, performance, and fluidity. Interactions between sexual orientation and gender were apparent in each narrative. These interactions are elaborated on later in this chapter because they represent the most consistent pattern of perceived interactions across the narratives.

Social class: Low saliency and few interactions. Economic privilege greatly contributed to social class often being the least salient dimension of identity. Indeed,

several of the self-described middle-class participants explained that they had not needed

to think about social class. Similar to what others also expressed, Leah stated:

> I guess I've kind of been in this non-descript middle class thing my whole life, so
> it's not really something I think about. . . . I wouldn't say that I take it for granted,
> but I don't even realize how lucky I am. I guess that's taking it for granted.

Also echoing the sentiments of several others, Beth, without considering the inherent

privilege in her observation, explained that she did not feel like she was in a social class

as a college student:

> Some people here are on full scholarship. Some people are here with no financial
> aid out-of-state. Most people are here somewhere in between. But no one really
> thinks about it or talks about it much. So, everyone's kind of on an even plane.
> You get your meal plan, you get your [debit card], everyone kind of assumes that
> you're all simultaneously too poor to go out for an expensive dinner but rich
> enough to go out to the movies. . . . Everyone acts like everyone is on the same
> financial plane, whether or not it's true. So [social class] doesn't affect me much.

Other than in the stories of Gia and Jacky, the participants infrequently perceived their

social class as interacting with sexual orientation, except for concern about their future

social class status.

Religion: Varied saliency and interactions. Variation in religious identity saliency

depended on several factors, including family influence and sexual orientation influence,

as well as the participants' intentional decision-making.   The nature of the interactions

between religious and sexual orientation identity differed, except for a common desire

among most for a comfortable relationship between these two aspects of their identity.

Nearly half of the participants enjoyed a comfortable relationship between their

sexual orientation and religious identities. Leah and Beth were both raised in Jewish

homes and consider Judaism very salient to their sense of self, and Leah did even more so

than did her parents. Both appreciated the relatively easy relationship between their

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sexual orientation and religion, and to varying degrees have easily integrated the two. Jacky was raised Catholic, and Angel as Christian (she was not sure of the tradition or denomination). For reasons that for the most part were unrelated to their sexual orientation, neither Angel nor Jacky felt a sense of connection to Christianity. Both gravitated toward Paganism, again for reasons they believed were unrelated to their sexual orientation. Both explained that the relationship between their sexual orientation and Paganism was only that they were pleased that Paganism approves of being gay.

For Carmen and KT, sexual orientation identity caused religious identity to be in a state of flux. KT was raised Catholic; Carmen was raised Christian (and was also unsure of the tradition or denomination.) KT, who rejected Catholicism because the church did not accept her, and Carmen both very much wanted to practice Christianity. Both were trying to determine if doing so would be a possibility for them. KT's and Carmen's sexual orientation identity caused religion to become increasingly salient to their sense of self, even though Carmen temporarily set religion aside and KT is a "closet Christian."

Billie, Amy, Gia, and Jordana were not raised in religious homes. Billie and Amy had not become personally religious and did not believe this decision was related to their sexual orientation. Gia, who was academically interested in religion, expressed much distaste for Christianity because of some its prohibitions against homosexuality. Jordana was actively searching for a religion with which she connected. After considering Atheism and Deism, she decided that Agnostic best described her beliefs. Jordana created her own religious principles grounded in honesty and facing fears. She created these principles based in part on her desire to confront her fears about her sexuality rather than living as introverted and unhappy.

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Race and culture: Varied saliency and interactions. The significant variation in racial and cultural identity saliency depended on several factors, including privilege, family influence, and to a lesser extent, focused attention on sexual orientation. Among the five participants of color, saliency of race and culture and their interactions with sexual orientation demonstrated much variability. Family influence contributed to the relatively low salience of race for Jacky or Angel. Jacky explained that she did not grow up as part of black culture:

> I never really grew up surrounded by black culture. I mean my parents, we listened to black music, like some stuff, I guess, but we weren't as deeply into that culture as most black people I've met or been around. . . . My parents don't talk black. . . . I wasn't raised in it, so it wasn't around me. . . . Black just happens to be the color of my skin.

Likewise, Angel, who felt more connected to her African American than white heritage as a result of having been raised by her mother who is black, stated: "I wasn't raised stereotypically black, I was just raised. . . .I'm not part of a black community. It's not something I think about." While Jordana was raised in a culturally Latino family, in fact her parents spoke only Spanish, she observed that she rarely considered her Latina identity in part because she was so intensely focused on understanding her sexuality. As discussed later in this chapter, at the same time that Angel and Jordana explained that they gave little thought to their race or culture, their stories revealed relationships between these aspects of their identity and their sexual orientation.

Amy and Carmen both observed that their race and culture were important aspects of their identity. Both also acknowledged that race and culture contributed to some of their family members' negative reactions to their sexual orientation. Yet the nature of the relationship between sexual orientation, race, and culture differed between the two

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women. Amy, who brought her girlfriend to Trinidadian family gatherings, proudly explained she did not need family approval and that her culture and sexual orientation were two distinct aspects of her identity. Although Carmen had on occasion introduced her girlfriend to her extended family, she did not think it was necessary to discuss identifying as bisexual with her Puerto Rican relatives, sadly resigning herself to what she believed was the inevitable separation of her sexual orientation and culture.

Although all of the white participants except KT were familiar with the concept of white privilege, they generally did not consider race to be important to their sense of self. This was true even for Gia who was deeply interested in white privilege and racial discrimination. The white participants therefore rarely perceived interactions between their race and sexual orientation.

Distinct narratives. Even though it took variation into consideration, this broad pattern describing the nature of the relationships between sexual orientation identity and race, culture, gender, social class, and religion, did not represent each participant. In fact, Gia's story is an important and unique narrative unlike many of the others. For Gia, social class was the dimension of her identity most salient to her sense of self. The meaning that she made of being "poor or working class" (e.g., "I'm all about going against the grain") influenced how she made meaning of the other dimensions of her identity, including her sexual orientation, to which she gave little consideration. Amy's story was also defied this general pattern. A biracial woman proud of her Caribbean culture, Amy was concerned that people acknowledge her unique racial and cultural heritage. While she described her sexual orientation as "centering," she believed it guided her social life and relationships more so than shaped who she was as a person.

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The pattern was also a tentative fit for Beth, for whom her Jewish identity was extremely salient to her sense of self and actively interacted with the other dimensions of her identity. Thus, while this broad pattern of saliency and relationships provided one perspective on the dynamics of the participants' multiple dimensions of identity, it did not depict the complete array of individuality represented among these women.

The Insufficiency of Gender Categories

Within this general pattern of saliency and relationships between sexual orientation and other dimensions of identity, a fairly consistent interaction emerged between sexual orientation and gender identity. In general, identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual tended to contribute to heightened scrutiny of gender identity, including awareness of gender as a social construction and a gradual appreciation of gender fluidity. No matter how wedded most of the participants were to sexual orientation labels, several considered the categories of masculine and feminine as insufficient for capturing the reality of gender and challenged the assumption of a causal relationship between biological sex and gender identity. Still, it was apparent that while they wrestled with these binaries, they could not escape them. And wrestling with them was part of the process of figuring out how to construct their identity.

Typically spurred by their sexual orientation identity, the participants intentionally performed gender in numerous situations and contexts. Intentional performances occurred in relationships: Billie explained that she wanted to assume the masculine role of taking care of her girlfriend. They occurred, or at least were thought about, in questions about sexual behavior: Jordana was concerned about whether she will assume a butch or femme role during sex. They occurred in professional situations when

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not wanting to be identified as a lesbian: KT wanted to come across as feminine at work

so that others didn't think she's a lesbian; Billie uncharacteristically dressed in women's

clothes at a banquet so as not to call attention to herself as a lesbian. Intentional

performances occurred when trying to "pass as straight": if Carmen tried to attract a man,

she would straighten her long curly hair that she typically wore pulled back with a

baseball cap. And performances occurred in social situations: Amy thought that in

general tomboys fit in better at gay bars.

Identifying as lesbian, bisexual, or gay seemed to enable these women to become

aware that regardless of their biological sex, they were able to determine how to express

their gender. At the same time, though, it was evident that most were still committed to

masculine and feminine, or butch and femme, as categories with certain expectations for

appearance and behavior. This was true even for Billie who identified as "androgynous"

since it gave her "a place in the world" in the middle of masculine and feminine. Rather

than abandoning the gender binary, the participants realized they were able to move

between the two categories, sometimes for personal interests and sometimes for security.

Even with the binary still intact, few felt comfortable identifying as either feminine or

masculine, realizing the slippage between the categories.

Adhering to a binary that for some was proving insufficient, the participants

tended to consider gender to be more of a social construction (e.g., What contexts define

whether I am acting masculine and feminine?) than they did a performance (e.g. How do

I create the meaning of gender through behaviors and appearance?). Jacky's story,

though, demonstrated movement toward challenging the binary itself. Jacky described

herself as "androgynous" only when pushed for a label (a word she, like Billie, learned

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through an internet gender quiz). She resisted my questions about how she described her gender identity, stating that she disliked "gender boxes." Using the language of "gender performance," Jacky explained that her gender does not need a label but was a product of her appearance, behaviors, and interests.

Regardless of whether the participants were attached to gender binaries, found them lacking, or directly challenged them, most developed heightened attention to the social construction or performance of gender. As such, gender typically was among the dimensions of identity most salient to their sense of self and one with which many wrestled as they figured out who they were becoming as people.

Perceptions of Independence Among Identity Dimensions

Part of the challenge to telling a consistent story about the relationships between the participants' sexual orientation identity and the other dimensions of their identity is that the participants' statements about their identity were sometimes at odds with what their stories reflected about their identity. This tension surfaced in another underlying theme that emerged from the narratives. Specifically, it was apparent that the participants perceived their dimensions of identity as being generally distinct from one another, even when their stories occasionally suggested otherwise. Although race, culture, social class, religion, and gender interacted to varying degrees with sexual orientation, and to a lesser extent with each other, the participants generally described these dimensions as independent.   With some exceptions, most discussed interactions with their sexual orientation only when I pushed their thinking during the interviews, and even then, they often did not recognize the interactions evident within their stories.

The following few examples, selected from many, illustrate the tension between the participants' statements and their stories. Jordana, for instance, stated that her Latina identity did not interact with her sexual orientation identity. Her stories, however, belied this assertion. Jordana described the cultural differences with her family that made discussing her sexual orientation a challenge for her; a feeling of "difference" as a "minority lesbian" that caused her "to see the world differently"; and a sense of comfort and happiness when called a "Latina lesbian." Likewise, Carmen explained that religion, specifically her family's claims that she will go to hell for being gay, did not influence the meaning she made of identifying as bisexual. Yet her reluctance to take a "butch" girlfriend to church suggests that her belief that the church frowns on her sexual orientation was another reason that she struggled to understand whether or not identifying as gay was "normal." Along similar lines, while Angel stated that her race and sexual orientation did not interact, her stories strongly suggested that she believed people would not like her as a lesbian just as they did not like her as a biracial woman.

liked as a biracial woman caused her to believe she would not be liked as a lesbian. Indeed, she acknowledged this relationship while still maintaining that they were distinct aspects of her identity.

Although the participants certainly acknowledged some relationships among their identity dimensions, in particular relationships involving their sexual orientation, they typically did not consider their dimensions of identity to intersect with each other. As Amy stated when I asked her reaction to the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity: "It's just tricky because everything [on the model] is intertwined and I generally keep my things separate. These are all separate issues for me. And this business of lines crossing

is crazy." Again, even participants whose stories about their identities suggested that some of their dimensions intersected generally articulated otherwise when specifically asked. For instance, Beth, who enthusiastically described the integrated relationship among her religion, gender, and sexual orientation, stated that her sexual orientation and religion are distinct parts of her "more tied to her core than to each other." And Jacky, who was very aware of her multiple "non-normative" identities and lack of multiple privileges, and who on more than one occasion explained that "intersectionality" is one of her favorite words, also explained that she typically thinks of her identity dimensions as distinct from one another. Similarly, Leah, a leader of a queer Jewish student organization, expressed that these two dimensions of her identity are more "parallel than intersecting." She was especially pleased that her sexual orientation and religious identities "peacefully co-existed," without seeing a need for them to intersect. Thus, the differences between the participants' perceptions of their identities and the way in which they lived their identities was another twist in the story of the dynamics of their multiple dimensions of identity.

The Influence of Context

The influence of context on the participants' sense of self was implicit within the stories they told about the various dimensions of their identity. Contextual influences such as family, friends, college organizations, college courses, religious institutions, career planning, and geography influenced the salience of the multiple dimensions of their identity, as well as how the participants understood their identities. The influence of context varied though among the participants. Contextual influences strongly shaped the saliency, meanings, and the nature of interactions among identity dimensions for some

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participants. For others, contextual influences were considerations in the construction of identity but not defining factors.

For example, context strongly influenced KT's understanding of her identity. The opinions of family and friends influenced her understanding that her identity as a lesbian and as a Christian were mutually exclusive.   Likewise, Carmen explained that context, specifically the beliefs of the church, will cause her faith to fluctuate between an aspect of her identity central to her sense of self and one that is peripheral. Likewise, she explained that gender "could be the least important from my individual perspective. . . . I don't really think about my gender without taking into account the social norms and stuff like that." On the other hand, contextual influences, specifically discrimination, influenced the saliency of Jacky's multiple identity dimensions. They did not, however, influence how she understood these dimensions. Instead, her critical analysis of multiple viewpoints shaped her self-understanding. Like Jacky, Beth was very aware of the influence of context on the relative saliency of her identity dimensions. She stated:

> I'm taking a Women's Studies class, . . . I'm taking a psychology class, I'm going to a GLBT conference, I'm going to a diversity conference, visiting with my girlfriend . . . actively working with [a black-Jewish dialogue organization]. [All of these] . . . will probably bring out different parts of me.

Beth also knew that she would continue to learn more about herself through new opportunities, but wanted to believe she could shape the meaning of her identity within these contexts.

Compassionate and Open-Minded

Regardless of the meaning the participants made of their sexual orientation identity or their perceptions of relationships between sexual orientation and other

dimensions of identity, a notable pattern emerged across their stories. Although not

necessarily apparent in the individual narratives as part of the crux of identifying as a

lesbian, nearly every participant expressed that sexual orientation identity caused her to

be more compassionate toward others and more open-minded about people different from

herself. And they were generally appreciative of this new facet of their identity. Similar

to the attitude expressed by many others, Jordana explained the basis of her compassion:

> I have more compassion for people, just because I've been different, you know. I
> can understand very well, where anyone who has ever felt different is coming
> from. I'm, in a way, we're lucky I guess in that way that we have that. Like we
> have more compassion, are more open, we're forced to be more open-minded.

Similarly, Angel observed that as a lesbian "I've been where I've not been accepted, so I

will pretty much accept just about anybody, because I know what it feels like to be

shunned." Several of the participants also observed that people who are discriminated

against should not discriminate against others. Carmen, for instance, explained that as a

result of being treated differently because of her sexual orientation:

> If someone makes prejudiced comments about blacks around me, like I hate that.
> I just totally jump down their throat. . . . Or if somebody makes fun of somebody
> because they're handicapped. I'm like, c'mon now, you can't expect everybody
> to be like you. That's what I try to tell my friends.

Whether they described these qualities as being central to who they are as people, or

whether they described them only as one of the ways that identifying as a lesbian or

bisexual shaped their identity, increased compassion and open-mindedness tied together

this diverse group of women developing their sense of self.

The Structure of Identity Construction: From External to Internal Meaning Making

Although there was much variation across the content of the participants' descriptions of their identities, an underlying pattern emerged in terms of the structure of how they made meaning of their identity. In fact, structural differences in the construction of identity accounted for many of the differences in the content of the participants' descriptions of their identities. Structural differences also accounted for much of how the participants negotiated the path toward constructing an identity that they felt comfortably fit them at the time of the study.

A glimpse into the pattern of meaning-making structures was offered at the conclusion of each of the individual narratives. Specifically, it was apparent that how the participants understood their sexual orientation identity was determined to a large extent by whether they externally or internally defined their identity. The structure they utilized to make meaning of their sexual orientation identity was typically replicated when making meaning of other dimensions of their identity. As demonstrated through the narratives, some of the meaning-making structures included: (1) unexamined satisfaction with external meaning making; and (2) gradual dissatisfaction with insufficient external definitions; (3) tentative internal meaning making with the possibility of retreat; and (4) appreciation for an internally defined identity.

Most of the participants made meaning of their sexual orientation identity by relying to some extent on external definitions. Some of these same women were in the process of moving toward an increasingly complex way of making meaning. A couple of the participants hovered around an internally constructed meaning of their sexual orientation. Those who defined their identities based on external constructions, especially

Billie, Angel, and Carmen, were strongly influenced by contextual influences. Specifically, they were more concerned with fitting in with others, not drawing attention to themselves, being "normal," matching their identity with appropriate identity labels and other people's expectations, looking for guides and cues that explained how to express their identity; and setting aside conflicts that existed in their multi-dimensional identities. Amy's stories suggest that she fit this external meaning making structure as well, despite her insistence that she did not care what others think about her. Those who were approaching an internally defined identity, especially Beth, Gia, Jacky, and Leah, were less tied to contextual influences. They were concerned with resisting stereotypes and challenging identity labels. They typically presented their identity in a fairly consistent manner regardless of the environment. Personal contentment with their identities was more important than fitting in or fitting other people's expectations.

As participants made a transition or were on the brink of making a transition between external and internal constructions, their stories reflected numerous tensions and conflicts within their identity. These participants, especially Carmen, Jordana, and KT, were starting to realize the limitations of stereotypes; to feel frustrated by labels insufficient to describe how they made sense of themselves; and to challenge other people's expectations for who they ought to be or who they were allowed to be, including expectations that caused difficulties for integrating multiple dimensions of their identity. As part of the process of making a transition toward an internally constructed identity, these participants not only deeply grappled with the nature of their sexual orientation identity during the course of the interviews, but the interviews themselves actually influenced their meaning-making process. For instance, Carmen and Jordana relabeled or

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considered re-labeling their identities as a result of probing their sense of self during the course of the study. When participants were comfortable with how they made meaning, they grappled less actively with their identities during the interviews.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings from the data collected through in-depth interviews with ten participants. I told the individual stories of the ten participants, as well as the broader story comprised of themes that emerged across the participants' narratives. By sequencing the individual narratives to mirror the process of external to internal meaning-making, the design of the chapter demonstrated the inseparability of structure and content in the construction of identity.

While the extensive variations among the individual narratives spoke to the challenges of telling one coherent story about the identity of ten diverse lesbian college students, the variations also elucidated an integrated perspective on the nature of lesbian identity construction. The results of this study suggest that the construction of sexual orientation identity, considered in connection with race, culture, religion, gender, and social class, is influenced by a relationship between meaning-making structures, contextual influences, and the content of identity. More specifically, whether identity was defined from an internal or external perspective contributed to the multiple meanings of sexual orientation identity; the ease with which sexual orientation was integrated or peacefully co-existed with other dimensions of identity; and the extent to which the participants' perceptions of their multidimensional identity were consistent with the sense of self to which they aspired. Regardless of whether identity was externally or internally

defined, the participants were most frequently aware of interactions between sexual

orientation and gender. Interactions between these dimensions of identity were typically

a result of sexual orientation identity contributing to an increasingly complex

understanding of gender.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that the construction of sexual orientation

identity, considered in relationship with other dimensions of identity such as race,

culture, religion, social class, and gender, depends not only on the content of identity and

contextual influence but also on meaning-making structures. The purpose of this chapter

is to discuss these results in relation to the original research questions, as well as from the

perspective of the various theoretical frameworks that guided this study. Specifically,

this chapter considers the results in relation to existing literature on constructivist-

developmental theory; lesbian and multidimensional identity research on college

students; and queer theory. This chapter also discusses the implications of the study for

practice and for future research, as well as the limitations and strengths of the study.

Discussion Of Findings in Relation to Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore lesbian college students' perceptions of

their sexual orientation identity and how dimensions of identity such as religion, race,

culture, gender, and social class interact with their sexual orientation. Three research

questions guided the study: (1) How do lesbian college students describe and make

meaning of their sexual orientation identity? (2) Do lesbian college students' multiple

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dimensions of identity, such as religion, race, culture, gender, and social class, influence

how they describe and make meaning of their sexual orientation identity? (3) Which

dimensions of identity are most salient for lesbian college students? In what ways, if any,

do dimensions of identity influence the salience of other dimensions? The results of the

study indicated that the three research questions are intertwined. I therefore discuss them

in conjunction with one another.

Regardless of whether the participants were in the first few months of coming out

or considered identifying as a lesbian to be integrated into their overall sense of self,

nearly all of them perceived sexual orientation as the most salient dimension of identity.

Identifying as a lesbian was the dimension of identity to which they gave the greatest

thought; the dimension that affected their everyday lives; and the dimension that shaped

in many respects how they thought about who they were as people. The participants

described and made meaning of their sexual orientation identity in multiple ways. For

some, identifying as a lesbian was a source of liberation and strength, an identity that

brought them confidence and a feeling of being centered. For others, identifying as a

lesbian was a source of hardship or discrimination, translated into either a painful

existence or an empowered political response. For nearly all of the participants,

identifying as a lesbian, and therefore in some respect as different from the dominant

culture, was a source of compassion and open-mindedness. Still, for a couple of the

participants, sexual orientation had little influence on their sense of self.

For several of the participants, the meaning they made of their sexual orientation

identity was intertwined with their perception of what it meant to be "normal." Some

participants struggled, knowingly or unknowingly, with simultaneous desires to be

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normal and to shun normalcy. Some believed they were both normal and abnormal as a

lesbian, depending on the context or whose perspective was being considered. Another

defined her own normal and then set out to learn whether she could achieve this normalcy

as a lesbian. A couple of participants rejected normalcy, and were either pleased that

identifying as a lesbian was not considered part of mainstream culture or gave little

thought to whether or not they were normal.

Closely related to the construction of normal, identity labels also influenced how

several of the participants made meaning of their sexual orientation identity. Some

struggled to find the appropriate label into which their identity fit, while at the same time

expressing distaste for labels. Labels helped a few participants understand themselves by

providing a ready-made identity or a sense of connection to other people who shared

similar characteristics. Some participants were less interested in labels but were not

prepared to abandon these signifiers, either because they had worked so hard at

understanding the meaning of their identity label or considered them necessary means of

communication.

Dimensions of identity, such as race, culture, religion, social class, and gender,

had a moderate influence on the meaning the participants made of their sexual orientation

identity. For the most part, understanding their sexual orientation was the most pressing

concern for them; other dimensions of identity often paled in comparison and were not

perceived as related to their quest to understand what it meant to be a lesbian. A few of

the participants' stories, however, indicated that religion, race, and culture caused them at

some juncture to struggle to understand their sexual orientation identity. In particular, religion and race made it difficult for some participants to come out to their family or decide whether they were "normal" as a lesbian.

These relationships between sexual orientation and religion, race, and culture, sometimes went unnoticed by the participants. The participants more often recognized interactions that eased their understanding of their sexual orientation identity. For instance, a few of the participants acknowledged that previous experience being in the minority religiously or economically eased the transition to also being different with regard to their sexual orientation.

More so than other dimensions of identity influencing the meaning participants made of their sexual orientation identity, identifying as lesbian influenced the meaning they made of gender, religion, and to a lesser extent, social class. Identifying as a lesbian tended to cause the participants to perceive gender as one of the most salient dimensions of their identity. Indeed, they often described the two identity dimensions as being of the same importance to their sense of self. The influence that sexual orientation had on the construction of gender was complex but fairly consistent. Specifically, several of the participants recognized the inadequacy of masculine and feminine as categories to capture how they made sense of their gender identity, often rejecting a causal relationship between biological sex and gender. Identifying as a lesbian contributed to many recognizing gender identity as either socially constructed or performed.

Much variation existed in the saliency of religious identity and the influence that identifying as a lesbian had on the meaning made of religious identity. For reasons the participants perceived as unrelated to their sexual orientation, the saliency of religious

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identity greatly varied among the participants, ranging from inclusion in their core sense of self to a dimension not at all important in their life. Sexual orientation identity had a direct effect on the saliency of religious identity for two of the participants (KT and Carmen), both of whom wanted to practice Christianity. As they negotiated their desire for religion or faith with their uncertainty as to whether or not it could coexist with their sexual orientation, religion became increasingly salient for one and in a state of flux for the other. For some participants, identifying as lesbian caused them to examine certain religions' stances on homosexuality and to rethink their relationship with these religions. For others for whom co-existence of their religion and sexual orientation had not been a struggle, satisfaction with peaceful co-existence sometimes gave way to successful efforts to intentionally integrate the two.

For the most part, social class was perceived as the least salient dimension of identity, typically a result of privilege. Identifying as a lesbian did not seem to influence the salience of social class and had just a slight influence on the meaning some of the participants made of that aspect of their identity. A few participants whose exposure to other lesbians was limited to other college students or women in gay bars made a tentative observation about the negative influence that identifying as lesbian might have on their economic future. Based on this limited exposure, as well as concerns about discrimination, they expressed some concern about achieving a comfortable economic status in the future. Social class was, however, salient for Gia and Jacky, both of whom identified at the time of the study as working-class or poor. For Jacky, sexual orientation identity caused social class to become relatively salient because the lack of domestic partner benefits caused her to be "temporarily poor."

Variation also existed in the saliency and meaning of race. The perceived saliency of race greatly differed among the five participants of color, often a result of contextual influences, especially family. Sexual orientation identity had only a moderate perceived influence on the saliency of race. Specifically, Jordana observed that her attention to sexual orientation might have caused her to focus less on her race. Even though most of the white participants were familiar with the concept of white privilege, race was typically was not incorporated into their lives because it was not something about which they had to give thought.

In summary, sexual orientation was typically the most salient dimension of identity and the meaning made of this dimension of identity greatly varied among the participants. With some exceptions, race, culture, social class, gender, and religion had little influence on the saliency and meaning made of lesbian identity. Instead, lesbian identity tended to influence the meaning made of several of these other dimensions of identity. But for the most part, the participants did not perceive their multiple dimensions of identity as interacting with one another, but instead, as relatively independent. As discussed in the remainder of the chapter, these general responses to the research questions provide a basis for new understanding of lesbian identity development among college students.

Lesbian Identity Construction Through Meaning-Making Structures, Context, and Content

Much of the literature on college student identity speaks to the content, and to a lesser extent, the context of the development of individual dimensions of identity, such as

sexual orientation (e.g., Cass, 1979; D'Augelli, 1994; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996), and

the negotiation of multiple identity dimensions (Jones & McEwen, 2000). The results of

this study suggest that the construction of sexual orientation identity, considered in

relationship with other dimensions of identity such as race, culture, religion, social class,

and gender, depends not only on content and contextual influence but also on meaning-

making structures. Meaning-making structures determine whether lesbian identity is

constructed according to external expectations or an internally generated sense of self

(Kegan, 1994). Contextual influences on lesbian identity construction refer to factors

such as family background, current experiences, and career decisions and life planning

(Jones & McEwen, 2000). The content of lesbian identity refers to a woman's

perceptions about notions such as what it means to identify as a lesbian and how that

identity affects her sense of self (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). The relationship among

these three components of identity, which is not described in the literature, is discussed in

the next few sections.

Lesbian Identity Development Revisited: The Role of Meaning Making Structures

Kegan's Constructivist-Developmental Theory

The pattern of external and internal meaning-making that emerged from the

participants' narratives is consistent with Kegan's (1982, 1994) constructivist-

developmental theory. Kegan's theory of five increasingly complex orders of making

meaning is described in detail in Chapter 2. Third-order meaning making is most

prevalent among college students (Baxter Magolda, 1999). The third order is

characterized by making meaning through concrete relationships and referent groups to

which one's own interests are subordinated in favor of group loyalty (Kegan, 1994). The identity of a person who makes meaning at the third order is defined by her relationships, and no process exists for negotiating among these relationships when they conflict with one another.

Fewer college students make meaning at the fourth order of consciousness (Baxter Magolda, 1999). The fourth order is characterized through the ability to author one's own life. A self-authoring person internally constructs her identity rather than defining herself through her relationships. She develops a personal ideology that coordinates and integrates multiple values and beliefs, allowing for personal authority over her identity, and a system to resolve conflicts among groups with whom she has relationships (Kegan, 1994).

I did not formally assess the participants' meaning-making capacity, but instead, speculated on their Kegan orders based on the interviews and individual narratives. These speculations suggested that most of the participants either made meaning at the third order of consciousness or were transitioning toward the fourth order. Participants who constructed their sexual orientation identity from an external perspective appeared to be make meaning at Kegan's third order of consciousness. Epistemologically, they constructed sexual orientation and other dimensions of their identity according to unexamined external authority, including identity labels, family and friends, and stereotypes. KT, for instance, relied for a few years on her mother's statements that identifying as a lesbian precluded her from being religious, feminine, and upper-class. Interpersonally, they could not separate themselves from their relationships with other people, such as family, friends, teammates, and their church, and were concerned with

fitting in and meeting other people's expectations.   Carmen disagreed with her family's

opinion that she would go to hell for being gay, but still to some extent made meaning of

her sexual orientation based on her perception of Christianity's intolerance of being gay.

Intrapersonally, participants who made meaning at the third order constructed the

meaning of their identity in relationship to these other people and environments. The

meaning they made of their identity shifted depending on changing contexts, particularly

when contexts were in conflict.   Billie, for instance, dressed in what she perceived to be

a more feminine manner in the context of people who might not approve of her

"androgynous lesbian" identity, but then returned to her "normal" self in the context of

people with whom she was comfortable.

As further illustration of the relationship between the participants' constructions

of their sexual orientation identity and constructivist-developmental theory, Kegan's

discussion of the third order of consciousness elucidates Angel's fear of disapproval that

caused her to associate negative connotations with her sexual orientation. In the context

of exiting heterosexual identity, Kegan (1982) explained that the greatest concern

expressed by young men he counseled was not so much the possibility of being gay, but

even worse, being a person who might be met with disapproval from others with whom

they mutually defined themselves. At risk was "a particular evolutionary truce, the very

balance which composes the self and the world" (p. 192). Kegan explained that when the

self is imbedded in the interpersonal, as it is the third order, it is disconcerting not only to

be different from other people with whom you have relationships but to risk that these

people might disapprove of your identity. Kegan stated:

Because it is out of this very confusion of the self with these other persons that the interpersonal self emerges, the inability to meet their expectations and be acceptable in their eyes is nothing short of the ultimate inability -- the inability to make *myself* coherent. I have turned against myself. I have become riot. (p. 192, emphasis in original)

Facing disapproval from people with whom she defined herself, caused Angel to be, using Kegan's language, "in over her head."

Participants who internally constructed their sexual orientation identity appeared to be making meaning at Kegan's fourth order of consciousness. Epistemologically, they questioned external authority and sought out multiple sources of authority.   Jacky, for instance, intentionally researched and critically examined multiple perspectives on political and identity-based issues, and then determined her own points of view. Interpersonally, self-authoring participants were less concerned with fitting in and meeting expectations of others. Instead, they understood where they stood in relationship to these external sources. For example, Gia rejected her friends' critiques that she looked and acted too feminine and continued to express her gender as she was most comfortable at the same time that she maintained her friendships. Intrapersonally, they reflected on their relationships with friends, family, religion, and determined for themselves the meaning they made of their identity. They were able to maintain and convey the same identity regardless of the group with whom they were associating, and were less influenced by social norms in the construction of their identity. Leah, for instance, did not question her ability to maintain both her lesbian and Jewish identities in an environment where she was questioned for identifying as both.

Participants who were making the transition between external and internal meaning-making were exiting third-order meaning-making. Kegan (1994) asserted that

the transition between the third and fourth order is the most significant developmental transformation of adult life. Baxter Magolda characterized this transition toward self-authorship as moving from "external formulas" to "internal foundations" (Baxter Magolda, 2001, pp. xviii-xix). Such transitions are sometimes difficult and painful, but also freeing (Kegan, 1994). This mix of reactions was apparent in the frustration and even elation, experienced by Carmen, KT, and Jordana as they worked hard at constructing their identities in a new and more complex manner. Each struggled to varying degrees with feelings that expectations created by other people did not match how they perceived their identity. Not realizing she could challenge many of these expectations was a source of frustration for Carmen; KT's evolving understanding that authority could be questioned and knowledge was not certain brought her strength; direct challenges to external expectations caused Jordana to waver between euphoria and loneliness.

<u>Lesbian Identity Development Theory Through a Constructivist-Developmental Perspective</u>

The pattern of meaning-making that emerged from the participants' narratives is not only solidly grounded in Kegan's (1994) developmental theory, but is also remarkably consistent with emerging scholarship on the relationship between theories of identity development and self-authorship. King and Baxter Magolda (2001), building on the work of Kegan (1994), considered identity development as a process that moves from simple to complex ways of making meaning. Specifically, to capture the similarities among theories of racial, ethnic, and sexual orientation identity development, most of

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which describe the content of identity development, King and Baxter Magolda suggested an integrated model of identity development characterized by increased complexity in epistemological, interpersonal, and intrapersonal capacity.

Demonstrating the relationship between identity development and increased complexity on these three domains, they explained that at the initial phases of racial, ethnic, and sexual orientation development: "Learners accept authorities' views (epistemological dimension), define themselves through external others (intrapersonal dimension), and act in relationships to acquire approval (interpersonal dimension)" (King & Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 14). In the middle phases of identity development, learners question these external sources as they explore the meaning of their identity. King and Baxter Magolda explained:

> Dissonance in various aspects of identity development often stems from marginalization by external others, which can call the validity of external authority into question. As learners struggle through the confusion that comes with realizing that all knowledge is not certain and that individuals must consider establishing their own views (epistemological dimension), their reliance on external others for definition (intrapersonal) and seeking others' approval in relationships (interpersonal) is called into question. (p. 14)

Finally, "in later more complex phases of development where self-authorship on all three dimensions is achieved, an internally defined perspective on how one's race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation is integrated into one's view of oneself is possible" (pp. 14-15).

I did not specifically analyze the participants' construction of their sexual orientation identity from the perspective of stage theories of gay and lesbian identity development, such as Cass (1979), considered by King and Baxter Magolda (2001). I decided not to do so because these theories do not account for variations in development and understanding that might result from interactions with other dimensions of identity.

Still, it was apparent that the participants' descriptions of their sexual orientation identity, apart from and in relation to other dimensions of identity, followed the same meaning-making pattern described by King and Baxter Magolda. In fact, the meaning-making structure on which each participant relied to construct her sexual orientation identity typically appeared to be the same as the structure used to describe other dimensions of her identity.

I also resisted relying on theories of lesbian identity development because many presume linear development that is at odds with perceptions of identity as fluid. However, the striking similarity between the pattern of meaning-making that emerged from the narratives and King and Baxter Magolda's proposed integrated model of identity development suggests that, to some extent, linear development has a proper place within the process of identity construction. The process of identity construction described in theories of lesbian identity development provides one important explanation for the participants' descriptions of their sexual orientation. And then considering these theories in conjunction with the development of meaning-making complexity helps illuminate some of the variations in the identity development process not accounted for by the developmental theories alone. For example, Carmen had been out to her family and friends about her sexual orientation for several years; had heterosexual, gay, and lesbian friends; and believed it was important to educate people that gay people are normal. From this perspective it seems that she has developed through several of, for instance, Cass's (1979) stages. At the same time, she struggled to decide whether she was lesbian,

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bisexual, or straight. Her indecision and determination to find an identity category are a

product of third-order meaning-making, rather than a representation of a particular stage

of development.

The Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity Revisited: Relationships Among Structure, Context, and Content

The Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity and Lesbian Identity Construction

While the findings from this study suggest the role of meaning-making structures

in the construction of identity, these findings grew out of the contextually-based

depiction of identity construction presented in Jones and McEwen's (2000) Model of

Multiple Dimensions of Identity. As detailed in Chapter 2, the Model of Multiple

Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) depicts the dynamic construction of identity and the

influence of changing contexts on the relative salience of multiple identity dimensions.

The model describes three components of identity: (1) the core sense of self; (2) social

identities surrounding the core; and (3) context.   For ease in understanding the remainder

of this chapter, the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity is presented in Figure 5.1.

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CONTEXT
Family Background
Sociocultural Conditions
Current Experiences
Career Decisions and Life Planning

Race

Religion

Gender

Sexual Orientation

Social Class

CORE
Personal Attributes
Personal Characteristics
Personal Identity
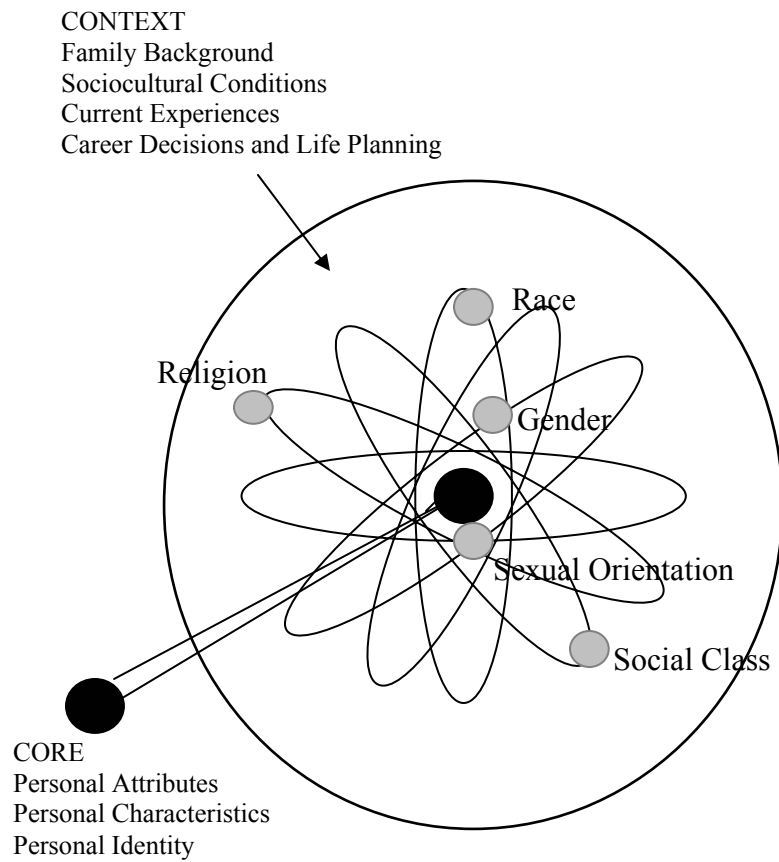
Figure 5.1 Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000)

This study relied on the MMDI in several respects. When designing the study, the model's portrayal of identity shaped the research questions upon which this study was based.   During data collection, the participants mapped their identities onto the MMDI as part of the second interview, and we based further discussion of their identity on the completed model. The model then guided data analysis to the extent that the general pattern of salience and interaction described in Chapter 4 was grounded in the MMDI's depiction of identity. In these respects, the MMDI proved very useful for exploring the relationships among the participants' multiple identities.

As a relatively new model, the MMDI's depiction of identity has not been widely tested. The results of this research offer a perspective on the applicability of the model when studied in the context of women college students who share another common dimension of identity, e.g. sexual orientation identity. In connection with the MMDI, one of the interesting findings of this study is the relationship between the participants' sexual orientation identity and the core. Whereas the MMDI describes sexual orientation as a social identity surrounding the core, three of the participants (Beth, KT, and Carmen) included sexual orientation either as an aspect of their core or touching their core. Almost all included sexual orientation as the dimension of identity closest to their core, or at least no less salient than any other dimension. For a few participants, the importance of sexual orientation identity influenced the saliency of other dimensions of identity, including race (Jordana) and religion (Carmen and KT).

The influence of context on the saliency of identity dimensions was fairly consistent with the MMDI's depiction of this relationship. Jones and McEwen (2000) explained: "dimensions become more or less salient as they interact with contextual

influences such as family background, sociocultural conditions, current life experiences, and career decisions and life planning" (p. 410). Indeed, the participants described contextual influences, such as discrimination, privilege, family, geographic location, participation in student organizations, courses in which they were enrolled, girlfriends, and potential employment, which influenced or had the potential to influence the saliency of identity dimensions. But despite acknowledging the potential for change in saliency, many of the participants described the relative salience of most dimensions of identity as fairly static, generally shifting only in response to large life events. For instance, several thought social class might become more salient once they graduated from college; or religion more or less salient depending on their future partner's religious beliefs. Most of the participants believed that regardless of the context, sexual orientation would remain most salient to their sense of self. In general, the participants did not consider the salience of their dimensions of identity to be continuously shifting as much as they recognized the potential for occasional shifts.

Further, the participants anticipated that dimensions of identity closest to or part of the core were less likely to shift than those less salient to their sense of self. Often, the nature of the shifts the participants anticipated were ones where dimensions of identity would move in closer to the core than their current position. For instance, some acknowledged that religion might become closer to the core as they acquired a better grasp on their religious beliefs, and social class might become more salient after graduating from college.

The participants' descriptions of the interactions among their identity dimensions slightly differed from the MMDI's depiction of interactions. The MMDI is based on an

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assumption of relationships among all dimensions of identity. Explaining their model,

Jones and McEwen (2000) stated: "The circles intersect to demonstrate that no one

dimension may be understood singularly; it can be understood only in relation to other

dimensions" (pp. 409-410).   The results of this study, however, indicated that except for

interactions with sexual orientation, there were only limited perceived instances of

interactions among dimensions of identity. With some exceptions, the participants

generally considered dimensions of their identity to be relatively independent of one

another.

Power and privilege were among the factors that contributed to some of the

participants' perceptions of their identity dimensions as distinct. For instance, one of the

white participants did not include race when she mapped her identity onto the MMDI,

and one of the middle class participants did not include social class. Identifying as white

or as middle class likely had some influence on how they understood their sexual

orientation or other dimensions of their identity. However, the benefits of their

privileged status, often invisible to those with privilege (McIntosh, 2001), prevented them

from recognizing these interactions. Some of the white participants' awareness of racism

more so than the implications of their own race were consistent with the tendency of

many white people not to perceive whiteness as a race (Frankenberg, 1993). Frankenberg

explained that white people "can see antiracist work as an act of compassion for an

'other,' an optional, extra project, but not intimately and organically linked to our own

lives" (p. 6). Likewise, many of the participants' perceptions that college students share

a social class, or that they will acquire a social class after college graduation, is consistent with a common lack of recognition of the implications of class status in daily life for those with and without class privilege (hooks, 2000).

Perceived interactions typically occurred only among dimensions of identity most salient to the sense of self. Dimensions of identity could be salient for reasons unrelated to sexual orientation (e.g., Judaism had always been salient to Beth) or directly related to sexual orientation (e.g., sexual orientation identity contributed to increased gender salience). In fact, the manner in which the MMDI is drawn depicts this pattern. The identity dimension circles are drawn such that interactions occur more frequently as dimensions become closer to the core. Dimensions salient to the participants' sense of self were often ones about which they had reflected and that shaped how they thought about themselves. It was important that these dimensions peacefully co-existed, if not intersected. Participants who experienced or anticipated experiencing interacting multiple dimensions close to their core described a resulting sense of strength. As KT, who wanted to be perceived as an upper-class, feminine, religious, lesbian, explained after completing the MMDI:

> I put religion the closest because that's one thing that's most important to me [after sexual orientation]. It's not in my core, but I'm searching for it right now. . . . And then I put my gender a little further away because it's important. . . . . And then my class is out there because I'm not really in a class right now. . . . I feel that when I have my job and my religion, that these will all come closer. And I'll just be a stronger person.

The MMDI suggests the potential not just for interactions among identity dimensions, but also the intersection of multiple dimensions of identity where women "simultaneously engage in more than one aspect" of their identity (Jones & McEwen, p.

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410). As the model is drawn, it implies that all dimensions have the potential to intersect as all identity dimension circles cross each other at multiple points. Yet, most of the participants were reluctant to speak in terms of intersections, but instead, were more satisfied with the peaceful co-existence of dimensions of identity typically considered as distinct from one another.

Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity and Constructivist-Developmental Theory

The MMDI clearly provides an effective model for understanding the construction of lesbian identity when multiple dimensions of identity are considered. So, too, constructivist-developmental theory offers a structural explanation of how the content of lesbian identity is constructed.   Thus, merging the MMDI's contextually-based depiction of multidimensional identity with constructivist-developmental theory provides a more holistic understanding of lesbian identity construction. Indeed, the results of this study suggest that development toward self-authorship not only shapes development along individual dimensions of identity but also affects the negotiation of multiple dimensions of identity. More specifically, the results suggest that meaning-making structures act as a filter that determines how contextual influences shape the content of lesbian identity considered in relation with other dimensions of identity. The relationship between these three components of identity is illustrated in Figure 5.2.

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┌──────────────┐        ┌──────────────┐        ┌──────────────┐
│              │        │ MEANING-     │        │ CONTENT OF   │
│   CONTEXT    │ ─────▶ │ MAKING       │ ─────▶ │ LESBIAN      │
│              │        │ STRUCTURE    │        │ IDENTITY     │
└──────────────┘        └──────────────┘        └──────────────┘
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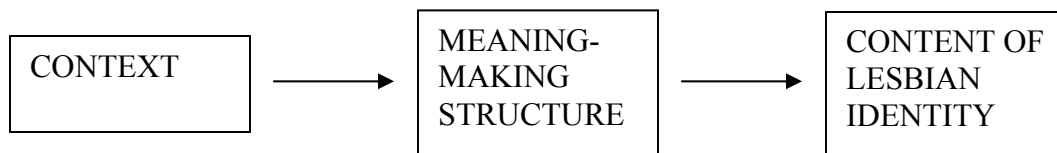
Figure 5.2 Meaning-making structures as a filter between context and content

The inclusion of meaning-making structures into the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity is illustrated in Figures 5.3 and 5.4. As an initial matter, the MMDI is drawn such that it portrays sexual orientation identity and gender as most salient, since that is how many of the participants described their identity. The salience of the other dimensions of identity do not represent any one particular person, but are merely illustrative of one possible construction of identity. The two models illustrate different meaning-making structures. Figure 5.3 depicts external, or third-order, meaning making (or "formulaic" Baxter Magolda (2001)). Figure 5.4 represents internal, or fourth-order, meaning making (or "foundational" Baxter Magolda (2001)).

Each model depicts the interaction between the context, meaning-making structures, and content of identity. The slice drawn into the MMDI represents the meaning-making structure. It demonstrates that the meaning-making structure acts as a filter between the contextual influences and the content of lesbian identity. A smaller, simple filter allows context to have a significant influence on the content of identity. As the filter becomes more complex, context has less influence. Therefore, the meaning-making structure for a person at the third order is drawn more simply than for a person at the fourth order. Because context cannot be separated from content, the filter would never be so complex that context is precluded from influencing identity construction. The structure points toward sexual orientation because this depiction of the MMDI was developed based on narratives on the construction of lesbian identity. In the model depicting fourth order meaning-making, some of the other dimensions of identity are a bit closer to the core than in the model depicting the third order. This movement is consistent with the general pattern that emerged from the narratives.

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Third-order, "formulaic,"
meaning-making. A simple filter
enables contextual influences to
greatly influence the content of
identity.

Race

Religion

Gender

Sexual Orientation

Social Class
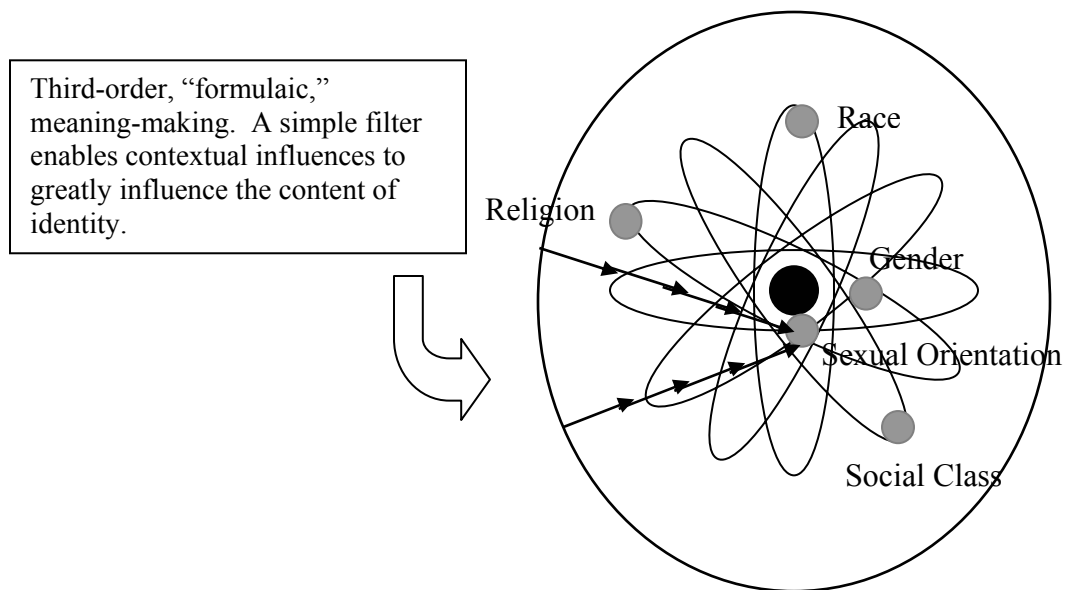
Figure 5.3 Third-order meaning making and the Model of Multiple Dimensions
of Identity

Fourth-order, "foundational," meaning making. A complex filter contributes to contextual influences having less of a direct effect on the content of identity.

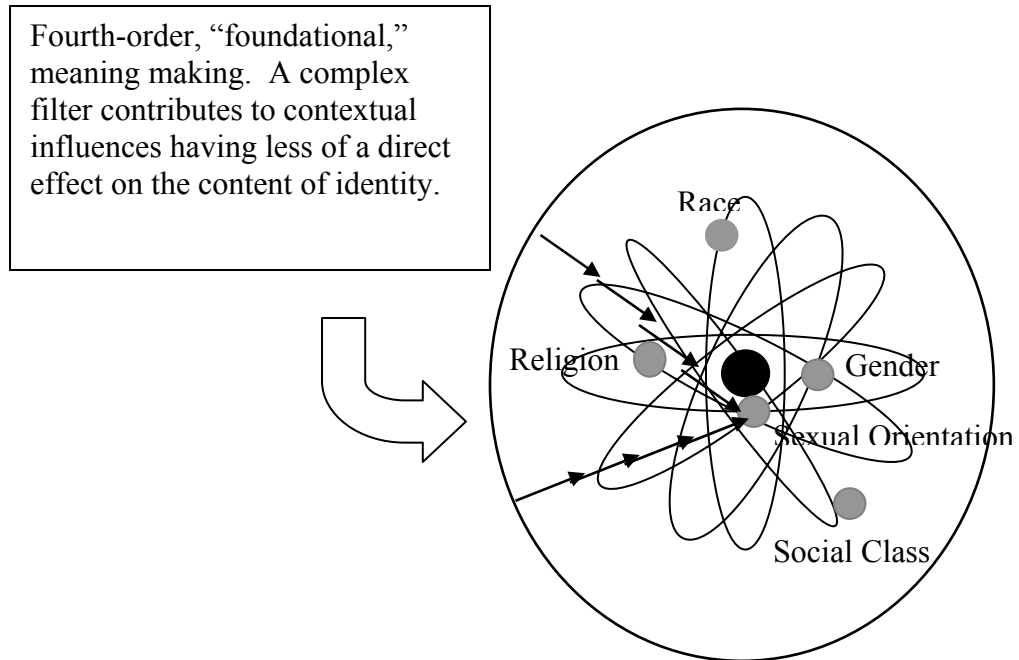Race

Religion

Gender

Sexual Orientation

Social Class

Figure 5.4 Fourth-order meaning making and the Model of Multiple Dimensions of
Identity

For instance, combining the MMDI with constructivist-developmental theory offers an explanation for the influence of context on the participants' perceptions of identity dimensions as distinct. The perception of identity dimensions as distinct is content. When the meaning-making structure acting as a filter was simple (third-order meaning-making) and the participants therefore relied on external contextual influences and unquestioned authority for the meaning they made of identity dimensions, they sometimes understood certain dimensions to be in conflict with one another. For example, KT and Carmen, who defined their identities through social norms and stereotypes, understood their religious and sexual orientation identities to be in conflict. Because they made meaning of their identity through relationships with others and had no consistent internal system for negotiating conflicts among external sources through which they had relationships, they compartmentalized these conflicting dimensions of their identity. In fact, both expressed a desire to integrate their sexual orientation and religion, but also decided to put religion on "the backburner" or in "the closet" until figuring out `whether integration was possible. Thus, third-order meaning-making contributed to KT and Carmen allowing contextual influences, especially family and friends, to cause them to construct the content of their sexual orientation identity as precluding religion, and the content of their religious identity as precluding homosexuality.

In fact, the discrepancy between some of the participants' perceptions of their dimensions of identity as independent of one another and the stories they told where dimensions interacted might be explained through this relationship between structure, context, and content. The interactions that the participants tended not to acknowledge, but were apparent in the stories they told, were often associated with conflicts between

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their sexual orientation and contextual influences caused by their religion, race, or culture. Difficulties recognizing these relationships could be attributed to third-order meaning making that does not allow for negotiations among conflicting interpersonal relationships. Rather then seeing a relationship between their sexual orientation and their race, culture, or religion, they compartmentalized these dimensions of their identity. Because they defined their identity in terms of the contextual influences, they did not consider the content of identity dimensions to include aspects of other dimensions perceived as conflicting.

Movement toward an internally generated identity through fourth-order meaning making allowed some participants to consider the content of identity dimensions as integrated, or at least in peaceful co-existence. Self-authoring participants internally defined dimensions of their identity. Critically examining multiple perspectives and authoring their own identities without the need to fit in with others, they understood identity dimensions such that they were less likely to conflict with one another. Or, if conflicts existed as a result of contextual influences, they were able to negotiate the conflicts and integrate (even if that means peacefully co-exist) identity dimensions. Thus, their structural complexity caused contextual influences to be only a consideration in the content of the perception of their identity, but the content is not determined by the context.

Lesbian Identity Development as a Facilitator of Cognitive Complexity

At the same time that the findings suggested that cognitive complexity is an integral component of the construction of lesbian identity, as well as the negotiation of

multiple identities, they also suggested that lesbian identity development might have some influence on the development of cognitive complexity. One of the striking aspects of the findings is the complexity with which several of the participants, some only first and second-year students, discussed their identities. Whether discussing "false exoticness as a product of homophobia in the general consciousness," rejecting the construct of normal, or adopting descriptive rather than concrete identity labels, some participants were challenging external sources of authority, critically examining multiple perspectives, and developing their own understanding of their identity. This fourth-order meaning-making and transitions toward the fourth order are exceptional for college students, especially young students. The findings from this study therefore point to the importance of considering theories of student development in conjunction with one another.

Specifically, it is reasonable to speculate that identifying as a lesbian, and thus outside of what is often considered normative expectations, might have contributed to the complexity with which some of these participants constructed their identity. Lesbian college students who make meaning at the third order are likely "in over their heads" as they exit heterosexual identity and perhaps face conflicting dimensions of their identity. This predicament raises the possibility of whether the sexual orientation identity development process causes these students to more rapidly develop increasingly complex ways of making meaning than some of their heterosexual peers.

Both Kegan (1982) and Fassinger (1998) suggested the possibility of increased cognitive complexity as a result of non-normative sexual orientation identity. Kegan observed that with support from those with whom we have significant relationships, the

"riotous" experience of difference and possible disapproval might be the impetus to facilitate development. Fassinger asked how "personal awareness and acceptance of a stigmatized identity" might affect "cognitive shifts from dualistic through multiplistic to relativistic points of view?" (p. 20). She then stated:

> Negotiating a new identity and lifestyle that are often at odds with the larger community [is a] crash course in how relative everything is. . . . Learning that authority might be wrong -- parents, teachers, and clergy-- leads to an increasing degree of reliance on oneself and one's own needs. (p. 20)

In fact, several participants encountered contradictions between external sources of authority and their evolving self-perceptions; they were faced head-on with the inadequacy of unquestioned authority and fitting into external expectations.

The participants' growing recognition of ambiguity and multiple viewpoints is consistent with their developing ability to live biculturally with heterosexual and lesbian experiences (Brown, 1989). Brown explained that the condition of living biculturally:

> may create different ways of knowing and understanding oneself and one's reality. A healthy resolution of such conflicts of identity is one that must eschew either/or perspectives on who one is and embrace what is 'other' within oneself. Such a successful resolution of a bicultural identity may create a propensity to view things on a continua rather than in a polarized fashion. Being able to operate within grey areas and on middle grounds and balancing the demands of two divergent groups that are now internalized self-representations are characteristic of the experience of being gay or lesbian. (pp. 449-450)

The challenges associated with living biculturally might cause lesbian college students to develop more complex ways of making meaning.

Another possible indicator of the participants' developing cognitive complexity is their growing open-mindedness about people different from themselves. The findings indicated that at the same time the participants worked hard to understand their own sexual orientation identity, they also grew more compassionate and open-minded about

people who were different from what is considered the norm and who were marginalized

for being different.   This finding is consistent with Parks Daloz, Keen, Keen, and Daloz

Parks's (1996) discussion of marginality in the context of their study of people whose

lives are committed to the common good. Parks Daloz et al. observed:

> Even when it carries a price, marginality can also bear certain gifts: greater self-knowledge, greater awareness of others, and a kind of comfort for life on the edge. The central gift of marginality, however, is its power to promote both empathy with the other and a critical perspective on one's own tribe. (p. 76)

While not necessarily using language specific to cognitive development, Parks Daloz et

al. observed that life on the margins contributes to the ability to consider multiple

perspectives and therefore gain sensitivity toward differences. They noted: "Marginality

makes it possible to hold several different perspectives and so gain a more complex and

sensitive way of seeing, unavailable to those with only one point of view" (p. 76).   This

observation is consistent with literature that suggests that exposure to different

worldviews, including recognition of their own differences, may lead to greater cognitive

complexity (King & Shuford, 1996).   It is therefore possible that the transitions toward

self-authorship apparent in several of the participants' narratives might be attributable to

their early experience with difference as a lesbian.   Thus, it appears that not only do

meaning-making structures influence the content of identity, but content of identity also

influences meaning-making structures. Figure 5.4 illustrates this relationship among

context, meaning-making structures, and the content of lesbian identity.

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│             │          │ MEANING-    │          │ CONTENT OF  │
│  CONTEXT    │ ───────▶ │ MAKING      │ ───────▶ │ LESBIAN     │
│             │          │ STRUCTURE   │ ◀─────── │ IDENTITY    │
└─────────────┘          └─────────────┘          └─────────────┘
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Figure 5.4 Relationship among context, meaning-making structures, and the content
of lesbian identity

Queer Theory as a Conduit to Explorations of Meaning-Making Structures

When designing the study, I had anticipated that queer theory would allow me to explore more deeply the fluidity of identity, especially as a product of intersections of other dimensions of identity with sexual orientation. Instead, I found that considering certain aspects of sexual orientation identity from a queer theoretical perspective made especially apparent the role of meaning-making structures in the construction of identity. Specifically, queer theoretical principles caused me to hone in on the various ways that the participants constructed "normal" in relation to their identity, as well as their reliance on and rejection of identity labels. Focusing on these issues foregrounded how the participants' identity constructions were intertwined with external and internal meaning-making structures.

What is Normal?

Queer theory challenges assumptions of normal and deviancy with regard to sexuality and gender (Tierney & Dilley, 1998). "Proponents of normalcy and deviance have accepted a sexual binary -- heterosexual-homosexual -- that privilege some and silences others" (Tierney & Dilley, p. 65).   As Britzman (1997) explained:

> When it comes to questions of desire, of love, and of affectivity, identity is quite capable of surprising itself: of creating forms of sociality, politics, and identifications that untie the self from the dominant discourses of biology, of nature, and normality. The capacity and the labor of untying the self from the normality in order to be something more than what the order of things predicts is . . . presently termed 'queer theory.' (p. 185)

The participants' struggles with normal as defined by the dominant discourse permeated

their identity construction stories. Examining how they wrestled, or chose not to wrestle, with what it means to be normal provides a passageway for exploring the role of meaning-making structures in the construction of identity.

Several of the participants were torn between the dominant understanding of normal and their own contradictory belief that they were normal. Motivated by a desire to fit in, few were able to wholly resist the dominant understanding of normal. And fewer defined their own normal or rejected normal as a construct. For instance, even Leah, who appeared to author her own identity, qualified her understanding of normal by defining herself as "Normal within this minority, but still normal." Carmen's tactic of initially passing as straight before coming out as gay to people so that people think of her as normal, coincides with Warner's (1999) observation that throughout history, including much of the present way of thinking, "gays and lesbians were always tempted to believe that the way to overcome stigma was to win acceptance by the dominant culture, rather than to change the self-understanding of that culture" (p. 50). Summarizing the dominant way of thinking, Warner stated: "To have dignity, gay people must be seen as normal" (p. 52). But whether normal is self- or other-defined is a product of the complexity of the meaning-making structure utilized to construct identity.

In fact, Warner then proceeded to critique the desire for normalcy, questioning the source of the meaning of normalcy, typically defined as "the average of a large population" (p. 58). Warner explained:

> Just so, normal and pathological are not the only options. One of the reasons why so many people have started using the word 'queer' is that it is a way of saying 'We're not pathological, but don't think for that reason we want to be normal.' People who are defined by a variant set of norms commit a kind of social suicide

when they begin to measure the worth of their relations and their way of life by the yardstick of normalcy. The history of the [gay and lesbian] movement should have taught us to ask: whose norm? (p. 59)

Interestingly, Jordana, who came to the study with no prior knowledge of queer theory, often spoke from this queer theoretical perspective, directly challenging normal as a construct, as well as deviancy (or at least, what it means to be a "freak"). Because of her fetish that she desperately wanted to go away, Jordana felt so abnormal as defined by the dominant discourse that she immersed herself in learning about variations in sexuality, as well as gender. Again, Jordana's approach to learning about sexual variations and her new understanding of normal were consistent with Warner's critique of normalcy:

When you interact with people in queer culture . . . you begin to recognize how stultifying the faith in the norm can be. You learn that the people who look most different from you . . . [are] the people from whom you have the most to learn. Your lot is cast with them, and you begin to recognize that there are other worlds of interaction . . . (pp. 70-71)

Still, this complex understanding of normalcy and identity, which required fourth-order meaning making, was uncharted territory for Jordana. She longed for the safety of fitting in with what she perceived as societal definitions of normal. Wrestling with these concepts, though, illustrated the transition she was making toward self-authorship.

In addition to Jordana's foray into queer perspectives, the participants' challenges to gender normalcy came closest to coinciding with queer perspectives on identity. Although unable to escape the binary of masculine and feminine, many of the participants found the categories masculine and feminine insufficient to capture how they understood their gender, challenging the causal relationship between biological sex and gender. The close relationship and interactions between sexual orientation and gender identity

matched the queer notion of the "collapsing of gender and sexuality" (Britzman, 1997, p. 188). Discussing the relationship between sexual orientation and gender, Weeks (1986) explained:

> Gender, the social condition of being male or female, and sexuality, the cultural way of living out our bodily pleasures and desires, have become inextricably linked, with the result that crossing the boundary between proper masculine or feminine behavior (that is, what is culturally defined as appropriate) sometimes seems the ultimate transgression. (p. 45)

As a result of their sexual orientation, several of the participants had encountered criticism, questioning, and stereotypes about their gender identity. Aware that the perceptions of their identity did not meet external expectations of "normal" gender roles, many challenged or were on the threshold of challenging these gender expectations created through the dominant discourse. Differences in the participants' awareness that external sources created gender expectations, as well as their ability to resolve conflicts between external and internal gender expectations, were related to the complexity of the structures through which they made meaning.

<u>Identity Categories and Language</u>

Considering the participants' perceptions of their sexual orientation identity from the perspective of queer theoretical notions about the insufficiency of identity categories also highlighted the role of meaning-making structures as part of identity construction. Queer theory supposes that identity fluidity and performance diminishes the meaningfulness of identity categories (e.g., Butler, 1991). Yet many of the participants were searching for or clinging to categories to help make meaning of their sexual orientation identity. Carmen struggled to decide whether she was straight, lesbian, or bisexual; Jordana tried to determine whether she was bisexual, lesbian, or lesbian with a

bisexual fetish. Both needed an existing label, or a combination of existing labels, to understand their sexual orientation. Such reliance on identity categories is reflective of identity defined to some extent through external perspectives.

It appears that identity labels became less important as participants authored their own lives. In fact, it seems that self-authorship allowed participants to realize the control that language had on their sense of self and to reclaim language as their own. Leah, the participant perhaps most comfortable and appreciative of a self-authored sexual orientation identity, claimed, to the extent she was able, control of language. Aware that "lesbian" was often defined as unnatural and with fixed characteristics, Leah adopted the term queer to describe her identity. The term queer provided her with more freedom to define her own identity rather than having it constructed for her by societal definitions of "lesbian." Defined as a "lesbian," Leah was on the powerless side of the heterosexual-homosexual binary shaped by heteronormativity (Tierney & Dilley, 1998).

Leah's realization of the need to make her own claim on the meaning of the language that she uses to identify herself is consistent with Foucault's (1978) notion of reverse discourse. Reverse discourse starts with the premise that the meaning of sexuality is created through discourse and perpetuated through power. Resistance is the corollary to power, and through resistance, the meaning of homosexuality can be transformed and inscribed with a positive meaning. Discussing the concept of reverse discourse, Butler (1997) explained:

> It remains politically necessary to lay claim to 'women,' 'queer,' 'gay,' and 'lesbian,' precisely because of the way these terms, as it were, lay their claim on us prior to our full-knowing. Laying claim to such terms in reverse will be necessary to refute homophobic deployments of the terms in law, public policy, on the street, in 'private' life. (p. 15)

It is not only politically necessary to lay claim to these terms, but also personally

necessary. While not specifically discussing reverse discourse, Britzman (1997)

observed that gay and lesbian people must redefine "homosexuality" before they can put

themselves into that category. Redefining this term requires undoing the meaning created

by power structures, in particular by heteronormativity.   Resisting power structures and

claiming the meaning of language requires complex meaning-making capacity beyond

the development of most college students. Instead, most students construct their identity

through available language infused with meaning created through the dominant

discourse.

<div align="center">Implications for Practice and Future Research</div>

<div align="center">Implications for Practice</div>

Both the research process and the results of the study suggest several practical

implications for student affairs professionals, as well as faculty. Among the most

compelling stories that emerged from the findings was the distinctiveness of each of the

women's stories about the construction of her sexual orientation identity. While a few

patterns emerged across the narratives, each woman had her own story to tell and her own

journey to navigate.   The variation among the students' stories serves as a reminder of

the importance of treating each student as a unique individual. Indeed, the participants

commented that they wanted their individuality to be respected and not have assumptions

made about them.   To treat students as individuals, it is important to provide

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opportunities for them to discuss who they are and who they want to be, and that

educators listen. It was apparent through this study that when given the chance to talk,

students have much to say.

Indeed, among the implications that stand out is the importance of creating

contexts that enable dialogue and reflection with and among lesbian college students

about identity construction. The strong response to my request for study participants

indicated that students are interested in discussing their identities. The positive feedback

I received from the participants about their experiences with this study suggested that

having the opportunity to discuss issues pertinent to identity with an attentive listener is a

beneficial developmental experience. In fact, several participants indicated they would

like to continue talking about these issues. Many also mentioned their interest in talking

to the other women in the study and reading their narratives. They told me they thought

it would be interesting and helpful to hear about other people's experiences as a lesbian

and how they understand other aspects of their identity. The interest in the study and the

positive feedback from the participants indicates there is an unmet need for students to

have the opportunity to discuss their identities. It is therefore important that contexts be

created where students have the opportunity for reflection and dialogue.

Opportunities for reflection can and ought to occur in a variety of contexts in

order to meet the needs of a diverse group of lesbian students. Not all students are

interested in or comfortable participating in GLBT student organizations, and reflection

opportunities should therefore be varied and appropriate for a diverse student population.

Appropriate contexts might include academic courses in which issues related to self-

understanding are included as part of the curriculum or pedagogical approach, as well as

co-curricular opportunities, such as community service and multicultural programming. In fact, opportunities for reflection occur wherever colleges have structural ties with students, such as Greek life, residence life, athletics, and other student organizations.

While I was fortunate that many people responded to my call for participants, few women of color volunteered to participate. The difficulty I encountered identifying women of color to participate has important implications for practice. While some of my difficulty might have been attributed to the fact that I am a white researcher, some might have been attributable to issues specific to particular races and cultures, as well as the campus environment. Residence hall directors struggled to suggest potential participants of color. Campus GLBT student organizations had few members who were people of color. In fact, a campus organization specifically for GLBT people of color had no undergraduate lesbian members. Directors of student services offices that served people of color were unable to recommend students to contact. Even an African American lesbian student affairs professional who worked with GLBT students had no suggestions as to whom I might contact, telling me instead that it would be challenging to find anyone. She suggested that I hang flyers on city busses and in gay bars. Looking for participants of color on busses and in bars instead of on campus was a poignant reminder of the absence of appropriate space for lesbians of color on campus. While student affairs professionals cannot necessarily change cultural attitudes, there is room to more effectively reach out to individual students with the purpose of understanding how to most effectively serve and educate them.

The findings, which pointed to a relationship between self-authorship and lesbian identity construction, also reiterate the importance of creating contexts in higher

education that foster self-authorship. The students clearly wanted to define their identities to coincide with the people they aspired to be, and expressed frustration when their self-perceptions did not match perceived expectations. Enabling these students to author their lives would contribute to their ability to internally construct their sexual orientation identity and integrate other dimensions of their identity. Much has been written about the intentional and supportive environments that educators need to create to help students become self-authoring individuals (e.g., Baxter Magolda, 1999; 2001). Kegan (1994) conceptualized this process as building a "consciousness bridge" over which educators and students travel together. Realizing the important role of self-authorship in the construction of sexual orientation identity and negotiation of multiple identities adds further support for building these bridges.

While self-authorship could be developed in any context, including in the curriculum and co-curriculum (Baxter Magolda, 2001), specific interventions might be especially appropriate in the context of sexual orientation identity construction. For instance, in the classroom, course material should be included that is representative of diversity within and among sexual orientations that allow students to reflect on their own life experiences. Students can engage in self-exploration through journal writing and "raising and answering their own questions" (Howard-Hamilton, 2000, p. 51). While most courses can include such diverse perspectives, service-learning courses provide particularly appropriate context for exploring differences among dimensions of identity and reflecting on one's own identity (Jones & Hill, 2001; Jones, 2002). In the co-curriculum, opportunities could be provided for supervised discussion among peers where lesbian students of different meaning-making capacities interact. Recognizing

that lesbian identity development might foster cognitive capacity, Fassinger (1998)

suggested that such interactions be targeted toward "strengthening and building upon

their cognitive strengths, for example, support groups that focus on cognitive coping

strategies" (p. 21).

Regardless of whether contexts are created in the curriculum or co-curriculum, it

is important that they be intentionally designed to incorporate Baxter Magolda's (1999)

three principles for educational practices that foster self-authorship. These principles

include: (1) validating learners as knowers; (2) situating learning in learner's experience;

and (3) defining learning as mutually constructing meaning. Through these principles,

Kegan's consciousness bridge is anchored with "equal respect for both ends, creating a

firm foundation on both sides of the chasm students will traverse" (Kegan, 1994, p. 278).

The results of this study also suggest the importance of providing role models for

lesbian college students. Several of the participants acknowledged that most of the

lesbians they knew were college students, and they had little understanding of the

possibilities for adult life as a lesbian. Several discussed the importance of seeing

examples of lesbians who do not fit stereotypes. They mentioned the importance of

seeing lesbians in long-term relationships, lesbians who practiced religion, and especially

lesbians in professional careers. This suggests the importance of having visible lesbian

faculty and staff on college campuses. Because many students are not involved in campus

GLBT organizations, these role models must be available not just in settings specifically

related to GLBT issues. It is therefore important that colleges and universities provide

supportive environments that facilitate the ease with which faculty and staff are able to be

open about their sexual orientation. It also speaks to the importance of campus programming where students can interact with lesbians with mature life experiences.

Further, the results of this study suggest that student affairs educators should be open to understanding and framing non-heterosexual identity as queer rather than gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. It was apparent through the study that the participants ascribed very different meanings to the term "lesbian" and that the term was sometimes insufficient for describing how they understood their sexual orientation identity. Conceptualizing identity as queer rather than lesbian might reduce the tendency to assume similarities among students' identities that do not exist and might provide a framework that allows students increased control over the meaning associated with their identity.

<u>Implications for Future Research</u>

This study brings attention to the importance of further research on lesbian identity considered from the perspective of multidimensional identities. Additional research should consider different theoretical and methodological approaches than the ones utilized in this study, as well as build on the results of this study.

Theoretically, the use of different methodological theoretical frameworks would bring to light perspectives from the data different from what constructivism revealed. For instance, a critical theoretical perspective would uncover how power structures, such as racism, heterosexism, classism, and sexism, affect how the participants make meaning of their identity; and a feminist theoretical perspective would closely examine issues of gender. Methodologically, while I am partial to narrative inquiry for studies of identity, other methodological approaches such as case study, grounded theory, or discourse

analysis would consider the data from a different perspective. For instance, case study might consider just a few participants in much greater detail or even a particular set of students as a whole. The analytic approach of grounded theory would generate theory about the interactions among multiple dimensions of identity that might build on existing theories of lesbian identity development and multiple identity negotiations. By closely analyzing the text of the participants' speech, discourse analysis would critically examine how language structures identity.

Further research might also consider using different sampling approaches and research sites. While this study utilized a relatively diverse sample along several identity dimensions, additional research might use a sample of students who have another dimension of identity in common. For example, research could be conducted that considers the multiple dimensions of identity for African American lesbians, Jewish lesbians, or upper-class lesbians. Research of this nature might elucidate differences within dimensions of identity that contribute to variations in interactions with sexual orientation identity. Research could also consider dimensions of identity I did not analyze, such as disability and age. Given the importance of context in the construction of identity, it is important to conduct research similar to this study at a variety of institution types and geographical regions. For instance, the salience of identity dimensions, as well as the nature of interactions, might differ depending on whether the school is a religious institution, an HBCU, a women's college, or a community college; it might also differ depending on whether it is located in a rural or metropolitan setting.

Additional research is important also to build on the results of this study. Research should be conducted that simultaneously considers multiple theories of student

development. The results of this study especially call attention to the need for further research that examines the interplay between self-authorship and the construction of identity, in particular the negotiation of multiple dimensions of identity. It is important to continue research that explores identity construction from the perspective of meaning-making structures rather than only content. The results of this study suggest the importance of additional research that explores in more depth the relationship between identity development and the development of cognitive complexity. Also, this study represented a snapshot of the participants at one point of time in their lives. Longitudinal research that follows their on-going constructions of identity would highlight evolutions in identity development and meaning-making complexity. As part of this longitudinal work, research could include some formal assessments of stages of lesbian identity development, provided that the limitations of stage theories are taken into consideration.

It is also important that additional research be conducted that more deeply probes the dimensions of identity considered in this study. For instance, religion was a complex construct in this study, considered by the participants as spirituality, faith, and worshipping. Additional research could focus greater attention on the relationship between lesbian identity and these variations within the construct of religion. Likewise, the relationship between social class and lesbian identity could be explored in more depth, exploring, for instance, how cultural capital shapes lesbian identity. While I opted to focus the greatest attention on lesbian identity, much room exists for research that analyzes at great length multiple dimensions.

Limitations and Strengths of the Study

Limitations of the Study

The results of this study must be considered in relationship to several limitations related to the study design. A few limitations are connected to sampling considerations. The results of this study indicated that sexual orientation was typically the most salient dimension of identity and one they were comfortable discussing with me. However, sexual orientation might be a more salient and comfortable dimension of identity for women who volunteered to participate in this study than for those who did not volunteer. In fact, my sampling strategies might not have reached some of the women who are not comfortable with their sexual orientation. The discomfort that some women might experience with their sexual orientation could be a product not only of developmental considerations, but also dimensions of identity such as race, religion, and social class. Understanding these differences would have added to the richness to the study.

In some respects, the diversity of the sample was also a limitation. In terms of dimensions of identity represented, the diverse group of participants provided breadth to this study at the expense of depth. Since there were so few participants representing any one aspect of an identity dimension, other than sexual orientation, I was not able to explore differences within particular identity dimensions. In particular, a limitation of this study was the difficulty I experienced identifying participants of color to participate, especially African American women. Also, most of the participants identified as middle class, preventing me from probing differences within social class identity. By not always thoroughly probing differences within dimensions of identity, I did not completely escape binaries or essentialism.

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Another limitation related to sampling is the language I used when describing the study to potential participants. I intentionally chose to use the term "lesbian" in the title of the study as well as in my letters of invitation. Even though I explained that I intended "lesbian" to be defined broadly, the use of this language might not have attracted women who identify using different language. Had I instead used the term "queer," the study might have attracted women who were less bound by identity categories and more focused on identity fluidity. I chose to use "lesbian" out of concern that queer would allow for such a wide range of identities that the results would be too divergent to build on theories of lesbian identity in the literature on college student development.

The research site also presents a limitation to the study. All of the participants attended a large, co-educational, predominantly white, midwestern research university. Knowing that context influences identity, the results might have been different had the sample included participants from a variety of institution types in different geographical regions. Differences in campus culture might influence the saliency and interactions of dimensions of identity.

Despite the comfortable and trusting relationships that developed between the participants and me, the reality is that I met with the participants on only a few occasions. There were, therefore, limits to how much the participants shared with me, especially on personal and sensitive topics. The participants appeared to become increasingly comfortable with each interview, and I suspect they might have shared even more had the study design included additional interviews and opportunities for time together.

<u>Strengths of the Study</u>

Reflecting on the research process, I believe there were several strengths to the study. One of the greatest strengths was the participants. Whether the questions I asked related to issues about which they had given much previous thought, or whether the issues were unfamiliar to them, all of the participants thoughtfully engaged in this study, took risks, and put much thought into their interview responses. It was their willingness to give so much of themselves that allowed such rich data to emerge.

The participants' dedication to this study also allowed me to develop comfortable, trusting relationships with them. While I met with the participants on only a few occasions, it was my priority to help them feel at ease throughout the process and to treat them with the respect they deserved at all times. Based on the personality of each participant, I interacted and communicated with her in what I thought would be the most appropriate way. As a result of their commitment to this research, they were receptive to relationship building. As the interviews progressed, we became increasingly relaxed with one another and lengthy conversations naturally flowed. I therefore feel confident that the participants were forthcoming during the interviews, even if all details were not always shared, as well as during member checking. Also very important to me, I believe these relationships allowed the participants to enjoy the research process and learn more about themselves as a result of having experienced it.

The use of narrative inquiry as the methodology for this study was another strength. Consistent with this methodology, I shaped broad, open-ended questions that often allowed the participants to guide the nature of the topics discussed during the interviews. These broad questions allowed the participants to discuss their own

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perceptions of their identity. Their detailed stories were filled with rich descriptions that allowed me to understand the meaning they made of various dimensions and dynamics of their identity. The stories revealed aspects of meaning-making that would not be apparent in shorter, guided responses. Also consistent with narrative inquiry, I was able to analyze and present the participants' stories in a manner that offered rich descriptions of their identities.

Another strength of this study was the relatively diverse mix of women who participated. The sample was diverse in terms of racial, gender, and religious identities, but the participants were also at varying stages of comfort with their sexual orientation and the extent to which they had come out to others. There was a mix of students involved in campus GLBT organizations and those with no interest or involvement in participating. There was also much variation among the participants as to their prior experience discussing identity identity-based issues. While certainly not representative of all lesbian college students, the sample represents a fairly good cross-section.

The extent of member checking involved in this study was also a strength. I drafted for each of the participants an essay analyzing the stories they told in the first two interviews. The participants reviewed these essays and provided me with feedback during the third interview. Each participant also reviewed the narrative I constructed about her and provided feedback. I therefore feel comfortable that the individual narratives appropriately described the participants' perceptions of their identity. The third interview also served as a form of member checking. By asking the participants to discuss their

reactions to some of the basic tenets of queer theory, I feel very comfortable that I applied queer theory in an appropriate manner that helps illuminate the participants' perceptions of their identity.

Returning to Researcher Subjectivity

My personal subjectivity was both a strength and limitation of the research. As discussed in Chapter 3, my identity shaped all aspects of the research process, from the design of the study to data analysis and the presentation of the findings. One way in which I intentionally introduced my identity into the study was through the disclosure of my sexual orientation to the participants at the outset of the study. While I can only speculate on how disclosing that I identified as lesbian influenced the study, I surmise that doing so contributed to some of the trust and comfort that developed between the participants and me. A few of the participants asked to hear more about my identity story during the course of the interviews; some also sought my perspective on issues related to their sexual orientation. By contributing to our comfortable relationship, disclosure of my sexual orientation identity was a strength of the study.

However, I also recognize that my sexual orientation identity was not the same as the sexual orientation identity of each of the participants. The fluidity and social construction of sexual orientation, and perhaps the multiple dimensions of our identities, contributed to differences in how we understood the meaning of our sexual orientation identities. These differences limited how the participants and I understood one another and likely caused us to make false assumptions about one another's identity grounded in our own unique experiences. In that regard, my identity was also a limitation of the study.

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Summary

The results of this study suggest that the construction of lesbian identity, considered in relationship with other dimensions of identity, depends on a relationship between meaning-making structures, contextual influences, and the content of identity. Meaning-making structures that emerged from the participants' narratives ranged from: (1) unexamined satisfaction with external meaning making; and (2) gradual dissatisfaction with insufficient external definitions; to (3) tentative internal meaning making with the possibility of retreat; and (4) appreciation for an internally defined identity. Whether meaning was constructed through external expectations or an internally generated sense of self determined how context influenced the content of lesbian identity, including the nature of interactions with other dimensions of identity. Thus, meaning-making structures serve as a filter between context and content. The results also suggest that the content of lesbian identity might contribute to development in the complexity of the participants' meaning-making capacity.

Regardless of whether identity was externally or internally constructed, the participants were most frequently aware of interactions between sexual orientation and gender. Interactions between these dimensions of identity were typically a result of sexual orientation identity contributing to a more complex understanding of gender. In particular, many of the participants challenged the assumption of a causal relationship between biological sex and gender identity. Interactions between sexual orientation and other dimensions of identity such as race, culture, religion, and social class greatly varied among the participants. The nature of these interactions can be portrayed in only a broad pattern that allows for variation. In general, this pattern describes the participants'

perceptions of the influence of their sexual orientation identity on the meaning they made of other dimensions of their identity, more so than perceptions of other dimensions influencing how they understood what it means to identify as a lesbian.

The relationship among diverse contextual influences and different and developing meaning-making capacities provides one explanation for the variations in lesbian college students' perceptions of their sexual orientation identity and the interactions between sexual orientation identity and other multiple dimensions of their identity. Understanding the nature of this relationship provides a basis for creating contexts conducive to fostering lesbian college students' capacity to author their identities. Appreciating the differences among lesbian college students' perceptions of their identity enables the creation of contexts mindful of students' individual journeys of on-going discovery and construction of sense of self.

Reflection and Appreciation

As this study reaches its conclusion, I'm left with two somewhat divergent, but necessarily intertwined, reactions. I have indelible memories of the ten distinctive women who graced this study. Ten spirited college students determined to construct their own individual identities in the best way they knew how. I also have much anticipation about the continued growth of identity development theory as applied to college students -- theory reflecting the immense complexity involved in developing one's sense of self. Through my inseparable affective and academic reactions to their stories, these ten students vividly impressed upon me the value of deeper teaching.

For all that these ten women taught me and for all they are able teach others, I thank them for the gift of their words and for allowing me to retell their words.

These words are dedicated to those who survived
because life is a wilderness and they were savage
because life is an awakening and they were alert
because life is a flowering and they blossomed
because life is a struggle and they struggled
because life is a gift and they were free to accept it (Klepfisz, 1989)

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APPENDIX A

LETTER OF INVITATION BASED ON RECOMMENDATION

November 2002

Dear (insert name of student):

I am writing to invite you to consider participating in a research project for my Ph.D dissertation. I'm interested in learning about the lives of lesbian college students. Rather than having you fill out a survey or answer a few short questions, I want to learn by listening to the stories that you tell about your lives. Your stories will be the focus of the research. I am interested in stories about who you are as a person, about sexual orientation, and about other aspects of yourself that might be important to who you are, such as your race, religion, or gender. Although I'm using the term "lesbian," please know that you are welcome to participate if you use a different label to describe your sexual orientation, as long as you are physically and emotionally attracted primarily to other women. _____ suggested that I contact you as he/she thought you would make a valuable contribution to this study.

Your involvement will include participating in three interviews with me, each approximately one hour. We'll do the interviews during fall and winter quarters. I hope that you will also review summaries of your interviews and help me think about what we're learning from the study. Doing so should take about three hours, and we'll do that during winter and spring quarters.

By participating in this study, you will have the opportunity to share with me, a non-judgmental listener, stories from your life. I hope you will find this to be a rewarding experience that allows you to better understand how the various parts of yourself come together to shape who you are as a person. Your participation will also help educators and counselors better understand important issues for lesbian college students. In addition to these benefits, you will also receive a bookstore gift certificate at the completion of the study as a small token of my appreciation.

I know that discussing your sexual orientation can be a very personal and sensitive subject. You only need to discuss with me topics that you are comfortable discussing. It is not my intention to force you to talk about anything that makes you uncomfortable. Also, please be assured that I will take great care to treat all information confidentially and that whenever I write or talk about this study, I will not use your name or describe you in a way that others can recognize you. Your participation is voluntary and you may discontinue at any time without penalty.

If you are interested in participating please complete and e-mail back to me the Interest Form included with this message (abes.1@osu.edu). I will review all of the Interest Forms and then select the participants so that there is a diverse group of women. I will contact you within a few weeks to let you know whether or not I selected you to participate.

If you have any questions, please e-mail or call me at home (262-0017). I have voice mail and am the only person with access to my messages. I am excited about this study and eager to get started, so I hope to hear from you soon. Thanks for your time!

Sincerely,

Elisa Abes   Susan R. Jones, Ph.D
Ph.D. Student   Assistant Professor
Educational Policy & Leadership   Educational Policy & Leadership

APPENDIX B

INTEREST FORM

YES, I am interested in participating in the research project exploring lesbian college students' sense of self being conducted by Elisa Abes.

Name_____

Local Address_____

E-mail Address_____

May I call you at home? _____ **If yes, telephone number**_____

May I leave a telephone message for you at home? _____

Year in school: (please circle or put an "X" to the <u>left</u>)   first-year   sophomore   junior   senior   other _____

Age _____

Major_____

What is your sexual orientation? _____

How would you describe your comfort level with your sexual orientation?
(please circle or put an "X" to the <u>left</u> of the number that best represents your comfort level; 1=uncomfortable, 10=comfortable)

uncomfortable   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10   comfortable

To whom have you disclosed your sexual orientation?
(please circle or put an "X" to the <u>left</u> of all that apply)

at least one parent (or other person who raised you)   at least one sibling   close friends

most friends   GLBT friends   heterosexual friends   heterosexual roommate

anyone and everyone

How do you describe the following aspects of your identity?

Race/Ethnicity_____
_____
Religion_____
_____
Gender_____
_____
Social Class_____

What GLBT/lesbian campus or community organizations, activities, or events are you or have you been involved with? How would you describe your level of involvement?
_____
_____
_____

APPENDIX C

LETTER OF INVITATION

The Dynamics of Multiple Dimensions of Identity for Lesbian College Students

I am a Ph.D student in the College of Education and am inviting you to consider participating in my dissertation research about the lives of lesbian college students. Rather than having you fill out a survey or answer a few short questions, I want to learn by listening to the stories that you tell about your lives. I am interested in stories about who you are as a person, about sexual orientation, and about other aspects of yourself that might be important to who you are, such as your race, religion, or gender. Although I'm using the term "lesbian," please know that you are welcome to participate if you use a different label to describe your sexual orientation, as long as you are physically and emotionally attracted primarily to other women.

Your involvement will include participating in three interviews with me, each approximately one hour. We'll do the interviews during fall and winter quarters. I hope that you will also review summaries of your interviews and help me think about what we're learning from the study. Doing so should take about three hours, and we'll do that during winter and spring quarters.

By participating in this study, you will have the opportunity to share your life stories with me, a non-judgmental listener. I hope you will find this to be a rewarding experience that allows you to better understand how the various parts of yourself come together to shape who you are as a person. Your participation will also help educators and counselors better understand important issues for lesbian college students. In addition to these benefits, you will also receive a bookstore gift certificate at the completion of the study as a small token of my appreciation.

I know that discussing your sexual orientation can be a very personal and sensitive subject. You need to discuss with me only topics that you are comfortable discussing. It is not my intention to force you to talk about anything that makes you uncomfortable. Also, please be assured that I will take great care to treat all information confidentially and that whenever I write or talk about this study, I will not use your name or describe you in a way that others can recognize you. Your participation is voluntary and you may discontinue at any time without penalty.

If you are interested in participating please e-mail me at <u>abes.1@osu.edu</u>, and I will then send you an interest form to fill-out. I'll review all of the interest forms and then identify the participants so that there is a diverse group of women. I will be back in touch once I have completed this process.

If you have any questions, please e-mail me. I am excited about this study and eager to get started, so I hope to hear from you soon. Thanks for your time!

Sincerely,

Elisa Abes   Susan R. Jones, Ph.D
Ph.D Student   Assistant Professor
Educational Policy & Leadership   Educational Policy & Leadership

LESBIANS OF COLOR INVITATION FLYER

AN INVITATION FOR UNDERGRADUATE LESBIANS OF COLOR
(Same-Gender-Loving Women of Color)

If you are interested in participating in a confidential research project being conducted by a Ph.D. student in the OSU College of Education that studies the relationship between sexual orientation and characteristics such as race, social class, gender, and religion, please contact studyofwomen@yahoo.com for more information.

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL -- FIRST INTERVIEW

As you know, what I am interested in learning about through this research are stories from your life. The interview questions are very open-ended and I want you to share with me only what you are comfortable sharing. It is not my intention to pressure you into telling me anything that you are not comfortable talking about. Please let me know if at any time during the interview you become uncomfortable, and we can stop the interview or change the nature of some of the questions so that you are less uncomfortable. Do you have any questions before we start?

(1) In the first question, I just want to start getting to know you better as a person, so thinking about your life in general, tell me about the people, or places, or situations, or experiences, etc. that have been most influential in shaping who you are as a person.

(2) As you know, a lot of what I am focusing on in this research is sexual orientation, can you talk to me about how your sexual orientation has been a part of your life.

(3) Can you tell me how your sexual orientation has shaped who you are as a person?

(4) Tell me about a time or times you felt you could be your "true self."
    *What is your true self?

(5) Tell me about a time or times when you felt you could *not* be your true self.

(6) Do you feel as if you have conveyed to me the most important stories about who you are as a person? If not, what other stories from your life should I know?

Note: If I sense during the interview that the participant is uncomfortable, I will check in with her to see if she is doing alright and ask whether or not she wants to continue.

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL -- SECOND INTERVIEW

(1) What was the experience of reading your transcript like for you?

(2) Was there anything that was triggered by reading the transcript, or any other additional thoughts that you've had since the first interview, that you'd like to add to what we discussed?

While we spent most of the time during the first interview talking about sexual orientation, I want to talk more during this interview about other aspects of who you are, such as your race, religion, social class, and gender -- some of which you talked about also during the first interview.

(3) During your first interview you talked some about your race/religion/gender/social class
●how would you characterize your _____?
●how important is your ____ to who you are as a person?
●are there times when it becomes more or less important to who you are?
●tell me about the relationship between your ___ and your sexual orientation

**Repeat for each identity dimension discussed during the first interview.

(4) You didn't talk much about your race/religion/gender/social class
●how would you characterize your ____ ?
●do you consider your ____ to be something that is important to who you are as a person?
●are there times when it becomes more or less important to who you are?
●tell me about the relationship between your ___ and your sexual orientation

**Repeat for each identity dimension not discussed during the first interview.

EXPLAIN MODEL OF MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF IDENTITY AND THEN ASK PARTICIPANT TO FILL IN THE MODEL AS IT BEST REPRESENTS HER TODAY. WHEN MODEL IS COMPLETE, ASK THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

(5) Tell me about how you filled in the model.
*How did you decide where to put each aspect of your identity?

(5a) Can you give me an example or tell me a story about what caused you to fill in the model the way that you did? Any other examples/stories?

(6) Do you consider the way that you filled in the model to be pretty constant or are there times when you might fill in the model differently?

(6a) Can you give me an example or tell me a story about times when you might fill in the model differently? Any other examples?

(7) Tell me about the relationship between your sexual orientation and the other aspects of who you are that are included on your model (race, religion, etc).

(7a) Can you give me an example or tell a story about the relationships that you just described? Any other examples/stories?
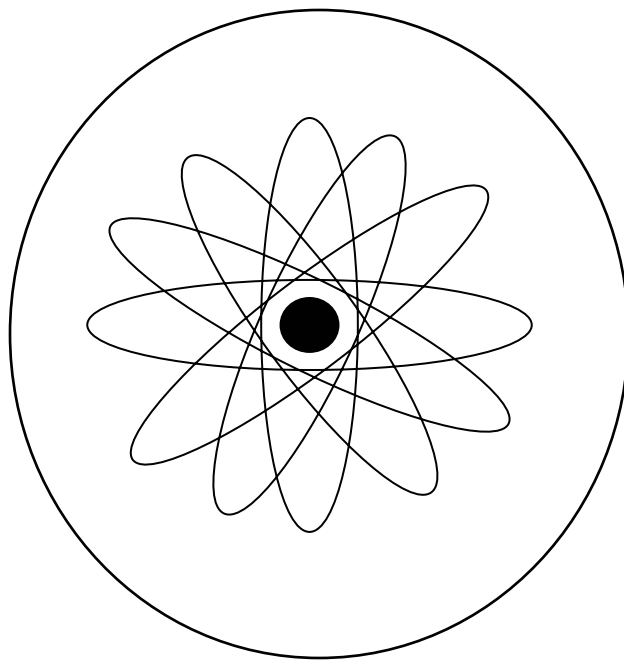
(8) Are there other ways that the different aspects of who you are relate to each other?

(8a) Can you give me an example or tell a story about the relationships that you just described? Others?

(9) What was the experience of filling in this model like for you?

APPENDIX G

MODEL OF MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF IDENTITY
COMPLETED DURING SECOND INTERVIEW

APPENDIX H

SAMPLE MEMBER CHECK ESSAY

Hi ___,

Thank you for agreeing to review a short summary based on the stories you told during your first two interviews. While I asked you very broad questions during the interview, I was carefully listening for stories and responses that addressed three specific research questions. What follows is a draft summary of how I understood your stories to address each of these research questions. The questions are in bold.

Please keep in mind that this is only a draft based on my interpretation of what you said. As you review this summary, please think about if there are any parts that you don't think I got quite right or things that you want to clarify or add. You know yourself much better than I do, so please be very honest with me about your reaction to what I wrote! I do not want to put words in your mouth or mischaracterize who you are as a person. We'll discuss your reaction to this summary during the third interview (and I'll also ask you a couple more questions). If you would like, don't hesitate also to e-mail me any reactions. I will use these summaries to help me develop larger patterns, similarities, and differences among all of the study participants; as well as to select parts of your story to tell in more depth.

You'll notice that I did not include in this summary a lot of the things that we talked about during the interview. One of my next steps will be reviewing everyone's transcripts again to look for other themes that don't directly relate to the research questions, but that I will also want to include in the final product. I will send you a summary of these other themes for you to comment on once I have completed that step.

As always, thank you for your time, assistance, and willingness to share so much of yourself with me! It has been a treat for me to spend the past few months with you.

<u>In what ways do lesbian college students describe and make meaning of their sexual orientation identity?</u>

Strength and confidence are the backbone of your story about what it means to be a lesbian. . . .

Do lesbian college students' multiple identity dimensions, such as race, social class, gender, and religion, influence how they describe and make meaning of their sexual orientation identity? If so, how?

It seems that the backbone of your story about the relationship between your sexual orientation and other dimensions of your identity is that your other dimensions of identity don't influence how you make meaning of being a lesbian, but instead, being a lesbian has influenced how you think about other dimensions of your identity. . . .

Which dimensions of identity are most salient for lesbian college students? In what `ways, if any, do dimensions of identity influence the salience of other dimensions?

Being a lesbian is at the core of who you are rather than being an aspect of your identity that surrounds your core. . . .

APPENDIX I

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL -- THIRD INTERVIEW

(1) Tell me about your reaction to the essay
•does it capture you?
•how do you feel about my interpretations?
•anything you want to add/clarify; anything I left out that you want included?

As I read the data, one of the ways I'm looking at it is through a queer theory perspective. A few of the principles of queer theory are:
(a) there are no identity categories (no lesbian, bisexual, straight) because the meaning of each category is different for different people and each person's meaning changes
(b) language constructs people's reality - the words we have to describe sexual orientation, gender determine how we understand our identities (lesbian, bisexual, straight, masculine, feminine, androgynous)
(c) questions what is meant by normal in terms of sexuality and gender
(d) people perform their identities and therefore identities change with every performance
(e) challenges the institutionalization of heterosexuality

I want to get your reaction to some of these ideas:

(2) Do you have any general reactions to any of the ideas that I just explained?

(3) You use the word ___ to describe your sexual orientation/gender.
•Why do you use that word/category?
•How did you learn what that word/category meant?
•To what extent does your understanding of the word influence how you think of yourself?
•Might there be a more appropriate way to describe yourself?
•How do you feel about being in a category?
•Have you heard of the word queer? What is your reaction to it?

(4) We've discussed normal. Or . . What does it mean for you to be normal? How do you know what it means to be normal? To what extent does being normal influence how you think about your sexual orientation and gender?

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APPENDIX J

<u>Statement of Informed Consent</u>

I agree to participate in the research project entitled The Dynamics of Multiple Dimensions of Identity for Lesbian College Students conducted by Elisa Abes, Ph.D student in the School of Educational Policy and Leadership, The Ohio State University. The purpose of the research is to study how lesbian college students' describe their sexual orientation, the relationship between their sexual orientation and their sense of self, and how other aspects of who they are, such as race, social class, gender, and religion, interact with their sexual orientation.

I understand that my participation in this project will involve three interviews, each lasting approximately one hour. The interviews will be recorded on audiotape and transcribed verbatim. I understand that I will also be asked to review a summary of the interviews and help think about what can be learned from them.

I am aware that some people are uncomfortable talking about themselves, and that any discomfort I might experience should be no more than that normally experienced during a small group discussion. I understand that I do not have to discuss anything that I am not comfortable discussing. If I wish to discontinue participation in the study, I will be free to leave without penalty. All audiotapes and transcripts that were already created will be destroyed if I withdraw from the study.

I understand that participating in this study might help me better understand how the various aspects of who I am come together to shape my identity. My participation will also help educators and counselors better understand lesbian college students' sense of self.

I also understand that my participation in this project is strictly voluntary and that information will be treated confidentially. My name will not be connected with any materials produced for this study. Only Elisa Abes, Dr. Susan R. Jones (a professor in the Educational Policy & Leadership and Elisa's advisor), and an inquiry auditor to be named at a later date will have access to individual data. Tapes will be kept in a locked file and then destroyed one year after completion of the study.

I am aware that if I have any questions about my participation in the project I may contact Elisa Abes (262-0017; abes.1@osu.edu) or Dr. Susan R. Jones (688-3095; jones.1302@osu.edu). I may also contact the Chair, Behavioral and Social Sciences Institutional Review Board, The Ohio State University, 614-292-6950, if questions or problems arise during the course of the study.

_____
Participant Name (please print)
`
_____   _____
Signature   Date

_____   _____
Principal Investigator Signature   Date

_____   _____
Co-Investigator Signature   Date