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Dynamics of conflict in lesbian intimate unions: an exploratory study

by

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i

Table of Contents

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Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in this dissertation has been submitted in support of an application for another degree of this or any other university or institute of learning.

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Abstract

The pre-1996 anti-gay/lesbian laws have been repealed and today South Africa's constitution recognizes and protects the rights of homosexual people. The adoption of a new constitution in 1996 included a Bill of rights prohibiting discrimination on sexual orientation and opened up the space for the recognition and protection of the rights of homosexual people. The Equality Clause, Section 9 in the Bill of Rights, prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation by the state and all other persons. The Civil Union Act, passed in November 2006, is the fruition of LGBTI peoples' lobbying for protection and recognition which was made possible by the new constitution. Although Parliament has passed more than 30 progressive laws that include the protection and recognition of LGBTI people, since 1994 there is still a great amount of stigmatization of the homosexual way of life. Not only is the homosexual couple made invisible in many instances, but the couple must also face prejudice from all sectors of society.

The dominant hetero-normative narrative of relationships, has led to an "othering" of same-sex couples and families. Thus, despite equality in terms of the law, lesbian relationships are assumed to be inferior to heterosexual relationships because they are not conventional and are plagued by stereotypes and misconceptions. Unlike heterosexual women, lesbian women must contend with a society in which their lifestyle is not the norm. The impact of this oppressive cultural context on the individual and her intimate union is the subject of this study. Fifteen South African lesbians were interviewed in order to gain in-depth understanding of the potential stressors that intervene to shape their relationships, and their coping mechanisms, within the prevailing social and political milieu. The study outlines a variety of stressors as potential sources of conflict for lesbian couples thus contributing to building understanding of the dynamics of lesbian intimate unions. Additionally, in response to homophobic conceptions which are still dominant in society, the women reveal particular ways of representing themselves and their relationships. Different discourses are appropriated in an effort to present themselves in a more 'favourable' light. They valorise their relationships, adopt strategies to guard themselves and withstand stigmatisation. These actions however, also present certain stressors for their relationships. This exploratory study contributes to the growing body of literature on homosexuality, serving to counteract stereotypes and shed light on the dynamics specific to lesbian relationships. It highlights systemic, contextual, familial and intimate issues and the ways in which gay women contend with them.

Abstrak

Die anti-gay/lesbiër wetgewing wat voor 1996 gegeld het, is herroep. Tans erken en beskerm die grondwet die regte van homoseksuele persone. Die goedkeuring van 'n nuwe grondwet in 1996 het 'n Handves van Menseregte ingesluit wat diskriminasie op grond van seksuele oriëntasie verbied en plek daargestel het vir die erkenning and beskerming van homoseksuele persone se regte. Die Gelykheidsklousule, Afdeling 9 in die Handves van Menseregte, verbied diskriminasie op grond van seksuele oriëntasie deur die staat en alle ander persone. Die Wet op Burgerlike Verbintenisse wat in werking getree het in November 2006 is moontlik gemaak deur die nuwe grondwet en die vrug van werwing van LGBTI persone vir beskerming en erkenning. Ten spyte van meer as 30 progressiewe wette wat die beskerming en erkenning van LGBTI persone insluit wat deur die Parlement sedert 1994 goedgekeur is, is daar steeds 'n groot mate van stigmatisering van die homoseksuele leefwyse. Die homoseksuele paartjie is nie net onsigbaar in baie omstandighede nie, maar moet ook die vooroordele van alle sektore van die samelewing in die gesig staar.

Die dominante hetero-normatiewe narratief oor verhoudings het tot die 'anders-making' ("othering") van paartjies van dieselfde geslag en hul gesinne gelei. Lesbiër verhoudings word dus as minderwaardig aan heteroseksuele verhoudings gesien, ten spyte van hul gelykheid in die reg, omdat hulle nie as konvensioneel beskou word nie en dus met misverstande en stereotipes belas word. In teenstelling met heteroseksuele vroue, staar lesbiër vroue 'n samelewing in die gesig waar hul leefstyl afwyk van die norm. Die impak van hierdie onderdrukkende kulturele konteks op die individu en haar intieme verbintenis is die onderwerp van hierdie studie. Onderhoude is gevoer met vyftien Suid-Afrikaanse lesbiërs om 'n in-diepte begrip te vorm van die potensiële stresveroorsakende faktore wat tussenbeide tree om hul verhoudings te vorm, asook van hul hanteringsmeganismes, binne die heersende sosiale en politieke milieu. Die studie skets 'n verskeidenheid van stresveroorsakende faktore as potensiële bronne van konflik vir lesbiër paartjies en dra só by tot die uitbou van 'n begrip van die dinamiek in lesbiër intieme verhoudings. Daarbenewens, in reaksie op die homofobiese konspesies wat steeds dominant is in die samelewing, onthul die vroue bepaalde wyses waarop hulle, hulself en hul verhoudings voorstel. Verskillende diskoerse word gebruik in hul pogings om hulself in 'n meer aanvaarbare lig voor te stel. Hulle valoriseer hul verhoudings en neem strategieë aan om hulself teen stigma te beskerm en weerstand teen dit te bied. Dié aksies hou egter ook sekere stresveroorsakende faktore vir hul verhoudings in. Hierdie verkennendestudie dra by tot die groeiende massa literatuur oor homoseksualiteit en dien om stereotipes teen te werk en lig te werp op die spesifieke dinamiek van lesbiër verhoudings. Die studie beklemtoon sistemiese, kontekstuele, gesinne en intieme kwessies en die maniere waarop die gay vroue die kwessies hanteer.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Rationale

As a young, (and for the most part) openly homosexual woman, I am very aware of my own divergence from what is considered the norm. My own experience of being repeatedly exposed to heterosexist discourse around lesbianism played a large role in my interest in doing research on lesbian relationships. Before coming out myself, I had told a friend of mine that at our next cycling trip a girl would be joining us, and that she was lesbian. His response was, "Oh… does she look like a man?" This was not the first or last time I had been exposed to such stereotypes. My own experience as an in-the-closet lesbian was a painful one, as the people around me battered and bruised that identity which I struggled to accept. My coming out process was hampered for a long time by people's patronizing jokes, sneers, stereotypes and general lack of awareness about homosexuality. The only lesbians they knew of were the ones that marched at the gay pride and those who were identifiable because of their masculine appearance.

When we had revealed our sexuality and lesbian relationship- upon meeting my partner and I, people would ask questions regarding our gender roles, such as, "So who wears the pants in the relationship?" or, "I can't figure out who of you is the man in the relationship?" This was often accompanied by a rather uncomfortable laugh. They had applied their own heteronormativity, in an effort to normalize the "unusual" relationship by fitting it into heterosexual categories. Neither of us look particularly masculine nor do we follow gender specific roles. What could I say but that our relationship did not subscribe to such prescriptions?

Frustratingly, despite our progressive constitution, there is a lack of awareness about homosexuality, and most of what is thought to be known publicly is based on stereotypes.

As a result of these personal experiences, my interest lies in illuminating how lesbians are confronted by a heterosexual world in their everyday lives and how they are excluded from this. While heterosexual relationships, are encouraged, cosseted and generally given positive energy, same-sex relationships face the opposite reality. Same-sex relationships are

often rejected, ignored and not taken seriously. They are unwelcomed to a large extent and not fully integrated into society. A variety of stereotypes exist which misrepresent, undermine and demoralize homosexual people and their relationships. Fear of rejection and stigmatization cause homosexual people to repress their sexuality or remain hidden. The present world is one that might "accept", but not encourage; or ignore rather than recognize these same-sex unions. Thus, the social climate has a large role to play if we are to understand the additional stressors that same-sex unions may face. This research endeavours to recognize and unravel the dynamics specific to lesbian relationships.

1.2. Problem statement and research question

In the past, homosexuality was viewed as a mental illness. Previously, researchers had been influenced by religious prejudice and social conventions which framed homosexuality as a perversion. Today however, up-to-date research shows that homosexual people are, "just as normal, just as healthy, and just as valuable members of a pluralistic society as are heterosexual people" (Kitzinger 1987:8).

This development of research on homosexuality did not come easy and despite the new research on homosexuality, societal discrimination and adherence to the old discourses and stereotypes is still abundant. One author, Krieger (as quoted by Renzetti 1992:27), outlines that pre-1960 writing on lesbianism was,

> …invariably heterosexist and based on a medical or psychiatric model that depicted lesbians as pathological, perverted, inverted, fixated. Deviant, narcissistic, masochistic and possibly biologically mutated, at best the daughters of hostile mothers and embarrassingly unassertive fathers.

Up until the early 1970s, a large amount of mainstream academic writing and popular public writing in general on lesbianism supported the uncritical view that lesbians were sick in one way or another- products of disturbed upbringings or genetic mishaps. Much of the research focused on the supposed causes of lesbianism and was concerned with devising cures for the ailment. In her book, "The Social Construction of Lesbianism", Kitzinger (1987) outlines that by constructing lesbianism as pathological, scientists had taken the place of priests in condemning and banning socially acceptable behaviour. "Diagnosis is but a semantic lever to justify the elimination of the (alleged) illness" (Szasz 1971 as quoted by Kitzinger 1987:

40). It was only in 1973 that homosexuality was removed from the DSM-II classification of mental disorders and replaced by the category "Sexual Orientation Disturbance". This represented a compromise between the view that homosexuality is invariably a mental disorder and the view that it is merely a normal sexual variant (Spitzer 1981). Due to the controversy of homosexuality, historically, there is a lack of impartial research on topics relating to homosexuality and same-sex unions.

Homosexual issues are somewhat silenced and ignored within the research community- mirroring the ignorance of wider society. Many mistaken beliefs and myths about homosexuality exist, thus making this topic trying because it tackles widely held conventional ideas of gender that are based in heterosexism. Research into lesbianism will challenge misconceptions, thus potentially helping to liberate homosexual people from heterosexist notions and from discrimination.

Lesbian relationships invite considerable interest especially within the current South African context due to the recent changes in policy and the constitution. A look at lesbian unions is appealing, because it sheds light onto additional factors that lesbian partners may be faced with- despite the liberal South African constitution. Living in South Africa, a heterosexist and still relatively conservative society, brings an additional set of challenges to lesbians which need to be exposed. We need not only look at lesbians as a separate group, but also at the society in which they live. The reality is that while same-sex unions have been accorded the same value and are equal to heterosexual intimate unions, homosexuality is still a very taboo subject in South African society. Many unconstructive perceptions of homosexuality are prevalent which render them twisted and deviant by the majority of society. In this climate of heterosexism and homophobia, homosexual people face many challenges. It is the aim of this research to explore what difficulties lesbian intimate unions may face. Additionally, in the face of an unaccommodating environment; I investigate how these women reflect on their identity, and on the challenges faced in their relationships.

While lesbian relationships are represented in dominant public discourses as unusual or out of the ordinary, my own perspective is that these relationships deserve recognition. In spite of equal recognition legally, homosexual people still counter considerable discrimination

and their relationships lack validation and respect. The women in my study are defined as 'different' and face the additional challenge, given this recognition, of being ridiculed by society. I do not subscribe to the dominant stereotypes of the lesbian lifestyle, but respond to this by outlining how lesbians behave and talk within this archetype.

Research on gay and lesbian concerns in South Africa is limited. There is a great need for more scholarship to be built in this area. In view of the paucity of research, this study investigates the dynamics of lesbian relationships to gain a greater understanding of the challenges faced by lesbians, and the factors of conflict within such relationships. The aim of this exploratory study is to gain sociological insight into the sources of conflict and strain in lesbian relationships. In this exploration of the dynamics of such relationships, questions about the effect of the social climate, constructions of gender and domestic violence arise.

In view of this broad aim a key research question is: "What challenges, do lesbian women face in their relationships?" From this question, three secondary questions arise: First, "How do lesbian women reflect on their identity and their lifestyle?" Second, "How are the relational dynamics and sources of conflict of lesbian relationships represented?" and last, "To what extent do lesbians appropriate 'hetero-normativity' in describing their, or other lesbian relationships?"

Chapter two will demonstrate these concerns that have briefly been introduced and will highlight additional topics of relevance. The chapter begins by discussing terminology specific to the topic of lesbians and their lifestyle. Following this, a general outline of how lesbian unions function, their dynamics and the challenges faced are provided. To complete this outline, a discussion of lesbian relationships within the context of South Africa as well as the application of theories is offered. Chapter three addresses the procedures and decisions involved in the design and execution of the research. This chapter maps out the plan that was followed in each phase of the research. Chapters four to seven deal with the findings of the research. The chapters reporting the findings of this research are lengthy in order to cover and reflect on the extensive volume of material collected in this exploratory study. Detail is provided to shed light on key topics. Chapter four deals with lesbianism as an identity, concentrating on how these women identify themselves, how they talk about their

lifestyle and construct discourse. Chapter five and chapter six address potential internal and external stressors respectively. The chapters discuss a variety of potential stressors which had emerged from the data, but also outline particular discourses that had arisen when these women reflected on such conflict. Chapter seven discusses those potential stressors that can neither be classified as internal or external. Each of these chapters highlights and discusses the information that helps to answer the research questions. Chapter eight, the concluding chapter, summarizes the research and the analysis of the data, graphical summaries of the research analysis are provided here.

Chapter 2: Key research and theory on lesbian relationships

2.1. Introduction: concepts and clearing the air

The literature review is of great importance as it sketches a general picture of both the past and current research in the field and demonstrates how past research has shaped general ideas surrounding lesbianism. Such an overview involves a critical look at the research that has been done up until now, as well as the theories that have been developed on the issue of conflict within lesbian relationships. Chapter two begins by outlining terms and themes related to the dissertation topic, these are everyday terms used by and about homosexual people and include those terms found in the literature as well as slang words that are commonly used. Before delving into a full review of the literature, this section will outline and explain some of the main concepts[1] to be dealt with throughout this dissertation, by doing this I will also introduce some of the key concerns of the research.

2.1.1. Heterosexuals, homosexuals, gays and lesbians, GLBTI/Q

Heterosexual is used to describe the sexual orientation of any individual who is attracted to individuals of the opposite sex. The term *heterosexual* is also often replaced and used interchangeably with the term *straight*. Thus, a *straight* relationship includes two partners of the opposite sex. The term *homosexual* is used for both men and women whose primary romantic and sexual attraction is toward partners of the same-sex. Many however dislike using this term, believing that it overemphasizes the sexual aspect of their lifestyle. The term *gay*, although originally used to describe homosexual men, is used to describe both homosexual men and women. Many people in the homosexual community prefer to use the term *gay* to refer to any person or group who is homosexual, both men and women are included in this term.

Lesbian however, refers specifically to women who identify as being sexually and romantically involved with other women. According to Cory (as quoted by Rosenbluth 1997) a *lesbian* is a woman whose main erotic, psychological, emotional and social interest is in a member of her own sex, even though that interest may not be explicitly shown. There are

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[1] A more abridged version of each of these terms as well as additional key terms is included in the glossary to be found in the appendix.

many varying definitions of *lesbian*, the one that I have decided to work with is Brown's (1995: 4) definition of *lesbian* as being a:

> self-ascribed identity held by a woman over time and across situations as having primary sexual, affectional, and relational ties to other women. This identity may or may not be congruent with overt behaviour at any point during the lifespan, and the variables making up this definition may come and go from the foreground from a woman's definition as life circumstances change.

For the purpose of this study, I will use the term *lesbian* to refer to homosexual women; there are however, instances where the literature may use the term *gay* when referring to women. In these instances I will outline the reference to women if it is not explicit. All relationships which involve romantic, sexual and affectionate relationships between women will be encompassed in this study.

LGBT or GLBT is an acronym that was created to refer to and include; Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transsexual people, there is however some variation on the acronym, such as GLBTI, which includes Intersexed individuals or GLBTQ, including those who identify as Queer.

2.1.2. Heterosexuality, heteronormativity, heterosexism, homophobia

Heterosexuality is considered to be the outcome of a normal and healthy psychosexual development, *homosexuality* on the other hand has been considered to be a pathological divergence from that supposed norm (Clunis & Green, as quoted by Lubbe, 2007). Lubbe (2007) further discusses that the consequence of thinking within binary labels, has led to heterosexuality becoming privileged over homosexuality. Homosexual relationships are often rejected on the grounds of *heteronormativity*, the belief that heterosexuality is normal, functional and that all other forms are weak imitations of it. *Heteronormativity* thus assumes and emphasizes the correctness and universality of heterosexuality. *Heteronormativity* indicates how heterosexuality dominates in frequently unconscious or subtle ways. Puri explains that,

> normativity of heterosexuality- the notion that everyone is unquestionably assumed straight (until proven otherwise) - becomes visible in subtle forms of discrimination, indifference, or unwarranted assumptions (as quoted by Lubbe 2007: 264).

I think it is valuable to explain the concepts of *homophobia*, and *heterosexism* here. According to a LGBT OUT Wellbeing (2007) booklet (referred to as OUT from here onwards),

homophobia is the irrational fear of, hatred against, or disgust towards homosexual people. The same OUT booklet explains that *heterosexism* is the belief that everyone is and should be heterosexual and that other sexual orientations are unwholesome, threatening and unnatural. In accordance with these definitions, Ristock (1994:282) explains that *heterosexism* is "…the use of heterosexuality as the dominant and institutionalized form of sexual identity' for dominance and privilege". Lubbe (2007) builds on this idea by outlining the role that heteronormativity plays in emphasizing the correctness of heterosexual dogmas and traditional family forms by censuring, punishing, 'medicalising', and rendering homosexuality invisible. Wright, (2001) uses the term 'heterosexual supremacy' to describe the heterosexual-supremacist notions of society which idealize the 'male/female' bond as being naturally superior to any other variant of sexual relationship. It is this heterosexual supremacy that imposes forms of gendered and patriarchal society on people who don't fit into the neat categories of heterosexuality, thus silencing and marginalizing GLBT people.

Homophobia and heterosexism can take form in a range of behaviours such as: avoidance, discrimination and rejection, verbal and emotional abuse, denial of economic opportunities and physical violence. Homophobia and heterosexism have played a large role in the ongoing scarcity of research exploring lesbian relationships (Kitzinger, 2007), thus data on same-sex relationships, specifically lesbian relationships is very much lacking. Research into lesbian relationships is important because it not only deals with significant issues facing the lesbian community, but it also delves into some sticky areas of gender.

2.1.3. Gender, roles and differences

When referring to *gender*, I am referring to the socially constructed beliefs that are developed around notions of what defines men and women. *Gender roles* are sets of behaviour that society considers appropriate for members of each sex. These constructed ideas have significant influences on our actions in everyday life as well as our behaviour towards others. Weedon (1999:5) outlines that,

> Gender difference is not naturally given but is an effect of relations of knowledge and power which permeate all areas of life. Moreover, the ways in which gender difference is defined are far from neutral.

Gender differences are those that are socially constructed and ultimately play key roles in shaping our everyday relationships and behaviours. Weedon (1999) discusses an important idea as expressed by the radical French writer Helene Cixous in her well-known essay, 'Sorties'. The point made is that, in Western thought especially, 'gender' tends to be conceptualized as a set of polarized oppositions in which one set is privileged over the other. Masculinity versus femininity. A few examples that she discusses are father/mother, head/heart and reason/emotion. Such structures value aspects defined as male above those defined as female. Binary thinking also relies on certain assumptions about gender, for example, it is presumed that men are the more violent, controlling, dominant and assertive of the two sexes, which implies that women are the opposite thereof, and thus, fragile, submissive and sensitive. Heterosexual relationships are seen to be based in nature, to be functional and even necessary. Binary thinking compliments the idea that heterosexual relationships are natural and necessary, because it appeals to common sense understanding that opposites balance and compliment each other.

The objective is not to delve into a debate on whether men truly are more dominating, or biologically predisposed to aggression- rather I highlight the implications of social constructions on the way one views or studies certain phenomena. Understanding these dichotomies is valuable because it shows an exclusion of the middle ground and also highlights the faults of attempting to use conventional notions of gender for less conventional gender practices. These are important concepts to understand, because it shows how the heterosexist status quo is supported and restored. From what has been read in the literature, as well as from general conversation with people, it becomes evident that these dichotomies are applied, rather casually, to lesbian relationships too.

Stereotypical gender roles are at the core of our understanding or rather misunderstanding of homosexual relationships. It is precisely because the 'norms of gender' are adhered to that homosexual relationships are seen as peculiar and out of the ordinary. This 'traditional'/ binary thinking has led to homosexual relationships being fitted into a heterosexual mould. This is done, for example, by classifying partners as either butch or femme or classifying one partner as, 'more masculine' and thus the individual who adopts the husband/manly role and vice versa.

2.1.4. Butches and femmes

The concept of *butch* and *femme* identities have been heavily debated amongst lesbians, even agreeing to what the terms mean has proven to be a difficult task (GLBTQ, 2004). Defining these terms is a difficult task because so many interpretations exist, and there is no consensus. Put very simply, *butch* and *femme* lesbians adopt traditional gender roles, *butches* assuming masculine identities, wearing men's clothing and being more sexually aggressive, while *femmes* would assume feminine identities, wearing feminine clothing, and being more emotional. The limitations of such a definition must be noted, because it fails to take into account the diversity that exists within these roles, as well as the fact that classification of these identities is not simple.

Butch and *femme* sexual and emotional identities have a long history, emerging in the 1930s bar culture of working class women. The popularity of butch and femme roles has risen and fallen in different historical periods, for instance, during the 1940s and 1950s, butch and femme roles were accepted by a large number of lesbians as a model for lesbian unions. By the 1970s, butch-femme roles were no longer favourable and were widely perceived by lesbian feminists as oppressive (GLBTQ, 2004).

In the 1950s the butch-femme couple was considered the norm among the lesbian community and was the most visible and accepted way of being lesbian. In fact any deviance from these identities was stigmatized; women who did not fall into either category were often rejected and labeled as being confused (GLBTQ, 2004). However, with the feminist movement in the 1970s, the butch-femme culture was harassed for replicating heterosexual relationships which were oppressive to women and a replication of patriarchy. While butch-femme relationships still exist within the lesbian community, there is a divide between those who involve themselves in a butch-femme dynamic and those who reject it entirely.

Some femmes have been dismissed as being too pretty to be *real* lesbians. On the opposite side, those lesbians and bisexual women who do not understand the appeal of butch women are often heard saying things like, "If I wanted to be with somebody who looks like a man, I would be with a man!" (GLBTQ, 2004). But according to Carol Queens (1994:88) writing on butch women, "Male'" traits in females constitute something else altogether—

something our gender-impoverished language doesn't offer us words to describe". Many women have argued that *butch* and *femme* are labels that oversimplify, generalize and box complex identities into false dichotomies. The butch-femme dynamic is a lot more complex than simply distinguishing between the manlier, stronger, dominant woman and the softer, quieter or less dominant woman.

Many lesbians reject both butch and femme identities, holding androgyny as the ideal-being able to identify as both male and female. Today, unlike in the 1950s, butches and femmes are not expected to date only each other, but it is acceptable to have two femmes or two butches in a relationship together (GLBTQ, 2004).

This stereotyped masculine/feminine classification has been used to explain lesbian relationships as well as the phenomenon of lesbian partner abuse. However, gender is not necessarily conformed to in all situations such as the rigid role-playing of *butch* (masculine) and *femme* (feminine) lesbians, as is often believed. It is shown that, many homosexual couples actively reject heterosexual role playing (Renzetti 1992; Miller, Bobner & Zarski 2000). While many have claimed that it is a misconception to think that all lesbians follow the butch-femme relationship model, there are some instances in which this heterosexual modeling is found. For example, Kheswa & Wieringa (2005:212) discuss their research findings of interviews with black lesbian women in Johannesburg. They report that, the dominant way of living in a same-sex relationship for women is within the butch-femme subculture, thus women have a choice to be either butch or femme. These authors also discuss the fact that these identities are often fluid, thus women may switch between butch and femme during different times of their lives. Despite whether lesbian women identify as butch or femme or neither, the challenge of accepting lesbianism as an identity proves difficult for many. The process of accepting homosexuality as an identity and asserting this in a largely heterosexist and homophobic environment is a difficult process for many homosexual people.

2.1.5. Coming out

Coming out is a process shared by all homosexual people, whether they have *come out* already or are concerned about it. *Coming out* involves the disclosure of ones sexuality in

the face of possible rejection from society, family and friends. This process involves anxiety and a fear of what others will think. *Coming out* to ones family and friends is often very difficult to do and involves a lot of fretting on the part of the homosexual over whether they will be rejected, scorned or be viewed as a disappointment to their loved ones. Outproud, an organization for and about LGBT people, explains that *coming out* is a process of constructing and then asserting a homosexual identity. This process involves both *coming out* to oneself in the form of acceptance as well as assuming this identity at all levels of society (outproud, 1995). *Coming out*, it must be outlined, is not a once off thing; because heterosexuality is assumed in most cases, homosexuals may have to come out to many different people, in many different situations. Each *coming out* brings with it a different set of challenges.

2.2. Lesbian intimate unions: a discussion

Kurdek, a leading author in the field of homosexual relationships, has provided a large body of research investigating different aspects of these relationships, which serves to outline the functioning of homosexual relationships and also draws similarities to and differences from heterosexual relationships. One study by Kurdek (2004) entitled, *"Are Gay and Lesbian Cohabiting Couples Really Different from Heterosexual Married Couples?"* found that despite a general social climate of prejudice against gay men and lesbians, being part of a couple is integral to the lives of many gay men and lesbians. This research was conducted by comparing gay and lesbian couples to heterosexual couples on variables previously proven to be indicative of relationship health, stability and quality. The first of the three variables used is, *relationship style* which involves balancing of intimacy, autonomy and equality. Second, *Conflict resolution* refers to the interactions between individuals which are important because it is regarded as the most important task of close relationships. And last, *social support,* an important category showing the social contexts, involving family members and friends, in which couples are embedded. Importantly too, is how the forces from these social contexts affect the stability of relationships. It was found that found that for 50% of the comparisons, gay and lesbian partners did not differ from heterosexual partners. 78% of the comparisons on which the differences were found indicated that gay or lesbian partners functioned better than heterosexual partners did. Overall the study by Kurdek (2004) showed that homosexual couples did not function in ways that placed their relationships at

risk for distress. The only area in which gay and lesbian partners fared worse than heterosexual partners was that they received less social support from family members than what heterosexual couples did (Kurdek 2004).

Many authors have written about gay and lesbian relationships; comparing, finding similarities and differentiating them from heterosexual relationships. I will summarize these findings under the most common themes.

2.2.1. Levels of satisfaction

Most evidence points to the fact that gay men and lesbians are on average satisfied with their relationship, place great importance on their relationship and also that their level of satisfaction is at least equal to that of heterosexual couples (Marecek, Finn & Cardell 1988; Peplau & Amaro 1982; Peplau & Gordon 1983). The correlates used for measuring relationship satisfaction include feelings of having equal power and control, perceiving many attractions and few alternatives to the relationship, placing value on attachment, and engaging in shared decision-making (Blumstein & Schwartz 1983; Kurdek 1994). Studies by Peplau and Cochran (1990) that compare heterosexual and homosexual relationships found that both lesbians and gay men reported very positive feelings about their partners, and that, their relationships were very satisfying. Thus to summarize, there were no differences as a function of sexual orientation on any of the measures of relationship quality and both gay men and lesbians had high rates of satisfaction in their relationship (Peplau & Cochran 1990).

2.2.2. Household labour and divisions of power

Peplau and Cochran (1990) have found that a great majority of lesbian and gay men believe that an equal balance of power is desirable. For example, Kurdek (2005) in an article entitled, *What Do We Know About Gay and Lesbian Couples?* outlines topics that are specifically relevant to lesbian and gay couples. The first being household labour. Carrington (1999:18) further elaborates on this and says that,

> because gay men and lesbians cannot use the gender of the partner to fashion the content of their relationships, they must negotiate common couple-level issues such as household labour.

A difference exists, because for many heterosexual couples, biological sex is the factor that determines which partner assumes which roles. Gay couples however have to divide household chores independently of biological sex (Blumstein & Schwartz 1983 and Kurdek 1993).

Although some believe that, in same-gender couples, one partner plays a traditionally "male" role and one a traditionally "female" role, research has shown that this is rarely the case (Kurdek 1995; Peplau et al. 1996). Kurdek (2005) outlines characteristics that have emerged from studies done on how homosexual couples divide household labour. First, and contrary to stereotypical beliefs, homosexual couples do not assign roles according to traditional heterosexual husband and wife roles. Second, although they may not divide household chores in a perfectly equal manner, they are more likely to negotiate a fair distribution of household labor by accommodating the different interests, skills, and work schedules of particular partners (Kurdek 2005).

Unlike the majority of heterosexual couples who emphasize traditional masculine-feminine role behaviour, most homosexual couples reject these roles. Instead it's reported that, the division of labour develops along a "best friend" model rather than that of a traditional marriage (Peplau & Gordon 1983:226). Authors such as Blumstein & Schwartz (1983), Kurdek (1993) and Harry & DeVall (1978), report similar findings about the "best friend" model of gay relationships in their research of homosexual couples.

In their study of gay and lesbian couples, McWhirter & Mattison (1984) noted that the handling of household chores varied by stage of the relationship. They noted that in the first year of the relationship, partners shared almost all household chores. Later, as routines were established, chores were assigned based on partners' skills and work schedules. Blumstein & Schwartz (1983) and Kurdek (1993) had also noted that lesbian couples at any stage of their relationship were particularly likely to divide household labour equally. Thus the delegation of chores was flexible and could for example adjust to the work schedules of each of the partners.

Mary Mendola's, *The Mendola Report: A new look at Gay Couples*, (1980) is a report on both gay men and lesbian couples. Mendola believed that the fact that same-sex partners cannot be assigned husband or wife roles based on the traditional basis of biological sex, gave these partners the ability to remain free of the conventional feminine and masculine stereotypes. This is also echoed by authors such as Peplau (1988); Peplau & Gordon (1983) and Marecek, Finn & Cardell (1988). While this ability to evade sex-defined duties has been named as an advantage above straight relationships, it must be noted that it may require an amount of open communication and compromise between partners in order to be successful.

2.2.3. Stability

Kurdek (2005) outlines that many survey results and studies show that heterosexual couples are more likely to stay together for longer than homosexual couples are. It is shown that homosexual couples are able to develop long term stable relationships, but that their rates of breakup are higher than heterosexual couples. This is often due to the comparable lack of support that gay and lesbian couples face from social institutions. Homosexual couples are not affected as much by certain institutional forces, such as those social, legal and religious barriers to leaving relationships. Also, not many gay people raise children, removing another factor that is often a barrier to separation for heterosexual couples.

> Thus, perhaps what is most impressive about gay and lesbian couples is not that they may be less stable than heterosexual married couples, but rather that they manage to endure without the benefits of institutionalized supports (Kurdek 2005: 253).

This lack of formalized institutionalized barriers to leaving homosexual relationships shows that gay and lesbian relationships function in a context that is very different from that of heterosexual couples (Kurdek 2005; Porche & Purvin 2008). Homosexual relationships are faced with forces that pull them apart and name their relationship as deviant. Such discouraging messages can have a negative impact on the partners as well as the relationship itself.

2.2.4. Conflict

With regard to conflict, Kurdek (2005) outlines that, conflict between heterosexual couples is thought to occur because of the differences between men and women and how each perceives their worlds, if this is true, we can expect to find that same-sex couples resolve

conflict better than heterosexual couples do. Kurdek (2004) found that homosexual couples resolved conflict easier and in a more positive manner than heterosexual couples did because they argue more effectively, are less likely to use poor method of conflict resolution, and are more likely to propose solutions and compromises (Kurdek 2004).

Authors Gottman, Levenson, Swanson, Tyson & Yoshimoto (2003) have speculated that lesbian couples handle conflict better than heterosexual couples do, because they value equality more and have less power and status differences between them. In an article discussing the similarities and differences of gay and lesbian couples, from the *Time Magazine* (2008:37) it was noted that because gender roles are less prevalent in homosexual relationships, these relationships are often more equal than heterosexual marriages. This may be true for some couples, but the reality (often overlooked) is that lesbian and gay couples are often involved in domestically violent and dysfunctional relationships. A similarity that Kurdek (2005) outlines between homosexual and heterosexual couples is that both couples are likely to disagree over the same issues. So the differences in conflict resolution between heterosexual and homosexual couples seem to be more about how the conflict is handled, rather than what the conflict is about.

When lesbian and gay couples experience tensions in their relationships, many of these stem from the same roots from which difficulties in straight relationships arise. In homosexual couples, problems can also arise as a result of job problems, financial pressures on the couple or friction with members of extended family networks, just as they do in straight relationships (Patterson 2000). There are however some problems that are unique to lesbian and gay relationships, such as those posed by couples having to deal constantly with discrimination, disagreement over disclosure of sexuality or disclosure of being in a homosexual relationship. Green (as quoted by Porche & Purvin 2008:146) describes a framework of risks that may negatively affect the development of the homosexual couple, which include, "Homophobia (internal and external), a lack of a normative and legal template for same-sex couples and low levels of family support".

2.2.5. Relationship support

With regard to family relationships of lesbians, Patterson (2000) notes that because of the stigma attached to non-heterosexual identities, those who declare lesbian or gay identities often do so at the risk of their family relationships. According to Rostosky, Riggle, Gray & Hatton (as quoted by Porche & Purvin 2008: 145), "Experiences of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation may be perpetrated by family members and mark a break with family". Despite these obstacles, gay people have often succeeded in developing and sustaining meaningful family relationships.

Huston (2000), states that it must be recognized that relationships develop within social contexts, and thus, the level of support for ones relationship will determine the health of that relationship.

> The lack of support for one's primary close relationship is often viewed as a unique stressor for gay men and lesbians and perhaps represents the overall lack of legal, social, political, economic, and religious support that gay and lesbian partners experience in their relationships (Kurdek 2005: 252).

This is not to say that homosexual people do not receive support at all. In a study of midlife lesbians, it was found that one of their greatest sources of support was lesbian friends of the same age. It was also found that many of the women turned to their "new family" of gay friends for support, rather than their biological family. Large numbers of lesbians hide their sexuality from their family which may explain why some are less involved with their families. Despite this, there are many women who have maintained very strong family ties and often lean on them for support (Kimmel & Sang 1995; Kurdek 2000).

2.2.6. Summary of lesbian intimate unions

In studies that have compared homosexual and heterosexual relationships, both similarities and differences have been found. These relationships, because they are not defined by gender roles, theoretically have a better chance at achieving equality in the relationship. It has been said that many homosexual couples reject heterosexual modeling and pride themselves on their ability to negotiate chores and household duties. Very high levels of satisfaction have been reported in studies of lesbian and gay couples.

Homosexual relationships are different in that they are not socially legitimate; these relationships face anxiety over rejection as well as discrimination. Homosexual couples often have to deal with issues of coming out to, or conversely hiding from their families. The process of coming out, both individually and as a couple, can be a daunting and worrying undertaking. With regard to conflict, it was reported that homosexual and heterosexual couples often fought about the same issues, it was the method of conflict resolution that was often different. There was however certain areas of difficulty that homosexual couples endured which heterosexual couples were not exposed to. There have been reports of poor levels of social support for homosexual couples, other gays and lesbians being reported as the main sources of support. Taking all of this into consideration, there is a need to look at the dynamics that are specific to lesbian relationships.

2.3. Dynamics of lesbian relationships

Just as there are similarities between homosexual and heterosexual relationships, there are some important differences that are particular to homosexual relationships. Some differences that affect lesbian couples in particular are homophobia and stigmatization, poor/ lack of support systems, the notion of merging or fusion, ideas around 'mutual abuse' and attachment. Additionally, Elliott (1996:5) outlines that some of the chief differences affecting lesbian relationships are the affects of cultural oppression and internalized homophobia as well as,

> …the use of the unique psychological threat of 'outing' a partner, the extreme isolation experienced by gay and lesbian domestic violence victims because of a lack of societal recognition, and the lack of appropriate services.

2.3.1. Stigma and discrimination

Despite the greater acceptance of homosexuality in some sectors of South Africa, such as the law, heterosexual couples are still preserved as the normative form of adult relationships. Not only is the homosexual couple made invisible in many instances, but the couple must also face bias from all sectors of society.

> Significant societal biases remain evident in the media, for example in newspaper accounts of legal debates, television debates on moral and religious issues pertaining to the family, the portrayal of families in school text books, articles in popular magazines and the legal questions such as the debate around the sanctioning of same-sex marriage (Lubbe 2007: 262).

A study carried out by OUT, revealed that 37 percent of a sample of lesbian, gay or bisexual people had experienced verbal harassment or abuse because of their sexual orientation while 12 percent had been asked to leave their faith or religious community because of their sexual orientation (Wells, Kruger, and Judge, 2006).

Thus there is still stigma attached to non-heterosexual people because of the privileged position of heterosexuality. The dominant narrative of the family, has led to an "othering" of same-sex couples and families. Although homosexual marriage is legal in South Africa, integration is difficult to achieve. Thus, all people are assumed to be heterosexual (read: innocent) until proven gay (read: guilty). Since heterosexuality is assumed in most cases, homosexual people will be put in positions having to answer questions like, "What does your husband do for a living?" or "Where is your girlfriend tonight?" Questions like these put the homosexual person in a position where they may have to contemplate the outcome of revealing their sexuality or concealing it.

Unlike heterosexual women, lesbian women must contend with a society in which their lifestyle/ sexuality is not the norm. The impact of this oppressive cultural context on the individual has been referred to as "minority stress". According to Balsam & Szymanski (2005: 259), "Minority stress is psychosocial stress derived from being a member of a minority group that is stigmatized and marginalized". This stress could result from the pressure of coming out, or the anxiety that comes with concealing ones sexuality, fear of rejection and discrimination. These stressors related to cultural oppression may also result in internalized homophobia; when lesbian women internalize negative messages about themselves and their relationships.

2.3.2. Myths and misconceptions

There are many myths surrounding homosexuality, most of them based in heterosexism. These are often held by people outside of the gay community, they are discriminatory and offensive because they portray homosexuality in a negative light which further isolates them.

There is a public belief that all lesbians are butch. This myth stems from the visibility of and ability to identify the butch lesbian, while the more feminine lesbian goes unnoticed. The average person on the street only sees the butch lesbian and assumes that this is what it means to be lesbian. Some lesbians do fall into these categories, but many believe they should not have to adopt such restrictive roles to express their love of women. This does not mean judgment should be passed on those women who are in butch-femme relationships and who are happy with their roles. This disproves the next myth that gay men and lesbians are easy to identify. Parker (2006) outlines that while there may be some women who look more masculine than others, the general lesbian population looks similar to the general female population. Thus, a woman should not be classified as lesbian or straight based on her appearance, hair length or whether she wears make-up or not because this is an unfair categorization. People often use gay and lesbian stereotypes to identify a person's sexual orientation, this does not recognize the fact that the homosexual community is very diverse and its members cannot be neatly categorized into stereotypes.

Another myth exists which classifies lesbians as man-haters. Lesbianism is not a dislike of men, only an emotional and physical attraction to other women. Not wanting to be romantically or sexually involved with a man does not translate into hate. There is also, as already stated a false belief that one partner always plays the husband role, and the other the wife role. This myth has been debunked and much research has shown that gay men and women often actively reject traditional husband-wife or masculine-feminine roles (Renzetti 1992; Miller, Bobner & Zarski 2000; Peplau & Gordon 1983). Many researchers have shown that it is more often that homosexual relationships do not conform to traditional 'masculine' and 'feminine' roles; but rather that role-flexibility and turn-taking are more common patterns (Peplau 1988; Kurdek 2002).

Another set of myths stem from the need to explain what causes homosexuality. It is incorrect to believe that women become lesbians because they have had bad or negative sexual experiences with men. A 1990 study reported by Balsam & Szymanski (2005) of lesbians and female students found that there was no significant difference when compared with traumatic heterosexual experiences. Both lesbian and heterosexual women reported the same number of traumatic experiences including molestation, rape, physical abuse and

incest. According to mcgill.queerhealth (2007) most women said they began to question their sexual orientation because they felt strong emotional and/or sexual bonds with women and not because they felt an aversion towards men. Another belief is that lesbianism is generated in damaged families where the mother was emotionally distant or too domineering. The reality is that, many people who are not homosexual have come out of broken families, and conversely many homosexual people come from families without any negative history in them.

Research has only shown that we cannot identify a cause for homosexuality. This need to "diagnose" homosexuality has an interesting heterosexist slant; it assumes that it is something unnatural and something which could be prevented or cured. In fact, studies have shown that there are observations of same-sex behaviour and gender fluidity throughout the animal kingdom and from every known culture in the world (Parker 2006). Also an interesting note is that, as one gay and lesbian organization has pointed out, "People never wonder or ask what causes heterosexuality…" (Parker 2006:5). Although there are some religions that accept homosexual people as people of God, many conservative congregations frame homosexuality as immoral and there are a variety of religious texts that can be used to condemn homosexuality. Homosexual people often have to struggle with their identity being at odds with their religious beliefs.

Another prominent myth is that lesbians and gays are not good parents, because, they introduce their children to the homosexual lifestyle which causes their children to turn out homosexual. First, parents' sexual orientation does not predict their children's sexual orientation and second, many studies have documented developmental differences between the children of heterosexual and homosexual couples and there has been no evidence of any difference (Parker 2006; Kurdek 2005).

All of the above myths and misconceptions are steeped in the notion that gay and lesbian relationships are abnormal and dysfunctional. Homosexual relationships are assumed to be inferior to straight relationships because they are not the norm and they lack depth of feeling and commitment. However, as demonstrated earlier, many studies (Peplau & Cochran 1990, Kurdek 2005) have shown that when heterosexual and homosexual couples

are compared, there is no difference regarding their satisfaction levels or commitment levels. In fact, as outlined earlier, the only variable in which they differ is that homosexual couples have lower levels of social support (Kurdek 2005). A possible result of same-sex couples experiencing lower support levels may result in the phenomenon of merging or fusion.

2.3.3. Merging: a mechanism for protection

A prevalent theme with regard to lesbian relationships is the idea of *fusion.* The concept of fusion is, "used to describe the person's state of embeddedness in, of undifferentiation within, the relational context" (Karpel 1976: 67). The theory of fusion dates back to before 1980, but still provides relevant and interesting arguments. Krestan & Bepko (1980) outline that fusion may also occur in heterosexual relationships, but it was found to occur more frequently and with greater intensity in committed lesbian relationships.

The issue of 'boundaries' becomes important. Minuchin, (as quoted by Kreston and Bepko, 1980:277-278) defines the "boundaries of subsystem as the rules defining who participates in it, and how…" Thus the lesbian couple is viewed as the subsystem functioning within society, the larger system. The authors describe that for the relationship to function, it requires certain rules and some structures that, "…both differentiate it *from* the larger system and define its relationship *to* that system" (Krestan and Bepko, 1980: 278). The problem arises when these rules and boundaries, as defined by the couple, go unrecognized by the larger system. Thus the lesbian relationship is either invisible or completely pathological. This absence of, or negative responses to the lesbian relationship from the larger system results in the couples' tendency, "to rigidify those boundaries further and to turn in on themselves, adopting what has been described as a 'two against a threatening world' posture'" (Krestan and Bepko, 1980: 278). The result of this is a closed system; the couple often cut themselves off from others and thus look to each other for support. Intensity of the fusion increases and individual boundaries become blurred. The problem occurs when partners experience difference or separation that intrudes on their 'one-ness'.

The heterosexual couple receives positive reactions from the larger society; its boundaries and rules are seen as the norm, feedback is encouraging and the necessity and sacredness

of these unions is acknowledged. Because the homosexual couple have to spend so much time and energy creating their own boundaries and private spaces in the face of countervailing forces, any energy spent on more individual interests or needs may tip the relationship balance and result in its end. Lesbian relationships do not have the same institutions supporting the couples' union as do heterosexual couples. To demonstrate how the homosexual partnership is pulled apart, while the heterosexual couple is pushed together, Krestan and Bepko (1980:279) are quoted; "It is as though the heterosexual pair operates in an energy field of centripetal force and the homosexual pair operates in a field of centrifugal force". Living in a system closed off from the rest of society seems to be the survival response of these women. Unfortunately the more tightly the boundaries are drawn, the more likely that the partners will fuse.

Abbot and Love, (1973:188) refer to the closed system that lesbian couples face commenting that,

> It is not surprising that lesbians try to minimize mistreatment by hiding. Outside their home or apartment, women who care for each other do not feel free to show affection; they do not like to cheapen their love by exposing it to ridicule. The privacy of the home offers freedom, but in time the home can become a prison.

Lindenbaum (1985) discusses the notion of 'merging' which is similar to that of 'fusion' as discussed by Pearlman (1989) and that of Krestan and Bepko (1980). Merging is based on the idea that women are socialized to be very empathetic and nurturing in their relationships, thus making lesbian relationships all the more emotionally intense. Each woman attempts to fulfill the other-almost in a mother identified role.

> The crisis occurs when one of the women begins to feel that she has become lost in her partner. She no longer has a sense of who she is. She feels invisible, unacknowledged, 'less than' (Lindenbaum 1985:86).

Thus, when two people are involved in merging, the materialization of 'difference' (or the attempt by one partner to do something independently) is experienced as a sign of differentiation or even rejection, thus reflecting the difficult reality that they are not merged, but that they are two separate people. This in turn creates tension in the relationship. McKenry, Serovich, Mason and Mosack (2006:235) refer to studies by Lockhart et al. (1994) as well as those by Miller, Greene, Causby, White and Lockhart (2001) that are valuable in illustrating that, fusion or a high level of commitment with one's intimate

partner was a predictor of psychological abuse in lesbian couples. Outside negativity also functions to further insulate the couple, they feel targeted by the world and turn to each other for support and protection against the outside world.

2.3.4. Coming out of the closet

Coming out is "that first permission we give ourselves to name our love for women as love, to say I am lesbian" Adrienne Rich (1980b as quoted by Maher and Pusch 1995: 25). Coming out can have many meanings, a woman's first sexual experience with another women, a woman's acceptance of the label lesbian, her declaration to others or even to herself. However it is defined, it requires a woman to take a stand against a cultural taboo (Baetz: 1984 as quoted by Maher and Pusch 1995: 26).

The often daunting task of revealing ones sexuality is a chore that plagues many homosexual people and their relationships (Goffman 1968, Kritzinger & van Aswegan 1992). Lesbian women are faced with challenging decisions, both as individuals and as couples, about when and how to come out to others. While there are many barriers to coming out, some research has shown that, having a greater degree of outness can be associated with lower levels of psychological stress, higher self-esteem and more positive emotional states (Balsam & Szamanski 2005). According to Peplau (1988) disclosure of sexual orientation can contribute to relationship quality by potentially increasing acknowledgement and validation for a couple from others. Conversely, a lack of disclosure may lead to an isolated relationship with the couple not receiving external support or validation.

Homosexuality continues to be stigmatized in our society, thus when coming out, people hearing the news may feel called upon to take some position or make some statement in response to learning of a person's differing sexual preference (Krestan & Bepko 1980). As mentioned earlier, most lesbians find that their heterosexuality is assumed. For example, when invited to an office party, or work function, it is assumed that although they are not married, there is a male friend who will accompany them. The lesbian is then faced with the decision of either not going to any such functions which will allow her to engage socially with colleagues, or she could make the uncomfortable/ risky choice of revealing her sexuality. Revealing ones sexuality, is not simply sharing information, it forces a response

from social acquaintances that often goes beyond the level of intimacy normally shared (Krestan & Bepko 1980).

Thus the person on the receiving end of the information is expected to respond in some way, either negatively or positively, and often this person feels they are privileged to have received such "secret" information. This situation of coming out has been applied to a work situation but is equally, if not more difficult to reveal to friends or family. Thus not revealing to friends and family may serve as a protective mechanism against the perceived threat of discrimination, violence or rejection.

A family's response to learning of their daughter being in a lesbian relationship may be one of acceptance or rejection. In the case that the family accepts the couple, there is a degree of difference when compared to the daughter being in a straight relationship. Not only may the family be skeptical about the relationship, but often do not give it the same status as what a heterosexual relationship would. Krestan and Bepko (1980) outline that it is very rare that the lover of the lesbian daughter is acknowledged as having status more significant than that of a 'close friend,' even though the couple may live together or share possessions. Where the heterosexual couple experience pressure to "coupledom", the same-sex couple faces many pressures to be separate and deny their intimacy. A lesbian relationship may not be seen as serious or may only be accredited with second class status, because of the belief that the most legitimate form of intimacy is that shared with a man (Krestan & Bepko 1980).

Thus many areas of potential conflict can materialize if one or both partners in the couple are not out. Having a hidden relationship would mean a lack of external validation and acceptance. The literature has shown that despite having an open relationship, it may not always be given the same acknowledgment as a straight relationship is given. People who are skeptical may not think seriously about the relationship and may label it as a phase or being due to some confusion. Pressure may also be placed on the couple to conceal their affection or to hide any intimacy between them. All of these make coming out a difficult task for many lesbians.

2.3.5. Agencies of "support"

Most support structures cater mainly for heterosexual people, and are not always receptive to lesbian women, or aware of the dynamics that affect lesbian couples. Lesbians may feel alienated because of the heterosexist assumptions of support agencies. The participants from Renzetti's study (1992) reported little help from police and a feeling of isolation because the services were not perceived as being available or open to lesbians. Additionally lesbians may feel extra stress about having to disclose their sexual identity upon dealing with a service provider.

Social support networks are not only important in times of need, but they also give people a source of acceptance and a backing of encouragement. Family, friends, religious congregations and the gay community could all be sources of support for lesbian women. It was however reported that lesbians were reluctant to go to their family members to discuss any problems for fear of disapproval and homophobic responses. Family and friendship groups are important reference groups and the threat of being rejected or shunned plays a huge role in determining whether the lesbian discloses information about her sexuality or not (Kritzinger & Van Aswegan 1992).

Many studies have reported that, both gay men and lesbians indicate that a major source of support for their relationships came from other gay and lesbian people, followed by siblings, mother and father (Kurdek 1995).

2.3.6. Domestic violence and abuse

Domestic Violence is a topic that is often discussed in the literature on lesbian relationships and thus deserves an overview. While many are shocked to hear about it, a large body of literature suggests that domestic violence between homosexual couples often occurs for the same or similar reasons as in heterosexual relationships (Cruz & Firestone 1998; Merrill 1998). It was found that common reasons for domestic violence (both heterosexual and homosexual) include jealousy and insecurity, financial strain, previous experience with family violence and substance abuse (Cruz 2000).

Chan (2005:2) outlines that gay and lesbian relationships are distinct in that they have forms of abuse that are specific to their type of relationship. Pharr (as quoted by Miller et al. 2000:197) states that,

> Battered heterosexual women experience abuse within a misogynistic social structure, but battered lesbians and gay men experience abuse in a society that is both misogynistic and homophobic.

For example, homophobia and heterosexism are factors less likely to affect heterosexual couples than lesbians. Homophobia affects the lesbian relationship at both a societal and internal level. Renzetti (1992) notes that the lesbian experience of partner abuse in a world that is both misogynistic and homophobic has implications for the internal dynamics of the relationship as well as how the partners interact outside of it. Within the relationship, homophobia, heterosexism and the threat of stigmatization are manipulative tactics that may be used by an abuser to intimidate, control or deter partners from seeking help. This additional type of emotional abuse has been called, "cultural/identity abuse" by "The Network La Red," an organization that has the aim of spreading information about lesbian, bisexual and transgender abuse. "Identity Abuse," is defined as the abuse resulting from threatening to out a partners sexual orientation or gender identity. Pitt (2001:124) in the same line of thought acknowledges that LGBT abusers may use homophobic language, criticism of body appearance, and sexual performance based on sexual orientation or gender identity in order to maintain power and control over the victim.

Several factors play a role in covering up the reality of lesbian partner abuse; aptly it has been named the "second closet". First, societal ideas of women have had a large role to play- the belief in women's inherent nature as caregivers and mothers leads people to believe that women are not violent towards one another. In my own experience, everyday conversations reveal that many are shocked to hear that lesbian partner abuse occurs at all.

Second, the lesbian community itself, to prevent further bias and disapproval, has been silent about incidences of abuse because it is felt that society will develop even more negative impressions of the lesbian way of life. The acknowledgement of lesbian partner abuse may serve to prove negative stereotypes and may lead to the further entrenchment of even more harmful myths. The silence around same-sex domestic violence has to a large

degree been reinforced by the fear that acknowledging it may feed societal homophobia and contribute to further bias that pathologises lesbian and gay relationships. This lack of knowledge and openness within the lesbian community has also played its role in silencing domestic violence.

> The gay and lesbian community shares responsibility for keeping same-sex domestic violence in the "closet"…the community sought to keep this issue quiet due to shame and the reluctance to provide ammunition for the homophobic majority who would use such problems to demonstrate supposed inferiority (Elliot 1996:6).

Some in the lesbian community developed their own literature that characterizes and celebrates lesbianism as a political choice that rejects male domination. They idealize lesbian relationships as, "…egalitarian, non-competitive, and free of power struggles that plague heterosexual relationships" (Pearlman, as quoted by Renzetti 1992:27). Painting the lesbian community as one that is based on equality and mutual caring has played a role in the 'overlooking' of lesbian partner abuse. These gay affirmative literatures have been critiqued because of their role in silencing some issues within the homosexual community, however they have played a positive role in refuting certain biased myths. Renzetti (1992) outlines that this set of literature has however been important for how issues of conflict in lesbian relationships are being dealt with. They have directed the focus away from 'lesbianism as an illness' towards an interest in gaining a better understanding of their lifestyle and issues that they may be confronted with. Thus the focus moved from assuming that lesbianism itself is the cause of interpersonal difficulties, to now focusing on how daily living in a homophobic and heterosexist environment may negatively affect lesbian's self concept and relationship quality (Renzetti 1992).

Partner abuse itself, needs to be understood in its broader sociological sense, such as the political, economic and legal context. Homosexual people are, to a large extent disempowered by homophobia, heterosexism and discrimination, as well as often being isolated from their family and friends. It is according to Chan (2005:4) that in these ways "…homophobia isolates the abused partner and prevents her/him from accessing resources such as family, friends, social services…"

2.3.7. Summary of dynamics of lesbian relationships

This section showed that lesbian experiences must be viewed through the additional "lens of cultural homophobia and heterosexism" (Balsam & Szymanski 2005). While heterosexual and homosexual relationships have much in common, there are also certain complexities that are specific to homosexual relationships which must be investigated and understood. Ristock (1997:287) comments that, "Learning to expect differences, then, between heterosexual and same-sex dynamics, is an important step in dislodging misrepresentations of lesbians…"

Lesbian relationships then are exposed to different and additional sources of stress than what straight relationships may experience. The lesbian relationship is affected by different social contexts; the relationship receives different reactions and must adjust to different circumstances. Despite legal equality, lesbian relationships do not hold the same position in society as what heterosexual relationships do and for this reason have the extra pressure of rectifying, or evading these false impressions. Many stereotypes about lesbians and their relationships had emerged; fear of being judged or unfairly labeled could all present anxiety for lesbians. External sources of discrimination can prove to be great sources of pressure for any relationship; the lesbian couple has to either find ways of avoiding such prejudice or dealing with it in such a way as not to create too much tension. Coming out individually and as a couple is shown to be a difficult task, often compounded by poor support networks. There are many dynamics which have been outlined which prevent the lesbian from revealing her sexuality; fear and rejection have to be dealt with on a daily basis.

All these dynamics serve to potentially create additional stress for the lesbian and her relationship. In the following section attention is paid to the importance of understanding relationships within the context in which they exist.

2.4. The South African situation: contextual closets

While similarities can be drawn between homosexual and heterosexual relationships, it is important to understand the contextual issues affecting relationships, especially those

additional factors of discrimination and misconceptions. In the following section I will look at the circumstances of lesbian women in the South African context.

2.4.1. Lesbians in South Africa: "Neither family or community is necessarily a haven…"

Understanding the historical context of South Africa can be very valuable in shedding light on current situations. The climate of Human Rights, democracy and equality that has prevailed since 1994, has led to a rejection of any type of discrimination before the law. The pre-1996 anti-gay/lesbian laws were repealed and today South Africa's constitution recognizes and protects the rights of homosexual people. The Equality Clause, Section 9 in the Bill of Rights, prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation by the state and all other persons. Also, on 30 November 2006 the Civil Union Act was signed into law, giving all homosexual people the same rights as heterosexual people in terms of being able to marry. Since 1994 Parliament has passed more than 30 laws that include the protection and recognition of LGBTI people. In spite of these progressive laws, there is still a great amount of stigmatization of the homosexual way of life**.**

There are several organizations such as Behind the Mask, The Lesbian and Gay Equality Project, Forum for the Empowerment of Women, Triangle project, OUT-LGBT Well-being, in South Africa. They have the goals of creating safe spaces for sexual minorities, gaining equality, improving services and tackling discrimination. Despite the growing diversity of services being made available to the LGBTI community, widely held homophobic attitudes still pervade in South Africa, resulting in the continued silencing of lesbians.

An article by the organization OUT, observed that their community work with lesbian women over the last 10 years, has often seen the issue of power come to the fore. Following from this, OUT conducted a small qualitative study to explore lesbian women's experiences of power at both individual and societal levels. The intention of the study was to increase the understanding of power experienced by lesbian women and to raise awareness of lesbian's experiences that have in the past been kept hidden (Wells, Kruger & Judge 2006). According to this article, harassment and hate speech are common forms of homophobic hate crimes, but it is reported that these hate crimes often go unreported because victims are doubtful that they will get help from the police and they fear secondary victimization.

Secondary victimization is the fear that, on the reporting of hate crimes or domestic violence LGBTI people will experience hostile responses for a second time from the police or service providers due to their sexual orientation being exposed.

This research by OUT reflects that the public arena is insufficient in assisting and realizing the rights of lesbian women. There was a general consensus of negative experiences when dealing with the police and even the health care sector. The lesbian women in the study reported experiences of overt discrimination as well as heterosexism. The latter is a much more subtle form of discrimination but has a negative impact in that it assumes heterosexuality as a norm and ignores complex life issues that may be of importance. Some authors maintain that, in a patriarchal society such as South Africa, a lesbian can be described as a 'double deviant'.

> In addition to being oppressed by various patterns of 'male privilege' which all women confront, she is also subjected to the widespread phenomenon of 'heterosexual privilege'. Thus, she ends up being treated as doubly deviant, negated both as a woman and as a lesbian (Schur as quoted by Kritzinger and van Aswegan 1992: 94).

Thus lesbian women, in the event of being sick or injured, may delay seeking medical care or treatment for fear of discrimination. Some women live with disabilities or illnesses, but do not seek help for fear of being discriminated against, or having their sexual orientation exposed. Religion is another institution that may create internal conflict for lesbian women who are taught that homosexuality is sinful. So, although South Africa has a constitution of equality and democracy, the lived out reality of South African people does not always mirror these noble standards. In comparison to some other countries, South Africa's homosexual community is still kept relatively underground, and the services offered to them are blatantly lacking and steeped in notions of heterosexism. It has been outlined that heterosexism and discrimination have led to fear of disclosure, and the avoidance of using certain facilities such as health and police services. According to Jody Kollapen, the Chairperson of the South Africa Human Rights Commission, "…lesbian and gay people are still experiencing discrimination in the home, the community and the workplace…" (ABC of LGBTI 2007:3).

On a more individual level, the prevailing social and political order plays a huge role in the everyday lives of lesbians. Outside pressures not only affect intimate unions but also those relationships between family and friends. These relationships in turn also have an effect on the lesbian. Kritzinger and van Aswegen (1992) investigate the consequences that stigmatization has on the primary relationships of lesbians. Due to the prevailing order of heterosexism, negative perceptions and poor information services, many lesbians feel conflicted about whether or not to share their sexual identity. The lesbian is constantly confronted by the possibility of being avoided or rejected and thus is faced with the choice of whether to conceal or disclose information about her sexual orientation or not (Kritzinger and van Aswegan 1992).

On the topic of the Civil Union Act, some argue that the rights of equality and to be married only apply to those who are openly gay. Thus,

> the rights that accrue to individuals as a result are accessible only if a gay identity is claimed- that is by 'coming out' as gay or lesbian, and/or being openly gay or lesbian (Matebeni 2008:249).

It has thus been argued that, 'The clause is meaningless unless you're "out"' (Botha as quoted by Matebeni 2008:249). This links with the ideas expressed above by Kritzinger & van Aswegen (1992) that because sharing their sexual identity may be sensitive and difficult for many lesbians, it may be difficult for them to access their rights without outing themselves.

Although the South African Constitution guarantees the right to equality and non-discrimination to all people which means, amongst other things, that lesbian and gay people cannot be unfairly discriminated against on the grounds of their sexual orientation, the societal reality is that homophobic notions are still retained by a large majority. Homophobia is part of the daily life in South African cities, especially in the townships. This problem is explained by Judge, Manion & de Waal (2008: 13),

> As the escalation of the rape, torture and murder of black lesbian women and other LGBTI people demonstrate, we have a long way to go before the lived reality of LGBTI people is anywhere near the constitutional aspirations of human dignity, equality and freedom.

2.4.2. The context of patriarchy

South African society is characterized by a strong sense of patriarchy; both heterosexuals and homosexuals operate within the context of dominant patriarchal institutions and ideologies. The results of the study by OUT (2007) reflected that the prevailing social and political hegemonic reality of South African society played a role in creating a sense of powerlessness in South African lesbian women. It was found that the participants derived little power from their social contexts, but in fact felt, "…restricted and constrained…not having a voice or a space in a heterosexist world" (Wells, Kruger and Judge 2006:12). This isolation sometimes could be seen as manifesting in concrete ways- such as hate speech, the silencing of women through instilling fear and more blatantly, 'correctional rape'. This speaks to the ramifications that a heterosexist society may have on the local struggles of a lesbian individual.

The implications of patriarchy are significant for lesbians and gay men, especially where traditional gender roles are not adhered to. The gender role assumed by an individual has implications for his/her social acceptance, exposure to discrimination or hate crimes. This suggests that, individuals who adopt opposite sex gender roles are more likely to experience discrimination than those who are not. In black communities there have been many cases of correctional rape as well as the murder of lesbians. Correctional rape occurs when women are raped in order to 'change them' to being heterosexual.

The struggles of lesbian women are thus not only those internal conflicts, but they connect with the broader norms of society. Institutions such as family, friends and religion are all sources of conflict in that they often mirror heterosexist ideologies and are thus opposed to the gay person's lifestyle. Thus the powerlessness of lesbian women in a patriarchal society affects their lives in many different spheres, in their family lives, work environments, social gatherings- in fact, any heterosexual space that she finds herself in.

2.4.3. Application of the systems perspective

The systems perspective proved to be valuable because it acknowledges the particular experiences of the lesbian couple and takes into account the distinctiveness of these relationships. This approach recognizes that same-sex relationships are stigmatized and thus exist as a defensive unit in response to the oppression and hostility existing in the larger

community. For example, homosexual couples have different experiences with regard to receiving external support and are reported to have lower levels of social support from family members (Kurdek 2005). I found the systems perspective meaningful for the study of lesbian couples in the context of South Africa, both with regard to direct systems of support as well as within the broader society.

Krestan and Bepko (1980), discuss the systems theory as based on the idea that the lesbian couple, often stigmatized, and living apart from larger society, is forced to develop separate rules and regulations which define and further differentiate themselves from larger society. If society does not agree with these boundaries, the relationship is likely to become even more regulated and even more isolated. This process of isolation is viewed as a protective survival response. In response to the negativity and hostility of heterosexual society, lesbian couples may insulate themselves by nurturing their relationships as "closed systems" (Krestan and Bepko 1980). This in turn, "…fosters emotional intensity and closeness in the relationship, but simultaneously generates insecurity by disallowing separateness or autonomy for the partners" (Lindenbaum 1985:88). The relationship then is so engulfing and dependent- or even needy that any effort to have outside friends or participate in separate activities is interpreted as rejection- this is referred to as 'fusion' or 'merging' as discussed earlier (Lindenbaum 1985; Pearlman 1989 as quoted by Renzetti 1992). The more closed the system becomes, the greater the likelihood of 'fusion' or 'merging'. High levels of dependence and neediness is then likely to result in insecurities and high levels of tension- which in turn may result in controlling behaviour and abuse. This theory is useful also because it draws attention to social factors and societal pressures that impact and shape these intimate unions.

This idea of 'fusion' is noteworthy because it relates to how the social environment impacts the intimate partnership. As has been outlined, despite South Africa's progressive constitution, the social climate is still marked by patriarchy, heterosexism and homophobia. Applied to the South African situation, this theory may be valuable to draw from. It may offer insights into how South African lesbian couples experience marginalization against the background of heterosexism embedded in their surrounding environment. A couple may develop a "closed relationship" with high levels of internal dependency in response to

external pressures. The constricting environment may lead to the 'fusion' of lesbian couples and thus the accompanying tensions.

2.4.4. Summary of the South African context

I had found it important to consider the environment in which lesbian women live. The South Africa situation is particularly significant because it is one of very few countries that has legalised same-sex marriage. Despite this, there exist many challenges for lesbian women. The patriarchal society of South Africa is both oppressive and overwhelming for lesbians. There exists a high risk of danger for many South African women, especially those living in townships. While the constitution presents equality and fairness, this is not reflected at a societal level. For women wanting to access their rights to, for example, report discrimination, there exists the possibility of secondary discrimination from service providers. The practicality of same-sex marriage is also problematic because accessing marriage rights requires the partners to be open about their sexuality. Being openly homosexual in the face of a patriarchal and patronizing society means having to expose oneself to the possibility of risk and discrimination. Given this context, the systems perspective is valuable in illuminating contextual factors that lesbian intimate unions may be faced with. Renzetti, a leading author in the field of lesbian relationship conflict proves to be a great resource from which to draw as her research makes use of the systems perspective and looks at many contextual factors and acknowledges the distinct dynamics in lesbian relationships.

2.5. The contribution of Renzetti's research

Claire Renzetti is one of the most popular and most prevalent authors in the field of lesbian relationship conflict. Her writing and research on this topic are both enlightening and relevant to my own interests. Her research is of particular usefulness to my own because she investigates areas of conflict in lesbian relationships. Renzetti (1992) did participatory research with members from a battered women's support group. A questionnaire was developed that was designed to measure partners' dependency and autonomy from one another, sources of strain and different styles of handling conflict, as well as the types and incidences of abuse. Additionally she conducted unstructured individual interviews with participants- to gain clarification and a deeper understanding of results reported in the

questionnaires. Her use of the phenomenological method allowed her to gain in depth, key information about the participants, providing a valuable contribution towards the study.

From her research, Renzetti (1992) found that conflict within lesbian relationships developed around "certain sets of issues" or "sources of strain", these being, "dependency versus autonomy", "jealousy and the balance of power between partners." Each of these sources of conflict is discussed separately.

2.5.1 Extent of dependency

'Dependency', in this study, was measured by analyzing levels of commitment. A few authors have investigated levels of commitment in homosexual relationships and have found lesbian relationships to have greater levels of importance placed on commitment and personal interaction than gay male and heterosexual relationships. Thus these partnerships have high levels of expectations with regard to time shared and activities done together and these relationships are marked by a strong desire to preserve their relationship from outside intrusions. These high levels of relationship commitment and attachment could be due to a lack of outside support systems. This "dyadic attachment", results in making them, "…allies against what is ultimately a hostile world to them" (Lewis et al. as quoted by Renzetti 1992:31). Renzetti (1992) outlines however that this does not sufficiently explain why dyadic attachment is higher for lesbian women than for gay men, seeing as both face heterosexism and homophobia. Some have tried to explain this inconsistency by appealing to the idea that the socialization of women attunes them to be caring and considerate for the needs of others. Thus in a lesbian relationship, it is not surprising that each women is, "…involved in a circular process of orientating self toward the other" (Vrago, as quoted by Renzetti 1992: 31). This notion appeals to the logic that it is natural for women to be caring and nurturing in a relationship because they are socialized to be so. An inherent contradiction is however that, lesbians do not adopt the typical gender roles that they were socialized into. An irony within this is that women are socialized to be caring and giving which leads to increased levels of attachment in lesbian relationships; resulting in increased dependency and then possibly restrictive relationships with abuse.

Lindenbaum (1985) had also outlined the problem of abuse arising when one partner becomes overly dependent on the other. High levels of dependency or "dyadic attachment" may be valuable in explaining the difficulty of a breakup. Dependency may leave one partner feeling responsible, while the other feels ashamed and a loss of self. "She who is dependent is likely to feel weak and ashamed, since dependency on one's partner is a trait associated with a destructive, culturally prescribed female role" (Renzetti, 1992: 32).

Renzetti's (1992) findings show that incidences of abuse often related to victims tending towards autonomy or independence. A correlational analysis revealed that the greater the desire for independence and the greater the levels of dependency, the more likely the batterer was to inflict more types of abuse more often. This may seem a little contradictory as one would expect that the more independent partner would have the power over the relationship and would be the one to use violence. It is rather that the dependent partner utilizes violence and abuse to gain some control over the relationship. This theory finds similarities with Walker, (1989) in the description of abusive husbands and their emotional dependence on their wives. This links to the theory that certain types of behaviour including aggression, drinking and violence are used to compensate for dependence.

2.5.2. Jealousy

Jealousy, according to Renzettis research (1992), played a large role in relationship conflict; in fact most of the conflict was seen to stem from it. Jealousy can be related to dependency, but is distinct as it contains a sexual element. For example, Berzon (as quoted by Renzetti 1992: 40) argues that homosexual relationships are entangled with elements of envy. The example given is that a lesbian woman witnessing another woman flirt with her partner, may feel jealous and susceptible to the potential loss of her partner, but she may also feel envious because of the attention her partner is getting. Studies of heterosexual domestic violence found that abuse was very often linked to jealousy and possessiveness. Renzetti's research of lesbian violence showed jealousy to be strongly correlated with abuse and a correlational analysis of the data showed, "…the more jealousy was a problem in the relationship, the more frequently certain forms of abuse, especially psychological abuse, occurred" (Renzetti 1992:41). Similarly, common to both heterosexual and homosexual domestic abuse, battered partners were often found to have been subjected to tirades and

accusations of infidelity and interrogation. Jealousy and possessiveness of batterers is according to Walker (as quoted by Renzetti, 1992: 43), "…linked to low self esteem and poor self concepts".

2.5.3. Power imbalances

The balance of power seems to be a relatively important aspect in understanding abuse in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships. There is difficulty however in defining what exactly is meant by 'power' and how is it measured. There is difficulty in deciding whether the greater power lies with the partner who brings the most resources into the home, or the individual who has the greatest say in decision making. Renzetti (1992) outlines that there is another difficulty because not all decisions have equal weight, and there is the fact that in many heterosexual relationships, it is accepted that men are the heads of the household and have the power over decision making despite their employment and social status. Another problem is that, "Power includes not only authority in decision making, but also the right to delegate responsibility for certain decisions to others" (Renzetti 1992:44). For example, a husband may assign the wife with certain responsibilities or duties, thus the wife does not act on her own, but rather as an agent for the couple.

In some regards, power in intimate relationships can be witnessed by studying the division of labour between partners and the benefits accorded.

> …a major difference between women's work and men's work in the home lies not only in the relative contributions each partner makes to the household, but also in the amount of control they each have over when they do the work (Renzetti, 1992: 45).

As stated earlier, lesbian couples have been said to enjoy the greatest degree of equality and shared decision making as they tend to reject traditional gender roles. It is still questionable however to what extent equal power and role sharing can be realistically achieved. Renzetti (1992), found that while many lesbians may support the idea of equal role sharing and decision making, many report imbalances which emerge when one partner has greater resources than the other- such as education, a higher social status, money or a better job.

While understanding the balance of power has been largely significant in understanding violent relationships, there is some ambiguity in the literature about how exactly power and violence are related. Some studies, such as those by Strauss et al. (1980) indicate that violence is especially likely to occur if the male partner perceives a loss of dominance in the relationship. Other theories, such as the socio-psychological perspective argue however that the batterer is the more dominant, powerful person. In other words, violence is just one of a variety of ways in which the partner's greater power is expressed.

With regard to the balance of power, Renzetti's research did not find any conclusive factors relating directly to abuse and power. The unequal contribution of resources was identified as one general factor of conflict- but there was no consensus on whether it was the batterer or the victim who was contributing more. Power, it seems is multi-faceted and includes age, education, career, social standing and, in homosexual relationships, the extent to which each partner is open about their sexuality. Renzetti (1992) suggests that perhaps all of these factors must be taken into account- recognizing that a different combination of factors result in different power imbalances.

2.5.4. Summary of Renzetti's research

I had found the research conducted by Renzetti (1992) to be of significance with regard to my own research. Her findings suggest that lesbian couples have difficulty in maintaining a balance between dependency and autonomy. While Renzetti (1992) had used questionnaires in one part of her research, she had also conducted in depth individual follow up interviews. Thus her application of a phenomenological and qualitative investigation of gay women lives is compatible to my own research.

From her research it is made clear that when looking at relationship conflict it is important to look at both the internal and external relationship factors involved. Renzetti (1992) makes use of the Systems Perspective which suggests that homophobia and discrimination may lead to the isolation of the homosexual couple from family and friends. This is because they face outside criticism and may attempt to isolate themselves from this external negativity. This is along the same lines as Kreston and Bepko, who report that, "Lesbian couples may attempt to insulate themselves by nurturing their relationships as relatively

'closed systems'" (1980: 29). As discussed a little earlier, this may facilitate closeness and strong bonds but may also increase dependency to the extent that the relationship is limited and controlling with little autonomy. This then is likely to lead to 'merging' or 'fusion' (Lindenbaum 1985; Pearlman 1989).

High levels of dependency were named as a possible source of conflict in lesbian relationships. This was based in a variety of factors, such as women being socialized to be nurturing and the need for lesbian partners to protect each other and consequently their relationships from a harsh climate. Conflict over implications of unequal power relations was also named as an area of conflict. Power inequalities -not being linked to gendered inequities as in some heterosexual relationships- were determined by other factors such as finances, age, status of being out and education. Jealousy had been named as a multi-faceted factor in lesbian relationships because of elements of envy. All three of the factors linked together, had demonstrated how dependency of a partner may lead to dominant behaviour by a partner that was feeling insecure or overly reliant on the other.

2.6. Concluding remarks

My review of the literature has revealed a small range of topics dealing with research on lesbian relationships. While similarities can be drawn between heterosexual and homosexual relationships, it is also shown that lesbian relationships are exposed to different pressures than heterosexual relationships are exposed to. Many positive aspects of lesbian relationships are evident, such as the ability to assign household chores based on interests or skill rather than allocation based on gender.

In my literature review, I assessed the South African situation and also outlined general views on lesbianism, all of which play a role in shaping their relationships. It had been argued that South Africa was still governed by patriarchal and heterosexist forces. In this context lesbianism is exposed to many stereotypes and misconceptions. The many misconceptions about lesbianism serve to further isolate this group of women. Although legally they have the same rights as heterosexuals, social acceptance and equality still have to be realized. The social context of lesbianism in South Africa is clouded by negative connotations and misconceptions. This group of women faces many challenges to their

relationships, such as social stigma and fear of discrimination, which play a huge role in determining their actions and behaviour.

I found domestic violence in lesbian relationships to be an appealing topic. Renzetti's (1992) research outlined various factors that could contribute to conflict as well as violence in lesbian relationships. Adopting the systems perspective, she took environmental and contextual factors into account. Dependency, jealousy and power had been outlined as important aspects to understanding conflict in lesbian relationships.

There are many differences in lesbian intimate unions that require them to be studied from a different perspective. From my own analysis, I find that it is vital to develop new theories of lesbian relationships, which are not inhibited by those of heterosexism that we now encounter. With this said, the necessity to recognize the role that societal pressures play on homosexual relationships and the effects that this may have is great. In this light, the systems perspective proved to be valuable when assessing the situation of South African women.

In general there was only a small amount of literature on lesbian relationships. There is however a small group of active researchers doing work investigating lesbian relationships. The literature was inundated with information and studies from this small handful of researchers rather than there being a wide pool of scholars. I found only a few authors writing on topics specific to the South African situation of lesbian women. Much of the South African focus was on groups of black South African women; given their additional discriminatory status of race.

With this valuable background of information, the next chapter discusses the methodological concerns I had to take into consideration when dealing with my sample group. The following chapter outlines all the specific details relating to the research procedures and explains how and why the research was conducted in the chosen manner.

Chapter 3: Research procedures

3.1 Introduction

The following chapter addresses issues concerning my research methodology. I address the factors involved with the qualitative research design that I have chosen; including the requirements of my sample population, my data collection procedure, and the analysis thereof. It is here that I discuss the specific methods I have chosen in obtaining and analyzing data. I will also discuss the relevant considerations that were taken during the data collection stage. I also reflect on my own identity and role as a researcher as well as any ethical issues that arose.

3.2. Research design

I had chosen to work from a qualitative paradigm to understand the dynamics of lesbian relationships from an insider's perspective. Many authors point out that because qualitative research has its focus on people's lived experiences, it is well suited for locating the meaning people place on the events, processes and structures of their lives (Potgieter 1997; Fouche & Delport 2002). My aim was to identify different experiences, perceptions, meanings and ideas surrounding lesbian relationships and thus chose the qualitative paradigm, which according to Fouche & Delport (2002: 79),

> …aims mainly to understand social life and the meaning that people attach to everyday life…the qualitative research paradigm in its broadest sense refers to research that elicits participant accounts of meaning, experience or perceptions.

My research extracted the personal experiences and perceptions of the participants in order to gain a greater understanding of the dynamics and nature of conflict in lesbian relationships. Qualitative research was favoured because of its flexibility, uniqueness and its ability to gain in-depth knowledge.

Additionally, reflexivity was a vital part of my research. Bannister, Burnman, Parker, Taylor & Tindall (1994) state that reflexivity is the most distinguishing attribute of qualitative research. Reflexivity holds that the researcher should be aware of their own role in the exchange with participants and the construction of knowledge. Bannister et al (1994:64) outlines that qualitative research recognizes the complexity of the social world and thus this

research involves the researcher being actively engaged with the participants and the acknowledgment that understanding is constructed and that it aims to gain valid knowledge and understanding by illuminating people's experiences. Thus the development of a theory is firmly grounded in the participants' experiences and meanings rather than a priori theories. My use of the phenomenological approach was beneficial in understanding the everyday experiences and meanings of the participants. This type of research allowed me to extract rich, detailed information as well as allowing me to engage with the participants at a more personal level than a quantitative method would have allowed.

Very little research has been done on lesbian relationships within the South Africa context. As has been outlined, understanding these relationships contextually is very important because external factors- such as social networks, community, societal, political and even legal pressures- have an impact on lesbians and their relationships. Some authors and South African organizations have outlined the fear of discrimination as a source of anxiety for lesbians. Understanding such external forces in their context, lends value to understanding the internal workings of lesbian relationships and thus directed my approach to this research. The discourses that emerged from these women lends value to understanding how lesbians perceive themselves and their place within society.

3.3. Defining & sampling the population

I planned to conduct 12 in-depth individual interviews of middle-class South African lesbian women of 21 years of age and older. I had initially not provided a strict demarcation of the sample population by age or race, but allowed for a fairly open range of women to be involved. My sample group[2] was small, in line with my aim to extract in-depth discussions and experiences from these women rather than generalisable and representative data. I had outlined a particular group of women for participation in the study; middle-class South African lesbians above 21 years old. It was also important that the women identified themselves as being either lesbian, gay or any related term. My reason for wanting to speak to women who had accepted an identity as homosexual was because this self-accepted identity may play a role in directing behaviour. Being comfortable identifying oneself as gay,

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[2] Tabulated summaries of demographic information of the sample are provided in the appendix (Table 1 and 2 pages 207-208). Personal profiles of each of the women are also to be found in the appendix (page 216).

may have also placed these women in situations of having to talk about or explain their identity. With the knowledge of the negative associations linked to homosexuality and all things related to it, my interest lay in finding how these women reflected on their own identity and choice of lifestyle.

Although my interests do not necessarily focus on class differences, my reason for focusing on middle-class women was that I had greater access to this community and a focus on this group excludes certain issues that are particular to women of different classes. My research questions address issues of lesbian relationship dynamics and lifestyle but within this I looked critically at matters surrounding conflict in lesbian intimate unions. With this in mind, I sought to recruit participants who had been in more than one homosexual relationship, or at least in a long term lesbian relationship and thus potentially may have had more experiences.

Although I planned to interview women over the age of 21, an important selection criteria for the women in my sample was that they had some "experience" in that they had been in a few lesbian relationships or a long term relationship. During the research process I had become aware that my sample included women over the age of 30. The reason for this was twofold. First, most of the women with the relevant "experience", or more established intimate unions tended to be older women. Second, my sample had shaped itself through a snowball technique and thus, many of the women referred me to their lesbian friends who were roughly the same age as them and who were currently or had previously been involved in a lesbian relationship. It became evident that focusing on women above the age of 30 allowed a greater likelihood of having been involved in longer or more lesbian relationships. I realized however that this was not always the case as many middle-aged women may have only recently begun a same-sex relationship, or may have been in the same intimate relationship for many years.

I aimed to recruit women who were willing to talk about their experiences as well as their same-sex relationships, this was also reflective of older women who had in some cases been out for longer and perhaps felt more comfortable sharing this information about their sexual identity (refer to table one in appendix). Most of the women who participated in the

interview were open about their sexuality to their family, friends; some of them having been out for many years. The fact that so many of them were openly gay, had perhaps contributed to their openness and willingness to share information without anxiety.

I noted that a few women may previously have been in heterosexual relationships- this was not a necessary condition but provided for some interesting comparisons. This in fact did occur with just under half of the women sampled having previously been in heterosexual marriages (refer to table two in appendix). It allowed for some insightful discussion and introduced issues I had not anticipated before then.

I imagined that the process of finding women to talk to would be difficult. This was not so as I had many women volunteering to be a part of the research. Just over half of the women I had interviewed volunteered themselves to be participants. Their eagerness to participate in the research is probably a consequence of them being open and not anxious about sharing their experiences. I took their eagerness into consideration, which could play a role in what they reveal and conceal about lesbian relationships.

At the end of the interviewing stage, I had conducted 12 in-depth interviews, 9 of them were individual interviews and the other 3 were couple interviews. Thus, a total of 15 women had participated. Although I had not planned to conduct couple interviews, in one instance the couple preferred to be interviewed together and the other two cases the couples had begun speaking about relevant issues before the actual interview had begun. With their approval, I began recording the conversation and the interview flowed from there.

My own involvement in the lesbian community and links to a variety of lesbian women allowed me to gain access to and recruit women who fitted the specified sample. My involvement in the lesbian community proved to be valuable because it allowed me access to this community. My preference was to interview women whom I did not know personally- as this may have hampered their openness. I drew on informal contacts which referred me to other lesbians who fitted the defined sample and who were willing to participate. Of those interviewees that I had interviewed many referred me to their friends

and others put me in contact with their women's groups. One woman, without my knowledge, had put my details and information regarding my research onto a mailing list of a large group of South Africa lesbians. I received an overwhelming response from these women wanting to be involved in the research. Had this study been a large scale one or had I more time, I would have liked to interview[3] more of the women, or perhaps conduct focus groups. Their eagerness to participate was very encouraging. Many of the women commented on the lack of and need for research on South African lesbian women. Due to this form of snowball sampling, many of the women I had interviewed were of similar ages and had defined themselves as a particular type of lesbian.

Each interview lasted approximately one and a half hours, some a little shorter and some longer; with the exception of the couple interviews lasting up to two and a half hours. Prior to conducting the interviews, I had outlined that they should be conducted in an area that is quiet and private thus allowing the participant to feel relaxed and secure, as well as for uninterrupted recording purposes. Thus, I offered the participant the choice of where to hold the interview. Most often I was invited to the participant's home. Some opted to hold the interview at a quiet coffee shop. Both places provided a neutral locale that was comfortable and free from distractions. No payment was offered, but I did give a small gift to show my appreciation on completion of the interview.

3.4. Data collection procedure

I chose to use individual interviews as the method for collecting information. Charmaz (2006: 29) outlines that,

> Qualitative interviewing provides an open-ended, in-depth exploration of an aspect of life about which the interviewee has substantial experience, often combined with considerable insight.

In-depth individual interviews, with a focus on meaning and understanding were most valuable in exploring the context of lesbian relationships. This method proved to be the most instrumental in gaining detailed information for understanding internal and external dynamics of lesbian intimate unions.

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[3] Twelve interviews, with a total of fifteen women had provided many pages of transcripts and data. There was repetition despite the degree of diversity, which allowed me to tap into some of the ways that lesbians talk.

I designed a semi-structured interview schedule which would allow for flexibility, while at the same time giving direction and keeping the focus on the main subject matter. This method ensured that I covered the related themes, while keeping the interview centered on relevant information and while allowing the participants the freedom to elaborate and to address new areas that I had perhaps not dealt with. I drew up a set of open-ended questions and probes that focused around my main research questions and themes. The interview schedule acted as a guide- providing direction but also allowing for a degree of freedom and deviation if needed, this allowed each participant to feel comfortable to tell their valued story and not feel limited. This permitted me to acquire the information that was needed as well as any interesting or unexpected data that the participant may have wanted to talk about. The fairly informal interview structure allowed me to create a comfortable atmosphere and once rapport with the participant was established, to extract detailed and deep information regarding their experiences and thoughts.

Lee (1994:104) commenting on sensitive research, remarks that in-depth interviews often produce more valid information and that these interviews provide a means of "getting beyond surface appearances and permit greater sensitivity to the meaning contexts surrounding informant utterances". I feel confident that this method was the most valuable in line with my proposed research and research questions.

With the participants' permission, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. I had decided to record the interviews in order to allow for a fuller record of the data gained during the interview to be captured. This would also prove to be valuable in the analysis phase where the interviews would be re-listened to, in order to draw out common themes.

3.5. Interview schedule

My interview schedule[4] was composed in a semi-structured format, with a selection of questions relating to my main research questions. Open-ended questions allowed participants to answer freely and allowed them to elaborate. The questions were easy to understand and sensitive questions were phrased gently. The interview schedule was useful

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[4] A copy of the interview schedule used is attached in the appendix (page 209).

in helping me to define the terrain I wished to cover as well as allowing me the freedom to deviate from the set questions. The flexible design of the questionnaire allowed me to go back and forth between questions and ask those questions that were relevant to the topics discussed by the participants at the time. I tried to ask all of the questions to all the women, sometimes varying the order and wording, depending on the context of each separate interaction. I encouraged participants to introduce topics that they felt were relevant to them and thus would follow up on topics not included in the research schedule.

The questions were grouped into broad themes-starting with general information and moving towards more intimate questions. The first theme focused on the coming out process and served to get to know the participant a bit and allowed them to open up. The following section of questions was grouped into a theme that had at its focus the experience of being a lesbian in South African. The next broad theme asked general relationship questions and following from this, more personal and intimate relationship questions. I had used and adapted some of the questions from Renzetti's (1992) research and interview schedule.

3.6. My role and identity

Before the interviews, I outlined that my role as the interviewer would be to create a comfortable atmosphere, to ensure that the participants and their views are valued and respected and to encourage honesty. I reported that as a researcher, my role involves keeping participants informed as well as using and interpreting data ethically and confidentially.

I was aware that the interview itself is a social interaction that has within it certain dynamics. Throughout the research, I was aware of my individual identity and the role it played as well as my relationship to those being researched. My identity as a young lesbian researcher allowed me into certain insider circles. I believe that my identity as an insider was of value, both in the recruitment of participants and in the interviewing phase. This was evident as already stated, when a couple that I had interviewed put my name onto their women's network website. This spurred many responses about my research as well many of the women volunteering to take part in the research. I doubt I would have received the

same reaction if I was seen as an outsider, and would more than likely not have been added onto the lesbian network if this was the case.

The women I interviewed may have felt that we shared common experiences because of our shared sexual identities and thus may have felt a little more relaxed in sharing information with me. My shared identity as a lesbian allowed me to frame my research as something of significance and necessity rather than as an outsider probing into an issue with perceived condescension.

I am however mindful that while I was an insider in some circumstances, I was simultaneously an outsider. The women I had interviewed had been between the ages of 32 and 54, thus my age for example excluded me to a certain degree. Age also played a role in the fact that many of these women had expressed the view that the experiences of lesbians in their generation had been very different from those lesbians of my generation. Being a young researcher, I may have been viewed as the young or "new" lesbian being instructed or educated to a certain degree by the older women. Thus my identity as a young lesbian placed me in both insider as well as outsider circles.

I aimed to create an informal and relaxed atmosphere that encouraged openness; I was open about my sexuality as well as my perceived need for a greater awareness about and research into the challenges that face lesbian relationships. Before the actual interview took place, most of the interactions began with an exchange where I was questioned about my sexuality and degree of openness. I was often asked if I was in a relationship, for how long it had lasted and whether or not I had come out to my family. Those that did not ask the particulars before the interview could be seen to noticeably relax once they heard me speak of my own experiences which I shared during the interview if and when I felt it appropriate. This information about myself, I felt helped to facilitate sharing of information from the participants. Their responses indicated that the women were comfortable sharing their views with me and there was a level of trust and sharing.

As a part of building relationships of trust I made available a number of reading material. In this way I established myself as a researcher and activist. It helped to negotiate access and

represent myself to the women. I provided some leaflets about gay relationships that I had received from OUT, written by and about the gay community. Pamphlets about homosexual couples and the homosexual lifestyle were also distributed. I had referred those interested to books about interesting lesbian topics and informed them of lesbian groups, websites and functions that may have been of interest. This was in an effort to spread awareness and allow these women to access these resources if they had not yet done so. Additionally each month after conducting the interviews, I have sent articles of interest as well as news about gay and lesbian relationships to the participants. Many of the women are appreciative of this information and have allowed them to network between each other. The idea behind this was to provide information and allow for some discussion about the issues that many of them may face each day.

Overall, the participants were open about most topics and elaborated especially when telling their stories of coming out. I have noticed that lesbian women often share this information with each other early upon becoming acquainted. It may be of importance as some women view being out as important criteria for possible relationships. One's coming out process is often a point of commonality and sharing amongst homosexual people. It is an area that many lesbians can easily relate to- or assume to relate to. Their coming out stories are very personal experiences, involving a mixture of pride, fear and relief. I had asked about their coming out process relatively early in the interview, this was beneficial as it got the women to talk and open up, setting the format for the rest of the interview.

The method of interpretive inquiry that I used involved my own subjective understanding of the interviews and my own interpretations of the data.

> All interviews are interactional events and interviewers are deeply and unavoidably implicated in creating meanings that ostensibly reside within participants…Both parties, the researcher and the participant, are thus necessarily and unavoidably active and involved in meaning-making work" (Holsteni and Gubrium as quoted by Greef 2002:292).

Thus, I was aware of my own subjectivities, experiences and ideas and the role they played in my analysis of the findings.

3.7. Ethical considerations

Given the controversy and taboo around homosexuality, the research done was both controversial and sensitive in nature. The sensitive nature of this research demanded that I take certain variables and factors into account during the recruitment, interviewing and analysis phase of the research. Careful thought was given as to how to approach and recruit participants, as well as handle the information retrieved.

My topic deals with issues that may be sensitive to some women and thus the recruitment of the sample had to be done discreetly. The women who I interviewed may have not wanted to be subject to public scrutiny and thus I assured them that their identity would be kept anonymous and that their shared information would be treated with respect and confidentiality. I also made clear to them; the subject of my research, who and what would be involved in the interviews as well as why I would like to interview them. I also gave the participants the assurance that they may withdraw at any time and could choose not to answer any question if they felt uncomfortable. Their names would not be used in the research, and thus their identities not be linked with the interviews or the written analysis. A copy of the consent form is attached in the appendix.

The questions in the schedule were phrased sensitively and with consideration. I drew from and adapted some of the questions used by Renzetti (1992) in her research as these centre on the same issues that I was interested in. Relationships and past experiences may have been emotional for the participants to talk about and I was cautious so as not to make the participants feel pressurized at any time. I had considered the possibility that speaking about sensitive issues of past relationships, partners and experiences may be emotional for the participants. I provided contact information of organizations (Life Line and OUT) that assist women in dealing with emotional or relationship troubles- or any other problems they may have been facing.

3.8. Method of analysis

The digital recordings were transcribed verbatim. Language did not serve as a problem as all the interviews were conducted in English. Pauses and hesitations were not recorded. Talk that went off the topic, or that was not relevant was not transcribed. The interviews were

re-listened to and only information that I was confident had nothing to do with the concern of the interview was excluded from being transcribed. Pseudonyms were assigned for each participant and all names within the interviews also changed. I did all of the transcribing myself which was valuable as it allowed me to become familiar with not only the interviews, but some of the common themes.

I had found that during the interviews I became aware of certain commonalities between what the women were saying, it was however not until the analysis phase, after reading and categorizing, that I found more definite patterns and commonalities between what the women had said. This of course also drew my attention to the many instances of contradiction between the women as well as within their own ideas.

In the process of coding the data set, many topics were coded and categorized. I began to find similarities and some differences in the discourses. Both similarities and differences were found in the discourse between participants as well as within their own accounts. Some of these contradictions are more obvious than others. Through the analysis, certain themes became evident and could easily be extracted; others were more embedded in the data. Although some of my themes follow from the questions I had formulated, they are not defined solely by the questions.

Specifically I have decided to use the method of thematic analysis. According to Braun & Clarke (2006:79), "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data". These authors outline that this method can be used to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of 'reality'.

Using this type of analysis required that I outline certain things before I began. As the data was analyzed in terms of themes, it was important to define what counts as a theme. In this body of research, a theme was counted as a patterned or repeated response that has a significant relation to the research question and sub-questions. Additionally, I looked at minority ideas as well which may have some broader significance or bearing on my topic of interest. The article by Braun and Clarke (2006) has proven very useful as it outlines certain

considerations that one should take into account before beginning the process of analysis. These will be discussed below.

My analysis of the data was coded in relation to the research question, thus I used a 'theoretical' thematic analysis, which according to Braun & Clarke (2006: 84), "would tend to be driven by the researcher's theoretical or analytical interest in the area…"

Another thematic analyst, Boyatzis (1998 as quoted by Braun & Clarke 2006: 84) outlines that, one should also decide at which of the 2 'levels' themes are to be identified, "a semantic or explicit level, or at a latent or interpretive level". The semantic approach allows themes to be identified within the surface meanings of the data unlike the latent approach which goes beyond the surface of the data and starts to identify underlying meanings or ideas in the data. In my research I focused on identifying themes using a semantic approach in the analysis; although in some instances the analysis went deeper making use of a latent or interpretive approach.

During the analysis phase, certain discourses became evident and particularly significant. I began to recognize patterns in what the women where saying and talking about. I used these commonalities of discourses to form themes. Looking at patterned responses and topics caused certain themes to emerge form the data. The use of discourse analysis proved to be functional in questioning the societal context and these women's' life experiences and perceptions. "Discourse theorists maintain that talk is constitutive of the realities within which we live, rather than expressive of an earlier, discourse-independent reality" (Sampson 1993 as quoted by Wood & Kroger 2000:4). Fairclough, an accomplished author writing in the field of discourse analysis explains, without reducing social life to language that his approach to discourse analysis is,

> based upon the assumption that language is an irreducible part of social life, dialectically interconnected with other elements of social life, so that social analysis and research always has to take account of language (Fairclough 2003: 2).

From this perspective then discourses analysis is an important concept for understanding society and human responses to it. A look at the discourses of the women in my sample

allowed me to gain insight into their perspectives of their positions in the world as well as how they respond to it.

The article by Braun & Clarke (2006) was also very useful as it provides a step-by-step guide to doing thematic analysis. Their 6 step method, which was employed in my own research process will briefly be explained. This method of thematic analysis, combined with the application of some principles of discourse analysis was used.

The first phase very simply involved becoming familiar with the data by transcribing and, repeated "active" reading, in the search for meanings and patterns. It is here that I began to identify common topics in the interviews and highlighted common ideas or issues that the women had spoken about.

The second phase involved the initial coding of the data. According to Boyatzis (1998 as quoted by Braun and Clarke 2006: 88)

> Codes identify a feature of the data that appears interesting to the analyst, and refers to the most basic segment, or element of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way…

This process organized the data into small groups that were more manageable and important in facilitating the development of themes later on.

The third phase involved sorting the codes into potential themes. I began to analyse the codes and consider how they may combine to form overarching themes (Braun & Clarke 2006). In this phase I began to organize the patterned discourses into categories which would form the larger theme.

Phase four began when the initial themes had been devised, and were being refined. This involved ensuring that each theme was related to the research question, and each theme was distinct without too much overlapping. The themes had to be valid in that they accurately reflected the meanings that were evident in the data.

The next phase involved the defining and naming of themes. In this phase, themes were built up by collecting extracts for each theme and, "organizing into a coherent and internally consistent account, with accompanying narrative" (Braun & Clarke 2006: 92). The authors outline that it is not enough to just paraphrase certain extracts, but it is important to identify what is of interest or of importance about the extract.

The last phase involved the final analysis and report of the data and the findings, revealing the story of the data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of the analysis" (Braun & Clarke 2006). The aim for the end product is an analysis that is reflective of the data and provides narrative about the themes while relating to the research question.

3.9. Construction of themes

According to Maher and Pusch (1995: 22),

> The qualitative researcher discovers (or uncovers) the ways in which the world is interpreted from the perspective of those people who are at the centre of what the researcher is studying.

As a researcher I have interpreted and developed an understanding of how the women from my sample perceive their world. In particular, their perceptions of their relationships and of their identities as lesbians.

After analyzing the transcripts many commonalities could be identified from the women's stories of everyday experience. Only after further reading and analysis did themes emerge from these patterned commonalities. It must be outlined however that although there were commonalities in what the women spoke about, this did not always translate into agreement over these issues. Many important topics surfaced, within which some women followed the mainstream arguments while others expressed differing ideas.

Considering the dynamics of relationships, it is apparent from the interviews that a distinction can be drawn between internal and external challenges. I have structured much of my analysis along this internal and external divide. Although external and internal stressors can in most cases be linked, and in many instances cannot be separated, I for the purpose of gaining an understanding have categorized these conflict areas. Thus I had to

disentangle each theme, or stressor for the purpose of explaining each separately, isolating each factor while explaining the link between themes. Themes are divided into those that pertain to internal pressures and those external pressures which impact lesbian intimate unions. Within this division, I will discuss a range of themes addressing my sub-questions and in turn my main research question. Some themes may relate to both internal and external pressures, these will be explained under their own comprehensive heading.

Potential External Stressors

Potential external sources of stress are those areas of conflict that are rooted outside of the relationship and present challenges from the outer barrier of the relationship.

Potential Internal Stressors

Potential internal stressors are those pressures or challenges that can be found to happen within the relationship. This includes conflict that arises between the couple, and is defined as conflict that arises from the relationship itself.

Potential Stressors occurring both internal and external to the relationship

Such stressors are those that could not be classified as strictly originating internally or externally from the relationship, but were rather a combination of the two. A graphical explanation is provided below.

Diagram 1: A graphical representation showing the potential sources of stress for lesbian intimate unions.
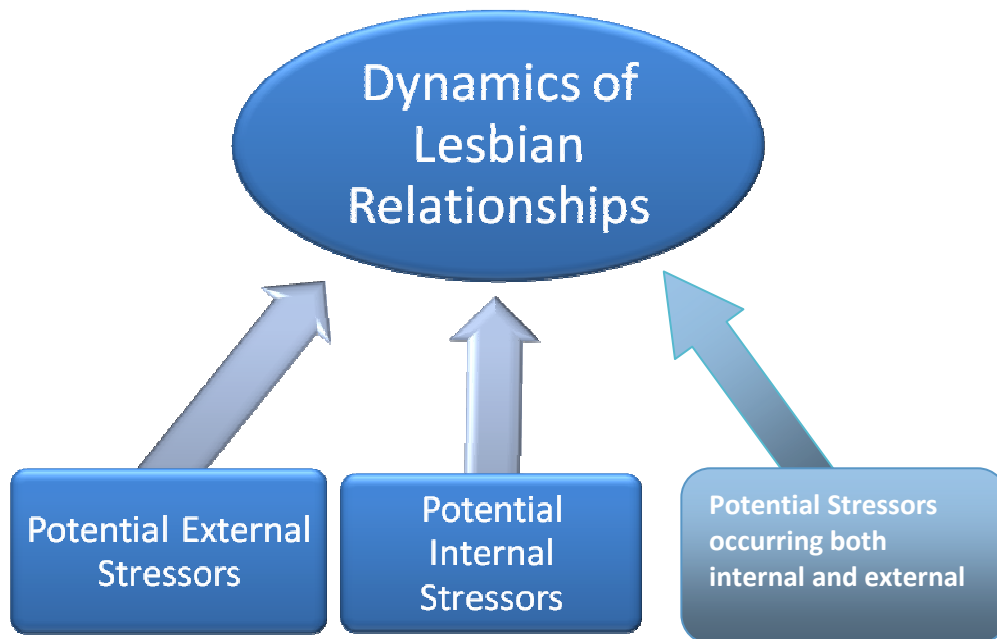
Under each of these initial headings (*Potential External Stressors, Potential Internal Stressors and Potential Stressors occurring both internal and external*) I will discuss different themes. Themes dealing with issues such as jealousy will be categorized as internal pressures, while those themes investigating discrimination and social support for example will fall under the category of external pressures.

As in any relationship, there are many factors which may cause conflict between the couple and it is not always a clear-cut decision as to how to categorize the themes, some are obvious while others require some debate. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that after enough digging and compartmentalizing, all themes may be traced to external sources of pressure. For example while self-acceptance falls into the internal category, this lack of self acceptance may be traced back to the lack of societal acceptance and negative stereotypes which plague gay relationships. I do however use my own judgment in categorizing the themes, and do express an awareness of indirect factors which play a role.

3.10. Conclusion

This chapter addressed the methodological matters within my research. It outlined my reason for choosing a qualitative research design and how it complimented the research I

had done. I had addressed the ethical concerns of research in general, as well as those concerns specific to my own research. Matters concerning my own identity and the importance of reflexivity were also discussed.

I had discussed the specific process I had undertaken in defining a sample population; as well as the reasons for recruiting that specific category of women for my research. I had also explained how I had acquired the participants and the process of gaining information from them. Within this too, I had explained important aspects that I had become aware of in the research stages and the adjustments that had to be made. This chapter also gave a step-by-step account of my choice and the process of analysis of the research data. An explanation of how and why I had constructed some of the themes was also given.

All of this information served to construct a solid base from where to conduct my research. Having an understanding of the importance concerning the design of the research process allowed me to shape my own research according to what would be most advantageous in gaining the most valuable data possible, within the border of maintaining a high ethical standard.

Having an understanding of the often vulnerable position of lesbian women, especially in the context of South Africa was valuable as the recruitment and interviewing had to be done with consideration. With this in mind, the first section of analysis begins with the first set of themes, it investigates how gay women reflect and explain their identity and lifestyle. This discussion takes the social context of South Africa into account. The following section presents the information gained from the interviews and answers the research questions that have been delineated. This first chapter of analysis not only unravels issues of identity and status, but also serves to introduce the reader to who these women are and what their lives entail.

Chapter 4: Reflecting on lesbianism as an identity

4.1. Introduction

Since I am dealing with the dynamics of lesbian intimate unions, I would like to begin by explaining how the women in the sample viewed themselves as well as their relationships- both previous and current. This will help to sketch an image of South African middle class, middle-aged, lesbian relationships. This outlines the circumstances of these women in South Africa and deals with important themes dealing with self perceptions, identity and their position as lesbians in the South African climate. This chapter contextualizes the lives of the women and how they speak about their position in their communities and their lifestyle.

This, the first chapter reporting research findings, demonstrates some of the societal pressures and how these impact on the individual. This has important implications for understanding how these women reflect on their identity and explain their lifestyle choices.

Lesbians, it must be noted, are not a homogenous group of women. They include all ages and races, their reasons for being gay differ, their age of coming out is as diverse as the age they first realized they are attracted to the same sex. Their preferences are different, as are their practices. I find it important that the reader is able to get a feel for who the women in my sample are.

4.2. Being lesbian in South Africa

I had asked the women what lesbianism[5] meant to them. Many of them viewed this as a rather simple question, and explained that it was simply an attraction to women. Most of the women answered the question quite simplistically as having a romantic and sexual attraction to women. Many of the women gave answers similar to that of Ilza for example,

> *So then what is being gay to you? (Interviewer)*
> Being gay to me? Infinitely preferring the company of women to that of men, in all aspects of life. (Ilza)

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[5] I have chosen to use the terms *lesbian* and *lesbianism* in my headings and in most of my discussion, because the majority of the literature makes use of these terms. Some of the women had preferred to identify as *gay*, in these instances I phrased the questions and discussion according to their preference. In a following section, I discuss these preferences, but by retaining these terms I by no means discredit the women or their choice of identity.

Most of the women explained lesbianism as some sort of an attraction to or preference of women, some however identified that their status as homosexual, placed them in a position of minority. Thus, the development of the discourse of "being different".

4.2.1. 'Being different'

A number of the women in my sample explained lesbianism not as only having an attraction to women, but also meaning that one was different from the norm. Many of the women's definitions are in agreement with Brown's definition of a lesbian as,

> a woman whose primary sexual and affectional attractions are to other women and who has a sexual minority identity...

meaning that there is an awareness that,

> her sexual orientation places her apart from sexual mainstream, even though she may not use the term 'lesbian' per se(1995: 9-10).

Lesbians, according to this definition see their relationships with women as primary and they identify themselves outside of the sexual norm- the majority of the women in my sample had similar ideas about their identity.

The emergence of 'being different' was a discourse expressed by many of the women. Carol for example acknowledges that being gay sets her apart from heterosexual society because she is different from the norm.

> *How would you define being gay? (Interviewer)*
> Being gay? Well it's just a partner that is the same sex... and being different, ja. (Carol)
> *Being different? (Interviewer)*
> Same-sex partner. Well being different that you don't fancy... you not heterosexual and you don't fancy a man, you fancy a woman. (Carol)

The awareness of being different was also expressed more indirectly by women who named their experiences of being stigmatized in some way or saw themselves as being placed in a marginal position. Catherine describes that being gay exposes you to experiences of having an identity as a minority. She also demonstrates that being aware of ones surroundings is necessary because there is discrimination practiced against lesbians. She is also conscious that people act differently around her and may be uncomfortable in her presence.

> *What does it mean to you to be gay? (Interviewer)*
> Uhm... as a lecturer in the class the other day, my students were making gay jokes and I don't tell my students that I am gay, but I think it is kind of tattooed on my forehead... and I felt

them sort of get half way through what they were saying and then suddenly stop, suddenly realize, "hey but there is a gay person in the room... let me just think about what I am saying here". You become aware of that. I think you become aware of the fact that because you are not playing a traditional role as a female, the way men cope with you or don't... But ja, I think you understand that you have to live carefully, you understand you have to keep a side glance at what is happening with the constitution, what's happening with legal changes, and you know who is getting killed where, like these lesbians that where killed in the township. I think like any minority group, I think like if you are the "other" in any situation you will have similar experiences. (Catherine)

Catherine's story is specific to South Africa as she mentions the need to keep up to date with the legal changes happening as well as being aware of the acts of discrimination that occur. Many of the women had also expressed concern over the discrimination, correctional rape[6] and murders that occur in the townships. All of the above women expressed a sense of difference which emerges from the notion of being 'marked'. The majority of the sample felt that their identity as lesbian placed them in a marginal position and had endured similar experiences of being the uncomfortable minority. Freda's explanation provides a vivid picture of being the centre of negative attention.

That is why we are such deep people; we care so deeply because we had to fight for ourselves to be. We had to take a lot of abuse as well… sometimes not verbal abuse, but just the way people look at you the way they shift away from you. They don't want you in their presence; they raise their eyebrows and ask questions around you… not from you or to you, from others. So you have that strange, I would say, emotional stirring factor that boils up in you everyday. (Freda)

Only one woman expressed the view that South African people do not really care and are more accustomed to homosexuality now. Fay feels that most South Africans have experienced the initial shock of seeing homosexual people and that they are now relatively accepting of their lifestyles. On the other hand she outlines that certain actions from the gay community may reinforce negative impressions of homosexual people. She thus indirectly acknowledges the negative stereotypes that are existent about homosexuality.

What do you think the average South African person thinks about gay people? (Interviewer)
I don't think people really worry about it anymore, I think people have gotten over the initial shock of seeing two men or two women together. You know, I think there was a time where it was a big thing because they never knew it, it was very new. I think today, the more people I come into contact with, who know me and who find out I am gay say, "Oh well it's your life" you know so uhm I think people are more open to gay relationships these days, but uhm, I also don't think like with these gay marriages being publicized in the newspapers, "First gay couple and the first gay divorce!" I don't think it is very good for our image, because it

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[6] Correctional rape or corrective rape refers to the crime of raping women assumed to be lesbian in order to "cure" them of their sexual orientation.

61

becomes like, "Ah they gay people and you can expect that of them". But no I don't think, I don't think people are really concerned about it anymore; I think people have gotten over the initial shock you know. It's fine. (Fay)

While other women had highlighted their sense of difference, Fay downplayed this difference. Most of the women however expressed that being the 'other' or the 'deviant' placed them in the line of scrutiny. They felt unfairly stereotyped and judged. Amy outlines that she experiences South Africans as being afraid of homosexuality because they are uninformed about same-sex relationships and hold stereotypical beliefs about them. She demonstrates their lack of knowledge by mentioning a common stereotype.

> *How do you think the average South African views homosexuality? (Interviewer)*
> I don't know, I don't think that people are informed, um and therefore, my experience and belief is that they are scared. My experience is that they are scared, they don't know what exactly and how does it work and so on, so ja, they, for instance, when I revealed our relationship to a friend years ago, his response was, "Now who is the man?" You see, I really think society don't know about gay relationships. They are uninformed and therefore they are getting homophobic. (Amy)

The majority of the women took offense to such stereotypes that implied partners performed different gender roles. Many women expressed frustration with these everyday misconceptions resulting from heteronormativity. The most common being the false idea that one partner performs a male role while the other a female role, thus mimicking heterosexual relationships. The second most common, was the belief that lesbians wanted to be men. In fact these women rejected these classifications on all grounds.

In a few instances the women expressed their frustration over the fact that people had negative perceptions about them because of the preconceived ideas surrounding lesbianism. As Khayatt (1992) notices, 'often when a woman is recognized as a "lesbian" she ceases to be a '"woman," a "teacher,"… a "mother," and so forth' (as quoted by Maher and Pusch 1995: 33). Yvonne exclaimed her aggravation over being classified as a deviant rather than an average person. From her statement, "*We are not freaks, we are just normal people!"* it is suggested that because she is lesbian, she is labeled as abnormal. Since heterosexuality is taught as the norm, there is difficulty in proving that homosexual people are no different from the average person. She feels that once she is classified as homosexual she is boxed into a category that ignores her professional capacity. Other women had

expressed similar ideas about their identities as mothers, women or professionals being blurred by the label of being homosexual. Rachelle talks of herself and her partner Yvonne saying,

> I am a qualified social worker and she is a teacher, we are not freaks! (Rachelle)

This notion of being classified as being a certain way is discussed by Maher & Pusch (1995:32),

> The label itself is confining because people have particular notions about what lesbian means. It is about, if someone is a lesbian then they are a certain way, it does not leave much room for open dialogue.

These authors note, in the above sentence that it is often that social definitions are assumed to be one's identity and these definitions produce a lack of agency. This is reflective of how many of the women felt about using *lesbian* to describe themselves, many preferred the use of *gay* because it does not have the same pre-judgments attached.

Johanna in a more specific fashion expresses her frustration that people immediately attach lesbian relationships to a sexual identity and don't take the relationship seriously. She suggests that in general, society does not equate lesbianism with a loving and compassionate relationship, but rather link it to sexual stereotypes.

> I mean the whole identity of lesbians, they will say it's an affinity for women… but most people will talk about lesbians… they will say to you, "well what do you do in bed?"… That's sort of all they are thinking about. Excuse me, I'm talking about lesbian relationships and you are thinking about sex! For most of them it is, it's a sexualized identity, a highly sexual identity. They are not thinking about relationships, they are thinking about sex, "What do you do…There is no penis, so what do you do?" So actually being gay is very quickly identified with sexual behaviour. (Johanna)

Johanna's sentiment is often quoted as the reason for not wanting to be called "homosexual", as many men and women dislike the term, believing it overemphasizes the sexual aspect of their lifestyle (Peplau & Gordon 1983).

From the above narratives, and the discussion it is obvious that all of the women are aware of the negative meanings that often accompany homosexuality. There is an obvious awareness of difference and belonging to a minority group that is not socially accepted. Their knowledge of being in a minority position is expressed in their feelings of "being

different" and their awareness of being treated differently. They often feel pigeonholed by outsiders because of their sexual identity. Unconstructive stereotypes, predetermined judgments, differential treatment and the possibility of discrimination all play a role in demonstrating their difference from the norm. The following section takes a more direct stance, by investigating how these women feel in the context of South Africa.

4.2.2. Finding a place in South Africa

Taking a more particular stance, I thought it important to learn how these women felt about being homosexual in the context of South Africa. South Africa has recently seen some groundbreaking changes in the constitution which names it the fifth country in the world to legalize same-sex marriages. Given this milestone achievement, I asked the participants what they thought the average South African's notion of lesbianism was. Their comments were similar and most agreed that people did not understand or accept homosexuality. Understanding their perception of the social climate has important implications for understanding why they reflect on their own identity and choice of lifestyle the way they do. In the following section, I draw out what these women describe the South African views on lesbianism to be and apply this to their reflection of their own identity. This is important as it helps to outline the setting in which these women see themselves.

An overwhelming majority of 14 of the women were of the opinion that the average South African was uninformed and had negative perceptions of homosexuality. Thus, despite constitutional equality and recent marriage rights, the freedom to be openly gay without battling stereotypes still lacks.

Over half of the women identified that while the South African constitution is outstanding and very fair on paper, the general South African view of homosexuality is far from the constitutional standards of equality. The literature had outlined that despite legal equality, homosexual people that are not open about their sexuality, are not able to access their rights sufficiently. Similarly Jen recognizes that the constitution allows for those experiencing discrimination to be able to report it, but that this is not always possible due to the stereotypical beliefs that are still held by the majority of society. These negative

reactions from people may have direct consequences in that it could hamper a homosexual from coming out, or may prevent them from accessing legal protection services.

> *What do you think of the South African constitution and the protection of rights, the extent of it really protecting? (Interviewer)*
> I think the constitution is amazing, but, like I have said to other people too, the reality is that legal protection does not necessarily translate into social acceptance because you sit with peoples perception, their stereotypes, all of that that people have grown up with from political, religious and cultural perspectives, they come out, people experience those things, the legal protection is there, so that if something does happen there is a legal route to follow. For me, coming from a privileged background it was easier coming out, whereas people from rural areas, more uhm... depending on what kind of religious, political and cultural issues are at play, it is more difficult and a lot more abuse... and non acceptance, and then people don't always take the legal route because people are afraid or they don't know about it. (Jen)

While all of the women recognized the changes in the constitution to be of great importance for achieving equality, there was an awareness that equality was yet to be reached. Three of the women showed an awareness that their position of equality gained in the constitution does not necessarily stem from the country being prepared for the recognition of same-sex rights, but it was a function of the constitutional standards based on the equality of all people. Johanna expresses a view that South Africans are still too conservative and that the country and its people are not ready to accept homosexuality.

> Yeah, the laws may sound very liberal, but I think in practice, people have not caught up, so people are not ready for the liberalization... (Johanna)

The majority of the women acknowledged their position of equality in legal terms but don't purport that this translates into social equality. Catherine recognizes the importance of the legal aspects of equality, but also makes clear that implementing this equality takes time. There is recognition of the conundrum in South Africa of having a liberal constitution and a conservative public. Her views are a reflection of findings by Kitzinger & van Aswegan (1992) as well as Matebeni (2008).

> My take on it is the constitution is fantastic and it has been used a couple of times to legalize things. So the constitution is incredibly valuable and important in terms of helping the legal processes when they come about. In terms of society at large, making people think there must be a reason why it is there... in terms of the reality of implementation in terms of how society behaves regardless of the constitution is another problem. (Catherine)

Linked to the above statement, some women recognized that there are some South African communities that denounced homosexuality. Ten of the women mentioned the danger that

black lesbians were in, especially in the townships, the mass of discussion on this topic may have been a result of many recent cases in the media of black lesbians being murdered and raped in the townships. With this comes the recognition that black homosexual people are in danger in the townships, especially women who are at risk of being punished or suffering correctional rape. Authors such as Judge, Manion & de Waal (2008) as well as Matebeni (2008) discuss the challenges that LGBTI people in South Africa still face, especially those people in townships.

There was awareness that while some groups are accepting of homosexuality, there are many South African groups that hold extremely stereotypical views about homosexual people. These groups were named as those who were very conservative, religious or very cultural. In general it was felt that black communities were not as accepting of homosexuality as white communities are, but it was not limited to these communities, for example, Ilza named conservative Afrikaners as a group who are against homosexuality.

> *What do you think the average South African view is about gay women? (Interviewer)*
> Well the general Afrikaans view is "No" the conservative typical Afrikaans people are very much against it. You know I hear of many cases were people are absolutely horrified when they find out that their children are gay, they are shattered. And sometimes they say, "You are not my child anymore!" (Ilza)

Conservatism and religion were named by all the women as obstructions to creating better understanding or acceptance of homosexuality. Tasha and Catherine suggest that most South Africans are not willing to learn about lesbian relationships because they want to retain their conservative practices. Many of the women in my sample were of the opinion that religion rejected lesbianism, and proved to be an area of contention for many of them. Catherine explains that because her neighbours are very religious and homophobic, there is a barrier that prevents them from getting to know each other; instead they lead separate lives without engaging each other.

> *Do you think there is a general lack of understanding or ignorance? (Interviewer)*
> Uhm, can I call it willful ignorance, they don't wanna know anything they want their stupidity, they want their opinion, they want to uphold their traditions. There is room for everybody, there is room for them, as long as they don't look over the wall and tell me I should be guarding their traditions, they can do whatever they want. Like our neighbours- very seriously religious family and the wife just does not talk to us, does not look at us and will not bring her children near us… and the husband, the only reason he talks to us is because we forcibly engaged him about the dogs... (Catherine)

With regard to the new marriage act, only one couple had considered getting married under the new law. Another couple that had been together for 17 years felt that the implementing of same-sex marriage in South Africa has not changed anything for them, but had in some sense undervalued long term relationships, bestowing significance and recognition only with marriage. In some sense this couple felt that their long term relationship was not given adequate recognition despite having lasted through a time where it was banned or oppressed.

> *With regard to the South Africa constitution? Has it changed anything? (Interviewer)*
> No I think for those who want to get married, it's great, but I mean for years you could share medical aid and live together as common law partners. (Wanda)
> I felt that it was not a negative thing, but almost saying that like the previous relationship was not as good as if it was married... (Rachelle)

Other women however spoke of their daily experiences and the realization that true equality had not yet been realized.

> As soon as you are in a straight environment, you become the uncomfortable factor. You know, what if you are a bad influence on the children? Uhm you know, *that* I still find uhm hurtful on a personal level. I get quite upset about it and I actually terminate a lot of friendships and leave, I don't tell them why. Because if you are going to be my friend, you must fight for me to be there and to be invited and if you are not prepared to do that then I would rather move on you know. And I am not prepared to confront people about it anymore. I had a very good friend who made me move *our* commitment event so I would attend her wedding, but then she would not attend ours because she has religious objections! You know, stuff like that... And she still wants to be my friend after all that, and she does not understand what an incredible insult that was. So I don't think straight people always realize... like as well what they are doing, so I don't really fight it most of the time, I just close that door and say 'bye-bye!' (Catherine)

The above quote demonstrates Catherine's feelings about having her relationship reduced to something of no significance when compared to her friend's straight relationship. While this is an expression of very personal feelings, it is a reflection of homosexual relationships not being given equal value as what heterosexual relationships are. This is reflective of a climate of heteronormativity. Heterosexual relationships; are viewed as the norm and are thus seen as more legitimate than homosexual relationships. Jen very passionately outlines that while homosexual relationships are of equal value legally; in a social sense these relationships are undermined.

> I think also the fact that we sit with the fact that gay and lesbian relationships do not have the same value as a straight relationship... because now also on a legal level, we saying is that gay and lesbian relationships are as valuable as a straight marriage, if they want to

formalize it... it is as valuable, it is equal. I think in many people's heads it is not so, many people on a subconscious level don't think it is a permanent thing... (Jen)

Johanna uses her own experience to express her frustration with her homosexual marriage not being taken seriously. She had been married before the civil union act existed, but the divorce took place after marriage was made legal and she had still felt that she was not protected by the law.

> So the legislation is fine, but there are many cases where you go to the police station and they laugh at you. Because I mean I went though a divorce, from a gay marriage and I don't feel the law protected me, granted we got married before there was civil unions, so we had an ordinary anti-nuptial contract, but the law was not out to protect me at all, at all! Didn't regard it as a real relationship! (Johanna)

This links to the idea that homosexual relationships are not serious or long term. Jen explains that while there is no formal difference in terms of the law for heterosexual and homosexual relationships, social equality still needs to filter down. She explains that the legal constructs are necessary in helping to bring gay relationships to be valued and placed on the same level as heterosexual relationships.

> And again, the legal constructs are helping to it, because it is fully legal. Absolutely no difference in terms of the law... but that is again something that needs to filter down. So it is as valuable... but that needs to happen as well, it really does. (Jen)

This may be as result of the law and the fact that gay relationships and marriage was illegal for so long. One woman however alludes to the fact that the poor legitimation of gay relationships may be bound to the fact that the change in law is only recent and is still being accepted. Straight relationships are seen as legitimate, while same-sex relationships are often reduced to 'a phase' or the result of some dysfunction. There is a realization that homosexual relationships are not the norm and may be offensive to some and thus should be downplayed in front of straight people. Many said that while they are openly gay, they would not go around advertising it, in fact only one woman said that she dresses 'out' to make a statement about being lesbian. So while there is equality in a legal sense, it is still assumed that homosexual relationships are different and not equal, or not as serious or devoted, as has been shown earlier.

The impact of such an oppressive cultural context on the individual has been referred to as "minority stress". Balsam & Szymanski (2005: 259) discuss the idea of minority stress, which is "psychosocial stress derived from being a member of a minority group that is stigmatized and marginalized". Being different and having to either hide or divulge personal information may create substantial stress for a homosexual.

4.2.3. To summarise

At the end of this first section, it is evident that there is a general awareness of being different. Some women identified that being lesbian placed them in a minority position which was reflected in how these women thought South Africans viewed homosexuality. The general feeling was that social views of homosexuality are plagued by stereotypes and misinterpretation. They felt that their lifestyle was rejected by certain groups, both religious and cultural. Conservative institutions, such as religion and patriarchy were identified as barriers to overcoming homophobia.

Looking at how these women reflected on their identity within South Africa, many of them noted that, while they have been granted equality in a legal sense this does not automatically translate into social acceptance. Their concern and fear about the incidents of discrimination against lesbian women was obvious.

While some felt that their homosexual relationships were not viewed on the same terms as heterosexual relationships were, they were eager to explain the importance of their relationship to their lives. While their relationships are very important to them, it is noted that there is still some societal progress to be made that values and places homosexual and heterosexual relationships on the same level of equality.

The above extracts all represent these women's awareness of their identity in a social climate of heteronormativity. This links to the ideas discussed earlier by Lubbe (2007) that homosexual relationships are often rejected on the grounds of heteronormativity, the belief that heterosexuality is normal, functional and that all other forms are mere imitations of it. Heterosexuality is seen as normal and healthy -whereas homosexuality has been considered

to be a pathological divergence from that norm. From their statements these women are aware of the negative undertones that are linked to homosexuality.

Although they may not be completely aware of how the heterosexual climate shapes their behaviour, their actions are reflective of their awareness that their relationships are not accepted as normal. This information is valuable because it leads one to question how these women behave in a climate that rejects or holds negative ideas about their lifestyle. The systems perspective lends value when looking at these women in the particular social context. This perspective directs one to look at how the social environment impacts the intimate partnership. As has been outlined, despite South Africa's progressive constitution, the social climate is still marked by patriarchy, heterosexism and homophobia. Applied to the South African situation, it may be that South African lesbian couples feel marginalized by the ideals of patriarchy and heterosexism from their environment. In this line of thought, a couple may develop a conflictual relationship with high levels of internal dependence in response to external pressures. The constricting environment may lead to the 'fusion' of lesbian couples and thus the accompanying tensions. Of great relevance then; how, in an environment of negative responses do these women define themselves?

An insightful dynamic unfolded when it was discovered that most of these women prefer not to be identified as lesbian. *Gay* was preferred above *lesbian* in most cases, thus connecting identity with a term that did not hold as much social stigma.

4.3. Terms, identity and labels: gays, lesbians and dykes

Initially I asked the women how they preferred to identify themselves, or which word they favored to use when referring to themselves. This was done for the purpose of being able to phrase questions using the terminology that they were most comfortable with. During the interviews I found that this question held so much more than just using their preferred terminology. The answers to this question revealed more than just their word preferences; it revealed their feelings about the words as well as their understandings and meanings attached to the differing words.

Maher and Pusch (1995: 19) have noted that, "in a social context of compulsory heterosexuality, where lesbian existence is either denied or seen named as deviant, people named lesbian negotiate lesbian identity". From the extracts, information was gathered about how these women spoke about their own situations and how they presented themselves as women involved in same-sex relationships.

I feel it very important to understand how these women identify themselves and even more so, why they identify themselves in these ways. My criteria for recruiting participants was: women over 21 years of age, who had "experience" in lesbian relationships and who identified themselves as gay or lesbian. My reason for this was that I wanted to speak to women who had accepted an identity as homosexual because ones self accepted identity directs ones behaviour. Brown (1995: 3) explains that,

> …a sense of oneself as lesbian, gives meaning to behaviour across dimensions of time and place, as distinct from simply being an unidentified participant...

This is similarly linked to the ideas expressed by Maher and Pusch (1995: 20) that,

> language frames thinking and has implications about identity and action- that language is based upon certain personal and cultural assumptions and the way in which people think about their lives is largely the basis for how they act.

To reiterate, the word *lesbian* is known to hold many negative connotations, much of the literature describes it as an offensive word because of its historical meaning as an illness or some kind of dementia or even perversion. The word *gay*, unlike *lesbian*, is not connected to the negative associations from the past where homosexuality or lesbianism was diagnosed as a sickness or a dysfunctional form of a heterosexual relationship. As will be demonstrated, many of the women in the interviews had taken on a position that sees lesbianism as it is seen by dominant, heterosexist beliefs- in a negative light. This is reflected in the interviews; very few of the women report not having an aversion to either term *lesbian*[7] or *gay*, but do express an awareness that there are preferences among those in the gay community. Eight of the women preferred to be called *gay* in all instances and felt that *lesbian* was distasteful.

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[7] Once again it must be noted that I have retained the use of the word *lesbian* in headings and my own discussion. I do not apply or associate *lesbian* with any of the stereotypes which it may be said to be associated, nor do I attempt to discredit the views about these terms.

I begin by discussing the marked discourse which rejected the term *lesbian* on many different grounds and then address the contradictory, as well as less popular, discourse produced by those women who adopted *lesbian* as an appropriate term. A discussion noting the importance of and possible reasons for these patterns in the women's discourses will be discussed throughout the section. They are aware that the dominant meaning of lesbian is derogatory and their behaviour within this context is important.

An important note is that, since I had asked how they preferred to identify themselves early in the interview, I conducted each of the interviews using the preferred term, either *gay* or *lesbian*. Most literature makes use of the term *lesbian*, and for this reason I have also used *lesbian* for the most part. For the purpose of the study, *lesbian* will be used as the standardized term, except when another preference is brought forward in the literature or by the interviewees.

4.3.1. Rejecting the term 'lesbian'

Four of the women said that they did not mind how people identified them, however they explained that *gay* was the preferred term or the term they would favour to identify themselves. These women did however show an awareness of the negative associations that *lesbian* may hold. Eight of the women in the entire sample completely rejected the label *lesbian*. These women felt that the label did not apply to them. Thus, a total of 12 of the women have adopted *gay* as more preferable than *lesbian* and now refer to themselves as such. Only three women said that they chose to be called *lesbian* above *gay*.

Those women who did not mind either terms, but ultimately preferred being called gay said similar things to what Meghann had said. Meghann explains that she does not mind the term lesbian, but is aware of the controversy surrounding the use of the term.

> *How do you prefer to identify yourself? (Interviewer)*
> As gay. Gay I prefer… (Meghann)
> *Do you have a problem with the word lesbian? (Interviewer)*
> No, I am fine with it. I know a lot of women don't like the word but I don't mind it. I am ok with it, gay, lesbian it's fine. Gay is more acceptable… (Meghann)

At first glance, it may not seem important how these women identify themselves. But with closer inspection it becomes evident that many women are embarrassed or ashamed of the

term. These women are very conscious about how they identify themselves as well as how others identify them. The majority of the women preferred describing themselves as *gay* rather than *lesbian*, thus I had identified the rejection of *lesbian* as a common discourse found in the interviews. This general rejection of the word was framed in many different ways and reasons for this negative interpretation were many. Negative historical stereotypes, commonplace everyday negativities of perversion or sickness, inaccurate classifications of perversion, sickness or gender confusion were named as reasons for rejecting the term.

> Khayatt (1992) delineates that the label was never intended to be in lesbians' interest. "Lesbian" was coined by "members of an intelligentsia, men who created the word to identify women who reject, in some way, what was or is considered "natural" and therefore "normal" thus-not surprising- normative, namely, sex (etc.) with men" (Khayatt 1992: 113 as quoted by Maher and Pusch 1995: 32).

This is reflective of many of the women's feelings about the word and their recognition that it still holds much taboo and is less than complimentary.

> I actually don't like the word lesbian to be honest, because there are so many negative things that you think of when you say the word *lesbian*... That kind of butch, with the cigarette hanging from her lip... (Mary)

This feeling is echoed by her partner. In this quote, Yvonne describes her relationship as different from the average lesbian relationship because they do not subscribe to the butch-femme stereotype.

> I think we are actually a unique couple, if we compare ourselves with other lesbian couples... that terrible word... (Yvonne)

Freda, for example, articulates that words such as *lesbian* and *queer* are derogatory and that words such as *gay* and *homosexuality* are more suitable. She rejects the term *lesbian* and *queer* because according to her they are steeped in negativity and have no relevant meaning. Freda expresses her discomfort with the word *lesbian* and chooses to identify as *gay*.

> *Lesbianism* is a word that has been created. I have no idea who ducked it up… but personally I am going to give you a very flat tone of my mind- I think it is a word of a shit taste. I cannot see what it means. I can see *homosexuality* and *gay* as meanings. *Gay* has many different meanings, but I cannot see the word *queer* as a word that describes something and I cannot see the word *lesbian* that describes something. (Freda)

Gerda, for example, is more specific about her rejection of using the term *lesbian*. She had a hard time identifying herself as a lesbian because of her awareness of the undertones about lesbianism. Similarly many of the women expressed an awareness of the disparaging views about lesbianism being sick or perverse, linking up to initial homophobic writing in the past. Her discomfort with the term is still noticeable as she prefers to identify herself as gay.

> *What is lesbianism to you? Do you have problem with the word? (Interviewer)*
> Well no... It's just that there is a bad connotation to it. I probably prefer the words *gay*. It took me a long time to say, "Yes, I am a lesbian..." because it sounds like a sickness or something! So personally I would rather say I am gay. (Gerda)

Some of these women have described that lesbian is an unattractive word, one they would rather not identify with, gay on the other hand does not carry negative connotations with it and is easier to use as Freda had said, "*Gay* falls very easy on the tongue". Carol for example expresses this view, which matched many of the views expressed in the interviews.

> *Do you prefer gay or lesbian? (Interviewer)*
> *Gay* I think... *lesbian* is a harsh name. I mean it is there, but no I don't like it, I just think it sounds harsh! (Carol)

Brown (1995: 10) notes that a woman may call herself gay, thus, "purposefully eschewing the term lesbian, reflecting class and cultural origins where the latter term is more stigmatized than the former". By choosing gay as opposed to lesbian, they are appropriating a word with no negative historical meanings. Freda for example tells that many women, including herself, are not comfortable with the term lesbian. Similarly to Carol she feels that *lesbian* is an unattractive word, she adds that gay is easier to use.

> *So you feel that the word lesbian has got negative connotations? (Interviewer)*
> Can I tell you as soon as you start bringing up the word *lesbian* in a conversation, they start to get…uh scratchy about it. Because it is like, such an ugly word! Nobody likes it. It sounds so cheap, so foul. Gay women feel kinda sensitive towards that. As soon as you talk about the word *lesbian*… it's... it's just not fitting, they are easy to live with the word *gay*. (Freda)

In the interviews, discussion about the term *lesbian*, often led to the emergence of a discussion about butch women. Stereotypes about butch women were common in the interviews and often linked to the term lesbian, an apparent reason for not wanting to be associated with the term.

4.3.2. Lesbian identities and stereotypes

The widespread pattern of women in my sample rejecting the term *lesbian*, on the grounds that it was associated with butch women, caused me to investigate why this was and what functions this discourse achieved. For the reason that butch-femme identities are seen in a pessimistic light, the discourse rejecting butch identities is linked directly to the common preference of being identified as *gay* rather than *lesbian*.

Historically, to be a lesbian was to adopt one of these identities that mirrored heterosexual relationships. When asked how she preferred to identify herself, Ilza explains why *gay* is more preferable. She recognizes that these connotations are connected to the past, and makes explicit that her perception of *lesbian* connotes images of butch-femme couples. Her preference for being called *gay*, separates her from the negative images of lesbians that she holds.

> As *gay*... I prefer the word. I think there is a very definite boundary between the gay women of today and the older generation. That was the generation where, older than I am, where they were very divided into femme and butch roles... And I don't know why but I associate the word lesbian with those people. I know one woman who was furious when called a lesbian. She said, "Don't insult me like that!" I think it has a negative connotation. I prefer gay, I don't mind if people want to say I am a lesbian, but being gay I prefer. (Ilza)

Although having a butch or femme identity is a personal matter, many of the women expressed disdain towards butch women in particular because they are emulating heteronormativity. In general, it is suggested that being classified as butch implies gender confusion. It is believed, by the majority of the sample, that butch women want to be men. In this line of thought, there are numerous stereotypes that label butch women as aggressive, jealous and gender confused, traits associated with masculinity.

The majority of the women in my sample defined themselves outside of these butch stereotypes. Although the literature portrayed these stereotypes about butch women being directed from heterosexual society, many in the homosexual community also accept them as true. Their effort to escape being labeled as such, some of these women adopted heteronormative discourses which framed butch lesbians as abnormal.

Golden (1996: 235) outlines a distinction that was also suggested by the majority of the women earlier, between masculine "butch" and gender conforming "femme" lesbians. Unfortunately, "research concerning these typologies is quite limited, inconsistent..." and, "there is no compelling evidence that any of these typologies provides a general model of women's sexual orientation" (Peplau & Garnets 2000: 343). A large body of research has shown that these stereotypes are inaccurate and misleading. Although these stereotypes may portray the lives of some lesbians and gay men, it does not fit the lifestyle of all homosexual people. Although there is little evidence in the form of research, it is believed that many lesbians do subscribe to these typologies as reflected in the interviews I had conducted.

Two of the women looked at the role-play relationships from a social perspective, believing that women who adhered to heterosexual role-play in their relationships were individuals coming from oppressed communities. Similarly, some research reports that, "gender role-playing may be more common among gays and lesbians from socioeconomic and educational levels" (Peplau & Gordon 1983:233; also Harry & DeVall 1978).

> You generally find in the research that most of the acting out happens where there is higher levels of oppression because people see only a heterosexual example as a norm and then they imitate or mimic that role. So you'll find where people are very suppressed- in the Northern suburbs of Pretoria where the society is quite conservative, you'll go in the, to the gatherings there and its kind of very butch-femme. You know, very feminine girls, lipstick and nail polish and then the very butch ones with the sensible shoes and baggy clothes and bad haircuts. And it's an extreme stereotype... (Johanna)

In the same line of thought, Catherine theorizes that butch-femme role-play was prevalent in oppressed societies.

> ...there is kind of a evolution that happens in a lesbian society, if you look at the time when we became active lesbians, it was a very closeted environment, people took on very traditional roles, so you had your women who felt they were the man in the relationship and the enforced all those rules on their partner, so that women may as well been involved with man as far as equality goes, so that is probably the scenario you would find in many township lesbian as well because they are also at the early stage of coming to terms with lesbianism. So the first reaction we saw was this butch. In fact the first time I went to a gay club, I thought, "oh, ok I am not gay..." I don't have to deal with this issue, I am not like those girls, those truckdrivers... (Catherine)
> Horror if I look back now I am ashamed! (Tasha)
> That is how extreme things were, we were in Pretoria, very conservative, very oppressive society, so ja you were either the butch or the femme and if you did not fit into one of those two, you felt you better get out of there! (Catherine)

The majority of the women rejected the butch identity, but this did not mean they necessarily defined themselves as femme. None of the women in my sample defined themselves as either butch or femme and they rejected the notion of heterosexual role-play in their relationships. There had been some discussion on why some women acted more masculine than others. A common belief was that; butch women had more than likely been abused when they were younger and their "masculine look" functioned as a defence against men and also would not appeal to men. It was not only butch women who faced prejudice from these women, femmes who chose to be with masculine women were portrayed as being confused, or "not really lesbian". Prominent discourses amongst the sample portrayed butch women as wanting to be men and thus were labelled as being more jealous, hostile and violent, characteristics associated with masculinity. A few women related stories of lesbians that had been aggressive or had portrayed violent behaviour. They rejected such behaviour and did not want to be coupled with these women.

> And remember that girl at the bottle store... they were also, one of our friends at a time, but the jealousy and I don't like this butch girls thing. I don't like it and I don't want to be associated with them... I don't like them. (Yvonne)

Peplau & Gordon (1983) answer from where these stereotypes originate by outlining the faulty assumption of the inseparability of the three components of human sexuality. Peplau & Gordon (1983) outline these three components as sexual orientation (attraction to gender), gender identity (belief of being male or female) and gender-role behaviour (acting in traditionally masculine or feminine ways). Misconceptions arise because people wrongly assume that if an individual differs from the norm in one of these aspects, they must differ on others as well. A lesbian, for example, differs with regard to her sexual and romantic attraction to women, this does not translate into her being confused about being a woman, or wanting to be a man, nor does it mean she rejects traditional gender roles (as stereotypes suggest). In line with this, as previously outlined, research indicates that "the majority of lesbians are not masculine in dress or behaviour" (Peplau & Gordon: 1983). Gerda explains her confusion when she started to realise she was gay. This demonstrates how ingrained many of these stereotypes are.

> I thought I was a freak, because I am feminine and at that stage the only lesbians I had seen where all butch, so I thought I was a freak! And my husband at that stage was telling [me] that I am a freak because, "Gay woman want to be men..." (Gerda)

Many of the myths and misconceptions about lesbians are linked to these inaccurate assumptions about sexuality. From what Amy says, it is evident that she is aware of the stereotype that "all lesbians want to be men". She clearly wants to avoid this stereotype.

> Because that is another thing you know, it is important for me to be a woman, I am not a man and I don't want to be man, which is not why I am a lesbian! (Amy)

While some authors argue that butch-femme identities are more complex than mere imitations of heterosexuality (Walker 1993), butch-femme stereotypes were very prevalent amongst this group of women and viewed as being simple imitations of heterosexual relationships. For example, Mary and Yvonne who have been together for five years talk about Yvonne's previous relationship with a butch girl. Mary names the relationship as a "typical lesbian relationship" because Yvonne's partner had been butch and was violent with her. The couple now define themselves as 'unique' because they do not subscribe to heterosexual role-play.

> But that was a typical lesbian relationship. (Mary)
> Jealous! If I talk to another woman, and I mean I am really an outgoing person actually, and I don't... I am always the last one who suspects stuff or...so... (Yvonne)
> ...then she is in big trouble... (Mary)
> We are a unique couple, if we compare ourselves with other lesbians... those butches and femmes. (Yvonne)

Despite this belief that all lesbians follow this relationship style, many women do not fall into these categories and it is often that two butch or femme women would be involved in a relationship. Most of the women however assumed that butch women would partner with femmes. Butch-femme relationships were thus not viewed as being equal because of the perceived inequality in heterosexual relationships which they mimicked. Patriarchy and dominance was often mentioned when reflecting on butch-femme relationships. Amy for example depicted butch-femme relationships to be similar to a conventional marriage, implying inequality between partners and the possession of one partner by the other.

> But, if you are in a relationship where um, there is the dykes and the others that is the butch girls and I think in those kinds of relationships, it is more like the traditional marriage. So like, "I am the man of the house and this is my woman." (Amy)

The literature outlines that it is a false belief that one partner always plays the husband role, and the other the wife role. This myth has been debunked and much research has shown that gay men and women often actively reject traditional husband-wife or masculine-feminine roles (Renzetti 1992; Miller, Bobner & Zarski 2000; Peplau & Gordon 1983). As

outlined earlier, Peplau (1988) discussed that most gay relationships of today do not conform to traditional male and female roles, but instead there exists role-flexibility and turn-taking. Johanna explains that in relationships where partners "act out" or mimic heterosexual roles, inequalities arise because the one partner adopts a more dominant role and an unequal power relation develops. She explains that, there is however the potential for greater equality in a gay relationship because there exists the possibility of negotiating roles and responsibilities.

> Mostly… because they get kind of hectic… it becomes sort of a muddle of gender confusion… and the thing of the acting out is acting out of a power relation that does not actually exist. So you are trying to mimic a power relationship and you are going to struggle, somewhere, somebody is going to get stood on. So sometimes those relationships are very dysfunctional. Those relationships mimic heterosexuality, and heterosexuality is built on an understanding of power… somebody in the relationship is dominant and someone is submissive, subservient… whereas in gay relationships, you have the opportunity to negotiate that. Sometimes I am stronger and sometimes you are stronger and there is that mutuality that can potentially exist. But if you want to act out and that's all you have ever understood about being homosexual and living a gay life, then there is a very high possibility for enormous conflict. (Johanna)

4.3.3. 'Real women' and 'real lesbians'

In the previous section many stereotypes and unfavourable views about other lesbians surfaced. A few of the women, in an effort to break away from the stereotype, have outlined that as lesbians they want to be completely "woman identified". These women explained that they wanted to retain their identity as women while being with women.

> …most of the people I know say they love women because they are women. They don't want a woman who looks like a man and tries to act like one. (Ilza)

They express bewilderment over why some women would "want to be men" and why femmes would "want to be with women who are like men". A common discourse which showed their rejection of butch women was that of, "If I wanted to be with a man, I would be with one…" Yvonne and Mary discuss the topic; Yvonne rejects the idea of having a partnership with a butch woman because according to her, it would be the same as being with a man.

> But to me that is funny because I want to be with another woman, so I won't be with a butch woman like that because I don't want a man, it is exactly the same thing! (Yvonne)
> I don't like butch girls because I like, I want a woman… (Mary)
> It is exactly the way I feel… (Yvonne)

Amy in a similar vein highlights that it is women she is attracted to, and in no way does she find butch women attractive.

> So I am… I am not attracted in anyway to those butch girls and I don't judge them, if they are happy doing that then it's fine, but ja… (Amy)

There was an implication that butch women are not real women and butch-femme couples are not real lesbian couples. Gerda explains that in a "real" lesbian relationship, where roles are equal because they are not defined by gender, the person that is the best at a certain activity takes it on.

> I think if you have a relationship with somebody that has sort of more male genes in them, then they sort of take the role of domineering attitude. But there, I think that is another factor there, I don't think that is real lesbianism... But if you have a real lesbian relationship, where both of you are feminine, the one that is the best at this does it. There I'm not a leader all the time, the one that is the best at it would be the leader so in that sense I think you are more equal. (Gerda)

The sentiment is echoed,

> We recently had a baby baptized in our church and I was looking forward to this so much because it's two women and there are not many members there and they came to have the baby baptised. We knew a week or so before that on Sunday a baby would be baptised. And in they came with the baby and the one was so butch... And we, a few of us we were sitting together later on spoke about it. That it's really a disappointment; we didn't want her to look like man. We wanted two feminine women... (Ilza)

The above is a reflection that butch women are not given the same amount of positive energy or sisterly support from these women as feminine women would be given. There is an implication that butch women are not real women and that having two *real* lesbians, or *real* (feminine) women together would receive more support. The new ideal is to have two feminine women together rather than have two women involved in heterosexual role-play.

The following section addresses the discourse that emerged on the same topic where the women adopt *lesbian* as an appropriate term and redefine the negative stereotypes surrounding it.

4.3.4. Being proudly lesbian

Only three women preferred *lesbian* above *gay* and were even comfortable appropriating the more taboo term of *dyke.* This was the minority discourse, but nevertheless provides an area of interest. Possible reasons for their comfort with the term was that these three women, Johanna, Wanda and Tasha described themselves as either feminists or politically

active. They had also, all been involved in the struggle for same-sex rights in South Africa. Both Johanna and Tasha have been out and openly gay since their twenties. Wanda, only coming out later in her life, has however been involved in a 17 year long homosexual relationship. Tasha and her partner had also been involved for 17 years. These three women expressed complete comfort with their identity and had been involved in well established unions. These were however not the only women in the sample that had been out since young, or had established unions. These women, rather than rejecting lesbian, appropriated the term in order to redefine its meaning. These women use the words in a rebellious fashion, in order to make a statement and reject the common stereotypes. They defined *lesbian* as separate from the derogatory meanings of dominant discourse. For two of these women, being *lesbian* was a part of a political identity.

> I call myself a lesbian! Why deny it? Even a dyke… I don't mind if people call me a dyke. Like I said earlier I am political so I don't feel negative about saying I am a dyke. (Wanda)

Johanna also tells that she is comfortable with both lesbian and dyke. Johanna notes that there are difficulties about terminologies, but they no longer have the same meanings as they had historically. Johanna noticeably embraces *lesbian* rather than rejecting it.

> *What is lesbianism to you? (Interviewer)*
> For me, it is a clear affinity with women, women between women. Gay men tend to refer to themselves as gay men, lesbians tend to refer [to] themselves as lesbian, some are comfortable enough to appropriate *dyke*. I am more comfortable with *dyke* than *lesbian* for example. (Johanna)
> *I find that a lot of women don't like the word lesbian? (Interviewer)*
> Yes, and they would rather be called a moffie than a lesbian. It's a difficult term and I think there are a lot of issues around terminologies and not many are confident enough to call themselves dykes because it's regarded as a negative word, but in fact it has been reclaimed long long long ago. So if you watch programmes like "The L-Word[8]" you will see women completely embrace these terminologies and are completely fine with them. (Johanna)

Johanna had reinterpreted *lesbian* as an empowering identity rather than a minority identity. Tasha also reports to be comfortable with the terms *lesbian* and *dyke,* but realizes that some women are not as comfortable with these words and also that there are negative connotations to some of the words. She, like Johanna mentions that *gay* refers to homosexual men and does not represent homosexual women.

> *What do you prefer gay or lesbian? (Interviewer)*

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[8] "*The L-Word*" is a popular American television series about a group of lesbian friends. It traces the antics of their daily lives.

Lesbian please! I like to be called lesbian, because "gay" thwacks us in with the boys, not that we shouldn't but the boys don't like us to be thwacked in. But I like the word lesbian, I have not got an aversion to it, I don't have that frizon of yuckiness about it, but I don't have a frizon of yuckiness about any words... (Tasha)

None of these three women ascribed to the same negative views of the other women. In these cases, the reclaiming of the label *lesbian* is used to create an empowering opportunity. This resistance to being labeled as deviant creates space for empowerment and new identities. They portrayed themselves as proud to be called lesbian or dyke. It must be noted that neither of these women fitted the stereotyped description that many of the other women held about *lesbians* and dykes being butch. These three women were comfortable using even derogatory terms to describe themselves. They fully adopted both the terms *lesbian* and *dyke*. Those women who reject *lesbian* and by accepting 'lesbian as deviant' show some adherence to the dominant stereotypes that exist. These three women on the other hand give no acknowledgment to these ideas, instead they embrace the terms and don't feel the need to develop new ways of identifying themselves.

4.3.5. Summary

From my own experience, women feel more comfortable using *gay* to describe and introduce themselves. It has a social function. It is assumed that people know (or make judgment about) what *lesbian* means and that upon meeting a lesbian can already make certain presumptions. It holds connotations that cannot easily be escaped. Rather than changing the meaning of a word, many in the lesbian community have started using *gay* to describe themselves because it does not have the social stigma attached to it that *lesbian* does. *Gay* allows for a redefinition of what it means to have two women together, while the term *lesbian* rests on outdated stereotypical assumptions. Despite the definition they choose, these women are constantly competing with and trying to escape the dominant stereotypes of being homosexual.

These women are in a position where they are unable to ignore the stereotypes about lesbianism. They, thus have to find ways to define themselves separately from these. In the above section it is shown how some reject the label *lesbian*, which they feel negatively confines them. The term *lesbian* is rejected by these women because of its negative

historical connotations, links to being an illness or perversion and its association with butch-femme stereotypes. The women described *lesbian* as being an unattractive word that they did not identify with. *Gay* was preferred as the more appropriate word and this "new" word allowed for a redefinition of being a woman involved with another woman.

Butch women, being more masculine, were characterized as having manly attributes. These traits were framed negatively and the focus was on dominance, violence and jealousy. Because these women valued equality in their relationships, butch-femme relationships were rejected on the grounds of the inequality in heterosexual relationships which they emulated. In line with this, there was an implication that "real lesbian" relationships are based on equality and negotiation and thus do not involve any acting out.

I do not discredit what these women have said, but note that while it is not done consciously, their adherence to the dominant discourses on lesbianism serves to embed the stigma from which they are trying to escape. These women by rejecting *lesbian* on the basis of the negative stereotypes it has attached to it are both accepting 'lesbianism as deviant' and further entrenching the dominant heterosexist misconceptions. To relate all this information to the research questions, these women are aware of their minority position in society, and have adopted a discourse which 'others' lesbians who do not conform to their gender roles. This names butch women as gender confused and abnormal; with the function of separating them from this alleged deviance. By doing this, they portray themselves as belonging to a different group, apart from those to which the stereotypes apply. This tendency to side with heterosexist discourse allows them the opportunity to frame their own lesbianism as more natural or normal. While appropriating a part of the discourse that names heterosexual role-play between women as deviant, they ignore the discourse that names two women together as unnatural. It serves to categorise their relationships as apart from butch-femme relationships. By differentiating themselves from "that type of lesbian" they appear normal because they reject the negative images that stereotyping has imprinted. A minority of the women had chosen to identify with the term *lesbian*, choosing to embrace it rather than reject it as the other women had done. These women rejected the stereotypes associated with the term *lesbian*, instead trying to instil new ideas and associations with the term.

Thus their reflection on their own identity demonstrates an awareness of being different, but also the need to normalise themselves in the face of a heterosexist and homophobic society. The discourses that emerged from the interviews functioned in different ways to normalise their own lesbianism while rejecting other forms of lesbianism- their choice of identity as well as the stereotypes held by these women reflect this.

4.4. Primary versus elective lesbians

Some researchers have proposed a distinction between lesbians who were born that way, or "primary" lesbians and "elective" lesbians who chose same-sex relationships later in life. According to Golden (1996: 235),

> primary lesbians have a sense of difference based on sexual attraction toward members of the same sex and do not perceive this difference to be a conscious choice.

Elective lesbians, on the other hand are those that chose to be in same–sex relationships. The literature revealed that research cannot identify what causes a person to be homosexual, but still there is a need to "diagnose" homosexuality. This has an interesting heterosexist slant, it assumes that it is something unnatural and something which could be prevented or cured. Interestingly, many of the women felt the need to justify or "diagnose" their own homosexuality. This became evident in the different discourses that arose where the women used different reasons to explain their sexuality. The most common discourse, although expressed in different ways was that lesbianism had been inherent, something prevalent from a young age.

4.4.1. Discourses relating to having always been homosexual

Many of the women in my sample (including those who had been involved in heterosexual marriages) expressed the discourse of that of the primary lesbian as discussed by Golden (1996). This assumes that homosexuality and heterosexuality are fixed early on and persist throughout ones life course. Within this framework, identifying oneself as homosexual, or coming out, is a process of accepting what one was all along. Hollander & Haber (1992, as quoted by Kitzinger & Wilkinson 1995:95) outline that, "the very expression *coming out* suggests that the lesbian has always been inside, awaiting debut". For example, one woman explained that she felt she had always been lesbian and that revealing this to her family was

a great relief from having had to hide her sexuality for so long. Carol was the only woman who reported directly to have been born gay, all the other women suggested their homosexuality was evident from young.

> I think I was born gay, I hid it for 26 years. It was tough. Ja it was really hard. (Carol)

Many of these women phrased their being lesbian not as a choice but as something inherent that they have been aware of from a young age, Johanna gives a good illustration.

> I was sort of clearly not straight from small. I was quite odd from small and I grew up in an environment that was extremely conservative, so it was pretty obvious that I was a bit different. (Johanna)

Some of the women have stories explaining the difficulties of growing up knowing of their lesbianism. Some women explained that it had been obvious to their family and they had known she was gay even before she told them. Three of the women said that their families had always suspected that they had been gay. This in a sense made coming out a little easier because it was not a complete shock for their family. Fay shares how she came out to her mother.

> [I] came out when I was 21- phoned my mom told her over the telephone. And we never really spoke about it, she was just like, "I have always known you were gay and it's not a surprise..." (Fay)

On the other hand, Johanna and Catherine had conflict with their family from a young age about being lesbian. Both of them explain that they had barely known what 'being gay' meant, but that their families had picked up on it from their behaviour at a young age. Their stories reflect that growing up "different" resulted in a lot of trauma for them. Catherine explains that, with her Catholic upbringing, homosexuality was condemned as sin, and that her mother and people at school had undertaken to steer her in the right direction by making her feel guilty about the feelings she had.

> For me it was much more of a typical traumatic event. My mother being worried about me before I even new the concept... so she invested a lot of energy to making me feel incredibly guilty into feeling one day if I was, she could guilt me into the opposite direction... Well I have always been gay I have always been lesbian. You know, I was in love with girls in junior school I was fooling around with girls in the bathroom not with boys. Because when you a child, you don't know that that stuff is wrong, you are exploring. It is part of your exploration process... ...but then eventually everybody starts talking to you about your sexuality, so by the time that I understood that I was gay, that I loved girls, not boys and I understood that people had a problem with that, I was trapped because if all these horrible things were gonna happen, you know it was the end of my life! So I was 14 when I first actually twigged and understood what the issue was, because people were not direct. And I knew that I was in

love with this girl at school. So that went on throughout high school right into university. (Catherine)

Johanna had a similar experience; she explains that she knew she was different somehow and that her mother had seen that she was gay from a young age.

> I was sort of clearly not straight from small. I was quite odd from small and I grew up in an environment that was extremely conservative, so it was pretty obvious that I was a bit different. Then I had my first relationship with a girl when I was 13 and then my mother... uhm she spotted it immediately, she looked at this and she knew immediately what was going on and they forcibly separated us and then of course put me in a hormone replacement therapy programme at UCT, to try to make sure I turned out a girl and they put her into a number of institutions because she tried to commit suicide cause they had separated us. We were very innocent, we had really no idea, because of the conservative environment, that what we were doing was sexuality, we were just playing and children and explorative. (Johanna)

The above women had always known they were attracted to women and would identify as primary lesbians. Other women who I had interviewed also explain lesbianism as something that was inherent and existed within them all along, but it had only came to their realization later on in life.

The claiming of a lesbian identity involves a move into the unknown, claiming a forbidden identity. Material costs, especially when leaving their marriage included loss of their home, their standing in society, and the possibility of losing their children. None of the women had however expressed regret about having made the transition to lesbianism. Similarly, Cassingham & O'Neil (1993) also reported that none of their sample of 36 previously married women regretted their change in sexuality. The women gave varying reasons for why they got married. Most explain that they got married to fulfil the roles of society, and expectations of their family. Others just married because they had no other option. Most of the women expressed similar sentiments to that of Mary.

> I have always known that I was not supposed to be married; you get married because the world expects you to... (Mary)

Even though 7 of the women had only come out after the age of 30 or after having been married, most of the women said that they had been gay all along. For example, Mary's story was very similar to the majority of women who only realised their lesbianism later in life.

> It was only when I was about 37 then I really admitted to myself that this is what is going on in my life, that I am gay and I don't really want to be in a marriage anymore, and that's when,

I won't say went out looking, but admitted to myself... and opened up to myself then, and then I met Yvonne... (Mary)

The above quote implies that being homosexual was something that had been going on throughout her life and she had only realized it at a later stage. Some explain that upon looking back, they realize they had crushes on women and that ultimately they had been lesbian all along. Authors Kitzinger & Wilkinson (1995) on the topic of lesbian transition outline that the reconstruction of a past offers a sense of continuity with the present. Thus it meant that early experiences with women assumed an enormous importance for the women in explaining their current sexuality. Similarly to their study, many of the women in my sample had brought previously unrecognised or forgotten experiences to light. By mentioning the crushes they had on girls, their boyishness or fascination with older women, served to recognise their innate lesbianism from their youth. These discourses serve to justify being gay now and mark a process of continuity from the past.

> To be honest, in school I was always having crushes on girls and teachers... You heard about moffies, but you never knew about women. It is not like today; children of today have it much easier than we had it... so that is why it never came to mind that I was gay. My husband was actually my first boyfriend; we went out for 7 years before we got married, so he was the only man in my life, beside my brother and my father. And I never went out to parties and that, I dunno why, but I just was not interested... I did not know why, I was just different... (Mary)

Gerda had first started thinking of women in a sexual way when she was 30, but reports that upon looking back she can identify times that she had been in love with her friends and that she had wanted to be a tomboy when she was younger. This discourse, rooted in the past, serves to justify her current lifestyle and in line with Kitzinger & Wilkinson (1995), highlighting instances of the past offers a sense of continuity with the present.

> I did not experience myself as lesbian, I came out when I was 34, so up until 30 I had no idea that I was gay, I thought I was straight! If I look back I realize I have been gay all my life. I see that I was in love with this girl in standard 7 and in love with this woman, and these friends! If anybody had at anytime, just taken my hand touched my hand or just given me a good kiss, I would have known, but I just didn't know. If I look back I wish that somebody had just kissed me, it would saved me all that! But then I would not have had my boys, so maybe that was the reason I don't know. (Gerda)

So many women revert to the discourse of having been or wanting to be a tomboy. Once again this implies that she was gay from a young age already and it was not just an idea that sprang on her but something that has been within her for long. It implies it is a part of her nature. This is based on a stereotype that tomboys who like to play sports and be outdoors

grow up to be lesbian. Bailey & Zucker (1995) provide some suggestive evidence that gender nonconformity in childhood may be linked to adult sexual orientation. In opposition to this, Peplau & Garnets (2000) found that, lesbians are more likely than heterosexual women to remember being a tomboy when younger, but that this link is inconclusive because, "memories of childhood may be colored by adult experiences" and "most tomboys grow up to be heterosexuals" (Peplau & Garnets 2000: 355).

> When I look back, I now, looking back I see that I have known most of my life, but I just did not see it. I did not link sexuality with women. I can remember I wanted to be a tomboy and then at a stage, around 13 I realised, I am a woman; I want to be a woman. I think the only reason I wanted to be with a guy was because they have an adventurous life and I like hiking and all that and they can do all of that, a tomboy can't, just can't do that. And every time this thing is thrown to you, "But you're a girl, you're a girl!" I did not link sexuality with women... (Gerda)

It can seem, from stories like these, that a woman's life was an unconscious acting out of her lesbian identity. By using the discourse that, *"I have been gay all along!"* or, *"I knew there was something different about me..."* implies that being gay is not a choice but rather an inborn trait. By framing their sexuality as an inborn trait they are excused from having to explain their lesbianism as a choice. There is an implication that once realising or accepting their sexuality, a hole had been filled. Some women reported a sense of self-discovery and of finding themselves, they reported their lives being filled. Jen felt that before she had admitted her sexuality to herself, she had felt incomplete.

> I knew I could not be with a man and the whole faith issue was a struggle for me, and I also could not be with a woman, and I just got to a point and I realized you know I just can't do this anymore...there was a huge portion of me missing... (Jen)

One woman had found a new sense of comfort amongst gay people Ilza explains,
> And then I started meeting gay people, coincidently. I met someone and I sort of realized, this is who I am and I felt at home. (Ilza)

These stories of having a new found sense of completeness once realising their sexuality is linked to the implication that their lesbianism was inborn. Gerda for example started realizing she was really different at the age of 30. She explains that she saw an internet site with women kissing and this image had stuck in her mind and caused her to link sexuality with women. It was then that she realised what had been amiss in her life.

> And after that, it took a couple of months and it was not going away and I think for the first time sexuality clicked. Then I made the connection, between, because at that time I could not understand why I felt this hole, I could not understand what it is that I am missing! (Gerda)

88

There is also a stereotypical tendency to label lesbianism as the end result of some experience, such as abuse or bad experiences with men. My trouble with this is that it assumes lesbianism is the dysfunctional consequence of a negative experience. This discourse frames lesbianism as an "unnecessary" outcome. This discourse is non-the-less still used by many of the women. Some women indirectly referred to abuse that had occurred when they or their partners were young, Mary and Yvonne had comments similar to that of Freda.

> ...because of the trauma that happened to me in my past… way way past back… you have a space for guys and you just do not allow them past that space. (Freda)

An article by Peplau and Garnets (2000) reviews the scientific findings about women's sexuality and sexual orientation. One major verdict was that research had failed to identify biological or childhood experiences as predictors of sexual orientation. In their article Peplau and Garnets (2000: 329) present the perspective that, "Women's sexuality and sexual orientation are potentially fluid, changeable over time, and variable across social contexts". The idea of sexual fluidity is explored by Baumeister (as quoted by Peplau & Garnets 2000), he explores the concept of plasticity, which is, "the degree to which a person's sex drive can be shaped and altered by cultural, social, and situational pressures" (2000: 332). In contrast, a lack of plasticity would mean a person's sexuality is more rigidly patterned in early life as a result of childhood and/or biological influences. If women's sexuality is not primarily shaped by biology and childhood experiences, there is a lot of room for investigating and understanding women's sexuality.

This research shifts the focus from biological theories to social and psychological theories of sexuality. Baumeister (2000 as quoted by Peplau & Garnets 2000: 323) illustrates how the social environment could influence sexuality by looking at factors such as education, religion and acculturation. The link between education and sexuality is highlighted. One survey found that completing college doubled the likelihood that a man identify as gay or bisexual but was associated with a 900% increase in women identifying as lesbian or bisexual (Peplau & Garnets 2000: 332). Another consistency with the plasticity theory can be seen in the 1970s feminist movement, which caused many women to turn away from sexual relationships with men and to establish relationships with women (Kitzinger 1987; Peplau &

Garnets 333). Thus, according to Baumeister, "plasticity would permit a woman to change aspects of her sexuality or sexual orientation across the lifespan" (as quoted by Peplau & Garnets 2000: 333). This perspective sheds some light onto those women who had been involved in long term heterosexual relationships before becoming involved with a woman. I find this theory to be of interest because many of the women in my sample had previously been married and many chose a lesbian lifestyle later in life.

Although there is research being done on these areas, very few of the women adopted the discourse of choice in explaining their switch from heterosexual relationships to homosexual ones. In my sample, the stories reflect that many of these women came out later in life, 8 coming out when they were over 30 years old. Seven of the women in my sample had been involved in a heterosexual marriage, and 14 of them reported having had some sort of romantic relationship with a man, I thought this to be interesting with regard to how they identified themselves, or reflected on their sexual identities and also suggests finding their sexuality. Given the climate of heteronormativity it is not surprising that they tried to conform by being involved in heterosexual relationships.

4.4.2. 'Lesbianism was my choice!'

Only two of the women said that a lesbian relationship was their choice. Both of the women who explain lesbianism as their choice, identify as feminists and political lesbians. Wendy had previously been married and describes her choice to be lesbian as a "choice she made for herself". Wendy and Tasha were the only women who identified themselves as political lesbians. Tasha describes herself as being involved with both sexes until she chose lesbianism above heterosexuality or bisexuality.

> I never had any idea that, not, I never I never acceded to peoples attitudes, I did not let myself say 'oh this is all naughty'. I let myself do what I wanted. I never had a big or small coming out. But I did boys and girls, higgledy piggledy and only when I was 20, when I was 22 that I decided that I was gonna be a fulltime lesbian as opposed to a fiddler. (Tasha)

Both Wendy and Tasha expressed very similar sentiments. Tasha explains that it was a choice to be lesbian, this stems from her feminist beliefs. Thus her choice was something of a political stand against patriarchy, thus she would be classified as a political lesbian.

> *So you finally made up your mind? (Interviewer)*

> I did ja, people always say that you could have decided to be straight, I definitely decided to be a lesbian. I could have decided to be straight, but I'm not bisexual... in an identity sense, but I love to sleep with men, but I love to sleep with women too. So maybe in a sexual sense, but in a political sense... you know I get very [angry]... if people call me bisexual! (Tasha)
> She is a political dyke. (Catherine)
> Ja, I chose it as positive decision for myself, the thing that I wanted to do. (Tasha)

The rhetoric of choice was not a common one in this group of women. The majority of these women's stories suggested them to be primary lesbians. I by no means claim this to be false, but aim to draw out the patterns in their discourses. Very few women named their homosexuality as a choice and I found this interesting given that so many had been married. As has been shown, many of these women have demonstrated their awareness of the dominant discourse of homosexuality as an abnormal form of relationship. With this background it is possible that they are not comfortable with labelling their homosexuality as a choice, but rather as something unchangeable and inborn. This may possibly be because it is still gaining acceptance as a legitimate choice of relationship. I by no means aim to discredit these women's explanations of why they are lesbian; I have merely explored their narratives.

4.5. Concluding reflections on lesbian identity

I began the chapter by outlining how these women felt about being homosexual and how they positioned themselves in the South African context. It had emerged through a number of different discourses that they were aware of being the minority and of being dissimilar from the norm. Most of the women were aware of the legal changes that occurred in South Africa. A few of the women were vocal about the lack of social equality that exists in South Africa despite the high legal standards of equality. With this perception of difference and marginality, it became interesting to explore how these women identified themselves and explained their sexuality within this oppressive context.

Looking at how these women reflect on their identity, it was shown that a large majority of the women preferred to identify as *gay* rather than *lesbian*. Reasoning behind this was that a range of negative typecasts existed about the term *lesbian*. The term *lesbian* was linked directly to classifications of homosexuality as a perversion as well as stereotypes about butch women. It was for this reason that they chose to be called *gay*. By rejecting the butch

stereotypes, they portray themselves as normal women rather than gender confused stereotypes. They not only reject butch-femme relationships, but try to portray their own relationships as different from these.

When providing an explanation of their identities, the majority of women framed their lesbianism as an innate trait. Just under half of the women had previously been involved in a heterosexual marriage. When reflecting on their current identity as homosexual, they recounted same-sex experiences from their past in order to present their lesbianism as a feature they had always possessed, but only recognised later in life. By framing their homosexuality as an inherent trait it suggested something inborn and thus natural. By implying that one had always been lesbian and that it is inherent, could perhaps be a mechanism to counter-act this weight of condescension from society. The pressure- both direct and indirect from society is made obvious by the mechanisms these women feel the need to adopt in presenting themselves as normal.

By looking at these women's lives in context, it can be assumed that lesbianism as a choice would be challenged or ridiculed. Perhaps it was for these reasons that very few of the women reflected on their identity as a choice. The two women who had however described their identity appropriation as a choice had named this as a political stand. These women were however very vocal about the negative aspects of heterosexual relationships, thus the portrayal of their own lesbian relationships as better and more equal.

The majority of the women had thus reflected on their identity as a trait that was inherent. A variety of discourses emerged which functioned to communicate the innateness of their sexuality. For those who had previously been married their need to justify their lesbianism was compounded by the fact that they had maintained heterosexual (read: normal) relationships before changing to homosexuality. These women in particular had highlighted same-sex experiences that had only recently come to light. Having been or wanting to have been a tomboy was also adopted as a discourse to communicate that their sexuality had been evident from a young age. Many of the women had also spoken about the fulfilment that had been achieved in their lives once they recognized what had been missing. For these women, lesbianism was framed as a positive life change.

Chapter 5: Potential external stressors

5.1. Introduction

The following chapter discusses the dynamics of external factors that contribute to conflict within lesbian intimate unions. While not all of these pressures impact all lesbian relationships' they are possibilities of conflict that have been drawn from the stories of these women. This forms the first part of three that discusses the dynamics of conflict in lesbian relationships. The factors that I name, are both those directly named by the participants, as well as additional factors that I have drawn from what they have said about their experiences. It was often that I had introduced the subjects to the participants, yet it did happen that they spoke on the topic before I could ask about it. In most instances, I have drawn from the participants own experiences to illustrate these stressors, but at times present their stories about other people and their generalisations- which I believe also reflects something of interest.

Very briefly, the major themes to be discussed in this chapter are: *discrimination*, and linked to this is the *pressure to adjust behaviour* which discusses types of behavioural adjustments that are made as well as perceptions of this heteronormative conforming. *Necessity to create safe spaces*, *ambivalence of social support*, *financial dependencies* and various conflicts with family members is also discussed as possible areas of conflict in lesbian relationships. *Previous marriages* and difficulties dealing with children are also addressed. I also discuss the importance of *social support,* looking at both the effects of not receiving acceptance from certain people as well as where these women turn to for support.

5.2. Discrimination and threat of physical harm

Discrimination was a dominant theme that emerged from the transcripts, while some women report to have never been victims of discrimination others have felt that they had been blatantly targeted because of their sexuality. Discrimination has been drawn out as a key theme because it is a major source of conflict and links directly to how these women live their everyday lives. What follows is a discussion and interpretation of these women's experiences and the discourses which they use to explain their lives.

I had found it surprising that so many of the women report never having experienced any overt discrimination because of their sexual orientation at all. The main discourses that became evident was: *'I am really lucky, I have not experienced any discrimination ever!'* For example,

> *Have you ever felt discriminated? (Interviewer)*
> No, no! Even at work, everybody just loves me... and my boss, him and I get on very well and he is supportive of me, as long as I am doing my work, what's it got to do with him? Personally I don't think I have ever been discriminated against or anything like that. (Fay)

This was a dominant discourse amongst the women, eight of them reported that they had never been the victim of direct discrimination, but there is a sense that although they may not have experienced discrimination, they were conscious that their lifestyle is not fully accepted. Only three women reported that they had experienced direct and obvious discrimination. All of their comments, whether they had been victims of discrimination or not, reflect their awareness of people's negative views and connotations about homosexuality.

For example when asked if she had ever experienced discrimination of any sort, one respondent notes that it is not overt discrimination, but rather a prejudiced way of thinking that becomes evident. It was summarised perfectly by Catherine when I asked her if she had experienced any discrimination;

> Not particularly, not overtly. What we experience at our age is more ignorance. On the one hand, other people's discomfort which contrasts later into being very patronising, but you learn the older you become, you learn to manage it for those people. (Catherine)

This "ignorance" that Catherine talks about has to do with the general misconceptions that are held by society. So, while she has not experienced explicit bigotry, she is aware of misconceptions that exist and how these affect people's thinking about lesbians. Gerda on the other hand had the most public coming out process and had received very disturbing reactions from people. Her experience of discrimination is more overwhelming than what any of the other women had experienced.

> Because it was in the newspaper, I have so much; I have letters of people that have written to me saying you are… saying bad things about me. (Gerda)

Discrimination need not only be direct physical or verbal attacks such as those that Gerda had experienced, but the "ignorance" mentioned by Catherine can also have a negative

effect on the individual. For example, she had never been cursed or verbally attacked, but Amy had felt like she was always the topic of conversation and that people always gossiped about her. She also mentions that while nobody knows about her sexuality at her new job, they joke about and curse homosexual people, not realising the effect it may have on those around them. Catherine had for example also reported feeling discomfort in the presence of people joking about homosexual people. There is a sense that Amy would avoid coming out to these people because of their patronizing views. These derogatory comments about homosexuality portray a very condescending view of homosexual people. This joking about homosexuality is a more subtle form of discrimination.

> *Today, have you experienced any discrimination? (Interviewer)*
> Well ja, like I said at the place I am working now, you can hear by what people joke about and what they are saying and so on… when I was a teacher, I was teaching for 16 years, so um, there at the school it was also like that, like when you leave the room, everyone is guessing and gossiping. (Amy)

There are many instances where concern about being judged had been expressed by these women. From these experiences then, there is a realisation that some heterosexual people view homosexuality as abnormal and thus, revealing ones sexuality could be a risk and thus there is a need to hide it in some circumstances.

Another reaction to having experienced discrimination was an, '*I don't care what they think*' discourse, expressed by fewer participants. For example Johanna had said, "I kind of have the attitude that if they have issues, then it's not my problem". Women with this outlook, had all said that they realise they may be seen as different and people may have problems with their lifestyle, but they expressed that they were at the point where they had accepted themselves and didn't care what other people thought about them. Both Fay and Freda spoke about receiving strange looks from people and feeling judged because of their sexuality. They have both, however said that they are no longer willing to take it to heart, but rather recognize it is as the problem of society.

> I suppose when you go out sometimes and you get people looking at you… You get these, these young guys that have got things to say, but uhm I just turn around and look the other way. I have never really bothered about people, if you're… if you don't know me as a person and you want to prejudge me, then you have no place in my life. So I just feel if you wanna... ag well I have one or two people that I know their husbands are not too comfortable with the idea of me being gay, but that is their choice and once they actually get to know me…

they understand and they get to know me as a person, not as a gay person. So... no I don't think I have been discriminated. (Fay)

Just under half of the women in my sample expressed their fear of being attacked or raped because of their sexuality, in this sense there was a growing awareness of the possible dangers which they faced. This was perhaps a reflection of the numerous reports of correctional rape and murders of lesbians in certain parts of South Africa. Given the current social climate and changes within the country, the women are becoming more aware of their position as a minority. Jen highlights the social changes occurring in the country with regard to homosexuality and gender.

> I am becoming a little bit worried... even politically things happening in our country, like the things Zuma said about homosexuality. Legal protection and all that are things that can quite easily change again. So I think there is also a change happening that I think we need to be aware of, and I think the organizations in the field also need to be aware of it, the shift in the social field. I think the average person still thinks this is a sickness, and it is something really strange. And in South Africa specifically we still have impact of patriarchy which is majorly in the air; I mean all sorts of cultural settings and race settings and again the religion again as well. (Jen)

While all the women who had expressed fear of being raped or attacked, thought about it in terms of their sexuality, Tasha talks about the current state of women as a minority. She explains that her fear does not stem from being lesbian, but rather her worry is about traditional and backwards thinking that is prevalent about women. There is a recognition that in general women in South Africa are in a precarious situation. She explains that her fear of rape is not a result of her identity as lesbian, but rather her identity as a woman.

> I am not always worried about anybody physically attacking me, although I am obviously scared of that, but I think I am more scared as a woman. The only time ever that any slur was directed towards me was, "ag you just need a good fuck!" and that worries me, that thinking worries me... I don't want to be raped, but I consider that a woman's thing... it not just, I feel that the minority that I feel I am a part of, is women... (Tasha)

While only three women said they had experienced direct discrimination, the rest of the sample had mentioned times when they felt threatened or instances where they had felt judged because of their sexuality, but did not name this as discrimination. Their perception of being a minority and the possibility of risk within the South African context was demonstrated in the previous chapter. Many of the women express the awareness that heterosexual society represents the norm, in this line of thinking; some of these women have explained that they choose to ignore negative response while others had justified the

employment of certain strategies of complying with heteronormativity. The reasoning being that if nobody knows you are homosexual, you will not experience discrimination. Thus, perhaps the reason for having so few reports of experiences of discrimination is linked to the fact that they are not openly lesbian all the time.

5.3. Pressure to adjust behaviour

It is evident that while not many women report having experienced discrimination, they are aware that it could happen and thus attempt to avoid it if at all possible. Thus the scarcity in reports of discrimination is not necessarily a result of a greater acceptance of homosexuality from society, but perhaps a result of their sexuality being hidden or their avoidance of potentially harmful situations. These women are therefore very aware of their sexuality as something that many do not agree with because it is believed to be something sick and perverted. Many of these women are aware of the consequences of living out and being openly lesbian in public, and for these reasons they find ways to avoid exposing their sexuality. The following theme will highlight the ways in which these women change their behaviour so as not to draw attention to themselves or be stigmatized. Not only are these women very aware of people's reactions, but have developed means of avoiding these negative reactions. These methods of changing in front of heterosexual society is what Jen named as to, *"dance around straight people and make things comfortable for straight people..."* Her disagreement with 'dancing around straight people', stems from the fact that legally, heterosexual and homosexual marriages are equal, yet homosexual couples still feel the need to adjust their behaviour.

5.3.1. Passing as straight

This theme looks at how most of these women, whether alone or in a couple, adjust their behaviour so as to appear straight (read: "normal"), not draw attention to themselves and thus, not be exposed to discrimination. Their tactics reflect an awareness of the prevailing stereotypes of homosexuality and that heterosexuality is the proposed norm. Because heterosexuality is the norm, these women are automatically assumed to be straight. In some instances straightness is enacted, while in other instances, they allow their straightness to be assumed. Thus, passing as straight involves either allowing straightness to be assumed, without challenging heteronormativity or actually pretending to be straight.

The fact that some feel the need to change their behaviour; may be seen on the one hand as an acceptance of straight-as-normal and lesbian-as-deviant, but within the hostile environment, appearing straight proves to be a necessary strategy for many women. By appearing straight, these women are accepted into certain circles; they are not discriminated against or looked at differently.

Some of the women were concerned about drawing attention to themselves especially in potentially threatening situations. Appearing straight proves to be especially important in situations of possible threat. There is a recognition that some circumstances could be potentially dangerous, and thus they need to remain hidden or on guard to prevent an uncomfortable or even dangerous situation. For example, Yvonne and Mary report that they have not had overt experiences of discrimination, but report in numerous occasions that they do not let their sexuality be known in public.

> *Ok, uhm have you experienced any discrimination? (Interviewer)*
> Ag we... not really, not straight out... not with us. It depends, especially in a place, it depends on where you hang out. Where you go to a place where you get these macho guys, where you go to the place where you get these macho guys, you will have problems if they find out... (Yvonne)
> That is why we don't have gay stickers on our cars, because I have heard of men following women home and attacking them and rape...just to show them. Else I would love to have a sticker... (Mary)

Many of the women had similarly reported not having had any experiences of discrimination, but in turn, had expressed various strategies of avoidance. While she is open to her family and close friends, Freda tells that in some circumstances she would avoid having to tell people she was gay. She explains that she would have to pretend she was someone else. She would try to avoid straight questions- those that assumed her straightness such as questions about her husband, boyfriend or children. Facing such questions causes her to have to lie or change the topic so that she does not have to face telling the truth in such uncomfortable situations. I had asked her if there were any people that she hid her sexuality from. She replied:

> You know I think there are certain people, usually at work that are highly critical about things, uhm that's not your family that are as easily accepting. Your family understand and they give you the time to at least talk to them and at least put it in a nice way. But people at work for example, I worked for a Jewish company and they are anti-gay. So even though you look gay, you had to confuse them or keep your mouth shut very very tightly. Man, you just

pretend you're in a different world, that's it. And if anybody asks you a straight question, you make something up, or ask them another question to avoid the actual thing. (Freda)

These women are aware that those lesbians with a straight appearance could pass as straight and not be exposed to prejudice. One's appearance may allow one to pass as straight, or may be used to make a statement about being gay. Not all lesbians however dress masculine or look especially manly. None of the women in my sample described themselves as butch, but there was an instance where a participant described the process of dressing masculine or butch as "acting out" in order to make a statement about her sexuality. She was the only woman who actively and rebelliously went out to make it known that she was lesbian. This proved to be particularly interesting and reveals something significant about appearance and dress. Johanna refused to hide her identity, and felt that dressing as she normally does, would not be sufficient to reveal her homosexuality.

> *Have you ever experienced any discrimination? (Interviewer)*
> You can see I'm reasonably straight looking, I don't look like a boy, you know I'm not sort of a diesel dyke, so I will get passed it and then eventually someone will say ask if I am lesbian. Personally I have not really ever suffered discrimination except for in the conservative growing up environment where they were determined to make me a girl… a straight girl. So I very occasionally have to act out and that's mostly when I go back into that conservative environment and then I have to make it clear to them that I am not straight! Because for me it is worse to be confused for being straight than it is to be assumed to be gay. So that's how out I am, so I make a point of it, if anybody is left with any doubt, there is no doubt by the time we are done! (Johanna)

Johanna then goes on to describe what she had planned to wear to her sisters wedding in the attempt at making a statement about being lesbian. Her actions show that she is not ashamed of being a lesbian and by no means wants to hide it. She is aware that her point would not be put across if she chose to dress normally because her straightness would be assumed. She tells that most people know about her sexuality, but she feels the need to make a point about it to the people in her home town that may not yet know. Her clothing choice is reflective of her awareness of the stereotype that lesbians dress in a particular manner; she is playing out this stereotype in an effort to show that she is a lesbian.

> So I decided my dress will be very boy and then I am just going to make sure I have a plunging neckline. So I will have to do a bit of acting out there but normally I don't have to act out because people kind of know and if they have issues, they have issues. I kind of have the attitude that if they have issues, then it's not my problem. (Johanna)
> *You planned it all? (Interviewer)*
> Absolutely, because I hate shopping, but I went out and found the most masculine French cut shirt and pants I could find. And I am going to wear those boots... those scary dyke boots

that my sister calls, "those big black boats". So they are going to have a rough time. And then my mother phoned and said would I please just be polite for the day and not say anything (about being gay). So I am just going to have to go very very boyish and I am not taking a man, no hope in hell! (Johanna)

The above instance illustrates what role one's appearance may have. For the reason that heterosexuality is assumed, it is taken for granted that these women are straight because they do not "act out' or look masculine. Allowing this perception to remain, is also a strategy of avoidance and prevention of unconstructive reactions. Because there is a need to hide their sexuality in certain situations; it was a convenient strategy to allow their heterosexuality to be assumed. Thus,

> women who are lesbian but actively deny or hide their status, are treated similarly to women who are not lesbian, "forgiven" as it were, their sexual orientation as long as it is hidden from public view... (Brown 1995: 13).

Allowing people to assume straightness, allows them to treat you 'normally'. While some of the women allowed their heterosexuality to be assumed, other women, like Freda were more active in presenting themselves as straight. Freda spoke about how she, before coming out, use to act straight by dressing feminine and having a boyfriend for the show- a measure to ensure acceptance and prevent discrimination.

> And you did not dare to even stick your neck out as a gay girl! Wow man! You would be thrown out of the flat, so I kind of got myself a boyfriend. A nice little attachment, to hang around. And you dolly up, I mean I had dresses, I use to wear dresses, minis and big earrings and I had long hair and pantyhose with lines! And I had everything that a girl should wear! Believe you me... just to be ok. And I mean it felt good, you get the attention, people notice you alright… (Freda)

It seems that there are two factors determining whether bias is experienced from society or not. Those women who are more open about their sexuality, either by way of appearance or behaviour, are those who expose themselves to societal criticism. Firstly butch women- those that do not conform to traditional gender roles- are said to be more likely to experience discrimination because they are not conforming to the prescribed feminine gender role. Only Johanna described the act of dressing out so as to celebrate her sexuality. She, unlike the other women played into the butch stereotype in order to be identified as lesbian. She was aware that dressing as she always does would cause her heterosexuality to be assumed. Some of the other women were more comfortable to allow their heterosexuality to be assumed, so as to avoid negative reactions from people. The second decisive factor for experiencing societal discrimination that emerged was physical affection.

It was assumed that the more physically affectionate a couple is in public, the greater chance of negative reactions, both from family as well as unfamiliar people in public places. For this reason, some of the women chose not to be affectionate in public, differing opinions on the topic did however arise.

5.3.2. Opinions on displaying affection in public

Studies by Kurdek (1995), have reported affection as being a major source of conflict in homosexual relationships. The women in my sample had a lot to say about public affection, affection in the presence of family and the need to hide affection. Monitoring of behaviour is a definite source of stress, because it requires keeping your behaviour as a couple in-check while in all public spaces. Given the social climate, many of these women were attentive of how they behaved in the company of others. Different opinions on public behaviour were however expressed. Jen for example felt that gays change their behaviour to suit the heterosexual climate too easily. She identifies that there is a degree of inequality because according to her, it is assumed that gays should be the ones to adjust or change their behaviour.

> Gay people are, sort of too willing to dance around straight people and make things comfortable for straight people... it is not really an equal negotiation there... (Jen)

Not all of the women agreed with Jen's sentiment, Carol expressed a completely different view. She feels that the majority of society is heterosexual and thus gays should not intrude into their 'straight' space. She expresses that gays who are openly affectionate in public are being inappropriate and can expect to receive negative reactions. Her dialogue serves to justify remaining hidden, because not only will it offend, but also give gay people a bad reputation. Her opinion reflects an acceptance of heterosexuality as being normal and lesbianism as something abnormal.

> *What about physical affection in public? (Interviewer)*
> Look I don't have a problem, but it depends on what kind of affection it is. If it just a hug, then that is not really seen as a bad thing, but if you want to kiss and... I, I don't approve of it, and even though I am gay, I just think that 90% of society is straight, and you have to respect their feelings as well, so I think it is a 50/50. Me personally I would respect that other person; I would not go ahead and hug and kiss. I mean Fay and me have held hands, but not for long, we just grab each others hand because you never know what is out there, you get some form of abuse, so I would rather be safe and be sure that you know you respect how other people's feelings, because some people feel very much against gay relationships, and you cant expect them just to accept it, because that is just not what they are about so, I, I don't believe in it. I don't think you should make a show of it that you are gay, I don't think you

should really go like, "Hey I am gay!" because then you are looking for trouble, and that also might be what gives gay people a bad name, because you get the few people that will just go out there and say, "Look I am gay and I want you to know and respect me for being gay..." but then they don't think of the other person, they just thinking of themselves and thinking, "hey I am gay and get over it!" it is not about that... So...ja I think you need to be very careful with that. And you will find that people that have done that openly are the, probably the ones that have got some form of abuse because they have just not accepted how the other people feel. (Carol)
Because they are overly open about it? (Interviewer)
Yes, if my partner wanted to kiss me in the open, in front of a whole, like a whole straight... I would not do it very easily because it, I, you know you will get looks. And you just might get one angry man, one angry woman who just thinks, "This is not on". And you will get that... (Carol)

There is an implication that those who are publically affectionate are placing themselves in a risky situation. Carol's is a narrative that supports the silencing of homosexuality. She explains that avoiding public affection will prevent "offending" straight people and will not attract negative attention. Carol, it seems is willing to sacrifice being affectionate in public rather than face transgression from outsiders. Ellis (1922 as quoted by Brown 1995: 3) came to the realisation that, "lesbian relationships, when they were identifiable to the outside world, tended to be perceived as perverse relationships between women who were essentially heterosexual". The implication that being identifiable to the outside world exposed one to prejudice was expressed by a large group of the women.

Gerda expresses similar feelings to those of Carol on the issue of public affection; it is felt that most of society is still anti-homosexuality and for these reasons she advises that it is safer to hide your sexuality or "gay love" than be stigmatised. Gerda feels that by hiding your "gay love" you are saving yourself as well as your partner unnecessary critical attention.

You know what, I suppose I have built a wall around myself, you don't choose places that is gay unfriendly, which is most places, you don't work at a place that is gay unfriendly. You don't make friends with people that are gay unfriendly. You don't go shopping and show your gay love, if you do that you are going to get stigmatised, so I don't know, in a sense you protect yourself so you are just not so obvious. You keep it a low profile... but I think that is the problem, is because the straight community does not see gay love, so I don't think they look at gay love as love, they look at it as lust, or some kind of sexual perversion or something and you just trying to experiment some kind of crazy sex... Something that is perversion and they don't see... and I mean if you are clever, you just hide your love... (Gerda)

Gerda expresses an awareness that some people may not be comfortable with homosexuality and also that it may lead to an uncomfortable confrontation. For these reasons she is happy to change her behaviour and not express physical affection in public. There is an avoidance of having to display any form of intimate behaviour in public. This behavioural tactic is justified in terms of a discourse which was articulated by many of the women as, *"It is not worth offending somebody and being the cause of a scene".* All of this is evidence that these women are aware of the stigma attached to their lifestyle. Having to hide one's sexuality, or change one's behaviour in the fear of being stigmatised would place a degree of pressure on any couple, especially if the partners have different ideas about what degree of public affection is acceptable. Being compliant with heteronormativity is strategic and gives them more security and less vulnerability, but the trade-off is that they cannot be completely open in public.

While the majority of the women did not express themselves as a couple in public, but there were those that did not comply with this and were adamant that they were affectionate in public. These women expressed a resistance to heteronormativity. Fay, Jen, Johanna, Wanda and Rachelle are those who did not report having experienced direct discrimination, they are also the individuals that reported being comfortable with public affection. Wanda and Rachelle report that although they are publically affectionate, they have never felt stigmatised.

> No and I mean we are open in public, we are affectionate, we hold hands and kiss. Never had a negative reaction. (Wanda)

On the other hand, both Fay and Jen realise that some people may not appreciate public affection, but choose to ignore their reactions. Jen maintains that she and her previous partner, "were both incredibly physical people", and although they had not received any direct confrontation, they had received "strange looks", which they ignored. Similarly when I asked Fay if there were any places where she had felt uncomfortable expressing her sexuality, she replied;

> No... Such as? No, I walk around and I won't think twice about sitting and holding Carol's hand, or just touching her, showing emotion towards her. If people don't like it, you know, turn around and walk away, or look the other way! (Fay)

These women expressed a degree of resistance to heteronormativity, they are aware of the possibilities of receiving strange looks, yet they are strident and choose to ignore the impact it may have. They chose to ignore the reactions from people around them, and reported to have no trouble being affectionate in public. There is however some debate as to what degree of affection they actually reveal, as well as to what degree they do actually experience discrimination but choose to ignore it. While the women had different feelings about public affection, there was some talk about what degree of affection was acceptable. Most of the women were comfortable with some affection as long as it is not intimate. Meghann for example tells how she feels about having an affectionate girlfriend;

> No I don't mind that, if she comes to my work and gives me a hug and a kiss, I don't mind that. But I mean it can't be intimate… (Meghann)

Some of the couples had differing opinions between them about being affectionate in public. A couple would have to choose whether to brave the possible strains of their expression of affection versus the strains of hiding affection. Some of these tensions would have to be negotiated with their partners, especially if one is out and other not comfortable with it. Ilza explains that she and her previous partner had been affectionate in public, but she never felt entirely comfortable. She highlights that while her partner was not bothered by what people may think or say, she felt self-consciousness.

> *Physical contact in public, did it bug you? (Interviewer)*
> Well we could I mean I would not even in a straight relationship do sort of heavy petting, and we did hold hands when we wanted to...uhm but it would have been nice to do it more openly. Ja, that's definitely something that could improve. One thing that I noticed about myself, I mean when I walk between people, in a mall or whatever, I look people in the eyes, I sort of look at people. Then I noticed later on that when we, like she did not mind, like in Brooklyn mall for instance we would walk holding hands. But then I realized that I am looking down. I was a bit shy about this; I felt a bit self conscious. I noticed that I was not keeping my head high... (Ilza)

 Such differences in opinions could very well result in conflict for the couple. For example Tasha does not take note of people around her, Catherine on the other hand reports being wary of reactions and would rather avoid being the centre of attention.

> Whatever is good... (Tasha)
> I am much more careful than she is, but I think I have gotten bigger over time, but I am more careful... so she takes my hand and I... I am not somebody who looks for confrontation I would rather not have it, so if we are holding hands and I can see that somebody is going to throw a shit fit, whether it's a old man, old tannie, or even if its young men that are making

fun, then I will let go, simply to avoid that dealing with that issues. I don't need it, I can hold her hand 100 times a day, I don't have to deal with their ignorance. (Catherine)

Similarly to Tasha and Catherine, Yvonne and Mary have differing views on affection in public. While Mary is not at all worried about people around her, Yvonne is concerned about the attention that it might attract. To prevent this, they have resolved to be affectionate only in their own spaces.

> *How do you feel about physical contact in public? (Interviewer)*
> I don't have a problem with that, but she does, and I respect her feelings, so we don't really have physical contact... as you can see we are not sitting here and holding hands, but at home it is a different story, when we are private... (Mary)
> Ja we are always sitting and touching at home, but I don't like people staring at me, and if we are sitting here holding hands, you will see people staring, especially the men. (Yvonne)
> *You don't want to expose it more than it needs to be? (Interviewer)*
> I don't care, I will hold hands with her anywhere, I don't care who knows, I am, she is too private, and I respect her feelings, so I don't insist on it. (Mary)

There was a sense that choosing to be publically affectionate meant facing and having to ignore negative reactions. Conversely, concealing affection meant not having to deal with negativity from outsiders, but meant having to monitor the expression of love or fondness in public. The frustration of not being able to express ones love openly and the consequent monitoring of affection proved to be areas of contention for many women. The issue of showing affection required the negotiation between partners and could present itself as an area of conflict especially if the partners had different opinions about affection in public.

5.3.3. Family reactions to public affection

Although all of the women who are out, and report that their families have accepted their sexuality, many reported instances where they could not be completely open as a couple in front of family. These women spoke of incidences where their family members have not felt comfortable with being in the presence of physical contact between the lesbian couple. Amy explains that while she has been accepted by her partner's family, she felt pressurized by the comments made about the couple being affectionate.

> So there is pressure... And then that comment of my partner's brother, there is also a bit of pressure in that you know, to hear from a family member, "Yes, just don't hang on each other…" It's pressure… (Amy)

Jen explains that she and her partner had never had negative reactions about being affectionate in public, except for her sister's discomfort. Jen reports that she did not let that

change her behaviour, in line with her earlier argument that gay couples change their behaviour too easily.

> The only bad things we had was my one sister for a while, you know she said she felt uncomfortable when we were visiting... and I said to her, "Well tough, I am not changing this!", and if her daughter can sit there and hug her husband, and it is not like we are making love there on the couch while they all sitting there! So they just had to deal with it, that was their problem. (Jen)

While Jen did not feel the need to change her behaviour in front of family, the other women felt less comfortable showing affection. Meghann, the only woman in my sample not out to her family, had the additional pressure of having to hide any relationship from her family. She not only hid affection when in family company, but was also anxious about showing affection in public places where her family may see her. Once again the need and importance of gay spaces is reiterated- the only place she feels comfortable being publically affectionate.

> *Are there any places that you feel uncomfortable expressing your sexuality? (Interviewer)*
> Yes, I think going into a shopping centre and holding my girlfriends hand… I would be scared to be seen by my family and my parents. But I mean if I go into a gay society, gay club, gay venue then being more intimate with a person, I am fine with that. Also going into a coffee shop with gay friends and people seeing, I don't mind about that. (Meghann)

Meghann then restates her awareness of being openly gay in front of her parents, explaining that she would not want to offend them. She does explain that some friendly physical contact would be tolerable, as long as it does not imply an intimate relationship.

> But also I mean with my parents, it will be acceptable for her to give me a kiss and a hug like as in a greeting, but holding my hand, or hand on my leg in front of my parents… that's going to be a little bit difficult. (Meghann)

The following couple live together with Yvonne's 18 year old daughter, although she knows about their relationship, they feel uncomfortable being affectionate in front of her. Other women such as Freda, Wanda and Rachelle had also mentioned times where they felt they could not, or should not be affectionate in front of certain family members. Once again there is the implication that any physical contact should not be too affectionate, only degrees of physical contact are acceptable.

> *Anybody you hide it from? (Interviewer)*
> Well my daughter... (Yvonne)
> Well we don't hide it from her, she knows and her friends all know. (Mary)
> But we don't sit there and hold each other… (Yvonne)

Especially when her friends are there... we don't hide it, but we don't sit and hold hands... (Mary)

When asked if there were any places she felt uncomfortable expressing her sexuality, Freda explained that she was aware of people giving her looks, which she chose to ignore. Additionally she tells that in the company of extended family or distant family she would feel that she could not be open about her sexuality. Freda also expresses some frustration at the fact that she cannot express her love openly.

> But otherwise you get your family; you know the ones that you are not so close with, so you kind of watch it you know. You won't go and sit and hold your girlfriends hand or stuff like that which I think is wrong because at the end of the day, you have a life to live! I mean whoever you love at the end of the day, would it be a black person, or an Indian or an alien, at the end of the day it is about what makes you happy you know. (Freda)

It has been shown that some couples have differing views on whether public affection is tolerable or not. All of the women showed a degree of awareness that society is not entirely accepting of lesbianism, some chose to ignore outside reactions while others chose to hide their relationship from the public. A few of the women explained that they would rather avoid being affectionate than face discrimination or stigmatisation from the public. The following section is linked to this and deals with other means of self-preservation that these women employ.

5.4. Necessity to be on guard & seek safe spaces

Maher & Pusch (1995) outline that "covering up and maintaining a facade so one cannot be identified as lesbian", are two central aspects of being on guard. In South Africa there is a real concern for the safety of lesbians, and this is reflected in their discourses. Limited public affection and being on guard in certain areas, have become natural responses not only for the prevention of being the target of slurs and nasty looks but also the very real danger of being the victim of an attack. In South Africa there have been many cases of lesbians being beaten up and murdered because of their sexuality. Correctional rape is also a reality for lesbians. Although these atrocities have been reported to happen more often in townships or rural areas, the women in my sample are very attentive to such occurrences. Some of the women, realising they are part of a marginalized group, perceive being openly lesbian as risky, this had led to them having to take certain precautions.

5.4.1. Watching your back

Johanna, Catherine, Ilza, Mary, Yvonne, Amy and Gerda had told of times they had felt uncomfortable, or had felt the need to be aware of their surroundings. Being aware, or on guard was part of many of these lesbians identity, it had become their natural response for protection. Catherine states that she is constantly aware of the area that she is in and who is around her. For Catherine, and many of the women, to be gay means to be careful.

> Well... I think you realise that you are a minority, like any other minority group. I think you are.... you live very carefully, you speak very carefully, you move very carefully. Tasha and I will definitely not go strolling around Hillbrow holding hands. I am very constantly monitoring my space of... is it ok, or is it not? But ja, I think you understand that you have to live carefully, you understand you have to keep a side glance at what is happening with the constitution, what's happening with legal changes, and you know who is getting killed where, like these lesbians that were killed in the township, I think like any minority group, I think like if you are the other in any situation you will have similar experiences. (Catherine)

This inability to be completely comfortable or open in public has lead to these women seeking spaces which were both safe and comfortable.

5.4.2. Creating safe spaces

Johanna explains that lesbians are in potentially dangerous situations whenever they are in straights environments, thus they need to create their own spaces. She expresses that the number of safe lesbian venues is dissatisfactory. She talks about *Playground* which is a Gauteng based event that takes place once a month and is only open to lesbians. A lesbian would have to be on a mailing list to know when and where the event takes place because it is constantly moving and very strict about whom it allows into the doors. Strictly no men are allowed into the venue. Johanna was in fact the only woman in my sample who knew about *Playground*.

> So for a dyke that is just staying at home on a Saturday night and is not going anywhere and is not putting herself in a potentially dangerous place, like a straight environment, a straight environment for a lesbian is a very unsafe environment. That's why we try to keep them out our clubs, straight people are very dangerous because they get into our clubs and we constantly have to move clubs, so you have to be on the inside of the network to know where they're going... because they phone their friends outside to say 'Look this group of lesbians is leaving', and then they jack roll these girls... So we constantly have to create safe spaces for gay people to move in. You might go to *Playground* once a month and see a significant amount of lesbians, but that's like once a month! (Johanna)

Involvement in the gay community allows opportunities to meet like-minded people and share similar experiences, for many of the women meeting with other lesbians was very important, but not always accessible. Some of the women had spoken about their own safe

spaces that they had created or belonged to. These small groups proved to be important spaces for being able to meet other lesbians in a safe and secure environment. Ilza and both couples, Catherine and Tasha as well as Rachelle and Wanda belonged to small social groups of about 10 women, that meet once a month to socialise. It was here that they were able to discuss and share information on issues pertaining to their relationships. It is here that they reported feeling most comfortable and accepted in a social setting. The women suggested that it was at these meetings where they were able to discuss issues such as gay marriage, gender roles and sex which they were often not able to talk about in straight settings. These small groups provided vital social support for those women who belonged to them. Sadly not all of the women belonged to any of these small, yet important networks.

5.4.3. Summary of discrimination and the resulting safety strategies

I had begun by demonstrating the women's experiences and views about discrimination. A few women had reported never experiencing any discrimination at all, it did however become obvious that the they were very much aware of the threat of discrimination. The two factors that were most likely to cause discrimination from the public which emerged was appearance with regard to gender conformity and the expression of public affection. Differing opinions about public affection arose from the transcripts; some found it necessary to hide public affection while others chose to ignore the reactions. There was a sense that different degrees of affection were acceptable. Few of the women expressed that some physical contact was acceptable, as long as it was not too close or intimate. Many of the women described having to adjust their behaviour in front of their family, so as to prevent discomfort.

There was also an awareness that some public situations and locations could be more threatening than others, in these circumstances, the women were more wary about being openly gay. Many women expressed their fear of being raped or attacked because of their sexuality and this resulted in a great degree of discomfort with being openly gay. These women indirectly express their awareness of their minority position by showing their awareness of homophobia and stereotypes, their need to appear straight in some circumstances, or hide physical affection in public and their fear of being stigmatised. Previously I had discussed the fact that widely held homophobic attitudes still pervade in

South Africa, resulting in the continued silencing of lesbians. This "silencing of lesbians" is evident in different forms. Many women are not openly gay in public, they hide public affection and some couples hid affection from their families. All of this reinforces societal impressions that lesbian relationships are of less value and hold less legitimacy than heterosexual relationships.

It became obvious that while only a few women had referred to experiences of direct discrimination, certain strategies for the prevention of discrimination had been developed. Monitoring ones behaviour- in terms of where one could be affectionate and the degree of acceptable contact, finding safe places to socialise and being on guard had emerged as strategies of avoidance that were employed by these women. Most heterosexual couples would not even be aware of their behaviour while in the company of others. These lesbians on the other hand, had described the stressful and frustrating undertaking of having to be aware of their actions and the reactions that they might receive in public. Thus, both the awareness of being the minority and the effort to prevent being rejected are possible areas of conflict for lesbian couples.

Additionally, the fact that they must constantly monitor their behaviour has implications for the introversion and intensification of stress on the individual as well as the couple. Merging could result from the couple feeling excluded or rejected from external social support networks and thus withdraw from social activities and people. External disapproval results in the couple becoming further insulated particularly when they feel targeted by the world and turn to each other for support and protection against the outside world. This may, according to Miller, Greene, Causby, White and Lockhart (2001) result in fusion, which places great pressures on the couple and often results in conflict.

5.5. Ambivalence of social support

Research by Kurdek (2004) had demonstrated that the only difference between homosexual and heterosexual couples was that homosexual couples received less social support. Homosexual partners received less support for their relationships from family members than heterosexual parents did and this proved to place pressure on the couple. Social support is important in the sense of being able to talk openly and feel accepted, as well as

knowing that you are being supported by loved ones. These women reported a variety of sources of social support. Most of the women who had homosexual friends, chose to turn to them for support. In this study however, many of the women had managed to maintain good family bonds and felt supported by them, some however were not as lucky.

5.5.1. Finding social support

Gerda had a particularly difficult coming out process because her story was in the media. She had received hate-mail and felt very stigmatised in the community. She explains that she was rejected from her church and had few places she could turn to for support. Once she joined a gay church she made new friends who became her new support system.

> But so this therapist introduced me to other gay people and I joined the gay church in Van der Bijl Park. They all helped me. I could not find work because I was stigmatised in the community... (Gerda)

Some women had felt rejected from the church because of their sexuality, while others had found a haven in the church. Gerda for example was rejected from one church but found a new family in the gay church that she had joined. The people she had met there played a huge role in helping her to find her feet after leaving her husband and losing custody of her children. Jen had also left her "fundamentalist" congregation to join a church that was gay friendly. Ilza is also a member of a gay friendly church and it is here that she has made her new friends and feels the freedom to be openly gay. Thus, gay friendly churches proved to be great sources of support for some of the women.

Huston (2000), outlined the importance of recognizing that relationships develop within social contexts, and thus, the level of support for ones relationship will determine the health of the relationship. Kurdek (2005) stated that, the lack of support for one's primary close relationship is a unique stressor for gay men and lesbians. This lack of support may contribute to their presentation of relationships as equal and better, in an attempt to counter these destructive forces. Gerda expresses this lack of support for lesbian couples, as "push and pull factors". She states that in a straight relationship, there are forces that encourage the relationship to work, while gay relationships do not have this same push, or encouragement. Same-sex relationships are exposed to factors that make their relationship more difficult because of the lack of social support. Jen also, very similarly to Gerda notes the impact that "push and pull factors" may have on a couple. She finds that same-sex

111

relationships have extra pressures because they don't have the same support networks and that society is judging their relationships.

> ...the whole social thing of gay and lesbian relationships not being accepted plays into it as well, you know it is difficult to be secure in a relationship if society is sort of discerning[9] it, you know, you don't have that social support system so much, I mean if you are a straight couple and you are going through a rough time, you have family and friends that rally around and say, "No man, work it out!" but if you are a gay couple, family and friends might say, "Yay they are going to break up!" (Jen)

A few of the women had told of the women's groups that they belonged to, and where they could share experiences, talk freely and be comfortable. These groups proved to be of great importance to the women who did belong to them. Many of the women however did not have such social groups for support. While some women, such as Johanna, Gerda and Jen were very involved in the gay community, others such as Amy, Carol, Fay, Mary and Yvonne had little or no connection to the gay community. According to research by Kimmel & Sang (1995:198) the extent of a midlife lesbians' connection to the lesbian community is related to many variables. Those identified are: "age at which she came out, her need for secrecy and her geographical area". One of the women from a small town outside of Pretoria complained that there was a lack of gay activities for older women in her area and thus she had no connection to the gay community at all. Age of coming out did not prove a significant factor as to whether these women were involved in the gay community or not. Some had only recently come out, such as Gerda and Jen who were very involved. Some of the women who came out at younger ages, had no connection to the gay community, or had only a few gay friends, but did not participate in any lesbian gatherings.

Other reasons emerged from the interviews to explain the lack of involvement in the gay community. Some of the women felt they would rather not be involved in the gay community because of the problems it may cause with their partners. Jealousy was named as a big reason why a few of the women were not involved in the gay circles. This was a reason given by many of the women as to why they preferred not to be involved with the lesbian community. Fay expresses her concern of having a third party get in the way of her relationship.

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[9] In this instance, Jen uses the word 'discerning" to mean "discriminating".

> I got a couple of gay friends, but I am also wary of having too many gay friends because you know how it is in a gay relationship, hey there is always someone lurking in the back. (Fay)

A major source of support for any individual is their family. While some women tell of the great support and encouragement they had received from their families, others were less accepted. Thus, family proved to be a haven for some and a source of conflict for others.

5.5.2. Ambivalence of family support

The literature outlines that coming out and receiving acceptance from family members may be a huge challenge to the lesbian. With this then, it may not always be easy to turn to family for support. Patterson (2000) notes that, because of the stigma attached to homosexual identities, those who claim these identities often do so at the risk of their family relationships. As had been outlined in the literature overview, experiences of discrimination based on sexual orientation perpetrated by family, may mark a break in family ties. Fortunately, the women who I had spoken to had retained strong family ties and in some instances turned to them for support.

The one woman in my sample that had not disclosed her sexuality to her family, could for example not be open with or about her relationship. While this could for some, result in less involvement with the family, the literature showed that there are many women who have maintained very strong family ties and often lean on them for support (Kimmel & Sang 1995). Different experiences with regard to family support had materialized from the interviews. Some women had very positive experiences with their families, while others had some anxiety over revealing their sexuality and lifestyles.

Meghann, who is not yet out to her parents, fears that she will not be accepted by them. This same anxiety was expressed by a few of the women when they spoke of their own coming out process. Not being out to ones family may also be a cause of considerable pressure for a lesbian couple, because it involves having to hide the relationship from the family. This may mean introducing the partner as a friend, as Meghann had done, or not acknowledging the partner at all. Her need to hide her sexuality was based in her fear of rejection.

> I think definitely, if there is no acceptance from their friends and family, then that is a big thing. I mean you don't, your nightmare will be if your parents can't accept you, or they don't

accept your partner. At the end of the day, you want your parents to accept you and you want happiness for you. And you don't want to be disowned by your parents. Love is a very important thing. I would say acceptance is a big factor. (Meghann)

I will use Carol's story to illustrate another pressure that a lesbian couple may face with regard to family reactions and levels of support. Carol had a situation where neither of the couples' parents accepted the relationship that she had been in. She tells how they could never spend time as a couple with the family.

So what tensions did that cause? (Interviewer)
I would go visit family when she was working. Christmas she would spend with her family and I would spend with mine, we would not take turns, so ja when it came to family and that we never socialised as a couple with the family. (Carol)

In this example, family was a major source of pressure for their relationship. There is a sense in this example that the support the couple eventually received from the family was superficial. When they broke up it was seen as an opportunity for the reforming of the individual back to heterosexuality.

Do you think there are any pressures on lesbian relationships? (Interviewer)
Uhm yes, no there is definitely definitely definitely! This previous partner, uhm when we first got together, the mother would not accept it, she was extremely domineering woman. But being with an older person like me, she got more confident with her mother and she eventually told her and there was rigmarole and she did not want to speak with them... she totally lost contact with them. So it did affect her, but then eventually I had them braaing here with me and they loved me and they...but when we broke up, they presumed she was gonna turn straight. And then they did not want us to be in contact at all... so I think there is definitely outside factors in relationships, especially gay relationships... (Carol)

So while family may be a major concern for some, other women spoke of the love and acceptance they had received from their family. Fay felt that her family had been very supportive of her.

Ja well my family is very supportive of me and I have gone through some rough patches recently and they are very supportive and ja, my work, my family and my very close friends...
as long as they support me and are with me then I am happy. (Fay)

Thus, family was both a source of anxiety for lesbians as well as a caring and supportive environment. There was a degree of ambivalence with regard to family support, some women had experienced acceptance and support from their family, while others had unconstructive experiences.

It was shown that poor family support could provide significant stress for the lesbian couple- both in terms of being able to turn to family for support, spending time with family as well

as their general discouragement towards relationships. Parental homophobia is an additional factor of conflict. It's suggested that poor relationships with ones family of origin as a result of heterosexism and homophobia may accentuate internalized negative feelings and deeper depression. "This vulnerability in turn may leave the adult child in a disempowered position within an intimate relationship" (McKenry, Serovich, Mason & Mosack 2006:235). Isolation from family and poor support networks have been shown to play a significant role in concealing abusive relationships as well as facilitating the exertion of control of one partner over another. This applies to the case of lesbian women in the South Africa situation as they are often reluctant to report conflict to family, friends or even service providers due to the accompanying possibility of stigmatization and prejudice.

5.6. Difficulties in shifting from heterosexual to gay intimate unions

Seven out of the fifteen women I had spoken to had been involved in a heterosexual marriage. Previous marriage and ex-husbands were sources of conflict in some cases. In many of the cases these women had very poor relationships with their ex-husbands. They did not report this as an area of conflict, but when children were involved this proved to be an area of hurt. Six of these women bore children from their heterosexual marriages. Gerda and Wanda were the only two women who had young children at the time of coming out and starting a lesbian relationship. Mary and Yvonne's children were in their teen years, while Ilza and Rachelle's children were in their early twenties when they came out. Thus, for those women who had children, dealing with how or whether to tell them or not, as well as anticipating their reactions was a possible area of anxiety.

Many of the women had been securely involved in a heterosexual relationship and then realized or developed an attraction for women. Some women, describe themselves as knowing of their attraction to their own gender from a very young age, even prepubescent age, but chose to ignore it and thus got married to fulfil certain expectations. Others felt their attraction become directed to women as they grew older and this resulted in the deterioration of their marriage. None of these women express regret at having been married, because it allowed them to have children.

According to Kimmel & Sang (1995:193), "Children leaving home is frequently cited as the central event that marks the beginning of midlife changes for traditional heterosexual women". It is at this time that women who are not working, return to the workforce, and those whose lives have been focussed around childcare, begin a search for their own identities separate from family. When asked her reason for why she was gay, Gerda responded that it had probably been there all her life, but she notes that a change occurred when her kids were older and she had more spare time.

> I was at a time of my life where the boys were old enough and I could drop my youngest off at crèche, and so I was at a time where I had more time for myself and I started thinking of maybe getting a job. For the first time I was focussing on myself, for the first time for a very long time. Because we did not even go away, we very seldom went away without the kids... (Gerda)

Those women who had young children at the time of leaving their husbands for women, (Wanda, Mary and Gerda) had to deal with custody hearings, and the battle to keep custody of their children. These women feared being declared unfit mothers as a result of their sexuality. For example, Wanda explains that when she and Rachelle began a relationship, they had to keep their sexuality hidden because it was illegal and she feared losing custody of her children to her ex-husband.

> But the other thing was that I was divorced and my ex husband had the guardianship of the children and he was a nut case and so we had to go to court before we come out we had to go to court and ensure that I had sole custody and sole guardianship because we thought he might go to court and get the kids. (Wanda)

Gerda and Mary had both suffered substantial losses after their divorces from their respective husbands and for these reasons could not retain custody of the children. Both of these women had also explained the poor relationships they now have with their ex-husbands. Mary tells that her children are accepting of her new relationship, but she still has a poor relationship with her ex-husband.

> I knew that when I was about 37 and I admitted it to myself, I knew that I was never going to be happy in my marriage, even though my husband loved me, he really did. Now he does not want to speak to me... my children stay with him and I see them every second holiday. (Mary)
> *How do they feel? (Interviewer)*
> Yes, no they are happy, we even thought of getting married the two of us and I asked them one time if they would have a problem with it and they said no, they love her to bits. They even want to come stay with us, but their dad will not let them... (Mary)

Wanda having custody of her children, explains that there was uncertainty about whether they should explain the situation to the children or not. They went to a priest who advised them not to tell the children. Rachelle, Wanda's partner, explains that their uncertainty led them to seek advise from a gay priest. Interestingly, he had advised the couple not to breach the topic, but rather treat it as any heterosexual relationship.

> No, no it was, when we first came here, we were quite closeted, and of course, it was still illegal, and then we went to see a gay priest and he said, "Well if you were a heterosexual couple, you would not be expected to answer the children what you did at night, so why now?" (Rachelle)

Later on they realised this to be a mistake that they regretted.

> The only thing was that Sarah, the only thing was that she said if we had explained it to them, she could have accepted it... because we only came out to them later and she, I suppose, felt I had usurped her place. (Rachelle)
> So she was upset that I had not been open to her, I suppose that was a mistake, we should have been more open with them. (Wanda)
> Well it was difficult, I mean to tell a 6 year old... we did not hide anything about it. (Rachelle)
> We told her 2 or 3 years after we had been together. (Wanda)

Gerda and Ilza also had the additional challenge of explaining the concept of lesbianism to their children. Ilza found herself in a situation where she chose to avoid telling her children because she did not know how to handle the situation. Having to "hide" the relationship in front of the children could also result in friction between the couple because it would mean a constant monitoring of what was said or done around them.

> So uhm, and that was, well my oldest daughter was in standard six and then I had a sort of an uhm relationship with someone. And one day she said to me, "Are you gay?" and I know it's completely wrong educationally speaking, but I said that I did not want to discuss it with her. And then at a later stage when I was not there she asked my partner, "is my mother gay?" and Sam very nicely told her, "yes". (Ilza)

Gerda had not received custody of her children, but explains that the children visiting on weekends caused significant stress for her partner whom she lived with. Gerda's young children had become a burden for her partner, who did not have her own children. Gerda later explained that she moved into a bigger house so that it would not feel as if the children were intruding into her partner's space, she was however, not able to stay there because of her poor financial situation after the divorce from her husband. This instance demonstrates the difficulties that couples may have to deal with when children are involved.

> I have three boys and they come and invade her space and she is studying, or she is working on her masters, and here is this...she is this very very organised person and here is this family moving with her. And my children were small hey, 4, 5 and 7! It was hectic, and every single

weekend they were with me. She really had such a hard thing to adjust to all of that, and I don't think she really every recovered. I should not have moved in with her, she really struggled with it.

Gerda's partner did not have children and found it difficult to accept and deal with. Both couples, Wanda and Rachelle, Mary and Yvonne had children from previous marriages and for these women accepting their partner's children and finding acceptance was not a concern. One couple, Wanda and Rachelle, had even said that having two mothers in the home was an advantage. Wanda felt that her children adapted to having another woman around easier than they would have done if there was a different man in their home. She explains that having two mothers in the household helped relieve some of the stress of running a household with two children. Wanda explains that after Rachelle had moved in with her, the children took to her like a second mother. Issues that she had previously struggled with as a single mother were now resolved.

> Rachelle took on my kids which worked quite well and I think in a way it is easier for kids to have a second mother than a stepfather... I mean I could go away for weekend conferences and leave the kids, and not be worried. It made things so much easier... having two moms! (Wanda)

Children proved to present many obstacles for the women, although it was only named as a direct cause of stress in one relationship, there were however, many challenges that emerged with regard to their children. As a couple, each of these women had to deal with and negotiate how to handle issues concerning their children and their partner's children. Some of the women had to hide their relationships, in the fear they may lose custody and others had to face being labelled negligent and not fit to have custody of their children. One couple had felt the adjustment of having two mothers in the household worked to an advantage because the children adapted easily. Thus, previous marriages and the children from these marriages had proved to result in a variety of different stressors. While some of the women had very poor relationships with their ex-husbands, none of them named their previous heterosexual marriages as causes of tension in their lesbian relationships. There was however an idea that some had been left in a financial lurch after their divorce. This had resulted in being financially reliant on their lesbian partners.

5.7. Economic dependencies

As was previously mentioned that two of the women had undergone great financial losses, both of these women had to rely on their new lesbian partners for accommodation and financial resources. Kurdek (1995) named financial conflict as significant amongst homosexual couples. For some of these women financial issues were real areas of conflict in their relationships. For example, Gerda named money as a major cause of conflict in her relationship because after she came out and got divorced, she had to rely on her new partner financially. She labels this financial dependency as a major stressor for any relationship. There is a sense of power inequality in this example because Gerda was left in a vulnerable and dependant position. There is a sense that while in between jobs, her dependency fluctuated. She explains however, that it is not any more of an issue than in it would be in a straight relationship.

> Ja well money is always an issue in relationships. It was no more an issue than it was in a straight relationship. Money is an issue. In general money is an issue in any relationship. Uhm I think what really played a role was that I was very dependant and it was only when I became independent that a lot of that disappeared where I was not dependant on her anymore. Because I struggled for very long to find a work and what I did not tell you was the one place I worked, it was so gay unfriendly that I just did not want to work there anymore. So I was very dependant on her for a long time, and she had really spent such a lot of money trying to sustain both of us and that was very bad, bad for any relationship, you must be independent, you must try and get a work, an income. (Gerda)

Johanna feels that money is one of the things that all couples, gay and straight fight about. Both Gerda and Johanna had mentioned the similarities between heterosexual and lesbian relationships, not wanting to shed negative light on lesbian relationships, they highlight the similarities to heterosexual relationships. There is a sense that by finding similarities to heterosexual relationships, lesbian relationships are normalised. They are not portraying lesbian relationships as worse because they have conflict over these issues, but rather as similar to heterosexual relationships because there is also conflict over these normal issues.

> That relationship was not an ugly relationship, so the money issues… it's like straight relationships, they fight about sex, religion, money… That's what straight people fight about… I have a feeling that gay people fight about the same kinds of issues, money, values, your value system, religion, which is again your value system and sex. (Johanna)

Johanna goes on to talk about a time when she and her lesbian marriage partner had a lot of conflict around financial issues because they had different values with regard to economics.

> So we really came to real loggerheads… the only thing we had in the end, that I realized was an issue, was that because we came from such different communities and economics meant

everything for her and economics meant nothing to me. At the end of the day, that was a big difference. So while during the peaceful duration of the relationship, that was not an issue, at the end of the relationship that was critical. Then she measured her worth economically, and I don't have an economic sense of my value… (Johanna)

Freda outlines that money has the potential to cause conflict in lesbian relationships, just as in heterosexual relationships. Freda has had a few long term relationships, and explains that in every relationship, bills were split between partners.

No we never discuss money. Whoever was in my life, my salary is mine and your salary is yours. At the end of the month we write down what is the expenses for the house, which includes the dogs and dogs food and whatever and we both contribute to it. One does the groceries this month and the other sees to the rent. So we have always had a nice way of dealing with that. So we never fought about money because I saw my own mom and dad fight about money. As soon as you have the other persons money in your bank account, or you let yours, then you deprive privacy. That person doesn't have a way of buying their own things. You slowly start to cut off your own individuality. You should not have to ask if you want to go and buy a top, you have your own money, go and buy it! Personal things, it's your own stuff you worked for it. As long as at the end of the day we agree that first things which are our responsibilities are seen to and whatever goes after that is fine. (Freda)

All of the women had discussed an equal division of the finances. In relationships where their salaries were not equal they came to a compromise, but still shared costs. Carol feels that her previous girlfriend had exploited her for her money.

I was very attracted to her and uhm but then later on she started becoming needy, but by then I was already hooked with the girl. So I thought no, I'm gonna, people don't know what she is about or who she is and I will prove them wrong... which I didn't. They were actually right from the very beginning... and all she was round for was just for the money, eventually. (Carol)

Thus financial issues have been delineated as a major area of conflict for many of these women. Some had felt that money created inequalities in their relationships, such dependency was labelled as unhealthy for any relationship. Money was seen as a source of conflict for a variety of reasons: it highlights different value systems on the topic of money, and it led to partners feeling exploited. Most of the women had noted the possibility of conflict stemming from money related matters, and had all mentioned the importance of shared responsibilities. The literature had framed finances to be a cause of conflict because of the unequal power relations it could create, some of these women spoke of money as being a root of inequality with regard to dependency between partners. These women felt that it was important for both partners to contribute to household costs. It was however not spoken of as a gay specific issue, but an area of conflict affecting heterosexual relationships too.

5.8. Absence of role models and the poor gay image

> Because of the social stigma surrounding homosexuality, lesbians and gay men receive little, if any, information regarding the nature of lesbian and gay couples in the course of their socialisation. As a result, lesbian and gay close relationships develop without consensual norms (Laird 1993 as quoted by Kurdek 1995: 244).

When asked if there had been any role models, all of the women had felt that this was severely lacking. There was a sense that had it been more open, or had there been any role models, these women would have had an easier time accepting themselves as gay women and perhaps have had an easier coming out process.

> No, as I said to you in the time when we grew up it was not open, there was not such a thing as gay women it was very undercover, nobody of us knew it. (Mary)

Catherine feels that because there were no "positive" images of lesbian couples, gay women followed heterosexual relationship patterns, because this was all that they knew. Thus women adopted either butch or femme identities. There was a suggestion that women who did not assume these identities were excluded and felt confused about their place.

> I think that, because as lesbians you don't have role model relationships around you, I think obviously a lot of lesbian relationships, brought their heterosexual preconceptions, so like when we came out, this big butch femme thing was happening in South Africa. Either you were butch or femme... And if you did not feel like joining one of those two parties, you were not a lesbian. And the whole stereotypical; the man does this and the women does that, but we never fell, we never followed that, we never thought of ourselves as butch or femme. (Catherine)

It has already been established that these women don't identify with butch femme role-play, in fact many of these women feel that this heterosexual modelling stereotypes all lesbian into these categories. Gerda feels that the average lesbian is not seen, only butch women are identified as being gay and for this reason people have the wrong perceptions of lesbians.

> ...but they don't see gay love and ja they only see big butch women, that on the one hand what they see is what is printed on the newspaper which is some kind of something that will catch the public eye. Like some gay, like drag queens or some strange perversion, that is what is in the newspaper, so then what do people associate lesbianism with? (Gerda)

It had been addressed that only butch lesbians are the ones that are recognised as being lesbian, while "straight" looking lesbians are assumed to be heterosexual. The problem which emerged from this was that most lesbians were not identifiable because they looked

straight and were not publically open. For this reason then, lesbians whom this group of women would identify with were not visible.

Some women felt that some gays are too pushy in their ways and this gives them a poor reputation. While these women portray their own relationships as being equal and based on negotiation and sharing, according to many, the stereotyped gay image does not always reflect these qualities. Freda feels that even today there is a lack of good role models, she feels that the gay parade does not represent the gay community truthfully and is disgusted by this. While the gay parade is a hyper-expressive event and the boundaries are pushed in order to make a point, Freda expresses her frustration that those who are exhibitionist confirm stereotypes of homosexual people.

> Uhm… you know, can I tell you, if you go to a club, it could be a mixed club and you will have two guys or two girls kissing each other in front of lots of people, or you get vulgar things, like what they say and do on the gay parade. A gay parade nowadays is more for… we have already passed the barrier on rights, marriage rights, and gay rights. Now, if you want to stand for certain rights, stand for adoption rights or stand for other things, but do it in a clean manner. They do it in such a vulgar way that it really puts you off, and it looks really cheap. So although the gay society has received its freedom, it had given a lot of people breathing space ok. It has also let people go overboard and take it a bit too far. (Freda)

None of these women were able to name any lesbian role models. Some of the women had only been exposed to butch-femme couples, because they did not identify with either of these, they had been unsure of their own identity. It was suggested that had there been more openness and more proudly lesbian women for them to look up to, they would have been able to come out earlier in life. For many women, they felt the need to identify themselves apart from the stereotypes of lesbians; this constant rejection and need to portray themselves as separate from the stereotypes could be both stressful and consuming. For many partners this could present tension and stress. Because of their need to classify themselves outside of the stereotypes, they had only considered certain lesbians as potential partners.

5.9. Difficulty of forming relationships

Some of the women felt that it was difficult to meet other lesbians, and even more so begin dating them. One woman in particular felt that the lesbian community is really small and thus the chance of meeting somebody compatible is really difficult.

> ...lesbians make up 3.4% of the population... and if you think about trying to find an appropriate partner that will match you, out of that small community, you are left with very slim pickings. (Johanna)

Ilza, who is 54, comments that her age has a lot to do with meeting and initiating meetings with other lesbians. She had only come out late in her life when she was 50 and thus had not been involved in dating women. She expressed a degree of insecurity and curiosity about who would make the first move if she had wanted to date.

> Yes, if I wanted to date... I would not know how to go about it... I recently met someone whom I am not interested in, but we could be friends... I have never been interested in people my own age... but she could be a good friend... But it is sort of awkward, who says first I'd like us to be friends, you know because you never ever want to be pushy. We chat wonderfully well when we are together, but I don't phone her the next day and say, "ok what about we do this again next week?" it's sort of two months and then two months... and she has said that she enjoys my company and I have sort of let her know that I enjoy hers, but if, if there had been a romantic uhm... in potentially... and I know that she has had one relationship... who would know what to do first? That's a mystery. But I think it is easier with young people, I don't know if you would be able to tell me... there is no pattern, no example, there is no set... you know its like being stranded on a desert island you have to figure out survival for yourself. (Ilza)

The following woman, while recognising that beginning a new relationship may be difficult, explains that meeting other gay women is easy because there are so many around. She does however recognise that being older may make it more difficult to meet other lesbians.

> *Do you think it's difficult to meet other gay women? (Interviewer)*
> No, I don't think so. If you just take a look if you walk around shopping centres, your workplace, being with friends and meeting new friends, there is always bound to be some gay people around. So I don't think its difficult meeting them, it's just maybe getting to know them and ja that's a different story. Meeting them and picking them up is easy you just go to a bloody gay bar if you want to, but actually getting into a relationship, there is a difference. And it's also harder the older you get to meet the right kind of person and to you know actually settle down with someone. But no I don't think it is an issue meeting people. Gay women are all over, and you can, women you tend to pick up a lot easier when a woman is gay than in the olden days or a couple of years ago. You know they are more themselves; they are not hiding it as much as what they use to. So you just walk into any shop and you are going to see 3, 4, 5 gay couples walking around, gay people walking around with their straight friends. No I don't think it's difficult. (Fay)

Those women who are out, especially Jen, Johanna and Gerda who were involved in a public capacity named their biggest criteria when dating, be that the women have to be out to everyone and not have any qualms about it being publically known.

> If you want to date me, you just have to be out. To everyone. If you are not out, just forget about it, don't even think about me! So, finding an out woman to date is rough! At my age. And I'm not that old, I mean I am 43. (Johanna)

Gerda having a very public, media covered coming out, and having been involved in giving public speeches, was openly gay to everybody. Her partner however was not open about her sexuality and this caused intense tension between them. Gerda's partner had wanted to hide their relationship, and with Gerda being so openly gay, this was not always possible. This resulted in a lack of validation for their relationship. Jen had also outlined the possibility of tension arising because of one partner being out and the other not. She is well known in the gay community and having a partner that is comfortable with this is a necessity. She is a minister in a gay church and thus, outlined that she, "cannot be involved with a person that is not out, absolutely not!"

Thus finding a suitable partner proved to be an area that some of these women were concerned about. Most importantly, this theme highlights the importance of having partners that are open about their sexuality and the possibility of tensions arising as a result of this. This theme served to demonstrate that being involved with a partner who is not out could be the cause of considerable stress in the relationship. Having one partner who is not out would mean that the relationship would have to be hidden and a facade maintained. Additionally there would be a lack of external validation. The small community of lesbians, from which to find a partner, may provide an explanation for why women feel there is more jealousy in lesbian relationships. It may also be an explanation for why women stay in unhappy or violent relationships.

5.10. Concluding potential external pressures

There are many possible external stressors to lesbian relationships. These stressors become clear set against the backdrop of the heterosexist and largely homophobic attitudes that prevail in South Africa. The very first theme, *Facing Discrimination*, served to show the traumatic experiences that some of the women had faced. Interestingly a large majority of women denied having ever experienced discrimination. Upon investigation it was found that certain behavioural changes had been employed by the women. It was found that these behavioural changes could perhaps explain why so few instances of discrimination were reported. It had in a previous chapter been outlined that none of the women in my sample looked or acted particularly butch or masculine and none adopted this identity; thus they were able to a large degree to pass as straight. Some of the women allowed their

heterosexuality to be assumed while others were more descriptive about the measures they utilized. Given their awareness of the social climate in South Africa and the reality of the dangers that lesbians faced, these women described having to be on guard and keep their relationships with women undisclosed.

While some women were comfortable with being affectionate in public, others preferred to stay away from the glare of the public. There was debate as to what degree of affection was shown in public and what was seen as acceptable. Some women had felt that certain degrees of friendly affection was acceptable in public as long as it was not too intimate. Having to be aware of their surroundings, limiting affection to friendly exchanges, and being attentive so as not to be too expressive about being lesbian in the company of certain people or in certain places had become everyday mechanisms of protection for many of these women.

Having to constantly be on the lookout, having the fear of being rejected or even attacked, not being able to fully express love and caring in public, knowing people hold negative perceptions of them and the attempt always to escape or ignore these present a framework for stress and conflict within lesbian relationships.

The ambivalence of social support, from family as well as other support networks were identified as possible external stressors. The importance of social support was discussed; the role the family had in providing support as well as being a source of anxiety was shown. Previous marriages and children also proved to be difficult areas for couples to deal with. Many of those previously married women discussed the financial dependency that had resulted from their divorces. This in turn placed pressure on their new lesbian relationships resulting in inequalities and levels of dependency. All of these possible stressors required negotiation between partners and held the capacity to create tension for the lesbian couples.

The theme that followed addressed the lack of role models and the poor gay image, highlighting the tensions that many of the women held with regard to how society perceived them as well as their relationships. The last stressor in this section was that of,

finding a partner which some women felt was difficult because of the small community of lesbians that are out, age as well as other criteria had also played a role. The following diagram shows a summarised version of all the potential external factors that have been discussed.

Diagram 2: A graphical summary showing the potential external stressors that have been discuss

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Potential external          Discrimination and
stressors          ──────── pressure to adjust
                            behaviour

                            Necessity to be on
                            guard and seek safe
                            spaces

                            Ambivalence of social
                            support

                            Difficulties in shifting
                            from heterosexual to
                            lesbian intimate unions

                            Economic
                            dependencies

                            Absence of role models
                            and the poor gay image

                            Difficultues of forming
                            relationships
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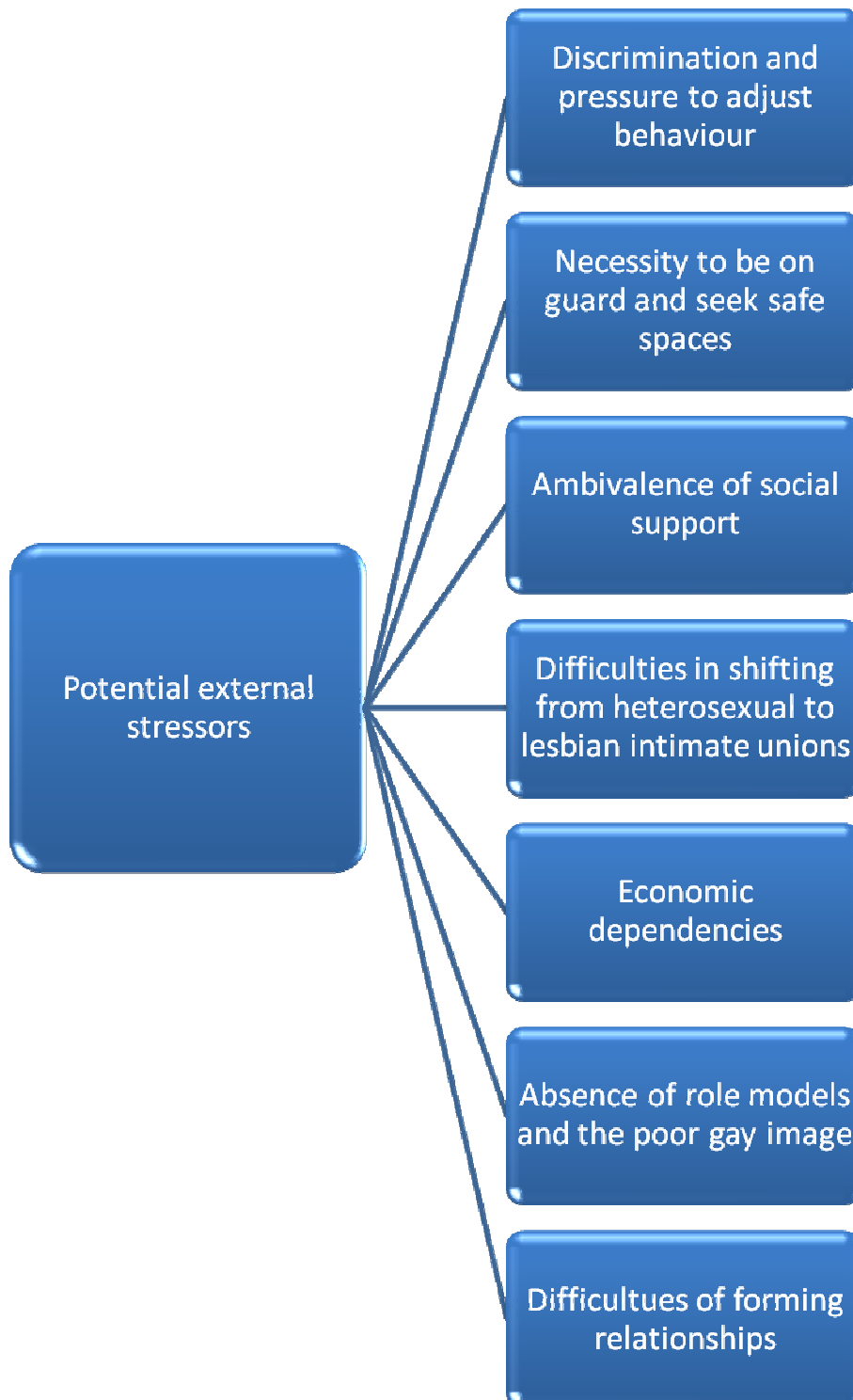
In many instances these women have presented their own lesbian relationships as being similar to straight relationships. Similar areas of conflict are identified in an attempt to show that lesbian relationships are not really different from their lesbian relationships. They spoke about their areas of conflict, but at the same time did not want to portray their relationships as worse than heterosexual relationships. All of the above are evidence of potential external stressors to lesbian intimate unions. The following section investigates the potential internal stressors to lesbian intimate unions.

Chapter 6: Potential internal stressors

6.1. Introduction

The following chapter deals with potential stressors that occur internal to the lesbian intimate union and which may result in conflict. This forms the second part of three that discusses the dynamics of conflict in lesbian relationships. Each of these stressors will be discussed separately as individual themes under this broader topic. Some of the subjects are obvious and have been named by the participants, while others are underlying issues which have emerged and I have included. I have tried to draw from the participants direct experiences of internal stressors, but also include instances where they generalise or talk about other relationships.

6.2. High levels of jealousy

From her research, Renzetti (1992) found that conflict within lesbian relationships developed around three sets of issues or "sources of strain", one of these being,", "jealousy and the balance of power between partners". Jealousy, according to Renzetti's research (1992), played a large role in relationship conflict; in fact most of the conflict was seen to stem from it. Berzon (as quoted by Renzetti 1992) demonstrated that homosexual relationships are entangled with elements of envy because, a lesbian woman witnessing another woman flirt with her partner, may feel jealous and susceptible to the potential loss of her partner, but she may also feel envious because of the attention her partner is getting. Similarly to the information gained from Renzetti's study, jealousy is also outlined by the participants as a major source of strain in lesbian relationships.

Many of the women had reported to have experienced jealousy in their relationships. While jealousy was outlined to be a major source of conflict in lesbian relationships, the reasons reported for this differed. When I asked the women what they thought the main cause of conflict in lesbian relationships was, many outlined jealousy as a major factor. What Meghann said for example, was similar to what at least 5 of the women had spoken about.

> *When you have heard of conflict in lesbian relationships, not necessarily violent, but any tensions and fights that lesbians have, what do you think are the main problems? (Interviewer)*
> I think one of the main aspects is jealousy. Like if there is a third party in the picture, I have experienced that. It causes tension between me and my girlfriend and eventually we broke

up. I feel the person either loves me or they don't. But a lot of the main issues are jealousy. (Meghann)

Although jealousy was named as a major area of conflict in lesbian relationships, it was not seen as a lesbian specific issue, it was often framed as the outcome of insecurity and a major factor of conflict for both heterosexual and homosexual relationships. Fay, Carol, Ilza and Jen were of the opinion that jealousy was found in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships.

Carol begins by saying that jealousy is a major source of conflict in gay relationships, but she does not exclude heterosexual relationships from this. She explains that there may be more jealousy in lesbian unions because two women are more "in tune" with each other and better able to pick up on their partner's feelings. Her explanation for why jealousy is so pronounced in lesbian relationships is based on the common notion of women being naturally more emotional and thus more in touch with each other. Carol feels that being more in touch with ones female partner would allow one to pick up infidelities. After carol had named jealousy as a huge problem in lesbian relationships, I had asked her if she thought it occurred more in heterosexual relationships:

> Yes... well maybe not, maybe not... look, maybe not because I have got my best male friend who is straight and his girlfriend is extremely jealous... I think it depends on the individual, but I think in a gay relationship because women feel the same and their emotions are very similar that they tend to tune into when that person is smiling, or when they start changing a little bit, they notice it a lot quicker than in a straight relationship, so I think that is where the jealousy is a lot stronger. They do pick up things a lot quicker, they are more in tune with you as a person...being a female. (Carol)

Jen felt that jealousy was possibly a greater problem in gay relationships because of the social climate. She explained that jealousy was the result of insecure relationships. This insecurity of lesbian relationships stemmed from a lack of social acceptance and poor support systems. Insecurity had emerged as a recurrent theme with regard to jealousy. She explains that insecurities develop because the relationship is not always secure in that it was always being laid bare to judgement.

> *Do you think that lesbian relationships have more jealousy? (Interviewer)*
> I think so... I think again, I think it is quite complex, again it depends on each individuals mental health actually and what it is you bring and how secure you are in yourself and the whole social thing of gay and lesbian relationships not being accepted plays into it as well. You know it is difficult to be secure in a relationship if society is sort of discerning it, you know you don't have that social support system so much... (Jen)

Both Meghann and Jen had felt that while jealousy was a major issue in lesbian relationships, it could have been a result of not having their relationships formally recognised. Mary similarly explained that with the legalisation of marriage, these relationships can be more secure, but is still of the opinion that lesbians interfere in each others relationships; for this reason this couple does not involve themselves with other lesbian women.

> *Do you think there is more jealousy in gay couples? (Interviewer)*
> Yes! (Yvonne)
> I think so definitely, it's insecurities, and I think now that the laws have changes and that you can get married and stuff like that, now you can say, this is my wife, leave her alone and stuff like that. And I mean it's for, it is about respect, you don't go and get involved in something, why go and meddle? Why scratch where it is not itching? Whether it is a straight couple or gay couple... So we don't really mix with the other [lesbians], we don't go to clubs and stuff like that, it is actually sad because we don't have a lot of friends, because of this, you are actually scared to make friends, especially if it is a single person, there is always a third party. And it is actually sad, because actually we should stand together, it does not have to be like that... (Mary)

Both Carol and Fay had similar experiences with their previous partners with regard to jealousy. Fay explains that her previous partner's jealousy led to them discontinuing friendships with other gay women, she was willing to give up their gay friends rather than have conflict over jealousy.

> *And you say jealousy was a problem in your previous relationship? (Interviewer)*
> Yes, she was very jealous. She was unfortunately a bit insecure because I have a very outgoing personality and she was a bit more quiet and reserved, although when she drank she was a lot more open and funny and friendly and things like that, but uhm ja she was very jealous. She always use to think that if we went out that someone was going to try and pick me up or I was going to cheat on her. Ja very insecure in that way, but uhm you know we made the sacrifice and we gave up our gay friends and it suited me fine, because I knew then that I was a lot more secure in our relationship. So, for me it was important, I would rather have her being secure, than have her being jealous and us fighting about you know petty things the whole time. (Fay)

In order to diffuse such insecurities, Fay and her partner had chosen to separate themselves from the lesbian community, choosing to have only straight friends, or isolating themselves from all possible situations which may cause insecurity or jealousy. This isolation could mean fewer social support networks and it could even result in the increased dependency of partners; and consequently, merging.

Some stereotypes about poor commitment levels of lesbians had emerged from the topic of jealousy. Some of the women named lesbians as being more promiscuous, others felt that

having lesbian friends may interfere with their own relationships, because outsiders would meddle. A majority of the women labelled butch women as being more jealous. Yvonne for example frames jealousy and possessiveness as being a characteristic of butch women. The couple gave many examples of jealous lesbians they had known, all were labelled as butch.

> And remember that girl at the bottle store... they were also, one of our friends at a time, but the jealousy and I don't like this butch girl's thing. I don't like it and I don't want to be associated with them... I don't like them. (Yvonne)
> Tell her about the rally... (Mary)
> Yes, the Libra rally, it is actually a bikers rally; we were only women there the whole weekend. All was fine, one night we went to bed early, but the next morning we heard about this fight. The two partners thought their partners were having something and it was just, it is not... (Yvonne)
> The jealousy around them! You can't believe it, it is not, I think that's... (Mary)
> We just don't mix with other gay couples because of things like that, insecurities and they cause fights. (Yvonne)

Thus, many of the women in my sample spoke about jealousy and their experiences of it. It was outlined as a major source of conflict in lesbian relationships, but heterosexual relationships were not excluded from this. While jealousy was often brought up in conversation, the reason for its cause differed from one woman to the next. The heterosexist social climate was often named as a cause of insecurity and consequentially jealousy. Two lesbian stereotypes were linked to this theme, firstly that lesbians are more promiscuous and meddling and secondly that butch women are more possessive over their partners. Some of these women explained that they did not involve themselves in friendship relations with other lesbians because jealousy was a source of conflict for their relationship. Interference from "third parties" was seen as threatening and another reason not to socialise within the lesbian community. It could be assumed that the high levels of jealousy are a result of the marriage market which they feel to be very small, thus there is some anxiety about losing their partner.

Thus, while there are many reasons given for jealousy, which make it seem like a lesbian specific issue, the women had outlined that jealousy was a characteristic of heterosexual relationships too; perhaps to draw similarities between heterosexual and homosexual relationships and not label their own relationships as dysfunctional.

6.3. Lesbian partner abuse

Given the backdrop of how these women identify themselves and how they see themselves within South Africa, I was interested to explore their thoughts on domestic violence. The literature had shown domestic violence in lesbian relationships to be an interesting and important topic. I had planned to address the issue of domestic violence in my interviews, as part of the overall understanding of relationship dynamics, but it so happened that the women often brought up the topic before I had the chance to.

6.3.1. Experiences of lesbian partner abuse

Previously it had been shown that these women attempted to identify themselves separately from butch women and did not condone heterosexual role-play in their relationship. In recognising the occurrence of domestic violence in lesbian relationships, butch women were portrayed as being the main perpetrators of violence. Throughout the interviews, violence of any kind (toward their partner or other women and general aggressive behaviour), was said to be characteristic of butch women. This common sense view portrays butch women, "because they want to be like men", to be similarly dominant and aggressive. Socialisation was spoken about in a few instances, but this once again was linked to heterosexual mimickery.

Yvonne had explained that her ex-girlfriend had hit her because of jealousy.

> And she hit me about 3 times, the first time was at Oppikoppi. There were some girls that I spoke to and later that night there was this fight... I mean I am bigger than I use to be, and I told her please just shut up, the next moment, dwa!!... But that was... As I said, just jealousy... and I never hit back, I just sit there, because I am actually really strong and really...so I won't and I am not a violent kind of person, there is no aggression in me. (Yvonne)

There was a suggestion that, although not very big, her ex was a butch woman. In this sense this couple are highlighting the fact that the abusive partner was butch, they present it as an almost understandable reason for the abuse and for her jealousy.

> Yes, my ex, she is about, not very tall, very thin, she was 10 years older than me… (Yvonne)
> She looks like a young boy if you see her. (Mary)

It was suggested by Mary that Yvonne's previous relationship had been a "typical lesbian relationship" because her ex-partner had been more butch. Yvonne explains that jealousy was a huge problem in her previous relationship. She felt as if she was always being watched or accused of something. For example;

Jealous! If I talk to another woman, and I mean I am really an outgoing person actually, and I don't suspect, I am always the last one who suspects stuff or...so... (Yvonne)

I had asked Catherine and Tasha if they had heard or ever experienced lesbian partner abuse. They had explained that they had seen domestic violence between a lesbian couple, but similarly to what other women had said, the perpetrator had been a butch woman. Catherine explains while they do not have any physical abuse in their relationship, there is a high degree of verbal abuse. Tasha however explains that she cannot agree that it is abuse because it is their way of arguing rather than an attempt to control each other.

> No I think our problem in our relationship is verbal abuse, definitely. In our lifetime we have witnessed physical abuse, the one lesbian was male identified and she beat... but in our circle no. (Catherine)
> When you look at other shows on TV, we are not strange let me tell you... Catherine thinks we verbally abuse each other, I don't agree. I think the difference comes in when you are trying to exert power over, and disempower... in the physical abuse situation the person tries to cut the person off from friends he tries to diminish the ego of the person, so that the person become reliant and dependant on him, that to me is abuse, that is not what is happening here. I am never going to agree it is abuse, Catherine is on that baby. (Tasha)

I had asked the couple how they dealt with resolving conflict. They explained that they were both very bad at dealing with conflict and thus they had screaming matches. It was explained that they very rarely resolved conflict and that it often resulted in more fights. In the following conversation they talk about conflict in their relationship.

> *How do you as a couple deal with conflict? (Interviewer)*
> Very badly… (Catherine)
> Very badly! (Tasha)
> Let's put it this way, we have an old lady that lives next door and she was actually worrying about us, we have slamming doors and screaming action... (Catherine)
> We don't actually break anything, but other girls that we know do... but... (Tasha)
> But I think because there are no rules... so you, but in our case as well we are very very strong personalities and... (Catherine)
> And very verbally acute. (Tasha)
> So I would say we very... (Catherine)
> We both abuse each other (Tasha)
> Verbally ja... (Catherine)
> Verbally (Tasha)
> It gets very hectic... (Catherine)
> Then Catherine, uhm constantly worries about the poor neighbours, what can I tell you, the dogs cringe in the corner... (Tasha)
> *And that gets resolved how? (Interviewer)*
> I think uhm, a lot of it does not get resolved (Catherine)
> Crops up over and over again… (Tasha)

Tasha and Catherine had explained their own situation of poor conflict resolution. They had admitted to having verbal fights with each other. The following theme looks at how these women explain the occurrence of domestic violence in lesbian relationships.

6.3.2. Explaining lesbian partner abuse

More than half of the women had heard of instances of lesbian partner abuse, and all of them expressed disgust at its occurrence. While many of the women reported knowing of friends that had been involved in these relationships; two of the women who I had interviewed had reported to have previously been involved in abusive lesbian relationships. Given the controversy surrounding lesbian partner abuse, I found it of interest to identify the reasons they used to explain the occurrence of lesbian partner abuse. Interestingly these women adapted the same discourse that is expressed in dominant heterosexual theories. The theory of learnt behaviour and socialisation are very popular theories for explaining abuse in relationships. The theory of the learnt transmission of violence rests on the idea that children learn their coping mechanisms from parents and use these in their relationships later in life.

In some cases, lesbian partner abuse was explained as being similar to heterosexual domestic violence because the reasons or causes are the same. Johanna presented domestic violence as being a result of power inequalities. She suggests that such inequalities are a result of differing values, religion, finances and sex.

> It's one of the, I mean abuse is very often about power, it's about an inability to deal with conflict, or emotional immaturity, in other words insecurities. A man who beats his woman a lot is a very insecure person. Battery is often around issues of power. Values, religion, money… sex. It's power, power based. And those same dynamics play themselves out in lesbian relationships. It's just that people don't like to think about that because it doesn't make us look too good. (Johanna)

In general domestic violence in lesbian relationships was said to occur for the same reasons it occurs in heterosexual relationships. Socialisation was named by Gerda, Jen, Amy, Carol and Rachelle, as a reason for the occurrence of domestic violence. On this topic, styles of conflict resolution were also reported to be learnt through ones socialisation. Gerda gives her perspective;

> It's the way you are brought up, if you were not taught to respect women or your partner or you… if you grew up in an abusive situation, if your father hit your mother, or there was one person who was very domineering and always getting his way or manipulating to get their

134

way I mean you have not learnt how to be equal, how to solve problems just by talking... I remember when we talked, with my girlfriend, if there was a problem, she would shut out and want to go out of the room instead of talking through this thing until you have found a solution to it. (Gerda)

With this idea of socialisation being a cause, some women connected heterosexual role-play in lesbian relationships as possibly resulting in domestic violence. While Rachelle agrees that socialisation and individual factors play a role, she names heterosexual role-play as being a possible cause of domestic violence in lesbian relationships too.

> So where there is role definition in lesbian relationships, yes, that might happen, but it is not always the case. But I think, for me in terms of lesbian relationships, gay women, I think it is probably more really in terms of the persons own individual and... Also maybe background where they have seen abuse. This is also the way they deal with abuse. I mean they might come, mostly they come from a straight household, and they could have seen it happening, that then is learnt behaviour... so it lies again on the more individual level for a lot of lesbians. (Rachelle)

Freda is more explicit about the inequalities that role-play presents. She tells of her ex-girlfriend who had previously been in an abusive relationship with a butch woman. She explains that the relationship, being butch-femme, followed a heterosexual pattern and thus the butch partner asserted her dominance as a man would have.

> You know again, if you look at dominance and role-play, most of it sometimes has the tendency to get aggressive. My ex use to be hit. She use to get a lot of hidings. And she had a woman as I said before that thought she was a man. So immediately you have a role-play there. As soon as you start to have dominance of one partner over the other partner… that is usually a hard role-play and it's with women who believe they are men. Most of them are aggressive in that sense. I think it's a mental thing. First of all, dressing like a man, acting like a man…surely you must be feeling like a man as well. Acting, behaving… and if you have a female in your life that's very feminine… then that's how it should be isn't it? The man look and the female look… I think it is the dominance thing in a big way… very much the male dominance thing… It also depends on how you were brought up… a lot of you comes from how you were brought up. (Freda)

As discussed earlier, many women had explained that lesbian partner abuse was more likely to take place in butch-femme relationships because of the adoption of masculinity by one partner. In many instances, the women had named domestic violence as resulting from jealousy, a common source of conflict in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships. Other reasons cited were jealousy, insecurity and drinking- all somehow related to common heterosexual theories of masculinity.

Jen had explained that abusive partners are often insecure and thus have the need to control their partners. She explains,

> …it is about insecurity…an abusive partner usually is very insecure in themselves in their own value… You know a way of me defining myself, or finding value is by controlling someone else.

Freda explains that partners, whether male or female are aggressive and abusive for the same reasons. She however draws out the fact that it is women who "act like men" who are aggressive and dominant.

> The most things fought about is jealousy. Because that is when a woman gets a hiding… when her partner is jealous and has an insecurity. I have not seen a man hitting his wife over a bad plate of food or that she has not wet the garden. It's usually about money, about his family or jealousy. Also about pride… when you start to touch their pride, they feel a little bit insecure… so again it's about dominance, control, jealousy, it's about the same reasons that any man would hit a woman. I have not seen non role-players really beat up each other, it's always women who dress like men and act like men that are more dominant. And I have been in the gay society long, as I say I had a gay club, so I have seen a lot of things. (Freda)

There was a tendency to label lesbian partner abuse as only occurring in butch-femme relationships. It was assumed that because butch women are emulating masculinity, they too would be violent and aggressive as men are. However, it has been shown by some authors that the stereotype that the perpetrator of the violence must be the 'man' or the 'butch' (physically stronger, more masculine looking or wage-earning) while the victim is the 'woman' or the 'femme'- is false. Authors have acknowledged that the 'butch' member of the couple may be as likely to be the victim as the batterer (Ristock 2007; Pitt 2000).

6.3.3. Constraints of investigating lesbian partner abuse

An aspect of homosexual life that is often overlooked and rarely spoken about is domestic violence in same-sex relationships. Same-sex domestic violence is a poorly understood phenomenon that is surrounded by much controversy and misunderstanding. Lesbian partner abuse has been coined, "the second closet" because it is so well hidden and representative of a second secret that many homosexual women live with and fear disclosing. This fear stems from anxiety over societal discrimination and prejudice. Abuse in general remains fairly hidden, but there are additional factors that make it even more difficult for lesbians to disclose abuse in their relationships. This is understandable to an extent because the gay community is relatively secluded and silent, especially in third world

societies. Despite South Africa's progressive legislation, gay related issues are kept off the radar of mainstream concerns.

I was aware that finding information on lesbian partner abuse would be difficult because of the social stigma surrounding it. Not only is it a sensitive topic but women may not want to admit to abuse which would portray their already stigmatized relationships as dysfunctional. Johanna had explained this;

> They all gonna say to you, or make it nothing, or they going to try to cover it, or misrepresent it. Because they don't want to look bad, they really want those relationships to look constructive, because for the rest we look like deviants and perverts and objects for male voyeurism. So you got a sort of pressure-cooker phenomenon going on where you got an isolated couple and actually in that level of isolation, to have no conflict, or no abuse, no conflicts emerging at all, it's very unusual. Very unusual. (Johanna)

In the literature review, I had outlined the many factors that play a role in covering up the fact that domestic violence occurs in lesbian relationships. Firstly, the societal beliefs in women's inherent nature as caregivers and mothers leads people to believe that women are not violent towards one another. Secondly, the lesbian community may choose to be silent about incidences of abuse because it is felt that society will develop even more negative impressions of the lesbian way of life. The silence around same-sex domestic violence may thus be a result of the fear that acknowledging it may feed societal homophobia and contribute to further bias that pathologizes lesbian and gay relationships.

The idealization of lesbian relationships as egalitarian, non-competitive, and free of power inequalities has created high expectations for lesbian couples. Portraying the lesbian community as one that is based on equality and mutual caring has played a role in the 'overlooking' of lesbian partner abuse. Such high expectations may prevent them from admitting imperfections in their relationships.

6.4. Differing interests and age

Renzetti (1992), found that while many lesbians may support the idea of equal role sharing and decision making, many report imbalances which emerge when one partner has greater resources than the other- such as education, a higher social status, money or a better job. Some authors theorise that while heterosexual couples have power differentials classified

along gender differences, for homosexual couples these power inequalities are said to arise from other factors such as financial and education and age differences. Renzetti (1992) in her discussion of power, stated that it is multi-faceted and includes age, education, career, social standing and, in gay relationships, the extent to which each partner is open about their sexuality. In my study, many women reported that they preferred lesbian relationships because they had a greater opportunity for equality, yet there was still a sense of inequality that resulted from age differences and financial dependencies. Only a few women had been in relationships where there was a significant age difference.

Freda had been in a relationship with a woman 19 years her senior. She explained that she had felt respect towards her because of the age difference.

> I been once in a relationship, where she was just a stronger predominant person, she was much older than me. 19 years is a hell of a difference though for an older person though… so you have a silent respect for the age number one and number two, you would not dare to go and change an older person! (Freda)

Conflict caused by age differences were not framed as power related but rather differences in partners' focus and priorities. Some women felt that age differences resulted in the partners having different interests in their lives. Carol explains that she had previously been involved with a woman older than her and the age difference was problematic because they had different priorities.

> She was ten years older than me… there I think the difference was the age. And uhm I still wanted to to have a good time in life and I was not a settled… (Carol)

Carol then continues to explain that the situation was reversed when she was involved with a younger woman who had different interests than hers.

> …that is why I totally understood with this partner now, that I went out with now, that is why I use to allow her to go out… because it was like a catch 22. I was in that situation, so I knew I did not want her to feel like I felt, so I actually think I gave her too much freedom and that also caused a problem… (Carol)

Johanna explains that the age difference in her previous relationship, led each partner on different paths with regard to their careers. While Johanna, being the older partner, had settled in her career, her partner was still developing one which caused her to travel a lot and ultimately led to their divorce after ten years of marriage.

> *So would you say that was a consequence of age? (Interviewer)*

Yes… the difference in the end was that we were just getting parted, you know… she was developing a career, growing and I am consolidating a career. I'm getting more and more senior and she was working her way through the ranks, which I was able to help her to do, but in the end it was taking her far away, she was travelling and living in different countries. I wanted her to have that opportunity, but at the same time I was left…. (Johanna)

Ilza was involved with a woman 26 years her junior. She describes the relationship as wonderful, but mentions the few times where the age difference proved to be challenging for the couple. Because the age difference was so great, according to Ilza the couple never really committed.

> I was 50 at that stage and she was 24. ...we were in a relationship for five years which was wonderful. I always knew, and so did she that the age difference is too much, and she never really committed and we never spoke about "forever". I think we both wanted to avoid that. We just did not want to put it onto words. (Ilza)

Ilza also explains that the large age difference led to the partners having different interests.

> ...but again the age difference, she had many straight friends and wanted to go out, and she did [go out] with her straight friends. I sometimes wanted to stay at home and do nothing. (Ilza)

Age was described by Ilza as an additional factor of discrimination in her previous relationship. She had felt that because the age difference was so great, she could not be as open about their relationship as she would have wanted.

> *Have you ever wanted your relationship to be more recognised? Did you ever want her to tell people that you were together? (Interviewer)*
> I think we would have like to, uhm actually I can't really... I know that she does now, she tells everyone... but I myself, once we walked in the street in Hatfield holding hands and a couple of students were sitting there and they shouted something about lesbians. And that is not so nice, you know I would have liked to have been able to do that openly without... but again with us there was this age difference. I suppose if we had a definite, committed... in so many words relationship, we would have told more people... (Ilza)

Thus, significant age difference was identified as a possible cause of conflict in a relationship. While the literature outlined age as a possible source of power inequalities, most of the women named stressors that accompanied these age differences as the problem. For example, different interests and phases of career development were named as causes of conflict in relationship with regard to age differences.

6.5. Lesbian presentations of their relationships

There was substantial evidence that these women held their relationships as very important and that many of the women had also been in long term relationships. There exists a

stereotype that homosexual people cannot sustain relationships; the women in my sample expressed an awareness of this stereotype and were eager to discredit it.

6.5.1. Views on satisfaction and stability

The statistics of my sample however, did not support this stereotype that lesbians have short or unsustainable relationships. In the sample, there were nine couples that had been in relationships that lasted between five and twelve years long and four that had relationships that had lasted over twelve years long. Two of the couples had been involved for seventeen years at the time of the interview. This is evidence of the fact that lesbians do hold relationships as important and that they are able to have lasting unions. This is an echo of Blumstein and Schwarts' (1983) findings that contrary to popular myths- lesbian and gay men form lasting cohabiting relationships. Their findings reflected that 8% of their sample of 1,938 couples lived together for 10 years or more. Briant and Demian (1990 as quoted by Kurdek, 1995: 243) similarly found that 14% of the 706 lesbian couples they studied lived together for 10 or more years. These statistics suggest that at any particular point in time a large portion of homosexuals have stable loving relationships. Many women had been in lasting long term relationships and many knew of couples that had remained together for many years. Johanna, being fairly involved in the gay community reports that she knows of many lesbian couples that have established unions.

> I know of, I know of plenty of lesbians, because I am getting to that age now, where we have been in relationships for 20, 25, 17, 18, 13 years… So it's… we are pushing… we stay on the route… If we can find somebody appropriate, we go the route. We are serially monogamous…We don't necessarily want to be in and out of relationships. (Johanna)

Thus contrary to the stereotype, it is not uncommon to find that lesbian couples often form long term relationships despite the fact that they may be difficult to maintain because of social stigma and the fact that these relationships are inhibited rather than encouraged. Being a part of a couple is integral to the lives of many lesbians. Not only do many lesbians view their partners as very important to them, but as mentioned earlier, many studies have reported that they have high relationship satisfaction (Kurdek 1995; (Marecek et al; 1988 Peplau & Amaro 1982; Peplau & Gordon 1983; Blumstein & Schwartz 1983; Kurdek, 1994). Research has shown that most gay men and women want steady love relationships and that, "Few would be satisfied to have only casual liaisons" Peplau & Gordon (1983: 229).

Freda's sentiment is reflective of the findings by Peplau & Gordon (1983: 227) that, "Emotional intimacy and equality are values that are very strongly held among lesbians..." She is also expresses a rejection of the typecast that lesbians only want short meaningless encounters.

> If you speak to a gay girl…she will say that she is out there for love, there are little out there for lust. Most of them are out there for love. Love and acceptance. That is what gay is all about… love, acceptance, understanding and acknowledgment, the feeling of existence, of being equal. (Freda)

During the interviews it became obvious how close many of the relationships were. All of the women held their relationships as very important to their lives and expressed the satisfaction they received from those relationships, as well as the immense love and loyalty they had for their partners. Thus, despite the myths that, gay, lesbian and bisexual people cannot and do not want long term relationships or that they are unable to develop enduring relationships (Peplau & Gordon 1978), these women place great significance on their relationships. The typecast of the lonely women drifting from one sexual liaison to another without commitment or satisfaction is not applicable to these women who spoke proudly about both the long term relationships they had been in as well as those they knew of. I noted that, given the topic of study and the awareness of negative stereotypes, these women may have attempted to exaggerate certain positive aspects of their relationships, attempting to eradicate the stereotypes.

During the interviews, I had asked the women if they thought lesbian relationships were any different from straight relationships, many of them felt that their relationships had some positive differences. I drew out the positive commonalities that had been outlined by this group of women. Their positive portrayal of their relationships reflects something of importance about how they view and present their relationships. Some had become evident where the women had not only highlighted the positive aspects of their relationships, but had elaborated on that which they perceived to be negative aspects of heterosexual relationships.

6.5.2. Views of heterosexual relationships
In most cases the inability of men and women to understand each other or their differing attitudes was mentioned, but in one case the couple discussed a phenomenon they had

come across. The couple explained their perception that in heterosexual relationships there is a culture of complaining about ones spouse. This was outlined as a major difference between heterosexual and homosexual couples.

Do you think lesbian relationships differ from straight relationships? (Interviewer)
I am a feminist and I just have to preface my answer with that, and I think straight relationships are insane, I don't understand them, the straight women I know complain *waaay* more about their husbands and boyfriends than I complain about their men! (Tasha)
Ja that we found interesting. (Catherine)
They moan so much about their own partners, I have no idea why every woman on the planet is not a dyke, it is beyond me! (Tasha)
That is a very interesting phenomenon that I bumped into when I started, when I moved from my old job, and when I started working in Joburg, then I obviously became the gay girl in a straight community, I was shocked to listen to straight couples bitch about their partners, whether it's men or women. I was shocked, like, "I am supposed to be moaning about your husband, not you... I am the lesbian! I am the one that has got issues with men!" I find that very shocking... (Catherine)
And it's not just moaning, something that I pick up with hets[10] is that, divorce is a real possibility for them. The word applies to them, because marriage applies to them, so they are constantly thinking about leaving, how can I plan to get away? And like you know, "do you have children?" is the qualifier of now I can't leave, damn! You know! Whereas we are free to leave at any time... (Tasha)
The way I listen to straight women bitch about their husbands, I think but, "Do you love them?" (Catherine)
They don't have any sense of togetherness... (Tasha)

This piece of dialogue highlights more than one pessimistic aspect of heterosexual relationships. The notion that men and women communication poorly is highlighted. Tasha explains that she cannot understand straight relationships, especially in the context of only hearing bad things from women about their husbands. They note that divorce is very common in straight relationships, simply because it is accepted and attainable; almost a norm. Heterosexual relationships have been portrayed by this couple as unhappy and tedious unions. Tasha's puzzlement on the issue leads her to ask why every women has not chosen to be in a lesbian relationship; implying that such partnerships would be more meaningful for women.

6.6. Discourses relating to the pressures of maintaining a principle of equality

These women pride themselves on the equality of their relationships and the fact that their relationships are based on the ideals of negotiation, communication and understanding. The practical internal functioning of their relationships is magnified and portrayed very

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[10] "Hets" is a slang word for heterosexuals.

positively by these women, while sources of conflict are identified as resulting from sources external to the couple. This may be a mechanism of highlighting the normality of their relationships, by portraying their relationships as very practical and functional, and even more sensible than heterosexual relationships. This representation places lesbian relationships as having very high standards, which may at times be difficult to reach. Although the following section deals primarily with the positive aspects of lesbian relationships identified by these women, possible areas of conflict which result from this will be highlighted.

The majority felt that lesbian relationships were very different from straight relationships, for many of these women, a relationship that involved two women provided a dynamic of understanding and greater connection which could, according to them, not easily be achieved with men. Many of the women built their arguments on the discourse that women are more emotional, a trait inherent to women. They defined lesbian relationships as being much better than heterosexual relationships, especially since they had a greater chance of achieving equality. A greater chance of attaining equality in the relationship was said to be as a result of having roles and household chores negotiated and rather than being assigned as they are in straight relationships.

Many of the women agreed that lesbian relationships are more equal than straight relationships. Different discourses emerged to explain this greater equality. Authors (Blumstein & Schwartz 1983; Kurdek 1993 and Harry & DeVall 1978; Peplau & Gordon 1983) had originally claimed that homosexual relationships are more egalitarian because they followed a "best friend" relationship pattern rather than that of a heterosexual marriage pattern. I had found evidence of this, some of the women referred to their partners as their best friends, while others related to them as if they were their best friends.

6.6.1. "We are best friends!"

Compared to heterosexual couples, gay couples, especially lesbian couples are more likely to follow an ethic of equality, basing their interactions on what has been termed a "best friend" model (Harry & DeVall : 1978 as quoted by Kurdek 1995: 256). Accordingly, homosexual partners are more likely to have relationships based on equality rather than

heterosexual role-play. Following a "best friend" relationship model rather than a heterosexual marriage model (Peplau & Gordon 1983: 226) often alludes to the relationship having greater equality. Many of the women spoke of their partners as if they were best friends, shared activities and ease of communication was often highlighted. Fay for example talks about her relationship with her partner.

> I would say it is true because two women once again are more in tune with one another. It's like talking to your best friend and when you are involved with someone you actually become that person's best friend. So if I have a problem I should be able to go to my girlfriend, and and you know it's just easier talking to her than going to a man and saying this is the issue that I have got. So ja no I agree with that completely. (Fay)

The best friend model was not the only reason women gave for their belief that lesbian relationships were more equal than heterosexual relationships. The next discourse that emerged was based on the common stereotype that women are innately different from men, and because of this, they have a connection that allows them to understand each other.

6.6.2. "...there is nobody that really understands a woman like another woman"

When asked if there were any positive aspects of lesbian relationships, many women discussed the fact that having two women together allowed them to be "more in touch" and allowed for greater insight. This was often based on the fact that both partners are women and it is assumed that they can identify with and understand each other better. Eleven of the women employed this discourse and used it to highlight the positive aspects of their relationships. Carols passage expresses ideas that a large majority of the women had also highlighted.

> *What are the positive aspects of lesbian relationships? (Interviewer)*
> I think 'cause you understand each other more. A woman understands another woman, what another woman feels what she goes through. Emotionally as well, even though sometimes that can get out of hand you... if she comes home and she says she feels this way, you can understand it more because you go through the same emotions as what she does. So I think you can understand exactly what she is going through and what she feels. (Carol)

These women focus on the perceived similarity of being emotional and frame this as resulting in a greater emotional connection between two female partners. Accordingly this would result in greater understanding and thus ultimately equality. Freda also employed the belief that, because they are "emotional beings", having two women together would lead to greater understanding and appreciation of each other. In this line of thought, it was also felt

that a lesbian woman gets more emotional satisfaction from her lesbian partner than she would from a male partner.

Another source of equality was that, many of the women report greater comfort with women, in the fact that they can be themselves without any pretence. Many women had felt more secure with women because of the greater equality, more trust and the idea that they would be understood by their partner. Both Wanda and Rachelle had been married to their ex-husbands for over 10 years, and they both felt that they were more comfortable being with women.

> Positive aspects of lesbian relationships? (Interviewer)
> Just that women understand each other so much better. (Wanda)
> And it is easy to talk to [another woman] without having to think, now should I say this or should I say that and how is it going to be taken? (Rachelle)

Yvonne and Mary report that their relationship is so close because they think alike. When I asked if they thought lesbian relationships were different from heterosexual relationships, this couple felt that their relationship was even better because they are not bound by roles, they are free to communicate and have an extra connection.

> I think even better because there is not these roles...and we can talk about our relationship. We do everything together, we don't even need to talk because we think alike... (Yvonne)
> It sounds corny but it is true! It does sound corny, but it is true! (Mary)

Two women together was thus portrayed as being more equal and having easier patterns of communication because they understand each other's experiences and emotions thus creating greater comfort, freedom and equality. While they highlighted the greater understanding they have as women, there exists a contradiction because there are many instances where they report a lack of understanding between women, such as their own lack of understanding of butch women, or the lack of acceptance or understanding from family members such as their mothers, sisters or daughters. In this sense they have appropriated a majority discourse that women naturally understand one another in order to portray the value of their relationship.

6.6.3. "Men are from Mars, women are from Venus"

Flowing from this belief of shared understanding then, came the stereotypical discourse that, men and women are innately different and thus do not understand or communicate as

well as two women do. This was based on the belief that women are naturally more emotional, thus two women have an advantage over men who are not as in tune with these emotions. Through such discourses these women are normalising their relationships to an extent by painting them as naturally more equal and understanding than heterosexual relationships are because,

> Two women together are just a lot softer a lot gentler, a lot more understanding than men are for example. (Fay)

It is evident that these women are appealing to typical gender stereotypes. Men and women are categorised as two different beings that have little in common and a poor means of communication. Ilza who had been in a heterosexual marriage for fifteen years gives her view.

> *Do you think lesbian relationships differ from straight relationships? (Interviewer)*
> Oh absolutely, they definitely do. In every way, because there is no way that a woman is ever going to understand a man, and the other way around, they are completely different species. Uhm they humour each other and some people think they are happily married and it's just because they don't know any better. Where as with a same sex relationship, maybe that's... I mean you have this emotional bond that nothing can describe and you are completely in tune with each other. I think. (Ilza)

An additional reason given that two women connect better than a man and woman do, is that women have similarity in experiences which men cannot identify with.

> A guy would not understand when a woman has her period let's say… while a girl and a girl would understand. There are just those personal things that men just don't have a connection to and a woman has. Touch feel, smell, hair… little things that really are just so important for a woman, and a guy just cannot get it. I mean why do women leave their husbands for other women? I mean ask yourself that… there are little things that a woman sees and feels as acknowledgement, as acceptance. (Freda)

Wanda was also of the opinion that because women have different experiences with regard to bearing children and their bodily functions, men are not able to identify with such experiences and they are further stereotyped as not being able to understand women's emotions.

> Men's thinking is crooked! (Rachelle)
> Men think with their genitals... ja I think women understand each other well, I mean even silly things like PMS and how they feel about their children that kind of stuff you know. Women understand each other better. (Wanda)

To summarize, all of these women had reported that lesbian relationships were better than heterosexual relationships in some way. Highlighting these positive aspects of their relationships, allowed them to demonstrate the value of their lifestyle. They had marshalled

public discourses of gender in order to justify lesbian relationships. Common clichés of men and women were appropriated in order to highlight the positive aspects of having two women partners. Women were described as innately emotional and having different needs to those of men, thus making women better suited to meeting these needs. These women appealed to the idea that lesbian relationships- albeit not all of them- are more equal because women are innately better able to understand each other. Their appropriation of these ideas helped in creating a convincing argument enforcing the positive features of having two women in a relationship. They rejected the patriarchal premise that men and women are biologically suited for each other and that procreation depends on this coupling. They appealed instead to the reality that women can better identify with each other's experiences, and thus compliment each other in a 'natural' way.

6.6.4. Probing stereotypical notions

Not all of the women had articulated the above discourses, Jen for example does agree that on some level there is greater understanding between women but finds problematic the idea that women are innately more emotionally connected. She provides an alternative explanation for better understanding and better connection, based on the way women have been socialized. She had explained that, women had all been socialised in a particular setting. While she questions the assumption that women are naturally "in tune", she finds an alternative reason to explain the greater emotional connection.

> ...ja I think for us as women, we, you know, I dunno if it because we... people say we connect more on an emotional level... and I am wondering again for me is that really the case, or is it the way we have been socialised... but I think yes, as we have been socialised and then in that sense then obviously yes, we connect more on an emotional level. (Jen)

Gerda expresses a comparable argument to that of Jen's. Similarly, she reported that equality depended on each partner's individual personalities and how they have been shaped. She feels that lesbian relationships are better because they can be more equal, but at the same time she questions where this equality comes from. She mentions that socialisation has a role to play and recognises that men and women have different expectations placed on them.

> *People often see two women together as being a more equal relationship? (Interviewer)*
> It is definitely more equal because... well it depends now on what kind of personality you have. And I suppose there things play a role like if you are brought up to be domineering that's the kind of attitude you would probably take. Or if one grew up in an abusive situation,

147

then that person might take a kind of a victim attitude... It's very much like an ordinary relationship, I just think it is better. Because you can be more equal. But that is actually, it's not really because it's better, it's not what you inherently are, it's because the community has formed you in a way. Because there are expectations about what the roles are of men and women. So that domineering kind of attitude is a learnt attitude, it's not... it's so... maybe gay relationship are more equal, but I think it comes from the, uhm if the community was more open and supportive, maybe it would not even be like that. Then whether you are a man or a woman it would not matter, then a man would not be domineering [dominating] a woman. They would also be equal. (Gerda)

Amy rejects this notion of equality based on gender, and explains that rather, partner's personalities play a role in whether equality is achieved or not.

> *Um, ok many people in the gay community say that having two people in a relationship means that there is more equality. How do you feel about that? (Interviewer)*
> I can see why they say that, but you know, isn't that a matter of um, personalities, in any relationships? In a gay or straight relationship. If you are going to let yourself be dominated by one party whether it's a man or a woman, then it will happen, so I do understand why they say that, but I don't think it's a good generalization to say that. (Amy)

Johanna on the other hand had completely refuted the idea that women are naturally more emotional, and puts this down to mere generalisations. She gives as an example of her previous partner who was not typically emotional- as women have been stereotyped to be.

> *Some women have said that because women are more emotional, the relationships that they have are more emotional? (Interviewer)*
> That's crap; I mean there are some people who are more emotional and some people who aren't. I mean I have, I had a partner who is actually not very emotional at all, and that was the problem. She would, if any feelings she had, she sat on, you know like any self-respecting boy would. That's what she did with her feelings; she was not emotional at all... (Johanna)
> *And that comes down to personality? (Interviewer)*
> Absolutely, it had nothing to do with gender at all! People like to make these great big generalizations... (Johanna)

So while there is an overall agreement that lesbian relationships are more equal, and thus better than heterosexual relationships, there is some debate as to where this equality stems from. Some women based similar understanding between women on the belief that women are innately more emotional and thus ultimately share a greater connection. Four of the women questioned the argument of natural emotionality; two of them had explored the idea that the similar socialisation of women creates similar understandings and thus a greater chance at equality. Individual personality differences were also outlined as factors in relationships.

Subscribing to such beliefs may lead to assumptions that could cause stress because it is based on the notion that women are similar and thus know what the other partner wants. High expectations are created, because it is assumed that as a woman you can identify and read what your partner wants. Johanna for example, explains that holding such beliefs that women are more alike leads to the misconception that women automatically know what the other wants. This could lead to considerable stress, because it assumes women should automatically be good at pleasing their partner.

> I think that women who have just come out also have this great big lesbian fantasy that having two women together, it's all going to be peaceful and harmony and love and romance and all that stuff... It's going to be so pretty and you will know the woman's sexual needs because you are a woman too, so you know what to do with the equipment and bla bla bla... Not a chance, not true, it's harder, it's harder! (Johanna)

Due to these high expectations being created; substantial stress could result when it is realised that partners have different needs or differing ways of communicating. Substantial pressure can be placed on the individuals to "know" what is expected of them or to automatically understand their partner.

6.6.5. "...a connection that is too strong to deal with..."

While a greater emotional connection was named as a strength of their relationships, two women later mentioned that it could also be a negative aspect because the relationship may become too intense with all the emotions. Ilza felt that having so much deep emotion in a relationship, makes a relationship concentrated with emotion, something almost irrational.

> *Do you think there are any negative aspects of gay relationships? (Interviewer)*
> I suppose everything has something negative, I would not like to say so, I am so loyal. I never thought so, I mean I thought I was in the happiest relationship that was possible, and then it crashed down, so I don't feel qualified to say anything. But I suppose what can happen is too much of an intensity, a thing that is too emotional and then it could be too, a connection that is too strong to deal with in this sort of logical world we live in. I think it makes breaking up that much more difficult, uhm it's too intense. It could be, well that's the only drawback I can think of apart from the obvious ones, like if neither of you is very practical, but that could be with some men as well. (Ilza)

Carol had earlier reported that two women can better understand each other and they have similar experiences which allow them to identify better with each other, but later on she mentioned that the relationship can have "extreme emotions". I had asked her if she thought such "extreme emotions" could be bad, she responded;

> Ja, it can be because...because it is such an up and down situation that even in the gay relationships, two women, some take it very logically and others they take it by emotion. That if you don't touch or kiss they feel you don't love them. And then if you are both that kind of person, you have to explain to them. But talking and communication is important especially in the same-sex situation. If you talk a lot, you work through those things. But if you don't have a partner that you can communicate with and the emotions are involved, it just really gets out of hand, and no matter what you do, they are not happy with it and they tend to get upset about it. And it becomes difficult, and if you don't talk about it, it makes it worse. Because any little thing you do, if you go out and you talking, just talking to another girl and having a laugh, they take it the wrong way. You know, "Why is she laughing with her, she doesn't do it with me does she fancy this girl?" It can get out of hand, it really can and it's all emotions. (Carol)

In this quote, Carol outlines that misunderstanding between two women partners is possible and that communication is very important. Her notion of women being intensely emotional is still present as she points out that women get upset about certain issues. Carol admits to some difficulties arising because of misunderstandings. The adoption of such stereotypes, results in high expectations being created for lesbian relationships because it is assumed that women can read and identify with each other. This could be linked to the notion of 'merging' Lindenbaum (1985). Women are socialized to be very compassionate and nurturing in their relationships, which leads to lesbian relationships being all the more emotionally intense. While each woman attempts to fulfil the other a crisis results when one of the women begins to feel that she has become lost in her partner (Lindenbaum 1985). This in turn creates tension in the relationship. The following section is closely related to this one, it deals with positive aspects named by participants with regard to equality within the home. Once again such a discourse creates high expectations for the couples to accomplish.

6.7. Expectations of equality and household chores

The following section addresses the practical application of equality in their relationships. Peplau & Gordon (1983:231) summarise that,

> In most heterosexual marriages, clear distinctions are made between the husband's work (for example, being the breadwinner, doing household repairs) and the wife's work (for example, doing the cooking and other domestic chores).

As discussed in Chapter two, Blumstein & Schwartz (1983) and Kurdek (1993) show that there is little evidence that homosexual relationships follow a heterosexual division of household tasks. In one study, Kurdek (1995) reported that the division of household tasks was one of the top five reasons for conflict in gay relationships, this did however not match

what I found in my sample. The division of household chores was named as a strength for the relationship because these could be negotiated. I have found a lot of evidence in the transcripts that these women divided household chores equally.

> When I came out of the closet, with my previous girlfriend, it was you know we were equal. There was no like, she was the dominant one or I was. She had certain factors where she would dominate and I had certain factors where I would dominate. (Fay)

6.7.1. Negotiation in lesbian relationships

Mendola (1980) had said that given the fact that same-sex partners cannot be assigned husband or wife roles based on the traditional basis of biological sex, these partners are able to remain free of the conventional feminine and masculine stereotypes. This was very applicable to what the women had reported, they felt free to negotiate roles and duties between each other. McWhirter & Mattison (1984) noted that the handling of household chores varied by stage of the relationship. Routines were said to be established and chores were assigned based on partners' skills and work schedules. All of this was very appropriate and similar to what many of the women in my sample had spoken of.

Many of the women felt that their relationships were more equal because they shared household chores. This is reflective of my overview of the literature on this topic. Because gay men and lesbians do not always use the gender of the partner, they must, negotiate common couple issues such as household labour (Carrington 1999). Despite the stereotypes of role-playing, Peplau and Cochran (1990) have found that a great majority of lesbians and gay men believe that an equal balance of power is desirable. In some regards, power in intimate relationships can be witnessed by studying the division of labour between partners and the benefits gained. In this regard, some of the women compared their relationships to heterosexual relationships and found that their relationships were more equal, because there was not a gender specific division of labour and they had equal control because their roles were negotiated.

> No, I think what sort of, maybe, because we don't have this little template that we are told to live by, you know we have to make it up ourselves as we go along... (Catherine)
> So we fight about who is actually gonna mow the lawn as opposed to like the man has to... (Tasha)
> *So in a straight relationship there are given things but in a lesbian relationship you actually have to... (Interviewer)*

Negotiate! Aren't we lucky? Because men and women don't get to negotiate anything... (Tasha)

No I think, ja we are not confronted by all the expectations, like if I was married to a man, because I am a woman and he is a man. In the society that we live in in, uhm whereas she can't expect anything from me, she can only hope... (Catherine)

It happens over the years, things chop and change... like when Catherine was so thin, it really freaked me out, so then I was cooking 24/7, all I could think about was what food I could make for her, freeze etc. so she could take it with to work... Now if you get me in front of that stove, it's because I am really hungry and I can't wait for her to cook something... so it changes, like I was into gardening, and now Catherine has to do some gardening, it changes and renegotiates... (Tasha)

Tasha's explanation of how roles/duties in the relationship change is the same as McWhirter & Mattison's (1984) theory that the handling of chores varied by the stage of the relationship. According to both the theory as well as these women's opinions, there is often a more flexible division of labour in the household and these relationships are more egalitarian. These women saw their relationships as more equal than heterosexual relationships because the division of labour within the home was not pre-defined. Some women had outlined that this negotiation of roles is good because it is based on what each partner is good at, rather than being based on gender specific duties. For example:

Not simply because you are a man and now you must take the role of the man, I think that is good it calls to the strength of each partner in the family or the relationship , which is good, so... (Jen)

Wanda then explains that they do not have a strict division of roles, they are both capable of doing household chores.

And we both do everything, and if we need to build a carport then we discuss it and we build it together. If I think the lawn needs mowing, then I do it, same with Rachelle. If the house is a tip and it gets on my nerves, then I clean it... if the house is a tip and it bugs her, then she cleans it... Rachelle does the washing mainly because I am at work all day.... there is none of this, "I think you should tidy the kitchen," you know which you get in a heterosexual relationship. (Wanda)

Wanda explains that Rachelle does the washing because she is at work during the day, reflective of the flexibility and negotiation accommodating the different interests, skills, and work schedules of particular partners, as discussed by Kurdek (2005) and McWhirter & Mattison (1984). I found a lot of evidence in the transcripts of certain chores being shared and delineated according to the women's interests, strengths and work schedules.

With regard to equality in lesbian relationships, I do agree that perhaps it allows for a greater chance at equality because certain things can be negotiated. Whether this negotiation is always equal is another matter.

6.7.2. Issues of inequality in butch-femme relationships

Once again, there was a distinction between the types of lesbian relationships that exist. While these women felt that their relationships were more equal than heterosexual relationships, not all lesbian relationships were defined as being this equal. There was an effort to define their own relationships as separate from butch-femme partnerships which were said to be unequal. While these women spoke of their own lesbian relationships to be more equal because they are based on equal roles within the home, butch-femme relationships were seen as unequal because of the heterosexual mimickery.

Below, Wanda establishes that power is problematic in straight relationships. It was not only heterosexual relationships that were portrayed as being unequal, but some types of lesbian relationships were also categorised as having unequal power relationships. Rachelle points out that not all lesbian relationships are like theirs, alluding to the fact that butch-femme relationships do exists, which are not as equal.

> *Do you think there are different problems in straight and lesbian relationships? (Interviewer)*
> I think quite often the problems in straight relationships are power related; men seem to think they have the power and quite often in our generation they did have the power, at least economically. (Wanda)
> I do think we are particularly lucky to have found each other and to get on so well, but not all lesbian relationships are like this. Fortunately many of our friends are like this. (Rachelle)

Lack of equality was often explained by role-playing. Mary and Yvonne explain their relationship as equal, but speak condescendingly of butch-femme couples which are said to be unequal.

> In our case... you see there are too many couples that are always thinking about this role thing, where one is the dominant and the other is the little femme. (Yvonne)
> We are not like that, to me it is actually stupid to think that way, I mean I was a mother, still a mother, we are still two women even if whatever, so why can't you do both? (Mary)

Gerda explains that because butch-femme relationships mimic heterosexual relationship patterns, issues of gender inequality come into play and thus do not reflect true equality.

She goes on to explain however that a "real lesbian relationship" does not rely on stereotypical gender division of roles, but rather on skill.

> So, say you are in a relationship with somebody who is more male, then I think because of South Africans, then that person might follow a kind of male attitude towards women and then you have this kind of patriarchal relationship where you are being domineered. But if you have a real lesbian relationship, where both of you are feminine, the one that is the best at this does it. (Gerda)

Many of the women attempted to define themselves separately from "those butch relationships". There was an effort by the women to show that doing or enjoying a masculine activity such as having a motorbike did not necessarily delineate one as butch. Ilza for example, explained:

> Ok it often happens that the one prefers cooking and the other not and the one works on her motorbike and the other not, but that does not put them into those roles. (Ilza)

Amy's view is analogous to Ilza's. She clarifies that she may do the washing in her household, but this does not necessarily categorize her as the femme partner in the relationship. She explains that her partner enjoys doing certain things more, but that this does not mean that she is "the man" in the partnership.

> I don't want to define it as a specific role. It's just a matter of, my partner is stronger in her arms, so, if there needs to be a hole drilled, then she will do it. She likes this d.i.y. program because she likes doing that stuff, but it does not mean that she is now the man in the house doing all the handiwork…I really like doing washing. It is sometimes very therapeutic for me to stand and be with myself and do the washing. It is a lovely time to be alone. Really. So I am more the one doing the washing in the house, but that doesn't make me the woman of the house. My partner also puts some washing in the dishwasher and um, if we braai, she loves to make fire. But I can also make fire and braai. If she loves to do it… um why not? We both like to drive in the Landrover. We both like to drive in it and sometimes it's a fight about who is driving it. You know so, ja, but that does not make me the masculine partner or the feminine partner. So to say there are specific roles in my relationship, no not at all! (Amy)

Equality due to the opportunity to negotiate household chores was named by these women as a positive aspect of their lesbian relationships. Evidence emerged, similar to that of the literature, showing that tasks were assigned on partners' preference, skill and work hours. For these reasons then, these women believed that their relationships were more equal than most heterosexual relationships. In the same breath however they explicate that not all lesbian relationships are equal. Butch-femme relationship where once again outlined as unequal because of the heterosexual mould they mimic. These women had adopted the dominant discourse that viewed butch-femme relationships as dysfunctional. There was an effort by a few of the women to show their relationship as being different from butch-

femme relationships, because they held equality as a vital ideal. It seems that they reject these relationships in an attempt to both be a part of dominant society who classify butch-femme relationships as dysfunctional and thus appear normal because they are in agreement with the rest of society.

While the negotiation of roles could lead to greater equality in some sense, achieving such equality requires open communication and negotiation about who does what. While this ability to discuss and negotiate roles was named as a positive aspect of lesbian relationships, it would require open communication and agreement on chores. It has been shown that partners often do the chores that they enjoy or are best at. It is however possible that individual' chore preferences do not always compliment each other. The possibility that this could result in a relationship stressor is probable, especially if communication lines are not open between partners.

6.7.3. Summary of expectations created by valorising of lesbian relationships

Many of these women have portrayed their relationships in a very positive light. This valorising of their relationships can be understood in the context of being in a minority position. Their attempt to define themselves and their relationships outside of the stereotypes is evident. With the awareness that their relationships are generally viewed as deviant or abnormal, they have appropriated public heterosexual discourses in order to present their own relationships as normal and even better in some cases. The emphasis placed on the high-quality of their relationships does nevertheless create significantly high expectations of their relationships. Pressure may be placed on a lesbian couple to meet these high standards, anger and tension may be created when it is realized that they cannot meet these high values.

6.8. Sharing friends and limited separate activities

There is a lot of evidence that lesbian couples share friends. In my sample most women reported having the same friends as their partners.

> You know what happened, I came to the relationship with my friends and she came with hers, so through the years now, they are all our friends, but there is friends that… like my old colleagues and her friends from work that we don't share. But we do share friends. (Amy)

One difference outlined was that in a lesbian relationship, both individuals in the couple could spend time with each others' friends. A few women named this as an important and positive factor of their relationship.

> *So what do you think are some of the positive aspects of lesbian relationships? (Interviewer)*
> Well I think the way we connect with each other, the way we, you know we can do things together. For me, in most relationships, gay or straight you need your private time and you need your time with your friends, uhm for me it's like we need to do as much as possible together, so when I go out, I want to know that I have got my partner with me... But I think in a straight relationship, the men do the men thing and the ladies do the ladies thing. Whereas in our relationship, we can all interact together, you don't have the men huddling here and the women here. We interact with each other and we actually get to know each others friends and ja it's... and you know men tend to keep their friends to themselves and women to themselves whereas in our relationships, I can go to Carol's friends at any time and I can visit them. I don't have to feel well they are her friends. They are my friends as well because they are women and we can interact with each other as women do... so I think that is one of the positives. (Fay)

It was felt that because both partners are women, it is easier to become friends with each others friends. With this then, they are able to spend more time together. Tasha explains that a major difference is that lesbian relationships share social worlds, where heterosexual couples don't in the sense that they keep their friends separate, or do separate activities such as men's evenings.

> There are no boys evenings, ok Catherine and I do our separate thing, but their are no boys evenings... if I feel like socialising I go with Catherine and her friends, or she comes with me and my friends or we go to our "together friends", or whatever... it's "together world". We share worlds, I think that is the key. Don't you think Catherine we share worlds where men and women don't share their social worlds? (Tasha)
> Women go to parties and they stand around in the kitchen and... ...then you go to the braai area and the husbands are going, "the wife says..." Ja, you become the wife and the husband, you not "Janet and George" anymore... you understand where we don't become the wife and the husband... (Catherine)

Catherine uses the example of a social braai to explain that in a straight relationship, men and women do separate things. Women are in the kitchen while the men are around the braai, whereas a lesbian couple does not have this split.

Most of these women had shared friends with their partners; some mentioned that they had their own separate friends as well as the shared friends. Although this is named as a positive, some authors have outlined this as a part of merging which may not be entirely healthy for a couple. The difference when compared to heterosexual couples is that in

lesbian relationships the same activities can be done together. Friends can mix because they are all women.

Ultimately, as has been shown in a previous section, all of these women are happy to be involved in gay relationships. Many of them have demonstrated long term relationships and the reports on their relationship satisfaction have been high. They name positives of their relationships, which are based in stereotypical notions of the inherent characteristics of man and woman. Overall they are happy and report many positive factors of their relationships. Many of the women express stereotypical and depreciating views about butch-femme couples. They seem to have adopted the dominant discourse of these relationships being dysfunctional. This serves to perhaps categorise their own relationships as separate from this and also allows them to classify themselves in agreement with dominant beliefs. Their discussion of heterosexual relationships as being dysfunctional may function to place their, "more understanding" lesbian relationships in a better light.

6.9. Concluding potential internal stressors

While chapter five discussed the external challenges that affect lesbian relationships, chapter six dealt with stressors internal to lesbian relationships. Jealousy was named as a potential source of conflict for their relationships, many of the women had told of their experiences in jealous or possessive relationships. Hetero-normativity was appropriated in some instances where women were labelled as being inherently more jealous.

In the literature review, satisfaction was rated high in a variety of different studies of homosexual couples. The correlates used for measuring relationship satisfaction included feelings of having equal power and control, perceiving many attractions and few alternatives to the relationship, placing value on attachment, and engaging in shared decision-making (Blumstein & Schwartz 1983; Kurdek 1994). From this chapter, it is evident that many of the women reported that their relationships were fulfilling and satisfying. Satisfaction was rated high, shared decision making and equality were highlighted and elaborated on. Many of the women had also elaborated on the value that lesbian women placed on their relationships and the length of the relationships that they were able to maintain.

A body of information that I could not ignore was the many discourses which provided convincing arguments highlighting the positive aspects of lesbian relationships. Four main discourses were discussed which served to show that lesbian relationships were better than heterosexual relationships because partners are more equal due to the fact that they have greater emotional connections as women, they have the freedom to negotiate roles, and they share friends and activities. Their adoption of certain hetero-normative public discourses allowed them to portray their relationships as valuable and practical. Negotiation, rather than defined roles, was portrayed as a positive aspect of some lesbian relationships, which allowed a greater chance for achieving equality. While all these discourses served to create a convincing argument for why lesbian relationships are not only more functional for the participants, but better than heterosexual relationships, I was able to draw out some interesting zones of possible conflict within these discourses. These women had attempted to valorise their relationships in order to justify them as being important and of value. With this, high expectations have been created for their relationships. Anger and disappointment could possibly result when these expectations are not met.

Butch-femme relationships were once again framed as abnormal because of their heterosexual modelling; there was a definite effort by some of the women to identify themselves as well as their relationships as different from butch-femme relationships. To a large degree many of the women had appropriated hetero-normative discourses to describe butch-femme relationships; thus they were framed as being dysfunctional and strange because of their heterosexual modelling. Such relationships did not represent the standards of equality, negotiation and femininity which they portrayed to be inherent in their "real lesbian" relationships. In a few cases, heterosexual relationships had also been rejected on the grounds of inequality as well as the perceived miscommunication that was evident between men and women.

From the vantage point of the participants, the way they present both lesbian relationships as well as their own identities is functional. In reflecting on their relationships, they portray their relationships as being a rational and acceptable partnership because of its advantages

above other relationships. Their own identities are once again defined separately from butch or femme women, and there was a definite boundary drawn between themselves and "those women". These presentations function to provide acceptable reasons and justifications for why their relationships are of value. Different mechanisms and appropriations were adopted and adapted in each situation to suit their description.

Diagram 3: A graphical representation of the potential internal stressors that have been discussed.
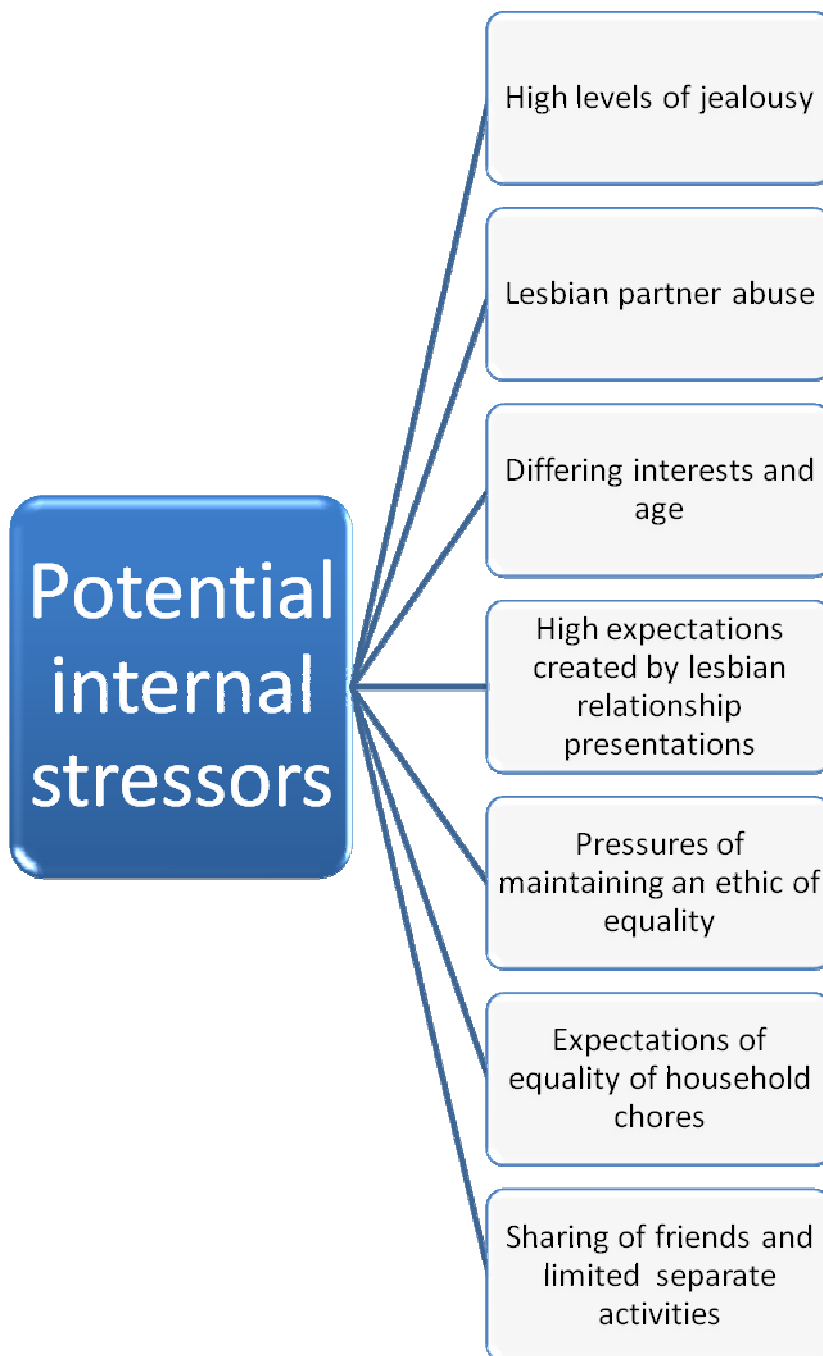
Thus, it is evident that there are many potential stressors to be found internal to lesbian relationships. Many of which stem from the high expectations they have created for themselves. The following chapter addresses those stressors that cannot be categorised as either internal or external stressors, but is rather a combination of the two.

Chapter 7: Factors potentially causing internal and external stress

7.1. Introduction

This is the third chapter which delineate the stressors which are both internal as well as external to lesbian intimate unions. I had found it necessary it make a third section which discussed factors that could not be defined as being strictly internal or external stressors. The following section deals with potential stressors that could not be defined as either internal or external stressors but rather presented both internal and external stress for lesbian intimate unions. Two major themes are discussed which discuss coming out and closely linked to this, religion.

7.2. Coming out

The literature established that coming out was a process which involved disclosing ones sexuality to others, often in the face of a disapproving climate. Coming out had been named as a source of "minority stress" by Balsam & Szymanski (2005). This stress is a result of being a part of a minority group. Coming out is specific to GLBTI people because it involves disclosure of information about their sexuality which may lead to rejection from others. For the lesbian, coming out was said to be a process because it involved having to place herself in a vulnerable position in any situation where her heterosexuality was assumed.

Asserting ones identity at all levels of society in which heterosexuality is assumed proves to be challenging for many homosexual people. This process involves anxiety and a fear of what others will think. Coming out to ones family and friends is often very difficult to do and involves fear of rejection and disappointment. In the previous chapter, I had discussed discourses employed by the women who framed lesbianism as acceptable; this being reflective of their need to show their relationships as normal and even valuable. In contrast, very few women adopted a discourse of choice when explaining their sexuality, so in their coming out stories there is often reference to having been lesbian throughout life despite only revealing this later on in life.

Coming out not only involves disclosing ones sexuality to others, but includes recognition and acceptance of the identity. The process thus involves both the constructing and asserting of a gay identity. Coming out to one's self has been outlined by many of these women as an important developmental phase of lesbians. In a previous section, the women's discourses outlined that having a partner who is out to be very important criteria when choosing a partner. These women portrayed those who had remained in the closet as having emotional concerns because they could not fully accept their lesbian identity.

The literature outlined that coming out is also not a once off task, because heterosexuality is assumed in most cases, homosexual individuals may have to come out to many different people, in many different situations. Each time brings with it a different set of challenges. "Coming out" relates to both internal and external pressures of lesbian relationships because it involves self acceptance as well as disclosing one's sexuality to others. Lesbians may have internal conflict about adopting their sexual identity, and conflict may come from external sources.

7.2.1. Difficulties of coming out to family

All except one of the participants were out to their family. While they all reported to be out to some degree, many prefer to keep their sexuality hidden from some people and some groups. Disclosing their sexuality to family and close friends had been a difficult task for many of the women.

Freda felt that her family was very disappointed to find out that she was lesbian. She explains that her mother had felt that it was somehow her fault, that she had raised her daughter poorly.

> I think my mom found out when I was 24. It was a big disappointment for the family; we have a very conservative family. So… I think it was pretty much a shock for my mom because she took it very personally because somehow when your kids grow up differently you think you're at mistake. My dad has always been a conservative, very serious uhm type of strict South African man. So you kinda follow the rule, you get yourself a husband and lots of kids and you live happily ever after. But he kinda knew…I think he knew in his heart… so for her it was a shock... (Freda)

Freda explained earlier that her parents had accepted all her partners and were hospitable and kind to them, but here she explains that deep down they are not entirely happy with

her lifestyle. Freda feels that her parents were disappointed because she did not follow the plan that they had designed for her; even though she was open about her sexuality she still feels that they are not happy with her lifestyle. Having this concern about not being entirely accepted because of ones sexuality also presents considerable stress for the individual which may impact on the relationship. Freda explains the difficulty because, *"I mean you just want to keep them happy and proud of you"*.

Meghann also expresses her fear of disappointing her parents. Although she has not yet come out to her parents, she expresses the same concerns as Freda. She worries that her parents will feel that they were at fault if they find out she is lesbian.

> *Ok, does your family know? (Interviewer)*
> I think they suspect…they know I have gone to a gay church and the have met my gay friends and uhm… like I said, I think they suspect, but I am a little bit I think scared and nervous to tell them. They want me to be with a man and I know they will be very disappointed. (Meghann)
> *So what do you feel are the difficulties of coming out? (Interviewer)*
> I think the main thing that bothers me is my parents being disappointed. And also them possibly blaming themselves…or they might feel that they have done something wrong. Why is their daughter gay? They may worry that they brought me up incorrectly, or that what mistakes have they made? (Meghann)
> *So you are worried that they might feel like it was their fault? (Interviewer)*
> Yes that's true (Meghann)

In such a scenario, the lesbian relationship has to remain hidden from the family. There is no external recognition and the lesbian relationship is not as validated as it would be if both partners were out and able to be open about their relationship.

Although many of the women have said that their families were accepting, the fact that they had to try to hide their sexuality for so long illuminates their fear of rejection and fear of being a disappointment to the family.

Gerda came out at the age of 34. Coming from a very conservative and religious background, she faced some very negative reactions from her family who viewed lesbianism as a problem which needed to be fixed. Gerda tells that when she first told her father about her sexuality he had reacted against her, but today he has forgotten his own homophobic reaction.

Because at that time he had told me that I am vomiting on their love. He has forgotten that now, because just the other day he was saying that he can't understand how people can have a problem with gay people! He has totally forgotten his own reaction at the time that I came out! The family thought, especially my mom, she thought there was something wrong with my hormones, she wanted me to go for hormone therapy, she wanted a medical cure. My sisters thought that I was in a bad marriage and that I was being dominated and was using this as an excuse to avoid marriage which was also not true. (Gerda)

Gerda's situation is demonstrative of stereotypes that many lesbians face when disclosing their sexuality. Gerda for example had to battle against stereotypes and had to face disdain and intolerance from her family. A few of the women who came out later in life felt they did not have the same pressure of having to answer to their parents.

> *Who did you have the most anxiety about telling? (Interviewer)*
> I think if I had parents that are alive, I think I would have more. My mother I think would think it's strange. (Rachelle)

In previous sections it has been made obvious that these women are aware of the stereotypes and the negative social stigma of homosexuality. It is not only strangers who hold these beliefs, but as prominent societal beliefs, family members may hold these stereotypical beliefs too. For these reasons, coming out to family may be particularly difficult.

Catherine rejected her sexuality for many years, because her entire upbringing had condemned homosexuality. It was suspected that she was "different" from a young age and had been told it was wrong by her mother and the nuns at her school. She had even been sent for counselling. Eventually she came to a point of realization that despite what she was told or what she had tried, she could not change the fact that she was gay. She came the realisation that her efforts to change were not because of her own problem with being gay, but because everybody else had a problem with it.

> So I spent 7 years, living a life of falling in love with girls and being approached by many girls, because people pick it up in each other, and I kept saying, "No! No! No!" It was hectically traumatic, so by the time I came out the closet, when I had tried all those avenues; I had listened to my mom, the nuns, I even tried therapy. I did the whole thing and eventually I understood, I can't change it. I can't change it for my mother I can't change it for society... and then it reversed I understood it's not my problem, it's their problem. So as soon as I understood that, that it's not my problem, my mother has to deal with me my mother has to come out the closet. When I understood that, then I was free, society had a problem, my parents had the problem, not me. I accepted myself, I was very, I was getting a lot of sexual attention, from women and men… I am not very religious either even though I had the nuns. I did not beat myself up because of religious reasons; my issues were more about my peers, parents and society. (Catherine)

While coming out to family and close friends was a major theme, there was also a degree of anxiety about coming out to other people. Some of the women were concerned about what people might think of them upon finding out about their sexuality. This fear demonstrates awareness of being stigmatized. One woman was afraid that she may loose her friends, while another was worried that the people she worked with and trained would lose respect for her. It would mean a loss of credibility. Appropriately this idea is summarized, "Lesbians understand how we may be perceived and the danger of having our identity rewritten by others when we come out" (Maher & Pusch 1995:33). This is because as lesbians, there is an awareness of what images the label can conjure up in people's minds. A large number of the women expressed similar ideas, reflecting anxiety over what people may think about their lifestyle. Gerda gives an example of not wanting to lose credibility amongst people she works with. Her anxiety is a result of the misconceptions they may have and may apply. These are all examples of external pressures for individuals, but may also impact the individuals in the relationship.

For most of these women, homosexuality had been framed as a very taboo subject. If homosexuality was spoken of, it was condemned and stereotyped. Very few of them had reported being exposed to any openly homosexual people during their upbringing and coming to the realisation that they were attracted to the same-sex could be rather disturbing for many of these women. Often these women had internal struggles with accepting their own homosexuality because of the pessimistic ideas surrounding homosexuality. Some of the women had themselves held stereotypes about lesbians and this too hampered their coming out process.

7.3. Self-acceptance

I had asked the women to tell me about their coming out experiences, many of the women spoke of the difficulty they had coming out to themselves and accepting the identity of lesbian, a vital step in the coming out process.

7.3.1. Confronting stereotypes

Throughout this dissertation, many misconceptions and stereotypes about lesbianism have surfaced. Common stereotypes and negative misconstructions about homosexuality created

165

great barriers for many of the women. For many of the women it meant adopting a less than complimentary identity or finding a space where the label of lesbian was redefined. For many of them, realising they were lesbian caused them to think they were gender confused. When confronted with the issue of whether or not they were lesbian, for example, Catherine and Gerda had trouble classifying themselves. Many women had felt their attraction to other women, but could not find themselves fitting into the stereotypes that they knew.

Catherine explains her first visit to a gay club where she had seen many butch women. She was not butch looking herself and because the only identifiable lesbians had been butch ones, she did not identify herself as lesbian at first.

> In fact the first time I went to a gay club, I thought, "Oh, ok I am not gay..." I don't have to deal with this issue; I am not like those girls, those truck drivers... (Catherine)

Similarly Gerda had been confronted with the stereotype that lesbians wanted to be men. She did not know how to classify herself because she was feminine looking and had no inclination to be masculine, but yet felt attracted to women. Gerda, like Catherine had only ever recognised butch women as lesbians, and was unsure about herself.

> And I thought I was a freak, because I am feminine and at that stage the only lesbians I had seen where all butch, so I thought I was a freak! And my husband at that stage was telling that I am a freak because, "Gay woman want to be men..." (Gerda)

Some women told stories of having met a lesbian that allowed a redefinition of what it meant to be lesbian. Catherine tells that while at university she had been struggling with whether she was gay or not. To her surprise she had been friends with a woman who she had not identified as lesbian because she did not fit the stereotype that she had held. It was this woman who allowed Catherine to redefine what being lesbian meant.

> I mean I befriended a woman who I did not realise was gay at all, because I had made my own stereotypical notions of what gay was. (Catherine)
> *Being? (Interviewer)*
> Truck driver! So there was this very petite turn of the century looking woman wearing very frilly dresses. And she sat me down and we would talk early in the morning and she sat me down and asked me, "What is this issue you have?" and I think she is the one that made me understand that it's not my problem, and she got me to know all the women at Rhodes at the time. Beautiful, stunning women. (Catherine)

Jen, being involved in a very fundamentalist church had been confronted with images of homosexuality as being a sin. She explains that having a lesbian friend at the time of coming out helped her to resolve some issues about homosexuality.

> I had a friend, I had been discussing it with her, she is also lesbian, and we worked together. She was the first person that I actually told, that morning that I made that statement to myself, I told her... she was a good space to be with and to talk, good sounding board... And then I decided I should go through this also on a more professional level, and I went to a psychologist. Then at the end of the year I sat down, took my family one by one, took them for coffee and uhm I explained this and said this is it, same with my friends, close people... (Jen)

Both Jen and Catherine had named these exchanges with other gay women as valuable in changing their perceptions and allowing themselves to, for the first time express themselves as gay women. Having sources to turn to for information and insight proved to be valuable sources of support, especially at times of coming out.

7.3.2. The importance of being openly gay

It had previously been outlined by many of the women that an important dating criterion was that women be openly gay. Being openly gay was named by these women as an important stage to have reached for any lesbian. Freda feels that many gays have not accepted themselves and for this reason there are high numbers of suicide.

> There are a lot of gay people the commit suicide. If you read and you ask some of these pastors, they will tell you. And that is mostly about self acceptance. (Freda)

Some research has shown that being out has many positive aspects. Balsam & Szamanski (2005) and Rothblum (2001) reported that a greater degree of outness is associated with lower levels of psychological stress, higher self-esteem and more positive emotional states. This is reflective of what I found in the transcripts, many women were of the opinion that being out was important for ones emotional health. Johanna is of the opinion that older lesbians that are not out are bound to have emotional baggage because they have not fully accepted themselves.

> There are a lot of women who reach thirty, forty who have not grown up, they still have lots of issues with their families, not out to their families, not out to themselves. Then they have emotional issues, they are adult women who can't take adult responsibility for themselves! And I find they are the most threatening to me... (Johanna)

Jen explains the importance of being open about ones sexuality.

> One of the things that I do with people and absolutely believe in is, that, coming out and being completely out and open is the best for the individual…. (Jen)

Amy, previously a teacher relates her experiences. She explains that once she felt at peace with herself and accepted herself, it felt like she was no longer being targeted. For her, being out to herself was of great importance because she no longer felt conflicted about who she was.

> So ja, and in the process, the worst part for me was at work, because there I really, I was harassed by the kids, they wrote ugly things on the tables of my class and in their textbooks… That was the worst part. But you know what, I think it is quite related to one's personal feelings, if you feel comfortable and if you are at peace in yourself, "This is who I am," and… (Amy)
>
> *(Interviewer) You accept yourself?*
>
> That is what happened, I've been through, myself, been through a lot of conflict, reading Christian books… Ja, so… during that time at school, it was more of a struggle within myself, and when I came to that point to accept myself, I realized, I still believe in God, that has not changed and I got to accept who I am, it was like, everyone else accepted it as well. (Amy)

Mary explains that she went through a process of questioning herself and really accepting the identity of lesbian. At first she tried to convince herself that she was not gay at all, then she contemplated that perhaps she was bisexual. She explained that she could eventually not ignore the fact that she was gay and this lead to her accepting the gay identity. She ends by saying that acceptance is needed for one to be truly happy with oneself.

> Yes, it is not a choice; the only choice comes in when you make a choice to live an honest life! And I think it is much more difficult to admit to yourself that, "I am gay" than it is to stand in front of somebody else and tell this person… You go through these phases, like no I am not no I am not, then maybe I am bi, and then one day it just hits you like a hammer where you just cant say no and turn your back on it anymore. And to be happy you have to be true to yourself. (Mary)

Thus for many of the women being out about one's sexuality is both necessary for emotional growth but also allows for a degree of contentment with oneself. Coleman (1994) outlines that internalized homophobia is a major individual factor that distinguishes between homosexual and heterosexual conflict. "Internalized homophobia has been linked with lower self-esteem, feelings of powerlessness, and self-destructive behaviour such as substance abuse" (McKenry, Serovich, Mason & Mosack 2006). These feelings of self-loathing, isolation, exclusion and rejection may contribute to stress in the relationship and may cause conflict.

7.3.3. Relationship difficulties of being out and living out

Although coming out has a lot to do with the lesbian's own acceptance of self, it has the potential to negatively impact a relationship. Previously it was shown, by way of these women's discourses that being in a relationship with a partner who had disclosed her sexuality was of great importance because it was not satisfying having a relationship that had to remain hidden. Having both partners open about their sexuality is the difference between a concealed relationship and a liberated one.

> It can cause, it can cause trouble. But I think the security of the women within herself can even compensate for that. I mean you can't force your partner out… but if they not out, they are going to have issues. I mean I have met somebody recently, she is 45 and she is not out to her family and will not refer to herself as a gay woman! She has nothing but gay relationships, she is you know regarded as "platinum"… she has never slept with a a man. She is completely completely dyky, she looks the part! She is not out to herself, not out to her family. At 45 how do you expect to be emotionally, mentally, spiritually balanced as a person? And then how respectful are you of your partner if you're with somebody who you just constantly deny? (Johanna)

In a relationship where one partner is out and the other not, much conflict arises because it involves the couple having to hide their relationship from family and friends. As had previously been outlined, many of the women identified "being out" as an important criteria for possible relationship partners. All except one of these women were out- being involved with a woman who had not disclosed her sexuality would prove difficult and awkward for these women who had already dealt with coming out and were happy to be openly gay. Gerda demonstrates the conflict that arose because her partner wanted to remain in the closet, while Gerda was out and not willing to keep hiding her sexuality.

> *In your past relationships, what did you think were the main things that caused tension or conflict? (Interviewer)*
> Well in our case a whole lot of it came from the fact that she couldn't really accept herself as a gay person, things like the neighbours, they know we are gay but we can't talk about it, they would visit us but we can't talk about it. Or I would be training somebody and I would tell them I am gay and she would be angry because I had told them. She thought it was irrelevant and there was a lot about whether we should be out or not, or who to tell and who not to tell. So a lot of issues come from just the whole gay issue because you differ on how things should be handled. (Gerda)

Jen had also explained that being out is not only necessary for emotional health but for a healthy and honest relationship. Being in a relationship with a closeted woman would mean having a closeted relationship. A relationship where there was inequality with regard to

being out had proved to be a great source of conflict. Having to hide the relationship was itself stressful but also proved to show a lack of validation for one's partner.

Additionally, Peplau (1988) found that disclosure of sexual orientation can contribute to relationship quality by potentially increasing acknowledgement and validation for a couple from others. Conversely, a lack of disclosure may lead to an isolated relationship with the couple not receiving external support or validation. This is in the same line of thought that Johanna adopts expresses these same ideas. She refuses to hide her sexuality as if she should be ashamed of it.

> So if I go to functions at the University here, and people assume ah that I have a husband and they talk about, "How is your husband and everything?" I have to correct them and say, "Excuse me, I am married to a woman!" because otherwise I just completely dishonour the fact that she exists and that she is female and that that's the person I have chosen to be with! I am not prepared to collude with those kinds of lies, because you get caught up in those lies. So for me, the psychological and spiritual growth of the woman is important… (Johanna)

Earlier an extract by Lubbe (2007) commented that South African society is dominated by a social discourse of 'straightness'. This leaves these women in spaces that assume they are straight, uncomfortable on the spot situations where they are required to explain themselves, compulsory coming out. As discussed in the literature review, all people are assumed to be heterosexual (read: innocent) until proven gay (read: guilty). I had asked some of the women what they did if it was assumed they were straight. Some of the other woman expressed that they were by no means prepared to hide their sexuality or the fact that they were involved with a woman. Jen and Wanda had both explained that they would not allow it to be assumed that they were involved in heterosexual relationships.

> From there on I have been completely open... in new situations, it's not like, "Hi I'm Jen and I am gay..." but as soon as it is appropriate, I will inform people, this is who I am." (Jen)
> *And when they ask about your husband? (Interviewer)*
> Well when I was in a relationship, I would inform them that I don't have a husband and that I was involved with a woman. (Jen)

It was encouraging to hear that these women did not feel compelled to hide their identity, but rather stated it in the face of dominant discourse. Despite this, there were many women who did not disclose their sexuality unless necessary because they preferred to not to be faced with possible rejection. This anxiety of coming out is reflective of the impact of the oppressive cultural context may have on the individual.

A relevant question at this point is that posed by Maher and Pusch, "What does the discourse of coming out reveal about its own constraints, its own abilities, and about dominant discourse itself?" (1995: 20). The fact that all these women talk about coming out is not a coincidence. It is not just a phrase or experience that they all share. The participant's experiences and the way they talk about their lives is linked to the social context in which they live.

> These women are not socially isolated individuals, but rather part of a complex society. As a part of the whole, their words and meanings have implications about the society and discourse in which they are embedded (Maher & Pusch 1995: 24).

Throughout this dissertation the dominant social and linguistic ideas have been demonstrated. Through their discourses and their actions, these women have revealed the heterosexist and homophobic nature of the dominant discourses. The fact that they often have to change their behaviour and accept the process of revealing their sexuality as something that is out of the ordinary, shows their adherence in some way to these discourses. "'Coming out', then, discursively and linguistically recognizes straight-as-standard and homosexuality as hidden" (Maher and Pusch 1995:27). So in reply to this question about what the constraints of coming out are, the fact that so much emphasis is placed on hiding and revealing one's sexuality, recognizes that straight is the norm. Homosexuality is phrased as something that one needs to admit to. In the South African context, while homosexuality is formally legal, homosexual people to a large degree remain hidden from social rebuff, evidenced by their actions, their discourses and their stories of coming out.

7.4. Religion

Religion follows from the theme about coming out because to a large extent these two themes were connected. For many of the women, coming out to others, as well as themselves involved some conflict with religion.

7.4.1. Battling with Religion

In the review of the literature it was outlined that although there are many religions that accept homosexuals as people of God, many conservative congregations frame

homosexuality as immoral. It became evident when reading through the transcripts that some of the more religious women had to struggle with their own identity as being homosexual which conflicted with their religious beliefs.

Being a very religious woman and having belonged to a very fundamentalist church where homosexuality had been named as sin, when Jen first admitted her sexuality to herself, she tells that she half expected to have been punished. Once she was able to come out to herself she took the steps to tell each of her family members and move to a different congregation which accepted homosexuality.

> I can remember it was actually funny coming out, I had a night again that I had a real fight with God, and that Saturday morning I then decided, bugger it. And I then stood in front of the mirror and I said that is it, "Jen you are gay". And I sort of waited for God to zap me. And I think in pictures quite a bit and the picture I got was God sitting in his chair saying, "shew, now we can carry on with business". So uhm I think that was the main thing and I just could not live this way and stay in the closet anymore, and I wanted to become involved, so ja... (Jen)

She further explains the process that led to her coming out. Being very involved in the church involved a huge internal struggle because she suspected she was lesbian, but this was condemned by her church and religious teachings. Going into ministry herself, she realised she needed to find herself first. When Jen met ministers from gay friendly churches and was exposed to religious material that welcomed homosexual people rather than rejecting them, she began to feel comfortable with herself. This process proved to be very difficult and challenging, but today Jen is a well-known minister of a gay church in Pretoria.

> I just, I knew I could not be with a man and the whole faith issue was a struggle for me, and I also could not be with a woman, and I just got to a point and I realised you know I just can't do this anymore... There was huge a portion of missing and then understanding that I was going into ministry... so then I stepped outside of the church and resigned from all the positions I held. I was outside of the church for about two years, a very personal struggle. Then I started talking to other people from other churches that were open to this. Spoke to other ministers that were not necessarily gay, but open to it. Read a lot, uhm... and then just came to a realisation that this is really who I am and this is how I wanna live and whether I am in a relationship or not it does not change. Then I got introduced to this church, read stuff from them and got to speak to some of the minsters from USA. And I just came to ...realised that you know I have never been fundamentalist about the Bible even though I was in a church like that. I am actually very liberal... (Jen)

Having been married to a minister, Gerda was also very involved with the church. After a long battle with herself and the religious leaders of her church, she realised that she could

172

no longer maintain a facade. She went for counselling and after a long process recognized that she could no longer pretend.

> Well that happened about 6 almost 7 years ago, when I came out, but that was with a bang in the newspapers and all that, because I was a minister's wife. And uhm, I had to, when I said I wanted to divorce, and uhm when I realized I can't love my husband in the way I thought he should be loved, then I went... Ag it took, I went for counselling for very long and at the end I suppose at the end, the counselling process and my own struggle which was about 4 years. I came to the point where I knew I can't stay married and uhm because he was a minister in the NG church, Dutch Reformed church, you can't just go out of the church and you can't just get divorced. You have got to disclose why you are divorcing. (Gerda)

Gerda not wanting to have her husband blamed for the divorce was forced to come out to the entire congregation. She explains her intimidating experience of having a church group assigned to find out what had happened to her, and why she was claiming to be lesbian,

> it was like a task team, like an interview, you are being interrogated and all that. A group of men, about ten, sitting there, so you were interrogated and tell them why. They had all kinds of questions.

The church also sent her for counselling in the attempt to 'straighten' her out. Once she realised that she could not change, she left her congregation and her home. She explains that her story was exploited as an unthinkable felony. Today however, Gerda is a spokesperson for gay rights and uses her own story of coming out to give educational talks about homosexuality.

The examples of Gerda and Jen show how they struggled to accept a gay identity because it contrasted with the beliefs of their religion. These two women had been rejected by their congregation as sinners, but found solace in gay friendly churches. These women were able to retain the sense of being Christian by joining congregations where their lifestyle was accepted. Other women however, had rejected religion altogether.

7.4.2. Views on religion

Johanna conveys her frustration with Christianity. She feels that Christianity is tainted because it holds distorted views of homosexuality. She explains that there is scientific literature which research shows homosexuality in a different light. She notes, in agreement with literature that I had found that there are recorded observations of same sex behaviour and gender fluidity throughout the animal kingdom (aglbical.org 2008).

Christians are apt to think it's a form of perversion. Christians. It's taught in the bible. That's what is believed by a large number, that's it's an abnormality, a deviance. That's the average prejudiced view. And then they will usually start quoting the Bible at you and the whole thing around nature and what's natural and they all very confused about stuff in nature… they say well, "Animals don't do that…" Well in fact they do, it's like you end up having to fight with straight people on such mundane levels, that I no longer even engage in. I say, "Look, here is the literature, go and read it." (Johanna)

Despite both having previously been involved in the church, and Wanda being married to an Anglican priest, the couple is against religion. Rachelle felt that religion is used as a mechanism to make people feel guilty and Wanda explains that it creates biased opinions.

Religion is evil because it makes people feel guilty! (Rachelle)
I was married to a priest who was a nutter, and abusive and manipulative, and if the church could accept that relationship and not this relationship that is loving and peaceful, then there is something wrong... and all this stuff about praying and getting what you need, I mean that does not match up, there are people in the townships that are poor and they are just as religious... so I am just worried about the perceptions it creates. (Wanda)
It's an evil institution. (Rachelle)

Mary, Yvonne and Catherine expressed that although they had a Christian upbringing, they also feel that religion was used in an attempt to guilt them away from lesbianism. The implication is that religion causes homosexual people to feel rejected and thus they are unable to live with themselves because religion frames them as sinners.

So you are not religious? (Interviewer)
I was, I was a Christian. I grew up as a Christian, but as I say, I have always been different; I had a lot of questions... (Mary)
Like people when they first heard I was gay, they said I must think of my soul! I think it is more sinful to live a lie! And be dishonest. More of sin to be a liar. (Yvonne)
Yes, I think that is why so many gay people commit suicide... because they in this and they feel guilty. I am committing sin. Really I am very open here, I don't feel even, I don't feel guilty at all!! (Mary)

Many stories demonstrated that these women are often confronted by religious messages that condemn who they are. A large majority of women had previously been in positions where religion was used in attempted method to convert them from homosexuality. Amy explains her story;

My aunt, that is another part of the family, my fathers youngest sister- she is very much into church and um this whole kind of charismatic stuff, and um she sent me a book and in this book it was condemning up until the seventh hell. And um so, what I did then is, I phoned my grandma, because the two of them usually works together, and I told her, now please understand, "You may not like my lifestyle and you may not agree with the way I choose to live my life… so please don't send me any tapes of condemnation, or any books.." That stopped, but that was something I needed to set that barrier and say, "No, I am not gonna take it!" (Amy)

The couple, Catherine and Tasha also make clear their trouble with religion. There is an assumption that all religious people- unless educated otherwise- have biased views of homosexuality.

> But to answer, for me the big issue is religion. People use God when it comes to homosexuality, people use God. No church in the world says that homosexuality is ok, so you can go to any South African that is spiritual or religious and they have to be very educated and evolved before they can say no that is wrong, the Bible is wrong, or their interpretations of that is wrong. So I think religion is the big problem. (Catherine)

While Amy is open about her sexuality, she explains that she is wary of revealing this to religious people. She is aware that her lifestyle will not be accepted by them because it goes against their religious beliefs. Despite being in a 13 year long relationship with a woman, she manages what she says in front of her colleagues, because she is not willing to place herself in a position of rejection.

> The place where I am doing my internship now, I won't reveal my sexuality there, because the people I'm working with are also very much into church and um ja… So it is a matter of reading the situation and revealing to whom needs to know, not everyone needs to know. And also in my work situation now, you know, they are not ready to receive such news and I am not ready to make myself open to another Christian rejection, because I do have a big problem with the church. I believe the church is way out of line, their way of seeing it. (Amy)

Another root of conflict was having two women of different religious beliefs in a relationship. Rather strangely Gerda had recently been in a relationship with a partner that belonged to a charismatic church and who had trouble accepting herself as gay. Gerda explains that this was a huge problem because the church defined lesbianism as sin. Every time something went wrong, the partner felt she was being punished for her sexuality. The relationship had a lot of conflict because of this.

> I mean, you cannot force anybody through it, they just have to go through it and you just have to know, this is a long struggle until they find peace with themselves and with God. So I will just be there for her, because it is very difficult, if you stay with her and you become involved with that person, its unethical, because you cause them to, what they think is sin all the time. And you are like their demon! And if that person is in a charismatic kind of church they really think that you are a demon, that you are possessed. And if anything goes wrong with a business or whatever and that's the kind of focus that they have, they think it is punishment. They think that you are the reason that everything goes wrong all the time, and you just become the scapegoat... so a relationship really struggles with that kind of, it won't last. Can't be open, you have to hide things all the time; you come to a point where you realise that you can't be free. It doesn't work! (Gerda)

Thus religion had proved to be a source of conflict for many of the couples. Religion presented a number of difficulties for the women as individuals as well as for their relationships.

7.5. Concluding potential internal and external stressors

In this chapter, I had discussed three major stressors of lesbian relationships, *coming out, self-acceptance* as well as *religion.* These have been named as both internal and external factors that contribute to possible areas of stress within lesbian relationships. Both of these contribute to a greater understanding of the dynamics of conflict within lesbian relationships.

Diagram 4: A graphical representation showing the three stressors which presented stress from both internal and external sources.
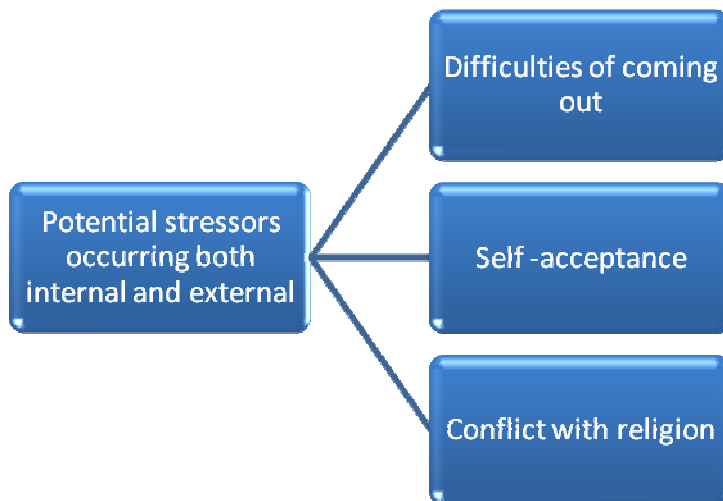
Coming out had been outlined by both the literature and the women as a process of first gaining self-acceptance and then disclosing sexuality to family and friends. The difficult task of disclosure was noted to be a very important step for these women, both for their own well-being as well as for the health of their relationships. The majority of these women had said that it was vital that their partners are also out and openly gay because this could contribute to conflict in the relationship. Internal stress could result between partners due to one partner not being comfortable disclosing her sexuality to others. Conflict between the couple is likely to occur if they have different degrees of being out or differing opinions about being openly lesbian. Linked to this, the partner who is out may have to hide her

sexuality in an effort to keep the relationship secret. This had been outlined by the literature as resulting in a lack of external validation. Literature has also demonstrated that a hidden couple may also cut off social support networks and become dependant on only each other. This isolation may result in merging or fusion. There are many potential causes of stress for the lesbian relationship with regard to coming out and being out. Meghann for example, was not yet out to her family and had to hide any intimate relationships from them. In such a situation, conflict may result between the couple about being openly gay or about having to hide the relationship and not receiving recognition. All sorts of pressures are linked to this, such as hiding public affection, not being able to rely on family for social support, as well as facing fear and rejection from family members.

Religion was closely connected to coming out. I had demonstrated, through the voices of these women how religion was often connected with one's identity. A few of the women explained the battles they went through in gaining self-acceptance. These battles were closely linked to their religious upbringing and beliefs. One woman had been in a relationship with a woman who had very fundamentalist religious beliefs, this proved to be a huge area of conflict in the relationship. Religion thus proved to be a factor that could cause conflict not only within the lesbian herself, but within a lesbian relationship too. Many of the women had rather negative views about religion as it was felt that it had been used as a tool to make them feel guilty or to highlight their lifestyle as sin. Many women had found themselves in situations where religion had portrayed them as evil, or as sinners. In this way, religion was outlined as a source of external stress as well as an internal stressor.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1. Review of the findings and research questions

The primary research question addressed what challenges lesbians face in their relationships. It was found that a variety of stressors impacted on lesbians and their relationships; two main sources from where stress and conflict originate had been identified; potential internal and potential external stressors. A variety of stressors had been discussed under each of these categories. It was found that while lesbian couples endured similar conflict to what heterosexual couples faced, there were dynamics specific to lesbian relationships. The heterosexist and often homophobic environment had proven to play a significant role in the lives of these women.

One of the secondary questions addressed how lesbian women reflect on their identity and their lifestyle. Acceptance of their sexual identities and their involvement in same-sex relationships was suggested to have been the most rational and informed prospect for their lives. A great majority of the women had expressed that the recognition and acceptance of their own sexuality had led to degrees of self-fulfilment. It was not surprising, given the heterosexist and homophobic climate that many of the women framed their sexuality as an inborn trait rather than a choice. Framing their sexuality as a natural trait implied something unchangeable and unstoppable. Lesbianism as a choice, expressed only by the more politically involved women, was perhaps not yet an acceptable option for the others. There was also considerable effort made by the women to separate themselves from commonly held stereotypes of butch women and butch-femme relationships. It had been found that there was an overwhelming identity preference for the term *gay* over *lesbian*. *Lesbian* was said to hold negative connotations because it was linked to butch women. However, all of the women who participated had posed positive opinions about their lifestyle and their relationships. The need to amplify positive aspects of their lifestyle is associated with their position as outcasts in their present environment.

Overall, the women had valorised and highlighted the worth of their relationships by appropriating majority discourses of gender. Women's inherent nature of being more emotional and caring was appropriated and amplified. Their relationships were said to be

178

more intimate, open and communicative, equal, appreciative and allowed a greater chance of role negotiation. Not all lesbian relationships were portrayed in this manner, butch-femme couples that mimicked a heterosexual relationship style were branded as abnormal and confused. In appropriating a 'gender' discourse - they become more 'real' or perhaps 'hyper-women'. Those who diverge from this ideal were 'othered' and they distanced themselves from that. In a sense, these women were rejecting what they did not want to be associated with.

When investigating how the relational dynamics and sources of conflict of lesbian relationships were represented a variety of different relationship stressors had been identified. Relationship conflict was often denied by many of the women even though many areas of conflict had emerged. Some forms of conflict had been likened to problems faced by heterosexual couples; finding similarities in conflict to heterosexual couples allowed their relationships to be normalised and prevented their relationships from being defined as dysfunctional. Any other areas of difficulty in their relationships were blamed on factors external to the relationship, such as the promiscuity and jealousy within the homosexual community. It had become evident that the social climate of heteronormativity played an enormous role in directing how these women live. By taking their environment into account, a wide range of dynamics specific to lesbian relationships had been identified. Discrimination, coming out, pressure to adjust behaviour and being on guard were stressors resulting from heterosexism and homophobia which all impacted heavily on these women's lives. Their obvious awareness of commonly held misconceptions regarding lesbianism had influenced their need to demonstrate the practical value and significance of lesbian relationships. Such discourses had created high expectations for their relationships and for many of the women, admitting to conflict in their relationship would not only have contradicted their arguments for the significance of these unions, but may have also confirmed negative stereotypes which they had defied. Different discourses were adopted which served to present their relationships as normal and in turn prevent them from being condemned.

The last of the secondary questions raised the question of, to what extent lesbians appropriate 'hetero-normativity' in describing their own or other lesbian relationships.

Heteronormative discourse was used to a fair degree by these women; often only parts of the debates appropriated in accordance with what best suited their arguments. Common public discourses and stereotypical ideas of men and women were appropriated in order to emphasize the problems of heterosexual relationships and in turn, the positive aspects of their own relationships. The women had successfully propositioned particular segments of the common public debates which suited their arguments. Butch-femme relationships had been attacked and blamed for misconceptions about lesbianism and the existence of false stereotypes. Such relationships that conformed to gendered role-play were presented as a poor representation of true lesbian relationships; many of the women in my sample had stated clearly that they did not want to be associated with butch women. In this sense a heteronormative discourse had been adopted which labeled butch women as gender confused and abnormal.

Having an understanding of the South African legal and social situation was imperative in understanding the lives, behaviour and discourses of these women. Their behaviour would not have made sense if not for being placed within their social climate. Their discourses showed that these women are very aware of how their sexuality classifies them as out of the ordinary and how they are labelled and categorised by society. They have expressed various ways of dealing with this, which directly reflects the fact that they are aware of being the 'other'. Many discourses revealed an effort to valorise and show the value of lesbian relationships, trying to prove their worth in the face of a patriarchal, unaccommodating and judgemental environment.

8.2. Application of the systems perspective

A systems perspective was adopted because I felt it to be the most productive to identify and investigate the potential stressors of lesbian relationships within the context of a larger system. While each of these potential stressors is different, it was often that these stressors were directly related to the fact that the couple was not ordinary in a conventional sense. As each of these factors is particular to lesbian couples, the dynamics of such relationships had been different from those of heterosexual relationships. For this reason, it can be established that lesbian relationships cannot be applied to heterosexual relationship models

(and vice versa). A perspective which notes the additional challenges and particular dynamics of these relationships had to be adopted.

The systems perspective takes account of the environmental context as a whole and the impacts it may have. This perspective proved to be an important perspective because it acknowledged the particular experiences of lesbians and took the distinctiveness of these relationships into account. Understanding the fact that lesbian relationships are stereotyped and ridiculed played an important role in understanding the reasons for their discourses and behaviour. This viewpoint forced me to study these women and their unions in relation to the social environment or system.

Renzetti, a leading author in the field of lesbian intimate unions had used the systems perspective in her 1992 study of lesbian relationship conflict. The systems perspective recognizes that same-sex relationships are stigmatized and thus exist as a defensive unit in response to the oppression and hostility existing in the larger community. Krestan and Bepko (1980) had used the systems perspective when it was discussed that the lesbian couple, often stigmatized, and living apart from larger society, is forced to develop separate rules and regulations which define and further differentiate themselves from larger society. A couple may develop a "closed relationship" with high levels of internal dependency in response to external pressures; this survival response protects them from the negativity and hostility of heterosexual society. Lindenbaum (1985) outlined that while living in a closed system generates safety and intimacy in the relationship, it could negatively result in 'fusion' or 'merging'. I had found these ideas particularly noteworthy because it relates to how the social environment impacts the intimate partnership.

From the interviews it had become evident that many of the women felt the need to hide their relationships from certain people and in certain circumstances. In many instances, the women had described deteriorating relations with family members and even friends that had resulted when they had come out. In some instances, any hints of intimacy and affection had to be hidden from family or public view, thus they were bound to expressing themselves as loving couples only in their homes or private places. This resulted in the isolation and exclusion of the couple from certain social circles.

The South African context had been outlined as a patriarchal society where heterosexist stereotypes prevailed. Homophobia had presented a very real problem for these women, not only in terms of the homophobic reactions they had received, but also as the reality of being in physical danger. The systems theory is valuable to draw from because it offers insight into how South African lesbian couples experience marginalization against the background of heterosexism embedded in the surrounding environment.

In order to understand lesbian intimate unions required that I take both internal and external factors into account. Adopting the systems perspective allowed me to investigate how these women reacted to and coped with their surroundings. This allowed me to investigate factors (internal and external) which may have impacted upon lesbian women and their relationships. Acknowledging the South African context allowed me to investigate any potential external factors of stress for these intimate unions. Looking at lesbian relationships from this perspective helped me to understand their behaviours and discourses in relation to their context. While the South African legal and political context had played a huge role in a legal sense, other external factors had also played a huge role in the lives of these women.

The women that I had interviewed had been very aware of their social status of being different and many of them explained times when their own public behaviour was vastly different from their private actions. Many of these women had felt they could not be openly lesbian in public, thus a variety of behavioural changes had been identified. Reasons for these behavioural changes were a result of a variety of potential internal and external stressors. Social institutions, religion, family relations, upbringing, friendship and work groups had significantly impacted the lives of these women and their relationships in a variety of ways. The research not only named these behaviours, discourses and sources of conflict, but placed each in a context that explained the reasons for this. Thus, a woman's difficulty with accepting lesbianism as an identity or the fear of coming out could be understood in relation to her environment. The development of specific discourses and explanations could also be better understood in the context of how family, society and religion impacts the individual.
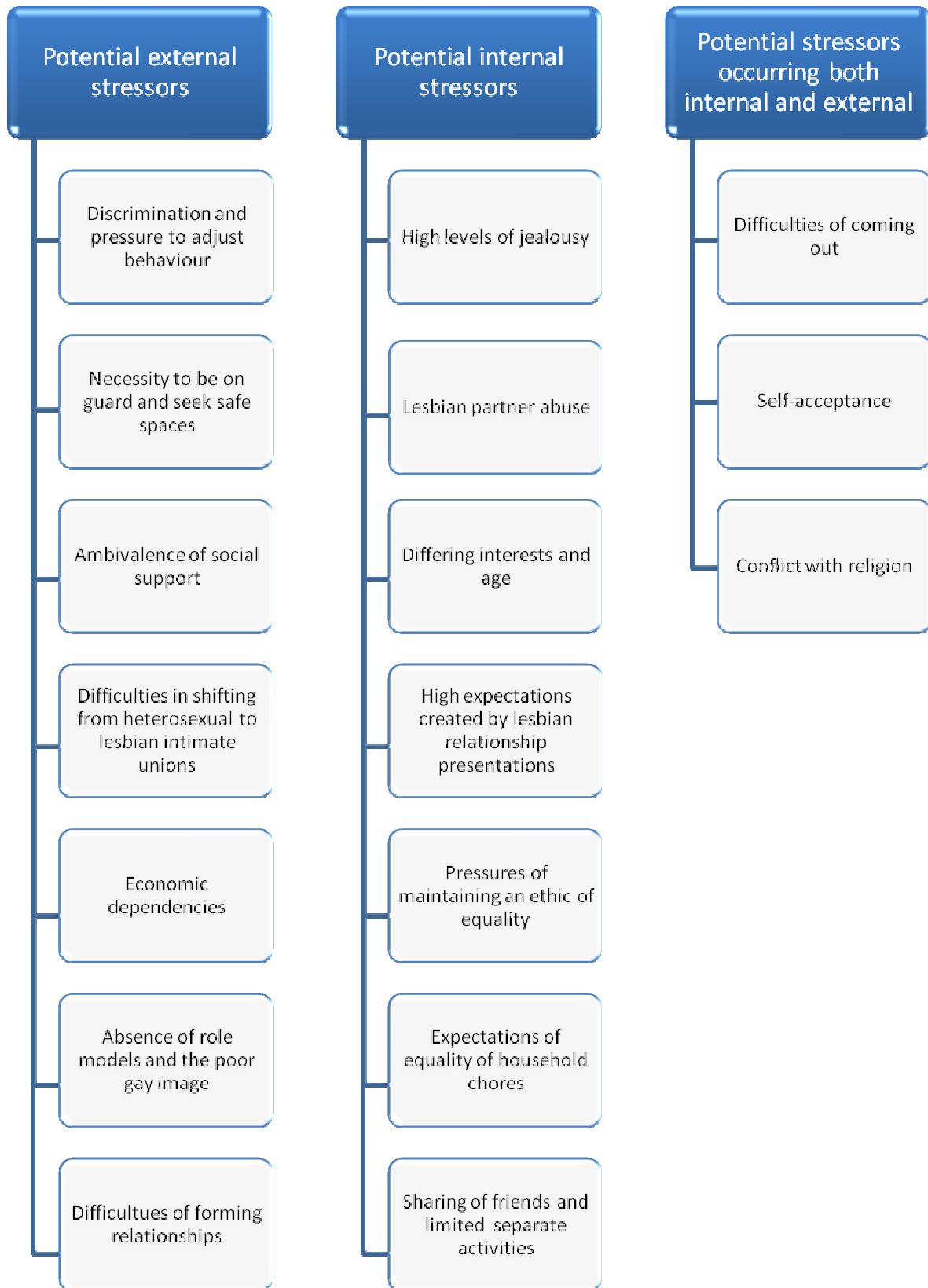
8.3. Dynamics of conflict specific to lesbian intimate unions

While some of the women were cautious when talking about conflict in their relationships, it often occurred that lesbian relationship conflict was compared and likened to heterosexual conflict. When reflecting on their relationships, the women had generally portrayed their relationships as being based on egalitarianism and fairness. The effort to portray the positive aspects of their relationships was understandable given the negative perceptions which exist about lesbian relationships. Equality and better understanding between women had been highlighted as a major benefit of lesbian relationships. Such discourses had been based on the concept of women as being naturally more emotional, thus two women could better identify, communicate and understand each other. By finding similarities to heterosexual relationships, it allowed them to talk about conflict without the risk of labelling their relationships as being inferior. Despite the fact that some similarities had been identified, it was evident that there were sources of conflict particular to lesbian relationships. These dynamics are those stressors posed by couples having to deal constantly with discrimination, disagreement over disclosure of sexuality or disclosure of being in a homosexual relationship. Most of the potential external sources of conflict were directly related to being a minority group facing stigmatisation and unequal treatment. Many dynamics specific to lesbian relationships had emerged as valuable to the exploration of lesbian relationship conflict. Lesbians, apart from facing sexism, have the additional factor of homophobia to deal with. For example, utilizing support systems equates "coming out" which adds extra pressure and stress for the lesbian partner because of fear of rejection and judgment.

Many of the potential internal stressors were initially named by the participants as positive aspects of their relationships. It had emerged however that by valorising their relationships, they had created unreachable expectations. Not meeting these expectations could potentially cause significant stress for the couple. Many of the discourses which highlighted the benefits of lesbian relationships had been based in assumptions about the nature of women, when these beliefs were not met it could cause significant stress and uncertainty for the lesbian partners. The following diagram summarises the different potential sources of conflict under the three relevant headings; potential external stressors, potential internal

stressors and potential stressors occurring both internal and external to the lesbian intimate union.

Diagram 5: A representation of all the potential sources of stress that have been covered.

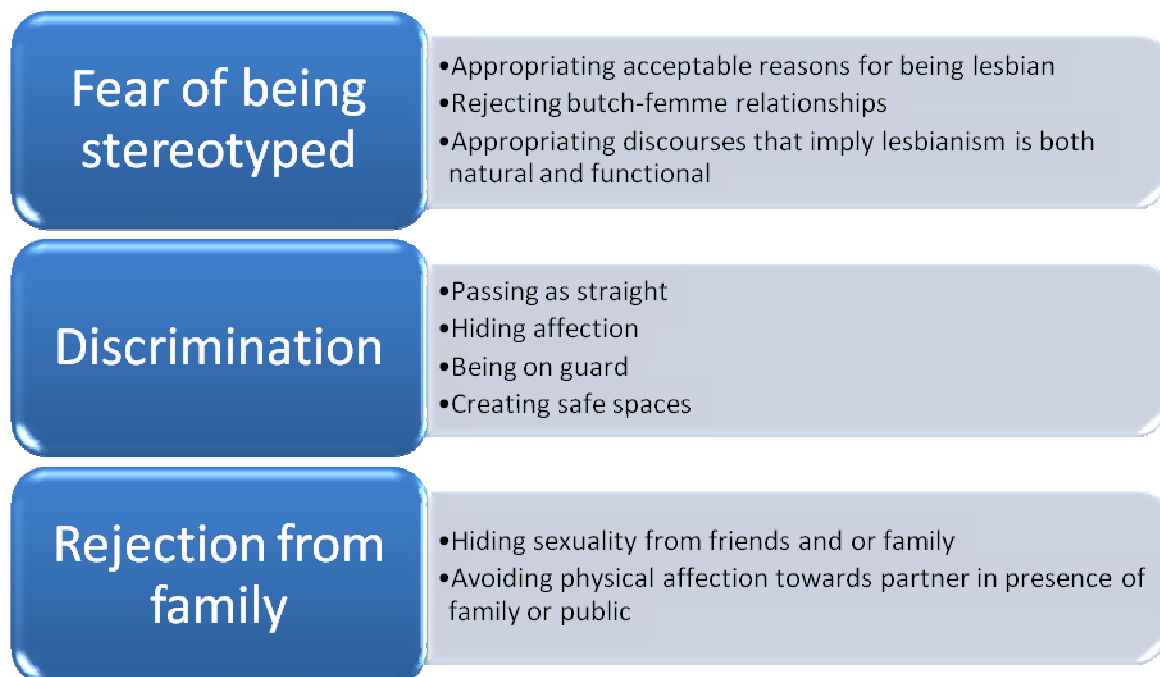| Potential external stressors	Potential internal stressors	Potential stressors occurring both internal and external
Discrimination and pressure to adjust behaviour	High levels of jealousy	Difficulties of coming out
Necessity to be on guard and seek safe spaces	Lesbian partner abuse	Self-acceptance
Ambivalence of social support	Differing interests and age	Conflict with religion
Difficulties in shifting from heterosexual to lesbian intimate unions	High expectations created by lesbian relationship presentations	
Economic dependencies	Pressures of maintaining an ethic of equality	
Absence of role models and the poor gay image	Expectations of equality of household chores	
Difficultues of forming relationships	Sharing of friends and limited separate activities	

8.3.1. Behavioural responses to the heterosexist environment

The task of presenting themselves and their relationships as normal had been confirmed to be a source of stress for these women. Having to face charges of being abnormal, gender confused or perverted as well as trying to defy these accusations had proven to be testing and complicated.

These specific dynamics of lesbian relationships had been visibly demonstrated in their behavioural changes. Normalising behaviour implies a change in reaction to a situation in which something is considered "abnormal". The following diagram summarises the behaviour that these women adopted or adapted in different situations. The situation will be given in short as well as their reaction, or behavioural change. It must be noted that, both the situation of being stigmatised as well as the appropriate change in behaviour are sources of stress for the lesbian couple. This also represents the efforts made in order to present their relationships as better therefore leading to high expectations which exacerbate stress for the couple.

Diagram 6: A graphical representation of normalising behavioural reactions to heterosexism and homophobia.

Fear of being stereotyped
- Appropriating acceptable reasons for being lesbian
- Rejecting butch-femme relationships
- Appropriating discourses that imply lesbianism is both natural and functional

Discrimination
- Passing as straight
- Hiding affection
- Being on guard
- Creating safe spaces

Rejection from family
- Hiding sexuality from friends and or family
- Avoiding physical affection towards partner in presence of family or public

These women had thus adopted hetero-normativity in many instances to present their relationships as ordinary, a necessary tactic given the heterosexist and homophobic social

climate. In other instances, they hid their sexuality and allowed their heterosexuality to be assumed.

Interestingly, very few of the women had acknowledged being discriminated as a result of their sexuality. It had however come to light that in the environment of possible risk of discrimination, some of these women had responded by adjusting their behaviour. This was also classified as normalising behaviour. Heterosexuality is assumed in most instances, and because these women did not identify or appear butch, they could easily pass as straight. In instances where they had felt potential risk or discomfort, they would employ certain strategies which allowed them to be classified as straight.

Most of the women had established that it was necessary to be aware of their surroundings. In risky situations they had felt it a necessity to be on guard. Safe spaces or gay spaces were reported to be the only places they really felt comfortable to express their sexuality. Some women had only felt comfortable expressing themselves as a lesbian couple in their own homes, others had participated or belonged to lesbian social groups where they were able to be open about their sexuality and discuss lesbian related topics.

Their concerns of identity and self-definition were a result of stereotypical societal generalizations and reactions that they were attempting to combat. Although these expressions of lesbian identity do not represent all lesbians' voices, it does reveal a lot about how these lesbians reflect on their identity and speak about their position in society.

Ultimately, the women have shown an awareness of societal stigmatization of the homosexual lifestyle, which could be translated as being a source of pressure and thus of conflict for the lesbian and her relationship. With regard to how these women identified themselves, there was not one particular word that was preferred by all the women. To be called *lesbian* did not hold the same meaning for all the women, but most preferred to describe themselves as *gay*. Although this was not the trend, a few women had appropriated the word *dyke* in an effort to make a statement about their sexuality. The majority of the women attempted to escape old definitions and define a new type of *gay* woman who is not affiliated with butch women. This appropriation of *gay* rather than

lesbian may be seen as an attempt to appear "normal" in society and not be identified with the stereotyped aggressive and lower class butch lesbian. These women not only rejected the label of *lesbian*, but also any woman who behaved in certain manners associated with butch or femme role-play.

Many of the women had previously been in heterosexual marriages before they began relationships with women, given this background. It was interesting to hear how they explained their own 'change' from heterosexual relationships to lesbian relationships. Most of the discourses that arose explaining their current sexual identity were centred on features that implied they had always been lesbian. Some of the women had highlighted same-sex experiences from the past, or having wanted or having been a 'tomboy'. Many of the women also gave details of the fulfilment they had experienced upon accepting their lesbian identity. All these discourses implied their sexuality as inbuilt, something that had always been present but that they had only acted upon or realised later in life.

Three different mechanisms had been employed to different extents by each of the women; firstly, they rejected lesbian stereotypes especially those implying gender non-conformity, as well as the rejection of any lesbian that fits these stereotypes. Thus they did not identify themselves as butch or femme and did not classify their own relationships as being butch-femme in any way. Most of them had rejected *lesbian* as their identity and consequently appropriated *gay* as a "new" word/identity not connected to old stereotypes. Last, two of the women retained *lesbian* in an effort to redefine the stereotypes that have been imposed on it by heterosexual society.

Their relationships were portrayed as 'better than', in most instances, however when conflict was mentioned it was outlined as being comparable to heterosexual relationships, but never worse. Once again the social context of being stereotyped and classified as deviant had played a big role in why they had portrayed their relationships as they did. The following diagram gives a summarised version of the heteronormative behaviours that had been identified from the interviews. The corresponding discourses are also summarised.

Diagram 7: A graphical representation showing the heteronormative behavioural responses and corresponding discourses which had been identified.
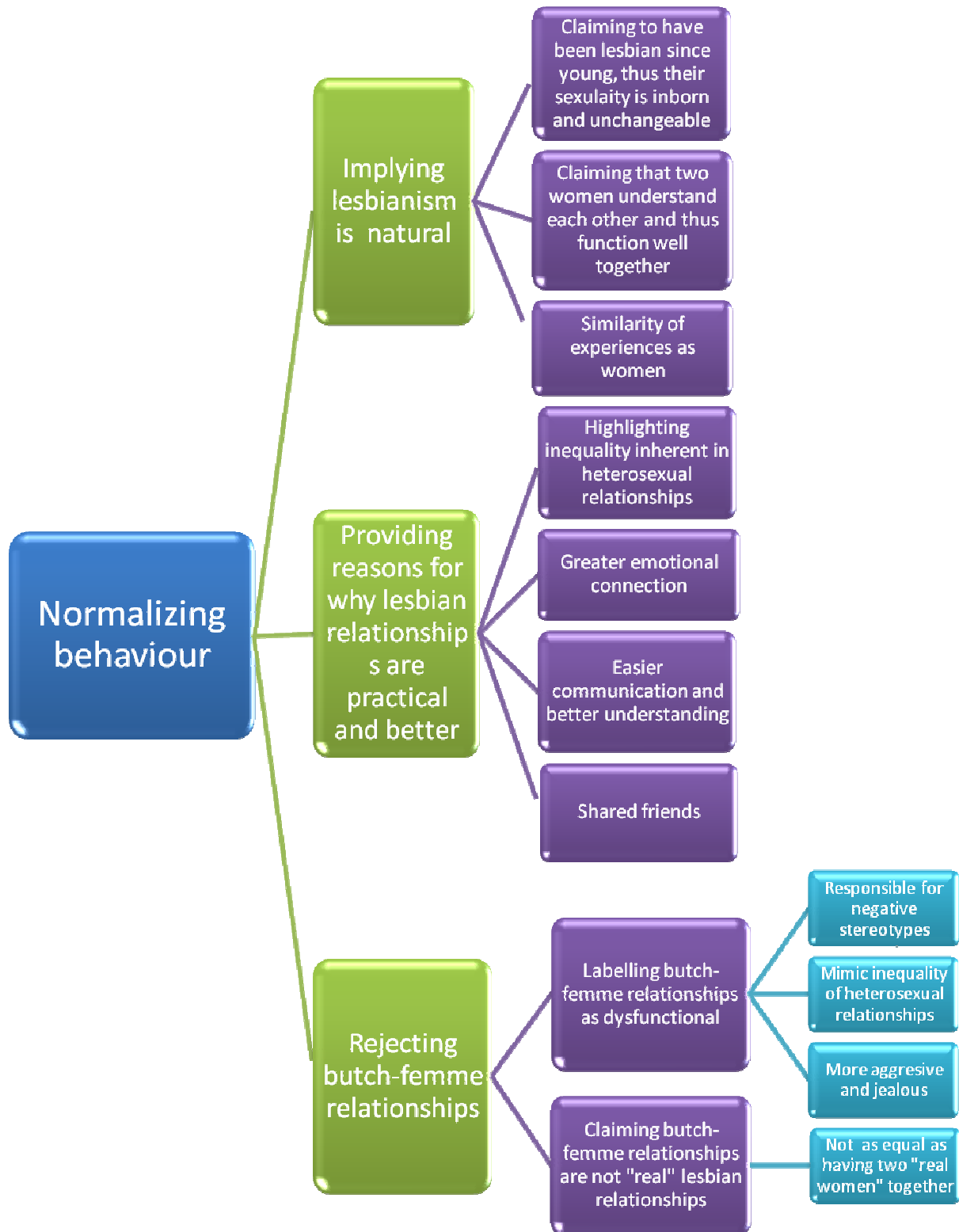
8.4. Methodological issues, constraints and reflection

An additional question of methodological interest arose during the interview stage, this being: "Do gay women, through their behaviour and speech strive to appear "normal"? If so, how and why do they do this, and what space might exist under these circumstances to fully understand the dynamics of relationships and the challenges that lesbian couples face? It had become evident that these women had presented themselves and their relationships in particular ways which served to portray them as ordinary couples. In light of this, can we thus explain the dynamics of conflict, given the evidence that they adjust their arguments? This was a general methodological issue which I had been aware of.

This sample of women had all been older than I was and knowing the topic of my research and the focus on conflict, it may have been that these factors affected the way they depicted their relationships. Not wanting to prove negative stereotypes by reporting negative factors of their relationships, they may have valorised their relationships, highlighting the benefits and underplaying conflict or difficulties they may have had. Coleman (1996:80) highlights that lesbians who acknowledge conflict in their relationships oppose the lesbian myth of healthier and more egalitarian relationships. For this reason, conflict is hidden by the lesbian community for fear of being further stigmatised. Many may not have wanted to report on abuse or the occurrence of conflict, both for the fear of reinforcing the myth that lesbianism is pathological and for disrupting the lesbian community ideals of relationship equality. Reactivity was also a consequence of being conscious of the stereotypes which ultimately created the situation where those with a 'spoiled identity' may have had motivation to recover this identity and present it in a positive light.

These behaviours as well as discourses adopted had presented a methodological issue for being able to identify stressors in their relationships. Also any stressors that had been presented were not always named as significant sources of stress. It did however emerge that challenges to their relationship were revealed and I had felt that many of the women had opened up to me with regard to conflict in their relationships. Although I had received a great amount of information from the women, little of this focused on lesbian partner abuse, my original interest.

My initial research interest was directed towards domestic violence in lesbian intimate unions. Anecdotal evidence suggested that it was 'real' and affected the lives of a number of South African lesbians. Within the broad topic looking at "Dynamics of conflict in lesbian intimate unions" I hoped to speak to women who had perhaps been in domestically violent relationships. My interview schedule included a section with specific questions about being involved in domestic violence. While I did find some very interesting information on this topic, I had realized that it may have been difficult to access information about this on a deeper level. Not only is it very sensitive and personal information to share, but there are also constraints from the lesbian community.

As was discussed earlier, talking about domestic violence in lesbian relationships may further entrench the negative stereotypes surrounding lesbianism or portray these already taboo relationships in a negative light. Many in the lesbian community may not want to talk about domestic violence because they may fear that it is interpreted as a confirmation or result of their "abnormal" relationships. So, while I asked questions about domestic violence, I acknowledged that accessing this would be difficult. Also, the difficulty of finding lesbian women exposed to domestic violence was compounded by the fact that there are no shelters catering specifically for these women which I could access. Domestic violence remains hidden because of the stigma surrounding it, because there are no facilities catering for these women and because it is very rarely recognized as a problem within the homosexual community. I had, for these reasons included a section addressing domestic violence and allowed space for the women to talk about it, but realized the many constraints I faced in accessing this very personal and sensitive topic.

I feel that this topic of domestic violence is of great importance, not only in unmasking the occurrence of domestic violence, but also in investigating linkages between masculinity and violence. Interestingly many of the women in my sample had labeled butch or more masculine women as the perpetrators of violence. I would like to see future studies on this interesting dynamic of domestic violence and gender roles. Once again the dynamics specific to lesbian relationships would need to be understood, and perhaps new models of domestic violence applied.

190

Any future studies in the particular area of lesbian relationships would benefit from the use of qualitative methods. In-depth interviews had proven the best method to gain insight into this exploratory topic; a great amount of valuable and interesting information had been gained. For many, lesbianism was an emotive topic which they spoke passionately about. A careful approach to the recruitment and interviewing was taken. I had felt inspired by these women, many of whom had faced less accommodating environments than those existing in South Africa today. Each of these women told stories that have relevance and that reflect important things about our social, political and community environments.

Had I more time, I would have conducted more interviews and perhaps conducted focus groups. I had thoroughly enjoyed interviewing the women and learning from them. My continual contact with them, I hope, will help to shed light onto issues pertaining to their relationships.

8.5. The significance of this study for gender studies

Despite the presence of large numbers of homosexual people throughout the world, their history has often been neglected or marginalized, a result of the inhibiting factors of heterosexism, homophobia and the unwillingness of the larger society to recognize the value and merit of different relationship forms. South Africa, having recently legalized same-sex marriage is of particular interest given its conservative background. Despite legal equality and the legal access to rights, these are not always accessible to homosexual people in a realistic sense. Fear has led many homosexual men and women to live a closeted life where they are unable to access their rights. Understanding the particular South African social climate was vital in gaining a better understanding of these women, their lives, behaviour and discourses.

Ristock (1997) advocates a resistance to using the heterosexual model of relationships as the framework for explaining all relationships. The workings of lesbian relationships are particular to their situation as women, lesbians, mothers and as daughters. Stereotypes and discrimination have a significant impact on these women, directing their behaviour and challenging their identities. Given the evidence that lesbian relationships face different

realities, it would be poor to apply a heterosexual relationship model to a lesbian relationship. The development of a model which is specific to lesbian relationships should receive the serious attention of gender studies scholars.

More specifically, the topic of conflict in lesbian intimate unions is of great importance to gender studies for many reasons. While on the surface it is a study of lesbian relationships, on a deeper level it looks at the patriarchal nature of our society. From this study it has become clear that there are notable factors which affect lesbians and their relationships, many of which are located in society. Heterosexism, homophobia and heteronormativity penetrate the lives of these women in various ways. This study is important because it promotes awareness of the relevance of historic, legal and social contexts. Having an understanding of one's social climate, allows an understanding of how gender and sexual orientations have been, and are, constructed and conceptualized.

As had been mentioned in the beginning of this dissertation, this research delves into some sticky areas of gender as it deals with gendered notions of manliness and femaleness. Understanding gender is crucial to the analysis of society because it is a concept that refers to the diverse understandings and experiences of all human beings irrespective of their identities or circumstances. Gender roles proved to be deeply imbedded in the notions of what is acceptable and what is not. Masculinity, femininity and gender conformity had been important topics of deliberation for many of these women. A review of the discourses showed how deeply gender was ingrained and used as a measure of determining what was acceptable and what was taboo. This study also investigated social structures and constructs that define ideas about sexuality as an identity and analysed how assumptions and beliefs about masculinities, femininities and sexualities shape behaviour and discourses.

The lives of lesbian women in South Africa often remain hidden. Many remain secluded, afraid and closeted. There is a need to create openness and awareness about lesbianism, allow freedom and security to talk about these issues, which may in turn lead to greater knowledge and understanding. This study has shed light onto lesbian relationships and potentially challenged stereotypes and negative misconceptions which plague the lives of many lesbians in South Africa.

8.6. Last words

Given all the societal pressure and the additional dynamics of lesbian intimate unions, the fact that they maintain healthy and committed relationships should be recognized. I end with an inspirational quote;

> Certainly, under the present social setup, a homosexual relationship is more difficult to maintain than a heterosexual one… but doesn't that merely make it more of a challenge and therefore, in a sense, more humanly worthwhile? The success of such a relationship is revolutionary in the best sense of the word. And, because it demonstrates the power of human affection over fear and prejudice and taboo, it is actually beneficial to society as a whole-as all demonstrations of faith and courage must be: they raise our collective morale.
> Christopher Isherwood, in a letter to Gore Vidal, 1948 as quoted by Berzon 1996

Lesbian relationships are plagued by many sources of stress, but despite this they still have the ability to develop healthy and long lasting relationships. Understanding the dynamics which shape and impact lesbian intimate unions is important to the study of the lesbian lifestyle and her relationships, but also for recognising the implications of heterosexism that persists in our society. Illuminating the contextual and societal factors is valuable in the study of such relationships which are heavily undermined by majority beliefs and dominant stereotypes. These relationships deserve equal recognition and the freedom to live openly and with confidence. While South Africa boasts legal equality for homosexual people, there are still many hurdles to be crossed before this equality can be accessed and practised.

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Appendix

Glossary

Table1: Quick reference table: demographics of sample

Table 2: Demographic features of interviewees, N=15

Interview schedule

Letter of consent

Profiles 1-15

Glossary

Coming out is a process shared by all homosexual people, whether they have come out already or are concerned about it. Coming out involves the disclosure of ones sexuality in the face of possible rejection from society, family and friends. This process involves anxiety and a fear of what others will think.

Butch lesbians adopt the roles traditionally associated with men; assuming masculine identities, wearing men's clothing and displaying behaviour that denotes masculinity.

Butch-femme is the term used to describe lesbian partnerships where one partner assumes a masculine identity and the other a feminine identity. These relationships are said to mimic heterosexual relationships, and thus are described as mimicking **heterosexual role-play**.

Discrimination refers to the process by which a member or members of a socially defined group are treated differently or unfairly.

Dyke is the term that is generally used to describe women that are particularly butch. It is not limited to this though, as many women who are not butch identified have adopted the term. Historically, the term had rather derogatory meaning and was offensive, but today many women have appropriated the term as acceptable. There are many variations of this term, such as **diesel dyke**- an extreme butch lesbian who portrays very masculine traits; and **Platinum dyke** which refers to a lesbian who has never had sexual relations with a man.

Femmes can be best described as lesbians, bisexual or queer women whose manner and style falls along the lines of what is traditionally considered feminine.

Gay traditionally only referring to homosexual men, the term nowadays is used to identify both homosexual men and women.

Gender refers to socially created attributes by which men and women are categorized; such as masculine and feminine. These are socially imposed traits and roles considered appropriate to the sexes.

GLBT (also *LGBT*) is an acronym referring collectively to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender/transsexual people. This term relates to the diversity of sexuality and gender identities. There are many variants of the acronym, the most common being include *GLBTI*, thus including Intersexed or Interested people and *GLBTQ*, including those identifying as queer or questioning.

Heteronormativity emphasizes the correctness of heterosexual dogmas and traditional family forms while at the same time rendering homosexuality as deviant and invisible.

Heterosexism is the belief that everyone is and should be heterosexual and that other sexual orientations are unhealthy, unnatural and a threat.

Heterosexuality is the desire for the opposite sex. Assumed to be the 'natural' form of human sexuality, it is the privileged and dominant expression of sexuality in most societies. Heterosexual people are also commonly known as *straight.*

Homophobia can be defined as the fear of, hatred against, or disgust towards homosexual people or homosexuality.

Homosexuality refers to an individual's attraction to the same sex.

Identity refers to the sense of self and how an individual chooses to categorize themselves.

Lesbian refers to a woman who is romantically and/or sexually attracted to women.

Potential External Stressors are sources of relationship conflict that are rooted outside of the relationship and present challenges from the outer barrier of the relationship.

Potential Internal Stressors are those pressures or challenges that can be found to happen within the relationship, including conflict that arises between the couple.

Potential Stressors occurring both internal and external to the relationship are those stressors that could not be classified as strictly originating internally or externally from the relationship, but were rather a combination of the two.

Prejudice is an unjustified negative opinion or belief about a specific group.

Sex refers to the biological distinctions between males and females.

Sexuality refers to a natural property of an individual, which finds expression through sexual activities and relationships.

Sexual identity refers to the sexual category an individual chooses to identify with.

Sexual preference is ones preference for or orientation towards specific types of sexual expression or desires.

Stereotype is a set of inaccurate and simplistic generalizations about a group of individuals which enable others to categorize members of the group and treat them according to these unjustified beliefs.

Table1: Quick reference table: demographics of sample

	Age	Length of Previous Heterosexual Marriage in years	No. of children from heterosexual marriage	Longest Homosexual relationship in years
Freda	39	Not applicable	-	6
Meghann	32	Not applicable	-	1
Johanna	43	1	-	10
Gerda	45	12	3	5
Jen	46	Not applicable	-	6
Amy	33	Not applicable	-	11
Carol	32	Not applicable	-	2
Fay	34	Not applicable	-	14
Ilza	56	15	3	5
Mary	45	15	3	5
Yvonne	39	5	1	5
Rachelle	54	15	2	17
Wanda	49	11	2	17
Tasha	39	Not applicable	-	17
Catherine	38	Not applicable	-	17

Table 2: Demographic features of interviewees, N=15

Variables		N
Age	30-34 35-39 40-44 45-49 50-54 55-59	4 4 1 4 1 1
Disclosure of sexuality	Open to family only Open to friends only Open to family and Friends	0 1 14
Age of coming out	20-24 25-29 30-34 35-39 40-44 45-49 50-54 Not fully out	5 2 3 3 0 0 1 1
Previous heterosexual marriages?	Yes, heterosexual marriage Not applicable	7 8
Number of children from heterosexual marriage	0 1 2 3	1 1 2 3
Length of longest homosexual relationship in years	Under 1 years 1-4 5-10 11-14 15-20	1 1 7 2 4

Interview schedule

Semi-structured interview schedule for individual interviews:

A Study of the Dynamics of Conflict in Lesbian Intimate Unions.

Participants will be thanked for agreeing to take part in the research. It should be highlighted that they will remain anonymous throughout the research and that their information will be treated with respect and confidentiality. It will also be outlined that they don't have to answer any questions that they feel uncomfortable with and are free to ask any of their own.

1. General background

- To what extent are you open about your sexuality?

- Have you come out/disclosed your sexuality to your family and friends?

- If so, tell me about your coming out process.

- What were some of the reactions you got?

- What difficulties did you face in this process of coming out?

- Are there any people or specific groups of people that you hide your sexuality from? And why?

2. South African context

- The South African constitution protects the rights of all people including homosexuals. To what extent do you think lesbian in South Africa are protected?

- Have you ever been the victim of discrimination based on you sexuality?

- If so, what happened, why do you think it happened? How did you react?

- Did you report the incident? Why?

- How do you think the average South African views homosexuality? Do you think there is a lack of knowledge, acceptance, understanding etc?

- Are there any places that you feel uncomfortable expressing your sexuality?

- Do you know of any organizations that cater specifically for gay related issues?

- How involved are you in the gay community?

- Do you feel there is anything lacking, with regard to the provision of services to the gay community?

- If you have a relationship problem, to whom would go to discuss it with? (Friends, family, other gay people).

3. Relationships (general)

- What is *lesbianism* to you?

- Are you currently in a relationship? (Tell me a bit about it; how long etc.)

- How many serious homosexual relationships have you been in?

- Have you ever been in a serious straight relationship? Tell me a bit about it?

- How do you think lesbian relationships differ from straight relationships?

- Do you think lesbian relationships have extra/different problems that straight relationships don't have?

- What do you think are some of the positive aspects of lesbian relationships?

- What do you think are some of the negative aspects of lesbian relationships?

- Many in the gay community feel that lesbian relationships are more equal because of the fact that there are two women; how do you feel about this idea?

- Often people talk about roles within relationships. People try to distinguish between butch and femme, or try to outline who is the more masculine or dominant in the relationship. Do you see lesbian relationships fitting into this definition of gender roles?

- Do you think there are tensions over power dynamics in lesbian relationships?

4. Relationships (personal)

I would like you to think of relationships that you have been involved in; previous or current. I would like to find out more about the dynamics between you and your partner/ ex-

partner. *These questions are only guidelines; they are phrased in the past tense- but will be adapted to present tense if that is the situation.*

- In your experience, have you experienced that partners tend to take on particular roles? (masculine/feminine)
- Have you ever experienced power struggles in a relationship? If so, what caused this tensions/conflict?
- Who made the decisions in the relationship?
- Did you live with your partner? (Or most recent partner?)
- What about money matters; who took on what responsibilities?
- Was there an equal division of household chores?
- What were some of the common interest that you shared?
- Did you have the same friends?
- How independent do you feel each of you was?
- How intertwined do you feel your lives were? In other words, how involved were you in each others lives? To what extent did you each participate in separate activities, socialize with different people etc?
- Did your family know about her? Tell me a bit about this.

1. <u>Conflict</u>
   - Many people are surprised to hear about lesbian partner abuse. Most women are unaware that it occurs at the same rate as it does in heterosexual relationships. When referring to abuse, I am not only referring to physical violence, but also emotional abuse. Are you aware that this occurs?
   - What were your first perceptions of lesbian partner abuse when you heard about it?
   - Have you heard about lesbian relationships that involve this type of abuse?
   - Why do you think a woman would want to batter another woman?
   - Do you think women abuse their partners for the same reasons that men do?
   - Have you ever been involved in a domestically violent relationship?

Here the interview can take one of two directions. Either the participants have experienced an abusive relationship (5a) or have not (5b). These questions are only guidelines and will be adapted according to the different participants.

5a. Affirmative response to having experienced domestic abuse.

- If so, could you tell me a bit about it? How long was the relationship? Has it ended and if so, who ended it?

- How did you explain the battering/abuse to yourself? Why do you think this happened?

- Did your explanations change over time- as the relationship continued, or after it ended?

- How did you react to the abuse?

- Did your reactions change over time? As the abuse got worse? As the relationship progressed?

- Why do you think you reacted that way? Was there anything in your background or past experiences that could have contributed to your reactions?

- Did the violence take you completely off guard in that you had never been exposed to this type of violence before?

- Was there anything in your partners background that you think may have contributed to the abuse?

- Getting out of an abusive relationship, freeing yourself of the violence, is often difficult because of pressures you feel from outside the relationship. Often people don't take lesbian partner abuse as serious because they think lesbian relationships are supposed to be based in equality. Did you ever experience this?

- Another problem of getting out of an abusive relationship is accepting the fact that you are being battered. What made you come to identify yourself as a battered lesbian?

- How do you feel connecting those two words: *battered* and *lesbian*?

- How would you describe the relationship that you had with her? Who was more in control, dependant etc?

- Did your partner ever appear to be two different people? For example, one person in public and another in private?

- If so, how did this impact you getting free from the abuse?

- What were the main causes of fights, or tension in the relationship?

- Was there any jealousy/possessiveness? From who and over what?

- Typically, how did you and your partner resolve conflict, or disagreements? (For example, discuss calmly, yelling, sulking, leave room, ignore, physical aggression-throwing things, hitting etc.)

- Did you feel your partner was trying to control you?

- If so, how did she try to control you?

- Did she seem to be threatened if you exercised any independence, or pursued outside interests?

- Was alcohol or drugs ever involved in any abusive incidents?

- Were there any external pressures that you think may have contributed to the abuse?

- Did you ever feel pressurized to come out?

- Did you tell anybody about it? If so, how did you feel talking about it and how did they react?

- Who made the decisions in this relationship?

- Did you live with your partner? (Or most recent partner?)

- What about money matters; who took on what responsibilities?

- Was there an equal division of household chores?

- What were some of the common interest that you shared?

- Did you have the same friends?

- How independent do you feel each of you was?

- In comparison to your other relationship experiences, how intertwined do you feel your lives were? In other words, how involved were you in each others lives? To what extent did you each participate in separate activities, socialize with different people etc?

5b. Negative response to having experienced domestic abuse.

- If not, I would still like to hear your views about it. How would you explain this battering or abuse?

- If you compare lesbian partner abuse and domestic violence in heterosexual relationships; do you think there are any differences? If so, what do you think they are?

- What do you think are the reasons for abuse?

- Do you think external pressures contribute to abuse? What role do you think family, friends, and community play?

- Do you think the lesbian community is open about lesbian partner abuse?

- To what extent do you think this abuse is taken seriously?

- What changes do you think can be made to bring lesbian partner abuse into the open?

Participant is offered the opportunity to add anything or ask any questions of her own.

Letter of consent

Universiteit van Pretoria
University of Pretoria

Angela Ochse
Cell: 082 901 5226
angela.ochse@up.ac.za

Dear Participant,

My name is Angela Ochse. I am a student at the University of Pretoria doing research into the dynamics of lesbian relationships. This will form part of the practical component needed to complete my Masters degree in Sociology. The title of my study is, *Dynamics of Conflict in Lesbian Intimate Unions: An Exploratory Study.*

Lesbian relationships are rarely studied and are often surrounded by many conflicting ideas. I am interested in hearing your stories and experiences with regard to being involved in same-sex relationships. The research aims to gain a greater understanding of the dynamics and specific challenges that lesbian relationships face. Your information is valuable as it sheds light onto my areas of interest: gender, conflict and relationships.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you choose to be involved, you will not be obliged to participate or answer any question you don't want to. You are free to withdraw from the interview at any time.

I will be conducting one-on-one interviews with each participant. The interviews should not take longer than 1 and a half hours. Each interview will be audio-recorded and some of the information may be used in my written research report. The recorded interviews will be stored in accordance with the requirements of the University's Research Proposal and Ethics Committee. If any of the information is to be used in future, prior permission will be gained from you in the form of a letter of consent.

All of the information retrieved will be treated with the utmost of respect and confidentiality. Your name will not be used at any time and you will not be linked to the interviews or the written analysis. You will remain anonymous and your identity protected throughout the research. The findings will reflect what was established in our discussions, and no names will be used.

Talking about past relationships can often be emotional, lay counseling services will be made available if you at any time feel you would like to access these.

I would like to ask for your formal permission to participate in the interviews. Your input is appreciated and valued. If you are willing to partake in the research, please sign in the allocated space below. Please feel free to contact me, via email or phone if you have any queries regarding the research.

Thank you
Angela Ochse

Formal Acknowledgement of Consent

I, …………………………………………… on this day of……………….. 2008, at………………, agree to willingly partake in the interview sessions for the research project investigating lesbian relationship dynamics. I understand that I'll be involved in discussions focussed on issues surrounding same-sex relationships and that I am free to withdraw at any time. I understand that anything said during the discussions will not be linked to my identity and my name will be kept confidential throughout the research process.

Signed ………………..

Profiles

1. Freda

2. Meghann

3. Johanna

4. Gerda

5. Jen

6. Amy

7. Carol

8. Fay

9. Ilza

10 and 11. Mary and Yvonne

12 and 13. Rachelle and Wanda

14 and 15. Tasha and Catherine

Profile 1: Freda

Freda is 39 years old. She has been very involved in the gay community from her teen years. Her family found out she was lesbian when she was 24 and she reports that it was a huge disappointment for them. Although they don't talk about it, her parents are to an extent accepting of her sexuality and have been welcoming to all her partners. She reports to having always been homosexual, and hints at the cause being that she was treated like her brothers by her father. She feels that there are however a variety of factors that contribute to ones sexuality. She is openly gay in most of her spaces, but cautious in others where she feels threatened. She prefers to be called gay rather than lesbian, which she does not like at all. She holds a very negative perception of the term lesbian as being a derogatory term.

Freda reports that she had boyfriends but they were just a "nice little showpiece" that she used to cover up the fact that she was gay. She reports never feeling comfortable with guys and would never allow closeness between them. On the other hand, she has had many gay relationships and was even married to a woman before the civil unions act had been passed in South Africa. Her marriage did not last; she reports this being a result of a third party getting involved in her relationship. Her longest homosexual relationship was 7 years. She has just come out a short term relationship, but is seeking a long term relationship so that she can settle down.

Freda was even the owner of a gay club in Johannesburg at one stage of her life, thus she is very informed about gay organisations and knows many of their key role-players. She reports to have seen many things and met many gay women. She does however, not like the "cheap" impression that some gay people give society. She is very aware of the law and is critical of the fact that society is not yet reflective of the laws. She is aware of the changes that have happened since she was growing up and the greater freedom that gays have today in comparison to the past. She is very aware of her own sexuality as being seen as different and has had many experiences of having to hide her sexuality. She was one of the few women who had reported experiencing discrimination.

Profile 2: Meghann

Meghann is 32 years old. She has been in a few same-sex relationships. She is the only woman who identifies having dated butch women. She is not in a relationship at the moment but would very much like to meet someone and have a long term relationship.

She is open about her sexuality to her friends- most of which are gay as well. She has not told her parents about her sexuality and is very afraid that they will find out and be disappointed and blame themselves. She had crushes on boys and male teachers in school, but when she started work she fell in love with a lesbian woman who she worked with, since then she has only dated women.

She knows about many gay organisations and is involved in the gay scene as she goes to gay clubs on occasion and attends gay churches.

She is the only woman in my sample that is not openly gay to her family. She faces additional pressures because she is afraid of having her family find out. For this reason she manages her behaviour in front of her family, having to hide physical affection to partners and is not able to share her life fully with her family. She is even conscious of hiding her sexuality in public places, with the fear of the slight chance of her family seeing her. Thus she is only openly gay, in "gay only" spaces.

She has not reported ever experiencing discrimination.

Profile 3: Johanna

Johanna is 43 years old. She reports to having known she was gay since a very young age. She had her first homosexual experience when she was 13, which her parents stopped. Johanna was married to a man for a short time and then got involved with a woman again. Johanna has done a lot of dating, had three serious homosexual relationships, the longest of 10 years had recently ended at the time of the interview. She had been married to her previous partner for ten years (before the civil unions act in South Africa). The relationship ended because their interests and career paths separated them.

She is very open about her sexuality, even dressing 'out' to make an impression. She is out and proud, very connected within the gay community and well known. She has read a lot about gay relationships and talks about the deeper intricacies that are prevalent in South Africa. She preferred to be identified as lesbian. She identifies as a feminist and reports to have also been involved in the struggle for gaining equal rights for homosexual people.

Johanna is completely out to all her family and everybody she knows, she believes it is important for gay women to be open about their sexuality, as this will help to spread awareness about lesbians and will negate the stereotypes that are held. She is well aware of treading carefully in certain places and explains that in black communities, women have to be especially careful. Johanna explains that heterosexuality is problematic because it is patriarchal and oppresses women, thus homosexual relationships are the only real chance at achieving equality in a relationship. Johanna explains that she thinks domestic violence is more likely to occur in those homosexual relationships where there is a lot of acting out, because they are trying to mimic heterosexual relationships- which are based on inequality and are thus oppressive.

Profile 4: Gerda

Gerda is 45 and is very open about her sexuality. Those that she deals with on a daily basis, as well as her family and friends all know about and have accepted her sexuality. She is wary about where she can express her homosexuality, and very aware of herself in gay unfriendly spaces.

She had a rather traumatic coming out process. Gerda began realising that she was 'different' at the age of 30, she had a very traumatic battle with herself and with God before accepting her sexuality and coming out at 34. She had been married to a minister and when it was made known that she was gay, the media got involved and spread the scandal all over the newspapers. She had gone for all sorts of counselling to try and "fix" the problem, but she realised she was not going to change and was eventually able to accept herself. Gerda's family had in the beginning found it difficult to accept her sexuality, but with time had become comfortable with it. Gerda reports that upon realising and accepting that she was gay, she had realized what she had been missing in her life. She had felt a new sense of insight, a gap in her life had been filled.

Gerda had three sons from her heterosexual marriage. She did not gain custody of her children and suffered great financial losses during the divorce. Her relationship with her ex-husband is very poor.

Gerda had never been in a gay relationship until after she had divorced her husband, but reports that on thinking back on her friendships, she had been in love with many of her best friends in school and throughout her life. She had previously been in a five year long relationship and at the time of the interview had been on and off with another woman for three months.

She is very involved with the gay church and has given many motivational talks about religion and homosexuality. Despite the very negative reactions she had received upon coming out, she is very open about her sexuality.

Profile 5: Jen

I got more than I bargained for when interviewing Jen, being a counsellor as well as a pastor for a gay church. She is 46 years old and very involved in the gay community. She has been involved in the church throughout her life, but only recently with the gay church. She expresses that she had previous to joining the gay church been involved in a rather fundamentalist church group that was against homosexuality. She never felt completely at home with all the ideas the congregation preached, but explains that she adopted the ideas that she liked and ignored those she was not comfortable with. She studied theology and is now the minister of a pro-gay congregation.

She had a late coming out and attributes this to her conflict with the church. Jen explains that she had always known somehow that she was lesbian, thus her lack of involvement in relationships until her first same-sex relationship when she was 40. Jen explains that she knew she could not be with a man and had conflict with the church so could not be with a woman either. Her coming out to her family and friends was not particularly traumatic, she puts this down to the fact that she was already an adult and could not be told what to do. Her coming out to herself and to God is noted as a lot more harrowing and distressing than coming out to others. Once this process was done, the rest seemed to follow more easily. She had received no negative reactions from those that she told. She has also not experienced any discrimination. Today she is completely open about her sexuality.

She has had one serious gay relationship of six years with very little conflict. Their families knew and were accepting of the relationship. She knew her partner for a year or so before they realised it was more than just friendship and that real feelings were involved. They only moved in after a year of being together and although their lives were very much intertwined since both women were very involved in the church, they each had separate activities and separate friends. Chores were not defined, but fell into place. She explains the break up as difficult and unexpected, but at least they each had still maintained their own lives and selves.

Profile 6: Amy

Amy is 33 years old. She has been involved in one long term relationship of thirteen years. She became involved with her partner from the age of about 22 and they have been together ever since. Amy and her partner share many of the same interests and spend much of their time together. Amy was very frank and open about her relationship with her partner and was willing to share information about the conflicts and rough patches they have gone through. Amy and her partner are not involved in the gay community because of its apparent possessiveness and jealousy, thus most of their friends are straight.

She has had many experiences of being discriminated against. She is a teacher and received much bias from her colleagues as well as the children she taught. She lives in a small town-which being very conservative, has seemingly served to force her gay relationship into hiding.

Her family is aware of her sexuality, as is her partners' family. Both families have accepted it although are not completely comfortable with physical contact in front of them. Amy reports that she does not hide her sexuality, but she does not advertise it either. Her family and close friends know, but she still hides it in certain places and from certain people.

Amy and her partner met at the same church that turned them away when they sought help and guidance with regard to their relationship. She thus has some qualms about religion, and feels that it used against homosexual people.

Profile 7: Carol

Carol is 32 and came out to her family when she was 26, she explains that it was very difficult hiding it and that once her family knew about it she felt like a weight had lifted off her shoulders. She explains that in the beginning her mother especially had a problem accepting her homosexuality, but today they are fine with it and are very welcoming towards her partners.

She is open about her sexuality at work and has never experienced any discrimination. She has a mixture of gay and straight friends, and is not involved in the gay community much.

Carol has been in a few relationships, 6 serious ones. At the time of the interview she was in a relationship that she explains to be the best out of all of them because there is a fifty fifty divide and they are both equal in the relationship. She has never had a serious straight relationship. She describes her previous relationship of two years as emotionally and financially abusive.

Profile 8: Fay

Fay is 34 years old and came out when she was 21. She had told her mother and left the rest of the family slowly find out. Her family has fully accepted that she is gay and are very supportive of her. She is openly gay and does not worry about what people think. She is openly gay at work and to all her friends (most of which are straight) and has not received any negative reactions from anyone.

She was involved with a woman for twelve years, they met when she was 21 and moved in together three months later and they shared all their spare time together. Their families knew and got along very well together. She describes her previous partner as the love of her life. Sadly her partner had died in their twelfth year of being together. At the time of the interview, she had been involved in a new relationship.

She was comfortable identifying herself as lesbian and gay. Fay also reported to be comfortable being physically affectionate with her partner in public. She did not report experiencing direct discrimination, but does admit to having received strange looks from people.

Fay has heard of cases of domestic violence, but never been exposed to it. She expresses that she has a friend that is in an emotionally abusive relationship, and she is unsure of what to do to help her out of it.

Profile 9: Ilza

Ilza is 56 years old. She had one gay relationship in university, after the relationship was ended by the parents; she married a man and put her gay days behind her. Her marriage lasted fifteen years and she bore three children. After her husband died, she coincidently met many gay women and realised that she had been missing something. When she was 50 she began a relationship with a woman. Her children, in high school at the time were rather confused, but grew to accept it and now hold their mom as quite "cool" because she is different. This relationship had lasted for five years; the breakup taking a toll on Ilza.

Today she does not tell anybody about her sexuality, she feels no need to tell anyone beyond those that already know; being her three children, her sister and a few doctors. She became quite involved with a group of women forming a strong friendship group, almost all of which are gay. She is not currently in a relationship and feels that she is not sure who would make the first move if she had to be involved in one again, she reports that her age contributes to this uncertainty.

Ilza had preferred to call herself gay, not wanting to identify with the negative stereotypes that she felt lesbian portrayed.

Profile 10 & 11: Mary and Yvonne

Both of these women came out relatively late in their lives and although it was a rather traumatic experienced, they report not feeling any great rejection. Both these women have had heterosexual marriages and have children from their previous marriages.

This couple has been together for five years and report to be soul mates. They reject the notion of the stereotype butch lesbian woman and do not want to be associated with woman who dress and act like men.

Mary is 45, she realised she was gay when she was about 37, she says that looking back she remembers having crushes on girls. She had never even considered being gay, as she was never exposed to it. She had been involved in a fifteen year marriage before divorcing and moving in with Yvonne. She reports that after she realised she was gay, she knew her relationship with her husband would never be the same and she would not be happy. Her relationship with her husband is very poor. Her parents as well as her siblings are accepting of her relationship with another woman. She is outgoing and open about her sexuality. While she is comfortable with being publically affectionate, her partner is less at ease with it.

Mary does not regret her decision to leave her family and move to another city without her children. She left without many of her possessions and started a new life with a woman. She was left with very little finances and for this reason did not gain custody of her children. Her children are 15 and 18 and are completely at ease with the gay relationship their mother is in.

Yvonne is 39. She was in a heterosexual marriage for 5 years and has one daughter from this relationship. She says she did not even think of women when she was younger and has been with many men. Eventually, "she gave up on men". Mary is her second gay relationship. She was involved with another woman previously, a 2 year relationship. She reports that the woman was physically, emotionally and financially abusive. This relationship lasted two years and was on its brink of ending when she met Mary. Yvonne does not enjoy attracting

226

attention to herself and thus avoids any physical affection in public. She never actually told her family, but it is assumed that they all know and are accepting of it.

They moved in together and started a relationship very quickly. Mary moved from Durban to Pretoria and having nowhere to go, moved in directly with Yvonne and her 18 year old daughter. Mary had originally not had a job and was in a very poor financial situation; she thus relied on Yvonne financially until she had found her feet.

The couple say they prefer not to have too many gay friends because third parties always get involved and the lesbian community is renowned for its jealousy issues! Both these women don't want to be associated with the "butch, manly" women who they feel represents lesbians. They feel that they are a different type of lesbian couple because they are not representative of the couples they have encountered- those that take on roles of butch and femme. They report to spend all their time together, and they say they don't have many friends. They have recently discussed getting married under the new civil unions act.

Profile 12 & 13: Wanda and Rachelle

Wanda (49) and Rachelle (54) have been together for seventeen years. They have lived together and accepted each others family. Rachelle migrated from England to South Africa after only knowing Wanda for a few months.

When they first moved in together, they had to hide their sexuality in case Wanda's ex husband would try to gain custody of the children- as lesbianism was illegal then. Now they are openly gay and are happy to be affectionate in public. They have had no negative reactions from the public and have never felt discriminated against.

Rachelle moved in with Wanda and her two daughters. She completely accepted the two girls, the only conflict they reported was in relation to difficulties with the children and the eldest feeling that her place had been usurped by Rachelle. Wanda felt a high level of independence when she and Rachelle got together; she no longer had to raise the kids alone and could go away for weekends without having to find a sitter.

Today they still share many common interests and are building a house in Wakkerstroom to retire to. They each have their separate interests, Rachelle enjoys classical music, history and reading while Wanda paints and watches TV.

This couple report to be happy that there are no prescribed roles in the relationship like there are in heterosexual unions. They are content with their places and seem happy with the way they have divided chores. Their relationship reflected more fluidity between who does what with regard to household chores. Once again, they note that cooking, and physical chores are defined with gender, they attribute their division of these to whoever is naturally better, or enjoy it more. Even so, they are fluid and swappable.

There has been no conflict over the division of chores. They both share them, and take on the duty they feel necessary. Both agree that having two women together allows for freer communication and better understanding.

When they first moved to Pretoria from Durban, they were not out and in want of some like minded friends, they put an ad in the newspaper to meet at a coffee shop, and they met a few friends. It was from here where they built their friendship group. They have mainly gay friends and belong to a women's group that meets on the last Friday of each month. They were very involved in political issues in the past, but today are less active in the lesbian community, despite being very aware of what is going on with regard to the law and constitution.

Wanda feels that the average South African does not really care about lesbians, while you do get a few that are against it, but this is normally because it conflicts with what their religion says. Despite being involved in the church previously, and Wanda being married to an Anglican priest, the couple is against religion. "Evil" because it makes people feel guilty. Wanda comments that she did not go out to look for a woman, she just fell in love with that person, if Rachelle had been a man, the same could have happened. Wanda also reports to be a political feminist and that lesbianism was her choice. This is Wanda's first gay relationship or experience, Rachelle had had a 6 month affair with a woman before she married into a heterosexual relationship.

Profile 14 & 15: Tasha and Catherine

This couple has been together for seventeen years. Tasha is 39 and Catherine 38 years old. They met in their twenties and after realising their friendship had developed into something else, they moved in together. They began their relationship when it was still very risky to be involved in a gay relationship in South Africa because it was illegal. They are very expressive about the noticeable changes that have occurred between then and now. Both are very aware of the literature about lesbian relationships and were involved in political rallies. Nowadays they are not as involved in the gay community as they use to be, but still keep abreast of what is going on legally and politically. They belong to a women's group that meets monthly. They were very open about their relationship and shared many of their experiences- good and bad with me. They have a mixture of gay and straight friends.

Tasha describes herself as a politically active lesbian. She is a feminist and rejects heterosexual relationships because of their oppressive nature. In her teen years she had been with both men and women, and when she was 22, decided she was a lesbian. Having a very liberal family, she did not have much anxiety about revealing her sexuality. Most people know that she is gay and she is not afraid to express her sexuality. Tasha had had one serious gay relationship before she met Catherine.

Catherine was aware that she was attracted to women from a young age. Her mother, being more conservative, had picked up on this and invested a lot of energy into putting her onto the straight path. Catherine is completely happy with her sexuality and is not prepared to hide it, she does however explain that they accommodate straight people a lot. She is aware of the social climate and says that she is very aware that lesbians are the minority in a heterosexist society. Catherine had 3 serious relationships before Tasha and had never been involved with men.