Achieving a positive valuation of being lesbian, gay, or bisexual in a heterosexist world.

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UMI
Achieving a Positive Valuation of
Being Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual
in a Heterosexist World

by

Jodee M. McCaw, M.A.

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through the Department of Psychology
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ABSTRACT

Psychologists have documented a wealth of negative psychological consequences experienced by members of oppressed groups as a result of their oppression. Much less visible within the literature have been individuals' efforts to overcome these consequences. Yet it is clear that many people who belong to oppressed groups do not labour under a life-long burden of negative psychological consequences resulting from their oppression. The current study used a grounded theory approach to examine the ways in which in a heterosexist environment, individuals of all sexual orientations develop positive understandings and valuations of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. Results illuminate the many ways in which lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals adjust to their sexual orientation, and then move beyond adjustment to a positive valuation both of their sexual orientation, and of themselves. A probabilistic model of development is proposed. Results also suggest that some heterosexuals struggle with issues related to sexual orientation in ways very similar to lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, and thus raise questions about the assumption that issues of sexual orientation are relevant only to people who do not identify as heterosexual.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

A majority of the world’s population lives under oppression. Race, sex, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, age, and class are all used to classify people into two or more categories. A hierarchy is then imposed such that one category is somehow “better” than the other category or categories. Members of the lower categories are defined by the dominant culture as being somewhat less than fully human (Adam, 1978; Beran, Claybaker, Dillon, & Haverkamp, 1992; Bristow & Wilson, 1993; Caplan, 1992; Gutierrez, 1990; Moreau, 1990; Myers et al., 1991; Watts, 1992).

Oppression affects the lives of members of oppressed groups in many important ways. They often receive less, poorer, or no education, have less personal freedom, experience more violence directed against them, and have access only or largely to less interesting, less well-paid, and more dangerous jobs (Adam, 1978; Burstow, 1992; Pharr, 1988). Less visible, but also serious, are the psychological consequences of oppression.

Members of oppressed groups also have significantly less access to many experiences that facilitate optimal psychological development and functioning than do members of dominant groups. Miller (1986) observes that “dominant groups usually impede the development of subordinates and block their freedom of expression and action” (p. 7). Moreover, members of oppressed groups also experience what might be called psychological oppression: The dominant culture perpetuates a number of myths and stereotypes about oppressed groups, which collectively comprise an ideology which serves to justify their oppression (Adam, 1978; Burstow, 1992; hooks, 1993; Prilleltensky, 1990; Wolf, 1986). In particular, members of oppressed groups are continually informed of their own inferiority (Adam, 1978; Pharr, 1988; Wolf, 1986). Any differences they observe between their own experience and the experience of those who are not
oppressed are explained by the dominant group as an inescapable result of the inferiority of oppressed groups.

The consequences of this psychological oppression are widespread, and may be devastating. Effects that have been repeatedly identified include lowered self-esteem, work- and school-related problems, substance abuse, social withdrawal, interpersonal difficulties, depression, anger, and suicidal ideation and behaviour (L. S. Brown, 1986; Erwin, 1993; Neisen, 1993; Savin-Williams, 1994). However, within the literature on the psychological consequences of oppression, the consequence which is discussed most frequently is internalized oppression. The internalization of oppression is a process whereby members of oppressed groups come to believe to some extent in the myths and stereotypes that justify their oppression, and they then make use of these stereotypes in understanding their own experiences and in defining themselves. Experiential narratives by members of oppressed groups often contain extensive discussion of their internalized oppression, and of their struggles to free themselves from it (e.g., Bulkin, Pratt, & Smith, 1983; hooks, 1993; Monette, 1993). Both researchers and clinicians often perceive self-deprecation, or even self-hatred, in members of ethnic or racial minority groups which they attribute to the individual’s belief in the myth of their inferiority (Adam, 1978; Exum & Moore, 1993; Sue & Sue, 1990). When lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals tell their life stories, they frequently assign a prominent place to their struggles to overcome the lies about lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals that they learned from their culture and believed to be true (see, e.g., Curtis, 1989b; Hall Carpenter Archives Lesbian Oral History Group, 1989; Holmes, 1988; Vacha, 1985). Internalized oppression is often argued to be the most serious consequence of oppression (e.g., New, 1993; Slater, 1988), in part because it is believed to cause many of the other negative psychological consequences of oppression, including feelings of powerlessness and inferiority,
dysfunctional beliefs and patterns of cognition, substance abuse, and suicidal behaviour (Kooden, 1994; Malyon, 1981/82; Slater, 1993).

The present study was designed to investigate the processes used by members of oppressed groups to undo the negative psychological consequences of oppression, particularly internalized oppression, and to develop positive conceptualizations and valuations of their group membership. However, because some members of dominant groups also develop positive conceptualizations of members of oppressed groups (e.g., anti-sexist men, white workers within the Civil Rights and anti-racist movements), I also wanted to examine these processes amongst members of dominant groups. I chose to focus upon the oppression of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals on the basis of sexual orientation, which is most often called heterosexism, although I have also drawn upon and discussed other forms of oppression. It is clear that there are many similarities between the various kinds of oppression; moreover, most lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals suffer other forms of oppression as well, so that an adequate analysis cannot be restricted to a single basis of oppression.

In this chapter, I first briefly discuss the heterosexism which lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals experience. I then survey the research and clinical literature on the psychological consequences of heterosexism. Because of the unique place of internalized heterosexism among these consequences within the literature, I discuss it separately in the succeeding section. The fourth section of the chapter presents the literature on undoing the negative psychological effects of heterosexism. Again, the literature, and hence my discussion, is largely concerned with the undoing of internalized heterosexism. Finally, I provide a brief introduction to the present study.

The Ubiquity of Oppression on the Basis of Sexual Orientation

In order to explore the psychological consequences of heterosexism, one must begin with the various kinds of oppression experienced by lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals (lesbigays).
this section, I present a brief introduction to the prejudice, discrimination, harassment, and violence that is experienced by people who are perceived to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual because of their sexual orientation. (Although the majority of such victims are indeed lesbigay, heterosexuals can be, and at times are, victimized when they are falsely perceived as lesbigay.) It is, however, well beyond the scope of this project to examine these issues in detail. Indeed, the oppression of lesbigays is so extensive that comprehensive investigations can deal only with particular issues (for example, on cultural representation of lesbigays, see Signorile, 1993; on legal issues, see Herman, 1994; on religion, see Jung & Smith, 1994; on violence, see Comstock, 1991, and Herek & Berrill, 1992). It must also be noted that although heterosexism continues to be a pervasive cultural force, it is slightly less pervasive now than it was even a few years ago. This is particularly evident in the gradual increase in the number of openly gay and lesbian people and characters in popular culture. While exceptions to generalizations about heterosexism continue to be relatively few, they do exist. Moreover, it is probable that these exceptions will continue to increase in frequency.

The most obvious aspect of heterosexism is the silence surrounding issues of sexual orientation. The greatest myth is that very few lesbigays exist, called the “Big Lie” by Kirk and Madsen (1989, p. xvi) and a “conspiracy of silence” by many writers, including Kielwasser and Wolf (1993/94, p. 59) and Beery (1990/1993, p. 242). Within the mass media, almost everyone is heterosexual (Gross, 1991), and the audience is assumed to be, and addressed as if they are, uniformly heterosexual (Bradley, 1994). The recent emergence of several lesbian and gay characters on television shows represents some progress, but also highlights the fact that most television shows depict a reality in which lesbigays apparently do not exist. School, college, and university curricula, which purport to teach their students all that is worth knowing, are largely silent about lesbigays and issues of sexual orientation (D’Augelli, 1991; Schulman, 1992/1994;
Sedgwick, 1993), although simultaneously lesbigay studies is emerging as an academic discipline and some lesbigay content is available in a few courses at many universities and colleges (D’Augelli, 1991). Due to the pressure on lesbigays to conceal their sexual orientation, many people wrongly believe that everyone whom they know is heterosexual (Gross, 1991; Hunter & Madsen, 1989). Virtually all public figures are perceived as heterosexual; the mainstream media has often kept the secret of the actor or politician who has been discovered to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Gross, 1993; Signorile, 1993).

To make matters worse, the invisibility of lesbigays applies most strictly to happy, well-adjusted, and sexually-active lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals (Bronski, 1990/1993). Of the information about lesbigays which does exist within the mainstream, much of it serves less to inform than to stigmatize and condemn lesbigays. Some of this information is simply wrong; stereotypes, falsehoods, and inaccuracies abound. Herek (1992) describes this as an “alternation between invisibility [of] and hostility” towards lesbigays (p. 90). For example, the mass media have always printed the names of men arrested for soliciting sex from other men, but a tremendous effort was required on the part of lesbian, gay, and bisexual activists before the New York Times would include a gay man’s surviving partner in his obituary (Schulman, 1994). The former both stigmatizes the men arrested and provides evidence that gay men are devoted to anonymous sex, particularly in public, while the latter acknowledges the existence of committed, long-term relationships among gay men. In terms of the values of dominant society, the former maligns gay men as a group, while the latter does them credit.

Within the mass media, the lesbigays who do exist are “almost invariably victims -- of violence or ridicule -- or villains” (Gross, 1991, p. 27). Of the lesbians visible in the media, a disproportionate number are serial-killers (Hart, 1994). The months-long controversy that occurred last year as to whether it was appropriate for the character Ellen to become the first
lesbigay protagonist on a network television show was instructive for the fear that was engendered as to what might happen were the media to depart from depicting a uniformly heterosexual world. Kielwasser and Wolf (1993/94) argue that within schools, a largely unofficial “curriculum of hate” exists (p. 74), in which lesbian, gay, and bisexual students often find themselves exposed to heterosexist remarks and verbal harassment by both students and teachers (see also Elze, 1992; Sears, 1991). When textbooks do, occasionally, mention homosexuality, it is usually in a pejorative context (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1993/94; McDonald, 1981). One health textbook mentioned issues of sexual orientation precisely four times -- once linking AIDS to “sexual contact with men of the same sex [sic]” and three times advising students that they should “never have homosexual sex” in order to avoid AIDS and other STDs (cited by Kielwasser & Wolf, 1993/94, p. 64).¹ D’Augelli (1989b; D’Augelli & Rose, 1990) found that 98% of the heterosexual college students whom he surveyed reported having heard disparaging remarks about lesbigays on their campus; most of his participants also acknowledged making disparaging remarks. The message, which too many lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals learn, is that it is impossible to be healthy and happy without being heterosexual (Hanley-Hackenbruck, 1988; Sears, 1991; Sophie, 1987).

Ironically, research on individuals’ prejudice toward lesbigays also illuminates the pervasiveness of heterosexist bias. Within psychology, an extensive research effort has been directed towards an examination of the correlates of greater or lesser degrees of homophobia in heterosexuals. Homophobia appears to be positively associated with religiosity; authoritarianism; sex (males are often found to be more homophobic than females); having had less contact with open lesbigays; greater acceptance of traditional gender roles; living in rural areas; being older and less well-educated; being more dogmatic; and being less sexually permissive or having more guilt about sexuality (Agnew, Thompson, Smith, Gramzow, & Currey,
1993; Herek, 1984b; Kerns & Fine, 1994; Schwanberg, 1993). However, these studies also consistently find that a large majority of the respondents are to some extent homophobic, a conclusion which is, in my opinion, equally important. Examining items from measures of homophobia provide some evidence of the stereotypes of lesbians that many North Americans hold (e.g., "the idea of lesbian marriages seems ridiculous to me" and "lesbians are sick" (Herek, 1984a, p. 51)).

The pervasiveness of heterosexist prejudice is also supported by research on interventions which are intended to decrease heterosexuals' prejudice against lesbians. Such interventions work, when they do, by decreasing to some extent the mean level of the participants' heterosexism (see Stevenson, 1988, for a review). Thus, these studies suggest that individual differences exist primarily in the extent of heterosexuals' prejudice against lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, rather than in whether or not they are prejudiced.

Finally, oppression on the basis of sexual orientation also manifests itself in discrimination against lesbians, verbal harassment of lesbians, and threats of and acts of physical violence directed towards lesbians (Comstock, 1991; Herek & Berrill, 1992). Many lesbians experience this kind of harassment as a matter of course, including an ever-present awareness of the threat of physical violence. Even on the campuses of colleges and universities which proudly proclaim a commitment to the values of liberalism, lesbian, gay, and bisexual students report experiencing heterosexist comments, verbal harassment, and threats of and acts of physical violence (Herek, 1993; Norris, 1991). Perhaps even more significant, and clearly indicative of the extent to which prejudice is institutionalized, is that few of those victimized report the offence to campus authorities, believing that the institution's commitment to equal rights for lesbians is at best token. At Oberlin, arguably one of the most liberal colleges in the United States, a lesbian student stated that "I have never heard, officially stated, in a house
meeting or classroom that harassment of Lesbians/Gay men/Bisexuals is unacceptable and will not be tolerated" (Norris, 1991, p. 105, participant's emphasis).

**Mental health professionals and prejudice.** The continued existence of prejudice against lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals among apparently well-educated mental health professionals demonstrates both the strength and the irrationality of this prejudice. Approximately two decades ago, both the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association collectively agreed that homosexuality is not in and of itself a mental disorder, although a vocal minority of psychiatrists and psychologists continue to dispute this (Bayer, 1981; Socarides, 1992). The vast bulk of the current professional literature holds that homosexuality per se is not pathological (Gonsiorek, 1991). However, there is considerable evidence that many mental health professionals continue to be quietly prejudiced against those who are not heterosexual (Garnets, Haycock, Cochran, Goodchilds, & Peplau, 1991). The Association of Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists (1989) mails its newsletters in unmarked envelopes and offers to label them as "personal" or whatever else the recipient may desire so as to keep the contents a secret. Indeed, the Association takes this commitment so seriously that it includes a blank line on its application form for "special markings" an applicant might want them to place on correspondence (Association of Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists, 1989, p. 120). Sedgwick (1993) makes a disturbing, but extremely convincing, argument that heterosexual mental health professionals, even those who claim to be affirmative of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, often tolerate adult lesbigays but simultaneously treat gender-inappropriate behaviour in children so as to prevent them from growing up gay or lesbian. Of course, the "treatment" is justified by the presumed difficulties the child will face in a society where cross-gender behaviour is seen as inappropriate, rather than because of the likelihood that the child will become lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Sedgwick, 1993).
Beyond this covert prejudice, some mental health professionals both maintain and publicly acknowledge beliefs about gay men (and, to a much lesser extent, lesbians and bisexuals) that are so absurd they would be laughable were it not for the history of psychiatric abuse of lesbians. O'Donahue and Caselles (1993) argue that opinions that are labelled as homophobic may equally well be considered “rational reactions to homosexuality” (p. 187). The authors justify this position by denouncing the sexual activity of gay men: Male homosexuals, they claim, more often than heterosexuals “engage in ‘fist-fucking,’ engage in high magnitudes of promiscuity [sic], and who insert rodents in rectums” (O'Donahue & Caselles, 1993, p. 187). No reference is given for these assertions, nor is any suggestion offered as to why people might be prejudiced against lesbians. Moreover, the poor grammar of the passage suggests that the authors are far from dispassionate on the topic of men who have sex with men. Queen (1997) observes that the obsession with gay men having sex involving gerbils, feces, and fisting, is a staple of anti-gay rights crusaders, and a considerable puzzlement to gay and bisexual men, who do not recognize their sexuality in these depictions.

Arguing that the acceptance of homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle has been a social and clinical disaster, Socarides (1992) observes that “serious flaws in sexual codes and institutions have undoubtedly played a significant role in many a culture's demise” (p. 321), evoking, for this reader, images of Sodom and Gomorrah. Nicolosi (1993), an advocate of so-called “reparative” psychotherapy which assists lesbians to become heterosexual, claims that more than 100 mental health professionals in North America are committed to providing this therapy. Nicolosi (1993) believes that a truly intimate relationship between men cannot be sexual; it is a “perennial gay fantasy” that male friendship can co-exist with a sexual relationship (p. 221). Dutch psychologist van den Aardweg (1986), another advocate of reparative therapy, sees homosexuality as one form of neurosis, and argues that it is caused by an “attachment to
childhood self-pity" (p. xv) and by a boy's failure to develop an appropriately-masculine gender identity.

The persistence of heterosexism among large numbers of mental health professionals is very disturbing. Although one might hope that heterosexism most often results from ignorance, mental health professionals do not have that excuse. They have had many opportunities to overcome their prejudice -- one might have hoped that they might have learned something from the large amount of non-prejudiced professional literature which exists; their many openly lesbigay peers, family members, friends, and acquaintances; or, unfortunately, in many cases, their clinical work with gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals. Not only does the determined heterosexism and overt prejudice of some mental health professionals suggest that prejudice against lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals is irrational, but it also provides strong evidence that this prejudice is in some way crucial to their worldview. It is also revealing that many of these professionals accept and advocate even the most patently false stereotypes of lesbigays. Perhaps in some inarticulate fashion they understand that ending heterosexism would be revolutionary, as radical lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer activists argue (e.g., Kitzinger, 1987; Pharr, 1988). Alternatively, their tenacity may also be related to these views being their professional "reason for being," allowing them to publish, do clinical work, and achieve fame -- or at least notoriety (H.L. Minton, personal communication, April, 1995).

The Psychological Consequences of Oppression on the Basis of Sexual Orientation

The environment of heterosexist prejudice and hatred within which we live, as discussed briefly above, has led to considerable concern about the effects of such prejudice upon those who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, as well as those who are in the process of developing such an identification. The sequelae of psychological oppression have been examined most thoroughly for adolescents. Numerous writers have documented the "intense feelings of confusion and pain"
experienced by young people as they struggle with their growing recognition that they belong to a group which it appears that everyone despises (Zera, 1992, p. 849; see also, Gonsiorek, 1988; Kielwasser & Wolf, 1993/94; Sears, 1991; Slater, 1988). Malysen (1981/82) describes this as "the exquisite psychological pain associated with the profound alienation, loneliness, and self-contempt engendered by the homophobic ethos" (p. 65-6). Less dramatically, Uribe and Harbeck (1991) observe that although a wide range of responses exist, most often an adolescent who is lesbian, gay, or bisexual passes through "a period of great turmoil" (p. 13).

Typically, most painful for these adolescents is their isolation -- as Rothblum (1994) expresses it, the usual adolescent experience is that "I only read about myself on bathroom walls" (p. 213). Unlike members of other minority groups, young lesbigsays seldom share their oppressed identity with close family members. Even when there are other lesbigsays within the extended family, often this is a family secret, kept from the adolescent. Parents may be very punitive when they suspect or discover their child is lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Borhek, 1988). Like many heterosexuals, a young man or woman who is beginning to struggle with issues of sexual orientation often does not realize that she or he knows anyone who is not heterosexual. Peers will often withdraw from the lesbian, gay, or bisexual adolescent, who is seen as "different," sometimes even before the youth begins to consider sexual orientation issues. Most teachers and school counsellors neither discuss lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues on an individual basis with lesbian, gay, and bisexual students nor address the issue directly when a student makes hateful remarks about lesbigsays during or outside of class (Elze, 1992; O'Connor, 1993/94; Sears, 1991). 5

It is important not to underestimate the pain experienced by many adolescents as they struggle with their sexual orientation. This pain is most vividly demonstrated by the frequency with which lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents contemplate, attempt, and commit suicide.
Hammelman (1993) and Savin-Williams (1994) surveyed numerous studies, which have consistently found that between 20% and 40% of their lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescent participants have attempted suicide. In contrast, studies which have used community samples of (presumably largely heterosexual) adolescents have found much lower, but still significant, rates of attempted suicide of between 5% and 10% (Andrews & Lewinsohn, 1992; Leenaars & Wenckstern, 1990). In her own study of lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents, Hammelman (1993) found that 29% of her participants had attempted suicide; 64% of those reported that their sexual orientation was part of or most of the reason for their attempt. Numerous other serious consequences of heterosexism for lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth have been documented: School-related problems, including academic difficulties, truancy, and dropping out of school; social withdrawal, depressed mood, and suicidal ideation; clinical depression; AIDS; running away or being homeless; conflict with the law; prostitution; and substance abuse (Anderson, 1993/94; Reynolds & Koski, 1993/94; Savin-Williams, 1994).

Research literature on the less extreme psychological consequences of heterosexism for lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents is considerably more limited. Some attention has been paid to the difficulties of the coming out process (acknowledging oneself as lesbian, gay, or bisexual both to oneself and to others; see Gonsiorek, 1988), the lowered self-esteem of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth (Uribe & Harbeck, 1991), and the effects of internalized heterosexism (see below for an extensive discussion). However, relatively little empirical research has been done which examines the long-term effects of stigmatization (D'Augelli, 1991; Uribe & Harbeck, 1991). The most visible lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth -- to teachers, school counsellors, clinicians, and researchers -- have typically been those who are experiencing the most extreme distress (Savin-Williams, 1994). The research and clinical literature thus focuses on the immediate pain experienced by these adolescents and the self-destructive behaviour which too
often results. From a political perspective, this has been a reasonable decision, as it maximizes the likelihood of necessary change occurring. For example, Uribe and Harbeck (1991) describe how PROJECT 10, a counselling and educational program for lesbian, gay, and bisexual high school students, was developed as a result of the experiences of one particular gay student. This student dropped out of school after being verbally abused by both students and staff and subsequently became homeless. Thinking about how the school had failed this student (and many students before him) brought the staff together and led to them taking action on behalf of other lesbigay students. From perspectives other than the political, however, this focus on those lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents who have suffered the most traumatic abuse is more problematic, as it gives an exaggerated portrait of the difficulties and distress experienced by lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents.

In particular, largely absent from the research literature are the “vast majority” of lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents who cope with the heterosexism that they experience, both institutional and individual, and develop into psychologically healthy lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults (Savin-Williams, 1994, p. 262). Kielwasser and Wolf (1993/94), observing (in a footnote!) that most lesbigays “do survive adolescence,” postulate “an extraordinarily powerful and creative resilience” that somehow enables them to do so (p. 59, their emphasis). Uribe and Harbeck (1991) emphasize the variability of techniques used by lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents in coping with their sexual orientation -- from dropping out to excelling academically or socially. Harbeck (1993/94) asserts that because of their use of adaptive coping strategies, lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents “also face a greater risk of being perfectionistic ‘A’ students, National Merit Scholarship winners, earned-wealth millionaires, doctors, lawyers, artists, Olympic athletes, and over-achievers in all that we do” (p. 169). Moreover, not all differences in experience between lesbigays and heterosexuals favour heterosexuals. For
example, given the difficulties experienced by heterosexual girls who engage in sexual activity before they are emotionally prepared to do so, I would hypothesize that the delay of young lesbians in developing sexual relationships may be in many ways helpful to them — if they can resist being pressured into heterosexual sexual activity.

One factor that contributes substantially to the overly-negative tone of the research literature on the effects of heterosexism on adolescents is the scant attention paid to the fact that the experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents are in many ways similar to those of some heterosexual adolescents. Heterosexual adolescents who are seen as “different” are often isolated and made fun of in ways similar to lesbigsays. Indeed, many children are rejected by their peers as “fags” or “lezzies” long before they have any real idea of the meanings of these words, let alone whether they apply (Borhek, 1988). Children and adolescents who do not conform to gender stereotypes often experience negative reactions from peers, parents, and other significant adults, including mental health professionals (Sedgwick, 1993). However, not all of these gender nonconformists will become lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Sedgwick, 1993). The experience of heterosexual gender nonconformists may in fact be more similar to that of lesbigsays than to the usual heterosexual experience.

Another limitation in the literature which exaggerates the differences between heterosexual youth and lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth is that writers have most often depicted lesbigsays as a homogenous group. In particular, lesbigsays, both youth and adult, who belong to racial or ethnic minorities have been largely invisible (Greene, 1994; Tremble, Schneider & Appathurai, 1989). This exacerbates the dichotomization, as it is clear that minority youth of all sexual orientations must struggle with issues such as racism and the reconcilition of conflicting demands of dominant and minority cultures. Reconciling, for example, one’s own feelings and decisions about sexuality with the views of one’s parents and/or one’s culture of origin is a
difficult task for many children of immigrants, whether heterosexual or lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Baptiste, 1993). Although Tremble et al. (1989) do not discuss this issue in their study of ethnic minority youth, it is clear from the accounts of some of the participants that their conflicts with their families also involve issues other than their sexual orientation. One young lesbian stated that her being lesbian “is one aspect among many that [my parents] don’t like about me” (Tremble et al., 1989, p. 260), while a young gay man observed that for his parents, “the big contradiction” is his intention not to get married and have children, not his sexual orientation per se (p. 261). Greene (1994) calls attention to the importance in many cultures of conforming to traditional gender-role stereotypes. Among young women of all sexual orientations, conflicts with family over a refusal to comply with prescriptive gender roles are not uncommon (Comas-Díaz & Greene, 1994).

Finally, differences between heterosexual youth and lesbigay youth are exaggerated by ignoring the many adolescents who struggle with same-sex feelings and attractions but will not identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Sears, 1991). Goff (1990) observes that young men who are uncertain as to their sexual orientation experience “shame, anxiety, depression, denial, reaction formation, performance anxiety, concern about being found out, isolation, substance abuse, and occasional acting out” (p. 599), behaviours which are also seen in troubled lesbigay adolescents. Many of these young men engage in little if any sexual activity with men, and most will come to identify as heterosexual (Goff, 1990). Similarly, boys who have been sexually victimized by an adult male often doubt their sexual orientation, even when all other indicators suggest that they are heterosexual (Lew, 1988). Clearly, many heterosexual youth confront some issues related to sexuality in ways very similar to many lesbigay youth.

Thus, the research literature on the psychological consequences of heterosexism on lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents is important, but limited. The primary focus of the
literature has been documenting the psychological pain of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth, and the loss of too many adolescents to suicide and other forms of self-injurious behaviour. However, the unremittingly negative focus of the work is both misleading and disturbing. Harbeck (1993/94) argues that we are in danger of replacing one negative stereotype, that being lesbian, gay, or bisexual is pathological, with another, that being lesbian, gay, or bisexual dooms one to emotional distress, interpersonal isolation, and suicidal behaviour. The positive aspects to being lesbigay are entirely absent from the literature. This literature also ignores the similarities between heterosexual and lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. This further increases the psychological distress that lesbigays are portrayed as experiencing, as heterosexuals who are experiencing similar distress are invisible. Moreover, such an extreme differentiation between lesbigay youth and heterosexual youth implies that interventions that may assist heterosexual adolescents are unlikely to assist lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents. Gonsiorek and Rudolph (1991) suggest that, rather than conceptualizing lesbigays as developing entirely differently than heterosexuals, one might instead think of lesbigays as needing to complete an additional developmental task, that of negotiating a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity in a heterosexist environment. This conceptualization permits us to avoid having to either focus on adolescents as a homogenous group, which renders the experiences of lesbigays invisible, or seeing lesbigays as entirely different from heterosexuals, and thus uniquely disturbed.7

The psychological sequelae of oppression in adults. Less research has been done on the effects upon adult lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals of prejudice and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Again, the bulk of this literature has been devoted to the negative psychological consequences of oppression on lesbigays while they are in the process of defining themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, and revealing that self-definition to others. This process, and thus the negative psychological consequences, are seen as very similar in adolescents and in
adults, in large part because it is widely assumed that adult lesbians go through an "emotional adolescence" during this time (Kooden, 1994, p. 41; see also D'Augelli, 1991; Malyon, 1981/82; J. Smith, 1988), although this process has been better documented for men than for women. Erwin (1993) argues that there is wide acceptance, by lesbian activists, medical and mental health professionals, and researchers, that high levels of psychological distress are manifested in particular ways by lesbians: Contemplation of and attempts at suicide, alcoholism and other drug abuse, and feelings of self-hatred, isolation, depression, and low self-esteem. Other writers have focused upon the struggle necessitated by having to embrace a stigmatized identity, including feelings of self-doubt and disapproval, and changes in one's self-conception, goals and expectations, and affiliative patterns (Fein & Nuehring, 1981). Pointing to feelings of self-blame, isolation, fear, depression, anxiety, anger, and difficulty trusting others, Neisen (1993) argues that the effects of heterosexism on lesbians are very similar to the effects of sexual or physical abuse.

Even after lesbians achieve a committed sexual identity, they must continue to struggle with oppression on the basis of sexual orientation. The literature demonstrates that all areas of lesbians' lives continue to be affected by oppression. Verbal harassment and physical violence do not end once a lesbian, gay man, or bisexual has come out (Comstock, 1991; Herek & Berrill, 1992), and may become more likely with the individual's increasing visibility as lesbian. Conflict with family members may also continue (L.S. Brown, 1989a). Oppression on the basis of sexual orientation also has an impact on when and with whom lesbians may be open about their sexuality, and when they feel pressured or compelled to pass as heterosexual (Harry, 1993). Perhaps less obviously, oppression on the basis of sexual orientation also has an impact on lesbians' relationships with one another. Among these effects are the difficulties lesbians have finding models for lesbian and gay relationships (Rose, 1996); the lack of institutional support, specifically marriage, and interpersonal support for lesbian and gay relationships (Kurdek, 1995;
Thompson, 1992); and the widespread misperception that lesbians make poor parents (Patterson, 1996). More recently, as well, lesbians have been writing about their experiences of continuing to develop their lesbigay identities as they age (e.g., R. Brown, 1996; Duberman, 1996).

**Positive aspects of being lesbian, gay, or bisexual.** The literature on the psychological sequelae of oppression on the basis of sexual orientation paints a grim picture indeed of the experiences of lesbigays. However, it is also a misleading portrait. For many lesbigays, being lesbian, gay, or bisexual also has many positive aspects, so that despite the oppression they experience, their sexual orientation contributes positively to their lives. Positive experiences of coming out and of being lesbian, gay, or bisexual are widely available in anthologies where lesbigays discuss their lives (e.g., Hall Carpenter Archives Lesbian Oral History Group, 1989; Holmes, 1988; Oikawa, Falconer, & Decter, 1994). As the old political slogan has it, many lesbigays are indeed "glad to be gay."

In contrast to the large psychological literature on the problems experienced by lesbigays because of heterosexism, relatively few researchers, clinicians, or theorists have talked much about the positive aspects of being lesbigay. For many researchers, it appears to be the painfulness of the oppression lesbigays experience, particularly as they come out, that has impelled their research on lesbigays. Baron (1991) states that “because we are psychologists focused on human welfare, our eyes are inexorably drawn to focus on problems and our attempts to understand, explain, and justify the etiology of those problems” (p. 240). I myself am not sure why our eyes are not drawn to individuals' strengths and possibilities, but Baron's (1991) words do appear to reflect the attitude of the majority of psychologists, particularly clinicians (Caplan, 1992). Yet without looking at the positive aspects of being lesbian, gay, or bisexual, an examination of the negative psychological consequences of oppression presents an incomplete, and misleading, depiction of the experiences of lesbigays (D’Augelli, 1991).
Measures of psychological adjustment and mental health most often show no difference between heterosexuals and lesbians and gay men, and many of the exceptions favour lesbians (Gonsiorek, 1991; Rothblum, 1994). Given the strength of the hatred and contempt which lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals experience, this provides strong evidence that, as J. Smith (1988) suggests, survivors of heterosexism typically develop superior coping skills and attain an unusual resiliency and strength of character. D’Augelli (1991) argues that the socialization, life experiences, and family histories of lesbians, which for most lesbians contain many painful and difficult experiences, "provoke" them to "achieve higher developmental statuses and more differentiated personal, interpersonal, social, and community lives" (p. 216). Mari (1988) observes that some members of oppressed groups have always responded to their oppression by excelling. Harbeck (1993/94) asserts that the adversity she has experienced as an open lesbian has contributed substantially to "[her] strength, [her] wisdom, [her] advocacy, and [her] vision of a better world" (p. 171).

Perhaps the most important positive consequence of heterosexism has been that its existence has necessitated the creation of lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities. Although imperfect, these communities have contributed immeasurably to the lives of large numbers of lesbians and, ironically, have provided many lesbians with more of a community than is available to many heterosexuals. For example, Schulman (1994) argues that the lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities mobilized around the AIDS crisis much faster and much more effectively than heterosexuals could have, suggesting that the existence of these communities has literally saved lives. D’Augelli (1989a) describes a rural area in which lesbians and gay men developed formal, non-professional helping networks, so that lesbians have access to more and better resources than do the heterosexuals who live within the area. Giese (1994) documents the recent invasion of queer social spaces and communities by large numbers of heterosexuals, who appear
to feel more comfortable there than they do in the heterosexual community where one would
assume they belong.

Because the various forms of oppression have many common elements (Adam, 1978; Pharr, 1988), many lesbians argue that they can and do use their own experiences of oppression to assist them in understanding the experiences of people who experience different kinds of oppression and marginality (e.g., A.J. Smith, 1990, cited in Morgan & Nerison, 1993). There is some research evidence that lesbians appear to be more tolerant of other marginalized groups than are heterosexuals (Corbett, Troiden, & Dodder, 1977). Moreover, lesbians appear to be more aware of discrimination against other stigmatized groups and to be more supportive of civil rights protection for them (Beran et al., 1992). One of the more vigorous debates within lesbigay communities at the present time is to what extent, if any, the oppression of lesbians is necessarily linked with other forms of oppression (see Vaid, 1996, and Sullivan, 1995, for opposing viewpoints).

Lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals also derive some benefits from the lack of lesbian, gay, and bisexual role models. A lack of role models can also be conceptualized as the absence of prescriptions about the way lesbians, lesbian and gay couples, and lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities are supposed to be. The Hall Carpenter Archives Lesbian Oral History Group (1989) entitled their collection of lesbian life stories "inventing ourselves," celebrating the freedom which many lesbians feel to become whomever they wish (see also Beam, 1991). L.S. Brown (1989b) observes that this process of inventing being lesbian, gay, or bisexual for ourselves not only terrifying, but also exhilarating. In their interviews with three lesbian couples, DePoy and Noble (1992) found that each couple celebrated an anniversary of their relationship, but each couple used a different, personally meaningful definition of anniversary. Thompson (1992) observes that the refusal to allow formal marriage to lesbian and gay couples has meant
that many couples have chosen to devise their own commitment ritual. He argues that this makes their commitments more meaningful than marriage often is for heterosexual couples. It has also provided him with a positive alternative to marriage for his own heterosexual relationship (Thompson, 1992).

The Construct of Internalized Heterosexism

Above, I have discussed the most obvious consequences of the oppression experienced by lesbians, from feelings of isolation and distress to self-destructive behaviours. However, as one seeks to understand the experience of individuals who experience oppression, another aspect of oppression quickly becomes evident. From an observer's standpoint, many members of oppressed groups appear to behave in ways that are difficult to understand — their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours too often appear to be governed by the dictates of the ideology of oppression, rather than by what is best for themselves. They often appear to consider the interests of members of the dominating group in preference to considering the interests of other members of their own groups. It is argued that these feelings, thoughts, and behaviours are the result of individuals accepting, and acting in accordance with, the dominant stereotypes, which is called internalized oppression. For lesbians, this is most often called internalized heterosexism or internalized homophobia. Internalized heterosexism is imprecisely defined, but the common core of the various definitions involves the lesbian, gay man, or bisexual believing some or all of the stereotypes about lesbians which are prevalent in the person's environment. Internalized heterosexism is seen by many writers on lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues to be the most serious consequence of oppression (e.g., Koooden, 1994; Malyon, 1981/82; Savin-Williams, 1994; Slater, 1988).

In this section, I will discuss at length the construct of internalized heterosexism, beginning with definitional issues, then the theoretical bases proposed for the construct, the
problems with the construct, and finally the issue of heterosexuals and internalized heterosexism. The importance that I place upon this construct is in part a reflection of its importance in the literature. My emphasis is also a result of the extent to which the construct is taken for granted as intuitively obvious. Because internalized heterosexism has been merely assumed to exist, serious problems of definition, meaning, and measurement have been all but ignored. When a construct is that compelling, I believe, it is critical to examine it fully. Finally, the appeal of the construct for researchers and clinicians means that examining it in detail provides me with a unique vantage point from which to examine the research on and clinical work with lesbigays.

Although many writers appear to feel comfortable defining a variety of behaviors as the result of internalized heterosexism, it is not always obvious what causes a person to behave in a particular way. As observers, we consistently make the Fundamental Attribution Error -- when considering another's behavior, we overestimate the role of dispositional factors in determining the behavior, and we underestimate the ways in which the individual's circumstances, including oppression, influence their behavior (Collier, Minton, & Reynolds, 1991). In particular, it is not always easy to tell whether even apparently self-defeating behavior on the part of an oppressed person might not be a rational response to coercion, rather than a sign of psychopathology or internalized oppression (Caplan, 1985).

Moreover a wide variety of definitions of internalized heterosexism exist, although the term is almost always used as if it were well-defined (i.e., having a single agreed-upon definition). The following are a selection of definitions of internalized heterosexism:
Gonsiorek's (1988) "negative attitudes toward homosexuality that are incorporated into self-image" (p. 115); Forstein's (1988) "unconscious irrational devaluing of the gay self" (p. 488); Sophie's (1987) "an internalization of negative attitudes and assumptions concerning lesbianism" (p. 53); L.S. Brown's (1986) "internaliz[ation] into her or his core identity and self-concept all or
part of the negative stereotypes and expectations held by the culture at large regarding that group” (p. 100); Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, & Williams' (1994) “the incorporation of these negative attitudes [about gay men] into one's self-image” (p. 92); and Fassinger's (1991) “the internalization of hostile and derogatory societal attitudes [about lesbigays]” (p. 159).

Four important issues can be discerned in the multiplicity of definitions of internalized heterosexism. The first is the extent to which many of the definitions are somewhat tautological, an issue highlighted by those definitions which themselves include the term “internalization” (see the range of examples above).

Secondly, some of the definitions of internalized heterosexism require that the self-concept or self-definition of the individual be affected, while other definitions involve the lesbian, gay man, or bisexual believing stereotypes about lesbigays in general. One of the few writers who has acknowledged this issue is Rothblum (1994), who avoids taking a position by saying that lesbigays “may internalize the heterosexist attitudes toward themselves or other lesbians or gay men,” without proceeding to differentiate what could in some cases be two very different experiences (p. 214). Some writers whose definition of internalized heterosexism does not contain the restriction that the internalized heterosexism must influence one's self-definition nevertheless assume that it does (e.g., Murphy, 1991; Savin-Williams, 1994). However, as with other group stereotypes, such as those based on gender or race, research suggests that one's attitudes towards oneself as a gay man may be significantly different from one's attitudes towards gay men as a group (Jenks & Newman, 1992; Nungesser, 1983).

The third definitional issue is a frequent, but not unquestioned, restriction that internalized heterosexism is only experienced by lesbigays. For some writers, internalized heterosexism appears to be defined only as heterosexist beliefs held by lesbigays, which seems to me to not be a particularly useful construct (e.g., Anderson, 1993/94; Gartrell, 1984). A
relatively few writers (including Kirkpatrick, 1991; Slater, 1988; J. Smith, 1988) define internalized heterosexism as something that heterosexuals may also experience. Hanley-Hackenbruck (1988; 1989) exemplifies the confusion as to whether heterosexuals may internalize heterosexism: In 1988, she defined internalized heterosexism as existing within the unconscious of lesbigays, while in 1989, her definition included the possibility that heterosexuals could internalize heterosexism. However, she neither acknowledged having made this change, nor discussed her reasons for doing so.

Finally, some definitions of internalized heterosexism incorporate broad assumptions about its etiology. Hanley-Hackenbruck (1988) defines internalized heterosexism as "the 'evil image' which the dominant group projects" which lies within the unconscious of lesbigays (p. 29). Herzberg (1990) states that "when these beliefs and messages [of cultural heterosexism] are introjected and become part of an autonomous internal dialogue and set of emotional responses, this is known as internalized heterosexism" (p. 277).

Many writers simply have not defined internalized heterosexism, apparently believing that the definition is so self-evident that it does not need to be stated (e.g., Cabaj, 1988; Helfand, 1993; Kooden, 1994; Slater, 1993). This is particularly troubling in light of the numerous definitional questions raised above.

Theoretical bases of the construct of internalized heterosexism. The construct of internalized heterosexism has been justified in various ways. Most often, it is presented as self-evident. Given the weight of hatred, contempt, prejudice, discrimination, and fear directed towards lesbigays, the stereotypes about lesbigays which abound, and the silence about well-adjusted and happy lesbigays, it is unsurprising that many have assumed that some of these lies are accepted as truth by some lesbigays themselves. Indeed, it seems all but impossible that a newly lesbian woman or a newly gay man, surrounded by disinformation about lesbigays could
somehow intuitively perceive the "truth" about being lesbian or gay -- particularly given that there appears to be no such "truth." Lesbian and queer theorists have convincingly demonstrated that there is no single "lesbian" identity (McIntosh, 1993; Phelan, 1993). This conclusion has also been reached by political activists (Bristow & Wilson, 1993; (charles), 1993; Giese, 1994), psychologists (Golden, 1987; Kitzinger, 1987; Sophie, 1986) and sociologists (Rust, 1993). "Gay" and "bisexual" identities are equally varied (DeCecco, 1981; Weise, 1992).

Often implicit in discussions of internalized heterosexism is a validation of the construct which relies upon the difficulty that people have in making changes in their understanding of the world. According to cognitive psychology, a cognitive schema is a relatively large unit of information, which both functions as knowledge and also guides perception, memory, and inference, so that it significantly influences subsequent experiences and learning (Best, 1986). As a result, schemata are highly resistant to change, as disconfirming evidence is often simply not perceived, altered so as to be more consistent with the schema, or seen as a rare exception (Viss & Burn, 1992). Our socialization within this culture means that we incorporate into our schemata many of the stereotypes about members of both oppressing and oppressed groups that serve to justify oppression: the resistance to change of schemata thus contributes to the longevity of those stereotypes (Bitonti, 1993; Viss & Burn, 1992). For Stillings and Dobbins (1991), the incredible persistence of stereotypes which serve to justify oppression, even those which are obviously absurd, lead to the conclusion that "data from and about members of target populations [oppressed groups], when they conflict with existing schemata, are irrelevant" (p. 209).

From this perspective, people who will come to identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual are even more vulnerable to experiencing internalized oppression than are members of other minority groups, as lesbians often learn many of the stereotypes before they realize that they belong to the stigmatized group (Fein & Nuehring, 1981; Malyon, 1981/82) -- that is, before they realize
that stereotypes about lesbigays are stereotypes about themselves, and people like themselves. Indeed, studies of identity development suggest that for many women and men, identification as lesbian, gay, or bisexual occurs only after they are able to reject some of the worst stereotypes associated with these identities (Cass, 1979; Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Sophie, 1987).

The construct of internalized oppression has been most extensively explored by writers using an experiential approach to examine the effects upon themselves of oppression based on sex, race, class, sexual orientation, disability, and age (e.g., Boykin, 1996; hooks, 1993; Monette, 1993; Oikawa, Falconer, & Decter, 1994). Typically, such writers have painstakingly struggled to reject the oppression in which they were socialized by the dominant culture. However, they have repeatedly encountered within themselves unwanted feelings, beliefs, or automatic responses which they realize perpetuates the very oppression they repudiate. These they recognize as consequences of the way that they were taught by the dominant culture to be, but reject as inconsistent with what they believe and, hence, with whom they want to be. Their conscious rejection of oppression, and the ideologies justifying it, is not, however, always sufficient to induce the desired change. The construct of internalized oppression captures their experience of these feelings as having been brought into existence by the dominant culture and then somehow incorporated as a part of the self which is unwanted, yet difficult to alter. In their examination of their personal struggles with racism and anti-Semitism, Bulkin, Pratt, and Smith (1984) provide powerful examples of this experiential approach. Unfortunately, an experiential approach has generally not been used by psychologists and psychiatrists -- even writings by those who assert that internalized heterosexism is universal, or universal among lesbigays, do not speak as powerfully and authoritatively about internalized heterosexism as those whose work overtly focuses upon their personal experiences (e.g., Cabaj, 1988; Gartrell, 1984; McHenry & Johnson,
1993). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the few mental health professionals who have written from an experiential perspective have most often done so in non-academic fora (e.g., Sanders, 1994).

The intuitive appeal of the construct of internalized oppression is also supported by the existence of a number of similar constructs within other domains. Marxists argue that a "false consciousness" explains the refusal of most members of the working class to organize collectively in their own self-interest. Cognitive-behavioural therapists believe that key to the distress of many is irrational ideas about the self that they have been taught and continue to accept (Burns, 1989). In seeking to explain the co-operation of members of oppressed groups with their own oppression, Wolf (1986) postulates "a process by which the external structure of oppression is internalized," which she calls "reflexive legitimation" (p. 228). Adam (1978) argues that because oppressed groups are defined as inferior, many members of these groups internalize a feeling of inferiority, which prevents them from rebelling.

Probably because of the strength of its intuitive appeal, however, little effort has been made to validate the construct of internalized heterosexism. It has most often simply been assumed that many lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals share the negative views of lesbigays that are so common. Notably, few attempts have been made to measure internalized heterosexism empirically. As Jenks and Newman (1992) observe, most studies have asked how heterosexuals perceive gay men, and less often lesbians. Interestingly, in a comprehensive review of the literature on "attitudes towards gay men and lesbian women," Schwanberg (1993, p. 99) does not discuss the question of whose attitudes are being discussed. Almost all of the studies she reviews, however, were done on populations that were not chosen on the basis of sexual orientation, so that one can assume that what has been researched is largely the attitude of heterosexuals towards gay men and lesbians.
Moreover, because little progress has been made in developing a standardized instrument which measures internalized heterosexism, neither the reliability nor the validity of the construct has been assessed. Studies which have attempted to measure the internalized heterosexism of lesbians have most often used a measure developed by the researchers which is composed of a number of stereotypes about gay men and/or lesbians (e.g., Kahn, 1991; Nungesser, 1983; Wagner et al., 1994). Nungesser (1983) used an instrument he created to assess both a gay man's negative perceptions of himself as a gay man and of gay men as a group. He found a wide variation in both dimensions, and that the two variables were not highly correlated. Similarly, Kahn (1991) found significant individual differences in internalized heterosexism amongst the lesbians she surveyed. Lower levels of internalized heterosexism were associated with a more feminist orientation and with increased comfort in disclosing sexual orientation, but were unrelated to stage of identity development and extent of disclosure to family (Kahn, 1991).

In those few studies where the researchers did use an existing instrument to measure internalized heterosexism within lesbians, most often they used an instrument originally designed for heterosexual participants. McDermott, Tyndall, and Lichtenberg (1989) used the Index of Homophobia (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980), a standard measure of heterosexuals' homophobia. Although the authors observe that some of their lesbian and gay participants remarked that they were not sure how to interpret items such as "if a member of my own sex made an advance toward me, I would wonder if I were homosexual," they do not discuss the possibility that this might render their results largely meaningless (McDermott et al., 1989, p. 34).

In his quest for a valid homophobia scale, Lumby (1976) used a modified version of K.T. Smith's (1971) measure. Among other items, Lumby's (1976) gay male participants were confronted with the paradoxical "I would not want to belong to an organization that has homosexuals in its
membership" (p. 41). I would argue that these studies have contributed very little to the literature on internalized heterosexism.

In their investigation of gay men's attitudes, Jenks and Newman (1992) asked gay men to indicate their own position, the average position of gays in general, and the average position of nongays on a number of different issues and personal characteristics. On some issues, the participants' responses indicated some agreement with the prevailing stereotype -- they classified gays as a group as differing from nongays as a group in a direction consistent with the stereotype. However, the participants also appeared to clearly differentiate their perceptions of gays in general from their self-perceptions, that is, they rejected stereotypes as not relevant to themselves. On social justice issues, the participants felt both gay men as a group and they themselves were more liberal than nongays. However, on negative characteristics associated with gays, such as being afraid of the other sex, being less satisfied with their lives, and being less in control of their lives, the gay male participants saw themselves as scoring less highly (i.e., in a more positive direction) on these dimensions than the average position of nongays, who in turn were seen as scoring in a more positive direction than were gays as a group. These gay men appeared to accept to some extent many of the stereotypes about gay men as a group, although they personally rejected the stereotypes as not applying to themselves. Although this finding may reflect little more than the widespread phenomenon that most people see themselves as better than average, it does highlight the dangers of assuming that lesbians' opinions about lesbians form the basis of their opinions about themselves.

Similarly, Simon, Glassner-Bayerl, and Stratenwerth (1991) found that heterosexual men and gay men share to some extent the network of stereotypes about straight and gay men which prevails in the dominant culture. However, their gay participants did not exactly reproduce the
stereotypes, as their responses were more favourable to gay men than were the responses of the heterosexual men.

In contrast, Viss and Burn (1992) found that heterosexuals' perceptions of lesbians are very dissimilar to lesbians' perceptions of lesbians as a group. Using a pretest, a list of 21 adjectives was derived, each of which a majority of a sample of (presumably mostly heterosexual) college undergraduates believed to be either very typical of lesbians or not at all typical of lesbians. Comparing a sample of lesbians with another sample of undergraduates, Viss and Burn (1992) found significant differences on 16 of the 21 adjectives, from which they concluded that stereotypes of outgroups are not congruent with the self-perceptions of outgroup members.

The very different results obtained by Jenks and Newman (1992) and Simon et al. (1991) and by Viss and Burn (1992) provide evidence of the complexity of the issue of the acceptance of stereotypes about lesbians by both lesbians and heterosexuals. Taken together, these studies provide limited support for the construct of internalized heterosexism. The studies do suggest that lesbians may endorse to some extent the stereotypes about lesbians propagated by the dominant culture. None of the studies support the strong version of the internalization of heterosexism hypothesis, that lesbians simply adopt without question the stereotypes of the dominant society about lesbians -- although it is possible that all of the participants had at one time done just that and had since changed their minds about some or much of what they had internalized and began to think differently. Moreover, the study by Jenks and Newman (1992) also suggests that even though gay men may endorse stereotypes about the group to which they belong, they do not therefore automatically apply those stereotypes to themselves. This finding is particularly important because researchers and clinicians have often assumed that internalized heterosexism is very damaging because the stereotypes one believes about one's group
necessarily have a significant effect on one's self-esteem and self-concept (e.g., Murphy, 1991; Savin-Williams, 1994).

One major confound in these studies, as well as within the literature on internalized heterosexism as a whole, is that there is still considerable debate over the existence of genuine differences between lesbians and heterosexuals. From a liberal humanist perspective, any perceived differences between lesbians and heterosexuals which are not directly related to sexual activity and relationships are assumed to be stereotypes (Kitzinger, 1987). An endorsement of any of these stereotypes thus suggests some internalization of heterosexism. However, many reject the liberal humanist perspective. Kitzinger (1987) observes that lesbian feminists endorse a number of opinions which liberal humanists define as homophobic, because lesbian feminists see lesbians as significantly different from heterosexuals in ways not directly related to their sexual preference. For example, many lesbians believe that if children were not so strongly socialized to be heterosexual, the percentage of the population that identifies as lesbian, gay, or bisexual would be considerably higher (Kitzinger, 1987; Rich, 1980; Weise, 1992). This belief would earn one a "homophobia' point" on many measures of homophobia, which tend to take a liberal orientation and assume that the proportion of people who are lesbigay is independent of social context (Kitzinger, 1987, p. 59).

Moreover, as a wide variety of contradictory stereotypes about lesbigays exist, it is unsurprising that lesbigays would endorse some stereotypes as having some validity. As different studies of lesbigays' acceptance of stereotypes about lesbigays have inquired into different stereotypes, it is only to be expected that they have yielded inconsistent results.

Problems with the construct of internalized heterosexism. Thus, the widespread appeal of the construct of internalized heterosexism has meant that the construct itself has been accepted as self-evident, with little attempt at constructing a reliable measure or validating it. Moreover,
few questions have been raised about its varied uses. As Friedman (1991) observes, many different phenomena are lumped together under the label of internalized homophobia. Wagner et al. (1994) criticize the paucity of empirical research on internalized heterosexism, which they believe is particularly important because of the destructive impact of internalized heterosexism upon the mental health of lesbians.

Not only are there different definitions of internalized heterosexism, but individual differences in internalized heterosexism, although they may be substantial, are largely ignored; Hanley-Hackenbruck (1988; 1989) is one of the very few researchers or clinicians to even acknowledge them. Of course, a wide range of attitudes towards lesbians exist (Herek & Glunt, 1993), including a range of negative attitudes, so that different individuals will be exposed to, and hence will internalize, different "heterosexisms." Moreover, lesbians, like heterosexuals, do not automatically and uncritically adopt any or all of the attitudes in which they are socialized. E.J. Smith (1991) argues that individuals who are members of oppressed groups have a "selective permeability" to the ideology that justifies their oppression (p. 183), which suggests that individuals may internalize more or less of the heterosexism(s) to which they have been exposed. Friend (1990) observes that heterosexism may give rise to internalization or to resistance. Unfortunately, the focus upon internalized heterosexism has meant that the latter possibility has been almost entirely ignored.

Another difficulty with the construct of internalized heterosexism is the breadth of some of the definitions used. For some writers, almost any problems experienced by a lesbian, gay man, or bisexual can be, and are, construed as the result of internalized heterosexism. Slater (1993), for example, claims that among the effects of internalized heterosexism are:

- self-doubt, isolation, engaging in attempts at heterosexuality in order to survive,
- identifying with the aggressors and allowing further abuse, inability to function socially
or academically, self-hated or self-loathing, and engaging in serious self-destructive behaviours including substance abuse, eating disorders, serious risk taking, self-mutilation, and suicide attempts. (p. 197)

Malyon (1981/82) argues that internalized heterosexism "influences identity formation, self-esteem, the elaboration of defenses, patterns of cognition, psychological integrity, and object relations ... [and] contributes to a propensity for guilt and intropunitiveness" (p. 60). Koonen (1994) sees internalized heterosexism in gay men's "feelings of immaturity, powerlessness, effeminacy, inferiority, pretence, social ineptness, isolation, shame, and self-loathing" (p. 41).

McHenry and Johnson (1993) look for internalized heterosexism in:

- clients diagnosed with depression, anxiety, substance abuse, narcissism, borderline personality disorder, identity disorder [sic], compulsive sexuality, codependency, paranoia, sexual dysfunctions, sexual identity problems, physical and sexual abuse issues, violent behaviours, self-destructive acting out behaviours, sadomasochistic behaviours and low self-esteem. (p. 144)

Surveying the behaviours that are believed to be manifestations of internalized heterosexism, one is reminded of the inventiveness which enabled an earlier generation of psychiatrists to find the root of every problem experienced by a homosexual in his, or less frequently her, homosexuality per se, rather than in the oppression experienced because of his or her homosexuality.

Moreover, many writers argue that internalized oppression is more damaging than oppression by others. Slater (1988) asserts that internalized heterosexism is "more dangerous" than what she calls overt homophobia (p. 227), a category which she defines as including verbal harassment, physical attacks, hospitalization and forced treatment, and job loss! New (1993) asserts that feminist therapy argues that "women are psychically hurt not so much by mistreatment and discrimination as by their own belief in the justifications offered for such
treatment," that is, by their internalized oppression (p. 191). Sophie (1987) echoes this in her observation that when a lesbian comes into therapy because of issues related to her lesbian identity, "the major source of distress is usually the individual's internalized homophobia" (p. 53), rather than, for example, the heterosexism of her family and heterosexual friends. Both Cabaj (1988) and McHenry and Johnson (1993) claim that in therapy, every lesbian, gay, and bisexual client will at some point explore her or his internalized heterosexism, unless the therapist prevents it from emerging.

The combination of the extension of the definition of internalized heterosexism to include almost any arguably dysfunctional behaviour exhibited by a lesbian, gay man, or bisexual, with the belief that the real damage done by oppression is done by internalized oppression is disturbing. From this perspective, external oppression virtually disappears, simultaneously being non-existent and unimportant. That is, problems that are experienced by lesbigays are seen almost by definition as stemming from their internalized heterosexism, rather than as a result of the (external) heterosexism they undoubtedly have experienced and are currently experiencing. This shift of focus from external heterosexism to internalized heterosexism is made explicit by Margolies, Becker, and Jackson-Brewer (1987), who call internalized heterosexism "the oppressor within" (p. 229). Hanley-Hackenbruck (1989) provides another interesting example of this focus in her assertion that individual differences in the coming-out process result from individual differences in internalized heterosexism, while neglecting to address the role of individual differences in the heterosexism of the client's environment. A more obvious contradiction is provided by Slater (1993), who observes that college students with internalized heterosexism will largely conceal their sexual orientation, being open with at most a few trusted peers. This concealment is said to stem from a fear of rejection by others. Slater (1993) then observes that "in fact, there is a great deal of reality in this
fear" (p. 190), leaving unanswered the question of why she chose to define the concealment as an effect of internalized heterosexism rather than as a rational response to a heterosexist environment.

**Blaming the victim?** Burstow (1992) argues that the focus on internalized heterosexism is another way of pathologizing lesbians, now that lesbianism per se is no longer pathological. Again, the focus is upon the problems of lesbians, now their internalized heterosexism, rather than the problems of those around them, specifically their heterosexism. As Moreau (1990) observes, many behaviours that are labelled as internalized oppression have been adopted by members of oppressed groups as survival tactics in a hostile world (see also Caplan, 1985; Gutierrez, 1990).

Assumptions that are made about how to explain individuals' behaviour may have a significant impact. In an article that has spoken to the experience of many women, Rich (1980) elucidates an ideology she calls compulsory heterosexuality. In our society, Rich (1980) argues, women are required to be heterosexual, which is enforced by simultaneously pressuring women to become and remain actively heterosexual and by defining all women as heterosexual. Necessary for the success of the regime of compulsory heterosexuality has been the many women who never think to question whether they are heterosexual. It could be argued that the social phenomenon Rich (1980) describes results largely from internalized heterosexism, specifically the belief held by most women that they are heterosexual, although in another context, they might enjoy or prefer sexual relationships with women. The constructs of internalized heterosexism and compulsory heterosexuality both describe the experience of the women who accept this ideology, but the latter also illuminates the pervasiveness and coerciveness of the pro-heterosexuality, anti-lesbianism environment within which women live.
The extent of the confusion of internalized heterosexism with rational responses to heterosexism is clearly demonstrated by the research that has been done on the process of coming out. The term coming out has had two somewhat different meanings. Coming out has meant making a personal commitment to a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity and it has also meant publicly acknowledging that one is lesbian, gay, or bisexual. These two definitions have co-existed for many years largely because researchers and clinicians have often assumed that a person sufficiently comfortable with her or his sexual orientation would necessarily be out publicly. Indeed, the two definitions have been conflated -- in order to achieve the later stages of many of the models of sexual identity development, one must be open about one's sexual orientation (e.g., Fassinger, 1991; Sophie, 1987). Yet as Schulman (1990/1994) argues, being publicly known as lesbian, gay, or bisexual is a luxury which many lesbians cannot afford, however comfortable they are personally with their sexual orientation. I suspect that collapsing the two definitions results from a failure to fully and consistently acknowledge how hostile the environment of some lesbians is -- although academics and clinicians may be, and at times still are, penalized for their sexual orientation, they are on average considerably less vulnerable than many other lesbians.

Recently, some researchers have begun testing the longstanding assumption that failure to be out publicly is a result of failure to reach the higher levels of identity development. Franke and Leary (1991) found that for their 184 lesbian, gay, and bisexual participants, the best predictor of the participants' openness about their sexual orientation was their perception of others' attitudes about lesbians; the participants' own feelings about being lesbian, gay, or bisexual predicted their openness only weakly. Harry (1993) found that for his gay participants, being out publicly was significantly related to the area in which they lived, their occupation, their income, and the predominant sexual orientation of their friends. As these variables have little to
do with any hypothesized stages of coming out, Harry (1993) concluded that the extent to which one is out publicly is more a function of one's circumstances or context than one's identity as a gay man. Testing Cass's (1979) model of lesbian and gay identity development, Brady and Busse (1994) found that psychological well-being and psychosocial adjustment were not significantly different for participants in the final three stages of the model. That is, for participants who had attained a coherent self-identity as gay or lesbian, psychological health and psychosocial well-being did not differ for those who were still quite reticent about their sexual orientation (Stage 4) as compared with those who were largely open (Stages 5 or 6). All of these findings suggest that what has long been seen by clinicians and academics as evidence of internalized heterosexism (not being out publicly) may in fact be more correctly seen as a response to the heterosexism of one's environment. It is ironic that people well-trained in psychology have made this mistake, as it is a well-known truth within social psychology that people tend to underestimate the impact of the situational determinants of another's behaviour, while overestimating the impact of the dispositional determinants (Collier et al., 1991).

The neglect of external heterosexism in favour of a focus on internalized heterosexism also has worrisome implications for research. Our ultimate goal, I would argue, should be to end oppression, rather than to merely cushion its impact. Thus, studying oppression, rather than only the effects of oppression, is crucial, as it is certain that we will not end oppression if we do not study it -- and, of course, act against it. I am simply astonished by the extent to which it appears possible for researchers and clinicians to avoid the conclusion that efforts must be directed towards decreasing the (external) oppression directed against lesbigsays. In a moving and sensitive article about the self-destructive behaviours engaged in by lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents as a result of the verbal and physical abuse they endure, Savin-Williams (1994) concludes by arguing that clinicians and researchers should work towards minimizing the
internalized heterosexism of these youth. Conspicuous by their absence from Savin-Williams' (1994) discussion are any ideas about how clinicians and researchers might also work towards decreasing the heterosexist verbal and physical abuse that too many young lesbians continue to experience, although his data seem to this reader to demand these interventions as well.

Although lesbians who are physically attacked because of their sexual orientation would without doubt benefit from understanding that they did not deserve to be abused, they would benefit considerably more were they simply not to be abused. Our ultimate goal must be the elimination of heterosexism, rather than the elimination of internalized heterosexism.

Although one might expect that mental health professionals and researchers would have a tendency to focus upon internalized heterosexism and pay relatively little attention to real, external heterosexism, it is somewhat surprising to see other lesbians, who are not invested in these systems, doing so. Within lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities, competing value judgements about what a lesbian, gay man, or bisexual should do, be, or believe are currently emerging in the form of debates about whether or not something is a result of internalized heterosexism (Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993). Proponents of "outing," choosing to reveal that a public figure who is passing for heterosexual is in fact lesbian, gay, or bisexual, have argued that outing is "a refutation of internalized homophobia" (Brownworth, 1990/1993, p. 252). Outing has also been defined as "internalized homophobia run amok" (Carr, 1991/1993, p. 274). It thus seems clear that it would be more helpful to openly debate the practice of outing, rather than to focus upon the relationship between this practice and internalized homophobia.

More disturbingly, lesbians of colour have reported that when they have chosen to be less than fully open about their sexual identities within their communities of origin, because they need that community as a refuge from the racism of the dominant society, they have been accused by white lesbians of doing so because of their internalized oppression (Anonymous, 1991).
Arguments about which political positions stem from internalized heterosexism are a poor substitute for openly debating political beliefs, goals, strategies, and tactics (Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993).

Not only does the overemphasis on internalized heterosexism pathologize lesbigays and erase the pathology of their environment and of those around them, but it also implies that the logical remedy is clinical change. What seems to be called for is a massive clinical effort to help lesbigays heal their internalized heterosexism. Reynolds and Koski (1993/94) apparently believe that access to understanding and compassionate counsellors will keep lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents from being at greater risk than heterosexual youth for academic difficulties, clinical depression, prostitution, and AIDS. Hammelman (1993), in an important article about suicidal behaviour among lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents, calls for therapists to do a thorough psychosocial assessment of and crisis intervention work (i.e., psychotherapy) with lesbian and gay youth who seek counselling from them. Hammelman (1993) calls her stance "proactive," although she does not advocate that therapists reach out to lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents, either for preventative work or to determine whether some of them might be in need of crisis work (p. 77). Still less does she (and most writers in this area) consider the possibility that clinicians might be able to play an important role in working against heterosexism, which would in turn result in decreasing young lesbigays' internalized heterosexism.

The Vermont Conference on the Primary Prevention of Psychopathology devoted to the prevention of homophobia and heterosexism, which I attended, similarly focused on privatized efforts to help lesbigays heal from emotional damage inflicted by homophobia and heterosexism, rather than addressing the systemic, political changes that would actually qualify as primary prevention (VCPPP, 1995). Yet researchers and clinicians could make substantial contributions towards decreasing heterosexism in many ways: Working towards sexual education classes for
children and adolescents that teach the diversity of human sexuality rather than heterosexuality; making “homophobia” and other kinds of prejudice visible as mental disorders, as “homosexuality” was once; providing public education about lesbians, particularly in debunking lesbian stereotypes; questioning, problematizing, and studying the origins of heterosexuality; using our knowledge and authority to work towards political changes that would decrease heterosexism, including same-sex marriage; and aggressively confronting the heterosexism which remains in our own fields (cf. Garnets et al., 1991).

Moreover, the focus on providing clinical assistance for lesbians is in stark contrast to research which suggests that therapists are not the only, or even necessarily the best, sources of help for lesbians. As do heterosexuals, lesbians rely on friends, partners, and family for support more than they do on therapists (Rothblum, 1990). In many communities, lesbians have also developed effective non-professional helping networks or organizations (D’Augelli, 1989a; Shilts, 1987). Kitzinger and Perkins (1993) and Caplan (1992) argue that especially for members of oppressed groups, friends, family, and community resources are preferable alternatives to psychotherapy, as even therapy which is intended to be affirmative risks pathologizing them further, and indeed often does.

**Heterosexuals and internalized heterosexism.** Although most theorists and researchers assume that heterosexuals do not experience internalized heterosexism, upon closer examination, this assumption is inconsistent with any reasonable definition of the construct of internalized heterosexism. Thus, this assumption provides further evidence of the theoretical incoherence of the construct.

The argument that only lesbians experience internalized heterosexism is contradicted by the difficulties experienced by many heterosexuals because of their own heterosexism. As oppressed people have pointed out since Frederick Douglass, oppression harms both the
oppressor and the oppressed because it dehumanizes both (Harper, 1992; Miller, 1986).

Heterosexism also has other negative consequences for heterosexuals. In her study of adolescents, Elze (1992) found that many of the heterosexual teens she interviewed had engaged in behaviour that they would not have otherwise chosen in order to demonstrate that they were indeed heterosexual. Girls in particular described themselves as engaging in unwanted heterosexual sexual behaviours to prove their heterosexuality (Elze, 1992). Pharr (1988) argues that heterosexism keeps women from taking effective collective action against their oppression by men, as heterosexual women must put much time and energy into demonstrating that although they are working with other women, they are not lesbians. Similarly, Adams (1994) points out that many heterosexuals who engage in stigmatized sexual behaviours have common cause with lesbigays; a majority of people do not fit within the heterosexual norm, which excludes not only lesbigays, but also those who openly practise non-monogamy, transgenderism, and sadomasochism. Adams (1994) argues that heterosexism has prevented these heterosexuals from working for sexual freedom in coalition with lesbigays. Some heterosexuals find that their own heterosexism interferes with formation of close same-sex friendships, a problem that is particularly severe for men (Thompson, 1992).

Moreover, the argument that heterosexism and internalized heterosexism differ because the former involves heterosexuals learning stereotypes about lesbiagays and the latter involves lesbiagays learning stereotypes about themselves cannot be sustained. Stereotypes about lesbiagays are also stereotypes about heterosexuals, as the two groups are defined as being complete opposites. Especially for heterosexual men, learning that gay men have a particular attribute or interest (whether or not this stereotype has any basis in reality) often makes it unlikely that they will develop that attribute or interest. That is, stereotypes about lesbiagays may have a significant impact on a heterosexual man's self-definition, including his occupational choice, as he avoids.
jobs which are perceived as “gay” (Blumenfeld, 1992). Blinde and Taub (1992) interviewed 24 female college athletes to investigate the impact of the stereotype that female athletes are lesbians. Many of the women described themselves or other female athletes they knew as consciously behaving in a more feminine manner to convey their heterosexuality: being careful to dress and act in a feminine way, making sure to have a boyfriend to show off, or openly being sexual with men. Internalization of the stereotype was seen in the efforts of some of the women to limit the intimacy of their relationships with other women, especially their teammates, and in the care which some women took in order to not be too athletic -- for example, one woman limited her weight training, so that she would not become too muscular, something that one might have thought would be an unlikely limitation for an athlete (Blinde & Taub, 1992).

Finally, a neat differentiation between the heterosexism of heterosexuals and the internalized heterosexism of lesbigays requires a clear distinction between those who are heterosexual and those who are not. Studies of sexual identities and sexual behaviour have found, however, that the two are not always identical and that both may change over time (DeCecco, 1981; Golden, 1987; Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolf, 1985). People who label themselves as heterosexual but have some same-sex attraction or experience are likely to experience internalized heterosexism, whatever the definition used (Neisen, 1993). Moreover, heterosexuality, like other forms of sexual identity, is socially constructed within a particular context. A woman who has always labelled herself as heterosexual and has had only heterosexual sex may have also, or instead, chosen to have sexual relationships with women in an environment where she perceived this to be a possibility (Penelope, 1989; Rich, 1980). Women who come out as lesbians after identifying as heterosexual often later describe their heterosexual identity as one which they adopted because of the lack of visible alternatives or because their socialization taught them that they were supposed to be heterosexual (see, e.g., Hall Carpenter
Archives Lesbian Oral History Group, 1989; Holmes, 1988). In these examples, a woman's heterosexuality does not appear to have prevented her from having internalized heterosexism — indeed, it would be more accurate to say that her heterosexuality appears to be an extreme manifestation of internalized heterosexism.

Thus, I argue that to restrict the definition of internalized heterosexism to lesbigays is to deny many grounds of similarity between the experiences of heterosexuals and those of lesbigays. Both heterosexuals and lesbigays may suffer personally because of their own heterosexism; in particular, the self-concept and self-esteem of people of all sexual orientations may be negatively affected by heterosexism. Finally, both heterosexuals and lesbigays may experience this heterosexism as unwanted but difficult to change, and thus feel it as imposed upon them.

**Summary:** The construct of internalized heterosexism. The above summary makes clear that the construct of internalized heterosexism has been reified. Although it is widely assumed that the term is well-defined, in fact a bewildering variety of somewhat-contradictory definitions have been offered. Begging as many questions as it answers, the construct of internalized heterosexism has obscured important issues, foreclosed debate, and prescribed the terms within which research is done.

A central core of the construct of internalized heterosexism appears unarguable — most lesbigays, to a large extent socialized within and by the heterosexist mainstream, appear to have believed to some extent and for at least some period of time in many of the stereotypes about lesbigays that are perpetuated by the dominant culture. Many lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals appear to have at some time learned lies about themselves and others like themselves, lies which hurt them through their impact on their self-esteem, their self-conceptualization, and their understanding of the kind of lives that it is possible for them to lead as someone who is not
heterosexual. The psychological distress that many lesbigays experience while they are coming out (in either sense of the term) provides substantial support for this observation. However, it is also important to recognize that most of what is known about such experiences is reported in retrospect, as people who are struggling most seriously with internalized heterosexism are not visible in the lesbigay communities, do not volunteer for research on topics related to sexuality, and are unlikely to enter therapy with openly lesbigay therapists.

Beyond this central core, however, are many important issues and conflicts, most of which remain largely unacknowledged within the research literature. Particularly disturbing is the breadth of many of the definitions of internalized heterosexism. For many researchers, clinicians, and theorists, internalized heterosexism is offered as the explanation of choice for almost any feeling, attitude, or behaviour on the part of a lesbian, gay man or bisexual which is seen as dysfunctional or undesirable. The result is that lesbigays are once again classified as psychopathological, although in this conceptualization the psychopathology is the result of the heterosexism that they have experienced (Erwin, 1993). Broad definitions of internalized heterosexism also render all but invisible the external oppression which lesbigays experience and, hence, the psychopathology of those who act to perpetuate heterosexism.

Finally, broad definitions of the construct of internalized heterosexism suggest that the appropriate response to the distress experienced by lesbigays should be directed towards lesbigays, and moreover should be clinical. Individual psychopathology is typically seen as best dealt with at an individual level, psychotherapeutically, whether or not that psychopathology developed because of societal oppression. Thus, efforts are largely directed towards healing individuals, rather than altering the societal oppression that engenders the problems, which contributes to their continuance.
 Undoing the Negative Consequences of Oppression on the Basis of Sexual Orientation

Although the psychological consequences of the prejudice and discrimination experienced by lesbians have been depicted as an extremely serious problem, surprisingly little attention has been devoted to discussing how these consequences can be overcome. In part, this results from the pervasive tendency of psychologists to describe what is, rather than to investigate the process of how change occurs, a considerably more difficult undertaking. It is also a consequence of the fact that most of this literature is written by and directed at professionals, especially clinicians, but also school counsellors and teachers, all of whom assume that the logical remedy is professional intervention, usually individual psychotherapy or counselling with lesbians. As Gonsiorek (1988) observes, what mental health professionals know best is psychotherapy, so that is what they most often recommend, even when other kinds of intervention would be more appropriate.

As discussed above, the tendency of lesbians to internalize heterosexism has often been seen as the worst consequence of their oppression. As a result, much of what research exists on the question of undoing these consequences has focused upon working through internalized heterosexism.

Identity development models for members of all oppressed groups typically depict a first stage in which internalized oppression largely defines the individual's understanding of what it means to belong to the stigmatized group (Rowe, Bennett, & Atkinson, 1994; for lesbians, see Kahn, 1991). Progress out of this stage requires, and indeed is typically defined by, the individual's resolution of her or his internalized oppression. It appears to be assumed that this development occurs naturally as the individual comes to learn more about the community to which they belong. From this perspective, internalized heterosexism is seen as a natural result of the ignorance of most people, of all sexual orientations, about lesbians. The stereotypes are
accepted as truth largely because no countervailing, more correct information is available. As that information becomes available, it replaces the individual's internalized oppression. For example, a young man who has recently begun to think he may be gay may have at some point learned the stereotype that all gay relationships are based solely upon sex. When he begins to meet gay couples, he will find some whose relationships are clearly loving in the way that he has been taught only heterosexual relationships can be, and he will reject the stereotype.

This is obviously an oversimplification. One major complicating factor is the problem of self-fulfilling prophecies. To some extent, one perceives what one expects to perceive (Prilleltensky, 1990), so that one may perceive only what is consistent with one's stereotypes. A study by Testa, Kinder, and Ironson (1987) demonstrated experimentally how the belief that lesbians have inferior relationships functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Participants who were presented with identical descriptions about lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples, perceived the gay and lesbian couples as less satisfied with their relationships and less in love, as compared with the heterosexual couples. Stillings and Dobbins (1991) argue that stereotypes about members of oppressed groups are typically very resistant to being altered by any experiential data one might gather. They give the "glaring example" of the "odious tradition that Columbus 'discovered' America," which in fact was already populated by numerous indigenous cultures (Stillings & Dobbins, 1991, p. 209). The spectacle of the 1992 celebrations of the 500th anniversary of this "discovery" and the very negative responses made to those who disagreed with this version of history provide further evidence of the validity of Stillings and Dobbins' (1991) argument.

Stereotypes may also function as self-fulfilling prophecies in that one's stereotypes may influence one's own behaviour in such a way that the probability of the expected or stereotypical outcome is increased. L.S. Brown (1986) observes that many lesbian couples experience
problems in sexual functioning as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Having internalized negative stereotypes about lesbian sexuality, the couple may behave in ways that decrease the likelihood that they will establish a rewarding sexual relationship. Moreover, no attempt may be made to solve any sexual problems that exist, as the sexual relationship is expected to be poor. Fein and Nuehring (1981) argue that as lesbigays reformulate their life choices after having realized their sexual orientation, their choices may result in fulfilment of some stereotypes, e.g., that library science is a popular career for lesbigays, and that large cities have proportionately more lesbigays than do small towns or rural areas.

Not only does the power of stereotypes to shape our perceptions and behaviour often render them self-fulfilling prophecies, but even when stereotypes are intellectually recognized as false, they may retain considerable power over an individual's feelings, attitudes, and behaviour. Many parents of lesbigays have a difficult time letting go of their heterosexism so as to be able to salvage their relationship with their son or daughter, even when they wish to do so (Borhek, 1988; Tremble et al., 1989). Rejecting the ideology and manifestations of oppression may also be difficult for members of the oppressed group as well. For example, it is typical for both women and men, of all sexual orientations, to struggle with old habits of speech for some period of time after making a decision to stop using sexist or heterosexist language. Citing the difficulties of working through internalized heterosexism, theorists and clinicians have begun to argue that the achievement of a positive lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity requires not the elimination of internalized heterosexism (as had been assumed), but a reduction of it to "manageable proportions" (Sophie, 1987, p. 54; see also Kahn, 1991). Some clinicians have gone so far as to argue that because of the heterosexism in which they were socialized, all lesbigays, therapists and clients, will retain some residue of internalized heterosexism (Gartrell, 1984; McHenry & Jackson, 1993). As anti-racist activists have argued, what is most important is to act
against racism, rather than endlessly focusing on removing all traces of racism from one's psyche, as it is the former which contributes much more meaningfully to the goal of ending racism (Lorde, 1981/1997).

Research on the process of undoing this more complex conceptualization of internalized heterosexism is rather limited. Most often, the subject is raised within the context of doing psychotherapy with lesbigays. Internalized heterosexism is seen as an issue that may be important to address when one is doing psychotherapy with a lesbian, gay, or bisexual client -- or, by some writers, as an issue that should always be addressed (e.g., Cabaj, 1988; McHenry & Jackson, 1993). As is typical of discussions of therapy, the focus is on general theoretical information presented at a fairly high level of abstraction. The actual process that the therapist uses to work through the client's internalized heterosexism is described cursorily, because it is assumed that much of what happens in therapy cannot be discussed in any detail as it is specific to the individual client and therapist. Moreover, as the intended audience is comprised of competent clinicians, the main purpose of the publication is to give these clinicians basic information about lesbigays which will assist them in doing psychotherapy with this client group. Malyon (1981/82), for example, describes the contribution he intends to make in an article as "not a prescription for how to do psychotherapy [with gay men] ... [but] a frame of reference for the accomplished clinician," (p 62). Thus, Malyon (1981/82) observes that "knowledgeable and sensitive interventions can mitigate the subjective bias created by internalized homophobia" (p. 67). However, he does not go on to describe particular interventions, although it is clear that in his mind they are psychodynamic (Malyon, 1981/82). In contrast, Sophie (1987) recommends cognitive therapy techniques to assist clients in decreasing their internalized heterosexism. She argues that the basic process underlying the reduction of internalized heterosexism is cognitive
restructuring, changing the meanings associated with lesbian or bisexual identity and changing
one's self-concept and one's future expectations so as to be consistent with one's sexual identity.13

Nonetheless, the research literature provides some guidance as to how lesbigays might
undo their internalized heterosexism. Besides psychotherapy, the most frequently-advocated
intervention recommended within this literature is that a lesbian, gay man, or bisexual must
somehow come into contact with and then become involved with one or more of the lesbian, gay,
and bisexual communities that are available to her or him. For most therapists who are
affirmative of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, assisting a client to become involved with the
community is a priority (e.g., Fassinger, 1991; Gartrell, 1984; Helfand, 1993; Margolies et al.,
1987). Slater (1988) suggests many resources that psychologists might use to assist lesbian and
gay youth, almost all of which are produced within lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities and
serve to get the youth in contact with those communities -- books, papers, meetings, workshops,
performances, the local lesbigay newspaper, and community resources and programs. Kooden
(1994) argues that for many gay men, psychotherapy is useful as a socialization process which
assists gay men to become adult members of the gay community. Indeed, some lesbigays appear
to need psychotherapy only until they are able to become involved with the lesbian, gay, and
bisexual communities, although few therapists recommend routinely considering the possibility
of termination once a client has made sufficient connections with and within lesbigay
communities. Gartrell (1984) relates the experience of a lesbian client who felt that she no longer
needed therapy after she had made some lesbian friends with whom she could talk.

Another version of community endorsed by the research literature is the creation of
support groups for lesbigays. Gonsiorek (1988) argues that support groups provide the most
valuable resources for lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents. Ideally, they focus on social and
developmental issues, allowing the participants to develop social skills, exchange information,
discuss the meanings of sexuality and sexual identity, share support and understanding, and socialize. Masterson (1983) advocates consciousness-raising discussion groups for lesbians, where the participants collectively explore issues around coming out to self, coming out to others, and managing one's social and occupational identities within a heterosexist society. A similar, though less structured, process is suggested by Sophie (1987) and Hanley-Hackenbruck (1989), who recommend that new lesbigays develop friendships with other lesbigays.

Many therapists who are themselves lesbian, gay, or bisexual argue that another method of undoing internalized heterosexism is for them to be role models for clients. That is, they provide their lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients with counter-examples to the client's internalized heterosexist beliefs, a process which is believed to assist clients in working through these beliefs. Moreover, they believe, they also serve as someone upon whom clients may model themselves. Malony (1981/82) observes that for a gay male client, a gay male therapist can serve as a model of psychological integration and a positive gay identity, as well as serving to counter stereotypes. Gartrell (1984) argues that as a lesbian psychiatrist, teacher, and researcher, she disproves the myth that lesbians cannot be successful and competent. Kooden (1994) claims that as a gay male therapist, he is "a mature and competent adult" who "teach[es] the other how to function at optimum capacity and to realize his potential ... [and] impart[s] lifelong skills in living and loving successfully while integrating his intellectual, emotional and spiritual life" (p. 48).¹⁴

Other writers propose as role models neither themselves nor their colleagues, but other, more visible lesbigays, in order to decrease internalized heterosexism. Slater (1988), for example, suggests that psychologists "provide examples of successful and healthy lesbians and gay men currently living and in history, the media and literature" (p. 229). Gonsiorek (1988) observes that within some lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities, formal structures for providing lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth with role models are being developed. Efforts to
introduce openly lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals and issues into the curriculum are advocated so strongly in part because doing so provides important role models (D'Augelli, 1991; Garber, 1994).

In various ways, all of these approaches to reducing internalized heterosexism are based upon the importance of lesbigays knowing or knowing about other lesbigays. It is possible to distinguish several reasons why this is seen as crucial. Perhaps most important is the simple realization that other lesbigays exist. As discussed above, for many newly-emerging lesbigays, the most painful aspect of their situation is their feelings of isolation, and their dread that they will always be alone.

A connection to or knowledge about other lesbigays is also seen as providing counterexamples to stereotypes about lesbigays. In a society where many young lesbigays fervently believe that one cannot be both happy, or successful, and lesbian, gay, or bisexual, the importance of this cannot be overemphasized. Sophie (1987) argues that the diversity which exists among lesbians is sufficient to prove all stereotypes about lesbians false, although this has not prevented endless discussion about who is "really" a lesbian within, as well as outside, lesbian communities.

Knowledge about other lesbigays is also seen as important to normalize the experience of a lesbian, gay man, or bisexual (Gonsiorek, 1988). Neisen (1993) argues that individuals who are being or have been abused, which includes lesbigays experiencing heterosexism, will often: (1) minimize the abuse or not recognize it as abuse at all; (2) blame themselves for the abuse; and (3) give up hope that their lives could ever be better. The loss of hope may be devastating for those who as a result give up working to make changes in their lives (Neisen, 1993). As in consciousness-raising groups, it is often easier to see that others are not to blame for the abuse they have experienced than to realize that one is oneself blameless. Thus, the power of talking
with, or even knowing about, others in the same situation is that it makes it much more likely that one will be able to see the heterosexism that one has experienced and is currently experiencing for what it is. That is, information about other lesbigays assists individuals in understanding that the problem lies not in them, but in the heterosexism of their environment and, all too frequently, of those closest to them. It is also important for someone newly identifying as lesbigay to be exposed to a variety of responses to heterosexism. Many lesbigays, especially new lesbigays, feel helpless to challenge heterosexism, and as a result never do so, which often results in feelings of worthlessness (D’Augelli, 1991). In contrast, other new lesbigays place impossible demands upon themselves to confront heterosexism (Hanley-Hackenbruck, 1989). Talking with others about how to respond to heterosexism assists lesbigays to decide how confrontational they want to be and how to direct their energies so as to be most effective (Masterson, 1983).

Finally, it is seen as important for a lesbian, gay man, or bisexual to connect with the lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities, or an affirmative therapist, because of the relatively greater likelihood that the individual will receive validation from other lesbigays than from heterosexuals. Not all lesbigays are necessarily affirmative of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals — Gartrell (1984) observes that a lesbian therapist will not necessarily do lesbian-affirmative psychotherapy. Affirmation is, however, more probable from other lesbigays; although heterosexuals may be affirmative of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, relatively few are (Garnets et al., 1991; Keating, 1994). Lesbigays cannot even count on their parents and family of origin to be supportive (Borhek, 1988).

Beyond the importance of the emerging lesbian, gay, or bisexual knowing or knowing about other lesbigays, a second, less obvious theme in the research and clinical literature on decreasing internalized heterosexism is the importance of participation. Emerging lesbigays must begin to talk about themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, that is, they must begin to come out to
others to some extent. Neisen (1993) calls this breaking the silence. Part of the reason, I think, it has been assumed that therapy is the appropriate place for lesbigays to break their silence is the presumed safety of therapy. For many authors, this safety is extremely important. For example, it is typically recommended that support groups for lesbigays be led by professionals (Gonsiorek, 1988; Masterson, 1983). Among other responsibilities, leaders are advised to intervene when a group participant brings up an issue which is more appropriate to group therapy than to a support group or a consciousness-raising group (Masterson, 1983). Another reason why therapy is seen as a good place for a lesbian, gay man, or bisexual to first break her or his silence is that an emerging lesbian, gay man, or bisexual may also make poor choices about coming out to others, both in terms of whom she or he chooses to tell and how she or he goes about doing so (Borhek, 1988; Hanley-Hackenbruck, 1989). For these writers, therapy is seen as important to assist an emerging lesbian, gay man, or bisexual in the process of coming out, both to self and to others, as easily and as safely as possible.

A third theme that emerges from this literature is that working through one’s internalized heterosexism is a process experienced by each new lesbian, gay man, and bisexual (Fein & Nuehring, 1981; Neisen, 1993). Hanley-Hackenbruck (1989) postulates a slow transition through growing self-awareness, positive experiences, and questioning of stereotypes. As Monette (1993) reports, once he realized that one stereotype was false, he wondered whether others might be too.

The final theme that is evident in this literature is the emergence of lesbigays from the self-hatred of internalized heterosexism into a new identity. Having assumed that she or he was heterosexual, a lesbian, gay man, or bisexual must reconstruct her or his social reality, including her or his self-concept, when she or he realizes otherwise (Fein & Nuehring, 1981). Neisen (1993) argues that the final stage of therapy is for a lesbian, gay man, or bisexual to reclaim her or his personal power, to redefine her or his self-concept as an individual who is lesbian, gay, or
bisexual, and to recover her or his self-esteem and self-confidence. In part because this literature is focused upon the experiences of lesbians who come out while they are in therapy, the process is assumed to have the potential to simultaneously facilitate other important changes within the client. Thus, having other lesbians as role models is of great importance, as they suggest possibilities to the new lesbian, gay man, or bisexual as she or he not only begins to self-define as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, but also develops a new and perhaps very different identity (e.g., Koo den, 1994).

The community literature. The themes discussed above are also present in another literature, which is produced by lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals who do not identify themselves as writing primarily within an academic or professional context. I call this literature, the community literature. Even more strongly than in the academic/professional literature, the emphasis within the community literature is upon the importance of new lesbians becoming involved with the lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities. The community literature also conceptualizes a process in which the new lesbian, gay man, or bisexual both develops her or his sexual identity and integrates into the lesbigay communities. The community literature differs from the academic/professional literature principally in that therapy or other specialized interventions are not seen as necessary to assist the emerging lesbian, gay man, or bisexual through this process.

Within the community literature, there is a widespread belief that the process of becoming a fully-fledged member of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities is largely self-guided. Stein (1989) argues that despite the increasing agreement among theorists and researchers that our sexual identities are to some extent both socially constructed and fluid, "most people experience their sexuality as a powerful, natural, unchanging force" (p. 2). Stein's (1989) assertion also holds for many lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, who believe that they were
always lesbian, gay, or bisexual, although heterosexism prevented them from realizing it for some period of time. The process of coming out is thus conceptualized as a kind of self-discovery; one is merely working through the distortions that have been imposed upon one by heterosexism to uncover whom one already is — a lesbian, gay man, or bisexual. Hence this process is seen as relatively uncomplicated and inherently self-directed. One collection of gay men’s coming out stories is called “Revelations,” a title which implies that coming out occurred when the men realized that they were gay, rather than at some point in a process during which they became gay (Curtis, 1989b). Even for those lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals who experience their sexual identity as to some extent chosen, the process of coming out typically feels like discovering a more authentic self. As have other lesbigays (Adam, 1978), Frye (1990) writes that for her becoming lesbian was like coming home, implying a sense of recognition that assisted her through the process. Weise (1992) entitled her collection of writings by bisexual feminists “Closer to Home,” suggesting that for these women, a bisexual identity was a closer approximation to the person whom they “really” were than was the lesbian identity which many of the women initially adopted.

The community literature also, however, contains a widespread acknowledgement that some people may have difficulties with the process of coming out. As a result, a multitude of resources and assistance is offered. A considerable amount of nonfiction exists which is intended to help acclimatize new lesbigays both to their sexual orientation and to the lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities. Collections of coming out stories or lesbians’ and/or gay men’s life histories provide information, role models, reassurance, and helpful hints (e.g., Curtis, 1989b; Hall Carpenter Archives Lesbian Oral History Group, 1989; Holmes, 1988; Vacha, 1985). Other books have been written specifically as introductions to being lesbian, gay, or bisexual (e.g., Biery, 1990; Preston, 1991). Some lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities have organized
telephone information and advice lines, which offer listening, advice, information, and support to
lesbigays, particularly emerging lesbigays. Coming out, discussion, and support groups may be
available. Beyond the diversity of resources offered, the community literature also offers a wide
variety of choices to an emerging lesbian, gay man, or bisexual through its greater recognition of
multiple lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities. For example, those communities defined by
lesbigays who also identify as members of a racial or ethnic group are much more visible in the
community literature than they are in the academic/professional literature.

In contrast to the academic/professional literature, where most writers appear content to
work toward helping lesbigays who have been victimized by heterosexism, writers within the
community literature are much more vocal in advocating social change, particularly within the
mass media and the educational system. The immediate goal is to decrease heterosexism, both on
the institutional and social level, and within individuals of all sexual orientations. A more long-
term goal is to decrease the heterosexism that incipient lesbigays will internalize. Radical activist
groups like Queer Nation, the Lesbian Avengers, and ACT UP are committed to increasing the
positive visibility of lesbigays and fighting heterosexism (Schulman, 1994). There is evidence
that mainstream lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals are also becoming increasingly radical in their
activism in pursuit of these goals (Gross, 1993; Signorile, 1993), although lesbigays' recent focus
on same-sex marriage as a central political goal has been argued to be symptomatic of a retreat
from radical politics (Brownworth, 1996).

The Present Study

Thus, the literature on the overcoming of the negative psychological consequences of
prejudice and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is far from conclusive. The
professional and academic literature has assumed that psychotherapy, usually individual but
sometimes group, is the most appropriate intervention for lesbigays struggling with heterosexism
and/or their newly-discovered sexual orientation. Many of these writers also advocate assisting
the emerging lesbian, gay man, or bisexual to make use of various resources produced by the
lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities in conjunction with psychotherapy; some therapists
suggest that psychotherapy should function as a transitional resource for new lesbigays to enable
them to connect with the lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities. Notably, this framework, with
its focus on assisting individual lesbigays to deal with the consequences of heterosexism, does
not facilitate discussion of questions about how heterosexuals might make similar changes,
although heterosexism also harms many of those who identify as heterosexual.

The literature produced by members of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities who
do not identify as academics or mental health professionals has primarily focused upon the
importance of the emerging lesbian, gay man, or bisexual becoming a member of the lesbian, gay,
and bisexual communities. The process of emerging is seen as less difficult and more self-guided
than in the academic/professional literature. This literature also highlights the many different
community resources which function to assist in the process, and have been made available
largely through the efforts of members of the lesbigay communities.

Examining both the academic/professional and the community literatures on the undoing
of internalized heterosexism more closely provides some intriguing suggestions about how at
least some lesbigays manage to achieve a more positive valuation of being lesbian, gay, or
bisexual. For many lesbigays, knowing, or knowing about, other lesbigays appears to decrease
isolation, provide counterexamples to stereotypes and role models, and normalize their
experience. Talking about themselves as lesbigays and receiving validation for doing so is seen
as important. Finally, it is argued that lesbigays must create or discover a new self-identity as
someone who is lesbian, gay, or bisexual and begin to interact with others in a manner consistent
with that new self-identity. However, neither literature sheds much light on why or how these processes work.

In general, neither of these literatures provides much information about the experiences of the newly-emerging lesbian, gay man, or bisexual as she or he redefines her or his understanding and valuation of being lesbian, gay, or bisexual. It is assumed that this validation comes mostly from other lesbigays, yet most writers do not acknowledge the paradoxical nature of this growth -- how can someone whose sexual orientation you despise provide you with validation? -- which seems to me a major reason why the process is both so difficult and so important. Moreover, both literatures are written from the perspective of those who seek to assist new lesbigays through the process. The academic/professional literature is particularly distant from the experience of new lesbigays, as it is primarily directed toward mental health professionals, who in turn are expected to assist new lesbigays. Within the community literature, many writers talk retrospectively about their own emergence, but the goal of relating the experience is to assist emerging lesbigays, rather than to describe their experience as completely and accurately as possible. Neither literature addresses the wide variety of responses found within emerging lesbigays that I assume exists (Curtis, 1989a). Indeed, one of the central questions that the academic/professional literature has set itself is a complete description of the stages of coming out (which is assumed to be a well-defined process that all lesbigays go through). Moreover, the professional literature speaks very largely about clients (although this is not always acknowledged), who of course are different in many ways from non-clients. The community literature makes visible only the experiences of lesbigays (and much less often heterosexuals) who are sufficiently involved within lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities to become involved in producing the literature.
It is for these reasons that I have chosen to conduct the present study. I began planning the study with an interest in the experiences of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals who successfully struggle with, that is, to some extent overcome, some of the feelings, thoughts, and behaviours that are usually labelled internalized heterosexism. In particular, I was interested in studying the various processes that lesbigays use in doing so. As I studied the various literatures, I became troubled by the way in which lesbigays and heterosexuals were perceived as two entirely independent groups of people. The blurred boundaries between sexual identities, especially between heterosexuality and bisexuality, were ignored. I was also struck by the neglect of the fact that in a heterosexist context, most lesbigays think or assume that they are heterosexual for some period of time -- indeed, almost all writing on lesbigays assume that a lesbigay must "come out," a psychological task which includes realizing that one is not heterosexual. I hypothesized that for some people who would later identify as lesbigay, some alterations in their internalized heterosexism might occur while they were still identifying as heterosexual. Thus, I also became very interested in examining the experiences of heterosexuals who had made similar changes in their valuations of lesbigays.

It was my assumption that because of heterosexism, and in particular the lack of systematic and accessible knowledge about psychologically healthy lesbigays, many (perhaps most) lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and, to a lesser extent, heterosexuals make use of a number of different processes to decrease their internalized heterosexism. I was interested in examining these processes, including individual variation in their use, investigating how people find and make use of them, and exploring how those individuals who use particular strategies think about them. As I read the literature and thought about these processes further, it became clear to me that internalized heterosexism is more likely to be replaced with positive valuations of lesbigays than to be simply decreased or eliminated (Beam, 1991). Because the academic/professional
literature has almost entirely ignored the issue of positive lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities, I became interested in studying both negative and positive conceptualizations and valuations of being lesbian, gay, and bisexual and how and why these change over time. I came to conceptualize my study as an investigation of the ways in which individuals of all sexual orientations are able to achieve a positive valuation of being lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

This formulation of my research topic, with its focus on the diversity and subjectivity of individuals' experience, necessitates the use of qualitative research methodology. Perhaps the hallmark of qualitative methodology is its commitment to studying individuals' subjective experience and the ways that they understand their experiences, with a commitment to examining the variability of both. Denzin and Lincoln (1994a) argue that qualitative researchers "attempt to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 2). McCracken (1988) argues that the most important difference between quantitative and qualitative methodologies is that within quantitative research, the analytic categories to be studied are defined as precisely as possible by the researcher before the study begins, and the purpose of the study is to investigate the relationships between the categories. In contrast, the goal of qualitative methodologies is to isolate and define analytic categories during the study itself, and then to investigate their interrelationships (McCracken, 1988). Thus, the researcher studies analytic categories which are developed on the basis of data collected from the participants, rather than her or his own ideas (McCracken, 1988).

Although qualitative research encompasses many methodologies, I have chosen to use grounded theory for the present study. Grounded theory is "a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed" (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 273). First developed by sociologists Glaser and Strauss in 1967, grounded theory grew out of their concern that sociologists were preoccupied with "inordinately
speculative" theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 275), resulting in an "embarrassing gap between theory and empirical research" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, cited in Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 275). In contrast, Glaser and Strauss argued that theory should be derived from, and indeed grounded in, data (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). To achieve this goal, they developed a systematic approach to the analysis of data and subsequent generation of theory which they called grounded theory. This call for a closer relationship between empirical research and theory has been echoed in psychology, social work, education, and nursing, and grounded theory has repeatedly been proposed as a useful methodology to bridge the gap (Gilgun, 1994; Rennie, Phillips, & Quartaro, 1988; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Denzin and Lincoln (1994b) suggest that grounded theory may be the most widely used qualitative method within the social sciences.

I chose grounded theory as the methodology for the present study for several reasons: its systematic approach to data analysis and theory generation, its commitment to developing theory, and the congruence of the assumptions of grounded theory and those of the present study. Although the procedures of grounded theory have not changed since their inception, they have become more specific and more elaborate as the method has evolved through use (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). As a result, grounded theory currently "gives the researcher a specific set of steps to follow" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994b, p. 200). For many researchers, including myself, the systematic nature of grounded theory, as compared with other qualitative methods, recommends it as a methodology (e.g., Rennie et al., 1988).

Another advantage of grounded theory is that use of this methodology results in a very comprehensive analysis. Similar to other qualitative methodologies, grounded theory is a useful technique to analyze and describe participants' experience (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The major difference between grounded theory and other qualitative methodologies is that grounded theory is equally committed to deriving theory based upon this description (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).
Both of these goals are of importance to me. As I have discussed above, I believe that an understanding of individuals' experiences with achieving a positive valuation of being lesbian, gay, or bisexual comprises an important lacuna of both the academic/professional and the community literatures. However, I am also very interested in pursuing a theoretical analysis. The academic/professional literature is so theoretical that in order to relate my own research to it, and in particular to use the present study to contribute to it, I must also investigate the theoretical implications of my data. Moreover, my personal preference is for a fairly abstract level of analysis.

Another reason for the use of grounded theory in the present study is that this methodology enables researchers to interpret the participants' experience in ways that may not be congruent with their own understanding (Charmaz, 1983; Rennie et al., 1988; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). This follows from grounded theory's commitment to explaining as well as describing participants' experience (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). For example, in their study of the client's experience of psychotherapy, Rennie et al. (1988) derived a category they labelled "client defensiveness." This was a concept that the researchers felt captured certain aspects of the data, although the client-interviewees did not make use of this concept in their explanations of their behaviour. The possibility of interpreting participants' experience in terms of concepts that they do not endorse is important in the present study, as much of the literature assumes that many people are reluctant to acknowledge and may be unconscious of their internalized heterosexism. Although I did not know whether my data would support this assumption, it was essential that my methodology allowed me the possibility of examining and addressing the issue.

Moreover, the basic assumptions made by grounded theorists are congruent with those of the present study. Grounded theory directs researchers towards a focus on process and change (Gilgun, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1994), a focus which is the basis of my own philosophy of
research, including the present study. Strauss and Corbin (1994) assert that grounded theorists are concerned with "reciprocal changes in patterns of action/interaction and in relationship with changes of conditions whether internal or external to the process itself" (p. 278). Charmaz (1983) calls this the development of a processual analysis. In her own study of the chronically ill, Charmaz (1983) investigated not only the analytic category of self-pity, but also the processual categories of becoming immersed in self-pity and reversing self-pity. Although it was not the focus of his study, when Rennie (1992) used grounded theory to investigate the experiences of clients during psychotherapy, he derived substantial information about clients' perspectives on the processes of change through psychotherapy.

Grounded theory also assumes that context is crucial to understanding experience, as I do in the present study. Corbin and Strauss (1990) assert that however microscopic the research, grounded theory demands that broader structural conditions must be studied, analyzed, and integrated into the theory. Moreover, a researcher must demonstrate the connections between these structural conditions and the more specific concepts she or he is studying (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). It is clear that previous work in this area has suffered significantly because of its neglect of the importance of structural conditions on the phenomena being studied, a mistake which I did not intend to repeat.

As do other qualitative theories, grounded theory relies chiefly on interviews, field observations, and existing documents, such as letters, diaries, or historical accounts, as principal sources of data (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Of these, the most appropriate source of data for the present study is interviews. Qualitative researchers have often turned to the interview as an effective and efficient method for allowing us to understand the experiences of others, and especially the categories and logic through which they understand both the world and themselves (McCracken, 1988; Reinharz, 1992). Feminist researchers have disproportionately favoured
interviews as a methodology, because of the way in which the use of interviews allows women to speak for themselves, in contrast to “centuries of ignoring women’s ideas altogether or having men speak for women” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 19). The interview is appropriate in the present study, as it is in the study of women, because of the poverty and questionable validity of previous literature, as well as the extent to which the voices of the ostensible subjects of the literature (lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals) are muted or absent. Using interviews also enabled me to take an unusual approach to exploring heterosexuals’ experience, in which I questioned rather than assumed the “naturalness” of their heterosexuality. Ideally, the interview maximizes participants’ freedom of response while minimizing the assumptions made by the researcher, although the use of interviewing does not guarantee that the ideas of the participants will be presented accurately, or even understood, by the researcher (Kitzinger, 1987).

Research questions. Creswell (1994) recommends that in lieu of hypotheses, a qualitative research proposal include one’s initial research questions, the questions which the researcher hopes to answer through doing the research project. Hypotheses, as theory-based predictions of the outcome of one’s research project, run counter to the basic tenets of qualitative research (Creswell, 1994). It is one of the strengths of qualitative research that one’s findings grow out of one’s data and analysis. Thus, the findings are not, and should not be, predictable. Qualitative methodology is often used in exploratory research (Marshall &Rossman, 1989), where the literature is so theoretically sparse that one cannot make predictions about what one will find. Similarly, Gilgun (1994) proposes the use of qualitative methods to take a fresh look at phenomena, unbounded by the assumptions and limitations of the literature. It is assumed that one’s research questions, unlike hypotheses, will change as one gathers data and begins analyzing them (Charmaz, 1983; Creswell, 1994).
As discussed above, the present study was designed to explore individuals' conceptualizations and valuations of being lesbian, gay, and bisexual, both negative and positive, and how and why these change over time. Because the literature, especially the academic/professional literature, has focused upon internalized heterosexism as the principal valuation of being lesbian, gay, or bisexual, I was interested in the extent to which this construct fits with the lived experiences of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. To begin to address the gap left by this focus on internalized heterosexism, I was particularly interested in positive valuations and the ways in which lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and heterosexuals develop such valuations. Thus, the research questions which guided the present study were as follows:

1. What does it mean to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or heterosexual? How do different people define their sexual orientation? Other sexual orientations?

2. How does belonging to a heterosexist society affect people's understandings of what it is to be lesbigay? To be heterosexual? Do individuals experience feelings, thoughts, or behaviours similar to those for which researchers and clinicians have used the label internalized heterosexism? Does the construct of internalized heterosexism make sense to people who are neither researchers nor clinicians?

3. How do individuals' feelings, attitudes, and thoughts about lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals as a group and (where relevant) about themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, change over time? How does this happen? How do those feelings, thoughts, or behaviours that might be considered to fall into the category of internalized heterosexism change over time?
4. **What positive images and valuations of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals do individuals have? About themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual?**

   **How and why do these images change over time?**

5. **Are these positive images and valuations and their consequences related to what has been called internalized heterosexism and, if so, how?**
CHAPTER II

METHOD

Participants

Participants were recruited in a large Canadian city largely through flyers that were posted in cafes, restaurants, shops, and the community centre which serves the lesbigay communities. The poster was addressed to people who were interested in participating in research on how ideas about sexual orientation and ideas about lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities change over time (the poster is reproduced in Appendix A). Most of the posting was done within the lesbigay communities, though posters were also placed in several stores and cafes which had a mixed or primarily heterosexual clientele. These locations were chosen for their similarity to the sites that were postered within the lesbigay communities. As participant recruitment continued, participants emerged from all of the target groups except for bisexual women. As a result, I wrote to a bisexual women's support group, describing the study and asking members to consider taking part in it, and I also placed an advertisement directed at bisexual women in the local lesbigay newspaper.

For the present study, I chose a target of 40 lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and heterosexuals, divided approximately equally among these four groups. This target was chosen because previous researchers using grounded theory have suggested that typically 5 to 10 protocols serve to saturate the categories (provide sufficient data that further data gathering is superfluous) (Rennie et al., 1988). That this was a reasonable target was confirmed, as no new data emerged from the final interviews.

The final sample of the present study consisted of 46 participants -- 10 gay men, 14 lesbians, 15 bisexuals (9 women and 6 men), and 8 heterosexuals (3 women and 5 men). At the
time of the interview, their ages ranged from 18 to 57 (M = 34.11, SD = 8.63; median = 33); 36 participants (78%) were of European descent, 3 had some native ancestry, 2 were of Chinese descent, 2 were black, 1 was Jewish, 1 was Mennonite, and 1 was Israeli/Latin American. Participants' social class as denoted by their occupations was quite heterogeneous, although a disproportionate number of participants were highly educated (see Chapter III for details). Participants were paid $20 for their time.

Measures

Background questionnaire. A brief background questionnaire, adapted from Senn (1991), was administered to participants in order to collect basic demographic information. The questionnaire is reproduced in Appendix B.

Interview. A semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant. The interview protocol, reproduced in Appendix C, formed a template for the interview. The first question of the protocol asked the participants to describe themselves briefly. This question was designed to offer an opportunity for the participants to begin to talk about themselves using the terms which were most meaningful for them, and to provide a context within which their responses to the more specific questions in the interview could be interpreted. To explore the meanings that participants attached (and did not attach) to their sexual orientation, I then asked participants about the label or labels they used for their sexual orientation, and what the various labels denoting their sexual orientation meant to them. The next questions explored other aspects of participants' lives that might be related to their sexual orientation: What did participants like about being their sexual orientation, and what impact did it have on how they lived their lives? Heterosexual participants were also asked explicitly about the impact of lesbigays and lesbigay issues upon their lives. I then asked participants whether they had thought about how sexual orientation develops, and how their own sexual orientation had developed. This question was
chosen with the expectation that this would provide another perspective on how participants understood issues of sexual orientation.  

Participants were then asked about changes that they had undergone in how they understood their sexual orientation. I asked about whether they had a "coming out" story, and how they had come to believe that their sexual orientation was as they currently understood it to be. I asked specifically about whether the meaning of their sexual orientation had changed over time. Then I asked about whether, and how, they had developed positive images of their sexual orientation. Finally, I asked about the impact of myths and stereotypes about lesbians, both on them personally and on lesbians in general.

These questions formed the basis of each of the interviews, although they were phrased as much as possible using the perspectives and terms that the participants themselves used. Follow-up questions were then asked to further investigate issues and experiences discussed by each participant. The framework of the interview did not change over the course of interviewing, as issues that were raised by participants either fell within the initial framework or were clearly beyond the boundaries of the study (e.g., gaybashing, the impact of living in the closet for a long period of time).

Procedure

As discussed above, most participants initially heard about the study through a poster. Potential participants were told that the study consisted of a short background questionnaire and an interview that was expected to last between one and two hours. They were guaranteed confidentiality, and encouraged to ask any questions that they might have had in order to decide whether or not they wanted to participate.

Almost everyone who initially contacted me was interviewed, with two exceptions. Once I had gathered enough interviews from members of a given category, I stopped interviewing
members of that category -- for this reason, I declined to interview three lesbians. I was also contacted by a heterosexual man, who told me that he called because he wanted to make sure his views were represented in the study (that homosexuality was against the word of his god). I described the study, and he informed me that he did not have enough time to be interviewed in the next few weeks. I encouraged him to contact me again at that point if he was still interested in participating. He did not.

In total, I interviewed 49 people. Three of the interviews were unusable. In one case, the tape recorder malfunctioned, so a transcript could not be made. In two cases, the interviewee did not answer the questions asked, but talked at length about other issues. One of these talked mostly about his spiritual journey (which had almost no relevance to my questions, nor to issues of sexual orientation). The other interviewee identified as transgendered, which meant that she did not feel that her erotic orientation was adequately described by any of the usual labels. My interview with her reminded me that our understanding of sexual orientation assumes that one is a man or a woman, and has been all one's life (if I am attracted to women, but not to men, I am straight if I am a man, and lesbian if I am a woman. If I identify as neither a man nor a woman (Bornstein, 1994), then by definition there is no label for my sexual orientation). It must also be noted that the irrelevance of sexual orientation issues to this interviewee was related to the way in which people keep their distance from transgendered people, especially not wanting to become involved with them (see also Bornstein, 1994; Wilchins, 1997). For many people, including this woman, this renders sexual orientation a moot point.

Participants met with me individually, in my home, in their home, or in a private room at the community centre which serves the lesbigay communities. The meeting began with a discussion of the consent form (reproduced in Appendix D), which described the procedure of the study, discussed the measures being taken to ensure confidentiality, and informed them of their
rights as a participant in the study. The participant was asked to choose a pseudonym, and was
told that this was the only name that would be used to identify her or his responses in the data
analysis, the dissertation, and any subsequent writings. The audiotaping of the interview was
then discussed. Its importance was explained, and the participant was told that at any time she or
he could end the interview, end the taping, not answer one or more questions, or stop the tape
temporarily. In any case, the participant was assured, she or he would receive full payment for
participating. No participant ended the interview early or stopped the tape during the interview.

The participant was again offered the opportunity to ask any questions that they might
have. Most participants had no questions, but a few participants asked me a little more about
who I was, personally or academically. My policy was to answer all questions, including that of
my sexual orientation, unless I believed the participant was asking for information that might
substantially affect the responses that they might make in the interview. When that happened, I
explained my reasoning, and asked if we could talk about that after the interview instead. No
problems with this policy were encountered.

Once the participant said that they agreed with these conditions and still wished to
participate, they signed two copies of the consent form, one of which remained with the
participant for future reference. At that time, the participant was asked if they wished a copy of
the final results of the study, and if so, her or his name and address was taken and kept separately
from the data. If the participant did not ask for the final results, this was confirmed at the end of
the session.

The participant then filled out the background questionnaire, and was interviewed. After
the interview concluded, participants were fully debriefed. The participant was asked whether
they had any questions or concerns and these were addressed. Participants were paid $20
(although two participants chose to have their honoraria go to charity instead).
All interview tapes were transcribed word for word. In the interest of confidentiality, the tapes were erased following the defence of the dissertation.
CHAPTER III

RESULTS

Background Information

As discussed above, the 46 participants in the sample included 10 gay men, 14 lesbians, 15 bisexuals, and 8 heterosexuals, whose ages ranged between 18 and 57 at the time of the interview. Most participants were white, of European or Eastern European background. Three participants identified themselves as disabled: two on the questionnaire, in response to the question about occupation, and in the interview, and a third only within the interview.

Twenty participants reported that they were currently in one intimate relationship, 3 were in more than one intimate relationship, and 22 were not in an intimate relationship. With respect to their religious affiliation, 18 participants said they had none, 2 were agnostic, 16 described themselves as Christian in some way, and 10 said they had some kind of nontraditional religious affiliation (including two pagans, a radical faerie, a wiccan, and four who described themselves as “spiritual”). Although one participant identified her racial background as Jewish, she described her current religious affiliation as “N/A.”

Almost all participants (43 of 46: 93%) had at least a high school education, with 14 holding university undergraduate degrees, and 8 holding post-graduate degrees. At the time of the interview, 12 participants were currently in school; 34 were not. Ten participants (22%) were unemployed or “in transition” at the time of the interview. Also amongst the sample were four artists, four writers, four health professionals, two computer workers, two real estate salespeople, four unskilled labourers, and four workers in the service industry. Thus, the sample was relatively heterogeneous with respect to social class as denoted by current occupation, although it was more homogeneous with respect to education.
Data Analysis

In the present study, data analysis was conducted using two parallel approaches. As I had intended, I conducted an analysis of the participants' interviews following the tenets of grounded theory. Grounded theory is a well-defined set of procedures which together provide a systematic approach to analyzing data and enabling themes and ultimately theory to emerge from those data (see Appendix E for a theoretical description of grounded theory and Appendix F for a delineation of the practice of a grounded theory analysis). However, it must be noted that grounded theory assumes that the results of an analysis are entirely driven by the data, which is clearly not the case in the present study (personal communication, A. Sears, December 16, 1997). I came to my analysis of participants' interviews with extensive knowledge, and critiques, of the literature on internalized heterosexism (as discussed in Chapter I), as well as my own experiences with heterosexism and issues of sexual orientation. Thus, although I followed the procedures of grounded theory, my analysis was also shaped by my prior knowledge and experience.

Indeed, researchers in all fields are increasingly aware that all research is influenced by the values and person of the researcher(s), whether or not such influence is explicitly acknowledged (Lather, 1991). From this perspective, conscious awareness of these influences allows them to be used in a way which contributes to the research, rather than detracting from it. With respect to the present study, I held "insider" status both as a psychologist and clinician and as someone for whom issues of heterosexism and sexual orientation have long been salient. Both of these perspectives informed my interaction with the participants, enabled me to hear the participants in ways that I would not otherwise have been able to, and substantially enriched the data analysis. Moreover, my dual status enabled me to use each perspective to interrogate the other.
As I developed the grounded theory analysis, I was surprised to find that internalized heterosexism did not naturally emerge as a category of analysis. Many of the participants did report having struggled with heterosexism, and having accepted for some period of time some of the tenets of heterosexism. Many participants described struggling with some of the manifestations of heterosexism, but their experience with each of these was sufficiently different that there was no reason within the data themselves to group them into a single category of heterosexism. The categories of heterosexism and internalized heterosexism were both too abstract and too inclusive to emerge naturally from the data -- participants simply did not seem to conceptualize their experience in those ways.

Although I had hypothesized that internalized heterosexism would not be as important to many of the participants as the literature suggests, nonetheless I was surprised by its complete absence. Thus, I decided to undertake a second stage of data analysis, in order to analyze participants' responses to the questions about internalized heterosexism. In this data analysis, I followed an approach that Hayes (1997) calls “theory-led thematic analysis.” Hayes (1997) observes that in many qualitative research studies, the results of most interest are those which test the researcher's theory. In theory-led thematic analysis, the data analysis is focused upon the data which is related to the theoretical issues being investigated. The themes which form the framework of the qualitative analysis are those predicted by the researchers' theory. Thus, I compared and contrasted the responses of the participants to each of the questions of the interview which related to internalized heterosexism. General themes were extracted, as was the range and variability of responses. Because the interview questions specifically inquired about participants' experience in relation to the construct of internalized heterosexism and the development of a positive valuation of lesbigays and being lesbigay in participants' experience, it
was the thematic analysis that enabled me to closely examine these issues, without imposing that
focus upon the general data analysis that I completed using grounded theory.

In my presentation of the outcome of the present study, I draw on both of these analyses.
This chapter focuses on the major results of the grounded theory analysis, which explores and
develops theory from the participants' experience as they recounted it during the interviews,
while the next chapter draws on both the grounded theory analysis and the thematic analysis.
(See Appendix G for a complete enumeration of the categories that emerged during the grounded
theory analysis.)

In this chapter, I first discuss participants' experiences with encountering heterosexism --
the silences, stereotypes, and negative judgements surrounding lesbigays and being lesbigay. I
explore the impact of these upon participants, and the many ways that participants responded to
them. In particular, I explore participants' experience with unlearning stereotypes and reversing
negative evaluations of lesbigays. One of the most difficult, and most common, experiences
described by participants was their struggle to learn that it was okay to be lesbigay, which I
discuss at length. Then I examine the experience of the many participants who felt that they
developed a personalized lesbigay identity which was consistent with who they were as
individuals. This leads to a discussion of the many ways that participants conceptualized being
lesbigay. Finally, I explore some of the individual differences that appear to contribute to the
very different experiences of heterosexism and its effects that were described by participants.

In Chapter IV, the conclusion, I develop these findings further to theorize about the
participants' experience. The conclusion also draws extensively upon the thematic analysis,
which I used to explore the relationship between participants' experience and the research
questions. Most importantly, the thematic analysis, coupled with the grounded theory analysis,
enabled me to draw conclusions from the data about the construct of internalized heterosexism and the development of a positive valuation of lesbigays and being lesbigay.

**Encountering Heterosexism**

All of the participants made reference in different ways to the impact of the heterosexist environment in which they grew up, and continue to live, on their feelings about lesbigays. Participants of all ages and all sexual orientations vividly recalled growing up knowing nothing, or almost nothing, about lesbigays. Though Sylvia was one of the youngest participants (24 at the time of her interview) and had started kissing and taking showers with her female friends when she was 8, she nevertheless assumed she was heterosexual. She recalled:

Growing up with only straight people, I didn't think there was any other, I didn't think there was anything different from that. I thought the whole world was like that. And also watching TV, in stories, there's a mother and a father, and a white-picket fence, the dog, the lab, you know, the two kids, and like the Honda Civic in the driveway. (Sylvia, 16-17)

Many older participants recalled hearing nothing about lesbigays until they were well into adulthood. Coyote, aged 53 at the time of the interview, explained:

Through the early years of my life, I had no language for [my sexual orientation]. Even though I knew there were boys and girls [inaudible] I had no language for it, but I knew I was different.... And if anybody had any inkling of [homosexuality], certainly it was never spoken about or alluded to, it was so perverse. (Coyote, 16)

Older participants often attributed their childhood ignorance about lesbigays to the social circumstances of their youth. As a teenager, Ron knew that he wanted to have an intimate relationship with a man, but didn't think about this in terms of his sexuality; simultaneously, he also believed that at some point something would happen and he would want to marry a woman.
Looking back, Ron thought that this confusion in his thinking was the result of growing up before the riots at Stonewall, an event often seen as the birth of the current lesbigay liberation movement. Ron believed that had he had access to the language and ideas that were developed after Stonewall, particularly the concept of one’s sexuality as not only a personal attribute, but an identity and a political force as well, then he would have realized he was gay much sooner than he did.

As Sylvia did, most of the younger participants, lesbigay and heterosexual, identified a period in their lives when they had known nothing about lesbigays. Despite the increasing public visibility of lesbigays in the 30 years since Stonewall, for many participants, this period had lasted well into adolescence. Ann, aged 34 at the time of her interview, recalled:

I remember having this conversation with my mother when I was 15, asking her if she thought that I was a boy born into the wrong body.... That's pretty drastic, when you don't know, I didn't even really know there was the possibility of another choice, I just thought there was straight. So that's why I thought I must be a boy then. (Ann, 17)

Erik, aged 30 at the time of his interview, recalled that he became curious at a young age as to whether men could be sexual with men, but information on this topic remained inaccessible to him for many years:

I was kinda curious about, did men have sex with other men, when I was much younger. I mean, [I thought,] "all I've ever been told is men have sex with women, but I wonder if men have sex with other men." And then later on as you get older, you hear about fags and that kind of thing, especially in that suburban vibe, everybody's straight and there's no such thing as a fag, and if there is, the guy is like really screwed up. (Erik, 5)

Erik grew up with a "pretty cool" mom, who was open to answering his questions about sex, or buying him a book when she wasn't sure how to answer (Erik, 10). Yet his curiosities about gay
sex seem to have been treated differently. In his interview, Erik surmised that he "probably" asked his mom some questions about men having sex with men, but he could not remember any specific conversations (Erik, 11). Any conversations that they might have had appear to have been largely unhelpful, as Erik doubted his sexual orientation for years despite having little reason to do so. He recalled that at about age 13, he thought that he should have had sex by then, and so he began to wonder if he might like boys, rather than girls. Erik continued to feel uncertain about his sexual orientation until he was 18, although during this time he was attracted to girls and not aware of being attracted to boys. This suggests that Erik knew very little about being gay, although he was relatively knowledgeable about sex.

Similarly, Julie, aged 21 at the time of her interview, grew up with very liberal parents, who were committed to teaching her that men and women were equal. She had a lesbian aunt, and a great aunt who lived with another woman. Yet Julie knew nothing about homosexuality until she was 17, and finally realized she was attracted to women:

> All I knew was faggot was a bad word you called people on the school playground. And my parents never said anything negative about homosexuality, ever, nothing negative, but they never talked about it either, it was never mentioned. It was never mentioned that the aunt was gay or anything like that. So I didn't have the vocabulary at all, like no access to it, no understanding of it, no nothing. And this was at 17, which I find so peculiar now. (Julie, 14)

**Stereotypes and negative judgements.** Whether or not they recalled a time when they knew nothing about lesbians, all participants had at some time in their lives started to became aware of the negative stereotypes and valuations of lesbians. The ubiquity of heterosexism was most evident in these data. Many participants recalled a milieu in which it was understood that lesbians were unacceptable, deviant, perverse, mentally ill, or abnormal. Often these
judgements were not made overtly, but through rumours and negative comments about people who were assumed to be lesbigay -- an assumption most often based on their not conforming to appropriate gender norms. Kira heard nothing about lesbigays beyond the negative comments she heard through the grapevine about a woman who was seen as being insufficiently feminine:

It was not something that was readily acceptable. There was one woman in the neighbourhood who was definitely your dyke type, your lumber jacket and the slicked-back hair, the cowboy boots, you know, neon sign kind, the only one around. And you'd hear different things about her that were definitely, nasty comments and stuff. (Kira, 26)

Some participants recalled that they had been well aware that there was something very wrong with being lesbigay, but were unable to pinpoint how they had learned that. Klerdawn recalled:

I knew I liked little girls.... I liked it when Madeleine and I played doctor [laughs], I liked it much better playing doctor with Madeleine than I did with Mark! Put that down in your paper [laughs]. And I knew that there was something wrong with my liking to play with Madeleine, [worse] than with Mark. I knew it was dirty and shameful and never to be spoken.... I definitely knew it was a much bigger secret about Madeleine [than about Mark]. (Klerdawn, 17)

Many participants recalled that the topic of homosexuality and who was homosexual exerted a strange fascination, despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that homosexuality was forbidden. Dick grew up in a "wonder white bread" environment, a very white, conformist suburb in the sixties, where "everything was just one big homogenous whirl, where everybody did the same things, looked the same [way]" (Dick, 20). In such an environment, overt homosexuality was unthinkable, yet rumours and gossip were rife:
Nobody was saying anything [about homosexuality, but] there were suspicions, there were always suspicions about certain people, and the rumour mill was rife and then, you know, the jungle tom-toms were beating about so-and-so, oh, god, boys and girls, whatever. But it was pretty well hush-hush, and as I was saying, it was quiet whisperings in the halls and around lockers and that. (Dick, 17)

Even in environments where there was more tolerance of lesbians, judgements about lesbians may have been less overtly derogatory, but they were seen as inferior nonetheless. Ralph grew up in the antique world, where his mother worked with a number of gay antique dealers. Although there was more tolerance for gay men within this milieu than outside of it, stereotyping was still a problem, and that tolerance did not extend to the possibility that Ralph himself might become gay. When Ralph was 8, his mother warned him that if a man were to approach him in the washroom, he was to tell her, but didn't explain this further. Ralph recalled:

I knew that there were antique dealers ... and that these guys didn't have wives, they talked a little differently, you know, in terms of the lisping, Robin Williams, La Cage Aux Folles, type of thing or whatever, and that they had a preference in terms of males as partners, but that was about [it]. I can't even actually remember whether that was something that I knew, but I knew there was something different, and I didn't know to what extent. (Ralph, 10)

Asked whether there were any judgements made about the difference, Ralph responded, “oh, yeah, that’s not good. It was not the way we would encourage our little prince to go” (Ralph, 10).

Almost all participants, of all ages, reported that they had been well schooled during adolescence that being lesbigay was a bad thing. Many participants said that in their high school, calling someone gay or a fag functioned as an all-purpose insult — Erik had a friend who denigrated everything, as well as everyone, that displeased him by describing it as “gay” (Erik,
12). Larissa, aged 27 at the time of her interview, believed that she would not have survived high school were she suspected to be a lesbian. When a friend of hers had heard rumours and asked her if she were gay, Larissa panicked, and dropped out of school the next day. Inez, aged 27 at the time of her interview, had a high school teacher who died because he was gaybashed. She observed that most of her classmates believed the man deserved to be beaten up for being a faggot; they felt he got what he deserved. Brett, a high school teacher, reported that this aspect of adolescence doesn’t seem to him to have changed much: He was still seeing students using “fag” as an insult (Brett, 24).

One of the striking contrasts amongst participants’ experience was the way in which accusations of homosexuality were so significant, and so painful, for some, and unimportant to others. Mark explained that when he was called gay in high school, it was not a big deal for him. Such accusations never led Mark to doubt his sexuality, although he was aware that he had no attractions to girls, and he came out as gay only a few years later. He recalled that when he was called a fag:

I was always thinking, oh fuck you [we laugh] [inaudible] [Umhm, yeah] I didn’t like, oh my god, he’s right [laughs] it never dawned on me, like it would go, whooo, totally over my head, so that’s good. And then afterwards, [people would call me a fag and] I was like, well, yeah, so. (Mark, 29)

In contrast, Ralph had always been primarily attracted to girls and women, and had always believed he was heterosexual. Nevertheless, he described himself as having been “taunted” and “tormented” throughout high school by boys who insisted he was gay (Ralph, 5). The pain and self-doubt that this caused him is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that years after leaving high school, Ralph was ecstatic when he finally had a sexual encounter with another man, which enabled him to be certain that he was not sexually attracted to men:
And then afterwards, [we] went back to his place and I guess the disinhibiting influence of alcohol or whatever, and having known him and worked with him for a number of years, I said, yeah, and so we tried [sex]. And I remember the next day not feeling guilty or shame or anything, but going, yes, now I know, I'm straight. And that was it. That was my defining moment of sexuality, because up until then, those little bastards from high school gym class had always put that doubt in my head. (Ralph, 12-13)

**Heterosexism and the Developing Lesbigay**

The impact of ignorance about and prejudice against lesbigays differed dramatically amongst the lesbigay participants. Some lesbigay participants described experiencing high levels of distress that were in large part a result of the difficulties they experienced around their sexual orientation. Interestingly, some of the heterosexual participants likewise had experienced considerable distress around issues of sexual orientation. For some heterosexual participants, this was the result of their suspecting that they might be lesbigay, and reacting in ways very similar to those of some of the lesbigay participants. Other heterosexual participants were quite upset by the mistreatment that lesbigay friends and family experienced.

The impact of heterosexism experienced by participants was influenced by many different factors. One important factor that influenced this was whether participants believed that they had always been lesbigay. Some participants described being aware from as far back as they could remember that they were lesbigay, whereas others recall a time when they thought or assumed that they were heterosexual. For participants who believed, as Brad did, that they had "been gay [their] whole life ... you KNOW this," encountering stereotypes about lesbigays meant hearing things that they understood were supposed to be about themselves (Brad, 2, 4, emphasis in original). Some participants said that this made not accepting the heterosexism they were surrounded with relatively easy. Brett said that he had his first homoerotic attraction at 3. As a
child, when he first heard other kids putting down gays, he realized that the word gay described him, that he was gay. As a result, it was easy for him to reject the stereotypes and negative judgements that came with it. Brett observed, "I never accepted [stereotypes] because I didn't see that about myself, so I thought, oh, it's just the straight community's way of, you know, trying to pigeonhole us" (Brett, 19).

Participants who realized that they were lesbigay at some point after they had encountered stereotypes about lesbigays had a rather different experience. They only began to think that perhaps they were lesbigay after they already understood that lesbigays existed as a group and, moreover, that some people held stereotypes about them and negative valuations of them. Thus, they were faced with having to confront whether and how they belonged to this caricatured and disliked group.

Some participants were much less affected by the stereotypes about lesbigays, because they found it easy to trust themselves and their feelings. They tended to describe the emergence of their sexuality as natural -- their feelings of attraction for members of their own sex emerged relatively easily, were recognized, and acted on or not in a decision that depended mostly on the specific circumstances that the participant was in at the time. These participants took a number of different approaches to the stereotypes, all of which were in some way protective. Some simply didn't believe the stereotypes as they encountered them. Brad recalled he would wonder briefly when presented with stereotypes, "well, that's not me, but they're gay, but is that what gay [is]?" (Brad, 21). Brad never really thought much about the issue, and he believes he never accepted the stereotypes, nor applied them to himself (Brad, 21). Some participants doubted the stereotypes as soon as they began to realize they were lesbigay, reasoning that because the stereotypes did not describe them, they must be false. They believed their own experience as someone who was lesbigay, rather than that depicted by the stereotypes. For other participants,
their first real exposure to lesbigays enabled them to see that the stereotypes were not accurate—they trusted their own assessment of these lesbigays, which conflicted from the beginning with the stereotypic depictions. Still other participants described not engaging with stereotypes about lesbigays, believing that the stereotypes were not about them. Thus, these participants felt they had been largely unaffected by stereotypes.

For many other participants, though, the realization that they were lesbigay was very much affected by the silences around lesbigays and the negative stereotypes and judgements that they had encountered. Many participants said that the category of “lesbigays” was largely defined by the negative stereotypes that they had encountered, so that they literally had trouble recognizing that they might belong within this category. Other participants had more difficulty once they recognized that they might belong within the lesbigay category, and then struggled with the extent to which the stereotypes and negativevaluations applied to them, and what that might mean.

**Reacting and Responding to Heterosexism**

The silences concerning lesbigays had very different effects on participants. Silence can represent disapproval, proof that the thing in question does not exist, or permission and opportunity. For Dick, who grew up bisexual, the silence about bisexuals was freeing. Growing up in the suburbs in the sixties, he was well aware of a lot of negative stereotypes about gay men. In the interview, Dick recalled his fears as he first ventured downtown in search of other men:

I expected to be picked up every 50 feet on Church St. or Yonge St., and it didn’t happen, so [laughs]. And I thought, what if I have to use the washroom, is somebody going to attack me or something? ... [laughs] I expected the Village People to attack me as I went up Isabella [St.] or something, oh, god, yeah. (Dick, 13-14)
Yet Dick never applied these stereotypes to himself, although he had been aware of being attracted to other boys since puberty, and had sustained a long-term sexual relationship with another boy during high school. Dick's equally strong feelings of attraction to girls and his sexual relationships with girls meant that he never identified as gay, and so it never occurred to him to think that the stereotypes might also be about him. As a result, he believed, he "never thought of [his bisexuality] as being abnormal, or ... never really felt guilty at all" (Dick, 2). Dick thought that he probably would have had more difficulty had he been gay, as he would likely have been affected by his stereotypes (Dick, 15). For Dick, the silence around bisexuals was freeing, allowing him to just be who he was -- to do as he wanted, without thinking or feeling badly about himself.

In contrast, for Jane, not knowing anything about being gay was terrifying. She knew that she was different from other people, being gay, but had no real idea what that was all about. Jane recalled:

I was scared to death [about being gay]. Because it was in my mind and everything that that was what I wanted, but at the same time I was afraid to really approach it or do anything about it.... I think it was the fear to explore myself, I mean, if you want to get right down to it, because I was really afraid to find out who I was. I know because of the stuff that was happening at home [being sexually abused] that I was already different, and to have that also, knowing that I was realizing that I knew I was gay, also different.

Nobody ever said anything to me about gayness or anything like that. (Jane, 8)

Most participants had an experience somewhere between these two extremes, where the silences around being lesbigay complicated their development as someone who was lesbigay, but not overwhelmingly so. Brad's matter-of-fact approach was typical of the experiences of these
participants. Speaking about his desire to be involved in raising children some day, Brad observed:

We have no role models to really go by, being gay. You only have straight things to go by, so to speak. But it's happening now, anyway, in the nineties, the next decade, because we're making it happen, we're the next generation, which is good. (Brad, 4)

As was the case for Ann, who thought that her feelings for girls meant that she was a boy born in the wrong body (quoted above), the absence of knowledge about lesbigays meant for some participants that they did not have the tools to understand themselves and their feelings. Many participants recalled that once they figured out that they were lesbigay, they realized that they had been attracted to members of their own sex long before, at a time when their ignorance had prevented them from correctly identifying their feelings. For Sylvia, who was 24 at the time of her interview, her ignorance about lesbigays was part of the reason why it never occurred to her she might not be heterosexual: "It just never occurred to me, I never, up until I was 20, I had never ever known anyone that was gay.... I thought the whole world was like that [heterosexual]" (Sylvia, 16). Sylvia observed that she never saw anyone who was not heterosexual on television or in the books she read. Even feelings of attraction that Sylvia had towards girls were explained to Sylvia as something that little girls do as part of their growing up to become heterosexual.

Growing up, Sylvia and her female friends would kiss each other and take showers together. Sylvia's mother told her that all little girls do that, so it didn't mean anything. At 15, Sylvia slept with her best friend, and her mother said it was because they were drunk. Sylvia believed her mother, so that even feelings and experiences which might have indicated to Sylvia that she was not heterosexual were interpreted as within the boundaries of heterosexuality. Sylvia's mother continues to believe that Sylvia will eventually become heterosexual, although towards the end of a three year intimate sexual relationship with another woman, Sylvia began to disagree. Her
mother has attempted and failed to convince Sylvia this relationship was the result of Sylvia's being a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, and that once she heals from the abuse, she will be heterosexual.

Ellen recalled that prior to her first relationship with a woman, it didn't occur to her to think about being with women, although she knew she found women more attractive than men:

Before that [relationship with a woman], I had defined myself as straight, I never thought about being with women, although I knew I was attracted to women. You know, they're more attractive, they're prettier. I fooled around with a little girl when I was 9, stuff like that, and then again with my best friend when I was 18, but I never defined myself.

(Ellen, 2)

Several participants experienced feelings towards members of their own sex that they were unable to recognize at the time as feelings of attraction, but in retrospect that is what they believe they were. Larry recalled:

Looking back on it now, I know since, my earliest memories, when I was 1 and 2 years old, I was fascinated by men's bodies, and even in school, in elementary school and stuff, I can remember having different feelings for men, for boys at that age [laughs] I guess, I had girlfriends too, but I also liked hanging out with certain boys that I thought were really cute and nice and looking back on it now I can tell that I was attracted to them, although didn't realize it at the time. (Larry, 11)

For participants who did not recognize their feelings of attraction, realizing that they were lesbigay often enabled them to make sense of their past and their past relationships with others. Gina recalled that as an adolescent, she had kept herself physically distant, and somewhat emotionally distant, from her friends. When she realized she was a lesbian, and had been attracted to some of her female friends as an adolescent, Gina also realized "maybe that's why I
couldn't hug any of my girlfriends and, you know, like I was always one of those, you know, don't, I don't wanna, I don't hug, I don't hug” (Gina, 13). Having never understood why she couldn't bring herself to put an arm around a friend who was crying, once she realized she was a lesbian, Gina was suddenly able to see why that had felt so dangerous to her, finally understanding that she had been afraid that feelings might have gotten out of control had she not kept her distance.

Participants' varied responses to the silence about lesbigays were highlighted particularly clearly by bisexuals, who had often spent many years being taught, and believing, that bisexuals did not exist. For some, this meant many years trying to figure out if they were lesbian/gay or heterosexual. Casey recalled her relief at finally learning she did not have to fit herself into either lesbianism or heterosexuality:

[When I fell in love with a woman] that was my first like realization [that I might not be heterosexual], but I'd still never heard the word bisexual, never heard it until I went to [a social services project directed towards lesbigay youth]. And I guess that was a [sighs] coming out for me, it's like, oh, there is something in between that has been acknowledged. Because I'd been going through a lot of years, am I [lesbian] or am I not, am I or am I not? ... Because I think bisexuality was something that I didn't know anything [about], I didn't think existed, it was either black or white. (Casey, 16-17)

In contrast, other bisexual participants were quite happy to live as bisexuals, indifferent to the fact that they were not supposed to exist. Although she only began to identify as bisexual shortly before she was interviewed, Inez felt this had not, and would not, change the way that she lived:

It really, it truthfully will not affect the way I live my life. Because I would argue that I've always lived the life of a bisexual, I just never called myself that. (Inez, 32)
Responding to stereotypes of lesbigsays. The stereotypes about lesbigsays that participants were exposed to also had a wide range of effects, some of them quite serious. For most participants, not knowing about lesbigsays caused less difficulty than the stereotypes they encountered, and often believed to some extent. When he was speaking theoretically, Carl argued that the lack of information about lesbigsays makes growing up lesbigay difficult:

People don’t bring up their children to be gay, and if somebody is, then of course they have to hide it initially, because it’s not something that is ever looked at as an acceptable alternative, hardly ever, not for many people early in life. Like how do you learn to be gay when most of your upbringing has been, either learning not to be or at least not having anything to do with it if you are aware of it? (Carl, 13)

However, in his own life, Carl’s biggest struggles have been with the difficulties involved in “being gay in a straight world” and the many years it took him to feel sure that his being gay wasn’t the result of sexual molestation that he’d experienced as a teenager (Carl, 5). That is, although his theories suggest otherwise, Carl himself has struggled less with the lack of information about lesbigsays than with the pemicious stereotype that one becomes gay through seduction by an older gay man, and with the difficulties involved in learning to cope with heterosexism.

Many participants saw it as quite natural that they believed to some extent in the stereotypes about lesbigsays that they’d been taught. Some participants felt that they had been exposed to a single consistent message about lesbigsays with no countervailing information, so it only made sense that they’d accepted that message. Scott recalled:

[I heard that] gay men were fags, you know, perverts, and stuff like that, keep away from them.... that’s pretty much what I was believing. (Scott, 47)
For many participants who had grown up in very conservative and sheltered environments, very little information about lesbians was available beyond the stereotypes. With her family belonging to a conservative Mennonite congregation, Starfinch recalled every one of the half dozen times she encountered any information about gays and lesbians. Because everyone carried the message that homosexuals were people who wanted to be the other gender, her response was to think, "well, no. It's not that I want to be a man [laughs], that's not it. But it was all I knew" (Starfinch, 20). An almost-total absence of information was reported more often by older participants and participants from highly religious backgrounds, although there were some striking exceptions. Michelle grew up in a strict Baptist family, where her next-door neighbours were a lesbian couple and a lesbian affair occurred within the church to which her family belonged:

One of the elders, his daughter was engaged to be married to another elder's son, and it was rumoured that she was having an affair with the [female] organ player, and this was the big thing that came out. And it was so hush-hush, it was like only the adults could talk about it. And I remember the minister actually was having appointments with these two, or actually three, people that were involved with this whole thing. And it was a pretty big thing. And I remember feeling like, wow, this is what they do with homosexuals, it's so secret, it's never talked about. And I remember once when I was over at another family for dinner, she was talking about it, the mother was talking about it to my aunt, and it was, I walked into the room and it was hush-hush, but they didn't know I was hearing, I was listening to the whole conversation in the living room. But it was funny, when I went into the kitchen, it was just like silence, like we can't talk about this. (Michelle, 6)
Another group of participants who tended to be strongly affected by the consistency of the stereotypes they encountered were those participants who identified as bisexual. Stereotypes and negative valuations about bisexuals are found in both the heterosexual and the lesbian/gay communities, with a consistency for some participants that was overwhelming. Stephanie, who had spent many years being attracted to and involved with both women and men, but not identifying as bisexual, observed:

I often joke that this is the one area where segments of the homosexual community and segments of the heterosexual community can agree on, is hatred for people who call themselves bisexuals. Because I run into the same feelings in the heterosexual community, like everything that I've heard, I've heard from both communities.

(Stephanie, 12)

From the time she was an adolescent and started becoming sexual, first having sex with a woman and soon after with a man, Stephanie recalled that she “had a pretty good sense of who [she] was,” but it took her many years to begin to call herself bisexual (Stephanie, 14). Stephanie thought that much of the reason for the delay lay in her fears that being bisexual would mean living out the stereotypes of bisexuality:

I think for me, the whole notion of being bisexual, I have a huge regret that for so long I bought into the myths about being bisexual, you're a person who can't make up your mind, you want your cake and eat it too.... And that was never how I lived my life, but I was afraid that I would be all these people, that I would be all of this, have all these terrible qualities known as bisexuality, and even though I lived it in terms of, I got involved with both men and women, I wasn't really clear if I was bisexual and for the longest time I thought I was a screwed-up straight person, and it took me a while to get to
the point where I said, this is fucking bullshit and I'm not going to let anyone define who
I am, and people can think whatever they want. (Stephanie, 4-5)

Other participants explained their belief in the stereotypes they were taught as a result of
the strength of this teaching, rather than its consistency. Lisa likened her socialization to
"brainwashing," emphasizing the impact it had on her life and power it held over her (Lisa, 33).
Lisa was approached by a girl who was interested in her in high school. Lisa recalled that
because she knew "it wasn't a girl that was supposed to be saying these things to me [that she was
interested in me], it was supposed to be a boy," she was very upset by this girl's approach (Lisa,
33). Nonetheless the two of them began a two year intimate sexual relationship. After that
relationship, Lisa spent three years trying and failing to have relationships with boys. She was
not sure when she realized that she was lesbian:

Realizing? Yeah, I don't know, it's just that it wasn't working out with guys, I didn't have
the same feelings .... [It] didn't happen with guys. Actually there was a lot of anger
towards guys, but when the inhibitions were pushed aside [with alcohol], then I jumped a
woman, and that was my second girlfriend, when I was 21. Like I just. I wasn't into
getting into guys, chasing guys. So I guess [then] it was pretty much in my mind that I
didn't like guys any more, I didn't even think about them that way any more. (Lisa, 38-39)

Raven also saw her socialization as very strong — she was raised Catholic by her mother,
who instilled a lot of negative messages about people of colour, and gays and lesbians. Raven
reported struggling with these "internal tapes" for 3 or 4 years during her adolescence, especially
with the teaching that being lesbigay is a sin: "I was still [worrying], you know, 'is God going to
get me for this?' kind of thing" (Raven, 13, 18). Similarly, Larry's religious upbringing
convinced him that being gay was such a terrible thing that it never occurred to him that he might be gay. Being gay was simply not an option:

[Being gay] was wrong, it was bad, it was the devil, you were going to hell, and so it just wasn't, it would be like thinking about growing up to be a mass murderer, you just wouldn't even think that way, you know? [laughs] (Larry, 10)

Even after Larry realized that he could be gay, and indeed he was, his upbringing meant that he "had guilt about it for years, about having sex with men" (Larry, 7).

Klerdawn felt that her acceptance of heterosexism was linked to her upbringing to be a good girl, to accept what she was taught and not question it. She recalled:

[My therapist asked,] why do you have shame around being lesbian? I'd never questioned it before. I'd just sort of taken on that hairy coat and worn it, like a good fucking quiet woman should. (Klerdawn, 16)

At the time that she was interviewed, Larissa was still struggling with some of the stereotypes about lesbians. She said that she was still feeling that she would prefer to be heterosexual, pointing to some of the stereotypes which were still influencing her feelings:

Why would I want to be straight? [Umhm.] Because I want kids. Well, see, I shouldn't have said that, because I know like gay relationships, they have kids, I know that.

(Larissa, 9)

Intellectually, by the time she was interviewed, Larissa knew that lesbian and gay families exist, and thus that as a lesbian, she could choose to have children. That is, she knew the stereotype that lesbians cannot have children to be false. However, it retained some power over her, particularly at an emotional level.

**Resisting negative stereotypes.** Although some participants felt it was natural that they accepted the stereotypes they had been surrounded by, other participants were able to resist the
negative stereotypes to some extent, so that their impact was much less significant. Several participants described themselves as having been exposed to information other than the stereotypes, which made it easy for them understand that the stereotypes were not correct, and thus to disbelieve the stereotypes. Ron observed:

I saw stereotypes when I first came out, but I was exposed to, just every different, I saw all different types, so I could see through the stereotypical person. I knew when I saw a leather guy that wasn't something to be frightened of. (Ron, 28)

Mark thought that he might have believed the stereotypes had he not also had access to other sources of information:

When I began to have feelings about it [having sexual fantasies about men], then there was enough media exposure that I was like, okay, maybe I'm one of, maybe I'm gay, and like at that time, it wasn't a negative thing. Because when I think about it, like I remember listening to those sex call-in shows and stuff like that, and every once in a while they had gay callers, and they handled them very, like nonchalantly and very matter-of-factly, it was Sue Johanson, actually.... Yeah, and she was really good. I have to say, I must credit [her] with quite a lot, seriously, because if she hadn't been on the air, if she didn't have like very positive attitudes, or if she had negative attitudes, I probably would have had a different slant on things. But I think it just comes down to like how much information you get. (Mark, 27-28)

Mark's story is not unusual in that for many participants, one or a few sources of positive or affirmative information were often of greater impact than a much greater amount of negative information. Inez also described having been entirely comfortable from the beginning with her sexual fantasies, although she fantasized about both women and men, usually together. Like Mark, she attributed much of her comfort to Sue Johanson's radio show:
The thing is, is that I never really reflected on [my sexuality]. Like, when I masturbated, I fantasized about women and men, usually both at the same time, and I never felt that was odd, okay. I listened to Sue's sex show regularly, I knew this was okay. So I put no thought to it. (Inez, 22)

Some participants found the messages about the stereotypes of and prejudice against lesbians easy to dismiss because of their source. For Jane, anti-lesbigay stereotypes were associated with her adoptive father, for whom she had contempt. As he provided her only knowledge about lesbians, she believed that the stereotypes must be false. Because her adoptive father put down gays, she believed the opposite, and felt she “had to prove that what he was saying was wrong” (Jane, 9).

Other participants felt that their values had prevented them from accepting stereotypes of and prejudice against lesbians. Brett credited his mother, and Kira her family, for teaching them the importance of treating others fairly, as human beings. Both participants thought that because of these teachings, they had never accepted the stereotypes of and prejudices against lesbians that were common elsewhere in their environments.

Some participants felt that the stereotypes they encountered may have been true of others, but were irrelevant to them personally. Inez argued that the stereotypes are about white, middle class women. As a black woman, she did not perceive the stereotypes about bisexuals as applying to her, so they did not affect her (Inez, 39). In contrast, Inez had a difficult struggle with the stereotype that as a black woman, she had no sexuality. Some bisexuals, such as Dick, encountered stereotypes about lesbians and gays that they felt did not apply to them, as they were not lesbian or gay.

Other participants reported that they had resisted the stereotypes because they had previous experience with stereotypes -- they had wrestled with other kinds of difference, which
involved other stereotypes. These experiences were seen as having taught them to reject all stereotypes, including anti-lesbigay ones. In particular, participants who were aware of prejudice and discrimination on the basis of gender, class, or race were often better at later resisting stereotypes about sexual orientation. As Inez observed, having experienced racism all her life, she had become used to being insulted as inferior, as having something wrong with her. Thus being pegged as bisexual was much less frightening:

After you've spent your childhood being called a nigger, being called a dyke is not that big a deal.... You know, you call me a dyke, what are you telling me? I wear comfortable shoes? (Inez, 33)

The effects of accepting the stereotypes. Participants reported a wide range of sequelae that resulted from their acceptance of some of the stereotypes they had learned about lesbigays. For some participants, their acceptance of stereotypes was only temporary, lasting only until they were able to gain access to alternative viewpoints. These participants believed that they had accepted negative stereotypes because they had not been exposed to other points of view -- at first, they had not realized that there were alternatives to the stereotypes. Scott, who felt he grew up believing the stereotypes about being gay that he had been taught, went away to Montreal for a weekend when he was 15 and came back with a very different set of beliefs. Having found a boy with whom he spent the weekend, who introduced him to gay clubs, Scott returned home with the realization that he was gay, and that it was okay to be gay:

I met this guy my own age, and he didn't look like a pervert. We went out to a few clubs, I was only 15 but I looked much older, and like they were just full of young people. It was like, wow, you know, this is okay, it's okay to be who I am, like I'm not going to be a pervert or whatever. (Scott, 24-25)
Similarly, Julie found through her initial contacts with lesbigays that the idea of being lesbigay "became more and more normal, it became more and more natural, it was like this exposure to the whole concept, the idea, the people, the community, what people were really about" (Julie, 24). Julie's preconceptions about what being lesbigay was about were all "shattered," and she concluded that lesbigays "were normal people" (Julie, 24-25).

For some participants, their first realization that the stereotypes about lesbigays might not be true occurred when they realized that they were lesbigay. Coyote recalled "it's only when I fell in love [with a woman and realized I was a lesbian] then, yeah, that the consciousness changed, because I knew I wasn't a lot of the ugly stereotypes" (Coyote, 23). These participants found it easy to believe their new sense of themselves and alter their stereotypes, rather than alter themselves and their understanding of themselves to be consistent with their stereotypes.

Other participants were unable to make sense of the contradiction posed by the stereotypes about lesbigays and their own same-sex attractions. Several participants observed that they did not believe that they were lesbigay, as they did not fit into how the stereotypes defined that category. For some participants, this meant loving someone in what they later realized was a sexual way, but not developing the relationship as they did not know that was what they wanted. Other participants had sexual contacts with members of their own sex, but did not think to allow themselves to fall in love or develop emotional relationships with them. Larry recalled that:

When I became sexually active, I had sex with both men and women, and even then I don't think I consciously realized that I was gay, I just thought it was, just a sexual fun kind of thing.... When I did start having sex with men, I never thought of having a relationship with them, basically, it was just sex. (Larry, 2, 5-6)
Other participants, contemplating the contradiction between themselves and the lesbigay stereotypes in which they believed, wondered if they would have to change themselves to match the stereotypes. Casey recalled:

To me a lesbian like I said was a dyke. The only lesbians that I'd known were the ones with the shaved heads and the rattails and whatever, who were, none of them were under 150 pounds.... All I saw were the shaved heads, you know, macho women who were ardent feminists and, you know, really ball bashers, and I didn't really fit there. So I wondered, where do I fit? And am I going to have to change myself if indeed, I am a lesbian? (Casey, 17-18)

Some participants engaged in long-term intimate, sexual relationships with members of the same sex without ever realizing that they were lesbigay. Ann recalled that she had to be told she was a lesbian, by a woman whom she pursued after her first intimate relationship with a woman ended:

I didn't realize for a long time I was a lesbian, because I had the stereotypical images of, you know, big tough muscular women with tattoos.... I actually went out with someone and had a sexual relationship with someone in high school for a year and a half without defining myself as a lesbian. Then it took somebody to tell me I was a lesbian [laughs] before I realized it [inaudible], because I couldn't equate those two ideas. (Ann, 5)

Similarly, Ellen moved from thinking of herself as heterosexual to thinking of herself as lesbian, and had identified as a lesbian for 11 years at the time of the interview. However, she was always aware that she was also somewhat attracted to the occasional male and she had one long-term relationship with a man during the time she identified as lesbian. It took Ellen many years to accept that she was to some extent bisexual, as she struggled with the stereotype that
bisexuals are people who cannot make up their minds about their sexual orientation. She explained her struggles, alluding to an old joke that bisexuals are "bi-confused:"

Perhaps that you had to be one way or the other [That you had to be straight or gay?]

Yeah, yeah. I think it really, it made my process of becoming who I am and comfortable in my own shoes a lot longer, because there was this bad feeling within and without the gay culture about bisexuals, the bi-confused thing. I think, yeah, I think that I was probably afraid to be bisexual, because people just didn't respect that.... It got in the way of my development and honesty with myself. (Ellen 40-41)

Some participants saw themselves through the stereotypes they had learned. Stephanie observed that she had accepted stereotypes about bisexual women and believed that she fit them, when in fact many of them were not true of her:

I think I used it in a negative way, to say, all these bullshit things about bisexual women, I am, when I [laughs] never felt that, I never felt that. (Stephanie, 6-7)

Some participants went so far as to change themselves so as to be more like the stereotypes they held about what people of their sexual orientation were like. Klerdawn recalled:

I think before I was into being the personae I thought a lesbian was supposed to be, um, hard, tough.... With that came a whole pile of behaviours that fit what I believed was the criteria for being a lesbian. [Where were those criteria from?] I don't know, but I got them real good! I think I probably picked them up from, I don't think they were ever said to me, but I think, you know. I mean, we all know that lesbians are weird looking, and are rough and tough and drink, and are diesel dykes.... So that's what I was trying to be, I was trying to be a lesbian like they said I was supposed to be, and those pictures that I was supposed to look like, or what I was working at trying to look like. I had my wallet in my back pocket, thank you very much. (Klerdawn, 18-19)
Klerdawn's attempts to behave as a stereotypical lesbian extended as far as taking on men in physical fights, many of which were very unequal. She observed, with the amount she fought, "my god, how I managed to live this long, [I don't know]" (Klerdawn, 19).

The effects of stereotypes was particularly poignant for participants who wanted to meet other lesbigays but could not find any, as they found only people who did not fit the stereotypes. Sunny recalled watching a bar that was rumoured to be a haunt of gay men. He did not see anyone he recognized to be gay go in, as all the men he saw looked normal:

I started walking up and down Yonge St., I'd heard about the gay bars, so I would just, I'd walk up and down Yonge St. on the other side of the street from the bar, just look across and see if I could spot one [a gay man]. And I kept looking at these people. And then I saw some go in and out of the doors of the bar, and they didn't look any different than any of the other people walking up and down the street, and I figured, maybe they go in the back door or something, or there's a secret entrance that I don't know about. I knew something was wrong, because I wasn't sure what they were supposed to look like, but I just thought they must be different somehow (Sunny, 16).

Unlearning stereotypes. Among those participants who had accepted negative stereotypes of lesbigays, all also reported having changed or begun to change their mind about the validity of the stereotypes. For some participants, this was simply a result of their increasing knowledge of lesbigays, which enabled them to see immediately that the stereotypes they had believed were in fact not true. Thus, for these participants, as soon as they were presented with an alternative to the stereotype, they rejected the stereotype. Many of these participants argued that a person presented with a negative stereotype and a positive alternative, would naturally choose the more positive alternative as soon as they had the opportunity. For example, Scott's discovery of other gay men one weekend was followed immediately by his coming to feel that it
was okay to be gay, and okay for him to be gay. After that point, he struggled only with who he could tell and who he could not.

More often, however, participants reported that their stereotypical beliefs faded gradually over time, as they gathered more and more disconfirming evidence, rather than being rejected immediately. Ron recalled:

Where I came from, and in my family, there was this belief that those type of people were mentally ill. That was the belief, mentally ill, just not right in the head. So I remember, of course I was influenced by that kind of thinking, and I can remember when I came out, and for a year or two, I wondered about my mental state, I did wonder. I mean, I didn't feel guilty about being gay, but I wondered. Like, am I, is there something wrong with me? (Ron, 17)

Positive effects of stereotypes. Though stereotypes about lesbigays caused difficulty for many participants, other participants found that they recognized themselves in the stereotypes. These participants had a sense of themselves as different from most of the people around them before they realized that they were lesbigay, and felt that they were more similar to lesbigays, or to stereotypes of lesbigays, than they were to the group with whom they had assumed or thought they belonged. Starfinch recalled the sense of relief and belonging that she felt when she realized that things about her which had always been seen as peculiar were actually accepted and expected behaviour for lesbians:

When I first met [this group of lesbians], they were constantly laughing at me, because I would, I just kept doing things that were stereotypes, you know. Like of course I had my jackknife with me. Just all kinds of stuff, driving aggressively, and all these stereotypical things. And I took so much comfort in that, every time they were laughing at me, and I'd realize, oh, geez, is that another one, you know [we laugh]. For years I only had earrings,
my ears pierced on one side, I didn't know that was a dykey thing. [laughs] There was all kinds of stuff that I didn't know. I didn't shave my legs, I didn't know that was a dykey thing [laughs]. I really wanted to play hockey. And I didn't know that those were sort of dykey things. And so the more I learned about the stereotypes, I actually found it very comforting. (Starfinch, 21)

**True and somewhat true stereotypes.** As the above discussion has suggested, open questions remain about the validity of some stereotypes of lesbigays. Brad perhaps best summed up the issues when he talked about a book called "The Gay MANual," a collection of humorous essays on gay men. The book, Brad explained, derives its humour from stereotypes of gay men that are somewhat true:

> It says how a gay man is your best friend, because when you're planning a party or a wedding, they're there at the invitations, and the flowers, and they help you decorate, and whatever, they're [there], you know, for the aunts and picking patterns, and the straight man's watching football on tv or something like that [laughs].... It's just full of stereotypical things like that, but in a lot of respects they're true though. (Brad, 30)

Many participants discussed the apparent paradox that some stereotypes about lesbigays are partially true. Larry argued:

> I like a lot of qualities that gay people have. I think a lot of some of the stereotypes that are out there, I think a lot of people do have some of them, but instead of seeing them as negative things, I see them as very positive things. Being neat and clean, I think gay men tend to dress better and take better care of themselves [laughs], you know. I think those are good things. (Larry, 13)

That some stereotypes of lesbigays are partially true is demonstrated vividly by those participants who reported that as they began to socialize with other lesbigays, they felt
encouraged or pressured to behave more stereotypically, so that they would be recognized as lesbigay. Julie recalled being told repeatedly that if she did not cut her hair, other lesbian and bisexual women would believe her to be heterosexual. Sunny observed:

It's almost like, you know, when you first come out, you have to make sure everybody knows, especially other gay men, you want to make sure they know you're gay too, so you kind of fall into that trap of being a little effeminate and pick up the mannerisms and maybe tone of voice as an identifier. (Sunny, 31)

That lesbians are often less conventionally feminine than heterosexual women was alluded to by most of the female participants -- both as a stereotype and as a truth. Both Starfinch and Ann perceived lesbians as not conventionally feminine, in somewhat different ways. When she first became aware of lesbians, Ann felt that lesbians were considerably more butch than she was, so much so that she didn't identify herself as a lesbian. Initially, Ann thought that lesbians were "big tough muscular women with tattoos" and motorcycles, a group with whom she could not identify herself (Ann, 5). Starfinch characterized lesbians similarly -- lesbians drive aggressively, carry jackknives, and drink beer from the bottle. These two descriptions are in many ways similar, yet vastly different in impact. Ann was unable to see herself amongst this group, and so did not identify as lesbian, despite being in a sexual relationship with a woman. For Ann, this characterization of lesbians really was a stereotype. As Ann learned more about lesbians, she widened her understanding, until she felt comfortable identifying as a lesbian. Starfinch identified with her stereotypical understanding of lesbians, and found the more she learned about lesbians, the more comfortable she found herself being lesbian. For Starfinch, this "stereotype" about lesbians is also a generalization that was true much more often of lesbians than of women who do not identify as lesbian. The complexity of the issue is illustrated by the fact that while Ann found that her initial perception of lesbians, that they were very unfeminine
women, was false, she continued to see lesbians as, on average, less traditionally feminine than heterosexual women. At the time of the interview, she described her current view of lesbians as including the fact that most lesbians look somewhat androgynous, like she does, having "round glasses [and] short hair [and wearing] comfortable, casual clothes" (Ann, 28).

Thus, because many (although certainly not all) stereotypes have a grain of truth to them, unlearning stereotypes is considerably more complex than simply learning that a particular stereotype is completely false. For the participants in the present study, what I have discussed as unlearning stereotypes is more accurately described as a process of coming to understand that while some stereotypes about lesbigsays may be somewhat correct as generalizations, they are neither universal nor so extreme as they are typically defined by mainstream society. Participants believed that some stereotypes about lesbigsays are completely false, while others are partially true, with some disagreement over which stereotype falls in which category.

Negative Valuations of Lesbigsays: "I had to Learn It was Okay to be Lesbigail"

Many of the lesbigail participants talked about having to adjust to being lesbigail. They had to realize that they were lesbigail, figure out how to be lesbigail, and accept that it was okay for them to be lesbigail. For some participants, merely recognizing that they were lesbigail was difficult. Once this realization was achieved, however, most participants struggled with their lack of knowledge about what lesbigsays were like. They literally did not know how to be lesbigail. Within our culture, as Emma observed:

through television and film and advertising, you know, virtually everywhere you look, there's some kind of a message that's being given to you, as to what the good life is supposed to be, and how you're supposed to look, and things like that. And certainly heterosexuality is absolutely everywhere, you know, heterosexual images are everywhere. (Emma, 4)
As Raven put it, even now that she is a lesbian, "I see heterosexuality as in my face all the time, blatantly in my face all the time, everywhere I go" (Raven, 16).

We are continually surrounded by information about how heterosexuals develop, maintain, and end relationships. In contrast, information which might be useful to people wanting to develop gay or lesbian relationships is remarkable for its absence from all arenas but that of the lesbigay communities. Michelle recalled sitting in sex education class and hearing nothing that was remotely helpful for her:

God, I can remember just sitting there, I think in grade 7 we had our first sex ed class, and it was totally heterosexual. And it was like, I was kind of looking around [laughs] like, what's going on, you know? [What is this?] Yeah, what is this? This isn't the way I feel. (Michelle, 29)

As a result, many of the participants felt that they had struggled to figure out how to be lesbigay, particularly how to develop and maintain relationships. Brad has had only a few intimate sexual relationships, all of which have been difficult. He attributed this in part to his ignorance about how one goes about developing a good gay relationship:

I don't think there's many role models to go on. I knew what it was to be straight and have to sort of act that way in a relationship, but being gay it was different. (Brad, 27)

Typically, though, the hardest part of participants' adjustment to being lesbigay was not realizing how to be lesbigay, but accepting that it was okay for them to be lesbigay. Having heard, and in many cases accepted to some extent, negative valuations of lesbigays, these participants were faced with trying to make sense of their suspicions or knowledge that they belonged to this disliked and disreputable group. For all the difficulties that the stereotypes caused some of the participants, most participants who struggled with their sexual orientation
reported that the issue of whether or not it was okay to be lesbigay was the most difficult aspect of their development.

Sexuality as natural. Some participants described their sexualities, their sexual feelings and sexual behaviour, as emerging quite naturally and comfortably; they merely did what they felt like doing. Some lesbigay participants reported being attracted to members of their own gender for as long as they could remember. For many of these participants, their feelings or fantasies were felt to have emerged naturally, unaffected by the censure around same-gender pairings. Kira recalled having sex play with other girls, but she wasn’t upset by it nor bothered by it. She simply never thought that what she was doing might be wrong. Talking with other women, Kira came to see this as a very unusual response, so that in retrospect, she felt somewhat puzzled by, and a little guilty for, the ease with which her sexuality emerged:

I was still very young when I had some sexual carryings-on, I mean, basically your playing doctor stuff, with the girls. And it never crossed my mind to think that, this is wrong, this is right, this feels good, this doesn’t feel, it was, okay, so [laughs] and like I said, I never agonized over any of it, and then it could absolutely flip just as fast and, and I would be, as my parents said, boy-crazy. So I was basically boy-crazy, growing up, tomboy, always playing with the boys, but the odd time it would come about that we would be playing and there would be the two girls. And like I said, I never thought about, gee, does this make me or does that make me [any particular sexual orientation], it was just, this feels good, that feels good, I like both. And I never put in any length of time thinking about it, to figure out, well, am I straight or am I gay, or bisexual, right, I like both, they both feel good, whatever comes up first [laughs] this is me. I guess it’s just been, I sometimes feel guilty that I haven’t, I sometimes feel like, maybe I should have given it more thought and agonized over it. It’s almost like a writer suffering for his
work or something like that.... I always wonder, well, maybe I should have [suffered more], because all these people who sit in the group [a lesbigay support group], will pretty much say the same thing, that they've suffered for it, one and another, and felt guilty and it's just done this to them and that to them. And I'm there, you're kidding, you know, and then I pipe up, never felt a thing, maybe I'm shallow, I don't know. (Kira, 9-10)

For participants whose sexuality emerged relatively easily, their sexual feelings often had a very strong influence on their development. The power of sexual attraction was perhaps best described by Sam, who observed that for him:

All the erotic images and whatever [were and] are essentially of men. And, yeah, I see a guy coming down the road, and yeah, he's sexy. And I respond in the same way as various other guys are going, oh, wow, look at that skirt, you know. And it's the kind of thing that is current, alive and vigorous in one's life from the age of about 13, 14, up until 25 or 30. And it's in that 15, 10 to 15 year age bracket that sex is a very large part of one's whole thing. (Sam, 18)

Yet because Sam was also well aware that being gay “was not socially acceptable, no question whatsoever,” he felt that during his twenties his state had been one of “confusion [and] contradiction” (Sam, 17). He had had some sexual contacts with other men in “furtive bits and pieces, particularly in my mid-20s to late 20s, but I was into real denial that this was all temporary and dada dada dada [so on]” (Sam, 1). Although his sexual attractions and sexual experiences were very powerful for Sam, for many years, the pressures of heterosexism were sufficient to keep him from identifying as gay.

Many other participants, however, felt that the heterosexism of their environment prevented not only their sexual identities, but also their sexual expression and even their sexual
feelings from emerging naturally. Several participants recalled not engaging in same-sex sexual behaviour because that was seen as inappropriate. Esme, who identified as bisexual, recalled several early instances of attraction to girls, but never acted upon them. In retrospect, she believed that this had much to do with the social pressure to be heterosexual that she experienced:

When you get older you want to fit in, so you, consciously or unconsciously, you just kind of go with the heterosexual tide. {So your sense is then that in a different environment, that would have transpired differently for you, that you might have started exploring your feelings for women earlier or?} Yeah, if, I think if society had been, because in a way I didn’t really think to, and maybe that’s just because it wasn’t strong, or because I didn’t have a preference, one or the other, and yet society was saying, men, men, men, you gotta go with the men. Yeah, because if, maybe if society had said, no, men and women, it’s fine, I’d probably just be like, okay, and just go with that. (Esme, 21-22)

Emma recalled having had sex play with other girls, which was permissible because they said they were practising for boys. However, when Emma found herself very attracted to a particular girl, she told a friend, who let her know that that was not appropriate: “It was very clear, immediately, that was absolutely unacceptable and I should never say anything like that ever again” (Emma, 21). Indeed, with hindsight, Emma was unsure as to how much of her heterosexuality had to do with natural inclination, and how much with “a habit of mind and a cultural imposition” (Emma, 10). She continued:

Maybe it’s just a habit that I’ve gotten used to thinking of myself that way. {What might be a habit, the labelling of yourself as heterosexual, or?} Yeah, yeah, how you define yourself. {Might it even be a habit that you’re attracted to more men than to women?}
Umhm [absently, then laughs] yeah [I don't know] Yeah, yeah, exactly, yeah. (Emma, 10-11)

**Sexuality as externally-driven.** For many participants, their sexuality was not something that emerged naturally, or as limited or influenced by external pressures, but something that began as an attempt to do what was perceived to be appropriate. It is striking that such attempts were made by some heterosexual participants, as well as by many of those who identified as lesbigay. When she was asked about how she became aware of her sexuality, Tamar differentiated a genuine, chosen sexuality from one which she acted out in response to pressures around her. Tamar felt that she didn't yet have any sexual feelings at the time that she was being taught about sex. She understood that she was supposed to be becoming interested in boys, but in fact was not having those kinds of feelings. Nevertheless, she began to drift into relationships with boys:

I suppose [my awareness of sexuality] was more externally than internally driven, in the sense that, being prepared for maturation, being prepared for beginning to menstruate, sex education classes, that would be when I first became aware of it, that would be around the time I started experimenting, like with my girlfriends, so I was maybe 11, 10 or 11, and so it was kind of, that's what was going on in society at the time, and I think maybe that was because I was advanced a few grades, so everybody was 2 or 3 years older than I was, so it was something that I was told about rather than, before I started asking the questions. [Umhm, okay. How did you start discovering boys, start getting interested in boys?] [laughs] Well, I think probably from, there's like, there's the being interested in boys because I thought that was the right thing, the socially right thing to do, and then [later] there was being interested in boys because I was actually interested in boys and having sex with men, I guess, is the way I'd put it. (Tamar, 15)
Even when Tamar began to have relationships with boys in whom she really was interested, she still found her sexuality very much influenced by external factors, particularly the stereotypes about women's sexuality to which she had been exposed:

Reflecting on my own sexual experience and especially in the period when I was sort of 17, 18, 19 with this boyfriend, and kind of reading Penthouse magazine and stuff, and experimenting with different kinds of sexual behaviour that really wasn't me [laughs], it really wasn't what I was interested in, or what I found stimulating or erotic, and part of that was a natural experimentation, but part of that was, well, you know, women are supposed to be that way, or sex is supposed to be that way, because that's what they write about in magazines. (Tamar, 28)

The sexual pressures that adolescents, in particular, experience are often not perceived as coercive while they are happening. Michelle, who identified as lesbian, had boyfriends in high school because that is what girls did. She said that it literally never occurred to her to wonder whether she herself wanted a boyfriend: "It's like, I think I should have a boyfriend. Why? You know, it never occurred to me why. I just thought, everybody's doing it and I'd better do it too" (Michelle, 15).

Other participants saw their earlier heterosexual relationships as attempts to deny, to themselves and/or to others, that they were lesbian or gay. Most of these participants felt, looking back, that they had had at least a vague idea about what it was they were doing. During her adolescence, Gina had a whole series of short-term boyfriends. It is only in retrospect that Gina realized that her constant search for boyfriends was her attempt to convince others, and herself, that she was heterosexual:

I just wasn't a very intuitive kid, it just didn't kind of dawn on me to say hey, I'm gay, and then go from there.... I know now that the more I subconsciously freaked out about [my
feelings for girls], the more I saw guys. Like I was never without a boyfriend, from the
day when I was like 15 until the day that I slept with my first woman, I always had a
boyfriend, and they were always very, other than the last one, very short-term. I would
always end it before it got to a point where it could get beyond, you know, the necking
stage, and [I was] constantly breaking hearts. (Gina, 14)
Pressure to be heterosexually active was also reported by male participants as well. Scott
recalled:
I slept with a lot of girls, from the age of 11 on, like, I was known as the town whore,
when it came to sleeping with women.... And I think that was my form of denial or
whatever or I was trying to prove something to myself or something, I don't know. (Scott,
26)
Some participants understood quite clearly that they were lesbigay, but engaged in
heterosexual relationships in an attempt to deny that to others. Rumor belonged to a youth corps
of the Armed Forces, where being a lesbian was definitely not a possibility. She was lucky to
find a boyfriend with whom she shared the understanding that this was a relationship for public
consumption, and a friendship in private:
I had the obligatory boyfriend, but I think he was gay, so that was a cool thing. We didn't
really do anything together, so that was really nice. We just kind of held hands at the
right time and I think we were both together because we both didn't want anyone else to
know we were gay, so it was really kind of cool. (Rumor, 18)
Brad's experience was similar:
In high school, I knew I was attracted to guys, but then again, the stigma of being out and
being gay in [my suburb] in high school, and the way they treated a few people that were
out, I just didn't [want to do that]. So a new girl came to high school ... I just dated her,
she was in the band and we sort of went out, until college. And I knew I was gay, the whole time. (Brad, 8)

Strenuous and painful efforts to demonstrate that they were heterosexual were also described by some heterosexual participants. In Erik's adolescent male friendships, the unspoken rule was that nothing was to happen that might cause anyone to doubt their heterosexuality. Touching one another and expressing affection were strictly off-limits. Erik recalled:

Probably like anybody else, I didn't display any kind of signs of real affection for people of the same, other guys, people of the same sex. {Were you conscious of not doing it, or was that?} Yeah. Yeah, I was. I always did kind of privately wonder like why that was such a bad thing, or why no guys I ever hung with ever touched each other, beyond a handshake. It wasn't until I was probably 19 that it was okay, I was getting signs from my peers that it was okay for guys to hug each other. We never even, my closest personal friends, we never hugged each other. We would console each other if something bad happened, but I didn't grow up with very warm and fuzzy friends, which is kind of a drag now that I think about it, but, you know, that's the way it was. We were all kind of really repressed [laughs]. (Erik, 14)

Constructing one's sexuality. Many participants talked about deliberately choosing to do things to help construct their sexuality. While many heterosexuals experience their sexuality as emerging naturally, or as being externally driven in a direction that they would eventually have found for themselves, many of the lesbigay participants in the current study recall making conscious efforts to shape their sexuality and its impact upon them.

Some participants tried to alter their sexuality by trying to be heterosexual, although they knew or feared that they were not. For most participants, the stereotypes about and negative valuations of lesbigays to which they had been exposed meant that the possibility that they might
be lesbigay was disturbing, upsetting or frightening. For some, the prospect of being lesbigay felt like an absolute disaster. In response, many participants described trying to be heterosexual for some period of time, developing sexual relationships with members of the other sex in the hopes that this would "cure" them of being lesbigay. After Raven began her first relationship with a woman, she decided she did not want to be a lesbian. So she decided to make herself heterosexual. She recalled, "I went out and slept with 4 or 5 men in a period of a month to try to make myself straight, this is going to make me straight" (Raven, 12).

Sunny, whose knowledge of homosexuality was derived from discussions of sexual perversions in 1960s medical texts, knew that he was attracted to other boys, but he definitely did not want to be. He tried to be as butch as possible, and went out and got a girlfriend in the hope that being sexual with her would make him heterosexual:

I just thought homosexuals must be different somehow [They must not look like normal people?] Fairies, fags, yeah. So I overcompensated, I mean, I went the other way in my style of mannerisms and dress and tried to be as butch as possible, as butch as possible, actually, to make sure, I guess I was trying to force myself to be straight and I thought having a girlfriend would be a good idea.... I wanted to have sex just to make sure that I was, you know, try to straighten myself out. I didn't want to end up like one of those homosexuals, so I figured if I could have sex with her, everything would be fine. (Sunny, 16)

Sunny was so eager to become heterosexual that he spent a year in a exploitative heterosexual relationship. His role was to chauffeur his girlfriend around to places that he was not invited and supply her with alcohol. She would drink the alcohol at parties with her friends, where Sunny was not allowed to go.
Other participants described constructing their sexuality in terms of actively working to figure out what being lesbigay meant to them. Many participants deliberately chose to meet other lesbigays, seeking information that they needed to learn about the sexual orientation that they thought or knew was theirs. Starfinch explained that as she had only recently begun to identify as lesbian, she was very aware of her needs for information and support:

I was realizing that I was [lesbian] and needed the support, so I sought out lesbian friendships.... Right now, because I'm still asking a lot of questions, it's really important to me to be able to ask other lesbians, maybe women who have been aware of their sexuality longer than I have. (Starfinch, 6)

Other participants took other approaches in seeking information about lesbigays. Mark recalled reading all the books about gay men in Toronto's reference library before he ventured out into Toronto's lesbigay communities.

**Knowing and not knowing.** Many participants talked about knowing more than they allowed themselves to know about their sexuality and their sexual orientation. These participants talked easily about parts of themselves knowing different things, or about knowing but not knowing, suggesting that a part of themselves was more aware of lesbian or gay feelings, or their lesbigay identity, while another part of themselves was unaware or less aware. For these participants, some part of themselves was monitoring and adjusting their conscious level of awareness about being lesbigay.

Some participants described having had feelings of lesbian or gay attraction that they had not consciously been aware of; they felt they had repressed their lesbigay feelings. Larry observed:

Now, looking back on my life, I believe that I was born gay, and that I was always attracted to men, even as a very young boy. I repressed all of those feelings, I believe, to
do the quote right thing, to please my family and my religion and my church and school and everything.... For years I didn't even realize that I was repressing those feelings.

(Larry, 1-2)

Sylvia felt that although she had repressed her lesbian feelings, they had strongly affected her, causing her to react very negatively even to the idea of lesbianism. She recalled, "I used to be just totally repulsed even by the word lesbian, let alone thinking, god, I could be like that, but there was something really strong in me that I had been denying and repressing" (Sylvia, 10).

For many participants, however, their experience was more complex than what is commonly understood as repression. They felt that they had not simply been unaware of their lesbigay feelings, but had been aware of them to some extent, or had been able to make use of them. Although Julie had not consciously been aware that she was attracted to women during much of her adolescence, she was nevertheless aware enough that she was able to protect herself from her friends' homophobia by withdrawing from them when she became aware of it. Julie disengaged from her friends when they let her know they thought two girls kissing was gross. She explained she must have known more than she let herself know; she must have had some "inkling" that she was bisexual:

I was at a party one time, and there was a movie ... [in which two girls were] kissing, and the girls in the room were like, eeww [sound of disgust and upset], and this was like grade 9 or grade 10 or something. So I drifted away from that group of people real fast. I must have had some kind of inkling in my head, had a semi, around 15 or 16, because I know that's when that happened, and that really bothered me, that they said that. (Julie, 17)

Later, when Julie did realize that she was attracted to women, she realized that she had been afraid that "that's what they're going to do to me, they're going to say eeew," so she left them before they could reject her (Julie, 17).
Michelle was one of the participants who felt that in retrospect some part of them had always been aware that they were lesbigay, that they had not merely repressed their lesbigay feelings. She observed:

I think I always knew [I was a lesbian], I think I always knew. And it was just this game I was playing, I think, with myself and what I should be.... I think I knew what it was, I just didn't have the strength. I think that's the big thing, I wasn't strong enough to say, this is who I am. I couldn't look myself in the mirror and say, this is who you are, it's no big thing. (Michelle, 15)

Most often, as Michelle did, participants felt that knowing and not knowing that they were lesbigay was a way of protecting themselves from a situation that they would not have been otherwise able to cope with. Their dual awareness enabled them to protect themselves from reactions of others which they anticipated would be negative, and also to protect themselves from having to deal with their own feelings before they were at least somewhat able to do so.

Realizing or deciding that one is lesbigay. Lesbigay participants described the realization that they were lesbigay as occurring in a variety of different ways. For some, it was a simple matter of recognizing that they had feelings of attraction towards or were fantasizing about members of their own sex, and then realizing that this meant that they were lesbian or gay. Some of these participants were quite frankly puzzled as to how it could be possible for someone to NOT always know that they were lesbigay. Brad observed that other people have told him that they didn't realize they were gay until puberty, but he didn't really understand how that could be:

Some people have told me that they never knew until they hit puberty, but, you know, sometimes, I just [think] you are or you're not, there's not this [confusion], I don't know (Brad, 5).
However, for other participants, it was indeed more difficult to recognize that they were lesbigay. Many participants recalled a first time when it occurred to them that they might be lesbigay. For some participants their realization that they were lesbigay started with sexual fantasy, or feelings of attraction that they could not ignore. For other participants, realization came when they fell in love with a member of their own sex. Still other participants became involved in an intimate same-sex relationship, and only later realized that they were lesbigay -- as both Ann and Lisa did, having had one relationship with a woman and still believing themselves to be heterosexual. Later, these participants realized that their attractions were to other women as well, and hence that they were lesbian.

Adjusting to being lesbigay. Most participants talked in some way about the difficulties they experienced in adjusting to being lesbigay. For some participants, these difficulties were primarily their struggles with their feelings that it was wrong to be lesbigay. These participants struggled with the negative valuations of lesbigays, afraid that they could not simultaneously be a good person and lesbigay. Simply put, these participants struggled, sometimes with immense pain, about whether it was “okay” to be lesbigay.

At the time she was interviewed, Larissa was still struggling to adjust to being a lesbian. Though Larissa said that since she has come out as a lesbian she has felt happier than she ever had, she still somewhat wished she was not gay. In the following excerpts, one can clearly see how Larissa endorsed two contradictory positions, one heterosexist, the other based on her emerging lesbian consciousness. Also evident is the transition that she was in the process of making from the former to the latter at the time she was interviewed. Indeed, the process of doing the interview seemed to help Larissa move a little further along this path, as I invited her to think about whether being a lesbian had benefits, as well as costs:
What do I like about being queer? [laughs] That's a funny question. I don't know if I really like anything about being queer. Actually, you know, like if I had my choice, I'd be heterosexual. If I had one wish right now, that's what it would be, but that's never going to happen, so it's just a matter of me learning to adjust to it. I mean, I see girls outside holding hands and stuff like that down the street, well, I would never do that. Not yet, like that's, I'm not ready, you know what I mean, to be doing that. But I don't really know if there's anything I like about it. I don't know. Girls are different from guys, you know what I mean, they're more compassionate, more easier to talk to, so they understand you better than guys. I think that's what, I guess, I do like about it, because females do have a different perspective on things .... I was always afraid, what would people think [if I were to say I were gay], what would my family think, what would my friends think. And I just got so tired of being unhappy, you know, I wanted to be happy for a change, so I just decided, do it, and I did. [And then what happened?] And then what happened was I met a lot of really nice people that I've become very fast, close friends with. And I'm just like really happy, I wouldn't change me for anything now. I mean, even now, I still think, I wish I wasn't gay, and I don't think I'm ever going to stop thinking that. No, actually, I think I will once I meet that one person that I fall in love with. Then I'm going to be thinking, I'm so glad I'm gay, I'm glad I'm female, I'm glad I'm gay, because if I wasn't, and I was a guy, then she wouldn't be in love with me, because she'd be with somebody else, another female. I think that's what I probably will end up thinking. But right now, because it's only been 2 months, I still think, well, why me? Why do I have to be gay? I've accepted it, though, I'm not ashamed of it, sometimes I think maybe I still am, but I know I'm not, because if I was ashamed of it, I wouldn't be willing to tell people, like I wouldn't be sitting here right now [doing this interview]. So I
know I'm not ashamed of it, it's just a matter of feeling more comfortable with it and
adjusting to it. (Larissa, 8, 18-19)

Raven recalled having several very difficult years in her adolescence, as she struggled to
feel that it was okay for her to be lesbian:

When I was 13, 14, I was like, why am I feeling these things about women, why am I
dreaming these things, what's going on? And then it was like, I was still fighting
Catholicism, and I still had all those internal tapes and things, saying this is wrong, this is
bad, [I'll] go to hell, and all that stuff, I'm sinning for even thinking about these things.
And then I just struggled with it and struggled with it for years, and then I finally said to
myself, I think I'm gay. And that was when I was 17. And then there was a whole
acceptance part that had to come with it, like because I would say yes, I am, no, I'm not,
okay I am. It took, maybe, I don't know, 8 months to a year, from the point where I said I
think I am to yes I am. (Raven, 13)

At the time of her interview, Lisa was still struggling with whether it was okay for her to
be lesbigay, although she'd made considerable progress. Her difficulties, she said, stemmed from
her vulnerability to the negative valuations about lesbigays that she was still hearing that still
made her sometimes doubt whether it was okay to be lesbian. Lisa thought it was because she
was having some emotional difficulties that she was much more influenced by the "crap" that she
experienced, discounting the support:

I'm definitely not on even keel, like I'm walking around and I just see so much ugly stuff
out there, and it's like, man, I can't fucking believe the way people act, and what they say
and what they think, and I'm not on even keel, so it really bothers me, and it knocks me
over, but if I was on even keel, if I was somewhat strong and sturdy, it would just bounce
off me, I think, but it doesn't. (Lisa, 45-46)
While Lisa was vulnerable to the negative messages about being lesbigay she received, she was more resistant to the affirmative messages that she was also receiving. She said that she hears often from people she knows, especially heterosexuals, that she must be a strong person, being a lesbian and being so open about it. Yet though Lisa is aware that other people see her as strong, she does not perceive herself that way:

So then when I hear that, when I hear comments like that, like, you're strong because you can be so open about [being in same-sex relationships], in this straight society, then I start thinking that I'm strong, I must have some kind of backbone, to be able to keep going. So I guess that kind of puts my sexuality, that's the sexuality part, in how I feel about myself, it's kind of answering it, but, okay, but you're asking me, do I really feel that? [Umhm, yeah] No [laughs] [Okay] So, yeah, I don't feel that I'm strong, about my sexuality, and how I see myself? I don't know. See, but people see, think that I'm strong because I'm so out [but] sometimes I'm out, but not all the time. (Lisa, 8-9)

Thus, many participants struggled with how they felt about themselves as they realized they were lesbigay. For other participants, however, difficulties with adjustment related less to their own feelings about being lesbigay than to their difficulties with others' reactions to their sexual orientation. These participants found that their realization about being lesbigay was quite easy, but had to struggle much more to deal with others' beliefs that it was inappropriate for them to be lesbigay. For Gina, the most difficult thing about being lesbigay was having to learn to lie.

When she first accepted that she was a lesbian, Gina, who had been raised Roman Catholic, believed that she would never be able to be open about her relationship with a woman:

For quite a long while, when I first came out it was, like I said before, I felt kind of invisible, I didn't have a voice, and no rights, and this that, and the other, and, just gotta accept your lot of life. If you want this lifestyle, this is what you've gotta be, period, you
know, you have to have double lives and so on and so forth. And now I know that's not
true. (Gina, 31)

While it was difficult for Gina to accept that she was a lesbian, it was much harder for her to learn
how to lie to almost everyone in her life -- and that's what she felt she had to do:

It was hard. I had to redefine who I was, really, I had to, you know, kind of, like, come
up with a whole set of morals. And, big thing for me, I had to lie. I never lied when I
was a kid, never.... The first time I started lying was when I started seeing Lisa, you
know, lie, lie, lie, lie, lie, lie. That was hard, really really hard for me, I felt, more than
the sexuality struggle, that was a bigger struggle for me.... I was lying about everything
[laughs], what I did, where I went, who I was with, how I felt about certain things. Going
to a movie, oh that guy's cute. Yeah, and all I could see was like the woman in the film,
you know, like, everything just changed, you know, overnight almost, it, you know, like
my whole perspective. I felt like I was waking in someone else's body. It was that, it was
that sudden and that drastic for me. (Gina, 25-26)

The Next Step: A Comfortable and Personal Identity

As discussed in Chapter I, the literature on lesbigays tends to focus on coming out,
suggesting that the process of coming out -- defining oneself as lesbigay and telling that to others
-- is the major psychological adjustment that lesbigays make to their sexual orientation. In
contrast, in the present study, participants talked about a much longer and more complex process
which for many culminated in their developing a more personal definition of their sexual
orientation and coming to feel truly comfortable with that sexual orientation. Many participants
talked in different ways about moving beyond their first understanding of what it meant to be
lesbigay, typically understood as an issue defined by one's sexual attractions, and towards a more
complete and more personalized lesbian or gay or bisexual identity. Most of these participants
also described progressing from a recognition that it was okay for them to be lesbigay to feeling that they were truly comfortable with this identification. Such journeys are well beyond what is commonly understood as “coming out”, but were nonetheless of great importance to most of the participants.

What kind of lesbigay do I want to be? As participants gradually became more aware of the lesbigay community, they also became more aware of the diversity of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. Although the stereotypes suggest that all lesbigays are the same, or very similar, in practice knowing that someone is gay, or lesbian, or bisexual conveys little more information than the knowledge that someone is heterosexual. As Scott explained it, he came to see that “being gay is like a huge umbrella and there’s all kinds of things underneath it” (Scott, 55). Thus lesbigay participants, once they identified their sexual orientation, were faced with the question of how they wanted to live that sexual orientation: What kind of lesbigay did they want to be?

For Michelle, this was an obvious question. No sooner had she identified herself as lesbian than she realized that to do so did not begin to answer what she recognized as more important, and more relevant, questions about how she was going to live her life as a lesbian:

I think I really had to take a look at my life and ask myself who I wanted to be and how I was going to live my life in this lifestyle. And that was the big thing. Yes, I’m a lesbian, but how am I going to live this life? It was a big decision for me ... like what I wanted to do for a living, how I saw relationships, what type of a girlfriend I wanted to be.... Because once you say, I’m a lesbian, it’s like, okay, it’s over [we laugh] and I think the next big hump, for me anyway, I think the next hump was, probably the biggest hurdle was “who am I?” because it just raised so many different questions for me, inside.

(Michelle, 13)
While it was immediately obvious to Michelle that she needed to decide what kind of a lesbian she wanted to be, other participants took longer to reach that question. When Mark came out as gay, he embraced the gay community and the lifestyle led by many of the young gay men that revolved around clubbing and cruising. He lived this way for several years before he realized that he really did not enjoy it, and he began to develop a gay lifestyle that did suit him:

It's been a process of finding out what's important to me, and what I find enjoyable. And I really used to think that I really liked hanging out in clubs and bars and stuff like that, but I found out I really didn't. I really hated it [laughs], it was really awful [laughs] and I don't enjoy that stuff at all, but the thing is, it's very funny, because when I first came out, that was all there ever was. That's not all that there ever was, but all that I seemed to be involved with. So it was like oh, it's Friday, okay, gotta go to a bar with friends and stuff like that. Saturday, oh, gotta go clubbing til 5 in the morning. Sunday, oh gotta rest [[laughs]] to go out the next [weekend]. So that was what the situation was. And then I got really sick of it. And then I realized that I really hated it [laughs]. It was just horrible, so I don't do any of that stuff anymore.... I guess the thing was like bars seemed to be things that people in their teens and 20s and maybe early 30s did, and then after that they did other things, I'm not sure what they did at the time, now I realize there are things to do. So I didn't look at it like, this is what being gay is all about. But you could say in terms of if you're a young gay man, then that is the thing to do, because that seems to be the thing to do, yeah. (Mark, 14-17)

At the time of his interview, Sunny felt he was only beginning to answer those questions about how he wanted to live his life as a gay man. In retrospect, he saw himself as having drifted though most of the many years since he had come out, only recently having begun to look for the direction, the focus, that he needed in his life:
I think when I came out, there was such a release of tension, and it was like, you know, wow, I'm here now, I'm here, this is me, but there was nothing to replace that. It was like I swept off all this garbage, like, this baggage, but I didn't have anything to replace it with, I didn't have anything to, what's next, where do I go from here? I never answered that question. I didn't know where I was going after that, it was like, you know, I had arrived at a place and now what do I do? I sort of felt lost for a long time. (Sunny, 21-22)

Becoming comfortable with being lesbigay. The responses of several participants also suggested that it can take a long time to become truly comfortable with being lesbigay, a process considerably longer than that involved in coming out as lesbigay. Although Brad always knew he was gay and his coming out process was a relatively easy one, he felt it took him “a long time [after I came out] to feel comfortable and accept myself, just because of society. Because my mother had a real hard time with my being gay” (Brad, 3). Yet for Brad, becoming comfortable about being gay was just a part of becoming comfortable about being who he was as a person. In his interview, Brad drew a parallel between his own experience and what he assumed was mine, a parallel which was particularly striking because he also assumed I was heterosexual:

[Being gay] is not a problem with me. It's who I am. [laughs] I don't know, I keep saying the same thing. [Yeah, I know, and I guess what I'm really trying to isolate is how you came to that, because I think that's a really important realization.] It takes a long time to become comfortable with yourself. I don't know if you're still becoming comfortable with yourself, you don't know where you're going to be when you finish [school], you know, where's my career going to lead me, where am I going to live, who am I going to marry, I don't know, it's probably, you just deal with it as it comes, and you try to be as comfortable with it as you can. (Brad, 19)
Ellen also felt that for her, becoming truly comfortable with her sexual orientation was a very gradual process that lasted several years beyond the time that she began identifying as a lesbian. At the time of the interview, Ellen felt that she was finally really comfortable, 11 years later. She recalled:

I was pretty comfortable back when I was with Sue and I was in university. [But] I would say I'm most comfortable now, really comfortable, but that's probably when I started to be comfortable. (Ellen, 36)

**Becoming comfortable with being lesbigay in a heterosexual world.** It is important to make a distinction between being an individual being comfortable being lesbigay, and being comfortable being lesbigay within a heterosexist context. As Brad did, many participants differentiated between a struggle to feel personally comfortable with their sexual orientation, and a more difficult struggle to feel comfortable in their sexual orientation in surroundings where other people were uncomfortable with their sexual orientation. Carl found it easy, when he began to attend university in the early 70s, to act on his feelings of attraction to both men and women. He was never particularly troubled by his bisexuality, though he chose not to be very open about it:

The idea of being bi to me, you know, even in my 20s or before, wasn't something that I wasn't entertaining in my mind. I just didn't talk about it because other people maybe around me weren't necessarily being open about it. I didn't see anything wrong with it. I thought being bi, being open to all aspects of life was a more natural state of being, but I even believed back then that you know due to societal pressures, it was better to pretend to be one or the other. (Carl, 14)

Carl eventually chose to enter a heterosexual marriage, a decision which he made because "it was so ingrained in me to get married and have kids, like I remember wanting to have kids from the
time I was 10 years old, I always wanted children' (Carl, 14). Many years later, Carl's marriage ended, in part because of outside sexual contacts that he had had with men during the marriage, and he began to identify as gay. At the time of the interview, Carl felt that he had been struggling with the question of how to be gay in a heterosexual society for several years, and was only at that point nearing the end of that process.

**Redefining what it means to be lesbigay.** Several participants talked about having continued to make important changes in the way they understood their sexuality long after the time when they began identifying as lesbigay. For these participants, their ideas about how they understood being lesbigay and what role that played in their lives changed dramatically. Some participants began to experience being lesbigay as a political and/or community identity, as well as a personal one. Scott lived for many years with the idea that his private life was gay, and his work life was heterosexual. It has only been within the last few years that he has begun to mix the two, recognizing that he can work professionally with lesbigay clients. He has also recently begun to be active in charity work which both includes and transcends the lesbigay communities. Many participants paid tribute to the ways in which they had grown through their involvement with the lesbigay communities by discussing their commitment to giving something back to the communities. This often took the form of making a personal or political commitment to mentoring younger lesbigays, or people just coming out.

For other participants, the change in how they felt about being lesbigay seemed to be mostly about how to bring their lesbigay selves more fully into all that they do. Many participants reported that they were lesbigay in specific contexts (relationships with other lesbigays, being in lesbigay communities) and over time were able to be themselves, including being lesbigay, in all (or almost all) areas of their lives. Carl explained that it wasn't hard for him to feel okay about being gay in a context where that was seen as appropriate, but it took him more
time to feel that he "can be gay and be okay with it, even in places where maybe others can't" (Carl, 7). Gina explained that she now insisted on equality in her relationships with heterosexuals, being just as open and honest with heterosexuals about her life as they are with her about theirs. She goes to heterosexual bars with her straight friends, and insists that they come with her "equal time" to lesbian bars, where she feels most comfortable (Gina, 11). This is a significant change from when she was in her first lesbian relationship, when she kept her life and her lesbianism private. Gina observed:

I don't hold anything back, you know, if my girlfriend, my straight girlfriend talks to me about, you know, oh, blah, blah, blah, you know, I haven't been getting enough lately, I mean, I can do the exact same thing. We talk about that stuff, it's completely and totally open. And I make her jealous all the time. (Gina, 8)

As Gina described, for many participants, a big change occurred when they began to feel that they could be themselves in relationships with heterosexuals. Mark said that for several years after he first came out, his friends were all gay, as that was who he felt comfortable being himself with. More recently, he came to feel that he could be himself with some heterosexuals as well. At the time of the interview, many of his best friends were heterosexual, a change that Mark largely attributed to no longer feeling he had to censor himself in his friendships with people who are not gay -- he eventually realized that he could talk to some heterosexuals about anything. He mused:

I think, you know what, I think that only thing that I wouldn't talk to [my heterosexual friends] about, is something that, some really kinky aspect of something that I'd heard about, but, actually, yeah, I probably would. [[laughs]] Yeah, I could even talk to them about that [laughs]. (Mark, 13)
Current Conceptualizations of Lesbians

Another facet of the data that is important to examine is the multiplicity of conceptualizations of lesbians that were discussed by the participants. Heterosexism in its various forms is an ideology, a set of sometimes contradictory beliefs that allegedly describe the nature and behaviours of lesbians. As such, fully examining participants' experiences with heterosexism requires that one investigate the understanding of lesbians that they developed to replace the heterosexism in which they were schooled.

Most participants, lesbian and heterosexual, began with an understanding of lesbians that was strongly influenced by the heterosexist beliefs that they had encountered. While there were some significant differences amongst participants' initial conceptualizations of lesbians, there was a lot of similarity. In particular, most participants began by knowing or being afraid that being lesbian was somehow wrong, that lesbians were inferior human beings. Some participants applied these understandings to themselves, while others did not. Some participants found these understandings made things very difficult for them, while for others they were much less important. However, whatever their path, all of the participants described themselves as having changed over time their ideas about lesbians, particularly about what lesbians were and how they fit in the world. In this section, I explore participants' current understandings of lesbians, and what it means to them that they are lesbian.

Differences between lesbians and heterosexuals. The most enduring and consistent message of heterosexism is that lesbians are different from, and inferior to, heterosexuals. As discussed above, almost all lesbian participants described reaching the realization that it was okay that they were lesbian, that they were not a worse person than they would be had they been or remained heterosexual. Those few participants who had not been able to bring themselves to entirely believe this nonetheless saw themselves as in the process of making this journey, and
anticipated that eventually they would truly feel that they were not inferior because they were lesbigsay. Similarly, all of the heterosexual participants explicitly endorsed a framework in which people of all sexual orientations are of equal value, although some were still struggling with overcoming heterosexist feelings or beliefs at the time they were interviewed. Thus, participants clearly rejected heterosexism's tenet that lesbigsays are inferior to heterosexuals.

The current status amongst participants of the belief that lesbigsays are qualitatively different from heterosexuals is less clear. Are lesbigsays in fact different from heterosexuals? Well, the participants said, yes and no. Most participants struggled in some way to convey their simultaneous beliefs that lesbigsays are different from heterosexuals, and that they are not. Yes, on average, most lesbigsays are different from most heterosexuals: Lesbigsays tend to have different life experiences and as a result tend to be different in important ways from (most) heterosexuals. No, lesbigsays are not different from heterosexuals: Quite simply, people are people, and when you think about what makes people different from one another, sexual object choice just is not that significant a factor.

Participants struggled to explain their commitment to both frameworks -- that lesbigsays are different from heterosexuals and that they are not -- in a variety of ways. Jane saw no differences between herself and her other lesbian friends, and their heterosexual friends, yet she also saw her lesbianism as making her very different from mainstream heterosexual society. Thus, she suggested that the difference between lesbigsays and heterosexuals results from most heterosexuals not being as open-minded as she would like:

My friends are just so open, it's like we don't think of the sexuality when we're together, because it's not something that we actually sit down and actually talk about. The majority of my friends are gay, but since we're not together sexually, it's just kind of not really there. I mean, we don't really talk about it. (Okay. Is your relationship with your
friends though affected by the fact that a lot of you are gay?| No. No, everybody's just so openminded that it's not an issue. Now, mind you, the general population, quote-unquote, it's a different story. (Jane, 1-2)

A central issue of the psychological literature on difference asks whether a difference between two groups of people is of practical significance: In the real world, does this difference matter? (Lips, 1988). General Systems Theory makes a similar point in its assertion that a bit of information is "a difference which makes a difference," so that in order to be a difference, a difference must make a difference (Bateson, 1972, p. 459). While the participants were in agreement that sexual orientation per se -- the gender of the people whom one chooses as sexual partners -- was not at the root of the differences they perceived between lesbigays and heterosexuals, they differed extensively on what was at the root of that difference. The remainder of this section, as it explores participants' current conceptualizations of what it means to be lesbigay, also demonstrates the similarities and differences that participants perceived between lesbigays and heterosexuals.

Sexuality is more fluid than we think. Many participants talked at length about the fluidity of sexuality, and contrasted it to the rigidity with which they feel most people think about categories of sexual orientation. Many participants who identified as lesbian, gay, or heterosexual described a significant amount of sexual attraction and/or sexual behaviour that was inconsistent with a strict definition of their sexual orientation. These participants typically chose not to identify themselves as bisexual as they had a preference for their own or the other sex. As Carl described it, at the time of his interview, he identified as gay because he had "a major in men and at best at this stage a minor in women" (Carl, 4). Though Sunny identified himself as gay at the time of the interview, he was still attracted to some women, and to bicycles. Moreover, he felt his sexuality was much more fluid than that rather vague description suggests:
[My sexuality] is a liquid, it's a plastic thing that keeps, it's like the tides, it's the clouds and the sky, what can I say. It's not fixed, it's not inscribed in stone... I can't predict what's going to, I can't say I'll be straight or gay tomorrow or next year or 10 years from now. (Sunny, 5)

That human sexuality is fluid, and more bisexual (or potentially more bisexual) than most of us admit was seen by participants as one important similarity between lesbigays and heterosexuals. At the same time, it was seen as an important difference between the two groups that lesbigays tend to be more aware of, and more comfortable with, this fluidity than are most heterosexuals.

**People's sexual orientation is not important.** Some participants observed that lesbigays and heterosexuals were similar because a person's sexual orientation is not an important aspect of who they are. For some individuals, a change in sexual orientation does not make a significant difference in who they are -- something that was reported both by some participants who had changed sexual orientations themselves, and by other participants who had seen other people change their sexual orientation.

Esme identified as heterosexual for many years, and then fell in love with and became involved with a woman. Although this might be seen as a significant change in her life, Esme said that she felt like she had not really changed -- she was the same person as she had been before this change. During the interview she identified other attractions to women that she had not pursued, and I asked her what had been different that she chose to develop this relationship. Esme replied, "it's funny because the question makes me feel dramatic [laughs] and yet it felt so normal, yeah, the change was just normal" (Esme, 22). For Esme, the change from heterosexual to bisexual did not significantly affect who she was.
Although Larry had been married to a woman for 13 years, and subsequently become openly gay, he also felt that coming out had not been a big change in his life:

Everybody is a sexual being, but you don’t really spend that much time of your life actually having sex [laughs] in the whole picture, and it’s really nobody’s business who I’m having sex with, and because I do have sex with men, it doesn’t change, it hasn’t changed me as a human being, or anything else about me, really. I still do the same job, I, you know, do everything the way I did before I came out, before I even realized that I was gay. And that like when I came out, it was me sharing, I guess, with my family even more, and my friends, letting them know more about me, so I tend to look at it a real positive. (Larry, 18)

Inez observed that an individual’s behaviour is often determined much more by personality than by sexual orientation, so that changes in sexual orientation may be of minor import. She described a roommate of hers whose behaviour was remarkably consistent, as she moved from identifying as heterosexual, to bisexual, and then to lesbian:

[My roommate] would be very gung-ho. She was a gung-ho heterosexual and then 6 months later she was a gung-ho bisexual and then 6 months later she was a gung-ho lesbian, and then she became a total diesel dyke. It’s just like, it verged on being trendy as opposed to being an identity. It was just like, yeah, whatever. And now it’s sort of come full circle [to where she began], because despite the sort of diesel dyke mentality, the conservatism’s come up again, because now she’s married to her female lover, and it’s just like, going back to that same sort of construct.... It’s just like, yeah, despite the fact that she’s involved with [a woman with a facial piercing], she still has a wedding ring. It’s just like, yeah, yeah, whatever. (Inez, 33-34)
Many participants argued that what made people different was less their sexual orientation per se than their sexuality in general. Some single participants observed that both the heterosexual community and the lesbigay community make it clear that it is better to be one half of a couple than to be single; for some of these participants, their interactions with others were more strongly influenced by the fact that they were not part of a couple than by their sexual orientations per se (e.g., Emma, Tamar, Casey). Other participants pointed to the similarities among people who engage in transgressive sex, whether heterosexual or lesbigay. Brad found it funny that his father so exaggerated the differences between lesbigays and heterosexuals that he thought it was only gays who were into leather:

I showed [my family] pictures of us at Halloween, we all did leather, and my dad’s like, oh, you’re getting into leather now? [laughs] Well, you know, it’s a costume, whatever, it’s neat, it’s erotic, I like it. All the stuff that Jason’s got on, he got from his straight friends. And he was really decked out. So who’s to say what, anyway? (Brad, 33)

Other participants argued while sexual orientation per se was not a big difference amongst people, heterosexism results in the consequences of one’s sexual orientation being a major difference between (most) heterosexuals and (most) lesbigays. Because of heterosexism, many lesbigays begin by thinking they are heterosexual, and trying to be heterosexual, while relatively few heterosexuals consider the possibility that they might not be heterosexual. Esme recalled that when she was heterosexual, she just took her sexuality for granted:

You know, everywhere you look [heterosexuality] is reinforced by the media, and by people that you see on the street, and by the people that you deal with, so you’re constantly told that what you’re doing is quote-unquote normal and okay. (Esme, 2)

Esme only began to consider sexuality more when her sister came out as lesbian. Because Esme wanted to understand her sister, she began to think more about sexuality in general and her own
sexuality in particular. That was a substantial change for Esme. Then later on when Esme herself began a relationship with a woman, that made much less of a difference in her life. Esme suggested that a large part of the difference between lesbigays and heterosexuals result from the fact that relatively few heterosexuals have thought about and sampled "the other side", and decided that they were in fact heterosexual (Esme, 19). Thus, she observed, lesbigays know much more about heterosexuality than most heterosexuals know about being lesbigay. Moreover, many heterosexuals just assume they are heterosexual, and thus may know relatively little about their own sexual orientation, which is very seldom the case for lesbigays. As Esme did, when participants were generalizing about the differences between lesbigays and heterosexuals, they often acknowledged both that some heterosexuals are very like lesbigays, and that most heterosexuals are very different.

In this section, the focus has been on the views of those participants who argued that sexual orientation per se was not an important difference between individuals. Most participants, however, focused their discussions on the differences they perceived between (most) lesbigays and (most) heterosexuals. For many participants, unlike Esme, realizing that they were lesbigay was accompanied by significant changes in other aspects of their lives. For other participants, their realization of how significant an effect their sexual orientation had on other aspects of their life emerged only slowly. In the following sections, the profound differences that most participants perceived between lesbigays and heterosexuals are explored.

**Being lesbigay is not just about sexuality.** Most lesbigay participants objected to the heterosexist notion that being lesbigay is just about the gender of one's sexual partners. While love and sex are not the same thing, neither are they as divorced for lesbigays as heterosexism implies, and many heterosexuals believe. As Gina said, being a lesbian for her means that she is "sexually and spiritually, attracted, drawn, whatever, to women. I want to be intimate in every
way with women” (Gina, 4). Many of the participants observed that their initial attractions to members of their own gender were as much or more about wanting to share an intimate relationship as sexual attraction. Ann felt that what defines lesbians is the primary emotional commitment that they have made to women, rather than their sexual histories, which may be quite different:

The heterosexual community focuses so much on the sexual aspect of lesbianism, and to me that isn’t the major thing, to me it’s more an emotional identity, I guess, you bond with women as opposed to men.... There’s so much confusion over sexual identity in the lesbian community, I mean, some women say they’re bi even though they’ve been with a woman for whatever, because they’re still attracted to men sexually. It seems like the emotional thing is the thing that’s so totally lesbian. (Ann, 5, 9)

Other participants saw being lesbigay less as a sexual or relational matter than as an overtly political perspective, one that has a significant impact on who one is and how one interacts with the world. Realizing that she was a lesbian changed Coyote’s perspective on the world:

I certainly feel that it’s been a blessing that I’ve had the opportunity to question authority, question life the way I have, and I don’t think I would have done that if I had been heterosexual. I think if I had, my life would have been more status quo and conforming, I think I may have been a very different person, but I do know that very much part of my questioning in life, my constant asking does come from the sensibility that I have as a lesbian. (Coyote, 6)

Many participants said that when they began identifying as lesbigay, they saw it as a question of choice of sexual partners, but later they grew into seeing it as a central part of their lives, and a defining feature of who they were. Rumor said she had first thought that lesbianism
was a sexual preference, but later realized that her being a lesbian has a huge impact on who she is and how she lives her life. For Rumor, being a lesbian was such an important part of her self-concept that she wished that people could know that she was a lesbian without knowing that she preferred women as sexual partners:

I thought that [being a lesbian] defined my sexual preference, but I actually think that it defines a lot more than my sexual preference. It defines my politics, who I choose to be around, yeah, it defines my friendships, my relationships, my politics, basically how I live my life. It kind of defines me.... [Being a lesbian is] about how I identify, my politics. My writing, my painting, how I choose to live, what I fight for, you know, what I believe in. I mean, being a lesbian has shaped my entire life.... That was always the only strange thing about being out, that if I said I was a lesbian, people automatically knew who I slept with, as opposed to thinking it was about my politics, it was about my lifestyle, it was about, you know. I really despise that part of being out, because I think it's a really private thing, and who I choose to sleep with is my own business. (Rumor, 1, 22, 20)

Lesbian and gay relationships are different. Several participants thought that there were significant differences between lesbian and gay relationships, and heterosexual relationships. Pointing to the differences between women and men, some participants felt that lesbian relationships (and, less often, gay relationships) were more intimate than heterosexual relationships; two women could understand each other better and communicate better than could a woman and a man. Sexually, too, gay couples and lesbian couples were seen by some lebigay participants as more compatible. Additional support for the impact of gender differences on relationships was offered by heterosexual participants, many of whom observed that one of the major advantages of heterosexual relationships was the way in which they required one to deal
with difference. Other lesbigay participants pointed to the way in which it was easier for lesbian relationships and gay relationships to be egalitarian, freer of roles and power imbalances than heterosexual relationships.

Participants also observed that gay and lesbian relationships have particular stress factors that are less often found in heterosexual relationships. Most often mentioned were the stresses imposed by the lack of recognition of lesbian and gay relationships as serious and committed.

Lesbigays are less restricted by gender stereotypes. Most lesbigay participants observed that lesbigays tend to be less confined by gender stereotypes, as did some heterosexual participants. Scott summed up the changes in his life upon first realizing that he was gay by saying “it was a good feeling, like not to have to spit anymore” (Scott, 23). He observed:

I just look at some straight men, and I say, my god, thank god I don't have to do that [laughs] you know, like hold those feelings in or try to act tough or, you know what I mean? ... When I see the straight men afraid to look [at another man’s body in the locker room], I laugh, it's like, you know, we're all here for the same reason. Why are they afraid to admire another man's body? Because they're straight and they're afraid of being called a fag. That doesn’t happen when you’re gay, you can do what you want. (Scott, 10-11)

Several other gay and bisexual male participants identified their not having to live according to the restrictive dictates of traditional masculinity as one of the great advantages to being gay or bi. Erik, a heterosexual participant, explained that the reason so many of his close male friends were gay was that with most gay men “there’s none of the macho bullshit that you have to put up with [from many straight men], or very rarely” (Erik, 22).

Most female lesbian and bisexual participants also felt that they really benefitted from not having to be stereotypically feminine, but instead had the freedom to behave as they wished. As
Raven observed, "it's just great not having to, you know, girl myself up and try to find myself a man" (Raven, 6). Many women described struggling with the traditional feminine gender role, especially in heterosexual relationships, before they began questioning their sexuality; indeed, some female participants said that what they disliked most about previous heterosexual relationships was the gender role into which they were pressured. Starfinch mused:

When I was trying to live as a straight woman, it just seemed so much of a bother to deal with men all the time. I sometimes think I'm a lesbian just because I'm lazy [laughs]. It's just so much more work [to be in a heterosexual relationship and have to be appropriately feminine].... I like the freedom to do what comes naturally. (Starfinch, 3)

Lesbigays have to do more self-exploration. Another difference between lesbigays and heterosexuals that was remarked upon by many participants was that living in a heterosexist environment forces lesbigays to engage in a level of self-exploration that is relatively rare. As a heterosexual, one can live the life that is laid out for one, just going along with what is expected and socially appropriate (although of course many heterosexuals do not). Defining oneself as lesbigay requires one to actively make decisions about who one is and what one wants, and then work towards realizing those goals. Tamar, who identified as heterosexual, found that as she went through life and struggled with her own issues, she developed much more respect for people who somehow do not fit into the norm, among whom she classified lesbigays:

To the extent that I have positive images [of lesbigays], I suppose it is more connected with the political, in that I myself have come to respect more the importance of struggling with what's important to us, and dealing with issues that can hold us back, that's a very vague way of putting it, but kind of that sense of, how it's more difficult when things just don't go normally for you, when you have to figure things out for yourself as opposed to
just being able to accept what, being told what to do and it working for you, so I think
that's part of it. (Tamar, 25)

Several participants observed that the self-exploration lesbians do around their sexuality
often spills over into other domains as well, so that amongst those who have challenged other
social restrictions, a disproportionate number are lesbian. Sam observed:

Some of the most adventuresome, non-conformist people that I've ever encountered have
been essentially gay. The bulk of all populace is conformist, but the numbers of radical
types in the gay community is larger than, my experience has been, than in the
heterosexual community. (Sam, 10)

Some participants linked this to a perception that lesbians, more often than heterosexuals, tend
to live the life they want to live, to be whom they want to be. Starfinch explained:

Maybe it's because we tend to have already lost a fair bit by coming out. There
sometimes seems to be not as much fear of losing other things. That's not always true,
because there's also some lesbians who are just really scared of getting found out and this
is definitely not true of them. But for some of the lesbians I know, there's already so
much lost, that there's sort of an attitude like, what the heck? How much more can go
wrong? I may as well just do what I feel like, I may as well go for it. I've already risked
so much, why not risk a bit more? (Starfinch, 5)

Lesbians have a different social role. Several participants felt that lesbians had a
particular role in society, as compared with heterosexuals. Some felt that their god had
deliberately chosen to create lesbians to fulfil a social purpose. Other participants discussed the
contributions that lesbians have made throughout history -- as Brad quipped, "if Michelangelo
were straight, the Sistine Chapel would have been painted with a roller" (Brad, 3). Perhaps the
most thoughtful contributions to this debate were made by participants who felt that
heterosexuals tended to be preoccupied by the demands of family (especially for women), while
lesbians were more likely to make contributions to a broader community. Participants pointed
to the disproportionate contribution made by lesbians to women’s studies and the women’s
movement, the generativity of many lesbians in fields ranging from the arts to religion to
computer programming, and the traditional roles and responsibilities of lesbians in Native North
American communities.

Lesbians exist in a hostile society. Some participants located the differences between
lesbians and heterosexuals entirely in the oppression that lesbians experience. When Nancy\textsuperscript{24}
was asked what she liked about being a lesbian, she said there was nothing to like about it, she
observed that she finds that “life is a lot harder for homosexuals than straight people” (Nancy,
10). At the time of the interview, Nancy had only been aware of the difficulties associated with
being lesbian -- the problems she has had knowing whether a woman she finds attractive is
lesbian or bisexual (or thinks she is heterosexual but is not), the estrangement that it has meant
from her family and other people in her life, and the difficulties it causes her within her
conservative profession. Ron, who identified as gay, felt that heterosexism means that gays are
not able to be as happy as heterosexuals:

Because we live in such an overwhelmingly heterosexual society, I think really gays are
limited. I think their happiness is really limited. It’s like a pressure, there’s always
something, like a pressure always being exerted down on gays.... There’s always that
kind of pressure. Don’t be so visible, don’t be so visible, and don’t expect so much
acceptance, don’t expect increasing acceptance, and just don’t be so free and easy. And
don’t think you’re going to expand and your community. (Ron, 20-21)

Ron saw the endpoint of his journey as becoming “as happy as one can be in a basically straight
society” (Ron, 20).
Individual Differences

As discussed above, participants had a wide range of reactions to the heterosexism they'd experienced, and a wider range of responses to that heterosexism. Some participants described themselves as all but unaffected by heterosexism in how they felt about themselves and their sexuality, while for other participants, the heterosexism that they had experienced had caused them years of pain and self-doubt. In this section, the factors that underlie these differences are explored more systematically.

Age. One of the issues that must be addressed is the effect of age. Over the last 30 years, there have been dramatic changes in public attitudes towards and public visibility of lesbians. Older participants who had a difficult struggle with becoming lesbian tended to attribute a significant part of their difficulties to the very anti-lesbian attitudes of the time they grew up. Many of the younger participants who believed they had a relatively easy time becoming lesbian attributed this to the much-improved environment in which they had grown up and lived. Certainly, then, the impact of the changes around lesbian issues, and indeed how heterosexism itself is manifested, play an important role in understanding participants' experiences.

Yet neither do participants' ages explain the wide diversity of experiences that were explored in the present study. Some of the participants who found it easiest to adjust to being lesbian were older (e.g., Kira, Brett, and Dick, who were respectively 42, 35, and 45 at the time of the interview), while some of those who had had the most difficulty with their sexual orientation were still in their twenties at the time of the interview. Three participants who reported attempting or seriously considering suicide, all of them in part but not entirely because of issues related to their sexual orientation. Two of these three were in their mid-twenties at the time of the interview (Larissa and Nancy).
Psychological health. Most participants received conflicting information at many points along their journey. Some participants began knowing nothing but heterosexism, while for others there were alternative perspectives almost from the beginning. There was a huge variation in how easy it was for participants to make the shift from a heterosexist perspective to a lesbigay-affirmative one, a variation which often had more to do with the general psychological state of the participant in question than with the balance of information the participant was receiving. Mark said that he thought that in the past 15 or 20 years there had been a lot of heterosexist influences, but there had also been a lot of alternatives to heterosexism. Thus, he argued, by the time people his age grew up, he felt "you'd have to be pretty self-loathing, okay, no, you'd have to be pretty masochistic" to accept the heterosexist perspective rather than a more affirmative perspective (Mark, 33). In his own case, Mark initially argued that he had been exposed to many different positive influences, yet when he was asked further about the positive influences that he'd experienced, Mark struggled. After he reflected on the question, he found only one important positive influence, a radio talk show host who took a non-heterosexist perspective and some lesbigay-affirmative literature actually provided the only positive influences available to him. In the following excerpt, Mark begins by trying to argue that a diversity of affirmative information was available to him, but cannot sustain his argument. What he is able to say with confidence is that things are not as negative as they were:

But the thing is, though, towards the middle 80s, the late 80s there was more of a balanced representation, well, actually, maybe that's not true [inaudible] Suffice it to say that it wasn't as negative as say it was before, and I didn't have very negative feelings about it from, let's say, religion or family, or. Because my parents just never talked about it, nobody talked about it, although, oh, friends. See, that's the other thing, because when
you're in high school, like, you know, if somebody wants to call you a bad name, they're going to call you a fag (Mark, 29).

These comments suggest that for Mark, his acceptance of a relatively rare lesbigay-affirmative perspective had much more to do with his positive outlook on himself, rather than, as he initially suggested, a largely-affirmative environment.

Other participants did experience a more lesbigay-affirmative perspective, but were nevertheless much less affected by it. One of the participants most negatively affected by heterosexism, Larissa grew up watching the yearly Toronto Lesbian and Gay Pride Parade on television — and making fun of it. The Pride parade was identified by many participants as among the most lesbigay-affirmative events in their lives, but was not sufficient to have a positive influence on Larissa. Lisa, who at the time of the interview was still at times struggling with her feelings that maybe it really was wrong to be a lesbian, identified her general emotional difficulties as the reason why she continued to be so affected by the heterosexism she encountered. She was much less affected by affirmative influences, so that although she often heard that she must be strong because she is so open about being in same-sex relationships, she had not yet begun to feel that she was in fact strong.

Several participants argued explicitly that individuals' reactions to stereotypes varied with their general psychological state. Jane said:

It depends on the person, really, you know, it depends on where your head is at, really, as to whether you're going to accept being called a stereotype or if you're going to call yourself a stereotype. I think it would depend on the person, the individual. (Jane, 16)

Esme thought similarly:
I think that exists in varying degrees in people, actually, and I think it has to do a lot with how well people, it has to do with so many things ... how well people know themselves, and how confident people are to listen to themselves inside. (Esme, 30)

Many of the participants were confronted not only with conflicting sources of information, but with mixed messages that they had to interpret. Several participants described being told when they were young that some girls have feelings of attraction to other girls, and that this is sometimes a stage in the development of heterosexuality. This very mixed message had a variety of effects on participants. For Gina, it gave her a huge sense of relief, validating her feelings in a way that she wouldn't experience again until years later, when she first kissed a woman. For Emma, the central point of the message was that she was expected to grow out of her attractions to girls. It did not validate her attractions to girls, but pressured her to get over them.

The reaction of others. Many participants spoke in different ways about the impact of people who made it easier for them, or harder for them, to become comfortable with being lesbigay. For many participants, the first lesbigays whom they met were of great importance in influencing how they adjusted to being lesbigay. People who first met lesbigays who were similar to them found this very helpful, as it assisted them in thinking of themselves as lesbigay, and in believing that being lesbigay was not necessarily a bad thing. Participants who met lesbigays who seemed very different from them, with whom they were uncomfortable, said that this made it harder for them to adjust to being lesbigay. Gina contrasted her own experience, where the first lesbians she and her partner met were a couple very much like them, with that of a friend of hers. Gina’s friend’s first contact with lesbigays occurred on leather night at a bar, which terrified her and convinced her that she did not want to be a lesbian. Gina recalled:
I'm grateful, thankful, for the two women that were our first contacts with the [lesbian] community, because they were much like us. I have friends who came, like, one friend, very isolated, came in from New Brunswick, small town, came to the bar, you know, walked in and it was like a leather night or something like that. She was mortified, you know, she thought, my god, I can't be this way. (Gina, 27)

Other participants were more influenced by the reactions of heterosexuals within their lives. Esme felt that the ease with which she entered her first lesbian relationship was largely attributable to the positive reactions of the people around her, who were largely heterosexual. Had they questioned her, she thought, she would have questioned herself:

When I started seeing Martha, like I said, people just totally accepted it, and I think, when people question you, that's when you start to question yourself. So if the people around me had started going, what are you doing? [laughs] then I might say to myself, what am I doing? [laughs] and it would have been a lot. (Esme, 16)

Raven felt that she had received a lot of validation as she struggled with her belief that being lesbian was wrong, but the most important influence had been her heterosexual friends: "I'm constantly seeking validation, so I guess when I got it from [other people], especially, you know, whoa, the STRAIGHT friends, well, my straight friends are validating me, you know" (Raven, 29, emphasis in original).

Some participants said that their heterosexual parents were important sources of support. Julie observed:

So coming out, it was important for me to tell my parents, because I see my parents as being smart and loving, and, basically smart, and like they're where I get all my ideas and like my attitudes and everything from, and like my morals and, and if I didn't have their
approval, I'd still live my life, but it would be like, something, I would question it, seriously, seriously question it.... And if they said there was something wrong with this [being bisexual], then there must be something really wrong, so I was crossing my fingers, I was like, can't be anything wrong with this, so that was a traumatic event, with coming out, but they both said fine and no big deal.... It's like not a part of their life, so they don't really know how to understand it, but they don't have a problem with it at the same time. Yeah, so that was the biggest thing. (Julie, 16-17)

More often than this kind of support, however, participants reported that their families' ability to cope with their sexual orientation lagged significantly behind their own. Most participants found that their families had to go through their own process to adjust to having a lesbigay family member. As a result, participants usually needed to feel comfortable with their sexual orientation before they could do what was necessary to help their parents' adjustment process. Several participants talked explicitly about "educating" their parents about lesbigays and lesbigay issues. Often this took the form of debunking stereotypes and trying to show that "gays and lesbians are good people," as Sylvia said she was in the process of trying to demonstrate to her mother (Sylvia, 18).

Some participants described creating for their families a systematic educational campaign of impressive dimensions. Larry recalled:

I had to learn how to try to educate my parents. [My being gay] is something that they were very, and my brother, something that they were very against, but something that they had to deal with, and, you know, I had to deal with them, and have them be supportive [of me], and me being supportive of them in the coming out process for them [laughs].... My family knew some of my friends, but didn't know that they were gay, that they'd met during the year I had [my first] boyfriend, and my family liked those people,
and then when they found out they were gay that kinda helped. I sent my family a lot of books, different books on the subject [of gays and lesbians], a lot of different articles, I sent them movies that I bought, and I tried to have like really open communication with them, I'd let them ask me any questions that they wanted, and I'd give them answers, but I would tell them to make sure that they want to know the answers [laughs] before they ask the questions.... My mother told me to come to her house and take everything out of her house, and she never wanted to see me again. And I went to her house for three days and she wouldn't be in the same room with me, and they wouldn't talk with me on the phone or anything. So I would just like mail them stuff, mail them books, mail them movies. And my brother would let me know that, yeah, they were watching them, yeah they were reading them [laughs]. And it took a year before they decided they had to accept it if they wanted any type of relationship with me. (Larry, 8)

Most participants found that their efforts to develop positive relationships with their families eventually paid off to some extent. Several participants reported that their families tolerated their sexual orientation, although they felt their relationships were more distant than they would be otherwise, or limited in some way. Carl was dismayed to find that even his most supportive family member, his brother, felt uncomfortable with the prospect that Carl might bring his lover for a visit. Carl recalled his response:

I thought, oh, and what do you think we're going to do? Fornicate on the couch in front of the children? You know ([laughs] You're going to scare the dog? I don't know.) And that really threw me, and I thought, oh, maybe we'd better take a couple of steps back here and kind of re-think this grand idea of sharing your life with the family (Carl, 9).
Other participants reported that their families' reactions were quite hostile, and believed they were unlikely to improve. Ann is bitter about the pain that she and her female partner have gone through with their mothers. Her own mother forbid Ann for years from even mentioning the fact that she is a lesbian and refused to come to Ann's commitment ceremony, although Ann had written to her to tell her how much it would mean for her to be there. Ann continued:

My partner was actually cut off from her family for a year, and the pain is horrendous, like really nasty, and she was very upset. And it was all during the Paul Bernardo trial and before that, and we were just, I remember thinking, what is this, that Karla [Homolka]'s mother is standing by her like this, and [my partner's] mother and my mother are such assholes. What have we done, you know, that is so bad? We love each other. I'll never, ever be able to understand that, as long as I live. (Ann, 20)

*Other types of difference.* As being lesbigay is a very significant difference in the current social context, it is unsurprising that it was important whether or not participants had previously faced being different in some way before they began struggling with their sexuality. It was clear that for many participants, some of the struggle around dealing with sexuality was related to struggles with being different. For participants for whom their sexuality was the first time they confronted being different from the norm, much of the difficulty they experienced was not about sexuality per se at all, but about such things as disappointing their parents, having to constantly explain themselves to others, having to deal with others' prejudices, and so on. Thus, such participants struggled simultaneously with both issues of sexual orientation and what might be conceptualized as issues of difference.

In contrast, for participants who had struggled with some other way in which they were different from the norm, assimilating a second difference, that of sexuality, was often much less difficult. Many of these participants had struggled with and come to accept that they were indeed
different. Thus, in their struggles with sexuality, they had to confront fewer issues and usually had an easier time. Inez observed that even before she knew what being lesbigay was, being black, she felt a kinship with gays and lesbians, in that they were also persecuted for being different. She described her response to finding out one of her high school teachers was gay, a fact that became public when he died after being gaybashed:

My classmates were of the attitude of, well, the faggot got what he deserved. Being a black woman in an all-white school, I didn't see it that way. The concept of him having sex with another male was not in my head, the only concept was the fact that he got beat up on because he was different. And that to me wasn't right. So, I don't think like, him being homosexual was so much an issue as it was, he was different and he got beat up for being different, I am different, I know what this is like, I don't want to be beat up on, I don't think he should be either. (Inez, 25)

Esme felt that long before she began to identify as bisexual, she had come to believe that being lesbigay was "just something that some people preferred, and that was it" (Esme, 26). Looking back at the time of her interview, Esme speculated that this was in part because she "just [had] as part of [her] personality, more nature than nurture, an openness to, always being against racism and sexism," an attitude which she felt had extended naturally to the issue of sexual orientation (Esme, 27).

For Emma, although she had thought of herself as heterosexual for many years, it was not at all difficult for her when she fell deeply in love with a woman; she recalled going through "a bit of trauma over a weekend" (Emma, 3). As an adolescent, Emma had seen friends have a very difficult time with the realization that they were gay. I asked her about why she thought her own experience was so different. For Emma, much of the pain associated with realizing one is lesbigay is the result of being different in a society which is hostile to difference, and the pain
that that entails. Yet long before she fell in love with a woman, Emma had struggled with and finally made her peace with being different from mainstream society in other lifestyle choices, particularly her commitment to defining herself as an artist:

> When I did [have strong feelings for a woman], I don't know, maybe working in theatre and knowing a lot of gay people and, they're all just sort of outside the mainstream, all that sort of, those associations and stuff, and especially as an artist, particularly in theatre and stuff, you're pretty used to being different, it's just like, you don't do anything right, so [laughs] [[laughs] You've already taken all kinds of grief for being different?] Yeah, exactly, and going through a certain amount of suffering, economic deprivation and really having to struggle to assert, to maintain a sense of integrity and self-respect, because basically, what you're doing isn't really acceptable to your family, and it's not acceptable culturally speaking. It's like, everybody likes movie stars, but that's not the reality of life for most artists, who are trying to actually make their living professionally. So I think maybe some of those struggles about difference, I maybe kind of worked through in other areas before I came to actually having to acknowledge my own feelings for someone which wouldn't fit into the right box. (Emma, 8-9)

Having faced difficulties as an artist that are remarkably similar to those many lesbigs struggle with as they adjust to being lesbigay, it is unsurprising that the possibility that she might not be heterosexual was not particularly difficult for Emma.

**The relationship between oneself and one's sexuality.** Although some participants characterized being lesbigay as an essential or core part of who they were as individuals, other participants felt that the way in which they were lesbigay was very much a function of who they were as a person. For these participants, their self-definition was to a great extent a product of their values or their personality, and thus these had a significant impact on how they understood
and experienced their sexuality. For Brett and Kira, their moral values defined them, and
determined their approach to their sexuality. Ann said that because she had grown up feeling an
outsider, she found that identifying as lesbian was particularly important to her because it meant
that she belonged to a community of people in a way which she never had, and otherwise would
not. For Ann, belonging to the lesbigay communities has continued to be a crucial part of what it
means to her that she is lesbian. A number of participants felt that they had always been flexible
or open-minded, personality traits which have been very important in terms of how issues of
sexual orientation manifested themselves in their lives -- particularly for participants who at times
have identified themselves as bisexual (e.g., Carl, Dick).

Other participants described themselves as having struggled more than they might
otherwise have with their sexual orientation because of particular personality traits. Stephanie
recalled that she had always been extremely sensitive to the possibility that others might think she
was a coward, running away from a challenge instead of confronting it. This had made it harder
for her to publicly identify as bisexual, as she felt so vulnerable to the stereotype that bisexuals
move from having a relationship with a member of one sex to a relationship with a member of the
other sex because they running away from or giving up on one of the sexes.
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

In drawing conclusions from the present study, the first issue which must be addressed is the sample. The usual question of interest is whether the sample is representative, that is, whether it is a random subset of the population under investigation. However, it is widely accepted that it is impossible to have a representative sample of lesbigays. Inconsistent definitions mean that as yet it has not been possible to define with certainty exactly who is, and who is not, lesbigay (Donovan, 1992). Indeed, the more researchers explore the sexual fluidity that is characteristic of many people's experience, the less adequate our few categories of sexual orientations appear (Klein et al., 1985). Moreover, a lesbigay sample cannot be representative because participants are required to identify themselves as lesbigay to the researcher(s). Even for clearly lesbigay-affirmative researchers, this requirement means that a non-random subgroup of lesbigays — those who will not admit they are lesbigay to anyone, or anyone but sexual partners — will not be represented in the sample. Clement (1990) argues that research on sex is less useful as an attempt to understand the frequency of sexual behaviours, than it is as a tool to study the range of sexual behaviours. Such an approach is consistent with qualitative research, which explores the diversity and gestalt of participants' experience, and in particular with the present study.

As in any study which seeks to understand a particular phenomenon, participation in the present study was doubtless more appealing to people who were interested in and thoughtful about the issues in question, as well as those who were somewhat conflicted about or still struggling with the issues (Clement, 1990). Several participants told me that they became interested in participating in the study because they were intrigued by my research questions, some because at the time they were thinking about, or struggling with, these questions in their own lives. This was true especially of those heterosexually-identified participants in the sample.
Their openness to lesbians, lesbian issues, and the possibility that they might themselves have, or in other circumstances have had, same-sex feelings and attractions all suggested that the sample of heterosexual participants was not representative. Within the research literature, heterosexuals demonstrate a wide range of attitudes towards lesbians, with most heterosexuals appearing to be at least somewhat prejudiced against lesbians. In contrast, in the present study, the heterosexual participants all had largely positive attitudes, and many were genuinely affirming of lesbians and of their own lesbian feelings.

The number of bisexuals and other people who did not fall neatly within traditional categories of sexual orientations is also likely to be overrepresented amongst the sample, the poster specifically invited the participation of "lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, fags, dykes, questioning folk, heterosexuals, queers, straights, homosexuals, people who do not define or label their sexuality, and people who don't fit into any of these categories" (see Appendix A). I also advertised specifically for bisexual women. It may also have been the case that my approach meant that even participants who identified themselves as lesbian or gay were disproportionately likely to have a more fluid conceptualization of sexual orientation than is typical. However, a sizeable number of participants also felt quite comfortable within the traditional framework. More importantly, even participants who began by resembling the traditional, or stereotypical, lesbians of the literature, whether academic/professional or community, quickly made it evident that this was only a part of the person they were.

The sample also underrepresents the racial diversity of the city in which the research was done. The lesbian communities in which a large majority of participants were recruited are still, very regrettably, more comfortable for white lesbians than for lesbians of other racial and ethnic backgrounds (Boykin, 1996). Cannon, Higginbotham, and Leung (1988) provide strong evidence that Black participants, as compared with White participants, are more difficult, and
hence more time-consuming and more expensive, to recruit. As a student, my resources were limited, in terms of both time and money. Thus, it is unsurprising that my recruitment procedure was insufficient to yield a representatively diverse sample.

The final factor that is likely to have had a significant effect on who chose to participate in the study was that I paid participants $20 for their time. For several participants, this was an important motivating factor. Don, for example, had social anxiety -- he said he would not have volunteered if he had not needed the money (although he was surprised to find that he did ultimately enjoy doing the interview). The payment was useful in that it seemed to increase the participation of people who were currently struggling financially, especially those who were unemployed, and thus decreased the middle-class bias often found amongst research samples (see Cannon et al., 1988). It is likely that because of the payment, a disproportionately large number of participants were unemployed. However, there is no evidence which suggests that this has systematically biased the results.

Thus, the sample was reasonably inclusive, although more in some ways than others. The diversity of participants' racial and ethnic background was sufficient to suggest a number of ways in which these identities may influence and interact with the experiences of sexual identity under investigation, although not so well-represented that it is unlikely that further study would not yield important results. People of diverse class backgrounds were well-represented in terms of class as denoted by current income, but less so in terms of class background as denoted by educational level.

Internalized Heterosexism

The academic/professional literature on lesbians' struggle with issues of sexual orientation has understood much of that struggle in terms of internalized heterosexism and its sequelae. This assumption has also been made within the community literature, to a lesser extent.
It is assumed that surrounded by heterosexism, people come to accept the negative stereotypes and valuations about being lesbigay that they have been exposed to. Thus, as some people come to realize that they are lesbigay, these negative stereotypes and judgements make that realization, and subsequent adjustments, difficult and painful. The many difficulties that people go through as they begin to consider the possibility that they might be lesbigay, realizing that they are, becoming comfortable with this, and making changes in their lives as a result, are very often understood within the framework of unlearning the prevailing negative stereotypes about lesbigays.

The data of the present study are in many ways congruent with this literature. Many of the participants did describe struggling extensively and painfully with beliefs or feelings about being lesbigays, including negative stereotypes and negative valuations, as well as difficulties that resulted because of their absence of knowledge about lesbigays. The aspects of the present data that are most consistent with the descriptions of internalized heterosexism found in the academic/professional literature were given by participants who described wrestling with their own beliefs about the rightness or wrongness of being lesbigay, as well as social beliefs about the same. Many participants described in some way having to realize that it was okay for them to be lesbigay, and a few participants still had moments when they doubted this. It was these descriptions that most clearly resonated with the literature's depiction of the sequelae of internalized heterosexism, a long and painful struggle around issues of sexual orientation and who one is, that has the potential to devastate the individual's self-concept and self-esteem.

However, there are also significant ways in which the data are not adequately represented by the construct of internalized heterosexism. Although intermittent references to individual differences occur within the literature on internalized heterosexism, most writers in practice generalize about "the" experience of internalized heterosexism, rather than exploring the
variability of its manifestations. Thus, in the present study, participants' experience demonstrated much less consistency than this literature would predict. Participants described a wide range of responses to the heterosexism they encountered, and in particular the extent to which that heterosexism could be said to have been "internalized" varied dramatically amongst the participants. Also inconsistent with the literature is the variety of means by which participants developed positive valuations of lesbigays, and of being lesbigay, many of which could not be described as undoing internalized heterosexism. In the following sections, the results of the present study are examined in an effort to elucidate the contradictions of the literature on internalized heterosexism, and to begin the development of a more coherent and more valid theory about the development of lesbigays in a heterosexist context.

**Heterosexisms.** The construct of "internalized heterosexism" can only be as valid as the heterosexism which has been internalized. The data of the present study provide strong evidence that it would be both appropriate and helpful to begin to think in terms of "heterosexisms." Most participants said that they had experienced a significant amount of support and assistance around issues of sexual orientation as well as prejudice and disapproval. Indeed, participants described a vast and very idiosyncratic range of environmental influences. In particular, there were large differences amongst participants in the balance they reported between experiences of support and encouragement, on one hand, and experiences of disapproval, prejudice, and discrimination, on the other. This provides strong evidence that it is important to consider an individual's personal experience with heterosexism -- what one might think of as her or his own heterosexism, in contrast with that of others.

The central tenet of heterosexism, that lesbigays are different from and inferior to heterosexuals, is of course still ubiquitous in the current social climate. However, it is also true that, as most of the participants observed, things are changing for lesbigays, albeit slowly. There
are occasional lesbigay television characters who are depicted as human beings like any other, visible lesbigays work in prestigious occupations without having to pretend to be heterosexual, and in some educational texts, being lesbian or gay is now defined as an alternative sexuality, rather than an (overtly) inferior one. As such changes continue, the messages to which individuals are exposed will become even more complicated and contradictory, at least for so long as heterosexism in some form continues to exist. Thus, it will become ever more important to explore precisely an individual’s unique environment with respect to issues relating to sexual orientation, and the individual’s response to that environment (i.e., her or his personal experience of heterosexism and other conceptualizations of lesbigays and lesbigay experience).

**Internalization.** In theory, lesbigays might respond to the heterosexism that they encounter in any number of ways -- they might reject it, laugh at it, give in to it, internalize it, fight it, or ignore it, or they might do some of each. However, the centrality of the construct of internalized heterosexism within the literature implies that the response to heterosexism which is most worthy of concern, discussion, and study is internalization (Friend, 1990, is a rare and welcome exception). The assumption is that many lesbigays will accept much of the ideology of heterosexism as truth, that is, as valid statements about lesbigays. Thus, stereotypes are accepted as valid descriptions, and negative valuations are accepted as fact. Internalized heterosexism then becomes a part of the belief system of many or most lesbigays, resulting in cognitive dissonance as they struggle with the conflict engendered by their knowledge of their sexual orientation and their own, internalized heterosexism. This focus on internalized heterosexism as one of the most important lesbigay experiences is underscored by theorists who insist that all lesbigays have internalized heterosexism (e.g., Cabaj, 1988; Gartrell, 1984; McHenry & Johnson, 1993), as well as those who argue that internalized heterosexism is the worst consequence of the oppression
experienced by lesbigays (e.g., Slater, 1988; Sophie, 1987; see Chapter I for further discussion of these points).

The present study departs from this depiction in the wide variety of responses that participants described making to the heterosexism to which they were exposed. Those participants who never accepted the heterosexism they had encountered, as well as those who had never felt guilty about or upset by their sexual orientation, provide support for the argument that different lesbigays respond very differently to heterosexism: Many internalize some aspects of heterosexism, but some do not. Many participants described accepting some stereotypes but not others, or being strongly affected by negative valuations of lesbigays, but less affected by stereotypes.

Moreover, participants who were exposed to very similar environmental influences often reacted very differently. Grudging acknowledgement that lesbigays do exist translated for some participants into permission, for others into a conviction that they didn't want to belong to the group so depicted. For some participants, one affirmative source of information had a greater impact than the much larger amount of negative information they received. For others, much more affirmative information was insufficient to balance less negative information, with the result that it was much more difficult for them to become comfortable with their sexual orientation.

Silence, stereotypes, and negative valuations. The construct of internalized heterosexism also fails to distinguish between what for participants in the current study were three distinct facets of heterosexism: silence, stereotypes, and negative valuations. These are clearly all manifestations of heterosexism, and are frequently linked to one another (e.g., the silence around lesbigays is often understood to be the result of their being perverse). Indeed, participants often made such links themselves, both as connections that they were aware of at the time and as connections that they only perceived in retrospect. However, the data analysis demonstrated
clearly that the participants thought, for the most part, in terms of these three interconnected aspects of heterosexism -- silence, stereotypes, and negative valuations -- rather than a single undifferentiated conceptualization of heterosexism.

These three aspects of heterosexism most often had different impacts on the participants; many participants were significantly more affected by one than the others. The struggles that participants described with having to develop a different perspective on what lesbignays were like, or what it meant to be lesbigay, differed with the aspect of heterosexism that was at issue. The silence around lesbignays and stereotypes of lesbignays tended to function by keeping participants from recognizing that they were lesbignay. For some participants, this meant that they did not recognize their lesbian or gay feelings, while for others, it meant that their same-sex encounters or relationships were not recognized as lesbian or gay. In contrast, those participants who struggled with the negative valuations ascribed to lesbignays were more likely to apply those negative valuations to themselves, rendering this a more difficult and more personal struggle.

**Struggling with heterosexism.** One of the more problematic aspects of internalized heterosexism is the way in which this construct renders invisible the external oppression that individuals experience and react to. When lesbignays behave in accordance with the tenets of heterosexism (or, more precisely, the heterosexism of their experience), it is assumed that their behaviour is a result of their internalized heterosexism. However, such behaviour might instead result from external heterosexism, particularly pressure from others to behave in accordance with their heterosexist worldview. Thus, as lesbignays engage in heterosexist behaviour which is against what is, arguably, their best interests, the construct of internalized heterosexism suggests that such behaviour results from the oppressor within, rather than the oppressor without (e.g., Margolies et al., 1987).
In the present study, the construct of internalized heterosexism was validated by a substantial number of participants who said that they felt that much of their struggle had occurred within themselves, rather than between themselves and their environments. Many participants talked about parts of themselves knowing different things about lesbigays, particularly about their being lesbigay. Often these participants felt that some part of themselves had been more strongly affected by heterosexism, while another part knew better than that. Some of these participants described a long and painful struggle that occurred largely amongst the parts of themselves, largely unrelated to current environmental influences. For these participants, as much of the literature would suggest, the heterosexism of their environment was less of a problem than was that part of themselves that had been strongly influenced by that heterosexism.

Many other participants, however, were careful to distinguish between their struggles with themselves and their own feelings, and difficulties that they had experienced because of the heterosexism of their environment. These participants talked at length about apparently self-defeating behaviours in which they had engaged because of external oppression, and were clear that these were not the result of internalized oppression. Several participants observed that their struggle had been less about coming to feel themselves that it was okay for them to be lesbigay, and more about their difficulties in coming to feel okay about being lesbigay in circumstances where others are not okay with that.

Alternative perspectives. The present findings also suggested that behaviours that are typically attributed to internalized heterosexism might also be interpreted very differently. Many participants observed that individuals who are just beginning to identify themselves as lesbigay often begin to behave more stereotypically. Undergoing such a change can be argued to be a result of internalized heterosexism, the result of the emerging lesbigay thinking that in order to be
lesbigay, they must act in accordance with stereotypes, but this is not the only possible interpretation.

Participants offered a number of different reasons why new lesbigays sometimes behave more stereotypically. Some participants observed that emerging lesbigays sometimes begin to behave more stereotypically in order to identify themselves to other lesbigays. For women, this may mean taking on a more androgynous appearance or the-shaved-head-and-facial-piercings look popular amongst today's younger lesbians. For men, it may mean paying more attention to one's appearance, dressing more fashionably, or adopting the slightly effeminate mannerisms and voice that are stereotypical of gay men.

In addition, many participants suggested that having realized that they were lesbigay, they began to behave more "stereotypically" by choice, because they valued the stereotyped behaviour in and of itself. This occurred most frequently with gender-atypical behaviours. Many participants said that as lesbigays, they felt less constrained to follow traditional gender roles than they had as heterosexuals. For these participants, realizing that they were lesbigay allowed them to step outside their prescribed gender role in a way that they would have liked to before they began to identify as lesbigay, but had not felt able to. Thus, more apparently stereotypical behaviour was not something imposed on these participants by the heterosexism they had been exposed to, but something that they had long wanted and finally felt free to be able to choose once they began to identify as lesbigay.

Perhaps, however, the most important issue raised by participants was that emerging lesbigays who begin to behave more stereotypically are often simply doing what we all do in joining a new group -- changing our behaviour so that it is more in accordance with what we understand to be the norms of that group (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). As Brad observed: "I think
it's because they want to fit in, they don't know where they fit in. They're gay in this straight environment, and how and where do I fit in?" (Brad, 24-25).

Entering a new profession, starting at a new school, or moving to a new city or a new country, most people begin by trying to fit in, behaving in ways similar to what they understand to be the norm of their new environment. This change is perhaps most evident in the way in which a move from one class to another, whether geographically, occupationally, or educationally, is usually accompanied by a change in behaviour, the adoption of many of the norms of the new class (see Raffo, 1996, for a variety of accounts). New lesbians face an added difficulty, because their understanding of how to be lesbian is often at least as shaped by heterosexism as by actual knowledge of the lesbian communities. This often makes the adjustment process more difficult, but not as qualitatively different as is implied by attributing these changes to internalized heterosexism, rather than as one manifestation of the very common and familiar phenomenon of trying to fit into a new environment.

Indeed, some participants, arguing that new lesbians often begin to behave more stereotypically because that is simply what people do when they join a group, explicitly criticized what they perceived as my assumption that such changes in behaviour were more common amongst lesbians than amongst heterosexuals. Sam said:

I think that's true of people in general. Sure, if you don't know, you pick up what's the nearest, handiest model. And that's one of the things which I feel that older people can provide, real life role models, for younger people, that it's not necessarily according to the stereotypes. (Sam, 21)

Likewise, Gina argued:

I think that happens with any community. You know, if I was straight and seeing a guy, and I really loved him, and he was, I don't know, he wore bermuda shorts all the time, I'd
more than likely go out eventually, buy myself a pair of bermuda shorts. I think that’s just kind of adapting a little bit to your surroundings. (Gina, 32)

Tamar, who identified as heterosexual, felt she had gone through a process where she experimented with different kinds of sexual behaviour because she thought that’s what heterosexual women liked, sexually (Tamar, 28). Tamar went on to argue that this process occurred in realms other than the sexual as well:

And on all my other identity things too.... I mean, when I started working and kind of having an image of what an accountant was supposed to be like, so I’d wear the suits and do that, I mean, I would do those things, not because I particularly like suits [laughs]. I thought it was just like, that’s what you’re supposed to do and I didn’t know any better, so I had to copy people. So, yeah, so it would make sense that if you only have an image to follow, if you only have one or two images to follow, then you might get stuck for a while. (Tamar, 28-29)

Defining internalized heterosexism. The construct of internalized heterosexism has been defined in a bewildering variety of ways, most of which are somewhat contradictory. The results of the present study suggest that researchers and clinicians appear to have been using internalized heterosexism as an umbrella term to refer to a number of different psychological phenomena. The various definitions of internalized heterosexism correspond quite closely with the experiences described by some subset of the participants in the present study. For example, some writers on internalized heterosexism focus on the stereotypes that an individual is exposed to, while others focus on the incorporation of negative attitudes towards lesbians into the self-image and self-esteem (what I have called negative valuations). Similarly, in the present study, some participants reported struggling with the stereotypes of lesbians while another subset of participants reported struggling with negative valuations. It seems reasonable to suggest that the
two groups of writers have focused upon these two different kinds of experiences in their exploration of the construct of internalized heterosexism.

Another issue raised by the various definitions of internalized heterosexism is the considerable confusion over whether internalized heterosexism manifests itself in how individuals think about lesbigays as a group, or about themselves. In the present study, participants tended to struggle significantly more about "lesbigays" as a group or about themselves being lesbigay, with relatively few struggling extensively with both. This suggests that the theorists who focus upon personal internalized heterosexism, as compared with those who focus upon general stereotypes of lesbigays, may be generalizing from groups of lesbigays with different experiences.

Thus, the present study argues simultaneously for the demise of the construct of internalized heterosexism and its import. As it is currently used, the construct is a hopelessly contradictory entity which erases individual differences, mistakes cause for effect, and blames the victims of oppression for its continuing existence. At the same time, the present study suggests that the psychological phenomena that have been grouped under the umbrella of internalized heterosexism are of substantial importance to the lives of lesbigays, and heterosexuals as well -- and doubtless will be as long as oppression on the basis of sexual orientation continues. For most participants, the silences surrounding lesbigays, the stereotypes of lesbigays, and the negative valuations of lesbigays that they were exposed to had a significant impact on how they came to identify and think about themselves as someone who was lesbigay. Many participants, both lesbigay and heterosexual, described struggling with some of the psychological effects of heterosexism, and often these caused serious difficulties.

The present study suggests that it might be more helpful to conceptualize the experiences of individuals exposed to heterosexism in terms of the facets that participants identified in this
study -- the lack of information about lesbians, the stereotypes about lesbians, and the negative valuations of lesbians. This would enable us to explore the commonalities and differences in people's experience of these, and their reactions to them. It would also serve as a reminder that many people are likely to be more influenced by some aspects of heterosexism than others, as were most of the participants in the present study. Similarly, the present study suggests that some people "internalize" heterosexism, or more accurately many of its various elements, and others do so very little or not at all. Thus, it becomes important to explore internalization as one response to heterosexism, neither uncommon nor universal. Such a personal, subjective approach would enable us to continue to explore the manifestations of internalized heterosexism described in the literature and explored in the present study without neglecting the multitude of other responses to heterosexism and its sequelae that lesbians also experience.

**Undoing Internalized Heterosexism**

Disentangling the different manifestations of internalized heterosexism that were described by participants enables significant clarification of the question of how individuals overcome or undo internalized heterosexism. At present, considerable confusion is evident in the literature. Some writers argue that overcoming internalized heterosexism requires only that the individual be exposed to lesbians, as the diversity of lesbians is such that it is obvious that none of the stereotypes are true. In contrast, other writers argue, equally vehemently, that emerging lesbians require psychotherapy or professional-led support groups to overcome their internalized heterosexism. Such a contrast becomes more comprehensible when one examines on the confusion around the implicit definition of internalized heterosexism used, which in turn likely results from focusing on different groups of lesbians.

Those writers who argue that exposure to other lesbians is most often sufficient in and of itself to enable new lesbians to overcome their heterosexism are found most often in the
community literature (but see also Kahn, 1991; Sophie, 1987). These writers draw much of their knowledge about lesbigs from their experience in lesbigay communities, which suggests that they know a disproportionate number of people who adjust well and relatively easily to being lesbigay. It is thus unsurprising that these writers then largely equate internalized heterosexism with lack of knowledge about lesbigs and stereotypes about lesbigs, as this is often the case for individuals who adjust most easily to being lesbigay. Within this context, therefore, it is entirely reasonable for these writers to conclude that more correct information about lesbigs is sufficient to enable lesbigs to overcome their internalized heterosexism.

The other tradition is represented by clinicians and researchers who focus on samples which are drawn from clinical or near-clinical samples (e.g., lesbigay adolescents who are unable to survive in mainstream schools). These writers are exploring the experience of lesbigs who have the most difficulty adjusting to their sexual orientation, whose considerable distress becomes evident as they seek psychotherapy or otherwise draw the attention of a researcher (Savin-Williams, 1994). Thus, these writers focus their understanding of internalized heterosexism on the negative valuations of lesbigs, and of themselves as lesbigay, that some lesbigs hold, and which often cause so much distress for the subgroup of lesbigs that comprise the population studied in this literature. For this subgroup, it can be difficult indeed for lesbigs to overcome their negative feelings about being lesbigay. These writers' focus on professional assistance thus seems much more reasonable when examined from this perspective. However, it must be noted that those few participants who said that they had benefited from psychotherapy also said that there had been other factors which were also crucial to their being able to adjust well to being lesbigay.25

In the present study, participants reported a variety of ways in which they had overcome their internalized heterosexism and developed a positive valuation of lesbigs and of being
lesbigay themselves. Most participants said that there had been a time when they knew nothing about lesbigays, when they had no information at all. That understanding that lesbigays do not exist was one of the most common forms of internalized heterosexism that participants described experiencing. It was usually simple for participants to learn that lesbigays did exist -- most often by way of gradually coming to hear rumours about people who were suspected or accused of being lesbigay, and what a bad thing that was. Younger participants were more likely to also be presented with some affirmative information about lesbigays from the beginning, or almost the beginning, of their awareness.

Participants varied widely in whether and to what extent they believed the stereotypes about lesbigays to which they were exposed. Some participants said that they had never believed any of the stereotypes. Participants who already understood that they were lesbigay were sometimes self-confident enough to believe that the stereotypes were false because they conflicted with their personal experience. Other participants found that the stereotypes they encountered contradicted their basic values, whether of not judging people on the basis of rumour, wanting to treat others fairly, or not stereotyping members of minority groups. All of these participants were thus relatively unaffected by the stereotypes of lesbigays that they encountered.

For other participants, internalized heterosexism manifested itself in their accepting many of the stereotypes. Participants described believing that lesbians and gay men really want to be the other sex, that bisexuals are really lesbian or gay (or, less often, heterosexual), that lesbigays are perverts or abnormal in some way, and so on. It is notable that most participants who accepted some stereotypes seldom believed all that they had been taught, but recalled one stereotype or a few stereotypes that had a significant impact upon them. Many of these participants found it easy to stop believing the stereotypes once they were presented with
information that contradicted them -- often in the form of lesbigsays who were happy and well-adjusted, or good lesbian and gay relationships. Some participants found contradictory information in their own experience: Once they realized they were lesbigay, they realized that the stereotypes were not true, because they were not true of them. For these participants as well, the stereotypes about lesbigsays had relatively little impact.

Those participants who had more difficulty disbelieving the stereotypes were most often those who both had very little access to contradictory information and very much doubted themselves and their own experiences. Some participants, both lesbigay and heterosexual, were unable to reject stereotypes about lesbigsays without repeated exposures to lesbigsays who contradicted these stereotypes. Some bisexual participants struggled for years with stereotypes about bisexuals, unable to find a bisexual community, or a lesbian and gay community which was affirming of bisexuals. Other bisexuals faced the same circumstances, but drew on their own experience, especially their self-concept and self-esteem, which they found sufficient to enable them to disbelieve or simply to ignore these stereotypes.

The most disturbing responses were given by the participants who described a long and difficult struggle with the negative valuations of lesbigsays that they had accepted, and their subsequent realization that they themselves were lesbigay. These were participants who had struggled, often for a prolonged period and with a great deal of pain, with the question of whether it was "okay" for them to be lesbigay. These participants had accepted that lesbigsays were inferior and that it was a bad thing to be lesbigay. They then had to deal with the implications as they became increasingly afraid that they might themselves be lesbigay. Some of these participants denied themselves any sexuality, others tried desperately to make themselves heterosexual. Several participants described enduring years of misery; three seriously considered or attempted suicide, in part because of issues related to sexual orientation, in part because of
other difficulties. These struggles mirror the experience of internalized heterosexism depicted most frequently in the literature.

However, more participants described a much shorter, much less painful process of adjusting to being lesbigay. Many lesbigay participants described themselves as having struggled very little, or not at all, with questions about whether it was okay for them to be lesbigay. There were a variety of reasons why these participants felt that it had been so easy for them to adjust to being lesbigay. Some said that their sexualities, and in particular their lesbian or gay feelings and sexual relationships, emerged so “naturally” that they simply did not think to question or doubt themselves as their sexualities developed. Some participants felt that from childhood they had been self-confident, judging themselves by their own standards rather than others’, and that this was why it had been easy for them to adjust to being lesbigay. Other participants felt that the most important influence on them was that as their feelings emerged, they were also aware that some people did believe it was okay to be lesbigay, and they found this perspective easy to accept, and to apply to themselves.

Most participants, however, fell between these two extremes. Many participants described having experienced a definite period of adjustment to being lesbigay, but one that was much shorter, and much less painful. Some participants said that they had made that adjustment largely through seeing other lesbigays who were well-adjusted and happy, enabling them to see that the negative valuations of lesbigays were quite simply false — as the community literature suggests. Others had been able to reason themselves through their adjustment, realizing that they were still the same person, still a good person, and that their being lesbigay did not change that. Still other participants acted on their feelings and eventually found out through their own experience that there was nothing wrong with being lesbigay.
Developing Positive Images and Valuations of Lesbigays

Another problematic aspect of the literature on internalized heterosexism is that it suggests that lesbigays move in a trajectory from having internalized heterosexism to not having internalized heterosexism (or having much less internalized heterosexism). In this formulation, the desired endpoint apparently consists of lesbigays who do not privilege heterosexuality over other sexual orientations and who do not stereotype lesbigays. There is very little open discussion of the idea that lesbigays might continue, beyond this point, to change their ideas about being lesbigay and what that means to them. There is no discussion of what belief systems might replace the internalized heterosexism; the question of "what are lesbigays if they are not as depicted by heterosexism?" is not addressed. Thus, it is implied that lesbigays replace the ideology of heterosexism with the assumption that there are no real differences between lesbigays and heterosexuals, the liberal perspective currently held by most social scientists and clinicians (Kitzinger, 1987).

The present study provides substantial evidence that many lesbigays move beyond undoing internalized heterosexism into a further development of their lesbigay identity, and their understanding of lesbigays and the lesbigay communities. Most of the lesbigay participants in the present study described a point in their journey where they no longer believed in heterosexist stereotypes about lesbigays and they felt it was okay to be lesbigay. It is at this point that I would say that in the framework described by the literature, these participants were no longer under the influence of their internalized heterosexism, that they had managed to "undo" it, or to overcome it. Most participants, however, continued to explore and grow in their sexual orientation past this neutral point, developing positive images and valuations of lesbigays, and of themselves as lesbigay.
Many participants talked about struggling beyond just being "okay" with their sexual orientation, to becoming truly comfortable with it, even in circumstances where others are not. Even for participants who never found it hard to accept that they were lesbigay, feeling truly comfortable with their identity could be a lengthy process. Feeling truly comfortable being lesbigay, as described by many of the participants, was very much akin to the kind of psychological maturity that individuals derive as they explore and come to accept who they are as a human being and the kind of life they want to live -- a parallel drawn explicitly by some participants.

For most participants, feeling truly comfortable with their sexual orientation also required their developing a more personal definition of what it meant to them to be lesbian, or bisexual, or gay. While a heterosexist perspective insists that all lesbigays are alike, in reality there are a wide variety of ways to be lesbian, bisexual, or gay. Several participants talked about the development of their realization that there were many different ways they could live as someone who was lesbigay, and ultimately finding a way that resonated with who they were as a person. For some participants, being lesbigay was a political identity; others identified closely with the lesbigay communities, so that for them a very important part of being lesbigay was being a part of the lesbigay communities. Still other participants developed a more idiosyncratic lesbigay identity, that resonated in other ways with their broader sense of self. One of the striking commonalities amongst participants was the many participants for whom being lesbigay was linked with a kind of generativity, wanting to contribute to further development of some subset or aspect of the lesbigay communities.

*Replacing the ideology of heterosexism.* The bland formulation that lesbigays are like everyone else except for their sexual behaviour, was both embraced and rejected by the participants in the present study. Many participants both embraced and rejected it, struggling
with the contradiction that at present, lesbians as a group are very different from heterosexuals as a group, although this is not necessarily true (in different circumstances, this might not be the case), nor are such differences true of all lesbians and all heterosexuals. Most lesbian participants had heterosexual people in their lives who were important to them, and very similar to them, while the inverse was true for many of the heterosexual participants. However, both heterosexual and lesbian participants felt that as a group, lesbians were quite different from heterosexuals as a group. Perhaps the most striking evidence of the differences that participants perceived between lesbians and heterosexuals was that many lesbian participants in different ways talked about the ways in which being lesbian was not only something they had to struggle beyond, but something that had added immeasurably to their lives -- a perspective that suggests that being lesbian is indeed different from being heterosexual.²⁶

The perceived differences between lesbians and heterosexuals took many forms. Many participants argued that sexuality is much more fluid than is commonly acknowledged, and that lesbians are more aware of and more comfortable with this than most heterosexuals. In a related vein, many participants argued that an individual's sexual orientation per se (as opposed to its consequences) is not an important aspect of their personality, something which again was seen as more widely recognized by lesbians than by heterosexuals.²⁷ Lesbians were also seen as less restricted by the dictates of gender-appropriate behaviour than were most heterosexuals.

For many participants, differences between lesbians and heterosexuals were rooted in their relationships with others. Some participants believed that lesbian and gay relationships were different from heterosexual relationships. The differences between men and women, they argued, meant that lesbian and gay relationships could be more intimate, more comfortable, more sexually compatible, and more egalitarian. Other participants pointed to the lesbian
communities, which for many lesbians provide the kind of community that many heterosexuals who belong to the dominant culture lack.

Many participants argued that because of heterosexism, being lesbigay is often very different from being heterosexual. Because of heterosexism, lesbians know much more about heterosexuality than most heterosexuals know about lesbians. Heterosexism also means that being lesbigay is for many a political issue and a political perspective, as well as a personal attribute. Finally, some participants argued that because of heterosexism, lesbians must do more self-exploration, struggle with who they are and who they want to be in a way which is beneficial for anyone, but which heterosexuals can much more easily avoid. The psychological "work" that lesbians do as they adjust to their sexual orientation provides, for many lesbians, a source of psychological strength and an increased level of psychological competence which manifest themselves in many other areas of their lives.

Beyond Internalized Heterosexism: A Probabilistic Model of Lesbigay Development

The core category that emerged from the grounded theory analysis was that of a journey, variously discussed in terms of change, growth, exploration, journeys, developing, discovering, seeking, finding, and learning. In Chapter III, I discussed the participants' experience organized by the metaphor of the journey, attempting to do justice both to the centrality of this metaphor for so many of the participants as well as to the extensive individual differences in the journeys they described. For most participants, their journeys began with the heterosexism to which they were exposed, most often long before they were aware that they were lesbigay. The growing realization that they were lesbigay was another important stage in participants' journeys, one which was frequently complicated by having to struggle with hurtful stereotypes about lesbians or the question of whether it was okay for them to be lesbigay. For most participants, the next stage of their journeys were that they developed comfortable, personal lesbigay identities.
Finally, I discussed the point in their journeys at which participants were at the time of the interview: their current conceptualizations of being lesbigay. Most participants, explicitly or implicitly, saw their journeys as ongoing, something which would continue throughout their lives. Their current understanding of what it meant to be lesbigay were thus just the point in their journey at which they were at the time of the interview.

In this section, I briefly discuss the literature on lesbigay development, which I have drawn on to theorize about participants’ journeys. I conclude the section by proposing a different kind of model of lesbigay development, which is in some ways very similar to, and in other ways very different from, the traditional approach.

Within the literature, models of lesbigay development have largely been models of “coming out,” a term which denotes the realization that one is lesbigay, the development of a lesbigay identity, and communicating that identity to others (e.g., Cass, 1979; Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Coleman, 1981/82; Kahn, 1991; Minton & McDonald, 1983/84; Sophie, 1986). As Gonsiorek and Rudolph (1991) describe it, these models “describe a developmental process of coming to terms with [one’s] homosexuality” (p. 164).

The models of coming out generally focus upon a shift from the individual’s acceptance of negative ideas about being lesbigay and an accompanying rejection of the possibility that they might be lesbigay to “personal acceptance of a positive [lesbi]gay self-image and a coherent personal identity” (Minton & McDonald, 1983/84, p. 91). Although there is some variation in the stages the various models propose, a common general pattern is evident (Gonsiorek & Rudolph, 1991). In the initial stage, because of the prejudice against lesbigays, the individual denies or blocks recognition of same-sex feelings. For many individuals, after some period of time, a gradual recognition of their same-sex feelings develops, and then, slowly, a tolerance of them. In this stage, however, they continue to be confused about what lesbigays are really like, whether
they are lesbigay, and what their life would be like were they indeed to be lesbigay. In the next
stage, experimentation, both emotional and sexual, occurs, and often there is an increasing sense
of normalcy about same-sex feelings. The individual then gradually develops a sense of identity
as someone who is lesbian or gay, and this is accepted as a positive aspect of the self
(Gonsiorek & Rudolph, 1991).

Because the development of a lesbigay identity occurs within a context in which
heterosexuality is almost universally seen, outside of lesbigay communities, as the preferred
sexual orientation, much of the difficulty lesbigays experience around coming out is assumed to
be a result of heterosexism. McDonald (1982) argues that “what coming out ultimately
symbolizes is the individual’s response to social stigmatization in a struggle to redefine
him/herself against a background of antihomosexual prejudice and discrimination” (p. 58).
Moreover, the models assume that the impact of heterosexism is so great because emerging
lesbigays have to struggle not only with the heterosexism of their environment, but with their
internalized heterosexism as well. Indeed, for some theorists, internalized heterosexism is the
more important of these. Kahn (1991) argues that:

Most theories of homosexual identity formation are based on the assumption that
internalized homophobia and reaction to societal homonegativism must be resolved for
adequate integration to occur. Through a process of cognitive restructuring, the
meanings attached to homosexuality are changed and homosexual identities take on
positive meanings. (p. 48)

Gonsiorek and Rudolph (1991) discuss a number of factors that may account for the difficulties
lesbigays experience during coming out: internalized heterosexism; the inability of most lesbian
and gay adolescents to participate in the romantic and sexual experimentation that is typical for
heterosexual adolescents; the sense of being different that young lesbigays must often cope with,
that may lead to feelings of inferiority; and certain developmental routes which are taken by some lesgibays and may prove problematic, such as married men who covertly engage in anonymous same-sex sexual encounters.

From the beginning, theories of coming out have been presented as general descriptions which apply to many but not all lesgibays. Coleman (1981/82) is more articulate than most writers about the limitations of his model:

This model does not assume that every individual follows each stage and naturally evolves through all. Some become locked into one stage or another and never experience identity integration. It is not uncommon for individuals to work on developmental tasks of several different stages simultaneously. Some individuals will begin tasks at higher levels of development before focusing on the task of an earlier stage.... While the development of many individuals is in fact more chaotic, fluid, or complex than this model describes, the framework remains useful as a way to understand these people and can assist therapists and clients if used in a flexible manner. (p. 32)

Empirical research has suggested that Coleman (1981/82) was, if anything, underestimating the variability of individuals' progression through the stages of any of the models of coming out. Surveying 199 "self-identified homosexual males," McDonald (1982) found extensive individual differences in the coming out process for members of his sample, finding that for a substantial number of men went through a later stage before an earlier one (p. 50). For example, 18% of McDonald's sample labelled themselves as homosexual before they had any same-sex sexual experience, and 22% began a long-term relationship with another man before defining themselves as homosexual, both of which are in contradiction to the theories of coming out that McDonald (1982) was testing. This finding of the importance of individual differences was replicated for women by Sophie (1986) and Kahn (1991). Sophie (1986) concludes that:
the general stage description described lesbian identity fairly well only because it was so
general; as soon as more specificity was introduced, the theory was inaccurate in
accounting for development in various individuals. (p. 50)

Kahn (1991) proposed that individual differences in the coming out process for lesbians were
best explained by the existence of five different coming out processes for lesbians, each of which
is characteristic of a subgroup of women. 29

Morris (1997) addressed individual differences by proposing that coming out as a lesbian
could more accurately conceptualized as a multidimensional process. Studying earlier models of
coming out, and finding them overly simplistic in contrast to the diversity of lesbian experience,
Morris (1997) derived four dimensions of coming out: Sexual identity formation, or awareness
of oneself as lesbian; disclosure of sexual orientation to others; sexual expression and sexual
behaviour; and lesbian consciousness. Morris (1997) argues that each new lesbian must deal with
each of these components of the coming out process. However, unlike other models of coming
out, it is not assumed that there is any particular relationship between, or ordering of, these
dimensions.

The difficulties that most of the models of coming out have had accounting for individual
differences is particularly ironic because almost all the empirical work that has been done has
been based on samples that are very largely white, middle- and upper-class, and well-educated
(Eliaison, 1997). 30 Thus, it is extremely likely that this research has significantly underestimated
the range and frequency of individual differences in coming out. Eliason (1997) proposes that a
cyclical model of identity development would provide a framework within which each important
facet of an individual's identity -- such as sexual orientation, race, class, and gender -- would
develop interactively with the others, rather than in isolation.
Thus, the literature on coming out provides extensive empirical evidence of significant individual differences in how lesbians and gay men come out. Moreover, more recent models of the coming out process have been increasingly complex and theoretically sophisticated, suggesting the existence of multiple coming out processes. Neither of these has, however, has lessened the unfortunate tendency of many researchers, theorists, and (particularly) clinicians to use descriptive models of coming out prescriptively. As Rust (1996) argues:

The observation that many people have followed a particular path of change through time, ending in a particular state of being, becomes transformed into the expectation that other people will follow the same path and reach the same state of being. (p. 98)

Rust (1996) also criticizes models of coming out for their neglect of the social constructs shaping sexuality. She argues that the models:

focus on how both external and internalized social pressures (e.g., homophobia) inhibit an individual’s journey toward recognition of her or his true essence [i.e., someone who is lesbian or gay]. They fail to encourage us to look at the broader social forces that map out the terrain across which this journey takes place. (p. 102)

For example, Rust (1996) argues, the models usually do not address the political meanings attached to sexual identities. Moreover, when they do address such meanings, they tend to rely on the researchers’ meanings, rather than those of the participants, which may be very different from the researchers’ meanings, and from one another’s meanings (Rust, 1996). Moreover, the neglect of such important “broader social forces” as racism and classism means that the models have even failed to adequately characterize the external social pressures that many lesbians face, as lesbians of colour, and those who are not of middle class origin, experience rather different social pressures than do white, middle-class lesbians (Boykin, 1996; Kadi, 1996).
In a discussion of the social constructionism debate, Kitzinger (1995) observes that it is now widely accepted that it is "impossible to begin to understand lesbian or gay existence without reference to its social, historical, and political context" (p. 142). In this sense, social constructionism is unarguable. Irrefutable evidence is provided by the wide diversity of lesbigay experience in different contexts, including the existence of societies in which people were not categorized according to sexual orientation, and thus there were no equivalents of lesbigays as they are understood in the present context. Yet there continues to be vociferous debate as to how far to explore and extend this perspective. As Kitzinger (1995) demonstrates, a "strong" form of social constructionism "challenges the idea that some people 'are' or can discover themselves to be gay or lesbian" (p. 143). This calls into question the premise of models of coming out, which are intended as descriptions of the process of how individuals do discover themselves to be lesbigay. Moreover, it raises the issue of how the concepts of lesbian, gay, and bisexual have changed, even over the time that the models have been discussed.

A social constructionist perspective also highlights the variability of meaning amongst individuals. Studying women who identified themselves as lesbians, Kitzinger (1987) found five distinct, and very different, meanings of the term "lesbian", each held by some of her participants. In the models of coming out, individuals are assumed to encounter, and have to learn to deal with, a monolithic heterosexism. In actuality, as the participants in the present study described so well, an individual encounters her or his own personal manifestation of heterosexism. Some of these are tied to demographic and other variables which have a predictable influence. Thus, for example, people who grow up in urban areas generally have access to more alternatives to mainstream ideas than do those who grow up in rural areas, and younger people tend to have had earlier and easier access to more positive images than older people -- although both of these are generalizations; exceptions do exist, and must not be ignored. Other individual differences are
less predictable, linked to idiosyncratic interpretations of events which are complex enough to admit a number of different responses. Thus, for example, a number of participants in the present study recall being told that same-sex attraction was a stage that some adolescents passed through. For some of these participants, the effect of this mixed message was liberating, giving them a sense of relief. For others, it was a reproof, a statement that their same-sex feelings were something to be left behind as soon as possible.

In place of the approach taken by linear coming out models, I propose a probabilistic model of lesbigay development, which is much more consistent with the diversity of experiences and outcomes described by participants of the present study. With due regard for the objections raised by Rust (1996), Kitzinger (1987, 1995), and others, as well as my own, the analysis of participants' experience demonstrates that within the current context, individuals, both lesbigay and heterosexual, understand their sexual identity in terms of journeys and development, albeit in a much more complex, and idiosyncratic manner than is currently assumed within the models of coming out.

I adopted the term "probabilistic" from Quantum Mechanics. Very briefly, a central tenet of Quantum Mechanics is that many things that we think of as causal processes (will X cause Y to happen, or Z?) are in fact not deterministic -- we cannot predict what will happen with certainty. However, this does not necessarily mean that no pattern exists. Often, once X happens, there is a certain likelihood that Y will happen, and a certain likelihood that Z will happen. That is, in many cases, we can determine the likelihood of Y happening and the likelihood of Z happening, given that X happens. Thus, for example, a deterministic model of coming out might argue that young people would first identify same-sex feelings, then hypothesize that they were lesbigay, then develop a lesbian or gay relationship. However, in the present study, some participants moved from a hypothesis that they were lesbigay to a lesbian or
gay relationship, while others only began to suspect that they might be lesbigay after having
developed a lesbian or gay relationship. This suggests that it is simply absurd to explore whether
identification of sexual orientation precedes (enables) or follows (is a result of) a same-sex
relationship. Instead, what is of interest is the likelihood that a particular individual will identify
as lesbigay through a relationship, versus the likelihood that identification will precede any
relationship -- likelihoods that will vary dramatically with particular attributes of the person in
question.

A probabilistic model would also address more adequately the sociopolitical contexts
within which an individual exists, and develops. Currently, models of coming out generalize
about "the" coming out process of individuals who are largely devoid of context. Some theorists
have recently called for models which integrate race, class, and cultural identities (e.g., Eliason,
1996; Morris, 1997), but these remain elusive. One major difficulty is the deterministic
paradigm, in which, for example, people of colour are most often seen as either "like" white
lesbigays, or "different" from them. In the former case, the experience of lesbigays of colour is
invisible in so-called general models of coming out (which are largely based on the experience of
white lesbigays). In the latter case, the different experience of lesbigays seems to require the
development of an alternative model. A probabilistic approach, in contrast, facilitates the use of a
framework in which lesbigays of colour would be seen as somewhat similar to and somewhat
different from white lesbigays. A probabilistic model would encourage an exploration of the
relationship between sociopolitical differences and differences in lesbigay development. Again,
because such differences would be expected to alter the probability of the occurrence of a
particular developmental event or a particular ordering of events (rather than causing particular
events to happen and preventing other events from happening), the individual would be
considered within their sociopolitical context, without being determined by it.
A probabilistic model of lesbigay development would be profoundly subjective, focusing on the individual who is, or who is to become, lesbigay, their social context, and the interaction of the two. Such a model would have to take into account the different ways that sexual orientation is experienced, and understood. Individuals experience their sexual orientation differently -- whether as a central aspect of who they are as a human being, or as a pattern to their behaviour which is only of importance because of the heterosexism with which they are surrounded, or (even more complexly) as some point along the continuum between these two positions. As demonstrated by the present study, some people feel that they have been lesbigay all their lives, that that has always been part of who they are, while for others, there seems to have been an essential "self" that became lesbigay, often in a way very much influenced by the qualities of that essential self. More importantly, for most participants, it appeared that both of these apparently contradictory positions were somewhat true for them -- most participants used both of these accounts to explain different aspects of their experience.

In addition to the wide range of ways that individuals experience their sexual orientation, it is equally important to incorporate into the model the sociopolitical contexts which contribute to these apparently "individual" differences. Although we often speak, and feel, as if our sexuality were a purely natural force, the way sexuality is manifested and experienced within a particular subculture is strongly shaped by that subculture (Stein, 1989; see also the discussion of social constructionism above). Many participants believed that their earlier experience of their sexuality was rooted in one or more of the subcultural contexts in which they developed, particularly their religious affiliation and the time in which they grew up. Some understood their current understandings of sexuality as influenced by their spirituality or religion, by the understandings of sexuality offered by the lesbigay communities with which they have had contact, by racial or class differences, and by their personal history.
The model would also have to take individuals into account in terms of their particular pattern of strengths and weaknesses, their self-esteem and self-concept, their experience with issues of difference (including race, class, gender, and other relevant attributes), their tendency to be self-directed or other-directed, their optimism or pessimism, and other factors. In the present study, some participants identified each of these factors as having influenced their experiences of lesbigay development, and it is certain that there are other important individual and subcultural differences that would emerge were we to look for them. Moreover, all of these factors would be expected to be influenced by the individual's sociopolitical context, and would likely continue to be manifested somewhat differently for individuals in different contexts. Within this category as well, there are likely to be issues that are more explicitly subcultural. Thus, for example, the imperative in many racial and religious minorities to be fruitful in order to contribute to the survival of the group may well be an important factor in the development of some lesbigays who belong to those minority groups. Within the present study, such factors were most visible for those participants who had strong spiritual or religious identities, for most of whom their spiritual development strongly influenced, and was strongly influenced by, their development of a lesbigay identity, and the form that that identity took.

Finally, the model would be dependent upon the environments that the individual has experienced, both personal and sociopolitical. The combination of silence about lesbigays, negative stereotypes of lesbigays, and negative judgements and valuations about lesbigays that are the principal manifestations of heterosexism were reported by all participants in the present study, but the specific experiences reported by participants differed dramatically. Many of these differences were related to the sociopolitical context of the individuals, while many more were idiosyncratic. Some of these differences were clearly the result of the historical context at the time the individual was struggling with these issues. Many participants who came out before the
advent of the current lesbigay liberation movement felt this had made their struggle more
difficult, while most of the participants who came out afterwards drew on some part of that
movement to ease their coming out process. More specific changes in the lesbigay communities,
of which the AIDS epidemic is a tragic exemplar, also influenced some participants’ development
as lesbigays. Other participants described themselves as more strongly influenced by the general
social context at the time, whether this was the “free love” attitude of the sixties or the earlier
social and sexual conservatism.

In addition to historical context, the model would take into account other aspects of the
individual’s sociopolitical context. The individual’s racial or ethnic identity, class, gender,
financial resources, religious background, current religious or spiritual identity, and so on, all
contribute to the individual’s experiences of heterosexism, and their access to alternative
perspectives and possibilities.

Finally, the individual’s personal contexts would also be taken into account by the model.
In the present study, relatively small differences in the manifestations of heterosexism were
described by many participants as making very significant differences in their development as
someone who was lesbigay. For example, some participants happened to have encountered a
single lesbigay-positive person who made a tremendous difference to the way their felt about
their emerging sexual orientation. Some participants were negatively affected by the
conservative religion to which their family subscribed, while others felt their personal god was
helpful to them in their struggles.

I envision the model as a sketch of the path that an individual would take as they learn
about lesbigays from both their environment and themselves, and the ways that they struggle to
make sense of the contradictions that this entails. It would start with the socially-imposed silence
about lesbigays. For some, the next step would be feelings of same-sex desire, but for others
(probably most) learning about lesbigay would at first be externally-driven. Awareness would develop of rumours about people who are suspected of being lesbigay, and the most obvious (current) social manifestations of lesbigay visibility would become evident. These manifestations will differ cross-culturally, as well as historically and individually. At present, this might mean awareness of some or all of: stereotypic or demonized movie and television characters, occasional sympathetic movie and television characters, denunciations of lesbigays from some religious perspectives, a cautious reaching out from others, and journalistic coverage of lesbigay rights issues, of movements against lesbigays, and of lesbigay activism. In addition, personally-significant figures, including teachers, parents, friends, and so on, are likely to communicate their own views about lesbigays.

At present, it seems increasingly unlikely that the individual would be presented with a single, consistent view of lesbigays. However, a variety of viewpoints is also characteristic of the experience of most participants in the present study who came of age in the last 20 years, as a result of increasing lesbigay visibility in mainstream culture and the increasing tolerance of segments of mainstream culture towards lesbigays. A substantial number of older participants were also influenced by the variety of views of lesbigays that were accessible to them, although some were not exposed to alternatives to heterosexism until they were able to venture into the lesbigay communities.

Thus, the individual progresses from the silence of heterosexism, a complete (or almost complete) lack of knowledge about lesbigays, to a set of inconsistent stereotypes and value judgements about lesbigays, some frankly condemnatory, others studiously neutral, others perhaps openly approving. It is most likely at this stage that the individual begins to identify same-sex feelings and to wonder whether they may be lesbigay. For some, it appears that stereotypes of lesbigays and/or negative valuations of lesbigays are accepted before the
individual comes to recognize that they may be lesbigay. Indeed, having accepted stereotypes and negative judgements will, for some, delay that recognition, as they literally do not see themselves within the group portrayed. For others, their recognition that they may be lesbigay comes before they have fully committed themselves to a single viewpoint about lesbigays, so that their perspective is influenced not only by the variety of information that they are surrounded by, but also by their dawning recognition that they are lesbigay. This latter group includes, but is not limited, to people who have felt that they were lesbigay all along, though they may have only realized it or been able to articulate it when they first began to hear that lesbigays exist.

Then, as the individual begins to consider the possibility that they may be lesbigay, they go through an adjustment process, usually with some amount of struggle. Minimally, the individual is faced with having to figure out how to be lesbigay in an environment in which many people and institutions remain heterosexist. Some people struggle with questions about whether the stereotypes about lesbigays apply to them, or if they have to live in accordance with them to be lesbigay. Other people struggle with negative valuations of lesbigays: Is it really acceptable for them to be lesbigay? In the present study, many participants of all ages struggled with this issue, some relatively briefly and easily, others with a great deal of pain over a long period of time. It is most often during this period that emerging lesbigays make it a priority to meet other lesbigays, as an important step in learning what it means to be lesbigay.

The question of adjusting to being lesbigay is complicated by the fact that many emerging lesbigays must also struggle with other stigmatized identities. This can influence lesbigay development in a variety of ways, both positively and negatively. Some people who have already struggled with one stigmatized identity find claiming a second (or third) to be a much easier process, as much of the work that must be done is common and hence need not necessarily be re-done. Yet a minority racial or class identity may also make it more difficult for
an individual to claim a lesbigay identity, as the lesbigay communities are most representative of, and most comfortable for, lesbigays who are white and middle or upper class (Kadi, 1996; Raffo, 1996). People of colour sometimes feel that they cannot develop a lesbigay identity without compromising their racial identity, an argument which is too often made (implicitly or explicitly) by both heterosexual people of colour and white lesbigays (Boykin, 1996; Kadi, 1996). Even gender may be an important factor: Men’s greater earning power often means that mixed lesbigay media and communities cater more to gay and bi men than lesbian and bi women, rendering some women’s lesbigay development more difficult.

After the individual has adjusted to being lesbigay, they continue to grow in their sexual orientation. While many begin with the belief that lesbigays are different from heterosexuals only in terms of the gender of people whom they choose as sexual partners, the reality is considerably more complex. The diversity of the ways that one can live as someone who is lesbian, bisexual, or gay means that the individual must then construct a personal lesbigay identity. It is important to note that the diversity of lesbigay experience is most visible to lesbigays who are white, urban, and middle- and upper-class -- within the lesbigay communities, considerable stereotyping of lesbigays who are working class, poor, rural, and of racial or ethnic minorities continues to occur. Thus, many lesbigays who also have one or more of these identities would be expected to have more difficulty developing a comfortable personal identity.

The individual also confronts other important tasks as they continue to develop their lesbigay identity. One is the individual’s struggle to become truly comfortable with being lesbigay, including having to become comfortable with being lesbigay in circumstances where that makes others uncomfortable. Another is learning how to develop egalitarian relationships with heterosexuals. For many, this part of their journey is about moving from being lesbigay
within comfortable, lesbigay contexts to being fully comfortable being someone who is lesbigay in all contexts.

The issues of resiliency and vulnerability emerged repeatedly within the responses of the participants, and form a crucial part of the model. As lesbigays proceed along their varied developmental paths, the resiliency of some and the vulnerability of others are evident at every step. Some find it easy to believe lesbigay-positive information, others are disproportionately influenced by heterosexist views. Faced with a contradiction between what they believe about lesbigays and their own sense of themselves as someone who is lesbigay, some find it easy to believe in themselves, while others are certain the stereotypes must be correct, and thus there must be something wrong with them.

The present study identified a number of issues that influenced participants' vulnerability and resilience. Many participants identified age as an important variable, with younger people seen as more resilient because they were exposed to more lesbigay-positive information — although analysis of participants' responses suggested that while the age of the individual is likely to have an impact, it is by no means determinative. Another important variable was self-esteem and self-concept. Confronted with conflicting data about lesbigays, participants whose general emotional state was fragile were very vulnerable to focusing on the most negative perspectives, while participants whose self-esteem was good more easily accepted the more positive perspectives. Participants who in general measured themselves by external standards tended to do so with regard to their sexual orientation as well, while participants who had a solid self-concept tended to find it easier to extend that to their sexual orientation. Another issue that influenced participants' resilience as they adjusted to being lesbigay was whether they had previously dealt with being different from the norm. Participants who had done so, whether related to race, gender, or class issues, or other, more idiosyncratic differences, tended to find it
easier to adjust to yet another difference. In contrast, some participants who were still struggling with other forms of marginalization as they were developing their lesbigay identities found that the two magnified each other, rendering each more difficult that it would have been alone.

This probabilistic theory would, ideally, give rise to research and writing in two distinct forms. One important approach would be to search for patterns, to explore correlations which underlie the connections between individual differences and particular outcomes at the various points in the developmental process, and the connections between earlier outcomes and later consequences. Thus, one could generalize about the developmental paths that occur most frequently, as well as predict increasingly accurately how a given individual would develop. The second approach would be a continued focus on exceptions to the usual patterns, and resulting attempts to develop the model through the integration of apparently-anomalous outcomes. Clinical literature in particular requires both of these approaches. It is crucial that clinicians have both an understanding of how a particular client is most likely to develop, and as much knowledge as possible about other outcomes that might occur.

**Strengths and Limitations of the Present Study**

The exploratory nature of this study is at once both its greatest strength and its greatest weakness. Enabling, indeed requesting, participants to tell their own stories in their own words brought to light issues and connections that could not have been predicted by existing literature. The vast majority of the participants, both lesbigay and heterosexual, had clearly spent a lot of time and effort thinking about many of the topics raised by this project, and the unstructured nature of the questions that were posed to them meant that this study benefitted more than most from the experience of participants. Other questions were particularly useful because they asked participants to articulate their feelings about issues that are seldom put into words, but are important and powerful nonetheless. Most participants, for example, were surprised when they
were asked what they liked about being [their sexual orientation]. Such a question, with its implication that being lesbigay may be better in some ways than being heterosexual, is very seldom seriously considered (or seen as socially appropriate) except by politically radical lesbigays. Hence within the academic context of the interview, the question was shocking for most participants. After getting over their surprise, however, almost all participants answered this question at length, and their responses touched on issues that were clearly meaningful and important to them.

The broad range of participants, most unusually including heterosexual participants, was another strength of the study. It was perhaps predictable that differences between different sexual orientations would be much smaller than differences within sexual orientations, although far too much of the literature sets up "gays" and "heterosexuals" (or "gays and lesbians" and "heterosexuals") as two distinct, non-overlapping, and dissimilar groups. It is important to note that the pain experienced by many heterosexuals around issues of sexual orientation raises questions about the practice of using heterosexuals as a control group for lesbigays (i.e., as people unaffected by issues of sexual orientation).

The final strength of the study was my commitment to focusing on the positive aspects of being lesbigay as well as the struggles. Almost all of the participants, of all sexual orientations, told of struggling with issues of sexual orientation in ways that were often very congruent with the literature. Yet there seemed to be a second half to the participants' journey, in which their sexual orientation was seen as a positive force, an important and valued part of themselves. I hope that this study will serve as a very small step towards filling the enormous lacuna in the literature, which I believe should explore the second half of the journey as thoroughly as it has the first.
Many of the limitations of the present study are also due to its exploratory, unstructured nature. The results must be interpreted with caution, and the conclusions drawn, while quite persuasive within this context, must be considered provisional until further validated. Much of the data are retrospective, and thus depend upon participants' recall. The data also reflect what participants thought at the time of the interview influenced their past behaviour — an understanding which has likely changed over time, perhaps significantly. Perhaps most crucially, qualitative studies do not generate data about the relative rates of frequency of the phenomena examined. Thus, the relative infrequency of very dysfunctional behaviour reported by participants is at best suggestive. Although it is very tempting to suggest that the present study provides evidence that dysfunctional behaviours occur significantly less frequently than the academic/professional literature suggests, and indeed all the data are consistent with that argument, such a conclusion could only be drawn on the basis of an extensive quantitative study.

Directions for the Future: Research and Activism

The probabilistic model of lesbigay development sketched above provides a wide variety of possible directions for research. Aspects of the model that seem particularly important to research further include: a more extensive examination of the factors that correlate with individuals' vulnerability or resilience; further exploration of the changes that occur in individuals' understanding of their sexual orientation once they have identified it to themselves and others, and become somewhat comfortable with it; and a rigorous testing of some of the connections made by participants.

Although it is traditional to end a dissertation with suggestions for further research, the present study also demonstrates a continuing need for activism. It was indeed sobering to contemplate the stories of participants who had, or were having, a very difficult struggle with
whether it is okay to be lesbigay, particularly because in this study, such struggles were nearly as common among younger participants as older ones.

The finding that some participants report one or a few positive influences as more important to their development than many negative influences is encouraging. It suggests that activism might be more usefully directed towards increasing the availability of lesbigay-positive information, rather than limiting heterosexism. As the former is the easier task, it is good news indeed that it may be the more important.

The finding that some heterosexuals also experience considerable difficulties because of heterosexism and its sequelae suggests that it might be possible to argue for lesbigay-positive education, for example, as something that some heterosexuals also need. Although a cynical approach (that emerging lesbigays need non-heterosexist education should be reason enough to make changes), it might be effective. Alternatively, the same people who dismiss lesbigays as not meriting fair treatment might also dismiss the needs of heterosexuals who struggle with the possibility that they might be lesbigay, and the needs of those heterosexuals who suffer because of the pain experienced by lesbigay friends. In addition, this finding also suggests that the current approach to lesbigay-positive education which stresses lesbigay studies courses in university and college settings, and in some schools lesbigay studies programs, is insufficient. As heterosexuals, particularly men, are quite unlikely to take such courses (D’Augelli, 1991), lesbigay-positive education must also be integrated into courses which are not explicitly lesbigay-identified for the information to be available to those heterosexuals who need it (as well as for the benefit of those who have not yet identified as lesbigay, but will later in their lives).

The finding that the participants who struggled most with their sexual orientation did so in part because of a generally fragile emotional state and/or other specific, only partially-related difficulties is suggestive in several ways. It suggests that ameliorative programs addressing other
issues might also be of assistance to vulnerable lesbigs, thus arguing for collaborative work on projects that are compatible with a lesbigay-affirmative perspective, but not specifically directed at lesbigay issues. Particularly important here are those participants who felt that it was less difficult for them to become lesbigay because they had already learned to deal with one form of oppression, which provides empirical support for the currently-contentious belief that it is important for lesbigs to work in coalition with members of other oppressed groups.

Another important implication of the current study also arises from the finding that the participants who struggled with their sexual orientation also had other emotional difficulties. This suggests that it might be possible to begin to predict which emerging lesbigs will have particular difficulties dealing with their sexuality, and thus target our interventions more actively and appropriately to a subset of vulnerable emerging lesbigs. It is also quite possible that among individuals who are struggling with, for example, self-esteem issues, emerging lesbigs are particularly vulnerable, and particularly strongly affected. Were this to be found to be the case, it would provide a powerful argument that interventions designed to address such issues also be explicitly lesbigay-positive.
ENDNOTES

1. Both "homophobia" and "heterosexism" are terms which have been used to label prejudice and discrimination against lesbians and gay men, and sometimes bisexuals. Homophobia, or the fear and dislike of homosexuals, was first used by K.T. Smith (1971) and Weinberg (1973) and quickly entered both the popular and the scientific lexicons. Many later writers have preferred the term heterosexism, "an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behaviour, identity, relationship, or community" (Herek, 1992, p. 89). In contrast to the term homophobia, the term heterosexism recognizes the extent to which prejudice against lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals has been institutionalized and acknowledges the power relations involved (Neisen, 1990). Psychological researchers have also demonstrated that heterosexuals' attitudes toward lesbians do not seem to be merely a function of their fear of homosexuals, as the term homophobia implies (e.g., Herek, 1984b; Shields & Harriman, 1984). Those who reject the term heterosexism argue that it is inadequate because of its relative neglect of the strength of some heterosexuals' hatred of lesbians, which is so strong that it too often erupts in physical violence directed toward lesbians, including murder.

Although some writers argue that heterosexism and homophobia are distinct but related terms, and hence both should be used (e.g., Cruikshank, 1992), most writers choose one or the other to refer to both the environment of and individual incidents of prejudice and discrimination experienced by bisexuals. Within this work, I have chosen to use the terms heterosexism and internalized heterosexism, rather than homophobia and internalized homophobia. At times, I shall use the latter terms in discussing others' ideas or research when, in my opinion, to do so clarifies their meaning.

2. The term "lesbigay" has become a convenient and widely-used contraction of "lesbian, bisexual, and gay," and will be used in this way in this dissertation. The emergence of "lesbigay" is a result of the increasing acceptance that "gay" is (largely) gendered masculine, although some women still identify themselves as gay. The term "lesbigay" also makes visible the large number of bisexuals who have always been present amongst lesbians and gay men.

The research and clinical literature has largely focused on lesbians and gay men as participants, clients, and targets of attitudes -- and more on gay men than lesbians -- rendering bisexuals (of both sexes) all but invisible. More recently, queer activism and the new bisexual movement have increased the visibility of bisexuals (Bristow & Wilson, 1993). Moreover, bisexual and queer activists argue that heterosexism ensures that the experiences of bisexuals (whatever their sexual history) are much more similar to the experiences of lesbians and gay men than they are to the experiences of heterosexuals (Weise, 1992). Bisexual visibility is also newly evident in the work of many researchers and clinicians (e.g., Golden, 1987; O'Conor, 1993/94; Rust, 1993). Because this dissertation addresses the experiences of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, at times I will extend findings about lesbians and/or gay men to bisexuals where it seems appropriate.

3. This also makes blatantly obvious that for the authors of this text, the audience of interest is not only heterosexual (or potentially heterosexual), but it is also male. For women, the advice is both offensive and factually incorrect -- for women, sex with women is considerably safer than sex with men.
4. Although my main interest in these writings is to critique their content, at times it is impossible for me to resist the temptation to psychoanalyse their authors. I cannot help but wonder about the extent to which this statement of Nicolosi's (1993) serves to defend against acknowledging the near-impossibility of genuine intimacy between two heterosexual men who are separated by their heterosexism (Thompson, 1992).

5. This silence is in large part due to the institutional and interpersonal pressures which mandate it, rather than the moral failings of individual teachers and counsellors (Reynolds & Koski, 1993/94). It is likely that relatively few teachers and counsellors would choose to see their lesbigay students victimized, but most are unable to prevent it.

6. These studies have typically used a convenience sample, as for obvious reasons it would be impossible to attain a reasonably large and representative sample of lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents. Although part of the reason for such high prevalence rates likely lies within the nature of the sample, these figures are still extremely disturbing.

7. See also Hare-Mustin and Marecek (1990), who argue that although theorists have conceptualized women and men either as the same or as different, it is more correct to see these as two non-contradictory perspectives, both of which have some validity.

8. One of the difficulties of discussing any positive consequence of oppression is the fear that by doing so one will appear to be condoning oppression. I do not, of course, mean to condone heterosexism by acknowledging that positive effects of some aspects of heterosexism do exist.

9. Although many of the researchers, theorists, and clinicians whose work I am discussing, as well as many other lesbigays, refer to "the" lesbian and gay community, or "the" lesbian, gay, and bisexual community, this is far from universal. Some bisexuals recognize (or wish for) a somewhat-independent bisexual community, while others identify with a single queer community. Lesbians and bisexual women are more likely than men to recognize the existence of at least a men's community and a women's community. Some lesbigays recognize multiple communities, also seeing divisions based on racial or ethnic differences, (dis)ability, and class. In this work, I have attempted to acknowledge the existence of multiple communities insofar as possible without distorting the views of those who do not agree with me on this issue and without making my prose impossibly convoluted.

10. Of course, had white, middle and upper class heterosexuals experienced a severe AIDS crisis, there would have been little need for community mobilization, as the response of governments would have been very different (Shilts, 1987).

11. Many heterosexuals respond to any acknowledgement of the existence of lesbigays, particularly by the mainstream media or the educational system, with what can only be called hysteria. Their apparent belief that a television program which shows two women in bed will cause girls and women to become lesbian on a massive scale is testament to a firm, if unarticulated, conviction that social and institutional pressures are all that keeps many heterosexuals pure.
12. For example, research on heterosexuals' negative attitudes towards lesbians has focused on measuring those negative attitudes, while relatively few researchers have attempted attitude change (Luhrs, Crawford, & Goldberg, 1992).

13. The reader may find this somewhat tautological, as I do myself, but it is the clearest formulation I was able to find within the paper.

14. It is not necessarily true that a lesbian, gay, or bisexual therapist will necessarily be a good role model for lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients. Although therapists usually assume that their clients could only benefit from becoming more like them, this is not necessarily so (Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993; Masson, 1994). Koden's (1994) statement highlights the tendency of many therapists to exaggerate their personal accomplishments and psychological health, and hence the extent to which they can serve as a role model for their clients.

15. Of course, therapy is not always safe, particularly for lesbians and members of other oppressed groups (Garnets et al., 1991).

16. This is not to imply that the researcher's interpretation is necessarily correct.

17. Sadly, the voices of lesbians are also somewhat muted in the academic/professional literature written by lesbians who appear to identify more closely with their academic or professional peers than with the lesbian communities.

18. This expectation was not fulfilled. Participants' responses to this question tended to be relatively unhelpful, generally advocating the biological basis of sexual orientation and also alluding to the social pressures pressuring people to be heterosexual, with little attempt made to make sense of this contradiction. Thus, participants' views on the development of sexual orientation will not be discussed further.

19. Not included in these figures is one participant who said that she was in more than one intimate relationship on the Background Questionnaire, but said in the interview that she was in a monogamous relationship.

20. Hayes (1997) argues that such analyses are not purely qualitative, but may be more accurately conceptualized as taking a hypothetico-deductive approach which uses qualitative data rather than quantitative.

21. References to the participants' interviews contain the pseudonym chosen by the research participant to identify their data and the relevant page number(s) from the transcript. Excerpts are taken directly from transcripts with occasional, very minor modifications to increase ease of reading, including deletion of repetitive phrases and verbal hesitations. All names used in participants' responses have been altered to protect confidentiality.

22. The curly brackets (1) are used in excerpts from the interviews to indicate the interviewer's questions or comments.

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23. One might also say that some participants "were" heterosexual before they came to believe that they were lesbigay, but this perspective was uncommon amongst the participants.

24. I have assigned the pseudonym Nancy to this participant, as the pseudonym she chose for herself was male. Early drafts which used her chosen pseudonym were confusing.

25. Although a research interview such as this is clearly insufficient to enable a judgement to be made as to whether a participant would benefit from psychotherapy, I would estimate that no more than a further half-dozen of the participants might be thought to perhaps be in need of therapy. Although an estimate, this is clearly a very different picture than that conveyed by those writers who believe that psychotherapy is all but required for an individual to adjust successfully to being lesbigay.

26. In contrast, heterosexual participants who speculated about what their life might have been like had they identified as lesbigay tended to focus on how much harder their lives would have been. Positive effects were very rarely mentioned.

27. This argument must be differentiated from that often made by heterosexuals who insist that an individual's sexual orientation is unimportant in an attempt to deny the privileging of heterosexuality. These participants were making the point that sexual orientation in and of itself is relatively unimportant, while simultaneously holding that the social and political privileging of heterosexuality means that the consequences of one's sexual orientation may be of great significance.

28. General models of the coming out process have generally paid little attention to the possibility of developing a bisexual identity which is not transitional between an initial heterosexual identity and an ultimate lesbian or gay identity (Rust, 1996).

29. Because Kahn's (1991) sample consists of 81 lesbians, it would not be surprising were even more patterns of development to emerge with a larger and more diverse sample.

30. While some exceptions to this generalization do exist (e.g., Tremble et al., 1989), this work has until very recently been marginalized, apparently ignored by those who have postulated general theoretical models of coming out.

31. It is highly unlikely that this model would continue to apply within a significantly different social context, for example, one in which it was assumed that everyone was bisexual throughout their lives.
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APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT POSTER

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED...

Why issues of sexual orientation or sexual preference or sexual identity seem so important to some people, and just the way things are to others?
Why for some it's easy to come out, for others very hard?
Why there are so many different ideas about what it means to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or heterosexual? Why do we believe some, but not others? How do we develop our own ideas?
Why do these ideas keep changing for some people and not for others?

These are questions I've wondered a lot about myself, so I decided to try to answer them in my Ph.D. research. Now I'm looking for

LESBIANS, GAY MEN, BISEXUALS, FAGS, DYKES, QUESTIONING FOLK, HETEROSEXUALS, QUEERS, STRAIGHTS, HOMOSEXUALS, PEOPLE WHO DO NOT DEFINE OR LABEL THEIR SEXUALITY, AND PEOPLE WHO DON'T FIT INTO ANY OF THESE CATEGORIES

To discuss how issues of sexual orientation / sexual preference have influenced their lives — and how they haven't.
Small honorarium and reimbursement of expenses offered.

If you are interested in participating in a one-time interview, please call Jodee at (416) 463-3002 or email me at jodee@interlog.com and I'll tell you more about the study. Please also contact me if you think you might be interested in participating, but want to ask some questions first.
APPENDIX B

BACKGROUND QUESTIONNAIRE

Pseudonym: ____________________________________________

1. What is your age? _______ years

2. To which racial or ethnic group(s) do you belong? Please include all that apply.

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

3. What is your current religious affiliation, if any?

________________________________________________________________________

4. Are you presently in one or more intimate sexual relationships?

______ no
______ yes, one
______ yes, more than one

5. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?

______ elementary school
______ junior high school
______ high school
______ community college
______ undergraduate university
______ graduate degree at university

6. Are you currently a student?

______ no
______ yes

7. What is your occupation?

________________________________________________________________________
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

for lesbigay participants:

1. I'd like to begin by getting to know a little about you -- would you describe yourself to me? What are the most important things that you want other people to know about you?

2. [Modify depending on answer to question 1] Does your sexuality / sexual relationships contribute to how you think about yourself? Do you have a label for your sexual orientation or sexual preference, or a way of thinking about it?
   If participant doesn't use a label -- is there a label which you feel comes closest to describing you? What about it works, and what doesn't?
   If participant does use a label -- could you tell me more about how you think about that, about what it means to you?

   Are there other labels [ways of thinking about it] that are somewhat true or applicable for you, or that you use at some times?

I want to look a bit at how your sexual orientation fits into your life:

3. What do you like about being [participant's sexual orientation]? What's not so good, difficult? What do you like about [participant's sexual orientation] as a group? Are your close friends primarily [participant's sexual orientation], another sexual orientation, or a real mixture? Does this matter to you? Why or why not?

4. What about what you do, how you spend your time, reading, friends, places, politics, organizations?

5. Recently, it seems to me there's been a lot of talk about the origins of sexual orientation. Does the question of why you are [participant's sexual orientation] matter to you? Have you answered this question for yourself? Why are you not another sexual orientation? How do you explain other [participant's sexual orientation]? [Other sexual orientations]?

6. I want to get some idea of your process, of how you got to where you are now -- Have you used the phrase "coming out" to describe any of your own journey? [If so] would you tell me what that was like for you? [If not] Would you tell me how you came to believe that you are [participant's sexual orientation]? What does the term "out" mean to you? Are you "out" now?

7. How have your ideas about what is means to be a [participant's sexual orientation] changed since you first thought about yourself as [participant's sexual orientation]?
   About other [participant's reference group, from question 3]? Other sexual orientations? How have these changes come about?

8. Now I want to switch gears a little, and talk more theoretically -- Looking back over the changes that you've made, did you develop positive images of [participant's sexual
orientation]? Did you come to believe that being [participant's sexual orientation] was okay, or perhaps even good? [If yes] Which aspects of being [participant's sexual orientation] changed for you? Which aspects became positive, which okay or neutral? How do you think that you managed to develop those positive images in the midst of the heterosexism that you'd been experiencing [use examples]?

For some participants, I asked more concrete questions here: What did you first learn about women and women, men and men? How did you understand it? How has this changed? Or I asked about how they had developed the positive opinions about lesbians that they had previously described. E.g., if a participant spoke about trying to convince her mother that lesbians are good people, I often asked how she had realized that herself.

How did you learn to feel comfortable with, good about yourself as [participant's sexual orientation]?

9. Some people look at the myths and stereotypes about being lesbian [lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals; use participant's reference group where appropriate] that society teaches and argue that lesbians must be very affected by them -- you know, like [give examples using stereotypes the participant has talked about previously]. They say that many lesbians believe many of the stereotypes, even when their own experiences could tell them that these stereotypes are not true. Does this make sense to you? Relate to your experience? Are there feelings, or thoughts, or behaviours that you can look back at and understand this way? Are there others you know who this seems to describe?

10. Are there any issues that we've touched on that you think it would be useful to discuss further, or something that I should have asked that I didn't?

for heterosexual participants:

1. I'd like to begin by getting to know a little about you -- would you describe yourself to me? What are the most important things that you want other people to know about you?

2. [Modify depending on answer to question 1] Does your sexuality / sexual relationships contribute to how you think about yourself? Do you have a label for your sexual orientation or sexual preference, or a way of thinking about it? If participant doesn't use a label -- is there a label which you feel comes closest to describing you? What about it works, and what doesn't? If participant does use a label -- could you tell me more about how you think about that, about what it means to you?

Are there other labels [ways of thinking about it] that are somewhat true or applicable for you, or that you use at some times? Have you ever identified as other than heterosexual? [if participant answered this question affirmatively, questions from the lesbian/gay protocol were also given]

I want to look a bit at how your sexual orientation fits into your life:
3. What do you like about being heterosexual? Dislike? What do you like about heterosexuals as a group? Dislike? Are your close friends primarily heterosexual, primarily lesbian, gay, or bisexual, or a real mixture? Does this matter to you? Why or why not?

What do you like about lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men (lesbigsays) [or the subgroup that participant feels most related to if this exists, from question 2]? Dislike? How would your life be different if you were not heterosexual?

4. Some things in our culture are directed primarily towards lesbians, gay men, and/or bisexuals. How much contact do you have with this? Are there specific places that you go to? Stores or bars? Read newspapers, books, or magazines, see movies or plays? Are you involved with organizations or political work? Why do you participate, or avoid? What is this like for you? [If participant has chosen contact] What about this is important for you? How does your heterosexuality influence these things?

5. Recently, it seems to me there's been a lot of talk about the origins of sexual orientation. Have you thought about why some people are lesbian, gay, or bisexual? Have you thought about why you are heterosexual? Other heterosexuals?

6. When did you first become aware of your own sexuality? How did you understand it or define it? What were your first sexual relationships like? [nb: a parallel of the coming out question]

When did you first become aware of [lesbigsays or participant's reference group]? What did you think about them then? When did you first have personal contact with them? Did that change your ideas?

7. How has your understanding and experience of heterosexuality changed over time? About what it means for you to be heterosexual? How has your understanding of [lesbigsays or participant's subgroup] changed over time? What kinds of things have influenced these changes?

8. Now I want to switch gears a little, and talk more theoretically -- Looking back over the changes that you've made, did you develop more positive images of [lesbigsays, or participant's reference group]? How do you think that you managed to develop those positive images in the midst of the heterosexism that you'd been experiencing [use examples]?

For some participants, I asked more concrete questions here: What did you first learn about women and women, men and men? How did you understand it? How has this changed? Or I asked about how they had developed the positive opinions about lesbigsays that they had previously described, or how they had become more comfortable with or more accepting of lesbigsays, asking them to give a fuller description of changes that they had already talked about.

9. Some people look at the myths and stereotypes about being lesbig [lesbigsays, gay men, and bisexuals; use participant's reference group where appropriate] that society teaches and argue that lesbigsays must be very affected by them -- you know, like [give examples
using stereotypes the participant has talked about previously]. They say that many lesbians believe many of the stereotypes, even when their own experiences could tell them that these stereotypes are not true. Does this make sense to you? Relate to your experience? Are there feelings, or thoughts, or behaviours that you can look back at and understand this way? Are there others you know who this seems to describe?

10. Are there any issues that we've touched on that you think it would be useful to discuss further, or something that I should have asked that I didn't?
APPENDIX D

CONSENT FORM

This study is being conducted by Jodee M. McCaw of the University of Windsor under the supervision of Dr. Charlene Y. Senn, also of the University of Windsor. This research is being conducted as part of the requirements for Jodee McCaw’s doctoral degree and will be in her doctoral thesis. In addition, the results may be published or presented at conferences, but no personal identifying information will be used in reporting any research results.

The study has been cleared by the Ethics Committee of the University of Windsor. If at any time you have questions about the study and/or your participation in the study, please feel free to contact the researcher (at 416-463-3002 or 519-253-4232 x 2217) or Dr. Senn (at 519-253-4232 x 2256). If you have any questions regarding the protection of the rights of research participants, please contact the Office of Research Services (at 519-253-4232 x 3916).

The study is an investigation into how people’s ideas and feelings about sexual orientation (sexual preference) develop and change. You will be asked about changes in your views about sexual orientation and sexual identities (what it means to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or heterosexual) in general. You will also be asked about changes in your view of your own sexual orientation and sexual identity and their impact on other areas of your life.

The study will involve meeting with the researcher for a single session, which is expected to last between one and a half and two hours. During this session, you will be asked to complete a brief background questionnaire, followed by an interview. The interview will be audiotaped, because of the importance of obtaining a complete record of the interview. The tape will be transcribed, and will be erased once the research project is completed. You may if you prefer request that the tape instead be returned to you at the end of the research. At the end of the interview, you will have the opportunity to ask any questions you may have about the study and/or your participation. You will be paid $20 for your participation. If you so wish, you may receive a writeup of the findings of the study once the study is completed. In that case, your name and address will be collected, kept separately, and used only for that purpose.

The data that you provide will remain completely confidential. Your real name will never be used in connection with the study. You will be asked to choose a fictitious name, which will be used to identify your responses during data analysis and in any writeup or discussion of the study, including the thesis. Any information which you give which might possibly identify yourself or someone else will not be used, or will be altered to prevent identification.

Either on the questionnaire or during the interview, you may choose not to answer one or more questions or you may choose not to have your answers to one or more questions recorded. You may end the interview at any time. In any of these cases, you will still receive full payment for participation.

If you have any questions or concerns about participating in the study, please raise them now. If you choose to participate in the study, please sign below. Your signature indicates that you have read and understood this form and agree to participate in this study under the terms described. A copy of this consent form will be left with you for later reference.

_________________________  _________________________
Date                                       Signature

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APPENDIX E

GROUNDED THEORY

Within grounded theory, data collection and data analysis are interrelated processes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, canon 1). Analysis begins as soon as the first data are collected, and subsequent data collection is influenced by the data analysis which has been completed by the time at which the data are collected. The basic units of data analysis are concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, canon 2). The incidents, events, and happenings of the data are analyzed as potential indicators of phenomena, and are given conceptual labels. The conceptual labelling is done by comparing incidents to highlight similarities and differences, grouping like with like, and naming the concept represented by a set of incidents.

Comparisons are also made among concepts. Concepts that relate to the same phenomenon are grouped to become categories, which are more abstract and higher in level than are the concepts which they represent (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, canon 3). As well as being an abstract label for several similar concepts, a category "must be developed in terms of its properties, and dimensions of the phenomenon it represents, conditions which give rise to it, the action/interaction by which it is expressed, and the consequences it produces" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, pp. 7-8). It is this development of the categories which gives them their explanatory power. It also allows the relationships between categories to emerge, from which the theory develops. The specification of categories is done through both analysis of the data that has been collected and through purposeful collection of further data. (See Appendix F for an explanation of how these comparisons differ from the comparisons sought in quantitative research.)

Within grounded theory, sampling is based upon theoretical grounds (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, canon 4). Samples are chosen so as to capture as much variability as possible in the concepts (and, hence, categories) of interest, including their properties, dimensions, and interrelationships. Corbin & Strauss (1990) call representativeness of concepts, rather than persons. (Recall that quantitative studies attempt to achieve a sample of individuals which is representative of the population of interest.) Thus, as data collection and analysis proceed, they influence the choice of later sources of data. As a concept emerges through data analysis, data collection may be deliberately altered so as to maximize the variations in the conditions affecting that concept. For example, during the present study, were my analysis to suggest that amount of previous heterosexual experience before the adoption of a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity appeared to be an important concept, I might have needed to deliberately attempt to sample individuals whose amount of heterosexual experience is insufficiently represented within my sample, say by recruiting from a coming-out group. Alternatively, I might only have needed to alter my interviewing to ask more explicitly about amount of prior heterosexual experience and the various aspects of this experience that appear to be important. Another approach would have been to tell later interviewees that for earlier participants, the amount of heterosexual experience they had appeared to affect current lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities in particular ways, and then to ask them whether and how these might fit with their own ideas and experience.

Data analysis also affects sampling through the issue of saturation. The categories are said to become saturated when the analysis of further data adds no new categories, properties of categories, or relationships between them (Rennie et al., 1988). Although pragmatic decisions also play a role, ideally saturation marks the end of data collection (Rennie et al., 1988). Saturation of a subset of categories suggests that one should orient one's data collection toward investigating the remaining categories.
As discussed above, data analysis makes use of constant comparisons (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, canon 5). Incidents are compared with other incidents for similarities and differences. The resulting concepts are also compared and grouped into categories. These repeated comparisons force the researcher to stay close to the data, which contributes substantially to the systematization of grounded theory (Rennie et al., 1988). Corbin and Strauss (1990) argue that use of constant comparisons assists the researcher in guarding against bias and allows her or him to achieve greater precision and greater consistency in classifying units of data as concepts.

As data analysis continues, patterns and variations must be accounted for (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, canon 6). Examination of the data for regularities and apparent inconsistencies assists the researcher to more precisely delineate and differentiate concepts and categories. Moreover, process must be built into the emerging theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, canon 7). How changes in internal or external conditions affect concepts and categories is important. A phenomenon may need to be broken down into stages, phases, or steps.

Another crucial aspect of a grounded theory analysis is the writing of theoretical memos (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, canon 8). Beginning with the first collection of data and ending only with the end of the research, theoretical memos contain all of one's reflections upon the ongoing research project. It is here that categories, hypotheses, and generative questions first begin to develop. Memos change significantly in content and form over the course of the research project. As one generates hypotheses about relationships among categories within memos, these hypotheses should be developed and verified as much as possible during the research project (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, canon 9). This search for verification also includes negative and qualifying evidence. Thus, the researcher's hypotheses are continually revised and tested again, until they consistently hold true.

The tenth canon of Corbin and Strauss (1990) is that a grounded theorist need not work in isolation. Testing concepts and their relationships through interaction with colleagues (or a dissertation committee!) may be enormously helpful.

Finally, Corbin and Strauss (1990, canon 11) conclude that grounded theory requires that broader structural conditions be analyzed. Although the research questions may be directed towards microscopic phenomena, broader structural conditions, such as economic conditions, cultural values, political issues, and social changes may well affect these phenomena. These broader structural conditions must be studied, analyzed, and integrated into the theory, in particular through investigating the connections between these structural conditions and the more specific phenomena the researcher is studying (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Recently, Strauss & Corbin (1994) have formally recognized the existence of a sequence of levels, from microscopic to macroscopic, all of which have conditional features which must be related to the phenomena of interest.
APPENDIX F

THE PROCEDURES USED IN A GROUNDED THEORY ANALYSIS

In qualitative research, data analysis begins with the collection of the first data (see Appendix E). The fundamental method of data analysis in grounded theory is transforming data into concepts, categories, and theory, traditionally called coding (e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Rennie et al. (1988) prefer to call this process categorization. They argue that "coding" evokes quantitative methodologies, where after data is assigned a code, its qualitative aspect is lost, as it is used only to contribute to a frequency count (Rennie et al., 1988). Although I appreciate their argument, I shall use the term "coding" to minimize confusion.

Grounded theory differentiates between three types of coding. Open coding is the process whereby data are broken down analytically into concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Events, actions, and interactions are compared with others for similarities and differences, and are grouped to form concepts. It is important to note that these comparisons are not the usual group comparisons studied by quantitative researchers (Creswell, 1994), which typically take the form "bisexual women tend to..., but lesbians are more likely to..." Rather, the researcher analyzes the experiences of each participant within the context of the experiences of other participants, so as to derive similarities and differences between individual participants, rather than between groups. Importantly, units of data may be, and often are, sorted into two or more concepts simultaneously, hence the term "open coding." This prevents the researcher from oversimplifying complex data and foreclosing possibilities. The concepts are then similarly compared to form categories and subcategories. The process of open coding stimulates questions, which guide the researcher as she or he continues to collect data. Once categories exist, the researcher must investigate the properties and dimensions of each category. To increase the accuracy of open coding, Rennie et al. (1988) advise condensing the meaning unit (their term for a unit of data) in two steps, the first closely following the meaning unit, the second less detailed and more abstract.

The second type of coding is axial coding, during which further development of the categories occurs and categories are related to their subcategories (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). To develop the categories, the researcher examines more closely the events in the data that underlie a particular category, including a focus on the conditions that give rise to the event, the context in which it occurs, the actions and interactions which comprise it, and its consequences. Moreover, as the categories develop, it becomes clear that some of categories are properties, or defining characteristics, of other categories (Rennie et al., 1988), so that the relationship between a category and any subcategories that may have emerged from the data becomes evident. The reformulations and interrelationships of categories that emerge through axial coding remain hypothetical until verified through subsequent data collection.

The final type of coding is selective coding. Selective coding is the examination of the relationships between all of the categories (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). A core category becomes apparent, which represents the central phenomenon of the study. The core category may be one of the categories already identified, or a more abstract category which encompasses some of those categories. The remaining categories are then related to the core category. Corbin and Strauss (1990) assert that although it may be difficult, a core category can always be found.

Besides coding, the other major task in analyzing the research data is writing theoretical memos, in which the researcher formulates and revises the theory that emerges through the research study. Memos are where categories, properties, hypotheses, and generative questions first emerge (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Memos force the researcher to keep thinking about and

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questioning the data, the analysis, the study itself, and the theory as it develops. Themes and patterns in the data or among the concepts, speculations about categories and their interrelationships, the researcher's own assumptions, and criteria about further sources of data are all appropriate material for memos (Rennie et al., 1988). Importantly, the memos provide a place to record ideas that are still incomplete, or are not yet verified, so that they will not be lost (Rennie et al., 1988). Charmaz (1983) characterizes memos as bringing the questions developed in coding into an analytic context. The coding describes the data, while the memos treat them analytically (Charmaz, 1983).
APPENDIX G

RESULTS OF GROUNDED THEORY ANALYSIS

Following is a list of the categories derived from the participants’ data, with sub-categories, indicated by indentation, immediately following the categories they belong to and partially delineate.

what is sexual orientation?
  various definitions
  conflicting definitions
    who judges someone else’s sexual orientation?
    jokes about people changing sexual orientation

I think I've been this person all along
  I've never doubted my sexuality
  god made me lesbigay

finding out I was lesbigay changed my life
  being lesbigay filled a kind of vacuum for me
  being lesbigay changed my perspective

what it’s like for me being lesbigay
  I’m really happy being who I am
  I am lesbigay, and I don’t want to hide it
  it’s fun to be lesbigay

I think sexuality is a foundation
  being lesbigay is who I am

being lesbigay is about much more than sex; lesbigay identity versus sex
  being lesbigay versus announcing one’s sexuality
  it’s about being lesbigay in a straight society
    it’s about explaining
  it’s about the relationship
    my relationships are a part of who I am
being lesbigay is about politics
being lesbigay is about freedom
  being lesbigay is about freedom from gender roles
being lesbigay is about living an examined life
  being lesbigay has taught me ...
being lesbigay is about thinking about sexuality, and who I am
being lesbigay means being more in touch with who I am
  it’s kinda hard to define what being lesbigay is, beyond sex, but it’s so much more
there are reasons for us, purposes for us
sexuality // sexual orientation is not the major axis for me
other people, heterosexuals, see things in sexualized terms

being lesbigay is also about sexuality, or sex
sex as liberation

there are lots of ways to be lesbigay
being lesbigay isn't everything about me
one's sexual orientation is a part of who one is, like other parts
I try not to get too caught up in it all, being too politically correct, too

stereotypically lesbigay
being lesbigay means different things at different times
for a while, being lesbigay was my life
I'm getting beyond just being lesbigay

labels / words can put up barriers between me and others
a label is not who I am

my life philosophy ties into my sexual orientation:
life is greys, not black and white
being different is good -- or bad
it's good to explore options, to grow and change
I want to be treated like I'm a human being
my values are an important part of who I am
my family taught me values
my faith gives me strength

emotional needs, as lesbigay, as a person
developing a healthy sense of who you are and that it's okay
I need / needed support, validation
I don't know where my strength comes from; I just struggle on
I don't feel like I'm strong

bisexuality
what is it?
bi-phobia, and not
bisexuality and androgyny
I think it's easier / harder / much the same being bi

the difference between sexual orientations isn't that great sometimes
most of us are kinda, or could be, bisexual; people are more fluid
I've thought about trying the other sex
a lot of straight people aren't so straight as all that
people are people; it's really a question of who one is as a person
gay bars are like straight bars
lesbigays are just normal people
lesbigays are like straights
I see consistency in people, across sexual orientation
I'm just who I am
people's sex or doesn't really matter
I don't know why sexuality / labels are such a big deal
I'm not sure the major distinction is between traditional sexual orientations
pressure to develop a sexual identity, to be coupled

I'm not sure how different lesbigs are; it depends on the heterosexual, and the lesbigay
there are stereotypical lesbigs, and non-stereotypical lesbigs (but different
definitions of stereotypical)

we see more differences then there really are
it's funny how we assume things, we put a political stance on people's sexuality; is there a
natural link between lesbigs and other left politics?
people should be able to know better by thinking about it through inversions

there are real differences lesbigs and straights:
sometimes lesbigs keep their distance from straights
being lesbigay is different from being straight
being lesbigay is difficult in this society
I get scared, of stupid people doing stupid things
it's always there, what reaction am I going to get if I do this?
there may be consequences to being lesbigay
lesbigs are different from straights in some positive ways
my friends are jealous

sexual orientation matters
I'm not sure of my sexual orientation
I know I'm not some other sexual orientation
I tried being some other sexual orientation
sometimes I wish I were a different sexual orientation

sexual orientation and gender stuff
being lesbigay allows one to be less limited by gender roles
but the relationship is not absolute
the road to happiness is long hair -- not
gay men are much more out there than gay women
I relate differently to men and women, or I don't

interacting with others
my connections with others don't depend on sex or
I'm worried what others will think of me

interacting with heterosexuals
they see stereotypes, so I actively do things to prevent being stereotyped
lesbigs are trendy (amongst straight people)
stupid questions straight people ask
what I learned from straight people was not to do
I put effort into educating straight people
some straight people can't be educated
I don't deserve to be treated that way
people are unpredictable in their reactions, ideas
it's important for me to have straight people in my life
heterosexuals are also an important part of my world
I'm also reaching out more to the straight community
family problems, and not
some straight people can be very supportive
I struggle with whether and how to come out to people
sometimes I don't come out to straight people

being with other lesbigays: "the" community
I hang out in the community
I'm more comfortable with other lesbigays
the lesbigay community is special -- especially in helping each other
I spend a lot of time in the community
it's weird that a stereotyped community has its own stereotypes, and makes its own judgements
the community is an important place, that I want to keep for us
being part of the community is natural to me, I fit in there
I don't spend so much time in the community, I'm more of a home-body
I have mixed feelings about the community
what is the community?
the boundaries of the community are fuzzy -- what is lesbigay stuff?
there are multiple communities
I help other lesbigays, or people questioning their sexuality
community and diversity

my context // society matters:
changes in the social pressure
there's lots of influences re being lesbigay
there's many other pressures on lesbigays besides sexual orientation
society is set up in such a way that you can't help but do certain things
the liberal milieu
without the social pressure
social changes have influenced how I see/what I do about my sexual orientation
there are all these role models now

stereotypes of lesbigays
stereotypes can be true -- or false
stereotypes with some truth to them
absence of stereotypes

how does one respond to stereotypes?
on an ongoing basis:
it's so hard to get away from making assumptions
I actively do things to prevent being stereotyped
historically:
I didn't think I could be lesbigay, I didn't fit the stereotypes
I sometimes see or saw myself through stereotypes
knowing myself helped me get beyond the stereotypes
the stereotypes weren't a big deal for me, or weren't true for me
fitting into the stereotypes was/is natural for me

how do others respond to the stereotypes?
people sometimes see the stereotypes instead of me
// sometimes I'm seen as a generic homosexual
often you get stereotyped as part of only one group, though you belong to more
people's stereotypes also limit them if they're reacting against them
history and perceptions and people's fear of how they will be perceived
complicates things
my sexual orientation gets misperceived

finding a concept or language for it all was an important part of my process
I'm trying to get away from labels

language wasn't an important part of my process
I've always lived the life of a lesbigay, without the label
the behaviour came before the labels -- it was no surprise to my friends when I came out

adjusting to my sexual orientation
adjusting to my sexual orientation hasn't been a big deal
adjusting to my sexual orientation has been a big deal
I'm comfortable being lesbigay
always felt comfortable being lesbigay
it's been a process for me
I'm so new at this
my being lesbigay has a history
I'm still working on all this, learning the rules, getting comfortable
you've gotta [work to] understand [other lesbigays]
I'm still not sure being lesbigay is a good thing
(also "family problems, and not" here)

it's kinda a developmental process thing
like being a kid and growing up
being lesbigay felt right for me, is right for me
and then the process continued/continues
there have also been some important changes besides, since coming out
I'm still growing and changing
who knows what will happen once I've done some more exploring?

you have to actively construct being lesbigay
choice does play a role, sort of
there are a lot of influences out there re lesbiags
I did all this reading / learning
I deliberately started meeting (other) lesbiags
I started meeting lesbigsays, other lesbigsays:
  I saw myself in gays and lesbians
  it mattered a lot who I met

part of what was going on was just me, not sexual orientation stuff
  I struggled mostly with issues other than sexual orientation
  I had to struggle with the concept of being a sexual being, having a sexual identity
  I had to struggle with other sexual issues (e.g., promiscuity)

it was more about finding out who I was and how I wanted to live than coming out per se
  it was about making a life, having goals
  it's about being lesbigay in a straight world

the biggest thing was accepting myself
  there are a lot worse things than being lesbigay

my specific circumstances made a real difference to coming out
  being my sexual orientation is contingent -- I might have done otherwise

my sexual orientation relates to the rest of me
  the way I'm lesbigay has a lot to do with who I am
  I've always been the sort of person who ...
  who I am as a lesbigay determines other stuff

though I'm heterosexual, I can understand lesbigsays' experiences to some extent
  I understand being lesbigay through my own experience
  I understand being lesbigay through the experience of others

my understanding of myself reflects my understanding of others
  I know what other lesbigsays' lives are like, and that's a strong influence on how I think
  about my own life
  I compare myself to other people in general, or other minority groups
  coming out is like other processes

I really didn't know what was going on
  I was confused about my sexual orientation growing up
  I thought I was like the only person in the world, or in this city
  I really didn't know what it meant to be lesbigay
  I struggled with lesbian or heterosexual for a while

different parts of me reacted differently
  I sort of protected myself, knew more than I allowed myself to know
  I used to be against lesbigsays, which I think now was a defence
deeep down, I think I've always known I was lesbigay, but I also fooled myself

there were always differences
  I always felt I was different
  I struggled to fit into categories
my sexuality came naturally to me
I fooled around with other kids
I played with the other sex, growing up
I was born lesbigay
you gotta experiment
I was sexual with the same sex when I was a child
I never felt guilty

things came naturally to me (other than my sexuality, but associated with it)

for a while, sexuality or sexual orientation wasn't a big issue for me
I never really thought about lesbigays
I never really thought about what I was doing
I didn't identify a sexuality for a while
being lesbigay wasn't a big deal

I (sort of) avoided struggling with my sexuality
I tried to balance out the various sides of my life
wrestling with coming out
I knew I was gay, but I didn't do anything about it
it was like having this secret double life
I found some kind of escape

my sexuality was more externally than internally driven for a while
looking back, retrospectively, I can see same-sex attraction
I didn't think I could be lesbigay, I didn't fit the stereotypes
I (thought I) was heterosexual

my relationships with one sex just didn't work

I struggled with myself around my sexuality
I denied my sexuality to myself
I tried to not be lesbigay:
I tried to ignore my feelings
I tried to be heterosexual, or another sex or
I was just beating myself up

you go along with what others say, and then you have to be who you are

my environment made a big difference
there was encouragement/support/permission
I had a difficult childhood
some of my being lesbigay came from my family, through their values and/or their genes
I grew up being called a fag
I was in a really homophobic environment
I didn't know much growing up
most of what I heard wasn't good
I knew it would be tough
the experience of lesbigay people close to me made a real difference

I made an effort to deal with my sexuality
    I resolved that if it came up, I would deal with it
    I started looking for other lesbigays
    I changed my friends when I came out

being lesbigay "worked" for me
    I found I fit in with (other) lesbigays
    there was joy, incredible relief

I had to figure out being lesbigay was okay
    I didn't want to be gay
    I had to see that abuse didn't make me gay
    I figured I was okay, so being lesbigay had to be too
    I felt like there were all those other lesbigay people out there, so it must be okay
    I had to answer my own questions
    it's taken me a long time to be comfortable with myself

in some ways, I'm still developing in my sexuality
    coming out is a lifelong process
    having come to terms with me, it's easier to accept others

I struggled with others around my sexuality
    I denied my sexuality to others
    I told someone a partial truth about my sexuality
    my sexual orientation was misperceived
    I came out as bisexual, and then recanted
    someone who was prejudiced had a positive impact on me

eventually, things fell into place
    eventually I realized I was a particular sexual orientation
    eventually I realized I wasn't a particular sexual orientation

    I became, or became aware, that I was lesbigay
    it started with sex, sort of
    it started with fantasy
    I didn't have to have sex to know I was attracted to [men or women]
    it was falling in love that convinced me I was lesbigay

eventually, I just had to give in and do it
    I think it was just such a strong urge
    it comes to a point where you have to exhale

I would have liked to know someone who was lesbigay when I was younger
VITA AUCTORIS

1982: Graduated from Alternative Scarborough Education

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