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Querying Sexual Identities: Constructions of Identity among 'Lesbians'

by  
Kelly Phipps

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through Sociology and Anthropology  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts at the  
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada  
2008  
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*Your file* *Votre référence*  
*ISBN: 978-0-494-47054-1*  
*Our file* *Notre référence*  
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## **Abstract**

Since the 1960s, lesbian and feminist activists have been involved in large scale organization for the advancement of identity-based rights. Recent developments of poststructuralist and queer perspectives have problematized identity politics, viewing identity categorizes as available cultural categories rather than essential attributes. This complicates political engagements in which we are called to both account for the discursive construction of these categories while demanding that social and political institutions accommodate differences. In consideration of these discursive pulls, this research is concerned with the ongoing viability and political usefulness of sexual identities. Based on the narratives of twelve women between the ages of 23 and 38, this project explores how 'lesbian' is lived and described by those who imagine this label applying to themselves in some way. This contributes to an understanding of how lesbian narratives have changed according to a rapidly changing concept of lesbianism over the past several decades.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would especially like to acknowledge my research advisor, Dr. Barry Adam, for his patient support of and contributions to this thesis. In addition, I would similarly like to acknowledge my departmental reader, Dr. Glynis George, for giving me her helpful insights; and my outside reader, Dr. Charlene Senn, for giving me her time and input. On a more personal note, I thank my parents and Sarah Beer for their constant encouragement and patience. Final thanks to my participants for sharing parts of their lives with me.



## Table of Contents

Author's Declaration of Originality	iii
Abstract	iv
Acknowledgments	v
Sections	
Introduction	1
Literature Review	
<i>Historical Constructions of Sexuality</i>	3
<i>Feminist Constructions of Sexuality</i>	4
<i>Sociological Constructions of Sexuality</i>	7
Methodology	13
<i>Methods</i>	16
Analysis	
<i>The Names We Use</i>	18
<i>Who are 'We'?</i>	26
<i>The Postmodern Demise</i>	31
Discussion	44
Conclusion	49
Appendix A: Interview Guide	53
Appendix B: Sketches of Participants	55
Bibliography	57
Vita Auctoris	63

## **Introduction**

'Lesbian' is not a transparent category but an experience that needs to be interpreted and situated. Modern lesbian and gay identity has been viewed as an ongoing accomplishment founded on numerous historical moments of interaction, situational negotiations, and cultural commitments (Plummer 1975). Over the past two decades, queer theorists have taken anti-identity approaches to offer a theory about identity which counters this concept as pre-existent and necessarily useful. This theoretical approach works to break apart lesbian and gay identity categories, viewing them as limiting rather than liberating. This offers important contributions to theoretical conceptions of subjectivity and identity-formation and for future possibilities of social relations. This perspective has been unable however, to explain why lesbian and gay cultural forms have been flourishing as never before, and why people are increasingly participating in, and embracing, the distinguishing markers of sexual difference (Adam 2000).

Within academia, social categories are deconstructed, analyzed, and thoroughly critiqued. Recognizing these binaries (such as woman/man, queer/straight, etc.) as constructed, within the social world they still "make sense to us" (Warnke 2005:106), and remain prominent in how various institutions and social relations are established and maintained. For analytical reasons these categories need to be deconstructed but we also need to recognize the political implications of these categorizations as they are experienced. Upholding this paradox, we can still use these categories while maintaining a critical stance towards them (McCall 2005). Warnke (2005:114) suggests that "If social identity is interpretive, then we need to discuss the horizons, contexts, purposes, and assumptions that contribute to our interpretations."

The premise of this project is to understand how women who identify as lesbians attribute meaning to this label and come to explain their experiences in relation to this category. That is, how do ‘lesbians’ interpret the social, cultural, and/or political significance of either upholding or abandoning specifically ‘lesbian’ identity? How might the participants in this study negotiate their position in a world in which sexual identities are both proliferating and being deconstructed? And finally, how might their narratives be informed by, or depart from, historical constructions of women’s sexuality?

The following research is based on the narratives of twelve women between the ages of 23 and 38 who identified with the term lesbian. An analysis of lesbian-identified women is not intended to reify experience into an identity but to examine how the category ‘lesbian’ is lived and described by young women who imagine this label applying to themselves in some way. Here, ‘lesbian identity’ is viewed as a “subjective experience” rooted in whatever “social, emotional, sexual, political or personal configuration” intended when the participants describe themselves as ‘lesbian’ (Kitzinger 1987:90). Open-ended qualitative interviews were used to explore these configurations, based on the perspective that participants are “active, meaning producing, agents” (Eves 2004:484), who offer an important contribution to theories of sexual identities.

Seyla Benhabib (1999:351) writes, “The narrative view of identity regards individual as well as collective identities as woven out of tales and fragments belonging both to oneself and to others”. In order to appreciate how women negotiate ‘lesbian’ identities presently, I turn now to the historical context in which ‘lesbian’ identities have been variously constructed. The following will illustrate how ‘lesbians’ have been both the subjects and objects of theorizing within shifting cultural and political contexts. This

is followed by an analysis that demonstrates how subjects are located within “webs of narrative” (Benhabib 1999:344) in which they actively make sense of, take up, subvert, and resist multiple and competing narratives that have been produced over time.

## **Literature Review**

### *Historical Constructions of Sexuality*

Homosexuality has not always been organized as a unique category of people, rather it is a recent historical construction deeply embedded within multiple discourses and contested sites of power relations. Prior to the late nineteenth century, love and intimate relationships between women were not uncommon, though they were not associated with a specific identity or ‘type’ of person (Weeks 1981; Faderman 1982; Kitzinger & Rogers 1985). By the turn of the century, discourses on the burgeoning modern lesbian and gay public worlds came to be ‘explained’ through biological and medical models, condemned by moral crusaders, and individually treated by physicians and psychiatrists for disorders and perversions. The strength of medical ideology would enable a century of physical and psychological manipulation and experimentation on those deemed homosexual. This ideology would further articulate itself within legislation used to deny homosexuals employment, immigration, or to detain them in mental hospitals and prisons (Adam 1995:14-18).

This was a powerful construction that incited a response whereby the homosexual became recognizable to themselves and others in new ways. The construction of the homosexual has not been the mere invention of a new classification, but a category that has facilitated exclusionary and oppressive practices, and has been systemically reacted to with hostility and sometimes violence. Individuals subordinated by this classification

have long been engaged in contentious political struggles over rights, representation, and inclusion. Over the course of the past century, lesbian and gay culture and movement activism would gain momentum and by the late 1960s, “almost every sizable city in North America and Western Europe would see a gay liberation front in its midst” (Adam 1995:80).

### *Feminist Constructions of Sexuality*

Large scale activism for lesbian and gay liberation escalated alongside other identity-based social movements during this period, notably the civil rights and women’s liberation movements. While lesbians were involved in the gay movement in addition to the civil rights and/or women’s liberation movements, some experienced a profound feeling of marginalization in each, finding it difficult to advance their particular concerns within any of these groups. In effect, the women’s liberation and the civil rights movements tended to neglect the specific oppressions faced by homosexuals, such as compulsory heterosexuality, while the gay liberation movement often ignored concerns specific to women, such as equal employment and independence.

Socialist feminism became a powerful trend during this period, arguing for “a comprehensive inclusion of women, gay men, and other subordinated people in a broad front against patriarchal capitalism” (Adam 1995:100). While lesbian visibility was well received within this camp, some lesbians were critical of how heterosexual women were able to retain their privilege. Some lesbians would come to view their inclusion as superficial and their concerns still ignored. As a result, some of these disenfranchised women established a new sexual and political identity: lesbian feminism (Rupp 2002).

This separatist split defined lesbianism as a woman-identified experience (Adam 1995; Jeffreys 2003). This was intended to move beyond sexual desire between women, “to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support” (Rich 1980:648-649). Woman-identified women put forward the idea that lesbianism could, and indeed should, be ‘chosen’ to free women from patriarchal oppression. In considering this escape from heterosexuality, Monique Wittig (1993:108) argues for lesbianism as “the only social form in which we can live freely.” From this perspective, lesbians became “the paradigm case of patriarchal resister because she refuses to be heterosexual” (Calhoun 2002:25). It was argued that woman-loving women were removed from homophobia and the historical position of lesbians premised on same-sex desire rather than feminist politics (Allen 1982; Nestle 1985; Rubin and Butler 1998; Calhoun 2002).

Critical of this configuration of lesbian feminism, Biddy Martin (1993:279) argues that convergence of lesbians and heterosexual women as the ‘woman-identified woman’ was “disabling and reductionist in its own way”. This referred to how this new notion of ‘lesbian’ was elevated to a “magical sign” (King 1994:136) that all women could relate to in order to attain liberation. Katie King (1994:136) writes, “Identifying with lesbianism falsely implies that one knows all about heterosexism and homophobia through identity of association”. For those who based their lesbian identity in same-sex desire rather than political choice, political lesbians were at times seen as puzzling and disloyal; they did not understand lesbians’ routine hardships, often lacked emotional commitment, and were perceived as ‘experimenting’ sexually with other lesbians (Ponse

1978:147; Adam 1995:100-2). Additionally, many felt confined and repressed by political lesbians who were, for example, extremely critical of role-play or butch-fem dichotomies, though these remained a distinctive feature of lesbian bar culture. In effect, the redefinition of lesbianism as women's solidarity came to be understood as both desexualizing and losing the social location of lesbians.

Of particular significance was the antipornography movement of the mid-1970s, which Freedman and Thorne (1984:103) describe as "the impetus for a new sexual politics". Strongly influenced by the works of Andrea Dworkin (1981) and Catherine MacKinnon, this was grounded in activism on issues of rape, battery and other forms of violence against women, which was to include pornography and patriarchal sexual practices. As in other fields, there was a move to denaturalize gender and sexuality. For example, Dworkin (1974:113-4) describes the gendered performance of male transvestites writing, "these men have penetrated to the core experience of being a woman, a romanticized construct." As women came to view sex roles as taken up and performed, they devised new possibilities to contest and resist them. Many feminists would refuse gendered appearance norms and the performance of sexual practices deemed patriarchal, including pornography, sadomasochism, and penetration between lesbians.

The tendency to perhaps simplify patriarchal oppression, or at least fail to grasp how many lesbians constructed their own sexuality would cause a significant political divide within the lesbian feminist community; the former cast against those who opposed the erasure of lesbian difference (Calhoun 1995), the tendency to conflate sexuality and violence (Freedman & Thorne 1984), and to present lesbian feminists as 'antisex' (Rupp

2002:188). As a result of this, Rupp writes, that by 1990s, the divergent lesbian feminist community witnessed a flourishing of styles and identities that played with, and built upon, butch/fem styles. From “butchy fems” to “femmy butches”, she writes, “Nothing could illustrate better the fluidity of the idea of what it means to be a lesbian” (Rupp 2002:189).

### *Sociological Constructions of Sexuality*

Defining and making sense of homosexuality generally, and lesbian identity in particular, was also of interest to a variety of academic disciplines and social institutions. Central to sociological thinking was the “social constructionist turn” during the 1970s. In opposition to biological and medical models that suggested sexuality as natural or innate, constructionists instead “aimed to show the myriad ways in which human sexualities are always organized through economic, religious, political, familial and social conditions” (Plummer 2003:515).

In 1967, William Simon and John Gagnon had written an article entitled, *Homosexuality: The Formulation of a Sociological Perspective* in which they critiqued the study of homosexuality as overly simplistic and homogenizing, with an exclusive interest in “the most difficult and least rewarding of all questions, that of etiology” (177). Their essays would later be compiled into a landmark text for the sociology of sexuality, *Social Conduct* (1973), in which they offered ideas of sexual scripting, involving symbolism, ritual, and improvisation, negotiated within the personal, inter-personal, and cultural realms. The performance aspect of this work would later be taken up in the poststructuralist writings of Judith Butler (1990). The constructionist approach to sexuality was further influenced by Jeffrey Weeks (1977) who contributed a



historiography of homosexuality. In describing enforcement practices and changing social attitudes toward lesbian and gay subculture in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain, he firmly situated homosexual identity as a historically specific construct.

The influential work of Ken Plummer (1975), Vivienne Cass (1979), and Richard Troiden (1988) offered stage models, ranging from four to six stages, of identity development. This aimed to describe how individuals recognized their same-sex attractions and desires, developed an identity based on these attractions, disclosed this identity to others by 'coming out', and successfully adjusted to being a lesbian or gay adult, as their identity stabilizes (Plummer 1975), they develop strong commitments to being lesbian or gay (Troiden 1988), or develop identity pride (Cass 1979).

In her research on lesbian subculture and its relationship to lesbian identity formation, Barbara Ponse (1978) identified a 'gay trajectory', involving a five step process through which women came to assume their lesbian identity. In this, she identifies the "normative power" of identity stage models, and how they function as "a biographic norm of the community" (255). She notes that many women come to accept the gay trajectory after a period of time, even reinterpreting their own biographies accordingly, and explains the period of difficulty in fully acknowledging and accepting lesbian identity as "institutionalized in the community in the process of coming out" (Ponse 1978:259).

By the mid-1980s however, researchers interested in lesbian and gay identity began to question these models of identity development based on their assumption of a linear process and the tendency to ignore the vast variation in the development and expression of a lesbian or gay identity (Kaufman & Johnson 2004). While both Cass

(1979) and Troiden (1988) claim that their models are not linear but indeed very flexible, they arguably presume a linear and goal-oriented progression that assigns positive attributes to later stages (Rust 1993; Kaufman & Johnson 2004).

In their study on lesbian identity, Cecilia Kitzinger and Rex Stanton Rogers (1985) moved away from this usual pattern of developmental sequence exemplified by the above researchers. They importantly highlighted how researchers have typically used *a priori* definitions of what it means to be a lesbian or gay man, and have recruited subjects, designed and interpreted their research based on this definition. As such, subjects must qualify as a ‘real’ lesbian or gay man, which includes the ability to demonstrate that their ‘sexual orientation’ is a stable part of their adult personality (Kaufman & Johnson 2004). Kitzinger and Rogers (1985:183) oppose theorizing about identity evolution; in their view, “ontological processes are constructed not given.” They specify the term ‘lesbian identity’ to epitomize “the set of meanings ascribed by the individual to whatever social, emotional, sexual, political or personal configuration she understands by her ‘lesbianism’: the emphasis being on the way in which a woman constructs her lesbianism, and the story she tells about it” (167-168).

Based on Q-methodological research, Kitzinger and Rogers (1985) suggest five concrete identities: the ‘Personal Fulfillment’ identity (one who emphasizes the personal fulfillment achieved as a result of lesbianism), the ‘Special Person’ identity (one who feels their sexuality cannot be classified as ‘truly’ lesbian; they choose not to label themselves or invest in lesbian identity), the ‘Individualistic’ identity (one who understands herself as born lesbian and is content to be so), the ‘Radical Feminist’ identity (one who interprets lesbianism within the political context of radical feminism),

and the 'Traditional' identity (one who is unhappy about being a lesbian, associated with feelings of shame and lack of choice). Participants were classified based on their responses to structured interviews and through Q-sort. This was intended to address problems of "interpretational validity" common in 'life history' and interview techniques (Kizinger and Rogers 1985:169). This of course relies on the notion that there is something 'real' that can be located beyond the scope of interpretation; a notion that would be strongly critiqued through the influences of postmodernism.

During the 1980s, Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1978) gained recognition for its importance for sexuality studies. Combined with the later contributions of Judith Butler (1990) and Eve Sedgwick (1990), their work would become foundational to future queer theorists. Described as postmodern thinkers, they contributed a deconstructionist approach to identity theories. After the perceived failures of prior 'revolutionary' movements, the late 1960s brought about a "substantial rethinking of the question of cultural politics" (Docherty 1993:35). This perspective rejects universal truth, essentialism, and notions of singular and centralized power. This position would instead posit that theoretical criteria used to measure 'truth' is "internal to the structures of the discourses themselves and thus historical and subject to change" (Weedon 1997:172).

As with many feminist thinkers, Foucault (1978) contends that modern subjectivity is an effect of networks of power and that sexuality is a discursive production rather than a natural condition. This would popularize the notion that homosexuality is a historically recent concept. As Tamsin Wilton (1995:39) writes, according to postmodernism, "sexual identities are historically and culturally contingent and, therefore, opaque to retrospective scrutiny". This has however been a source of debate

amongst feminists who hold similar contentions with postmodernism as do many lesbians, questioning how women can unite against common oppressions while lacking an essence of womanhood (Weedon 1997:170).

If 'sexuality' and 'identity' are tied together as "the effect of a 'modern' Western regime of power which implicates human bodies in and as sites of its discursive (re)production" (Cohen 1991:81), then how can the consequences of a politics that grounds itself in/on a 'sexual identity' be understood? Butler (1990) argues that "The very subject of women is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms" (2). Although Butler (1990) argues that 'the subject' is not able to constitute the category of women, this subject has been central in feminist and lesbian politics, as a category, albeit a contentious one at times, around which to organize and struggle for rights. The question of 'the subject' is crucial for politics, and for feminist and lesbian politics in particular, because subjects are invariably produced through certain exclusionary practices that do not reveal themselves once the structure of politics has been established.

Queer theorists would come to deconstruct these categorizations altogether, countering homosexuality is a condition or identity attributable to a segment of the human population (Seidman 2004). Schlichter (2007:192-193) writes, "Central to the queer critique is the deconstruction of the gender binary *and* of the dichotomy of hetero-versus homosexuality. These binaries characterize the hegemonic culture's attempts to produce and regulate dominant as well as marginal sexual subjects." Queer theorists dispute the view of homosexuals as a social minority, and instead consider the social impact of the constructed categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality. This challenges the notion of a core sexual identity and as such, the agenda of queer theory

and politics is to “expose and disturb the normalizing politics of identity” common in the straight and lesbian and gay mainstream (Seidman 1997:140).

To attribute the quality of ‘queerness’ to everyone, means there would be no difference between gays and straights, women and men, lesbians and gays. In light of current struggles around rights and representation, is this a path we wish to pursue, or will certain segments of the population be forgotten and ignored? Is there something specific to the experiences of the categorical constructions of ‘woman’ and of ‘lesbian’ that queer theory fails to grasp? Will queer formulations that emerged during the 1990s effectively erase the specific experiences of women involved in same-sex relationships as they are envisioned by others and by themselves in a world in which queer is not the normative formulation of identity?

If it is impossible to disconnect ‘sexuality’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is always produced and maintained, how does this play out in the lives of women who identify as ‘lesbian’? Ideas surrounding lesbianism and what it means to be a ‘lesbian’ abound, but the question remains: how do these women understand themselves? How has this understanding of ‘lesbian’ identity changed since the emergence of the lesbian and gay movement, feminism, and the queer movement? In the area of gay and queer studies, ‘lesbians’ are an under-researched population and the literature often neglects lesbianism specifically. This research project will rely on the notion that ‘lesbian’ is, as demonstrated above, a politically-implicated and historically situated category, an identity group uniquely compounded by the social categories of women and homosexuals. However, it is also based on a need to further understand how self-identified ‘lesbians’ understand this category themselves, whether they see the

political necessity or utility of upholding the identity of 'lesbian' and why this might be valuable, or whether they draw on the queer notions of fluidity and deconstruction to understand themselves in ways unimagined generations prior.

The premise of this research is to better understand how self-identified 'lesbians' take up these issues and the political implications of their positions. This body of research will contribute to an understanding of how 'lesbian' narratives have changed according to a rapidly changing concept of lesbianism over the past 30 years. Shane Phelan (1993:773) emphasizes that "we must examine the consequences of our stories in terms of power and change." In light of the current popularity of queer theory in academia and academic deconstructionist efforts, we must pause to reflect on how particular inequalities come to resonate and then explore ways of comprehending them both theoretically and analytically.

### **Methodology**

Methodology is the understanding or theory that frames the research and identifies how it should proceed. This entails the process by which the researcher goes about exploring the social world (Harding 1987; Stanley & Wise 1990). In particular, a feminist approach to qualitative methods puts women's experiences and the meanings attributed to their lives at the centre of research. This project grounds itself on the premise that "the word lesbian is not an identity with predictable content [...] it is a position from which to speak" (Jay & Glasgow 1990:6). Nancy Naples (2003:22) suggests that positionality offers a conceptual framework that allows us to discuss gender, and in this instance sexuality, not as natural, essential or ahistorical, but a

position from which women speak and potentially act in political ways. Qualitative interviewing provides a powerful tool by which to approach an analysis of this nature.

Past research in this area, such as that of Ponse (1978) and Kitzinger and Rogers (1985), offered qualitative approaches, such as interviews and observational methods, in order to assess how 'lesbian' identities were socially constructed. The former located these within a stage model framework, and the latter researchers used Q-sort, a sample of items or statements to be arranged on a scale of validity by the participants, in order to relieve researcher bias. By locating their participants within stage models and concrete, albeit open-ranged, identity formations, these methodologies implied coherent and concrete conceptualizations of 'lesbian identity'. The current research is not looking to locate women in stages of identity formation or as any one 'type' of 'lesbian', but instead attempts to understand how language and discourses shape identity and to answer the "question of what realities and/or subjectivities are being constructed in the myriad sites of everyday life" (Holstein and Gubrium 2005:498)

What distinguishes the present methodological approach is its postmodern influence in that there is no 'truth' or 'reality' to be located. The participant narratives are not intended to offer continuity or cohesiveness, but instead "a series of fragments in continuous flux" (Gubrium and Holstein 2003:52). A postmodern approach to interviewing considers "the minute events of everyday life" (Gubrium and Holstein 2003:52) as important and meaningful, and attempts to understand these fragments in their own right. It is through these fragments that people "make sense" of their lives; often these fragments are not coherent, with a beginning, unfolding, and ending. As Benhabib (1999:348) writes, "Retelling, remembering, and reconfiguring always entail

more than one narrative; they occur in a “web of interlocution,” which is also a conversation with the other(s).” In this, I recognize my role as researcher and how I am deeply implicated in creating meanings that seemingly arise from my respondents alone. That is, both my respondents and I are involved in meaning-making work. As such, all interviews are “reality-constructing, meaning-making occasions” (Holstein and Gubrium 1995:4), and these interpretations are in a process of ongoing reconstruction and open to new discursive possibilities and subjective understandings.

The epistemological orientation of this research positions participants as carriers of discourse in an ongoing process of (re)negotiation. In the process of sexual identity formation, women bring with them a sense of self which is based on available accounts or repertoires of meaning (Stein 1997). The web of experience through which individuals interpret and negotiate discursive constructions variously impacts how they come to understand the world and themselves. As such, the focus is on “*how* social experience is created and given meaning” (Denzin and Lincoln 2003:13). It is not the intention of this research to assert these women with their variable lesbian identities as ‘real’ lesbians, but rather to consider the relationship of a group of women to the category ‘lesbian’ and how identification with this category structures various aspects of their lives (Phelan 1993).

Given the historical backdrop described above, this paper offers a contemporary analysis of ‘lesbian’ subjectivity in light of rapidly changing narratives over the past 30 years. This is to consider the experiences of lesbians in their 20s and 30s, who were raised during the queer movement of the 1990s, whether familiar with it or not. This project aims to understand how lesbians construct and articulate their subjectivities and how these reflect or resist various constructions of ‘lesbian’ identity. This considers



subject positions related to the language through which they understood their sexuality, the boundaries of 'lesbian' identity, the parameters of community, and what this suggests of the contemporary popularity of inclusive or queer sexual scopes, or perhaps what these scopes fail to grasp in terms of specifically 'lesbian' culture, politics, or subjectivity.

### *Methods*

Stanley and Wise (1990) define 'method' as research technique. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow the participants the freedom and creative space to expand, explain, and interpret the category 'lesbian' as they have imagined and experienced it throughout their life course. Semi-structured interviews suggest a focused conversation that enables open communication between participants and researcher. The value of this approach lies in the conversational quality of the dialogical exchange. Through this I was able to relate to the participants as a self-identified lesbian and the participants were given the opportunity to reflect, discuss, question, and contemplate their responses throughout our conversation. A dialogical and semi-structured approach offered a forum through which I could juxtapose academic arguments or statements made during the interviews to allow participants to further consider their position.

These interviews were conducted with twelve participants between the ages of 23-38, recruited through snowball and convenience sampling and interviewed based on six core questions (see Appendix A). The result was a 60 to 90 minute conversation based on these core questions in addition to secondary probe questions that arose from each participant's unique responses. Self-identified lesbians who identify as transgendered or transsexual were not encountered and as a result, not included in the analysis.

The experiences of the twelve women interviewed for this project range from growing up in small towns to working in a car factory, from being previously married to men to being in their first relationship with a woman, from having a high school diploma to being graduate students. Given that half of this sample is currently in university, in addition to two who are recent university graduates and seeking employment, overall their class locations are in flux. All but one has attended at least some university, of these, nine have taken at least some women's studies and/or gay and lesbian studies courses (two of whom did so at the graduate level). This reflects a sample that had previous engagement with feminist and/or gay and lesbian literature and to varying degrees, associated this knowledge with their own subjectivities as women and as lesbians. Several of the participants were originally from small towns and discussed this as influential on their conceptualizations of lesbians. All of the participants currently live in Windsor, a mid-sized, working class city, in which the only gay and lesbian bar shut down during the period of this research. As a result, many of the participants perceived Windsor as lacking a lesbian community, further indicating that they had to travel to Detroit or Toronto to participate in lesbian and gay events. These are some of the indicators that helped to organize my understandings of the following analysis; they are not meant to refer to themes that are generalizable to the population as a whole, but offer specificity to this sample. Further social context of the participants and the lens through which their narratives were interpreted is provided in Appendix B. The names of the participants have been replaced with pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

Constant comparative analysis guided the analysis of the transcribed interviews. This analytic method is a grounded approach in which interview data is grouped and

categorized in order to develop links to theoretical applications (Strauss & Corbin 1998). Through this systematic approach data was coded into three themes. These included the 'names' used to label sexual identity, the parameters of this identity, and how this speaks to contemporary theories of 'lesbian' identity. Ongoing review of the material gradually formed subthemes and allowed for further comparisons between the data and theoretical considerations.

## **Analysis**

### *The Names We Use*

Labels within the lesbian and gay community have held particular significance. Ainley (1995:96) suggests, "Having a language to describe yourself means you exist." Ponse (1978:246) writes, "In the lesbian world, the terms *lesbian*, *homosexual*, and *gay* have special meanings in the context of identity. The way these terms are used is important in distinguishing the lesbian subculture from larger society and making distinctions within the subculture itself". For example, Ponse (1978) found 'gay' a commonly used term amongst the women in her sample. An exception to this were political lesbians who found 'gay' and 'homosexual' to be male terms and instead used 'lesbian' as a consciousness-raising device.

In light of the possible meanings attributed to terminology, all twelve participants were asked if they use a term to describe their sexuality and if so, what this term means to them. Based on sampling method, all participants identified with 'lesbian' in some way, though this reflected complex understandings of their identities. Their identifications with 'lesbian' were multilayered and ambiguous, both uncomfortable yet associative. Following Ponse's (1978) findings, the participants attributed various meanings to the

term 'lesbian', commonly preferring other sexual descriptors including 'lesbian with an asterisk', 'gay', 'dyke', and 'unlabeled'. While Ponse (1978:247) suggested "the term lesbian is having a renaissance", thirty years later, the women interviewed for this research commonly perceived 'lesbian' as formal, constrictive, and for some it invoked images or ideas that did not seem applicable to them. This is not to say that 'lesbian' has lost its clout, it was still used among participants in this sample who associated it with political ideology and considered it culturally relevant.

### *Lesbian*

Six of the women interviewed considered 'lesbian' the most suitable term to describe their sexuality, though offered different interpretations and associations to it. Joanna, Casey, Clarissa, Jessie, Holly, and Drew all used 'lesbian' to describe their sexuality. All but one of the women in this group had heard of queer theory and easily understood its basic tenets, with two having extensive knowledge about queer theory and politics. These latter two were also more knowledgeable of the lesbian and gay movement and lesbian history. Also, this group of women tended to describe a stronger sense of 'community' with other lesbians; Joanna, Casey and Drew have all belonged to university campus based LGBTQ and/or feminist groups/organizations; Casey, Jessie and Holly all described extensive social networks within the lesbian and gay community and Holly has been involved in organizing local annual pride celebrations. As will be elaborated below, these women seemed to have more invested in their sexual identities, both politically and culturally.

Drew is currently in her first relationship with a woman and expressed discomfort with the term 'lesbian', though upheld it for its political value. She explains:

It's just like, who you have sex with is what the term applies to. I don't want to talk about it that way. [...] So I don't want to tell everyone that I encounter that I'm a lesbian, 'hey, picture it!' You know what I mean?

She goes on to explain however,

there is a difference, like when I talk to close friends about personal issues, I recognize that my experiences of being in a relationship with a woman are probably very different than hers, if she's never been in one, or isn't in one, so I understand that there is a difference. [...] I would fit the description, by definition I agree with, I think the term applies to me, I just don't like using it, like, I know I'm a lesbian I just don't feel fully comfortable using the word for some reason.

Jessie was much more comfortable with the term 'lesbian'. She presented herself as very confident and well-connected within the Windsor 'lesbian community'. When asked how she describes her sexuality, Jessie responds, "I usually consider myself a lesbian." Joanna was very articulate and invoked the idea of sexuality as a spectrum, locating herself on the lesbian end of the spectrum:

In terms of how I talk about my identity and think about it, I identify as a lesbian. But I think of sexual identity or orientation as a spectrum, and you might have a few people who are 100% hetero and a few people who are 100% homo. I personally think that there's very few people there though. I feel like I'm closer to the lesbian end of the spectrum so I identify as a lesbian.

While more ambiguous than Joanna, Casey, a very outspoken woman's hockey coach and bartender also described herself as a 'lesbian',

I guess I describe myself as a lesbian or a dyke or whatever the fuck. With an asterisk! [...] I think it's arbitrary to me, these labels or categorizations. Pigeonholing people is kind of, you know, like I understand it because society wants you to be categorized. You need to be categorized as your political party just as much as you categorize your sexual orientation. So I mean, for society to understand me, it's easier for me to tell people that I'm a lesbian. I think they relate to that better than, 'oh I'm a lesbian with an asterisk'. That's more appealing.

Clarissa was the only woman who was currently married in the sample. She was however, in the process of getting divorced from her husband and is in her first monogamous relationship with a woman. She explains:

Originally because I was married and experimenting with other women, I would actually say that I was bisexual. When I clearly understood that my orientation was more towards being a lesbian then I just knew it. So now that I'm with a woman in a relationship, I totally identify as a lesbian.

However, Clarissa said she would identify with "gay as well because it's more broad."

All of the women in this sample who identified with 'lesbian' searched for ways to offer a broader conceptualization of their identities but none used queer. Instead, 'lesbian' emerged as a concept and label that was actually quite free-flowing and open in its own right: posited as a moving point on a spectrum, a term that belongs inside quotation marks, or as a political position.

In comparison with others in the sample (who disliked the term 'lesbian') these women were less likely to subscribe to gendered notions of lesbian identity or use gendered discourses to conceptualize lesbian femininity. Casey for example, overtly contested this tendency, explaining, "For some people, if you're a lesbian, you're more manly; you have no feminine traits. Which is bullshit. [...] People's preconceived notion is that all lesbians are butch, and that's unfortunate because it doesn't make a difference, your orientation or gender identity, and people honestly can't differentiate the two".

When asked to conceptualize their sexual identities, what was most interesting was how these women "resisted the essentializing inherent in the question" (Esterberg 1996:264). That is, they were more resistant to the connotations of this term when it was left to the interpretations of 'straight' society. As Casey explained above, she views the world as needing to 'pigeonhole' her, and like political party affiliation, this does not necessarily reflect individual meanings. Through these interviews there seemed to be a greater sense of comfort within lesbian circles, in which it was presumed that 'lesbian' would be well understood as fluid but meaningful. Outside of these circles, the

participants seemed to use this term for the benefit of mainstream society to enable understanding even as they perceived them to misappropriate and misconstrue the concept itself.

*Gay but not queer*

Sandy, Leslie, Harley, Anne and Paige did not like using the term 'lesbian' because of what they perceived to be its underlying connotations. In the ways that they distinguished themselves from 'lesbians' they strongly invoked rigid gender norms trying to position themselves as more feminine than what they thought a standard definition of 'lesbian' implied. At least for some women, this seems to point to "the centrality of gender in the negotiation and construction of lesbian identities and subjective experience" (Farquhar 2000:226). Except for Paige, who was the eldest woman interviewed, these women were among the youngest in the sample. Sandy described herself as from a small town, a background she viewed as influential in her rather narrow conceptualizations of what it means to be a 'lesbian'. Throughout her interview she tended to explain her experiences surrounding her sexuality as negative, especially when she was younger with her family and peers, who seemed to have equally narrow conceptualizations of 'lesbians'. This was reflected in how Sandy identifies her sexuality:

I've always just said that I'm gay, I don't really use the term lesbian because it doesn't really fit with how I view myself. Whenever I think of lesbians I think of, you know, like when you open the dictionary you see a picture of a certain type of woman, even in high school, you know when so and so is a lesbian and they use the word lesbian it would be someone with a really short hair cut and really butch.

Sandy feels that 'gay' is more open and has less baggage than the term 'lesbian'. She explains,

When you say you're gay people don't know what exactly that means, they're like 'oh, gay, I know what a lesbian is, but what's a gay?' So gay gives me the option to present myself however I want to.

Paige agreed with Sandy, explaining that when she 'came out' in the mid-90s, "lesbians wore plaid and drove trucks and I wasn't one of those, are you kidding me? I wore high heels and dresses and certainly wasn't one of them [...] so I say I'm gay."

Similarly, Leslie preferred using 'gay' over 'lesbian'. Her conceptualization of 'lesbian' was different than those above, though remained intimately bound with gendered appearances as well as a political position. Contrary to perceiving 'lesbian' as masculine she explained it as "girly" and instead equated 'butchyness' with the term 'dyke'. She says,

I usually use the term gay, I don't like the lesbian label although I've been called that before but I feel that it is really girly and it's very political not that I wouldn't want that I've just never been completely comfortable using that term. I just use gay and that's good enough and I've never used the word dyke because it makes me assume really big butch women and I'm not a very big butch woman.

Similar apprehensions toward the term lesbian have been noted since at least the mid-90s. As Ainley (1995:97) writes, "Not liking the word 'lesbian' is not unusual because the sanctions against it are so high: it can be unsafe, some women think it is an ugly word, or do not want to be pigeonholed, or dislike its feminist connotations." The identity label 'dyke' can also be interpreted negatively, at least for some women, because it implies 'butch' which is usually associated with perceived masculinity (see for example Farquhar 2000). The five women who preferred 'gay' understood this term as more broad, with regards to both sexual preference and gender performativity, and interestingly did not feel a strong sense of community with other lesbians.

*Unlabeled but not 'straight'*



Amanda disagreed with having to use any term to label her sexuality. Like Drew, Amanda says, “I know I’m a lesbian,” and like Casey, she dislikes having to label herself. As a result, she suggests methods of resistance to this,

I don’t think anybody should be labeled. Like, I know I’m gay, but I just think that I’m me, this is who I am and I don’t need to label myself by saying that. Like, often when I come out to people [...] a lot of times I say that I like girls, instead of saying that I’m a lesbian [...] I just don’t feel I need to label myself and tell the world that I’m gay.

In addition to her discomfort with any form of labeling, Amanda expressed a concern with being identified as a ‘lesbian’ that did not come across in other interviews. Especially at her workplace, a local car factory, she feels unable to be ‘out’ saying, “I’m worried about what people I work with would think of me. [...] whenever there’s a function like Pride in Windsor, I’m nervous about people I work with seeing me.” Amanda also had a somewhat negative stance on lesbians and ‘the lesbian community’, saying “well I think some lesbians make other lesbians look bad. You know, you probably hear all the time, about the drama and stuff like that, I’ve never been involved in drama.”

Some of her reluctance to uphold this label is based on how outsiders would perceive her. Although she has strong social ties with other lesbians (her social network was predominantly identified as such), she has internalized a seemingly negative notion of what it means to be a lesbian and the high stakes of being perceived as such, especially in her workplace. For example, Amanda explains that her co-workers assume she is a lesbian but she still feels the need to hide her “sexual orientation [...] because sometimes Ford or the factories are worse, it’s like you’re in high school again. And where I’m at, I work with a lot of older people, who might be old fashioned, or I just don’t want to hear it, I don’t want people looking at me or saying things, so I choose to keep it to myself.”

Her reluctance to invoke 'lesbian' seems to be based on both concrete concerns and her resistance toward labeling in general. Although her views at times paralleled a queer perspective, as will be discussed below, this was not an appealing term to her as she perceived it to hold equally negative connotations as 'lesbian' and further associated it as a term gay men would use.

Clearly, the term 'lesbian' continues to be a contentious one. This was partially attributed to the perception it was confining (see for example Ainley 1995; Healey 1996). This is not however, to be interpreted as a queer stance. None of the participants used the term 'queer', and when they were specifically asked what they thought about it, most rejected 'queer' for various reasons. These terms cannot be separated from discourses about gender. Just as lesbians were presumed by many as a masculinized form of woman, queer was attributed to gay men. Although many leading queer theorists such as Sedgwick, Butler, and Fuss are women, and the latter two lesbians, participant responses reflected a major critique of 'queer' by lesbian and feminist theorists who argue that this new area of 'sexuality' studies is "dominated by gay male sexual politics and interests" (Jeffreys 1994:459). For example, when asked if she would ever call herself 'queer', Amanda responds "No, I think a lot of gay guys are called queer. I think they call themselves queer." Similarly, Drew explains,

I imagine queer to apply to gay men, I think gay men use it, but I know a lot of women who are quite 'open' and would have sex with women and men, but those women always seem to end up with men in the end so I feel like I don't have anything in common with them. I just feel like there is an actual difference in who I am and how I see the world between now and when I met my girlfriend.

Like Amanda, Drew also associates 'queer' with gay men, which is interesting given 'queer's' equal unpopularity among gay men (see Adam 2000). Drew also

considers 'queer' to be applicable to women with a more 'open' sexuality, that is, women who have sex with both women and men. She then draws a clear distinction between herself and these women. While she has previously talked about disliking the personal connotations of 'lesbian' (in that sexual matters are private matters), Drew more comfortably assumed 'lesbian' as a political label, as she explains how her social position and perspective changed when she came to identify as a 'lesbian'. This also seems to indicate, as did other participants, a distinct sense of who is similar and different, inside and outside of a lesbian community.

*Who are 'We'?*

Farquhar (2000:221) writes, "The terms 'we' and 'us' are often used inclusively in lesbian discussions to embrace all female non-heterosexuals within a common identity." Although lesbian, with its many connotations, is a contested concept, throughout the interviews, there was a clear sense of who 'we' are. In describing their sexual identity, many of the participants perhaps 'queered' traditional definitions by challenging sexual binaries in offering accounts of sexuality as flexible and fluid, however, they did construct their identities as unique from heterosexuals generally, and heterosexual women in particular.

Whisman (1993:580) writes, "The boundary between lesbians and straight women may be permeable, but we usually know when we've crossed it." Amanda invokes this sense of boundaries with the idea that you can know when someone is straight. She explains her discomfort with 'straight' women entering the local lesbian and gay bar, perceiving 'straight' women as not belonging within this specific social space. Interestingly, Amanda was the most reluctant to identify herself as 'lesbian' (or gay or

queer) however she expressed a strong sense of boundaries with the idea that you can 'know' someone is straight and as such does not belong. Regardless of how 'outsiders' might consider themselves (queer, bisexual, or otherwise), Amanda explains the difference between 'real' lesbians and straight women:

I'm the type of person where, if we were at the Wellington and a really good looking girl walked in, and I knew she was straight, but you could tell they want that attention, a lot of my friends, their jaws might drop open, like 'wow', but I'm not like that, I won't give that person that attention because I don't want to feed into, I don't want to satisfy her, do you know what I mean? Because you see girls go there and they'll imitate, they'll start dancing on each other and just laughing, and I know they're having fun, but you can tell sometimes when they're just doing it for all that attention, do you know what I'm getting at?

Concern over lesbian authenticity has been noted since the 1970s (Whisman 1993; Wilton 1995; Ashton 1996; Healey 1996; Hird & Germon 1999). From this, derived a discourse as to how lesbians should look and act (Penelope 1996). Lesbian identities and cultures "continue to be organized in opposition to hegemonic heterosexuality, and as a form of resistance to the policing of non-conformity" (Farquhar 2000:221). Intrusions into the physical space designated by these boundaries, as Amanda describes above, were resented. This supports Alison Eves' findings in which this resentment "often produces a desire for boundaries and distinction, which promote a policing of who is a lesbian" (Eves 2004:487). In spite of her resistance to invoke labels generally and to be identified as homosexual in the workplace, within a sexualized social context, Amanda affirms her position as distinctly lesbian.

#### *'Us' and 'them'*

Implicit in the homo/heterosexual dichotomy is the distinction between 'us' (lesbian) and 'them' (straight) (Humphrey 1999). Clare Farquhar (2000:221) suggests that the subjective meaning of 'lesbian' is revealed "in the use of terms such as 'we' and

'us'." For example, who exactly "are lesbians referring to when they talk about 'we'? What forms of discourse and subject positionings are being invoked?" (Farquhar 2000: 221).

As was mentioned above, for some of the participants, lesbian identity was grounded in, and seemingly inextricable from, gendered discourses of femininity. Appearance norms can easily be taken for granted and might even appear to be superficial considerations. However, sex and gender are intimately intertwined in both the social imagination and that of the participants. In challenging heterosexual normativity, lesbians and gay men are often presumed to also challenge gender norms attributed to both behaviour and physical appearance. This has direct implications for lesbian visibility, and the participants in this study were acutely aware of, and often concerned with, physical appearance which was manipulated in order to either avoid or embrace lesbian identification by others.

The participants in this sample were extremely cognizant of lesbian signifiers. Kristin Esterberg (1996:277) suggests there is "a coercive element to the coding of lesbian visibility." There was the notion among some of the women interviewed that the term 'lesbian' applied only to a certain type of woman: a butch woman, interpreted as a masculine woman. These signifiers were in fact the reason that many did not feel the term 'lesbian' was especially suitable, inciting notions of "big butch women" (Leslie), as "wearing plaid shirts and driving trucks" (Paige), or as Sandy recalls how she used to conceptualize lesbians: "the textbook lesbian was, you know, the girl on the hockey team or with the really short hair, severe, just really butchy [...] to me a lesbian was like the

woman in men's clothes." This image of 'lesbian' is still important in Sandy's life in that she avoids appearing 'butchy' or using 'lesbian' to describe herself.

This imagery was not embraced by any of the participants, and was by many, overtly resisted. This is not to say that other 'lesbian' and 'gay' markers were not wholeheartedly embraced. The rainbow symbol, clothing, and particularly hairstyle consistently came up as distinguishing features of lesbian identity. This was especially prevalent for two of the participants when they initially came to identify as lesbians.

Joanna recalls,

I came roaring out of the closet. You know, we talk about our 'coming out' haircuts, like my head was like, just take the clippers to it, and everything was raver days, so baggy raver jeans and big t-shirts and everything rainbows. And I swear I would 'come out' and people would be like, 'really?' Like, are you just trying to be polite or did you not notice my shaved head and rainbow necklace?

Similarly, Casey remembers how she changed her appearance and indicates that others seemed to be able to identify her differently as well,

I cut off all my hair. I cut it spiky and that's when I got real negative reactions from people. It wasn't until I cut my hair off. It was like, I noticed I would go into a store – and it wasn't like I just cut my hair off, I cut it, spiked it, dyed the tips blond, pierced my tongue – I was making a huge statement.

Through clothing and style both Joanna and Casey embodied their 'lesbian identity', and as Clarke and Turner (2007:271) found, this was especially significant "when first coming out". As Ruth Holliday (2001) suggests, dress and appearance, especially hairstyle, are primary ways in which lesbians assert their 'lesbian identity' and signal their sexual identity to others.

These same markers were equally important for those who did not want to be identifiable. Drew seems to take the opposite approach now feeling restricted in her appearance:

I feel like I can't cut my hair off anymore. I used to grow it long and then cut it short, I even wanted to shave my head for years and didn't think anything of it except that my mom would have been too mad, but now that I'm in a relationship with a woman it suddenly seems like if I cut my hair above the shoulders everyone will think about it differently, or maybe just I would, who knows. It's weird too because my girlfriend has mentioned that she thinks I'm more feminine since I've been with her and yet I find myself thinking for the first time when I try on clothes that I look butchy, and I find she looks like a lesbian to me, and that's what I really like about her appearance, but she doesn't think she does.

Interestingly, while Casey did not think of lesbianism in political terms, through her appearance she was trying to make a "huge statement". Comparably, although Drew was one of the only participants to assert her lesbian identity as a political position, she expresses some discomfort in disrupting "heteronormative hegemony" that results from visibility (Eves 2004:482).

Katherine Johnson (2007:112) uses the examples of androgyny and butch to describe how lesbians are constituted through gendered clothing. For most of the participants it seems current connotations and self-perceptions of women who sleep with women are much more blurred, though still recognizable. As stereotypical portrayals of lesbians or butches were rejected, the participants suggested the use of more ambiguous markers, and these were wholeheartedly embraced. Holly states in her interview, "I don't know why I think lesbians have to look a certain way but I definitely feel more 'lesbian' when I wear certain things". Anne recognized appearance and visibility in that she thinks "some girls stand out more than others as being gay, but that's probably stereotypical." She then takes into account her 'mohawk' haircut saying "my style is me – how I feel comfortable." By invoking their own sense of style to contradict stereotypical images, they formulated their own ideas about femininity and masculinity.

Discussing conceptualizations of femininity and masculinity challenged my own, seemingly narrow, notions of femininity. Through this process I came to recognize how

my perceptions of these gendered concepts were quite constrictive, and I became aware of my taken for granted assumptions about what 'lesbians' and 'butches' look like. That is, based on physical appearances, I expected a few of my participants to invoke notions or ideas about 'butch' lesbians and what I perceived to be 'masculine' signifiers. I instead came to realize that contrary to my own limited sense of feminine, masculine, or perhaps androgynous appearance, women whom I assumed would discuss their appearance style as 'masculine' firmly located themselves as distinctly feminine by stretching and bending the limits of this spectrum. While they thought of themselves as identifiable to other lesbians, these markers were perceived as nuanced and subtle. And it was exactly in this subtlety that marking of the body allowed some lesbians to discretely identify with one another beyond the purview of the heterosexual gaze.

#### *The Postmodern Demise*

Within wider concerns about identity, and lesbian identity in particular, researchers in the 1970s and 1980s focused on competing notions of lesbian authenticity: that is, who counts as a 'real' lesbian and why. During the 1990s, however, theoretical debates over the meaning of the category 'lesbian' focused increasingly on the strategic necessity of keeping the category intact in the face of postmodern dissolution (Farquhar 2000). In terms of identity, postmodernism, which has enabled the queer movement, attempts to deconstruct this notion, and for queers in particular, the idea of a sexual identity, whereby the ultimate goal would be for all to come to the understanding that each and every one of us are queer. Butler (1993:308), a major proponent of queer theory and politics, views identity categories as "instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as



the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression.”

With the emergence of queer politics and theory came fears that ‘queer’ would eradicate lesbian experience and identity. Suzanna Walters (1996:845) wonders “If queer becomes the new reigning subjectivity for hip activists and intellectuals alike, what kinds of politics and theories then become ‘transcended’, moved through and over in the construction of the queer hegemony?” Though queer theory could be viewed as equally destructive of gay male culture and politics, specific to critical lesbian theorists, is the concern that lesbians risk being overshadowed by gay men. Sheila Jeffreys (1994:459) writes that the distinctive interests of lesbians are specific to their membership to the political class of women, and these interests tend to appear in the realm of queer studies “only where they can assimilate seamlessly into gay male culture and politics.” These criticisms are also reflected in the writings of Wilton (1995:3) who eloquently argues, “By refusing the ideological imperative by which we are defined and cast out of the body politic, by deconstructing ‘lesbian’ as a disciplinary sign instrumental in the social control of women and sexuality, we render the subject and object of lesbian studies both archaic and politically contaminated.”

In 2000, Farquhar questions whether the incorporation of ‘lesbian’ into ‘queer’ equates to an attempt to dismantle or reproduce hegemonic power relations (220). As others have pointed out, at the moment in which lesbians (and women) have acquired a position on the political stage, the period is considered post-lesbian, post-identity politics, and risk the erasure of the very identities upon which they have struggled toward gaining political agency (Jeffreys 1994; Farquhar 2000; Doan 2007; Zimmerman 2007). For

example, Toni McNaron (2007:148) writes, “For a long time I have been watching with keen interest as efforts have been launched in the popular press as well as in theoretical writings to declare us not only in a post-lesbian but also a post-feminist moment.” She further argues that while it appears “academically chic” to move away from such essentialized terms as ‘lesbian’, to declare ‘lesbian’ culturally irrelevant or passé could have serious historical, cultural and political ramifications. This reflects “a deep skepticism” in the ongoing urge to dismiss a subject of research and reality that “have never been fully considered in terms of scholarship or politics or materiality” (McNaron 2007:148).

Although Amy Villarejo (2003:7) worries that “the term *lesbian* is in its final hours, slowly to be overtaken by the term *queer*”, she doubts its extinction will happen anytime soon in noting how the term ‘lesbian’ has entered into national culture and commodity culture. This is evidenced by the marketing of lesbian-specific books, videos, cruises and vacation packages, festivals, the proliferation of lesbian erotica, sadomasochism, art and photography, and the increasing visibility of lesbian comedians, athletes, and mainstream celebrities (Wiegman 1994; Villarejo 2003). Similarly, for Adam (2000:326), “Queer theory has little to say about the desire that fuels this widespread proliferation and consolidation of identity markers.”

In addition to the realm of cultural production, as the authors above indicate, lesbian and gay identified people continue to be policed according to these labels. For the women interviewed here, identity categories “were not simply floating discursive forms, but were concretely embodied in institutions [...] and informal structures of social control” (Green 2002:527). Regardless of the terms employed, each saw themselves

through the gaze of the heterosexual 'other', a gaze that was believed to be misunderstood, often stereotypical, and sometimes painfully internalized. Personally and institutionally, participants were continually positioned to have to either label themselves as 'lesbians' or avoid being identified as such. From feeling forced to 'come out' to others, to avoiding 'disclosure' in the workplace, to concerns over marriage rights and not being able to move abroad with their partners, the participants were continually positioned in a way in which they had to respond to their subjectification as lesbians.

Foucault (1978; 1982), Sedgwick (1990), and Butler (1993) would suggest that by taking up these identity labels, lesbians and gay men are reinforcing these boundaries themselves. However, even Butler (1993:308) herself writes that she "will appear at political occasions under the sign of lesbian, but that I would like to have it permanently unclear what precisely that sign signifies." The participants in this study seemed to relate to Butler's use of this identity. Many expressed discomfort with the term itself, but at different moments they all invoked 'lesbian' in conversations about themselves. Whether they preferred other words they considered broader, such as gay, or were comfortable with 'lesbian', they all understood their experiences and sexualities as less rigid than 'lesbian' might imply. Even if they understood their own sexual identification as quite stable, each recognized how their lives and identities are constantly in flux and felt the need to explain their understanding of lesbian in order to express this.

Though many are drawn to the fluidity of its ideology, they do not invoke queer politics or theory in conversations about their identities. Similar to prior research (see Ainley 1995; Esterberg 1996), women are reluctant to label themselves 'lesbians' and when they do, they tend to explain that their identity and sexuality are actually more fluid

than the term 'lesbian' would allow. This however does not suggest that the participants did not retain a notion of who is excluded from their vision; they maintain a sense of what it means to be a 'lesbian' and this is meaningful to them. The sense of difference from 'straight' society also invoked a sense of pride and feelings of belonging with other lesbians. 'Lesbian' was invoked for different reasons; it was variously thought of as a political position, a social perspective, a distinguishing feature from heterosexual culture, or a means by which heterosexuals would most easily understand and relate to them.

As a result, almost 20 years since the emergence of queer theory and politics, lesbians are still here. Even if they may problematize the term 'lesbian', they are not calling themselves 'queer'. Not only did the women interviewed not identify with the notion or label 'queer' in any meaningful way, they continued to establish their lives around lesbianism, albeit with differing interpretations and critiques of strict notions of what this term was perceived to imply. While some positioned themselves more politically than others, most rejected notions of lesbian feminism, understood as a rejection of patriarchal relationships, or political lesbians per se, and instead established their identity in terms of desire for women. It was common consensus that this desire felt normal and natural, and should not be interpreted as particularly meaningful to mainstream society. That said, identification with 'lesbian' offered something special and unique on a personal level and through interaction with other lesbians that none of the participants wanted to see diminished by conceptualizations of queerness.

*What about queer?*

I was interested in whether these participants thought there was something specific to the categorical constructions of woman and lesbian that queer theory fails to

grasp. As a graduate student, Drew was relatively knowledgeable about postmodern theory and queer politics and in responding to questions about queer theory she explains,

I don't really like the idea, I get how in theory deconstructionism is an interesting idea, it's a useful, I mean, I think it makes complete sense except that we don't live in a deconstructed environment [...] I don't think it applies to me, I would never consider myself queer; I think there is a politics to lesbianism that applies to me. Which I feel like, is similar, I feel like I'm more closely identified with the lesbian movement than this, than a queer movement.

When asked about queer theory's challenge to fixed identity categories, Drew responds,

I think that identity in a way is like, important because people feel it in their everyday lives, like even though I feel normal being with my girlfriend and no one should think twice of it, I'm constantly reminded that most people, apparently, don't think I'm normal and don't think I deserve the same rights as them. Like, that's so hurtful.

Drew's narrative is dialectic; she originally described her discomfort with the term 'lesbian', though from her interview emerged an apparent philosophical and political attachment to 'lesbian'. For Drew, this perspective materialized as a result of her own reading as a graduate student in Sociology and Women's Studies. She explains, "I feel like I developed some kind of lens and I couldn't see heterosexual relationships as normal any more." Her relationship with the insider/outsider divide was a distinguishing moment in her life. The hurt she experienced through this, in contradiction to her normalized feelings about her new relationship, situated her in a politics that she continued to negotiate throughout the course of the interview.

Drew clearly articulated her positionality as a member of a sexual minority in heteronormative culture. Annette Schlichter (2007) suggests that what differentiates 'queer' from 'lesbian' is that 'lesbian' has an entirely different history behind it that is quite specific to women and continues to have implications. The crossing of a divide was evident as Drew recalls having learned about queer theory when she considered herself

straight, and thinking this was an interesting theory, but still only understanding it as applicable to lesbian and gay studies. Coming to identify as 'lesbian' enabled her to more fully understand the need to disrupt assumptions of heterosexuality, but did not employ 'queer' as reflective of her new identification.

Drew reflects on her shifting perspectives of queer theory, coming to understand its utility when invoked by 'straight' society:

I just don't know straight people who take the time to learn about queer theory and without straight people being queer all you are, are a bunch of gay people calling yourselves queer.

Agreeing with Drew, Sandy explains how heterosexual people would have to take up a notion of fluidity for it to be meaningful.

I think we're always going to have these labels, people fighting for rights, you're going to have to put a label on something to be able to fight for it, it's not that I believe that labels are a good thing. I'm really a fan of being able to be fluid [...] I think that everyone would have to be queer, then everyone is kind of united, then everyone is just like, queer, then it could have any meaning to that person. I think that's what it is about, finding what that means to you, I'd be more than happy to call myself queer, I think I will at one point and if I use the term it is whatever it means to me, so we were all united under one term. I'm sure there is like, something everyone could find within that one term that does fit them in some way.

Clarissa similarly draws on the present need for labels and inevitability of current identity categories,

That's just the way it's going to be. When you think about it right? It gives you a sense of, I don't know, identity, for lack of better terms, you mean something to the world. You have a name, you can identify with something. I think people naturally want to feel connected, so if you didn't have a sense of identity related to anything else, you wouldn't feel connected and you wouldn't feel a sense of, purpose, I guess is the word I'm looking for.

When Holly is asked whether she found value in her 'lesbian' identity or if queer's fluidity is appealing to her she responds,

I think that our identities are definitely fluid. At the moment, I am a lesbian and I can't see that changing. But at one point in my life I was straight and I think although for some people it never changes, for lots, it does and that should be okay, more than okay. At the moment, I think it [lesbian identity] is somewhat important to me, but only because I feel the need to define myself. I disagree with the fact that I have to be defined and I think there are lots of people who don't comfortably fit into one of the pre-set categories.

Joanna offers a very interesting perspective when discussing queer theory and its political aim to deconstruct identity categories, to posit sexuality as fluid, and so on. When discussing this notion of sexuality as fluid Joanna describes herself saying, "if I were to get really technical with my identity, I feel it's probably a bit more fluid than the term lesbian might imply". She goes on to explain insightfully her own interpretation of queer potential,

Well if it is fluid, and we are opening it up, then I think you would have to have those tensions because everything is included, right? So you have some people who are lesbian and you have some people who are bisexuals and who are queer, and that's the idea of opening it up, so people are free to identify [...] Where I think we go wrong with that is we think it's mutually exclusive and that you're either this or that, and it's either fluid or it's fixed. Well, if it's fluid, there's this idea that it could be fixed for some people. [...] So I feel like if we're going to open it up, we have to be prepared to coexist with those tensions that are there.

This challenges the notion of a "monolithic, obvious, and dichotomous" (Walters 1996:832) notion of 'lesbian' that queer implies, even supporting the idea that "queer theory itself is as engaged in the construction of lesbian sexuality, albeit in a radically different form, as was lesbian feminism before it" (Shugar 1999:15). However, queer notions within these interviews do not suggest the demise of the lesbian, as Jeffreys (1994; 2003) fears but instead demonstrate the utility of a group that like any culture, changes and adapts, and indeed has, since the conception of lesbian feminism in the 1970s. Also revealed, are the competing discourses surrounding lesbianism and sexuality in general. Concepts of lesbian identity are both fragile and persistent. As Judith

Halberstam (1996:257) argues, “this is the postmodern condition – a simultaneous disavowal and confirmation of desires, bodies, and identities, and the pleasure that comes from holding onto identity in the face of radical uncertainty and letting go of it even if this entails considerable risk.”

While Jeffreys (1994) predicted the postmodern demise of lesbians, I suggest this concept be understood as a cultural category that changes and adapts in different contexts, while retaining certain features, such as many of the participants point out, there is something to this category that is specific, important, exciting and even special to them. While the women in this sample tended to find the term ‘lesbian’ constrictive, they understood themselves as subjectified by the outside world. This was central to how they negotiated their sense of self as lesbians and internalized notions of perceived meanings of ‘lesbian’ to others. In response to this, their ‘lesbian’ identities can be a source of pain, oppression, and struggle, but within a community of lesbians they find it a source of belonging, recognition, and even excitement. When asked if she found value in being able to call herself as lesbian, Jessie explains “I take pride in knowing that that’s who I am.” Similarly, in reference to lesbian community, Clarissa describes “a feeling of empowerment and feeling of affirmation”. In considering her lesbian community, Casey responds “there’s something so exciting about hanging out with other lesbians”.

This conception of a cultural category normalizes rather than instigates fear that lesbianism is changing and adapting rather than disappearing. Stuart Hall (1990:225) writes that identity is “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’”. It is a concept that is not pre-existing, but historically rooted, “But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialist past,



they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power.” Wilton (1995:3) describes lesbians as “shape-shifters” and “so multiform” that “the naming of lesbians begins to seem a curious matter indeed.” This speaks to the permeability of all cultural categories, situated in a constant (re)negotiation of self and other-identified experiences, perceptions, and expectations. For example, Jeffrey Weeks (1995) indicates that while sexual identities are socially constructed, there are instances in which they prove themselves necessary, such as in struggles against homophobia or the AIDS epidemic. He writes, “Sexual identity involves a perpetual invention and reinvention, but on ground fought over by many centuries” (Weeks 1995:47).

### *Community and Culture*

Viewing lesbianism as a cultural category indicates a notion of lesbian community. The lesbians in this study seemed to hang out together and find connections with one another unique from heterosexual culture(s). There is no doubt that although boundaries are tenuous and shifting, they were clearly present. Most primarily socialized with other lesbians, however expressed ambivalence toward a notion of lesbian community. Shugar (1999:12) argues that while the very existence of ‘the lesbian community’ is debated, “lesbian communities have proven valuable to lesbians in a number of ways.” Positioning herself as a lesbian, Bonnie Zimmerman (2007:46-47) writes, “I continue to feel a particular need to work on the connections between identity, culture, history, and politics. I would go as far as to say that without a culture and a politics, we wouldn’t have lesbians, only women who have sex with women.”

In her classic study of an American mid-western lesbian community, Susan Krieger (1983) describes diverse and often contradictory accounts of this community, and

varying levels of importance attributed to it. In a reflection piece on this study, Krieger (2005:7) writes, “For me, the idea of lesbian community is an idea of kinship: it means “how we feel toward each other.” By examining feelings of ambivalence, confusion or disappointment within lesbian community, she suggests we might come to consider how to strengthen social bonds.

More recent studies on this topic have included that of Kristen Esterberg (1997) who examined how lesbians in an eastern American city understood themselves and their lesbian community, in order to understand their perspective of informal rules, behavioural norms, and location within, or on the margins of, this community. Liahna Gordon (2006) notes how her participants in the lesbian community she researched found it difficult to define this community. Similarly, the participants in the present research described Windsor as lacking a ‘lesbian community’. And while most predominantly socialized with other lesbians, they had a difficult time either defining what a ‘lesbian community’ might be or felt ambivalent towards this community.

Two of the participants demonstrated a strong sense of community. Holly says, “I definitely have a community.” Similarly Casey explains,

I would say that yah, we tend to flock. And there’s something so exciting about hanging out with other lesbians that it’s just like, so weird, but it’s just affirmation that I’m okay. [...] If I get invited to a party it’s not from anybody other than that network [lesbian network].

For others who made positive associations to community, this was in terms of kinship (Krieger 1983). Jessie describes an instant connection to other lesbian-identified women, when I’m hanging around at a bar or something, like at a straight bar and someone’s like, ‘oh yeah, those girls, have you ever seen them before, they’re lesbians too’. It’s like oh, I feel like I have a relationship with them, [...] I feel like I have something to relate with them as.

For Clarissa, she finds affirmation and support amongst those who lead 'alternative lifestyles', and goes on to highlight how this is especially the case with other lesbians,

Yes. I definitely would hang out in a place that would be more, alternative lifestyle, and you would find more often than not, gay people. [...] I think it's important for mental wellbeing, indirectly that support system. Because you do find that feeling of community and going to a bar or whatever, gathering of more lesbian people versus not, you just feel instantly more accepted.

Amanda is unsure about her 'sense' of community, though does recognize a community and like Clarissa, goes to places that are lesbian and/or gay oriented or frequented by lesbians and gay men. When asked if she felt a 'sense' of community she responds,

Yes and no. Here a little bit, because the community that's open and out, it seems like you know almost everyone or you know a lot of people and you always end up at the same places and stuff like that. [...] I think it's a sense of belonging.

Joanna echoes the appeal of feeling supported by lesbian and gay-friendly networks.

Joanna felt a 'sense' of 'lesbian community' in both organizations on her university campus and social networks in her local community,

I do really in both ways, it was much more concrete when I was younger because like I said, we had organizations on campus and I was in the women's studies program and really involved in that [...] it is a small community so we have like, you know, a gay enclave area, you know, there is gay and gay-friendly parts of town and gay and gay-friendly establishments, and it doesn't take long, once you know one or two people in the community, you know where those are, again even if you're not necessarily connected or involved, it gives you a place to be, you know, you can kind of be supported.

As with Krieger's (1983) findings, some lesbians in this study felt disillusioned by lesbian community. Sandy describes feeling disappointed with the local 'lesbian community', especially in the context of the university-based LGBTQ group, *Out on Campus*:

I thought community would be like, like community is what I thought would be support, like friendship and acceptance but it felt like, I feel at times the gay community can be really unaccepting, and uh, that's why I'm really, I mean I'd like to be more involved but

I don't think it's possible, not here, not to me. I find there is just this general cattiness or lack of open-mindedness sometimes.

As Amanda expressed above she similarly perceived the lesbian community as dramatic, of which she wanted no part. Drew recognized that many of her friends are lesbians but she felt disconnected to 'community' saying "I feel like they are really different from me, there's no politics, like overt or like intended politics on their part." In this sense, the lesbian community did not meet what she went to explain as her preconceived expectations.

Perhaps the place of 'community' has changed in the lives of lesbians. Of course, in the past not all lesbians were a part of distinctive lesbian communities, some lesbians have always felt ostracized and others have chosen different forms of community. And just because a woman sleeps with women, this does not mean she identifies herself as a lesbian, and even if she does identify as such, this does not mean she shares a common vision or grand agenda with other lesbians. Taylor and Rupp (1993:34) describe political lesbian communities as serving as a base of mobilization for women, which "provides continuity from earlier stages of the women's movement to the future flowering of feminism." All of the women in this sample were asked if they considered themselves feminists. Half said yes and a large portion of these were reluctant to do so. Most of the women in the study recognized spaces in which they had felt oppressed, as women and/or as lesbians, they did not talk about this as systemic, and were not coming together on the basis of this oppression or in an effort to remedy it. Leslie was even disturbed by the association of lesbians with politics.

Others still had no tangible concept of 'lesbian community'. Harley states "I don't really consider it a sense of community. Like a lot of my friends are gay, but not

necessarily because they're gay. I guess if you take a woman's studies class and then hang out at the gay bar, that's who you're going to meet, right?" At the same time, Harley traveled to attend annual Gay Pride celebrations explaining, "it's a huge event, there's more that kind of community because we're all there because we're gay." Similarly, while Leslie felt no sense of community on a daily basis, she described a "joining of communities" at events such as Gay Pride Parades. Other than this annual event, she says, "only then do I feel a part of it, but not the rest of the year because I don't feel like I'm really connected to it." Although these women did not feel apart of a local community, they understood their membership to a broader community on the basis of their homosexuality.

### **Discussion**

Jeffrey Weeks (1995:49) writes, "Available identities are taken up for a variety of reasons: because they make sense of individual experiences, because they give access to communities of meaning and support, because they are politically chosen. These identities can, however, equally be refused, precisely because they do not make sense to an individual, or because they have no cultural purchase." The intended purpose of this project was to consider the potential impact of queering sexual identities, by asking a group of women who presently identify as lesbians, the meaning they attribute to this identification, politically, culturally and symbolically.

Discussions about identity are intrinsically tied to notions of 'who we are' – a notion deeply rooted in sociological and psychological formulations of the self. Evident in these current narratives is the "normative power" of identity models (Ponse 1978: 255). Likewise, remnants of normative constructions of 'lesbian identity' found in

Kitzinger and Rogers' (1985) social constructionist approach were evident within the present narratives, though none were exhaustive or mutually exclusive. For example, in line with Kitzinger and Rogers' (1985) 'Personal Fulfillment' identity, both Jessie and Clarissa emphasized the personal fulfillment they have found through their lesbianism, describing a sense of "pride" (Jessie) and "feeling good" (Clarissa). Similar to the 'Individualistic' identity, Anne understands herself as born 'lesbian' and feels comfortable with this: "this is me – I was born gay." Over twenty years since Kitzinger and Rogers' (1985) research, the participants involved in this current research drew on similar constructions of 'lesbian identity'. These constructions were however fragmented, not indicative of a 'type' of 'lesbian', but a changing aspect of subjectivity.

One of the most interesting aspects of qualitative interviews is how they reveal competing and contradictory narratives that are (re)negotiated within the span of the interview itself. In this instance, the participants relied heavily on a mixture of their own discourses gained from personal experiences, in addition to discourses learned from others and popular culture. These discourses were clashing and overlapping, relying heavily on stereotypes and at times essentialized notions about gender, lesbians, and sexuality, even as their subjective understanding of themselves was inconsistent with these ideas.

Everyone interviewed for this project had used 'lesbian' to describe themselves or understood 'lesbian' as relevant to their identity, though most problematized the term on the basis of the stereotypical images it invoked; they did not wear plaid, act 'butchy' read as 'masculine', wear men's clothes or drive trucks. Ponse (1978:249) explains butch-fem role playing as "a prevailing stereotype of lesbian behavior in the heterosexual world and

as such has importance as a kind of negative standard in the perception of lesbians I met.” Thirty years later, dominant stereotypes of ‘butch’ or ‘masculinized’ lesbians, were prevalent amongst most of the participants even though none of them were perceived by themselves as conforming to these images. Bending ‘femininity’ themselves, without extending this to other ‘lesbians’, seemed then, to demonstrate the depth and strength of heteronormative definitions, conceptualizations, and interpretations of what it means to be a lesbian. Similarly, participants went back and forth between fluid sexual identities and essentialized notions of lesbianism. Even though everyone problematized the term ‘lesbian’ and what it was thought to imply, preferring greater fluidity and/or no label attached to sexuality, they also thought they would automatically get along better with each other, connected to one another in a way that outsiders cannot understand or reproduce with them.

A sense of commonality amongst other self-identified lesbians offered a feeling of lesbian culture, albeit one that is “never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes, and perhaps also yielded to in favour of terms that do that political work more effectively” (Butler 1997:14). However, unlike Butler’s imagining of a queer community, I would extend this definition to a specifically lesbian community, which entailed more fluidity than I would have ever initially imagined. Participants were able to bend and expand their own conceptualizations of lesbianism and lesbian community just as much as they did with notions of femininity. A major theme that emerged throughout the interviews was a particular language about identity, that was not ‘queer’ or

stereotypically 'lesbian', and how our identities are (in)visibly marked on our bodies, in the places we go, and in the social and cultural spaces we occupy.

Appearance markers were an important point of consideration for all of the participants. Signifiers were used to be identified by other lesbians, or avoid identification by outsiders. Far from being superficial, all participants attributed meaning to appearances. As Holliday (2001:217) writes, "fashion's communicative role in the production of identities is an important one and must not be overlooked, especially in the context of queer identities." For many 'coming out haircuts' were discussed as a shedding of skin that helped establish themselves, a transition made visible based on the importance of being identifiable within, and being identified by, a new cultural group. Obviously not all lesbians respond in this way, and this was evident among a few of the participants within this small sample. Even so, the symbolic and visible signifiers were significant considerations, but in these instances, to be avoided. These women talked about relating to their appearance in new ways – no longer feeling free to cut their hair short, trying to appear feminine to avoid unwanted identification or to please outsiders, or suddenly wondering if they now look 'butchy' when their appearances had not changed. More thorough consideration of this important symbolic realm contributed to my own reimagining of the political realms.

Individuals who I initially perceived as quite political versus those who avoided this form of identification revealed more subtle contradictions. For example, Clarissa removed herself from lesbian or feminist politics per se, explicitly saying that she would not consider herself a feminist. However, her narrative was strongly aligned with political lesbianism feminism, "I was saying earlier, to your question about being feminist or not, I



actually feel that I would more say, that instead of being completely and utterly attracted to women, I grew to dislike men.” She goes on to describe relationships with men with whom she felt “womanized and controlled. [...] I see it more. I look at guys more that way, that they’re controlling and their animal instinct”. She explains further how she has been able to escape this within her current (and first) relationship with a woman. Paradoxically, Clarissa’s partner Casey, who describes herself as a feminist, claims, “I completely understand there’s some real crunchy women out there who are man-hating and are just like, ‘I don’t want to perpetuate this, so I’m going to be with a woman’ [...] I can’t imagine anybody being like, ‘okay I’m politically going to do this, have sex with a woman.’” Ponse (1978:247-8) writes that “The idea of choice about lesbianism is incompatible with notion of the essentiality or ontological status of lesbianism. The self-labeled political lesbian who is bisexual or heterosexual in practice is somewhat of a mystery to women who have always defined themselves as lesbians and see this not as something one chooses to be but something one simply is.”

Conversely, Drew used a language that struck me as explicitly political. She located her transition in coming to identify as lesbian deeply rooted in politics and as a result felt disconnected from other lesbians, imagining a community in the 1970s that would have been grounded in political choices, ideas and philosophies. Even though she was perhaps the most overtly positioned political lesbian, she was one of the only participants to express discomfort in gender non-conformity (albeit for herself, not her partner). This indicates the contradictions evident within all the narratives, in addition to the idea that perhaps ‘politics’ can also be located on a spectrum, whereby one who comes ‘roaring out of the closet’ or attempting to make ‘a huge statement’ through

lesbian visibility, offer a political expression to lesbian identity with confidence and pride while others offer important contributions to the advancement of rights through more overt political expression, for example concerns over equal marriage rights or seeking equality within marriage. Deepening my own relationship with the data, these complex, competing, and often contradictory narratives, left me with multiple (re)interpretations of the data, demonstrating how “Interpretations shift in relation to the institutional and cultural markers they reference, which, in turn, fluctuate with respect to the varied settings in which social interaction unfolds” (Holstein and Gubrium 2005:498). The present analysis offers a thoughtful and dialogically situated attempt to convey how ‘lesbians’ render this category meaningful. Their narratives demonstrate the ongoing process through which we make sense of our lives, for ourselves, others, and within our intimate relationships.

### **Conclusion**

This research began by questioning the potential impact of queering sexual identities. A group of women were asked whether they related to a ‘queer’ vision of sexuality or if they retained the category ‘lesbian’ as culturally and/or politically significant. Though many of the participants perhaps ‘queered’ traditional definitions of ‘lesbian’ by challenging sexual binaries in offering accounts of sexuality as flexible and fluid, their identities were however constructed as unique and distinguishable from heterosexuals generally, and heterosexual women in particular. Although ‘lesbian’, with its many connotations, was a contested concept, throughout the interviews emerged a distinct sense of who ‘we’ are.

Many of the participants involved in this current research drew on similar constructions of 'lesbian identity' as formulated by Ponse (1978) and Kitzinger and Rogers (1985). As evidenced in both, past research on 'lesbians' has relied on and (re)produced normative discourses while taking into account the power of these discourses in conceptual formulations of identity. As a result, their subjective accounts as 'lesbians' were situated both within and beyond hegemonic discourses. At times, the participants drew on normative discourses of what it means to be a 'lesbian'; most commonly this included stereotypical ideas about lesbian appearance (read 'masculine'), and presumed associations between lesbians and politics (read radical or lesbian feminism). Throughout their narratives it was clear these women were positioned as having had to respond to visions of 'lesbian'. And although many described 'other lesbians' according to these stereotypes, they generally recognized themselves as 'outside' of these discourses.

In response to these images of 'lesbianism' many participants distanced themselves from 'lesbian' politics and 'lesbian community'. These same women however, made statements through non-normative appearance, subverted gender, expanded the spectrum of femininity, and resisted heterosexuality. I would suggest they related to the category 'lesbian' in political ways, though these were reconfigured from the "textbook" definitions and images of what it means to be a 'lesbian'. Others articulated 'lesbian' as a concept and label that was quite free-flowing and fluid, whether understood as a moving point on a spectrum of sexuality or as a political position. This however, should not be interpreted as a queer stance. There was something unique to 'lesbian' as a cultural and political category that was considered valuable – even to those

who at other times resisted it. They did not want these distinctions to be erased, but found a value in calling themselves lesbians and to be able to recognize each other. In addition to social networks consisting of lesbians, social recognition gave further meaning to lesbian community; it is something that makes us talk to each other, a social exchange that gives way to culture.

Compared to previous literature reviewed above, this research comes after the emergence of queer theory and politics, and takes on an interpretive approach influenced by postmodernism. As a result, the narratives offer unique conceptualizations; they rely on existing constructions while weaving together individualized understandings that simultaneously challenge and embrace 'lesbian' identity. This goes beyond what their identity means to them to challenge them on the very premise of this meaning. In turn, they offer accounts that weave together dominant, stereotypical, and historical imagery, combined within fluidity of meaning, to offer a unique conceptualization of lesbianism in the current time and place. As James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium (2005:348) write, "In practice, diverse articulations of discourse intersect, collide, and work against the construction of common or uniform subjects, agents, and social realities."

These insights are critical for lesbian/gay/queer politics in that they allow people to "gather together on the basis of constructions that 'we' are constantly and self-consciously in the process of inventing, multiplying, and modifying" (Cohen 1991:88). Georgia Warnke (2005:94) writes, "Social identities are not pre-given pieces of matter but rather the results of history and power." The narratives analyzed here were the result of historical constructions and discourses of what it means to be a 'lesbian' blended with these women's own conceptions. This offers competing and at times contradictory

conceptions of the self. The interviews and subsequent analyses were approached in a way that allowed subjectivity to be viewed as continuous and shifting rather than cohesive and concrete, as open and subject to interpretation, as an ongoing construction.

## Appendix A

### Interview Guide

Age:

How long have lived in this area:

Do you have children/dependents:

Highest education level:

Income: above average/average/below average/inadequate

1. I've asked you to participate in this study because you identify as a woman interested in same-sex intimate relationships. Do you have a term that you use to describe your sexual preferences? (such as lesbian, dyke, queer, bi, etc.)
  - What are the meanings you attribute to this term(s)?
  - When did you first identify with this aspect of sexuality?
  - Did you experience a 'coming out' process?
  - Did you find this difficult, confusing, exciting, etc?
  
2. Have you ever experienced oppression, hostility, or discomfort with others because you have same-sex relationships?
  - Has this occurred in your workplace?
  - Among family and friends?
  - In public settings?
  - Do you ever change your behaviour for particular situations?
  - Are there certain situations in which you invoke a 'lesbian' identity?
  - Are there certain situations when you would not?
  
3. Are you involved in the lesbian and gay 'community' or activism?
  - If yes, explain
    - Is this important to you? How so?
  - If no, have you ever wanted to be?
  - Do you think 'lesbian community' is important?
  - Do you think activism is important?
  - Do you think women and men are relatively equal today?
  - Would you consider yourself a feminist?
  - Do you think there is an ongoing struggle or do you think that lesbian/gay and straight people are relatively equal?
  
4. Have you ever learned, read, heard about either the lesbian and gay movement or the queer movement?
  - If yes, how do you understand these movement(s)?

- Do you find this movement(s) socially, culturally, and/or politically important and meaningful?
  - Do they affect your daily life?
5. In the lesbian and gay movement in the 1970s, many researchers suggested that women chose to be lesbians or involved in same-sex relationships because they wanted to reject patriarchy, male dominance and violence. Others explained their relationships with women as purely based on desire, love, sexual attraction. I'm wondering if either or both of these ideas are true for young lesbians today.
6. In academics, researchers are currently questioning the idea of identity as being fixed. Some have suggested that we can move from these categories of woman/man, gay/straight, and think about gender and sexuality as fluid and stop labeling them. Others think that these are important categories because people's rights and identities are based on them, for example struggling for gay marriage, employment equity, and things like that. What do you think about these two arguments?
- Is a 'lesbian' identity important to you in your personal life?
  - Do you think a lesbian identity is important in a bigger struggle for rights and representation?
  - Do you think we would be better off leaving these categories behind?

## Appendix B

### Sketches of Participants

Leslie is 23 and originally from a mid-sized city in central Ontario. She came to Windsor for university and just graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree. She is currently attending college and works part-time in retail. She considers herself to be in a monogamous relationship.

Sandy is 25 and originally from a small town in north-central Ontario. She came to Windsor for university where she obtained her BA and Bachelor of Education degrees; she is presently seeking employment as an elementary school teacher. She is currently dating.

Anne is 25, of Italian descent, born and raised in Windsor. She has attended some university and is currently in college for journalism, while working full-time as a production associate. She is single.

Harley is 26 and originally from a small town in south-central Ontario. She came to Windsor to attend university however is currently taking time off school and is working as a cashier. She is living with her partner.

Clarissa is 26 and was born and raised in Windsor. She spent several years living in New York City where she pursued a career in the music industry. She is currently a university biology student and works as a bartender. At the time of her interview she was in the process of divorcing her husband, and is in her first long-term, monogamous relationship with a woman.

Drew is 28 and originally from a small farming town in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. She came to Windsor to attend graduate school. She is currently living with her partner.

Holly is 28 and was born and raised in Windsor. She has recently graduated from university with a BA in English Literature and at the time of her interview was about to move to Toronto to live with her partner.

Jessie is 29 and was born and raised in Windsor. She has a BA and is currently employed in a government position as a human resources worker. She is single.

Casey is 30 and was born and raised in Windsor. She attended university in the Eastern United States where she obtained her BA and Master of Arts degrees. She is currently living in Windsor where she works as a bartender and women's hockey coach. She considers herself to be in a monogamous relationship.



Joanna is 31 and originally from a mid-sized Midwestern American city. She came to Windsor to attend graduate school. She commutes between Windsor and her hometown, where she lives with her partner.

Amanda is 34 and describes herself as Native from a small farming town in south-central Ontario. She has a high school education and has worked in an auto plant in Windsor for the past 14 years. She is single.

Paige is 38 and was born and raised in Windsor. She worked as a secretary at a legal firm for the past 15 years; she has recently quit her job and enrolled in university to take biology. She was previously married to a man, with whom she has two children, as well as young child from another heterosexual relationship. She is currently living with her partner with whom she is raising her children.

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