

Institute for Clinical Social Work

LATE RESOLUTION OF LESBIAN SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND THE IMPACT
ON WORK IDENTITY

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By

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ABSTRACT

Lesbians, as a group, have been under-researched to date. This study examines the lived experience of lesbians in the hopes that stereotypical and presumptive notions about lesbian psychological development will be replaced with knowledge based upon research data. The experiences of lesbians who have a later resolution of their sexual identity and the effect a later resolution has on their work identity and professional attainment is explored in this retrospective qualitative study. Nine subjects who resolve their lesbian sexual orientation in their late twenties or later are interviewed twice using a life story narrative methodology. A post-modernist framework and Jessica Benjamin's theory of intersubjectivity anchor the study. Specificity and individuality replace the idea of a single metanarrative to explain what it means to be lesbian. The intrapsychic and the interpersonal experience of the participants are both privileged.

A holistic-content data analysis reveals several findings. Lesbians who resolve their sexual orientation later are not a homogeneous group. While they share many commonalities, there are also significant differences in their life experiences. It cannot be assumed that a later resolution is necessarily due to homophobia, either external or internalized. Important aspects of sexual and work identity need not be completed in adolescence or early adulthood for healthy and happy psychological outcomes to be obtained. When lesbian sexual orientation is fully resolved, even when it occurs later in life, there is a noticeable positive impact in the realm of work. Finally, a more nuanced and complex view of sexual and work identity development can help clinicians discern the difference between individual specificity and pathology.

In loving memory of
Kathy Geroski

The best way out is always through.

-Robert Frost

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	vi
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Clinical Example	
Formulation of the Problem	
II. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	7
Overview	
Life Cycle and Life Course Theories	
Vocational Psychology Perspective	
Homosexual Identity Developmental Models	
Psychoanalytic Perspective	
Theoretical and Conceptual Framework	
The Stance of Over-Inclusiveness and Both/And	
Mutual Recognition and Breakdown	
Use of the Object	
Thirddness	
Theoretical and Operational Definitions	
Research Question Explored	
Statement of Assumptions	

TABLE OF CONTENTS – *Continued*

Chapter	Page
III. METHODOLOGY.....	36
Research Design and Strategy	
Framework of Postmodernism	
Life Story Narrative Approach	
The Participants	
Data Collection Methods	
Method Used for Data Analysis	
IV. FINDINGS PART A: THE PARTICIPANTS, NINE “CASE STUDIES”...50	
Introduction	
“Stella”	
“Julie”	
“Elaine”	
“Lucinda”	
“Anne”	
“Wanda”	
“Chris”	
“Trudy”	
“Hope”	

TABLE OF CONTENTS – *Continued*

Chapter	Page
V. FINDINGS PART B: DEMOGRAPHIC AND BIOGRAPHIC COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES	174
Introduction	
Cluster 1: Being a “Late Resolution” Lesbian	
Cluster 2: Situating Homophobia	
Cluster 3: Proximity of an Important, Non-familial “Other”	
Cluster 4: Involvement with Gay/Lesbian Community	
Cluster 5: The Vicissitudes of Childhood	
Cluster 6: Feeling Different	
Cluster 7: Being the “Compliant,” “Dutiful” or “Quiet” One	
Cluster 8: Strong Religious Affiliation or Upbringing	
Cluster 9: Influence of Women on Initial Choices About Work	
VI. FINDINGS PART C: THE IMPACT OF LATE RESOLUTION OF LESBIAN SEXUAL IDENTITY ON WORK.....	192
Introduction	
Theme One: The “Undoing” of Defensive Structures	
Theme Two: Feeling More Authentic, “Whole,” and “Happier”	
Theme Three: Resolution Leads to Being More Ambitious and Reclaiming of Career Aspirations and Goals	

TABLE OF CONTENTS – *Continued*

Chapter	Page
VII. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS.....	228
Theoretical Implications	
Overview	
Benjamin’s Intersubjectivity	
Overinclusiveness and Both/And	
Mutual Recognition and Breakdown	
Use of the Object	
The Idea of Thirdness	
Implications for Clinical Social Work	
Limitations of the Study	
Directions for Future Research	
Appendixes	
A. FLYER, ONLINE NOTICE FOR RESEARCH STUDY AT CENTER ON HALSTED.....	254
B. CONSENT FORM.....	257
C. FIRST AND SECOND INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS.....	261
REFERENCES.....	265

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Clinical Example

The client, Zoe, is an Ivy-Leaguer with impressive academic credentials. She graduates from college in the late nineteen seventies feeling not precisely “unequipped” for the next stage of her life but rather uninterested in it. This surprises her because she has known herself to be an ambitious sort. Choosing a “professional career” lacks salience for her and this is an uncomfortable situation because all of her peers are gearing up for professional schools or “good jobs.” She thinks to herself, “All I really want is to fall in love.” But therein lays the difficulty. The person she would like to fall in love with, that as yet unknown, unmet, person is another woman. Zoe is gay and knows it but cannot allow herself to reveal this knowledge to another soul nor can she allow herself to fully know it. She is aware of groups on campus where there are lesbians, but she feels utterly unable to have any sort of association with this group of women. She can scarcely bring herself to say the word “lesbian” to herself much less to say it aloud.

Zoe is simultaneously scared to death that someone might suspect her of being a lesbian –although none of her behaviors would lead to such a suspicion—and horrified that no one will ever figure out that she is a lesbian, leaving her utterly alone and forsaken. Work, career, a profession, seem, if not irrelevant, colorless and devoid of meaning. She does find employment, after all, she is well schooled, but work feels flat

and often pointless because she feels she needs to leave a big piece of herself at home each day. Zoe dates men. She fulfills the societal obligations of a single, available, woman. It takes increasingly more energy to manage her feelings around knowing she wants a relationship with another woman while acting as if she is heterosexual. To Zoe there seems to be no way out of her dilemma. She realizes that being gay carries less stigma than it did in previous generations but that does little to allay her fears about how she will manage in her world among family and friends and employers and others, if she, not some faceless other gay person, proclaims her homosexuality.

Zoe does her best to sublimate, but not being able to share the internal drama that most preoccupies her circumscribes her friendships both at work and socially. Keeping her feelings to herself seems to have the effect of dulling her, of making her less engaged with all of her activities. As aware of it as Zoe is, she feels powerless to do anything about it. And so it goes, for years. Zoe marries and has children. She loves her husband and her children. But the knowledge that she is a lesbian gnaws at her, refusing to go away. There are a series of unfulfilled crushes on women and then a divorce. Zoe enters therapy. She is in her mid-thirties. Over the course of therapy, Zoe is finally able to accept who she is and what she wants. To her amazement, the world she beheld in pale shades of gray suddenly blooms in Technicolor. And to her further astonishment, Zoe finds her way out of an unsatisfying job and onto a career path that promises challenge and fulfillment.

For Zoe, coming to terms with her lesbian sexual orientation and settling into a career path are linked. There is not only a revitalization in the sexual realm but in the realm of work. Work, career, professional development, which seemed to hold only

limited value for many years, suddenly become imbued with possibility. Zoe feels invigorated and enlivened. The advanced academic degree that held little import before now seems worthy of extraordinary efforts. Gaining a professional identity seems not only a plausible goal but so obvious a one that it is hard for Zoe to believe that there ever was a time when she did not feel motivated and energized. Reaching her full potential suddenly feels within Zoe's grasp. Soon after, when Zoe is almost forty, she falls in love with a woman and has a full emotional and sexual relationship with her.

Zoe's story is one of coming to embody not only her sexuality but her place in the world of work. This occurs later in her life. Zoe's resolution of her sexual identity has a noticeable effect on her work identity. Sexual identity and work identity seem vitally connected.

Formulation of the Problem

This study explores the experience of lesbians who integrate their sexual identity later in life and the impact of late resolution of sexual orientation on their work identity.

Work is the adult "playground," encapsulating crucial aspects of an individual's personality and internal psychic structure (Grey, 1989; Axelrod, 1999). Work also powerfully affects and shapes adult personality and psychic structure (Grey, 1988; 1989; Axelrod, 1999). Developmental psychologists, psychoanalytic theorists, and sociologists concur that work represents the culmination of childhood and adolescent identity processes: it is the proscenium upon which adults lead their lives and leave their marks (Freud, 1930; Erikson, 1950; 1959; Vaillant & Milofskyt, 1980; Settersten, 1999; Sterns & Huyck, 2001). Work can be seen as the summary of the developmental and identity

processes leading up to adulthood while also being at the center of adult development itself. Work plays an essential role in an adult's meaning system, at least in Western societies. Work gives meaning and purpose to people's lives as well as being a place, physically and psychologically, where meaning gets expressed for adults.

The personal and work experiences of lesbians are under-researched and understudied in the psychoanalytic and clinical social work fields (Saari, 2001; Magee & Miller, 1997; Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000). Magee & Miller (1997) cite Mitchell's 1981 position, which he recanted in 1996, that homosexual material does not often appear in psychoanalytic case write-ups because most analysts feel that "homosexuality does not pose particularly distinctive or unique features in terms of analytic work" (p. 59). There has been a tendency, until recently, to universalize the developmental route to homosexuality in the psychoanalytic field. Etiological theories based on pathology took precedence over clinical material (Magee & Miller, 1997; Downey & Friedman, 1998; Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000; Reed, 2002). The lived experience of lesbians is solicited in this study.

For too long the lesbian experience has been invisible. Saari (2001) speaks to the toll on lesbians of their invisibility. The inability to share meaning with others, in Saari's view, impedes recognition of options for behavior and constricts the ability to envision a future (2001, p. 648). This is consistent with Erikson's (1959) belief that the formation of a solid ego identity emerges out of the experience of being with others where a person can be most himself, among those who mean most to him. All too often in clinical work the meaning of being a lesbian is unexamined and, in important ways, the lesbian may

remain invisible to her therapist and to herself (Saari, 2001; Magee & Miller, 1997; Reed, 2002).

Lesbian experience and the difficulties that might ensue from identifying as lesbian are generally seen in terms of social stigma and social discrimination. Homophobia certainly continues to be an especially repugnant reality that lesbians have to contend with. Coping with homophobia, in its external and internalized manifestations, however, is not sufficient to explain the experience of these particular lesbians. Lesbians living in the United States in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have all had to contend with a social and cultural milieu that is at times discriminatory, intolerant, and oppressive. Even in this less than ideal environment, some women integrate their sexual identity early on, in their adolescence or early adulthood. But this is not the case for the lesbians in this study and the question is how best to understand this. In this study a later resolution of lesbian sexual identity is viewed as both an intrapsychic and an interpersonal phenomenon. Career and professional attainment are investigated in relation to late resolution because work is a place where the internal (intrapsychic) and external (interpersonal) forces operating in an adult's life are readily revealed (Grey, 1988; 1989; Axelrod, 1999; Vaillant, 1980; Levinson, 1978).

Work itself has tended to be under-examined in the clinical domain (Axelrod, 1999). It is common practice, for example, when clinicians publicly present their work to "disguise" their patients' professions, as if what patients do is somehow less pertinent and relevant to the understanding of the case. The experience that individuals have in their work life has the potential to illuminate many of the psychodynamic issues patients bring

to therapy. This study paves the way for the intersection and connection between work and sexual orientation to be thought about in new and vital ways.

In looking at the work and career experiences of these particular lesbians, stereotypical clinical understandings of the integration of a minority sexual identity are replaced by more nuanced versions. By exploring sexual identity and work identity together, a deeper psychological understanding of these particular lesbians who have had a later resolution of their sexual orientation is obtained. Visibility replaces invisibility and the psychoanalytic ideal of individual specificity and knowing becomes possible.

Cohler & Galatzer-Levy (2000) speak directly to the importance of this for clinical work:

As in all aspects of psychoanalytic work, there must not be any a prior assumption of a privileged position for either heterosexuality or homosexuality. The sole focus is on the meaning for the analysand of an aspect of sexuality and on fostering an enhanced sense of vitality and responsiveness (p. 313)

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Life Cycle and Life Course Theories

Erik Erikson's (1950; 1959) epigenetic theory of development was the catalyst for this study. Erikson (1950; 1959) built upon Freud's psychosexual drive theory, with its age-specific erogenous developmental phases. Erikson (1950; 1959) delineated a stage theory of development that continued throughout the life cycle, extending psychoanalytic theory beyond infantile sexuality, and broadening the conflicts and vicissitudes of development to include not only the psychosexual but the psychosocial as well. Erikson (1950; 1959) was interested in how the relationships an individual had with others and with the larger culture and society affected that individual's development and the formation of his identity.

Erikson (1950; 1959) conceptualized development and identity formation as emerging from a series of natural, unfolding progressions from one maturational stage to another. Successful completion of one stage was a prerequisite for movement into the next. Pathology was understood as failure to successfully master the developmental challenges of a given stage. Indeed, failure to master one stage was seen as preventing mastery of subsequent stages (Vaillant & Milofsky, 1980). Developmental gains were achieved through the resolution of psychosocial crises which Erikson ([1959] 1980)

formulated in dialectical terms: trust vs. mistrust; autonomy vs. shame and doubt; initiative vs. guilt; industry vs. inferiority; identity vs. identity diffusion; intimacy vs. isolation; generativity vs. self-absorption; integrity vs. despair (pp. 51-107). These psychosocial crises were viewed as expectable, predictable, and necessary developmental events, following the epigenetic principle of growth ([1959] 1980, p. 53).

Of significance to this study was Erikson's contention that the consolidation of a sense of self, what he called identity formation, preceded the individual being able to take his place in society and achieving intimacy and a work identity (1959; McAdams, 2001). Erikson ([1959], 1980) felt that an individual "learn[s] to be most himself where he means most to others – those others, to be sure, who have come to mean most to him," (p.109). Identity was an expression of "both a persistent sameness within oneself (self sameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others," (Erikson, [1959] 1980, p. 109). Being oneself in the context of others, sharing one's self-sameness and identity *with* others and achieving adult intimacy were all seen as critical components to establishing a place in the world of work. In Erikson's stage theory of development, achieving adult intimacy was not only a crucial part of establishing one's identity, it was what permitted "the apprentice to become the master craftsman," (Vaillant & Milofsky, 1980, p. 1349).

Erikson's epigenetic developmental construct establishes a normative sequencing of events where identity, sexuality, and work are seen as vitally connected. Life cycle theory raises many questions that are relevant to this study. For example, how are subsequent stages of development navigated when a lesbian is struggling to resolve issues related to self sameness in the context of her sexuality? When this particular lesbian is

ambivalent about sharing what she may know or suspect about herself, what sort of impact does that have on her ability to take on a work identity that requires, in life cycle theory, a significant sharing of herself with others? If Erikson ([1959]1980) is correct, and there is a correlation between achieving mature intimacy with a significant other and career, then, would it not to be expected that unresolved issues around sexual identity and orientation would have an effect on the establishment of a work identity and/or career advancement?

In the nineteen sixties, life cycle theory began to be supplanted by life course theory (Fry, 2003). Salient features of life course theory for this study include the importance of social norms, social roles and social timing. The theory of social norms encompasses ideas about what is socially expected and expectable; the theory of social roles revolves around the expected tasks of individuals. Social timing relates to when individuals are expected to do what is normative.

Life course theory reiterates the importance of work for the adult. Work is seen as the center of adult development. Work is what adults strive towards according to social norms and roles and according to social clocks. Work is also viewed as a developmental force indelibly shaping adult lives (McAdams, 2001; Settersten, 1999; Nemiroff & Colarusso, 1980; Axelrod, 1999).

Life course theory allows for more individual variance than life cycle theory posits. The idea of equifinality, for example, emphasizes that developmental outcomes can come about in a myriad of ways (Settersten, 1999). This would mean, for this study, that late resolution of sexual orientation might not have as negative an outcome as life cycle theory might suggest. Having said this, however, a prominent concept in the life

course literature is that of “on-time” and “off-time.” “On-time” refers to developmental milestones completed at the expected time according to the norms of society. “Off-time” refers to when accomplishment of these tasks and goals occurs at non-normative times. Neugarten (1979) was the first to identify the importance of this phenomenon. As other theorists have explored this idea, what has emerged is that while there is a great deal of variance among individuals as to when certain events occur in their lives, those individuals who do things “on-time” seem to experience a greater satisfaction and “positive morale” (Cohler & Boxer, 1984). The advantage of doing things “on-time” clearly extends into the world of work for adults. Settersten (1999) in his review of the life course literature found that those individuals who enjoyed early success in their education and work lives reaped significant benefits in the latter part of their careers (p. 59). If this idea from life course theory is correct, and the preparation for work and early work experiences have a significant impact on an individual’s work life, then it might be expected that the lesbians in this study, who find themselves stymied in the formation and/or solidification of their sexual identity and orientation, would see a difference in the progression of their work lives. To put it differently, these particular lesbians who have taken longer to integrate their homosexual identity might very well experience themselves as “off-time” in comparison to their heterosexual peers and to other lesbians who are not wrestling with their sexual orientation. Based on life course theory, the subjects in this study would be expected to experience some adverse effects in the realm of work.

Vocational Psychology Perspective

The idea that these particular lesbians might encounter delays or derailments in their career development as a result of the added developmental and social challenges and difficulties of having a minority sexual identity was borne out in a review of the vocational psychology literature on lesbian career development (Boatwright et al., 1996; Croteau & Hedstrom, 1993; Dunkle, 1996; Fassinger, 1995; Hetherington & Orzek, 1989; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Nauta et al, 2001; Rheineck, 2005). These researchers found that the consolidation of a lesbian identity involved the expenditure of considerable emotional and psychological resources that left many lesbians with significantly less energy and motivation to deal with career concerns.

Boatwright et al (1996) described the turmoil of securing a lesbian identity as “a second adolescence,” a time which “recycled” the identity confusion and struggle Erikson identified in adolescence (p.212). The result of this “second adolescence” was a sense of being “behind” their peers and “off-track” from expected norms for career development (p.223). Dunkle (1996) also frames the establishment of a gay or lesbian identity in developmental terms, suggesting that difficulties in integrating a homosexual sense of self result in lower vocational maturity and adaptability (p. 157).

Self-concept, with its correlate self-esteem, and exposure to role models are viewed as critical components in career development. A strong sense of self, self confidence, and seeing positive role models are integral to career development (Hetherington & Orzek, 1989; Fitzgerald & Betz,(1983); Fassinger, 1995; Dunkle,1996; Rheineck, 2005).

Issues related to low self-esteem and lesbian identity are connected, in the vocational psychology literature, to the “coming out” process. This is the developmental trajectory that lesbians (and gay men) are seen as having to traverse in order to secure a healthy identity as a homosexual person. The vocational psychology literature emphasizes that for many lesbians, securing a homosexual identity and securing a career occur at the same time, making career development especially stressful and complicated. The idea is that the process of assuming a lesbian identity involves, at least short-term, a loss of self-esteem as the individual confronts, privately and/or publicly, the negative effects of homophobia among family, friends, and larger institutions, including the work environment. Lowered self-esteem is seen as an outcome of either having to hide one’s sexual identity and the negative impact of maintaining secrecy or as the outcome of confronting homophobic responses to one’s sexual identity. In either case, low self-esteem often leads to a lack self-confidence and lessened self-efficacy making career exploration and decision making more difficult (Nauta, 2001; Dunkle; 1996; Fassinger, 1995; Chung, 1995; Hetherington & Orzek, 1989).

The lack of lesbian role models is viewed as another major factor in the difficulties lesbians have in finding their place in the world of work. This is often characterized, in the vocational psychology literature, in terms of lack of role models in non-traditional careers (Hetherington & Orzek, 1989).

Homosexual Identity Developmental Models

The vocational psychology literature on lesbian career development utilizes models of lesbian and gay identity development, but the idea of a separate and additional

line of development for lesbians and gay men began to emerge in developmental studies in the nineteen seventies (Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Perhaps the most cited of these stage models of lesbian and gay identity development is that of Cass (1979). Cass (1979) outlines six stages that lesbians and gay males go through in the establishment of an integrated and positive homosexual identity:

Stage 1: Identity Confusion

Stage 2: Identity Comparison

Stage 3: Identity Tolerance

Stage 4: Identity Acceptance

Stage 5: Identity Pride

Stage 6: Identity Synthesis

In Cass' model of homosexual development, Stage 1 is when the individual first begins to consider that he or she might be homosexual. Cass describes this as the individual's first attempt to translate the concept of homosexuality into a first-person perspective from a third-person perspective (p.234). This is the stage when the individual begins to self-observe and to think that there is something about his or her behaviors (which Cass defines as acts, thoughts and feelings) that could be called homosexual. Coping with the confusion and discomfort that arises when the individual realizes that they might not be heterosexual, as is expected in Western society, is a hallmark of this stage. At this juncture, the individual can either shut down the whole process and refuse to accept that they might be homosexual, Cass refers to this as foreclosure, or the individual can accept that this idea has some meaning and begin to deal with it, either in a positive or less than positive manner (pp. 234-236).

Stage 2 in Cass' model is that of Identity Comparison. This is the period when the individual very tentatively begins to consider that he or she might be homosexual. Given that homosexuality in Western societies is negatively valued overall, the idea that the individual might belong to this minority sexual group can produce significant feelings of alienation, a sense of loss of continuity and confusion. Foreclosure can occur at this stage as well.

In Stage 3, there is a growing acceptance of the idea that the individual is homosexual. This explanation of self makes increasingly more sense and the individual makes more attempts to get social, sexual, and emotional needs met. This often includes some disclosure to others, in particular to other lesbians and gay men. This stage is characterized by a growing tolerance on the part of the individual that he or she is homosexual. Foreclosure remains a possibility at this stage if there are too many negative experiences.

The hallmark of Stage 4 is that tolerance is replaced by acceptance. There is increasing contact with other lesbians and gay males. Cass sees this as an essential piece in the solidification of a homosexual identity: as more people come to identify that person as lesbian or gay, this encourages a stronger sense of being that kind of person (p.244). In this stage there is also more disclosure of sexual identity to non-homosexuals. These processes are viewed as helping the lesbian or gay male to more strongly embrace their identity and to feel that "gays are just as good as straights," (p. 245).

During Stage 5, Identity Pride, the idea that lesbians and gay males are just as good as non-homosexuals is replaced by a devaluation of heterosexuality. Being homosexual is preferred to being heterosexual. There is an immersion into the gay and

lesbian subculture with a strong sense of group identification. As Cass puts it, “lesbian or gay identity has now become a public pronouncement” (p. 246).

Stage 6, Identity Synthesis, represents a stage of less anger and alienation and opposition to heterosexuality as “an ideology” (p. 246). There is greater public interaction with others as a lesbian or a gay male which Cass believes strengthens the inner psychological experience of identity. Being a lesbian or gay male is now an integrated part of the whole self which can be well maintained in a daily fashion. (p. 247).

Both McCarn & Fassinger (1996) and Gonsiorek (1995) review and discuss the lesbian and gay identity developmental models, including those of Cass (1979), Coleman (1982), Troiden (1989) Sophie (1985-1986), Chapman & Brannock (1987), Dank (1971), Grace (1979), Hencken & O’Dowd (1977), Lee (1977), and Plummer (1975). The models of each of these theorists have much in common. There is found to be: 1) a long, often arduous, process of personally coming to terms with same-sex desire and the changes in self-concept required to accommodate and act upon those desires; 2) movement from self-affirmation to disclosure to others of sexual orientation; and 3) a strong identification with the gay and lesbian community (p. 513). McCarn & Fassinger’s (1996) main critique of many of the developmental models, and the rationale for coming up with one of their own, is that group affiliation and group identification are considered to be a higher developmental achievement than self affirmation and identity consolidation. McCarn & Fassinger go as far as to describe many gay and lesbian developmental models as imposing a “tyranny in which political activism and universal disclosure become signs of an integrated lesbian/gay identity. The models deal little with

the meaning of homoerotic intimacy, addressing mostly accommodation to minority group membership” (p. 519).

The tension in lesbian/gay developmental theory is the same, then, as that of mainstream developmental theory: how to balance the intrapsychic with the social and cultural experience. The social, political, cultural and historical milieus play an indelible role in shaping the internal experience, and internal experiences shape how the social, political, cultural and historical milieus are received. The challenge is to avoid privileging the intrapsychic over the interpersonal or the interpersonal over the intrapsychic but to give due consideration to both aspects.

Having said this, the lesbian/gay developmental models certainly expand the paradigm of life cycle and life course theories, which often presume heterosexuality as the normative and healthy outcome of adolescence and young adulthood (see, for example, Nemiroff & Colarusso, 1980, EBSCO, pp. 4-5). The lesbian and gay identity developmental models provide a means of depathologizing the lesbian and gay developmental experience. They also effectively open up the discussion, enabling the exploration of the effects of societal oppression and persecution, or homophobia, on an individual’s development.

In the literature on homosexual development and the homosexual psychological experience, societal and cultural discrimination, intolerance, and oppression are seen as playing a large role in the developing psychology of lesbians and gay men (Cass, 1996; Malyon, 1982; Drescher, 2000; Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000). Malyon (1982), in what is considered a seminal work on internalized homophobia in gay males, suggests that the socialization of children depends upon their internalizations of culturally sanctioned

attitudes and values which means that gay men internalize antihomosexual attitudes and values since the greater society is heterosexist and homophobic (Downey & Friedman, 1996, p. 472). These negative internalizations affect “identity formation, self esteem, the elaboration of defenses, patterns of cognition, psychological integrity, and object relations,” contributing to “a propensity for guilt and intropunitiveness among homosexual males,” (Malyon, 1982, p. 60).

Cass (1996) maintains that when expectations in a society are linked with a heterosexual orientation, then being a lesbian is experienced as a loss of continuity with the past, present, and future (p.236). Gair (1995) writes of the loss of self-cohesion and the rise of the “false self” when the lesbian’s self is viewed as “foreign, malevolent, contemptuous, and hateful,” (p.108). Gair (1995) suggests that the lesbian can look socially capable and well-functioning but self-cohesion is based on a false self. For Gair (1995), the impact of hiding one’s true self is not feeling entitled to “the possibilities, responsibilities, partnerships, families, success, and respect” that are automatically allocated to heterosexuals (p. 114). Magee & Miller (1996) discuss how the need to hide and be secretive about one’s sexual identity inhibits the elaboration and organization of the self (p. 198). Falco (1996) concurs, maintaining that non-disclosure of sexual orientation often generalizes to other psychological areas of a lesbian’s life. She believes that hidden aspects (her words) of the self are very often self-interpreted as bad aspects. She believes that this internal landscape often results in rigidity in interpersonal relationships (p. 401).

Psychoanalytic Perspective

Downey & Friedman (1998) in their overview of how female homosexuality has been discussed and portrayed in the psychoanalytic literature make the point that for a long time it was assumed that the experiences of lesbians mirrored that of gay men. Socarides (1978) in particular characterized lesbian psychological development in this way. There has also been, until quite recently, a pervasive view in psychoanalytic theory that female homosexuality could best be understood as an outcome of developmental psychopathology, most often depicted as clustering around difficulties in separation-individuation (Downey & Friedman, 1998, pp. 474-475; Magee & Miller, 1997; Reed, 2002). Lesbian and feminist psychoanalytic writers have sought to challenge the idea that to be a lesbian signified a developmental derailment or arrest (Schuker, 1996; Reed, 2002; Magee & Miller, 1997; Cass, 1996; Harris, 1995, 2005; Downey & Friedman, 1998; Jacobo, 2001; Fassinger, 1995). Schuker (1996), writing in the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, is typical of these writers, as she takes issue with the notion that there is a singular route to female homosexuality, "... there is no unitary dynamic or etiologic theme [that] provides us with universal understanding of these [lesbian] patients" (EBSCO, p. 10). Schuker (1996) makes the point that being immutable does not necessarily mean it is biological (EBSCO, p. 9).

Finding a biological basis to explain homosexuality has been one way in which gay and lesbian writers, and their supporters, have sought to lessen the psychoanalytic pathology associated with the topic. If being homosexual is a result of having a "gay gene" or a different set of prenatal hormones, then, the thinking goes, homosexuals cannot be blamed for their object choice (Downey & Friedman, 1998; Magee & Miller,

1997; Reed, 2002; Schuker, 1996; Harris, 2005). The biological data, to date, is inconclusive and as Magee & Miller (1997) and others suggest, even if there is a biological explanation for why a person is homosexual as opposed to heterosexual, such explanations do not capture the subjective experience and meaning of being gay or lesbian for that particular individual.

The etiology of lesbianism is beyond the scope of this study. The goal is to find a way to understand and appreciate what the experience of these particular lesbians who have struggled to integrate their sexual identity has been. To do so requires that the voices of these lesbians be heard in as unfettered a fashion as possible. Just as feminist psychoanalytic thinkers in their theorizing on gender revealed that women's experience was not simply a female version of the male experience (Chodorow, 1989, 1995; Harris, 1996, 2005; Goldner, 1995), so too with lesbian experience. Lesbians are not simply female versions of male homosexuals or masculine women (Reed, 2002; Magee & Miller, 1997; Young-Bruehl, 2000.)

Psychoanalytic theory in many ways has been unkind to lesbians. Lesbians were portrayed as regressed, developmentally arrested at preoedipal levels, disturbed in their oedipal relationships, seen as caricatures of men (Reed, 2002; Jacobo, 2001; Magee & Miller, 1997; Young-Bruehl, 2000; Downey & Friedman, 1998). But psychoanalytic technique offers a way out. By exploring with lesbians their thoughts, feelings, and fantasies, by adhering to the principles of over or multiple determinism, by giving berth to both conscious and unconscious phenomena, and by acknowledging the interplay between internal and external experience and development (Magee & Miller, 1997; Jacobo, 2001; Chodorow, 1989; Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000) it becomes possible to

move beyond descriptions and theoretical assumptions to learn and know in an intimate and meaningful way what the experience is of lesbians who have had a later resolution of their sexual orientation.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

It makes sense to situate a study of identity, in this case sexual and work identity, in developmental theory. Classical psychoanalysis is, after all, a developmental theory where psychosexual development, is seen as the biological and ontological impetus for growth (Freud 1930; Lichtenstein 1970; Saari 1991, 2001; Erikson 1950, 1959). Since Freud, the psychoanalytic field has broadened its view of development, reaching beyond drive theory and libidinal phases. Nonetheless, ideas about development have remained a theoretical constant. Developmental issues are evident in ego psychology as it grapples with the vicissitudes of the developing ego; in object relations as it seeks to understand how the internal life affects and is affected by external interactions with significant caregivers through the mechanisms of projection and introjection and fantasy; and in self-psychology as it conceives self-structure deficits emerging from less than optimal caregiving, to name a few of the major trends in psychoanalytic thought. In life cycle and life course theories, development is cast as a series of epigenetic life stages or, at the very least, as a series of expectable and prescribed stages or phases. Throughout psychoanalytic thought there is an implicit, oftentimes explicit, universalizing and essentializing character to the theories (Chodorow 1996, 1999; Harris 2005).

Theory is necessary to guide the clinician. But there are dangers to viewing individuals in universal and essentialist patterns, of forcing unity by excluding or

repressing that which would disrupt that unity (Benjamin 1995, p. 10). As Chodorow (1999) says:

Patterns and tendencies are useful clinical reminders of possible empirical repertoires and orient us, in our listening, in a generalized preconscious way. They are useful in the individual case, or at different times in the analytic process, but they cannot be more than that for a particular patient at a particular moment. (pp. 61-62)

In this study, life cycle theory and life course theory has proven to be an invaluable starting place for thinking about the lives of these particular lesbians. But as helpful as life cycle and life course theories are, the limitations of the overarching theoretical construct is to be found in the loss of the individual's specificity, that is, in locating the unique meaning each lesbian brings to her experience. Stage theories aptly and usefully describe "patterns" (Chodorow 1999); indeed, they are persuasive because of the ability of so many to identify with the pattern. Cass (1973) and McCarn and Fassinger's (1996) elucidations of the "stages" gay men and women go through on the way to accepting their full identity as gay men and women has much that would resonate for this population. The purpose in theorizing a separate or additional line of development for gay men and women was to address and correct heterosexist notions of sexual identity and orientation. The problem with this strategy is that it repeats the failings of the developmental constructs it criticizes: theories positing a separate line of development for homosexuals imagine an equally prescribed and invariable set of stages through which gay men and women proceed to attain their homosexual identity. Stage theories of development have great descriptive utility but they are hindered by a one size

fits all approach, and, its critics would argue, a sense that there is a desired, normative outcome that is predicted from the outset (Harris 2005; Dimen 1999; Schwartz 1999).

For the lesbians being investigated in this study, lesbian developmental stage theories might well describe the sequencing of events, but they would fail to explain why for this particular group of lesbians the resolution of their sexual orientation takes longer. What is missing is the internal, intrapsychic, experiential piece of the equation for these particular subjects. This, it seems, is the point Shelby (2000) is trying to make in his refutation of Drescher's (and many others) idea that understanding and overcoming internalized homophobia requires more than addressing the effects of social stigma. He writes, "If something has been internalized, we must consider the entire personality and how the internalized element is woven and managed within the complexity and uniqueness of the individual human mind" (pp. 276-277).

How best to surmount the limitations of developmental theory while retaining the valuable insights and guideposts it can offer? Jessica Benjamin's (1988; 1990; 1995; 1999) formulation of intersubjectivity offers a robust theoretical and conceptual framework for deepening the field of analysis.

Four major ideas contained in Benjamin's articulation of intersubjectivity will be helpful to this study. They are: 1) the stance of "overinclusiveness," referred to as a position of *both/and*; 2) mutual recognition and its corollary, breakdown; 3) use of the object; and 4) "thirdness."

The Stance of “Overinclusiveness” and Both/And

Benjamin’s stance of “overinclusiveness” means that the realms of the intrapsychic and the interpersonal are both valued, and neither perspective is privileged over the other. The advantage of this *both/and* position is that it can, in Benjamin’s ([1990] 1999) words:

...account both for the pervasive effects of human relationships on psychic development and for the equally ubiquitous effects of internal psychic mechanisms and fantasies in shaping psychological life and interaction.
(p. 185)

Benjamin views development as resulting from the inevitable internal and interpersonal tensions the subject experiences upon discovering that the *other* is not merely an object of its own intrapsychic wishes and phantasies but is a separate subject in possession of its own mind. In this sense, development is understood as what occurs when two minds meet – or the failure thereof. The meeting of two minds is understood to be at once an internal, intrapsychic experience and a relational one.

The *both/and* position also provides a means of moving beyond the dualism present in so much of Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalytic thought. The binary construct of either/or, with its conceptualizations of male/female, active/passive, heterosexual/homosexual, has retained a position of explanatory authority at the expense of the lesbian’s experience. To say that a lesbian “must be like a man, wish to be a man, or have inadequate feminine identifications,” (Reed 2002, EBSCO 1/16/06, p. 3) because there are only two gender categories, male and female, is to do a great disservice to the subjective experience of lesbians (Burch 1993). By adopting Benjamin’s approach of *both/and* [a position taken by other feminist psychoanalytic theorizers such as Chodorow

as well] this study will, hopefully, be freed from the constraining binds of dichotomous categorizing which is the antithesis of psychoanalytic investigation.

Mutual Recognition and Breakdown

Benjamin ([1990]1999) believes that an individual can only experience her full subjectivity, that is, her full sense of self in another's presence. A person can only be fully herself when others recognize her and when she is able to recognize others in return. The mutuality of the recognition, the sense of mutual influence and understanding, leads to a powerful and pleasurable feeling of being known and knowing others. When there is mutual recognition, as Benjamin defines it, there is ample room in the dyad for two subjectivities, two sensibilities, two minds ([1990] 1999, pp. 186-188).

Benjamin's ideas about mutual recognition are an outgrowth of the extensive mother-infant research which indicates that, from the very beginning, there is more reciprocity and interaction going on *between* mother and baby than was previously supposed ([1990] 1999, pp. 188-189). Mother and child respond to each other by way of recognition and this early caretaker/infant dyad(s) forms the initial basis of intersubjectivity. In Benjamin's articulation of development, maturation is evidenced not solely in the steps the child takes towards separation and individuation but also in her creation of connections and mutual recognition ([1990] 1999; 1995). Benjamin is of the view that separation and individuation should not be privileged over attachment and connection. She states, "The implicit assumption in differentiation theory is that acknowledging difference has a higher value, is a later achievement, and is more difficult than recognizing likeness," (1995, p. 49-50). When studying women, a framework such

as Benjamin's which strives to understand attachment and connection as something more than symbiotic and merger phenomena, has much to offer. It allows for the psychology of the women who are to be studied here to be seen as mature and non-pathological rather than as incomplete, fixated, regressed or immature (Benjamin, 1995; Chodorow, 1989, 1996, 1999; Reed, 2002; Jordan et al., 2004).

The road to mutual recognition, in Benjamin's ([1990]1999; 1995) formulation, is not an easy one. The struggle for recognition involves balancing the dialectic inherent in the acceptance of both likeness and difference in the other person and the ability to sustain the paradoxical tension of the two. The encounter with the *other* as subject rather than *object* is not a one-time occurrence but is an ongoing affair. In the meeting of the intrapsychic and the interpersonal there are inevitable and unavoidable moments of breakdown. Benjamin (2000) describes breakdown in this way:

It is when the tension or dialectic between negation and recognition collapses that we see breakdown. Breakdown means unassimilable difference. It feels impossible to recognize the other because her "interpretation" of our actions and intentions, or even her very existence, is too alien (too negating) to our own sense of self. The most typical form relationships take in breakdown is complementarity, the relation between "doer" and "done-to" – the relation in which only one person can be subject, can decide meaning, can determine the course of action, can get his way. (pp. 1-2)

When there is breakdown, relationships are played out in the register of power (Benjamin [1990]1999, p 194). There is room for only one subjectivity, one mind, and the *other* is forced to either submit or resist. Reality cannot be shared. This has major ramifications intrapsychically and relationally. In this construct, the failure of mutuality leads to a paranoid/schizoid withdrawal, where the mechanisms of projection and

omnipotence are predominant. The *object* has been destroyed and cannot be used (Benjamin citing Winnicott, [1990]1999; 1995; 2000).

How might this theoretical conceptualization be useful to this study? Benjamin's ideas of mutual recognition and breakdown can provide another way of understanding the experience of homophobia for the lesbians in this study. Homophobia could be viewed as a failure of mutual recognition and as "breakdown." Hatred of homosexuals and homosexuality could be understood as a collapse of the two person, two subject environ. In homophobia, there is only one subjectivity, that of the homophobe. There is no mutual recognition of homosexuality or the homosexual. In a homophobic environment, the homosexual must either submit to discrimination and intolerance or resist by standing outside of it. Either way, the power struggle is not dismantled but remains a powerfully corrosive and coercive force.

Internalized homophobia could be understood as occurring in response to the failure of mutual recognition by significant others. As Benjamin ([1990] 1999) says, "What cannot be worked through and dissolved with the outside other is transposed into a drama of internal objects, shifting from the domain of the intersubjective into the domain of the intrapsychic" (p. 192). In the context of this study, facing a lack of mutual recognition could, potentially, draw these lesbians into an internal world fraught with splitting, where projection and omnipotent fantasy are activated. This would look like different things in different subjects: for some, it might manifest as extreme rage towards outside others with fear of retaliation having an inhibiting or constricting effect on behavior leading to social isolation or social anxiety. For others, rage and destructiveness might be directed at the self resulting in self-loathing and self-punishing and depriving

behaviors. For still others, the effect of breakdown is an internal world heavily populated with bad objects or part-objects, making all relationships problematical. These are just a few of the possibilities. Benjamin's framework provides a theoretical framework for thinking about homophobia: homophobia is not just a particularly repugnant social and cultural construct but can be viewed as a manifestation of a breakdown in intersubjectivity. The ideas of mutual recognition and breakdown can provide this study with the theoretical traction for getting at these particular lesbians' subjective experience of homophobia.

Use of the Object

Benjamin (1988; [1990]1999; 1995; 2000) incorporates Winnicott's ([1969]1971) ideas about object usage in her theory of intersubjectivity. The object's ability to survive its destruction by the subject allows the object to be "used," to be experienced as more than a projective entity. An object that survives its destruction by the subject can be fully discovered, known, appreciated, and loved. An object that survives its destruction by the subject moves outside of the subject's omnipotent control (Winnicott [1969]1971, p 121) and becomes real. Reality can now be shared.

The 'use of the object' is an integral part of Benjamin's ideas about mutual recognition and breakdown. When there is mutual recognition the object is able to be "used" in the sense that Winnicott meant. When there is breakdown, object-relating has replaced object usage. For our purposes here, use of the object has been separated out because of its utility as a concept when looking at the realm of work and work identity. Work is the reality principle writ large. Rose (1966) quotes Freud (1930), "No other

technique for the conduct of life attaches the individual so firmly to reality as laying emphasis on work,” (p. 2 EBSCO July 9, 2006). Gaining a foothold in the world of work, being effective at work, requires, one could argue, object usage. Benjamin (1995) does not pretend to claim that object usage and mutual recognition are gained once and forever. Indeed, one of the strengths of her theory is an understanding that breakdown and complementarity are constant features in the intersubjective realm. What leads to difficulties is when aggression and the destruction of the object are not worked through or tolerated [the object has not survived] and the individual remains in the domain of object relating rather than in the domain of object usage. The individual resides in an internal world of unremitting projections and unconscious fantasy. This can result in what Benjamin (1995) describes as “a loss of balance whereby fantasies of frightening objects overshadow all psychic experience,” (p. 92). This is essentially a paranoid/schizoid position. Relating to the world in this way severely compromises social interactions. If as Axelrod (1999) suggests, that “mature working requires the individual to find her place in the social group,” (p. 14) then the inability to “use” the object in the workplace might be expected to interfere in a significant way with achieving a solid work identity and work attainments. Utilizing the clinical idea of object usage in this study allows this intrapsychic experience to be explored.

Thirdness

Benjamin’s ([1990] 1999) theorizing about thirdness references the work of Winnicott (1971) and Ogden (1986). She sees thirdness as emerging out of the experience of mutual recognition. When two minds, two subjectivities meet in mutual

recognition a third space is created which is greater than the sum of the two subjects.

This third space can allow for the transcendence of the bonds of complementarity and the oscillating imposition of wills and desires. It is worth quoting Benjamin ([1990] 1999) at length:

The notion of a third implies that there is a quality to this otherness that is external to the reversible complementarity, something outside just me and you to which we orient ourselves in order that the dialogue sustain a tension between the selves rather than collapse into oneness. Only from this standpoint can we be separate-yet-connected beings capable of a desire that does not endlessly reflect the other's desire—a condition in which we are doomed to either be what the other wants, or make the other be what we want. (pp. 205-206)

Benjamin (1995) makes the point that the child wants more from mother than mere reflection back and mirroring. She maintains that the child experiences pleasure from not being able to predict mother's response and from not being able to immediately assimilate mother's response as long as it is in the context of understanding and not in the context of subjugation and/or retaliation. Differences and similarities can be celebrated within the domain of mutual recognition. This is the realm of thirdness where there is not only pleasure but the ability to play and be creative (Benjamin, [1990]1999).

This idea of thirdness, where the interaction between subjects potentiates a space for creativity and pleasure, is another useful concept for this study. If work is the adult playground, as so many developmental psychologists posit, then a failure to attain a strong work identity and place in the world of work would intimate that what might be missing is the transitional space of thirdness. This suggests that mere tolerance in the workplace, as advocated by the vocational psychologists, might not solve the problem of work identity and attainment for these lesbians. Tolerance certainly is an improvement

over discrimination but it might still be too constricting. There may be too little give and take, too little opportunity for mutual play and creative endeavor to emerge out of a relationship that is primarily proscribed rather than naturally felt.

Theoretical and Operational Definitions

In this study, *late resolution* will mean that the women being studied here will have consolidated their identity as lesbians in their adulthood rather than during mid- and late adolescence or early twenties. *Consolidation of lesbian identity* will be understood to mean that the individual lesbian has fully come to terms with her homosexuality. This does not necessarily mean that the study participant is “out” publicly; it does mean that the study participant no longer questions her choice of a same-sex love object.

For the purposes of this study, lesbian *sexual orientation* and lesbian *sexual identity* will be used interchangeably and as synonyms. Homosexuality as an identity is a construct of the nineteenth century (Broido, 2000; Foucault, 1976/1990; Sedgwick, 1999). Foucault (1976/1990) is cited as the seminal work on this issue. Prior to the nineteenth century, homosexuality was categorized as behavior, aberrant and deviant behavior, but actions that anyone might engage in. In the nineteenth century, sexual orientation, that is, sexual behaviors, came to characterize who an individual was. As Foucault (1976/1990) has written about the transformation:

That nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle . . . It was consubstantial with him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature. . . . The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. (p. 43).

This study will make no distinction between orientation and identity in the behavioral sphere, which is to say that women who call themselves lesbians will be so considered whether or not they are or have been sexually active with other women. A past history of sexual involvement with men would not disqualify a participant from this study if the participant identified herself at present as a lesbian.

Work in this study will be defined and delimited to paid labor. This is not to suggest that unpaid activity, including volunteering, household management or child rearing are unimportant. Lesbians can be found in the unpaid work force as readily as heterosexual women. This study does not place a value judgment on paid versus unpaid work. However, this study focuses on lesbians who are part of the paid labor force.

Work identity will be defined as the individual lesbian's sense of herself in the world of work. The term will incorporate the lesbian's work-related ambitions and goals, as well as her outlook on the likelihood of achieving her ambitions and goals. *Work attainment* will be defined as what the individual lesbian has actually accomplished in the sphere of work.

Intersubjectivity, as defined by Jessica Benjamin (1988; 1990; 1995; 1999), incorporates the dual perspective of the intrapsychic and the interpersonal with mutual recognition and breakdown, use of the object and thirdness as the key developmental and theoretical terms. How and what the individual brings to the milieu, how the milieu affects the individual, as well as what gets created when the intrapsychic and the interpersonal meet will be considered.

In Benjamin's theoretical construct, *mutual recognition* refers to the acceptance of the likenesses and differences between two people when they encounter each other. It is

conceptualized as both an internal and relational affair that affects both parties on multiple levels. *Breakdown* occurs when the existence of two subjectivities, that is, of two separate minds, cannot be tolerated by one or both parties. *Breakdown* is when one individual feels the need to either submit to or resist the other. When there is *breakdown*, there is only room for one subjectivity, one point of view, one mind.

Benjamin's borrows from Winnicott in her ideas about the *use of the object*.

Use of the object is the theoretical idea that in order for an individual to fully recognize and value another person, that other must survive his or her destruction. By surviving the hatred and destruction thrust upon him or her by the individual, the other person can be appreciated and loved and seen for who they truly are, rather than as a mental creation, or projection, of the individual.

Finally, Benjamin's concept of *thirdness*, which again is indebted to Winnicott, as well as Ogden, encompasses the idea that the meeting of the two subjectivities, the two minds, results in something greater than the two, namely a third space. This is the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Creativity and a freeness to be oneself is found in *thirdness*. For this study, a successful work life would be seen as the adult version of *thirdness*, just as play represents *thirdness* for a child.

Research Question Explored

The research question explored is how the late resolution of lesbian sexual orientation impacts on these particular lesbians' work identity and professional attainment. What effect, if any, is there upon these lesbians' work life and professional goals and achievements when the consolidation and integration of their sexual identity

and orientation have taken longer? The life-cycle and life-course literature suggests that there will be a significant effect because “identity formation,” of which sexual identity and orientation are a part, is “off-time.” The concept of “equifinality” softens the blow by positing that most individuals do arrive at their given destinations at some point. But equifinality seems to fail to capture the very personal impact of homophobia, discrimination, heterosexism, and the lack of mutual recognition that may get embodied and enacted by these particular lesbians. It is the hypothesis of this study that the struggle to integrate a lesbian sexual orientation does get embodied and worked through the individual psyche. It is not enough to understand the cultural and societal framework of homophobia and heterosexism and intolerance and discrimination to comprehend the lives of these women. This study hypothesizes that the intersubjective experiences of being lesbian, of knowing oneself to be a sexual minority without a way of expressing it during adolescence and early adulthood, is not reducible to stage models of identity or to environmental diffidence or hostility without the dynamic, psychological aspect of these lesbians’ lives being missed, ignored, or subsumed in theoretical abstraction.

This study hopes to give voice to a group of lesbians whose experiences have remained mostly invisible to researchers. How do these particular lesbians view the unfolding of their work lives? Do they feel that their professional and career development went along smoothly or with difficulty during the period they were trying to integrate their sexual orientation and identity? Did they make any sort of connection between what was occurring in these separate realms of their adulthood as they were going through it? Did they think about it later? Do these particular lesbians feel that their work lives would have been different if they had been able to resolve their issues

around their sexual orientation? If so, how? If not, can they imagine any differences in how their work lives would have played out if they had gained an earlier resolution of their sexual identity? Do these particular lesbians feel that this question of unresolved sexual orientation and work is important? Does it have valence for them? Why or why not?

In the last ten years, the field of vocational psychology has turned its lens to the experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals in the workplace. But again what has been given short shrift is a dynamic understanding of the internal processes these individuals encounter as they navigate their sexual orientation and identity (Croteau, et. al, 2000). Cultural and societal discrimination, hostility, heterosexism, and intolerance have an enormous impact on how lesbians, gays, and bisexuals interact with the world at large and with the world of work in particular, and therapists and counselors are advised to be aware and sensitive to these issues. But why do some lesbians seem to resolve these issues more easily and feel freer to embody their lesbianism while the subjects in this study take longer? Using an intersubjective approach to the narrative material of these subjects, an approach that examines both the interpersonal and the intrapsychic experiences of these particular lesbians, allow this question to be more fully and complexly understood.

Statement of Assumptions

It is an assumption of this study that examining the realm of work can be useful for learning about the internal dynamic of lesbians who have taken longer to resolve their sexual orientation. It is believed that looking at these lesbians' experience with work and

the workplace may offer a means of making sexual identity issues, which often remain invisible to the observer because they are internal processes, visible. Equally, an assumption of this study is that examining the later resolution of sexual identity might reveal important information about the work experiences of these lesbians.

In this study, homosexuality is viewed as non-pathological. Homosexuality was officially dropped as a psychiatric disorder by the American Psychiatric Association in 1973 and it is the stance of this study that being a lesbian does not suggest or assume anything negative about these subjects' mental health or ability to successfully pursue a career.

It is beyond the scope of this study to enter into the debate about who "qualifies" as a lesbian (Brown, 1999). It will be assumed that a subject who self-identifies as a lesbian is a lesbian.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Strategy

The epistemological framework anchoring this study is that of postmodernism. A life story narrative approach is used in the collection and interpretation of data.

Framework of Postmodernism

Postmodernism is well indicated for the study of a heavily marginalized and stigmatized population such as lesbian women. Postmodernism rejects the idea of a single metanarrative that can adequately describe a universal reality for “humanity” (Tierney, 2003; Burch, 1993; Sedgwick, 1990). In the postmodernist perspective, there is room for alternative interpretations and the fluid nature of identity is posited. Subjects and their observers are contextually situated, in the postmodern view, and as Tierney (2003) states, “Individual lives are constant constructs embedded in societal and cultural forces that seek to constrain some and enable others “ (p. 299). Tierney (2003) goes further and references Smith and Watson (1992) who write, “The autobiographical occasion becomes a site on which cultural ideologies intersect and dissect one another in contradiction, consonance and adjacency” (p. 304). The postmodernist attempts to investigate identity through the peeling away of cultural constructs, ideologies, and

monolithic positivist and modernist explanations, aware, all the while, of how much the researcher himself is “situated” in the very same labyrinth he is attempting to study.

Chodorow (1999) brings postmodernism into the realm of psychoanalytic thought. She reminds us, as do other feminist psychoanalytical writers (Harris, 2005; Burch 1993; Schuker, 1996; Reed, 2002), that deconstruction of the metanarrative must ultimately reference back to the individual and the internal meanings that are operative. Knowing that lesbians are affected by and respond differently to the cultural and societal milieu is critical information but it is not sufficient for the psychoanalytically minded clinician. As Chodorow (1999) writes:

As psychoanalysis documents, people avail themselves of cultural meanings and images, but they experience them emotionally and through fantasy, as well as in particular interpersonal contexts. Emotional meaning, affective tone, and unconscious fantasies that arise from within and are not experienced linguistically interact with and give individual animation and nuance to cultural categories, stories and language (that is, make them subjectively meaningful). Individuals thereby create new meanings according to their own unique biographies and histories of intrapsychic strategies and practices—meanings that extend beyond and run counter to cultural or linguistic categories. (pp. 71-72)

In this study, a postmodernist approach allows the researcher to go beyond the binarism of heterosexual/homosexual that has constricted the conversation about sexual orientation and identity (Sedgwick, 1990; Magee & Miller, 1997; Harris, 2005; Roughton, 2001). The deconstruction and re-construction of identity from a postmodernist stance encourages a freer range of thought. Lesbians can be studied in a less restrictive register, one that sees them as more than their dichotomous opposite, that is, more than a non-heterosexual. It allows women who call themselves lesbian to be viewed in all their particularity and subjectivity rather than grouped into a monolithic

category. Benjamin (1995) speaks eloquently to the need to preserve diversity, especially in the psychoanalytic and clinical realm:

In contemporary gender theory the use of the term “identity” assumes difference as equivalent to the boundary between identities The notion of singular difference as a dividing line implies that on either side of that line is something called identity, something homogenous with everything else on that side. . . . The idea of gender identity implies an inevitability, a coherence, a singularity, and a uniformity that belies psychoanalytic notions of fantasy, sexuality, and the unconscious. (pp. 50-51)

The overarching framework of postmodernism frees this study from the dichotomist and modernist metanarrative intrinsic to a positivist approach. This has allowed the research to go beyond the essentialist versus social constructionist debate on homosexuality. The essentialist position states that homosexuals are born that way, that homosexuality is a biological and genetic circumstance (Broido, 2000; Downey & Friedman, 1998). The essentialist stance reflects the belief that there is a specific category of persons who are homosexual who go through a particular, homosexual, developmental identity sequence (Broido, 2000, p. 27; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Those who ascribe to an essentialist position believe that there have been homosexuals in every age and culture and that, therefore, cultural and societal constructs are, ultimately, of little import (Broido, 2000, p. 16). Social constructionists hold that homosexuality is a choice individuals make based upon the social, historical, and cultural contexts available to them (Broido, 2000, 27). By using a postmodern approach, with its embrace of multiple possible narratives, this qualitative study is able to contain both, or neither, of these positions. Postmodernism provides a framework for the voices and experiences of this particular subset of the lesbian population not only to be heard but to be valued.

Life Story Narrative Approach

The research methodology of this study combines the life story narrative research models of Lieblich et al. (1998) with Hollway & Jefferson's (2000) free association narrative method. Both methodologies position themselves in the postmodern framework. Lieblich et al. (1998) hold that life story research narratives “. . . provide access to people's identities and personalities” (p. 7). Hollway & Jefferson (2000) maintain that research subjects, and researchers, are “defended” subjects, meaning that their stories and biographies reflect “anxiety-provoking life-events . . . which have been unconsciously defended against” (p.24). The rationale behind using these two complementary methodologies is that together they can provide a means not only to elicit these particular lesbians' life experiences but a robust psychological and psychoanalytical platform to understand and interpret the meaning of these lesbians' lives. The two methodologies gather and interpret information in a format similar to the “case study” pioneered by Freud, and, indeed, both methodologies often refer to the data collected as “case studies” (Lieblich et al., 1998; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000).

For the sake of reading convenience, Lieblich's et al. (1998) terminology for their method of life story narrative research and Hollway & Jefferson's (2000) terminology for their method of free association and defended subject narrative interviewing will be collapsed into the terms life story narrative or personal narratives. The reader will understand that such shorthand is just that: a linguistic device to refer to the two methodologies, incorporating life story narrative research and free association and defended subject narrative interviewing.

The underlying premise of life story narrative research is the belief that the way individuals make meaning of their lives is by telling stories about themselves and their experiences (McAdams, 1993; Lieblich et al., 1998; Atkinson, 1998; Barresi & Juckes, 1997; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Cohler, 2000).

Lieblich et al. (1998) sum it up well:

People are storytellers by nature. Stories provide coherence and continuity to one's experience and have a central role in our communication with others. . . . One of the clearest channels for learning about the inner world is through verbal accounts and stories presented by individual narrators about their lives and their experienced reality. (p. 7)

Life story narratives form the fabric out of which individuals make meaning of their lives and their experiences (Cohler, 2000; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Atkinson, 1998; McAdams, 1993). In an individual's life story, the internal meaning is bound in an historical, social and cultural matrix; people's stories are contextually-bound (Tierney, 2003; Cohler, 2000; Lieblich et al., 1998). Life story narrative incontrovertibly places individuals in their historical time. As Lieblich et al. (1998) write, "[in life story narratives] the researcher can access not only the individual identity and its systems of meaning but also the teller's culture and social world," (pp. 8-9). This was useful in this study in order to understand to what degree each participant experienced marginalization, homophobia, discrimination, and/or discomfort with her sexuality as reflective of the external environment and internal processes. Life story narrative methodology can elicit this data (Tierney, 2003).

This study uses life story narrative because of its compatibility with a psychoanalytical approach to understanding human subjects. Psychoanalysis as a technique relies on patients telling their stories to their therapists. Freud (1920) in *The*

Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman reiterates the importance of the “analysis,” of hearing the patient’s story rather than depending solely upon developmental schema. The metapsychology Freud was developing was broad in scope and robust in its ability to synthesize but, he admitted, it could not predict how development would proceed for a specific individual. One might speculate that this struck him as particularly salient for homosexual women. It is worth quoting him at length:

So long as we trace the development from its final outcome backwards, the chain of events appears continuous, and we feel we have gained an insight which is completely satisfactory or even exhaustive. But if we proceed the reverse way, if we start from the premises inferred from the analysis and try to follow these up to the final result, then we no longer get the impression of an inevitable sequence of events which could not have been otherwise determined. We notice at once that there might have been another result, and that we might have been just as well able to understand and explain the latter. The synthesis is thus not so satisfactory as the analysis; in other words, from a knowledge of the premises we could not have foretold the nature of the result.

It is very easy to account for this disturbing state of affairs. Even supposing that we have a complete knowledge of the aetiological factors that decide a given result, nevertheless what we know about them is only their quality, and not their relative strength. Some of them are suppressed by others because they are too weak, and they therefore do not affect the final result. But we never know beforehand which of the determining factors will prove the weaker or the stronger. We only say at the end that those which succeeded must have been the stronger. Hence the chain of causation can always be recognized with certainty if we follow the line of analysis, whereas to predict it along the line of synthesis is impossible. (pp. 167-168)

Certainly, those writing about lesbian women would agree on the importance of listening to the distinct voices and stories told by lesbians, as their experiences have so often been overlooked or subsumed into the narratives of others or reflexively pathologized by unanalyzed theoretical presumptions and assumptions. (Magee & Miller, 1994, 1997;

Reed, 2002; Abramowitz, 1997; Jacobo, 2001). Life story narrative, through its specificity, its likeness to the psychoanalytic case study, is able to capture the complexity and subjectivity of this study's lesbian participants. As a qualitative research method, it is sturdy enough to find and showcase nuance and difference, as well as what was familiar and similar. Life story narrative addresses both the intrapsychic and the relational; life story narrative embodies intersubjectivity itself.

The Participants

Non-probability, purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to recruit subjects for this study (Rubin & Babbie, 2001). Purposive, also known as judgmental sampling, is especially useful when a subset of a population is being researched. In this case, a subset of the lesbian population was interviewed, specifically, those lesbians who resolved issues concerning their sexual orientation later in their lives rather than in their adolescence or early adulthood. Snowball sampling proved helpful as several subjects were able to direct the researcher to other lesbians they knew who had a later resolution of their sexuality. Snowball sampling methods make sense when working with a minority population that still suffers from stigmatization: subjects may be more willing to participate when their identification as lesbian comes from a familiar rather than unfamiliar source. Having said this, however, a third of the subjects responded to either a flyer or to a posting on a gay and lesbian mental health research study site.

Nine lesbians were recruited for this study. There were several criteria for participation in the study. The criteria included:

1. The women had to have had a later resolution of their sexual identity. This meant that they did not fully accept themselves as lesbian in their adolescence or early twenties but only later, in their late twenties or beyond;
2. They were still in the workforce, at least part-time;
3. They were to be between the ages of thirty and sixty-nine; and
4. They were interested in exploring the connection, if any, between their later resolution of their sexual orientation and their work identity.

The rationale for placing an age limitation on the subjects was to narrow the number of generational cohorts. This was important in this particular study since there has been a progressive lessening of intolerance and discrimination over the decades and lesbians coming of age in the nineteen sixties and seventies, and later, experienced a far different environment in terms of homophobia and intolerance than those lesbians coming of age in the forties and fifties (Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000).

Recruiting participants who were still working was done in the belief that the topic of work, work identity, work accomplishments and attainment would have more salience for working lesbians than for those who were retired.

Three participants were recruited via personal friendship circles, three subjects learned about the study through colleagues, two participants responded to an online posting of research studies at a local gay and lesbian community center, and one saw a flyer posted at a local feminist bookstore.

One participant was in her early thirties, one in her early forties, three in their early fifties, two in their mid-to-late fifties and two were in their mid sixties. Two thirds

of the participants were Caucasian. One participant was African-American and two were of Asian descent.

Data Collection Methods

This was a retrospective, qualitative study where the subjects were asked to think about an earlier period of their lives. The goal was to encourage the participants to tell stories about their experience of having a later resolution of their sexual orientation and stories about their work lives. This was done using Lieblich et al. (1998) and Hollway & Jefferson's (2000) life story narrative approach where questions were deliberately broad and open-ended. Each participant was interviewed twice. The first interview generally lasted ninety minutes, the second, follow-up, interview, usually was sixty minutes in length. The second interview provided an opportunity to clarify information elicited in the first interview, it gave participants an opportunity to reflect further on whether they felt there was a connection between sexual identity and work identity, and it further facilitated the making of life story narratives because of the "relationship" established between the participant and the researcher in the first interview. Participants in second interviews were generally more relaxed and at greater ease in talking about themselves and the subject matter at hand, as Hollway & Jefferson (2000) predicted.

Following Lieblich's et al. (1998) premise that childhood memories and stories often prove to be a particularly rich source of information about an individual's personality and lifestyle, the first interview began with an open-ended question about the participant's childhood that did not ostensibly have anything to do with either sexual identity or work identity (p. 79). The participant was asked to relate a memorable story or

two about her childhood and growing-up years. The purpose of starting the interviews in this fashion was to set the stage for story-telling and to communicate to the participant that the interview could be wide-ranging and free in format. This was done in an effort to encourage the emergence of personal narratives rather than “correct” or “compliant” answers to researcher inquiries.

Each participant was asked the same questions in the two interviews with allowances being made for the researcher to ask additional questions that clarified, amplified, or assisted the participant in understanding and/or expanding on the query. The interview process was, thus, structured and semi-structured as is necessary when undertaking a qualitative study involving more than one subject (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Lieblich et al., 1998).

Hollway & Jefferson (2000) emphasize, correctly it seems, the idea of the “defended subject” and the impact being “defended” has on data collection. This is what they have to say about the “defended subject,” and it is worth quoting at length:

The concept of an anxious, defended subject is simultaneously psychic and social. It is psychic because it is a product of a unique biography of anxiety-provoking life events and the manner in which they have been unconsciously defended against. It is social in three ways: first, because such defensive activities affect and are affected by discourses (systems of meaning which are a product of the social world); secondly, because the unconscious defences that we describe are intersubjective processes (that is, they affect and are affected by others); and thirdly, because of the real events in the external, social world which are discursively and defensively appropriated (p. 24).

They outline four data collection caveats of which the researcher must be aware:

1. The subject may not hear the question the same way the interviewer or other interviewees hear it;

2. The subjects may seek to protect vulnerable aspects of themselves and this will emerge in the way they tell their stories;
3. Subjects may not know why they feel things the way they do or why they experience things the way they do, and
4. Subjects are motivated, unconsciously, to hide or disguise the meaning of at least some of their feelings and behaviors (p. 26).

The idea that research participants are defended in one way or another seems a concept of universal utility and validity to the researcher; it certainly has merit for the researcher who is studying and analyzing data about a population that has been marginalized and ostracized as has the lesbian population, in general, in contemporary America.

Hollway & Jefferson (2000) hold that it is not just the research participants who are defended. The researcher brings her own set of defenses to the interview process and to the analyzing of data. Undoubtedly, this affects how material will be heard, what will be asked to be clarified and amplified, as well as what the researcher communicates non-verbally during the interview process. Lieblich et al. (1998) are mindful, as well, of the influence on the data of the interaction between interviewee and interviewer (p.9).

Method Used for Data Analysis

Each participant was interviewed twice. Interviews were held in private spaces where confidentiality was assured. These spaces included the researcher's clinical office, participants' homes, the office of participants, the researcher's home, and the researcher's hotel room for two participants who did not live in the same geographical area as the researcher. Privacy and confidentiality were important to each participant but for several it was extremely important: although all of the subjects had fully resolved their sexual

identity, there was a variance in how “out” the participants were. It is important to make this differentiation. A fully resolved sexual identity is not the same thing as full disclosure of that identity. Generally, those subjects who were more careful in who they disclosed their sexual orientation to were in careers or jobs where they felt that being fully “out” was either inappropriate or potentially detrimental to their job security. The need to be cautious in the work arena seemed to result in a greater caution around disclosure overall for these particular subjects.

None of the participants expressed psychological distress due to the interview process. Some were more comfortable talking about their personal life and their sexuality than others, underscoring the value of using Hollway & Jefferson’s (2000) “defended subject” narrative approach and Lieblich’s et al. (1998) life story narrative approach. Some discomfort was expected with this particular subset of lesbians and the methodology was equipped to handle it, both in the data collection phase through the use of two rather than one interview and in the data analysis phase, as the material was handled as if it were a psychoanalytic “case study,” where contradictions, placement of material, deflections and tangents all had meaning and could be interpreted. As Lieblich et al. (1998) state:

Meaningful components of a life story sometimes manifest themselves through silences, namely, nonelaboration in the narrative. Their force in the story is implied by their lack, by what may seem like avoidance, or by abrupt flashes of intense nature. (p.73)

Each interview was transcribed verbatim. This study used Lieblich’s et al. (1998) holistic-content model of life story narrative analysis. The holistic-content model uses the entire life story of an individual and focuses on the content presented. The researcher analyzes parts of the story in the context of the whole. Lieblich et al. (1998) liken this type of reading to how clinical “cases studies” are read and interpreted (p. 13). Lieblich

et al. (1998) offer the researcher specific guidelines for analyzing the transcriptions of the interviews using the holistic-content framework (pp. 62-63):

1. Read the material several times until a pattern emerges.
2. Keep an open mind while reading and re-reading. Trust your ability to discern the meaning of the text.
3. Put initial and global impressions into writing. Take note of any exceptions to the general impression. Note unusual features of the story, contradictions, unfinished descriptions. Note episodes that seem to disturb the subject or that produce disharmony in the subject's narrative.
4. Decide which foci or themes to follow. Themes are determined by the space allotted to the telling of it, its repetitive nature and/or the number of details given about this aspect of the story.
5. Use colored markers to mark the various themes to keep track of them.
6. Follow each theme throughout the story. Note when the theme first appears as well as the last time it appears. Note transitions between themes and the context that they appear in. Pay attention to episodes that seem to contradict the theme in terms of content, mood or evaluation by the subject.

Lieblich's et al. (1998) method of analyzing and interpreting data dovetails nicely with Hollway & Jefferson's (2000) ideas about the defended subject. The noting of contradictions, of placement of material, of thinking about parts of the narrative in terms of the greater whole allows for the emergence of significant links and associations, in effect, the life story's *gestalt*. It is this *gestalt*, the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, that enables the researcher to understand and capture more fully the subjective experience of the participants, and often hidden meanings of each participant's narrative (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 34; pp. 70-77; Lieblich et al., 1998, pp. 62-87).

Finally, Lieblich et al. (1998) encourage what they refer to as "reflexive monitoring" of the act of reading and interpretation when it comes to data analysis

(Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 10). For Lieblich et al. (1998) and Hollway & Jefferson (2000) it is a given that there can be no **one** correct reading or interpretation of the data particularly because, as Tierney (2003) emphasizes, the researcher is always situated in the text by the nature of the inquiry itself, the questions asked and what is tended to in the analysis (p. 301). It is the full circle of the postmodernist frame, of the decline of the metanarrative and the positivistic explanation for all things, in this case, lesbian.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS A: THE PARTICIPANTS, NINE “CASE STUDIES”

Introduction

Summaries using a life story narrative methodology look different from summaries used in other methodologies. In order for the “life story” of each participant to be known, verbatim excerpts from the interviews are presented. In this way, each participant’s unique “voice” can be heard and the manner in which she tells her story is made visible, two crucial aspects of this research model. Both Lieblich et al. (1998) and Hollway & Jefferson (2000) liken this approach to the psychoanalytic case study where specificity is seen to illuminate important features of the individual’s psychology.

Utilizing the methodology of life story narratives, the first interview with each participant begins with an open-ended question about each participant’s childhood. The subject is invited to tell the researcher about her childhood, and her relationships with her family, her mother, father, siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles, her friends. What is it like growing up in her household? Who is she close to? What memory or memories or an incident or incidents stand out? The response to the opening question proves highly relevant in this study, foreshadowing what is to follow. In answering the first question, salient themes are first announced; frequently, the degree of reservation and defensiveness around the topics of sexual orientation and work identity are first

discerned. For this reason, each summary will begin with the subject's reply to this very first question about her childhood.

"Stella"

Stella is 58 years old and lives with her female partner of ten years. When Stella is still in college, she marries a man and has three children in quick succession. Stella divorces in her early thirties. She resolves her sexual identity when she is close to 40 years old. This is how Stella speaks about her early life: "I was raised in a very dysfunctional family, with heavy drinking and smoking. I carry asthma from the smoking. My mother died of emphysema and my father committed suicide a few years ago."

Stella goes on to share that when her mother was pregnant with her, her mother's brother died. She's not sure if it was a heart attack or suicide that killed him. She shares that her mother went home from the hospital in a wheelchair with a case of phlebitis and was told by the doctors that she might never walk again. This is how Stella reflects on her beginnings: "So I was raised in this cloud of depression. I am climbing out of it now but it has taken."

Stella matter-of-factly reports that she was the victim of sexual and emotional abuse. She remembers a childhood where she could do no right, where she was deemed the "bad" daughter and her younger sister the "good" daughter. Her grandparents and a sewing teacher in high school provide some of the love and affection and belief in her abilities that she does not find at home. This is how Stella tells her story:

Stella: I was my father's child. And Dad had no power and I was called fat and I had bad hair, and my sister's hair was just like my mother's and she couldn't handle that. I've since dealt with it. . . I am the one who does things outside of the box. And my parents strictly believed that there was a proper way to do things.

Jill: Are we talking in terms of gender or just in general?

Stella: My gender was wrong. We were supposed to be boys. . . So I was "only a girl" my whole life. I actually did not know what my father's business was because I was "only a girl" and couldn't "understand" it.

So that was the way. But my sister was the pretty little cheerleader, the kind who did ballet and my parents every night of my life, my grandparents came over for cocktails at five o'clock and we ate dinner at seven or eight and as a little-bitty thing, I was put into a pretty little dress with patent leather shoes and then grandpa and grandma came over for drinks and we were put in the backyard and told to stay clean. And I never did. Oh, my God!

So I don't think inside the box. And I also had a high school teacher I really loved. Not the gym teacher, the sewing teacher. You know, that I loved. So I've always had people who cared about me but home was never a safe, caring place.

Oh, there's another important piece. My mother didn't speak to me the whole time I was in high school, unless it was, "Stella come to the dinner table," or "You can't do that." But she never had a conversation with me.

Jill: What was your relationship with your sister?

Stella: We were competitors all our lives. We didn't speak. . . . I always knew that I was a different type of woman and I couldn't name it. But I loved to sew and things and I thought that was how I was different. But I always wondered why people bothered to date boys and that kind of stuff.

Doing and thinking outside of the box becomes the way that Stella understands the difference she feels within her family, a difference she also feels among her peers. She is a girl of the 1960s who likes sewing and quilting and weaving, she is a girl of the sixties who embraces the domestic arts at a time when girls and women are shunning those things. And she is not interested in boys.

Her feelings of difference carry on into her adult years. Difference leads to conflict, as this story about college illustrates.

In high school I loved to sew and I wanted to be an artist. I'm quite an artist. . . I was told that my dad would pay for college. I didn't want to go to college but I was told that I had to go and I had to be a teacher or my dad wouldn't pay for it. I loved kids. I was in child development and always wished I followed through with that . . . Childhood development, nursery and kindergarten, he (her father) couldn't see the value in that, and it is still a great interest. He didn't see it as viable. I should teach high school or something. And I wanted to get married. I didn't want to have a career at that point. So I got married and had three kids in four years.

What makes this story interesting is what Stella shares about getting married. In terms of placement in her narrative, she tells this story about getting married to her husband before she speaks about "feeling different" and about "not thinking inside of the box."

Jill: How old were you when you got married?

Stella: Twenty. I was in college and my parents had a lot of money at the time and took off for Puerto Rico for three weeks and they didn't tell me where they were. It scared me terribly. And I got married to the guy I was dating because I wanted some kind of security and I really wanted kids. I'm a real child-oriented person.

According to her narrative, Stella marries for several reasons: she feels scared because she does not know where her parents are, she is in conflict with her parents, particularly her father over what she should do with her life, and finally, she sees herself marrying because she feels different and does things "outside of the box," that is, out of step in comparison to others.

When the interview moves on to questions about career, the narrative threads of seeking safety and security through an important relationship, the presence of conflict

and conflictual interactions, and the sense of approaching life by doing things “outside the box” continue.

Stella divorces her husband and returns to college. Although the arts still captivate her, she pursues an entirely different direction: she goes into the seminary. Here are some of the things Stella remarks about this career decision:

Hindsight is wonderful. I got my spiritual life from my grandma and fell deeply in love with a woman pastor when I was thirty-one. I wasn't a lesbian. Long story short: Got divorced, had to go back to school for two years. I could have gone back one year to get my bachelor's but I think I was going to seminary because the female pastor wanted me to be a pastor.

In the second interview Stella is asked again what she thinks is the impact on her work life of not accepting herself as lesbian until later. This is how she replies:

I would have taught art or early childhood development if the female pastor hadn't wanted me to go to seminary. . . Yeah, if I had been out to myself, I would have made a different choice when I got divorced. It was just too scary and I would have lost the [relationship with] female pastor – if I had come out because my church is so bad about this.

Only in the second interview can Stella let herself fully talk about her deep feelings for the female pastor who influences her career decision.

I was not out to myself and we were at a [religious] retreat and I saw her naked in the shower one time and I had this – “Ohhh! moment “and I ran. At the time I didn't know what was going on. It was too scary. It was a good 5 years later that I came out to myself. But I remember the physical response of seeing her naked.

Stella enjoys being a pastor although being different continues to be a factor. She decides after graduating from seminary to return to her home state outside of Illinois.

This is what Stella says of her reason for doing so and her experience of ministering:

Decided to go back to my home state because I dearly loved the female minister who was there. But I was not a lesbian. I did not know that at the

time. . . And she sent me a card saying, 'I'm looking forward to you coming back. I want to see you. I want to spend time with you.' I got back and was sent to a little country church that didn't want a woman, didn't want a divorced woman, and definitely didn't want a divorced woman with children. And their male pastor had told them that the church was forcing him out to hire a woman. And he had requested the move but he snuck back in all the time. And then I became a parish nobody could be with. All the clergy wanted nothing to do with me. I thought so differently. In the urban area (where she had ministered while at the seminary), we used inclusive language. God was He or She, and I was sent to the Bible Belt. I didn't know how to talk to these people. They kicked me out after the first year.

It turns out all right. Her church gives her a choice of three other parishes and

Stella finds a new home.

I made the decision that I was going to do whatever I had to do to succeed in this church. Now my friend [the female pastor], had never had lunch with me, had never once come by my parish. The clergy women stayed so far away because I was doing all these awful things, I was a bad housekeeper . . . the congregation I began hitting them over the head with the Bible and preaching it, it is so easy to do. And I also recognized in each family that has three or four kids, one or two stay home and one or two leave. And I was pastoring the ones who stayed home. And I'm the last one to stay home! I'm the one who leaves!

At this point during the first interview, Stella totally disrupts the narrative:

I tried to commit suicide. It was a gesture, I see now. I was in the hospital for 3 weeks. The police came to my house because I had disappeared. I was very isolated. And I was succeeding in the church but my inside was dying. It was right before my fortieth birthday. The year I was 39, I buried two women who were 39, and I realized I was going to die if I didn't get a different job. It was my second Easter there it was after my father's suicide and all this stuff had happened, I came home and my oldest daughter had cooked Easter dinner for us and I was vomiting all the time. And I was having severe migraines. And I had all this codeine medicine so that I could do Sunday church and I was doing wonderful.

I had succeeded at it but all the clergy at that time . . . I was so different they couldn't stand it. And the churches I was in, didn't quite know what to do with me because I think so differently.

When Stella is asked if the suicidal gesture has something to do with her sexuality, Stella states that she is out to herself by that time and moves the narrative into the story of how she comes to realize that she is lesbian. By her account, resolution occurs when a friend brings over a calendar of naked men to cheer her up and she realizes that naked women “turn her on” more than naked men.

And I thought, wait a minute, it was one of those, you know, I’m a lesbian. I’ve been in love with the female pastor. Oh, of course! It was just sort of that quickly. Just sort of that quickly.

Later in the interview Stella speaks of leading a double life, of being a minister and going to a lesbian bookstore and playing on a lesbian ball team.

Jill: So you’re leading this double life . . . is that why the suicide attempt?

Stella: Yes, and money was terrible, my car had died. I was succeeding as a pastor in the church where I was pastoring but not in the larger church.

In the second interview, the narrative line around Stella’s sexuality and her suicidal gesture becomes clearer but this is definitely tender territory. Clarification emerges from a different set of questions:

Jill: Did you have the experience of feeling unrecognized, estranged, or alienated from important others earlier in your life before your sexual orientation became an issue for you?

Stella: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. My family didn’t want anything to do with me. And I am very conscious that my dad, I was my Dad’s child but as I got older he traveled, Monday thru Thursday every week and my parents went out every Friday and Saturday drinking and I spent my summers with my grandparents so . . . being a grandparent is very important to me because my grandparents were so – they saw me. My mother – my mother loved me as she was able but I was so very different and I thought differently from how I was supposed to. I was raised in one of those families where it was “ This is how it is and this is how it is.” Any other idea was wrong.

And my mother bought a sewing machine when I was born and tried to sew and messed it up and she’s all thumbs and she couldn’t do anything.

And taught me to sew, just a little bit and I just took off. And I remember, before I was even in junior high taking sewing classes, I was making pants with elastic and I wanted to learn how to put in a zipper. And she took me shopping and bought me fabric and bought me a zipper. And she was going to work with me the next day and teach me how to do it. And I thought, “That’s not going to work!” So I got up at four in the morning and I read the directions on the pattern and on the zipper and they were different. And I figured out how to do it and I put the zipper in and she got up and I said, “There’s the zipper.” And I remember her looking at me and not knowing what to do with it. That I had this talent.

And then when I met Mrs.. B. [at school], I think I was as much a gift for her as she was for me, because one time I bought yellow fabric to school to make a vest—and she said, “You can’t make that at school.” And I said, “Why not?” And she said, “You’re not going to learn anything. Now you can take this pattern and blend it with another pattern, and you can make a jacket, or you can change the collar or you can do what you want to but you just can’t make this pattern.” And so she really saw me and pushed me.

But my family – I think outside of the box . . . it’s cute, my partner and my kids – my son is just as creative as I am and I didn’t see it but she did. Until she named it, I didn’t see it. And I’m now seeing it. And he talks with his hands just like I do and the girls do. [laughs]

For me, part of it was sexual orientation but part of it was my creativity and my right brain thinking.

Jill: So when you were struggling with your sexual orientation, those feelings did they feel similar to what you felt earlier on with your family, with your mother?

Stella: You know, I really didn’t struggle with it because I put it away and one day I knew and then as I explored it, I had to figure out – it was like, I’ve got to deal with this.

Jill: It was buried? You kind of knew but you didn’t let yourself know?

Stella: Yeah.

Jill: And then one day you let yourself know?

Stella: And then when I knew, I knew. There was no question about it. But what to do with it. I was very suicidal.

When Stella fully resolves her lesbian sexual orientation she has to leave her church and her career as a pastor. She does so in a rather public way which not only has professional consequences but personal ones as well as this excerpt from the first interview reveals:

Stella: The Methodist system was doing these things called Listening Processes. They were going around talking to the churches that were reconciling churches – there were many churches that were against gay and lesbian issues and it was a group of bishops doing this. And they were having a big worship service and they needed a speaker for the worship service and I was approached to be the speaker. I was just turning forty. My division leader came to me and told me that if I spoke at this meeting, they were going to put me on trial. So I spoke at this meeting and I turned in my letter of resignation and made all the Methodist newspapers. So my mother and sister who are Methodists found out about me that way. I didn't handle it well – but we weren't speaking anyway.

And the world just crashed around me. I hit a real . . . [long pause].

Jill: So having to leave the church.?

Stella: Yeah, that was my struggle. It was always what held me together. And when I moved back to the city, and my youngest daughter was living with her dad, she wanted to live with her dad -- he was very dysfunctional. He just died weighing 656 pounds. But she and I have worked a lot of things out.

Jill: So you lose that part of you that has been pastoring, they take that away from you because you come out as a lesbian.

Stella: Yes, and it was just, and I was so low and at the same time my mother told my oldest daughter that I wasn't a lesbian, that I was lying . . .

Traumatic as resolving her sexuality is, in terms of losing her work identity as a minister, Stella is clear that she chose the right path. This is what she says in the first interview:

Stella: Once I claimed myself as lesbian, I knew it was right.

Jill: You paid a high price for it.

Stella: A very high price. In hindsight, twenty years later, I'm not a pastor. There are so many parts I can't, don't do well.

Jill: So looking back, how do you think that not having your sexual orientation figured out earlier affected, if at all, your work identity, your ambitions or goals, your overall work experience?

Stella: Oh, if I had known I was a lesbian, I never would have gone to seminary. I was the female pastor's little puppet. I didn't want to go to seminary. I wanted to be an art teacher and she wanted me to go to seminary, so I went to seminary.

In the second interview, Stella is more emphatic about how her life changes in a positive way, despite the difficulties she endures.

Jill: After you accepted yourself as lesbian, did your ideas about work or career change? Can you share a story or two about that?

Stella: I had to struggle to figure out what to do as a career. And I also have accepted a lot more, as I see my kids interact with their mother-in-law, how much I love kids. And how much I love sewing and that aspect. And I look forward to retirement and really being able to have time to explore all of that. And to find ways to bring money in but claiming my sexuality, opened myself and gave myself solid feet to walk on so that I can now claim my creativity also.

It's like trying to live with one hand tied behind your back when you've got this thing that you're hiding from yourself and others. I dated a Methodist pastor before and it was just craziness, her pastoring and – she's since married a man. She wanted to be a pastor so much that she handled it that way.

And so, it has changed so much.

Jill: That's an interesting image you just said, going through life with one hand tied behind your back.

Stella: And that is what it is without claiming it.

Stella's work trajectory is more difficult after she leaves the ministry. In the years immediately following the resolution of her sexual identity, Stella does a series of odd jobs before finding more permanent work in health related fields. Yet, it is during this

transitional and uncertain period that she meets her future partner, a woman she has been with for 10 years and with whom she shares a full life:

It changes the whole world which is part of, you were talking about work and how it affected our work and it's given me the freedom to be who I really am. To have the supportive home to come home to. It's changed everything for me.

What is most striking in Stella's narrative about her work, is that although she has a good, steady job, she views her "real" work as that surrounding her domestic life: taking care of her family and her partner's family.

My job now is very much taking care of my mother-in-law. I spend a lot of time doing that. And I spend a lot of time with my children and grandchildren. My grandchildren are easy. My children have dealt with their anger and abandonment issues and all of that kind of stuff. And I feel really good about where all the kids are now. But it has been a journey. In order for me to be able to engage them, as an adult on my own two feet, I had to have my sexuality out there.

And when folks give my children a hard time about my sexuality, their issue is, "I don't know what God thinks about it, I don't know what the Church thinks about it, I know that my mother is healthier than she has ever been and she's not suicidal and she takes care of us, she loves the grandkids, she's in a wonderful relationship, so it's a good thing." They look at the results.

My father committed suicide a couple of years before I quit pastoring. So suicide is very real in our family. And all the consequences of that. And my children have all dealt with suicide. I passed it on, it's the family disease. So we talk about it, bring it into the light. That's all I can do for them. And so, we're getting stable was a part of me getting stable. And my partner is so solid and stable. In a lot of ways, she's very boring.
[laughs]

It's being able to walk on your own two feet that's what dealing with my sexuality is about.

“Julie”

Julie is a 33 year old physician of Asian descent. She “comes out” as a lesbian when she is 29 and has been in a stable relationship with a female partner for several years. The question about her childhood signals what will turn out to be the major themes in Julie’s life.

Julie: I had a very great childhood. Every time I have to recall about my childhood, I have fond memories. Our family was very close. We moved around a lot because of my dad’s work so that lead us to live in different countries. Throughout that though, the constant factor in my life was my family, my mother, my father, and my younger sister. So we remained very close.

Jill: How much younger is your sister?

Julie: Two years. And, umm, there’s also a cultural component too because Asian families tend to be close. So grandparents, aunts and uncles were all very integral part of growing up. The familial ties, the manner in which you are supposed to respect your elders, that was a very much important part that was sort of drilled into you when I was a child.

In eighth grade the family moved to the States. In terms of demographics, I would probably be an outlier in your study. It mattered what I did and what I didn’t do because it was all about saving face for my parents. My behavior was very much a reflection of my parents. So I had every incentive to do the right thing. Who was I closest to? You know actually, if I have to think about any negative things about growing up in such close-knit, multigenerational family structure with those kinds of values – there was a lot of misogynistic, if I have to say, for lack of a better word, misogynistic attitudes where the value of a woman was based on certain criteria. It is a very male-dominated society so it was not uncommon for my uncles, for example, to comment on my weight gain for example. Or my father would say things like, “Oh, girls don’t do that!” As a child growing up I had a lot of interests very different from other girls. I would belong to a science club or would enter a contest in model-plane making, or I would be out running around with the neighborhood boys and my dad would say, “Girls don’t do that.” So there was a lot of that that affected my identity as a woman.

When the questions move from Julie's childhood to how she thought about career issues, Julie reveals that she is aware of having same-sex attractions as a young girl:

Jill: Moving on to the second question now, as a young person, how did you think about career and what you wanted to do for a living? What were the family expectations for you?

Julie: [Long pause] Do I have to think about this in relation to my identity as a lesbian or?

Jill: Not necessarily . . . when you were growing up, maybe before you had any sense of . . . I don't know when you had a sense of being attracted to girls or women, when that happened to you. . .

Julie: That was in grade school. Starting in grade school. I had a very intense crush on my best friend to the point where I would get extremely jealous that she would talk to other girls or --

Jill: How old were you?

Julie: Third grade. That's when I first realized. . . . I knew that there were gay men, I just didn't know that there were women who were in love with women. So, I didn't really process it. I had no idea what it was. Since then, I've gone through many, many crushes on best friends. . . . As far as career goals, it was very early on that I knew I wanted to become a doctor. Essentially I wanted to save the world. I think a lot of it has to do with living in third world countries and growing up in third world countries that shaped that goal.

Cultural factors play an enormous role in how Julie views her place in the world and how she views herself. In the second interview when Julie is asked about her thoughts since the first interview, she says:

I think I realized that more than my sexuality, I think my ethnicity, the cultural background probably plays a bigger role.

The best way I can summarize it is, in my culture there's a saying that says: "The nail that sticks out will be hammered down." You have to blend in, you have to be affable, you cannot stick out. There's no individual. Now in American culture, "the squeaky wheel gets the grease." There's so much value put on individuality. So that was a big struggle trying to balance that and coming to terms with what that means for me and executing the things that I've learned from both cultures.

The more that Julie thinks about the resolution of her sexual orientation, however, the more Julie is able to consider additional factors, beyond her ethnicity. Julie gives a very thoughtful and elaborate answer to the question about what enables her to embrace her lesbian sexual identity.

You mean that I was fully at peace with it [her lesbian identity]? Wow, that's a really difficult question. It was definitely not when I first came out. When I first came out, I really wasn't sure what I was. I knew that I could be sexually attracted to men also because I dated men before. So, I was very confused and everyone loves to put labels and put other people in boxes so they can feel comfortable. So, at first, I didn't have an identity label as a lesbian and the closest thing I could define myself as was bisexual. And then when I first came out and was trying to date women, there was a lot of "bi-phobia". Yeah. So, that made me feel even less confident about my identity inside. I thought, well, maybe I am just confused and maybe I am just going through a phase. So that didn't help.

Umm, I don't know if it's *what*. I think *when* I finally embraced my sexuality was when I think that the community that I created with time, with friends that were, are gay or lesbian, the friends that were supportive or whether they were straight but it's the community that's supportive, friends, and also when I finally found myself in a relationship that was accepting. There wasn't really internal – it was more external validation from others, "Yeah, okay. It's okay to be gay. You're gay and that's fine." And that's when I started embracing myself, my own identity.

The more and more I realized that what, where people draw the line of that label of lesbian versus bisexual versus poly-amorous, I don't know, whatever that whole different definitions are, I realized that it's very different for everybody and just as people define dating as different. Some people define dating as just sleeping with a girl, or dating means you're exclusively in a relationship, though just as there are many different definitions, I've realized that there are many different definitions.

And it took some time for me to figure out what my definition was. Which is not the sexual part, it's the emotional relationship part which I never really had any satisfaction with men. So now I could look back and say "Ok, that's because I'm a lesbian!"

So yeah, a lot of it was external and so when I finally came out to my colleagues at work, and I saw that they weren't treating me any

differently, so that was another additional step of – the affirmation that I got. So it wasn't one particular "what," it was more of a gradual process.

Julie does not feel she can share her struggles with accepting herself as a lesbian with the people she has the closest relationships with:

Julie: While I was trying to struggle through the acceptance of myself, I pretty much kept that, the personal life a secret from my family, my mom, my sister and that drove me—and that was the thing that drove us apart for 3 years.

Jill: What was that like for you?

Julie: [sighs] It was very difficult. I mean at times, it was basically, I lost my basic support. The support that I used to have. Anytime there were difficulties in schoolwork or relationships, I would always talk to my mother or my sister. And in this instance, during this time period, I found that I couldn't. I was in a very verbally abusive relationship when I first came out. And it was very controlling and it was very difficult and I didn't know where to go to talk to, I didn't know who I could talk to about this because I certainly couldn't talk to my mother or my sister. And since I was forced to find new bonds with people who would be supportive, and that happened with some of the nurses that I worked with – but it was hard because I didn't know who was going to be accepting and who wasn't. And on top of that to try and talk to somebody about this messed up relationship.

Jill: So you felt like you lost the people closest in, your mother and your sister?

Julie: And my best friend. My best friend, actually several friends.

Jill: So you felt like you couldn't share that with them.

Julie: Yeah, because that would mean that I would have to come out to them and I wasn't ready for that because I wasn't sure at the time what this was going to be.

Jill: So did you maintain contact with them and just kept it at a different level or,

Julie: Very superficial, it was much more superficial and very seldom would we get to talk because I felt like when I did talk to them like I had nothing to say.

Julie has since come out to her mother and her sister and to close friends. But she is careful about self-disclosure. She is not at all confident that it would be well received in her ethnic community and feels that she wants to protect herself and her parents from any potential hurt or insult. Julie very much feels she straddles two worlds, the American and her Asian community, and this complicates things for her. Her father, for example, does not know that she is a lesbian.

Julie speaks a great deal to the issue of gender; growing up she is very aware that she does not fit the gender stereotypes for an Asian girl. She feels that she does not fit into the feminine mold expected of her, either in appearance or in interests. Julie is not “girlie” as she puts it, nor does she claim to want to be and she is interested in things boys are interested in, for example, science and medicine. She determines early on that she wants to be a doctor.

Julie: Culturally speaking there was a lot of these expectations that the girl was supposed to behave this way and girls were supposed to wear this and look like this, you’re not supposed to be fat, you’re supposed to be demure, you’re supposed to be feminine. I really didn’t care for it. [Laughs] So, there was a lot of, my mom and my sister were, they were like the ultimate feminine Asian women, and so, even with adults, male figures in my family, or even my sister and my mom, there was a lot of criticism on how I looked or how I behaved. There was a lot of this, “Well, girls don’t do that” or “Girls should do this.” There was a lot of that and it made me . . . yeah, I probably felt—I definitely felt inadequate compared to the standards that was being presented to me. And it bothered me a great deal. But I also realized that those were wrong. That a girl should be able to do whatever she feels like doing, including those “stereotypical” boy activities

Jill: And when did you realize that? As a child or later? You said you belonged to the science club, you made model airplanes, and they are not very typical girl activities.

Julie: At the same time I would sit at home with my sister and play with Barbie dolls. I got to do everything and certainly having a professional career also was a male thing to do because girls are supposed to have a job

not a career, they are supposed to be married by a certain age, and have kids by a certain age. I have basically broken a lot of the rules because I'm already 33 and I don't have babies, yeah – I run into my mom's friends or people that I know and they're like, "You don't have babies yet? Stop working and have babies." The value of a woman is so different. And yeah, so, for most of my life I have basically fought to prove people wrong. Yeah. I think it helped me to become stronger, I do.

Jill: Prove people wrong?

Julie: They said, well, my uncle said, I couldn't do it because I was a girl. He said, "Oh, she will never get into medical school. She just came to the states when she was in the 8th grade, how is she going to get into a good college or go to medical school? I go, "Well, I'll prove you wrong." The other thing is that my mom and dad only had two girls and so people always made comments, "Oh, you don't have a son." So then I felt that it was on me to prove that hey, I'm better than your loser son. So, there was a lot of that. I've always felt a lot more masculine around my girlfriends, my friends from high school for example. My best friend she was very much really a girlie-girl and I always felt, I don't know, like I never could explain what that was. But I always felt very much more masculine. I don't know if that meant something but . . .

Jill: And it sort of bothered you?

Julie: Oh yeah, totally. It felt like I was this awkward – I didn't fit into this mold. So I rebelled. I rebelled because I didn't want, I didn't look like those Asian girls that were petite but slim, girlie, perfect hair, perfect clothes. I was, like, I don't fit into that, so I'm going to rebel. So I went through a goth phase. It did allow me to experiment with a lot of different things.

Jill: And your sister, does she have a career? Has she done it more the way she was "supposed to?"

Julie: She's married to a lawyer, she's a nurse. She already has a baby. Yeah, so she's like the perfect child. [laughs with some bitterness.]

Jill: So there are some feelings about that.

Julie: Yeah. I definitely felt incompetent being a girl. . . . It wasn't like I excelled in sports either. I always joked that I missed that softball gene. How is it that I am a lesbian who doesn't even know how to play sports! [Laughs] I missed that gene. I think that a lot of these things are based on stereotypes, boys are supposed to be this way, girls are supposed to be this

way, lesbians are supposed to be this way and I feel like I don't fit in anywhere.

Julie gets very depressed during medical school and takes a year off. She feels enormous pressure to conform and cannot figure out how she would or could have a relationship with a woman.

Julie: I was in three very short-lived relationships with men in med school. That was about the time that all my friends and classmates were getting married. And I was really unhappy with dating these men and I thought that that was what I was supposed to do, find a man and get married and graduate med school and I was not very happy about that.

Even though I knew enough to sign up to go to one of those gay-lesbian student groups, it never really occurred to me to date anybody around me because—and I had crushes on my classmates—big time, I would have these impossible straight-girl crushes. And I would be like, “Why even bother because this is not going to go anywhere?”

At the same time nothing is like clicking to tell me, . . . I had no idea. I didn't know that it was like fluid. I thought that it was more . . . I thought, there are gay women out there somewhere but I just don't know where they are and I never met them so – meanwhile I'm getting these boys. It's so difficult and I'd always heard that relationships are difficult and are a lot of hard work. And I thought, man, this really is hard work. I'm having these parallel things but I'm not actually like connecting the two and going, “Ah, wait! What is so difficult with boys and so unsatisfying is because you are a lesbian. No, I didn't think about it that way. I never made the connection.”

Jill: So you say, yeah there are gay women, but you never say, “Maybe I'm a gay woman”?

Julie: [laughs] No, right. And I would like to meet or find out – I mean I never even talked to a gay person, so maybe I should go to these student things and find out but at the same time I'm thinking, but I'm not really, maybe I'm bi- but, you know, I think that was the time that was the most confusing during those years. Now that I think about it. I never ever really knew gay classmates, it never occurred to me. It's funny, when I first came out, I would always, I would always be fascinated by the stories of what was it like when you came out? Now I don't even care. But for the longest time, “So, what was it like when you came out? How did your family handle it?”

So the whole medical school thing, when I took a year off, I didn't like school, I didn't like my relationship, I didn't like my life, I was miserable and I just didn't know who I was. That was why I was so unhappy.

Julie gets married during the year she takes off from medical school.

I met this guy and within the year I got engaged and married because it was too complicated. It was too difficult. How am I gonna date women and have my family accept it, I have to come out, Oh! It's too much to deal with. And so, basically, I took what was easy because I figured, you know, it wasn't like I thought that I probably could be happy. It wasn't like a big priority, "I must have a relationship with a woman for me to be happy, whole and fulfilled."

Julie does what is expected of her. While Julie is married to her husband, she puts career first. She works very long hours, volunteering for extra work. She trains for the marathon. Her home life takes a back seat to her work life. After a few years, Julie realizes that her marriage is not working out and she decides to divorce her husband. In her ethnic community, getting a divorce is a big deal, a disgrace, a shameful act. By this time, Julie has completed her medical training and is established in her career.

Weathering the familial disappointment over the divorce and being a doctor gives Julie the courage to pursue relationships with women:

When I decided I was going to leave him, it was a big, huge deal dealing with my family and once that, it was like a floodgate that opened up. Because if I got a divorce and I was okay with my family, and the family was okay. After that, I decided, "I'm doing what I want." I got a divorce and like there can't be anything worse that I can do. I just felt like I had nothing to lose anymore. Gosh, why did I feel that way though?

I guess if I was going to be marked, and the divorce was one of those things. I don't know what it was that happened but after that I was like, "I have nothing to lose." I have already disappointed the family, how much more can I disappoint them? And by then, paralleling that, I had already graduated medical school, I had become a doctor, right, I was working all my life, what close to twenty years, and so I finished and gotten to that point, and now I had new found confidence in myself because "Wow, you know what, I'm a doctor!" I have accomplished my goals and that sort of helped me define other things.

Whereas before this becoming a doctor, this thing was like my whole self-worth. But once I've attained that it was much easier. And I started feeling more comfortable with myself.

After Julie divorces she actively dates women. It is a tumultuous time. She describes having a lot of “dating drama.” The ups and downs affect her work life, making it more difficult for her to focus and concentrate. Despite the “dating drama” being with women feels “right.” Once Julie makes the decision to be with women, either dating or in the current stable relationship that she is in, her approach to her career and work changes. Julie no longer wants to work long hours and volunteer for extra call and procedures. Julie's priorities shift: she wants to have a personal life. Julie is now in a stable relationship and she wants to be home with her female partner.

When I started dating women I knew that that was it, that felt right but it was the wrong people, the wrong women I was dating and there was a lot of turmoil and they were costing me a lot of energy and my work suffered. I wasn't able to concentrate or I would get very like—or it would get very interrupted. It was my personal life coming into my work life and kind of causing interruptions. Once I found peace with my identity and peace within my personal relationship, then it wasn't costing me much energy and so now I was able to function in both personal life and work life. And my work life is probably much easier now. . . I don't want to work that much. I need to redistribute my energy and time now and I'm taking some of that from work and putting it into my personal life. Whereas it was all work before. Now I'm saying, my personal life is more important than my work. I'm going to move some of that over here to my personal life.

When I was with my husband, having a personal life was not a priority. Yeah, yeah. I loved him, I cared about him but we never actually merged any finances. I never had to change my name. I always wanted kids but I could never picture myself having kids with him. It was sort of like we were just like living together. Married but he wasn't very important. It wasn't important—I never did anything to prioritize us, our time, anything like that. Whereas—gosh, that is so weird, I never realized that—it's funny, because I would go through times when I was co-habiting with a female partner, living separately or like single, I went through a big single phase, I definitely made sure that my work schedule worked around my personal life. So it was, “No, I can't be on call that night because I have to

go to this lesbian party or whatever.” Or, it was like, I can’t be on call that night because it’s my partner’s birthday. So it was like that big priority shift. And before, when I was still living the “straight life” [laughs], it was definitely like, “Career, career!”

At the end of the interview, Julie shares that she is changing jobs so that she has more control over the number hours that she works; she wants a better balance between work and her personal life. She mentions, in passing, that her new job is with an agency that services a predominantly gay and lesbian population.

“Elaine”

Elaine is 52 years old. She is a former nun. She is in the convent for 8 years. She meets the woman who will be her partner for the next 20 years in her religious community. Elaine accepts her sexual identity as a lesbian when she is 28 years old. Elaine has spent her entire work life teaching in Catholic schools. Over the course of the past several years, she has gone back to school to become a school counselor. Her hope is to continue to work within the Catholic school system but as a counselor rather than as a teacher. This is how Elaine answers the question about her childhood:

Elaine: I had four siblings, I am the middle child. I am four out of five. My oldest brother is 61, he left home when he was 17, he is a religious brother. Q. would have been 56. He died of AIDS in 1992. He was a social worker and special ed teacher. He’d been in the Peace Corps. My sister is 54 and she is a nurse and she lives on the East Coast. And then the youngest, another brother, is 50 and he is an attorney in the Midwest. I am 52.

We grew up in a pretty Scottish-Irish Catholic family where you didn’t express feelings. Well, people got angry. It was okay to yell but it was never okay to cry. It’s not that we didn’t cry, but it wasn’t—what do I want to say?—it was like you’re a baby if you’re crying. We never talked about sexuality. Ever. I do remember asking my mother once because I was always reading and I think I saw the word homosexual and rape in the

paper. And I remember asking her what it was and she wouldn't talk about it. I was about 8 or 9.

We all played together, we played in the neighborhood. We lived in a small town in the Midwest. So we were outside all day from morning to night playing together with kids in the neighborhood.

My dad was a . . . when they moved there [from the East Coast when her oldest brother was two years old] he took whatever job he could. Then he took a job at a welding plate company. He drove a truck for a number of years. He was delivering oxygen tanks and nitrogen. And then he had a heart attack, a serious one, when I was 12, so then he moved into the office and he stayed in that job until he retired. My mom was a housewife.

Friends, kids that we went to school with, we all hung out together. You know, in a small town. It was a town of 1200, eight streets one way, eight streets the other. The older kids had to take the younger kids with them to play. Everyone in town knew who you were. Everyone kept an eye out if you were doing something wrong they would call your mom.

I was close to my youngest brother and to Q. who was my deceased brother. My sister and I were too close in age and we fought like cats and dogs. I was the peace-maker in the family. My oldest brother left when he was seventeen and I was nine so I don't know, we don't have much of a relationship. But my sister and youngest brother particularly had tempers and so I was always sort of the smoother-over in the house.

My dad was . . . I can sort of recall my mom getting mad at my dad because he would go up town with his friends, he was not a drinker but he would play poker and she [Mom] would just get pissed. She'd be yelling at him. They didn't go out, their going out was shopping on Friday night to get groceries. My oldest siblings would babysit.

I went to a Catholic school that we walked to. Talking about sex . . . I can remember the nuns telling us when we were little that we should never touch those private parts. I grew up in that age when sex was just not talked about, you just didn't talk about it with anybody.

And then Q. who was gay. Q. was so much fun. He loved everyone and everyone loved Q. And he had girlfriends, he was very smart, very likeable, but he didn't have an athletic bone in his body. But he always hung out with all the jocks. And then when he went off to college, probably were his first gay experiences, is my guess. I mean I can remember when he must have, I don't know, my dad found something that Q. had written that indicated that he was gay, I don't know exactly how it happened, but I remember my father telling me, "Did you know that your

brother was a homosexual?" And I said, "No, " but I think I kinda knew. And it was a really shameful thing. I remember, I was probably about 18-19, and I was at a party with a bunch of kids that I went to high school with. So Q must have been 22 or so, because he was four years older than I was, and there were some guys . . . people gathered in a room talking. . . and one of the guys—and he didn't know that I was within hearing distance— said, "Did you know that Q is gay and is going to marry a black guy?" 'Cus Q. must have brought a black guy home with him. That would have been really taboo. And the guy talking was making fun of Q, and I remember one of my male friends saying, "Do you want me to go beat the shit out of him?" I said no, but I was just like, I just wanted to leave and crawl into a hole. I didn't have any inkling at that point of about my own sexuality.

Jill: So at 18 you still didn't have any sense [about your sexuality]?

Elaine: I'll come back to that, but no, not really. Not using the word lesbian. I had a sexual attraction for the first time when I was about 18. I worked on a real popular retreat program for high school seniors. I made [the retreat] when I was a senior and then my first year in college the people who were running it in my area asked me if I would work on it, and I said sure. And I got close to this girl, I was a freshman in college and she was a senior in high school. I got very close to her. And that was my first time of feeling of having sexual feelings towards another woman. But I didn't do anything about it. I just ignored it.

Jill: All girls at the Catholic school, or was it co-ed?

Elaine: It was co-ed but the retreats were either just for boys or just for girls.

Jill: So in high school, any dating?

Elaine: Oh yeah, I dated boys. It was real important to have a boyfriend. I mean the only word we used for homosexuals was queers. And I remember having a professor when I was a freshman in college, in junior college, who must have been gay. He was a great teacher but he was very effeminate, didn't have the best hygiene, and so people made fun of him behind his back. Including me.

[long pause] I'm trying to think of a memory or memories that stand out. Well, one of them was the incident I told you about being 19 or 18 and being at this party where they talked about my brother, and made fun of, and I didn't say anything and I was really pissed and hurt.

Jill: And what did you take away from that incident, do you think?

Elaine: Well it was... I was ashamed. And yet I loved my brother Q. deeply. And so I just wanted to go and hit this kid because I was so pissed that he would say something like that.

Elaine starts her preparation for being a nun at age 20. She has a relationship with an older nun who is affiliated with the convent but does not reside there. The relationship goes on for about six years. This is what Elaine says about her relationship:

Elaine: I had developed what I would call a sexual relationship with another nun, not in the house. She lived in town. And she was older than I was and, in retrospect, I see that. She gave me the affection that I craved, that I never got from my own mother. It was turning into something sexual but she would never say that she was lesbian. It was really an unhealthy relationship but we didn't end it until – it went on for 6 or 7 years.

Jill: It's funny how you phrased it, 'you would call it sexual?'

Elaine: Yeah, there was some sex involved but it was—[long pause] well, I'll just leave it at that. It was not, it was more sexual on my part than hers. But she was very manipulative. I remember the people that I lived with, all tried to warn me about her. At that time, someone in the house was involved also with a woman so she didn't say much. But we weren't using the word, we were talking about intimate relationships, which you know has lots of implications.

Jill: So for this other woman, for you, for you, you wouldn't have considered yourself a lesbian, you wouldn't have called yourself a lesbian?

Elaine: No, I never used that word. I found that word really frightening.

Jill: So how did you, how did you think about what your relationship was with this woman?

Elaine: I don't know. I don't think I wanted to look at it because one of the women that I lived with was particularly on me about looking at the relationship, and the nun I was with had this reputation in the community. And I didn't want anyone telling me who I could see and couldn't see. I was very resentful of people telling me what kind of relationship I should or shouldn't have.

I was never really questioning my sexuality. It was probably there but I wasn't thinking really consciously about it. I was intent upon being a nun, and being a teacher, you know, teaching my first year was really hard. Even though I had taught half year, it was really hard. It was junior high, it was rural kids.

In spite of having an ongoing relationship with the older nun, Elaine does not think of herself nor want to consider that she is lesbian. Elaine begins to "consciously" become aware that she might be lesbian when she is around 26 old and is volunteering and becomes involved with a woman who is not a nun and who is openly lesbian.

Elaine: Ok, so I spend my first year teaching, out in a rural area, then I moved into town to be a novice, I'm not teaching, learning about being a Franciscan, being at the mother house. And I have to do some volunteer work which I'm doing at a Catholic Worker House. Catholic Worker Houses are found all over the world, founded by Dorothy Day. So there are a couple of women who run it and one of them is a woman named KB, not in the convent but spent a lot of time with the Franciscans, kinda hanging out with them who is openly lesbian. And she and I get to be friends and her girlfriend also lives there, well, we began to spend more time together and she's the first one who ever used the word lesbian with me and I'm, "Oh! Oh, my God, don't say that word!"

That's when I started to think about myself as lesbian. So I was, what, 25-26. And she and I had a very short-lived affair but she was the one who really kind of introduced the word to me where it became real conscious. But I was still in the convent. So, of course that didn't stop me from having some little flings.

So went out and taught again, after my novitiate year, umm, that's when my current partner and I got involved. And then the first nun I was with, I got done with all that. Then I did community organizing for a year. We in the convent were talking more about people being gay, friends had left who were openly gay.

Jill: So is the church struggling with this? The Convent, as you're talking about it?

Elaine: I had already. I had kind of come out, kind of, but,

Jill: To yourself? To others?

Elaine: I think others knew I was struggling with the issue and that. I was 28, I think I had come to some understanding that I was gay and that I didn't have much integrity if I was saying I was celibate but I also wanted to be in a relationship with a woman. So I left the community and I was back to teaching.

I left in the middle of the year. It was really hard to explain to my students. I was Sister Elaine one day, at the beginning of Christmas vacation, and when I came back I was Miss Z and how come I left. Obviously I'm not going to tell kids. I said, "You know, it just wasn't for me." That was the first time that I had, what's the word I'm looking for, it's hard to be in a Catholic institution and being gay. Now I spent my entire life in Catholic schools, and so it's always been a struggle to be gay and to be in Catholic schools because of the teachings of the church.

Elaine leaves the convent. In the second interview, Elaine is more expressive when she talks about her same-sex attractions.

Jill: So, what enables you to, what's that process like of becoming more aware of yourself personally and accepting that about yourself? What allows that to happen do you think?

Elaine: Well I think I began to realize that I was more attracted emotionally to women than I was to men. And that it felt a lot better. I had never fallen in love with a man like I had with a woman, let's put it that way. Never felt for a man what I felt for women.

Jill: So the guy you came close to marrying before you entered the convent?

Elaine: Oh! I never had that kind of feeling, never. I think I just had boyfriends because that was what you did.

Jill: So it just seemed more natural to be with a woman because you had more feelings?

Elaine: Definitely an affectional preference.

Elaine resolves her identity as a lesbian and leaves the convent when she is 28 years old. She lives with her female partner. It is not all clear sailing in terms of her self-acceptance as a lesbian as the following excerpts reveal:

Jill: What enabled you to embrace your identity as a lesbian?"

Elaine: Hmm, I'm not sure I fully embrace it.

Jill: Even now?

Elaine: Yeah. Umm, but I think when I finally realized I was lesbian in the Franciscans. The Franciscans were very affirming about it. Nobody told me I was a terrible person. So it was easier to accept myself and feel fine about it. Now that doesn't mean that I always felt good about it. Embracing it and feeling good about it, I don't know if they are the same.

Jill: It's how you interpret the word embrace.

Elaine: [pause] I accept myself as lesbian. I don't always like being lesbian.

* * * * *

Jill: Tell me when you first began to have some idea that you might be a lesbian and what that was like for you. If there is anything else you want to add to it?

Elaine: No, just that it was really scary.

Jill: Because of all the messages you were getting?

Elaine: Yeah, it was terrible. Terrible. Couldn't be any worse than to be a lesbian.

Jill: So, do you come out to your family?

Elaine: My dad died in 1986, and my current partner and I had just been together about a year, so I never came out to him. I came out to Q, not to my oldest brother but that's partly because we have no relationship. We're siblings but that's about it. And my mother loved my current partner. And I think she knew. I just could never tell her, it was just. My mom spent tons of time with us, and we spent a ton of time down in my home town with her, but I never—it's like I couldn't tell her.

Jill: What was the worry?

Elaine: I think that she wouldn't say anything. She died, you know. That she wouldn't know how to respond, yeah, that she wouldn't respond at all.

My mom never really knew how to talk about her feelings. And so, I think she, and I think I inherited this from her, she worried. I think I know how to talk about my feelings. She worried. She just kept it all up in her head, worrying about all these kids who are scattered.

Jill: So she knew about your [gay] brother Q?

Elaine: Yes, and she helped to care for Q when he died in a hospice in Washington, DC. She spent a lot of time with him.

Jill: It's just interesting, given that your brother's out, your mother has to deal with having a gay son, that you feel you have to?

Elaine: I think I felt that I would be a disappointment to her if I was gay too. Like she did something wrong. And I was going to protect her and myself.

Jill: Was it hard not to be open to her?

Elaine: Well, it seemed to work better. We didn't talk about feelings. I don't recall my mother ever saying "I love you." When my mom got sick, I was the one, I mean, I loved my mother; I loved my mother very much. I was the one who took a leave of absence from work. School hadn't started but I went in and told them I needed to take a leave of absence and go home and take care of my mom. We didn't hug and cry and tell each other that we loved each other until she was sick. And that was a cathartic thing for me to be able to say, "I love you, Mom." But I wasn't going to say that I was gay at that point.

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Elaine: You know what happened to me, I think when I first left the convent I felt – I obviously had not come out to my family but I had come out to a lot of friends. My [current] partner was still in the convent. I was determined that if she was going to stay I was going to make my way. I mean I couldn't wait around for her to make some decisions. So I decided to go to graduate school and then she decided to leave and we moved here together. I had to write a paper on homosexuality or that was my topic. I don't remember what the exact topic was but it dealt with homosexuality and so I did a lot of research. And when I read all the stuff that the church has said over the years, it got into my head and I began to feel like I was a bad person.

So I went through a few years of feeling like “I’m bad. I’m doing something really bad.” We were still living together, I was kinda talking about how that was in my head and some of that harks back to when I was growing up, it was such a bad thing. Sex period. Sex and the Catholic church was a bad thing for years. I mean you only ever did it for kids, for procreation, not for any sort of pleasure.

Elaine leaves to go to another Catholic school, out-of-state. After 9 years she resigns because of the pervasive homophobic environment. She returns to the school she taught at before, a parochial school where she was “out” to many of the administrators although not “out” to parents and students. Her partner can accompany her to school functions, something that is not possible at the out-of-state school. Elaine makes the decision not to work in what she experiences as an overly repressive, conservative environment. Her move into counseling from teaching occurs shortly after her return. Her lesbian sexual identity seems to be one component in her decision to switch careers from teaching to counseling.

Elaine: Well I think I have always had an interest in being in some sort of social service. As I said I was a social work major for half of college. Ummm, I wanted to be. I mean I liked teaching, I loved, it’s kind of like your own little fiefdom but I also know that for me it takes a lot of energy to stand in front of kids, five classes a day. You really are on stage, if you’ve never taught, you’re on stage and for an introvert like me it took an awful lot of energy. Plus I’m teaching stuff, a lot of times I didn’t really agree with and so I felt that counseling was a natural, kind of an instinctual thing for me. I mean obviously there’s lots of stuff I’ve needed to learn and will continue to learn.

Jill: What helps you make that move, that shift over? Any correlation with your sexual identity?

Elaine: Yeah, if I’m working [clears throat], even if I am in a Catholic school, which I very well may be in, I don’t have to – if a kid comes in to talk about her sexuality I don’t have to say as religion teacher, “You know, now here’s what the church says.” In counseling I can talk about her sexuality because it is all confidential and help him or her explore. . . My sexual identity has been at odds . . . I have been at odds my whole professional career because I would lose my job if I was out. . . .

Jill: But for you, in your work life, once you say, yeah I really am lesbian, does that affect you and how you are able to work, in how you approach it, freed up or whatever. Does it make a difference?

Elaine: I don't know if I can answer that. I'm trying to think back on my first years of teaching when I wasn't necessarily aware of it and now. I kinda have tunnel vision when I'm teaching. I'm focused on what I'm doing that day, that moment, in that classroom. So I don't think so. Resolving it hasn't made a huge difference in my career. Personally yes. But career-wise and my work life other than it's just easier. Some jobs are easier to do when you're lesbian.

Jill: What do you mean?

Elaine: I think counseling will be easier. [pause]

Jill: How so?

Elaine: Because I don't have to live with the fear of being fired for my sexuality. [pause]

Jill: You move into counseling and that feels like you don't have to hide the fact that you're gay, because you're not going to get kicked out, you're not going to announce it to the kids but you can talk about the issue if they bring it to you. In a counseling environment where it can't be talked about in the classroom.

Elaine: Right.

Jill: So on your end, what is it like to be able to do that?

Elaine: Oh, it's very freeing.

Jill: Is the move to counseling a progression of sorts, have anything to do with being gay? With your fuller acceptance of your sexual orientation?

Elaine: I don't know if I can be objective about it because my sexuality has always been hanging out in the background. [pause] I remember when I left the [out-of-state] school, I told the president, "Whether you know it or not, I'm gay." And he said, "Oh, yeah, yeah." I said "I just can't deal with this conservative place." So, yeah, it's there somewhere. I don't know how to put it into words, I don't have language. It's there, there's a connection between being gay and my career but it's not the total reason why I move into counseling.

Jill: But it somehow feels, at this point, like a better fit.

Elaine: I think counseling always would have been a better fit for me but not necessarily because of my sexuality. I think it is more my personality.

Jill: And again, looking back, the reason why you didn't go into counseling right off?

Elaine: I never really thought about guidance counseling because when I was in high school the only time you saw your counselor was for something related to college and I thought, I'm not interested in that. And, I know that still happens in public schools but that's not true in Catholic schools. Catholic school counselors do a lot of personal counseling. I've been trying to change careers for the last 10 years and get out of teaching religion. Teaching religion—there's a correlation between getting out of teaching religion and being gay. I had to get out of teaching religion because I could not bear what the Catholic Church had to say about being gay. I had to go in some other direction. And counseling is just a better fit for me.

In the two conversations that Elaine has with me, she makes a point of telling me that she feels that if she had been born 20 years later, she might have been more comfortable with her lesbian sexual identity.

Elaine: Part of that is my age, I think. Having grown up in that age that I did. If I was born 30 years later, 20 years later and I figured it out, I don't know if I would have gone to the convent. Everything would be different. I think of kids today who talk about knowing that they are gay. . . when they're little.

Jill: The idea that they have language for it . . .

Elaine: And I didn't have the language for it. I just knew it was wrong. [long pause] I think I did everything not to be gay. Being in the convent was a very convenient way to hide it. You could have your little sexual flings.

Elaine returns to the idea that she might have handled her sexuality differently had she been born later in the second interview:

Jill: It's interesting, your brother Q. is openly gay and he's okay with it. [He's 4 years older than Elaine.]

Elaine: Yeah, he lived away from home. I'm not sure how he got where he was. How he got to that spot. We grew up in the same family. Maybe it was because my parents knew and there was nobody else to worry about. Q. was always a personality that was really extroverted and real entertaining, so I don't know; maybe it had something to do with his personality.

Jill: And did you ever talk with him about your own sexuality?

Elaine: Hmm, somewhat. When he died, I hadn't been out for that long. He was, he had already been diagnosed with AIDS so a lot of our conversations were about that. [pause].

Jill: His way of being out doesn't serve as a model in any kind of way, in being out and comfortable?

Elaine: I think maybe if I had been born 20 years later, I may have been more out. I don't know. I'm out to lots of people, I'm just not going to go right now and hold a sign in the street pronouncing the fact that I'm lesbian.

Elaine grows up in the sixties and seventies, and is a tomboy, but states that that was the "style" back then. Elaine connects being a tomboy to the social times rather than to a sense of being different in terms of sexual orientation from other girls and women:

Elaine: You know when I grew up, I grew up with women's liberation and it was a time when a lot of women weren't wearing make-up. Weren't trying to please men, and so, that part I think has sort of been ingrained. And so . . .

Jill: And your Mom and your sister? Was there a difference in?

Elaine: In the way we dressed?

Jill: In how you were from them.

Elaine: My mother was always trying to dress us – my sister and I both were tomboys growing up. My sister wears make-up, she dresses pretty nice. I would say that I dress – a part of this, my dressing is so much of it feels like I always wanted to live a simple life. And part of it has to do with not having very much money and part of it is just wanting to be comfortable. Sometimes I see the girls, the women, in their very spiked heels and I mean, I have dress clothes, and I'll dress up, dress decently, sometimes well to my school, but teachers always dress differently,

they're a little less professional-looking if you will, then if you're going downtown to work. I see people, women in their high heels and think, 'why do people subject themselves to that?' I mean, it would be more out of rebellion; I'm not dressing to please anybody but myself. So, umm, that's not to say that there haven't been times when I wished that I was prettier or had a better figure but I don't know if that has anything to do with being gay or not.

Jill: So you didn't feel less feminine and feel that that was a problem.. . And your sister, who is heterosexual, was just as much of a tomboy as you were.

Elaine: Uh-huh, I grew up in the days when girls were wearing bib overalls and long underwear and T-shirts and work boots. All of my friends, and all of them as far as I know are heterosexual, we all dressed the same way. It's part of the age.

Jill: Right. But it doesn't take on any other meaning for you, other than, this is the age, this is what we do.

Elaine: No it doesn't.

Jill: Even looking back at it?

Elaine: No. I don't think, I think it was more driven by style and comfort than anything else.

In the second interview, Elaine does speak to feeling different from her peers but she places it firmly within the context of her spirituality rather than in the framework of her lesbian sexual identity, even in retrospect:

Elaine: I think I always felt a little different from my peers. When I talk about my peers, umm, and I don't know whether it had anything to do with my sexual orientation. I always felt that it was more about, kind of this sense of liking quiet and feeling this religious vocation. I mean I never talked about it with my friends. I mean I might have joked about it. I mean no one would have ever suspected that I was a spiritual person or wanting to go into the convent. There was always the fact that I was different from, a sense in me that I was different internally from other people.

Jill: And looking back, from the perspective of now, and understanding that feeling of being different, would you characterize it the same way?

Elaine: [Looks at me wide-eyed, uncomprehendingly.]

Jill: Was there a part that might have been related to your sexual identity?

Elaine: I don't know that I thought very much about my sexual identity as a high school kid.

Jill: But looking retrospectively, kind of thinking about what might have made you feel different – and maybe it wasn't that, maybe it was the spirituality you felt that your friends didn't have. Did any of it have to do with your sexual orientation? Looking back.

Elaine: I don't think so. I mean not that I can consciously recall.

“Lucinda”

Lucinda is a 52 year old African-American woman. She reports being aware of same-sex attractions in elementary school. She does not fully accept her lesbian sexual identity until her late forties, early fifties. Lucinda's response to the question about her childhood reveals a significant history of trauma that indelibly shapes her sense of self both in the sexual realm and in the realm of work.

Lucinda: Ok, well, I grew up – this is kind of weird. For what I can reflect back on, the relationship between my mother and me was not great, from childhood on. She basically, I guess abortion wasn't one of the things they could have did legally or safely so—she didn't want me. That's the bottom line. She didn't really want to have me, and stuff like that. She drank throughout the whole pregnancy. The thing with her, I do remember as a – I was an infant, I remember a red color room. Now those were those light bulbs with the colors, they had the red, the green, yellow and stuff like that. I remember music playing, but I also remember a pillow being put over my face, trying to snuff me out. And then after that I was no longer with my mother. Meaning that I don't know if my grandparents walked in, did my stepfather walk in while she was trying to do something to me, but my sister – I have an older sister, she is two years older than me --- and she and me went to live with my grandparents from that time on.

The relationship that I have with my stepfather – great person. I was just sharing with people in group, that if it wasn't for my grandfather and my stepfather being the nurturing, strong black male, uh, they cared for us,

they provided for us—if it wasn't for them, I would have had a very distorted picture of men because I was—well, I'm going to get to that.

What was it like growing up in the household? My grandmother, beautiful gem, I mean, she was really the pillar and she, I guess she saw the abuse that my mother was inflicting on me, that she was the one I remember the nurturing, the show of the love, what a child needed and everything like that. Because when my mother—whenever my mother would have me around her, either she was scolding or verbally abusive because I guess she couldn't do the physical any more because she was being watched or something. But she had always related this story, even until I was 42 years of age, uh, the relationship between her and me was—she really didn't want me but at the same time she manipulated and co-depended me so to a point for 42 years whenever I would try to go away. I didn't do what my sister did, go off with the first john who walked down the street, just to get away from this woman, got married—that was a terrible marriage she was in.

My mother would find a way to manipulate me as well as my auntie and another cousin to get me to come back home. There was always that chain that she kept me towards her. But like I say, my grandparents were really pillars. They were the ones who made sure we had the right upbringing. Now I can't condemn the old girl for everything. She was just a bad mother. She didn't know how to be—now she wasn't like that with my sister. It was the weirdest thing—why was I picked on. She wasn't like that with her, unless my sister knew how to handle it well?

Jill: Did you both have the same fathers?

Lucinda: No. My sister had a different father from mine. And so, my mother, I guess, just made bad choices with men. And got knocked-up twice so it was like—The strange thing with my mother—even though she never really let me know who my father was, I kinda had an inkling but I never did really know—she kept relationship with these two guys. They was all drinking buddies. They all was alcoholics. And I guess it was cool, it was still fun to hang out with them, you know, alcoholics are the best of buddies with anybody as long as the booze is still flowing.

But they was, all the way up until they all died, they was all buddies and I was like, wow, she didn't allow me to know him and yet she's hanging out with him. That woman had issues.

Friends? Didn't really have any because I was a child who was sexually abused as an infant to 8 years old. As far as friends, didn't really have any because I was kind of a sickly kid, just for the fact, you know, of having my virginity taken from me in infancy, when I was child, a baby, it kind of

messed my pelvic. They used to call me pigeon-toed, but as I thought about it, years ago someone was saying, like the pelvic was all out of whack, of course, you're going to be deformed, so I'm thinking maybe – here's this male penis going into this infant, it probably messed with my pelvic, my uterus, so I had a lot of female problems.

Just the fact that I was a sickly kid I wasn't out there with the others. Also I was a chubby kid too and that was a mockery thing. Kids picked on me and stuff like that. So I kind of isolated and didn't really have friend friends.

Growing up with some kids in the building. My grandmother would take in children, to take care of and stuff, I guess just to make extra money and things. I remember, it was a sister and brother, then there was another little girl in the complex, in the building, and we would play with each other because we all was, now that I think back on it, all children of sexual abuse -- so we did the usual exploration things, that kids do with each other but I always caught myself always more attracted to the females than I did the guys.

I don't know if I was first or second grade, there was this girl and obviously I was very attracted to her. We used to go out to recess in the yard where the convent and the rectory was and the school – we were in that little grassy area, and I remember going up to her, this young girl. And I was always so forceful a type of person because like I say, whoever was doing me was forcing me. So when I was with the young girl I would force her in a sense, not to the point of pain or hurt but it was like a pinning her down or against the wall, forcing a kiss on her and things of that nature. And I guess the nuns saw me and the next thing I know I'm in the convent and all I remember was, "You are wicked! Evil! You're bad!" She shook me and oh gosh. Trying to shake the sex demon out of me or something, I guess. She was just really mean. And after that I was like her target. She picked on me for 8 years. And whatever she said or did to me, other than the shaking and calling me evil and wicked, and what you're doing is a sin – it obviously took away what little freedom I had, even though it was freedom of sexuality. She killed it. She frightened it away. She paralyzed it. She made me hate myself because at first nobody questioned it. I mean even the girls didn't question it. They thought I was cute. But like I say, we was kids. And so that was when I first felt shame and guilt and what's wrong with me and so I was just a basket case. And a withdrawn person. I really withdrew. I was like, I didn't know how to act and because of being withdrawn and not being like a kid, not having fun or anything like that. . . My mother thought I was crazy. Therefore, she talked to her teacher—she was going to school to be a nurse—and she talked to the doctor and "oh, something's wrong with her" because now I was being kept up not to show emotions, I was destructive inside so I

would – so with the kids teasing and taunting, with whatever was going on with the rape and stuff, I internalized it. I didn't say nothing. But there was that breaking point when I couldn't take it no more and I would react like [makes a sound like a wild animal]. I would, I guess, scream and holler and shake. She thought I was having a fit, a seizure. So they prescribed phenobarbital. I was on it from second grade until I was ten years old. So when I was being bullied, or beaten up by kids or being raped, I was a zombie. 'Cause I couldn't react, cause I was in La-la land. And I was like, man, I was wondering, "Did my mother know this? Did my mother know the effects of this? Was this planned by her or what?"

Lucinda's extensive history of sexual and emotional abuse at the hands of family members and teachers creates a deep sense of shame within her and leads to social withdrawal and isolation. The social withdrawal and isolation create an additional set of relational difficulties for her, as a child and young person and later, as will be seen, as an adult. Not all of Lucinda's trauma is directed towards her; she is exposed to a very traumatic environment. In the face of what Lucinda witnesses, she decides at an early age that being a "girl" is not a good or safe thing:

I used to hate Fridays and Saturdays because in the apartment building people would get drunk and the women became punching bags. Beaten and you would hear the screams from the gut, begging for mercy, "Please stop!" You would hear these thumps against the wall and running across the floors and this would be in different apartments but you would just hear it. And being a kid in the fifties and the sixties, people tend to their own self. They had the so-called "community" but if something was going on with your own self, that was your own business. All I know was that I used to lay in the bed curled up because I guess I thought about my own physical –somebody attacking me. But at the same time, here was these females just begging for somebody to help them but nobody was doing it. And in my mind, as a little kid, I guess I formed the worst possible image of what could be happening to these women.

There was this one woman. She was such a beautiful, gentle person and she was—like I said, by me not having friends, she was like the only friend that I had. She was just a nice lady. She, you know, I would ride over there in the hallway on my tricycle and she would say, "Hi, my little precious one." And just to hear that word "precious" was something that I welcomed. And she would give me cookies. And we would talk and stuff – but I don't know what we talked about, you know. And then one Friday

or Saturday, I don't know what day it was, I just heard this fighting. This time it was on our floor. It wasn't up in the building or across the courtway, nothing like that. It was closer. And of course it was just terrorizing for me. "Oh my God, this is starting to get close." And she was begging and hollering and screaming for mercy and stuff like that and next thing I hear was Pow! Pow! Pow! And of course I felt like my heart just fell out of my mouth and then you kinda of heard the adults in the apartment building moving around, like shush, because they didn't know if the boyfriend or the husband of this woman was going to go up and down the hallway. So it was just a scary, terrorizing feeling and I guess it was the next day, and still nobody is saying nothing about what happened, nobody venturing out. Just this hush, hush amongst the adults. And I guess I walked up the hallway but I saw the cops and the stuff and I saw the people in the room and I saw the bloody pillow case, so he obviously took a pillow case and buried her face and then shot her in the face. And I just knew my friend was gone. To me she was my friend and I knew she was gone.

But I had no one to talk to, nobody explaining what this was, what was happening. And I remember going back to our apartment and I guess I hid myself off into the bedroom and I remember just sort of curling up and saying, "Oh God, I don't want to be a girl." I don't want to be this way. I don't like what's happening. 'Cause you either get killed or somebody hurt you. I don't want to be a girl. From that day forth, I just didn't want to be a girl. I never knew what feminine was or femininity was.

And I basically didn't want to be a girl no more or associate in any way with being a female. So I didn't know how to dress like one. My mother would always put us in dresses. I'd find someway of tearing that thing up. They would get on me about – in church I was kneeling, and then in those days dresses were over your knee back then—and so I guess when I was getting up my knee would get caught on the hem of the dress. "Gosh! You've gone torn up another dress again!" And they thought it was intentionally but I was just clumsy. And you know I just never identified with anything feminine.

When the conversation moves to career, Lucinda is frank about how her childhood impacts how she thinks about career aspirations and expectations:

Because of the abuse that was going on in my life, be it the sexual abuse, the verbal abuse, kids bullying me, things happening all around me and stuff, I didn't think I would ever live to see a next year. From year to year, until I was 30 years old, when I realized that I had a voice and a choice, that I wanted to live and wanted to have a career. But coming up, I think at one time I thought about wanting to be a teacher because I didn't like the

way the nuns treated me so I figured that no child should be treated that way.

But other than that, it wasn't until I was like thirty that I really realized—and the only reason for that was that I became a born-again Christian at the time. And I began to focus on there's a God who loves me more than anything so I have a chance to live. I got a chance, that in spite of a society that don't want me, He wants me. It gave me a sense of being. But I still had my conflict with my sexuality, "Ok, God, now I know you're not too wild about this" but if He love me in spite of, He love me in spite of. He knows my past, my present and my future, so He knows how to deal with me when the time comes. Dealing with me in a good way, meaning the relationship between us was never going to separate or come apart because it was an eternal bond that I had committed to and vice versa because I took his Spirit into me.

Becoming a born-again Christian helps Lucinda feel better about herself but she has troubles in the workforce nonetheless. She perceives the problem as being seen as too "masculine." Lucinda constantly feels judged by her peers on the basis of her looks. It does not help matters that she has an alcohol addiction. Lucinda recognizes that this interfered with career goals and attainments. Lucinda solution to what feels to her to be relentless harassment, and her difficulty in coping constructively with it, is to become a "temp" worker:

Lucinda: I was being judged about how I looked or about how I acted. I was just acting like me. You know, like I said, feminine things was not something – I didn't have Seventeen Magazine like my sister with the lipstick. I was always judged at these places to the point where it made me feel awkward to even go to work. I saw the old pattern—dang, I used to do that at school when it was so uncomfortable. But I had to go to work because it was my livelihood whereas when I was a kid, I didn't have to.

Jill: So growing up, nobody told you what you might be good at.

Lucinda: My grandfather. The typical female role: secretary! He was a janitor. He was a well-paid janitor. That man brought in some big money back then. He said he walked into a doctor's office and to see the receptionist, he thought that she was the queen. To him that was a poised woman. She ran, she had an organization... but back in the seventies, the beginning of women's liberation, I didn't want to hear that. I was a

teenager; I didn't want to hear about being a secretary! [said with vehement disdain] And so I fought it. But damn, I was always working in somebody's office!

Jill: You knew what you didn't want, did you have any ideas about what you did want to do?

Lucinda: I didn't want to be a secretary. I tried other hats but it didn't work out. I was going to be a medical lab technician but I went to class one day, and it was the day we had to do the pipette, where you sucked the urine and the blood. I was nursing a hangover and so I forgot and I sucked up some piss – well that was the end of the medical lab technician! I was like, Ok, we can't do this, because I might go to work drunk and forget what I was sipping on. So that was out the door. Like I said, I always found myself in somebody's financial management office or accounting department. But like I said, I never thought about going to school for that. I was good in high school for three years straight. I won the top science and biology and chemistry kind of stuff. So I was kind of geared for that—biology, ecology. But in my mindset – unfortunately, black history was not part of our family. We knew about everybody else's history but we didn't know about our own. So I didn't know about the George Washington Carvers and the great explorers and scientists, the developers of modern day things that we even see to this day. So I had no image of a black biologist. So I didn't venture down that road. I just basically stayed in the business world and took whatever job they gave me.

I had no goal, no particular thing but I didn't like working in the large areas, what I call the pool; I kinda liked the four or less if possible. But when I would get into those environments, I would do my job well, I would get the recognitions, they always wanted to promote me to management. I would think, "You don't want a drunk to be a manager, please, uh-huh."

Jill: So alcohol became a problem when?

Lucinda: It was probably all the time, 'cause we would get the sip of the beer, the whiskey.

Jill: When did it start to interfere?

Lucinda: Okay, what had happened was that, one of my grandfather's clients, because he also had business clients that used his janitorial services as well as working apartment buildings, like that. One of the lawyers, he was a black lawyer; he gave my grandfather a case of some very expensive wine. That's how I knew I had an alcohol problem because before I would venture out to school, in high school, because we had to

walk up a few blocks to the train, so that I was involved with a lot more people, it was terrorizing, an intimidating thing for me because either I was pointed out, “Oh, look at the dyke, look at that!” And I was thinking, what the hell was that? So it was always kinda scary so I would go out on the back porch and pop that bottle, that cork, and give me a good swig of it and then walk out. I started maybe sophomore.

Jill: Sounds like you started as a way of handling anxiety against all the bullying and bad treatment.

Lucinda: And also they had started me on the Phenobarbital at either eight or nine and so I – that’s how the drug environment began. But going back to being in the workforce, I mentioned to you over the phone that I was at a firm downtown and I had on, you know, I was dressed appropriately, I had a skirt or something like that on, and then to walk into the lunch room and the first thing that a black male shouted was, how did he say it? “What the hell is that? She look like a man!” And I’m thinking—I was always uncomfortable because there was always a fool, that I called ‘em, that was going to make those kind of comments and then start the ball rolling. So it was like, Ok, should I go temporary? So I did temporary work for like twelve years. I worked temporary because if I didn’t have to set roots somewhere, just as long as I could get a paycheck to take care of my needs, but to be a part of a work force I could never fit in, could never feel comfortable because someone was going to do a “shout-out.” It made me feel embarrassed. It was that same pattern that I did from grade school all the way through life because whenever it got too challenging or too intimidating or whatever, I would run. Just run.

Lucinda begins to come to terms with her sexuality after her mother dies, when she is 42 years old. But although things ease in her mind, full resolution does not seem to occur until 2006 when after a health scare, she gets into therapy and gets into recovery for her alcoholism. Her work with her therapist provides her with the tools and the support to fully accept who she is.

Jill: How old are you when you finally come to terms with your sexuality?

Lucinda: Well, I would say after – I began to accept it. When I was in the church, I was trying to deal with the issue. No one wanted to deal with the issue in the church. When I tried to bring it out, no one wanted to hear it. So, okay, you all can’t deal with me. After I left the church – I really

think after my mother died, in 1998, and I was really out on my own, and it was like, “I’m who I am.”

Jill: So not really until your forties?

Lucinda: Forty-two. And I’m like, forget it. I am who I am. If nobody likes it, damn! I now have to take care of me. Whereas before I was having my episodes where I was running away from jobs or whatever, I had family I could lean on. I could stay with them. Didn’t have to pay rent. But now it was like I was forced to be out here now and if they don’t like it, they don’t like it. Like I said, I’m learning to be more assertive, what in the last nine months. Learning to be assertive that you don’t do the off-color joke about the gay community. They don’t mess with you, you don’t mess with them. So be it. Sometimes, you know I have this share-ride with the para-transit, sometimes people say, “Ooo, you in faggot-town!” And I say, “What’s your issue? How do know?” I’m more outspoken. “Shut-up! Keep to your own life!” So it was like, I wouldn’t say that, I wouldn’t say a thing because I don’t want to be judged, I don’t want to lose a friend. They wasn’t my friend. So right now I’m learning how to distinguish who can be a friend and who cannot be a friend. Who to social with and who to stay away from.

I had this thing because I was so needy, I wanted acceptance. I wanted to belong because of the way I was coming up in life. Now I’ve got a choice. Whether you like me or not, hey!

I found out since I’ve been going to therapy since 2006, I was like because of post-traumatic stress I was acting out when I thought I was defending myself. I’m going to therapy to learn assertiveness, learn how to speak up for myself, learning that I have rights. Because I was just a push-over. I was just didn’t want the challenge. I didn’t want anybody pointing me out. I didn’t know that I had post-traumatic stress all these years. That I had lost jobs because I would do well but there was always the co-worker or maybe a couple of co-workers--- they would team against me. Not knowing why, I didn’t do nothing, why they would come at me and say these things. Then the management would hear and I’m out the door. But before I go out the door, I might have had a tantrum. Basically you would have to nit and pick at me for months, maybe a year or more and then I’m going come at you, “ Get the F—out of my blankity-blank face! I’m tired of this!”

I guess that the way that I would do it was – I didn’t know how to handle it so that was the biggest disappointment. Though I’m not satisfied with my work life, I had opportunities to stay places but because I didn’t know how to handle the way people was treating me, I made the exit. Fortunately, they all gave me good references but some people have said,

“Haven’t you ever thought about going back?” “No! I’m not going back into that craziness.” If they did what they did to me, it was a sign of weakness. If I tried to go back, they may be even worse and I’m not quite at the point where I can defend myself in a positive way, in an assertive way. I’m still working on me.

Getting sober, learning through therapy how to understand and cope with her past and with current stressful situations helps Lucinda accept her sexuality and helps her in the work arena, as well. Lucinda’s fuller acceptance of herself leads her back to a childhood dream of a career in broadcast journalism.

I’m learning how to set boundaries and stuff. And if somebody do make an off-color, a joke about my sexuality or whatever – first off, they don’t know me, second, that’s their opinion. So I’m learning on how to say, “That’s your issue, not mine.”

I also want to make a choice of disclosure where – I would love to get into broadcast communication. That’s my – with this aftercare, alcohol treatment thing I’m going through, and with my counselor, they all kind of say, find the child within, find the child that used to want to do whatever. And for me, I always wanted to be in broadcast communication.

The only reason I was working in the kind of jobs that I was, was the familiarity, I know what I’m doing when I’m doing that kind of stuff. But I didn’t like it, I wasn’t happy with it. And I want to start to do the things that make me happy. The relationships, the places that I work, even if it’s temporary like that.

Jill: But again, what’s helped you to be able to make that jump? How come you can do it now and you couldn’t do it before?

Lucinda: Oh, umm . . . kinda just finally, now that I got a label of post-traumatic stress – because all those years up until I was 52. I now realize, oh my gosh, I was so f—‘ed up, I didn’t have a mindset to do nothing. You know, even if I tried to without attacking the issues. Because now I’m attacking the issues. I got a ton of baggage and I want to deal with it because I’m tired of it!

I’m tired of carrying this stuff around; I want to deal with it. Now that I got a label for it, I can understand it. I’m going to counseling where I can deal with it because even through the bad there was the good too. Of course the bad outweighed it but the good was that I lived to be 52, and I am a survivor, even though I tried to commit suicide.

And the thing with broadcast communication is the fact that that will give me an avenue to discuss and have open discussions on public television.

Because just like you're doing a study on lesbians and their careers and how it affects them, that could be something that could be put out there. Because people are still in the dark. And the more that I get knowledge about things, and the more I find out that when I talk people do listen, I never had that before, where people used to say, "You got nothing to say." "Shut -up" And I found out that I have a great deal to talk about and a great deal of things to say and whether it be personal or be on a large scale, it's about knowledge sharing. And the reason why I want to do that is the fact that I think that this would be a great forum. When you do see gays in the media it's more male but it's still that mockery, "He's so feminine." And everybody ain't like that.

So it's like, people can be educated. We can be doctors and Indian chiefs too. And so they need to understand that. So that's another reason why I want to it.

Jill: It's interesting when you think about broadcast and media, you are thinking about actually talking about issues around sexual orientation.

Lucinda: Yeah, because like I say, it's out there and yet again – What came across my mind is when people think of a strong woman or an opinionated woman, "Oh, she's a bitch." Well, I ain't never seen a talking female dog. I'm thinking right off the bat, where did that come from? They need to know that if a woman has those characteristics, she's not that, she's just playing the game the boys are playing. But the fact that she just happen to be female. And so, the reason why I chose broadcast journalism is that as a lesbian I think it would be a beneficial thing to have that forum in media that it can be expressed.

And yet again, from a woman's point of view behind the camera and produced by a woman and people can see, "Oh!" Because you don't know until "A woman did that?"

Lucinda struggles a long time to understand herself and her attraction to girls and to women. She connects it to her traumatic past but in the second interview, Lucinda affirms her lesbian sexual identity as something positive, an identity she is proud of.

Jill: What do you think enabled you to embrace your identity as a lesbian?

Lucinda: I always had an inkling that I was different from other females. Back in childhood and stuff, whether it was from the fact that I was raped from infancy until eight years old, I really don't know. Because somebody I know asked the question, if that had never happened to me, would you still have become a lesbian? And I really did not have an answer for that. Hmm, I never really thought about that. I said that fortunately, and perhaps that is a poor choice of word, but if I didn't have that trauma, and if it is a deciding factor or it's not a deciding factor, if that's the reason why I am a lesbian or not, I'd rather be than not because I don't want to be the typical female. I said because when we come out of our mother's womb, first thing that hits us is heterosexuality. I mean, we're pink or we're blue, you know, and you see in your household, a mom and a dad, you don't see a mom and a mom and a dad and a dad. It's in our media, it's everywhere we look. It's almost like we're stressing it so, if you're anything but this it's bad.

I'd rather be out the box than in the box. And conform that way because then I wouldn't be able to have choice. A choice meaning that I guess coming with the title "lesbian" it is a lifestyle but it's also how you see things. How you see things mentally, how you see things physically. Because you almost have to be strong, you almost have to show a tougher character in order to adjust because of the fact that you are going to be ostracized by society. So you have to have this calmer—I don't have to act or be or do a certain way, I am the way I am for a reason but at the same time I'm not going to pacify or down the fact that I have a brain, that I can make a decision for myself, I don't have to rely on somebody. You know, so, that's the part that I embrace about being a lesbian.

I really don't know as I was growing up whether I even thought about it. I always felt different from most females, in the sense that most females – I didn't do the 'doll thing.' I may have had done it because my caregivers put that in my hands or something but did I care, did I like it? Did I want to be a mommy? Nah. More like a Daddy [laughs]. I guess that's why I say I was outside the box, that I didn't fit that pattern or whatever it is that they were trying to do. I remember when my grandfather tried to my sister and me, now my sister was into Seventeen Magazine, I wasn't. My grandfather he sent us to Sears talent school, I guess to learn to be "ladies." What the hell was that? We were supposed to be "secretaries." [Said with a lot of disdain.] I didn't "get" it. My sister she fell right into it. And I was like, "Huh? What are they trying to do?" It kinda reminded me of the nun when I was in grade school, I was left-handed, and how she tried to force me to be right-handed. She tied my hand behind my back and tried to force me to write with my right hand. I'm like, forget it!

I'm outside the box, it makes me have the ability to think for myself and not have society or other people tell me what I should think as a female.

Umm, there's a certain strength and armor, you almost have to be tough skin because you know you're going to have opposition and stuff out there. But, at the end of the day, you can say, at least I made my own decisions.

“Anne”

Anne is 65 years old and has been with her female partner for 25 years. She enters the convent after completing high school and stays in for 18 years. Anne meets her partner in the convent when she is 32 years old; she is immediately attracted to her. Anne's partner leaves the convent after 3 years. Anne remains in the convent for another 5 years. This is a period of particular struggle and conflict, as will be seen in the narrative below. Anne is an elementary school teacher. The religious order that Anne belongs to is predominantly a teaching order but Anne seems to have been a natural when it comes to teaching.

In answering the researcher's first question about her childhood, Anne, sounds some of the predominant themes that will mark her struggles with her sexual identity. She feels like the “lost child” in her very large family. There are few opportunities, until high school, to socialize with peers outside of her family. She is shy, a “follower,” not at all assertive, very often afraid.

Anne: I was the third oldest of ten children. I grew up on a farm [in the Midwest]. And it was definitely rural life. My father was, I was afraid of my father. He was very authoritarian, very strict. And I think with all of us, there was a sense in him that if he gave us too much leverage, we were out of control. But we were a very quiet; we were very quiet as kids. I remember being at the dinner table, we called dinner at noon, and my father would come in and everybody would pretty much quiet down and then he would listen to the markets and the grain prices on the radio and we were quiet when we were eating. I sometimes wonder how that could possibly be with ten kids and there was always a baby. Umm, and then the atmosphere would change when he went outside. We would begin to

talk or whatever. But we had to be quiet and if there were days when he wasn't really listening to the markets, we wouldn't talk.

Jill: What was his background? His ethnic background?

Anne: He came from German background. His parents were born here and he lived on a farm and had a number of brothers and sisters. My mother was very much, she was much more gentle and much more compassionate. But she did pretty much what he wanted. He ruled the household. He was the boss and in a sense, we all knew it. Umm, let see what else. So I think my mother was somewhat trapped also. I don't think her personality was as authoritarian and she was German and Luxembourg in background. And she wasn't nearly as strict but I think that because of Dad, she was. She knew that she was supposed to follow his rule and keep us in order.

Jill: How many girls and how many boys?

Anne: There were 7 girls and 3 boys. And I'm third oldest of ten. Our grandparents lived close. One set of grandparents lived on a farm not far away from ours – my mother's parents. And my father's lived a little farther away on a farm also. As they got older they both moved from the farm into town. My mother's father was very strict, not a happy person. Pretty grumpy and my mother's mother was very outgoing, almost had a frenetic kind of energy. She seemed always to be busy. You'd come and she'd give you the candy and then you'd play games. When I think back it was almost too much.

The opposite was true of my father's parents. His dad, my grandfather, was very much out there, friendly, good-natured and Dad's mother was very strict. Didn't smile much. So we would go over there and we were—she'd give us things to eat but we were very quiet and very good there. We had more fun at my mother's parents even though Grandfather was a bit difficult.

Jill: And how far from town was your farm?

Anne: Five miles. And at that point in my life, when I was growing up, it was, it seemed far away. It seemed very far away.

Jill: So you didn't go into town much?

Anne: No, we didn't because it seemed . . . as a child until I got into high school, I didn't do any activities. Like learning how to swim or ice-skating. We would do some stuff on the farm but we did not take lessons like a lot of other kids did.

Jill: How big a farm did your parents have?

Anne: 160 acres. They raised corn and soybeans and then my father really made money by feeding cattle and selling it. But after a while that didn't really pay off. But in his prime, he fed cattle and then sold it for a high price.

Jill: And you helped with the chores?

Anne: No, my older brother helped mostly with the chores. I did more things inside. I did the inside work. I remember having the wringer washing machine and helping mother wash.

Jill: There were ten of you, tell me the boy, girl order, how that broke down.

Anne: A girl first and then a boy. Then me. And then a girl, and a girl, and a girl, and a girl, and then two boys and then a girl. So the oldest a girl and the youngest a girl.

Jill: And in terms of the siblings, who were you close to?

Anne: Well, I think, I was close to the sister younger than me, M., and I was also close to my oldest sister. I think I almost see her as being my mother. And it is interesting because I had a lot of conflict with her and it's the kind of conflict I always thought I might have with my mother and I never had the conflict with my mother. I had it with my sister and she was only 4 years older than me. But she still seemed like she took care of me. Because my mother was so busy with the little ones.

I felt very lost as a child. Very lost. My oldest sister was like the Queen. Firstborn, and then a boy. And then me. I was very shy. I remember as a little kid hiding behind my mother's skirts when people would come. I can remember doing this. I didn't talk much. And I think part of it was, I think I was afraid of my father. He did not have a temper but it seemed to me that he had so much inside that I was afraid of what was going to come out. Now some of this I am talking about as an adult [looking back], and there was always something about the silence that seemed pretty deadly to me. Or that something was going to happen.

Jill: Menacing?

Anne: Yes! Something not good happening. And in his later years, he mellowed so much. And I remember as a kid, the neighbors used to help each other and so when the neighbors came over, my father was so

different. He'd talk to the other men, of course, they had a good time. But then what I couldn't figure out was, even with neighbor kids coming over or my cousins when they came over, he seemed to talk to them more than he talked to us. And I'm thinking, "what's the matter with me that Dad is so different when someone else comes or we would go with him to a neighbor. And he's just talking away and having a good time and very, very pleasant. And so it was very confusing to me. It was like, how is it that when he's with someone else he seems different? And there was always this sense that I remember, my mother and my father both saying, "what will the neighbors think?" [Laughing] We were miles away from the nearest neighbor!

The career expectations for Anne are set by her father and they are limited.

Despite being an excellent student in elementary and high school, going on to college is not an option. Anne accepts this and then finds a way around her father's interdiction. Her way, though, is not through rebellion or self-assertion: she follows the path of her older sister into a religious community. This is what Anne says:

Jill: As a young person, how did you think about career and what you wanted to do for a living? What were the family expectations?

Anne: Well I did know from early on from my oldest sister that my father was not –he did not approve of going to college. Part of it was expenses –

Jill: For everyone? Boys and girls alike?

Anne: Yes, boys and girls. Part of it was the price of it. Another part of it was, we were just expected to go out, get a job somewhere, wherever it was, and get married. And have kids. That was the expectation. And I remember being in high school and someone coming from a local college wanting to interview me and talk about college. And Dad just said no, no she's not going, that's it.

Jill: So you just accepted that?

Anne: Yes.

Jill: You were a pretty good student? In high school, they come and talk to you.

Anne: Yes, I was a very good student.

Jill: So you just accepted it, and that was that?

Anne: There was a part of me that wanted to go to college. I know that there was a part of me that wanted to go to college. And that part somehow was always there. And then when my oldest sister went to the community, to the Franciscans [convent], she was educated there. And I think that part of my reason for going, for entering the community, was for me to get an education.

Jill: Because they would provide college?

Anne: The Franciscans provided college. Another reason was I had my older sister on a pedestal and I wanted to be like her. Another reason was, I just followed her. She got all this attention and I wanted it too. When she went into the community, after high school, she got even more attention because it was a big, big thing in the Catholic Church to have a son or a daughter in religious life.

When I was in high school, I worked as a nurses aide in a nearby city and I liked the work as a nurses aide and I remember – I remember this Irish nurse, she was short and stocky and she was very grumpy and she was the head nurse on the floor and she said to me, “Anne, you need to go into nursing.” And she would not just say that to anyone.

And then when I went into the community, it was very much, it was mostly a teaching community. There wasn't too much other choice. I could have become a nurse but I think I really did want to become a teacher.

Anne goes into teaching and from the outset it is a good experience. She has an aptitude for teaching, and this is despite, or perhaps because of, traumatic experiences she has as a kindergartner in a one room rural schoolhouse.

Anne: I think as a young person in high school and even in junior high, I did a lot of babysitting. And it was always with little kids. I would go to the neighbors and babysit for a quarter an hour. And I was really good with them. I was really good with them. And also, really good with my younger brothers and sisters. I always took care of them. I had a lot of practice. So I think I knew I was good with young kids so therefore teaching young kids, I thought, I could probably do that.

I remember being in the community. It was my very first year of teaching. I had forty-seven first graders. And then it was summer, and all the nuns would get together and we would have classes. We were sharing our

experiences of teaching. And I was about one of a whole group of them who said, "My first year of teaching was really great!" And I had 47 kids. I really felt successful. And it was my first year. Everybody was like, "It was such a disaster. I didn't know what I was doing. It was terrible. I don't know if I want to stay in it."

I taught in a Catholic school my first year. My principal gave me, it was like a mentor even though they didn't have a mentoring program. So this one nun, I remember her distinctly. She would come into my classroom every single day. And she would say, "Anne, I want to see you do this reading group today. Tomorrow I want to see your math group. I want to see your social studies." In those days you taught every darn thing. They went out for recess. We didn't even have a gym at that point. We just taught everything. I taught art. I taught music. I had no idea how to teach those things, especially music.

And she [her mentor] was so wonderful. She was such a wonderful teacher. And she would tell me, right then and there, in the beginning of my teaching career, in those first months, what I was doing right and what I should change.

Jill: It also sounds like you were a natural.

Anne: It came easy. I was a natural. I never otherwise could have dealt with 47 students. But she was also very, very helpful and I met with her weekly to talk over stuff. "This is what we do, and this is what we don't do." So I was there for 5 years and I taught before I had my degree. Then I guess I was there 4 and a half years because in the middle of the year, they pulled me out and told me, "Anne, you need to finish your education." And so, this young person came and took over my class. It was in the middle of the year which was very difficult to do. And then I went to the local college and the rest of that year and one more year and then I was finished.

Actually my work experience has been, I feel very positive about my work experience. It seemed like every single place I taught it was a good experience for me. It was a good experience.

Well today I think that because of my experience in kindergarten, I think my traumatic experience in kindergarten could have gone both ways. That I would have totally, totally not be near a school as a career but it's seemed to me that it was because of that situation that I wanted to be a teacher and to be a different teacher. So I think that that event triggered my career, along with other things, like the Franciscans.

As a kindergartner I went to the one room schoolhouse. It was maybe half a mile from where we were. And the teacher was very strict. When I didn't know my word, she put me in front of the class with a paper bag on my head and made me sit in a wastebasket. And this is interesting. My oldest sister and I were talking about this and she said that she didn't only do that to me, she did it to other kids as well. And she did it to her when she was very small. And I always thought that this teacher was a witch and that she must have been old. And then when I saw pictures of her, when I was grown, and she was this young, beautiful person. I was shocked. In my mind she was a witch and I could not remember what she looked like. And that certainly affected my career from the very beginning.

Anne finds her place in the world of work easily. This is not the case with her lesbian sexuality. She admits to having had a "crush" on one of the nuns who taught her in high school but she does not contextualize the experience into a broader sense of her sexuality. She has only a few dates with boys in high school. In the first interview, Anne portrays this is a function of being shy.

Jill: Tell me when you first began to have some idea that you might be a lesbian and what that was like for you.

Anne: Well it was certainly was late, late, late. I never even thought, I don't think I even knew what a lesbian was in grade school, maybe even in high school. I mean the word never came up.

Jill: What about attraction to girls, how about that?

Anne: I was very aware of having a crush on one of the nuns and I would, I would do anything just to get to see her when she was having office hours.

Jill: And that was when?

Anne: That was when I was in high school.

Jill: Were you doing much dating?

Anne: I wasn't doing much dating but I never, I always thought it was more my shyness. I thought the boys just didn't like me.

Jill: Was your older sister dating?

Anne: Yes. Yes. Yes.

Jill: And the other girls in your class were?

Anne: Yes. Yes. I never thought of being a lesbian at that point. It never entered my mind. It was more me being shy. I wanted to be out there more.

Jill: Did you understand, a lot of girls get boy-crazy, did you understand that?

Anne: Yes, I did. I wasn't boy crazy like so many were. Now I did have, I definitely had some dates but it wasn't – I really didn't enjoy them that much.

Jill: But you explained it, I'm just shy?

Anne: Yeah.

In the second interview, when Anne is asked to expand on her answer about how she feels about boys and men, it is clear that her lack of dates with men is more than just about being shy.

Jill: You talked about being very shy as a younger person, and in high school not really dating and feeling like the boys weren't interested in you. Did it work the other way? That you weren't that interested in boys? Did you have that sense?

Anne: Yes, I did have that sense. That I was not interested. Yeah, I did.

Jill: Other girls your age might have been "boy-crazy" but they just didn't hold your interest?

Anne: Yeah, it was like, "What? Do boys really matter to them?" Because I didn't feel like they mattered to me.

Jill: And the way that you explained it to yourself at the time was, I'm just kind of shy.

Anne: Right, right.

Jill: But really, it was you didn't have as much interest in boys.

Anne: That's right. Absolutely.

Jill: And, was that true, as you were getting older too? Did you notice that you weren't as interested in boys and men?

Anne: Well, I joined a religious community after I finished high school, so – I think, I don't know, that probably says something. Um, I think that's true. I mean, I uh, even when I worked for a year, I didn't do much dating. There was only one guy that I really seemed to like when I was doing nurse's aide work. And I always wanted to have a date with him. And, the other women I was living with kind of tipped him off, and we went out on this date. But it wasn't, it was like, I always wanted to—he worked down in – we were above an appliance center. He worked in the appliance center; we lived in the apartment above. And, it was nice but it wasn't like I thought it was going to be, the date.

Jill: So it was different from what you expected. You didn't have much feeling around it?

Anne: The anticipation of having the date was greater than –I wasn't so thrilled.

Anne joins the convent and during her first year she begins “jumping into bed,” as she puts it, with another nun. She has another experience with another nun but at 23 and 24 Anne is still not framing her behavior in terms of being lesbian or having same-sex attractions:

Anne: I was in my first year of teaching. There was a whole group of nuns in this house, maybe 25, going from very young to old. And I was very attracted to the one nun who was probably just a year older than me. And I would in the morning wake her up and jump into bed with her. And that's when – I can remember in those days taking all these little kids to church because they went to church every day. It was a pain in the butt. And I was thinking, “Oh my God, I got up this morning, I was in the bed, and we did kissing and hugging, and now I'm in church praying?”

There was some [she trails off in thought.]

Jill: So what did you make of what you were doing? Did you have any idea what you were doing? How did you understand it? To yourself.

Anne: Well, it felt good. It felt good. I wasn't real comfortable with it because it went against everything that I had been taught. Really. But I

didn't stop it. Nor did she. And then, she – I think that went on pretty much for two years. And then she left the community. She left the community. That was hard. That was difficult. That was the beginning of a lot of nuns leaving. And also it was at the point that my sister left. So that was also very difficult. So I kind of let the whole thing, being attracted to Z. just kind of – “Okay, it happened.” We just happened to be together. We were just close friends. And then I did have close friends in the community after that but –

Jill: Close friends meaning? You're hopping into bed with them?

Anne: No, no. Close friends in the sense of doing a lot of sharing. Knowing that there is an attraction there but didn't act on any of it. I remember F. and she was having a real hard time and we became close and shared a lot. But nothing physical really with her. But I knew and when she left it was very, very difficult. So I am beginning to think now, my gosh, this happened before with Z., and now with F. – but nothing happened so – I'm still not thinking I'm lesbian. It was just I was living with women so I'm going to get close to them, some of them, my friends.

And then, S. was a very good friend of mine. Nothing happened there. But we did a lot of emotional sharing and we were very intimate. Because at that point we were doing more shared prayer, where we prayed out loud. So it was really like getting your soul out there. You are saying to God but you are really saying it out loud to someone else who is hearing you. So that was very intimate.

Jill: Nothing sexual going on?

Anne: No.

When Anne is 32 years old, she meets the woman who will end up being her life partner.

Anne: And then my partner came to the convent. I was 32 years old. I was immediately attracted to her. And she came to live in my same house. And with Toby that was the beginning. And we did a lot of praying together first, a lot of touching the face and I think that after a year we were definitely physically involved.

Jill: So by that time you are kind of catching on?

Anne: Yes. I'm catching on. And then she left after 3 years. And that was extremely difficult. And I was still in, still thinking that I was going to stay in. After she left, it took me 5 years to leave.

When Toby leaves, Anne's world feels turned upside-down. The way that Anne experiences this is that she feels, quite suddenly, that maybe she has chosen the wrong career and should not be teaching but should be doing parish work instead. Anne no longer feels secure and confident in the profession where earlier she felt like a natural.

This is how Anne talks about it:

I was in a very confused state of mind. I was thinking, well maybe it's my career. Maybe I need to get out of teaching. I was very discontent. I was not happy. Not happy. A very close friend was living out-of-state. And by that time, we were pretty much able to go where we wanted, to say where we wanted to go and do, in the community. So I was going to do pastoral work, like work in a parish and give it a try and just see. Is it really my career. Well, it wasn't. But I spent a year down there and that was very difficult. I'd say I was depressed. Yeah, I was. Yes, it definitely affected my mood.

Anne is frightened of what she is learning about herself and her affectional preferences. She continues to see Toby regularly but cannot bring herself to leave the convent. It is the very real fear of losing Toby that propels Anne forward in her acceptance of herself as a lesbian.

Jill: Toby leaves the community. You're in the community for 5 more years. In the fifth year you go to the parish out-of-state and then the year after that you leave the community.

Anne: Even the year before that, before I went out-of-state, we would spend almost every other weekend together. She was in one city, I was in another. It wasn't that far away. Maybe three hours. And I'd spend the whole weekend in bed with her. And then come back and conduct a community house meeting. That was like, "Oh my God, I can't do this. I can't do this." But I was so afraid to say that I was a lesbian. And you know what really clenched it for me. Well, Toby at that time was very honest. She was saying, I really need to get involved with other people. And she got involved with this very aggressive woman. And one time I was visiting and we were in bed and she called me by the other woman's name. I thought, "Oh, oh. This is serious. If I really want her then I need to make a decision." I was extremely afraid to leave.

After a year of doing parish work, and 18 years as a nun, Anne leaves her religious community and moves in with Toby. She continues to struggle with worries about what others will think of her if they knew her to be a lesbian. She does not tell anyone in her family about her relationship with Toby for 6 years.

Jill: What were you afraid of?

Anne: Afraid that people would know. If I left and lived with Toby then I really am a lesbian. And you know what is really interesting? I did not leave until after my father died. I did not leave the community until after my father died. I think I was really afraid of what he would say or think. And I couldn't do it. He had such power over me.

Jill: So coming out to your family, have you done that? Did you do that?

Anne: Much later. Much later. Toby and I were living together. I thought we could get by for a couple of years as roommates. And I don't have money, so they'll think it's just until I get on my feet. And then after that, that's when I had to learn to deal.

Jill: What did that look like for you, to begin to deal?

Anne: I went to therapy. I was very scared. My therapist said, "Look in the mirror and say, 'I am a lesbian.'" I was afraid of the word. I was afraid of everything. I remember going into a gay bar and two other friends when we were traveling, and Toby saying, "Anne, your hand is like a board. It's so tight I can't even hold your hand. We can hold hands here." [She's laughing as she recounts this story.]

When Anne and Toby begin to live together as a couple, Anne returns to teaching. They move to an urban metropolitan area and Anne makes the decision to leave the parochial school system for the public school system in order to earn more money. As Anne resolves her lesbian identity, changes occur in how she approaches her work: she becomes more assertive. This is how Anne puts it in the first interview:

I could not teach in a Catholic school because of the money. I got an application for a public school. Nothing was online then, it was all paper stuff. And I went for the first interview and I know it went very, very well. I remember saying to the guy who interviewed me, and I don't know

exactly where I got this confidence. He said to me at the end, “Well, we will let you know. We are looking for the right person for the job.” And I said, “I’m the right person for the job!”

Anne elaborates on this idea of being more assertive and the relationship it might have to her lesbian sexual identity in the second interview:

I was in therapy and I remember dealing with, beginning to deal with my sexuality there. Ok? I think I was in the process of trying to be more comfortable with who I was as a lesbian. And so I think, yes, I think there was a correlation between my being assertive in saying to the head of personnel, “I’m the person for the job!” It was a sense of me coming to know myself better. I got along so well with the head of personnel, because he was gay, and I only found that out later. But we connected immediately when I went into his office. My anxiety level just way down and we connected and 5 years later I realized that he was gay.

As an elementary school teacher, Anne feels that it is necessary to be closeted at work. After several years, she confides in the teacher she works most closely with. She states that it was very “freeing” to do so.

Anne: Umm, I never ever told people at my work—that affected me very much because I just thought, if parents ever found out and other teachers find out, I’m working with these kids and what are they going to think about me and these little girls. I was very concerned and I was very closeted.

When I first went out to the public school, it was so difficult because I was becoming a friend of my partner-teacher, who was married, and I would always say what “I” did over the weekend. Was concerned about “we”. All of that. And I can’t remember, it took me a few years and then I told her. I said, “I just need to tell you.” She was wonderful. After that, all I needed was one friend.

Jill: So having her know took the pressure off. Somebody to know about your real life.

Anne: It took the pressure off. It was so difficult. It was getting more and more difficult. Just talking about what we did over the weekend. And who I was with. My friends, because they were all women. In my work world I was very isolated as far as anyone knowing I was lesbian.

A part of me was hidden. Actually, after I told my partner-teacher, it was like, I don't have to tell a lot of people. I felt really, really free.

Anne elaborates on how she felt "freer" in the second interview.

Jill: Ok, so what was the impact, if any, on your work life of not accepting yourself as lesbian until later?

Anne: [pause] Well, I think I wasn't truly myself. I think I did my job, I was a good teacher but I don't think I was totally myself or free. And, I don't know what impact that had on kids at that point. But I do know that after, the more I accepted my being a lesbian, it seemed like the more free I was to live my life and I really believe I was freer in my work also. I was more confident, I was less afraid, I wasn't so worried. It was like, this was who I am. I was more available to the kids as I accepted. I am sure that I was more sensitive, less judgmental.

Jill: What do you mean by that?

Anne: I think when I was not able to accept who I was, I was judging myself that I wasn't good enough, or wasn't and then I would put that judgment out there, on other people. I was much more judgmental. This is really interesting. This is true.

When I was a younger person, I was more judgmental. I wouldn't say it to you out loud, but I knew in my head that I was judging other people. And, the more that I accepted myself and less judgmental of me, the less I was judgmental of other people.

Yeah, there was a whole judgmental thing. And I remember that Toby would say, "Oh, Anne, you are so judgmental!" I'd say, "Really? I am?" And I wasn't really aware of it but there was a stiltedness or following the rule thing for me that was – because I had grown up that way, following the rules, I was a good girl. And then I went to the [religious] community and I was a really good person because I knew my boundaries and I knew what I was supposed to do and I did it. And, when I left the community and went out into this bigger world, I had a really hard time because I didn't have these boundaries.

Jill: And you were breaking the "rules?"

Anne: I was breaking all rules, yeah. So I think being judgmental, that that would be a really big difference. And I think being emotionally available to the kids or even being available to the staff. I was much more in the beginning, I'd go to my room, the partner-teacher and I were always friends from the very beginning, but it was okay if I didn't see other

people a lot. Or talk to them or—that was especially true in the beginning of my teaching.

Jill: So as you become more comfortable with yourself, you become more social—even though you're not out.

Anne: Right.

Jill: You're not disclosing but you move more freely socially and emotionally in the world?

Anne: Yes. Absolutely.

“Wanda”

Wanda is 66 years old and a professor and researcher in the field of nursing at a state university. She marries right out of college, has two children, and divorces after 17 years of marriage. By the time of her divorce, Wanda has already self-identified as a lesbian. She is 39 years old. After her divorce, Wanda has an 11 year relationship with a woman she describes as emotionally and at times physically abusive. Wanda does not foresee getting into another relationship but she strongly identifies as lesbian and is currently doing research involving the lesbian population.

This is how Wanda answers the interviewer's very first question, about her childhood:

Wanda: Umm, growing up in my family was not terribly unusual or unlike families of my friends. My father was an alcoholic. He, we, I think my family was kind of an upward aspiring family, uh, but my Dad also had mental health problems so was unable to work off and on throughout my whole growing-up years.

Jill: You mentioned the alcoholism, anything else you were aware of?

Wanda: Like what?

Jill: You said mental illness?

Wanda: He was just very depressed and uh he spent time in a State mental hospital, he spent time in and out of hospitals, he had electric shock therapy in the early days of that. Also, my mom was the one I always thought who held everything together. I have two sibs, a brother two and one half years younger and a sister eleven years younger and we are pretty close still, we're all still alive. We get together every couple of years; we don't live close at all.

Jill: So did your mother work then, with your father's work being so unstable?

Wanda: She worked at home some of the time. She was a dressmaker and a tailor, so she was able to do that at home. And once I left for college, she went back to business college and finished a two year course there and then was the office person for a surgeon for many, many, many years. So she was, she had the stable income. My father was on disability. So there was some income there too, so it wasn't like there was nothing. [pause] . . It is a big question.

Jill: It is a big question.

Wanda: I have no idea what else to talk about.

Jill: With your father being ill and unable to work, did that bring the rest of you closer together? With your mom, your sibs, how did that play out? Did you have friends, relationships with neighbors? Or were you a kind of isolated family?

Wanda: We were always very much involved in the neighborhood. And in church. So were not in any way isolated.

Jill: And what church did you belong to?

Wanda: It was a Methodist church. In fact this last fall, I went back for a reunion with my adolescent church group. And it was a lot of fun. Those were probably the kids that I spent the most time with. And most of them went to my high school too.

Jill: And did people know what was going on in your house or not?

Wanda: Some people did, not everybody did.

Jill: And being the oldest child did you feel, what was your role in the family in terms – given that your father was off and on – I don't know how he was when he was well.

Wanda: When he was well, he was, I don't know how to describe him. He was fine. He seemed fine but that was when he drank a lot more, so that wasn't great. My mother did not like his drinking; there was a lot of tension about that.

Jill: Would there be fights in the house? Were there fights?

Wanda: Uh, I wouldn't call them fights, no. She wouldn't let herself do that.

Jill: And how did he treat you, your sibs?

Wanda: Well I think he was kind of distant most of the time. Umm, [pause] but [pause] yeah, I don't know, he was either there or not there. And when he was there, he was interested in what we were doing and sort of participated in the family and when he was depressed, he didn't. When he was depressed, he was there but he was not there.

Jill: So I really wonder what that was like for you, growing up in a household like that.

Wanda: It was – I just remember sort of getting used to it. It was not [pause] anything that – I mean I don't remember anything really being a big deal about it.

Jill: You just kind of accepted it? It was your normal?

Wanda: Uh-huh, yeah.

Jill: And did you invite, did friends come over to the house?

Wanda: Uh-huh.

Jill: You just kind of worked around Dad?

Wanda: Uh-huh. [Pause. No elaboration given.]

Jill: And your sibs kind of responded the same way? You kind of tell your story, it's kind of matter of fact that this was going on in your house.

Wanda: I think my little sister hardly ever knew my dad when he was more normal.

Jill: So he got sicker as he went along?

Wanda: Yes. Right. And my mom was working away from home during the day all the while she was growing up. Which was very different from how my brother and I grew up.

Jill: Your mom was really around a lot when you were growing up.

Wanda: Right. [Pause. No elaboration.]

Jill: And would you visit your father when he was in the hospital or not?

Wanda: No. Never. We were never--- it was sort of like that wasn't allowed or something.

Jill: Did you wonder where he went? Or were you told?

Wanda: Yeah, I knew where he went [almost indignant tone]. I just didn't go see him there. There was one incident when I was about seven or eight, we actually lived in the same town as the hospital for awhile and he left --[laughs]--he went AWOL. And there were announcements on the radio about this guy who escaped from the hospital. And that was sort of weird.

Wanda states that she wanted to be a nurse from the time she was a young adolescent and that she happened upon that career on her own.

Jill: And how did you come to that?

Wanda: I have no idea. I probably read some Cherry Ames nurse books and I had a good neighbor who was a nurse, a baccalaureate. As I got older she just kept really encouraging me. She was a wife and a mother who lived across the street. A family that our family neighbored with and they were just really nice people and she specifically encouraged me to go to a baccalaureate program, which very few people did in 1960. You went to a three year hospital affiliated training program and you didn't get a degree. And, uh, she said, "You will be able to do much more if you have a bachelor's degree." And uh, you'll be able to teach and she just—it just made a lot of sense to me.

Jill: She was very influential in how you thought about it –

Wanda: Uh-huh. Once I went away to school I never saw her again. They moved.

Jill: So you kind of decide you're going to be a nurse. Does career get talked about in the house? Or do you just announce that this is what you're going to do and that's fine.

Wanda: That was fine with my mother. My father thought I ought to be a medical technologist. He thought that was a way to make more money than a nurse would make. But he wasn't opposed to what I wanted to do.

Jill: So it really comes from within you? The career ideas rather than coming from your parents or your family.

Wanda: Uh-huh, yeah.

Jill: And in your household, do things get talked about? Or not talked about?

Wanda: A lot of not talking about. But I don't think that was the thing that didn't get talked about. There was a lot of not talking. If things didn't go the way my mom wanted them to, there was a lot of sulking and not talking to people.

Jill: Including her kids?

Wanda: Uh-huh.

Jill: So you kind of learn how to be a "good daughter"?

Wanda: Probably.

Jill: And do you think that the interest in nursing might have had anything to do with Dad being sick a lot?

Wanda: No. I don't remember associating it with that at all. [Pause] When I applied to college, I wrote whatever stood for the essay then, which was hardly anything; I said I wanted to be a medical missionary. Because I really wanted to travel. And I thought that would be a perfect combination. Be a nurse and go someplace and work. I wasn't interested in the missionary part really except as part of being able to go to some foreign place and do something.

Jill: So it's very interesting that you decide to become a nurse coming from your family but it's almost like you don't know how you hit on that exactly, except this woman who you like a lot who tells you this is what you ought to do.

Wanda: But I had already decided to be a nurse before she started encouraging me. Because her encouragement had to do with going to a baccalaureate program rather.

Jill: So why nursing, what about it, do you think attracted you to it?

Wanda: I think it attracted me to be able to help people. It sounded varied and interesting enough. I was a Candy Striper at one of the local hospitals and that was not a particularly good experience.

Jill: How old were you when you were doing that?

Wanda: Probably 15. Or 16. They didn't have any kind of good supervision for us. And we were sort of thrown in to do whatever happened . [laughs]

Jill: Sounds scary actually.

Wanda: Yes, it was. It was really a very poorly handled.

Jill: But it doesn't dissuade you?

Wanda: No, no it didn't. It gave me an experience with patients in a hospital. But I didn't stay with it because I was really –I really felt at sea when I would go there.

Both my mother and my father were great readers. You know, there was just no question in our house that reading and being educated were important things to do. And my mother only had a high school education. My dad had two years of college. But that was during the Depression so that wasn't bad. Both of my parents were very smart. And uh, so all the kids ended up going as far as we could with our educations.

I'm the late bloomer. Umm, yeah. I don't know what else to say.

Wanda may have known at a young age that she wanted to be a nurse but it takes her much longer to resolve the issue of her lesbian sexual identity. Wanda first brings up the topic of her lesbianism in response to a clarifying question presented to her about her work life.

Wanda: So, while I was teaching at the small private college, I needed a little more money and one of the ways I got it was to work part-time at a local hospital in the community where I lived. So I did some more inpatient care but it was with obstetrics and I did, I worked on the obstetric

unit, I did a lot of teaching with moms and babies and I didn't mind that. I worked during the summer and school vacations and that was okay.

Jill: Were you still married?

Wanda: No, no, no. I got divorced after 17 years of marriage. Which was around the late 70s, early 80s. Early 80s. And by then I knew I was a lesbian and I had fallen in love with somebody and it took us a long time to finally decide to live together.

In response to the question about when she first began to have an idea that she might be a lesbian, Wanda shares that she was involved with a woman during college. All the while, she is "engaged" to her high school sweetheart whom she marries upon graduating from college.

Wanda: Well when I was in college I had a relationship with a woman – while I was engaged to be married. It was really a shock to me. I was just so wild about this woman. And this was 1962, so it was not a very good time to try to even get information. And we were pretty scared about it and just didn't say anything.

Jill: What year in college were you?

Wanda: I was a junior. And um, she ended up being the maid of honor in my wedding. Very sad in a way.

Jill: Did she go on to be married too?

Wanda: Uh-huh, yeah. But she went on to having another, full-blown lesbian relationship before she got married. I don't think she was real out or anything.

Jill: So how long does the relationship last?

Wanda: She was a freshman, but she was closer to my age. So that lasted all the way to the end, for me, of college. And my husband and I got married right after we graduated from school.

Jill: So, what did you do with all that? You have this experience with this woman and then ?

Wanda: Just sort of –I had to let it go.

Jill: So you told yourself –what did you tell yourself?

Wanda: That, uh, that this really can't be. That this isn't the basis of a long-term relationship like my relationship with a husband is going to be. So, you know, it's just not going to happen.

Jill: So you grew up with your husband, so what happened, did he pursue you? How did you end up getting married to him?

Wanda: We started dating while we were in high school. At the very end of high school. And then he went off to the Naval Academy. And we'd hardly see each other.

Jill: But you maintained contact with him?

Wanda: Oh yeah.

Jill: So he thought you were sweethearts all the way through?

Wanda: Uh-huh.

Jill: At the same time you're having this affair with this woman, you're also corresponding with your boyfriend.

Wanda: Right, because it seems so implausible that I could have a relationship with a woman, I didn't understand it. All I knew was that I was incredibly attracted to her.

Jill: Was it a physical relationship?

Wanda: Uh-huh, but we were so scared to do anything that we didn't do very much. But we were really, really close.

Jill: So it was very intimate?

Wanda: Yeah. So, um, and she was pretty much the same way. She didn't see how anything could evolve.

Jill: So you decided, you've been my boyfriend; this is what I'm supposed to do?

Wanda: Right.

Jill: So you do what you're supposed to do.

Wanda: Yeah, I did it.

Jill: And did you love your husband, would you say?

Wanda: Yes. I think I did. Very much so at the beginning. He turned out to be an alcoholic also. No family history on his side at all. But he was and he was a skirt-chaser and he was a liar. He was not a very good person. And uh, so finally, I tried as hard as I could to stay in that marriage. And it was just impossible. And he wanted out. So, we divorced.

Jill: So it was mutual. It was a mutual parting of the way?

Wanda: Uh-huh. And I actually went away, out of state to a midwifery program for quite a while. It was very hard to do that and be going through a divorce at the same time. I didn't finish the program.

Then I came back up here because I didn't want to be away from the kids anymore. I came back and visited them periodically. They came down to see me but I needed to be back here. So I lived in an apartment so I was close enough to them to see them often. They would come spend the night.

Jill: And you said you had met somebody, a woman?

Wanda: While my husband and I were still married, I had a really horrible job at a hospital for awhile. It wasn't – I don't know how to describe it exactly. It wasn't horrible, horrible but it was not a very good experience. I went down there to put together a program for OB/GYNE nurse practitioners and I did that and I got a class through and I taught undergraduates for awhile, but it was also hard because I took my daughter. My husband, my daughter and I traveled on the train from the suburbs to the city and then I took her with me when we got off at Union Station, I took her to the hospital with me where there was a good day school, and we did this part of the week, part of the week she stayed in the suburb where we lived. She was 3. Part of the week she would stay in the suburb with a caregiver so that my husband wouldn't feel like we were running away and leaving him every day.

Jill: What a lot of juggling.

Wanda: Oh my God, I don't know how we ever did it. I don't know how. Anyway, when I left that job after about a year and a half. I was very depressed. I didn't—I think the whole thing had been such a hard thing to do. And I took a job in my favorite bookstore in the suburb where we lived. I just said, I want to do something completely different. And the woman I eventually got involved with was sort of doing the same thing. She had worked out in a home for kids/adolescents who had problems. And she got really burned out. So she took a year off to work in a bookstore.

And um, she and I got to be really good friends while we worked there. She was married. But I really liked her more than like a good friend. And after some time, she left the bookstore finally, after I did. I just did stay a year, and then went back into nursing and she went – and she went back to get her Masters. And sometime after that we ran into each other again and she was getting a divorce because her husband had found somebody else who he was playing with. She wasn't going to stand for that so she just said, "Good bye. You get out."

So, we saw each other. We just ran into each other and began to see each other as friends outside, not associated with work in any way. And I really fell in love with her. And that was happening as my husband and I were breaking up our marriage.

In the second interview, the sequence of events gets clarified. Wanda meets "Laura" the woman who will be her future female partner in 1975. She loses contact with her until 1978-79. In 1980 she leaves to go to an out-of-state midwifery program. Wanda is still married but she has strong feelings for Laura and an incipient relationship begins. While she is still married, and in the context of what Wanda believes could be a viable relationship with Laura, Wanda begins to self-identify as a lesbian. Wanda starts the midwifery program in January 1980 and by Easter the same year she and her husband decide to divorce. During the time that Wanda is in the midwifery program she is openly out as a lesbian. This turns out to have a lot of negative ramifications for her: the program is quite conservative and not pleased about Wanda's lesbian sexual orientation. The conflict around her lesbian identity at school leads to a depressive episode and this, as much as missing her children, seems to affect her decision to leave the program. The manner in which Wanda tells her narrative is such that it takes the two interviews to adequately clarify the chronology of Wanda's acknowledgement of her lesbian sexual identity, the timing of her divorce and her experience in the midwifery program. Here is what Wanda says in the second interview:

Wanda: No, my work at the bookstore ended, at the end of 1976. I was still married for a while and so was she. No, she wasn't, yes she was. She was still married and so was I. And, uh, for a couple of years we didn't see each other. And then I got in touch with her some time in the late 70s because I was going to run a marathon and she was a runner and so I told her and she and her husband came down and waited for me at the finish. And that was the first time I'd seen her in quite awhile.

Jill: What year did you say that was?

Wanda: That was probably 78 or 79.

Jill: 78-79, okay. And then, you have the divorce. And what was the impetus. You were married a long time.

Wanda: Seventeen years.

Jill: Seventeen years. What finally is the impetus for divorcing each other?

Wanda: I think he, I think that he finally pushed it. I was still very reluctant, um, but he really began pushing hard and then I went away in 1980 to the midwifery program out of state.

Jill: So you were married when you went to the midwifery program?

Wanda: Yes, yes.

Jill: Ok.

Wanda: I was and I went in January of 1980 and I came back around Easter time and that's when we decided.

Jill: So already there had been a separation in the family—you were away.

Wanda: Right.

Jill: And then there was the divorce and the kids stayed with him. And then you went back to the midwifery program?

Wanda: Yeah, I was there a couple of years altogether.

Jill: And coming back up here, because you didn't finish that program which was unusual for you?

Wanda: Yup.

Jill: Not to finish what you start, I think, right? How come you moved back? How come you didn't complete the program?

Wanda: I was very depressed. My faculty suggested that I just stop.

Jill: What was depressing you, do you think?

Wanda: I was really sad about being away from my kids, um, I was sad about the divorce. It was a tough time.

Jill: And anything about your sexuality?

Wanda: While I'd been out of state, I'd come back to see Laura, a few times.

Jill: Ah, you did.

Wanda: Yeah, we began a sexual relationship. And we planned that when I came back I was going to live with her. And when I came back and I was depressed, she didn't want me to live with her. She basically said, get out. So, I lived with a couple of different friends for 4 or 5 months. And, um, then found an apartment and lived on my own.

Jill: That had to be tough. 'Cause part of the reason you came back was to be with Laura?

Wanda: Yes, yes! I felt really betrayed. Over a period of time, a long period of time we still saw each other, I grappled with, we both grappled with, did we want to live together. Both grappled with, did we want to live together and by 1986 we finally decided we could do it financially. And we bought a house together.

Jill: So did you date during that period other women?

Wanda: No.

Jill: So you had basically fallen for her and that was it?

Wanda: Yeah. No I didn't date anyone else.

Jill: But you identified at that point when you came back from the midwifery program as a lesbian.

Wanda: Yes, yes. I identified that way when I was living out of state.

Jill: Okay. So even when you were married, before you were divorced you had already come to that?

Wanda: Uh-huh, yes.

Jill: So that helped you then make the final decision, even though you lived with the man 17 years, you had kids, it's never easy.

Wanda: Uh-huh yeah. I don't know it was so much, it's interesting, that I decided I was a lesbian that helped me make the decision to divorce him.

Jill: It was just something you knew about yourself in addition to –

Wanda: I knew he wanted the divorce, and uh, I couldn't see any way to stay with him.

Jill: But if he hadn't wanted the divorce, would you have pushed for the divorce?

Wanda: I don't know. He did so I don't know what I would have done. Because I really was in love with her.

In the first interview, Wanda shares that when she is in graduate school in the nineteen seventies, she is beginning to have a better sense of her same-sex attraction. She frames it in the context of being exposed to feminist writings and the early writings about lesbian experience:

Wanda: In the early 70s, when I was in my graduate program, I took some courses in Feminist theory. I began reading more about lesbians because there was something to read. I knew about the Boston Women's Health Collective and when the new big Simon & Schuster edition of that book came out as opposed to the old newsprint edition, uhm, there was that great chapter on lesbians and I thought—"This is right."

And I thought, "But I don't know how I'm going to do this. I was still very married. I had an infant daughter. And so I just sort of sat on it for awhile. But I didn't really have crushes on anybody, I just thought about it a lot. And I think it was when my husband and I started breaking up that I finally acknowledged that that felt very right for me.

It is only in the second interview that Wanda reveals that she was sexually involved with a female professor during this period. Putting this sexual interlude into a coherent context is elusive at the time and remains so:

Wanda: I don't remember if I talked about this or not, but I actually had a relationship, very spotty relationship because we only saw each other once a year, with one of my professors. And, uh, probably that's where if anything where I figured out that I was much more interested in women.

Jill: In the first interview, you said that you were reading about lesbians and "thought a lot about it," and it might be hard to recollect what that thinking process was.

Wanda: I don't think I can recall what my thoughts were.

Jill: Was it like you knew but you didn't know how to make it work. Or, hmm, I'm attracted to women but I don't know what that means, it might not mean anything.

Wanda: Well I had had that type of relationship in college with the woman who was my maid of honor, so that was always kind of with me. And thinking, what is the meaning of that in my life, though I think I was just gradually putting it together, feeling that that was much more consonant with the way I felt inside.

Jill: I was wondering because we all try to make sense and coherence of our lives and how you fit the relationship in college in, and then the quasi-relationship with the professor, how you make sense of what you are doing in your life. So when you had that relationship with your professor, I wonder what you were telling yourself.

Wanda: [pause] That I was really attracted to her. Yeah. [pause]

Jill: For you had the marriage kind of died?

Wanda: No. I don't think so that early. I had a couple of depressions through there. I was working. Most all of the time, although some of the time it was part-time work.

Jill: So do you think that the depressions were related to the not being able to figure out how to kind of make it all fit?

Wanda: I don't think so. I don't really think so.

Jill: How do you understand those depressions? There's a family history certainly.

Wanda: [long pause] I can't really tell you. They would come on very suddenly. I think some of it was that I wasn't satisfied in my marriage. I had physical intimacy. But that was it. I never felt like my husband particularly cared about anything else. And he was really a workaholic when he wasn't chasing girls. And [pause] I don't know.

Once Wanda accepts herself as a lesbian, she is completely out. She does not worry about the ramifications of being a lesbian on her children nor on her work. Once Wanda determines that being a lesbian can be a viable lifestyle, she fully embraces it.

Wanda: I think that I've always been more out. For instance, when Laura and I were together, she was very careful how out she was and to whom. And I never really cared.

Jill: How come, you think? What enabled you to do that?

Wanda: I don't know. I never felt like there were any consequences that I couldn't manage.

Jill: Because you have kids.

Wanda: I have kids. My kids knew.

Jill: So it's kind of a non-issue?

Wanda: Yeah, what's the big deal?

Jill: It's interesting how you go from not being able to figure out how to do it all, which is why you stay married even though you kind of know after a while, and then the marriage ends and you're out. You're very comfortable with it.

Wanda: Uh-huh, that's right.

Jill: Because you had been thinking about it so much?

Wanda: Maybe. I think once I really acknowledged it, then I could see how I'd been a lesbian all the way along. And just didn't know it.

Jill: Meaning what for you? What do you mean when you say that?

Wanda: I mean, that probably my orientation was much more toward women but I never realized it. And I think because I grew up at the time that I did, that was easy to happen because everything was so, so closeted. You just didn't talk about it.

In terms of her career trajectory, Wanda gets depressed while attending the midwifery program. She does not finish the program and returns home. The depressive episode lasts for a while, jeopardizing her relationship with Laura. When Wanda returns, she takes a job affiliated with a hospital. In 1995, Wanda gets downsized from that job and ends up getting a research position at a local university. She discovers that she loves doing research and decides, at the age of 60 to return to school to get her doctorate. She is fully out as a lesbian when she takes the job and decides to go back to school.

Wanda: And after about 2 years on that study, I finally said, you know what, I think I need to get a piece of paper so that I can do my own research. So that's what I did. And the woman who was running that study, wasn't happy that I stopped and went to school instead.

Jill: It sounds like you found what you love to do.

Wanda: Yes, research with well people. And I had the opportunity to work with a faculty person the whole time I was in my doctoral program on her research study which was such a wonderful experience too. You know, I sometimes think, it's sad that I didn't get to do that sooner, because I always knew I would like research, but I don't really mourn that.

One of these questions about a high point, I think that research with the women on the South and West Sides was the high point in my work. And my whole doctoral experience was a high point. I felt like I had so much support and just people who wanted me to do well and went out of their way to help me. And everybody knew I was a lesbian. I'm really out and to me that felt like such a great integration of my self and my work life.

Jill: Sounds like it is very freeing then to be out and do the work – as opposed to the nursing when you weren't out.

Wanda: Uh-huh, yeah.

In the second interview, Wanda has a few more thoughts about what happened to her in the midwifery program that she felt she had to leave: they directly involve her sexuality.

Wanda: Yes. I can't tell you right now the specifics but I knew that I had feelings about it and I think they were very glad that I dropped out of the program because then they didn't have to graduate a lesbian midwife.

Jill: So it does have an impact. You had thought you wanted to be a midwife, a nurse midwife. So, that's what you decided you wanted to do and then it feels like a very hostile environment down there.

Wanda: It was. It was. Um, and I think, I'm trying to remember when I actually began to come out down there. I can't tell you the timing but if I had been a little more mature in my lesbian identity, I think I would have taken them on, just like I took the people on at the hospital. Because, I mean I have seen it over and over again, I don't like to essentialize people into groups, but among nurse midwives there are many, many conservative people. They're into families and mothers and babies like you wouldn't believe. And they don't have much room and they're into heterosexual parenting and they don't have room in their view of the world to see anything outside, or to accept much outside of that.

Jill: I find it really interesting that you feel that if you had been further along in your lesbian sexual identity you might have taken them on.

Wanda: Uh-huh.

Jill: That maybe you would have found a way to stay?

Wanda: Maybe.

Jill: Like you did – I mean, you told me how they fired you at the small local college you were working at later on and you believed it had to do with your lesbian sexual orientation and you fought them and said, "You can't do that." That's a pretty brave thing to do. And they hire you part-time back. There was some sort of acknowledgement. You don't walk away from the fight. And in the midwifery program, which was something you were interested in, it feels like you're not quite ready to necessarily take that on because you are just beginning to consolidate your sense of self as a lesbian.

Wanda: Uh-huh.

Jill: So to take on an institution?

Wanda: Right. A bunch of pretty powerful women too. Nurses.

Jill: Did that surprise you?

Wanda: Yes. It did. It did. Some of them were former nuns and the rest were different nurses who had become educated as nurse midwives and they were teaching. They were a kind of hardnosed bunch.

Jill: So there is some impact of your development as a lesbian affecting your work life and then you having to make other decisions the way you have?

Wanda: Uh-huh, yes. That was a big part of my depression coming back here. I felt so much like a failure. But there was a part of me that knew it wasn't all my fault. And one of my best friends there was another lesbian and she was on the faculty but she was very, very quiet about it. I think they knew because she had been in the state for quite awhile and had had a long term lesbian partner for quite awhile – she wasn't with her anymore—but she didn't talk about it out loud so they didn't have to think about it.

Jill: So that absolutely would have affected how you felt. Because when I was listening to the tape of the first interview, I was thinking, how unlike you, just from the little bit that I know of you, to not complete. It seemed like that was so unusual.

Wanda: It still feels like a sad piece of my life to me. But I have just sort of moved on.

Jill: But I guess it really makes sense too. You were struggling with so many different things, including your sexuality which had no place there.

Wanda: There was a place for it in the community at large because there were lesbians and I found them. But, my immediate environment was school and all the clinical work I was doing and it wasn't the patients, most of our patients were real poor black women from all over the coastal area of the south. But it was the faculty.

Jill: So then you come back and take a teaching job in the hospital?

Wanda: Uh-huh, I had to make money.

Jill: It starts you on a track you're okay with but not?

Wanda: It's not getting me anywhere really but it was a resting place. It was a place to figure out where I was going to go next. And then when I got that faculty position at the small local college next that was a step up for me, to me, that I really enjoyed for a period of time. When you are the only person on a faculty that is so small that what you teach is the only thing you teach, over and over and over and over, all the time, it's really wearing. But it was a very supportive place. The college was, is, a lovely place for faculty and students. It kind of has a lot of conservatism but –

Jill: And you could be out there?

Wanda: I could be out there and I took Laura to parties all the time and you know, I did whatever I wanted to.

Jill: Would you say that after you kind of came out and were able to live as a lesbian that you felt, happy?

Wanda: Yes. I would say that.

Jill: Happier than before?

Wanda: It is hard to say was I happier. I felt more like my real self. So that felt better. . . . I don't know what words I would use. It was more satisfying. It's more satisfying to be who you are. So, that's what felt better.

“Chris”

Chris is 41 years old, a teacher at a small boarding school in the Midwest. She comes out to herself as a lesbian when she is 28 years old. She has been with her current female partner for more than 5 years. Chris is of Asian-American descent and grows up with very strong familial expectations about how to behave and what her adult life is supposed to be like. As with the other subjects, the contours of her struggles around her lesbian sexual identity and career trajectory are sounded from the start, in her response to the very first interview question about her childhood. Chris's narrative is such that the initial question leads to one long rendition about her life that encompasses many aspects

of the interview; in the first interview, Chris answers many of the researcher's questions before they are asked:

Chris: I was born in 1967 and I am the oldest of three kids. My parents came over from [their homeland] in 1965 – correct that. They came over before 1965, just a little bit before. They got married here in the States much to both their parents' disapproval. From what I hear, my grandparents on both sides did not speak to my parents until I was born in 1967. So, and then my grandparents came over various times in which they would stay 6 months to a year. They would stay with my family, correct. My mom is a pediatrician. She's worked at several well-known hospitals there. My father is, was, an engineer, he has now since retired.

So, I'm the oldest of three. I have a younger sister, two years younger and a younger brother, four years younger. I can't say that anything in my childhood was really traumatic in any way. My dad used to tell me that as a kid or as a baby we'd go to church. And you see how most kids, most babies, will just start crying. He would say, you were the quietest baby. It seemed like you were so at peace there and so quiet and everything. So that was a memory that always stood out.

But I was raised Catholic. So. Through my years in grade school, middle school and high school – or at that time they called it junior high—um, nothing major. I was a very good student. There **was** a lot of pressure to do well academically. As my mom would tell me, if there was a white person with the same grades as you, or competing for a job, they'd pick the white person. So I had to do it better.

Jill: And in the community where you grew up, were they mostly white kids?

Chris: Mostly white kids. We had some Asian friends but they did not live in the same town, suburb, as we did. Actually, I was – I'll get into that later. Umm, I was always working very hard. I can't say I was a straight A student but I really enjoyed school, quite a bit. Junior high was when I really began to develop my close friends. To this day, all the way through high school and college, there are ten to whom I'm still close to. I cannot even say that about college. I know maybe two from college. But my high school friends, one of them goes back to grade school, fourth grade. She can remember every single dress I wore in elementary school – because I didn't wear dresses very often! [laughs]. I was such the tomboy. I was also very athletic. And so I was picked, one of the first girls to be picked during kickball or dodgeball or whatever it was that we were playing then.

And in junior high was when we had more of the organized teams. I was a regular varsity starter for all my junior high years, in field hockey, volleyball and softball. They wanted me to go out for the basketball team and I said that was too much running, I don't think so. So, I was athletic as well as a good student. I was an honor student.

Jill: Any problems being a tomboy with your folks?

Chris: No, I think, I still, when my mom said you need to wear a dress to church or to a party, I never argued. And I think that's one of the things. I'm a very quiet person. And as my dad finally said, I internalize so much. I was very hard on myself. Whereas my sister, I can't say whether she really did the middle child syndrome or not, she was the rebellious one. Did not get as good grades, did not like the fact that when she got into a classroom, it was "Oh, so your Chris's little sister?" So there's the whole set of expectations. So my sister and I had conflict for a while. But she is very gifted. I'm more of the math, science. She is definitely more of the humanities. Then my brother got blessed with both.

And my brother and I, we played around also. The dynamics was really fun. My brother was also one who said, we got to get our work done so that we can go play. And I'm that way. My sister was like, Oh, I think I'll go hide in the bathroom until it's all over. So, he and I ended up doing all the chores. So it was amazing those winters. We're shoveling the driveway and my sister would finally show up towards the end. And we're just like, and she says, "How can I help?" And we're like, "whatever."

But I think my sister and my brother are much closer. Because when I left for college they were still very much in their high school years there. In the same school.

In college I majored in Chemistry. But my high school friends, we were five girls and five guys. We were all pretty close. Funny, when I look back on it now, everyone dated everybody and we all managed to stay friends but I didn't date any of them. I was just friends with them. Um, I can't say that we were the popular crowd. If anything else we were the geekish crowd, but the cool geeks. The cool crowd liked me, the grunge group liked me – I just managed to fit in anywhere. And by the time I graduated from high school, the school was probably close to 50 percent Black, there were a lot more families moving in, they were integrating a little bit better. But previous to that, I was pretty much the minority. So it was a lot of pressure.

Jill: You said, everyone dated each other but you didn't.

Chris: I was pals. Yeah. I can't say I was attracted to any of them. They were just like my older brothers and sisters. So, I mean that would be the extent of my high school and childhood life.

Chris is an obedient, non-assertive oldest child. She is a tomboy growing up but conforms to her family and ethnic group's norms when it is required of her. When Chris goes off to college, she becomes involved with a woman. This relationship is very meaningful to Chris but it complicates her life in many ways. At that time Chris is unable to place her sexual identity into any sort of meaningful context.

Chris: In my culture, everyone, they're – well first of all, everyone has to, everyone is feeling like you have to be better. Everyone is a doctor. I was a huge disappointment to my parents that I became a teacher. They all thought I would go off to med school. And in fact, as a Chem. Major, I intended to. Until I just got sick of school. My ethnic group is very close-minded and I think it's because of the Catholic upbringing. It's a very staunch Roman Catholic. When I came out to my parents, and actually it wasn't quite the coming out that I wanted. There were a couple of sidesteps in there.

In college I ended up, I dated a couple of guys. And they were healthy relationships. Um, and then I spent a summer away in Europe working as a volunteer, came back and discovered that my boyfriend was sleeping with my best friend. I was like, uff—not so good.

Um, but I happened upon another person, um and she was the roommate of my best friend. And she was, "Oh, I can't believe she did that!" And we became really good friends. And over the junior and senior year it became very intense. Um, and we crossed a line. But we actually couldn't say.

Jill: When you say you "crossed the line?"

Chris: Crossed the line into the physical, where we slept next to each other. There was some physical intimacy. But we actually never thought of it as being, we're both lesbians. Um, this is an experience that we probably would never have again. And my parents caught me, on my 21st birthday, in my home, with her in my bed. We were dressed. And nothing had happened. We were just sleeping next to each other. Even though all the rest of the guests were sleeping in the other room where she was supposed to be sleeping. That did not go over well. So it was a very interesting 21st birthday.

Jill: What did they say to you?

Chris: Uh, um, they said, “What’s going on?” I said, “We’re just friends.” They said, “It’s unnatural for two women to be sleeping next to each other. She had her arm around you.” I’m like, -- I began lying. “Oh, it must have flopped over. We were talking late into the night.” Just coming up with this and that. But she sent me cards. She’s a big card person, I’m a big card person. And they wanted to see the cards. But luckily I had already sifted out anything that could be construed.

Jill: Huh, so you had done that?

Chris: So, I had done that. And hidden them under my bed or something like that. Ever since then it was very tense. My parents don’t care for her and she’s still my best friend. We broke up the first year I was out of college and right after her father had passed away. And she actually, as the phrase goes, has jumped back over the fence. That was a little rough for me for awhile. Because I was like, I just want to be with her. She knows everything about me, you know. But we worked very hard and to this day we talk to each other every night.

It’s hard to explain our relationship now. We are such special friends. There is something there that we had and always will. Very close. So that sort of started it with my parents. And in my Asian background which follows the Catholic tradition quite a bit, this is a major sin.

I think also on top of it is not only am I a minority, now I’m gay, who’s going to hire me. There’s so much trouble, hardships, you wouldn’t want that for your child.

All through college, Chris is pre-med, then, in her senior year she realizes that she does not want to follow the career path laid out by her family, the career path of her mother. This drastic change in plans occurs in the context of her relationship with “Rebecca”. The change creates a lot of tension in her family; it is Rebecca who helps her figure out what she should do if she is not going to go to medical school. This is how Chris discusses this period of her life:

Chris: In college I was planning on going to med school and was starting to fill out the applications and senior year I was like, I don’t want to do this. And it was actually Rebecca who asked, well, what do you want to

do? And I had no clue what I was going to do with this major. And she was like, well you've been tutoring, -- I was tutoring freshman. And she said, "You've been doing a good job have you considered teaching?" And her father was a teacher. Um, or came from a family of teachers, sorry, he ended up being the engineer in the family. Um, no [she hadn't considered teaching]. So I ended up applying for teaching jobs. I never thought I'd be a teacher. Now I can't see myself not being a teacher.

Jill: So the reason – you found your niche, clearly. You kind of went to college thinking pre-med, kind of prepared to do that and then it felt like, Oh my god I can't do so much more school. Was part of it also that you also had a relationship you didn't know – that there was also a lot of internal turmoil going on at the same time?

Chris: There was.

Jill: That the thought of having to like do what you needed to do to be in med school felt too much?

Chris: I think I agree with that. I think that there was a lot going on with me whether I recognized it or not. In my relationship with my family, the expectations that were placed upon me, whether it was by my parents or whether it was by me. Um, and um, and what am I going to do, I have to do well at whatever I'm doing. Um, do I have time for a relationship?

But I think that there was a lot of turmoil that I couldn't focus on one thing. And as the teaching became more of a last minute, I need to do something, I'm about to graduate, um, I just never expected it to go as well as did here. Especially with my dad, I'm pulling out, car's loaded, I'm hugging my dad good-bye and he's like, "Now be careful. Remember, the kids look up to you, they're—you gotta be a pillar of strength and act appropriately" and I'm sitting there thinking, "Oh, God, what the hell." I just wanted to start unpacking the car, thinking, "I can't do this."

And I actually, instead of driving directly to the school, I drove to Rebecca's, to my friend who I was dating at the time and talked to her father and stayed there a couple of nights. And he's like, "You'll be fine. Be forward with the kids. Be tough with the kids. You'll know when to ease up. If you don't know the answer, and it's going to happen, say you'll get back to them and be sure you get back to them." He gave me the basics. And I thought, "I got more here than I got from my dad!"

Chris and Rebecca break up the year after college. Chris describes how she put the relationship behind her and "dove into work." What also occurs, is that Chris begins

to drink very heavily, has violent and destructive episodes and is depressed overall. In order not to lose her job, Chris begins to see a counselor. Initially she does not connect the upset that is threatening her job security to her sexuality. Her therapist is the first to pose the question whether Chris's emotional state and her behavior might have something to do with her sexuality.

Chris: Um, and it wasn't until 7 years later when I finally accepted who I was. Because – but in that time period, um, when Rebecca and I broke up, I didn't think, Oh, I'm just going to find another woman. I just dove into work, I'm a teacher, I love my kids [at the school], I'm protective of my students there, um. I didn't date because I didn't know anyone here. Um, and I was still trying to get over some of that. Got into some drinking problems. And my head of school, and his wife finally said, "Look, you gotta get some help." They weren't threatening to fire me but they were like, --

Jill: Was that around the drinking?

Chris: Yeah, and wild mood swings and depression, that type of thing. And so I finally gave in to counseling and was seeing a counselor for about 3 or 4 years.

Jill: So this would have been?

Chris: Twenty-three, twenty-six years of age. Um, and we were dealing with more issues with my family at the time because I could not live up to their expectations. And the fact that I'd come home, Mom would try to set me up with someone and it was like, I just wasn't interested in a relationship.

Jill: Did they bring up your sexuality?

Chris: No!

Jill: So they keep trying to find appropriate young men for you.

Chris: But I figured, based off that earlier incident on my 21st birthday that they just wanted to make sure so they would try to bring –

Jill: They didn't try to do that with your sister?

Chris: No.

Jill: They were just trying to match you up?

Chris: Right.

Jill: Because your sister was dating guys I take it?

Chris: My sister was dating guys. My brother was with his high school sweetheart. Um, and they just didn't like the fact that I was just work, work, work. Or, it would be like, Okay, so you've been at the school like for two, three years, when are you going to apply to grad school? Why won't you try chemical engineering? You're good at math, at chemistry.

Jill: A lot of intrusion, of suggesting?

Chris: Right. And the problem was that I was not strong enough at the time to stand up and say, "This is my life." And so that was part of the counseling. Being able to accept the fact that I cannot argue with my mom and dad and know that everything will be all right.

But finally towards the latter part of my counseling, there were issues that started to surface. It wasn't that I was having fantasies or anything, it was like, but what's wrong with me? And my counselor asked, "Well, when were you the happiest?" I said, "With Rebecca." And she was like, "Well, have you ever considered yourself gay?"

And I was like, No! And that **is** my Catholic upbringing. And she was like, "Well you might want to think about it." And I was like, No, no, no, there is no way.

Jill: So when she said that?

Chris: I started to deny it all over again. Although it was in the back of my mind. I just wouldn't acknowledge it.

Jill: So you looked at the relationship with Rebecca as just a one time thing? And pertinent to her?

Chris: Yeah.

Jill: That you had fallen in love with this person who just happened to be a woman?

Chris: Right and that was it. So. What ended up happening, um, I truly believe in God. I believe He is watching out for me all the time. I spend half my time apologizing, "I've screwed up again." But I do believe He does open doors. He

brings you to a place and doesn't stick you in the frying pan without you knowing how to get out of it. And I played volleyball. That was a huge outlet for me. And, I ended up playing with a teammate; she subbed for us one night. And then we all went out afterwards. I invited her, she was about my age and I didn't know anybody that well my age other than my co-workers. And, I said, "We're going out drinking, and then they want to play indoor volleyball, do you want to join us?"

And she was like, sure. And, so we went drinking and then, she was like, "Aren't you going to play indoor volleyball?" And I said, "Oh, I'm just going to watch them." For me it's like a sin to drink and get on a volleyball court. A) I'm going to hurt myself; B) disrespect for the game. So she said okay. So, we're sitting there and we're talking. And I had overheard that she was talking about a boyfriend. But she had never mentioned a name. So we were talking and I said, "So what's your boyfriend's name?" And she kind of looked at me for a second and then said, "Her name is J." I said, "Okay. How long have you and J been going out?"

So that was like the thing and we became fast friends. Unfortunately the person she was dating was in NY and she was here in the Midwest so it was very tough. But in many ways she walked me out the door, out of the closet per se. Um, not anything physical; it was just, you know, "Oh, she does look normal."

Jill: Kind of a role model?

Chris: Kind of a role model, definitely. Um, and we became very good friends.

Jill: How old are you when this is happening?

Chris: 26-27.

Jill: She kinda gives you the courage to?

Chris: Yeah.

Jill: To say, maybe I am gay.

Chris: Yeah. And, we talked more about it. And I ended up talking a little bit more about myself and she's like, well you could be. But she wasn't saying that I was. Um, but the more time I spent with her and we went out to various places here, some gay, some not and everything like that –um, it pretty much for me determined, yeah, this is where I'm supposed to be. And when I finally did come out to myself it was like this huge weight off my shoulders.

Later on in the first interview, Chris returns to that very difficult period when she is asked to talk more about her work life, about some high points and low points. Chris shares a story about her disappointment in herself when she comes down too hard on a male student, becoming mildly physical with him to make her point.

Chris: Part of it is that I have a temper. I think I got it through my dad. And so when things didn't go well – in those years when I was going through counseling and the drinking and everything, I was also very violent. I was never violent towards someone. It was inanimate objects. I'd come home so angry from a bad day at school, I'd go into my dorm room and I am like throwing things at the wall, tearing things up, um, it took a long time to just get through all that.

So the turmoil was like – whether it was my sexual identity or work, my parents, no friends, it just, everything was jumbled in those mid-twenties.

Jill: As you were trying to figure out?

Chris: As I was trying to figure out – and once that piece, my sexual identity fell into place, other things were starting to fall into place. Because I was like, oh, I'm going to go for my Masters. The drinking had pretty much gone away. Um, and luckily I had a very supportive Head. So that helped quite a bit. Because I could have easily been fired.

I never intended to have a teaching career. I thought it would be a good gig until I figured out what I wanted to do. And then probably four years into it I thought, you know, I'm just having way too much fun. So I was going to keep going down this path.

Eventually I was like, it would be kinda nice to have a masters degree in school administration. So I started working on that, probably in 1998. So this was one more thing right after I came out. So then I was jumping into this.

Jill: So that's so interesting, so once things finally do –when you finally come to terms with who you are and with your sexual identity, things calm down in your life.

Chris: Things calm down.

Things calm down and Chris is suddenly more ambitious for herself. Returning to school to get a Masters degree in education is very casually inserted into her narrative but

this advancement happens after Chris accepts her identity as a lesbian. When Chris is asked to think more directly about the possible connections between her sexual identity and her work identity, the correlation between the two realms of her life is further elaborated.

Jill: Looking back, how do you think that not having your sexual orientation figured out earlier affected, if at all, your work identity, your ambitions or goals, your overall work experience? You've been kind of weaving it through as we've gone along, it's been wonderful.

Chris: I think not knowing my sexual orientation at the time just added to the whole muddiness of my life. Um, in not – why can't I date guys? Why wasn't I interested? What's wrong with me?

Jill: What did you tell yourself? How did you explain it to yourself?

Chris: I figured that I just wasn't interested in anybody.

Jill: Just asexual?

Chris: Asexual. And I was like, and I even looked that up and people do exist like that, and I was like, okay. And for me, sex has never been the issue. It has been the emotional connection. Um, trying to explain that to heterosexual guys is always fun. They're like, what is it? You just need the right man. I'm like, "That's not the problem.

Um, but, I think with not knowing that, I think that somewhere in the back of my mind I think that I knew it. But I couldn't acknowledge it because it's going to affect work this way, it's going to affect my family this way, it's going to affect my friends this way. I could lose everything, everything I've worked for. Even though it doesn't meet up with my parents' expectations. I could lose that very quickly, just by saying, I'm gay, I'm a lesbian.

So I think that while it might have crossed my mind at some point, after Rebecca and I broke up there was no way I could acknowledge it. So I think my work identity, I just became the teacher who was a liar. I had to lie to everybody. You see I was not one who—I just followed things. . . .

Jill: I suppose knowing that somehow you couldn't fit into the mold in some way that was made for you –

Chris: Right. I think so. Just going in that direction, you're at that fork, do I go and be in med school and be who I'm supposed to be but something's pulling me over here and I follow that direction. I think that's when all the chaos started.

Jill: Right. And is it around teaching or is it around being different?

Chris: Maybe being different in general. And not being able to identify what that difference is. And, but once I could get one thing nailed down, then I feel like I have an anchor to work with, I'm anchored now. Now I can start to try and juggle and fix these other things. . . .

And then, but I think it was at that point, that breaking that decision [to become a doctor], and the person who helped me break that decision was Rebecca at the time. [her female lover]. Because we were there, being intense, I could tell her anything.

Jill: So in a way, you can't do it the way the family has it for you.

Chris: No.

Jill: So you have to diverge. What becomes obvious is the work piece, that's a way you can diverge. You can't do it with your sexual identity?

Chris: Right.

Jill: Because that's almost too much?

Chris: Too much, right. I never thought about it that way. That my work was actually the way to be able to rebel or to set the stage for everything else.

[Pause. Is very thoughtful] I think once I figured it out, once my identity was settled I could really soar, "Ok, I'm going to be the best at this." You know and this is what I have to do. I have to get that Masters.

Chris is worried about her family's reaction to her lesbian sexual identity. Her siblings are very accepting and her father reluctantly comes around. He is concerned about the impact of Chris's sexuality on the rest of her life, that by being lesbian her life will be overly complicated. Her mother is still unhappy about Chris's sexual orientation. As quoted above, Chris's preoccupation about how her sexual orientation would be

received slows the resolution process down. She also speaks more fully, late in the interviewing process, of her struggle with her own internal homophobic ideas that interfere with her full acceptance of herself:

When I came out to my parents, I came out, unfortunately, over the telephone. At one point my mother said, “What is wrong with you? Do you like women?” And I was like, Okay, um, this is not the way I was going to go about it but, “Yes, Mom, I do,” and she hung up on me.

I didn’t go home for Thanksgiving and when I did go home for Christmas my mom was not speaking to me. Um, and then the night before I left, I only stayed like three days, the night before I left, I pretty much stormed into their bedroom and said, “Look, this is who I am. I am not apologizing for this. I am happy. I am not hanging out with really strange people who are child molesters or anything. I don’t know what you have in your mind but take it or leave it.” It took a lot for me to do that. And then I went upstairs and started packing. My dad came upstairs and he was like, “Are you okay?” And I was like, “Dad, I’d be fine – I know you can’t accept this and I’m not asking for acceptance but you have to acknowledge it.” And he actually sat with me and asked more questions. “Well, does work know? Are you going to get fired?” I said, “Yes, work knows. Work knew before you did.”

He was a little upset at that. “But Dad, they’re in my life. They see me all the time. We live so far apart.” Um, and he said, “Do you have friends, are you dating anyone?” I said, “I’m not dating anyone right now but I do have friends.” And that was because of my friend who helped me walk out of the closet. She suddenly moved to NY like four months later but before she left she introduced me to a lot of people. And I don’t know whether she said, “Keep an eye on her,” that type of thing but I will always be forever grateful because I was able to begin my social network.

I told my dad, “I’ve got people, friends, who work for large corporations, banks, things like that. Professionals, doctors . . .” And then he was like, he asked if I was happy. And I said, “Dad, you don’t understand. I feel so much taller now and I understand who I am.” And he said, “But it’s so hard,” and everything like that. “People will discriminate.” And I said, “Dad, if I had picked this, if I had a choice to pick this, there is no way in hell I would choose to pick it. It’s not a choice for me. This is who I know I am.” And he’s – between my parents, he’s the one who has reached out a lot better. I think my mom and I have always head butted because everyone said I looked like my mom, I have the personality of my mom, I was going to follow in the footsteps of my mom. So this has been a huge shock and disappointment for her.

Jill: Still?

Chris: Yeah. It's getting a little bit better.

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Chris: I think unfortunately at the time I had my own strange weird ideas of what a gay person is like, what they look like, and the most typical that one sees are really the really tough, butch or the really flamboyant and it was like, and in the roles in which they had been cast, in movies have not always been complementary. And so, I'm like, that's probably why I had resisted even if I did acknowledge, I would have resisted because I was like, But I'm not like that.

When Chris resolves her lesbian sexual identity, she more fully embraces her teaching career, she returns to school to get her Masters degree and she finds that she is more assertive in her life:

Jill: In light of what we have been discussing about your life, about your sexual identity and work identity, what stories come to mind about how you personally changed or how your work situation changed after you resolved your sexual orientation?

Chris: I'd say, after, I became a lot more calm. Umm, my temper goes every once and while but that's because someone pushed the button. The students or some event but I have definitely become at peace with myself.

I'm just not the person who is just going to be, like my mom would say, you have to be this type of person and I would say, yes. And that part, after coming out, I think I've been able to say, I'm not going to apologize for my life anymore. Which was a big struggle for me. And I think for that part, it was with work initially. . . . Um, and I've started to speak up a lot more. This is unacceptable. I'm fighting for things.

Jill: So you're a lot more comfortable in your skin, so that you can be more?

Chris: Assertive. In all aspects of my life.

“Trudy”

Trudy is 52 years old and works in real estate. She has been with her partner Samantha for over a dozen years. Trudy is 35 years old when she accepts herself as a lesbian. The relationship with Samantha is Trudy’s first sexual relationship with a woman but she reports having prior attractions to women.

Trudy’s answer to the first interview question about her childhood reveals a history of trauma which has a significant impact on her view of herself and on how she approaches relationships and work.

Trudy: I have six brothers and sisters. My parents, my mother in particular was devotedly Catholic. Um, it was, um, I would say rather difficult in the sense that my parents were really secondary. My siblings and I were incredibly close and kind of raised each other. My mother had polio when she was a child and underwent seven surgeries, was the baby of the family and was, and somehow got stuck in that hypochondriacal infant—she was just incredible – anyway, probably the illuminating moment of my childhood was when I was 7.

I went to my parents’ room, it was dark, my mother spent a lot of time in bed. And I asked her, why don’t you love me and she said, I can’t. Your father loves you too much so I have to save my love for the other children.

Yeah, yeah. I’ve obviously I’ve been through therapy, had a therapist. When I was 18 my friend thought it was really strange that I had no respect or love for my mother. There was a caring out of familial responsibility but I went to a therapist in college and after three sessions I said, “My friend thinks it’s strange. . .” He said, “I’m amazed you deal with it as well as you do. I hate your mother for you.” It is what it is.

Jill: Where were you in the birth order?

Trudy: I was in the middle but I was the oldest girl. My father did adore me and my mother was incredibly jealous. But I was a kid. But whatever.

Jill: Even at 7 you knew.

Trudy: At 7 I knew. So, what else? The whole dynamic of, I’m going to make her love me made me an incredible overachiever. And in some ways

led to the need for feminine approval certainly. Laid the ground work for a lesbian relationship later. Um, what else?

Jill: What was it like in the house? No love from mother. She's kind of staying in bed. Um, you're the oldest girl.

Trudy: So I took on a lot of the responsibilities. Dinner, laundry, all of that sort of thing.

Jill: You became the caretaker.

Trudy: Yes. I had, it was – [struggling to amplify]

Jill: And friends?

Trudy: I was the class comedian. That and National Honors Society were probably the highlights of high school life. Went to college with my best friend from high school. And we remain friends to this day.

There was a tremendous need to overachieve. I was going to make her love me. And at 18 I realized that it wasn't anything that I did. I had a brother immediately over me who was and is schizophrenic and proceeded to beat me up every single day of my life. And my parents, my father worked and my mother was in Valium, wherever you go when you take Valium constantly. Again, a real dislike of men is so rooted in my childhood. Not dislike. Fear.

Jill: Any other boys in your family?

Trudy: My oldest brother went into the seminary at 12 so he was gone. And he is the best of all of us. My next brother was quite social so he absented himself from the house. He spent all of his time with his friends and that left my brother immediately above me, immediately older than me, proceeded to pick on everyone younger than him and I became the protector. . .

My father is the biggest hearted person you would ever meet but certainly not a strong person.

Jill: Your parents still living?

Trudy: My mother passed away 14 years ago. While visiting me, ughh, she got me one last time! Um, I reach a point when you have to laugh. And certainly I'm not telling you this story to evoke pity or anything else, it just is what it is. Um, a lot of my basic personality comes from my father. Basically easy-going, basically optimistic. A belief that the world

is good and people are good and it is up to me to find it. It has served me well.

Trudy shares a bit more about her family when asked about how she thought about career as a young person and about family expectations:

Trudy: Um, the family expectations were very limited. We were lower middle income family with seven children. Um, the money went to put my brothers through college there was no financial source.

Jill: So it was important for the brothers to go to college but not the girls?

Trudy: Yes, definitely. So my sisters and I all put ourselves through college. And quite honestly we are the stronger for it. If I look at my brothers and I look at my sisters the women in my family are by far the stronger.

Jill: So how many brothers and how many sisters?

Trudy: Four and two. Three older brothers, two younger sisters and the youngest is my brother. In terms of what I wanted to do, I always knew I wanted to go into journalism. My father was a newspaper man. And um, my brothers, my two older brothers both one majored in photography and the other majored in theology, he was the one in the seminary and when he came out he joined my father's newspaper.

Jill: Oh, so he had a newspaper?

Trudy: He did. He worked for a community, a local newspaper and then he started his own newspaper for about ten years and then he ended up – so there's a bit of the entrepreneurial, my grandmother was incredibly independent and a wonderful woman who I was named after. Really emulated her a bit. So I think that answers that question.

Jill: So you hoped to be a journalist, so what did you do with that? Did you go into journalism then in college?

Trudy: I majored in journalism. Came out of college and had a minor heartbreak which was I was sure I had this job at a big advertising firm away from home and I came in number two. The guy was kind enough to send me a letter to say, you were our second choice, and really, quite honestly, I was gunning for you but it didn't happen but you have tremendous potential. Went to work for an advertising agency in my hometown as a copywriter. Is there enough on this subject, er?

Jill: You can feel free to expand as things come to your mind. So you like journalism like Dad. Did Mother – I know that she was a lot out of the picture, but did she voice any expectations?

Trudy: Just that you're going to fail, you're going to fail, you're going to fail. Just very negative.

Jill: Was that just towards you?

Trudy: That's what I was going to tell you. In our twenties, we were together, we were a drinking family, my brothers still are. As a coping thing probably.

Jill: What's your background. I know you're Catholic.

Trudy: German-English. Um, my brothers and sisters all said, what did Mom have in for you? Man, she was gunning for you our whole childhood. It was really a relief because for a long time I thought it was just me.

Trudy is interested in journalism and her father is a newspaperman. Her oldest brother, who leaves the seminary, goes to work with her father, but Trudy does not. Trudy is very matter-of-fact about not following her father into journalism in the first interview; in fact, she has very little to say about it. In the second interview, Trudy reveals more:

Jill: I thought it was interesting too that you always, you had a love for journalism and he's involved in newspapers all along.

Trudy: Yes.

Jill: And yet you end up in advertising. But you don't go after the journalism job. How do you understand that?

Trudy: Well, actually I did. I interviewed with a couple of companies out-of-state. I interviewed at that large ad agency which was my first choice. And I got a very nice letter that said, "I was number two."

Jill: But that's an ad agency.

Trudy: But it was still writing. I wanted to be a copywriter.

Jill: More than a journalist?

Trudy: More than a journalist. I wanted to be a writer. My other job, I interviewed with an out-of-state paper but it was really low paying and I opted not to try and survive in the big city. I was so disappointed over the loss of the ad agency job.

Jill: But you don't go to Dad and say, "Work some magic for your daughter."

Trudy: No, never. Again, going to my parents was never an option.

Jill: Because didn't one of your brothers – the brother who came out of seminary, work for your dad?

Trudy: Yes, when he came out of seminary he went to work for my dad.

Jill: So he feels able to do it.

Trudy: Yes.

Jill: But you don't feel able to do it.

Trudy: No.

Jill: So, that decision not to ask Dad for help with your job, with your career?

Trudy: He was vice-president of a newspaper the whole time I was growing up and then when I started college, that newspaper sold and he was offered a sales person's position. He refused it, struggled for a while and then started his own newspaper. Um, and by the time I graduated from school, he had closed that and that was the newspaper my brother J. worked with him on. Um, and then he was general manager of another small newspaper and he did that until he retired. It wasn't – you know what, Jill, it just never entered my mind. It really didn't, to ask him for a job.

Jill: That's kind of interesting because you're interested in the field.

Trudy: Yeah. You would think.

Jill: He's not promoting you; he's not supporting you in that way. Does he even know you have an interest?

Trudy: I was a journalism major. [laughs, sort of]

Jill: So he should have?

Trudy: Yeah. [lots of sadness in voice.] It was a small newspaper; I guess I didn't think there would be anything.

Jill: Right, but your brother does.

Trudy: Yeah, but that was a newspaper my dad started.

Jill: But you don't even have conversations with your father about it?

Trudy: No. But I did have a conversation about lesbian relationships with my old college roommate. [non-sequitur]

The non-sequitur disrupts Trudy's narrative revealing significant information about the intensity of the relationship with her college roommate. This is how the conversation continues:

Jill: When was that?

Trudy: After we graduated from college, um, we decided to go visit an old friend and um, this is a wild thing. Anyway, we proceeded to go out and hit the clubs and come back, and she was like, "Come on, let's go to bed. You know you always wanted to, come on."

I was like, you're drunk, you would regret it, believe me. But it's funny, that unspoken but acknowledged.

Trudy obtains her first job when this college roommate, with whom she has a strong emotional connection, puts in a good word for her at the advertising agency where she is working at as a receptionist. Indeed, many of the jobs Trudy gets have some connection to women to whom she is emotionally attached. When she decides to go into business for herself, her business partner is "Alice", a woman, it turns out, to whom she has a strong attraction. The nature of Trudy's feelings about her business partner emerge when she is asked when she first began to have some idea that she might be a lesbian:

Trudy: Probably with my friend Alice. She was a very sexual person. And it, and to go through her history would explain why her whole identity was in her sexuality.

Jill: Was she a straight woman or a gay woman?

Trudy: Yes, a straight woman.

Jill: But you had feelings for her?

Trudy: Yes and under the umbrella of experimentation we kissed a couple of times and then the next day it was, "Oh, it was the alcohol."

In the first interview, Trudy states that she has a conversation with Alice about the possibility of having a relationship but Alice says no. Following this, Trudy has a 5 year relationship with a male friend. She leaves him when he starts using drugs again. She has a rebound relationship with another man and gets pregnant but she has no intention of marrying this man. Getting pregnant coincides with the starting of her real estate business with Alice. In the second interview, Trudy reports that all during the time that she is with men, Alice and her husband are close friends and they all spend a lot of time together. When Trudy's daughter is 2 years old, Trudy moves into a duplex and befriends the other, female, tenant with whom she develops a very intense friendship.

Trudy: A friend of mine owned a duplex and a friend lived on the first floor, so my daughter and I moved into the second floor.

And this gal, we've been friends forever. My friend, in my estimation, would have been so much happier if she had found a woman and settled down. But she's one of those people who could never cross the line. She wanted desperately to have a child but she would never do it without a husband. In her defense, her belief was, I would never have a child and subject them to not having a father.

In the second interview, Trudy is a bit more expansive about her feelings about this woman:

Jill: And then, when it ends with Steve and you have the rebound relationship and that's over, then your thoughts about, am I going to be with anybody, who might I want to be with?

Trudy: I was actually in a friendship with a woman and my daughter considers her her other mother. Um, I think I told you about her, she is a person who would just never cross that line. She lived upstairs and we lived downstairs in a duplex for the first five years of my daughter's life. She took care of her as much as I did.

Jill: Did you wish it were something more?

Trudy: I certainly thought it could be a possibility.

Despite having a series of intense friendships with women, Trudy states that she does not think of herself as having a lesbian sexual orientation until she is 35 years old. The 5 year relationship with her male friend, Steve, and her rebound relationship where she gets pregnant, something that she states she wanted very much, complicates the picture for her. Trudy is 30 when she gets pregnant and starts her own company. She is all about work:

So after that, as I said, at 30, I came out of that second relationship thinking, relationships are not where I want my focus. I'm pregnant, I bought my first house; I did a lot when I was 30. And started this business. My child spent the first 3 months in the storage closet. I was back at work two weeks after I gave birth. I was showing apartments, third floor units the night I gave birth.

And after I moved the office into a high rent district, I took a second job, waited tables on Wednesdays and Saturdays, and , um, really no [sexual] orientation.

Really where the orientation came in was at 35, my daughter was 5. Really before then, no orientation. One of the people on my softball team, I just thought was hysterical. And when we first, when I first went to play with them, she showed up in a matching warm-up suit and she took the pants off and the shorts matched. And I was like, Oh my god! So out of my league, I'm never going to make this. And uh, about when I was 35, 10 years after we were all friends, they decided to come out and they said, There is something we want to tell you. And I said, you're pregnant. And they said, No! And that's when it came to the forefront of my mind that

this would be an option. I certainly could see myself with a woman. I think emotionally I would be more trusting. My experience with men was just unfortunately I always seemed to attract—I don't know if attract – but all the men I knew were incredibly weak. Um, so anyway, one of those in that couple approached me.

The woman who approaches her is Samantha, who later becomes her partner.

Further on in the first interview, Trudy is more expressive and clarifying of her same-sex feelings:

Trudy: There definitely is a preference for women. Absolutely. But not from a sexual standpoint. It's more an emotional standpoint.

Jill: So talk to me a little more about that.

Trudy: Again it goes back to my mother. I, I didn't trust my mother. There's just a higher comfort level with women than men. I relate to them better. I identify with them better. I [pause] just like them more.

So the emotional connection, more towards the lesbian end and in terms of sex -- in terms of satisfying that sexual appetite, it was much more satisfied with women than men. Always. Although Samantha is the only woman I've been with.

I knew I was attracted to Alice. I knew I was attracted to Barb. But it was never anything that I would act on.

Jill: Why not?

Trudy: Because I assumed everyone had crushes on both men and women and that was just part of growing up.

Jill: Okay, so then these two women come out to you, and you tell it like, something shifts?

Trudy: It did.

Jill: Something shifted and how would you define that shift? What shifted for you?

Trudy: [pause] The fact that these were two people that I admired tremendously and liked tremendously and, um, [pause] and perhaps it was something I wanted to pursue. At least experiment with.

Jill: It becomes possible. Is it like an “aha!” moment?

Trudy: It was an “aha!” moment. It definitely was a sexual orientation as opposed to an emotional relationship. It was like “I want to try this.”

In the first interview, Trudy does not see any connection between her sexual identity and her work identity.

Jill: Looking back, how do you think that not having your sexual orientation figured out earlier affected, if at all, your work identity, your ambitions or goals, your overall work experience?

Trudy: I don’t think it did. Maybe I am a compartmentalizer. They are two such different, separate parts of my life.

By the second interview, Trudy has thought more about the possible connections between sexual identity and work identity. Trudy states that being able to “cross the line,” as she puts it, in one’s sexuality enhances risk-taking and the ability to succeed in business. She also expresses the opinion that having her own business helped her have the confidence to accept her lesbian sexual identity.

Trudy: A thought that I had after our last discussion. Um, I don’t live in a gay community, I don’t have gay friends, the few gay women that I do know, are very successful. It’s like their, uh, their ability to cross the line sexually allows them to cross the lines other places. To see things outside the box, to lose that sense of fear – they’re more fearless. I don’t know if that is true or not but that certainly is what I’ve seen in gay women that I know.

Jill: And what about for yourself?

Trudy: I think that’s very true. I think it’s very true.

Jill: The way you told your story, if I heard it correctly was, your work life came first before you figured out, really, who you wanted to be with.

Trudy: Right. But, experimentally, a little bit before that. That [experimenting] had opened up that possibility, that door. And the fact that I accepted that that door was open, that that was a possibility for me, I think, um, helped me, strengthened me in a way.

Jill: Ok, Ok, so, because you were talking about after college?

Trudy: My business partner

Jill: Alice?

Trudy: Right, Alice.

Jill: So that willingness to kind of experiment with that?

Trudy: The willingness, and maybe that's the wrong word, but as I look back, and get older, I see so much of what we do crouched in fear. The initial fear of what people think, the fear of, I guess – I found in myself, a fear – a lot of fear that other people had I didn't have.

Jill: So it translates, what you're saying is that it translated into the different realms of your life, the work life—because in your personal life you were willing to take some risks.

Trudy: Yeah, maybe a confidence, I was willing to take risks in my personal life, um, and if I was brave enough to do that, I was brave enough to do this.

Jill: And vice versa? If I am willing to take risks in my work life, then I'm willing to take risks in my personal life?

Trudy: I think. Let me just give it a thought a minute. The two were just so intertwined for me. There was a fearlessness about starting my own business, um, and then the relationship with Samantha six years later - -

Jill: What's interesting, what struck me, you said that whether Alice had been in the picture or not you would have had your own business.

Trudy: Absolutely – no doubt. There is no doubt.

Jill: The question is, was it easier to have that confidence to do your own business because you had Alice?

Trudy: Absolutely

Jill: Alice was right there with you?

Trudy: Yeah. Let's face it. Ninety % of the population talks about it [starting their own business] but no one would do it. And again, I don't know if it is the fear factor, fear is such a big thing. And the fact that

Alice was there and willing to undertake the risk with me, absolutely made it easier.

Jill: I was really, again, as I was listening to your first interview, what a difficult childhood you'd had.

Trudy: I really did lay it on the line, didn't I? Sorry.

Jill: No, no, but your mother telling you you weren't worth anything, so to have a Alice who would say, "Yeah, we can do this."

Trudy: I've been a lesbian my whole life because absolutely been attracted to women, sought the approval of women, I love women. I like men, don't get me wrong, but I don't gain the emotional satisfaction from men that I get from women. My friends, my business associates, I picked a wonderful industry that is basically women-dominated. All my business associates are women.

Jill: So this goes into this question, kind of, "What enabled you to embrace your identity as a lesbian?"

Trudy: Certainly owning my own business and the success of that business, the support and admiration of the people around me, I certainly got a very strong sense of, "It doesn't matter what you choose, what you choose is going to be right for you." And that was [pause] what enabled me to embrace my identity. I just never had a strong identity as a "lesbian." As I said, I'm very aware that I've always sought female approval.

Jill: Is it the word that bothers you too?

Trudy: A little. It's just not a nice word. I don't feel comfortable with it.

Jill: So what we're talking about, what enabled you to be able to acknowledge that you?

Trudy: Sleeping with Samantha. Ok, here's concrete evidence. And it was certainly much more exciting than any sexual relationship with a man. It felt more right.

“Hope”

Hope is 54 years old. She is a licensed clinical social worker. She resolves her lesbian sexual identity when she is in her early thirties and embarks on what she feels to be her “life work” – being a social worker -- in her late thirties. Hope’s path to her lesbian sexual identity and to her career in social work can best be described as circuitous. Before getting her Master’s in Social Work, Hope obtains a Master’s in Adult Continuing Education. Hope enters a religious community when she is 36. She is preparing to take her final vows as a nun and is in her first year of social work school when she meets her partner, Sarah. Hope leaves the convent a year later to live with Sarah and has been with her for 14 years.

Hope: I grew up with my mother and my father. My father died when I was seven. I had a half-brother from my dad’s first marriage who was 6 years older. I grew up in the suburbs. We were middle, upper-middle class. Our dad owned his own company. I grew up in a family where everything looked perfect from the outside and we were very comfortably well off. But there were a lot of problems behind this appearance of happy family. My mother was involved in church and the daughter was really good in school.

My relationship with my mother as a child – I remember my mother being very, very loving and interested in me and just loving me a lot. It changed when my father died. My father was an alcoholic and my mother drank too but I didn’t pay too much attention to it until later. If I think about my relationship with my mother, my mother was very dependent, emotionally dependent on me, in a way I always felt but I didn’t realize how problematic it was—I think I realized it a bit when I was a child but it really became much more problematic later on.

I had a very close relationship with my brother, my half-brother. My father had very liberal visitation rights, and my brother was with us for holidays and all summer. He didn’t live too far from us, about half an hour away. When my dad died, and I was 7 and my brother was 13, our mothers decided that my brother and I should not be apart because we were very close and so they made sure we remained a family and we spent all holidays and special events, and not even special events, we had meals together. So I had a relationship with my brother’s mother also.

Friends, I had some good friends when I was growing up. A few. The kids in the neighborhood we played a lot. I went to parochial school and had friends but didn't play with them so much out of school. With the neighborhood kids, we played fort and baseball. Maybe I was a lesbian then and didn't know it because I loved playing all these boy sports. The funny thing is that I couldn't stand to wear pants. I would only wear dresses. I would go out and play fort and baseball and cowboys and Indians in these frilly dresses. I'd always tear them. Good thing I had a uniform for school.

What was it like growing up in my household? It looked like the perfect family from the outside but there was a lot of chaos on the inside. I never knew when Dad was going to come home drunk, never knew when Dad was drunk. When he was loving, he was very loving. I think he treated me more like a boy than a girl, which I loved, even though I loved wearing dresses. He died when I was 7. Before he died, he had me riding horses, I could ride a horse, I did archery with a real archery set, I was able to golf respectably and really do sports, baseball. I never was into football. And one year for Christmas he bought me a punching bag and my mother, no it wasn't Christmas, he just bought it for me, and Mom went ballistic and he had to take it back. I was really, really disappointed because for the 5 minutes it was in the house I really loved punching it. Anyway, but so around Dad's alcoholism, he would get violent.

Jill: Physically violent?

Hope: Yeah. Not so much hitting or slapping. There were several times, I mean more than once, when he would, when he was drunk, when he would want to put me to bed and he would lift me up very high above his head and throw me down into the bed. It was really terrifying when he was drunk. He was really very unpredictable.

Jill: How did your mother respond to those things with you?

Hope: You know? I do not remember. I don't remember. So there was a lot of unpredictability. I had to fill in a lot of the blanks myself, I had to figure out how to keep myself safe when I could.

Hope's childhood is traumatic, marked by the alcoholism of her father and then his untimely, premature death but she excels in school and is motivated as a child and young person to achieve. Having said this, Hope states that she received contradictory messages about achievement and goals.

Jill: As a young person, how did you think about career and what you wanted to do for a living? What were the family expectations?

Hope: Wow, this is so interesting. These questions are so loaded for me. My mother gave me such mixed message about achievement and who I should be. There was never any doubt about excelling academically, although my grades didn't always show it. Grade school was in some ways emotionally hard for me. But I loved school, I absolutely loved school. Had some rough times with a teacher or two and what was going on at home really kind of made school a good place for me . . . My mother had sort of this mixed message for me: Love learning, read, read, read, excel, excel , excel. Do your best. There was never any question that I would go to college, even as a kid. But the other message was, you'll meet a man and get married. She would push me towards men. When I was an adolescent, this is very embarrassing; she would push me toward young men. Like when we went to a 15th wedding anniversary of some friends of hers.

There was this really mixed message, go to college – but you know, I really had no idea what I wanted to be. Even though I really loved learning. I think the message from my mother was, being a teacher was not good enough, that I could do something better than that. I really cannot remember when I was kid.

However, for my mother, she was, she would talk about my going to college and simultaneously she either said or implied in some way but the message that I got was, yeah you're going to go to college and you're going to finish college but you're also going to get married.

Go to college and get your Mrs. I can't remember whether she said that verbatim to me but it was strongly implied because that was an expectation that I remember growing up with. And I wonder now whether it interfered with any early thinking about, my not being able to say, "When I grow up I want to be _____."

Jill: So you remember, this is kind of off the subject; do you remember your brother ever saying anything about what he wanted to be when he grew up?

Hope: Yeah, my brother wanted to be a doctor.

Jill: He would talk about that?

Hope: Yeah. Uh-huh.

Jill: You had a half-brother who would talk about what he wanted to be when he grew up, but that didn't lead to you thinking about what you wanted to be when you grew up?

Hope: Right, right. I'm horrified by that thought now, you know.

Jill: You don't need to be.

Hope: [laughs] But, it is so interesting to me, the gender difference, or whatever. So what I've been talking about does deal with the family expectations, in brief, the expectations were, doing well in school, being of an intellectual persuasion, um, but at the same time, it was my mother's expectation that I would get married.

As I think about this, another important thing to mention is that when my Dad died, my Mom had to go to work. And it was a big concern of hers, who was going to take care of me while she was at work. I was already in school. Dad died—I was seven years old, and Dad died the summer between first and second grade for me. So, in fact Mom got a job, I can't remember how soon after my father's death she did, got a very good job. It was a very good job, it was a very good job. And so she was very happy about that, she was very happy about the job. And, um, at some point during this time my Grandmother came to live with us. That was really stressful. She was verbally and emotionally abusive with me. And say things like, "You'll never amount to anything." And, um, I was a big girl for my age, always been big stature, big-boned gal and my grandmother used to tell me that I would grow up and be a football player. That I should be a football player because I was so big.

Hope's ideas about what she wants to do with her life are often in flux and quite mutable. This is how she describes choosing a major at college and her first forays into the world of work:

Hope: When I was accepted and started college, I had two different ideas about what I was interested in. They were both very strong. One idea that I had was to study theology, major in theology and philosophy. And other than teaching in a university setting, which was very appealing to me, my brother and other people asked me, "What the hell are you going to do with that?"

The question scared me. My second interest was to go into psychology. To become a psychotherapist one day. I wanted to understand better human behavior and I don't know how I knew what I knew about—it couldn't have been much. But here, by the time I had gotten to college, I had won –

the summer between my junior and senior year of high school, I was one of 50 students across the country accepted into a summer program, an 8 week summer program in Skinnerian psychology at Western Michigan University.

And, um, a very diverse young people, it's one of the highlights of my life, but certainly not the only one, thank God! Because that was a long time ago [laughs]. But um, it was, it just opened so many doors and I was one of two model teachers in a program that was affiliated with it. Our study was an 8 week study of both, that combined both undergraduate and graduate studies in Skinnerian psychology. So I knew something of psychology. And I knew that Skinnerian psychology was only one part of the world of psychology and I didn't want to go into behavioral psychology because even when I was in the program, I learned a tremendous amount, I knew that there had to be other areas of psychology that were more in keeping with whatever it was that I had in mind.

So anyway, what did I do? I started out, I thought psychology was what I was going to declare as a major and I was ready to declare my freshman year. So I declared theology.

Jill: Not psychology?

Hope: Not psychology. And I think, I remember being at one of the orientation events that they had for the freshman and talking to a sophomore or junior at one of these events, and talking about being interested in psychology and she said, "Oh, God, you don't want to do that here until you get into grad school. Don't do it as an undergrad. The dept. really sucks. For graduate school, yeah." Suddenly I felt like a deer in headlights. I thought, Ugh!

Jill: So why theology?

Hope: It's funny, because of my spirituality. At that time I can't say I had a mature spirituality but I was very interested in things theological. Now, at that time, I think I didn't have a grasp . . . This is something which is embarrassing to me. Let me just tell it. I declared theology as my major. I'm taking all liberal arts courses, as a freshman would. Then during my sophomore year I think it was, my brother, I had never met any of my brother's girlfriends, my brother had gone to the same university I was attending – so, sophomore year I met my brother's girlfriend who was majoring, she was a senior I think, majoring in Speech Pathology. And she was one of the people who said to me, "What the hell are you going to do with theology?" She knew, we talked, she knew I was interested in psychology and education and learning. She said, "You should go into speech pathology because it offers a really wonderful way to practice.

There's psychology to it." I can't remember her exact wording of why she advised me to do this.

And so I did it. I applied to the school of speech, and I knew—I had an interest in education but I always knew I didn't want to be a classroom teacher. That never appealed to me. So one of the things that my brother's girlfriend talked up was the part that it was intensely educational, speech pathology, but it wasn't classroom teaching. You work one on one with people. And that had a lot of appeal to me.

So, I look back on it now and one day I'm majoring in theology and the next day I'm majoring in speech pathology.

When I graduated from college, I went to France first. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I had this degree in speech pathology and by that time had very little interest in practicing it. Um, I was able to—I went to France, I graduated in December of 1976 and in February of 1977 I went to France and returned to a town in France I had visited two or three times by that time before.

Jill: In high school you went or in college?

Hope: In college. I had been there twice before, and it was a town where a Catholic shrine was, it was Lourdes, and my fantasy, my hope, my interest was in possibly in moving there. This is a very confusing time. Because once I got there, I really didn't know what I would do. Well, I did but I didn't. I felt kind of paralyzed. I loved being there but I put myself, I literally put myself in a living situation—I was living with two nuns who ran a house for pilgrims in Lourdes, which is a Catholic shrine. I'd been there twice before and volunteered in the hospital, and it really, it had deep, deep meaning for me. It was these nuns – these two nuns were renegade nuns from a certain community, and things did turn out to be a little wacky there after awhile.

Jill: What were you doing there? Were you working there?

Hope: I was working there. I was doing housework. I took care of pilgrims who came, and I did a lot of housework, visiting with them, taking them to the shrines, being with them as they were on pilgrimage. I also served food and did a lot of cleaning and I thought that would be—I think I went with the idea that that would be enough for me. And I found that it really, really wasn't. That I didn't feel fulfilled at all.

Hope returns to the States after 3 months and goes to work as a speech pathology paraprofessional. She can only work as a licensed speech pathologist if she obtains a

Master's in the field. After one year, Hope decides that working in the public school system is not for her. She switches gears and gets a Master's in Adult and Continuing Education. During this period, her mother supports her. When she finishes the program she is unable to get a job in the field because she lacks experience. She volunteers for a local community organization and ends up being offered a job as an administrative assistant. After working out of her field for 4 years, Hope finally obtains a job in continuing professional education for a major healthcare association.

Hope: I was at the community organization from 1980 to 1984. In 1984, I began working for a professional association, a professional dental association. Where I was responsible for continuing education program for dentists. For general dentists. So finally I was in the adult and continuing ed field. Um, it was very gratifying. I really enjoyed my job with the dentists. I was there for only two years, it feels like I was there a lot longer but in 1986 I was recruited away from the dental association to become the Director of Continuing Education. With the dentists my title was Administrative Coordinator. I was like a lot of people, the second tier under the director of the dept. But now I had an opportunity to become the Director of continuing education of a national organization for medical assistants.

And it was what I had heard, that once you got into the association world, that it was a very close network and you could network into a lot of areas you were interested in once you got into the association network.

So, um, that's what I did, and um, and a wonderful association. A lot of relationships with the volunteer members, of the Board, and the other members of the association. I had good working relationships with my peers.

Jill: So you liked your job.

Hope: I liked my job very, very much. And then, after, I heard the Director of the Continuing Education Board remark, she made this remark to me several times, over time, more than several times, over time, that I should really be a counselor. She said, "You should really be a counselor or a therapist of some sort." And she said this to me not because she was displeased with my work. The reason why she said this to me, we talked about it, was the members of the association with whom I worked with, who were appointed to the continuing education board, and these higher

volunteer positions, often, very often, would say to me, once they were appointed, “Oh my God, what do I do now? I don’t know how to do this. I’ve never done anything like this before. I used to work in a doctor’s office, that’s all.”

So a lot of what I did was training and support and preparing them to take on leadership roles.

Jill: These are the board members?

Hope: Yes, these are the board members who may have worked on a committee on a local level, maybe. But were chosen for whatever reason to be on the Continuing Education Board. And particularly the president of the board, said to me, I was with the Medical Assistants Association from 1986 to 1990 and, um, over time, [the president], would say to me, “You should be a counselor because you make me, you have made it possible for me to be the president of this board.

Jill: Was this person a man or a woman?

Hope: A woman – the membership of this Association was 99.999 percent women. Maybe I can remember one man. They all worked in medical offices, either administrative roles or in clinical roles in doctors’ offices. The President of the Board would say to me, and I heard this from other members of the Board, especially once I was leaving that job, that they all, many of them said, uh, they made a big hoopla over me when I left, um, many of them said, how I had taught them and supported them in their fear of doing and being in that particular position—they were so, so grateful that I had been so supportive of them and had steered them in the right directions and led them in directions they needed to go, and taught them how to do this, how to think about things, and how to approach different responsibilities that they had, that they had never faced before. So, the President on the phone with me, saying to me many times, “You are just so good. You should just—I don’t want you to leave what you’re doing now but you should be a counselor of some sort.”

Which kicked off in my mind, my original interest in psychology. And I thought, holy shit, I thought, maybe I’ve got to think about this.

Jill: You had kind of come full circle.

Hope: Exactly. Exactly. So, what happened? In 1990, I entered the convent. How did that happen, you’re wondering? Um, there’s my theology again. I had been in touch for about a year, while I was in college, with a community of nuns because I had flirted with entering the convent after I finished college. I obviously didn’t do that. So I was in

touch with the community. Had been in contact with them. I also came down from college to spend a weekend with the community when I was a senior.

Jill: So you had been thinking about it for a bit?

Hope: I had, yeah. It was a notion that would come to me from time to time. And, uh, it was probably in 1988 or so that I got in touch with the community and –took the steps that were necessary. So I entered in January of 1990.

Jill: So you join the convent in 1990, you made it sound related to your work life somehow?

Hope: Yeah, because I had to stop working. When I entered, and I was a postulant, I could work up to the time of your beginning your year as a novice. So that would be a six month period of time. Um, I was actually invited by the Formation Director after I entered. I entered in January. By about April, there was only one person at work who knew that I had entered the convent in January. I kept it a secret.

Jill: Why was that?

Hope: I felt, I wasn't prepared, I didn't want to face all the questions and wonderings and whatever. I felt that it was going to distract people from what they needed to be doing. There would be too much focus on me. And standing out as having entered the convent and what was going to come next. It was too complicated.

April came around and the Formation Director came around and said, "You know, if you'd like to, why don't you quit your job—because there are some courses that the Institute of Pastoral Studies—the community would be okay with you quitting your job and taking these courses in spirituality and theological classes. So what am I going to say to that! [laughs with pleasure] So, here we begin the full circle. Because, here's the theology and spirituality again, I'm living in this wonderful community and, uh, my spiritual life becoming so much richer and, um, so I quit my job in April of 1990.

And then, that summer I started taking classes at the Institute for Pastoral Studies. I took like one or two classes at first in the summer. And the rest of my time I could be a member of the community. I could help in different ways. Whichever nun needed help in her department or her area of work in the community, I was available to help. So that was great I thought.

So, I am in my period of novitiate, which is one year, that began in Sept. of 1990 and I was asked, it was getting closer to the end of my novitiate and I was asked by my Superiors what did I want to do in terms of work. The novitiate was not only a time to immerse myself in the community life, which it really was, but also to consider what kind of ministry I would like to do. They asked me, “Do you want to stay in adult education or is there anything else you’re interested in?”

[Laughing with pleasure] “Well, as a matter of fact, I think I want to go back, I’d like to be a psychotherapist.” And I wasn’t quite sure whether to go into psychology or what. I was in therapy at the time and my therapist highly recommended that I go into social work and not psych. She was very keen on social work because she had such a high regard for licensed clinical social workers, much more than LCPCs or – you know. So that’s what I decided to do. The community was 100% behind me.

Jill: So you became a social worker.

Hope: I became a social worker. Ok? Now, my life during that time. Well, maybe I’m going on to another topic now? What are your next set of questions?

Jill: We could go on. But I don’t know, you seem to want to say something. What did you want to say?

Hope: I want to start to talk about my sexuality.

Hope is anxious to speak about the process of resolving her sexual identity.

Unbeknown to Hope, this is the interviewer’s next question. From the beginning of the interview process and throughout the two interviews, Hope takes the premise of the research study very seriously and seems to make an active effort to think about her work identity and her sexual identity in tandem. The interview continues where Hope left off:

Jill: Ok, that’s exactly what the next question is about. So, tell me when you first began to have some idea that you might be a lesbian and what that was like for you?

Hope: Ok. In 1984 or 85ish.

Jill: You had just moved over to the medical assistants?

Hope: Yeah, and a little bit when I was with the dentists, it might have begun then, that I began questioning my sexual preference, my sexual orientation. And I can't say specifically what the precipitant of that was.

Jill: So in college, what did you think of yourself?

Hope: Oh my God, I was so heterosexual. I was like, I don't think I was hypersexual but I had a series of relationships with men.

Jill: So in college, did you have any thoughts about being lesbian or feelings of attraction to women?

Hope: No, no, I was still working on the assumption that I needed my Mrs. And I had no reason to think that I was anything but heterosexual.

Jill: So you were attracted to men?

Hope: Yeah I was attracted to men. But I didn't like the way I was attracted to men. I didn't like being attracted to men without imagining that I was anything but heterosexual. I had a real discomfort with men, because I immediately felt diminished when I was with a man, if that makes any sense. And I think because of my mother's insistence on getting a Mrs., every guy that came along I was seeing as a potential husband. Which was stupid but it was what I felt. "Could he be the one?" "Could this guy be the one?" And -I was always, I was attracted to this string of journalists, journalism students in college and they were not the mainstream journalists. These guys were like gonzo-journalists, they were out on the edge, they were wild and crazy and, maybe, literally and figuratively but, um, they all had reputations in one way or another.

So, um, but none of these relationships were long and they were mostly really draining on me. Uh, they just didn't last.

Jill: After college did you date men?

Hope: Uh, I did not actually. [Pause] I developed a very close relationship that I still have, a very close relationship, with the president of the community organization.

Jill: Was that person male or female?

Hope: Male. Male. It was very, um, very intimate relationship emotionally in some ways. It was not physically intimate at all. There was nothing happening there and it was frustrating for me.

Jill: Were you attracted to him?

Hope: Yes I was.

Jill: But there was nothing coming back?

Hope: There was nothing coming back. On an emotionally intimate level – we spent a lot of time together. We were really good friends. Really, really, really good friends. But then, again, I can't say, I don't remember what the precipitant for this was, but what I remember there was a turning point when I began to realize that my most satisfying emotional relationships were with women, not men. And then a ticker went off in my mind, like a ticker tape, that kind of went off in my mind. Thinking back, --and these may seem inconsequential but there are very important milestones to me.

When I was in graduate school, in the apartment building I lived in was a woman who came out to me as a dyke and there was no question – looking at her, she was really stereotypically a dyke, we spent a lot of time together, we developed a very close friendship. Nothing physically happened because I was looking at myself as a heterosexual. And what did not occur to me until this turning point time was that this woman was coming on to me! That she was interested in me. She gave me, just out of the blue, the first book of *Tales of the City* series, you know. I found the book just, I found it fabulous. I thought it was absolutely great and I was totally oblivious! Totally oblivious to the fact, to what now in hindsight is so, so, clear, that this woman was coming on to me.

She never made any moves on me at all, or anything but, um, I remember now—I remember specifically things, conversations that we would have, the time we would spend together, and this emotional intimacy that we had, that this woman was coming on to me, had been coming on to me.

Um, and I remember in high school, the president of the National Honors Society, of which I was a member, in retrospect was very much a dyke and during one party that was going on at school, she asked me to sit on her lap. And I'm oblivious.

Jill: So in 1984 you're taking stock of these things.

Hope: I'm putting some pieces together. Again, I don't know what.

Jill: So it wasn't in the context of meeting somebody?

Hope: No, no. There was nobody. There was nothing going on in 1984. I came to the – I put these pieces together and even though I had never been physically intimate with a woman, I came to the conclusion that my

most satisfying relationships were with women and my relationship physically with men had always been very unsatisfying.

In the second interview, Hope describes “putting the pieces together” in a more dramatic way.

Hope: I have a hard time describing how I got – I think it was a process for me, I know it was some kind of process for me to get to the thought but it felt like an explosion, like an “aha!” moment for me that I think on some level it sounds ridiculous.

It’s like those V-8 commercials, “Wow, I could have had a V-8!” Wow, I could have had a woman! Wow, maybe I’m a lesbian! [laughing]

The question that came to mind when I began to question my sexual orientation was –where are my primary close relationships? Who do I feel closest to? And as I said, it was an “aha!” moment, it was like a light bulb going off. I thought maybe—yeah, I think I am a lesbian but I didn’t call myself a lesbian, I called myself a bisexual and that was—I would always pooh-pooh people – for about a year and a half I called myself bisexual.

I pooh-poohed people who said it was a phase, that’s really just a phase into lesbianism. I would say, “No, No.” I do believe that there are individuals who rightly define themselves as bisexual but I pooh-poohed people and they were right. Because a year, year and a half, I really said to myself I’m attracted to women. But I had been saying to myself that I’m attracted to both men and women. It was a year and year and a half before I could say, “I’m not attracted to men.” I can have deep, deep emotional relationships with men but I don’t want to have intimate, physical relationships with men. I don’t want to be physical with them.

There was something else that came to mind. When this light bulb moment happened and I realized I’m a lesbian and again when I was first identifying as bisexual, I was very comfortable, one of the things that I realized at the time and I don’t think it shocked me at the time – looking back at it now, I don’t think of it negatively. I know that I felt it to be life-giving at the time.

I’ll tell you, here I think is the beginning of thinking myself more as a lesbian than as bisexual. It was when I came out to my mother. I had every intent of telling my mother that I was bisexual. Now why on earth I wanted to, but this was something I wanted to do. It was like I wanted to tell everybody because I felt so different; I felt whole in it. So anyway, we were having dinner and in the middle of dinner and I’m shaking and I’m nervous and I wanted to tell my mother, but I’m sure I was doing what I

do, which was to preface things for a half an hour before I get to them . . . I finally said to her, “I am bisexual. I consider myself bisexual.” And she said to me, her first words to me were, she didn’t look up from her food and she said, “That doesn’t mean you’re a lesbian, does it?”

And internally I had such, I was furious at her. I was furious with her. And that made me furious. My answer to her was, “Yes and no.” And I think—I can’t say that that was the beginning but I think that was – it was one of the first impetus, it was an impetus to my moving through this phase as a bisexual. But when my mother asked me “This doesn’t mean you’re a lesbian, does it?” Inside I was screaming, “Yes! It does!”

Hope states that she does not experience distress at realizing that she is no longer attracted to men; quite the contrary. In 1986 Hope joins a lesbian/bisexual women’s group and has a brief relationship with a woman. A few years later, after she has fully self-identified as a lesbian, Hope joins a religious community. This is how Hope describes it:

Hope: I started to read a lot, and, and things were just resonating with me, so, so strongly. Um, I, um, I really threw myself into the lesbian/bisexual community by joining a group of bisexual women, a support and social group. And became very active with that group. And, in that group, I began to develop something of a relationship with one of the members. That relationship lasted I would say no more than two months.

Jill: Did it ever become physical?

Hope: Yeah, once or twice we had sex. [pause] It may have been more than this one thing that made the relationship implode on itself, she was an adult survivor of sexual abuse. And, um, so, you know, people may have these notions that lesbians jump into bed with each other. Well, we didn’t and the two times we had sex, maybe it was more than that, but I’m remembering it being very little—there was a lot of cuddling and hugging. But we only really had sexual relations twice.

And, uh, she told me – and it was not long after the second or third time, or whatever it was, that after we had sex she began to move away. And I didn’t understand what was going on. And, she said to me one day that she felt that she hadn’t worked through her injuries as a sexually abused child and she couldn’t sustain a physical relationship even though we felt very—even though she felt very close to me, she couldn’t do that.

It was kind of a bad break-up because I wasn't -- I have to tell you, and I'm not proud of it, at that time, I wasn't too tuned in to how her history of sexual abuse, how heavily it, how influential it was.

Jill: And how was it for you, to be in a relationship with a woman?

Hope: It was really exciting. It really felt right. Um, it really clicked. The discomfort I felt in physical relationships with men, I didn't feel at all with Lucy or with being around these women – friends who would hug each other, um, they –

Jill: When was this relationship?

Hope: This would have been either 1985 or 1986. In 1986, I think it was.

Jill: So you have this relationship with this woman, you realize you're a lesbian?

Hope: Yeah.

Jill: And then you join a convent?

Hope: Four years later.

Jill: So how does that all fit?

Hope: Well, this community was a progressive community. It's interesting because I'm not sure how to answer your question. This is why I've given you the back-story, it's not back-story at all, but when I entered the community and I knew very well that I was a lesbian, I never brought it up. I was never asked about my sexuality.

Jill: So what were you thinking? You were thinking you would be in the convent and be able to have a relationship with a woman?

Hope: No, no, I thought at that point that I didn't want a relationship with a woman. It became secondary to this greater purpose that I felt. And I thought, well, I'm going to enter the convent. I did not think about having a relationship, about having any desire to have a relationship.

Jill: Was that because it was a bad break-up?

Hope: I, I do not know.

Jill: Because the way you tell the story was, you're with a woman, it feels so right, figuring out that you're a lesbian feels so right and then you

become, you want to join the convent, and it's like that's foremost and your lesbianism is someplace but not a big feature of your life anymore.

Hope: Yeah, yeah.

Jill: Instead of foremost.

Hope: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Yeah. When I entered the convent, I was never asked about my sexuality. It was like a don't ask, don't tell, is what I felt at the time. And so, I was never, in the four years that I was in the community as a nun, nobody knew. I did not tell anybody.

Jill: But you knew.

Hope: But I knew. I absolutely knew.

Jill: So it's interesting. You finally discern that you're a lesbian and then you go into a community where you're not going to act on being a lesbian. But you still identify as a lesbian.

Hope: Yeah, yeah. And it would bother me. There was, if anything, it's not as if there were discussions about sexuality, not even discussions, there were passing references about movie stars who were handsome, that could be talked about but what began to bother me and I didn't know what to do with it was, there was always the presupposition, the given, that everybody was heterosexual.

The ways I began to push back against that was – I would make it known when I would go to the gay and lesbian parade every year. When there was something on the news about gays and lesbians, I would always have some remark about supporting them, and the injustices against gays and lesbians.

Jill: So for you, being a lesbian was more than having sex with a woman or being in an actual relationship with a woman?

Hope: Yes. Uh-huh. It was more of an identity. It was a way of life whether or not I was sexual. I mean, there's a question that heterosexuals often have, and that is, how do you know you were lesbian because you never had sex with a woman? Well, do you have to have sex with a person of the opposite sex to know that you are heterosexual? No!

Jill: Ok, so for you, it might be off the topic maybe, what did being a lesbian mean?

Hope: That's a good question. Um, I guess for me it meant, it meant, that you were more identified—that sounds vague maybe— but, um, that emotionally and physically, even if you weren't in a physical relationship, --it still meant, that I was still attracted to women – it didn't mean that the iron curtain came down on whether or not I was attracted to anybody. And, as a matter of fact, it was while I was a nun that I met the woman who would become my life partner.

Jill: Was she also a nun?

Hope: No, she was someone I met outside the convent while I was training to be a social worker. Sarah and I quickly developed feelings for each other. I stayed in the convent for another year but I was spending all my time with her. [She laughs.] It was kind of embarrassing. I was *never* at the convent. I guess I had found a different vocation! Loving Sarah and doing social work.

Jill: It's interesting that you left given what you just said about the reasons for joining the convent.

Hope: It is interesting. But, you know, I have always felt that it was God's hand that led me to Sarah and I think because I was completely out to myself I was able to love fully. I don't think I could have been in the type of relationship I am in before then. And being able to fully live as a lesbian, to fully embrace that in my life, I think that also has made me so much better at my work, at my work as a social worker. Does this make sense? I never have had any regrets. Believe me, Sarah has asked quite a few times how I feel about leaving the convent. And I tell her what I have told you: It all worked as God meant for it to. I sincerely believe that.

As Hope considers the timeline of her professional development, she realizes that her gradual move back to her original dream of being involved in the field of psychology and becoming a psychotherapist is occurring at the same time that she is figuring out her sexual orientation as a lesbian.

Hope: Before I entered the convent I had resolved my sexual orientation. It's so interesting, I began to, I was recruited to continuing education for an almost all woman organization, so during that time of my resolution, I went from working for an exclusively male dominated association to one of women, exclusively women. And I felt comfortable working with women.

I just know that I preferred – I can't remember specific events or situations but working with the male members of the dental association and [pause] having to, there was a lot of –how would I describe it – socially [pause] acceptable ways or habits or customs that go on between men and women socially that I was very uncomfortable with in my own sexuality working with the Dental association. It wasn't just that we were—you know, when you work for an association, there is a relationship between the staff members of the association and the members. You're always of service to the members. I don't know how to describe this more precisely but I believe in retrospect, I loved the work that I did, I really enjoyed my job at the dental association, I became increasingly fidgety with serving men. The notion of having to be a certain way with men, associating with them in a certain way.

Jill: So how did it feel different working with women?

Hope: Working with women? I think, I'm carrying over this notion to then working for an association in my capacity of power and authority. I was the authority both among members and among staff about continuing education. So how this played out with the women, my relationship with the women members was different from my relationship with the male members of the dental association. The relationship felt different.

I felt extremely more available to the almost exclusively women members of the association and I felt I more actively and not just by virtue of the fact that I was Director that I was interested in empowering these women. And that in fact, was what I very happily was able to accomplish.

I think I felt more empowered. I was feeling more empowered, I think one of the reasons I was beginning to get fidgety with the male association membership, I was resolving my sexual orientation and that having to kind of “play” the heterosexual. Because among the staff members, the dental association had a lot of gay, male gay staff members.

Jill: I wonder if that played a role.

Hope: Maybe. I didn't know that when I was hired on.

Jill: I know but maybe being around gay men, people who were openly gay, who you knew were gay, allowed you to think about it.

Hope: Yes, that is absolutely correct.

Jill: Because you're suddenly wondering, why am I suddenly feeling differently about this.

Hope: It was suddenly okay to think about it. [pause] I'm thinking one of the reasons why I could enter the convent when I did was because I had resolved my sexuality and I was fully available, I felt like – even though I wasn't coming out to this community and there was this compartmentalized part of me, I was still so much more available than I might have been earlier. I felt like I had really matured in many ways when I began to question my sexual orientation. I felt like I was taking leaps forward.

Jill: You were able to because that part had been resolved?

Hope: Resolved, yeah. I questioned for -- not a long time, although, to me it seems like –I don't know whether long or short but all I know is, once I resolved it, I embrace it fully and it felt like such a relief.

Jill: And then you can embrace other parts of your life –is that how it feels?

Hope: Yeah, I think in terms of work, I don't think I would have been able to -- I don't think I would have felt prepared or able or ready to, I don't quite know how to phrase that part, would have been able to go into, say, when the opportunity came to me, when the nuns said to me, when the Superiors said to me, "What would you like to do? Would you like to remain in your field or go into some other type of ministry?" I could have stayed in adult education, um, but I saw this as an opportunity to go into social work which it was. I don't think I would have been able to, I don't know what kind of social work student and what kind of social worker I would have been had I not resolved my sexual orientation as a lesbian.

I'm not sure I know how to describe how it would have been different other than it being a big part of me that was up in the air or –if I were still living assuming I was a heterosexual or denying my lesbian identity, self-identity, I think it would have been very uncomfortable for me to be in social work school and to be a social worker because in that you have to have a high degree of self-awareness and self-acceptance. You've got to have some knowledge, you have to have self-knowledge.

Man, if I didn't have that, if I hadn't come to resolve my sexual orientation when I did, I don't think I would have been able to – I might have gone into social work but I don't think I would have been as—effective. Because I'm really good, I'm a really good clinical social worker. And I was known to be an excellent student. For the ability to question, not only ask questions but the emphasis I put in school on self-knowledge and self-awareness. I think there is a big connection.

In the second interview, Hope has given the idea of a connection between her sexual identity and work identity further thought and reiterates what she feels to be the relationship between the progression in the sexual realm and the realm of work:

Hope: I go through a series of phases in my sexual identity and in my professional life I do that too. I did that too. I seem to go through a parallel progression of going through different phases of thinking about sexual orientation in general – I intellectualized it before I was able, in a way, to accept myself and my sexuality. And maybe it did have something to do with the professions I chose. . . . I wonder if I ever would have become a clinical social worker which turned out to be my life's blood, I just was completely in my element professionally. I had enjoyed my prior jobs, I've always been clear about that, that I enjoyed them but then this was really it. And it was the same comfort that I felt when I came out to myself, in a way. That just came out right off the top of my head, right now. But there is a similarity in the comfort and the wholeness and the fullness that I felt when I came out to myself first as bisexual and then as a lesbian.

I experienced it as such a deep relief and comfort when I realized that I was not heterosexual, that I was bisexual and then ultimately identifying as a lesbian. It was like, this is who I am. This is who I am! Things just made sense to me. I felt real. I suddenly felt some sense of genuineness and authenticity that –because I think I was faking it with men.

Jill: So connecting it to work, that authenticity, that feeling real, how do you think that affected your work life?

Hope: I don't know if this answers the question but what comes to my mind is, the professions I had chosen before I became a clinical social worker, which came after I had resolved my sexual orientation, those jobs were completely satisfying—my adult education experience was more satisfying than my work as a speech pathologist um, but again I derived something out of it. I had some bad job situations but the work I always loved.

I don't know if this is too simplistic, but being a speech pathologist paraprofessional and being an administrator in continuing education, and being an office administrator in between, was like, I was teaching, I didn't have to use myself – although as an administrator in adult education, I was using myself and that was what—and the Chairman of the Board – you know you ought to be a therapist, and as I look back on that, “You know you are really intelligent, and are an excellent organizer and administrator but you also are a counselor with me and the other Board members, because we have ended up doing things we never thought we could do.” She really put her finger on it.

Jill: And chronologically is this the period, the time when you are figuring out that you are a lesbian?

Hope: Exactly! Exactly! This really blows me away because the chronology of it is really interesting. I began working as National Director of Continuing Education for this association in 1986 and it was 1985 that I began and by 1986 I was, I had already had a year under my belt as identifying myself as first as bisexual and then as lesbian and being comfortable with it myself.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS PART B: DEMOGRAPHIC AND BIOGRAPHIC COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Introduction

The purpose of including extensive portions of the life story narrative data is to allow the unique experience of each participant to be revealed. Embedded in the methodology is the understanding that there is no one “right” way of reading, understanding or interpreting the narrative. As Lieblich et al. (1998) assert:

Narrative materials – like reality itself—can be read, understood, and analyzed in extremely diverse ways, and that reaching alternative narrative accounts is by no means an indication of inadequate scholarship but a manifestation of the wealth of such material and the range of sensitivities of different readers (p. 171).

What this study focuses on may well differ from what other readers of the raw data might choose to notice and comment on. This is a given of the methodology as the above quote indicates. This need not be viewed as a strength or a weakness of the research’s validity or reliability but rather to be understood as a description of the nature of this particular type of qualitative method. For a marginalized and stigmatized population such as the lesbian women studied here, the wide berth of interpretation that this methodology embraces can only further more thorough and dense understandings of their life experiences.

All of the participants share at least three things in common as determined by the recruitment criteria: they “resolve” their lesbian sexual identity in their late twenties or later, they are in the work force and they are between the ages of thirty and sixty-nine

years. In analyzing the data, other similarities and commonalities surface. Differences also emerge. As Chodorow (1999) and Benjamin (1995) caution, as Freud (1920) felt compelled to admit in his case study of a female homosexual, and as Lieblich et al. (1998) and Hollway & Jefferson (2000) make clear in their discussions about the life story narrative approach, there can be no presumptive “categories” of persons: people can be understood in a myriad of ways from the data collected and interpreted about them. As the data presented as part of this study make abundantly clear, diversity exists within the commonalities as well as within the differences in this subset of the lesbian population. To speak of diversity within commonalities at first blush seems an oxymoron but as will become apparent in the following discussion, when the subjects share characteristics there are still unique qualities that differentiate one from the other. Such is the world viewed through a postmodernist lens. It is a world rich with individuality and specificity, where each person, each lesbian, comes alive in her own subjectivity.

“Finding” the commonalities and differences between subjects is an organic process emerging from the holistic-content data analysis particular to life-story narrative research study according to Lieblich et al. (1998) and Hollway & Jefferson (2000). “Clusters” of characteristics deemed important and relevant are determined by the amount of time spent on a topic and/or by the emphasis that the participants give to certain topics (Lieblich, et al., 1998; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Nine major clusters have been identified.

Cluster 1: Being a “Late Resolution” Lesbian

In this study, all of the participants resolve their sexual identity either in their late twenties or later. Elaine, Julie and Chris accept their lesbian sexual orientation the earliest, in their late twenties. Julie reports a lot of relationship turmoil once she “comes out” as a lesbian; Elaine quickly enters into a long-term relationship but in the midst of that relationship finds she has tremendous guilt-feelings as an outgrowth of her graduate studies in religion. Chris’s resolution comes in the context of working with a therapist and meeting a lesbian who does not fit her stereotypical ideas of what a lesbian is. Her conversations with this friend and the introductions to other lesbians that this friend provides help lead her out of the closet, as Chris puts it.

Hope resolves her lesbian sexual identity in her early thirties following what she refers to as a “phase” of being bisexual. Anne meets the woman who will be her future partner at thirty-two but it takes her a few more years to reach full resolution of her lesbian identity. Trudy states that she is 35 when she identifies as lesbian; by that time she has been in a 5 year relationship with a man, and has had a child by another man. Shortly after she “resolves” her lesbian sexual identity, she enters into a relationship that has lasted over 12 years with a woman. Stella and Wanda are near 40 when they allow themselves to accept their sexual orientation. Lucinda is 50 before she can fully resolve her sexual orientation but she is aware of having same-sex attractions as an elementary school student. Julie also reports having same-sex attractions as a child. Stella, Julie and Wanda get married to men before embracing their lesbian identity. Stella and Wanda have children; Julie does not. Elaine, Anne and Hope are former nuns. Elaine and Anne join the convent as young adults; Hope enters the convent when she is in her mid-thirties.

Elaine and Anne resolve their lesbian sexual identity while they are still in the convent. Hope enters the convent after she has come out to herself as a lesbian. Elaine, Lucinda, Anne, Wanda, and Chris all have physical involvements with women before they resolve their lesbian identity and self-identify as lesbians. Stella and Hope come to the determination that they are lesbian without any prior involvement with women. Stella, Wanda and Hope describe their “resolution” as an “aha!” moment, where once they allow themselves to “know” that they are lesbian, they seem to know rather definitively. Elaine, Anne, Chris, and Trudy, on the other hand, still struggle with the word “lesbian” although Anne less so than Elaine, Chris and Trudy.

In the cluster of “late resolution” there is remarkable variety and diversity. The commonality of a later acceptance of lesbian sexual identity sheds some light on the experience of being a lesbian for this particular subset, but it is only the beginning of what can be known and understood about each participant.

Cluster 2: Situating Homophobia

With a group of late resolution lesbians, one might expect to hear a lot about homophobia, either the difficulties and pain of encountering it in the larger world or the angst and shame accompanying internalized homophobia. An interesting finding in this subset of lesbians, is that remarkably little time and space is taken up discussing issues related to homophobia, either external or internalized. Indeed, it is scarcely mentioned in the narratives of Hope or Trudy.

Wanda encounters significant homophobia in the midwifery program she attends, but this is not mentioned at all in the first interview, and the extent of the hostility she

encounters is only revealed in the second interview in response to a series of clarifying questions posed by the researcher. She does discuss in the first interview an incident of probable discrimination at a job once she is fully out as a lesbian but it is a victory story, told very matter-of-factly. Dealing with a homophobic, heterosexist environment does not seem to hold much valence for Wanda and she is not wracked by internalized homophobia in the least. Once she realizes she is a lesbian, she is comfortable in her skin as a lesbian.

Lucinda's narrative is packed with stories about confrontation with a homophobic society and the impact on her self-esteem. Her story is the most dramatic: she feels persecuted and hated. But Lucinda also has an extensive history of sexual and emotional abuse, as well as substance abuse, which contribute heavily to her difficulties.

Julie mentions homophobia in the context of searching for her community, since initially she is confused where to place herself since she has had relationships with men and even been married. But in this story, she recounts bumping up against what she calls "bi-phobia," people in the gay and lesbian community who are suspicious of her. The other comment Julie makes about her concerns about being a lesbian, and it is very quick and in passing, is "How am I gonna date women and have my family accept it?" The question is summarily dismissed at the time because she cannot [or won't] connect the dots leading her to acknowledge a longstanding attraction to women. In Julie's narrative, very little is voiced about an internal struggle with being lesbian.

Stella speaks of the considerable homophobia of her church and the inability to continue in her capacity as pastor as a lesbian. Encountering the institutional homophobia does cause a significant crisis in Stella's life but, according to her narrative, her

difficulties do not lead to self-loathing or produce shame in her. Just the opposite: once she lets herself know she is lesbian, she wholeheartedly embraces the idea.

Anne, Chris and Elaine all speak to homophobia in both its external and internalized forms. Anne encounters it only after she has decided on a lesbian lifestyle – then she realizes she has to deal with her feelings about how she will be accepted by the outside world, the “what will people think” construct that she has carried forward from her family of origin. Worries about homophobia, including her own, do not inhibit her from hopping into bed with other nuns and in falling in love with her future partner. Chris, too, struggles for a time with homophobia, more with her own concepts of what a lesbian is but she is able to quiet her reservations when she meets gay men and lesbians who are professionals and who do not fit the stereotypes she has in her mind. Of the three, Elaine seems to struggle the most with homophobia. She accepts that she is a lesbian while hating the word and the difficulties being a lesbian creates for her in her career as a teacher. She is the most outspoken of all the participants, encapsulating it all in her comment, “Couldn’t be any worse than to be a lesbian.” Anne, Chris and Elaine are Catholic and the church teachings do have an impact on how they feel about themselves and their lifestyle. Interestingly, Hope and Trudy are also Catholic and homophobia scarcely enters their life story narrative.

Cluster 3: Proximity of an Important, Non-Familial “Other” to Resolution of Lesbian Sexual Orientation.

In the narrative telling of their stories, six of the nine participants relate the presence of an important “other” in their ability to finally resolve their sexual orientation. A significant finding is that none of these important “others” are family members.

Indeed, for all of the participants, family members are informed about their sexual orientation only after resolution occurs.

For Lucinda and Chris, it is the relationship with a therapist, who opens up a space for questioning and understanding feelings and behaviors that lead them to accept their same-sex attractions. Both Lucinda and Chris have involvements with women prior to fully acknowledging and accepting their lesbian identities. It is within the context of a therapeutic relationship that both women are able to embrace their lesbian sexual identity. Once this happens in the therapeutic space, Chris and Lucinda can carry their self-identifications out into the larger world.

Elaine has a relationship with an older nun for seven years but is stalwartly defended against seeing herself as lesbian. Her resolution comes about when she meets and then dates a woman who is “out” as a lesbian and who, in effect, tells Elaine that she is, in fact, a lesbian too. The naming of the relationship seems to help Elaine finally accept the identity she has been living but disavowing. Shortly thereafter Elaine gets involved with the woman who will become her life partner and Elaine leaves the convent. Her partner, also a nun, leaves the religious community soon after.

Anne is jumping into bed with a nun at the convent soon after she arrives there but she maintains a similar level of disavowal as Elaine. Then she meets Toby, a woman who arrives at the convent a few years later, and she can no longer deny her feelings of attraction. It is in the context of potentially losing Toby to another woman that Anne takes the leap and “resolves” her sexuality in order to live her life with Toby. They have been together 25 years.

Wanda has an affair with a woman in college before she is married and an affair after she is married while she is getting her Master's degree. She does not view herself as lesbian. The change comes when she meets Laura and feels that a relationship with her is feasible. It is the viability factor, according to Wanda, that permits her to resolve her lesbian sexual identity, an identity that until meeting Laura can only be "thought about" in the most abstract of ways and not embodied.

Trudy reports having intense friendships with and attractions to several women. She does not self-identify as lesbian until two close friends whom she has known for many years and deeply respects come out to her as lesbian and, as she describes it, being a lesbian becomes, as it did for Wanda, a viable lifestyle choice. When one of the women approaches her and wants to have a relationship with her, Trudy agrees and settles into her identity as a lesbian.

The situation is different for Stella, Julie and Hope. For these three women, the resolution of their lesbian sexual identity does not occur within the context of an important "other." Stella and Hope both describe the resolution of their lesbian sexual identity as an "aha!" moment, where thoughts, feelings and experiences that have been disparate and non-contextualized suddenly seem to fall into place.

Julie's experience is different still. As a youngster she is aware of liking other girls. It is only after she divorces her husband in her late twenties and rends the fabric of communal and ethnic expectations that she can let herself fully "know" and act upon what she has known about herself all along: that she has same-sex attractions. The breaking of the "norm" around marriage enables Julie to embrace her lesbian sexual identity.

Cluster 4: Involvement with the Gay/Lesbian Community

Most of the participants have limited involvement with the organized gay/lesbian community. Being a part of the gay or lesbian “community” is not a prominent feature of the participants’ narrative. Indeed, there is a notable lack of a “communal identity” for this subset of lesbians. The most involved are Julie and Lucinda. Julie’s self-identification as a lesbian is still relatively recent which may explain her more active involvement. Lucinda seeks hook-ups in the community in lieu of longer-term relationships. Stella has some involvement with the organized gay/lesbian community currently but much less than when she first identifies as a lesbian. When Hope first “comes out” she is involved in a lesbian/bisexual group but this is only for a short time and she no longer has any affiliation with the formal gay/lesbian community. Her closest friends, however, are other gay women, most of whom are former nuns who are lesbian. At the beginning of Chris’s coming out process she goes to gay bars and is somewhat involved with the local gay/lesbian community. Currently, however, more of her friends are heterosexual than homosexual. Trudy, from the beginning, has few gay friends and is not active in gay community activities or venues and this is still the case. Wanda conducts research studies on lesbians but she has never been socially involved in the gay/lesbian community. Elaine and Anne have many lesbian friends but do not participate in community-based activities or frequent gay venues. In summary, many of the subjects of this study initially have some, albeit loose, connections to the gay and lesbian community as they are beginning to self-identify as lesbian but this involvement is short-lived and does not remain a strong component of their lesbian identity or

lifestyle. In the narratives that the subjects tell, the importance of group affiliation and group identification, cited in many homosexual developmental identity models as an essential part of the homosexual identity trajectory (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989; Sophie, 1985-86; Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Dank, 1971; Grace, 1979; Hencken & O'Dowd, 1977; Lee, 1977; Plummer, 1975.) is muted. The participants do not spend a lot of time discussing their involvement in gay/lesbian group activities or in gay/lesbian venues. Stella, Wanda, and Hope talk about going to women's bookstores, Hope belongs for a short time to a bisexual/lesbian support group, Chris and Anne mention going to a few gay bars early on in their identity consolidation process. Referencing back to the narrative text, there never seems to be a particularly strong affiliation or sense of membership in the larger gay/lesbian community for this subset of women. Julie is the outlier; she is most involved in the gay/lesbian community both socially and professionally. Julie is in her early thirties and the youngest participant in the study which may or may not have relevance.

Cluster 5: The Vicissitudes of Childhood

In this small sample, two subjects, Stella and Lucinda, are sexually abused as very young children by male relatives and emotionally abused by significant others, most notably their mothers. Three other participants, Wanda, Trudy and Hope experience significant trauma in their childhoods. Wanda's father is alcoholic and depressed and in and out of mental hospitals. Trudy's mother is severely depressed, frequently in bed and makes no bones about not loving her. Trudy is beaten up "every day" by an older brother who suffers from paranoid schizophrenia. Hope's father is alcoholic and unpredictable

and dies when she is seven years old; her mother may also have become an alcoholic after the death of her father. Anne reports less “trauma” but experiences her father as “menacing”, feels “lost” in a sibship of ten, and is profoundly shamed by her kindergarten teacher, a humiliation that has stayed with her to this day.

Julie, Elaine and Chris feel mostly positive about their childhoods, although Julie reports that she does not fit into the feminine mold expected in her ethnic group and Elaine states that her mother does not tell her that she loves her until she is old and terminally ill.

Six of the nine participants who have a later resolution of their lesbian sexual identity report significant childhood vicissitudes.

Cluster 6: Feeling Different

Most of the subjects describe themselves as feeling different from others, some in childhood, others in adulthood, or both. Stella and Lucinda spend a great deal of time in their narratives speaking to how different they feel in their families and from others around them as children and adults. There is a convergence in language on how they talk about it: both state that they feel they operate “out-of-the-box.” Trudy uses the same phrase when describing herself in adulthood as she links accepting her lesbian identity with work: she feels that thinking “out-of-the-box” gives her an advantage in both spheres. Stella, Lucinda and Trudy do not know each other nor is their participation in the study the result of snowballing, making their use of this metaphor striking. Of the nine participants, these three suffer the most significant childhood trauma.

Julie views herself as a “rebel” growing up because she is interested in subjects associated with boys: science and math. Her weight is a problem so she does not fit into the ideal feminine model in her Asian community. Hope also sees herself as different from other girls. She fully embraces being a tomboy, viewing herself as “the son her father didn’t have” even though her father did have a son from a previous marriage. Chris also describes herself as “such the tomboy,” interested in all things athletic while also being a dedicated student and part of a tight co-ed circle of friends in high school.

Being a “tomboy” is one manifestation of difference but even within this small sample it has many permutations. Elaine considers herself to have been a tomboy but feels that most girls growing up in the sixties and early seventies eschewed the overly feminine and were “tomboyish.” Elaine views herself as different but does not place this within the context of gender or sexuality but rather in that she is more “spiritual” than her peers. As a child, Julie likes to play with the boys, and in this way is “tomboyish” but she states that she also is doing the typical girl activities like playing with dolls and such. She jokes that she doesn’t have the “sports gene” that lesbians are supposed to have. Lucinda views herself as being more “masculine” rather than being a “tomboy” per se. Stella’s view of herself as operating “out-of-the-box” is partially derived from the fact that she likes the domestic arts at a time when girls and women are embracing “feminism,” and turning to work and careers outside the home.

In Anne, Wanda and Trudy’s stories about themselves, being a “tomboy” is not a part of their narrative. “Tomboy” is not a descriptive term that they use to differentiate themselves from other girls or women in their family or social circles. Anne feels different as a result of feeling “lost” in her large family. Trudy feels different because she

is despised by her mother. Wanda is the outlier in the study sample: she does not speak to feeling “different” either as a child or as an adult, and neither before the resolution of her lesbian identity nor after.

Cluster 7: Being the “Compliant,” “Dutiful” or “Quiet” One

Chris’s introduction of herself is to tell the story her father frequently tells her of being the baby in the church who does not cry. The message to Chris is clear: she is the quiet, good child. Her struggle as an adult, as she portrays it in her life story narrative, is to free herself from having to conform to family expectations, in both the realms of work and sexual orientation.

Elaine refers to herself as the “peace-keeper” in the family. She has a brother who is gay and very much “out.” But this does not assist her in reconciling her same-sex attractions. In fact, she is afraid of “disappointing” her mother by telling her that she has two homosexual children.

Anne goes through her childhood and early adulthood being shy, non-assertive, and the obedient daughter. She is the “lost” child in the household. Anne is an excellent student and during her senior year of high school, local colleges come to her high school and express interest in Anne. Her father says no to college, to her and to all of her siblings, boys and girls alike. Entering the convent is Anne’s non-confrontational way of opposing her father and getting an education.

Trudy tries desperately to win her mother’s approval by becoming “Mommy’s little helper” and helping her depressed mother with the household and caretaking

responsibilities. She does forge ahead as she gets older but, Trudy states, gaining the approval of women remains very important to her.

Hope is the quintessential “good little girl” despite being a “tomboy.” Part of this is due to the early death of her father. Upon his death, she is thrust into a care giving role, providing emotional support to her mother. She is not the least rebellious, although she is aware of not liking how dependent her mother is on her, and becomes the studious, model student.

Julie describes herself as rebellious in college, going through a “goth phase,” deliberately flaunting the familial expectations for dress and behavior. But despite this, in Julie’s narrative, it is clear that, even during her most rebellious stage in her young adulthood, she remains the “dutiful” Asian child, never forgetting the cultural messages about the importance to the family of saving face and not being “the nail that sticks up.” This is what drives Julie to take off time from medical school to “find” a husband and get married. It is only after she gets divorced that Julie can she cast off most of these concerns and embrace what she is aware of as an elementary school child: that she has same-sex attractions. Even now, she remains the dutiful daughter in the sense that she has not told her father about her female partner and remains careful about sharing details about her personal life with people who might come into contact with her family of origin, to spare them discomfort and embarrassment.

Wanda’s narrative is more opaque on this topic. She does not speak expansively about her childhood. But what can be inferred from her life story is that she does not make waves. She is very matter-of-fact about her father’s alcoholism and depression and

is determined to see her experiences growing up as the same as all the other children in her neighborhood.

The two subjects who diverge from the cluster of “quiet” “dutiful” and “compliant” are Stella and Lucinda. Stella relishes telling stories of outfoxing her parents and going off with her grandfather without her parents’ knowledge. She learns early on that she is the “bad” child in her mother’s eyes and, unlike Trudy, who does everything she can do to try to please her mother to win back her love, Stella takes the opposite tack: she develops an identity in opposition to her family. The way that Lucinda tells her story, her emotional difficulties and frequent rage attacks make it almost impossible for her to adhere to the adult expectations. What is worth noting is that both Stella and Lucinda are sexually abused as very young children and have mothers who reject them.

Cluster 8: Strong Religious Affiliation or Upbringing

As a result of the use of snowballing to recruit subjects, three of the participants, Elaine, Anne and Hope, are former Catholic nuns. What could not have been foreseen is that three other participants, Trudy, Lucinda and Chris, are also Catholic. Elaine, Anne, Lucinda, Trudy and Chris all speak to receiving religious messages about the sinfulness of homosexuality which they feel may be a contributing factor to the later resolution of their lesbian identity. Of this group, Elaine reports having the most guilt, a sentiment that endures a long time. Of the six Catholic subjects, Hope is the only one who does not let the Church teachings on homosexuality affect her in a negative way.

Religion is also an important component of Stella’s identity, although she was raised Methodist. The difficulties that ensue for Stella are less internal: she does not

wrestle with the belief that she is a sinner. Rather, Stella's struggle is around how to navigate through the institutional homophobia of her church once she accepts herself as lesbian. Unable to be a lesbian and a Methodist minister, Stella has to leave her church.

Neither Julie nor Wanda speaks about religion playing a role either before or after the resolution of their sexual identity.

Cluster 9: Influence of Women on the Initial Choices about Work and Career

Two-thirds of the participants credit an influential female or females with leading them to their first job or to their careers. An important finding is that these important women are not the participants' mothers or blood relatives. Nor do the subjects' fathers play an integral role in the realm of work for this group of lesbians despite psychoanalysis' metapsychology that firmly places the world of work and life outside the family as resting in the domain of the masculine and of fathers. This would seem to undercut the essentialist viewpoint that lesbians are masculine women (Reed, 2002; Magee & Miller, 1997; Young-Bruehl, 2000.)

Stella does not realize it at the time, but after she resolves her lesbian identity she recognizes that the decision to become a Methodist minister is driven by her infatuation with an influential female pastor. Prior to meeting this woman, Stella's focus centers on a career in child development or the arts.

Elaine and Anne find their careers by joining religious orders that are heavily involved in teaching. The decision, in essence, is made for them by a community of women.

Chris is supposed to become a doctor like her mother but rejects that path in the midst of her involvement with a woman in college. This relationship, which Chris does not conceptualize as a lesbian relationship, leads Chris to question the pre-med track she has been on: she worries that going to medical school will preclude her from having a personal life. It is this same woman who suggests and encourages Chris to go into teaching, which is what Chris does, much to the vociferous disappointment and chagrin of her parents.

Trudy gets her first job and every subsequent job she holds through the intercession of close female friends. Hope abandons the two fields she is most interested in during her college years, psychology and theology, and pursues a degree and an initial career in speech pathology based on the forceful opinion of her brother's girlfriend.

Wanda claims to have decided to be a nurse independent of outside influences except for the Cherry Ames young adult books she read. Her decision to get a bachelor's degree in nursing rather than go through the more common route of attending a hospital-based program, however, is heavily influenced by conversations with a female neighbor.

Julie's experience is similar to Wanda's. According to her narrative, she decides on her own, without input from others, to pursue a career in medicine. Her family is not especially encouraging because medicine is considered a "male" field and that choice places her outside the feminine model for her ethnic and cultural group. At the same time, however, achievement and success are important cultural values, so the family does not place undue obstacles in her way and ultimately her family is proud to have a daughter who is a doctor.

Lucinda's extensive history of trauma clouds her career picture. Her willingness and ability to talk with others about her interests are compromised by a series of abusive relationships with important adults throughout her childhood and young adulthood. She approaches work in a haphazard way, trying to avoid problems. The constant harassment she states she experiences in many different work settings quickly leads her to join the temporary work force. Being able to pay her bills is what matters most rather than the job itself.

CHAPTER VI

FINDINGS C: THE IMPACT OF LATE RESOLUTION OF LESBIAN SEXUAL IDENTITY ON WORK

Introduction

At the outset of the study, only Lucinda makes any sort of link between being a lesbian and her work life. Lucinda states, during the screening process, that she wants to participate in the study because she feels she has experienced job discrimination as a result of being a lesbian. Although this is not the focus of the study, Lucinda wants very much to tell her story and she meets the research criteria. Prior to their participation in the study, none of the subjects, including Lucinda, have thought about the possible connection between their lesbian identity development and their work identity. This is uncharted territory for all of the participants.

Given this, a life story narrative methodology is highly advantageous. Hollway & Jefferson's (2000) suggestion that there be two interviews is of great utility: it allows participants to have initial thoughts about possible links between their lesbian identity development and their work identity and then have time to consider the topic more deeply. There is a range of response to the premise of the study. All of the participants have some level of interest because they volunteer for the study. Three of the nine subjects, Elaine, Wanda and Trudy, at the end of the two interviews do not feel that there are especially strong linkages between the two realms. The life story narrative research

approach is robust enough to contain such divergencies. Lieblich et al. (1998) and Hollway & Jefferson (2000) recognize the inherent subjectivity of people's narratives and stories about themselves. Lieblich et al. (1998) state that they "do not take narratives at face value, as complete and accurate representations of reality" (p.8). Lieblich et al. (1998) state that "We know or discover ourselves, and *reveal* ourselves to others, by the stories we tell" (p. 7). [researcher's emphasis]. Hollway & Jefferson (2000) continue this strand of thinking about life story narratives when they speak to "The subjective experience of the subjects and often hidden meanings of the narrative" (p. 12). Hollway & Jefferson's (2000) ideas about defended subjects, who "invest in discourses when these offer positions which provide protections against anxiety and therefore supports to identity" (p. 23), allows for the research situation where the investigator is able to identify linkages and connections that the subjects themselves might not readily see but are there nonetheless.

The life story narrative model of this study combines the holistic-content framework outlined in Lieblich et al. (1998) where themes emerge from reading and re-reading the whole text with Hollway & Jefferson's (2000) concept of the "gestalt" of the narrative where the whole is considered greater than the sum of the parts. Embedded in these two models, which is why they work well together and are used conjointly, is the idea that much can be learned from how the narrative is told: what the subject emphasizes, the contradictions, unfinished descriptions, repetitions, interruptions of the narrative flow, the placement of material, the silences and non-elaborations, the information that is missing as well as the information that is provided.

From the data analysis of the life story narratives, three salient themes about the relationship between the participants' lesbian sexual identity and their work identity can be identified. The themes are:

1. As the participants are resolving their lesbian identity or early on in the resolution process there is an unraveling of defensive structures. The impact of this psychological change plays out in the sphere of work;
2. Upon resolution of their lesbian sexual identity, participants are, overall, more content and feel more "authentic" and this extends in important ways into their work lives; and,
3. Resolution of their lesbian sexual orientation correlates to participants being able to be more ambitious for themselves and to reclaim career dreams and aspirations.

Theme One: The "Undoing" of Defensive Structures and the Impact on Work

It takes this group of lesbians longer to resolve and accept their lesbian sexual identity. The period of resolution is challenging for the majority of the participants and the psychological and emotional shifts that are involved in finally accepting their lesbian identity does manifest in their work lives. The effects of the changes in the participants' personal lives and identities vary in the realm of work but are noticeable and significant nonetheless.

For Stella, Julie, Anne, Wanda, and Chris there is enormous upheaval during the period when they are trying to understand, integrate and fully resolve their identities as lesbians.

Stella reports that her coming to terms with her lesbian identity was an “aha!” moment. She gets a calendar as a gift from a friend featuring male “beefcakes” and realizes that she prefers her *Playboy* magazines. It is her moment of “awakening.” Once she knows, Stella begins to live, essentially, a double life: she sneaks off to the big city and dates women on weekends but during the week she is the Methodist minister in a rural church. The Methodist church is not accepting of homosexuality and Stella is well aware that she cannot be true to herself personally and continue in her work capacity as pastor. Her inability to reconcile the personal and the professional parts of her life results in a suicide attempt. As Stella puts it, “when I knew [I was a lesbian] I knew. There was no question about it . . . but what to do with it. I was very suicidal.” It is only after this very serious gesture does Stella recognize that for her wellbeing and that of her children, she needs to leave the church, which she does. This is a very difficult decision for her to make and giving up her role as pastor leaves her floundering job-wise for several years:

Stella: Once I claimed myself as lesbian, I knew it was right.

Jill: You paid a high price for it.

Stella: A very high price. In hindsight, twenty years later, I’m not a pastor. There are so many parts I can’t, don’t do well.

Jill: So looking back, how do you think that not having your sexual orientation figured out earlier affected, if at all, your work identity, your ambitions or goals, your overall work experience?

Stella: Oh, if I had known I was a lesbian, I never would have gone to seminary. I was the female pastor’s little puppet. I didn’t want to go to seminary. I wanted to be an art teacher and she wanted me to go to seminary, so I went to seminary.

However, it is during this period of doing odd jobs that Stella ends up meeting the woman who will become her life partner. Stella falls in love and enters into a long-term relationship that gives her the stability and affection she has craved all her life. This is how Stella speaks about the impact of life with her partner:

It changes the whole world which is part of, you were talking about work and how it affected our work and it's given me the freedom to be who I really am. To have the supportive home to come home to. It's changed everything for me.

Julie also experiences considerable upheaval as she struggles with her sexual identity. As a young child, Julie is aware of having attractions to other girls, and she continues to have crushes on girls all the way through medical school. But she does not know what to do with these feelings, and so she, in essence, disavows what she knows about herself. This is what Julie says about it:

I would have these impossible straight-girl crushes. And I would be like, "Why even bother because this is not going to go anywhere?" At the same time, nothing is like clicking to tell me . . . I had no idea. I didn't know that it was like fluid. I thought that it was more . . . I thought there are gay women out there somewhere but I just don't know where they are and I never met them so – meanwhile I'm getting these boys. It's so difficult and I'd always hear that relationships are difficult and are a lot of hard work. And I thought, man, this is really hard work. I'm having these parallel things but I'm not actually like connecting the two and going, "Ah, wait! What is so difficult with boys and so unsatisfying is because you are a lesbian." No, I didn't think about it that way. I never made the connection.

Julie knows she wants to be a doctor from a young age. Everything gets derailed during her third year of medical school. Julie has difficulties in all the relationships she has with men, there is tremendous pressure on her from family to be married and the need to conform to cultural and family expectations takes an enormous toll on her. The

situation becomes so emotionally untenable that Julie is unable to continue her schooling and has to take a year off from her medical training:

I was in three very short-lived relationships with men in med school. That was about the time that all my friends and classmates were getting married. And I was really unhappy with dating these men and I thought that that was what I was supposed to do, find a man and get married and graduate med school and I was not happy about that.

So the whole medical school thing, when I took a year off, I didn't like school, I didn't like my relationship, I didn't like my life. I was miserable and I just didn't know who I was. That was why I was so unhappy.

Julie gets married during her hiatus from medical school but she does not feel better. She returns to school and to working as a doctor, becoming a workaholic and making no time for the new relationship with her husband. The marriage suffers and Julie divorces her husband a few years later.

When I was with my husband, having a personal life was not a priority. Yeah, yeah. I loved him, I cared about him but we never actually merged any finances. I never had to change my name. I always wanted kids but I could never picture myself having kids with him. It was sort of like we were living together. Married but he wasn't very important. It wasn't important—I never did anything to prioritize us, our time, anything like that.

Getting a divorce upends the cultural expectations and this rending of the cultural fabric gives Julie the courage to embrace her long-standing same-sex attractions.

When I decided I was going to leave him [her husband], it was a big, huge deal dealing with my family and once that, it was like a floodgate that opened up. Because if I got a divorce and I was okay with my family and the family was okay. After that, I decided, "I'm doing what I want." I got a divorce and like there can't be anything worse that I can do . . . I just felt like I had nothing to lose anymore. . . . I had already disappointed the family, how much more can I disappoint them?

Anne's account of coming to terms with her lesbian identity also plays out in the realm of work. Anne's sexuality is dormant before entering the convent after high

school. She is not particularly interested in boys but views her lack of interest as a manifestation of her shyness. When she joins the convent, she finds herself “jumping into bed” with another young nun. Still, she does not name her behavior or think in terms of sexual preference. It is not until she meets the woman who will be her future life partner that Anne begins to think seriously about her sexuality and to frame her desire in terms of a lesbian sexual identity. By this time, Anne is firmly ensconced in her career as an elementary school teacher. From the beginning she is comfortable in her job and very good at it. She has clearly found her professional niche. When the nun she is interested in, Toby, leaves the convent, Anne finally has to come to terms with her lesbian identity and all that it means. This period of trying to resolve her sexual orientation produces enormous stress and internal upheaval for Anne. How does this manifest itself? Suddenly, Anne calls into question her professional goals and attainments. Suddenly, Anne thinks she is in the wrong profession and should give up teaching and go into parish work:

And then my partner came to the convent. I was 32 years old. I was immediately attracted to her. And she came to live in my same house. And with Toby, that was the beginning. We did a lot of praying together first, a lot of touching the face and I think that after a year we were definitely physically involved. And then she left after 3 years. And that was extremely difficult. And I was still thinking that I was going to stay in. After she left, it took me 5 years to leave.

I was in a very confused state of mind. I was thinking, well maybe it's my career. Maybe I need to get out of teaching. I was very discontent. I was not happy. Not happy. A very close friend was living out-of-state. And by that time, we were pretty much able to go where we wanted, to say where we wanted to go and do, in the community. So I was going to do pastoral work, like work in a parish and give it a try and just see. Is it really my career? Well, it wasn't. But I spent a year down there and that was very difficult. I'd say I was depressed. Yeah, I was. Yes, it definitely affected my mood.

Anne moves, temporarily, out of teaching, thinking it is her work that is driving her discontent. She is unhappy and depressed and then realizes that what she is experiencing is not related to her job but her difficulties coming to terms with being a lesbian. She eventually leaves the convent in order to have a life with the woman she loves and returns to teaching.

For Wanda, the resolution of her lesbian identity and its impact on her work life can also be seen. Wanda, herself, sees the link less clearly. However, the stories Wanda shares about her work experiences, its successes and failures, reveal a significant bump in her professional life when she enters into a same-sex relationship she views as a viable alternative to the unsatisfactory heterosexual marriage she is in. In college, before she is married, Wanda has an affair with a woman and later, when she is married and getting her Masters, she has an intermittent affair with another woman. Despite these experiences, Wanda does not consider herself to be a lesbian because making a life with either of these women does not seem possible or plausible. Only when Wanda can fully imagine living with the woman she has fallen in love with can she embrace her lesbian identity.

Falling in love with Laura and beginning to see that she could actually live her life as a lesbian correspond to Wanda entering an out-of-state midwifery program. Away from her husband, to whom she is still married, and her children, Wanda proclaims her lesbian sexual orientation. She is newly “out” and just beginning to consolidate her lesbian identity. Unfortunately, the midwifery program is not supportive of her lesbian sexuality. This creates enormous stress for Wanda, and she has a depressive episode. She is counseled to leave the program and she does. In Wanda’s academic and professional

trajectory, this failure is aberrant and noticeable. She has had depressive episodes before but been able to persevere. Embedded in the narrative is the idea that the added stress of dealing with her lesbian identity contributes heavily to making the situation at school unsustainable. Being depressed does not help matters when she returns home to make a new life with her female partner. Laura is not sure she wants anything to do with a depressed Wanda. But they find a way to reconcile and Wanda enters into a full relationship with Laura. Once Wanda does this, according to her account, she immediately feels established in her identity as a lesbian; she feels very comfortable and is completely “out” as a lesbian in her personal life and in the workplace. As Wanda says, “I think once I really acknowledged it, then I could see how I’d been a lesbian all the way along. And just didn’t know it.” In fact, when Wanda is dismissed from a hospital position, several years after the midwifery debacle, she takes on the hospital administration, accusing them of discriminatory practices and she is re-instated. This is how Wanda frames the events in her work life:

Well, I can’t tell you right now the specifics but I knew that I had feelings about it and I think they were very glad that I dropped out of the program because then they didn’t have to graduate a lesbian midwife.

I’m trying to remember when I actually began to come out down there. I can’t tell you the timing but if I had been a little more mature in my lesbian identity, I think I would have taken them on, just like I took the people on at the hospital.

The road to resolving her lesbian sexual identity plays out dramatically in Chris’s personal and work life. In college she becomes intimately and physically involved with another woman. Neither one of them are calling themselves lesbians. All during college, Chris is on the pre-med track, following in the footsteps of her physician mother. Then, during her senior year, when she is heavily involved in her relationship with Rebecca,

Chris cannot bring herself to apply to medical school. She no longer can clearly see what her career path is supposed to be.

In college I was planning on going to med school and was starting to fill out the applications and senior year I was like, I don't want to do this. . .

I think that there was a lot going on with me whether I recognized it or not. In my relationship with my family, the expectations that were placed upon me, whether it was by my parents or whether it was by me. Um, and, um, and what am I going to do? I have to do well at whatever I am doing. Um, do I have time for a relationship?

Chris, following Rebecca's recommendation, goes into teaching. A year after college, Chris and Rebecca break up. This sends Chris into a tailspin and she begins to "act out." She starts to drink heavily, her mood is unstable, and she breaks things in her dorm room. Her behavior does not go unnoticed. The Head of the school where she is teaching insists that she get counseling, which she does.

It wasn't until 7 years later [after the break-up with Rebecca] when I finally accepted who I was. Because – but in that time period, when Rebecca and I broke up, I didn't think, 'Oh, I'm just going to find another woman.' I just dove into my work. Got into some drinking problems.

Part of it is that I have a temper. I think I got it through my dad. And so when things didn't go well – in those years when I was going through counseling and the drinking and everything, I was also very violent. I was never violent towards someone. It was inanimate objects. I'd come home so angry from a bad day at school, I'd go into my dorm room and am like throwing things at the wall, tearing things up. It took a long time to get through all that.

Chris is in counseling for several years before she connects the upset in her life, which is putting her teaching career at risk, to her lesbian identity:

And the problem was that I was not strong enough at the time to stand up and say [to my parents], "This is my life." And so that was part of the counseling. Being able to accept the fact that I cannot argue with my mom and dad and know that everything will be all right.

But finally towards the latter part of my counseling, there were issues that started to surface. It wasn't that I was having fantasies or anything, it was like, but what's wrong with me? And my counselor asked, "Well, when were you the happiest?" I said, "With Rebecca." And she was like, "Well, have you ever considered yourself gay?"

Chris initially fights off this possibility, but as she begins to seriously explore and come to terms with the idea that she is a lesbian, her personal and work life calm down. She is able to get her drinking under control, the violent, self-destructive behavior stops, and she can embrace her professional identity as a teacher:

Once that piece, my sexual identity fell into place, other things were starting to fall into place. . . The drinking had pretty much gone away. Um, and luckily I had a very supportive Head [of School]. So that helped quite a bit. Because I could have easily been fired.

I never intended to have a teaching career. I thought it would be a good gig until I figured out what I wanted to do. And then probably four years into it, I thought, You know, I'm having way too much fun. So I was going to keep going down this path.

Lucinda's entire life story is an anguished narrative about the struggle to accept herself first as a girl and then as a woman who preferred girls and women. Unlike Stella, Julie, Anne, Chris and Wanda, who use denial and/or disavowal to keep themselves from fully knowing their attractions to women, Lucinda speaks to being painfully aware of her same-sex attractions throughout her life. As a child, she is punished for what is perceived as inappropriate behavior:

I don't know if I was first or second grade, there was this girl and obviously I was very attracted to her. We used to go out to recess in the yard where the convent and the rectory was and the school – we were in that little grassy area, and I remember going up to her, this young girl. And I was always so forceful a type of person, and I was forcing a kiss on her and things of that nature. And I guess the nuns saw me and the next thing I know, I'm in the convent and , all I remember was "You are wicked! Evil! You're bad!" She shook me and oh gosh. Trying to shake the sex demon out of me or something, I guess.

She picked on me for 8 years. And whatever she said or did to me, other than the shaking and calling me evil and wicked and what you're doing is a sin – it obviously took away what little freedom I had, even though it was freedom of sexuality. She killed it. She frightened it away. She paralyzed it. She made me hate myself because at first nobody questioned it. I mean even the girls didn't question it. They thought it was cute.

Lucinda carries a persecuted stance forward into adulthood. This creates many difficulties for her in the workplace:

I was at a firm downtown and I had on, you know, I was dressed appropriately, I had a skirt or something like that on and then to walk into the lunch room and the first thing that a black male shouted was, how did he say it? "What the hell is that? She look like a man!" And I'm thinking, I was always uncomfortable because there was always a fool, so it was like, Ok, should I go temporary? So I did temporary work for like twelve years. I worked temporary because if I didn't have to set roots somewhere, just as long as I could get a paycheck to take care of my needs, but to be part of a work force I could never fit in, could never feel comfortable because someone was going to do a "shout out." It made me feel embarrassed.

I didn't know how to handle it so that was the biggest disappointment. Though I'm not satisfied with my work life. I had opportunities to stay places but because I didn't know how to handle the way people was treating me, I made the exit.

Once Lucinda accepts her lesbian identity, and this happens when she is almost 50 years old, in the course of her recovery from alcoholism and as an outcome of her work with a therapist, Lucinda is able to relinquish the paranoia that has interfered with her pursuing a satisfying work life:

I'm learning how to set boundaries and stuff. And if somebody do make an off-color, a joke about my sexuality or whatever – first off they don't know me, second, that's their opinion. So I'm learning on how to say, "That's your issue, not mine."

The only reason I was working in the kind of jobs that I was, was the familiarity. I know what I'm doing when I'm doing that stuff. But I didn't like it, I wasn't happy with it. And I want to start to do the things that make me happy. The relationships, the places that I work.

The story that Elaine tells about coming to terms with her sexuality and her work life shares some characteristics with the above participants. There is some turmoil but the way Elaine portrays it, it is quite internal and does not outwardly affect the trajectory of her career. She leaves the convent when she fully lets herself know that her affectional preferences are towards women. She has settled into an exclusive relationship with another nun and determines that to stay in the convent is hypocritical. Her interest in religion and spirituality persists and after she leaves the convent she begins a Masters program in religious studies. When Elaine writes a paper on the Catholic Church's teachings on homosexuality, she becomes deeply perturbed. She is wracked by guilt, making her self-identification as a lesbian very painful for a significant period of time. It does not deter Elaine from teaching in the Catholic school system but she lives with a persistent level of internal discomfort for some time.

You know what happened to me, I think when I first left the convent, I felt – I obviously had not come out to my family but I had come out to a lot of my friends. My [current] partner was still in the convent. I was determined that if she was going to stay I was going to make my way. I mean I couldn't wait around for her to make some decisions. So I decided to go to graduate school and then she decided to leave and we moved here together. I had to write a paper on homosexuality or that was my topic. I don't remember what the exact topic was but it dealt with homosexuality and so I did a lot of research. And when I read all the stuff that the church has said over the years, it got into my head and I began to feel like I was a bad person.

So I went through a few years of feeling like "I'm bad. I'm doing something really bad." We were still living together, I was kinda talking about how that was in my head that some of that harks back to when I was growing up it was such a bad thing. Sex period. Sex and the Catholic Church was a bad thing for years. I mean you only ever did it for kids, for procreation, not for any sort of pleasure.

It takes Elaine a long time to push through her defensive structures in order to be able to act on her discontent and internal discomfort and change career paths. Elaine's process of dismantling her defensive structure is more prolonged than any of the other

participants in the study, although, ostensibly, she “comes out” to herself earlier than many of the other subjects. This interpretation emerges from examining the entire text of the two interviews, in a content-holistic manner (Lieblich et al., 1998) and bearing in mind Hollway & Jefferson’s (2000) idea of the “defended subject” where more is revealed than Elaine herself is able to see.

I’ve been trying to change careers for the last ten years and get out of teaching religion. Teaching religion—there’s a correlation between getting out of teaching religion and being gay. I had to get out of teaching religion because I could not bear what the Catholic Church had to say about being gay. I had to go in some other direction.

I accept myself as a lesbian. I don’t always like being a lesbian.

I think maybe if I had been born twenty years later, I may have been more out. I don’t know. I’m “out” to lots of people, I’m just not going to go right now and hold a sign in the street pronouncing the fact that I’m lesbian.

These ingrained and internalized beliefs about the “badness” of being homosexual are what seem to impede and significantly delay the career changes that Elaine states she is eager to make.

Trudy, unlike many of the study participants, does not enter into a depressive phase as she is integrating her lesbian sexual identity: just the opposite. She responds in a rather manic manner, diving into work. After a 5 year relationship with a dear male friend ends, she has a short-lived relationship with another man and gets pregnant. It is during this period that Trudy decides to start her own business. Who does she do this with? With Alice, a heterosexual friend for whom she has long had strong romantic feelings. Indeed, Alice’s role in the company and her role in general in Trudy’s life is substantial, as is that of another woman who Trudy becomes close to after the birth of her

child. This other woman lives in the same duplex as Trudy and helps Trudy with childcare. This is what Trudy says about this period:

Jill: And then, when it ends with Steve and you have the rebound relationship and that is over, then your thoughts about, am I going to be with anybody, who might I want to be with?

Trudy: I was actually in a friendship with a woman and my daughter considers her her other mother. Um, I think I told you about her, she is a person who would never cross the line. She lived upstairs and we lived downstairs in a duplex for the first 5 years of my daughter's life. She took care of my daughter as much as I did.

Jill: Did you wish it were something more?

Trudy: I certainly thought it could be a possibility.

In Trudy's narrative, what one finds is that as soon as she leaves men behind, she throws herself into work, working two jobs despite having just given birth to a child she says she always wanted. For Trudy, becoming a workaholic coincides with having more serious thoughts about being with women. One interpretive reading of Trudy's story is that the escape into work is a sublimation of her desire to have a more intimate relationship with a woman. It is following this very hectic and demanding five year period where Trudy is running her own business, working a second job, and raising a child, that Trudy finally comes out to herself as a lesbian and becomes sexually involved with her future partner. This is how Trudy puts it:

So after that, as I said, at 30, I came out of that second relationship thinking, relationships are not where I want my focus. I'm pregnant, I bought my first house, I did a lot when I was 30. And started this business. My child spent the first 3 months in the storage closet. I was back at work 2 weeks after I gave birth. I was showing apartments, third floor units the night I gave birth.

Certainly owning my own business and the success of that business, the support and admiration of the people around me, I certainly got a very strong sense of, "It doesn't matter what you choose, what you choose is going to be right for you." And that was [pause] what enabled me to embrace my identity.

Hope's life story narrative is quite a bit different from the other subjects. At first glance it would appear that the resolution of her lesbian sexual identity causes little disruption in her work life. Indeed, the unraveling of her defensive structures do not produce the internal turmoil, the depression, the suicidal thoughts and gestures that is seen with Stella, Julie, Anne, Wanda, Chris and Lucinda. Hope does not exhibit the manic defense Trudy displays nor is she wracked with guilt that has her questioning her essential goodness as Elaine does.

Of all the participants, Hope's experience iterates the trajectory "predicted" by the developmental models posited by Erikson ([1959]1980) and others: that a solid work identity follows the consolidation of one's sexual identity, and that if there is not a consolidation of one's sexual identity, a solid work identity is harder to achieve. Hope is a high achiever in high school. She is one of a select few who attend a psychology summer program at Western Michigan University. But when she arrives at college, she quickly seems to lose her sense of self. She is easily talked out of areas that interest her such as psychology and theology. When she graduates college with a degree in speech pathology, it holds little interest. She feels directionless, at a loss at what to do with her life. She goes to France, which holds special meaning for her, but to her dismay, the menial work she is engaged in in assisting religious pilgrims does not satisfy. She returns to the States and works for a year as a paraprofessional speech therapist, mainly because she does not know what else to do. She decides to go back to school and gets a Masters' in Adult Education and Continuing Education. Upon completion of the program, Hope cannot find a job in the field and does volunteer work to fill the void. This stint leads to a paid position as an administrative assistant. Eventually, Hope finds work in the field of

adult and continuing education. She enjoys the work but ends up moving out of that area into social work. Hope reconnects with her old interest in psychology during the same period she is discerning that she is not heterosexual. Are Hope's multiple, sequential, careers related to an unresolved sexuality? Applying Hollway & Jefferson's (2000) concept of the narrative *gestalt*, where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, makes this interpretive reading of Hope's life story entirely plausible. Hope wanders from one career to another. Not until she resolves her lesbian identity does she land on the career that she refers to as her "life-blood," social work.

The dismantling of Hope's defensive structures does not throw her into a chaotic period nor into a period of guilt and self-loathing, as is the case with other participants. Rather, what Hope's defensive structures do is keep her from being able to embrace the personal and career interests that make her most uniquely Hope: her passion for all things spiritual and psychological. When the defensive structures that have kept her from knowing her sexual and emotional preferences are no longer operative, Hope's career aspirations are finally realized:

I go through a series of phases in my sexual identity and in my professional life I do that too. I did that too. I seem to go through a parallel progression of going through different phases of thinking about sexual orientation in general – I intellectualized it before I was able, in a way, to accept myself and my sexuality. And maybe it did have something to do with the professions I chose . . . I wonder if I ever would have become a clinical social worker which turned out to be my life's blood, I just was completely in my element professionally. I had enjoyed my prior jobs, I've always been clear about that I enjoyed them but then this was really it. And it was the same comfort that I felt when I came out to myself, in a way. That just came out right off the top of my head, right now.

Theme Two: Feeling More Authentic, “Whole” and “Happier” as a Person and the Impact in the Realm of Work

The participants generally experience the resolution of their lesbian sexuality as a powerful and positive psychological development. The subjects describe themselves as feeling “more authentic,” “whole,” and “freer” once they are able to embrace their lesbian sexual identity. Being a lesbian “feels right.” For many of the participants, full acceptance of their sexual identity leaves them feeling more “emotionally available” to themselves and to others. In the realm of work, this translates into a sense of being able to use *all* of themselves in their work, making their careers and jobs more meaningful, more enjoyable, and more purposeful. In short, the participants’ acceptance of themselves as lesbian has significant ramifications in their work lives.

This is how Hope describes what occurs internally when she resolves her lesbian sexuality in her early thirties:

When this light bulb moment happened and I realized I’m a lesbian, I was very comfortable, one of the things that I realized at the time and I don’t think it shocked me at the time -- looking back at it now, I don’t think of it negatively. I know that I felt it to be life-giving at the time.

I experienced it [resolving her lesbian sexual identity] as such a deep relief and comfort . . . It was like, this is who I am. This is who I am! Things just made sense to me. I think I felt more real. I suddenly felt some sense of genuineness and authenticity that – because I was faking it with men.

Hope makes the connection between feeling more “real” and “authentic” and “genuine” with being able to make her mid-life career change and be truly successful and effective in her new profession as a clinical social worker:

Before I entered the convent, I had resolved my sexual orientation. It’s so interesting, I began to, I was recruited to continuing education for an almost all woman organization, so during the time of my resolution, I went from working

for an exclusively male dominated association to one of women, exclusively women. And I felt comfortable working with women.

I felt extremely more available to the almost exclusively women members of the association. I think I felt more empowered. I was feeling more empowered, I think one of the reasons I was beginning to get fidgety with the male association membership, I was resolving my sexual orientation and that having to kind of “play” the heterosexual.

If I were still living assuming I was a heterosexual or denying my lesbian identity, self-identity, I think it would have been very uncomfortable for me to be in social work school and to be a social worker because in that you have to have a high degree of self-awareness and self-acceptance. Man, if I didn't have that, if I hadn't come to resolve my sexual orientation when I did, I don't think I would have been able to – I might have gone into social work but I don't think I would have been as –effective. Because I am really good, I'm a really good clinical social worker. And I was known to be an excellent student. For the ability to question, not only ask questions but the emphasis I put in school on self-knowledge and self-awareness. I think there is a big connection.

Anne, the former nun and elementary school teacher who resolves her lesbian identity in her mid-thirties, is thrown into emotional turmoil as she is resolving her lesbian identity. Once Anne works through her emotional upset and is able to fully accept herself as a lesbian, she can sort things out in the work arena, and she returns to teaching. With the resolution of her lesbian sexual identity, Anne regains her equilibrium and achieves, in her eyes, greater contentment personally and becomes an even better teacher. This is how Anne sums it up:

I do know that after, the more I accepted my being a lesbian, it seemed like the more free I was to live my life and I really believe I was freer in my work also. I was more confident, I was less afraid, I wasn't so worried. It was like, this was who I am. I was more available to the kids as I accepted. I am sure that I was more sensitive, less judgmental.”

Chris's period of resolution is also quite tumultuous. Despite having a relationship with a woman in college, Chris is unable to acknowledge or accept that she is a lesbian until her late twenties and only after considerable upheaval and self-destructive

behavior that manifests in both her personal and work life. Things change considerably in both spheres when Chris comes to terms with her identity as a lesbian: “when I finally did come out to myself, it was like this huge weight off my shoulders.”

Chris elaborates on the positive impact of the resolution of her lesbian identity in the context of the story of coming out to her parents:

When I came out to my parents, I came out, I came out, unfortunately, over the telephone. At one point my mother said, “What is wrong with you? Do you like women?” And I was like, Okay, um, this is not the way I was going to go about it but, “Yes, Mom, I do,” and she hung up on me.

I didn’t go home for Thanksgiving and when I did go home for Christmas my mom was not speaking to me. Um, and then the night before I left, I only stayed like three days, the night before I left, I pretty much stormed into their bedroom and said, “Look, this is who I am. I am not apologizing for this. I am happy. I am not hanging out with really strange people who are child molesters or anything. I don’t know what you have in mind but take it or leave it.” It took a lot to do that. And then I went upstairs and started packing. My dad came upstairs and he was like, “Are you okay?” And I was like, “Dad, I’d be fine – I know you can’t accept this and I am not asking for acceptance but you have to acknowledge it.” And he actually sat with me and asked more questions. “Well, does work know? Are you going to get fired?” I said, “Yes, work knows. Work knew before you did.”

He was a little upset at that. I told my dad, “I’ve got people, friends who work for major corporations, banks, things like that. Professionals, doctors.” And then he was like, he asked if I was happy. And I said, “Dad you don’t understand, I feel so much taller now and I understand who I am.”

Chris feels more self-assured, “taller.” She realizes that she can be a lesbian and have good, solid friends. Feeling better about herself, feeling more settled, calmer and happier, has immediate effects on how Chris thinks about her work identity and teaching aspirations: “I think once I figured it out, once my identity was settled, I could really soar. “Okay, I’m going to be the best at this.”

For Julie, the physician, accepting herself as lesbian comes after dating a lot of men and ending an unsatisfying marriage. Being with women immediately feels right. Julie speaks to a certain amount of drama attached to her first encounters with women but even this does not make her question her preference for women. And an interesting thing occurs in her work life: the doctor who has been a workaholic without time for a personal life suddenly seeks and is able to achieve a much more optimal work/life balance. Having a satisfying personal life and professional life brings Julie a lot of contentment. This is how Julie summarizes it:

When I started dating women I knew that that was it, that felt right but it was the wrong people, the wrong women I was dating. Once I found peace with my identity and peace within my personal relationship. My work life is probably much easier now. I don't want to work that much. I need to redistribute my energy and time now and I'm taking some of that from work and putting it into my personal life. Whereas it was all work before. Now I'm saying, my personal life is more important than my work.

Gosh that is so weird, I never realized. It's funny, because I would go through times when I was co-habiting with a female partner, living separately or like single, I went through a big single phase, I definitely made sure that my work schedule worked around my personal life. So it was, "No, I can't be on call that night because I have to go to this lesbian party or whatever." Or, it was like, "I can't be on call that night because it's my partner's birthday." So it was like a big priority shift. And before, when I was still living the "straight life" [laughs], it was definitely like, "Career, career!"

For Wanda, fully embracing her lesbian identity is strongly connected to being in a viable relationship and settling into a life with her female partner. After she falls in love with Laura, but before they are a formal couple, Wanda's life, including her work life, is up and down. She is counseled out of a midwifery program because, she reports, she is lesbian. She falls into a deep depression. She is newly "out" and in a long-distance relationship. Her lesbian identity is not fully consolidated. For Wanda, the consolidation

of her lesbian identity seems integrally linked to establishing a stable life with the object of her desire. Once this occurs, Wanda is fully comfortable with her sexual orientation. She feels empowered. There are few challenges either personally or professionally that she feels she cannot meet. At age 60, Wanda decides to pursue a doctorate. The following excerpt from her narrative gives a bit of the flavor of Wanda's self-confidence as a lesbian.

Wanda: I think that I've always been more out. For instance, when Laura and I were together, she was . . . she was very careful how out she was and to whom. And I never really cared.

Jill: How come, you think? What enabled you to do that?

Wanda: I don't know. I never felt like there were any consequences that I couldn't manage.

Jill: Because you have kids?

Wanda: I have kids; my kids knew.

Jill: So it's kind of a non-issue.

Wanda: Yeah, what's the big deal?

"What's the big deal" serves as Wanda's motto once she has resolved her lesbian sexual identity. At the end of the second interview, Wanda is more expressive of how much better she feels "within" once she is able to fully embrace who she is:

Jill: Would you say that after you came out and were able to live as a lesbian that you felt, happy?

Wanda: Yes, I would say that.

Jill: Happier than before?

Wanda: It is hard to say I was happier. I felt more like my real self. So that felt better . . . I don't know what words I would use. It was more satisfying. It's more satisfying to be who you are. So, that's what felt better.

Lucinda has a long struggle to gain self-acceptance as a lesbian. Her life is full of trauma. She battles alcohol abuse. But her recovery from substance abuse and her traumatic past also leads to the “recovery” of her sense of self and an acceptance of herself as a lesbian. When this finally occurs, in her fifth decade, Lucinda can embrace being different as a positive attribute. The paranoid stance that has hobbled her in her personal and professional life begins to disappear. Lucinda can now take pride in who she is and exudes confidence about what she might be able to accomplish in her life. Lucinda sums it up in this way:

The more I get knowledge about things, and the more I find out that when I talk people do listen, I never had that before . . . and I found out that I have a great deal to talk about and a great deal of things to say whether it be personal or it be on a large scale, it’s about knowledge sharing. And the reason I want to do that [broadcast journalism] is the fact that I think this would be a great forum.

I’d rather be out the box than in the box. And conform that way because then I wouldn’t be able to have choice. A choice meaning that I guess coming with the title “lesbian” it is a lifestyle but it’s also how you see things. How you see things mentally, how you see things physically. Because you almost have to be strong, you almost have to show a tougher character in order to adjust because of the fact that you are going to be ostracized by society. So you have to have this calmer—I don’t have to act or be or do a certain way, I am the way I am for a reason but at the same time I’m not going to pacify or down the fact that I have a brain, that I can make a decision for myself, I don’t have to rely on somebody. You know, so, that’s the part that I embrace about being a lesbian.

. . . I’m outside the box, it makes me have the ability to think for myself and not have society or other people tell me what I should think as a female. Umm, there’s a certain strength and armor, you almost have to be tough skin because you know you’re going to have opposition and stuff out there. But, at the end of the day, you can say, at least I made my own decisions.

Trudy’s recognition of herself as a lesbian occurs after a long-term relationship with a man followed by a short-lived relationship with another man that ends in a desired

pregnancy. Trudy very much wants to be a mother. Becoming a mother is a long-held dream that seems related to mastering the trauma of growing up with a rejecting mother. After she becomes pregnant, it is almost as if she can let go of men and of seeing herself as bisexual. Trudy can now allow herself to acknowledge her strong and abiding attractions and emotional connections to women. For Trudy, “it felt more right” to be with women. Trudy’s greater self-knowledge and acceptance of her same-sex attractions have strong reverberations in the realm of work. It is all in the same time period that Trudy begins to resolve her identity as a lesbian and starts her own business:

Trudy: I’ve been a lesbian my whole life because absolutely been attracted to women, sought the approval of women, I love women. I like men, don’t get me wrong, but I don’t gain the emotional satisfaction from men that I get from women. My friends, my business associates, I picked a wonderful industry that is basically women-dominated. All my business associates are women.

Jill: So this goes into this question, kind of, “What enabled you to embrace your identity as a lesbian?”

Trudy: Certainly owning my own business and the success of that business, the support and admiration of the people around me, I certainly got a very strong sense of, “It doesn’t matter what you choose, what you choose is going to be right for you.” And that was [pause] what enabled me to embrace my identity.

I just never had a strong identity as a “lesbian”. As I said, I’m very aware that I’ve always sought female approval.

Jill: Is it the word that bothers you too?

Trudy: A little. It’s just not a nice word. I don’t feel comfortable with it.

Jill: So what we’re talking about, what enabled you to be able to acknowledge that you –

Trudy: Sleeping with Samantha. Ok, here’s concrete evidence. And it was certainly much more exciting than any sexual relationship with a man. It felt more right.

Elaine is a bit circumspect when it comes to expressing her level of contentment upon the resolution of her lesbian sexual identity. Her life story narrative is, overall, more low-key, but Elaine does state that without question her “affectional preferences” are for women and what she feels for women is wholly different and more satisfying than what she has ever felt emotionally or sexually with a man.

Jill: So, what enables you to, what’s that process like of becoming more aware of yourself personally and accepting that about yourself? What allows that to happen do you think?

Elaine: Well I think I began to realize that I . . . umm, was more attracted emotionally to women than I was to men. And that it felt a lot better. I had never fallen in love with a man like I had with a woman, let’s put it that way. Never felt for a man what I felt for women.

Jill: So the guy you came close to marrying before you entered the convent?

Elaine: Oh! I never had that kind of feeling, never. I think I just had boyfriends because that was what you did.

Jill: So it just seemed more natural to be with a woman because you had more feelings?

Elaine: Definitely an affectional preference.

Resolving her lesbian sexual identity creates difficulties for Elaine in her work. She chooses to work in parochial schools, which require her to teach religion. This produces a lot of internal stress because she is opposed to the Catholic Church’s teachings on homosexuality and lives a life contrary to Church doctrine. Despite what she experiences as a deep conflict, Elaine opts to stay in the Catholic school system. Over the course of time, Elaine figures out how to remove herself from the day-to-day teaching of religion classes and eventually she decides to retrain as a counselor. But she remains in

the Catholic educational system, adhering to a religious identity that for her is ultimately more important than her sexual identity.

Jill: But for you, in your work life, once you say, yeah I really am lesbian, does that affect you and how you are able to work, in how you approach it, freed up or whatever. Does it make a difference?

Elaine: I don't know if I can answer that. I'm trying to think back on my first days of teaching when I wasn't necessarily aware of it and now...I kinda have tunnel vision when I'm teaching. I'm focused on what I'm doing that day, that moment, in the classroom. So I don't think so. Resolving it hasn't made a huge difference in my career. Personally yes.

Elaine is aware, however, of the impact of her need to keep her sexuality hidden in the classroom and the constraint this places on her, which chafes at her. This is what she says:

Well, I've always said that if I could – there's a wealth of knowledge I could share with students about relationships and life that I don't because I'm gay. If I were married, I could share that. Because I'm gay, I can't.

Stella's resolution of her lesbian sexual identity, as she tells it, happens all at once. Suddenly she can let herself know what she has "known" for many, many years without letting herself fully know it: "And I thought, wait a minute, it was one of those, you know, I'm a lesbian. I've been in love with that female pastor, oh, of course! It was just sort of that quickly. Just sort of that quickly." Accepting herself as a lesbian creates a crisis in her work life because she cannot remain a Methodist minister and live a lesbian lifestyle. Even with these considerable pressures, Stella is able to say of her coming to terms with her lesbian identity, "Once I claimed myself as lesbian, I knew it was right."

When Stella leaves the ministry, she is at a loss for what to do with her life career-wise. She does many different jobs, including housecleaning and driving a school bus. But despite financial pressures and difficulties in trying to find her place in the paid work

force, Stella never feels that embracing her lesbian identity is anything but positive. This is how Stella puts it:

I had to struggle to figure out what to do as a career [after I accepted myself as a lesbian.] . . . And to find ways to bring money in but claiming my sexuality, opened myself and gave myself solid feet to walk on so that I can now claim my creativity also. It's like trying to live with one hand tied behind your back when you've got this thing that you're hiding from yourself and others.

Theme Three: Resolution of Lesbian Sexual Identity Leads to Being More Ambitious and Reclaiming Career Aspirations and Goals

All nine of the participants in this study find their way into careers and into the world of work. Hope and Lucinda struggle the most. Hope graduates college and suddenly feels at a loss. To her surprise and dismay, what she has studied, speech pathology, does not seem to offer her an immediate pathway into a work identity. Hope loses interest and goes off to France in the hopes of recapturing something that has been meaningful to her earlier in her life. Hope's experience most closely follows what might have been predicted from Erikson's (1950; 1959) developmental model of identity formation: without a strong and well-formulated sexual identity, achieving a work identity is more laborious. Lucinda also struggles, but given her story which is filled with so much trauma and substance abuse, it is not surprising that finding her place in the realm of work is affected and that her choices reflect these factors as well as issues around her sexual identity.

A major finding of this qualitative study is that all nine participants, as different as their individual life story narratives are, become more ambitious for themselves or more assertive in how they deal with their jobs and careers after they resolve their lesbian

identity. For many of the participants, this means rediscovering and returning to career dreams and aspirations that held great meaning for them and that were long deferred.

The change in work perspective, for several of the participants, happens in tandem with the resolution of their sexual identity. For other subjects, it is a more gradual process but a significant one nonetheless that can be tracked back to their acceptance of themselves as lesbian.

Chris finally accepts her attraction to women and in short order she feels able to fully embrace her identity as a teacher and makes the decision to go for a Masters degree:

Once that piece, my sexual identity fell into place, other things were starting to fall into place. Because I was like, oh, I'm going for my Masters. The drinking had pretty much gone away. . . . I never intended to have a teaching career. I thought it would be a good gig until I figured out what I wanted to do. And then probably four years into it I thought, you know, I'm just having way too much fun. So I was going to keep going down this path.

Eventually I was like, it would be kinda nice to have a Masters degree in School Administration. So I started working on that, probably in 1998. So this was one more thing right after I came out.

Anne falls in love with Toby but struggles to reconcile her feelings with accepting an identity as a lesbian. Once she does, she wants to make a life with Toby. To do so means making more money, which for Anne means moving out of the parochial school system into the public school system. This is all new territory for Anne. Up until this time, she sees herself as the quiet, retiring type, not one to self-promote or call attention to herself. But once she has resolved her lesbian sexual identity, she discovers an assertiveness within her that, as she tells her story, she hardly recognizes:

I could not teach in a Catholic school because of the money. I got an application for a public school. Nothing was online then, it was all paper stuff. And I went for the first interview and I know that it went very well. I remember saying to the guy who interviewed me, and I don't know

exactly where I got this confidence. He said to me at the end, “Well, we will let you know. We are looking for the right person for this job.” And I said, “I’m the right person for the job!”

And so I think, yes, I think there was a correlation between my being assertive in saying to the head of personnel, “I’m the person for the job!” It was a sense of me coming to know myself better.

Hope’s move into a career in social work, which harkens back to an old dream of pursuing psychology, also unfolds within the context of resolving her lesbian sexual identity. In her telling of her life story, Hope becomes increasingly more engaged in her work as she moves from association work in a predominantly male organization to a primarily female one. This occurs as she is connecting the dots regarding her emotional and sexual preferences. Two things happen once Hope accepts her lesbian identity: she embraces the depth of her spirituality and enters a convent and she decides to get a second Masters degree in social work in order to become a psychotherapist. The embracing of her sexual identity and her reaching for her long-held dreams are inextricably linked.

I’m thinking that one of the reasons why I could enter the convent when I did was because I had resolved my sexuality and I was fully available, I felt like – even though I wasn’t coming out to this community and there was this compartmentalized part of me, I was still so much more available than I might have been earlier. I felt like I had really matured in many ways when I began to question my sexual orientation. I felt like I was taking leaps forward.

So here we begin the full circle. Because here’s the theology and spirituality again, I’m living in this wonderful community and, uh, my spiritual life is becoming so much richer So, I am in the period of my novitiate, which is one year, that began in 1990, and . . . [T]hey asked me, “Do you want to stay in adult education or is there anything else you’re interested in?” [Laughing with intense pleasure] “Well, as a matter of fact, I think I want to go back [to school], I’d like to be a psychotherapist.”

Lucinda has a similar experience to Hope's when she finally resolves her identity as a lesbian. She reconnects with her dream of going into broadcast journalism. The result of her hard work in recovery and therapy is that she throws off the shackles of shame around her attraction to women and decides to take some classes in broadcast journalism. The woman who has felt too persecuted to hold a steady permanent job, suddenly wants to be in front of a camera doing documentaries on the lesbian experience.

I would love to get into broadcast communication. That's my – with this aftercare, alcohol treatment thing I'm going through, and with my counselor, they all kind of say, find the child within, find the child that used to want to do whatever. And for me, I always wanted to be in broadcast communication.

And the thing with broadcast communication is the fact that it will give me an avenue to discuss and have open discussions on public television. Because just like you're doing a study on lesbians and their careers and how it affects them, that could be something that could be put out there. Because people are still in the dark. People can be educated. We can be doctors and Indian chiefs too. And so they need to understand that. So that's another reason why I want to do it.

And so, the reason why I chose broadcast journalism is that as a lesbian I think it would be a beneficial thing to have that forum in media that it can be expressed.

It takes Elaine a long time to switch her career from teaching to counseling. She reports having a longstanding interest in social service. Initially, she is a social work major in college. She changes majors, she says, because she has a limited view of what school social workers do. She goes into teaching instead. But being a teacher in the Catholic school system is problematical for Elaine. She is required to teach religious dogma that undermines and undercuts her identity as a lesbian. She makes the choice to live with the guilt and the hypocrisy built into the situation. She is able to do this because although she is not "out" to parents or students, school administrators at the school are

aware of her sexual orientation. When Elaine moves to a more conservative Catholic school system, she is forced all the way back into the closet and this becomes unbearable. Elaine returns to her old school.

In analyzing Elaine's life story narrative, what emerges is that the experience at the very conservative Catholic school changes her. It is after her difficulties and disappointments at this school that Elaine finally makes the decision to return to an old dream of hers, to become a counselor. Her reasons for going back to school to get a second Masters degree seem inextricably linked to her desire to move more freely as a lesbian. She moves from the stance of wishing she could talk to students about their sexuality, be it heterosexual or homosexual, to actualizing the wish by re-training to become a counselor where the rules of confidentiality allow her to safely converse with students about such topics without fear of dismissal.

Elaine: Well I think I have always had an interest in being in some sort of social service. As I said I was a social work major for half of college. Ummm, I wanted to be . . . I mean I liked teaching, I loved, it's kind of like your own little fiefdom but I also know that for me it takes a lot of energy to stand in front of kids, five classes a day. You really are on stage, if you've never taught, you're on stage and for an introvert like me it took an awful lot of energy. Plus I'm teaching stuff, a lot of times I didn't really agree with and so I felt that counseling was a natural, kind of an instinctual thing for me. I mean obviously there's lots of stuff I've needed to learn and will continue to learn.

Jill: What helps you make that move, that shift over? Any correlation with your sexual identity?

Elaine: Yeah, if I'm working [clears throat], even if I am in a Catholic school, which I very well may be in, I don't have to – if a kid comes in to talk about her sexuality I don't have to say as religion teacher, "You know, now here's what the church says." In counseling I can talk about her sexuality because it is all confidential and help him or her explore. My sexual identity has been at odds. I have been at odds my whole professional career because I would lose my job if I was out. Some jobs are easier to do when you're lesbian.

Jill: What do you mean?

Elaine: I think counseling will be easier. [pause]

Jill: How so?

Elaine: Because I don't have to live with the fear of being fired for my sexuality. [pause]

Jill: You move into counseling and that feels like you don't have to hide the fact that you're gay, because you're not going to get kicked out, you're not going to announce it to the kids but you can talk about the issue if they bring it to you. In a counseling environment where it can't be talked about in the classroom.

Elaine: Right.

Jill: So on your end, what is it like to be able to do that?

Elaine: Oh, it's very freeing.

It takes Wanda a long time to embrace her sexual identity and it takes her a great deal longer to land on the career that fully satisfies and brings into play all of her talents and abilities. Like other participants in the study, the choices she makes in her work life reflect the embracing of her lesbian identity. Wanda decides to go back to school at the age of sixty to get her doctorate. The reason for taking this ambitious step is that she wants to do research on the lives of lesbians. Wanda's personal life and her professional life come together in an especially meaningful and powerful way for her:

Wanda: And after about two years on that study, I finally said, you know what, I think I need to get a piece of paper so that I can do my own research. So that's what I did. And the woman who was running that study, wasn't happy that I stopped and went to school instead.

Jill: It sounds like you found what you love to do.

Wanda: Yes, research with well people. And I had the opportunity to work with a faculty person the whole time I was in my doctoral program

on her research study which was such a wonderful experience too. You know, I sometimes think, it's sad that I didn't get to do that sooner, because I always knew I would like research, but I don't really mourn that.

One of these questions about a high point, I think that research with the women on the South and West Sides was the high point in my work. And my whole doctoral experience was a high point. I felt like I had so much support and just people who wanted me to do well and went out of their way to help me. And everybody knew I was a lesbian. I'm really out and to me that felt like such a great integration of my self and my work life.

It is challenging for Trudy to separate out the two strands of sexual identity and work identity as she considers the question of the resolution of her lesbian sexual identity and its impact on work. She concludes that her willingness to "experiment" with the idea of being with women is what allows her to have the "courage" to become an entrepreneur and that wanting to run her own business is tied in with allowing herself to fully act on her desire to be with a woman. Becoming a successful businesswoman is very satisfying and gratifying to Trudy. When she is then approached by a woman she admires, Trudy is receptive. In Trudy's retrospective telling of her life story narrative, which comes first – the confidence in work or the confidence in her personal life – is not easily sorted out. Ultimately, it does not seem to matter because Trudy achieves what she has longed for both personally and professionally.

Trudy: A thought that I had after our last discussion. Um, I don't live in a gay community. I don't have gay friends, the few gay women that I do know, are very successful. It's like their, uh, their ability to cross the line sexually allows them to cross the line in other places. To see things outside the box, to lose that sense of fear – they're more fearless. I don't know if that is true or not but that certainly is what I've seen in gay women that I know.

Jill: And what about for yourself?

Trudy: I think that's very true. I think it's very true.

Jill: The way you told your story, if I heard it correctly was, your work life came first before you figured out, really, who you wanted to be with.

Trudy: Right. But experimentally, a little bit before that. That [experimenting] had opened up that possibility, that door. And the fact that I accepted that the door was open, that that was a possibility for me, I think, um, helped me, strengthened me in a way.

Jill: Ok, Ok, so, because you were talking about after college?

Trudy: My business partner.

Jill: Alice?

Trudy: Right, Alice.

Jill: So the willingness to kind of experiment with that?

Trudy: The willingness, and maybe that's the wrong word but as I look back and get older, I see so much of what we do crouched in fear. The initial fear of what people think, the fear of, I guess – I found in myself, a fear – a lot of fear that other people had, I didn't have.

Jill: So it translates, what you're saying is that it translated into the different realms of your life, the work life – because in your personal life you were willing to take some risks.

Trudy: Yeah, maybe a confidence, I was willing to take risks in my personal life, um, and if I was brave enough to do that, I was brave enough to do this.

Jill: And vice versa? If I am willing to take risks in my work life, then I'm willing to take risks in my personal life?

Trudy: I think. Let me just give it a thought a minute. The two were just so intertwined for me. There was a fearlessness about starting my own business, um, and then the relationship with Samantha six years later.

From childhood, Julie knows that she wants to be a doctor. She accomplishes this goal despite a period of confusion and turmoil when she is unable to make her personal life match up with what the familial and cultural expectations are for her. The depression that Julie falls into because she feels “compelled” to follow the heterosexual script

proscribed by her family and ethnic group almost derails her medical career. She follows the script, nonetheless, marries and becomes a workaholic. Only when her marriage comes undone, primarily because she does not tend to it in any meaningful way, can Julie allow herself to “know” what she has known about herself since she was a youngster: that she has same-sex attractions. The immediate effect of this on her work life is that she no longer wants to work long hours and put work first. She wants to have a personal life, too.

At first glance, the impact on Julie’s work life of resolving her lesbian sexual identity might be viewed as reining in her career. This would be to minimize the meaning of achieving a healthy balance between work and family life. After Julie resolves her lesbian identity, she is able to make career changes that not only lead to a more satisfying personal life but move her career forward in previously unthinkable directions: she takes a job at an agency servicing the gay and lesbian population. Julie is no longer satisfied being one of many doctors in a large, impersonal, healthcare system. She elects to take a position that directly serves the medical needs of the gay and lesbian community. Julie has fully embraced her lesbian sexual identity and it has become a propelling and influential factor in her career goals and aspirations.

Stella’s life story narrative would seem to suggest that the resolution of her lesbian sexual identity has a negative impact on her work life. After all, when Stella fully embraces her lesbian sexuality, she must forfeit her career as a Methodist pastor. She then finds herself rather at sea in the paid work force, although she is never without a job. A close reading of Stella’s narrative reveals that her full acceptance of her lesbian sexuality allows her to find what she has been looking for: a stable female partner with

whom she can make a happy and full domestic life. Stella realizes that her “life- work” is not to be found in ministering to congregations but in being a good mate, mother, grandmother and daughter to her mother-in-law. Domestic stability and happiness are longstanding aspirations for Stella and she is able to achieve them for herself and her family once she claims her lesbian identity.

My job now is very much taking care of my mother-in-law. I spend a lot of time doing that. And I spend a lot of time with my children and grandchildren. My grandchildren are easy. My children have dealt with their anger and abandonment issues and all of that kind of stuff. And I feel really good about where all the kids are now. But it has been a journey. In order for me to be able to engage them, as an adult on my own two feet, I had to have my sexuality out there.

And when folks give my children a hard time about my sexuality, their issue is, “I don’t know what God thinks about it, I don’t know what the Church thinks about it, I know that my mother is healthier than she has ever been and she’s not suicidal and she takes care of us, she loves the grandkids, she’s in a wonderful relationship, so it’s a good thing.” They look at the results.

My father committed suicide a couple of years before I quit pastoring. So suicide is very real in our family. And all the consequences of that. And my children have all dealt with suicide. I passed it on, it’s the family disease. So we talk about it, bring it into the light. That’s all I can do for them. It’s being able to walk on your own two feet that’s what dealing with my sexuality is about.

CHAPTER VII

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Theoretical Implications

Overview

1. Based on the literature review, it might have been expected that this group of women would have had a significantly more difficult time entering the workforce. This proves not to be the case except for one of the participants, Lucinda. In Lucinda's particular case, there is a significant history of trauma and abuse, as well as a significant substance abuse history, that add to her challenges. Singling out the factor of late resolution of sexual identity as the *prima facie* reason must be done with the utmost caution.

The participants, overall, find their way into jobs and careers with surprisingly little turmoil or angst. Their narratives noticeably lack commentary about how not being able to resolve their sexual identity interfered with them assuming their place in the world of work, as the proponents of life cycle theory, like Erikson (1950; 1959), or those who adopt a life course perspective, summarized by Settersten's (1999) work might have predicted. Even without their sexual identity settled, there is enough ego strength for these women to go forward in their work lives. There is also little if any conversation about how all they want is to find someone to love and that in that quest the importance of work pales.

These are welcome findings because they suggest that individuals do not need to have completed their identity formation to competently move forward in their adult lives. Having said this, when the women studied here **do** resolve their lesbian sexual identity, they feel much better about themselves and are able to take greater risks in their work lives. Their work lives feel richer and more purposeful and meaningful. This matches what they are experiencing in their personal lives. Erikson's idea, then, that having one's sexual and ego identity well-formed is what permits the "apprentice to become the master" does seem to have some validity with this group of subjects (Vaillant & Milofsky, 1980, p. 1349).

2. The life course concept of the vicissitudes of being "off-time" is not raised as a salient issue in the narratives of the participants. Wanda wishes she had come to her career as a researcher sooner but she does not connect it to her sexuality, although one could plausibly make the connection. She moves much more freely professionally and personally once all of her "self" lines up. Lucinda speaks of being dissatisfied and disappointed with her work life but she links it to her pronounced defensiveness around other people. When Lucinda obtains mental stability and resolves her sexual identity, the world opens up in a new way, with seemingly abundant opportunities and possibilities. Julie wishes she could have found work/life balance sooner and wonders if she would have been able to focus better during medical school if she had resolved her sexuality sooner but the musings come out of the interview process and do not seem to be thoughts that have overly consumed her. Elaine reports that it takes her ten years to get out of teaching and into counseling but she does not think of her situation in terms of being "off-time." Hope talks about finding her "life's blood" in social work, and it comes

when she is almost 40 but she does not speak of it wistfully, as in time wasted. Rather, she sees her resolution of her sexuality and the changes in her career as a ripening, a maturation process that is almost required. Hope voices little regret at how her life has unfolded.

The life course idea of equifinality, then, does seem to hold up in the findings of this study. But Settersten's (1999) accompanying idea, found in the vocational psychology literature as well, (Nauta, 2001; Dunkle, 1996; Fassinger, 1995; Chung, 1995; Hetherington & Orzek, 1989), that these women are "behind" their peers as a result of not having figured things out sooner may be true but is not announced in the life stories that the participants tell. Again, this is good news. Coming to things later in life, even something as important as one's sexual identity, does not doom one or result in a regret-filled life. For this group of women, just the opposite seems to be true: finding their true, authentic selves, even though it happens later, is life-giving and propels them forward. Inquiries into how life would have been different had they resolved their sexuality earlier turn out to be the questions of least interest to these participants and certainly are the hardest for them to answer because the query itself doesn't seem to hold much meaning in how they think about themselves or their lives.

3. The topics of homosexual identity formation and homophobia have been major areas of concern with populations such as the one studied here. The literature suggests that the challenges of dealing with homophobia could play a major role in delaying sexual identity resolution. But the findings of this study indicate that it is far more complicated and the presence of societal homophobia and internalized homophobia have various effects. It truly is as Freud (1920) commented in his paper *The Psychogenesis of*

a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman that “so long as we trace development from its final outcome backwards, the chain of events appears continuous, and we feel we have gained an insight which is completely satisfactory or even exhaustive. But if we proceed the reverse way . . . then we no longer get the impression of an inevitable sequence of events which could not have been otherwise determined,” (SE, p.167).

The participants do discuss homophobia, in its externalized and internalized forms, but the subject takes up much less space in their narratives than might have been anticipated or predicted by the literature. Wanda mentions how the early sixties when she came of age is a closeted time when little information is available. She runs into significant homophobia when she is attending a midwifery program in the South in the nineteen eighties. But Wanda does not even bother to mention this in the first interview. Her experience of bumping up against significant homophobia only enters the conversation when the researcher asks a series of clarifying questions in the second interview.

For Hope and Trudy, homophobia barely registers on the narrative radar and never in an explanatory context of why the resolution of their lesbian sexual identity takes longer.

Concerns emerge for Stella and Anne once they accept that they are lesbian. Stella cannot reconcile her love for women with a church that will not accept this about her. But it does not make Stella renounce her sexuality. In the telling of her life story, worries about homophobic responses to her are not given as a reason for her late resolution. It is different for Anne. Falling in love with Toby forces her to deal with being a lesbian and she is afraid. She stays in the convent five years after Toby leaves. Anne feels that it is easier to leave the convent and begin to live an openly lesbian life

after her father has died. But in Anne's narrative, concerns about homophobia do not interfere with her hopping into bed with other nuns and falling in love with Toby. For Anne, there are worries, to be sure. There is no identity foreclosure, however, in response to external or internalized homophobia. Anne's internal turmoil occurs after she knows she really is a lesbian and has made the commitment in her heart to be with Toby.

Julie makes one statement in her narrative about homophobia: "How am I gonna date women and have my family accept it?" and her answer to herself is to put the subject away. Concerns about homophobia are quickly dismissed through disavowal, denial and conforming to family and ethnic demands. Julie gets married. A few years later, she terminates the loveless marriage and adopts a "devil may care" attitude. In divorcing her husband, she endures considerable familial disappointment and consternation.

Weathering this maelstrom has a liberating effect upon her: she no longer feels tethered to what her family thinks or to cultural expectations. She unequivocally makes the decision to pursue her longstanding interest in women. This is not to say that she does not have some concerns about being "out" at work initially because she works with women and families, but this does not undermine her sense of identity as a lesbian.

The theme of not fitting in, of being different, of being overly-masculine, is woven throughout Lucinda's life story. In her account, the chords of homophobia are sounded. Yet, when she gains her sobriety and has a context for understanding her behavior – that she suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder – Lucinda's concerns about homophobia lessen considerably. Once her mental health is stabilized, Lucinda is able to accept her sexuality and her shame begins to disappear. Indeed, she is one of the participants most eager to talk about herself as a lesbian. This is in stark contrast to how

she was before, where she was reluctant to share anything about herself with anyone. In Lucinda's case, her homophobic responses are inextricably tied to her mental health issues. Once she gains a solid sense of self, the issues around her sexuality no longer are as troublesome.

In the way that Chris tells her story, despite having an intense and physically as well as emotionally intimate relationship with a woman in college, she does not allow herself to "know" that she is a lesbian. Several years after the end of the relationship, when her therapist poses the question to Chris about being homosexual, Chris initially rejects it. In her narrative, Chris initially places the rejection in the context of her religious upbringing as a Catholic. As Chris expands on her account of this period in her life, she situates her discomfort in stereotypical ideas about what lesbians look like [bull dykes] and how they presumably act [like butches]. Chris becomes comfortable with the idea that she is a lesbian when she meets a woman on her co-ed volleyball team who is a professional and who breaks the stereotypical images Chris holds. Chris meets an openly gay woman with whom she can identify and this friendship enables her, as she puts it, "to step out of the closet." It is not all smooth sailing for Chris, even after she has resolved her sexuality and accepted that she is a lesbian. There are still some remnants of internalized homophobia, as seen in the story she recounts about her talk with her father. In that vignette, she tells her father that she feels better about herself having accepted her lesbian identity but it is not an identity that she would "choose." This story, however, recounts a period early on in Chris's lesbian sexual identity development. While she still worries about issues of disclosure because she works as a teacher, her internalized homophobia seems to have dissipated.

Of all the participants, Elaine seems to struggle the most and the longest with homophobia, both external and internalized. It is interesting that she is one of the study's earlier "resolvers," having accepted her sexual identity in her late twenties. Even so, the story about the humiliation she feels when her gay brother is maligned at a local bar is a deeply meaningful one. Her openly gay and proud brother does not serve as the template for how to be gay. Rather, the template is the shame she feels at nineteen overhearing how others in her hometown speak of him. Elaine's feelings about being gay are loud and clear in her narrative: "Couldn't be any worse than to be a lesbian." "I tried very hard not to be gay." Despite Elaine's struggles with homophobia, her lesbian identity formation does not get foreclosed. She enters into a stable relationship with a woman that has lasted twenty years and she goes back to school in her fifties in order to become a counselor so that she can bring her experiences as a lesbian more actively into her work.

The findings of this research study show that having a later resolution of lesbian sexual identity does have an impact on the work lives of these lesbians but in ways that are different from what the literature review would suggest. The impact is significant but not as dire as would have been predicted by the life cycle and life course literature or by psychoanalytic assumptions held about lesbians or by the vocational psychology literature, or even by those writing from the perspective of a homosexual developmental model. How best, then, to think about these findings? Jessica Benjamin's model of intersubjectivity brings the theoretical implications of this study into focus.

Jessica Benjamin's Theory of Intersubjectivity

Overinclusiveness and the Construct of Both/And

The concept of overinclusiveness, with its companion construct of both/and, takes the formulations about these particular lesbians out of the constricting binary or dichotomous models of thought. Because the interpersonal is not privileged over the intrapsychic nor the intrapsychic privileged over the interpersonal, both can be held to be important. The result of this overinclusiveness and both/and approach is that the considerable variety in the lives of lesbians who resolve their sexual identity later can be fully and non-prejudicially examined. This study, as modest as it is, illustrates considerable diversity of experience. For Stella, Wanda and Hope the realization that they are lesbians feels like an “aha!” moment. They go from not acknowledging this part of themselves to fully embracing it with very little internal dislocation. The self-identification as lesbian feels right, makes these women feel whole and authentic. In the case of Hope there is a leap forward in her work life which is connected to her newly adopted lesbian identity. It is more complicated for Stella and Wanda in the career sphere. There are negative ramifications in Stella's work life as a result of her resolving her lesbian identity. Stella has to give up being a Methodist minister and the inability to reconcile the church teachings with her new-found understanding of herself results in a suicide gesture. But there never is any question, as Stella tells her story, of renouncing or foreclosing her lesbian identity: it feels too “right.”

For Wanda, being “out” as a lesbian in her midwifery program does cause a crisis: she gets depressed and is counseled out of the program. From her account, the depression is a result of missing her children, being in the process of divorcing her husband, being

away from Laura, her lover, and encountering a homophobic academic environment. Despite the difficult circumstances she finds herself in, Wanda, too, does not waver from or question her identity as a lesbian.

Stella, Hope and Julie come to their self-awareness of being lesbian without an important other in the picture. Lucinda, Wanda, Chris, Anne, Trudy and Elaine all have significant individuals who play a role in their resolution process. For Chris and Lucinda this is a therapist in the beginning. For Anne, Wanda, Trudy and Elaine, the coming to terms with their sexuality happens in the context of an important sexual or love relationship.

For the research participants, the interplay between what is occurring intrapsychically and interpersonally is different yet each configuration results in the resolution of their lesbian sexual identity. The differences and the similarities that abound, even in this very small sample, can all be held and viewed as important and relevant using an intersubjective theoretical model where overinclusiveness is valued. By doing away with dichotomous and binary constructs, there is room to study and think about these subjects' lives and to find them at once unique and representative of lesbian experience.

Mutual Recognition and Breakdown

Benjamin ([1990] 1999) believes that an individual experiences her full subjectivity, her full sense of self in another's presence. Her idea is that a person can only be fully herself when others recognize her and when she is able to recognize others in return. Benjamin's work on intersubjectivity and her construct of mutual recognition and its antithesis, complementarity or breakdown, elaborates on Erikson's construct of

identity formation where, as he put it, “[an individual] learn[s] to be most himself where he means most to others – those others, to be sure, who have come to mean most to him” ([1959] 1980, p 109).

In examining the lives of the nine participants in this study, what stands out is the lack of mutual recognition and the presence of breakdown in their early lives and continuing on into their adulthood. Benjamin (2000) writes quite eloquently that when the “other” fails to see the subject that the subject is placed in the unenviable position of complementarity, of either submitting or resisting, of being “done to” or being “the doer,” where only one person in the relationship can decide meaning, determine the course of action, can have her way (p. 1-2). In the intersubjective model, when there is a failure of mutual recognition, when there is breakdown, there can be only one mind, one subjectivity, rather than two. As Benjamin ([1990] 1999) writes, “What cannot be worked through and dissolved with the outside other is transposed into a drama of internal objects, shifting from the domain of the intersubjective into the domain of the intrapsychic,” (p 192). The failure of meaningful connection and mutuality may provide an explanation for the later resolution of the participants’ lesbian sexual identity. When examining the life stories of the participants, what becomes evident is that they do either resist or submit when faced with a lack of mutual recognition and the defenses of splitting, disavowal and denial, expectable defenses in the face of breakdown, are prominent features of their psychological structures.

In Stella’s narrative, it emerges quickly that she feels that she was a despised child. Her mother dislikes her, her father likes her better, but he is frequently away and Stella refers to paternal incest. Her younger sister is set-up as a rival. How does Stella

cope? She survives, she says, because “I don’t think inside the box.” Stella resists. She defies family expectations by marrying in college, dropping out and having three children in quick succession, not the norm for a young woman of her socioeconomic background coming of age in the late sixties and early seventies.

Lucinda is also a detested child. She begins her narrative by telling the researcher that her mother probably wanted to abort her. She suffers extensive sexual, physical and emotional abuse. She never feels that she belongs; her behavior is constantly misunderstood and punished. She is cast in the role as “outsider,” as different, as deviant from a young age. There is no room for her subjectivity, for her to have her own mind. Unable to share her reality with others, Lucinda adopts a paranoid/schizoid stance, as Benjamin, citing Winnicott, would predict ([1990] 1999; 1995; 2000).

Julie’s life story narrative also reflects the breakdown of mutual recognition. She does not fit the narrative story line for her ethnic group. She does not fit the image of the petite, feminine, Asian woman; she wants to have a career as a doctor rather than just a job until she marries and has children. Her uncles make a point of telling her she will not be able to succeed because she is a girl. Julie takes this as a challenge; she resists, and pursues her dream to be a physician. But in her story, there is also submission: at an early age she knows she is attracted to girls. But she buries the knowledge and makes herself conform to family and community norms and expectations by finding a man and marrying him. The unhappiness she experiences when she most acutely feels the need to conform almost jeopardizes her career: she has to take a year off from medical school and her mood is severely depressed.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are the women who readily submit to the “other” in the face of a lack of mutual recognition. This is the experience of Anne, Chris, Elaine and Trudy.

Anne describes herself as the “lost child,” plagued by shyness, clinging to her mother’s skirts. Chris is the baby in church who never cries. Trudy is the second “mother” to her siblings when her depressed and hypochondriacal mother takes to her bed. Elaine is the “smoother-over,” the “peace-keeper” determined not to make trouble. They all desperately want to conform. They want to be and are good, obedient daughters.

The life stories of Wanda and Hope read a bit differently although, ultimately, they too submit to the pervasive viewpoint of their families. Wanda shows independence in forging ahead in her career in nursing but although she is having sexualized and sexual experiences with women beginning in college, and gathering information about lesbianism, she does not allow herself to fully apply the knowledge to herself. Wanda conforms to convention, marries her high school “sweetheart,” and has two children. As Cass (1979) might put it, Wanda does not permit herself to move her lesbian sexual identity development from the third person to the first person until she finds a relationship that feels viable in her eyes. Once she permits herself to put all the pieces together, she steps into her lesbian identity with few qualms. As she puts it, “I think once I really acknowledged it, then I could see how I’d been a lesbian all the way along. And just didn’t know it.”

Hope is aware of the mixed messages she receives. She knows that she is to excel academically and professionally but her mother reinforces that going to college is as much about getting her Mrs. as anything else. She dates men in college conforming to

what is expected of her. She puts away dreams of being a psychologist or a professor of theology, allowing other people to heavily influence her decision-making process rather than relying on her own sense of herself. Once Hope graduates from college, however, she stops dating men. She wanders a bit professionally but as she begins to resolve her lesbian sexuality, her career ambitions align with earlier aspirations and dreams.

The lack of mutual recognition is also seen in how solitary a process coming to terms with their lesbian sexual identity is for each of the participants. Julie, Chris, Elaine, Anne, Wanda, Trudy and Hope all report having fairly good relationships with different family members. But none of the participants shares their thinking about their sexuality with their family. Elaine has a gay brother but does not reveal her sexuality to him until she has resolved it. Chris has very close relationships with her brother and sister but they are not told until after she has come out to herself. Julie comments on how she feels she “lost” the close relationship with her mother and sister during the period when she is struggling to accept her lesbian identity. There is no room relationally within these women’s families to talk about and share what is occurring intrapsychically. The breakdown in mutuality leads to an inward turning and to a reliance on defensive structures such as splitting, disavowal and denial. Without external support, the question of sexual identity is an internal process and, in the case of the vast majority of the women studied here, an unconscious process for many years. There is no intersubjectivity, no shared reality in adolescence and early adulthood, which may explain why it takes these women longer to resolve their lesbian sexual identity. Tronick’s (1998) intersubjective perspective on how infants grow and know themselves is applicable here: it is the

interaction with the “other” that allows for self-knowledge, self-organizing, and coherence. He writes:

Each individual is a self-organizing system that creates its own states of consciousness – which can be expanded into more coherent and complex states in collaboration with another self-organizing system. When the [specificity of] collaboration between two brains is successful, each fulfills the systems principle of increasing its coherence and complexity – the infant becoming capable of performing actions in the dyadic system that the infant would not be capable of performing alone. (p. 296)

Use of the Object

Benjamin (1988; [1990]1999; 1995; 2000) borrows from Winnicott’s ([1969]1971) ideas about object usage in her theoretical construct of intersubjectivity. Objects, or other significant people, can only be “used” when they have survived their “destruction” in the mind of an individual and have proven that they are more than just a projection, a phantasmagoric creation of that individual: the object moves beyond the omnipotent control of the subject. By “surviving” their “destruction,” the other becomes a fully dimensional person who can be discovered, known, appreciated and loved. When the “other” becomes “real,” the subject, in effect, becomes real too. The subject can be known in a more authentic and genuine way because all of who she is can be seen, recognized, and responded to. Important parts of the self need not be hidden. In Benjamin’s language: there is room for two subjectivities; there is room for two minds. In theoretical terms, object usage replaces the more one-sided, less reality-based stance of object relating.

The findings of this study bear out Benjamin and Winnicott’s assertion of the importance of object usage versus object relating. When the nine participants accept themselves as lesbian, they report significant changes in how they feel about themselves

and about themselves in the realm of work. They feel happier, more authentic. Life feels “right.” Lucinda and Anne directly speak to feeling more accepting of others. For Lucinda, it seems more dramatic: she becomes less paranoid. The hostility of the world feels more manageable and she becomes less preoccupied and concerned about what others think. Indeed, she moves from feeling persecuted and needing to withdraw to a position of wanting to educate others and be public, through broadcast journalism, about the experience of being lesbian. Anne realizes that once she accepts her lesbian sexual identity she is less judgmental. She is better able to accept others when she is in a relationship where all of who she is can be accepted and is acceptable. Falling in love with Toby moves Anne from object relating to true object usage. The result for Anne is profound: she operates in the world more “freely” and experiences her interactions in her personal life and in her career as a teacher as fuller and more satisfying.

Hope describes her resolution of her lesbian identity as “life-giving.” She reports feeling “whole” in a completely different way and this self-knowledge opens up many dimensions in her world: she is able to fully accept the spiritual part of herself, she reclaims an old career aspiration of being a psychotherapist and she falls deeply in love with a woman. When Hope stops dating men and working with men primarily and fully embraces her lesbian sexual identity, she no longer feels “diminished” and moves from object relating into the realm of object usage.

Stella’s coming to terms with her lesbian identity precipitates a crisis in her work identity. But the embracing of her lesbian identity feels so right that she survives the turmoil of having to leave her ministry. She finds her way back to the most authentic part of herself: her domestic side. Stella eloquently describes how once she accepts herself as

lesbian, her relationship with her children changes for the better. She can see her children in all their complexity and she can have a deep and meaningful relationship with her female partner. Embedded in Stella's narrative is the idea that her church ministering is on the level of object relating. Stella is aware that something is amiss. There are constant tensions with her congregations that she understands as a result of her not "thinking inside the box." In Stella's case, not thinking inside the box seems to be code for moving in a less than authentic manner through her life: she cannot be herself because of the constraints of the "box," the need to conform, to subjugate her mind to the mind of the "other." Once she resolves her sexuality, Stella no longer feels the need to resist, nor the need to be an iconoclast. There now is room for two minds, two subjectivities. Stella can just be and this frees her up to take joy in the domestic pleasures of home and family. When object usage replaces object relating, Stella is able to be more optimistic about life: she no longer feels dogged by the "suicidal tendencies" of her family history. Stella is more content in every sphere of her life.

Wanda sheds her "false self," a byproduct of "relating" to objects rather than "using" them in Benjamin's theory of intersubjectivity, when she finally resolves her lesbian identity. She is able to divorce her alcoholic and womanizing husband and move about in the world in what she describes as a more "satisfying" way. Once Wanda accepts her lesbian identity, she is completely "out." The disclosure causes her some difficulties early on in her identity development – when she is attending midwifery school – but this experience does not lead Wanda back into the closet. Even an abusive relationship with her female partner does not undermine Wanda's identity as a lesbian. She deeply knows and accepts herself as lesbian and over time this gives her the

wherewithal to pursue her doctorate so that she can do her own research on the lives of lesbians. Her full acceptance of herself allows her to make full use of herself, to move beyond mere hospital or teaching jobs and to become the professional she has long envisioned herself to be: the academic researcher.

Julie and Chris come from families and ethnic groups where the norms and expectations are formidable. It is difficult for each woman not to conform. They go along with how they are supposed to do things until they can no longer do so: in each case, it takes a full-blown personal crisis for these women to resolve their alternative sexual identity. Julie gets married, though she is less than thrilled to do so. When she divorces, it is an ordeal for her family but it leaves her feeling that if she can survive the fallout of familial disappointment around the failure of her marriage, she will be able to survive whatever fallout there is about being a lesbian. Having a prestigious profession in place gives her the additional wherewithal to move forward. As Julie embraces her lesbian identity, she makes a concerted effort to balance work and her personal life. Living a balanced life can be seen as moving from object relating to object usage: Julie now wants “real” relationships with other people. She is not content to be a workaholic where interpersonal interactions are relegated to brief, superficial contacts. Immediately upon accepting herself as a lesbian, Julie makes time in her life for work and friendship and love. It is little wonder that she feels happier: she allows herself to be a whole person.

Chris has a similar experience to Julie’s. The road towards the resolution of her lesbian identity begins with Chris also disappointing her parents in an area that has nothing to do with her sexuality. Chris does not apply to medical school. She becomes a teacher on the suggestion of her female lover – but they are not lesbians!—and is in

immediate conflict with her family, particularly with her mother. Being an obedient and compliant child and young person, this contrary behavior contributes to Chris's personal crisis. Chris begins to drink heavily, to act out violently and is in danger of losing her job. She turns everything around once she frees herself from the pressure of familial expectations and norms that force her into a position of object relating. As Chris begins to have the experience of encountering others who accept her as a lesbian, first her therapist, then a lesbian who becomes a close friend, and then the Head of her school, Chris's life is transformed. These significant individuals enable Chris to become more authentic in her relationships and she describes feeling like a weight has been lifted from her shoulders. Object usage replaces object relating. It is no coincidence that in her steadier state, with her inside reality matching up with her outside reality, Chris is finally able to take pride in her work as a teacher.

For Trudy, seeing women who are important to her accept themselves as lesbian and then accept Trudy in all of her complexity, allows Trudy to resolve her lesbian sexual identity. As Trudy lets herself more fully acknowledge the importance of women in her life, she feels freer to move forward as an entrepreneur and to have a long-term relationship with a woman she admires and who admires her. Trudy moves from the position of despised daughter to loved partner. As she resolves her lesbian identity, all of Trudy is welcome in her own life. In the context of a sturdy relationship with her female partner, object usage replaces object relating. Trudy is able to give her daughter what she lacked: a warm and stable home with an engaged and working mother.

Elaine's narrative is quite defended. The life story narrative approach is intrinsically intersubjective. The nature of the interview process, as Lieblich et al. (1998)

describe it, is dialogic at its heart. The methodology has an object-usage bent to it. The researcher's impression during the two interviews with Elaine is that the interactions more closely resemble object relating than object usage: Elaine does not warm up to the interview process and seems to feel that there are correct answers to the open-ended questions that are posed. This is where Hollway & Jefferson's (2000) contribution to life story narrative is helpful. By thinking about the *gestalt* of Elaine's narrative, what can be ascertained is that once Elaine resolves her lesbian sexual identity she does operate more authentically in the world. This is gleaned from the fact that she has a stable, long-term relationship of over twenty years duration with her female partner and has a stable work history. Elaine's decision to leave the convent because of her genuine concerns about her integrity and her deep-seated sense of the hypocrisy of wanting and having sexual relationships with women while professing celibacy also point to Elaine achieving object usage over mere object relating. In Elaine's actions, if not her words, a desire to be whole and authentic in the interpersonal realm is expressed.

The Idea of Thirdness in the Intersubjective Model

Benjamin's ([1990]1999) concept of thirdness which she adopts from the work of Winnicott (1971) and Ogden (1986) emerges from the experience of mutual recognition. The meeting of two minds, of two subjectivities, allow for the creation of a third space that is greater than the sum of the two subjects. In this third space, differences and similarities are celebrated and enjoyed. This is the place where creativity and play reside, where dreams and aspirations can take hold and growth is potentiated. One of the strongest findings of this study is that when the nine participants finally resolve their

lesbian sexual identity, there is noticeable self-growth and it is seen in the realm of work. The strengthening of the participants' lesbian identity leads to significant effects in the workplace. Benjamin's ([1990] 1999) concept of thirdness provides the theoretical basis to explain the experience of these particular women around what the developmental psychologists observe about work in general: that it is the adult playground, the place where the maturation and growth processes of adults are made manifest (Axelrod, 1999; McAdams, 2001; Settersten, 1999; Nemiroff & Colarusso, 1980).

The resolution of these women's lesbian sexual identity comes later in their lives. But when it occurs, they not only feel happier, more authentic, whole and real. They suddenly feel able to claim old dreams and aspirations. They feel able to be more assertive on their own behalf; they are more ambitious in their goals in the workplace. The resolution of their lesbian identity opens the way to being more creative and free in how they view themselves and what they want. It happens within the context of object relating transforming into object usage, with mutual recognition replacing complementarity and breakdown as the main forms of interaction. Once there is room in the lives of the participants for their lesbian identity, work lives become more expansive: there is thirdness.

In the thirdness that Benjamin ([1990] 1999) discusses, Hope finds her way back to her old dream of becoming a psychotherapist. Once she resolves her lesbian sexual identity she goes back to school and becomes a licensed clinical social worker. Social work is her "life's blood." Chris resolves her sexuality and being a teacher is no longer something to be ashamed of: she gets a Masters degree to further her teaching career. Shy and demure, Anne accepts that she is a lesbian and suddenly she feels able to tell the

man interviewing her for a position that she is the right person for the job. Lucinda finally integrates all the disparate pieces of her identity, torn asunder from childhood trauma and abuse, and finally feels proud to be a lesbian. Lucinda is so proud that she envisions making documentaries about the lives of lesbians to educate the public. Julie comes to embrace her lesbian sexual orientation and she stops being a cog in the wheel of medicine, where working, working, working is all that matters. She moves towards work/life balance and then, startlingly perhaps, takes a position at a gay and lesbian agency where she feels free to be exactly who she is. Stella resolves her sexuality and finds her way into a meaningful and long-term relationship with a woman. She embraces her true life's work which is making a loving and stable home for herself and her partner and for her children and grandchildren. She allows herself to be creative once more in the domestic arts, resurrecting a part of herself that long had languished. Wanda accepts herself as lesbian and knows herself in a more authentic way. Over time this leads her to find her life's work: being an academic researcher. The research she pursues is documenting aspects of other lesbians' lives. Elaine, like Wanda, finds the area of thirdness some time after the resolution of her lesbian sexuality. But it comes out of an especially pernicious experience with external homophobia. No longer willing to have so much of herself hidden away, Elaine's embracing of her sexual orientation finally propels her towards a degree in counseling: an old dream has been revived and embodied. For Trudy, starting her own business and resolving her sexuality are intertwined. The chronological order makes little difference to her: her willingness to accept her deep attraction to women is linked to starting her own, woman-oriented business. In the life story narratives of all of the participants, full acceptance and resolution of their lesbian

sexual identity allows them to find that place of thirdness, that place where their talents and abilities find expression and outlet.

The theoretical implications that arise from the findings of this life story narrative qualitative study are that growth and development are an ongoing process. Whether these women resolve their lesbian sexual orientation in their late twenties, mid-thirties or late forties, whether resolving their sexuality propel them to make career leaps immediately or years later, the resolution of their lesbian identity, with all its attendant complexities, leads all of the women studied here to considerable growth and expansion of the self.

Benjamin's theory of intersubjectivity illuminates a crucial finding of this study. Important interpersonal and intrapsychic experiences do not belong only to the adolescent or young adult. Change can and does occur later in life. Differences and similarities in development can be fully appreciated without the need to pathologize. Intersubjective experiences are ongoing and can facilitate mutual recognition, move object relating into the realm of object usage and can create the transformative space of thirdness. This study finds that later resolution of lesbian sexual identity can be life-giving and life-altering in the personal realm and in the realm of work.

Implications for Clinical Social Work

The lives of the women studied here, lesbians who have had a later resolution of their sexual identity, have been under-examined. For too long in the psychoanalytic and clinical social work community, the experiences of lesbians have been thought of in unitary terms (Schuker, 1996). Developmental models, be they derived from stage theories or life course theory for heterosexuals or homosexuals, all too frequently

collapse the diversity and specificity to be found in the individual life experience. There certainly are advantages to models and theories: they help clinicians to think about the clients that they see. The danger of adhering too strictly to the established “collective wisdom,” is that all too often, in the consulting room, the lives of the women studied here, because they deviate from what the clinician may view as the normative developmental progression, are pathologized. This study provides a basis for clinicians to keep an open and curious mind about clients who, for example, may have been in a heterosexual relationship or marriage, have had children, and at age forty self identify as lesbian. Sexual identity and work identity have been shown in this study to continuously evolve and change over the lifetime of these particular lesbians. The findings of this study provide clinicians with a more constructive and expansive way to think about what is going on with their clients. The study also affords a basis for reassuring clients themselves, giving them a positive way to think about and understand their personal life stories and trajectories. These clients are no “less” lesbian because they have come later to their sexual identity. They need not worry that having a later resolution of their sexual identity will automatically lead to negative outcomes either in the personal or work realm. This is important information for clinical social workers to possess and to pass along when working with lesbian clients. The individual and diverse life experiences that lesbians have can be validated and fully appreciated.

Finally, this study suggests that there is value in exploring with lesbian clients their sexual identity within the context of their work identity. While three of the participants did not feel that thinking about sexual and work identity together had much salience, two thirds of the participants, six of the nine, found the links and connections to

be revealing, thought-provoking, and helpful in understanding the trajectory of their lives. For the clinician, examining sexual identity and work identity in tandem opens up new directions for psychoanalytic and psychodynamic wonderings and reveries (Ogden, 1997).

Limitations of the Study

Nine subjects were recruited for this qualitative study. The limitations of the findings are to be found in the small sample size. A larger sample or even nine other women might have rendered different findings. The life story narrative methodology utilized in this study made enormous demands on the participants: it required them to share intensely personal aspects of their lives in a face-to-face setting, twice. Participants had to be willing, consequently, to engage in what was a highly time consuming and intimate research process. This undoubtedly created a limitation for the study, in the ability to recruit participants and in the self-selection process. Agreeing to meet a researcher in person for two lengthy interviews is quite different from filling out an anonymous survey or a Likert scale. The research model, because of its dialogic and interpersonal nature (Lieblich, et al., 1998; Hollway & Jefferson 2000), might carry within it an inadvertent bias that attracts participants with inherently more ego-strength or resilience.

Another limitation of the study rests in the way data is collected and interpreted. For Lieblich et al. (1998) and Hollway & Jefferson (2000) this is a given. Their life story narrative research approach accepts that the researcher is as much a part of the research process as the participant and that the interview is influenced by the interaction between

the interviewer and interviewee (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 9). Hollway & Sullivan (2000) directly speak to what the researcher assumes about people's motivations and memory in how they think about the data collected (pp. 1-2); this is the " 'hermeneutic turn,' (that is, a move to emphasize meanings and their interpretations.)" (p. 14). Another researcher might have focused on different strands in the data or might have elicited in the "dialogic act of conducting a life story interview" (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 166) other narratives. How different the findings ultimately would have been cannot be definitively answered but certainly must be held in consideration even with a postmodernist framework and intersubjective theoretical model anchoring the study.

Directions for Future Research

Lesbians as a group have been understudied and under-researched (Saari, 2001; Magee & Miller, 1997; Reed, 2002; Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000). This study reveals the richness and diversity of lesbian experience: there is much more to be learned about the lives of lesbians. Making the invisible visible will go a long way towards eliminating the stigma and pathologizing attitudes found in the lay population and among clinical practitioners and among lesbians themselves. Information can replace presumptive notions about the experience of lesbians.

This study, which looked at the impact of a later resolution of lesbian sexual orientation on work identity, suggests areas for future research. It would be worth comparing the work lives of lesbians who resolve their sexual identity early in their developmental trajectory with those who have a later resolution to identify what, if any, dynamic differences and similarities there might be. Are there differences or similarities

in the intersubjective realm? How do the two subsets of lesbians encounter and deal with societal and/or internalized homophobia?

For the group of lesbians studied here, non-familial, important “others” play crucial roles in identifying career paths. These non-familial “others” are women. It would be interesting to examine whether this holds true for lesbians who resolve their sexual identity earlier in their lives. It would also be of interest to do a comparative study of lesbians and heterosexual women to identify the role of family members and important non-familial women when it comes to determining a career path or work identity. In the theory driven, oedipal paradigms often used in the field of clinical social work and psychoanalysis, fathers are specifically associated with the outside world and with helping children move out from the family circle into the world at large. This was certainly not the case for the group of lesbians studied here. It would be worth studying the role fathers and other male figures play in the lives of lesbians who resolve their sexuality earlier and how it compares to the role fathers and other male figures play in the lives of heterosexual women when it comes to finding their place in the realm of work.

Examining sexual identity and work identity together offers a fertile field for future research and offers the promise of a more thorough understanding of the complexity of lesbians’ lives. Increasing the knowledge base about lesbians would go a long ways towards deepening and enriching the clinical experience of those in social work and allied psychological fields who treat lesbian clients.

APPENDIX A

FLYER

ONLINE NOTICE FOR RESEARCH STUDY AT CENTER ON HALSTED

FLYER

WANTED

PARTICIPANTS FOR DISSERTATION RESEARCH

“Late resolution of lesbian sexual orientation and its impact on work identity and professional attainment: A dynamic look.”

Seeking lesbian women between the ages of thirty and sixty-nine who are in the paid work force and who had a late or later resolution of their lesbian sexual identity.

“Late resolution” means that you had some awareness of same-sex attraction in childhood, adolescence or your early twenties but were unable to fully accept your lesbian sexual orientation until your late twenties or later.

If you are interested in exploring the possible connections between having a later acceptance of your lesbian sexual identity and your work identity and work experience and are willing to participate in two in-depth interviews, please contact:

Jill Newberger, LCSW
Licensed Clinical Social Worker
211 E. Ontario Suite 1195
Chicago, IL 60611
312-988-9150
jnewberger@icsw.edu

There is no remuneration for your participation. Your time and interest are greatly appreciated. Hope to hear from you soon!

CENTER ON HALSTED ONLINE RESEARCH STUDY POSTING

TOPIC: Late resolution of lesbian sexual orientation and the impact on work identity and professional attainment: A dynamic look.

INSTITUTION: Institute for Clinical Social Work, Chicago, Illinois

WHAT: This study seeks to explore the impact of having a later resolution of sexual orientation on lesbians' work and career experiences. Does not being able to accept or resolve one's lesbian sexual identity until the latter part of one's twenties or later affect work and professional development? If so, in what ways? The study seeks to examine sexual identity and work identity in tandem in order to learn more about the possible connections between the two.

PARTICIPANTS: Women who identify as lesbian and are between the ages of 30- 69, are in the paid work force, and did not resolve or accept their lesbian sexual orientation until their late twenties or later.

WHAT'S INVOLVED: Participation in the study involves two 60 -90 minute interviews held at a time and place agreed upon by the researcher and participant. Participation is confidential; no identifying information will be used in the dissertation.

BENEFITS/RISKS: There are no external benefits to participating in this study. Intangible benefits include increasing and diversifying the knowledge-base about lesbians' lived experience and personal exploration and increased psychological insight about two significant aspects of the self.

To participate in this study please e-mail Jill Newberger, MSW, LCSW at jnewberger@icsw.edu or call Jill Newberger at 312-988-9150.

For more information about the study: e-mail jnewberger@icsw.edu or write to Jill Newberger, MSW, LCSW at 211 E. Ontario Suite 1195 Chicago, IL 60611

This study's supervisor, Dr. R. Dennis Shelby, can be reached at 312-726-8480.

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Institute for Clinical Social Work, Chicago, IL on July 5, 2007.

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM

Individual Consent for Participation in Research

INSTITUTE FOR CLINICAL SOCIAL WORK

I, _____, acting for myself, agree to take part in the research entitled: Late resolution of lesbian sexual orientation and the impact on work identity and professional attainment: A dynamic look.

This work will be carried out by Jill Newberger, LCSW under the supervision of R. Dennis Shelby, PhD, faculty for the Institute for Clinical Social Work. This work is conducted under the auspices of the Institute for Clinical Social Work, 200 N. Michigan Avenue, Suite 407, Chicago, IL 60601, 312-726-8480.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this research is to investigate what the impact is of late resolution of lesbian sexual orientation on work identity and career attainment. In this study, late resolution of lesbian sexual orientation means that you did not or were not able to fully embrace your lesbian sexual identity until your late twenties or later. Some women know they are lesbian during childhood, adolescence or early twenties but are unable to let important others in their life know about their attraction to other women or to act on their same-sex attractions, or to even allow themselves to fully “know” that they are lesbian. This study seeks to find out whether struggles in the realm of sexual identity affected how you approached work, career, professional development and work goals. This study is retrospective. It is going to ask you to look back on your life and think about whether there might be some connection between what you were dealing with in terms of your sexual orientation and your work experiences. For example, did the difficulties you had in accepting your sexual orientation have any effect on how you thought about a career or career goals? Do you think that having a late resolution of lesbian sexual orientation had an impact on you in the sphere of work and career? Did you notice a difference in your work life and career aspirations once you resolved your psychological issues of being a lesbian?

Each of the steps that compose the completed study will be subject to scrutiny by the Institutional Review Board. The results of this study will be submitted and defended as a dissertation for the completion of the PhD program. Please ask any questions that you may have now or at any time during this process.

PROCEDURES USED IN THE STUDY AND THE DURATION

Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. The names of all participants are confidential. You will be interviewed twice. Interviews will be face-to-face and be between sixty and ninety minutes in length. The interviews will be tape recorded. Interviews will be conducted either at the researcher’s office or at another mutually agreed upon private site. You are free to stop the interviews at any time with no negative

consequences. There will be no payment for participation in this research study. A summary of the study's results is available upon request.

BENEFITS

The benefit of participating in this study is that you will have an opportunity to openly share your experience as a lesbian. All too often the lives of lesbians have remained invisible because the voices of lesbians have been silenced or unsolicited, and/or because others have presumed to know and speak for lesbians. By participating in this study, you will have the opportunity to enhance your own personal understanding of your life as well as to enhance the understanding of others about the lived experience of lesbians.

COSTS

There is no monetary cost associated with participation in this study. There is a time cost of approximately three hours.

POSSIBLE RISKS/SIDE EFFECTS

It is possible that talking in depth about issues related to resolving your lesbian sexual orientation or about your work experience and career might cause some discomfort or emotional upset. While I do not anticipate that you will experience a high level of distress, should the interview become too uncomfortable for you, you have the right to stop it. Equally, if I have the sense that you are experiencing a high level of discomfort and distress, I will stop the interview. There will be no negative consequence should you decide to withdraw from the study.

In the unlikely event that you experience emotional distress after the interviews have ended, I will schedule a meeting just for the purpose of talking about these feelings. If you should feel uncomfortable talking with me about these feelings, I will give you the names of three professionals who would be willing to talk further with you at no charge.

Should you have questions at any time, please feel free to ask me.

PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY

This research study is being conducted as part of my doctoral dissertation. Each interview will be tape-recorded. I will transcribe the interviews verbatim. None of the typed copy will contain any identifying information. Once the tapes are transcribed the audio record will be destroyed. The tapes and transcriptions will be kept in a locked file cabinet at my office. I am the only person who will have access to this file cabinet. The content of all interviews will be treated as confidential material. Within three years after the completion of the dissertation, all of the written materials will be destroyed. I may quote you in writing in this study but no name or identifying information will accompany the quotes.

SUBJECT ASSURANCES

By signing this consent form, I agree to take part in this study. I have not given up any of my rights or released this institution from responsibility for carelessness.

I may cancel my consent and refuse to continue in the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. My relationship with the researcher or staff of the Institute for Clinical Social Work will not be affected in any way, now or in the future, if I refuse to take part or if I begin the study and then withdraw.

If I have any questions about the research methods, I can contact Jill Newberger, LCSW at 312-988-9150 or R. Dennis Shelby at 312-726-8480. If I have any questions about my rights as a research subject, I may call Daniel Rosenfeld, M.A., Chair of Institutional Review Board, Institute for Clinical Social Work, 200 N. Michigan Avenue, Suite 407, Chicago, IL 60601, 312-726-8480.

SIGNATURES

I HAVE READ THE CONSENT FORM AND I AGREE TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY AS IT IS EXPLAINED IN THE CONSENT FORM.

Signature of participant

Date

I WOULD LIKE TO RECEIVE A SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

Signature of participant

Date

I certify that I have explained the research to _____
and believe that she understands and that she has agreed to participate freely. I agree to answer any additional questions when they arise during the research or afterwards.

Signature of researcher

APPENDIX C

FIRST AND SECOND INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

First Interview Protocol

As you know, this study is looking at how resolving your lesbian sexual orientation later in your life might have, or might not have, had an effect upon your work life, work ambitions and goals, and work attainments.

I'd like you to keep this in the back of your mind as you think about and tell me about your life. I'm going to ask you questions about different periods of your life and invite you to share stories and anecdotes with me.

- 1) Tell me about your childhood and your relationship with your mother, your father, your siblings, your friends. What was it like growing up in your household? Who were you close to? Tell me about a memory or memories, or an incident or two that stand out.
- 2) As a young person, how did you think about career and what you wanted to do for a living? What were the family expectations?
- 3) Tell me about your work life, its satisfactions, disappointments. Has your experience with work gone the way you thought it would? Tell me about a high point; a low point.
- 4) Tell me when you first began to have some idea that you might be a lesbian and what that was like for you.
- 5) Looking back, how do you think that not having your sexual orientation figured out earlier affected, if at all, your work identity, your ambitions or goals, your overall work experience?
- 6) In light of what we have been discussing about your life, about your sexual identity and work identity, what stories come to mind about how you personally changed or how your work situation changed **after** you resolved your sexual orientation.

Second Interview Protocol

It is hoped that the open-ended nature of the questions in the first interview will provide a lot of material regarding the connection the participant sees between her struggles in integrating her lesbian sexual identity and her work life. The second interview has three focal points: 1) to clarify points that were unclear or ambiguous in the first interview; 2) to ask more direct questions about the participant's experience of coming to terms with her sexual orientation and about her work experiences; and 3) to explore more in depth, as necessary, the participant's early relational history with significant others.

Focal point one: This part of the interview will be clarifying unclear or ambiguous comments made in the first interview. This part of the interview cannot be scripted out ahead but is dependent upon what the researcher finds to be confusing in the participant's earlier narrative.

Focal point two: More direct questions about sexual identity and work identity might include the following:

- What was the progression of thoughts and feelings you had about yourself as you realized you were a lesbian?
- How do you think not being able to resolve your sexuality affected your closest interpersonal relationships?
- It has been suggested that for gay men the sense of being different often translated into a feeling as a boy of being incompetent at being masculine (Shelby, 2000). Did you feel less of a girl or a woman? Did your budding sense of being attracted to other girls or women translate into an internal sense of distress? Can you describe what you felt?
- How do you think knowing you were a lesbian but not being able to share that knowledge with anyone or to act on it played out in choosing a career field or in the career field that you chose?
- Since we last talked, what additional thoughts do you have about how not being able to fully accept your sexual orientation affected your work identity, goals, ambitions, professional attainment?

Focal point three: More direct questions about early relating to others and of others to them.

- Thinking about your childhood, were some of the feelings you felt when you could not accept being a lesbian similar to feelings you felt as a child with significant others, for example, not feeling seen, not being recognized for you, not being appreciated for being who you were? Can you tell me more about that?
- If you felt estrangement and alienation during the period when you struggled with your sexual identity, were some of these feelings familiar? That is, had you had the experience of feeling unrecognized, estranged or alienated from others earlier in your life before your sexual orientation became an issue for you? Can you tell me more about that.

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