IDENTITIES AND COMMUNITIES:
THE STORIES OF
LESBIAN AND BISEXUAL WOMEN

ANN CRONIN

Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Sociology
University of Surrey
Guildford

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The town that I live in has a large book shop, which is the local branch of a national chain. Since it’s opening some two years ago, the ‘Lesbian and Gay’ section has been located underneath the stairs, towards the back of the shop on the ground floor. It contained a mixture of fiction and non-fiction books and its location placed it some distance away from the main fiction section at the front of the shop. Despite requests from some of its customers, this section has never been listed on the store’s guide boards located throughout the shop. On a recent visit to the shop, I discovered that the section had been relocated to the first floor and placed next to ‘Gender Studies’ and round the corner from ‘Sociology.’ Interestingly enough, it’s former home now housed ‘Black Fiction.’ This now means that ‘Lesbian and Gay’ fiction is even further away from the general fiction area, thus reinforcing its difference and separation from general reading. While the store guide boards still do not list this section, the shelf headers have been changed from ‘Lesbian and Gay’ to ‘Gay Interest.’ Before leaving the shop I, as usual, asked a shop assistant why the location of the ‘Lesbian and Gay’ section, or rather the ‘Gay Interest’ section continued to be absent from the store guide boards. This was met with the usual response: initial surprise that it is not on the board, followed by a promise to pass on my comments to the management. I can only conclude that the management team does not feel it is necessary for customers to know the whereabouts of these books...
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A friend once likened ‘doing’ a Ph.D. to a boxing match, in which the opponent is your thesis, not another person. Another friend simply asked ‘Why?’ when I announced I was doing a Ph.D. After four years I can certainly identify with the boxing match analogy, although a wrestling match may be more apt. For just when I thought the bell was going to ring for time out, I would discover that there was yet another round to fight (for ‘round’ read data analysis, chapter to write, revisions to do, further revisions to do and so on…). However, I was fortunate to have many people around me to provide support and encouragement so that I could face the next ‘round’.

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And to the friend who asked why I was doing a Ph.D. the answer is quite simple, because I knew it would be one of the most challenging and yet most exciting and rewarding things I would ever do in my life. After all, life is nothing if it’s not a challenge.
Abstract

This thesis uses data taken from eighteen edited collections of 'coming out' stories published in the period 1977-1995 to examine the development, maintenance, meaning and practice of lesbian and bisexual identity. In doing so, it examines these stories from two perspectives. The first relates to what we can learn about the social construction of these stories, each of which has developed in a particular social, political, cultural and historical context; and secondly to the role that these stories play in the creation and maintenance of that social setting. Thus, the stories are a product of and a contribution to lesbian culture and, as this thesis shows, bisexual culture.

The theoretical framework used to examine the data is a synthesis of symbolic interactionism, feminism and queer theory. This enables me to examine the relationship between gender and sexuality and heterosexuality and homosexuality within a framework that focuses on the social construction of all sexualities. Furthermore, building on the findings from previous research, close attention is paid to the differences that exist between women and how these differences might influence the construction of sexual identity and access to lesbian and bisexual communities.

At a semantic level, analysis of the data indicates that the term lesbian does not have a single meaning, which affects the performance of a lesbian identity, while at a political level it dismisses the notion that the category lesbian is a unifying concept for every woman included in it. The theoretical implications of these findings are assessed through examining the way in which claiming a lesbian identity reinforces a hetero/homo divide either through the straightforward acceptance of sexual categories or through the reproduction of fixed identities, whether they have a natural or political basis. This leads to the suggestion that a bisexual identity poses a greater challenge to the hetero/homo split by refusing to conform to a sexual dichotomy. This raises questions about the impact of feminism on lesbian and bisexual identities and, the future direction of political action among women who have same-sex relationships. It is argued that this needs to involve coalition politics, where differences are regarded as a source of strength, rather than something to be suppressed through adherence to community rules and regulations. The findings also contain implication about the ability of current sexual identity models to adequately theorise the diversity of lesbian and bisexual identities present in the data. In conclusion a new model is proposed, which acknowledges that sexual identity my be subject to transformations and change.
Preamble: It's all in a name...

Defining same-sex desire among women (1)
In 1996, I led a workshop entitled ‘Lesbian Health Matters’ for a group of female health professionals. This formed part of their postgraduate studies in Women’s Health Care. The course took place at a university in the North of England and the group consisted of 8 women. Following my introductions, I began the workshop by asking the women to reflect for a few moments on their own attitudes towards women who have same-sex relationships and to consider how these attitudes might impact on their delivery of health care to these women. Below are just a few of the comments that came out of that discussion.

Woman 1: I don't like the word lesbian.

Myself: Why not?

Woman 1: Well, I used to get called it when I was little at school because I used to hold my friend’s hand... and no one would tell me what it meant - not even my mum...

Myself: Well I guess if the word has very negative associations for you then you wouldn't like it...

Woman 1: Now 'gay', that’s a nice word - why can't you use that?

Woman 2: Yes, but then again that used to mean happy and joyful, now look what it means....

While I would never treat anybody differently because of their sexuality, I have to say that I find what lesbians and gay men get up to sexually absolutely abhorrent.

Now, I can understand why men and women want to have sex together because that can lead to reproduction but I just can't understand why two women would want to have sex together.

Well I think that lesbians and gay men bring it all on themselves - why can't they just keep quiet and then people would just assume that they were heterosexual.

Maybe this would be relevant in London, but we don't have any of them in ___.

Defining same-sex desire among women (2)
In contrast, below are extracts from the stories of three women who self-identify as lesbian:
I knew from overhearing some of their conversations that there were thoroughly sick people in the world who loved their own sex, men and sometimes women who wanted nothing better than to kiss each other and sleep in the same beds. It was very depressing to hear them speak like that. (Helen, *What a Lesbian Looks Like: Writings by Lesbians on their Lives and Lifestyles*, 1992:1-2)

I thought I was a lesbian but then I thought it was ridiculous and awful and every book on psychology I ever read [ ... ] told me that it was immature and that I should really get my act together and reconcile myself to my femininity and find myself a good man and have children. And so I thought, I must simply get on with being a normal woman. (Diana, *Inventing Ourselves*, 1989:49-50)

The message was the same each time. There was a 'real' lesbian, generally mannish, though not always, and a 'real' woman, who eventually left the lesbian, usually for a man. The lesbian then committed suicide, conveniently. She was always a sad, pathetic figure, or totally despised and unlikeable. (Steph, *What a Lesbian Looks Like: Writings by Lesbians on their Lives and Lifestyles*, 1992:16)

**Assessing the implications**

Both sets of statements - those from the health professionals and those from women who self-identify as lesbian are instances of a particular way of talking about lesbians. Lesbians are 'sad', 'pathetic', 'mannish' and 'miserable', they are women who perform abhorrent sexual acts with each other. Thus, they represent a particular type of knowledge, or way of talking about lesbians. Furthermore, they also say something about the way in which gender and heterosexuality are conceptualised in our society. The invisible nature of relationships between women is based on an underlying assumption that we all are or should be heterosexual. Hence, they say something about who is allowed to have sex and for what purpose. Likewise, they refer to the rules governing gender appropriate behaviour. Finally, by highlighting the negativity associated with the word lesbian, they valorise heterosexuality. In short, there is a relationship between what we know about 'the lesbian' and what we know about gender and heterosexuality. But where has this knowledge come from? And what effect does it have on those women who have same-sex relationships?
Chapter One: An Introduction to the Thesis via a Brief History of the Lesbian and Gay Movement

1.1 Introduction
This thesis used data taken from eighteen edited collections of 'coming out' stories published in the period 1977-1995 to examine the development, maintenance, meaning and practice of lesbian and bisexual identity during that period. The publication of these books have only been made possible by a thriving lesbian and gay culture that has developed over the last thirty years of the 20th century. While it has only existed for this relatively short period, its roots extend back into the last century. For example, Karl Heinrich Ulrich's called for rights for homosexuals at a meeting of the Congress of German Jurists on the 28 August 1868. Furthermore, the first recorded use of the term homosexuality was by the German campaigner Kertbeny in 1869. Since this time, society has seen the birth of a homosexual culture and political movement which has demanded the same rights and privileges accorded to heterosexuals (Katz, 1996). It is within this context that this chapter provides a brief overview of the important events to affect lesbian and gay history over the last one hundred and thirty years. In doing so, it sets the context for the issues to be examined in this thesis.

1.2 The birth of homosexuality
The last thirty years of the 19th century saw a growth in publications, and books examining the issue of homosexuality. While sharing a common belief that homosexuality should no longer be viewed as a crime but instead as something that is inborn and fixed beyond choice, these early sexologists disagreed as to how this should be viewed. While some argued that homosexuality was pathological, others such as Havelock-Ellis, Addington and Hirschfeld, argued that it should not be viewed as a disease. For example, in 1897 Hirschfeld founded the Wissenschaftlich-humanitare Komitee (Scientific-Humanitarian Committee), the world's first organisation aimed at removing all legal and social intolerance to homosexuals. It continued in operation until its destruction by the Nazis in 1933.

While these early sexologists favoured a biological explanation for homosexuality, it was Freud's psychoanalytic theory of sexual development that led to the psychological construction of the homosexual in the first half of the 20th century. This suggests a sequential systematic model, where an individual progresses from an initial bisexuality
or polymorphous sexuality in early childhood through to the development of mature sexuality, which is viewed as the achievement of a stable heterosexual identity. Within this, homosexuality is viewed as a temporary stage of development (usually occurring during adolescence) on the path towards heterosexuality. This implies that those who identify as homosexual in adulthood 'fixated' on an early and hence immature phase of sexual development; alternatively, they have, due to psychological disturbance, 'regressed' back to this early phase of sexual development. Either way, homosexuality is located within a discourse of deviance, psychopathology and illness.

In 1948, Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues published *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* and, in 1953, *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female*. In relation to men, Kinsey claimed that while only 4% of men identified themselves as exclusively homosexual, 37% of men had been involved in homosexual activities at least once in their lives. In relation to women, while only 2% identified themselves as exclusively homosexual, 13% had been involved in homosexual activities at least once in their lives. Based on this empirical evidence, Kinsey reasoned that the category "homosexual" should be dismissed because there are only individuals, some of who have had more homosexual experiences than heterosexual experiences or vice-versa. For Kinsey, the development of an exclusive homosexual identity was the outcome of society's rejection of such behaviour. This new understanding about homosexuality provided the catalyst for research over the next twenty years, eventually leading to the sociological analysis of homosexuality. However, alongside these different explanations for homosexuality, there is a continuing focus on the innate nature of homosexuality. For example, Simon Le Vay (1993) published the findings from research suggesting a genetic or biological basis for male homosexuality. This indicates that over the last 130 years there has been a strong research interest in locating the 'cause' of homosexuality. Such research has run alongside the development of a lesbian and gay culture. Furthermore, as this thesis will explore, a close relationship exists between the two.

1.3 Shedding light on homosexuality

During the period following the Second World War and up until the Stonewall riots in 1969 (see below) there were only a few isolated formal organisations and publications catering for homosexuals. In Los Angeles, the Mattachine Society, a homophile organisation, formed in 1950 and began publishing the journal *Homosexual Viewpoint* in 1953. This was followed in 1958 by the first nation-wide American periodical *One Magazine*. Illinois was the first state in the USA to decriminalise homosexuality in
1961. The first USA demonstration for homosexual rights in the military in the same year; while in 1966, the first gay student organisation was formed at Columbia University in the USA.

In this country, the Wolfendon Committee was formed in 1954 with a brief to examine the law relating to homosexual offences in Britain. It published its findings in 1957, but it was not until 1967 that the Sexual Offences Act was passed in England. This decriminalised homosexual acts between two men over the age of 21, as long as they happened in private.¹ (Horsfall, 1988). A major reason for this was a growing awareness of the way in which men who had sex with other men were vulnerable to blackmail due to the illegality of their action. The British film Victim, released in 1961, helped to bring to the attention of the public the misery these men faced. Having secured this victory the struggle continued to lower the age of consent to sixteen and thus achieve parity with heterosexuals and lesbians. Success has been slow to come, with the age of consent being reduced to 18 in 1994; at time of writing the House of Lords has successfully prevented it from being reduced to 16. The campaign continues.

1.4 Stonewall and beyond: The birth of a movement

This brief discussion of the twenty years up to 1969 shows that, apart from the major implications of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, there was little in the way of widespread reform. Instead, it was patchy and hindered by the lack of an organised movement demanding political and social change (Goodman et al, 1983). This was all to change in 1969 with the well-documented Stonewall Riots, which resulted in the birth of the modern Gay Liberation Movement, which saw momentous change in the position of lesbians and gays in the 1970s. As Weeks (1977) notes, the 1970s were the “turning-point in the evolution of a homosexual consciousness” (1977:186). In contrast to the generally submissive and hence weak homophile organisations of the 1960s, Gay Liberation, alongside the birth of the women’s movement, signalled a new form of political action aimed at challenging the hegemonic control and power of both heterosexual and male dominated society. It demanded changes in the political, judicial and social treatment of lesbian and gay men. It also signalled the birth of a modern lesbian and gay culture and community, which has continued to grow and extend over the last thirty years.

¹ The decriminalisation of male homosexuality did not occur until 1980 in Scotland and 1983 in Northern Ireland.
By the beginning of 1970 the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and Gay Activists Alliance had been formed in America, while in England the Committee for Homosexual Equality (CHE) came into being (Birch, 1988). The 1970s saw the birth of the Lesbian and Gay Pride Marches. While in this country, attendance at the early national marches numbered no more than a few hundred, this has steadily risen over the years. In 1996, an estimated 200,000 attended the March renamed 'Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Pride'. Furthermore, it has grown from a march followed by an informal picnic in Hyde Park to a huge organised festival of music and events attracting sponsorship and media attention. Ironically, the march has become a victim of its own success. The 1998 festival organisers, expecting large crowds and with an eye on future funding, made it a paid advance ticket only event. Although the March went ahead, the festival was cancelled due to insufficient number of advance ticket sales. The commercialisation of the Pride event is an indication of the level of commercialisation of lesbian and gay culture that has taken place over the last thirty years. In addition to the national Pride event, there has been a steady growth in Pride events being held in other parts of the country, for example Manchester and Brighton.

While the Pride events have been characterised by a celebratory carnival atmosphere, other demonstrations and marches have taken place with the purpose of both highlighting the discrimination of lesbians and gay men in society and signalling a refusal to accept such discrimination any longer. Following the formation of the London-based Gay Liberation Front in 1970, England witnessed its first gay demonstration targeting the police practice of the entrapment of homosexual men (Birch, 1988). This was followed by a series of protests and demonstrations in the 1970s aimed at gaining publicity for a variety of different issues. These included the struggle for an equal age of consent for gay men, the demand by lesbians that the women’s movement recognise their needs, demonstrations against unequal employment treatment and a campaign providing support for lesbians fighting custody cases.

Alongside this campaigning work, there has been a growth in support services and organisations for lesbians and gay men. In 1973, the first UK gay Help-Line was opened in Oxford, followed by the launch of the London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard (which became a 24 hour service the following year). Today, there are Switchboards and Help-Lines in most of the major cities and towns in the UK (Power, 1988). The first
The national conference for gay rights was held by CHE, followed by the first lesbian conference in 1974. The first international lesbian and gay rights conference was held in Edinburgh, which was followed by the formation of the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) in 1979. While the national conferences collapsed in the 1980s due to factional in-fighting, ILGA continue to hold annual international conferences and were granted full UN status in 1994. In the 1980s, the GLC headed by Ken Livingstone (and other local authorities) provided the funding for lesbian and gay organisations to increase support and services to the community. This enabled the creation of organisations such as Lesbian and Gay Employment Rights and the London Lesbian and Gay Centre. However, the 1980s saw the advent of the AIDS epidemic and a rapid growth in organisations providing services for those effected. These receive both public and statutory funding and are often staffed by volunteers from the gay community (Phillips, 1988).

There has been a steady increase in media provision for lesbians and gay men over the last thirty years. The first UK gay newspaper Gay News started in 1972, but folded in 1983 due to a fall in sales blamed on the increase of free newspapers. However, this in itself is a sign of the increasing financial and commercial success of lesbian and gay culture. Free newspapers can be sustained by advertising revenue gained from adverts placed by lesbian and gay friendly companies and organisations. Likewise, lesbian and gay books, magazines and other publications are increasingly available in high street outlets. Of particular relevance to this study is the growth in books containing lesbian, gay and bisexual 'coming out' stories. In 1979, the first gay drama series was shown on television. It went out at 11.30 PM on Sunday nights and was watched by an estimated 350,000 people. In 1983 One in Five, the first national lesbian and gay series, was launched by Channel 4. Throughout the 1990s, the growth in gay and lesbian programming has continued alongside an increase in lesbian and gay characters in television, film and radio.

While all this is an indication of the growing strength of the lesbian and gay community, it has not been without opposition. In 1977, a bill to reduce the age of consent for gay men to 18 was defeated in the House of Lords, and Ian Paisley launched the Save Ulster from Sodomy Campaign. In the USA, Harvey Milk, an openly gay candidate was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. However, Dan White, an ex-police officer assassinated both Milk and pro-gay liberal Mayor George Moscone.
in San Francisco the following year. Forty thousand people took to the streets in San
Francisco to show their anger at these homophobic murders. While this was a peaceful
demonstration, there was a riot the following year when, due to a technicality. White’s
murder charge was reduced to manslaughter and he received a seven-year prison
sentence.

In the 1980s, the backlash against the gains made by lesbians and gay men was fuelled
by the AIDS epidemic, with its well documented impact on the gay male community
and, by default, the lesbian community. In '1989, amidst growing public fears fuelled
by media hysteria about HIV/AIDS and adverse media publicity given to local authority
funding for lesbian and gay projects, Clause 28 of the Local Government Bill was
passed. This prevented the ‘promotion’ of homosexuality by local authorities. Despite
the election of the Labour party to office last year, this bill still remains on the statute
books, although there is some evidence to suggest that it may be repealed in the future.

In relation to campaigns and protests for change, it is possible to detect two strands of
action. The first consists of groups like ActUp (Aids Coalition to Unleash Power),
OutRage! and Lesbian Avengers, who have adopted a confrontational and direct action
approach. In contrast, Stonewall, which was established in response to Clause 28, works
for political change on a variety of issues through lobbying and networking. Issues
addressed by Stonewall include gays in the military, the successful campaign to reduce
the age of consent for gay men, immigration laws for lesbian and gay partners, housing
and property rights in lesbian and gay partnerships, parenting rights and employment
rights.

To summarise, an organised lesbian and gay movement has developed over the last
thirty years. Using a variety of different tactics, it has campaigned for political, judicial
and social change in the treatment of lesbians and gay men. At the same time, it has
provided a wide range of support and services, ranging from education and health to
leisure and entertainment. However, it is important to recognise that the issue of
diversity and division has increasingly dominated lesbian and gay culture. As has
already been mentioned, factional fighting led to the demise of national conferences.
There has been a steady increase in the growth of organisations catering for particular
groups of lesbians and gay men based on race, ethnic origin class and disability, for
example. Alongside this has been the growing recognition that it is no longer feasible (if
it ever was so) to talk about a single lesbian or gay community, culture or identity. Instead, the talk is of plurality and diversity. To this must be added the issue of bisexual identity, which has for a long time been ignored by the lesbian and gay communities. Despite this focus on plurality and diversity, society continues to categorise people on the basis of the gender of their partners. Furthermore, this favours one group - heterosexual - over another group - homosexual. For example, the law in relation to marriage or partnership rights regards a heterosexual relationship as valid but not a homosexual one. This means that lesbians and gay men are excluded from a range of social policies such as immigration rights, pension schemes, work related fringe benefits, tax allowances, rights of inheritance, adoption policies, issues involving next of kin and housing. Research carried out by Stonewall (1993) and the Social and Community Planning Research (1995) suggests that there is evidence of discrimination in the workplace. For example, 48% of the 2,000 men and women surveyed in the Stonewall research claimed that they had experienced harassment at work due to their sexuality, while the corresponding figure in the Social and Community Planning Research (SCPR) survey is 21%. Furthermore, 48% of the Stonewall sample and 64% of the SCPR survey stated that they conceal their sexuality from some or all of the people at their place of work. In addition, the SCPR also surveyed 600 heterosexuals and found that one in three would be less likely to hire a gay or lesbian applicant. However, while legislation exists outlawing discrimination on the ground of sex and race, lesbians and gay men are not afforded the same legal protection.

1.5 The structure of the thesis
It is within this context that this thesis uses data taken from eighteen edited collections of ‘coming out’ stories published in the period 1977-1995 to examine the development, maintenance, meaning and practice of lesbian and bisexual identity. In doing so, it examines these stories from two perspectives. The first relates to what we can learn about the social construction of these stories, each of which has developed in a particular social, political, cultural and historical context; and secondly, to the role that these stories play in the creation and maintenance of that social setting. That is, the stories are both a product of and a contribution to lesbian culture and, as this thesis will show, bisexual culture. This thesis begins with a literature review consisting of a critical evaluation of the empirical and theoretical research relating to the social construction of lesbian identity over the last one hundred and thirty years.
Chapter 2 begins with an examination of Foucault's analysis of the historical invention of sexuality. This framework is used to understand the construction of the lesbian object in discourses that utilise a concept of the natural, biological or psychological as a causal factor in human behaviour. Particular attention is paid to the way in which assumptions about gender appropriate behaviour influences the discursive construction of lesbian identity.

Chapter 3 explores the way in which these discourses have been challenged through different approaches that have sought to theorise sexuality as the socially constructed product of specific socio-historical circumstances. This chapter looks at the traditional sociological approach to homosexuality, based on symbolic interactionism and a labelling approach, as well as feminist theory and queer theory. This analysis identifies both similarities and differences between the approaches and the advantages and disadvantages of each. It also notes the insufficient attention given to theorising social differences that exist between women who self-identify as lesbian. In conclusion, it is argued that a synthesis of the three different theoretical approaches would be a suitable theoretical framework for my study. This would enable me to look at the relationships between gender and sexuality, and heterosexuality and homosexuality, within a framework that focuses on the social construction of all sexualities.

Developing the findings from the previous chapter, Chapter 4 critically reviews the sociological research on the development and maintenance of lesbian identity that has been conducted over the last twenty years. This review assesses the way in which women construct the stories they tell about their sexual identity, as well as the sociological models developed to account for identity formation. While recognising the value of this work, it is noted that it is unable to provide a sufficient explanation for the differences between women and the implications these might contain for the development and maintenance of a lesbian identity. This is discussed in relation to sexual identity formation models and the issues that this raises for both lesbian identity and bisexual identity amongst women.

This chapter concludes by discussing the implications of the findings raised in the literature review for my own research, and by outlining the research questions. This

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2 Queer Theory, through the work of Foucault and Derrida, focuses on deconstructing the relationship between homosexuality and heterosexuality.
discussion includes a consideration of four key issues. Firstly, research in this area must attend to the issue of differences that exist between women. Secondly, in assessing the relationship between culture and identity it is important to be sensitive to changes of both a temporal and social nature. Thirdly, it is as important to subject to scrutiny the theoretical discourses that we use to understand the social world as it is to evaluate ‘scientific’ discourses. The fourth and final point relates to the need to look at the experiences of women who self-identify as bisexual as well as lesbian.

Chapter 5 examines the methodology used in the study. It begins by examining both the practical and theoretical considerations, which guided my choice to use the published stories of women to answer the research questions. This is followed by discussion of the theoretical and methodological issues that informed the way in which the data was analysed. In doing so, it draws on Plummer’s (1995) framework for the sociology of story telling. The chapter then moves to a description of the selection criterion and a detailed analysis of the sample of books used in this study. It concludes with an evaluation of the methodology and an outline of the data analysis chapters.

Chapter 6 examines the issues to emerge from the analysis of the editors’ introductions to the 18 books included in the data analysis. Through an examination of the conceptualisation of unity and diversity and the construction of subjectivity, it is argued that these books are firmly located in the historical, social and political context of the late 20th century. Furthermore, it is argued that these stories, which focus on personal notions of lesbian identity, meaning and practice, should be regarded as part of a much wider lesbian-centred project, which seeks to (re)define reality. This chapter concludes with an assessment of the implications that these findings hold for the current analysis.

Chapters 7 to 11 provide a detailed account of the different stories of lesbian or bisexual identity identified in the analysis of the data set. Each chapter looks at one of the six stories present in the data set, the only exception to this being Chapter 8 which examines the stories of both butch and femme identities simultaneously. Chapter 7 examines the stories of those women, who believe that they were born a lesbian, while Chapter 9 looks at the feminist-inspired story of lesbian identity. Chapter 10 examines the stories told by Black lesbians and Chapter 11 looks at the stories told by bisexual women. Chapters 7 to 10 include a consideration of lesbian meaning and practice, as well as the maintenance and development of a particular lesbian identity, while chapter
11 looks at these issues in relation to bisexual identity. Throughout the data analysis, close attention is paid to the way in which the women talk about the relationship between identity and community.

The final chapter, Chapter 12, begins with an overview of the major findings of the study before discussing these findings in relation to the empirical and theoretical issues raised in the literature review. This includes an evaluation of the contribution that this study makes to the sociological understanding of the social control and regulation of all sexualities. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the implications of the findings for future research in this area.
Chapter Two: The Invention of the Lesbian

The term 'homosexual' was only invented in 1869 [...] the first use of 'heterosexual' listed in the Oxford English Dictionary Supplement dates to 1901. [...] The terms heterosexual and homosexual apparently came into common use only in the first quarter of this century; before that time, if words are clues to concepts people did not conceive of a social universe polarised into heteros and homos. (Katz, 1996:10)

2.1 Introduction

The social construction of sexual identity based on a dichotomy of heterosexuality and homosexuality can be traced back to processes that began in the last century. This was briefly explored in Chapter One and is developed in this chapter. Hence, this chapter examines the construction of the lesbian object in discourses that utilise a concept of the natural, biological or psychological as a causal factor in human behaviour. In doing so, close attention is paid to the nature and character of these different discursive constructions of lesbian identity, allowing similarities and differences to be identified and explored. In order to provide a theoretical framework to understand these different discursive inventions, this chapter begins with Foucault's analysis of the relationship between power, knowledge and truth before moving on to look at his work on the history of sexuality.

2.2 Relationship between knowledge, truth and power

Underpinning Foucault's work is a radical conception of the relationship between power, knowledge and truth. This challenges the modern liberal normative view of power as either the legitimate or illegitimate possession of an individual or group, for example the state, used against others in order to repress them (Frazer, 1989). While Foucault's main target for such criticism is the Marxist analysis of class relationships, his concept of power is also applicable to the radical feminist concept of patriarchal power. This shift in focus enables him to explore the processes, practices and apparatus by which truth, knowledge and belief are produced, that is, the "politics of the discursive regime" (Foucault, 1980:118).

Unlike the history of ideas which endorses the concept of progressive development through discursive content and practices, Foucault's aim is to expose the discontinuities of history (Frazer, 1989). Performed through genealogy, a method which focuses on different discourses, he moves away from the 'ownership of power' to examine the
"patterns of the exercise of power through the interplay of discourses" (Ramazanoglu, 1993:93). This enables Foucault to develop his analysis of the dynamic relationship between power and knowledge. While the practice of power creates knowledge, knowledge produces the effects of power. Illustrating this point, Foucault writes:

We should admit [ .... ] that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. (Foucault, 1977:27)

Thus, for Foucault there is a fundamental link between power and knowledge. Applying this to history, Foucault focuses on both the discontinuities of history and the role that power relations have played in the production of knowledge. This challenges history as the universal uni-linear progression towards a single truth guided by a western defined reason and rationality, by showing that its credibility is reliant on excluding 'subjugated knowledges' and alternative accounts. Foucault is not trying to replace this official account, but to locate these claims to absolute truth in their specific historical context and thereby illustrate their relationship to particular interests (Bailey, 1993). For Foucault, this highlights the fallacy of an essential self and the ontological basis (the belief in a fundamental and transcendental truth) of modern theory. That is, he argues that subjectivity is always linked to specific 'regimes of power-knowledge' and consequently is socially situated. This has resulted in a radical critique of modern social theory based on the Enlightenment paradigm. This critique centres on the role played by the human sciences in the control and discipline of populations in modern society (Philp, 1984).

Although dismissive of the modernist notion of absolute truth, the concepts of truth and knowledge remain central to Foucault's work. However, they are redefined and located in the material world where power is central to their formation. The task of genealogy, through the creation of alternative truths and making visible 'subjugated knowledges', is about describing how truth and identity are historically contingent constructions. This enables one to view contemporary culture and its power relationships, not as the inevitable outcome of a monolithic structure, such as patriarchy or capitalism, but as the outcome of specific relations of power which are historically and culturally located. Not aiming to produce a new truth, genealogy can produce partial truths or alternative
discourses which take the position that is normally assumed by claims of absolute truth (Bailey, 1993). In order to clarify the meaning of this and the process involved, it is necessary to examine the Foucauldian use of discourse. At its simplest level, a discourse designates what can be said and thought about a particular subject; it contains rules for when it can be said, by whom and with what authority they can speak (Philp, 1984; Ball, 1990). Discourses embody meaning and social practice and constitute both subjectivity and power relationships. Foucault defined discourses as:

Practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak [... ] Discourses are not objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention. (1974:49-50)

Language is constitutive rather than merely reflective, that is the meaning and effect of particular words and concepts are constructed within particular discourses. Consequently, discourses have the power to either exclude or include by governing what can or cannot be said on a particular issue (Ball, 1990). Foucault's interest in using genealogy lies in discovering why, at a specific time in history, when anything could have been said, was something in particular said; that is, "how is it that one particular statement appeared rather than another" (Foucault, 1974:27). The implications of this analysis for the current study is that it directs attention to the construction of lesbian identity in historically specific discourses which have been invested with power and hence defined as the truth.

2.2.1 The social construction of sexuality

Foucault applies his understanding of the social production of meaning to examine how human beings are created as subjects in our culture through being subjected to the accumulative power of the state through the technologies of discipline and confession. In The History of Sexuality Vol.1 (1979), Foucault produces a genealogy of sexuality intended to disrupt the transhistorical and stable categories of sex and sexuality by revealing how a new form of modern power, that is, bio-power, disciplines the body and populations. For Foucault, the body is a discursive production produced through discourses on sexuality. Therefore, a genealogy of sexuality fictions a truth of bodies as products of time, space and force by highlighting the way in which the body became the foci in power-knowledge-truth struggles (Bailey, 1993). Starting from the premise that sexuality (as we currently experience it) is the socially constructed product of modern western society, Foucault refutes the idea favoured by medicine and psychology of

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1 This issue is discussed in detail in Chapter 3, Section 3.5: The relevance of queer theory to
sexuality being dependent on an underlying biological instinct. He suggests that the very idea of sex as an instinct is part of the discourses on sexuality:

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check or as an obscure domain which knowledge gradually tries to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct. (Foucault, 1979:152)

From the 18th century, onwards sexuality became increasingly an object of scientific investigation due to the belief that it contained the key to an individual’s health, pathology and identity. Through discourse, sexuality became central to a strategy of power, which linked the individual and the population through the spread of bio-power.

Volume 1 of the History of Sexuality opens with an account of the traditional view of sex and sexuality in the Victorian period, that is, the Repressive Hypothesis, which is closely associated with the work of the psychotherapist Reich. Drawing on the work of both Marx and Freud, Reich argues that the growth of capitalism has led to an increase in sexual repression and the state regulation of sexuality. Capitalism’s need for a reliable supply of labour power was dependent upon the control and regulation of the sexual practices of the working classes; this occurred through the implementation of bourgeois ideology, which resulted in the repression of sexuality. Foucault questions the validity of this perspective, which suggests that, owing to Victorian morality, sex and sexuality were repressed and confined to the marital bedroom. While acknowledging that sex and sexuality were increasingly controlled and regulated, Foucault contends that this occurred not through silence, but through a proliferation of discussion, writing, thinking and talking about sex (Foucault, 1979; Weeks, 1989). It is through these discourses on sexuality that the relationship between knowledge and power becomes actualised. Consequently, for Foucault, studying the history of sexuality is not about studying the supposed silence that surrounded sex and sexuality. Rather it becomes a study of the discourses of sexuality and their role in controlling bodies and populations through regulation and not repression. Foucault asks:

Why has sexuality been so widely discussed and what has been said about it? What were the effects of the power generated by what was said? What were the links between these discourses, these effects of power, and the pleasures that were invested by them? What knowledge was formed as a result of this linkage? The object, in short, is to define the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the discourse on human sexuality in our part of the world. (Foucault, 1979:11)
For Foucault, these discourses enabled population control in the 18th century through the development of demography and statistics, while in the 19th century new discourses of sexuality, based on medical models developed. This led to a separation of the medicine of sex from the medicine of the body, which resulted in the construction and administration of scientifically based therapies. Within these therapeutic discourses, sex and sexuality came to mean two different things. Sex was associated with family, that is something one did with somebody else, whereas, sexuality symbolised the true essence of the individual, the core of identity. Only through the process of self-disclosure to a trained expert, that is, therapist, could one hope to have revealed the deep hidden truths about oneself (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982). For Foucault, this process of self-disclosure has echoes of the status and power that the religious confession had enjoyed in the past. However, despite this obvious similarity there is arguably a major difference in relation to legitimacy or authority. While the ultimate authority for the religious lies in God, these new therapies were based in scientific authority, regarded as containing the truth which, unlike religious truth, could, according to scientific discourse, be proven by recourse to the facts.

A Marxist analysis of sexuality, for example, Reich's Repressive Hypothesis, produces a single theory of sexuality related to the development of capitalism. Likewise, the feminist analysis of sexuality relates it to gender. In contrast, Foucault believed in the existence of multiple discourses on sexuality with as Weeks notes, "no single unifying strategy valid for the whole of society" (1989:7). Again, this is consistent with his analysis of power as an entity dispersed throughout society. Foucault cites four discourses through which different practices and techniques of power resulted in specific mechanics of knowledge and power on sex. These discourses, or ways of talking about sexuality, created people as subjects of these discourses who were in turn subjected to their power. Thus an hysterisation of women's bodies creates the hysterical woman; a pedagogisation of children's sex, creates the masturbating child a socialisation of procreative behaviour creates the Malthusian couple; the psychiatrisation of perverse pleasures creates the perverse adult (Foucault, 1979).

While remaining true to the belief that all sex had an underlying biological basis, the sexologists, therapists and experts of this period argued that this instinct could be subjected to distortion or perversion, leading to sexual abnormality and deviance. Thus, these discourses contained an implicit moral judgement about what was right and
wrong, acceptable or unacceptable. Indeed the task of sexology became one of developing schemes and categories of anomalies and perversions that were, in turn, applied to people's identities. Returning to the issue of identity, which is central to this thesis, Foucault contends that sexual behaviour has always been subject to sanctions and regulations. However, for the first time, sexual behaviour through discourse was constructed to represent the true nature and identity of an individual. Same-sex sexual behaviour was indicative of a homosexual identity while, in contrast, sexual behaviour between adults of the opposite sex was indicative of a heterosexual identity. This resulted in homosexuals being regarded as a separate species. As all behaviour was placed within a scale of normal to pathological, the assumption was that once a perversion was identified, corrective treatment could be given to eliminate it. For Foucault, this resulted in the connection of the body, the new human sciences and the demands for regulation and surveillance, so that power and pleasure (knowledge and sex) meshed with each other. Homosexuality was regarded as a perversion, thus legitimating its regulation and surveillance whether overtly as in the case of legal sanctions against male homosexuality, or covertly, as in the invisibility of lesbianism and the promotion of marriage and motherhood. As, Weeks (1989) notes, this very construction of the homosexual as a separate species led (eventually) to men and women organising and resisting this very pathologisation of their sexual behaviour.

As already stated, individuals exposed to authoritarian experts, their deepest hidden sexual fantasies and practices through the confession, in an attempt to know themselves. For Foucault, this confession was fundamental to the discipline and control of bodies, populations and, ultimately society. Unlike the repressive technologies of discipline (see Discipline and Punish, 1977) directed at the working classes, these technologies of the self, directed at the middle classes, were based on talking (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982).

Although Foucault's history of sexuality exposes the relationship between power-knowledge in the construction of discourse, he argues that this remains hidden. This is due to modern notions of power in which the discovery of truth stands in opposition to power and will ultimately lead to liberation. It is in this way that Foucault argues that power is dispersed throughout society and is produced through everyday social practices in which all people take part.
This brief introduction to Foucault’s analysis of the discursive construction of sexual objects provides the framework for my own analysis of this subject. My own analysis involves the examination of the lesbian object in discourses that utilise a concept of the natural, biological or psychological as a causal factor in human behaviour. This begins by looking at each of the different discourses before concluding with an examination of the way in which gender is theorised in these different discourses.

2.3 The biological construction of homosexuality

This section looks at the discourse that claims that homosexuality either has an individual biological basis or that any investigation into the causality of homosexuality should include a consideration of the biological make-up of the individual. Evidence of this discourse can be found in material published over the last 130 years, from Kraft Ebing’s study *Psychopathia Sexualis* first published in 1882 to more recent work including Bailey and Pillard (1991), Copeland and Hamer (1994), Hamer (1995) and Le Vay (1993).

Despite prioritising biology, this discourse does not completely exclude the consideration of other factors that might explain the existence of homosexuality. For example, some of the early sexologists distinguished between ‘real’ homosexuality, which has a biological basis, and ‘pseudo’ homosexuality originating in psychological processes or single sex situations, such as schools, prisons and even the 19th century women’s movement. Sexologists like Ellis (1897) warned that if women were to achieve equality then there was a danger they would no longer need men and would turn to women for emotional and sexual relationships. Furthermore, in the 20th century scientists looking at hormonal explanations for homosexuality acknowledge that hormones on their own may not provide a sufficient explanation for homosexuality but should be considered alongside other explanations:

> It seems axiomatic that real advance will require a multidisciplinary approach involving the respective skills of psychologists, physiologists, endocrinologists and possibly other specialists. (Cooper, 1974:2)

A third approach maintains a strict biological explanation for homosexuality. This is evident in the work of sexologists such as Carpenter and Hirschfeld (Carpenter, 1908; Haire, 1934; Hirschfeld, 1958) yet also finds some currency in recent work by Le Vay (1993). A fourth and final approach can be found in recent ‘gay gene’ research (for

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*This argument is explored in detail in Chapter 3, Section 3.4.1: Application to an analysis of lesbianism.*
example, Bailey and Pillard 1991; Copeland and Hamer 1994; Hamer, 1995) which argues that the causation of homosexuality cannot simply be explained in terms of biology. Thus Hamer writes:

Genes are hardware...the data of life's experiences are processed through the sexual software into the circuits of identity. I suspect the sexual software is a mixture of both genes and environment, in much the same way the software of a computer is a mixture of what's installed at the factory and what's added by the user. (Hamer, 1995:26)

Despite these differences, there is unity in the belief that homosexuality probably has a biological basis, even if biology cannot fully account for the existence of same sex desire.

2.3.1 The status of homosexuality

Nevertheless, it is possible to detect two opposing views regarding the status of homosexuality. The first approach regards homosexuality as a biological deviation from an essential and more authentic heterosexuality. Thus, the tendency is to regard it as a pathology which may or may not be treatable (for example Kraft-Ebing, 1882/1965; Gartrell, 1977). Kraft-Ebing believed that lesbianism was due to 'cerebral anomalies' furthermore, that it was a sign of 'an inherited diseased condition of the central nervous system' and a 'functional sign of degeneration' (Kraft-Ebing cited in Faderman, 1985:241).

The second approach is to regard the homosexual simply as being biologically different from the heterosexual, and not to attach any notion of pathology to this (for example Ellis, 1897/1911; Carpenter, 1908; Bloch, 1908; Hirschfeld, 1958; Cooper, 1974; Le Vay, 1993). Hirschfeld, a strong advocate of this position, writes:

That homosexuality is constitutional is further apparent from the fact that it is closely bound up with the very essence of the personality. The homosexual man and women differ from the heterosexual man and woman not only in the direction of their sex urge but also by the singularity of their being. (Hirschfeld, 1958:147-48)

While not dismissing the importance of this distinction, it is apparent that both approaches conceptualise homosexuality as a discrete sexual identity, reflecting the essence of the individual. Since the early days of sexology, the advancement of scientific and technological understanding has resulted in increasingly 'sophisticated' biological explanations for homosexuality. The early sexologists (Kraft-Ebing, 1882/1965; Ellis, 1897/1911; Bloch, 1908; Carpenter, 1908; Hirschfeld, 1958) could only suggest possible biological 'causes' for homosexuality. While 20th century
Developments led research to focus initially on the possible effect of hormones on sexual behaviour (Foss, 1951; Griffiths, 1974; Gartrell et al. 1977; Gartrell, 1982), genetic explanations or a focus on a genetic explanation for homosexuality have become the norm more recently (for example Bailey and Pillard, 1991; Copeland and Hamer 1994; Hamer, 1995; Le Vay, 1993). This last type of explanation is part of the general growth in genetic technology and a growing belief that much of our social behaviour is genetically determined, thereby rendering obsolete social explanations. Thus, in relation to homosexuality, the social context, which led to the polarisation of society into heterosexual and homosexual, is ignored. Instead, as Foucault argues, such sexual categories are seen as a true representation of groups of people. Likewise, while Le Vay, who identifies as gay, does not advocate the genetic elimination of homosexuality, it is possible that such an explanation could lead to demands for the elimination of a 'gay' gene.

While much of this research acknowledges that, at present, there is inconclusive proof concerning the aetiology of homosexuality, essentialist notions of masculinity and femininity nevertheless dominate. Thus, in the work of the early sexologists, the use of such terms as 'invert' (Ellis, 1897/1911), 'intermediate sex' (Carpenter, 1908) or 'third sex' (Hirschfeld, 1958), signify the homosexual as one who has the body of one sex but the mind of the other. Thus, they are something other than man or woman:

It is beginning to be recognised that the sexes do not or should not normally form two groups hopelessly isolated in habit and feeling from each other, but that they rather represent the two poles of one group which is the human race; so that while certainly the extreme specimens at either pole are vastly divergent, there are great numbers in the middle region who (though differing corporeal as men and women) are by emotion and temperament very near to each other. We all know women with a strong dash of masculine temperament, and we all know men whose almost feminine sensibility and intuition seem to belie their bodily form. Nature, it might appear, in mixing the elements which go to compose each individual, does not always keep her two groups of ingredients - which represent the two sexes - properly apart, but often throws them crosswise in a somewhat baffling manner, now this way and now that. (Carpenter, 1908:17)

While the focus this century on hormonal explanations may dismiss the notion of a third sex, the idea that possible 'hormone imbalances' may account for homosexuality is again reliant on essentialist notions of masculinity and femininity. For example, while Gartrell (1982), in a review of the research conducted in this area, acknowledges that much of the research is flawed, she maintains that two central questions concerning female homosexuality and hormones need to be answered:
Do lesbians have higher testosterone measurements than heterosexual women [and] Do excesses or deficiencies of hormones of the foetus in the uterus lead to adult homosexual behaviour? (Gartrell, 1982:169)

This not only raises questions about the social construction of the body but also raises questions about the meaning of 'maleness' and 'femaleness', which are worth commenting on here. The belief that homosexuality may be the result of an imbalance of hormones assumes that hormones are responsible for the direction of our sexual drive. Given the suggestion that there is a link between sex and sexual identity, this would imply that hormones not only have a sex but they also have a sexual identity which, when mixed in the 'right' combination will result in a natural, normal and authentic heterosexuality. Hence, the focus on the asocial biologically constructed individual is based on a conflation of sex, gender appropriate behaviour and sexual identity. In relation to lesbian identity, this raises questions about the notion of being a woman. That is, in order to be counted as an authentic woman, does one have to engage in heterosexual relationships? Moreover, if one engages in same sex relationships, does one cease to be an authentic woman and belong instead to a 'third sex'? Where does this leave the woman who identifies as bisexual?

To conclude, this section has examined a discourse that, over the last 130 years, has sought to locate the causes of homosexuality within the body of the individual. While remaining consistent to many of the early ideas of the sexologists, this discourse has nevertheless developed in the light of both scientific advancement and other competing perspectives on homosexuality. Le Vay explicates the connections between his own work and that of the early sexologists in a passage from his book The Sexual Brain (1993) in which he acknowledges the debt he owes to early sexologists such as Ulrich and Ellis and Hirschfeld. All three men suggest a biological basis for homosexuality while dismissing any notion of pathology. Writing about Ulrich, whom Le Vay describes as 'the first gay activist', he states:

Ulrich's ideas have formed the basis for most subsequent thinking and biological research on this topic. I believe that there is an important kernel of truth in his ideas, although, a century and more lately this still remains to be proven. (Le Vay, 1993: 112)

2.4 The psychological construction of homosexuality

The second discourse rejects a biological basis for homosexuality in favour of a psychological explanation. As already noted, some of the early sexologists did not rule out psychological explanations for some forms of homosexuality. However, the creation
of the homosexual as a psychological object owes its origins to Freud's psychoanalytic theory on sexual development. This suggests a sequential systematic model, where an individual progresses from an initial bisexuality or polymorphous sexuality in early childhood through to the development of mature sexuality, which is viewed as the achievement of a stable heterosexual identity. Within this model, homosexuality is viewed as a temporary stage of development, usually occurring during adolescence, on the path towards heterosexuality. This implies that those who identify as homosexual in adulthood are 'fixed' on an early and hence immature phase of sexual development. Alternatively, they have, due to psychological disturbance, 'regressed' back to this early phase of sexual development. Either way, homosexuality is located within a discourse of deviance, psychopathology and illness.

While dismissing the biological explanation of the sexologists, this discourse does share similarities with this perspective in two ways. Firstly it makes a distinction between 'real' homosexuality and 'pseudo' homosexuality. However, the 'real' homosexual is the psychological object while the 'pseudo' homosexual only engages in homosexual activity when a preferred heterosexual alternative is not available. Secondly, this level of explanation focuses on the individual, although in this case it is the psychology of the individual.

While the central focus remains the psychologically disturbed individual, material published over the last fifteen years has challenged the pathologisation of homosexuality from within a psychoanalytic discourse (for example, see Binson, 1995; Groth, 1978; Kalman and Waughfield, 1987; Kurdek, 1986; McNiell, 1998; Townsend, 1995). This challenge testifies to the power of the 1973 ruling by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) which stated that homosexuality should no longer be regarded as a mental illness, which by definition should receive psychiatric treatment. Following a long and protracted debate amongst members of the APA, the trustees ruled in 1973 that homosexuality should be reclassified as a sexual orientation disturbance (White, 1979). Of this category the APA write:

This category is for individuals whose sexual interests are directed primarily towards people of the same sex who are either disturbed by, in conflict with, or wish to change their sexual orientation. This diagnostic category is distinguished from homosexuality, which by itself does not necessarily constitute a psychiatric disorder. (APA, 1973:1)
The ruling itself was influenced by the growth of gay liberation and feminist discourse, however, this is not to dismiss the continuing power of a discourse that created homosexuality as a deviation or perversion and the effect that this discourse has on those women who self-identify as lesbian. Many psychiatrists continue to treat homosexuality per se as a mental disorder and there continues to be a focus on providing counselling and treatment aimed at converting homosexuals to a heterosexual lifestyle (for example Fine, 1987; Marmor, 1985; Moberley 1983; Socarides, 1995; van den Aardweg, 1986; Wilson, 1988).

The pathologisation of homosexuality continues to appear in textbooks or training manuals for psychiatric nursing. Here, they have taken unreconstructed material from an earlier period and reproduced it (for example Burrs and Andrews, 1987; Maddison et al 1985; Irving, 1982). Thus, while there appears to be a counter-discourse, which is actively challenging the traditional construction of homosexuality, the traditional discourse retains a power. Furthermore, empirical research has found that lesbian clients who present with identical symptoms to their heterosexual counterparts are viewed with greater negativity (Levy, 1978). Likewise, other studies (for example, Garfinkle and Morin, 1978; White 1979) suggest that an awareness of a lesbian identity affects clinical assessment, diagnosis and subsequent treatment. The findings of these studies when viewed alongside the current analysis suggest that the construction of the lesbian in psychoanalytic discourse has a material effect on the psychotherapeutic relationship.

2.5 Gender and the lesbian

One of the central concerns of this study is to do with the way in which gender structures the stories told about lesbianism. The relationship between gender and sexuality is present in the discourses examined in this chapter. It should be noted that in comparison to men, women are in general given less attention than men are in writings on homosexuality. This section begins by examining some of the reasons for this invisibility. While the invisibility of women may pass without comment, most writers make specific reference to the lack of research on lesbianism in the literature in general. This takes two forms: firstly as a plea for further research on lesbianism and secondly as an explicit justification for their own lack of attention to women. This justification is premised on the argument that as lesbians face few legal sanctions they therefore face less social condemnation than their male counterparts (Kraft-Ebing, 1882/1965; Haire, 1934; West, 1955; Storr, 1964; Chesser, 1971; Ellis and Abarbanel, 1973). This relates to two further points, the first based on the perception that the incidence of
homosexuality is lower amongst women than men. On this basis, it is suggested that relationships between women are more likely to operate at a psychological or emotional level rather than a physical level (Ellis, 1897/1911; Haire, 1934; West, 1955; Storr, 1964; Randell, 1973). Therefore, relationships between women are likely to be less sexual and less publicly open than male relationships and in consequence receive little social disapproval. The reason given to account for this rests on essentialist notions of male and female sexual behaviour. For example, Kraft-Ebing, accounting for the lack of research on what he terms 'sexually perverse women', writes:

Because woman (whether sexually inverted or not) is by nature not as sensual, and certainly not as aggressive in the pursuit of sexual needs as man, for which reason the inverted sexual intercourse is less noticeable, and by outsiders is considered mere friendship. (Kraft-Ebing, 1882/1965:262)

While Ellis and Abarbanel (1973), writing 89 years later from a psychological perspective utilise similar essentialist notions of male and female sexual behaviour to account for the apparent lower incidence of same-sex behaviour between women:

Male sexual demands, particularly during puberty and adolescence, are often so imperious that they require a search for an outlet, almost any outlet; while female sexual demands are usually less imperious and may more easily be suppressed or repressed. (Ellis and Abarbanel, 1973)

Moreover, material published before the 1970s make a special plea for the need for more research on lesbians. This plea is based on the premise that sexual relationships between women disrupt the social fabric of society and hence must be attended to in order for them to be prevented. For example, Caprio, writing from a psychoanalytic perspective, states that:

Lesbianism is capable of influencing the stability of our social structure. Much of the incompatibility between the sexes is closely allied to this problem. Unconscious or latent homosexuality in women affects their personalities and constitutes an important factor in marital unhappiness being responsible in part, for our present increasing divorce rate. (Caprio, 1957:viii)

Likewise, Socarides writes, from the same perspective:

Female homosexuality has important and significant social and psychological effects. It is severely disruptive of the family unity. Any child of an overtly homosexual mother is exposed to a variety of psychological traumata of intense proportions. The disorder can in actuality, destroy the family structure, produce divorce and cause great unhappiness. Female homosexuality is one of the greatest causes of frigidity. (Socarides, 1965:467)

Such sentiments make a special plea for lesbianism to be fully incorporated into these disciplines, and hence be accorded the same degree of seriousness as male homosexuality. It is important to acknowledge that such pleas were made at a time when women were increasingly demanding greater equality in both the private and
public arena. In the 19th century, sexologists such as Ellis (1897/1911) warned that if women were to achieve equality then there was a danger that they would no longer need men. This would mean that they would turn to women for emotional and sexual relationships. In the 20th century, psychoanalytic discourse made a similar case. Arguably, what lies at the heart of these arguments, is the need to maintain patriarchal control of women's sexuality. Thus, these grand stories or narratives of lesbianism are framed by gender rules, which are necessary for the maintenance of social order.

Finally, another important difference between the treatment of men and women lies in the way discussion of male homosexuality stands on its own, while female homosexuality is invariably dealt with in a comparative way to male homosexuality. That is, discussions of male homosexuality do not refer to female homosexuality, while discussion of female homosexuality is structured by references to male homosexuality. This results in a situation where models of male homosexuality are used to discuss female homosexuality.

From this description of the location of the female homosexual in the different discursive stories identified, we can see the beginnings of the creation of a lesbian object. That is, a lesbian object who, because she belongs to the category of woman, is defined as being less sexual than someone who belongs to the category of man. Hence, the related discourse of gender is employed to construct the sexual reality or sexual possibilities available for someone who fits the category of lesbian. However, does this 'asexual' woman not contradict the reasons behind the case made out for the necessity for more research in this area? While on the surface this appears to represent a contradiction, it may be more useful to view it as a way of maintaining power. That is, in order to retain control it has been necessary to construct discursively women as sexually passive. This would make theoretical sense when viewed in conjunction with the treatment of lesbians who are regarded sexually active or as sexual initiators. Women who transgress the rigid gender codes of sexual behaviour by being overtly or actively sexual are designated 'masculine.' This further reinforces the strict gender rules that construct sexual identities and practices. Hence, what may at first appear to be a contradiction may actually represent an outcome. The discursive construction of women as insatiable sexual creatures leads to the discursive construction of women as sexually disinterested. This justifies the concern displayed about those women who transgress
gender rules. This point is explored in greater depth below through looking at the relationship between gender and sexuality in psychoanalytic discourse.

2.5.1 Transgressing boundaries: The 'masculine' lesbian

The construction of the lesbian in psychoanalytic discourse is underpinned by the related discourse of gender. This is particularly apparent in the conceptualisation of the woman who transgresses gender boundaries. While the above statements referring to female homosexuals are applicable at a general level, there is one notable exception to the concept of the asexual woman: the 'masculine lesbian.' While texts usually begin with a general description of homosexuality that is applicable to both men and women, they then proceed to clarify the issue of female homosexuality. This can take various forms, for example, discussion of the different words used to denote female homosexuality, such as, 'lesbian' or 'dyke', to explanations for the lack of research on female homosexuality. This leads to the concept of the 'masculine' lesbian. For example, Ellis and Abarbanel write:

The female homosexual has been called a dyke or a butch with the latter term reserved for those who display considerable outward manifestations of masculinity. (Ellis and Abarbanel, 1973:486)

When there are masculine or active partners, they are called 'butch' or 'bull dyke' and they tend to wear the least feminine of female attire - plainly cut dresses or costumes, thick stockings, heavy shoes, often collar and tie. Cosmetics and scent are not used and underwear is of the plainest. Some of these active partners wear male clothes, including male underwear. They may cut their hair short, wear heavy wristwatches. (Randell, 1973:45)

His lesbian counterpart, called a 'dyke', 'stud', or 'butch', flaunts her masculinity, even to the point of trying to look like a man. (Coleman, 1976:590)

References to 'dyke' or 'butch' establishes the idea that some women who have relationships with other women adopt a 'masculine' style of behaviour. This introduction of the binary opposites of masculine and feminine is based on a heterosexual framework that is simply transferred to relationships between women. As discussed earlier, it is assumed that heterosexual relations are based on a natural active-passive dichotomy. Application of this heterosexual framework to relationships between women results in seeking out behaviour that can be defined as masculine, thus permitting heterosexuality as the norm to again remain intact and closed to question. Hence, masculine behaviour is clearly defined as being sexually active, while in contrast feminine behaviour is regarded as being naturally sexually passive (see below for a full discussion of the 'feminine' lesbian). It is this 'masculine lesbian', the one who transgresses the rigid boundaries of gender roles, who not only attracts most
disapproval, but is also seen to be most psychologically disturbed. Hence, Storr in 1964 writes:

In many homosexual partnerships, it is obvious that one of the couple plays a dominant role which is more masculine than maternal. Everyone is familiar with the conventional picture of the lesbian who adopts a pseudo-masculine way of dressing and talking, and who appears to despise anything feminine in herself as a weakness. [... ] Increasing psychological sophistication has diminished the numbers of those who display their adoption of the masculine role so blatantly; but there are many women who are more or less identified with the male who do not show this in so obvious a way. (Storr, 1964:77-78)

It is clear that gender appropriate behaviour is seen to reflect the 'true' inner identity of an individual. Furthermore, gender appropriate behaviour is directly linked with heterosexuality. Thus, Kremer (1969) writes:

Gender identity involves at least three distinguishable components: 1) recognition and association of self with the class of males or females; 2) entering into and performing certain culturally determined, institutionalised roles and; 3) engaging in heterosexual relations. (Kremer, 1969:58)

Within this gender-bound context it can be seen that many women who transgress sexual boundaries by choosing to have relationships with other women are characterised as behaving in a masculine way, that is, adopting male attire and being the sexual initiator or aggressor. For some, evidence of this masculine way of behaving can be traced back to a woman's childhood:

Tom-boyish activity is often found in the childhood of lesbian girls, with a predilection for boy's games coupled with a disparagement of dolls and feminine activities. Such girls prefer to wear jeans, shorts and to play football, climb trees and to fight boys. In the lower social classes they may join boy's gangs, go drinking and indulge in acts of hooliganism, crime and drunkenness which lead them into conflict with the civil authorities. (Randell, 1973:44)

While the explanations given by the early sexologists for the existence of the 'masculine lesbian' were based on notions of congenital inversion, those operating within a psychoanalytic framework produce more 'sophisticated' explanations to account for why women may identify with masculinity. These include the view that women envy men, for example, Alfred Alder's concept of 'masculine protest', or Freud's concept of 'penis envy.' Enshrined in these beliefs is the view that while women are envious of male superiority, they nevertheless try to emulate it by adopting male attitudes and behaviour. However, this is further complicated by their denigration of men. As Storr writes:

One of the most fascinating and perplexing aspects of feminine behaviour is that women without men, or women whose emotional contact with men is deficient tend to both express contempt for men and yet also to behave in some ways like the sex they affect to despise. Such behaviour can generally be traced back to childhood, for very many girls go through a stage of development in which they
openly avow their desire to be boys, want to wear masculine clothes, and long to
take part in the games and activities which tradition assigns to the boy rather than
the girl. In the eyes of the child, boys are more powerful, more independent, and
more adventurous. Since every normal child wishes to grow up and be free of the
trammels of adult authority, it is natural enough that both boys and girls should
reach towards the power that they feel to be lacking in themselves and that appears
to belong predominantly to the male. (Storr, 1964: 78)

Chesser (1971) offer an explanation that takes into account sociological as well as
psychological factors:

It is perhaps putting it too strongly to say that all lesbians hate men. Many of them
do, and practically all have an anti-masculine bias [...] From childhood a girl is
made conscious that in many ways boys are regarded as the superior sex. It is even
more evident later on that she lives in a masculine-dominated world. Resentment of
this situation may be projected on men as such while compensating at the same
time by playing a masculine role as far as possible. Thus an unconscious hostility
to men, although originally precipitated by the family environment, is also due to
sociological causes. (Chesser, 1971:175)

While on the surface this explanation may appear to take into account the unequal
distribution of power between women and men, it is from within a framework that
views relationships between women as deviant and abnormal. The implication is that
only the woman who fails to develop normally will be discontent with the unequal
power distribution between women and men. A ‘normal’ woman, that is, a heterosexual
woman, will happily accept gender relations, presumably regarding them as natural and
normal. As Romm (1964) argues, most women are able to neutralise their envy of men
and gain satisfaction in their life through gender appropriate behaviour such as:

being a wife and a helpmate, running a home adequately and bearing and rearing
children. (Romm 1964:291)

In this way, lesbianism is defined in relation to men and not women. Women are
lesbians because they hate men, because they envy men's power and because they want
to be like men, not because they choose to have relationships with women. Within this
scenario, lesbianism is regarded as a deficit, as a failure to adapt to the natural role
allocated to woman.

Complementing the 'masculine' lesbian and, in keeping with the construction of sexual
knowledge based on binary oppositions, there is the construction of the 'feminine'
lesbian which in many ways is regarded as being similar to the heterosexual women in
relation to her role in sexual practices. As Randell in 1973 writes:

The passive counterpart to the active lesbian is usually indistinguishable from the
so-called normally orientated woman. A 'bitch' lesbian does not find another 'bitch'
lesbian attractive. Often the passive lesbian is actively bisexual, for she is as
attractive to a man as she is to a lesbian, although she may prefer the sexual
attentions of a female. (Randell, 1973:45)
For other writers the very existence of the 'feminine' lesbian is treated as a source of puzzlement, because they cannot understand why, if she can behave in a 'feminine' way, she can not have 'normal' sexual relationships with men:

The 'feminine' homosexual acts the role of a female. The question immediately arises: If she is able to act the female role in the homosexual situation, what prevents her from acting similarly in a heterosexual situation? (Wilbur, 1964:273)

It would appear that within psychoanalytic discourse the question of gender is conflated with heterosexual identity. Thus to be regarded as 'feminine', that is, to be regarded as a woman, one must willingly enter into a relationship with a man and perform the role of passive recipient of the man's active sexual advances. Within this scenario the 'feminine' lesbian appears to contradict this basic rule of sexual behaviour and is thus a cause for concern. Many writers, in an attempt to make sense of this from within a gendered and heterosexualised framework, argue that the 'butch' lesbian in her imitation of masculine behaviour often sets out to seduce the weaker, more pliant 'feminine' woman. For example, West, commenting on the research of a colleague writes:

Dr. Albertine Winner, while agreeing that promiscuous lesbians are comparatively rare birds, at least in England, refers to them as particularly dangerous because they are usually dominant, forceful personalities who may seduce weaker, more pliant women. Occasionally, the 'butch' type, in pursuit of her masculine image, will deliberately aim to 'lay' as many women as possible in imitation of the male philanderer. (West, 1955:67)

Within the texts used in this analysis, the 'feminine' lesbian is often dismissed for being similar to the heterosexual women. This inability to move beyond a gendered and heterosexualised framework results in the conclusion that these women are not real lesbians. This leaves the 'masculine' lesbian as the real lesbian and, by implication, a non-woman. In relation to changing social attitudes towards women and sexuality in general, it should be acknowledged that many of the more recent texts used in this analysis, particularly those published post 1980, do not use the concept of 'masculine' or 'feminine' to the same degree as earlier texts. While the earlier texts appear preoccupied with the concept of the 'masculine' lesbian as a way of explaining female homosexuality, later books recognise that such an approach only creates and reinforces crude stereotypes. However, this does not mean that such stereotypes are completely dismissed, but it is generally recognised that they may only be applicable to a small number of women who have relationships with other women.

2.6 Summary and conclusions

Before moving on to look at the development of a sociological approach to homosexuality, it is important to assess the implications of the discursive inventions of
lesbian identity examined in this chapter. Endorsing Foucault’s argument, the
discussion in this chapter has shown the relationship that is constructed between sexual
behaviour and sexual identity. Thus the term lesbian, in as much as it refers to a woman
who has sexual relationships with other women, is a sexual classification. However, this
statement does need some qualification, that is, the different discourses note the
existence of ‘situational homosexuality’, which is regarded as temporary and
circumstantial. This construct assumes the existence of an overwhelming sexual drive
that must find an outlet. It also serves to reinforce the relationship between sexual
behaviour and sexual identity. That is, given a free choice people would choose to have
sexual relationships with people of the opposite sex, thus maintaining the link between
sexual behaviour and sexual identity.

As Foucault highlighted, what lies at the heart of these different discursive
constructions is a struggle for the power to represent the ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’ of
lesbian identity. This in turn reflects on wider social, political and historical issues
concerning the invention and perpetuation of all sexual identities. For in defining
lesbianism as either a biological or a psychological sexual entity, its opposite, female
heterosexuality is also being defined. Therefore, through an examination of the different
discursive constructions of lesbian identity it is also possible to gain an understanding
of the discursive construction of other sexualities.

The relevance of this ‘power struggle’ to my own research is that it highlights at least
three main issues. Firstly, that lesbian identity is a relatively new concept, which has a
specific historical and social context. Secondly, the debate over the meaning of lesbian
identity illustrates the way in which the lesbian does not represent an eternal and
universal truth. The final point is that lesbian identity is a site of dispute and struggle
for power, which is linked to wider struggles concerning the classification of all sexual
behaviour. This has resulted in a situation where it becomes more theoretically valid to
talk of lesbian identity in the plural rather than the singular. The construction and
existence of multiple lesbian identities have replaced the construction of a lesbian
identity.
Chapter Three: The Sociology of Homosexuality

Emotional relationships between women, whether or not they have involved physical expression, have tended to remain invisible to historians and sociologists alike; it is essential that notions of 'the lesbian' are re-conceptualised within the context of the oppressed social position of woman and not as 'female homosexual.' (Faraday: 1981:112)

A poststructuralist queer theory, then, offers sociology an approach to studying the emergence and reproduction of heterosexuality. Rather than designating gays, lesbians, and/or bisexuals as the only subjects or communities worthy of investigation, a poststructuralist sociology would make sense of the manner in which heterosexuality is itself a social construct. (Namaste, 1994:227)

3.1 Introduction

The first chapter examined the development of the Gay Liberation Movement at the end of the 1960s. This movement challenged the pathological definitions of homosexuality examined in the last chapter, while at the same time endorsing the view that homosexuality is innate, fixed and beyond choice. Likewise, the simultaneous re-emergence of the Women’s Movement led to the development of feminist-informed accounts of lesbianism, which prioritised the relationship between gender and sexuality. According to Plummer (1981), these social movements, alongside the Black Liberation Movement, helped to create an academic climate conducive to the research of oppressed groups in society. Thus, in contrast to the long history of medical intervention, the sociological study of homosexuality is a relatively new phenomenon. The Kinsey Reports (1948 and 1953) and the development of the labelling perspective provided the catalyst for sociologically informed studies (Plummer, 1981; Nardi and Schneider, 1998).

It is within this context that this chapter evaluates the sociological theorisation of homosexual identity in general and lesbian identity in particular. This critique will show that initially sociological theorisation focused on male homosexuality and was, until the middle 1970s theoretically informed by the labelling approach (Faraday, 1981; Plummer, 1981; Nardi and Schneider, 1998). Since then feminist researchers (for example, Faraday, 1981; Kitzinger, 1987; MacKinnon, 1979; Rich, 1980; Richardson, 1981; Wilton, 1995) and, more recently, queer theorists (Duggan, 1992; Epstein, 1994; Namaste, 1994; Seidman, 1994; Warner, 1993) have added their voices to the theoretical debate concerning sexuality. While supporting the social constructionist
implications of labelling theory, both sets of theorists have identified specific problems in relation to the way in which it is used to theorise sexuality. These criticisms are explored through the discussion of three inter-related points: firstly the way in which the specific experiences of lesbians are ignored; secondly, that gender and heterosexuality are inadequately theorised; and thirdly that insufficient attention has been paid to historical and social factors. However, these criticisms do not negate the fundamental contribution of this approach to the development of a sociological understanding of homosexuality. In conclusion, it is argued that a synthesis of the more traditional sociological approach to homosexual identity with feminism and queer theory will provide an appropriate theoretical framework for analysis of the data collected for this thesis. This will enable a closer examination of the relationship between gender and sexuality as well as the relationship between heterosexuality and homosexuality. This chapter begins by outlining symbolic interactionism and labelling theory.

3.2 Introduction to symbolic interactionism and labelling theory

Although largely based on the writings of G. H. Mead and W. I. Thomas, many of the underlying principles of symbolic interactionism can be traced back to Weber. Through the study of everyday interaction, symbolic interactionism highlights the significance of language and cultural symbols to indicate intent and meaning. Thus, human behaviour is created in the very process of giving a situation meaning. It is these meanings, ideas and symbols, which constitute our experience of the world. Starting from the premise that all human thought and experience is the outcome of social interaction between individuals, Mead (1934/1962) observed that interaction was only possible through the use of shared symbols, with language being the most important. In imposing a meaning, a symbol, for example, a word, simultaneously excludes other meanings. These symbols, through conferring a meaning and an order on the natural world, facilitate the possibility of meaningful interaction.

This fundamental concern with subjectivity arises from the assumption that all human behaviour is dependent on the way in which we interpret the situation we find ourselves in. By arguing that social reality can only be known through understanding the point of view of social actors, that is their meanings and definitions of situation, symbolic interactionism is decreeing that all action is meaningful. Thus, in order to understand this interaction it is necessary to be able to interpret the meanings which the actors give to their activities. As W. I. Thomas wrote, "if men define situations as real, they are real
in their consequences” (Quoted in Cuff and Payne, 1990:152). Nevertheless, these meanings are not fixed entities; in part, they depend on the context of the interaction and in part they are created, developed, adapted and changed within the actual process of interaction. Thus, interaction involves understanding and interpreting the meanings and intentions of others, which is made possible by the use of common symbols. Furthermore, this understanding has consequences for the action that an individual takes which in turn, is dependent upon an individual’s self-concept. In order to understand fully, it is necessary to examine what Mead had to say about the concept of self.

Ritzer (1996) states that for Mead the self is about “the ability to take oneself as an object; the self is the peculiar ability to be both subject and object” (Ritzer, 1996:341). Mead locates this understanding of the self in the social processes involved in human communication, in social interaction with others. Thus he claims that both animals and new-born babies do not have a self and, furthermore, that the self is dialectically related to the mind. For Mead, the body on its own is not a self, but is able to become one when the mind is developed. Nevertheless, while discussion of the mind directs us to focus on the mental processes involved in the development of self, it should be noted that for Mead these mental processes are social processes, involving social experience and social interaction. Elaborating on this, Mead (1934/1962) argues that the development of self is achieved through "role-taking", that is, the ability to understand others and respond appropriately. Human action is a continuous process of interpretation with each person taking the role of the other. In short, the development of self is reliant on reflexivity:

It is by means of reflexiveness – the turning-back of the experience of the individual upon himself – that the whole social process is thus brought into the experience of the individuals involved in it; it is by such means, which enable the individual to take the attitude of the other towards himself, that the individual is able consciously to adjust himself to that process, and to modify the resultant process in any given social act in terms of his adjustment to it. (Mead, 1934/1962:134)

Ritzer (1996) states that it is this understanding of the reflexive self that for Mead explains people’s ability to communicate with others. Building on this, Mead claims that the development of self has two aspects: the “I” and the “me”. The social processes that go on between these two make up the self. For Mead, the “I” is the instant response that an individual will give to others; it is not based on thought and is unpredictable.
Likewise, the reaction to that response is also unpredictable. Given the nature of “I”, it is not possible to know it in advance, but only from our memories.

In order to fully understand this distinction it is necessary to look at how Mead defines the “me.” Mead writes that the “me” is “the organised set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes” (Mead, 1934/1962:175). Thus it is the self as perceived by the generalised other. While people are not aware of the “I”, they are conscious of the “me.” It is this understanding of the two aspects of the self, the “I” and the “me”, where there is only awareness of the “me” that leads Mead to explore the issue of social control. That is, the ‘me’ demonstrates the way in which society controls the individual through inducing conformity in that individual. While maintaining this position, Mead concedes that at a pragmatic level this conformity serves a purpose in that it enables the individual to live in the social world. In addition, Mead suggests that while the “me” might produce conformity, the “I” – the unexpected and unpredictable – enables change to happen and thus prevents stagnation. Thus, both aspects of the self are a part of the whole social process which allows individuals and society to function in an effective manner (Ritzer, 1996).

In the 1960’s, this broad theoretical perspective provided an alternative to functionalism, which had theoretically dominated sociological inquiry for some twenty years. Advocates of symbolic interactionism found it particularly useful in the study of deviant behaviour. The traditional, that is, functionalist approach concentrates on the way in which pressure, motivation, or social forces contribute to an individual behaving in a deviant manner. In contrast, the interactionist perspective focuses on the interaction between deviants and those who label them as deviant (Downes and Rock, 1988). This focus enables new questions to be asked: What is involved in the process that leads to an individual or a group being labelled deviant? Why does this occur? What effect does this have on future behaviour? Howard Becker encapsulates this approach to deviance, known as the labelling perspective in his now classic statement:

*Social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labelling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the acts the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of the rules and sanctions to an "offender". The deviant is one to whom the label has successfully been applied; deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label. (Becker, 1963:9)*

For Becker, there is no such thing as an intrinsically deviant act: acts only become deviant when labelled so. Likewise, a person who commits a deviant act only becomes a
deviant through the public application of a label. Hence, deviance is the outcome, or the product, of an interactive process between the potential deviant and the agents of social control. Becker argues that this results in a person being solely defined in terms of their deviance. That is, the deviant label (e.g. thief, drug addict, homosexual), becomes their 'master status', in as much as a person is known, defined and judged by it. In this situation, an individual’s other statuses, for example, mother, friend and worker, become insignificant. Furthermore, Becker argues that if society’s reaction and treatment of an individual are dependent on their ‘master status’ this will effect an individual’s self-concept. As Mead observed, self-concept is largely dependent on the responses of others. Thus, a person viewing themselves through their deviant ‘master status’ will be compelled to commit further acts of deviancy. In Becker’s words this leads to a 'self-fulfilling prophesy.‘

Becker describes this as a process, which begins when a person is publicly labelled deviant and, consequently, is social rejected. This promotes the committal of further acts of deviance because:

> The treatment of deviants denies them the ordinary means of carrying on the routines of everyday life open to most people. Because of this denial the deviant must of necessity develop illegitimate routines. (Becker, 1963:1)

This leads to the development of the ‘deviant career’, which is further endorsed when an individual joins an organised deviant group, which sanctions and accepts their deviant identity. The formation of a deviant subculture with its own norms and values enables an individual to feel that their deviant and socially stigmatised identity has a positive value and worth. It is here that individuals are able to develop justifications and accounts for their behaviour.

### 3.3 The development of the sociological study of homosexuality

With its focus on the social construction of deviance and deviant labels, it is not surprising that the labelling perspective gained favour with an emerging sociology of homosexuality. It provided a theoretical basis for those sociologists who wanted to move away from causal explanations for homosexuality, with their essentialist notions of what constitutes normal and natural sexual behaviour. As discussed in the last chapter, such paradigms regard homosexuality as a pathological and individual deviation, which must be controlled (Gagnon and Simon, 1967; McIntosh, 1968; Plummer, 1981).
In contrast, symbolic interactionism and labelling theory offered a new way of looking at homosexuality. Based on the premise that all sexual behaviour is socially constructed, people who engage in homosexual behaviour are labelled deviant due to the reactions of a hostile society. Hence, there is nothing intrinsically deviant about a homosexual identity. According to Plummer (1981), elements of this position are present in Kinsey's pioneering studies of sexual behaviour. These include *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* (1948) and, of particular relevance to my own research, *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female* (1953).

Kinsey’s large scale analysis of human sexual behaviour highlighted the discrepancy between the number of people who either had or continued to engage in same sex behaviour, and the number who identified as homosexual. This led Kinsey to develop a six point sexual continuum, designed to encompass a variety of sexual behaviour ranging from completely heterosexual to completely homosexual. This led to doubts being expressed about the validity of dividing people into homosexual and heterosexual which, as demonstrated, has dominated the modern discourse of sexuality. Based on empirical evidence, Kinsey reasoned that the category ‘homosexual’ should be dismissed because there are only individuals, some of who have had more homosexual experiences than heterosexual and vice-versa. For Kinsey, the development of an exclusive homosexual identity was the outcome of society’s rejection of homosexual behaviour.

This new way of looking at homosexuality provided the catalyst for research over the next twenty years. This included American based studies by Cory (1953, 1964) on male and female homosexuality, and Hooker’s (1958) social psychologically informed empirical research, which argued for the ‘normality’ of homosexuality (Nardi and Schneider, 1998). In Britain, Westwood (1960) looked at the social lives of homosexuals, while Leznoff and Westley (1967) in Canada produced the first study of a gay male community (Plummer, 1981; Nardi and Schneider, 1998). All shared a common purpose: to expose the effect of stigma and social ostracism on the homosexual. The move away from causal explanations enabled research to focus on how:

> Historically produced stigmatising conceptions surrounding same sex experiences have had dramatic consequences for those experiences. (Plummer, 1981:17)
Moreover, it was this position, in conjunction with the growing respectability of a
labelling perspective in sociology in general, which enabled the sociology of
homosexuality to develop in the late 1960s. While remaining at the margins of the
discipline, it has produced work, which has made a major contribution to our
understanding of the social organisation of homosexuality. Such work includes Gagnon,
1997; Humphries, 1980; Irvine, 1990; McIntosh 1968; Plummer, 1975 and 1981; Simon
generally agreed (Faraday, 1981; Nardi and Schneider, 1998; Plummer, 1981; Weeks,
1981, 1998) that The Homosexual Role (1968) by the British sociologist Mary McIntosh
set the focus of the sociological research agenda.

3.3.1 The homosexual role

McIntosh (1968) stated that the very concept of homosexuality as an individual
condition should come under sociological scrutiny because:

This conception and the behaviour it supports operate a form of social control in a
society in which homosexuality is condemned. (McIntosh, 1981:32)

Elaborating on this position and at times demonstrating an almost functionalist
application of labelling theory (Plummer, 1981; Weeks, 1981), McIntosh, echoing
Becker (1963), argues that labelling an individual 'homosexual' acts as a form of social
control on two levels. Firstly, it highlights the boundary between acceptable and
unacceptable sexual behaviour thus acting as a deterrent for people who might simply
drift into engaging in homosexual behaviour, where subsequent acts may lead to the
development of a homosexual career. Secondly, labelling serves to segregate those
people who have already adopted a homosexual identity, which in turn leads to the
formation of a homosexual subculture, with its own rules, norms and values. In this
way, the concept of homosexuality as a condition acts as a deterrent for possible
newcomers and as a device to segregate and reinforce homosexuality in those identified
as deviant.

Furthermore, critical of the ahistoric universalism of the medical model, McIntosh
argues that homosexuality, as we currently experience it in the western world, did not
exist until the 17th century. This is not to infer that people did not engage in same sex
sexual behaviour, nor that this experience is not universal. However, it does suggest that
a specific homosexual role is socially and historically constructed. While not without its
critics, McIntosh's work is generally regarded as a landmark in sociology for its introduction of the 'homosexual category', which served as a basis for further work.¹

Similar status is also given to Gagnon and Simon's (1973) general study of sexuality, which utilises the work of social learning theory and symbolic interactionism; in addition, their work on sexual deviance borrows heavily from the labelling theory. One of the aims of their work is to make ordinary the realm of sexuality thus making its study mundane. As Plummer (1981) notes, in doing so they are arguing for the "ordinariness" of homosexuality; for Gagnon and Simon, it was regarded as different and strange only because of the prejudice and stigma of society.

To summarise thus far, the application of the labelling perspective to homosexuality led to the development of new research agenda in sociology. This focused on the development and nature of deviant labels, the circumstances in which a label became associated with particular conduct, and the consequences for both the individuals labelled and for general society (Plummer 1981). Such questions enabled sociologists to move away from the dominant traditional view of homosexuality as a condition; this resulted in research looking for causes, be they genetic or environmental. As discussed in the next chapter, this paved the way for the empirical study of homosexual identity, community and culture. Despite the distinct sociological advantages that this approach has over the medical model, labelling theory has not been without its critics.

For example, Weeks (1981) raises a number of issues concerning the lack of attention paid by labelling theory to material factors. Thus, he argues that labelling theory fails to explore the relationship between sexual patterns and other social factors. Consequently, symbolic interactionism is unable to account for the effect of race, gender and class on sexual behaviour and identity. Likewise, while acknowledging the unequal division of power that exists in society, the dismissal by labelling theory of a structural analysis leaves it unable to account for structural power. Assessing its political implications Weeks argues that its focus on the way meaning is constructed through social interaction, implies that all that is required to change a meaning is the collective will to

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¹ While Foucault's work *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (1979) makes a similar point, McIntosh's work focuses on homosexuality. As discussed in the last chapter Foucault, focuses on the construction of sexuality as a concept and the implications of this for all of the resultant sexual identities.
do so. Clearly, this idealism ignores the very real issue of power and structural inequality that Weeks highlights. Finally, Weeks is critical of the insufficient attention given to the historical context in which sexual taboos have been constituted. Collectively, these criticisms result in a situation where interactionism:

> stops precisely at the point where theorisation seems essential: at the point of historical determination and ideological structuring in the creation of subjectivity. (Weeks, 1981: 95)

While these criticisms have a wider application beyond the subject of this thesis, when applied to the issue of sexual identity, they illustrate some of the difficulties associated with using a symbolic interactionist approach to study homosexuality. Building on Foucault's analysis of the history of sexuality, it would appear that although symbolic interactionism endorses the view that homosexuality is socially constructed, it is unable to situate this within specific 'regimes of power-knowledge.' Furthermore, and of particular concern to this thesis, is the lack of attention paid, firstly to the relationship between gender and homosexuality and secondly, to the issue of bisexuality. These are some of the issues that both feminism and queer theory have raised in relation to this approach. These concerns are directly related to my own research and need to be explored in detail.

### 3.3.2 Feminist critique of labelling theory

Placing a feminist emphasis on the points raised by Weeks illustrates the problems associated with using symbolic interactionism to understand lesbianism. Viewed simply as a subculture there is a danger of ignoring the diversity of lesbian experience and behaviour. Moreover, the wider implications that lesbianism contains for a society structured by gender and sexuality are rendered invisible (Daly, 1979; Rich, 1980; Faraday, 1981; Jeffreys, 1985; Faderman, 1985; Kitzinger, 1987). Faraday (1981) argues that the sociological study of homosexuality (at the time of writing dominated by the labelling approach) renders invisible the experiences of lesbians, in part due to the essentialist assumptions about women and men held by researchers. For example, Faraday argues that symbolic interactionism unwittingly endorses a view that all men have an innately higher sex drive than all women do. This results in an assumption that lesbians will be less sexual than homosexual men will.

In providing evidence for this assertion, Faraday (1981) cites the work of Kinsey et al (1953) and McIntosh (1968). Likewise she is critical of McIntosh's (1968) assertion
that gay men have a better-developed homosexual role than women do because there is greater social control of women than of men. While not dismissing the issue of social control, Faraday is critical of the implications of this argument for sociological research: homosexual men are regarded as being easier to recruit and more sociologically interesting than women are.

Furthermore, when lesbianism is addressed it is viewed either through male defined models of sexuality, or through the extrapolation of findings from male studies to women. Faraday contends that the absence of a gender analysis in symbolic interactionism permits researchers to assume that lesbians and gay men share a common experience because of same sex desire. Hence, the lesbian becomes the 'female counterpart' of the male homosexual. Again, for examples of this position see Saghir and Robins (1973) or Bell and Weinberg (1978). Alternatively, they are included in the theoretical concept 'homosexual category' (McIntosh, 1968), which is based on male experience yet regarded as being applicable to women. Even lesbian-centred research (for example, Gagnon and Simon, 1973; Tanner, 1978) employs male defined concepts in relation to the constitution of sexuality resulting in 'the lesbian' being presented purely in terms of sexual behaviour. Faraday, critical of this, argues that attention to the (male-defined) social construction of sexual meanings exposes the way in which concepts such as 'social control' and 'sexual behaviour' are used to justify the continuing neglect of lesbians in research. For Faraday, this begins with the Kinsey studies and their impact on sociological studies.

The legacy of the Kinsey studies has been the application of a deterministic hydraulic model of sexuality, based on need, to the study of sexual behaviour. By focusing on issues of sexual stimulus and response the result has been to reinforce a:

- distinction between the 'social', the 'socio-sexual' and 'definitely sexual', whereby the only unambiguously sexual situation is that which results in orgasm, or what they preferred to call 'sexual outlet'. (Faraday, 1981:117)

In this way, the orgasm was used to measure sexual response in both men and women, with the difference between the two measured in terms of frequency and regularity. Women's lower response to physical stimuli was seen as a major difference resulting in the recommendation that women needed a longer period of sexual arousal than men. However, as Faraday points out, the outcome of these studies was to define 'the sexual' purely in terms of orgasm:
The Kinsey 'observations', that sex equals orgasm equals basic physiological need to which men are more subject than women, is a male supremacist construct par excellence; wrench the area of the 'sexual' from that of the 'social', observe that men are more 'sexual' than women, and the seeds are sown for a male-defined 'science' of sexology. (Faraday, 1981:117)

This distinction between 'sexual' and 'social' was reinforced in subsequent studies. Masters and Johnson's (1966, 1970) studies of the similarities between women and men in the processes leading to sexual arousal reinforces the idea that there is essentially no difference between women and men. As Faraday argues the base line for this comparison is a male-defined concept of sexuality, which focuses on the orgasm as the only true measure of sexual arousal. This singular focus within sexology on the orgasm, which dismisses the importance of "social meaning, social context and power relations" (Faraday, 1981:119) has resulted in women's sexuality being defined through a male defined model of what it is to be sexual.

In respect to sociology, Faraday examines the impact of these male-defined models of sexuality on the way 'the lesbian' has been defined in research. Faraday argues that it is important to acknowledge the distinct advantages that symbolic interactionism has over essentialist models of sexuality, Here, sexual 'deviance' does not have a biological basis but is the result of labelling and stigmatising 'unconventional' behaviour. For example, Gagnon and Simon (1973) use the concept of scripting to describe the 'symbolic constructs' that define a situation as sexual. However, the lack of attention paid to historically and culturally specific gender inequality leaves them unable to account for the origins of such scripts. Nor subsequently why and how some sexual scripts are defined as normal and others as abnormal (Faraday, 1981; Walby, 1990). Instead, their discussion of 'the lesbian' locates her difference to other women solely in terms of her sexual relationships. Faraday argues that the resulting image of lesbians is not one of "choosers or definers, but rather as women whose 'sexuality' happens to latch on to other women" (1981:120). This almost functionalist approach to women's sexuality, which rests on essentialist notions of womanhood, precludes analysis of the social construction of masculinity and femininity. This permits Gagnon and Simon to write "what we conventionally describe as sexual behaviour is rooted in biological capacities and processes" (Faraday, 1973:15). Additionally, they argue that only men are capable of being deviant. Lesbians according to this view, demonstrate conformity rather than deviance because of their femininity. From this perspective, lesbians have great difficulty in defining what a sexual situation is because:
For the female, sexual activity does not occur for its own sake, but for the sake of the children, family and love. Thus, sexuality for the female has less autonomy than it has for the male, and the body (either of the self or of others) is not seen by women as an instrument of self-pleasure. This vision of sexuality as a form of service is continuous with the rest of female socialisation. (Gagnon and Simon, 1973:182)

Faraday argues that the significance of Gagnon and Simon's work is the model it bequeathed for future sociological research on lesbianism (for example, see Hedblom, 1973). While an improvement on the medical model, it remains unsympathetic to feminism because it exchanges one essentialist model for another, which fails to theorise the social construction of gender. Such a theoretical approach, which treats sexual preference as a given, means that it is impossible to ask why some women have relationships with women while others have relationships with men. Instead, the focus remains one of highlighting the problems that lesbians face as they try to adjust to their lesbianism, for example Schafer's (1976) treatment of the lesbian as a cripple, or Ponse's (1977) study of secrecy in the lesbian world. While recognising that such research represents a genuine attempt to highlight the effects of living with a stigmatised sexuality, Faraday maintains her critical stance:

Generally then the task of liberal social science with regard to lesbians has been one of normalisation through humanisation with a touch of feminisation thrown in for good luck. The composite image of lesbians constructed in the interests of 'education' has generally been one of noble suffering in secrecy. (Faraday, 1981:126)

While not seeking to dismiss the oppression faced by lesbians, Faraday's opposition to such research is based on the role that social science has played in contributing to such lesbian oppression. That is, by prioritising a sexual understanding of the lesbian over and above a social or political understanding, such research continues to highlight the price to be paid for not being heterosexual. For Faraday, this reflects the inability of deviancy research to acknowledge or deal with feminism as anything other than the views of an oppressed minority.

### 3.4 Introduction to feminist theory

In summary, Faraday's article is a critical evaluation of the way lesbian definitions in the social sciences not only reflect but also create a male defined view of sexuality. The implication of this is that lesbian-focused research needs to begin by examining the way in which sexuality and lesbianism are defined. This inevitably involves looking at the power and the politics in practice when somebody is labelled deviant or lesbian. For Faraday and other feminists, this needs to happen within a clearly defined feminist framework that locates the experiences of lesbians in the wider context of the
oppression and social control of all women. Central to this is the belief that both lesbianism and heterosexuality are political institutions, which act to regulate and control women's sexuality, thus ensuring the continuation of unequal gender relations. This understanding of sexuality is most closely associated with a radical feminist perspective or, as Tong (1998) labels it, a radical-cultural feminist perspective. Tong bases this argument on the observation that there exist within radical feminism two strands of thought: one she labels radical-cultural feminism and the other radical-libertarian feminism. Although there is overlap between the two perspectives, it is radical-cultural feminism that has developed a radical agenda towards the issue of sexuality in general and lesbianism in particular. Thus, the following discussion will pay particular attention to this strand of radical feminism.

Radical feminism developed from the specific experiences of a relatively small group of white, middle class, educated American women in the late 1960s. These women were initially involved in the National Organisation of Women, (NOW) an organisation demanding equality for women, or leftist organisations campaigning on civil right issues or for peace. However, the sexism they encountered working in these mixed-sex groups, together with a perception that NOW was too conservative, led these women to abandon these organisations and start their own. Developing a more radical agenda than that proposed by NOW, these women worked at a grass-roots level on a range of different issues. These ranged from creating an alternative woman-centred culture to taking political action against violence against women to resisting the social control of women's sexuality (Bryson, 1987; Tong, 1998).

As already stated, at a theoretical level radical feminism is neither a static not unitary body of thought. However, it is united by a number of assumptions about human nature and social reality, in particular a belief in the universal domination of women by men, which is the primary form of social control and is practised through a system of patriarchy. While explanations for this may differ, radical feminism regard biology or, to be specific, the different roles that women and men play in reproduction as the basis of this patriarchal oppression of women. For example, Firestone (1970) explores male control of reproduction, while Brownmiller (1976) and Dworkin (1981) focus on the use of pornography to control women's sexuality. The idea of women as a unitary category sharing a common oppression has been fundamental to radical feminism at both a political and theoretical level. Thus, Andrea Dworkin writes:
No other people is so entirely captured, so entirely conquered, so destitute of any memory of freedom, so dreadfully robbed of identity and culture, so absolutely slandered as a group, so demeaned and humiliated as a function of daily life. (Dworkin, 1976:70)

This statement assumes that women have and continue to share a common identity of powerless victim. Oppression is assumed to be universal, cutting across time and space, and is encapsulated in the concept of patriarchy. In short, women constitute a class of their own, likewise, so do men. Thus, within radical feminist theory, patriarchy becomes the basis for all other forms of oppression. Furthermore, patriarchal assumptions about appropriate behaviour for women and men can be understood by examining the relationship between sex and gender. Sex refers to the biological differences between women and men, while gender refers to the social construction of male and female roles (Oakley, 1982). Although the two are inter-linked, sex is regarded, by radical feminists, as a biological given, and hence, unalterable. However, gender, the social meaning of femaleness and maleness, ensures the continuation of the sex/gender system, that is, patriarchy, which is reliant on male supremacy (Ramazanoglu, 1989; Stanley and Wise, 1993). Consequently, radical feminists are concerned with deconstructing and destroying gender roles in society. As Tong (1998) notes the theoretical project of feminism is to understand patriarchy, the political project to destroy it. Within this radical critique of male power, it is not surprising that radical feminism focuses on the relationship between patriarchy and sexuality which is regarded as a key feature in any analysis of society (Walby, 1990). This has led to a radical feminist analysis of both lesbianism and heterosexuality as political institutions aimed at regulating women's sexuality. While for some feminists this ensures the continuation of unequal gender relations, others such as MacKinnon (1982) argue that sexuality actually constitutes gender, and should be viewed as a singular concept where the subordination of women is eroticised in sexuality.

3.4.1 Application to an analysis of lesbianism

To understand this analysis it is necessary to examine the feminist account of the social construction of lesbianism. Faderman (1985), adopting a materialist approach, connects the social construction of lesbianism to the rise of feminism in the 19th century, with its demands for equality for women in a variety of areas including education, marriage, work and the enfranchisement of women. According to Faderman, before the rise of feminism 'romantic friendships' between women were viewed as a part of social relations. They had been neither labelled nor discouraged, indeed they were often regarded as preparation for marriage. However, Faderman documents the harsh
treatment of women who transgressed gender roles by cross-dressing as men in order to lead independent lives, which may or may not have included sexual relationships with women. Likewise, Robson (1992) discusses the punishments, including death, administered to those women who in having relationships with other women challenged the nature of gender relations prevalent in society at that time. It could be surmised that relationships between women, which were seen to challenge the hegemonic male control of women, were punished, while those relationships deemed as innocent and non-threatening were overlooked.

Nevertheless, the emergence of an organised feminist movement in the 19th century brought with it the possibility of economic independence for women. This resulted in those relationships previously characterised as 'romantic friendships', being recategorised and labelled abnormal. Feminist demands which men in general met with hostility, were contested through the utilisation of developing scientific/medical knowledge, which warned of the harmful effects of equality on women's health. Behind this lay a fear that gender distinctions, on which the social structure was dependent, would become blurred or indistinct, leading to subsequent social disorder and chaos. Such fear led Horace Bushnell to argue in 1889 against women attaining the vote on the grounds that women are a separate species, and that the vote would lead to women becoming like men (Faderman, 1985). Enshrined in this fear was the belief that women's fight for equality, which implicitly challenged women's traditional dependent role on men, would lead to a situation where women, having gained economic independence, would elect not to get married. This fear fed into existing 19th century concerns about the falling birth rate and the eugenics movement concerned about the power and strength of the British Empire (Weeks, 1985). If the economic imperative to get married disappeared then women would have little use for marriage and would turn to women, not for 'romantic friendships' before or during marriage, but as a replacement to it. For the first time "love between women became threatening to the social structure" (Faderman, 1985:238).

This scientific and medical construction of the lesbian was examined in Chapter 2. Based on essentialist notions of women, sexologists claimed that women's desire for independence (which was equated with desire for relationships with other women) was unnatural. Therefore, those women who demanded it were not real women, because real women accepted their natural dependence on men. One of the early sexologists
Westpahl, writing in 1869, used the term 'congenital invert' to argue that these women were abnormal due to hereditary degeneration and neurosis (Faderman, 1985). Westpahl's work led to a proliferation of literature on this subject, suggesting that women who wanted equality were either 'unsexed' or 'semi-women.' Faderman argues that this theoretical stance reflects the need to secure women's compliance to their traditional role through acceptance that a desire for independence from men was unnatural. Hence, the category 'invert' was developed and applied to those women who rejected their natural role. In relation to a woman, this meant she was sexually active rather than passive, desired to be in the public world of education and work instead of the private world and her primary allegiance lay with women not men. These women ceased to be real women, but instead became members of a 'third sex.' The demands of feminism, which offered the possibility of freedom for all women, became associated with pathological inversion.

Feminists have argued that these early sexology theories weakened the first wave of feminism because women were stifled by a powerful ideology that labelled them as 'non-women' if they fought for women's rights (Faderman, 1985; Kitzinger, 1987). Two such sexologists, Kraft-Ebing (1882) and Havelock Ellis (1897), who wrote extensively at the end of the 19th century about the pathological nature of the 'female invert', influenced 20th century notions of lesbianism. Ellis, warning against the dangers of feminism, distinguished between the 'true invert' as opposed to the woman drawn into same sex sexual activity during adolescence or due to situational reasons. Ellis identified three defining factors of the true invert: childhood crushes on other females; the adoption of masculine physical and social characteristics; the adoption of male attire. Assuming that any 'normal woman', given the chance, would choose to have relationships with men, he warned that feminism could lead women to have contact with true inverts and thus occasion 'spurious imitation.' The implication of his argument being that 'normal women' should stay away from feminism and moreover feminists. Ellis directed his concern towards professional or middle class women, whom he believed to be particularly at risk from inversion. Arguably, these women were well positioned to argue for women's equality.

While this section has focused on inversion theories in relation to women, these were also applied to men. Nevertheless, given the existence of gender, it is important to distinguish between women and men when assessing the impact of such theories. While
it was expedient for both male and female homosexuals to accept the scientific explanations of congenital defects, their reasons for doing so differed. Due to the stringent anti-homosexual laws aimed at men and based on the notion of chosen depravity, it was expedient for men to accept such explanations (Faderman, 1985; Weeks, 1985). However, for women, while congenital defective explanations granted limited legitimacy to women who wanted to pursue an independent life, they discouraged the majority of women from becoming involved in feminism. Viewed from this perspective, it could be argued that the social construction of lesbianism had little to do with women loving women and, more to do with isolating women who desired freedom from men. The labelling of lesbianism as an abnormality prevented the majority of women viewing it as a viable option, thereby enabling a separate group of women 'inverts' to develop. While not all feminists were (or are) lesbians, the link between feminism and lesbianism has become firmly entrenched and acts as an effective control against feminism. In turn, this weakens the threat to a social system dependent on unequal relationships between women and men. For lesbian feminists, this constitutes heterosexuality as a compulsory institution, hence ensuring women's continued subordination.

3.4.2 Gender, sexuality, heterosexuality and lesbianism

Rich's (1980) article Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence, focusing primarily on the sexual domination of women by men, argues that the compulsory nature of heterosexuality ensures that men retain their physical, economical and emotional control over women. Rich's starting point is a critique of previous feminist research on sexuality (for example, Ehrenreich and English, 1978; Chodorow, 1978; Miller 1976; Dinnerstein, 1976) for supporting the status quo through the perpetuation of the myth that most women are innately heterosexual. For Rich, as for Faderman, the institution of heterosexuality is dependent upon ensuring that the experiences of lesbians either remain invisible, or are associated with disease and illness. This denial of the lesbian makes it difficult for women to make a real choice over their sexuality. For Rich, the clinical definitions of lesbianism, with its focus on pathology, limit women's identification with this category. In its place, Rich proposes a new definition of lesbian existence: a lesbian continuum encompassing a wide range of women-identified experiences. This definition of lesbianism, moving beyond the clinical definition, deepens and broadens lesbian existence. The implication of this position for women's liberation is that in de-constructing the labels of sexuality that have been used
to divide women, women can unite to fight for liberation regardless of the sex of the person they choose to have sexual relationships.

This brief introduction to the radical feminist analysis of lesbianism highlights the way in which it directly challenges the symbolic interactionist perspective on homosexuality, with its focus on the effects of labelling that occurs in small scale interaction. The implication is that it is necessary to move beyond a sexual definition of lesbianism which, feminists argue, currently ensures that the wider implications of lesbianism for our understanding of gender relations in general remain ignored. From a feminist perspective the focus should be on lesbian existence and the compulsory nature of heterosexuality (Rich, 1980). Likewise, symbolic interactionism constructs the lesbian as sexually passive due to the absence of a man to define a sexual situation. In contrast, feminism constructs the lesbian as an active agent who, in choosing to have relationships with women, challenges the very source of male power. Hence, choosing to be a lesbian is a political act of resistance against a patriarchal system that seeks to define women's sexuality solely in relation to men. Thus, radical feminist theory moves beyond sexual definitions of lesbianism to look at social and political issues, which results in a radical critique of heterosexuality. As Mae writes:

Heterosexuality keeps women separated from each other. Heterosexuality ties each woman to a man. Heterosexuality exhausts women because they struggle with their man - to get him to stop oppressing them - leaving them with little energy for anything else. (Mae, 1975:71)

3.4.3 A critique of radical feminist theory

Despite the importance of this radical feminist analysis of lesbianism, it has not been without its critics. Some of these criticisms reflect the general problems of a radical feminist perspective, while others deal more specifically with their analysis of lesbianism. Radical feminist theory has been denounced for producing universalistic theory of women's oppression. Based on a fixed and static model of patriarchy, it is unable to explain historical or cultural difference amongst women (Ramazanoglu, 1989). Through focusing on and prioritising sexuality as the basis for women's oppression, it fails to pay sufficient attention to other social structures that materially effect the quality of women's lives. For example, black feminists (Lorde, 1981; hook, 1982; Reagon, 1983; Mohanty, 1992) are critical of radical feminism's universalistic claims, which in their opinion, reflect the experiences of white, western middle class women. Inevitably, they fail to address the issues that divide women, for example,
colonialism and racism. This results in an inability to theorise adequately the
differences that exist between women. In addition, the priority given to the role of
biology in women's subordination has echoes of the essentialist arguments used by
sociobiologists to justify women's position in society. This is evident in the work of
Rich (1980) and Daly (1979). Unlike earlier radical feminists such as Firestone (1970)
or Millett (1977), who viewed biology as problematic and something to be overcome
by technology, they actually seek to celebrate the difference between men and women
by arguing that women are naturally superior to men. However, this position is
controversial as it is seen as celebrating the characteristics that have been used by men
to oppress women, or by social theorists to justify women's position in society.

In addition to these problems, radical feminism, in common with other feminist
perspectives, is reliant on making a distinction between sex and gender. In recent years,
feminists attempting to incorporate a post-modernist perspective into their work have
been critical of this distinction. However, Wittig's work in the 1970s on this subject has
a particular relevance here because it directly addresses the relationship between sex,
gender and sexuality. Wittig wrote a number of essays during this period, which have
since been published in an edited collection titled The Straight Mind and Other Essays
(1992). The following discussion uses material published in this book. In her essays The
Straight Mind and The Category of Sex Wittig provides an analysis of heterosexuality as
a 'political regime' of unequal power relationships between men and women, and
between heterosexuals and homosexuals. In The Category of Sex, she exposes the
artificial distinction between men and women based on biological difference. However,
unlike the traditional feminist approach which makes the analytic distinction between
sex as biologically determined and gender as socially constructed, Wittig argues that the
categories of sex are socially constructed. This immediately has the effect of disrupting
our understanding of the category of sex as being biologically defined and hence
immutable. For Wittig, the taken-for-granted nature of sex differences means that we do
not look at the social construction of that difference. Furthermore, this prevents us from
looking at the necessity of maintaining that difference if we are to maintain the current
social order. By naturalising the category of sex, we are unable to think beyond it. The
solution to this is to move beyond the sex category, to dismiss the terms women and
men. Wittig recognises the problems associated with this and acknowledges that at a
political level we need to retain the category of woman. However, it must be seen as a
political and not as an essential category. In relation to the homosexual/heterosexual
distinction. Wittig argues that this depends on the distinction between men and women which is, at the base of heterosexual society. Thus, to dissolve the sex category it is necessary to dissolve the sexual categories of heterosexual and homosexual.

Taking her analysis even further, Wittig (1992) suggests that because of this definitional relationship between women and men, “Lesbians are not women.” While appreciating the theoretical implications of Wittig’s work, this suggests that because lesbians do not have intimate relationships with men (although this in itself is open to question), they are not defined in relation to men. Hence, men do not oppress them. This is clearly not so. However, where Wittig does succeed, at least partially, is in redefining the lesbian as something other than sexual. Likewise, she exposes the artificial relationship between heterosexuality and reproduction, which serves to make heterosexuality appear natural, normal and universal.

Thus, Wittig, before the development of queer theory and its analysis of the relationship between heterosexuality and homosexuality (see below), was exposing the defining power of a heterosexual discourse. Considering the effect that this has on lesbians and gay men, she argues that they are forced into a no-win situation. Unless they are willing to use the language of heterosexuality they are denied a voice and silenced. The legacy of Wittig’s work in the 1970s is the insistence that it is as important to look at the social construction of heterosexuality and homosexuality.

Wittig’s analysis highlights some of the theoretical problems with the distinction between sex and gender. In contrast, Phelan (1993) through an analysis of lesbian politics critically assesses the impact of feminism on the formation of lesbian identity. For Phelan, the notion that ‘feminism is the theory, lesbianism is the practice’ (Abbott and Love, 1973) has resulted in different lesbian communities looking inward rather than seeking to build alliances and coalitions with each other. In contrast, the theoretical writing of Fuss (1989, 1991), Butler (1990) and De Lauretis (1991) offer new ways of theorising and understanding lesbian identity and sexuality. Just like Wittig’s recognition of the political use of the term woman, these theorists recognise both the political necessity of retaining the category lesbian while at the same time viewing it as a critical site of gender deconstruction. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the multiple meanings attached to lesbianism result in a plurality of identities.
This view is evident in Fuss's concept of 'identity as difference' which links lesbian identity to other issues of identity and difference. Similarly, Butler argues that viewing identity as socially constructed will enable theory to move beyond viewing lesbianism as an essence without context to viewing it as 'critical space', which exists within social structures. Working within an (altered) feminist framework, these lesbian theorists are attempting to explore the differences, gaps and shifts between women and recognise that alliances and coalitions have to be worked towards. They have to be produced rather than assumed, as has often been the case in earlier feminist theorising.

Hence, for Phelan, "'being lesbian' provides a basis for mutual recognition, but it does not guarantee it" (1993:12). Politically, this is a more accurate reflection of the variety of lesbian identities, which should provide more opportunity for dialogue. Dismissing the political relevance of separatism favoured by radical feminism as a valid strategy for change, Phelan argues that it is necessary to engage with "the dominant social text" (1993:12) in order to achieve change. By necessity, this action must be local, where universal theory may not be most useful. Hence, while power is diffuse, so too is resistance.

While not dismissing these problems, radical feminism still has much to offer sociology of sexuality. In relation to the social construction of sexuality and in particular lesbianism, Walby (1990) argues there is an awareness of historical and cultural factors, for example, in Faderman's work. Nevertheless, it is important that such experience is not generalised to the experiences of all women, even if the motive is an appeal for political action to overcome the oppression of all women. Likewise, through challenging the belief that sexuality is an individual choice, radical feminism has, through the slogan of 'the personal is political', made visible the social control of all women's sexuality. Nevertheless, by challenging the sexual definition of lesbianism, radical feminism has been criticised by lesbians who believe that this removes the specific sexual nature of lesbian relationships (Harris, 1988). This is seen to symbolise the problem that radical feminism has with sexuality in general, and could be seen to reinforce rather than challenge male notions of sexuality.

Indeed, it could be surmised that radical feminism has, through challenging the sexual classification of the lesbian, replaced it with a new political definition. This leaves radical feminism unable to account for those lesbians who believe that their lesbianism
is beyond choice, or do not choose to align with feminism. Furthermore, it is unable to account for the experiences of women who identify as bisexual. Indeed, when confronted with such beliefs, radical feminism is in danger of displaying an arrogance of knowing better, arrogance challenged when displayed by male defined theory. For example, Kitzinger (1987), in her analysis of the social construction of lesbianism, could be accused of displaying arrogance when confronted with those lesbians who believe that their sexuality is fixed independent of will. Such women are dismissed for accepting dominant (false) accounts of their sexuality, the implication being that they are suffering from a 'false consciousness' and that radical feminism offers the only true account of lesbianism. In order to move beyond this situation there needs to be recognition that it may be more valid to recognise the plurality of lesbian identities, be they sexual, political or other in origin. This will involve not only a radical critique of dominant accounts of identity, be they medical, psychological or sociological in origin, but also a radical critique of alternative accounts, like radical feminism.

3.5 The relevance of queer theory to sociology

As stated in the introduction, feminism has not been the only discipline to critically evaluate the implications of the sociology of homosexuality. In recent years, queer theory has also added its voice to this debate. Despite the emergence of queer theory over a decade ago in the universities of America, it has remained firmly located within humanities departments, and, until recently has been regarded with suspicion by sociologists exploring issues around sexuality. Sociologist Namaste (1994) and Epstein (1994) argue this may in part be due to its poststructuralist origins. For many sociologists (for example, Plummer, 1998) this results in an over concentration on 'the text' with an accompanying lack of attention given to material factors and social structures. Despite this situation, sociology has begun to examine the benefits of a mutually interactive relationship between queer theory and sociology (for example, Duggan, 1992; Epstein, 1994; Namaste, 1994; Seidman, 1994; Warner, 1993).

Queer theorists argue that while sociology has concentrated on the construction of homosexual identities and communities, queer theory has, through the work of Foucault and Derrida, developed a radical agenda that concentrates on the dynamic relationship between the binary opposite of homosexuality and heterosexuality. For its part, queer theory has much to learn from sociology especially in providing accounts of sexuality

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6 The issue of bisexuality is examined in the following chapter.
that pay closer attention to social, political and historical factors. Furthermore, acknowledging the groundbreaking work of sociologists in this area, Epstein (1994) observes that if queer theorists fail to take notice of sociology they are in danger of 'reinventing the wheel.' A similar point is made by Weeks (1998) in a recent article, which assesses the continuing importance McIntosh's (1968) work, *The Homosexual Role.* For example, while sociology has long argued that sexuality is a socially constructed phenomenon, queer theorists treat this as a new discovery attributable to Foucault.

Similarly, a sociology of (homo)sexuality that has been theoretically dominated by symbolic interactionism has much to learn from queer theory. By showing the importance of the binary opposite of homosexual/heterosexual, it will be possible to remove the sociological study of homosexuality from the 'deviant ghetto' and permit a sociological examination of the (hetero)sexualised nature of all knowledge and social structures. As Eve Sedgwick states in the opening paragraph of her work *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990):

> The book will argue that an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition. (1990:1)

Before assessing the validity of these claims, it is necessary to discuss the meaning of 'queer theory.' Epstein (1994) locates the emergence of queer theory in the USA in the 1980s to two key events. The first being the emergence of new political movements such as Queer Nation and ACT-UP, which developed initially in response to the inertia of the then right-wing American government to act appropriately to the emerging AIDS crisis. While the second key event was the development of new programmes of lesbian and gay studies in academia. This subsequently gave rise to an intellectual enterprise, which called itself queer theory. So, what does queer mean and why is it used in preference to the more traditional terms lesbian and gay? Epstein (1994) notes the following uses of the term: a linguistic reclamation; a gesture signalling anti-assimilationist politics; a politics of provocation in which liberal boundaries are contested; reference to a more fully 'co-sexual' politics between women and men; a way of moving beyond homosexuality/heterosexuality. That is, it is inclusive of all sexualities opposed to the 'normalising regime' of heterosexuality. Likewise, it reflects a post-modern 'decentering' of identity (see below). Finally, queer politics signal a constructionist politics, which is characterised by a resistance to all-sexual labels and
categories, based on the understanding that there exists a fluidity of sexual expression. While this highlights the different uses of the term queer, this chapter focuses on the intellectual development of queer theory, while not dismissing the political significance of the term. As De Lauretis (1991) states, its use within the academy signals important theoretical shifts and a critical distancing from the term lesbian and gay. Stein and Plummer (1994) agree that the term queer is a catalyst for people disaffected by the academic use of an 'ethnicity model' to explore sexuality. Such a model treats lesbians and gay men as a homogenous group who share similar political interests. However, as Stein and Plummer point out sexuality is not like gender or race: membership is not automatically visible, nor is it static. Likewise, there does not exist a single definition of lesbian or gay identity. Within this framework, queer theory aims to challenge existing notions of lesbian and gay identity. Queer theory draws on the work of Foucault and Derrida to explore:

the ways in which homosexual subjectivity is at once produced and excluded within culture, both inside and outside its borders. (Namaste, 1994:220)

A focus on the relationship between homosexuality and heterosexuality highlights the social construction of heterosexuality as well as homosexuality (Namaste, 1994; Epstein, 1994). As discussed below this has a radical implication for sociology, which has traditionally concentrated on homosexuality in isolation. Summing up the key difference between poststructuralism and other theoretical positions, Namaste writes that poststructuralism is about:

A manner of interpreting selves and the social which breaks with traditional epistemologies. (Namaste: 1994: 220-221)

Starting with the traditional Cartesian split between agency and structure, which ascribes intentionality to the subject, Namaste argues that poststructuralist approach challenges this foundationalist assumption. This is because a foundationalist approach assumes that subjects are "the autonomous creators of themselves and of their social worlds" (Namaste, 1994:221). This dismisses the way in which subjects are the products of complex social relations that structure location and identity. Unlike Descartes, who viewed the individual existing before external structures, poststructuralism regard individuals as being constituted in and through socio-political arrangements. For poststructuralists, the Cartesian autonomous individual needs to be "deconstructed, contested and de-centred" (Namaste, 1994:221) in order to expose the social context which individuals inhabit. It is has been through the work of Foucault and Derrida that queer theorists have applied these ideas to develop a new agenda for the
study of sexuality. Foucault's analysis of sexuality was discussed in the second chapter: hence, discussion here is confined to Derrida.

3.5.1 The construction of 'difference'

As already pointed out, while Foucault's work on the social construction of sexuality is not in itself a revolutionary idea within sociology, it has acted as one of the catalysts for the development of queer theory. This is because it focuses on the social construction of all sexualities, not just homosexuality. The other main catalyst has been Derrida's concept of 'supplementarity', which refers to a particular philosophical stance towards the way meaning is established. Here, 'supplement' refers to the way in which meaning is derived from difference, or the dynamic play between presence and absence:

> Supplementarity, which is nothing, neither a presence nor an absence, is neither a substance, nor an essence of man [sic.]. It is precisely the play of presence and absence, the opening of this play that no metaphysical or ontological concept can comprehend. (Derrida, 1976:244)

By focusing on this dynamic relationship or, as Derrida calls it, 'play', it is possible to see that what might appear at first to be on the outside of a system is, in actual fact, inside it. Applying this to the current discussion of sexuality permits one to see the way in which homosexuality and heterosexuality are in binary opposition to each other, so that heterosexuality can only be defined in relation to homosexuality. Unlike sociology, which has focused exclusively on the construction of homosexual identity with little or no reference to the construction of heterosexual identity, queer theory, through Derrida's concept of supplementarity, redirects our attention to the dynamic play between the binary opposite of homosexual/heterosexual. However, as Sedgwick (1990) points out, this relationship, while mutual, is not symmetrical but one where homosexuality (B) is subordinated to heterosexuality (A).

> The ontologically valorised term A actually depends for its meaning on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of the term B; hence, third, the question of priority between the supposed central and the supposed marginal category of each dyad is irresolvably unstable, an instability caused by the fact that term B is constituted as at once internal and external to term A. (Sedgwick, 1990: 10)

This process of exposing the hidden relationship that exists between binary opposites has become known as 'deconstructionism' because it "seeks to make sense of how these relations are at once the condition and the effect of all" (Namaste, 1994:223). By highlighting the vital play between presence and absence, Sedgwick is validating Derrida's point that this play between presence and absence represents a double bind: we cannot break out of this binary logic, because any attempt to do so merely reinforces its power. This point is further endorsed by Fuss (1991) when she writes:
The philosophical opposition between 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual', like so many other conventional boundaries, has always been constructed on the foundations of another related opposition: the couple 'inside' and 'outside.' To the extent that the denotation of any term is always dependent on what is exterior to it (heterosexuality, for example typically defines itself in critical opposition to that which it is not: homosexuality), the inside/outside polarity is an indispensable model for helping us to understand the complicated workings of semiosis. (Fuss, 1991:1)

Queer theory, unlike the symbolic interactionist approach, focuses on the borders that exist between sexual identities, communities and politics, thus permitting new questions to be asked about the construction of such borders. Queer theorists such as Fuss (1991) and Sedgwick (1990), in their respective analyses of the construction of these sexual borders, illuminate some of the paradoxes that are present in the production of the homosexual in legal and scientific discourses. Alongside sociologists, for example Weeks, they recognise that the very construction of the homosexual enabled the struggle for civil rights. Nevertheless, it paradoxically created the 'closet.' Drawing on the concept of supplementarity, they show that the 'closet' encompasses a binary opposition: those that are visible about their sexuality as opposed to those that remain invisible. For Fuss, this means that "the emergence of homosexuality was accompanied by its disappearance" (Fuss, 1991:4). Furthermore, defining oneself as 'out' as a lesbian or gay man rests on two assumptions: the centrality of heterosexuality, and the existence of lesbians and gays who are not out, who remain in the 'closet.' This observation gives credibility to Derrida's claim that it is impossible to break out of the power of such binary oppositions. In short, it is impossible to locate oneself 'outside' dominant discourses, for to define oneself as standing outside the sexual norm one has to first place oneself within dominant definitions of sexuality. In Fuss's words, these gestures represent a "transgression of the border which is necessary to constitute the border as such" (Fuss, 1991:3).

In recognition of this 'double bind' queer theory does not attempt to move beyond current conceptions of sexuality. Instead it concentrates on how such borders were/are created, how they are regulated and how they are contested. It is this "emphasis on the production and management of heterosexuality and homosexuality" (Namaste, 1994:224), which forms the basis of poststructuralist queer theory agenda. As Stein and Plummer (1994) note, queer theory exposes the way in which sexuality and sexual power are present in all aspects of social life and structures. Likewise, it redirects our attention to the very notion of identity. By making problematic the sexual and gender categories in common usage, it illuminates the way in which "identities are always on
uncertain ground, entailing displacements of identification and knowing" (Stein and Plummer, 1994:182). For queer theorists identities are always multiple, made up of a number of factors, open to change and resistance.

So, what are the implications of such an agenda for the sociology of sexuality? What are the implications of queer theory's decentering of the concept of sexual identity? Does this mean that sociology should abandon its theoretical concerns with identity? Epstein (1994) argues that the incorporation of queer theory into the sociological arena does not mean we have to abandon the study of identity formation. However, it could mean that the sociological study of sexual minorities is no longer relegated to the margins of the discipline. The implications of queer theory are, for Epstein, an insistence that such studies are:

A window onto a larger world of power, meaning, and social organisation. The challenge that queer theory poses to sociological investigation is precisely in the strong claim that no facet of social life is fully comprehensible without an examination of how sexual meanings intersect with it. (Epstein, 1994:197)

Namaste (1994) in even more assertive mode than Epstein, claims that sociology needs queer theory because without it there is a danger that sociology's singular concern with homosexual identity and community reinforces and gives power to the heterosexual/homosexual opposition. Namaste highlights this point through a discussion of the work of Weeks. Namaste acknowledges that Weeks quite rightly asks about the discursive processes involved in the historical construction of homosexuality. However, he fails to ask the more Derridian based question: "In what way does an adoption of homosexual identity reinforce a hetero/homo split?" (Namaste, 1994:227) Thus, any study of homosexual politics needs to pay close attention to the heterosexual hegemony in which it is constructed. Through attending to the socially constructed nature of heterosexuality as well as homosexuality, it will be possible to move beyond the current situation where heterosexuality retains a privileged position based on the grounds that it is natural. As discussed in the next chapter this will also enable an examination of bisexuality.

3.6 Summary and conclusions
To summarise, this chapter has critically examined the three key theoretical approaches used in the sociological study of sexuality: symbolic interactionism and a labelling approach; radical feminism; and queer theory. In doing so, it has highlighted both the advantages and disadvantages of each approach when applied to a sociological understanding of lesbian identity. While all three share the view that sexuality is a
there is divergence in the attention or priority accorded to gender and
diversity. Radical feminism views sexuality and gender as linked, leading to the belief that it is
important to analyse the experiences of lesbians separately from gay men. In contrast, initial work using the labelling approach assumed that the experiences of lesbian and gay men could be explained through the same theoretical models. As Faraday (1981) showed, this resulted in the experiences and sexuality of women being defined through male models. To this must be added the lack of attention given to social structures. While symbolic interactionism may be able to produce very detailed accounts of small-scale interaction between lesbians and other members of society, it is unable to account fully for the relationship between gender, sexuality and power. In contrast radical feminism, through its concept of patriarchy, regards as essential to any analysis of lesbianism the theorisation of heterosexuality as a compulsory institution used to control and regulate all women's sexuality and thus perpetuate the subordination of women in all areas of life. While producing a sophisticated account of the social construction of lesbianism, it was shown that it suffers from a number of problems: a tendency towards essentialism, universalism and an inability to account for difference either between women or between lesbians.

In contrast, queer theory has through the work of Foucault and Derrida, focused on the relationship between power, knowledge and identity and the relationship between homosexuality and heterosexuality. While sharing the concern over categorisation raised by early writers in this area, its concern with all sexualities results in the focus moving away from a simple concern with homosexual identities and culture to focus on all sexualities. Thus, it is possible to look at the way in which the adoption of a homosexual or, in the case of my research, a lesbian identity, contributes to the maintenance of a sexual order based on the superiority of heterosexuality.

However, while for the purposes of this literature review each theory has been explored separately, it would be inappropriate to assume that, in practice, each perspective exists in isolation from the other. Indeed, a quick glance at the references used in this chapter will show that there are close connections between each perspective. It is important to recognise the inter-connections and overlaps between each approach to the study of sexuality. For example, feminism has had an impact on sociology in general and most
definitely in the area of sexuality. Hence, Faraday's (1981) critique of symbolic interactionism and the labelling approach must be taken in context. Such debate and criticism has only served to move the debate on, enabling other sociologists to pay closer attention to the issue of gender. Similarly, queer theory's attention to the boundaries and relationship between different sexual categories has resulted in sociology paying closer attention to the social construction of heterosexuality as well as homosexuality. Evidence of this can be found by looking at the titles of recently published sociological work in this area: *Theorising Heterosexuality* (Richardson et al., 1996), *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (Katz, 1996), *Same Sex, Different Cultures* (Herdt, 1997) and finally the new journal edited by Ken Plummer *Sexualities*. Thus, there has been a move away from looking at homosexuality in isolation from heterosexuality; likewise, there has been recognition of the diversity of sexual experience, behaviour and identity.

This brief summary of the different ways in which each perspective approaches the study of sexuality indicates that the reason for this divergence relates to the level of analysis within each approach. While symbolic interactionism focuses on the way in which individual people construct meaning through social interaction, feminism and queer theory have focused on structural issues of social categorisation. It is within this context that this chapter concludes with an examination of two inter-related issues, firstly that a synthesis of these three different approaches will provide an appropriate theoretical framework for the analysis of the research data. This will enable a fuller integration of both levels of analysis, thus leading to a deeper sociological understanding of sexuality. Secondly, this section explores the possible nature of that synthesis, through focusing on three major issues: the social construction of sexuality; the control and regulation of sexuality; the historical understanding of sexuality. This attempt to produce a more theoretically integrated approach to the sociological study of sexuality was first discussed by Weeks (1981) in his critique of symbolic interactionism, Foucault's analysis of the history of sexuality and Mitchell's feminist informed psychoanalytic framework. My own critique builds on and develops this work, firstly through the incorporation of queer theory and secondly through offering a wider understanding of feminist thought on sexuality.

As already stated, the starting point for all three approaches is a rejection of an essentialist model of sexuality in preference for a model which focuses on the social
construction of sexuality. So, for example, Gagnon and Simon (1973) use the concept of 'sexual scripts' to explain the way in which sexual meaning is constructed firstly through the situations that people find themselves in and secondly the meaning that they give to these situations. Likewise, queer theory, by utilising Foucault's analysis of sexuality, focuses on the way in which the very concept of sexuality has a specific historical location. Feminists such as Faderman (1985) again looked at this issue. As illustrated in this chapter, Faderman relates the social construction of lesbianism to broader issues of gender and the social control of women in general.

Thus, at one level there exists a consensus between these three approaches, yet simultaneously the level of analysis, or the priority given to social factors such as gender, results in the production of different types of analysis. Nevertheless, the different approaches are firstly united in the assumption that the social construction of sexuality serves a particular function in society which, furthermore, is enacted in a particular way. There is agreement that the social construction of sexuality contributes to the maintenance of social order. Secondly, there is general agreement that sexuality is controlled through the inter-related processes of definition and categorisation which in turn enable it to be regulated. Thus, there is a common rejection of the Repression Hypothesis, (examined in Chapter 2), which argues that sexuality is controlled through repression. From a social constructionist perspective, the Repression Hypothesis suggests that sexuality is something that resides within the individual as opposed to something that is produced through social interaction and social relations.

Symbolic interactionism illustrates this by focusing on the development of self and the way in which meaning is constructed through social interaction. Hence, it pays more attention to the effects of labelling on the individual and less to structural factors. In contrast, both queer theory and feminism pay more attention to the production of sexual categories and their boundaries and, ultimately, the contribution that they make to the regulation of sexuality and the maintenance of social order. In the case of feminism, this is a gendered social order. It is on this basis that it is argued that a synthesis of these three different approaches would be an appropriate way forward for the study of sexuality in general and my research aims in particular. It is necessary to look at both the constructions of sexual categories, which have a social and historical location, and the way in which individuals faced with these categories construct sexual meanings and identities. Furthermore, and in keeping with the theoretical arguments raised by queer
theory, this approach permits the sociologist to examine the possible contribution that claiming a sexual identity makes to the maintenance of a sexual social order.

Finally, the third point originally explored by Weeks (1981) concerns the treatment of history within each of the different perspectives. As already stated, the concern of symbolic interactionism with subjectivity, and the impact of particular labels on the development of self, results in an ahistorical bias or account. Furthermore, feminism’s use of the concept of patriarchy results in a similar ahistorical analysis. Hence, it is precisely for these reasons that it is important to incorporate the historical focus offered by queer theory in any study of sexuality. For it is only possible through tracing the historical development of sexuality to produce an account of sexuality, that can fully explain its social nature. However, this also needs to pay attention to the way in which individual identity and meaning is constructed. In short, it is necessary to produce a theoretical framework that pays attention to both structure and agency. That is, symbolic interactionism directs us to focus on the way in which sexual meanings are constructed through social interaction, thus enabling an examination of the effects of stigma and the formation of sub-cultures (Weeks, 1981). However, we also need queer theory and feminism, in order, to examine sexual diversity and the relationship between sexual patterns and other variables. This will bring a deeper understanding about the relationship between the subjective construction of a sexual self and the wider social context in which that happens, that is a society that endorses and reinforces the unequal relationship between homosexuality and heterosexuality. So in conclusion, to return to the two levels of analysis discussed at the beginning of this section, it is argued that both of these are necessary as they contribute different things to our understanding of sexuality. It is on this basis, that it argued that a synthesis of these three different approaches would enable me to address the research aims and objectives of this study.
Chapter Four: Examining Lesbian Identities

Lesbian-ness is a product of the shifting relationships among individual subjectivity, the body and the social (including kinship networks, sub-cultural groups etc) and of meanings constituted by/within those relationships. Such relationships are characterised by activity and rapid change, with the result that 'lesbian' is a word in constant flux, subject to continual negotiation and renegotiation. (Wilton, 1995:30)

4.1 Introduction

The last chapter examined the different approaches used to theorise homosexuality. Notwithstanding the differences between them, it was argued that a synthesis of symbolic interactionism, feminism and queer theory would be the most appropriate theoretical framework for an examination of the social construction of lesbian identity. It is within this context that this chapter evaluates the sociological research on lesbian identity and assesses the implications of the findings for my own research. This chapter begins with a critical review of the sociological research on lesbianism, which assesses both the value of this work and some of the difficulties it has in accounting for differences that might exist between women. This point is developed through discussion of the underlying assumptions of the sexual identity formation models used in this research. This raises issues concerning the theorisation of lesbian identity and bisexual identity. The chapter concludes by examining the implications that this holds for my study and outlining the research aims and questions.

4.2 The development and maintenance of a lesbian identity

The last chapter made the point that before the sociological interest in homosexuality, research had focused primarily on the aetiology of homosexuality. Underlying this research was the assumption that homosexuality is a 'condition' generally assumed to have either a biological or psychological pathological basis (Plummer, 1981; Richardson, 1981). In contrast, sociological research, at both an empirical and theoretical level, has focused on the development and maintenance of a homosexual identity. This is based on the understanding that same sex feeling, desire and behaviour may not lead to identification as a homosexual. Likewise, one may claim a homosexual identity without having any of these experiences or contact with other homosexuals. As Jenness (1992:65) notes, "there is a theoretical and empirical difference between 'doing' behaviours associated with lesbianism and 'being' a lesbian." Thus, sociological research has focused on the processes involved in the development and maintenance of a homosexual identity. The starting point for much of this research is
the relationship between women's behaviour, the cultural meanings given to lesbianism and the adoption of lesbian identities (for example, Ettore, 1980; Faderman, 1985; Jenness, 1992; Kitzinger, 1987; Phelan 1993; Ponse, 1978; Richardson, 1981; Rust, 1993; Smith-Rosenberg, 1985; Wilton, 1995). By focusing on this relationship, it is possible to gain a better understanding of what lesbianism means to those women who self-identify with the label. Consequently, the etiological concerns of earlier research have been replaced with concerns over understanding the social processes that lead to the development and maintenance of a lesbian identity in relation to the prevailing culture. However, as discussion will show, little attention has been paid to bisexuality, an issue that in itself contributes to the maintenance of a dualist model of sexuality.

4.3 Research on lesbian identity

Richardson (1981), acknowledging that the majority of lesbians regard their sexual identity as being fixed and beyond choice, examines the way this reflects the dominant cultural meaning of lesbianism. This is based on four inter-related concepts: the lesbian as 'pseudo-male'; lesbianism as a 'sorry state to be in'; the sexual definition of lesbianism; and lesbianism as a permanent condition. Through these concepts, Richardson exposes the pivotal relationship between gender and sexuality, with its implications for both lesbianism and heterosexuality. As previously discussed, conceptualising the lesbian as a 'pseudo-male' assumes a connection between gender-identity, gender-role orientation, sexual object choice and sexual identity. This results in lesbian sex being regarded as imitating heterosexual sex, which, as Richardson points out, weakens the threat lesbianism poses to a phallocentric society. It also contributes to the belief that lesbianism is an inauthentic sexuality. Addressing the issue of gendered lesbian identities, that is, butch or femme, Richardson argues that this use of a heterosexual framework simply serves to diffuse the power of relationships between women.

While recognising the validity of this point, the implications of this position for women who identify as butch or femme need to be examined. That is, Richardson's analysis suggests that such women are simply the passive recipients of cultural norms. This does not take account of the way in which women may play with gender roles in order to

7 These issues were explored in full in Chapter 2 of this thesis.
transgress and challenge the boundaries of gender. In relation to ‘lesbianism as a sorry state to be in’, Richardson examines the negativity of the institutional and cultural attitudes about lesbianism. For example, literature supports the view of the sad lonely lesbian who either commits suicide or is rescued by a man. Moreover, biological or psychological explanations have replaced the religiously orientated ‘lesbianism as sin’ model with the equally negative model of ‘lesbianism as a sickness.’

Drawing on Gagnon and Simon’s (1967) idea of homosexual identity as a ‘master status’, Richardson argues that this results in a particular definition of lesbianism which focuses on sex to the detriment of other aspects of lesbian identity. The lesbian then becomes ‘doubly deviant’: deviant in sexual object choice and by being sexually active. While incorporating lesbian images into pornography goes some way towards diffusing this threat to heterosexuality, Richardson nevertheless argues that the focus on sex conceptualises lesbians as presenting a ‘moral danger’ to society. This view partly explains the condemnation of lesbian mothers or, lesbians having contact with children.

Although this is a prevailing view of lesbianism, Richardson argues that it co-exists alongside an alternative view of lesbians as women who are psychologically and emotionally disturbed. Here, a lesbian relationship is regarded as a re-enactment of the mother-child relationship. Finally, there is the cultural view of lesbianism as a permanent condition, reflecting the true essence of the self.

As pointed out earlier, these dominant cultural views of lesbianism result in the majority of self-identified lesbians conceptualising their sexuality in a similar way (Phelan, 1993; Richardson, 1981; Rust 1993). However, as Richardson points out, this can be partly explained by the lack of alternative models affirming the viability of a lesbian lifestyle. For Richardson, exposure to such models is only possible if a woman is able to be open about her sexuality:

The person who chooses to disclose that she is a lesbian, however, immediately widens the source of social meaning of lesbianism available to her, even if, as is usually the case, she initially tells only a few highly selected individuals. Bearing

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8 The relationship between lesbian identity and masculinity was discussed in Chapter 2 and 3 of this thesis.
9 At the time of writing, it was only possible for Richardson to make passing reference to the new lesbian literature, which has developed out of the gay liberation movement and the women’s movement. Such literature offers positive images of lesbianism.
in mind that a lesbian identity is not a static entity, but an ongoing process, this may in turn result in a change in the meaning and significance such an identification holds for her. More specifically, it is likely to be reactions she encounters from significant others, as well as her experience of the homosexual subculture, which will be most important in this respect. (Richardson, 1981:117)

Not discounting the validity of this point, the situation has changed since Richardson wrote this in 1981. While a lesbian subculture continues to play a significant role in the development of a lesbian identity, the last 20 years have seen a substantial increase in positive images of lesbianism throughout society. These have not replaced the negative images that persist, but it is now possible for women to have access to more positive affirming models of lesbian identity without having to be open about their sexuality. The collections of lesbian ‘coming out stories’ used in the current analysis are an example of this.

Despite this, the importance of Richardson’s point is that it directs sociological attention to the significance of lesbian and/or homosexual subcultures for the development and maintenance of a lesbian identity. Richardson argues that while there is a link between the two, the separation of the homosexual and heterosexual world has resulted in the formation of a subculture that has its own meanings and lesbian identities. It is here that a woman can expect to find the validation that she needs in order to maintain her identity. Hence, the social norms “of the homosexual world serve to both affirm and confirm an individual’s identification as lesbian” (Richardson, 1981:119). Furthermore, they provide a range of role models available in the lesbian world, which may contrast with or reinforce the stereotypes on offer in mainstream society.

This is a point that has been explored in other research in this area. For example, Jenness (1992) applies the conceptual schema developed by Schutz (1964) to the published autobiographical accounts of self-identified lesbians to examine the relationship between “women’s behaviour, the cultural imputations of lesbianism and the adoption of lesbian identities” (Jenness, 1992:65). By focusing on the relationship between social categories and personal identities, Jenness highlights the way in which identifying, as a lesbian, is always a social process. Firstly, there must exist the cultural concept of lesbianism. This is in general negative, thus preventing women from initial identification with it. Identifying with the term involves a woman ‘detypifying’, that is, deconstructing the (negative) cultural meaning and then typifying, that is,
reconstructing her own meaning of the term before she can come to recognise herself as an instant of that construct.

The process of redefining and subsequently reassessing the social category ‘lesbian’ so that it acquires increasingly concrete and precise meanings, positive connotations and personal applicability. (Jenness, 1992:66)

Jenness uses the women’s stories to lend credibility to this process. While not dismissing the validity of this model to describe some experiences, it must be acknowledged that little attention is paid to the issue of diversity amongst women. As pointed out in the discussion of Richardson, positive images of lesbianism may co-exist alongside negative ones. Hence, it is possible to conceive of women who learn about lesbianism in a positive way. Likewise, Jenness’ model is unable to account for women who may retain a negative image of the term lesbian yet nevertheless identify as a lesbian. Thus in developing this model, Jenness is dismissing diversity in order to produce a homogenous lesbian experience. However the important point for Jenness is that it is the meaning of lesbianism that dictates whether a woman will identify as a lesbian or not, and not the practice of lesbianism. Although, Grammick (1984) found that a physical relationship with a woman was more important for self-categorising as a lesbian. Jenness dismisses this and maintains that:

Critical changes in the categorical meaning of lesbian are the decisive factor in self-categorisation. The presence or absence of same-sex genital behaviour or whether or not women are found to be erotic or worthy of primary affiliation is crucial to the process of self-categorisation only in as far as it facilitates a change in the social typification of the social category lesbian (Jenness, 1992:69).

Again, an awareness of diversity and plurality suggests that it is possible that both Jenness and Grammick are making equally valid points. Thus it is necessary to look at why a physical experience is a defining point for some women and not for others.

Despite these possible limitations, Jenness highlights the pivotal relationship between culture and self-identification as a lesbian. From this point, she investigates the role of lesbian subcultures in this process of self-identification. In doing so, she argues that instead of regarding individual stories as ‘cumulative discoveries’ it is time to examine them as ‘collective constructions.’ Jenness directs this at lesbian studies, suggesting that we need to assess the adequacy of academia to reflect women’s relationships with each other. However, the concept of ‘collective constructions’ also offers a way of looking at the diverse range of stories that women tell about self-identifying as a lesbian. This is a similar point to that made by Plummer in his theoretical framework for the sociology of stories.
Plummer (1995), in his recent work *Telling Sexual Stories*, develops a framework for the sociological analysis of stories. While the methodological implications of this framework are assessed in Chapter 5, his work is relevant to the current discussion because it addresses the way in which identity is constructed through the telling of stories. Plummer observes that over the last one hundred years of western culture it is possible to see that talking about being lesbian or gay at different times would have (and, in some cases, has) resulted in different consequences. Thus for much of this century the personal stories of being lesbian and gay have either been silenced or told in secret. It is only since the 1970s and the growth of the lesbian and gay movement that this story has started to be told in public. This has changed the story from being one of personal shame and pain to one of pride and strength. Plummer, endorsing the assumptions underlying the model discussed above, argues that these stories are about ‘suffering, surviving and surpassing.’ Based on this model, Plummer identifies five elements that are present in these stories. These are:

- linear progression from childhood through to adulthood
- childhood is characterised as a time of unhappiness and feeling different
- an important moment, usually characterised as a crisis, occurs in adolescence which leads to the discovery of one’s ‘gayness’
- the difficulty of this discovery is only overcome on meeting other lesbians and gay men
- this results in the formation of a specific sexual identity and the feeling of belonging to a community

Thus, the ‘coming out’ story is characterised as a journey of discovery. Plummer’s work on ‘telling sexual stories’ clearly highlights the way in which identity is always a product of specific socio-historical circumstances, where both cultural and subcultural beliefs are crucial. However, while this story structure may be valid for many individuals who identify as lesbian or gay, it does not pay sufficient attention to the issue of diversity, which may produce different stories. Indeed, Plummer (1995) acknowledges this in the concluding part of his book *Telling Sexual Stories* where he argues that the changes that have occurred over the last thirty years mean that there are a variety of stories being told, and that these need to be investigated.

So far, this discussion has used the work of Richardson and Jenness in particular, as well as Plummer, to explore the relationship between social context and lesbian
Similar findings and conclusions have been reached in other research conducted in this area (Cass, 1979; Ettore, 1980; Faderman, 1985; Kitzinger, 1987; Ponse 1978; Smith-Rosenberg, 1985). Much of this research, through focusing on the relationship between subcultures and lesbian identity, places emphasis on categorising different types of lesbian identity. For example, Ettore (1980) distinguishes between the 'sick but not sorry' group and the 'sorry, but not sick' group in her study of lesbian identity. Again, this focuses on the way these meanings either endorse or reject dominant cultural meanings of lesbianism. Similarly, Ponse (1978) places the 75 lesbians included in her study into two distinct groups: the secretive and the activist. These are then used to explore the way each group offers a different sort of support to its members. While demonstrating the importance of subcultures, the construction of these two groups underplays the importance of social diversity in order to produce broad all-embracing categories.

To summarise, three issues have emerged from this evaluation of research on lesbian identity. First is the important relationship between the cultural construction of lesbian meaning and the personal construction of a lesbian meaning. Second, is the importance of lesbian subcultures for the development and maintenance of a lesbian identity. Linking these two points is the influence that dominant cultural meanings have over the formation of meaning within a subculture. However, this is problematic. Both Richardson and Jenness recognise the variety of different lesbian identities on offer in lesbian subcultures. Furthermore, Jenness, elaborating on this point, recognises that an unfavourable lesbian identity may delay the adoption of a lesbian identity until a more favourable one is found. However, missing from this account, mainly due to its theoretical roots, is a full analysis of the power of subcultures to confirm and validate a lesbian identity while simultaneously taking an active part in creating that lesbian identity. By playing such a role, subcultures both define and limit the possibilities for 'being' and 'doing' lesbianism. This raises issues of power and control, which need to be investigated further. In addition, a lesbian subculture may also prevent the formation of other sexual identities, for example, a bisexual one. This point is discussed in detail below.

While these criticisms raise some interesting points, they also highlight an important theoretical issue concerning the use of subcultures to examine lesbian identity and practice. While there is recognition of the relationship between the dominant culture
and the subculture, that is, between heterosexuality and homosexuality, insufficient attention is paid to this relationship. This also relates to another issue explored in the previous chapter. Since the 1970s, feminism has played a major role in the formation of lesbian identity. However, to examine this through a framework of labelling theory and the language of subcultures ignores the implications that feminism contains for the rest of society. Likewise, any critique of feminism, and the impact it has had on lesbian identity and politics, must be able to look at it in a broader context than that offered by an analysis of subcultures.

The third point is the particular model of sexual identity formation used in these studies. All three of these points raise particular implications and problems for the understanding of lesbian identity when viewed through the theoretical framework developed in the previous chapter. These will now be discussed, beginning with an analysis of the sexual identity model used.

4.4 Developmental model of sexual identity

While this research has made an invaluable contribution to our sociological understanding of the development and maintenance of a lesbian identity, it is nevertheless important to examine the underlying assumptions guiding such research. Rust (1993) notes that this research uses a developmental, linear, sequential, unidirectional and goal-orientated model to understand the formation of sexual identity where priority is given to ‘coming out.’ Early research (Dank, 1971; Hooker, 1967) conceptualises this as a single event. However later research (Plummer, 1975; Coleman, 1982, Hencken and O'Dowd, 1977; McDonald, 1982; Richardson, 1981; Schafer, 1976; Troidan, 1988) recognises that ‘coming out’ is a developmental process involving different ‘milestones’ along the way. For example, Troidan (1988) identify five milestones that gay men follow in the process of coming out, beginning with personal suspicions about one’s sexuality and concluding with the formation of a homosexual relationship. Coleman (1982) starts with childhood feelings of difference and ends with the integration of public and private identity. Richardson (1981), focusing on lesbian identity, discusses the significance of ‘coming out’ to oneself and others. Emphasis is given to the relationship between the reaction of others to this information and the subsequent effect on self-perception.

Within the confines of these models, there is some recognition that there exist discrepancies. For example, McDonald (1982) and Coleman (1982) both acknowledge that people do not always sequentially follow each step of the model as predicted.
Likewise, Cass (1979) recognises that each state might be followed by foreclosure instead of progression. As Rust (1993) notes, this results in the introduction of feedback loops, alternate routes and dead ends to account for these differences. Consequently, the basic linear model remains intact and such behaviour is conceptualised as being 'deviant' from the expected linear process of 'coming out.' Moreover, 'coming out' and the establishment of a stable homosexual identity are still regarded as the end goal of this linear and orderly process. Some studies end up reinforcing an essential view of identity where 'coming out' is seen as a discovery of one's true self. In contrast, research utilising a symbolic interactionist approach avoids this by focusing on the processes involved in 'becoming a homosexual.' For example, Plummer (1975) identifies four stages in his model of 'becoming a homosexual.' These are 'sensitisation', 'signification', 'sub-culturalisation' and 'stabilisation.'

During the first stage of 'sensitisation' a person becomes aware of the possibility that they might be a particular sort of sexual person, that is, they become 'sensitive' or aware of their sexuality. However, this does not automatically lead to claiming an identity label. Plummer is keen to point out that this process may be both problematic and, in some cases, may last a lifetime. That is, people do not automatically proceed to the next stage. Highlighting the social construction of identity, Plummer's first stage of sensitisation highlights the way that one has experiences that only later acquire sexual meaning. That is, they only retrospectively become a part of the coming out process or, to be more precise, they become a part of the 'coming out' story (Phelan, 1993; Plummer, 1995).

The second step, known as 'signification' after Matza's work on deviancy, looks at the effect that an awareness of social stigmatisation has on identity formation. In this state, people are likely to internalise this stigma, which leads to questions of self-doubt and self-worth. It also means people are confronted with the decision about whether to tell people or maintain secrecy about their stigmatised sexuality. Again, people may stay at this stage all their life or move on. The defining factor in relation to this is, as Jenness points out, finding the right story or the right version of homosexuality. This is the third step, which Plummer has labelled 'sub-culturalisation.' This involves the process where people are able to meet other people with the same sexuality and re-evaluate the previously negative meaning of the term in the light of more positive subcultural views. Again, this highlights the importance of lesbian and gay cultures for the development
and maintenance of identity. The final stage, ‘stabilisation’, refers quite literally to the stabilisation of a homosexual identity: a coming to terms with one’s sexuality. Plummer uses this model in his analysis of sexual stories, which was examined in the previous section.

This model remains consistent with other developmental models in that the acquisition and stabilisation of a homosexual identity is the end goal of this process. Furthermore, and of particular concern to Rust in relation to her comparative study of lesbian and bisexual identity, is the treatment of bisexuality in this process. She argues that these models are based on either a dichotomy of homosexuality/heterosexuality, or a scale, neither of which is unable to explain the formation of a bisexual identity. Bisexuality is only ever a step towards a homosexual identity and never an end. Despite this, Rust maintains it is possible, through symbolic interactionism, to develop new models able to account for the maintenance and development of a bisexual identity as well as a homosexual one. In doing so, she draws on Hart and Richardson’s (1981) analysis of sexual identity produced through dynamic social interaction, which always contains the possibility for change. Thus the meaning attached to a particular sexual identity may vary among people and, likewise, a stable identity does not necessarily imply a fixed identity:

By applying interactionist principles to identity stability as well as identity change Richardson and Hart finalise the divorce between sexual identity and sexual essence, reconceptualise identity as a process rather than a goal and produce a fully interactionist account of sexual identity. (Rust, 1993:55)

From this perspective, the lack of social validation makes a bisexual identity difficult to sustain. Rust suggests that many women who currently identify as lesbian due to sexual experiences with other women might, in other circumstances, identify as bisexual. Yet, they are prevented from doing so because of a society that regards the choice of a sexual partner as indicative of a true sexual essence. For Rust, this understanding needs to be incorporated into the social constructionist account of sexuality, enabling it to move beyond a simple dichotomy of heterosexuality/homosexuality. Bearing in mind the concerns of queer theory, this would make a major contribution to resisting the normalising regime of heterosexuality.

Support for this position comes from Blumstein and Schwartz (1974, 1976, 1977, 1990), research which also explores the fluctuating nature of sexual behaviour and identity which, they argue, is normal and to be expected. Focusing on women who
identify as lesbian but engage in bisexual behaviour, Blumstein and Schwartz argue that such cases should not be disregarded as mere deviations from a linear model. Instead, they should be studied for the contribution they can bring to our understanding of the social production of identity. In particular such models highlight dichotomous models of sexual behaviour and identity, an antagonism towards bisexuality (especially amongst lesbians), and, gender role expectations. This view is endorsed by other research in this area including Klein, Sepekoff and Wolf (1985), LaTorre and Wendenburg (1983), Loewenstien (1985) and Nicholas (1988). However, while this research demonstrates similar discrepancies and problems with linear models, this is not the primary focus of their work. Likewise, they do not examine the social and political factors that influence sexual identity.

Examining the findings from her own quantitative research, which compares the formation of lesbian identity and bisexual identity, Rust states that on the surface the data supports the developmental models outlined above. Yet, she argues that the statistical distributions behind the averages tell a different story, one, which exposes the instability of sexual identity. This means that the linear development model needs to be replaced with one that treats variation and change as the norm, instead of deviance. For Rust, such a model must reflect a socially constructed view of identity:

Social constructionism teaches that self-identity is the result of the interpretation of personal experience in terms of available constructs. Identity is therefore a reflection of socio-political organisation rather than a reflection of essential organisation and coming out is the process of describing oneself in terms of social constructs rather than a process of discovering one's essence. By describing oneself in terms provided by one's social context, one locates oneself within this social context and defines one's relations to other individuals, groups, and socio-political institutions in this context. (Rust, 1993:68)

Within the developmental model perspective, changes in self-identity are seen as being either part of the developmental process or as immaturity, where maturity is the achievement and maintenance of a stable homosexual identity. However, Rust argues that it is possible to regard such changes in self-identity as necessary in order to:

- maintain an accurate description of one's social location within a changing social context; hence, changes in self-identity are to be expected of psychologically and socially mature individuals. (Rust, 1993:68)

Hence, changes in the social context may lead to changes in sexual identity. Clearly there have been historical changes in the conceptualisation of sexuality. As already noted, the term homosexual (and hence heterosexual) only emerged in the 1880's, thereby creating for the first time the possibility to talk about being a homosexual. As
discussed in Chapter 2, since then, different discourses have created different versions of homosexuality, each containing different possibilities for being homosexual (Foucault, 1979; Weeks, 1981). Alongside these changes, there have occurred changes in terminology: "Ulrich's urnings became yesterday's homophiles and today's gay men, and yesterday's gay girls are today's lesbian feminists" (Rust 1993:69).

Returning to the issue of bisexuality, Rust predicts an increase in the use of bisexuality as a category. This will influence existing heterosexual, and homosexual categories and the language of self-description. Rust cites the example of a woman who, due to her relationships with women, currently defines herself as lesbian. Yet, in the past this woman has been married to a man and, at that time, defined herself as heterosexual. While use of the term lesbian in the 1970's and 1980s did not rule out previous sexual relationships with men, Rust envisages that in the 1990s bisexual will become a more appropriate term to describe these events. Thus the woman in the example will find that the term lesbian no longer accurately describes her sexual identity and will use the term bisexual to acknowledge her relationship with her ex-husband.

While the position carries some validity, Rust may be in danger of falling into the trap of the earlier developmental models of which she is so critical. A dynamic model of sexual identity, which takes into account social, political and cultural factors should be able to account for a variety of sexual categories and not simply replace them with one all-embracing bisexual identity. The current thinking of Rust suggests that bisexuality should become the end goal of a sexual identity formation model. An additional point is that Rust is dismissing the way in which the term bisexual is used to indicate that a woman (or man) is willing to consider a relationship with either sex. The woman in Rust's example may be indicating through her use of the term lesbian that she is currently not willing to have relationships with men.

Continuing with her example of the woman who currently identifies as lesbian, Rust examines the way social constructs vary cross-(sub)-culturally, which results in different constructs being used to describe social location in different cultural contexts. Even though this woman presents herself differently within these different contexts, she probably does not feel that she is misrepresenting herself to either audience. On the contrary, she is merely using the language that most accurately describes herself within each context. (Rust, 1993:69)
This in turn relates to an individual’s location on the socio-political landscape, which again is subject to change. Put simply, new political movements (the Gay Liberation Front, the Women’s Movement, Queer Nation) emerge, thus creating new possibilities for being and doing. Maintaining a focus on language in this process, Rust states:

Language that locates oneself in relation to old landmarks becomes meaningless as these landmarks fade; eventually, such language locates one within a historical context but cannot accurately describe one’s location within the contemporary socio-political context. (Rust, 1993: 70)

Rust acknowledges that a gap between her analysis and the way in which people generally describe their experience of sexual identity. As already discussed in this chapter, most of the research suggests that people describe their sexuality as stable and fixed beyond choice, leading them to retrospectively attach meanings to past events in the light of current knowledge. However, it is possible for an identity model to take into account the way in which people see identity formation as a goal-orientated process of an essentialist nature. Rust believes this can be accomplished by:

recognising that goals themselves are constructed. In short, the social constructionist must avoid incorporating essentialist goals into theories of sexual identity formation but allow for the possibility that individuals who are creating their own identities will introduce their own goals. (Rust, 1993: 70)

This links in with the literature on queer theory discussed in the previous chapter, which highlights the way in which current constructs of heterosexuality and homosexuality limit individual goals. Just as Richardson (1981) argues that lesbianism is not seen as an authentic sexuality, Rust suggests that bisexuality is not seen an authentic option, nor is it seen as a permanent option. The implications for this dualist model for research is that experiences that cannot be explained through either heterosexuality or homosexuality are dismissed. Given the unequal balance between these two sexual identities, this means that:

Heterosexual identity serves as a perceptual schema that filters and guides the interpretation of experience; experiences are given meanings that are consistent with heterosexual identity. (Rust, 1993: 71)

This can lead to a dismissal of same sex attraction as being platonic, transitory or situational, whereas opposite sex attraction reflects a true heterosexual essence. This relates to one of the central concerns of this thesis: that is, the impact and power of heterosexuality to interpret all our experiences, regardless of their basis. This in turn reinforces heterosexuality as an institution, thus removing any threat posed by opposing sexual identities.
In conclusion, Rust returns to the position that “one’s self identity is a description of one’s social location” (1993:72). Thus, changes in identity should be expected of mature individuals and reflect changes in social location or in the language used to describe such social locations, where such change is socially constructed. That is, one cannot name one’s identity unless it already exists. Likewise, the very construction of categories makes change possible. That is, the construct of the term homosexual permit people to give a name to their identity based on their experiences. However, the current construction of sexual categories based on the gender of a partner creates and perpetuates the dualist model of heterosexuality and homosexuality. Thus, the bisexual is inconsistent, while the lesbian or heterosexual is consistent. Again, this serves to highlight the point made by Richardson (1981) concerning the relationship between gender and sexual identity.

4.5 Summary and conclusions
The concluding section of this chapter provides a summary of the major findings and assesses their implication for my own study. The chapter has examined the findings from recent sociological research on the social processes involved in the development and maintenance of a lesbian identity. Such research demonstrates the pivotal relationship between “women’s behaviour, the cultural imputations of lesbianism and the adoption of lesbian identities” (Jenness, 1992:65), which has enabled research to focus on the relationship between mainstream culture and subcultures. By highlighting the social processes involved in the development of a lesbian identity, such research is a powerful indictment against those claims that sexual identity is essential and fixed. However, it was argued that the research reviewed in this chapter pays insufficient attention to the issue of difference and diversity among women. There is a tendency either to treat lesbians as an homogenous group or to extrapolate the findings of research based on lesbians with certain social characteristics to all lesbians. This dismisses the way in which class, race, ethnicity, and age affect the construction of a lesbian identity. Even when there is a recognition of the differences between women, little is done to explore the nature of these difference or the implications they hold for the development of a lesbian identity. My own research, through attention to issues of difference and diversity between women, will make a valuable contribution to existing sociological research in this area and to the growing body of sociological literature looking at the nature of difference between women in general.
The issue of diversity and difference is also applicable to the social context of lesbianism. The research reviewed in this chapter, conducted over the last thirty years, examines the social context of the modern lesbian and gay movement and/or the women's movement. However social movements are not static, but subject to change. Research looking at the construction of lesbian identity at one particular point in time provides valuable data. Nevertheless, research that is sensitive to the issue of time and a changing social context will make a valuable contribution to the sociological understanding of the social processes involved in identity formation. It is within this context that my own study will look at the experiences of women over the last thirty years.

This in turn raises another important issue, which differentiates my own research from previous studies. Much of the research reviewed in this chapter is based in a sociological framework sensitive to the feminist concerns outlined in the previous chapters. Thus, close attention is paid to the relationship between gender and sexuality. While not denying the validity of this perspective, it is also important that we are able to be reflexive about the frameworks we use to investigate sociological phenomena. Likewise, it is important to recognise the impact that feminism has had on the formation of lesbian identity. Thus we must place our own theoretical discourses in the research framework and subject them to the same critical analysis given to other theoretical discourses. This means that it is necessary to understand the effect that feminist discourse has had on lesbian identity just as much as it is necessary to understand the effect of sexological or psychological discourses.

This discussion has so far concentrated on issues raised in the first part of this chapter. However, the second part of the chapter raised a number of problems relating to the model of sexual identity formation used in research on lesbian identity. These will now be examined and the implications for my own research assessed. The second part of this chapter examined the underlying assumptions guiding the sociological research on the formation of homosexual identity in general and lesbian identity in particular. This showed that research is based on a developmental model, which assumes that the formation of sexual identity is linear, sequential, uni-directional and goal-orientated. However, as Rust showed, this model may have more to do with the assumptions of the researchers than the actual reality of people's lives. This in turn raises interesting questions about the effect that sociological discourse has on the construction of lesbian
identity. This leads to the same conclusions as those discussed in relation to feminist discourse (see above). By focusing on the treatment of bisexuality in these models, this discussion focused on the way in which this understanding of homosexual identity reinforces the dualist model of sexuality based on the dichotomy of heterosexuality and homosexuality. The feminist and queer theory analysis of the unequal relationship between the two suggests that at one level the adoption of a lesbian identity may reinforce a heterosexual hegemony. However, this should not dismiss the possible politically strategic advantages to be gained from using the term lesbian. What is important here is to assess the implications that the different uses of the word lesbian have on the relationship between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Does the use of the term lesbian always reinforce heterosexuality? Under what circumstances can it undermine a heterosexual hegemony? Again, this demonstrates the validity of a research strategy that focuses on difference and diversity. In addition to this, Ruts' focus on bisexuality contains implications for my own research. Comparing the experiences of women who either self-identify as lesbian or bisexual will lead to a greater understanding of both identity formation and the contribution that sexual categories make to the maintenance of social order in society.

4.6 The research aims and objectives
My review of the relevant literature in this area has led to the construction of the following research aims:

- To examine the stories that women who identify as lesbian or bisexual tell about their sexual identity.
- To examine the nature of the relationship between the different cultural constructions of lesbian and bisexual identity and the personal development and maintenance of lesbian or bisexual identity.
- To examine the nature and extent of the social differences that exist between women who self-identify with these sexual labels. To explore how differences based on age, class, ethnicity, marital status and parental status, as well as beliefs about the aetiology of lesbianism or bisexuality affect the construction of identity.
- To explore beliefs and practices concerning the relationship between gender and lesbianism. To examine the impact of these differences on lesbian culture. This includes looking at the practices of power within lesbian communities and assessing the implications of these practices on both membership of lesbian communities and the construction of community or subcultural boundaries. This involves examining how this is challenged and the consequences of this.
To summarise, this study examines the different stories that women have told about the development, maintenance, meaning and practice of lesbian and bisexual identity within the context of the modern lesbian and gay as well as feminist movements. While these are the primary concerns of this study, theoretical and conceptual issues examined in the literature review raise the following questions:

- What contribution do the findings make to the sociological understanding of the social control and regulation of all sexualities, which in turn contributes to the maintenance of social order?
- How do the findings further sociological understanding about the development and maintenance of sexual identity?
- What are the implications of the findings for future sociological research in this area?

The next chapter examines the methodology employed to answer these questions.
Chapter Five: Methodological Considerations

5.1 Introduction

This study examined the development, maintenance, meaning and practice of sexual identity for women who self-identify as lesbian or bisexual. The specific research aims and questions were discussed in the last chapter. These were explored through a data set consisting of 570 women's stories published in 18 books during the period 1977-1995. Four hundred and sixty-eight of these stories were from women who self-identify as lesbian and the remaining 102 stories were from women who self-identify as bisexual. This chapter examines the methodology used in the study. It begins by examining both the practical and theoretical considerations, which guided my choice to use the published stories of women to answer the research questions. This is followed by discussion of the theoretical and methodological issues that informed the way in which the data was analysed. The chapter then moves to a description of the selection criterion and a detailed analysis of the sample of books used in this study. It concludes with an evaluation of the methodology.

5.2 Choice of data

The publication of books containing the stories of women who identify as lesbian or bisexual is a part of the gay and feminist movement. Indeed, they have been made possible only by these movements. However, this is not to deny that the publication of these books is the only cultural form in which meaning and construction of sexual identity and practice is given a voice. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter One of this thesis, such books need to be located in a wider context that covers many other cultural forms including film, video, music, art, theatre, the press, the media and more recently the Internet. Each of these different forms have contributed to lesbian and gay culture and hence identity, community and practice. However, the decision to look at just one particular form of this culture, lesbian and bisexual coming out stories, is based on two key issues. The first relates to the genre of auto/biography in general and in particular its relevance to lesbian and bisexual communities. While the second issue relates to the research questions outlined in the last chapter. The first issue will be addressed first.

Riessman (1993) writes that “Telling stories about past events seems to be a universal human activity, one of the first forms of discourse that we learn as a child” (1993:3). However, while telling stories may be a universal activity, it is important to recognise
that this activity is always a social activity. This affects who gets to tell their story and consequently who is denied a voice (Plummer, 1995) as well as the status given to a particular story or genre of story (Stanley, 1992).

Applying this argument to the genre of the modern auto/biography whose roots can be traced back to the Victorian period, Stanley (1992) contends that this genre has in general been dominated by the ‘great and good’ (usually men) who are regarded as having ‘something of importance’ to say. Furthermore, such narratives whether written in the first person or by a biographer privilege a particular notion of the ‘truth’. That is, through dismissing the social production of ideas it is possible to also dismiss the idea that auto/biographies are simply ‘one interpretation from a range of possibilities’ (Stanley, 1992:7). Instead auto/biography is understood through a realist perspective which has its roots in high Victorian positivism, where the text is regarded as referential. While this point is discussed in greater detail in the next section, the important issue here in relation to my own research concerns the status of such writing. As Stanley notes the ‘politics of greatness’ enshrined in this genre of writing has been challenged in recent years from a variety of different oppressed and minority groups, for example women, lesbians and Black people. Encapsulated under the slogan ‘the personal is political’ there have been attempts to use this genre to redefine reality from the perspective of groups of people who have previously been denied a voice. Clearly this has a particular resonance regarding the stories of lesbians and bisexual women. As discussed in Chapter Two, different discourses have over the last one hundred and fifty years sought to define and limit sexual identity, experience and practice. Consequently, the auto/biographies of ‘ordinary lives’ not only, as Stanley notes, dispels the myth that only the ‘great’ are interesting, but also represents an attempt to redefine meaning and practice.

It is this issue that Zimmerman (1985) and Martin (1993) address in their respective works on lesbian auto/biography and in particular the published lesbian coming out story. Zimmerman’s seminal work on this traces the development of auto/biography in lesbian writing to the emergence of a lesbian feminist politics of experience and identity firmly located in the 1970s. Furthermore, as Martin notes in relation to both her own work in this area and Zimmerman’s there is a fundamental need for the production of such stories in order to develop a sense of community:
Self-worth, identity, and a sense of community have fundamentally depended on the production of a shared narrative or life history and on the assimilation of individuals' life histories into the history of the group. The autobiographical writing has specific purposes in the not (always synchronous) histories of the community and of the individuals who write or read them; it aims to give a lesbian identity a coherence and a legitimacy than can make both individual and social action possible (Martin, 1993:278).

Similar to the arguments put forward by Jenness (1992) Plummer (1995), and Rust (1993), Zimmerman outlines the questions that are answered by the publication of lesbian coming out stories. For example, what does it mean to be a lesbian? How does being a lesbian figure in a life? What does it mean to come out? Thus, they address the process of becoming conscious of oneself and in doing so accepting and affirming that identity (Martin, 1993).

However, in the process of answering these questions, the coming out stories of lesbians also make an important contribution in defining and limiting lesbian experience and identity. Hence, Martin (1993) and Zimmerman (1985) suggest that analysis of these stories can contribute to our understanding of the social context of lesbian identity and meaning. As Martin (1993) argues to be a lesbian in the 1970s was very different from being a lesbian in the 1980s, and as my own research shows in the 1990s. Thus, these books are one way of gaining an understanding of these changes and, as my research shows, the continuities as well.

The research conducted by Martin (1993) and Zimmerman (1985) is largely concerned with examining the impact of feminism on lesbian identity and focuses on the lesbian coming out story in the 1970s and 1980s. Building on these findings my own research incorporates books from the 1990s and as such is an attempt to update and build on this earlier body of work. In doing so, it addresses the research questions outlined in the last chapter, which further demonstrates the reasoning behind my decision to look at published lesbian and bisexual coming out stories.

As highlighted in the literature review, to talk about lesbian identity in the singular is problematic and ignores the differences that exist between lesbians, which may result in different meanings being attached to the word lesbian. The issue of diversity amongst women makes it both theoretically and empirically more appropriate to talk about lesbian identities. To this must be added the need to look at the experiences of women.
who self-identify as bisexual. Consequently, the sociological relevance of this study partly rests on the ability to be able to examine the plurality of lesbian and bisexual experience.

Likewise, the literature review highlighted the importance of the relationship between the development and maintenance of a lesbian identity and the social context, both in terms of society in general and lesbian cultures. Over the last thirty years, this has occurred in the context of dynamic gay and feminist movements. Again, this demonstrates the need to be aware of difference and diversity, and the political and social processes that lead to change. In addition, following the work of Jenness (1992), Martin (1993), Plummer (1995), and Zimmerman (1985) on telling sexual stories I was interested in assessing the way in which stories both reflect and contribute to the creation of communities.

These were the major reasons guiding my decision to use documentary data instead of interviews. Through the use of published accounts that span a twenty year period it was possible to examine the way in which talking about a lesbian or bisexual identity has changed throughout the period since the birth of the gay movement and feminist movement. Given that these books are a part of those movements, it was reasoned that an analysis of them would enable me to gain an understanding of the relationship between identity and culture. In addition, it was felt that the use of such data would enable me to look at the experiences of a greater number of women than would have been possible through conducting interviews. An issue related to this matter concerns my own social location as a white feminist-orientated (even if sceptical) lesbian academic researcher. Based on my own knowledge and experience of lesbian politics, as well as my understanding of the differences that exist between women, I felt that my ability to gain access to particular groups of women who identify as lesbian or bisexual would have been limited. Furthermore, it would have affected the type of material I would have gained. While this would have been sociologically interesting in itself, it was not directly related to the interests of this study. Having outlined the reasons guiding my decision to use the published stories of women who identify as lesbian or bisexual, this chapter will now look at how the data was analysed.

5.3 A sociological framework for analysing stories

This section begins with a discussion of the theoretical issues surrounding the data analysis before moving on to look at how this was practically implemented. The first
part of the discussion assesses the growing sociological interest in narrative analysis before moving on to look at Plummer’s framework for sociology of stories, developed in his book *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds* (1995) which was briefly examined in Chapter 4. While Plummer’s interest lies in examining “the personal experience narratives of the intimate” (1995:19), that is sexual stories, his framework is applicable to other types of stories. However his interest in sexual stories, including lesbian and gay ‘coming out stories’ meant that it was particularly useful for my own analysis.

The ‘stories’ that people tell about their lives are a fundamental part of sociological inquiry. That is, as sociologists we gather ‘stories’ about peoples lives and use these to produce our own ‘stories’ on issues of concern to us (Plummer, 1995). Here, stories are treated as raw data which, when subjected to sociological scrutiny, will yield information about people’s lives and experiences. This means that attention is paid to assessing the ‘truth’ or ‘falsity’ of people’s account in order to validate the theoretical and empirical claims we make. This is not just applicable to the data collected through interviews but is also relevant to the analysis of documentary data. For example, Scott (1988) describes the processes involved in assessing the credibility, reliability and validity of documentary data. Consequently, until relatively recently, the story as a subject of sociological interest in itself has been ignored in preference to the information it may yield on a given subject. However, there is a growing body of sociological knowledge that concerns itself with the ‘story’ or ‘narrative turn’, in itself and for what it can tell us about the society in which we live in (for example, Bruner, 1986; Denzin, 1989; Geertz, 1975, 1983; Riessman, 1993; Rosaldo, 1989; Rosenweld and Ochberg, 1992).

Rosenweld and Ochberg (1992) in the introduction to their book *Storied Lives* suggest that narrative analysis disrupts the traditional sociological analysis of stories with its realist assumptions and focus on collecting information. Instead the focus shifts to look at the very construction of the stories and likewise the role they play in the construction of identity. Thus they write “Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one’s life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned” (Rosenweld and Ochberg, 1992:1). Rosenweld and Ochberg’s stance is part of a wider move within social sciences to move away from a realist approach to story telling and its inherent focus on uncovering the truth to a narrative approach which is more
concerned with the social construction of the story (for example, Denzin, 1989; Riessman, 1993; Stanley, 1993). Thus, uncovering the 'truth' no longer becomes the objective of analysis or, in other words, there has been a move away from the 'what' to the 'how'. The result of this has been to successfully deconstruct the realist position and hence its assumption that life stories can be regarded as 'mirrors of life events' (Rosenweld and Ochberg, 1992). It is this approach that represents a deconstruction of the disciplinary boundaries that have traditionally divided psychology, sociology, anthropology and literary studies.

So why has this happened? In order to answer this question it is necessary to look at the history of the study of life stories, which, as already stated, has traditionally been based on the belief that a story can be viewed as representational of a real life. As Denzin (1989) argues from Weber onwards and encapsulated in the Chicago School of Sociology in America in the 1920s there has been a desire within sociology to understand the meaning of peoples lives. This has been based on the assumption that all sociology has to do is employ the appropriate methodology and it will be possible to discover the "real subject who is present in the world" (Denzin, 1989: 14), that is the realist approach. However over the last twenty years this has changed and thus the focus has moved away from a realist perspective to look at the "process, product and consequences of reportage itself" (Rosenweld and Ochberg, 1992:2).

In accounting for this change in focus, writers such as Denzin, 1989, Riessman 1993, Rosenweld and Ochberg, 1992 and Stanley, 1993 cite a number of reasons for this which point to what Rabinow and Sullivan (1979) term the 'interpretive turn' in social science. This can partly be explained through the growing mistrust in the empiricist agenda and the counter argument that all scientific inquiry is theory-based and hence involves a high degree of interpretation. This has in turn led to an interest in the issue of reflexivity and the contention that social theorists construct their own stories when conceptualising human experience and behaviours and these too are culturally constrained. Thus by including the academic in the production of data, we are once again forced to acknowledge that it is not possible to claim that our research findings represent the 'truth' of people's lives. Summing up this position Rosenweld and Ochberg write, "Put bluntly, it means that the growth of any knowledge does not unfold the structure of the world but is itself a history" (1992:3). Denzin (1989) traces this change in the treatment of the story to three key sources, one from within sociology and
two from outside. Firstly Denzin argues that C. Wright Mills argument that the sociological imagination 'enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society' (1959:6) is of fundamental importance here in recognising that stories are always and can only ever be socially located. Secondly the work of Jean- Paul Sartre and finally more literary interpretative theory inspired by the work of Derrida. This has lead to the growing recognition that “A life is a social text, a fictional, narrative production” (Denzin, 1989:9) and hence the status of the auto/biography becomes deeply problematic. Thus to summarise, in recent years there has been a move by some sociologists to apply a narrative analysis to the story.

Reviewing this body of work, Plummer argues that the interest in narrative structures present in stories is indicative of its close association with the concerns of both literary theory and cultural and media studies. This results in an interest in locating ‘plot, setting and characterisation’, which contributes to the way a story is developed through the selective inclusion of past events. For Plummer, a symbolic interactionist, the point is not about discounting the value of this approach, but developing, thereby producing a more sociologically based approach to stories and story telling. The concern of this sociology of stories would be with:

the social role of stories: the ways they are produced, the ways they are read, the work they perform in the wider social order, how they change, and their role in the political process. (Plummer, 1995:19)

Thus Plummer shifts the focus away from a sole concern with narrative structure in stories to look at the “social work they perform in cultures” (Plummer, 1995:19). This involves looking at stories as both symbolic interactions and political process.

5.3.1 Understanding stories as symbolic interactions

Symbolic interactionism and its relevance to the current study was explored in Chapter 3 of this thesis. Among other things, it was noted that this approach made the point that all human behaviour is social, involving social interaction and the development of shared meaning. Plummer, locating the production of stories firmly within this framework, examines the way in which the telling of stories is a central part of this symbolic interaction. This enables stories to be viewed as joint actions involving three groups of people: the producers, the coaxers and the consumers. This understanding about the production of stories shifts the emphasis away from seeing a story as representative of an individual life to focus on the social production and consumption of
the story. As stated, this involves three groups of people, each of which will now be examined in turn.

The first group comprises of the ‘producers’ of stories, those people who tell the stories of their lives. In the case of my own study, this group consists of the women who have chosen to publicly tell their stories about being lesbian or bisexual in this society. However, it is important to recognise that the story told is simply a selective reconstruction or version of a life, it is not the life itself. This is the first step away from regarding the story as representative of a life, an event or experience, and seeing it as a creation in itself. This is not to question the ‘truthfulness’ of people’s accounts, but to indicate that the concern no longer rests with trying to assess the validity of the account using such criteria.

The second group of people is the ‘coachers’ or ‘coaxers’, who play a fundamental role in the production of the story. Plummer points out this can include an array of people, from the chat show host to the sociological researcher. These people coax, persuade and provide a forum for people to become storytellers. In my own research, the coaxer is most obviously the person who requests, gathers and collates the stories for publication. This is primarily the editor, although this gathering of stories also involves the publishing house that commissions the book. This role is not a benign one. The editor is actively involved in the production of the story. An obvious example of this being the story that results from an interview: the questions asked limit and shape the story told. The following chapter provides a full analysis of the role of the editor. Suffice to say, the role of the editor means that the story that appears in print may be very different from the original telling of that story. This increases the distance between the lived life and the story told about that life.

While the teller and the coaxer (the woman and the editor) are involved in the production of a story, of equal importance in this model of stories as joint actions are the consumers of the stories. Furthermore, the consumer, in this case the buyer and reader of the books containing the women’s stories, are involved in the active consumption of these books. Just as researchers in media studies have highlighted the interpretative and active role of the television watcher or filmgoer (for example, Bobo, 1995; Bonner, 1992; Gammon and Marshment, 1988; Van Zoonen, 1991) so it is with those who consume sexual stories. As Plummer argues, this means that any analysis of
stories must pay attention to the social location of the consumers. If we accept the idea that individual consumers may construct different meaning from the same story, this in turn shows the weakness of the link between the life and the story told about that life.

However, this analysis of the role of the consumer would not be complete without an understanding that the producers - the tellers and coaxers - are also consumers of other stories. Indeed, the stories they produce would not be possible without the consumption of other stories. The relevance of this is examined in Chapters 7 through to 11, which explore the different stories of lesbian and bisexual identity present in the data.

This model of stories as symbolic interactions offers a new way of looking at and understanding stories. Instead of viewing a story as representative of an individual life, it directs attention to the 'joint actions' involved in the production of that story. Plummer puts this succinctly when he writes:

All these people - producers, coaxers, consumers - are engaged in assembling life story actions around lives, events and happenings - although they cannot grasp the actual life. (Plummer, 1995:21)

Moreover, it indicates the way in which the meaning of the story, and hence its consequences, are always dependent on firstly the social location of those involved in the production and consumption of the story, and secondly on the wider social context in which the story is told. Plummer, elaborating on this point, examines the important role of 'communities' who hear and receive the story, again highlighting the way in which different communities over time will receive the story in different ways. This point is theoretically consistent with the discussion of community and culture that has appeared throughout this thesis.

As already noted, Plummer is interested in developing a new sociological approach to story telling. Nevertheless, this is not at the expense of dismissing its links with the approaches used by literary theory and media studies, and contained in post-modern social theory. Nevertheless, he argues that this approach is uniquely sociological because it goes beyond the level of textual analysis to expose the fundamentally practical and material nature of stories:

story production and consumption is an empirical social process involving a stream of joint actions in local contexts themselves bound into negotiated social worlds. (Plummer, 1995:24)
While endorsing this view, it is also important to recognise that this does not mean that the issues of interest to post-modern social theory need not be addressed through this sociological approach. It was argued in Chapter 3 that a theoretical and conceptual framework based on a synthesis of symbolic interactionism, feminism and queer theory would be the most appropriate way to address the concerns of this thesis. This argument is also relevant here. The discussion now considers the way in which Plummer looks at stories as political process.

5.3.2 Stories as political process

In order to understand the way in which stories can be understood as political process, it is necessary to have some understanding of the way in which Plummer defines power:

Power is not so much an all or nothing phenomenon, which people either have or don’t have, and which resides either here or there. Rather it is best viewed as a flow, a process, a pulsate - oscillating and undulating throughout the social world and working to pattern the degree of control people experience and have over their own lives. Power is the process, which shifts outcomes and distributes control and regulation. It affects hierarchy, patterns of domination and the distribution of resources. It connects processes, which make a difference to the conduct of life. Power is not a simple attribute or a capacity, but a flow of negotiations and shifting outcomes. (Plummer, 1995: 26)

Leaving to one side the suggestion that this conceptualisation of power has a certain amount in common with Foucault’s work in this area, it does highlight both the negative and positive aspects of power. That is, power can be both repressive and productive for both people and social situations. Furthermore, it is a part of all negotiated social activity and makes a fundamental contribution to social order. Consequently, stories, in this instance the sexual story, are inevitably linked to power:

*Sexual stories live in this flow of power. The power to tell a story, or indeed to not tell a story, under the conditions of one’s own choosing, is part of the political process.* (Plummer, 1995:26)

This means that any sociological analysis of stories must attend to the power mechanisms that permit certain stories to be told while silencing other stories. This includes an analysis of the processes involved in challenging this and the consequences that follow.

Included in Plummer’s analysis of sexual stories are those told by women and men who identify as lesbian or gay. As discussed in Chapter 4, Plummer observes that over the last one hundred years of western culture it is possible to see that talking about being lesbian or gay at different times would have (and has) resulted in different consequences. Thus for much of this century the personal stories of being lesbian and
gay have either been silenced or told in secret. It is only since the 1970s and the growth
of the lesbian and gay movement that this story has started to be told in public. This has
changed the story from being one of personal shame and pain to one of pride and
strength. This is a clear demonstration of the practice of power, both its repressive and
productive qualities. In the context of my own research, this understanding of the
practice of power directs attention to the changing and shifting social and political
context of the last thirty years and the effect this has had on the stories of being lesbian
or bisexual. This focus will make it possible to look at the practice of power in two
ways. Firstly between heterosexuality and homosexuality and the communities and
structures that have developed around the two, and secondly between the different
groups that make up the lesbian and gay community. This point adds depth to the earlier
discussion about the choice of data. Having outlined the theoretical issues that guided
the way in which I approached the analysis of the data, this chapter now considers the
practicalities of that analysis.

5.4 Analysing the data
The data set consisted of 570 women’s stories published in 18 books during the period
1977-1995. Four hundred and sixty-eight of these stories were from women who self-
identify as lesbian and the remaining 102 stories were from women who self-identify as
bisexual. The material was divided into two sets: the editorial introductions and the
stories. Given the nature of the material, the research questions and the theoretical basis
for my data analysis, the analysis was qualitative in nature.

The first part of this chapter addressed the theoretical and conceptual issues relating to
the decision to use the published coming out stories of lesbian and bisexual women to
address the research questions posed at the end of Chapter Four. This was done by
examining the valuable contribution that narrative analysis in conjunction with
Plummer’s concerns with the symbolic and political value of stories can bring to a
sociology of story telling. This section applies this theoretical framework to the
methodological aspects of the data analysis. In so doing, it draws on the work of
Riessman (1993) and in particular her understanding of Labov’s structural approach to
narrative analysis (Labov, 1972; Labov and Waletzky, 1967).

It has already been noted that the problematics of regarding the narrative as
representational of a lived life partially accounts for social science’s interest in narrative
analysis. Viewed through the tripartite framework offered by Plummer (1995) this raises questions about the role of the researcher in the construction of the story and hence contains implication for the analysis of the data. Hence, in the following discussion I seek to locate myself in that process, thus showing why my own concerns (outlined throughout this thesis) led me to prioritise the issues and themes raised in the data analysis. The implications that this contains for the reliability and validity of my analysis is discussed in the final part of this section.

Riessman (1993) examines the implications for the research process contained in the idea that representation is ambiguous and always open to multiple interpretations. This leads her to construct five levels of representation that are present in the collection and analysis of the data: attending, telling, transcribing, analysing and reading. Expanding on this she writes:

> We are interpreting and creating texts at every juncture, letting symbols stand for or take place of the primary experience, to which we have no direct access. Meaning is ambiguous because it arises out of a process of interaction between people: self, teller, listener and recorder, analyst, and reader. Although the goal may be to tell the whole truth, our narratives about others’ narratives are our world creations. ‘There is no view from nowhere’ (Nagal, 1986), and what might have seemed nowhere in the past is likely to be somewhere in the present or the future. Meaning is fluid and contextual, not fixed and universal. All we have is talk and texts that represent reality partially, selectively, and imperfectly. (1993:15)

Given that my data set consists of the published accounts of women, the first three levels of representation do not apply directly, in as much as I did not interview the women. However, these levels of representation are of relevance to the collection of stories by the editors of the books. Thus, Stage 1 of the research consisted of analysing the editorial introductions to the books. Plummer’s framework of stories as joint productions was used to assess the role that the editors played in the production of the stories. This analysis, alongside the findings from Stage 2, appears in Chapter 6.

However, the remaining two levels of representation, ‘analysing’ and ‘reading’ were directly relevant to my own analysis. As a researcher it was important to recognise that my own cultural location would inform my understanding of what is to be counted as a narrative. Riessman suggests that ever since Aristotle stated in *Poetics* that a narrative has a beginning, middle and end, academics and scholars prioritise sequence as a defining element of a narrative. For example, Labov and Waletzky (1967) focus on the chronological sequence of stories, showing that narratives present a linear unidirectional
move through time and space. As Riessman notes, viewed from this perspective a
narrative is always responding to the question "and then what happened?" Bearing in
mind Foucault's critique of traditional approaches taken to the study of history we can
see that both the construction and our understanding of the narrative reflects modern
western philosophical concerns with the linear progressive ordering of time. Other
researchers, for example Young (1987) focuses on consequential sequencing, where one
event is seen to cause another, while Michaels (1981) focuses on thematic sequencing.

This awareness of 'sequencing' in both the construction and analysis of narratives and
stories formed an important part of my own analysis. For example Labov, (1972)
sensitive to the issue of 'sequencing' in narrative has identified six common elements
which are present in a narrative: an abstract; orientation (time, place, situation,
participants); complicating action (sequence of events); evaluation (significance and
meaning of the action, attitude of the narrator); resolution (what finally happened); coda
 RETURNS the perspective to the present).

In relation to the construction of the stories I was able to identify both chronological
and thematic sequencing, as well as structural elements in many of the women's stories.
This became both an important aspect of understanding the construction of the stories
and consequently influenced the way in which I presented the data. For example, where
sequencing (either chronological or thematic) was felt to be present in the stories this
became a part of the way in which the data was analysed and presented. Additionally, it
also alerted me to be sensitive to the possibility that some stories may produce a
different type of narrative not reliant on either chronological or thematic sequencing.
Thus, an awareness of the cultural impetus of the researcher to sequentially order stories
when analysing and reading stories enabled me to avoid doing this when it was not
already present in the stories.

Likewise an awareness of 'sequencing' also helped me to maintain an awareness that as
Riessman notes "...a teller constructs a story from a primary experience and interprets
the significance of events in clauses and embedded evaluation" (1993:19). Thus,
instead of simply trying to identify past events and experiences I 'read' the stories in
order to gain an understanding of their significance or meaning for the individual telling
the story. This approach highlights the way in which narratives and the understanding of
narratives are build upon multiple interpretations. A point that Plummer illustrates in
his tripartite approach to story telling. At a methodological level this is consistent with
the traditional approach taken to qualitative data where analysis is inductive rather than
deductive.

Thus a sensitivity to 'sequencing' the structural construction of the story and the
meaning and interpretation the individual story teller gave to her experience and actions
enabled me to initially construct a skeleton structure for each of the 570 stories. This
formed Stage 2 of the data analysis. Bearing in mind Labov's model outlined above
details for each story included information on demographic details (where available);
life history details; beliefs about causes for sexual identity; nature of sexual identity;
views about gender; structure of story; issues of social context. This enabled me to
identify points of both similarity and difference between the stories. For example, an
obvious point of difference in the stories was how women chose to identify themselves
(lesbian, bisexual, butch, and femme, for example) and also the meaning that women
attached to these terms. This analysis resulted in allocating the stories to six different
story categories based on common themes present in the stories. These appear in Table
5.1 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category 1: Born a lesbian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Category 2: Butch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 3: Femme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 4: Feminist-lesbian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 5: Black Lesbian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 6: Bisexual</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.1 Story categories used in data analysis

As stated, the total data set consisted of 570 stories or accounts of women talking about
their lives in the context of their relationships with women. Stage Two analysis of all
the stories provided me with a broad understanding of the different issues represented in
the different story categories. However, I felt that the data set was too large to produce
any fruitful in-depth qualitative analysis that could be represented within the confines of
the thesis format. Therefore, in Stage 3 of the data analysis the decision was taken to
reduce the data set to 130 stories ensuring that there was an equal representation of
stories in all categories, apart from the bisexual category. Thus, the first five story
categories contain 20 stories each, while the sixth category ‘bisexual’ contains 30.
is in recognition that the first five categories all look at lesbian identities and hence have a greater representation throughout the data analysis.

Selecting which stories to include was based on a number of factors. Unlike interview material, where I would have had some control over the ‘story production’ and hence all the data would have had some relevance to my research questions, this was not the case with the women’s stories. Given that my interest lay in the personal stories that women told, I initially excluded poems, fictional stories and theoretical writing from the analysis. This reduced the data set by approximately one hundred and thirty stories. The final decision concerning the selection of stories was based on a consideration of the issues looked at in each story, and secondly the need to include stories from women from diverse backgrounds. Finally, while an equal number of stories (apart from the stories of bisexuality) were placed in each category this does not imply that each story category was equally represented in the larger data set of 570 stories. The issue of representation is looked at in detail in Chapter 6, and where appropriate, in the other data analysis chapters.

While the fourth stage of the data analysis focused on the subset of 130 stories, it also incorporated the analysis from the previous two stages. These story categories formed the basis for the subsequent analysis, which used the techniques associated with narrative analysis as outlined throughout this chapter. While the analysis involved four different stages, the findings at each stage contributed to my overall understanding of the social production of identities among women who identify as lesbian or bisexual. The decision to analysis the stories by story category affected the presentation of the findings. In keeping with the methodological framework explored in this chapter, a separate examination of the data placed in each story category enabled me to understand the overall story structure. However, where appropriate comparisons between the different story categories form part of the analysis. Chapter 12 also provides a detailed summary of the significant findings across all the six stories.

5.4.1. ‘Trustworthiness’ of the analysis

While the theoretical assumptions guiding narrative analysis render problematic the realist assumptions of reliability in relation to assessing the validity of a researcher work, we are still left with the problem of how to evaluate a narrative analysis. Riessman (1993) argues that the starting point is to acknowledge and locate one’s own analysis as the product of particular discourses. In my own case a discourse based on a
synthesis of symbolic interactionism, feminism and queer theory which results, amongst other things, in a strong focus on difference and rendering problematic the conceptualisation of identity. By locating my own analysis within this framework, I am firstly dismissing the criteria for validity based on realist assumptions, and secondly I am acknowledging that a different theoretical framework would have produced a different analysis. Therefore, as Riessman points out the basis for assessing the validity of an analysis no longer resides with the impossible task of representing the ‘truth’ but instead focuses on a notion of ‘trustworthiness’:

Validation, the process through which we make claims for the trustworthiness of our interpretations, is the critical issue. ‘Trustworthiness’ not ‘truth’ is a key semantic difference: The latter assumes an objective reality, whereas the former moves the process into the social world.
(Riessman, 1994:65)

In my own analysis I have implemented the notion of trustworthiness by making transparent the framework used in my analysis and also supporting theoretical claims with evidence from the stories. Likewise, where appropriate I offer alternative accounts and explanations for the events and meanings offered by the women. For example in Chapter Seven, which looks at the stories of butch and femme women, I offer my own analysis alongside a more traditional feminist account. In this way, while I do not claim that my analysis is any more ‘truthful’ than another I make transparent the process by which I arrive at my interpretation of the women’s stories and hence would argue that there is a high degree of trustworthiness to my analysis and conclusions.

5.5. Selection criteria
As stated earlier, the publication of books containing the stories of women who identify as lesbian or bisexual is a part of the gay and feminist movement. Indeed, they have been made possible only by these movements (Martin, 1993; Zimmerman, 1985). As discussed in section 5.2 Choice of Data, the ‘coming out story’ has become an important part of creating and defining initially lesbian communities and more recently bisexual communities. Thus, while not dismissing the vast number of books published in this genre, my ‘sample population’ were books published (and still in print) since the birth of these movements. This had the effect of limiting my selection to ‘what was available.’ This should not be seen as a deficiency of the research design but of sociological interest because of what it reveals about the production of stories. For example, it provides information about the internal practices of power within lesbian
and bisexual cultures and communities as different groups of women demand to tell their story. This issue is examined in Chapter 6.

In relation to country of origin, the initial decision had been to include only books from the UK. This was based on an understanding that the gay movement and the women’s movement in other countries such as the USA are not necessarily the same as in this country. For instance, the lesbian and gay culture in the America is much more organised, broad and widespread than in this country. An initial investigation into the number of books currently in publication in this country relating to my research concerns would have provided an insufficient amount of data for the study. Hence, the decision to include books from other countries, that is books from the USA, Canada and Australia. However, issues of cultural differences have not been ignored and, where appropriate, form a part of the data analysis. Furthermore, all the books included in this study are sold in the UK; hence, they are an important part of lesbian culture in this country.

This selection criterion was used when locating books for inclusion in the sample. Given that books are publicly available, my search for these books included requests to publishing houses for lists of books on this subject; visiting bookshops, both generalist and specialist lesbian and gay or women’s bookshops; visiting public libraries; searching the internet; and, finally, friendship networks. This resulted in locating eighteen books still in print. While this is not an exhaustive list of all possible books, it is argued that it is representative of the range of books of this sort published during the period 1977-1995. Furthermore, I would contend that while eighteen books is a relatively small number of books from this genre, the key factor influencing the inclusion of a book was its availability and relevance to the readership. This was demonstrated through an assessment of which books were most commonly available (for example in libraries and bookshops) and verified through discussion with friends. While acknowledging that the latter type of information is anecdotal, such discussion indicated that the books chosen for analysis were books that women had chosen to read at some point in their lives. In order to gain an extra level of validity for my choice of books I requested information regarding sales figures from the relevant publishers. However, despite in some cases repeated requests, I was either ignored or denied information on sales figures. On a number of occasions I was told that it was not the policy of the publishing company to release such information to the general public.
Nevertheless, informal discussions with staff working in women-only or lesbian and gay bookshops indicated that the books selected for analysis were books sold on a regular basis.

The details of all eighteen books appear in Table 5.2 at the end of this chapter. It contains information on editor(s), date, title and country of origin for each book. It also includes detail on the number of stories in each book. Finally, it contains information about the type of story. The letters appearing in bold and in brackets after each title are my own abbreviations for the book titles. For example, the letters WLU refer to Women Like Us, edited by Neild and Pearson in 1992. These have been developed so that throughout the data analysis chapters the reader will be aware of the source of the material.

Of the eighteen books appearing in Table 5.2, eleven are edited collections of stories exploring lesbian identity, meaning and practice. A further three edited books include stories by self-identified lesbians alongside other stories. The first, A Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour (1983) comprise stories by women of colour, regardless of their sexual identity. The latter two, Two Teenagers in Twenty (1994) and There Must be Fifty Ways to Tell Your Mother (1995) contain stories by lesbians and gay men. Only the stories by women have been used in the current analysis. A further book, What is She Like? Lesbian Identities from the 1950s to the 1990s (1995) contains 24 stories by women alongside an analysis of lesbian identity over the last five decades. Only the stories are examined here. While the other books are edited collections, this book, due to its format, has a single author. The remaining three books: BI Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out (1991), Closer to Home: Bisexuality and Feminism (1992) and Plural Desires (1995) are edited collections of stories by women who identify as bisexual. The first one includes stories by bisexual men, but these do not form part of the analysis.

5.6. Limitation of the data: An issue of control?

The decision to use the published accounts of women provided me with sociological insight into both the construction of identity and the contribution that these books make to lesbian and bisexual culture and politics. Nevertheless, at times I found the data frustrating to work with and limiting. Interestingly, this related to the fact that I had not taken part in the production of the data, hence had no control over the final product. Viewed through Plummer's framework of stories as joint production, I had not been
able to take the role of 'coaxer.' In retrospect I would contend that, given the theoretical framework developed in this chapter, this need for 'control' was firstly not appropriate and secondly demonstrates the role that the sociologist usually plays (and expects to play) in the production of stories. As stated this initially led to frustration when I was unable to investigate themes across stories or, more often, story categories. However, as my analysis proceeded I realised that this lack of continuity in themes across the different story categories was evidence of the different types of stories present in the data. Instead of viewing it as a limitation, it became a part of the data analysis.

5.7 Introduction to data analysis chapters

Chapter 6: Producing Stories of Unity and Diversity
Chapter 6 examines the issues to emerge from the analysis of the editor's introductions to the 18 books included in the data analysis. Through an examination of the conceptualisation of unity and diversity and the construction of subjectivity, it is argued that these books are firmly located in the historical, social and political context of the late 20th century. Furthermore, it is argued that these stories, which focus on personal notions of lesbian identity, meaning and practice, should be regarded as part of a much wider lesbian-centred project, which seeks to (re)define reality. This chapter concludes with an assessment of the implications that these findings hold for the current analysis.

Chapter 7: Journeys and Destinies: Born a Lesbian
This chapter examines the 20 stories allocated to story category 'born a lesbian'. As the name suggests, all the stories endorse the view that sexual identity is innate and beyond the choice of the individual.

Chapter 8: Imitation or Transgression: Butch and Femme Identities
This chapter examines the 20 stories allocated to the story category 'butch' and the 20 stories allocated to the story category 'femme.' The decision to look at the stories of butch identity and femme identity together was based on their defining relationship to each other. Each is constructed on a belief that there exists an essential erotic difference between women, which is realised through the adoption of gendered positions. Therefore, they only exist in relation to each other.

Chapter 9: 'Feminism is the theory, lesbianism is the practice'
The 20 stories examined in this chapter have been placed in story category 'feminist' because, for the women who tell them, feminism is fundamental to their current
identification as a lesbian. While some of these women identified as a lesbian before their contact with feminism, feminism and the women’s movement transformed their understanding of lesbianism. For other women, becoming a lesbian was closely linked to their involvement with feminism.

**Chapter 10: Naming Ourselves: The Stories of Black Lesbians**

The 20 stories examined in this chapter have been placed in story category 'black lesbian' because this is the label used by these women to talk about their sexual identity. There is a collective sense in these stories that a black lesbian identity is as much a product of historical and contemporary colonialism as it is a product of racism, classism, sexism and homophobia.

**Chapter 11: Disrupting Boundaries: Stories of Bisexuality**

The 30 stories examined in this chapter have been placed in the story category 'bisexual', This is the term that the women, who tell these stories, use to describe their sexuality. This signals that their choice of partner is non-gender specific. The stories produce a political analysis of bisexuality which challenges both heterosexual society and lesbian and gay communities.

**Chapter 12: Summary and Conclusions**

This final chapter begins with an overview of the major findings of the study and the answers they provide to the research questions. It then moves on to assess these findings in relation to the empirical and theoretical issues raised in the literature review. This includes an evaluation of the contribution that this study makes to the sociological understanding of the social control and regulation of all sexualities. It concludes with a consideration of the implications of the findings for future research in this area.

5.8 Summary

This chapter has looked at the methodological issues surrounding the data used in this study to examine the development and maintenance of lesbian and bisexual identity. It examined the reasons, which guided my decision to use published stories, and discussed the theoretical framework used to analyse the data.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Editor(s)</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Title of book</th>
<th>Country of publication</th>
<th>Number of stories</th>
<th>Type of story</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cassidy and Stewart-Park</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>We’re Here: Conversations with Lesbian Women</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(CLW)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baetz</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Lesbian Crossroads (LC)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moraga and Anzaluda</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>This Bridge Called My Back (BCMB)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Autobiography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradstock and Wakeling</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Words From the Same Heart (WSH)</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Autobiography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hall Carpenter Archives</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Inventing Ourselves: Lesbian Life Stories (IO)</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hutchins and Kaahumanu</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Bi Any Other Name (BI)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Autobiography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nestle</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>Interview and Autobiography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(TPD)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neild and Pearson</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Women Like Us (WLU)</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Lesbian and Gay Survey</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>What a Lesbian Looks Like (NLGS)</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Autobiography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weise</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Closer to Home (CH)</td>
<td>USA</td>
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Table 5.2 Books used in data analysis (table continues on next page)
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Editor(s)</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Title of book</th>
<th>Country of publication</th>
<th>Number of stories</th>
<th>Type of story</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Cassingham and O’Neil</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>And Then I Met this Women (MTW)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Interview</td>
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<td>Barber and Holmes</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Testimonies: Lesbian Coming Out Stories (TLCOS)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Autobiography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heron</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Two Teenagers in Twenty (TT20)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Autobiography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ainley</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>What is She Like? (WSL)</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Speak Out (TB)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newman</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>The Femme Mystique (TFM)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>Autobiography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sutcliffe</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>There Must be Fifty Ways to Tell Your Mother (TM50)</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.2 Books used in data analysis (continued)
Chapter Six: Producing stories of unity and diversity

Notes for a Coming-Out Story

Write about why it's important. Why it's still important. Why all our stories are important, because mine is different from hers is different from yours. Because I came out in 1980, three months before Reagon was elected, and you came out in 1960, nine years before Stonewall, and the year I was born. Because she came out in 1973, at the height of feminism's "second wave." Because someone killed herself because of it. And because someone got married and raised three children before she knew she was a lesbian, and lost them all, every last one, in a custody battle. Because someone went to her senior prom in 1990 with her girlfriend and the next day "DYKE LEZZIE QUEER" was painted all over her front walk. Because we are becoming braver and more numerous. Because we have always been brave and numerous. Because I grew up a Jew, and in the Jewish tradition, stories are to be told again and again and again, each year a cycle of the telling, of the retelling. Because the coming-out story is not obsolete. May this happen speedily and in my generation, amen. (Susan, TLCOS, 1994: 51)

6.1 Introduction

Using the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 5, this chapter examines the issues to emerge from the analysis of the editor’s introductions to the 18 books included in the data analysis. Through an examination of the conceptualisation of unity and diversity and the construction of subjectivity, it is argued that these books are firmly located in the historical, social and political context of the late 20th century. Furthermore, it is argued that these stories, which focus on personal notions of lesbian identity, meaning and practice, should be regarded as part of a much wider lesbian-centred project, which seeks to (re)define reality. This chapter concludes with an assessment of the implications that these findings hold for the current analysis.

6.2 The data

Table 5.2 in Chapter 5 lists the books used in this study. The introduction to the books, which first appeared in Chapter 5 is reproduced here for ease of analysis. Of the eighteen books appearing in Table 5.2, eleven are edited collections of stories exploring lesbian identity, meaning and practice. A further three edited books include stories by self-identified lesbians alongside other stories. The first, A Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour (1983) comprise of stories by women of colour, regardless of their sexual identity. The latter two, Two Teenagers in Twenty (1994) and There Must be Fifty Ways to Tell Your Mother (1995) contain stories by lesbians and gay men. Only the stories by women have been used in the current analysis. A further book, What is She Like? Lesbian Identities from the 1950s to the 1990s (1995) contains
24 stories by women alongside an analysis of lesbian identity over the last five decades. Only the stories are examined here. While the other books are edited collections, this book, due to its format has a single author. The remaining two books: Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out (1991), Closer to Home: Bisexuality and Feminism (1992) and Plural Desires (1995) are edited collections of stories by women who identify as bisexual. The first one includes stories by bisexual men, but these do not form part of the analysis.

6.3 Type of story

The stories were produced either through interviews conducted by the editor(s) or in response to editors' requests for autobiographical writing. Seven books used interviews to collect the stories, ten invited women to write autobiographical pieces and the remaining one book used both of these methods (see Table 5.2 for details of individual books).

6.3.1 Interviews

Information regarding interview structure given in the editors' introductions, or gained through reading the eight books, which used this method, forms the basis of the following discussion. The editors of three books Conversations with Lesbian Women (1977), Inventing Ourselves (1989), The Persistent Desire (1992) conducted 'interviewee-led' interviews containing elements suggestive of a life-history approach. While the interviews focused on lesbianism, women were free to construct their own story. In contrast, the interview format for Lesbian Crossroads (1980) was based on fixed questions, which were reproduced in the text. These included 'What is your definition of a lesbian?' and 'How did you realise you are a lesbian?' In a less rigid manner, the interviews for What is She Like? (1995) were based on an interview schedule covering particular areas. This in itself demonstrates the varying degrees of control exercised by ‘coaxer’, in this case the ‘editor’, in the production of the story. There is no explicit information to assess the interview format for the remaining three books, Women Like Us (1992), And Then I Met This Women (1993) and There Must Be Fifty Ways to Tell Your Mother (1995). However, a reading of the stories would suggest that these interviews were 'interviewee led.'

All the interviews were edited, again demonstrating the role of the ‘coaxer’ in the final story presented for the reader. However, the presentation of interview data differed between the books. Four books, that is, Conversations with Lesbian Women (1977),
Lesbian Crossroads (1980), Inventing Ourselves (1989) and The Persistent Desire (1992), presented edited transcripts of the interviews which included the questions asked by the interviewer(s). The remaining four books, Women Like Us (1992), And Then I Met This Woman (1993) What is She Like? (1995) and There Must Be Fifty Ways to Tell Your Mother (1995), removed the interviewers' questions and, through editing, presented the interviews as biographical stories.

Six of the eight books presented each interview as an individual story. The editors of the two remaining books, Lesbian Conversations (1980) and There Must Be Fifty Ways to Tell Your Mother (1995), performed an initial analysis on the data which resulted in sections of the interview data being allocated to different themes. For example, in There Must Be Fifty Ways... there are three major categories: Coming Out, Shouting Out and Moving On, which are further subdivided.

The interviews were carried out by the editor(s) for all eight books. There is little information given in relation to recruitment of interviewees. Women Like Us (1992) and There Must Be Fifty Ways... (1995), respectively developed from a television programme and a theatre play addressing issues of lesbian or lesbian and gay experiences, while What is She Like? (1995) advertised in the national lesbian and gay press.

6.3.2 Autobiographical accounts

Again, information regarding the collection of autobiographical accounts, which is given in the editors' introductions, or gained through reading the books, form the basis of the discussion that follows. Ten books consisted of autobiographical accounts, while one book used autobiographical accounts and interviews. Five of these books focused on a particular theme or a particular lesbian identity. The Persistent Desire (1992) requested stories from women on the theme of butch and femme identity while The Femme Mystique (1995) focused on the experiences of women who identify as femme. This Bridge Called My Back (1983), an anthology of writing by radical women of color, included the stories of lesbians, while Talking Black (1995), contains the stories from lesbians of African and Asian descent. Two Teenagers in Twenty (1994), explores being young and lesbian or gay. Furthermore, the book Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out (1991) examines the experiences of bisexual women and men. Three of the five remaining books Words from the Same Heart (1987) What a Lesbian Looks
Like (1992) and Testimonies (2nd edition, 1994), contain stories from lesbians in general. The remaining two books, that is, Closer to Home: Bisexuality and Feminism (1992) and Plural Desires (1995) look solely at the experiences of bisexual women. The theoretical implications of the way in which books focus either on lesbian identity in general or on a specific group of lesbians is discussed in full below. Nine of ten books presented each piece of writing as an individual story, while one book What a Lesbian Looks Like (1992), performed an initial analysis on the data which resulted in sections of the stories being allocated to different themes such as Beginnings, Kin and Becoming. Again, there is too little information given in the editors' introductions to permit a full analysis of the way in which writers were recruited. However, limited information suggests that requests for stories were either circulated through informal networks or appeared in relevant press publications. In the case of Talking Black (1995), the editor, Mason-John, selected particular women to write about living as a black lesbian in the UK. The majority of the autobiographical accounts in all these books appear as essays, with a small minority taking the format of poems or short stories.

6.4 Stories as symbolic interactions

This initial analysis of the data set supports Plummer's (1995) assertion that stories are symbolic interactions. The stories here are not the product of a single individual but the outcome of the symbolic interaction between three groups of people involved in the production and consumption of stories: the story tellers the story 'coaxers' and the story consumers. Each group has a particular role to play: the storyteller selects different incidents and events to include in her story, and the 'coaxer' asks the stories to be told. The 'coaxer' directs the story by asking questions and sifts through the material deciding what should and should not be included. Finally, the consumer interprets the story within the context of his or her own life. Thus, the final product is not representative of a lived life, which, as Plummer (1995) notes, is always 'unknown and unknowable.' Instead, it becomes a selective reconstruction of a life produced within a specific socio-historical and political context. However, the teller and coaxer also take the role of consumer, for the teller's role of selector is also based on the consumption and interpretation of other stories of sexual identity, meaning and practice. The relevance of such stories, be they from medicine, sexology, psychology or feminism, will effect her choice of which events and incidents to select when constructing her story. Likewise, the same processes are occurring with the 'coaxer', who in this case, is the editor or editors. She, or they, are not just sifting through material and selecting
what to include and what to discard. She, or they, are also shaping the very material being produced through the selection of interview questions, by means of the particular stance she takes in her request for women to talk about their sexual identity, through her belief that such a book is necessary in the first place. In doing so, she is drawing on her own consumption of stories. This understanding about the consumption of stories by tellers and coaxer alike merely highlights the relationship between cultural meaning and the construction of identity, in this case through the stories that are socially produced. While the following five chapters look at the stories produced through this process, the remainder of this chapter focuses on the role of the coaxer - the editor - in the process of telling stories. This begins by looking at the increasing numbers of these books published over the last twenty years.

**6.5 The growth of the stories**

All the books were published between 1977 and 1995. However, a decade by decade analysis indicates a growth in the publication of this genre of book over the last ten years. 5.5% (1) of books were published in the 1970s, 22.2% (4) of books were published in the 1980s and 72.3% (13) of books were published in the 1990s. These findings support similar conclusions made by other research in this area (for example Plummer, 1995). Furthermore, there has been a move away from books looking at lesbian ‘coming out’ stories in general and a growth in books looking at a particular aspect of lesbian identity, such as butch or femme, and books that link lesbianism to other social factors, such as race. Likewise, there is a growth in books looking at bisexuality. These changes parallel the changes that have occurred in the lesbian and gay movement, as well as the women’s movement, over the past thirty years. Hence, these books are one way of understanding these changes. They shed light on the way in which different groups are challenging dominant definitions of being lesbian and in doing so are creating new groups or subcultures within the lesbian culture. This is explored in detail below.

As stated earlier, the data set consists of 570 stories published in 18 books. Four hundred and sixty-eight are lesbian stories and 102 are bisexual stories. Of the 468 lesbian stories, 306 (65.4%) stories explore a particular aspect of lesbian identity and 162 (34.6%) stories look at the general experiences of lesbians. Based on this analysis,

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10 As discussed in Chapter 5, the analysis in this chapter is based on the entirety of each book and therefore it is appropriate to include all 570 stories in this analysis.
the books were allocated to one of three categories. The first category, 'diverse' comprises of books that look at the general experience of being a lesbian. This was the only defining criterion for a woman's story to appear in that book. This does not mean that other factors beyond lesbianism are not explored, but rather it indicates that they were not included in the criteria for a story's inclusion in a book.

The second category 'specific' comprised of books that look at the interaction between lesbianism and other social factors, for example, race, 'gender position', age and marital status. The third category, 'bisexual', comprised of three books, which look at the experience of bisexuality. As indicated earlier there has been a growth in the number of books placed in the second and third categories during the 1990s. This brief discussion of the three categories used raises a number of issues relating to diversity, unity, and the construction of lesbian meaning. These will now be explored, beginning with a discussion of books placed in the category 'diverse.'

6.6 Redefining reality from the inside

As stated, the category 'diverse' refers to books exploring the experiences of all lesbians. The books placed in this category are shown in Table 6.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We're Here: Conversations with Lesbian Women</td>
<td>1977</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian Crossroads: Personal Stories of Lesbian Struggles and Triumph</td>
<td>1980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words From the Same Heart</td>
<td>1987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inventing Ourselves: Lesbian Life Stories</td>
<td>1989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What a Lesbian Looks Like</td>
<td>1992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Testimonies: Lesbian Coming Out Stories</td>
<td>1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is She Like?</td>
<td>1995</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.1 Books placed in 'diverse' category

Before looking at the way in which the editors conceptualise diversity, it is worth reflecting on the social context that has made it possible to publish books by lesbians, about lesbians and for lesbians. As discussed in Chapter 1, the emergence of the gay and feminist movements at the end of the 1960s signalled a new form of political action aimed at challenging the hegemonic control and power of both heterosexual and male
dominated society. Part of this project has been the right to talk about one's own experiences whether they be as a woman, as a lesbian or as a gay man (Plummer, 1995). The books or stories examined in this study are a fundamental part of the attempt to (re)define reality from the inside. Linked to this redefinition of reality is an explicit message of optimism, of hope in the face of adversity, of survival and of surpassing the oppression that comes of being a lesbian in a heterosexist society. For many, this contains a direct political challenge to the heterosexual culture that has sought to define their reality by labelling them sick or perverted. Thus, these books are part of a wider lesbian project in as much as they provide an opportunity for women to talk about their own experiences and, in doing so, begin to define their own reality. This belief is reflected in editor's introductions, for example:

Society doesn't like to give us any space to be ourselves openly because we are an alternative. We're an alternative to heterosexuality, which is projected as the norm. We question, just by being here, many values which are part of heterosexuality. We question monogamy. We question marriage. We question women's dependence on men. We question male/female role-playing. We question the sexuality of every human being who thinks they're normal. (Cassidy and Stewart-Park, CLW, 1977:2)

But the major change that has taken place in the last century - the period spanned by the contributions in this book - is the fact that lesbians are constructing their own reality. (Bradstock and Wakeling, WSH, 1987:10)

This process of redefining reality is evident in the belief that these books are a necessary part of recording lesbian history. Through recording the lives of non-famous lesbians, these books offer the chance for lesbians to develop a collective sense of history, a history that has a past, a present and a future 'We have always been here and we always will be.' Emphasis in these introductions is placed on the need for this history to be defined by insiders, who will produce a more authentic account of lesbian history:

>From a broader perspective, the interviews comprise chapters of our lesbian history: the lives and processes of other lesbians. Whether the women on these pages dealt with their identities twenty years ago or yesterday, their stories are not just personal accounts, but also a reflection of their times, locations, and the gay consciousness of the community around them. (Baetz, LC, 1980:21)

Because the sources for a lesbian and gay history have largely been the writings of experts, writers, and famous figures, we focused on the spoken accounts of a cross-range of ordinary lesbians and gay men. (Hall Carpenter Archives, IO, 1989:xii)

The implication is that the stories in their books will provide the truth about lesbian existence.
6.6.1 Unity through diversity

The recording of history is an essential part of the process of creating a community and culture, that is, of creating a place where women feel they belong. In the 1970s and 1980s, this process was clearly linked to the women’s movement. Thus, these books are socially located within a lesbian feminist movement that has become increasingly aware of the problematic way in which difference(s) between women have been ignored or, alternatively, rendered invisible through an appeal to political unity. This has resulted in a radical critique from women who have felt excluded from a white, Euro-centric, middle class and able-bodied notion of womanhood. In their introductions the editor(s) reflect this awareness by exploring the issue of diversity in relation to the stories contained within their books, and claim to represent women from a wide range of backgrounds and diverse experiences. Indeed, editors openly acknowledge and celebrate diversity amongst lesbians, viewing it as a source of strength, not weakness. This endorsement of lesbian diversity validates the argument that lesbians are everywhere and cannot be relegated to one particular group of women in society:

The oldest contributor to this anthology is in her sixties, the youngest was twenty when she first wrote a report to us. These women were mainly born in these islands, others came from Australia, America and Africa. They now live in Scotland, England and Wales. Some left school early, others have gone on to further education. There are unwaged women and those in high-powered jobs. The single thing they have in common is that they all identify as lesbian. (National Lesbian and Gay Survey, NLGS, 1992: x)

I hope that every dyke who reads this book will find something with which she can identify. We’re all different, and we all come to our lesbianism from different histories. [ ... ] What’s important is finally realising that we can love women, feel good about it, and know there are many others who feel the same way. (Barber and Holmes, TLCOS, 1994: 8)

Notwithstanding this acknowledgement of diversity, there remains a strong appeal to the unifying experience of being a lesbian. Lesbianism is constructed as a defining factor that has the power to cut across diversity and speak to a common experience; a common identity, which is more important than differences which have the potential to divide this group of women. This concept of unity is present in the majority of the books included in this study:

Although it is about eleven specific lesbian women, in some ways it is about all of us. Many of the experiences you will read about are experiences many or most overt lesbians have had. (Cassidy and Stewart-Park, CLW, 1977:1)

Such statements suggest that while a veneer of difference exists amongst women, if we go beyond these differences and look underneath they reveal common themes and
common experiences. This construction of a unifying lesbian identity is applied equally to the potential audience of these books:

Many of the women interviewed told us that when they were wondering what to do with their feelings for women and with their lives they had wished there had been a book like thus; they wanted more information. We offer these stories to serve that purpose. (Cassingham and O’Neil MTW, 1993: Introduction)

I hope that Testimonies, too finds its way into the hands of women who are searching for validation of their desires, hungry for words and images that reflect their lives and truths. (Barber and Holmes, TLCOS, 1994: 7)

The inference is that within these books women will find voices that speak to them of similar experiences, similar struggles, and provide strength and a sense of community for women who already identify as lesbian or are learning to identify as lesbian.

6.6.2 Assessing the diversity

Given that diversity is a prominent theme within these editorial introductions, it is important to determine whether these books do indeed represent women from diverse backgrounds. This is done by means of an assessment of the demographic details of the women whose stories are included in these books. However, only three of the nine books in this category provide sufficient information to permit such an assessment. These are Conversations with Lesbian Women (USA, 1977), which contains 11 stories; Inventing Ourselves (UK, 1989), which contains 15 stories, and What is She Like? (UK, 1995), which contains 24 stories. This is 50 (8.7%) of all the stories included in the data set and 30.8% of the 162 stories included in the category 'diverse' (total 162 stories). To enable a comparison to be made between the three books, it was necessary that the demographic details selected be available in each book. This resulted in information being collected regarding age, country of residence, ethnic origin, marital status and number of children. Information relating to class membership was not sufficient to permit a full analysis. Despite this, using educational background and employment as indicators of social class could suggest that most women would be classified as middle class. Tables 6.2, 6.3 and 6.4 below give data for each of the three books. Cross-book analysis of age, marital and parental status and ethnic origin appear in separate tables (Tables 6.5, 6.6 and 6.7). In the tables below, NBM means ‘never been married.’
Table 6.2: Demographic details for women in Conversations with Lesbian Women (CLW, 1977)

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<th>Ethnicity</th>
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<td>White</td>
<td>NBM</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
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<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
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<td>NBM</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td>NBM</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>NBM</td>
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</tr>
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<td>7</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
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</tr>
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<td>8</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
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Table 6.3: Demographic details for women in Inventing Ourselves (IO, 1989)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Parent</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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<td>64</td>
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<td>NBM</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>NBM</td>
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<td>Divorced</td>
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<td>43</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Widow</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>39</td>
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<td>NBM</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>NBM</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Jewish</td>
<td>NBM</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>White</td>
<td>NBM</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>NBM</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
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<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>NBM</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>NBM</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>NBM</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>NBM</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>NBM</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>NBM</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
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<td>67</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>NBM</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>NBM</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>NBM</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>43</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>NBM</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>NBM</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>NBM</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>NBM</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>NBM</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>NBM</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>White</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Jewish</td>
<td>NBM</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
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<td>Jewish</td>
<td>NBM</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>NBM</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.4: Demographic details for women in *What is She Like?* (WSL, 1995)

**6.6.3 Age**

Table 6.5 below provides information about the ages of all fifty women. It shows the number of women in each category and the total age range and mean age for the women in each book. Viewed collectively, the ages range from 20 and 67, while the mean age for women in all 3 books is between 30 and 35 years. However, when viewed separately the age range, which was 21-50 in 1977, has expanded in the upper limit to 64 in 1989 and to 67 in 1995. This shows there has been an increase in the representation of older
women in these books. For instance, the book *Conversations with Lesbian Women* (1977) had only one woman in the age range 50-59 and none in the 60-69 age range. In contrast, the book *What is She Like?* (1995) contains four stories by women in the age range 50-59, and one in the age range 60-69. At the other end of the age limit, women under 20 are not represented at all. Thus, these three books are, in general, representative of women who fall in the age range 20-38.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Range</td>
<td>21-50</td>
<td>21-64</td>
<td>20-67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Age</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>33.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.5: Age range of contributors

### 6.6.4 Marital and parental status

Table 6.6 shows that 37 women have never been married and that 13 women have been married but were divorced, separated or widowed at the time of interview. Furthermore, as only nine women had children, these stories are more representative of NBM childless women by a ratio of nearly 3:1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book</th>
<th>No. of women</th>
<th>NBM</th>
<th>Divorced</th>
<th>Separated</th>
<th>Widowed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CLW (1977)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IO (1989)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WSL (1995)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.6: Marital status of contributor

### 6.6.5 Ethnic origin

The women were allocated to one of four different ethnic categories: White, Irish, Jewish or Black\(^{11}\), where White also includes Jewish (4 out of 40). Table 6.7 below

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\(^{11}\) The London Black Lesbian and Gay Project define Black as the ability to be able to "trace your decent through one or both parents, to Africa, Asia, the Middle East, China, including the
shows that 40 women were White, two women were Irish and eight women were Black. Consequently, these stories are overwhelmingly representative of white women. There has been a small growth in stories by Black women, with none being recorded in 1977, 4 in 1989 and 4 in 1995.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No. of women</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Irish</th>
<th>Jewish</th>
<th>Black</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CLW (1977)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IO (1989)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WSL (1995)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.7: Ethnic origin of contributors

6.6.6 Summary

To summarise, this section began with an examination of the editorial claims concerning the diversity of women represented in the books. In addition, the notion of diversity was linked to the notion of unity, that is, the belief that while women may come from a diverse range of backgrounds they are all unified by their lesbianism. This was conceptualised as 'unity through diversity' owing to the belief expressed by the editors that diversity lends strength to lesbianism in general. This claim was then assessed through an analysis of the demographic details available from three of the nine books in this category. These showed that the three books are generally representative of white, 'never been married', and childless women with a mean age between 30-35 years. This would suggest that the editors’ claims that their books represent a wide range of women with different backgrounds should be treated with some caution. These findings are contextualised in the next section, which looks at the second category of lesbian books, that is the ‘specific’ category.

6.7 Challenging 'unity through diversity'

Eight of the eighteen books were placed in the ‘specific’ category because they contain the stories of women who either identify as a lesbian in a particular way or feel that social factors influences their experience of living as a lesbian in society. These books are listed in Table 6.8 below.

Pacific nations, Latin America, the original inhabitants of Australasia, North America, or the islands of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean" (Hensman, 1995:24). The phrase 'people of color' is
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Theme/Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This Bridge Called My Back</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>black women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This Persistent Desire</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>butch/femme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women Like Us</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>older lesbians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And Then I Met This Women</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>women who had been married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Teenagers in Twenty</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>young lesbians and gay men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking Back</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>black women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Femme Mystique</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>femme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There Must Be Fifty Ways...</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>lesbians and gay men</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.8: Books placed in 'specific' category

6.7.1 "We're here too"

As already noted there has been a growth in this type of book in recent years. With the exception of *This Bridge Called My Back*, which was published in 1983 and examines the experiences of ‘women of color’, regardless of sexuality, all the rest have been published in the period 1992-1995 and focus on the issue of sexual identity. The following discussion highlights the way in which these books either contribute to or challenge the concept of 'unity through diversity' found to be present in the books in the ‘diverse’ category. The discussion begins with an analysis of the way in which age structures the experience of being lesbian in society.

The previous section showed that young women under twenty are not represented in the books placed in the diverse category. There has been an increase in stories by older women, particularly in the 50-59 age group; however women in the 60 and above group remain under-represented. The book *Two Teenagers in Twenty* (1994), edited by Heron, consists of stories of young lesbians and gay men, while *Women Like Us* (1992) edited by Neild and Pearson contains the stories of older lesbians. Both introductions carry the message that age structures both the individual experience of being lesbian (or gay) and the attitudes of the wider society towards either young or old lesbians. So, there is a need to look at these experiences separately from other categories of lesbians.

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used in the USA in the same way. Given that one of the books in the current study *This Bridge Called My Back* (1983), is American in origin and uses the phrase 'women of color', this should be read in the same way as Black.
In relation to young people, research has highlighted the problems facing young lesbians and gay men living in a heterosexist and homophobic society. In keeping with this, Heron, the editor, believes that a collection of stories that looks specifically at the experiences of young lesbian and gay men will provide support for others going through the same experience:

If you're one of these young people, I hope these stories will show that you're not alone; other teenagers have gone through experiences much like yours. (Heron, 2T20, 1994: 9)

Thus, being a young lesbian or gay person in society results in a particular type of story, which cannot be dealt with in a general book of lesbian life stories. In assessing whether this represents a challenge to the concept of unity through diversity, it is argued that it both does and does not represent a challenge. On one level, the category 'young lesbian' is an age-related construction and by definition transitory. One ceases to be a 'young lesbian' and becomes something else, that is, an 'adult lesbian', an 'older lesbian'; nevertheless it is generally presumed that one will remain a lesbian. So, at this level the conceptualisation of lesbian as a unifying category is not under challenge. Yet, the very existence of a book looking at young people, coupled with the under-representation of this group in the general books, would suggest that this book represents a challenge to the practice and meaning of diversity. Likewise, the location of lesbian stories alongside young gay men stories could be read as an attempt to broaden the definition of unity. That is, being young and belonging to a sexual category that stands outside the norms of society is seen as a more unifying experience than gender. It may also be indicative of the demise of a strong and active women's movement in the 1990s. This view is also present in the other book of the two books, which contains stories by lesbian and gay men, There Must Be Fifty Ways to Tell Your Mother (1995). As the editor Sutcliffe writes in the introduction:

This book is about that experience, universal to every lesbian and gay man. Everybody has their own story, and I wanted to show the strength that our community has developed as a coping mechanism. (Sutcliffe, TM50, 1995:2)

Again, the link between stories, books and the development of community is endorsed by such views. In Women Like Us (1992), which looks at older women, there is an explicit recognition by the editors Neild and Pearson that age is a defining factor in determining their experiences. However, unlike the previous book, (TM50) it is argued that while this is common for all older women, the experience of ageing is exacerbated by being on the outside of society's sexual norms:
But if old women are rarely visible in the media old lesbians have totally ceased to exist. There may be many reasons for this, but sex is certainly an important part of this cloak of invisibility. The image of lesbians shaped for us by the media is generally a sexual one, otherwise there is no reason for us to be acknowledged. Obviously in the media's eyes, old women have no sexuality. Every woman automatically becomes a 'granny'. (and therefore, heterosexual), irrespective of the reality. Therefore it follows there are no lesbians. (Neild and Pearson, WLU, 1992:11-12)

This critique of the way in which society denies old women per se the right to be sexual and in turn renders invisible the experiences of older lesbians is not solely confined to wider society. It is also applicable, in the opinion of Neild and Pearson, to other (younger) lesbians:

Lesbians are as guilty as the rest when it comes to worship of youth. Even being thirty is considered a major obstacle, and we often don't think to include images of old lesbians in the things we produce. Yet age is a natural progression of all our lives; and we have to confront the contradictions and the prejudices we all feel towards the old women we are becoming. If we do not then we become a party to the devaluation of our very selves. (Neild and Pearson, WLU, 1992:11-12)

Through the appeal of 'you will be one of us one day', there is a demand for older lesbians to be included in the wider lesbian community. Thus, the social function of these two books (TM50 and WLU) is to assert the claim that living as a younger or older lesbian in a heterosexist society is compounded by living in an ageist society, hence the need for a book that addresses those particular experiences. In relation to the concept of 'unity though diversity' the following quote from Neild and Pearson highlights, that these books merely reinforce it:

It seems to us that these stories, different as they are from each other, reveal important facets of a collective lesbian consciousness. (Neild and Pearson, WLU, 1992:2-3)

6.7.2 'Coming home'

There is a similar view expressed in the editorial introduction to the book *And Then I Met This Woman* (1993), which looks at the experiences of women who were once married but now live a lesbian lifestyle. For the editors, Cassingham and O'Neil, this book is about celebrating the lives of women who have found the courage to join the category of lesbian, of which they had always been a part. Cassingham and O'Neil, writing about the women who contributed stories, state:

For many making the transition from heterosexual wifehood to lesbianism was like "coming home," and they wouldn't even consider going back. (Cassingham and O'Neil, MTW, 1993: Introduction)
To summarise so far, the editorial introductions to the books discussed have, just like the books placed in the category 'diverse', taken sexual identity as the defining criterion for inclusion. Within this context, it is contended that these books while not directly challenging the concept of 'unity through diversity', are questioning its practice. That is, particular groups of lesbians need to be listened to by both heterosexual and lesbian culture; and it is only in this way that the diverse nature of the lesbian community will be recognised. In consequence, in order to explore this diversity there is a need for books looking at different groups of lesbians, notably young lesbians, old lesbians and lesbians who have been in a heterosexual marriage. While not challenging the concept of 'unity through diversity,' these books are challenging the presentation of this diversity.

6.7.3 Challenging definitions: Black lesbians

This challenge takes a different form in the two books that look at the experiences of Black lesbians. These are This Bridge Called My Back (1983), edited by Moraga and Anzaluda, and Talking Black (1995), edited by Mason-John. While the former includes stories by women of color, the latter centres on stories by lesbians of African and Asian decent. These two books represent a double challenge: firstly to the meaning of womanhood defined by white feminism and secondly to the meaning of lesbianism defined by white lesbians. The book edited by Moraga and Anzaluda, while initially conceived as a challenge to the priorities and agendas set by white feminism, was transformed in the process of its creation into a book about and for women of color, which explores relationships between women of color regardless of sexual identity. At the heart of this book lies the belief that one cannot look at one form of oppression without seeing links with other forms of oppression. That is, a Black lesbian is not Black and a lesbian and a woman, she is a Black lesbian woman, and the links between all three must be addressed alongside issues of class and economic status. As Toni Bambara writes in her foreword to This Bridge Called My Back:

Now that we've begun to break the silence and begun to break through the diabolically erected barriers and can hear each other and see each other, we can sit down with trust and break bread together. Rise up and break our chains as well. For through the initial motive several writers here may have been to protest, complain or explain to white feminist would-be allies that there are other ties and visions that bind, prior allegiances and priorities that supersede their invitation to coalesce on their terms ("assimilation within a solely western-European history is not acceptable" - Lorde), the process of examining would-be alliance awakens us to new tasks ("We have a lot more to concentrate on beside the pathology of white wimmin" - Davenport). (Bambara, Foreword, BCMB, 1983:vi)
The uniqueness of the experience of women of color theorised in this collection of stories is also present in the book edited by Mason-John, *Talking Black*, 1995) which looks at the experiences of black lesbians in the UK. In her introduction, Mason-John reflects on the questions asked by lesbians when they discovered she was editing a book about Black lesbians. While her explanation concerning Black lesbian invisibility in Britain was accepted as a reason for a book about Black lesbians, she was often asked ‘But shouldn't there be a book for all of us?’:

Ideally yes, but Black lesbians have been waiting for years for this ideal to be realised. When white lesbians have had the resources to write books, rarely have they included our experiences. They simply forget, or state they don't know any Black lesbians. Therefore in reality, no. Until there are as many books about Black lesbians as there are about white lesbians, only then can we begin to look at this ideal. (Mason-John, 1995: 1)

### 6.7.4 Excluded from unity: The case of butch and femme identity

There is a similar challenge in the next two books in this category: *The Persistent Desire* (1992) edited by Nestle, and *The Femme Mystique* (1995) edited by Newman. While the former explores butch and femme identity, the latter focuses solely on femme identity. As such, they represent a direct challenge to the concept of 'unity through diversity.' For these editors, identification as either butch or femme has resulted in exclusion from a feminist-informed construction of lesbian identity. As Nestle writes in her introduction:

For more than a hundred years now in America, the butch-femme couple has been the private and public face of lesbianism, and yet, we still understand little about this form of lesbian erotic identity. Everyone has taken a turn at denigrating the butch-femme couple - from the sexologists at the turn of the century who spoke about the predatory female masculine invert and the child woman who most easily fell her victim, to the early homophile activists in the fifties who pleaded with these "obvious" women to tone down their style of self-presentation, to the lesbian-feminists of the seventies who cried "traitor" into the faces of the new butch-femme couples who did not cross over into the new world of cultural feminism.

(Nestle, TPD, 1992: 14)

Here Nestle charges lesbian feminists with acting in a similar way to the early sexologists who denigrated the butch-femme couple. As such, Nestle represents a direct challenge to the concept of 'unity through diversity' in as much as she exposes that it as an illusion built upon the exclusion of certain groups of lesbians who do not conform to lesbian appropriate behaviour in regard to gender. This is echoed in the concluding comments of Newman's introduction where she reflects on the hopes she has for the book:

Here are our stories. It is my hope that this book will offer an understanding of the many ways there are to be femme. (Newman, TFM, 1995:13)
Newman hopes that the stories by femmes will help to dispel the myths and stereotypes about femmes that predominate in both heterosexual and lesbian culture. Through focusing on butch and femme identity, the books, *The Persistent Desire* and *The Femme Mystique*, represent a challenge to the very meaning of lesbianism, which subsequently has implications for control, regulation, and access to lesbian culture. While this issue is explored in full in subsequent chapters, it is interesting to note here that, apart from *What is She Like?* (1995), the few stories that include discussion of butch and femme identity which appear in books placed in the 'diverse' category do so from a critical distance, informed by feminism. This results in butch-femme identity, meaning and practice being theorised as confining and repressive, and as belonging to a pre-feminist era. In contrast, the two books looked at in this section are a celebration and exploration of what it means to be butch and femme which challenge the hegemonic control that lesbian feminists held over lesbian identity, meaning and practice in the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed it could be argued that the very decline of lesbian feminism as a powerful force within lesbian politics, accompanied by a growing sense in freedom and diversity, has made it possible for these two books to be published in the 1990s. They are books of our time.

To summarise, this section has explored those of the selected books which focus on particular groups of lesbians: young lesbians, older lesbians, Black lesbians, lesbians who have been married, and lesbians who identify as butch or femme. These books illustrate the diversity of lesbian experience and identity in the late twentieth century and the way in which this is increasingly being expressed. Furthermore, they contain an explicit challenge to the conceptualisation of 'unity through diversity' presented in other books which look at the experiences of a broad spectrum of lesbians. So, while the books placed in the category 'diverse' emerged as an attempt to (re)define reality from the perspective of lesbians, the books placed in the category 'specific' emerged as an attempt to (re)define reality from the perspective of lesbians who felt excluded or ignored from earlier. This finding demonstrates the way in which collections of lesbian life stories form an important part of lesbian culture while simultaneously contributing to and creating that culture.

### 6.8 Challenging the dichotomy

However, this challenge is not just confined to women who currently identify as lesbian. It also comes from women who identify as bisexual, who may or may not have identified as lesbian in the past. While the actual number of books containing bisexual
women’s ‘coming out’ stories remain small, it is beginning to grow. These are stories that are just beginning to find a public voice and demand recognition. In this study, the stories of bisexual women are explored by means of examining three books, all of which are published in the USA. These are Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out (1991) edited by Hutchins and Kaahumanu, Closer to Home: Bisexuality and Feminism (1992) edited by Weise, and Plural Desires (1995) edited by The Bisexual Anthology Collective. Together they comprise of 102 stories, or 17.8% of the data set.

A major theme of the editorial introductions is the claim that bisexual women’s sexuality is not validated in society. While not discounting that lesbians face oppression, the editors argue that at least lesbians have a community and a culture that sustains their identity. In contrast, bisexual women are excluded both by mainstream heterosexual culture and by lesbian and gay culture. This is because they refuse to conform to the dichotomous essentialist model of sexuality that prevails in society. As Weise notes in her introduction:

Bisexuals are supposed to be people who can’t make up their minds, or who are too afraid to. Because this culture presents sexuality as something essential to our make-up, as something we are born with, the idea that it need not be so black and white is threatening. (Weise, 1992: ix-x)

Particular anger is reserved for lesbian feminists who, the editors feel, have excluded women who may have previously identified as lesbian but now include men in their category of people with whom they are willing to have relationships. The editors challenge the idea that feminism is the preserve of lesbians:

Those of us who consider ourselves feminist are excited about the possibilities of a bisexuality informed by the understanding that sex and gender are classifications by which women are oppressed and restricted. We see bisexuality calling into question many of the fundamental assumptions of our culture: the duality of gender; the necessity of bipolar relationships; the nature of desire; the demand for either/or sexualities; and the seventies’ gay and lesbian model of bisexuality as a stage in working through false consciousness before finally arriving at one’s ‘true’ sexual orientation. (Weise, 1992: ix)

It is within this context that the editors feel that it is necessary, to have books for other women who are struggling to ‘come out’ as bisexual, which look at the experiences of bisexual women. Kaahumanu describes the importance of this by recounting her own personal experiences:

As a bisexual coming out of a lesbian closet in 1980, I needed books that did not exist. I wanted to walk into my favourite women’s bookstore and find an anthology of bisexual coming-out stories [...] I wanted to walk into the bookstore and find a section (however small) labelled BISEXUAL, BISEXUAL HISTORY, BISEXUAL CULTURE, BISEXUAL WOMEN OF COLOR, BISEXUAL
POLITICS, BISEXUAL SEXUALITY, BISEXUAL SPIRITUALITY. I wanted to walk in and feel at home, feel welcomed. I didn't want to walk into my favourite women's bookstore because I knew what I wanted and needed did not exist. (Kaahumanu, 1991:xiv)

Echoing the need to be recognised and be able to develop a culture and a community, Hutchins and Kaahumanu talk about the reason for producing their book:

In this book bisexual people tell the stories of our lives, name our experiences, and take pride in ourselves. Bi Any Other Name is a primer for the bisexual community and movement, and for everyone who seeks to understand. The voices in this book break our silence, and initiate dialogue with the diverse communities we call home. (Hutchins and Kaahumanu, 1991:xx)

The language used here and the sentiments expressed are similar to those expressed by the women who produced the first lesbian 'coming out' books, that is the need to tell one's story and to develop community. Thus, these books are seen as an important part of developing such a community. In addition, these women are trying to develop and maintain an identity from within a space that is socially ignored by heterosexual society and shunned by the lesbian community. In a similar way to the stories told by the Black lesbians and the butch and femme lesbians, these women tell their stories both within and in opposition to feminist informed notions of what it means to be a lesbian. However, these women differ in that while they challenge the politics of lesbianism, they also disrupt the dichotomous model of sexuality on which lesbianism depends.

6.9 Summary and conclusions

In conclusion, this chapter has provided a critical overview of the 570 stories, contained in eighteen edited books published in the period 1977-1995. Plummer's (1995) description of stories as symbolic interactions between tellers, coaxers and consumers provided the sociological framework to assess the way in which these stories were collected. While this analysis of the social construction of stories has important implications for the analysis of the women's stories, the remainder of this chapter, through reference to social, historical and political factors, focused on the role of the 'coaxer', or editor, in the process of telling stories.

The role of the editor was initially assessed through allocating each book to three different categories based on the themes it explored. Through an analysis of the editorial introductions to the books placed in the category 'diverse' it was concluded that emphasis is placed on the concept of 'unity through diversity', that is, the belief that the diversity of the lesbian community adds strength to it. In order to assess the validity of the editors' claim to represent this diversity, details concerning age, marital status,
motherhood and ethnic origin were analysed for three of the books placed in this category. The results of this analysis is that while there had been an attempt over the period of eighteen years to represent women from diverse backgrounds, the majority of the stories continued to represent the experience of young, white, never been married, childless women. On this basis, it was suggested that the concept of 'unity through diversity' posited in these introductions should be treated with caution.

This point was clarified further in the examination of the editorial introductions to those books placed in the category 'specific.' It was shown that these books represent a challenge to the concept of 'unity through diversity' on two different levels. Firstly, the editors of those books which concentrated on the experience of young or old lesbians, or those who have been married, were arguing that it is important that their experiences be included, otherwise the concept of diversity would in practice, be meaningless. Secondly, book representing lesbians who identified as butch or femme, or as black lesbians, were examined. It was noted that the editors of these books are explicitly challenging the very definitions of lesbianism constructed in the last twenty years and informed by lesbian feminism. That is, instead of demanding to be included in an existing definition of lesbianism, these editors are challenging the definition of lesbianism. Furthermore, the Black lesbian editors claim that it is necessary to situate the experience of lesbians in a wider social context, thus taking into account factors such as race and class. Finally, the two books looking at the experience of bisexual women challenged both the dichotomous model on which lesbianism depends and their exclusion from the lesbian community by feminists. Within this context, these two books are part of building a bisexual community informed by feminism.

To return to the conceptualisation of the editor as 'coaxer', this chapter has explored the way in which the 'coaxer' has drawn on her own stories of either lesbian or bisexual identity, meaning and practice, to define the key issues to be addressed by the storyteller. In doing so, it is apparent that the editors who collected stories for books placed in the category 'diverse' conceptualised lesbianism as a unifying identity that cuts across different experiences. In contrast, other editors have questioned this unifying experience.

To conclude, it is suggested that the conceptualisation of lesbian identity as a unifying experience has been called into question by the existence of women from diverse
backgrounds and with different experiences. That is, it has been argued that factors such as age, race, marital status and a butch or femme identity, affect lesbian experience. This leads to an important theoretical debate about the use of the term lesbian to define the experiences of a particular group of people. Included in this debate is an assessment of the meaning of the term and the way in which this effects identity, meaning and practice. This is one of the issues explored in the next five chapters through discussion of the different stories told about lesbian identity.
Chapter Seven: Journeys and Destinies: Born Lesbian

7.1 Introduction
This chapter examines the 20 stories allocated to first category: 'born a lesbian'. As the name suggests, they all endorse the view that sexual identity is innate and beyond the choice of the individual. With the exception of the three books looking at bisexuality, this story was present in all the books included in the data set. Furthermore, it was the most common story in all the books, which means that it is as likely to be told by young women as it is by older women. This endorses Richardson's (1981) argument that dominant cultural beliefs and subculture beliefs concerning the biological basis of sexuality both play an important role in constructing women's beliefs about their lesbian identity. As discussed in Chapter 2, the roots of these beliefs can be traced back to the very creation of homosexual identity, which began in the 19th century with the work of the early sexologists. The findings also indicates that despite thirty years of counter discourse focusing on the social construction of sexual identity, essentialism remains the culturally dominant way of thinking and talking about sexual identity. While this story may be common amongst all the women, the social context in which women develop and maintain a lesbian identity has changed considerably in this century. In turn, this has effected the 'possibilities' for lesbian identity and practice. This chapter presents the main themes present in the story 'born a lesbian' and examines the story structure.

7.2 What is a lesbian?
That homosexuality is constitutional is further apparent from the fact that it is closely bound up with the very essence of the personality. The homosexual man and woman differ from the heterosexual man and woman not only in the direction of their sex urge but also by the singularity of their being. (Hirschfeld, 1958: 147-48)

As discussed in the literature review, the modern classification of sexual identities is based on the defining relationship between the gender identity of an individual and gender of the sexual object (Foucault, 1979; Richardson, 1981). Within this framework,
a lesbian is a woman who has sexual relationships with women. The following extracts are representative of the way in which women in this category endorse this view of lesbian identity:

A lesbian is a woman who prefers to have her most intimate sexual and emotional contacts with other women, and who generally relates to other women in the same way as you traditionally think of women relating to men. (Mary, 44, LC, 1980:67)

I think being a lesbian means that you exclusively have sexual relationships with women and you do have sexual relations, you don’t just say you’re a lesbian. (Gloria, WSL, 1995:132-33)

As discussed in Chapter 2, the sexologists of the last century constructed homosexuality as innate and beyond the control of the individual. Similar sentiments are present in the women’s accounts, where the emphasis is on knowing that one was born a lesbian:

I knew I was a lesbian when I was quite small. I’ve never been interested in men. (Tam, TMS0W, 1995:16)

I think I was born that way because it was something I realised when I was quite young. (Janet, 32, CLW, 1977:46)

I don’t think anyone made me a lesbian, I think I was just born a lesbian. (Keava, WSH, 1987:189)

The world talks of sexual preference. I know it’s the only term we can use - it’s a kind of generic term. But, you know I really dislike it. It sounds as though sometime at puberty, there was someone who held out two hands and said, ‘Here is heterosexuality, and here is homosexuality; which do you pick?’ Actually, we lesbians know that it isn’t like that at all. We are as surely homosexual as straight people are heterosexual. I am a lesbian and that’s just the way it is. (Donna, 62, MTW, 1993:73)

These statements endorse the view that sexual identity is innate and represents the essence of the individual. They also signal to the reader the criterion for membership of the category ‘lesbian’, which is, above all else, a sexual classification defined by the sex of the person desired. This is not something that individual women have any choice over: they either desire women or they do not. At a broader level, such views reinforce the boundaries and regulations governing the classification of all sexual identities in society.

This definition of lesbianism also contains implications for the nature and the format of the story. As Plummer (1995) notes, the conceptualisation of identity as a natural possession influences the nature of the story told. This leads to the construction of a consistent and stable story in which the events and feelings discussed support the idea of a fixed identity. As discussed in the next section, women who believe that one is born
a lesbian conceptualise childhood as a period of discovery involving experiences and feelings that eventually and inevitably lead to the discovery of a lesbian identity.

7.3 Childhood and gender trouble

Tom-boyish activity is often found in the childhood of lesbian girls, with a predilection for boy's games coupled with a disparagement of dolls and feminine activities. Such girls prefer to wear jeans, shorts and to play football, climb trees and to fight boys. (Randell, 1973: 44)

Gender identity involves at least three distinguishable components: 1) recognition and association of self with the class of males and female; 2) entering into and performing certain culturally determined, institutionalised roles and; 3) engaging in heterosexual relations. (Kremer, 1969: 58)

Childhood experiences and feelings were cited in these stories as evidence of an authentic lesbianism which is innate and beyond the choice of the individual woman telling her story. These were based around an inability to conform to appropriate gender norms, which was conceptualised as 'feeling different.' The two quotes above, taken from psychology texts, formed part of the discussion in Chapter 2 of this thesis. They represent the dominant cultural view of the relationship between gender and sexual identity. These views inform the way in which women who believe that they were 'born lesbian' speak about their childhood.

For these women, childhood is conceptualised as a period of 'feeling different' from other female children. Accounting for this 'difference', women of all ages describe the ways in which they did not conform to appropriate gender behaviour. Two of the four extracts below were written by women who were sixteen in 1995, which suggests s. that gender constructs, and their relationship to sexuality continue to persist in society. The first two extracts highlight the way in which 'difference' regarding preferred attire and appearance is retrospectively transformed to become evidence of a 'true' lesbian identity:

I'd always felt quite 'different' as a child, although I could never pinpoint why. For a long time, I believed I should have been born a boy because I felt very uneasy in typically feminine roles. Being made to wear a dress and 'play nicely' was a torture; I was happiest up a tree with dirty knees and holes in my shorts. Not that I was actively discouraged from being a boisterous girl, I simply felt an unspoken expectation for me to grow out of it and an innate knowledge that I couldn't. (Jessica, NLGS, 1992: 6)

Throughout and since my childhood, I've been a "tomboy." In my second-grade picture, I was wearing a plaid shirt with rainbow suspenders and jeans. I hated dresses and nylons. I thought they were uncomfortable and never understood why I should have to wear uncomfortable clothes. My hair has always been cut short.
Once I tried to grow it out, only to get sick of it and chop it off. (Rachel, 16, TT20, 1995:11)

Likewise, involvement in childhood activities and friendships with boys provide further evidence that they must have always been a lesbian because they were unable to act in the way expected of girls:

I can't really say when I first figured out I was gay. I've always known that I was just a little different from most other kids. I never really seemed to act like a girl and most of my childhood friends were boys who played with toy cars and guns and GI Joe. I never had a problem with boys. I understood them. I was a major tomboy!!. I was labelled a "tough girl" when I was twelve, thirteen and fourteen. I played a lot of sport - soccer, rugby, basketball, tennis and softball. (Elizabeth, 16, TT20, 1995:145)

With the aid of retrospect, I can now recognise my lesbianism as being a part of my life from an early age, exhibiting itself in 'tomboyishness', in interest in and fear of girls, in disinterest in and jealousy of boys (for their status, what was 'given' them, and not for anything inherently in the male. (Laura, NLGS, 1992:97)

While not seeking to question the validity of these experiences, the subsequent meaning that is attributed to them is pertinent to the discussion here. It is important to acknowledge that these experiences of 'gender rebellion' are retrospectively given meaning. Hence, they reflect the current knowledge that women hold about a) gender and b) lesbian identity. As Phelan (1993) points out, in a society that views gender non-conformity as evidence of a 'deviant' sexuality it is to be expected that women will cite this as evidence of their true nature.

7.3.1 Gender and sexuality

Clearly, these women accept a gendered social order that regulates and controls behaviour, activity appearance, clothes and friendship networks. Thus, gender is not a social construct but a reflection of the inner self. This view, where gender and sexuality become conflated, is then employed to make sense of their behaviour, where conformity to gender-appropriate behaviour is evidence of heterosexuality, and non-conformity is evidence of homosexuality. Of course, such behaviour can only assume significance in a society structured by gender. These findings endorse Richardson’s (1981) observation that there exists a relationship between gender identity, gender-role orientation, sexual object choice and sexual identity. The result is that the gendered framework that these women use to tell their stories ultimately reinforces the value which society places on heterosexuality. That is, the women accept the view that a lesbian is a ‘pseudo male’; which validates the belief firstly that lesbianism is an inauthentic sexuality and, secondly, that lesbians are not ‘real’ women. Consequently, while on one level these women are claiming authenticity through essentialism, this claim is diminished through
citing 'gender rebellion' as evidence of a lesbian identity. This illustrates the argument put forward by queer theorists that claiming an essential lesbian identity has a self-defeating quality in that it ultimately serves to reinforce a particular concept of heterosexuality, that is, one which is valorised through the denigration of homosexuality.

**7.4 Adolescence and the 'discovery of lesbianism'**

Reference to early sexual experiences or attraction to other girls is cited as further evidence of an innate lesbian identity. Again, these experiences only make retrospective sense when individuals discover that there is a category 'lesbian.' This reinforces the concept of a journey of self-discovery or, in Jenness (1992) words, 'cumulative discoveries' divorced from the social context of life:

> When I was a child, I thought I was going to grow up and marry a woman. (Karen, TLCOS, 1994:67)

> As far as I can remember, I was always attracted to girls. (Sue, IO, 1989:213)

> Going back to my childhood - I had a very good friend, - you know your 'best friend' and, when she was about thirteen or fourteen she started having boyfriends and I could never understand why on earth she should prefer a boyfriend to me - so it was there, latent - I just didn't understand it at all. (Sharley, WLU, 1991:75)

The important point here is that the women who tell this story had these experiences or feelings before learning that there was a culturally constructed identity applicable to them. There was initially a desire, a feeling or behaviour that later became a lesbian identity. Thus, these women retrospectively construct stories which construct their sexual identity as a possession waiting to be discovered; life becomes a journey culminating in exposure of what was always there. This extract from Liz’s story encapsulates this idea:

> The beginning of my journey was coming out to myself. It happened in 1975, when I was fourteen and my knee touched the knee of the most beautiful women in my Minneapolis high school, Julia and I felt an undeniable surge of sexual excitement. All of my life experiences seemed to come together at once, and I knew I’d discovered the core of myself. I finally saw all that I’d been feeling in a new sexual light, and I found the word for myself: lesbian. (Liz, TLCOS, 1994:148)

However, this account does not reveal the social processes involved in the creation of this identity. This point is illustrated by data relating to the events leading up to the transformation of behaviour and experience into identity. While the circumstances differed for each woman, it was possible to identify general patterns of 'discovery of lesbianism' in the stories. For a majority of the women, adolescent sexual behaviour with another girl led either to self-questioning or to external disapproval on being
discovered, usually by a relative or peer group member. Due to the negative reactions of other people to their behaviour, this is generally, although not always characterised as a 'crisis.' The first extract, from Steph's story recounts the time when, at the age of 15, her girlfriend's parents found out about their relationship, while the second extract from Isla's story examines how other people applied the term homosexual to her:

When I returned I found that Felicity's parents had taken her away from school completely. I went round to see her. She wouldn't take the door off the chain. She told me I was a filthy pervert, sick, that I'd corrupted her, that it was all my fault, that I was a nasty lezzie and that she never wanted to see me again. (Steph, NLGS, 1992: 15)

My friend and I had known each other all our lives and had progressed from giving each other massages to sexual intimacy. I never thought of this as homosexual or us as homosexuals until other people labelled us with the term [... ] I still wasn't sure what a homosexual was. I loved women and I got a guilty thrill when homosexuality was mentioned or I read about it. But did that make me one? I didn't know where to turn. (Isla, NLGS, 1992: 11)

7.4.1 Information about lesbianism

This led the women to seek out information about the meaning of the term. For the majority of women, this was either through written material or through the media. Sources of material cited included fictional stories, dictionaries, psychology books, and the writings of sexologists such as Kraft-Ebing. This is sociologically significant for two reasons: firstly, the label came from an external source and, secondly, the meaning of the term lesbian was a reflection of dominant discourses available at that time. While psychologically motivated discourses conveyed views about the pathological nature of lesbianism, those discourses which utilised a concept of the natural legitimated their feelings and experiences, thus making it easier to accept their sexuality. However, regardless of the source of information, women learnt about the meaning of lesbianism in a context which linked it to gender. For example, The Well of Loneliness (first published in 1928) by Radclyffe Hall, with a foreword by the sexologist Havelock-Ellis, had a defining effect on the development of lesbian identity for many of the older women in this category. This book, controversial in its time, endorsed gendered notions of lesbianism, as well as the belief that a lesbian identity was beyond choice:

Then I read The Well of Loneliness, and this confirmed me in my belief that I was a lesbian. [ ... ] It swept me off my feet. I identified with Stephen Gordon, and I thought it was tragic and I wept buckets and went around in a daze, for days. (Diana, WLU, 1992: 97)

The following extract describes a common theme of many 'lesbian' stories written before the rise of the modern feminist movement:
The message was the same each time. There was a 'real' lesbian, generally mannish, though not always, and a 'real' woman who eventually left the lesbian, usually for a man. The lesbian then committed suicide, conveniently. She was always a sad, pathetic figure, or, totally despised and unlikeable. (Steph, NLGS, 1992:10)

In a similar way books on psychology conveyed the same message: lesbians are not 'real' women:

I thought I was a lesbian but then I thought it was ridiculous and awful and every book on psychology I ever read [ ... ] told me that it was immature and that I should really get my act together and reconcile myself to my femininity and find myself a good man and have children. And so I thought, I must simply get on with being a normal woman. (Diana, IO, 1989:49-50)

7.4.2 Rejecting lesbianism

A smaller number of women simply felt relief that there was a name for their experience because this must mean that there were other women who felt the same way. This demonstrates the importance of identity in society, even if it is a negative identity. However, the majority of women in the category 'born a lesbian' responded to the realisation that a lesbian identity was a 'discreditable identity' by hiding their feelings, not just to others but often to themselves:

Lesbians were somebody else. Lesbians were the women in the lesbian section of Our Bodies, Ourselves - women with short hair and caps, standing together with arms across shoulders, hands cupping each other's breasts - those were lesbians. The scenes in Going Down with Janice, Peggy Castenada's unscrupulous book which I read in high school - that was lesbianism. Kim, a girl in high school who carved her name into her arm and gifted me with stolen incense burners before she ran off to California, and then called me up and told me she had a wife - she was a lesbian. A lesbian was a woman who had sex with women, who craved sex with women, who creamed her jeans whenever she was with women - I didn't; I wasn't. I creamed my jeans for no one. (Nona, TLCOS, 1994:26)

When I was fifteen or sixteen I read Lesbian Women by Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon. Then I knew what I was, and it got to be so bad. I hid the book under my mattress. When I had a label for myself and knew there were really people like that and knew people didn't like people like that, then I started going into the closet really strong. (Olivia, 18, LC, 1980:72)

I was quite demonstrative and physical with girls until I was about fifteen but then it stopped. Even when I was in Junior school I remember clearly my best-friend and I playing photographers and touching each other and being besides myself with excitement, and at secondary school I had another best-friend and we used to play together. It was her who said to me, when we were about fourteen, that we should stop doing this now and start going out with boys. I became very wholehearted about going out with boys. I definitely fancied boys. I fancied girls as well but it wasn't really in my frame of reference to even think about doing anything about it. I'd heard the term lesbian in a derogatory way, but I didn't know any. The stereotype I had in my head told me I didn't look like one, so I couldn't be one. (Laura, IO, 1989:124)
This would support Jenness' (1992) finding that women initially reject the label of lesbian because of the negativity of the image offered to them. The following extracts from women's stories deal directly with the images of lesbianism that they had and how this prevented them from identifying as a lesbian until they could find a more positive image with which to associate themselves:

These new feelings seemed perfectly natural to me. I did not know any lesbians; yet, I knew I could love women in a heartbeat. I didn't know I was a lesbian. From the pictures that the culture painted of lesbian, I thought that they were a very hard, rough bunch of tough women with tattoos and leather and butch haircuts driving trucks. So I thought, from that, that I wasn't a lesbian. I just happened to be very attracted to this woman; but I'm not a lesbian. I'm not one of them! (Claire, 43, MTW, 1993:149)

Ever since I was small, I've had visions that a lesbian wore men's clothes and had short hair and had femme girlfriends (Dollars, 25, LC, 1980:60)

When I would have all these intense feelings after we'd been hugging, it would flash through my mind, 'Homosexuals.' But then I said, 'No, no, that's not what we are because we look perfectly normal. We look like we're out of Seventeen magazine. Lesbians wear dark leather jackets and dark pants and boots, and they have real short hair and caps, and they drive trucks, and they have whiskers, and they're real dark and mean. (Canyon, 21, LC, 1980:51)

7.4.3 Lesbian identity and marriage

Before looking at the way in which involvement in a lesbian culture altered a woman's perception of herself it is necessary to look at the group of women who, despite a belief in an essential sexual identity, spent part of their adult life either married or in sexual relationships with men before claiming a lesbian identity. While on the surface this might appear to contradict a belief in essentialism, the explanations given for this maintain a consistency and continuity with existing beliefs and, hence, retain the element of discovery that is important to this story. While some women married men or had sexual relationships with men in an attempt to deny their 'true' sexuality, others did not discover their sexuality until later in life. For example, Jocelyn who had been married for 25 years, explained her marriage as an attempt to avoid looking at her 'real' sexuality:

In hindsight, I think I was also running away from my own sexual stuff. (Jocelyn, 62, MTW, 1993:27)

Likewise, other women regarded their marriages as 'detours' before discovering their true identity as lesbians:

I went through all the heterosexual phase, and I didn't think about lesbianism until I had my first affair with a woman when I was 32 and married. I didn't consider myself a lesbian - just that I'd fallen in love for the first time, and was loved in a way I never, ever was with men. (Jackie, WLU, 1992:91)
Once I'd had that experience, I understood the things I'd felt when I was younger, the deep friendships I'd formed with other women. Suddenly it all fell into place. Of course, we're going back a few years now, when lesbians didn't talk about being lesbians. [...] I was conditioned into thinking that the married state was a very desirable one. But as I say, as soon as I'd has that experience, it all just feel into place. (Ruth, WLU, 1992:83-4)

To summarise, while a woman's initial discovery that a label existed for her feelings and behaviour may have resulted in a 'crisis', it is nonetheless an important event in the story. The transformation of feelings and behaviour into an identity is a significant stage in their journey of discovery. For women who had married, the childhood feelings of difference, the perceived inability to conform to appropriate gender behaviour and their sexual attraction to other females could finally be explained by an understanding that they belonged to the category lesbian. Whether this is initially rejected or accepted, which depended in part on other people's responses, the awareness of a lesbian identity eventually resulted in participation in a lesbian culture or community.

7.5 Lesbian culture: Rules and regulations

Jenness (1992) contends that identifying as a lesbian has less to do with sexual relationships and more to do with finding a positive image with which a woman feels comfortable identifying herself with. There is a difference between 'doing' lesbianism and 'being' a lesbian. As illustrated in Chapter 4, this process most often occurs through membership of a lesbian community which validates a woman's experiences and feelings (Jenness, 1992; Plummer, 1975; Richardson, 1981). Such research emphasises the fundamental importance of lesbian communities for the development and maintenance of a lesbian identity. The following discussion demonstrates that while at one level the women's stories in this category validate these findings, at another level it could be suggested that women have at times accepted 'what was on offer' in order to participate in a lesbian community.

7.5.1 A 'gateway' to lesbianism

This section begins by looking at the experiences of those women who were involved in lesbian culture before the advent of the modern gay movement and women's movement in the 1970s. Before this time, the organisation of lesbian and gay culture was weak and, by necessity, secretive. In this country, lesbian culture was based around one or two clubs such as Gateways in London, or bars and pubs frequented by those labelled 'deviant' or 'other' by society. These venues, by providing an opportunity to meet other women, quite literally offered women a 'gateway' into lesbian culture. However, as the extracts below reveal, access to the lesbian community was dependent on women
conforming to the norms and regulations governing lesbian identity and practice. In the 1950s and 1960s, this involved the adoption of lesbian gendered positions based on the masculine/feminine paradigm governing heterosexual relationships:

The other thing I didn't like about that whole scene was the role-playing. I didn't feel that way, didn't really understand it I suppose. I didn't want to be identified with these real butch types, and I certainly didn't fancy or want to be one of the femmes. (Val, 51, WSL, 1995:63-64)

I wasn't accepted at first on the gay scene because I was fancying women dressed up as men and I was fancying feminine women as well, so people used to call me an in-between. But after about six months of that I couldn't stand it anymore, so I thought, I looked ridiculous in a fucking skirt so I went and had the crop like [ .... ] and into the suit. (Luchia, 28, CLW, 1977: 124)

With the butch and femme stuff it was made clear that you had to be one or the other. (Janet, 46, WSL, 1995:163)

Such views suggest that these women did not necessarily feel that the image of lesbianism on offer was very positive, but that there was not any alternative. Hence, they either participated in the prevailing lesbian culture or faced social isolation. Despite the prohibitions and regulations that had to be followed in order to become a part of the lesbian community at this time, women recognised that in return they received the support of a community:

I have to say that despite the violence in a lot of relationships, there was a great deal of loving and caring in that community. Women would do anything for each other. If anyone was in trouble, if anyone was going to get the sack for being 'queer', they would all support each other. They'd share money, they'd share their flats. (Laura, 10, 1989:129).

Leaving this issue to one side, these extracts from the women's stories also highlight the way in which cultural beliefs about the relationship between gender and sexuality continue to inform this story. The majority of women in the story category 'born a lesbian', faced with the choice between adopting a femme identity or a butch identity, opted for the latter. This is because masculine behaviour is evidence of being a 'real' lesbian while feminine behaviour is evidence of being a 'real' heterosexual. In contrast, feminine lesbians are 'real' women and hence not 'real' lesbians. In addition, a 'masculine' identity conferred status and powers in lesbian culture; this was not available to the feminine lesbian.

7.5.2 Feminism and the past

For this group of women, it was only the advent of feminism that enabled them to stop participating in a lesbian culture which strictly enforced gendered identities. The
feminist critique of gender roles in heterosexual relationships enabled these women to change the way in which they conducted their relationships with women:

When the Women's movement started to get known about, I read books like *Sexual Politics* and saw that our relationship had some of the same things that were talked about as being destructive in heterosexual relationships - for instance the role-playing. I was the dish-washer and she was the money-earner. It was very clear. (Chrystos, 30, LC, 1980:44-45)

In those days, the early sixties, one just accepted that there was a butch-femme divide. I never thought of myself as either butch or femme, although people used to try and push me into the butch category, but I never felt that I really belonged there. I didn't feel I belonged in the femme category either. But it wasn't until the women's movement, much later on, that this came out as gender stereotyping, and as such, something which should not be promulgated. (Diana, WLU, 1992:102)

At a theoretical level, this highlights the way in which the telling of story is a production dependent on the cultural beliefs available at that time. The advent of feminism enabled women to bring a new understanding, a different way of talking about their participation in lesbian culture. This enabled them to distance themselves from earlier practices which they now felt to be inappropriate in a feminist context. This illustrates just one of the effects that feminism has had on the practice of lesbian identity.

On the surface, these comments present a contradiction. While rejecting the strict gender roles prescribed by lesbian culture, the women cite an inability to conform to gender appropriate norms in childhood as evidence of a lesbian identity. Yet, it could be argued that these two views are consistent with each other and simply demonstrate continuity with the belief that a 'real' lesbian identity is synonymous with masculine behaviour, because the existence of a butch identity is dependent on its opposite, a femme identity. This means that some lesbians must adopt a feminine role, yet this is inconsistent with knowledge about what a 'real' lesbian is. This point is developed in the next chapter through an analysis of a femme identity.

7.5.3 Feminist regulations

While feminism had a 'liberating' effect on lesbian culture and relationships for these women, the following discussion highlights the way in which feminism itself created its own norms and regulations governing lesbianism. This reveals a tension between definitions, that is, the women in this category defined lesbianism in a sexual way, while feminists defined lesbianism in political terms:

But with it came all these prohibitions about the way I was. I don't want to give you the idea I was some kind of rampant sex fiend, doing it twenty-four hours a
day, but suddenly it was, 'don't do that, don't say this, don't touch me.' [ .... ] This sexual culture grew out of the women's movement about 'we will not be like men, we're going to be lesbians, we are fighting against the way men want us to be.' Fair enough. Of course the movement was very young at that stage, but these reactions were terribly hurtful to me, and I know they damaged a lot of other people as well. [ .... ] Now I look back and feel I shouldn't be too judgmental. But that's too simplistic. They were fucked up, even more than I was. It was quite a long time before I thought of myself politically as a lesbian - the women's movement came first. For a long time I couldn't really come to terms with the idea that lesbianism, homosexuality, gayness, whatever, was a political statement. (Val, 51, WSL, 1995:60)

Likewise, another woman, while supporting the women's movement, believed that the women's movement and the lesbian movement are two separate entities, thus contradicting the feminist-lesbian understanding:

So I though the women's movement was an extremely good thing. What I didn't realise, and I think a lot of people didn't realise, is that the women's movement was one thing and lesbianism was another, and the two weren't necessarily the same. We met plenty of lesbians who would say they didn't think much of the women's movement, and, of course, there are thousands in the women's movement who would throw up their hands with horror at the thought that they might be lesbian. Although people say that feminism is the theory and lesbianism is the practice - and I can see the logic of that - nevertheless, the two don't necessarily overlap - although at some points they do. (Diana, WLU, 1992:102-3)

These criticisms are based on beliefs about the aetiology of lesbianism, beliefs that are challenged by feminism. As discussed in Chapter 3, feminism defines lesbianism as a political statement signalling resistance against a patriarchal system. The stories in this category both refute this definition of lesbianism and, in doing so, endorse the belief that lesbianism is innate and beyond the choice of the individual:

When I was younger and more naive I thought a 'political lesbian' was a lesbian who was interested in politics. I could hardly believe it when I found out what it really meant. It seems to me it is no different from being a gay person forcing themselves to be heterosexual for exterior reasons, like religion or the law or to gain the approval of society. (Grace, NLGS, 1992:142)

I can't understand political lesbianism at all. How can you 'choose' to be a lesbian for political reasons? You either are, or you aren't. It's not about rational things like choice. It's about feelings and attraction, emotion, love, lust. It's about feeling closer to women in every way, lovers, friends, companions. I could no more choose to be straight than I could flap my arms and fly to the moon, so how can a straight women choose to be gay? (Steph, NLGS, 1992:147-8)

The rejection of the politicisation of lesbianism is also present in the accounts of younger women who 'came out' as lesbian either during the height of the women's movement or since then. The extracts below validate Jenness (1992) claim that women only identify as lesbian when they find a positive image with which they feel comfortable. While these younger women recognised their sexual attraction towards women, they deferred 'coming out' or claiming a lesbian identity until they found an
image of lesbianism to which they could relate. However, it was not just the masculine image of the lesbian presented in sexology and psychology that these women were rejecting. These women were rejecting the image of lesbianism offered by feminism:

I knew lesbians existed before I came out but they were much older, middle-class, it was the Greenham Common stereotype. I was a punk and there was a lot of anarchist and feminist music at the time, and that was when it all started to become acceptable, with the shaved head and everything. I really liked that image. It was only when I found an image that I liked that I actually felt settled about being a lesbian myself. (Jo, 25, WSL, 1995:140)

In my first weeks at university, Phillapa and I went to a woman's liberation meeting on campus at which a woman identified herself as a lesbian. This was the first lesbian I'd ever encountered. Over the next couple of months we got to know her and the women's household she lived in. But I think, in a way, those women had a delaying effect on my own coming out because they weren't particularly the sort of women with whom I would have become close friends in any circumstances, and they were quite into the mid-seventies fashion for wearing drab clothes and having what, to me, were very boring appearances. Overall, they presented me with a pretty negative image of what being a lesbian was. It seemed not to have much to do with me. (Nicole, NLGS, 1992:51)

Looking beyond the data collected for this study, this view is prevalent in contemporary lesbian culture. Feminism is rejected, not only for its political beliefs, but also the rules and regulations it lays down in relation to dress codes and behaviour. An example of this is the recently held National Lesbian Beauty Contest, a first for this country. Categories for entry included: butch, femme, women of colour, mature women, tattooed and pierced women and drag kings, thus indicating a firm rejection of a feminist analysis of lesbianism and a celebration of gendered lesbian identities. This issue is discussed in detail in the next chapter.

7.6 Summary and conclusions
To summarise, this chapter examined the stories of women who believe that they were born a lesbian. It began by looking at the way in which lesbian identity, conceptualised at the level of the individual, is regarded as an innate or natural possession. Proof of this is provided through key themes and events, such as, childhood experiences or feelings for other females feeling different and, an inability to conform to expected gender norms. The selection of these issues, and the possible exclusion of other contradictory issues, results in the construction of a stable and fixed identity. The way in which the construction of this story is similar to Plummer's analysis of 'coming out' stories is discussed in Chapter 12.
The second half of this chapter showed that although the women believe that a lesbian identity is innate and beyond choice, there is a strong awareness that the practice of a lesbian identity is context bound. Furthermore, through an examination of the way in which these women reflect on lesbian culture it is apparent that the rules and regulations governing lesbian culture encourage some women to become involved while preventing others from doing so. Thus while Jenness (1992) argument that claiming a lesbian identity may be deferred until a woman finds a positive definition of lesbianism that she feels comfortable is endorsed by these findings, it does need to be qualified. That is a woman, who feels that she has no control over her sexual identity may acknowledge their lesbianism and yet retain negative views about this. Likewise, participation in a lesbian culture while enabling them to identify as a lesbian does not automatically confer positive feelings about this. This was illustrated in the discussion above. Thus, it is perfectly possible to identify as a lesbian, live as a lesbian and yet retain negative feelings about that identity. A full analysis of these findings alongside the analysis of the other stories appears in Chapter 12.
Chapter Eight: Imitation or Transgression: Butch and Femme Identities

8.1 introduction

The last chapter introduced the existence of gendered lesbian positions known as butch or femme. Within that story, butch and femme identities were a part of lesbian culture before the birth of the women's movement. A feminist analysis of gender roles led to such identities being discredited for their imitation of heterosexual relationships. Thus, for these women, identifying as butch and femme belonged to the past. Nevertheless, there continue to be women who identify as butch or femme, whether they are new to the lesbian community or have been a part of it for many years. The way in which these identities were discredited in the 1970s and 1980s highlights both the changing nature of lesbian culture and the practices of power that operate within. The butch-femme relationship predominated lesbian culture until the end of the 1960s, when the emergence of a lesbian feminist culture effectively silenced women who did not conform to the feminist version of lesbianism. More recently, this feminist hegemony has been challenged by different groups of lesbians, including those women who identify as butch or femme. These stories are a part of that challenge. The challenge is, in effect, part of this story.

The 40 stories examined in this chapter come from two story categories: ‘butch’ and ‘femme.’ All the women at the time of publication identified with one term or the other. This included women who identified as butch in the 1950s and 1960s. The majority of the stories come from either The Persistent Desire (1992) or The Femme Mystique (1995). Just two stories come from What's She Like? (1995). Again, this is a reflection of the way in which butch and femme identities have been discredited.

This chapter begins by looking at the way in which butch-femme identities are conceptualised as being both natural and defined in relation to each other. It then examines the way in which this represents a challenge to existing beliefs concerning the relationship between gender and sex. The remainder of the chapter is divided into two sections: the first looks at the stories told by butch women, while the second section looks at the stories of femme women. These stories reflect on the changing nature of
butch-femme culture, which have each evolved from changes in both the lesbian community and wider society in general.

8.2 Complementary stories

The decision to look at the stories of butch identity and femme identity together was based on their defining relationship to each other. Each is constructed on a belief that an essential erotic difference exists between women which is realised through the adoption of gendered positions. Therefore, these identities only exist in relation to each other. This relationship is a part of the stories told by these women:

For me the butch-femme dynamic is simply about yin and yang: opposites attract. (Jaime, TFM, 1995:95)

Femme is an expression of difference, not merely the negative of an existing concept, not merely unbutch. If there were no perceived differences between lesbians, why would the concept "butch" be necessary? By using that word we admit that there is another way to be, that which I call femme. (Victoria, TFM, 1995:50)

In constructing a femme identity, women are also constructing a butch identity and vice versa. As a consequence, while a story may be primarily about being butch or being femme, it may also reflect the opposite. At one level, the relationship between these two terms can be understood through Derrida's framework of binary opposites and the concept of supplementarity, which were discussed in Chapter 3. However, it could be argued that the butch-femme relationship does not valorise one identity by denigrating the other. Nevertheless, one could not exist without the other. In keeping with this understanding, the next section looks at the way in which women construct butch and femme meaning.

8.2.1 Celebrating the gendered lesbian

Endorsing the points made in the previous chapter, the stories of butch and femme identity are based on an individualist and essentialist notion of sexual identity:

I have always considered myself butch identified. I have never felt feminine. (Ira, TPD, 1992:61)

Without a doubt, I was born to be femme. (Aiye, TFM, 1995:26)

I am a femme from the inside core of my being to the energy that radiates from that core and touches those around me. (Julie, TFM, 1995:282)

Important clues emerged as I grew older, revealing my true identity as a femme ... (Maluma, TFM, 1995:254)

Elaborating on this point, the extracts below illustrate the way in which these women differentiate between being a lesbian and identifying as butch or femme. While for
these women there is a relationship between the two, they are conceptualised as being two different identities. Being a lesbian signifies sexual and emotional attraction to women, while being butch or femme signals the form that attraction will take:

A butch is simply a lesbian who finds herself attracted to and complemented by a lesbian more feminine than she. (Rita, TPD, 1995: 209)

I've been a butch my whole conscious life. It took me about twenty years to come fully into lesbianism, but I was a baby butch at the age of five. (Sue, TPD, 1992: 454)

This indicates that unlike the early sexologists or even psychologists, who have very clearly defined gendered lesbian positions, these women believe that while in their case gender and sexuality are linked, this is not automatic. This is interesting because it signals recognition of the plurality of lesbian identities. Unlike the lesbian culture of the 1950s, where membership of the lesbian community involved adopting a gendered position, these women do not believe that their version of lesbianism is more authentic than other versions:

Although I know my identity to be a femme, I am not saying that they should be. Many lesbians seem to be perfectly comfortable being androgynous, being femmes with femmes or butches with butches, or just being ‘themselves.’ I am not trying to fit all of the lesbian nation into my paradigm; what I am trying to do is broaden the paradigm so that women like me not only fit but are celebrated in our own right, and not derided for not being real lesbians. (Arlene, TPD, 1992: 382)

One of the possible reasons for this change in butch-femme culture is the impact that feminism has had on the butch-femme community, which is explored below in the analysis of the butch stories. This understanding about the plurality of lesbian also disputes the commonly held belief that only butch lesbians are ‘real’ lesbians. As shown in the last chapter, lesbians and non-lesbians hold this view.

8.2.2 Imitation or transgression

While gender is the dominant issue affecting the construction of these stories, the implications of this can be read in two ways. The first way is to regard the butch and femme relationship as imitating heterosexuality, while the second way is to regard this relationship as a challenge to the relationship between gender and sex.

In relation to the first view, these stories reinforce the arguments explored in Chapters 3 and 4 concerning the way in which both gender and sexuality are social products and hence do not refer to an authentic self. These two stories, based on concepts of masculinity and femininity, are a celebration of the eroticisation of difference. Viewed from Richardson’s (1981) perspective, this would validate her claim that gendered
lesbian identities simply serve to reinforce a heterosexual framework, thus diminishing the power of relationships between women. However, this implies that these women are the passive recipients of cultural norms, thereby disallowing the possibility for women to transgress and challenge the boundaries of gender through adopting gendered positions. As illustrated throughout this chapter, this feminist understanding of the butch-femme dynamic disallowed these women a voice in the 1970s and 1980s. In doing so, it ignored the alternative explanation that lesbians who identify as butch or femme have developed to defend their right to adopt gendered positions. This position is explained in the following extract from Rita, a woman who identifies as butch:

How are we lesbians to escape or resolve the butch-femme controversy? Let us once and for all separate female from feminine and male from masculine. All lesbians are female, but most assuredly not all lesbians are feminine, no matter how one defines that elusive word. (Rita, TPD, 1995:208)

Viewed from this perspective, butch and femme identities challenge existing gender beliefs by questioning the allocation of masculine and feminine characteristics to a particular sex. This stance questions the very meaning of masculinity and femininity. Unlike the story in the last chapter that saw only masculine behaviour in women as evidence of an authentic lesbian identity, the women in this story see such behaviour as one possibility for lesbian identity. Thus, it is possible to be ‘feminine’ and a lesbian. Looking forward to the feminist story in the next chapter which challenges gender by attempting to stand outside of it, the butch-femme stories challenge gender from within. For these women, butch and femme roles transgress culturally defined gender positions, thus permitting the male ownership of power to be questioned. It is a story that both reinforces and challenges the cultural construction of the dichotomous relationship between sex and gender. This challenge plays a central role at the heart of the butch and femme story:

It seems to me the real message of butch-femme identities is an acknowledgement of the full range of female and lesbian sexuality - actually the full range of human sexuality, because the truth is that regardless of their sexual identity, both women and men can experience either or both ends of this continuum - which is why transvestites and transsexuals make so many of us uncomfortable. Butch-femme is the tip of the iceberg of issues that call into question matters of sexual and gender identity. (Arlene, TPD, 1992:382)

What gets modelled in this society, as female or male natures are actually representations of two different modes of being, two different kinds of energy. I believe we recognise these different energies when we use terms like butch and femme. I think individuals fall all along a continuum that runs from assertive energy to accepting energy, and that natural continuum should create a balance for human society as a whole. Instead there is an imbalance, because society values one kind of human energy over another, and has forced its individuals, on the basis of their genitals, into extremes of those energies [... ] I believe butch-femme
honours this continuum of energies as valuable, and necessary, and not based in genital structure. (Victoria, TFM, 1995:52)

These women use this understanding of sexuality to challenge gender roles by illustrating the gendered nature of social order. For example, both butch and femme women talked about the challenge posed by butch women when they assume the appearance and attire of men. This is because it challenges deeply held cultural assumptions about the male ownership of power and the symbolic representation of that power:

Every time my lover is mistaken for a man, I get a little thrill. I understand that her daily physical expression of herself is tantamount to treason. On the street, she threatens an order that has been established on being able to distinguish male and female so that it can reward and punish accordingly. She is a constant reminder that the revolution is in progress, and that, through our partnership, we are on the cutting edge. (Jaime, TFM, 1995:97)

In a similar way, femme women challenge cultural beliefs about femininity:

I call myself femme because it describes who I feel I am, once I figured out it wasn't a bad word. It does not mean I love to cook, or that I never wear pants, or that I can't paint a house or seduce a woman. It does mean that I love the feel of my femininity, that I experience my essential self, sexually and socially, as female. (Arlene, TPD, 1992:382)

From this perspective, these women are arguing that far from imitating heterosexuality, they are transgressing gender and, in the process of doing so, are challenging the existing social order.

To summarise, this section has looked at the way in which butch and femme identities have been conceptualised and defined in these stories. Aware of the feminist denigration of these identities, women have produced an account of their identities that highlights the way in which they challenge the accepted relationship between gender and sex. This occurs within a framework that endorses a belief in essential sexual identities. However, as the next section shows, this way of theorising the relationship between gender and sex is in part the outcome of the impact of feminism on women who identify as butch or femme.

8.3 A tale of learning how to be butch

While drawing on all the stories in this category, this section focuses on the story of one particular woman, Jeanne, in order to examine the development and maintenance of butch identity. In many ways, Jeanne's story symbolises the butch story. Jeanne grew up to identify as a butch lesbian in the 1960s and became involved in lesbian feminism. Her story explores the relationship between identity and culture, while at the same time
maintaining a strong sense of destiny and essentialism. Furthermore, as this analysis
will show, Jeanne’s story and the stories of the other women contain many of the

In keeping with the views expressed by the women in the previous section Jeanne’s
story starts with the assertion that she was born a lesbian and born a butch:

> Being a butch - like being a woman, a lesbian, having a soul - is not something I
can dismiss. I believe that butches are born, not made. Since this is my birthright, I
choose to glory in it. (Jeanne, TPD, 1992:272)

8.3.1 Childhood

Remaining consistent to this belief Jeanne examines her childhood, which she talks
about in terms of ‘feeling different’ and ‘feeling outside of things.’ This is because, as a
child, she did not feel able to conform to society’s expectations of her as a girl:

> As a playground dyke, I ignored my older sister, who floated rose petals down the
storm drains and held court over ‘Miss America’ pageants. I preferred romping
through ‘Bamboo Land’, building forts with my baby brother, Bill. (Jeanne, TPD,
1992:274)

This is a common theme amongst the women in this category. Although in contrast to L-
the previous story, examined in Chapter 7, the purpose of this story is not just the
discovery of an inner lesbian self but also the discovery of a butch self. Sue and Marion
recall similar experiences from their childhood:

> I remember clearly the summer between kindergarten and first grade, my mother
arranged for me to get a haircut. My long, sausage curls piled up on the floor
around my chair at the beauty parlour. I climbed out of the chair, a new butchling
in the world. Jeans and T-shirts and sneakers became my earliest, and have proven
to be my most enduring, uniform of choice. (Sue. TPD, 1992:454)

> In the third grade we did a little play for the end of the year called The Princess
and the Woodcutter. The girl who was the princess was the only one in the class
who had long blonde hair. I was the woodcutter, because I was the biggest and
would be able to carry her off at the end. At least, that’s how I remember it. I
certainly remember the feeling of the role - the trousers and the boots, rescuing the
maiden in distress, and living happily ever after in the forest. I think this gave me
the taste of what was possible. I spent a lot of my adolescence being tall, dark, and
handsome and looking for a princess. (Marion, TPD, 1989:170)

These experiences, combined with a strong awareness of gender expectations, led these
women to construct explanations for their behaviour that rested on the assumption that
they were boys in the wrong body. This is illustrated in the following extract from
Jeanne’s story:

> I wasn’t cut out to be a girl. This might sound contradictory, since I was obviously
cast with two breasts and accessories for the part, but somewhere inside I always
thought my body was lying to me. If I liked all the things 'only boys' got to do, then somehow I must be a boy. Before feminism came along and said, 'Girls can be anything they want to be,' I had no mental options save thinking I was a boy. Reality had set in with no explanation. (Jeanne, TPD, 1992:274)

Before feminism, Jeanne had no other explanation for how she was feeling. Without any alternative explanatory system, Jeanne turned to the psychology books of the day to gain a greater understanding of her experiences and feelings. Based on essentialist notions of the relationship between gender and sex, these books informed Jeanne that she was suffering from 'gender dysfunction.' This feeling was not unique to Jeanne, but was expressed by other women who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s. For instance, Elly stated:

I had read in Sexology magazine about Christine Jorgenson and sex-change operations. I really started thinking that that's what it was - my feelings are natural so it must be my body that's wrong, and it's too bad they don't have an operation for me. I think at that time, before I found a community, I would have been very willing to have an operation in order to set things right. I had an awful lot of the kind of values that I thought I should have if I was a boy, that I would want to get married and support my wife and all that. (Elly, TPD, 1992:114)

These extracts from Jeanne and Elly's stories endorse the findings of previous research in this area (for example, Plummer, 1975, 1995; Richardson, 1981; Jenness, 1992), for they demonstrate the important functions that 'cultures of commonality' can perform for the individual. In Jeanne's case, the absence of a feminist analysis and, in Elly's case, being outside a lesbian community, meant that they could not develop alternative explanations for their feelings. This meant that they had to be content with dominant explanations, in this case psychological ones, that told them they were different from other people because they did not conform to the gender rules and regulations of society.

This accounts for why these women conceptualise their childhood as a period when they felt different and on the outside of their social world. Living in a society that confers identity through gender conformity, it is to be expected that those individuals who are unable to conform will feel different. This point is illustrated by this extract from Jeanne's story:

Today I argue with my lover, 'Are butches more oppressed than femmes, or vice versa?' But back then there was no debate. High school years are much harder on butches. Femmes passed as straight, even to themselves. Butches can't. We stick out like GI Joes in Barbie Land. (Jeanne, TPD, 1992:276)

As the next part of Jeanne's story shows, the lack of a critical analysis of gender itself led her to conclude that for a woman, being butch was synonymous with being a man.
8.3.2 Separating the butch from the man

Jeanne progressed through adolescence without gaining any better explanation for her feelings. The isolation that resulted from a lack of validation for her feelings prevented her from being able to form an identity, which led her to feel increasingly alienated from society. This situation was made worse by peer group and parental pressure to ‘get a boyfriend.’ As a young woman she retreated from society and became a nun. However, this was short lived and she left knowing that she was a lesbian, but having yet to discover her ‘butchness.’ She went to university where she had a brief relationship with a man, which proved conclusively that she was not heterosexual. Having decided that she was a lesbian, she set about finding other lesbians. This eventually led her to become involved in a butch-femme culture where she had a short-lived relationship, which ended when it became apparent to her butch partner that Jeanne was not prepared to be femme, and furthermore, wanted to be butch. This understanding about the gendered nature of lesbian relationships and her ‘affinity’ with being a butch made her realise that she needed to ‘learn’ how to be butch:

‘The gay life’ was becoming more complicated. Judy was right. I was no kinda femme, but I didn’t know much about being a butch either. Clearly I had missed something critical. I would have to learn a new set of behaviours: how to treat a lady, how to get a date, how to take her to bed. (Jeanne, TPD, 1992:279)

Again, this demonstrates the social construction of identity as well as the fundamental importance of community for the development of that identity: her involvement with butch-femme culture gave her a label for her feelings. It also enabled her to learn how to develop this identity. For while she felt that although her gender identity was essentially ‘butch’, she did not know how to ‘perform’ butch. In learning how to be a butch she incorporated her existing cultural knowledge, which stated that a butch was really a man in a woman’s body. This led her to conclude that in order to act butch she must act like a man. This status as ‘pseudo man’ would entitle her to the status symbols allocated to men:

I learned early that men had what I wanted: money, power, and women. And I could do it my way, by being butch. (Jeanne, TPD, 1992:279)

This insight into butch-femme culture, before the advent of a feminist discourse on this subject, validates the comments from women in the previous stories who were highly critical of butch-femme culture. As for Jeanne, her new found understanding of herself led her to have a relationship with a heterosexual woman, who expected Jeanne to behave like a man. This initially confirmed her own construct of butch lesbians. However, this woman left her six months later for a ‘real’ man. As a result of this
experience, she learned that being butch was not about behaving like a man. Instead, it was something else that could not be explained either through a rigid dichotomy of male and female or through a heterosexual framework:

Much to my surprise, I didn’t feel any more natural being treated like a man than I did being treated like a woman. I thought I hated being a woman, that I was really a man trapped in a woman’s body, a transsexual. At the wizened age of twenty-one, I’d nearly fulfilled my ambition. In the eyes of my girlfriend and friends I’d almost become a man. But in this new role I remained foreign to myself. (Jeanne, TPD, 1992:280)

As mentioned earlier, Jeanne initially believed that being butch involved behaving as a man was because she had read psychology books that told her that she was suffering from ‘gender dysfunction.’ At this point in her story she states, that it was not until feminism came along that she finally understood that it was not she who was wrong but society, because it allocated gender roles on the basis of sex:

It would take gay liberation and feminism another several years to show me that ‘gender dysfunction’ really didn’t exist; that I was not wrong, they were. My parents and Catholicism had taught me to accept the gender dichotomy. The patriarchy had created this ‘disease’ by rigidly classifying male and female behaviour according to anatomy. By this definition, my little-girl-bodied, male-behaving self was ‘sick.’ (Jeanne, TPD, 1995:280)

As explored above, this separation of gender and sex is a common theme in the butch-femme stories. For these women, the problem results from dividing people into two categories on the basis of anatomical differences and then assigning gender roles to them. As discussed above, for these women, gender is experienced as a continuum and not a dichotomy. Jeanne endorses this when she writes:

I would eventually become a political activist, because my ornery spirit knew, long before my mind could explain, that our gay place in the world had been fundamentally misdefined. If men and women weren’t divided and gender were accepted as fluid, I wouldn’t be perceived as deviating from a non-existent norm. And neither would the other one or two billion queers like me. I wasn’t a transsexual. I was simply individual, gender and psyche, a recombinant dyke. (Jeanne, TPD, 1992:280)

8.3.3 The feminist years

Having become a part of butch-femme culture enabled Jeanne to develop her butch identity as something other than being a ‘pseudo man.’ This culture enabled her to develop and maintain a positive image of herself as butch lesbian. This all changed in 1970 when she became involved in lesbian-feminism. As already mentioned, her involvement with feminism provided an understanding of self which led her to develop a political analysis of gender and sexuality:
Feminism healed the core contradictions of my life. Feminism said I was clearly a woman, but that I could be any kind of woman I wanted to be, and that in fact I was 'an amazon', a kind of proud, free woman who refused to be defined by the rules of patriarchy. This sounded great. Certainly more enhancing – and more workable – than my former analysis of myself as an unrequited transsexual. (Jeanne, TPD, 1992:282)

For the first time in her life, she had an explanation for her experiences that went beyond the individual to look at the structures of society. Her personal biography became a political story where the enemy was named as men and patriarchy. As the following extract from Jeanne's story shows membership of the lesbian-feminism community involved rules and regulations, which for Jeanne meant a dismissal of her butch identity:

Almost against my will, the early seventies turned me into a 'lesbian-feminist.' Feminism tore apart my butch identity [...] Feminism was heretical to the 'gay world.' Feminism struck at the core. Feminism said, 'A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion.' [...] I came to embrace and love lesbian-feminism because I knew these weirdos were right. Innately, I'd always felt lesbianism was more than sexual behaviour. Lesbianism embodied a political rage, an ornery core. [...] The new blasphemy attacked my trappings as well as my core. Feminism eliminated dirty dancing: leading my partner was 'heterosexist'; bumping and grinding was plain 'ol 'sexist.' The Lesbian-Feminist said it was wrong for femmes to wear makeup, patriarchal to indulge in monogamy and 'male-identified' (a mortal sin) for butches to wear ties. In fact, the Lesbian-Feminists insisted there was no such thing as butch-femme. It was a 'heterosexual cop-out.' [...] These frizzy-headed unshaven interlopers decreed that 'womyn' who acted like men (butches) or like girls (femmes) were not even lesbians! Feminism's only analysis of 'butch' was as synonymous with 'male' – which meant thoroughly politically incorrect. I didn't have a political analysis to explain my butch self, so I gave myself up to the 'larger struggle.' (Jeanne, TPD, 1992:283)

Her formal involvement with lesbian-feminism was curtailed when she was asked to leave a meeting because she had identified as butch, which contravened the feminist definition of a 'woman-identified-woman.' While maintaining her own feminist beliefs, this signalled a move away from the lesbian-feminist community and a return to the butch-femme community. Reflecting on feminism, Jeanne believes it had both positive and negative effects on her own identity:

Somewhere in my gut I knew feminism had both saved me and shoved me back into the closet. Feminism rescued women, but it subverted lesbianism. (Jeanne, TPD, 1992:288)

While feminism had provided a political analysis of sexuality that went beyond the individual, it had simultaneously denied her own gender identity. Just as the data analysis in the previous chapter indicated, Jeanne and other women in this category seek to separate feminism, which is a political movement, and lesbianism, which is a sexual identity. This is not to deny the links that exist between the two, but to recognise that differences also exist:
Like most radical philosophies, feminism had separated itself from its own radical version: freedom from gender. It had widened the patriarchy's definition of a 'real woman' but left me out. I could be anything I wanted to be, except butch. (Jeanne, TPD, 1992:290)

Jeanne's story concludes by stating that having survived feminism and reclaimed her butch identity, she looks forward to a future where difference and diversity are celebrated rather than denied. In keeping with her original beliefs, she maintains that sexual identity is destiny, yet separates the link between gender and sex. In doing so, she questions the social constructions of both sex and gender:

Being butch, femme, straight, bi, transsexuals our gender identity, our gender destiny. It is not our job to redefine who we are; it is merely our job to discover who we are – and make a safe-land for our reality. This is why, in the early nineties, as I watch the dawn of 'queerism' redefining the parameters of gender, I know that someday we'll understand that sexuality is more outrageously free than even we radical feminists dared believed. (Jeanne, TPD, 1992:291)

8.4 The challenge of the femme

Whenever I meet someone new and it is disclosed that I am a lesbian, the reaction is usually the same 'Oh you don't look like a lesbian.' What does that mean? Because I wear make-up and dresses and have an admitted aversion to mice and mechanics, even my politically correct lesbian friends tease me about being 'terminally femme.' I used to battle the shame of being queer in a straight world; now I find myself battling the shame of being femme in the dyke world. (Bree, TFM, 1995:228)

The butch story provided a clear illustration of the difficulty that people face in developing an identity if they do not conform to expected behaviour. Within this context, the woman who identifies as femme appears to accept and reinforce these gender norms, therefore she does not stand out as being different. Aware of this framework, the femme constructs her story around two issues: challenge and invisibility.

A recurrent theme in this story is the performance of a highly stylised form of femininity, which is used to challenge the meaning of femininity. Of fundamental importance here is that these women are enacting femininity for other women, not for men. This is an event which in itself challenges the cultural understanding of the relationship between gender, sex and sexual identity:

I like being feminine. I enjoy the clothes and the accessories, the makeup, the shoes. I like recreating myself every morning as I "put on my face" in the mirror. I love the feel of just-shaved legs against crisp cotton sheets. However I do not like people assuming I'm bad at math or can't drive a stick shift. And I will do anything, short of being butch, to counter the assumption that I am powerless in any way. (Anna, TFM, 1995:87)
Being femme for me means wearing a short, tight skirt, garters, and three-inch heels when I’m going out. It means standing in front of the mirror putting on mascara and reddish brown lipstick. It means shopping for a low-cut blouse to reveal a hint of cleavage some nights. It means smiling, or sometimes pouting, when my woman puts her arm around my waist, and, with her other hand, turns my face up to kiss hers. It means whispering, 'I'm yours, own me,' when she makes love to me. It means feeling sexy. Being femme for me means risking violence and sexism to be who I am. It means being mistaken for a straight woman and saying I'm not. It means fighting for the right for myself and my butch lover to dress the way we please and play the way we like. Yes, our roles can oppress us; they have in the past; they reflect dominant culture as it now exists. But they do not have to. I take my life, my decisions and actions, into my hands, as they were meant to be. I constantly deconstruct my education, my language, my culture, my desires. (Paula, TPD, 1992:365)

The last two sentences of Paula’s statement again show both the changing nature of butch and femme roles and their defining links to the dominant culture. As gender roles are questioned in society in general, this leads to changes in lesbian culture. However, unlike a radical feminist analysis which concludes that gender roles should be abandoned for an androgynous ideal, this story, just like the butch story, asserts changes should take place within the framework of gender.

8.4.1 The invisibility of the femme

The story of the femme is different from the stories placed in category one ‘born a lesbian’ and the stories told by the butch women. For the women in these stories, identification as a lesbian was partially because of gender non-conformity, which in this society is evidence of a lesbian identity. In contrast, femine women lacked the awareness that they might be lesbians because their behaviour appeared to conform to what was expected of them as children and young women. As Raphaella and Arlene point out, this made it very difficult to identify as a lesbian:

I am not a straight girl; I am a femme. There’s a huge difference, even though it may not be obvious to the untrained heart or eye. If I were butch or even androgynous, there might have been obvious reasons for me to question how I fit into society. However, as a femme, I found it difficult to isolate and identify my own sexual identity. In hindsight, I realise how invisible, discounted, and alone I felt. [ ... ] Many androgynous or butch women I know had the advantage in knowing early on that they didn't fit in. Some noticed that they looked different from other little girls; some had more boyish body shapes, features, or mannerisms; some noticed they didn't like to do things other girls in their neighbourhoods liked to do, such as play with dolls and wear dresses [...] As a femme-child, I didn't have the experience of looking outwardly different from my straight girlfriends. (Raphaella, TFM, 1995:30)

Although the role models for all of us growing up as lesbians leave much to be desired, I couldn't find any role models as a femme. (Arlene, TPD, 1995:378)

For these woman and others like them, their behaviour or appearance conformed to the requirements of heterosexuality. Thus, they had difficulty in differentiating themselves.
from heterosexual women because they did not display any of the outwards signs typically associated with being a lesbian. This lack of differentiation does not just occur at the individual level but also operates at the group level. All the women in this category talk about the struggle they are engaged in to be recognised as lesbians, both inside and outside the lesbian community:

In the lesbian community though, butches are our image of dykes. Butchness is the hub of our lesbian universe. Lesbians are never described as women who wear dresses and high heels, or have long nails or hair, or as women who dislike sports. Oh, we all know there are lesbians like that, but somehow they are different, not like 'us,' somehow not authentic. (Arlene, TPD, 1992: 378)

Being femme also means being invisible, not only to heterosexuals but also to many lesbians. I am almost always assumed to be straight. (Chris, TFM, 1995: 276)

As already discussed, the impact of feminist theory and practice on lesbian culture has constructed, in different ways, both the butch and femme as representing inappropriate models of lesbianism. This in turn regulates membership to lesbian communities. For women who identified as femme, maintaining an existing femme identity or ‘coming out’ as a femme during the 1970s and 1980s was particularly problematic. An awareness that assuming a femme identity in respect of clothes and appearance would lead to exclusion from lesbian culture led many women to alter their appearance in order to be able to fit in:

Although I came out as a ‘gay’ woman before reading The Femme Mystique, the seventies brand of white feminism had me trimming my nails and cutting my hair. Soon I was outfitted in farmer jeans and high tops. And still I was told by my ‘sisters’ that I didn’t ‘look like a dyke’ (read I didn’t look butch). I began to lead two lives – one as an outrageous, skirted lipstick femme while I worked and travelled with carnivals, and another as an imitation butch back home in the women’s community. (Mary, TPD, 1992: 388)

Embracing my femme self did not come easily. Coming of age in a political, largely androgynous, lesbian community often meant choosing between being a femme and fitting in. (Valerie, TFM, 1995: 19)

I know that I am femme. I also know that I’ve been femme much longer than I’ve accepted the label. At times I’ve tried to deny that I am femme. This was especially true when I got involved with women’s studies and feminism at college, and I bought the idea that women should hide their femininity and try to be as androgynous as possible. Androgyny was said to be a healthy acceptance of both sides of your personality. It was something feminists should strive for. (Christy, TFM, 1995: 275)

Again, this suggests that Jenness’ (1992) claim that women only identify as lesbian when they find an image they are comfortable with is more complicated when different lesbian identities are put into the equation. What is missing from Jenness analysis is an understanding of the practices of power which operate in the lesbian community and the way in which these can exclude plurality and choice. The lesbian-feminist culture was
extremely influential in terms of defining who was to be counted as a 'real' lesbian. While women who identified as butch were criticised for 'imitating men', femme women were dismissed for not being 'lesbian enough.' This is validated in the stories of the women who identify as femme. There was a common feeling that if you adopted a butch identity your lesbian credentials were not in question. However, they were open to question if you adopted a femme identity. It is possible that this is because a butch identity is closer to the androgynous ideal that was the feminist goal during this period. This would suggest that feminism's theoretical critique of gender is in practice a critique of femininity, and androgyny is in practice a male-defined androgyny. This results in femme women remaining invisible and marginalised in lesbian communities, which leads to their dismissal as feminists as well as lesbians:

Now lesbian style occurs in the context of a more and more androgynous-appearing society, and femme dress has become even more problematic. A femme is often seen as a lesbian acting like a straight women who is not a feminist – a terrible misreading of self-representation that turns a language of liberated desire into the silence of collaboration. An erotic conversation between two women is completely unheard, not by men this time but by other women, many in the name of lesbian-feminism. (Joan, TPD, 1992: 142)

Within this context, the books in this data set which look at butch and femme identity can be seen as a means of resisting and challenging the feminist definition of lesbian which, during the 1970s and 1980s, dominated lesbian culture. Feminism had the effect of silencing the voices of butch and femme women. Their stories are a way of claiming recognition in the lesbian community, furthermore they also signal that radical feminism no longer has the power to define lesbian identity. Instead, it has become just one lesbian identity amongst many. As with the butch stories, these stories conclude by 'reclaiming' femme identity:

Eventually I pulled the pieces of my being back together and proclaimed boldly 'I am a working-class lesbian femme.' (Mary, TPD, 1992:388)

For me, embracing the femme parts of myself began with appreciating my past. Looking back it's clear to me that being a femme is not only who I am, it's who I've always been. (Valerie, TFM, 1995:19)

Now nearly twenty years later, lesbians have bravely began to talk and write openly about being butch, being femme, having sexual identities. And in the same way that I claim my Black identity, my womanhood, my lesbianism and my feminism, all parts of myself despised by the larger society, I want to be able to claim my femme identity and, yes, even my femininity. (Becky, TFM, 1995:285)

Thus, the main elements of the 'femme story' are invisibility and subsequently, the struggle for recognition by a society that counts only gender non-conformity as evidence of a lesbian identity. The difficulty in being unable to differentiate from
heterosexual women prevented these women from identifying as a lesbian, thus illustrating the way in which identity is a social product. That is, based on the understanding that identity is about the simultaneous processes of distinction and similarity, the data indicates that these women found it difficult to differentiate between heterosexual women and lesbian women. This is further exacerbated by the way in which lesbian communities use cultural definitions of lesbians, which are based on the discursive construction of the relationship between gender, sex and sexual identity, as discussed in Chapter 2. Consequently, the 'masculine' lesbian is generally recognised, although, she may be as a result pilloried by mainstream culture; however the 'feminine' lesbian goes unnoticed because her gendered behaviour is synonymous with heterosexuality. As illustrated in Chapter 2, both sexology and psychology differentiate between the masculine lesbian, who is seen as more authentic, and the more feminine lesbian who is seen as misguided or easily 'led astray.' It may be recalled that, from a psychological perspective, many writers found it difficult to understand why a 'feminine' woman did not simply have a relationship with a man.

8.5 Summary and conclusions
This chapter has examined the stories of butch and femme women. The butch story is about being visibly different from heterosexual women, while the femme story is based on a struggle to be recognised as a lesbian by both heterosexual and lesbian alike. At a theoretical level the butch and femme stories challenge the feminist understanding of the relationship between sex and gender and the inability of feminism to explain and understand the diversity of lesbian experience. Furthermore, as the chapter has illustrated, these problems raise issues about the political practices of lesbian communities, in particular the exclusion of women who do not conform to a feminist understanding of lesbian identity. The theoretical and political implications of this analysis of the butch and femmes stories are examined in Chapter 12.
Chapter Nine: ‘Feminism is the theory, Lesbianism is the practice’

It’s very interesting where historically you begin to desire other women and how that is interpreted when it happens. So there was me in the 1970s and it was my husband who first noticed my desire for other women, or made me acknowledge that that was the case [...] At one time I would’ve said that it dawned on me that I was a lesbian. But looking back now, those historical circumstances led me towards a confirmation of a desire into an identity because of the time I was in. If you’d interviewed me ten years ago I would’ve talked about it differently, I would’ve said ‘This is when I came out, this is when I found out I was a lesbian’. It’s standing in a different position to your desire for women. (Carol, 44, WSL, 1995:40)

9.1 Introduction

The last two chapters explored the way in which the belief in an authentic sexual identity, based on biology and nature, continues to inform stories of lesbian identity development, maintenance and practice. In addition, both chapters examined the impact of feminism on these particular accounts of lesbian identity. This showed that for these women, feminism was not cited as a causal factor for their lesbian identity nor did it change their view of lesbianism as a fixed sexual orientation beyond their control. In contrast, the 20 stories examined in this chapter have been placed in story category ‘feminist’ because, for the women who tell them, feminism is fundamental to their current identification as a lesbian and their understanding of the meaning of that. While some of these women identified as a lesbian before their contact with feminism, feminism and the women’s movement transformed their understanding of lesbianism. For other women, becoming a lesbian was closely linked to their involvement with feminism. Prior to this, the majority of women had been involved in relationships with men. Hence, this story is about the feminist politicisation of lesbianism.

This story was present in books published in the UK, USA and Australia. It was more common in books from the ‘diverse’ category, although it was present in the books about older lesbians and women who have been married. It was more prevalent in books

13 Anne Koedt (1971:246) attributed this saying to the radical feminist Ti-Grace Atkinson. In the 1970s it was used to signal a strong connection between feminism and lesbianism. This was in part aimed at members of the women’s movement who were trying to dissociate themselves from lesbianism. However, Atkinson was actually questioning whether lesbians could work with the women’s movement. The full quote was “Feminism is a theory, but lesbianism is a practice.” It was only later that she changed her opinion and spoke out against the oppression of lesbians in the women’s movement. Thus the ‘but’ was dropped.
published before the 1990s and in the narratives by older women published during the
1990s. This is consistent with the findings concerning the current increase in non-
feminist inspired stories examined in the previous two chapters. Likewise, while
feminism has been fundamental to the construction of black lesbian identity, the
interaction of race, gender and sexuality produces a different type of story. The roots of
the current story can be traced back to the women's movement, which emerged at the
end of the 1960s and was, apparently overwhelmingly white. However, as discussed in
the next chapter, Black women were a part of this movement, although their presence
was often denied. As discussed in Chapter 1, while feminism is still important for
lesbianism, its impact was greater in the 1970s and 1980s than it has been over the past
decade. As demonstrated throughout this analysis, many of the stories told since then
have been in 'defiance' of feminism. For example, the feminist story is not prevalent
among the younger women's stories. Nevertheless, it is an important aspect of lesbian
culture and retains an importance for many women.

9.2 Theoretical context of story

While the introduction above locates the story in its historic context, this section looks
at its theoretical context. As discussed in Chapter 3, radical feminism suggests that
women's sexuality and reproductive capabilities are controlled and regulated by men
through a system of patriarchy. A fundamental part of this control is the construction of
heterosexuality as the only 'natural' and 'normal' expression of sexuality. As illustrated
in Chapter 2, beliefs about appropriate gender, norms and behaviour have been a
fundamental part of sexual discourses over the last one hundred and fifty years. These
incorporate a dichotomy in which women are constructed as sexually passive and men
as sexual initiators. Feminism has deconstructed this 'natural' relationship and, through
the slogan the 'personal is political' has highlighted the relationship between our
personal lives and the patriarchal society that we inhabit. Sexuality is no longer seen as
an individual possession, but rather as a socio-political construct, the use of which is to
control women. Thus, feminists argue (for example, Rich, 1980) that 'compulsory
heterosexuality' is fundamental for maintaining control over women. The radical
feminism of the 1970s constructed 'lesbianism' as a political statement, thus endorsing
a belief that women have the right to make decisions and choices about their lives, but
also recognising that this does not occur in circumstances of their own choosing. Within
this feminist discourse, lesbianism becomes something other than an individual sexual
orientation based on innate sexual and emotional desire for a person of the same sex. It
becomes a political statement. This brief re-introduction of the radical feminist
discourse on lesbianism produces a political definition of lesbianism, which links it to gender, and the social structure of society.

9.3 Redefining lesbianism

As already stated, some women already identified as a lesbian before feminism, while others became lesbian within a feminist context. For the former group, defining lesbianism was in part similar to the meaning found in Chapter 7, to the extent that desire for other women was seen as the decisive factor for their lesbianism. Unlike the women in Chapter 7, contact with women's groups and feminism resulted in this definition being relocated in a political framework. This meant that lesbianism became something other than just an individual sexual orientation. In contrast, the second group of women identified as heterosexual before feminism; some women had been married and others had been in relationships with men. For these women, their involvement with feminism is fundamental to their current identification as a lesbian. Despite the differences that exist between the two groups, the political definition of lesbianism is a major part of all the stories in this group. This is reflected in the following statements:

Being a lesbian is a complete way of life, a way of thinking and being. Lesbianism is political, all-functional. (Lindsay, 36, WSL, 1995:204)

Such a small part of being a lesbian is having sex with women. It is more about a feminist belief system. It's a life orientation, not just a sexual one. (Eve, 30, MTW, 1993:91)

Moving beyond the sexual classification of lesbianism favoured by the previous two stories, lesbianism becomes a critical place of resistance in which to challenge and undermine patriarchal power. As the following extracts illustrate, this political definition of lesbianism is essential to the feminist-inspired story:

Lesbianism is a political statement, it has to be. Because you don't settle for the straight politics, you don't believe in the traditional male breadwinner, the woman at home washing up and looking after the kids, and that is what the country's politics is a lot about and I don't believe in that. (Lindsay, 36, WSL, 1995:204)

But I don't see how you can be a lesbian and not be, to one degree or another, feminist. In fact, I sometimes wonder how feminists can not be lesbians, because it's so hard to be connected with men, physically or emotionally and be a feminist. It must be incredibly difficult. (Rosanna, WLU, 1992:116)

Within this paradigm, 'lesbianism is feminism is lesbianism' or 'feminism is the theory and lesbianism is the practice' (see Footnote 13, page 154). Lesbianism, in this context, becomes a challenge to heterosexuality. Part of this challenge to heterosexuality lies in prioritising relationships with women, be they sexual, emotional, social or political, as
more important than relationships with men. In feminist-inspired stories, a common way of encapsulating this concept was to talk about being a 'woman-identified-woman':

My definition of a lesbian is a woman who identifies herself as a woman, a woman-identified-woman. [ ... ] She relates to women on all levels: physical, spiritual, emotional, psychic and sexual. When I think of a lesbian, I think of an independent, creative individual. (Carol, 28, LC, 1980:61)

It's a woman-identified woman. It's hard to put it into words because it's so all encompassing. My whole life revolves around my relationship with a woman. It's an emotional, spiritual, sexual, intellectual relationship. (Jeri, 33, LC, 1980:37)

The discussion of the feminist analysis of lesbianism in Chapter 3 showed that this is based on the separation of sex and gender. While gender is socially constructed behaviour, sex is seen as a true reflection of the person. This lies at the heart of the conceptualisation of the lesbian as a 'woman-identified-woman.' The lesbian symbolises the true essence of woman. Furthermore, because they do not participate in gendered behaviour relationships between women are equal, where equality is defined as gender-free. Essentialism is inherent in this belief, which helps to explain the condemnation of lesbian relationships based on gendered positions. The effect of the feminist critique on lesbian relationships has already been examined in the previous two chapters and is further explored in the following two. The extracts below, based on the feminist analysis of gender roles in heterosexual relationships, argue that butch and femme roles perpetuate this style of relationship:

The older dykes were all butch and femme when I used to go to Gateways, when I hit London. I wasn't really an out lesbian to the rest of the world but I was an out lesbian on the lesbian scene. The Gates was the most depressing place, very cliquey, very butch and femme. I would have called myself on the butch side, because I wore jeans and jean jackets and cowboy boots when they came out. I wasn't a role player although I was fairly butch at the time because I copied other people. (Lindsay, 36, WSL, 1995:205)

We don't play 'male' and 'female' roles, and have been rather amazed to find that some people think that every lesbian partnership includes a Radclyffe Hall. We like being women, we love the camaraderie which we have discovered we share with all women, not just with lesbian women. We feel happily, proudly female. (Ida, WSH, 1987:83)

As the last statement suggests, these women are celebrating womanhood. However, their beliefs about the nature of women mean that butch-femme relationships can only be read as imitation heterosexuality. Unlike butch and femme lesbians who seek to challenge the assumed relationship between gender and sex, these women reinforce it. As discussed in Chapter 3, this leaves radical feminism open to the charge of essentialism, and, as we will see in the next chapter, unable to account for the differences between women. One way of understanding this problem is through Wittig's
work on the social construction of sex, which was also discussed in Chapter 3. Wittig argues that the separation of gender and sex renders invisible the way in which the categories of ‘woman’ and ‘man’ are constructs, defined in relation to each other and contributing to the maintenance of social order. This is what leads Wittig to assert that ‘a lesbian is not a woman’, a view that contradicts the concept of lesbian as ‘woman-identified-woman’, which is present in the women’s stories. The theoretical implications of the different ways in which lesbians theorise the relationship between gender and sex are re-examined in Chapter 12.

Nevertheless, it is important to look also at the political implications of the feminist analysis of butch-femme relationships. For these women, if the politicisation of lesbianism is to be successful, it needs to offer an alternative way of conducting relationships, which are free of gendered power relationships. This political belief might help to account for the move away from seeing lesbianism as simple sexual orientation based on desire and seeing it as part of the broad feminist movement. This view is present in the following three extracts which focus on friendships networks between women and a community of women which are seen to be nourishing and supportive:

I love being a dyke. I love being with other women and laughing and living every bit of my life with other women, and most of the work I do is about caring for other women while caring about myself too. (Maxine, NLGS, 1992: 104)

I care probably at bottom a lot more about friendships than I do about romantic love, which is not to say that being a lesbian precludes romantic love but that is what I care about mostly. I’m trying to explain the political dimension to it, that is, as a woman I feel my primary loyalty is to women. It has a political dimension but I’m doing it out of following my affections. (Sheila, 57, WSL, 1995: 32)

It isn’t necessarily about sex for me anymore, it is about more than I sleep with, and it is about having women friends who I identify closely with and feel very close to, about having a community. I suppose too it’s about having been sexually active and having had the most satisfying sexual relationships with women and also having had the most satisfying emotional relationships with women – and the most fraught ones as well. (Janet, WSL, 1995:166)

To summarise, this section has looked at how, in the feminist story, lesbianism is redefined as a political statement against a patriarchal system. In addition to this, the feminist understanding of the relationship between sex and gender means that lesbians are conceptualised as being ‘women-identified-women’, which has implications for those women who identify as butch or femme. It is this position which explains feminists attempts to eradicate gender from all aspects of lesbian culture, in order to celebrate womanhood as symbolised by the lesbian. The next section shows how this position is developed through undermining the naturalness of heterosexuality.
9.4 Undermining heterosexuality and choosing lesbianism

Part of the construction of lesbianism as a political subject lies in deconstructing the 'naturalness' of heterosexuality. Thus, the women who tell this story dismiss the essentialism of the previous stories and talk about 'becoming a lesbian' or 'choosing to be a lesbian.' This view is particularly apparent among women who had previously been involved in heterosexual relationships, resulting in the construction of a very different story. This story does not begin in childhood with the citing of experiences or feelings which are later read as evidence of a true lesbian identity. Instead, the story is located in the political arena of heterosexuality. The emphasis is on undermining heterosexuality as a 'natural' sexuality by exposing it as an artificial construct used to control women. While this is apparent throughout the women's stories, it also means that they emphasise a woman's right to make choices about her own life, including political choices about her personal relationships. This means that women in this category are more likely to endorse the view that being a lesbian is a choice and not a destiny:

It is a choice though. I don't believe in biological bases of behaviour, particularly as men use these 'explanations' to let themselves off the hook for all the shit they get away with, and I know that if my life had happened differently I would have married one of the men I was seeing to cover up my relationship with Gaby, or got pregnant and panicked into straightdom, or succumbed to everyone's expectations to be a wifey. (Maxine, NLGS, 1992: 104)

I can never answer that question. I think it's a combination of - I don't think you are born a dyke. I think it's more environmental - if you are growing up wanting to be a whole woman in this society, then you have to be a feminist because I just can't see how you could not be, and once you are a feminist it's almost impossible to have any kind of whole relationship with a man because there's all kinds of roles that you are taught, and even if he's really cool, you know, other people lay trips on you and it's all so ingrained. That's the only way that I can see myself going really from a strong person, to a feminist, to a lesbian, it's just a very logical progression. (Debee, 21, CLW, 1997: 40)

As the next extract suggests, it is not possible to argue that heterosexuality is socially constructed without accepting that lesbianism is also a social construct, and as such is a label used to separate women. It is this understanding of lesbianism that lies at the heart of the political use of the term lesbian:

Being a woman is political, being working class is political. When somebody oppresses you, I think there has to be a political reaction to that, and so I think a lot of decisions I make are political. In a perfect world I wouldn't need to identify as a lesbian, I'd be a person and I'd sleep with whoever I chose. Coming out is a political decision as well. [ ... ] Somewhere along the line I've decided that I'm a lesbian, so I'm not even going to look at men, because I'm bored with that and it doesn't do much for me. And I think that's a political decision. I didn't have this overwhelming incredible sex drive to go and sleep with women, but I did, I happened to sleep with women, and I happened to find it much better sleeping with
women. I don't want to share my life and get close to men. I could, I just don't want to. (Jo, 25, WSL, 1995:142-143)

It is this idea that is expressed in Rich's (1980) 'lesbian continuum', by which she seeks to broaden the definition of lesbian experience by moving it beyond the sexual. While some of the women's stories supported the politics of Rich's concept, there was a general reluctance to accept its implications. Reasons for this were usually based on personal experiences with 'heterosexual' women, who were felt to be 'experimenting' with their sexuality. However, this raises an interesting contradiction where, on the one hand, women recognise the artificial nature of sexual categories and yet, at a personal level seek to reinforce them. This would suggest that having established a lesbian identity and a pro-feminist women-centred community, these women are not prepared to broaden the criteria for membership. This point is examined further in Chapter II through the experiences of those women who identify as bisexual. However, the existence of this contradiction would suggest that the notion of a women's right to choose could be more accurately defined as a woman's right to choose as long as she chooses lesbianism and, having made that choice, it must remain permanent.

Within this notion of choice, lesbianism is seen to offer a different way of conducting relationships and a different way of seeing the social world. That is, it becomes a privileged place 'outside' heterosexuality where women are able to gain a new understanding of patriarchy and the normalising regime of heterosexuality:

It's a kind of being that gives me definitely a kind of intellectual leverage on what I see, that is what I perceive from outside. I can see things that other people don't see if they've lived within the mainstream all their lives and I treasure that perspective. (Sheila, 57, WSL, 1995:32-33)

For some women this means that feminism becomes the only way forward:

All I do know is that we are the future, we are the only people with anything of relevance to say. I just have this blind belief that it has to happen, women have to rise, or that's the end of everything – as Robin Morgan says, 'This time we will be free, or no one will survive.' (Monica, 37, CLW, 1977:101)

In contrast to the lesbian communities in the first three stories, this version of lesbian community, although inward-looking because it promotes the creation of a separate women centred space, is also outward looking. Its feminist basis means that women are interested in challenging, resisting and ultimately changing what they perceive to be a patriarchal society.

This section has examined the way in which the women telling this story define lesbianism as a choice. This highlights the 'compulsory' nature of heterosexuality
which, in turn, has implications for lesbianism as an identity. While recognising that the label ‘lesbian’ is an artificial construct, the women in this story category recognise the political significance of the term, that is, the way in which it symbolises resistance to a patriarchal system. The next section examines the way in which this position is developed through discussion of heterosexual relationships.

9.5 Examining relationships with men

This feminist-inspired story does not seek to excuse or justify previous relationships with men. Relationships with men are not constructed as attempts by individuals to hide their ‘true’ sexuality. Instead they are cited as examples of patriarchy and are examined for the contribution they bring to a feminist understanding of inequality and oppression. In the following extracts women reflect back on their relationships with men with the benefit of a feminist hindsight:

I feel that I made the right choice. It feels very solid. Now the thought of living with a man is alien to me. Men are a different species. I know that many same-sex relationships are difficult, but it seems to me that being with the opposite sex adds another dimension of difficulty. (Jean, 45, MTW, 1993: 94)

However, while dismissing the ‘naturalness’ of sexual identity, these women veer towards reproducing an essentialist view of men and women. For example, in the quote above Jean refers to men as a ‘different species.’ In these stories, it was common for women to talk about men in this way. As discussed in Chapter 3, these views are also present in some versions of radical feminism, which distinguish between sex as a biological given and gender as a social construct. This position dismisses Wittig’s (1992) arguments concerning the social construction of the categories male and female.

Another theme that is present in the stories when discussing previous relationships with men is to acknowledge that they did not become a lesbian because they did not like sex with men. This view dismisses any notion of a ‘natural’ lesbian identity; in addition, it reinforces the notion that lesbianism, while involving sexual relationships, is always about something else as well:

I do not remember during those four years questioning my heterosexuality as the right way for me. I enjoyed sex with men. But during this time, I became interested in the Women’s Movement. This was rather tentative at first, as I was discouraged by my boyfriend’s snide comments about feminists. When we separated I was very upset and deliberately became involved in feminism as a means of support and of building up my confidence. I remember reading the chapter on sexuality in Our Bodies Ourselves and feeling my consciousness rising by the minute! I feel that my eventual ability not to be afraid to say I was a feminist was important to later accepting my lesbianism. For me being a lesbian (or at first, accepting the possibility that I might be lesbian) developed from my raised feminist
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consciousness. I would not say that every feminist woman ought to be a lesbian. Personally, however I find it hard to separate the two. (Nicole, NLGS: 1992:47)

These relationships are used to explore both the inequalities of relationships between the sexes and the ‘compulsory’ nature of heterosexual relationships. Within this scenario, the adoption of a lesbian identity becomes a political choice which signals a refusal to comply with patriarchal structures. Thus, the patriarchal nature of relationships with men becomes an integral part of the story. In this way, claiming a lesbian identity becomes both a rational, logical choice and a way of challenging and resisting the male ownership of power. Thus, a common theme running through these stories is that while lesbianism was initially a choice, it is no longer a choice and these women could not imagine having relationships with men in the future. As discussed in Chapter 7, women who believe that they were born a lesbian often discredit the politicisation of lesbianism as an inauthentic sexuality. Within this context, the idea, expressed by feminist women, that being a lesbian is no longer a choice could be viewed as an attempt to validate their sexual identity. Likewise, this complements the findings discussed above concerning membership of feminist-lesbian communities.

9.6 The importance of feminism

My advice for women contemplating a change in their sexual outlook is just do it. I kick myself for waiting so long. A lot of misery could have been avoided. All of this feminist stuff has really opened me up. I'm just sorry I waited so long. I love being a lesbian. (Carole, 37, MTW, 1993:19)

So far, this chapter has examined the way in which feminism has enabled women to re-evaluate both their personal relationships with men and the patriarchal structures of society. A further element of this story is the way in which involvement in the women's movement or in feminism provided women with the support to make the transition from being heterosexual to becoming lesbian, thus the inter-connection between lesbianism and feminism is reinforced. For example, in the extracts below, the women reflect on the way in which the women's movement enhanced their ability to claim a lesbian identity:

Being a lesbian is about embracing the identity, about joining something. In my thirties I was clinging to heterosexual privilege, by making the assumption that I was only a lesbian if I was in a relationship and since I also had some affairs with men in that period I called myself a bisexual. When I was living in the absolute closet, I didn't know any other lesbians apart from my ex-lovers and their lovers. It was a very small circle, very unhealthy. I didn't know anything about a lesbian community and therefore I didn't know there was a lesbian culture. I didn't know anything about lesbian culture. I didn't know there was fiction, poetry, music, dancing. (Marion, 51, WSL, 1995:35)
Joining the local women's centre was amazing for me, it was a space where I could find myself and just be with other lesbians for the first time. If you're going to come out as a lesbian, you have to have the space somewhere, you have to have contact […] For me the women's centre was a celebration, having all these women around me, that's when I really started getting into my identity – going to workshops and going in demonstrations and meeting other women. It was my life, it was what being a lesbian meant to me at that point in time. (Maggs, 47, WSL, 1995:35)

In contrast to the experiences of women who claimed a lesbian identity in a previous era, claiming a lesbian identity has been made easier for these women as a result of the nature of the community they were joining. This 'woman-identified' community enabled women to feel personal pride and to involve themselves with the politics of sexuality. Below, Sheila discusses the way in which feminism enabled her to develop an alternative view of lesbianism which subsequently enabled her to identify as a lesbian in a very positive way:

My first relationship with a woman was in the late 1960s but by the same token the images in my head from when I was growing up, which was Freud and Radclyffe Hall and very little else. So I kept telling myself in this serious relationship that it was bad, wrong and we shouldn't be doing it. It was awful, although I was happy for the first time in my life perhaps. We didn't use the word 'lesbian.' […] I really came out in 1972, at the Acton Women's Liberation Movement Conference and by that point I'd read Shulasmith Firestone and I'd read Sisterhood is Powerful and in a feminist context it made perfect sense. Veils were falling from my eyes at a great rate, you know, and so to be lesbian and a radical feminist made a perfectly coherent and honest sense. Previously, I'd been having this abhorrent relationship – I wasn't being a lesbian and coming out. But then I came out hollering and that was wonderful. Since I came out as it were into the women's liberation movement the connection between being a lesbian and being a feminist is very organic to me. Up until then, if you thought about being a lesbian, you thought about being a monster, some kind of ghastly aberration, you know. (Sheila, 57, WSL, 1995:30)

For this woman and others like her, feminism provided the 'positive image' of lesbianism which, Jenness (1992) has argued, is necessary to be able to 'come out' as a lesbian. Yet, this image of lesbianism cannot be explained simply through reference to sub-cultural definitions of lesbianism, as favoured by the sociology of homosexuality. The feminist analysis of lesbianism focuses on social structures and thus addresses the whole of society. These stories illustrate that lesbianism is about a community of women. This is not any type of community, but a particular type of feminist-informed community where it is possible to claim and develop an identity. Similarly, at a more personal level, Susan (below) cites the way in which the positive image of lesbianism which feminism provides enabled her to start a relationship with a woman:

And when I took my attraction to Susan's mind a step further, when I realised that I might be sexual with Susan, I wasn't filled with anxiety, pain or guilt. I wasn't horrified; I wasn't disgusted; I was looking forward to it. Without feminism I don't think I would have been so comfortable with the idea. (Karen, TLCOS, 1994:102)
These different experiences illustrate the way in which the feminist analysis of heterosexuality and the supportive environment provided by the women’s movement enabled women to develop a lesbian identity and to make the transition to lesbianism. In doing so, lesbianism becomes something other than merely a sexual orientation.

9.7 Summary and conclusions

This chapter has examined the feminist story of lesbianism, which differs from the previous stories in a number of ways. Firstly, a biological basis for sexual identity is dismissed. This belief has implications for both lesbian and heterosexual identity, and does not fit easily with a feminist emphasis placed on the right to choose. Furthermore, by defining men and women as different and separate, essentialist notions of men and women are reinforced. In addition, the feminist story of lesbianism moves beyond an individual ‘journey of discovery’ to become instead a collective story of ‘political resistance, challenge and choice.’ Although the story retains a notion of ‘progress’, even this concept is politicised. The full implications of the feminist story are examined in Chapter 12.
Chapter Ten: Naming Ourselves: The Stories of Black Lesbians

Because we deal with more than one oppression at a time we as Black lesbians are well aware that it is possible and necessary to tackle more than one form of oppression at a time. (Linda, TB, 1995:69)

10.1 Introduction

While sharing a similarity with the stories examined in the previous chapter, the 20 stories in this chapter are told from the perspective of Black lesbians. This means that while a feminist understanding of lesbianism remains very important for these women, it is transformed by the inclusion of a broader understanding of oppression than that offered by white feminism. Hence, stories which focus on issues of inclusion and exclusion from different communities challenge not only lesbian communities but also the Black communities to which these women belong. In doing so, they reflect the work of Black feminists theorists such as Lorde (1981), hook (1982), Reagon (1983) and Mohanty (1992). These writers argue that radical feminism represents the experiences of white, western, middle class women, and this fails to address issues that divide women, for example, colonialism and racism.

As noted in Chapter 6, only a small number of the stories told by Black women were included in the ‘general books’ category. However, there was a greater number of Black women’s stories included in the butch, femme, and bisexual categories. While not dismissing their importance as stories told by Black women, they do prioritise a different aspect of lesbian or bisexual identity, and it was appropriate that they were represented in those chapters. Consequently, 13 Black women’s stories came from This Bridge Called My Back (1983) and Talking Black (1995). The remaining 7 came from Inventing Ourselves (1989), Words From the Same Heart (1987), Women Like Us (1992) and What is She Like? (1995). While the overall number of stories told by Black lesbians is relatively small in comparison to other story categories represented in this study, it has still been possible to identify themes and structures that are common to all the stories.

This chapter begins by looking at how Black women define lesbianism before moving on to look at the importance of community for the development and maintenance of
Black lesbian identity. It concludes by examining the need identified by Black lesbians to create their own communities.

10.2 Defining lesbianism

This section begins by looking at the way in which Black women define the term lesbian. Unlike the first three stories, the basis for this story moves away from the individual to focus on the political location of lesbianism. In this respect, it shares a common focus with the feminist story in that it recognises the detrimental effect that patriarchal society has had on both women in general and lesbians in particular. Furthermore, while this story acknowledges the way in which the women’s movement provided the opportunity for women to make a choice about their sexuality, this does not signal a full endorsement of the radical feminist project. Echoing the feminist story in the last chapter, those women who had relationships with men prior to becoming a lesbian focus on the unequal nature of those relationships and the subsequent choice to have relationships with women. For example, Aqueela writes:

Being a lesbian has made me feel very powerful and that I don’t have to compromise my personal life anymore. I knew at times when men were being sexist as lovers, but for the sake of the relationship. I didn’t say anything, but now I can move beyond all that. I became a lesbian through choice, but now the thought of sleeping with a man makes me feel sick, so it doesn’t feel like a choice any longer. I don’t want it to be anymore. It’s a positive thing. I like sex with women. I like being with women and I like living as a lesbian. (Aqueela, IO, 1989:166)

Yet, as the next extract indicates, this Black lesbian story differs from the feminist story in its treatment of race. From a Black perspective this feminist analysis of heterosexual relationships focuses on the interconnection between race and gender; therefore, relationships with men must be viewed within this context. Furthermore, this analysis includes a challenging message to white women as well, thus signalling that there is not an automatic bond between black and white women, as assumed in the feminist story:

My experiences with males were far more explicit and less equal. They brought my first distrust of things physical and my first real guilt. They also began my inability to accept what being female entailed in a male-dominated, racially judgmental society in which women of darker skin tones appeared to be seen primarily as vaginas, no matter what their age, by most men – Black, White, Coloured - who were unable to take out their frustrations on a Hydra-headed ideology that injured them all. That view was one that many White women secretly agreed with, and many Coloured women complied with. (Teresa, WSH, 1987:171)

This understanding of the inter-connections between race, gender and sexuality is an important aspect of defining lesbianism for the Black women, however it is not confined to an analysis of sexism and contemporary racism. There is a collective sense in these stories that a black lesbian identity is as much a product of historical and
contemporary colonialism as it is a product of racism, classism, sexism and homophobia. This understanding of identity is represented in the following extracts from two of the women’s stories, which reflect on the role that colonialism had on black sexuality in general and black lesbian identity in particular:

The widespread distaste for yet fascination with ‘un-natural’ acts and passions was partly the legacy of an imperial past (and to some extent present) when so-called clean living, God-fearing white men were supposed to bring the benefits of European civilisation to the rest of the world, backed by ‘their’ women who would give birth to and bring up future generations to carry on this work. This concern with and for upholding traditional values and sex roles, and maintaining racial and cultural purity often came with fear, and sometimes envy, of those (including not only colonised peoples but Europeans who broke the written or unwritten rules of their society) who were supposedly free from restraints. (Savitri, TB 1995:30)

Black lesbian sexuality is influenced by the colonisation of Africa and Asia, the atrocities of slavery and by today’s racism, sexism and homophobia. [...] Our lives cannot be defined simply by what we do in bed; sexuality includes how we think, dress, socialise, speak, move, express ourselves and by who and what we prioritise. Our sexual identities are also shaped by the cultural traditions which survived colonisation and were passed down through the centuries from generation to generation. (Valerie and Adowa, TB, 1995:72)

Thus, the socio-cultural context in which lesbianism is experienced means that for these women, it can never be simply a sexual orientation indicating a preference for women. Lesbianism will always contain information about both historical and contemporary culture, where sexuality becomes a site of power, and, by definition, about the practices of that power:

Black lesbians, whether or not we were born in Britain, our sexual identities are to a great extent influenced by the dynamics and debates that surround us. Power and powerlessness are features of racism. We respond to the dynamics of racism in different ways, each adopting strategies that seem appropriate and effective for us. We are also influenced by the sexual stereotypes of ourselves that a racist society. (Linda, TB, 1995:67)

Unlike the previous feminist-inspired story, which focuses on gender, the message in this story is clear: gender on its own is insufficient to explain Black lesbian identity:

As Black lesbians our identities do not separate into any single category, we can experience simultaneously all the oppressions of being poor, black, female and lesbian. (Valerie and Adowa, TB, 1995:73)

The political implications of such statements not only endorse the analysis offered by Black feminist theorists, but also find credence in Phelan’s (1993) critical analysis of feminist-lesbian politics, as well as in the work of Butler (1990) and Fuss (1991). These theorists argue that feminism’s starting point must be the recognition of differences between women and the inter-connection of different forms of oppression. By focusing on the political and cultural construction of identity, this Black lesbian story is less concerned with presenting a causal account of lesbianism, and more interested in
presenting the notion that being a lesbian is a political act of resistance, signalling opposition to many different forms of oppression. This view is illustrated in the structure of these stories, which inter-weave personal issues of identity with wider political and social events. This view is represented by this extract from Cheryl's story:

    For a woman to be a lesbian in a male-supremacist, capitalist, misogynist, racist, homophobic, imperialist culture, such as that of North America is an act of resistance [....] The lesbian has decolonised her body. She has rejected a life of servitude implicit in Western heterosexual relationships and has accepted the potential of mutuality in a lesbian relationship - roles notwithstanding. (Cheryl, BCMB, 1983:128)

To summarise, this section has looked at the way in which Black women define lesbian identity in these stories. This is a political definition, which examines the interconnection of different forms of oppression. In turn, this brings the Black women into conflict with a white western version of feminism, which prioritises gender over other forms of oppression. For the Black women there is awareness that identity as a Black lesbian is multifaceted, which has implications for their involvement in political struggle:

    It's not easy, because as far as I'm concerned, my race, my colour, comes first, my gender is next. Now many feminists think that's a load of crap, but I think, in reality people see my colour first before they see my gender. And in this society, I have to fight with Black men, because when the enemy comes, they're not going to put me aside with my white feminist friends and say 'We won't attack you, because you're a lesbian you're a feminist with these white feminists.' They see me as a Black person first. (Dorothy, WLU, 1992:138)

Furthermore, in recognition of the political context in which lesbianism has been constructed, there is a strong emphasis on the need for all lesbians, and in particular Black lesbians, to define lesbianism from the perspective of the groups of women who identify with the label:

    Therefore, it is important that we define ourselves. Regardless of where we live, it is crucial that we name ourselves, in our own minds, among friends and within our support networks. (Valerie and Adowa, TB, 1995:73)

    We are named by others and we are named by ourselves. (Barbara, BCMB, 1983:52)

10.3 Between communities

A refusal to separate the different aspects of identity or to prioritise one over another results in the stories of Black lesbians focusing on community membership. It was this issue, of community membership, which dominated their stories more than any other subject. This means that the story moves beyond the traditional 'coming-out' story examined in Chapter 7 to focus both on involvement in existing communities and on the
need to develop new communities. Consequently, women examined the 'limited' membership they felt they had with lesbian and gay communities and with ethnic and religious communities. In the former, they felt excluded due to their refusal to ignore their ethnic identity, while in the latter, their lesbian identity was marginalised or ignored. Hence, an important aspect of this story is the experience of simultaneously being part of and yet standing outside established communities. This raises problems for the possibilities of claiming a lesbian identity:

Therefore, coming out can be a very scary and traumatic experience for Black lesbians. The possibility of losing our families and communities can mean cultural bereavement. There is certainly very little in the lesbian and gay scene which reflects a Black women's culture. The choice is between homophobia from the Black and white heterosexual communities and racism from the lesbian and gay community. (Valerie and Adowa, TB, 1995: 81)

Such views support the findings of the research examined in Chapter 4 regarding the relationship between identity and community (Jenness, 1992; Plummer, 1981, 1995; Richardson, 1981), yet they also go beyond it. This is because the formation of identity is not dependent on the membership of one 'sexual' community, but is dependent on membership and full participation in other communities formed around ethnicity or religion. The rest of this chapter is an analysis of this issue, which begins by looking at the importance that women place on belonging to a Black community. The chapter then moves on to assess the way women feel about their membership of the lesbian and gay community.

10.4 Childhood experiences of racism

This section begins by looking at the way in which women reflect back on their childhood. This differs from the stories discussed in Chapter 7 and 8, where it was shown that childhood feelings and experience were retrospectively incorporated into stories as evidence of a real and constant lesbian identity. In contrast, these women focused on their childhood experiences of racism to show that their sense of 'difference' was based on ethnicity rather than sexual preference. Gilli, an Asian woman who came to Britain from India as a child, reflected on practices which indicated to her that she was different from the majority in this country:

People were so unused to seeing Asian people, they used to stop in their tracks and stare at us down Oxford Street. (Gilli, IO, 1989: 94)

Likewise, Joyce's experiences at school taught her about the differential expectations that teachers held on the basis of race:

The only thing I was successful at in school was athletics. I played most of the sports for the school. I feel bitter about my whole education. People expected us to
be able to do sports but not the work. I was there to jump and that would get me on in life. (Joyce, IO, 1989:172)

Furthermore, as Joyce goes on to explain, the experience of racism and being defined as 'other' meant that she formed communities with other Black girls at school in order to be able to resist these detrimental assaults on identity and to provide support for other Black children:

Most of my friends at school were Black girls. Racism was rife. Some teachers were outright racists: once I helped initiate an all day 'sit-in' because our maths teacher called one of the first-year students 'a monkey.' (Joyce, IO, 1989:172)

Thus, the need to belong to communities is something that is experienced at a young age for these women and is an experience that was endorsed in both family and social life outside school. An illustration of the strength of this need is evident in Aqueela's story, in which she examines the effect of not having access to a supportive Asian community where she could find validation for her identity. For Aqueela, her experience of racism as a child led her to deny her cultural background:

In Britain, I didn't have much to do with the Asian community. There weren't any Asian kids in my school. I was part of it in the sense of that's how we socialised, but as a teenager I rejected all that. I saw myself above it. The fact that I was one of them was beside the point. The experience of racism made me deny my own culture. Paki-bashing was a very real threat when I was going to school. My uncles were coming home bleeding after being in fights with skinheads. Especially on darker mornings when I had to walk to school it felt frightening. (Aqueela, IO, 1989:159)

These experiences and the importance attached to them through their inclusion in the stories serve to endorse the definition of lesbianism looked at in the first section. Racism is a defining experience for these women, signalling that they cannot simply be a lesbian, but always a Black lesbian. Such experiences of racism also demonstrate the importance of belonging to a community that can provide support and aid in the resistance of racism from the dominant culture. By raising such issues, the stories by Black women indirectly address the problems of radical feminism's conceptualisation of oppression. That is, by prioritising gender as the source of women's oppression, radical feminism ignores other forms of oppression. The experiences of the Black women serve to strongly refute any suggestion that gender was solely responsible for the discrimination they faced when growing up as members of minority ethnic groups in Britain.
10.4.1 The need for communities of resistance

As stated these experiences demonstrate the need to belong to Black communities. However, while this has not been easy for Black lesbians and gay men, the need is so great it has been something that they have been willing to fight for:

Black lesbians and gay men have had to fight for our right to exist within the Black communities, but it is a fight many of us have taken up because being Black remains an important part of our whole identities, and we could no more be silent about our race within the lesbian and gay community than we could about our sexuality within the Black communities. (Linda, TB, 1995: 61)

Nevertheless, it has been an issue that has either been ignored in the different ethnic or religious communities that these women belong to, or has been dismissed as irrelevant. Accounting for this situation, women again draw on the historical and contemporary construction of black identity and the way in which representations of sexuality are a part of that identity. Barbara’s opinions about the effects of gender and race on the formation of Black women’s sexual identity offer an explanation for the negative views that heterosexual Black women hold about lesbianism:

One of the reasons that I have thought for homophobic attitudes among Black women is the whole sexual stereotyping used against all Black people anyway, but especially women in relation to homosexuality – you know the ‘Black bulldagger’ image. Lesbianism is definitely about something sexual, a so-called deviant sexuality. So the way most Black women deal with it is to be just as rigid and closed about it as possible. White people don’t have a sexual image that another oppressor community has put on them. (Barbara, BCMB, 1983: 124)

In addition to this, other women talked about the priority given to the issue of race in Black political movements which means that even when lesbianism is acknowledged, it is not regarded as being that important:

Some women at the conference were angry that women should want to discuss such a ‘trivial’ issue like lesbianism when the country was in total chaos through racism. They believed that sexuality and other women’s oppression should be secondary to the needs of the wider Black communities. (Savitri, TB, 1995: 39)

This is another example of the way in which these women feel that they are expected to separate different aspects of their identity and only reveal what is acceptable in a given situation. As these women stated, the invisibility of lesbianism in their communities of origin contained implications for their ability to be able to claim a lesbian identity. Thus, just as the femme women in Chapter 8 claimed that the lack of femme role models made it difficult for them to identify as a lesbian, these women also reflected on the difficulties they faced. As Savitri and Linda explain, their difficulty in trying to find out about contemporary Black lesbians was exacerbated both by the invisibility of lesbians in the Black movement and by a lack of material:
Statistically there has to be other Black people who felt as I did. On TV lesbians and gays were few and far between, and generally white. I was lucky enough to know that a couple of my acquaintances were gay, and that the stereotypes of 'queers' were not true, but again these men were white. Some black lesbians managed to draw strength from one another, but there were few positive images around to inspire us to come out in large numbers. What is more, racism was an ever-present threat. Combating it could not be set aside until matters of gender and sexuality had been resolved, nor was it easy to risk damaging links with one's sisters and brothers by forcing them to confront issues which many found painful or just puzzling. (Savitri, TB 1995:40)

When I came out as a lesbian in 1980 there were few other Black lesbians who were out. I did not doubt that there were many Black lesbians but like me, they had found the few lesbian spaces which existed overwhelmingly dominated by white lesbians and very intimidating. My coming out was partly influence by the politics of feminism, which had made me question the naturalness of the sexuality I had been told was the norm – heterosexuality. When I realised that the feelings I had for another women were sexual, I had difficulty recognising them. I knew the word 'lesbian' but I thought it only related to white women. (Linda, TB, 1995:55)

For many women, the invisibility of lesbianism in their own cultures made it difficult for them to develop an identity that united sexuality and culture. Tina, a Greek woman, explains the difficulty of establishing a lesbian identity, which moves beyond the stereotype, without the support of a community or culture to give meaning or definition to the term lesbian:

I find it hard to negotiate what it means to be a lesbian in a Greek way of thinking, so I'm very aware of the image I put out. In Greece, the image of lesbians is more or less the equivalent of Radclyffe Hall that's the nearest. Highly undesirable, mannish, lusting after everything that's got a skirt on, very praetorian and distasteful. The image is changing very slowly in Greece. The other thing that is important for me is that there is no sense of lesbian history, lesbian community, and lesbian continuity in the way there is here or in the States. (Tina, WSL, 1995:81)

As with the other stories examined in this analysis, Tina's account demonstrates the defining relationship between identity and community. Although in Tina's case, as with the other Black women, a lesbian community in itself is not enough. To enable these women to fully develop their identities, lesbian communities need to incorporate their cultural backgrounds.

The lack of such communities has often resulted in these women feeling isolated and unable to make contact with lesbians of the same ethnic origins or Black lesbians in general. This feeling of isolation was particularly acute for women who came to live in England in adulthood. As Dorothy illustrates, maintaining an identity is always a product of social interaction:

For years I felt that there was no one else like me ... I didn’t feel like that at home in Jamaica, because I know there were quite a few of us [...] but when I came to
England, I didn’t meet any Black lesbians for a long time. The first time I did, it was nice to feel that here is someone else who recognises me, and she is Black. It made quite a difference. (Dorothy, TB, 1995:127)

As Marie states, this situation is compounded by the experience of racism, thus illustrating the differences between white lesbians and Black lesbians:

I've always been attracted to women, but it was very difficult to make contact, and I didn't hear about lesbians until many years after I arrived here. When I first came to England I didn't know where to go and meet people anyway. Also, there was a lot of racial prejudice for me to cope with, and I didn't get to meet many white women. But it was also difficult to meet other Black women, because most of them were married or in relationships with men. I think that at that time it was a very difficult for white women to be out as lesbians, but for Black women it was difficult even to be single and independent. I was lonely and eventually I started relationships with men. (Marie, WLU, 1992:158)

For Marie, the lack of a supporting Black lesbian community made it difficult for her to maintain her lesbian identity, and this resulted in her having relationships with men until she could access a lesbian community she felt comfortable with. This endorses Jenness’ (1992) findings concerning the need for women to find an identity that they feel comfortable with before being able to maintain a lesbian identity, although in Marie’s case this was exacerbated by the racism of white lesbian culture. This issue is explored further in an examination of Black women’s involvement and treatment in lesbian communities and women’s communities.

10.5 Members of the women’s movement

The re-emergence of the women’s movement in both Britain and in the USA in the 1960s served to offer Black women a place to organise and resist both racism and sexism. However as noted in Chapter 3, this potential was limited by the domination of the movement by white women whose power enabled them to set the agenda. In talking about their involvement, many of the stories in this category argue that, contrary to popular belief, Black lesbians were initially involved in the women’s movement. As reflected in the following extracts however, these women realised that issues of concern to Black women would not be addressed in this forum and hence recognised the need to organise separately:

Feminism offered another alternative to the stereotyped heterosexual woman. However, Black women saw the limits of a political movement mainly dominated by white middle-class women. Although they were involved from the beginnings in the 1960s, issues specific to them were rarely addressed. Consequently, a Black feminist model soon developed, and Black women placed racism, sexism, class oppression and sexual poverty side-by-side on the agenda. (Valerie and Adowa, TB, 1995:78)

While the majority of these women expressed disappointment at the failure of the women’s movement to address the issue of difference between women, for many it was
not surprising given both the social composition of the movement and the ideal of equality perpetuated by women involved in the women's movement:

Given these differences between us, that women are of different races and classes, how can a white middle class movement actually deal with all women's oppression, as it purports to do, particularly if most women are not present to represent their own interests? I think that this is one of the most essential questions the movement has to face. (Beverly, BCMB, 1983:116)

Challenging this was all the more difficult because it was sometimes assumed that women could not oppress each other, or that such oppression was of minor importance compared to that of women by men. Irish and Jewish women in general, women with disabilities and working-class women in general could also easily find themselves pushed to the margins of the women's movement. (Savitri, TB 1995:41)

As Savitri infers in the last extract, the women's movement is based on the understanding that it is only men who have and use power against other people. From this perspective, women do not oppress each other; therefore, it is not necessary to look at power differences between women. This was one of the issues examined in the analysis of feminism in Chapter 3 and explored in the women's stories in the last chapter. For example the quote from Dworkin (Chapter 3:44) captures the sentiment of a radical feminism from which these women felt excluded. Based on the need to appeal to all women because of the common oppression of gender, feminism claimed to speak for all women.

It is this lack of a theoretical and political analysis of difference that has resulted in many Black women disassociating themselves from both the women's movement and the lesbian community. Particularly problematic was the hostility expressed by white women towards Black women who continued to be involved in Black politics, which leads them into contact with Black men. For Black lesbians, this hostility signals that the radical feminist concern with gender as the source of all oppression is based on the failure of white women to recognise race oppression as a separate issue. For the Black women, this omission ultimately reflects the racism of white women. An example of this view can be found in the following extract from Barbara's story:

Black women and other women of color definitely share oppressed situations with men of their race. What white lesbians have against lesbians of colour is that they have accused us of being "male identified" because we are concerned with issues that affect our whole race. They express anger at us for not seeing the light. That is another aspect of how they carry on their racism. They are so narrow and adamant about that they dismiss lesbians of color and women of color who aren't lesbians because we have some concern about what happens to the men of our race. (Barbara, BCMB, 1983:121)
In addition to the issue of racism, many women were also critical of the classism that is present in the white women's movement. Women cited incidents of white middle class women feigning 'downward mobility' in an attempt to deny their class position and hence the power and authority that this gave them in society. The following extracts, from Joyce and Havva are examples of the women's views on this issue:

My first social gathering with a bunch of feminists was a beach party. They were all sitting there listening to some women howling on this cassette [... ] Anyway, they sat there in duffel coats and round specs and with cropped hair professing to be working-class women who were being constantly harassed. But they all had some sort of University background and I just though, ‘What do they know about my lifestyle?’ (Joyce, IO, 1989: 179)

There's also a whole thing about how my parents brought me up never to look rough. If I was going out, my clothes should be ironed, they should be clean, my hair should be clean. And I think at first I used to question that all these women - mainly white middle-class women - really looked like they hadn't washed all week. You know, the Greenham look. I used to wonder what was going on. The whole downward mobility thing used to really wind me up. I didn't know what it was then. I used to wonder why did they look at me because I wanted to look a certain way. Black people in this country have to try harder at everything and try to look good, because you have to constantly be making an impression. So I think, for all those reasons, we're expected, we're told we have to look better. (Havva, 25, WSL, 1995: 67)

These accounts again demonstrate the way in which Black women feel both excluded and alienated from white feminism. However, this does not necessarily mean that these women dismiss the political insight or implications of feminism, but that they recognise the limiting nature of white feminism. This view is encapsulated in the following extract from the Dorothy’s story:

The problem for me as a Black woman is that I see my feminism differently from white feminists, because I've come to it from a different angle. It's very difficult, because, I think white feminists have had to a certain extent, a luxury, to sit back and to think and to work out a philosophy. (Dorothy, WLU, 1992:135-7)

10.6 The way forward

The problematic nature of the women's movement, together with the lack of space given to these women in their own communities, has led these women to recognise the need to develop their own community of Black lesbians. As demonstrated in the preceding chapters and supported by other research (Jenness, 1992; Richardson, 1981), membership and access to a community is fundamental to women's ability to develop and maintain a positive self-image and identity. In addition, access to a Black lesbian community provides support and a refuge from homophobia, heterosexism, and racism, regardless of its source. For example, membership of a Black lesbian community has
enabled Havva to develop a sense of family which due to her sexuality, she has been denied by her own ethnic community:

When I first came out and I was going out on the scene, I always felt uncomfortable for various reasons, and that is to do with feeling a lot of racism, and not being sure about what was going on. It was only when I met other Turkish Cypriot lesbians – it didn’t matter if it was other black women. They ‘understand where you’re coming from’, and all the clichés - but they’re true. Not that everyone I meet there I feel really warm and loving to, because, obviously there’s differences there as well. In a lot of senses it’s a family that we’ve created for each other, because all of us have got very similar experiences of not having that, or being excluded from lots of things that we would normally be part of. All sorts of stuff involving the whole family network, and it just stops as soon as you leave home or you come out of the family by disgracing them, by doing something that means you bring shame on the family. I’ve done all those things, really. (Havva, 25, WSL, 1995:69)

In a similar way, Mirtha talks about her excitement of meeting other women who, due to background shared similar experiences to her:

I wanted to tell you about my visit to San Francisco, about coming together with my Latina lesbian/feminist sisters. The joy and the pain of finding each other, of realising how long we’ve ‘done without’, of how difficult it’s going to be to heal ourselves, to find our voices ... but how perfectly wonderful to finally have a family, a community. (Mirtha, BCMB, 1983:150)

Thus, the essence of these stories told by Black lesbians is the need to create communities of their own which will provide them with support and sanctuary:

In order for many Black lesbians to heal from society’s oppressions and feel strong, proud and safe about their sexuality, we have created spaces from ourselves. Here, Black women have the opportunity to self-heal, instil energy into other Black lesbians and develop their sexuality away from the hostile world. (Valerie and Adowa, TB, 1995:83)

However, given the experiences that these women have faced, there is a strong emphasis in all the stories on recognising diversity between Black lesbians. That is, the Black lesbian community must not reproduce the problems of the white women’s movement. While these women are united in being Black and lesbian, they should not dismiss the social factors that divide them, and which lead women to have differential access to resources and power:

However, this in itself is not sufficient, when even among Black lesbians there are significant differences of class, religion, culture and disability. But as we have continued to negotiate over differences, and have not been destroyed by dealing with it, we can perhaps take that process to a wider struggle. (Linda, TB, 1995:66)

In this country, lesbianism is a poverty - as is being brown, as is being a woman, as is being plain poor. The danger lies in ranking these oppressions. The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression. (Cherrie, BCMB, 1983:29)
10.7 Summary and conclusions

To conclude, this chapter has examined the stories of women who define themselves as Black lesbians. These stories have focused on the multi-faceted nature of identity and the implication that this contains for membership of both existing lesbian communities and of ethnic or religious communities. Consequently, these stories demonstrate the need for the development of Black lesbian communities. The implications of these findings are discussed in full in Chapter 12.
Chapter Eleven: Disrupting Boundaries: Stories of Bisexuality

Telling our stories is still important. As we change as individual women, our stories change, our needs change, and we make feminism as a movement grow. We have to stay in touch with each other without assuming we already know what direction our feminist struggles must take. In my mind a feminist approach to change still starts small, one woman connecting to one woman, then another and another and another. This is where I understand the origins of strength and power. As women we look at who we are, we look at how we fit, and we envision and ‘revision’ until the way we think has broadened to include our reality more completely. The values in feminist communities focus on the collective participation of all individuals. It makes sense to apply this to a changing perception of sexuality: inclusion of all parts is inclusion of the component parts, our component parts. (Ruth, CH, 1992:15)

11.1 Introduction

The last four data chapters have examined five different stories about the development, maintenance, meaning and practice of lesbian identity. Collectively they demonstrate that ‘lesbian’ and ‘lesbianism’ are contested concepts. Despite the differences evident in the women’s stories, they all share a commonality: the women, at the time of producing their stories, identified as lesbian. Furthermore, while causality differed, (for example, natural, political) all regarded this as a stable identity. In contrast, this chapter presents the stories of women who, at the time of telling their story, identified as bisexual on the basis that their choice of partner was non-gender specific. The discussion of queer theory in Chapter 3 highlighted the dichotomous model of sexuality prevalent in western cultures. This was developed in Chapter 4 through a review of the sexual development models used in the social sciences to theorise homosexuality, again showing that bisexuality is rarely conceptualised as a valid identity. Consequently the stories told by women who identify as bisexual are structured by the social location or lack of social location of bisexuality. As discussed through Rust’s (1993) work on bisexual identity, this can result in invisibility and dismissal by both mainstream heterosexual society and lesbian communities. However their presence, aided by the development of queer theory and practice, is slowly become more visible. This has resulted in a political analysis of bisexuality which challenges both heterosexual society and lesbian and gay communities. It is this issue that lies at the heart of the stories told by bisexual women. Sharing a similarity with the stories told by Black women and women who identify as butch or femme, these stories contain a particular set of challenges to the lesbian-feminist definition of lesbianism which was examined in Chapter 9. It also contains implications for those women who claim that a lesbian
identity is fixed and beyond choice. While this chapter endorses the findings of Rust's (1993) study in this area (examined in Chapter 4), it also goes beyond it through an examination of the practices of power that exist in the lesbian community. In so doing, it exposes the strong relationship that exists between community and identity.

As discussed in Chapter 5, the 30 stories placed in this category come from three books: *Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out* (1991) and *Closer to Home: Bisexuality and Feminism* (1992) and *Plural Desires* (1995). All three books were published over the last decade, thus demonstrating the 'newness' of this story. Bisexual women are just beginning to tell their stories and, as this chapter reflects, to build their own communities. These stories are part of that process. The women's descriptions of their identity indicate that Black women are represented in all three books. They also include stories from women who, at the time of writing, were involved in a variety of relationships (with men, women or both) or in no relationships at all. While some women had identified as lesbian or heterosexual in the past, others have always identified as bisexual. Hence, a diversity of experience is reflected in the 30 stories examined in this chapter.

This chapter begins by looking at how the women define bisexuality in their stories, before moving on to look at the processes that led to this definition. This first section is divided into two parts in order to reflect two different processes identified as being present in the stories. The first looks at women who claimed a bisexual identity without former involvement in the lesbian community, whereas the second part looks at women who had been involved in the lesbian community prior to claiming a bisexual identity. The concluding section of this chapter examines the way in which these stories reflect on the importance of community for maintaining and developing an identity that is socially located between a dominant heterosexual society and a subordinate lesbian community.

### 11.2 Defining bisexuality

This section examines the way in which women construct the meaning of bisexuality. While not dismissing the political implications of a bisexual identity, the women in this category believe that bisexuality refers to sexual desire for both men and women. This is represented in the following three extracts:
If you asked me about my sexual desires, they are for both sexes. This does not mean I will act upon my every desire. Especially those related to men. But the desire is bisexual. (Leela, PD, 1995:110)

I can no more deny the depth of my ability to love people of both genders than I could the fact of being myself: a woman. (Ann, BI, 199129)

I don't know what it's like for other bisexual women, but for me it's not just that I have sex with women and men, but I love then in much the same way. to the same depth, with all of myself, including the physical. I'm not schizoid - I am the same person with men or women, it is the world that tries to split me into straight and gay, that is always trying to make me deny one half of my reality, my sensibility. (Victoria, PD, 1995:181)

This meaning is constructed within the confines of existing cultural norms that, while valorising heterosexuality, acknowledge the existence of homosexuality, or, to be more precise, in this case lesbianism. While these women defined bisexuality as the ability to desire people of both sexes, they did not mean that this potential would necessarily be realised. Rather, it is an acknowledgement that they are capable of having relationships with either sex and are not prepared to rule out the possibility that they will do so at some point in their life. All the women regardless of the sex of their partner shared this view:

My past is heterosexual, my present lifestyle is mostly lesbian, and my future is unknown. I have been and will probably continue to be attracted to both women and men (whether or not I choose to act on these attractions). Because I may someday become involved with a man again, because I am unwilling to deny either part of my sexuality; and further, as a way of owning, acknowledging and validating my past, I am bisexual. (Dvora, CH, 1992:55-56)

Dvora’s reason for identifying as bisexual lends credibility to Rust’s (1993) claim that a bisexual identification is a more accurate description of identity for individuals who, over a lifetime, may have relationships with either sex. It also signals a potential to have relationships with members of either sex, even if this is never realised in practice:

I am married and monogamous. Not much of a bisexual you say. Yet my bisexuality influences my perception and my decisions. More than having sexual relations with both genders, bisexuality is a mind frame, a reference point from which to view the world. Being bisexual has more to do with potential than actuality. (Amanda, BI, 1991:25)

The term bisexual affirms the part of me that loves women, now and in the future, regardless of with whom I am sleeping. (Rifka, BI, 1991:77)

For these women, identification as a bisexual goes beyond sexual behaviour and addresses emotional and affectional commitment to men and women. Thus the term bisexual is a more accurate reflection of their sexuality over a period of time. This is based on their experiences of sexuality as fluid, changeable, and dependent on the social
circumstances. This finding demonstrates that as Rust (1993) suggests, sexuality and the expression of it is always a product of social interaction:

Sexual identity is not static, that it changes over time – and may change more than once. These changes may come about because of choice, circumstance, meeting a particular person or persons, or, simply because of one’s most basic sense of self. (Dvora, CH, 1992: 61-62)

This notion of sexual stasis is reinforced by the fact that we as a culture define sexual orientation largely in terms of current sexual behaviour. We basically buy the notion not only that we are who we sleep with, but also that we are who we sleep with today. Lesbian communities accept and perpetuate this as much as the heterosexual world does. And what a narrow definition it is: it invalidates our past actions, past feelings and present feelings. It doesn’t allow conflicting feelings to coexist, denying the possibility of paradox and discouraging ambiguity. It says: you must stay still so we can see who you are. Like a snapshot, this definition is a lie, halting the natural motion of our lives. It says: you are the one thing we see most readily; your actions create concrete casts. (Ruth, CH, 1992: 5)

These extracts from their stories highlight the way in which the women use their experiences to question the assumed ‘naturalness’ of the relationship between sexual identity and the gender of one’s sexual partner, which is a part of the cultural conventions surrounding identity. That is, identity, inasmuch as it reflects the true essence of an individual, should reflect continuity over time, which enables the prediction of future behaviour and, at a sociological level, contributes to the maintenance of an existing social order. These women believe that a refusal to conform to this dichotomous model of sexuality disrupts and disturbs established socio-sexual boundaries. This enables them to question the accepted cultural definitions of sexuality. Hence, these stories are built around this challenge which is directed at all sections of society, but in particular the lesbian and gay communities:

We are not divided into straight and gay couples. Visualise Kinsey’s famous hetero-homo continuum. Bisexuality begins the minute we step off the zero, heterosexual end. We don’t hit unambiguous dry land again until we get to Six, at the other end of the ocean, where gold-star gays and lesbians dwell. Some of us for sure, swim right to it. For the rest of us, perhaps the journey, not the destination, is the thing. (Carol, BI, 1991: 19-20)

I believe that choice is a central issue the sexual mainstream, not to mention many in gay and lesbian circles, does not want to address. It blurs the lines between straight and not straight; it messes up the distinction of who and what can be oppressed, who and what enjoy privilege. Even those ‘liberals’ who are tolerant of homosexuality would rather accept it on the basis that it cannot be helped. it’s okay you are born like that. If it’s in your genes, then, all right we’ll make room to accept you as someone who should not be persecuted, like we don’t persecute those with red hair [...] Bisexuality, I think, presents to the mainstream the challenge of accepting gayness as ‘normal.’ It also implicitly questions the legitimacy of dividing orientations into categories. It circumvents the fixed-in-your-genes argument since obviously bisexual people also have it in their genes to be straight. and it answers the question of why anyone would choose differently—
11.2.1 Ambivalence towards the concept of bisexuality

Although women felt that a bisexual identity questions the existing sexual classification system at a political level, many expressed concern over the inadequacy of the term bisexual to adequately reflect the reality of their lives or their relationships. The first two extracts are critical of the implied equality in the term bisexual:

I'm not really happy with the term bisexual. I feel like it implies an equal kind of relationship to women and men. Like you could be with either in the same way, but you can't. There are very different political, social and intimate implications that apply to each. (Amita, PD, 1995:110)

I personally do not like the term 'bisexual.' It implies a political equality that does not exist. Sleeping with a woman is not the same as sleeping with a man. A woman must consciously decide to be a lesbian. She need not question herself at all to be actively heterosexual. The prefix 'bi' or the implication of two equal sides, is therefore an inaccurate representation of present-day sexual relationships. (Lilith, PD, 1995:18)

For these women, an understanding of the differences in their relationships with men and women, which is indicative of a gendered social order, often led bisexual women to prioritise the political as well as sexual commitment they make towards other women:

It means that I have a real commitment to women in my life, to loving women and being with them sexually, emotionally, politically fighting for our rights, but it also means that I like having relationships with men. (Laughter) I have become really selective about the men in my life, and they have to be darn good! (Amita, PD, 1995:108)

Such commitments signal to a hostile lesbian community that bisexual women can also be feminists and support women, despite the possibility that they might choose to have relationships with men. Despite expressing ambivalence towards the term 'bisexuality' the majority of the women felt that, given their location in a society that categorises people on the basis of their sexual relationships, it was important to name their sexual identity. Their primary reason for this was to demonstrate resistance both to the hegemonic dominance of heterosexuality and allegiance to other communities of resistance.

In an ideal world, love would be love, and we would love whom we choose; that is, no one would care if we chose to love a woman or if we chose to love a man. But this far from an ideal world: people do care about whom we choose to love, and those choices put us in boxes called our 'sexual identity.' (Dvora, CH, 1992:55)

Bisexuality is not seen as an authentic way of being in almost every community. I hear people say that sexual preference should not be anybody's business. However,
as long as heterosexuality is the ‘norm’, and anything else, if not wrong, is less than heterosexuality, we non-heterosexuals must be willing to speak out and say we are here. (Rifka, BI, 1991:78)

Furthermore, as discussed in the last section of this chapter, these women argue that they need to use the term in order to be able to develop a bisexual community. This section has examined the way in which the women in this category conceptualise a bisexual identity. As shown, this contains implications for the sexual categorisation of all sexualities.

11.3 From heterosexual to bisexual via lesbianism

This section looks at the stories of those women who came to identify as bisexual prior to any long-term involvement with a lesbian community. These stories demonstrate the difficulty of claiming a sexual identity that accurately reflects both desires for men and women in a culture that perpetuates the belief that the gender of a sexual partner is indicative of sexual orientation. Although early sexual experiences did not indicate a singular preference for either men or women, women using the cultural constructs that were available to them concluded that they could be either lesbian or heterosexual, but not both. This is illustrated in the following extract from Amita’s story where she describes the difficulty she had trying to fit her experiences into this model. Following a relationship with a woman in which she had concluded she must be a lesbian, she found herself attracted to men. While this initially confused her, it eventually led her to re-evaluate the sexual identity she had assumed:

After this relationship, I found myself being attracted to men, but I thought I didn’t want to actually be with them again ‘cause I was a lesbian now (laughter). But then I thought, hey, hang on a second here, because I found myself attracted to a man and then in a relationship with him, I thought I’m back to being straight again (laughter). At this point I realised that it’s not so clear cut, and by then I was a lot more politicised and obviously had a greater understanding of sexuality and challenged myself on everything. So the great thing about it is that I was leaving all these options open and giving myself a real choice and I was practising this choice regardless of people saying you have to be straight or lesbian. And I said, no, I’m bisexual. (Amita, PD, 1995:107)

Similarly, Ann discovered that her feelings were not compatible with her definition of a lesbian because she found herself attracted to men as well. As with Amita, the term bisexual was a more accurate description of her feelings:

I knew I couldn’t be a lesbian (as I understood lesbianism) because I knew that I definitely had sexual and romantic feelings for men. I believed lesbians didn’t have those feelings and that they did not relate to men in sexual and romantic ways. In college, I first met a woman who considered herself to be bisexual. I had never heard the term before, but the sense of discovery I felt was immediate and powerful. Upon hearing her description of what being bisexual meant to her, I
experienced a profound sense of relief, excitement, and self-recognition. I now had a way to understand all of me. (Ann, BI, 1991:33)

These extracts, which are representative of other women's stories, show that in a society which designates the term lesbian to those women who sexually desire other women, there is little alternative but to adopt that term. This results in women trying to fit into a category, even if it does not represent all their feelings and experiences. Jenness’ (1992) work on claiming a lesbian identity does not look at bisexual identity. However it is possible to see how this model can be extended to include an understanding of the experiences of women who initially used the term lesbian to understand their experiences, but found that there remained a disjunction between their feelings and experiences and the label used to describe them. In this case, the women could not reconcile the use of the term lesbian and their feelings for men. It was only when they discovered the term bisexual that these women could begin to develop a framework for understanding their experiences.

11.3.1 Forced to choose: Us or them

This confusion over the appropriate label to use to describe their sexuality was further compounded by their limited involvement in the lesbian and gay community. Having established or considered the possibility that the term bisexual might be an accurate reflection of their behaviour and practices, these women turned to the lesbian community to find validation and support for their identity, especially in relation to their feelings for women. Contrary to expectations, they discovered that their identity was dismissed due to lesbian cultural norms that reinforced a dichotomous model of sexuality. It is interesting to note that this model was either reinforced through political or natural discourses of sexuality, thus indicating that, while different, both produce a stable and fixed concept of lesbian identity. This resulted in women feeling pressurised into having to choose between being a lesbian or a heterosexual woman; with no possibility for anything in between, which had a number of implications for future membership of the lesbian community.

I'm eighteen and think I'm bisexual – I go to the Lesbian and Gay Youth of Toronto support groups and am told by one of the members that 'BI'S ARE “ALL CONFUSED, FENCE-SITTERS ... closer to straight.’ A year later I officially come out as a dyke and am told by another member that ‘I DON’T LOOK GAY’ because I wear makeup...do my hair Motown...wear fishnets – I get labelled a ‘fruit fly’ (read: fag hag). (Karen, PD, 1995:38)

I took a gay studies class and got little support for my bisexuality, and a lot of support for getting past it – ‘a phase’ I was going through. (Carol, BI, 1991:18)
While I had had lesbian experiences and I loved women emotionally, physically and spiritually, I came to identify as bisexual for I loved men too – there is more room in that definition for me. I was always being told, usually indirectly, that I should belong to one camp or the other, but neither reflected the totality of who I was. For a long time I was very confused because I kept thinking I had to be one or the other. (Victoria, PD, 1995: 180)

Again, the existing sociological understanding of the relationship between community and self-identification (for example, Jenness, 1992; Plummer, 1981; Richardson, 1981) provides the basis for understanding the experiences of these women. That is, the lesbian community offered an explanation for their experiences or feelings with women. It even provided an explanation for any ambivalent or contradictory feelings for men by offering the view that a bisexual identity was a stepping stone towards a lesbian identity. Furthermore, some of these women recognised the potential rewards on offer for joining the lesbian community:

I thought it would be so much easier if I were either straight or lesbian. If I were not attracted to men, if only I didn’t have such great sex with them, then I could go running into the open cozy arms of the lesbian community and live happily ever after. (Indigo, PD, 1995:85)

However, admittance to the lesbian community was conditional on dismissing men from their lives, and thus dismissing an aspect of their identity. While this adds to our understanding of the relationship between community and identity, it also highlights the norms and rules, which govern membership and access to the lesbian community. A commitment to women is not in itself sufficient, unless it is an exclusive commitment.

To summarise, the findings from this section suggest that these women offer a counter argument to the models of sexuality looked at in Chapter 4 of this thesis, which perpetuate the idea that bisexuality is just a phase some women go through as they move towards claiming a fixed lesbian identity. Instead, these women are claiming that a bisexual identity is a more valid description of their sexual identity. However, it is an identity that resists the normal association with gender. As indicated, the lack of validation for a bisexual identity in the lesbian community makes it an extremely difficult identity to maintain. This issue is further explored in the last section of this chapter.

11.4 From lesbian to bisexual

In contrast to the stories examined in the last section, the stories in this section are about women who had established their sexual identity as lesbian, before a relationship with a man led them to re-evaluate their identity. The discussion examines the processes of transformation involved as women attempted to reconcile their identity with their
behaviour. This is located within the context of being a part of a lesbian community, which was simultaneously caring and supportive and yet had the ability to be constraining, limiting and in some cases rejecting. As the following discussion shows, these women undergo similar processes to those experienced by women making the transition from a heterosexual identity to a lesbian one.

11.4.1 I was a traitor to my cause. (Lilith, PD, 1995:16)

As stated these women had been members of the lesbian community for a number of years. This meant that they had undergone the transition from an assumed heterosexual identity to a stable lesbian identity, in which they expressed pride and commitment. Furthermore, the majority of these women belonged to lesbian communities with a strong feminist understanding that did not allow for the possibility of relationships with men. Unlike the women in the section above who rejected the label lesbian because of their attraction to men, these women had made conscious decisions not to have relationships with men. This meant that a re-evaluation of this situation generally occurred as a result of realising that they were attracted to a particular man. As discussed in Chapter 4, Plummer (1995) suggests that an initial awareness of feeling towards members of the same sex is often conceptualised as a 'crisis' in people's story. The findings in Chapter 8 supported this claim, which is also applicable to the women in this category. The realisation or growing awareness of their attraction to a man was often referred to as a 'shock', initially followed by denial. This is illustrated in the following extract from Ruth's story, in which she reflects on the occasion when she became aware of her attraction to a man:

Crossing the field between the Y and the apartment, it hits me: what I’m feeling is attraction. And then my exhilaration mixes with fear, my anticipation with denial. This couldn’t be attraction, shouldn’t be. This is familiar. This is what I felt the first time I found myself attracted to a woman. This time, years later, out, proud and happy as a lesbian, I am attracted to a man. (Ruth, CH, 1992:3)

It could be argued that conceptualising this event in such a way emphasises the lack of intention on a woman's part to become involved with men. This denial is based on an understanding of their lesbian identity, which does not include the possibility of a relationship with a man. In order to reconcile this apparent contradiction, these women initially go through a process of discounting their attraction to or relationship with a man as simply an anomaly in an otherwise stable lesbian identity. This can be likened to the woman who, having always identified as heterosexual, finds herself attracted to a woman. The initial response is to 'individualise' this experience and hence confine it to
that particular person. For example, Stacey describes how, during a three and half year relationship with a man, she continued to identified as a lesbian for the first year:

I identified as a lesbian partly for political reasons (I had learned that lesbianism was the only effective challenge to the institution of heterosexuality); partly for self-preservation (I was terrified of being cast out by the community that had been so very important to me) and partly because I assumed that this relationship was an anomaly and that except for this particular man I would have only women lovers. (Stacey, CH, 1992:81)

This highlights the conflict that these women experience between an established lesbian identity, which is accompanied by strong political beliefs, and a relationship with a man. While initially discounting it as a 'one-off', Stacey continues her story by explaining that it was only when she realised that her attraction to men was not confined to one man, that she re-evaluated her sexual identity:

After about a year, though, it became untenable for me to keep identifying publicly as a lesbian. For one thing, I began to sense that this man might not be the sole exception to my lesbian life. (Stacey, CH, 1992:81)

These extracts from Stacey's story also illustrate the importance of community to the maintenance of identity; in the case of these women, this was a feminist-lesbian community. Membership of such a community was a major cause of the difficulty they faced when attempting to re-evaluate their identity. Aware that they had contravened the rules of the community, many women responded by non-attendance at community events. This was based on a mixture of guilt and fear that publicly claiming a bisexual identity would result in exclusion from a community to which they felt they belonged and wanted to remain a member. The women were keenly aware of the support they had received from their communities and the validation they had received for being lesbian:

I was a traitor to my cause. (Lilith, PD, 1995:16)

To fall in love with a man, to be anywhere outside the center of my community, threatened my treasured sense of belonging. It confused the exhilarating feeling of pride that had blossomed when I claimed my lesbian identity. (Ruth, CH, 1992:11)

Coming out as a lesbian was a risk for me: it meant taking my power and the space to do what I needed to do to honour myself. Coming out of the closet as a bisexual in the gay/lesbian community was more than a small risk: it meant possibly losing the one community I felt safe in, the women's/gay community. (Brenda, CH, 1992:47)

Collectively, these extracts from the women’s stories illustrate the dilemma these women faced as they acknowledged that their public identity as a lesbian was inconsistent with their behaviour and feelings. However, the difficulty in resolving that conflict was exacerbated by their knowledge of the rules and regulations governing the social order of the lesbian communities to which they belonged.
11.4.2 Closing ranks: The lesbian community

For many of these women the perceived fear that their community would reject them became a reality when they publicly proclaimed their bisexuality. While some individual friends accepted, albeit reluctantly, their changed status in identity and behaviour, the response from the community as a whole was rejection. Karen’s account of this is representative of the women’s feeling in general:

Having defined myself as lesbian for five years and being an active participant within the gay community for seven, the fear of ostracism became a constant preoccupation as I lived my life more openly. In a community where the right to love who you want is at the heart of the struggle, unfounded distrust, disgust from my lesbian sistuh were either verbalised or acted out. In other words... girlfriend now feels she has license to be extra ... extra rude, disrespectful and dismissive. (Karen, PD, 1995: 37)

As Elizabeth explains below, rejection from the lesbian community was more painful than rejection from heterosexual society. In addition, she addresses the feminist suggestion that by including men in the category of people they are willing to have relationships with, bisexual women have access to patriarchal resources denied to those women who are exclusively lesbian:

For some of us, it hurts more to be excluded from the lesbian community than from the straight world. Oppressed groups often expect solidarity and support from other oppressed groups, especially when their oppressions are closely linked. Underclass women, women of color, bisexual women and others may expect more from the lesbian overclass that from the heterosexual world, even more than from heterosexual feminists. The lesbian community claims to be more sensitive. It also holds many resources for women who love women – cultural, economic and political. With many individual and group exceptions, the lesbian community still has work to do to stop excluding marginalised women, including bisexual women. Some have argued that since bisexual women can get needed resources from the ‘patriarchy’, they should not drain support from the beleaguered lesbian community. To demand sexual purity in exchange for membership in lesbian circles, however, requires the assumption that all bisexual women have equal access to patriarchal resources. (Elizabeth, CH, 1992: 30-31)

11.5 Heterosexual privilege

This issue of privilege, often labelled ‘heterosexual privilege’, is addressed in many of the women’s stories, regardless of their involvement in the lesbian community. For some women, there was awareness that involvement in a heterosexual relationship with a man did confer certain advantages and privileges upon them:

I discovered ‘heterosexual privilege.’ I was finally ‘normal’ to the outside world. (Lilith, PD, 1995:17)

Dvora quotes the experience of Katy, a friends who, having been rejected by the heterosexual community due to her relationships with women, suddenly found herself
accepted because she was in a relationship with a woman. Katy expressed her anger about their acceptance:

For all the subtle and incredibly nonsubtle messages they give me about how 'okay' this relationship is compared to my other ones, because this is a man. For instance, my parents have this summer house, and my mother called to make sure I have the first opportunity to pick a week to stay there. What I heard her saying is that, now that you’re seeing a man, I want you to be able to spend time together and have the relationship work. Whereas when I was seeing a woman, we weren’t even allowed to use it. (Katy, CH, 1992: 65)

This experience was common to many of the women in this position. For instance, women commented on the experience of being accepted without reservation or explanation. So, for these women there was a recognition that a bisexual identity, when expressed through relationships with men, is given more validity than a lesbian one. Amita explains why she thinks this happens:

Part of the privilege stems from the fact that bisexuality is probably more accepted by mainstream society than being lesbian or gay, because for some reason people think there's still that part of you that is straight and can be saved. (Amita, PD, 1005:114)

However, Black bisexual women contested the concept of 'heterosexual privilege'. These women argued that a feminist analysis of lesbianism that prioritises gender fails to understand that, for some women, class or ethnicity prevents their access to the resources conferred upon white middle class heterosexual relationships. Amina talks about her experiences of being a member of a South Asian community:

In terms of physical intimacy in public, I fear I can’t walk down the street and hold even my boyfriend’s hand, because this is a city where all my relatives are, and I always bump into people I know who would see this as 'immodest behaviour.' I could be treated as a social outcast by my family and community. So I think it's really relative in terms of what culture you’re talking about when you say 'heterosexual privilege.' Although I acknowledge when I walk down the street with a woman, as opposed to man, and I’m intimate with her, there’s a possibility of my getting gay-bashed. (Amina, PD, 1995:115)

For some Black women who identify as bisexual, the white-defined concept of 'heterosexual privilege' is symptomatic of the racism present in the lesbian and gay community, which results in the exclusion of bisexuals:

We must also begin to look at another root of biphobia: racism. For many years the gay/lesbian community has been seen as a white community. Until the last decade, people of color in the gay/lesbian community were not visible. We now see on a national level gay and lesbian people of color uniting and speaking out as a part of the gay/lesbian community. We also see the issue of racism within our community being looked at and worked on more every day. Because the gay/lesbian community was shaped by white gay and lesbian leaders for such a long time, I believe we have to look at how this contributed to the foundation of biphobia and the construction of our current definition of 'queer.' (Brenda, CH, 1992:50)
11.6 Breaking the rules and regulations

So far, this analysis has shown that all the women in this category were aware of the rules and regulations governing the maintenance of social order in the lesbian community. While the discussion in the first part of this thesis showed that sociological research highlights the control and regulation of sexuality which is a part of maintaining social order in society, the current findings show how women outside heterosexuality contribute to this process. This is one possible answer to the question posed by queer theorist Namaste (Chapter 3) when he asks, "In what way does an adoption of homosexual identity reinforce a hetero/homo split?" (1994:227). This issue is addressed in the women's stories through discussion of their exclusion from lesbian communities to which they formally belonged. One of the commonest reasons put forward to account for this concerned the 'threat' that bisexuality represents to the lesbian community. This is because bisexuality questions the boundaries that exist between heterosexuality and homosexuality, which lead to bisexual women being silenced:

Relatively few women are out as bisexual in the lesbian community – even fewer speak or write about it in any analytic or public way. Lesbians who talk or write publicly about bisexuality often do so from the assumption that bisexuals are a threat to lesbians and are opponents to be fought. This is oppressive of bisexual women. (Stacey, CH, 1992:76)

So just as Jenness (1992) and Richardson (1981) show that a lesbian community is important for the maintenance and development of identity, it must be acknowledged that it can also silence women who do not conform to the particular version of identity on offer and, in doing so, reinforce the boundaries between heterosexuality and homosexuality. In addressing the issue of the 'threat' posed by bisexuality, these women argue that this threat is misconstrued by the lesbian and gay community of which they want to remain a part of:

The lesbian and gay community needs to see that we are not a threat, we are not confused, that we should be included as a visible part of the movement and that such inclusion can only strengthen us all. We have always been here in the community. Bisexuals are queer too, and like all other queers, we must fight heterosexism every day of our lives. (Indigo, PD, 1995:88)

Bisexuals are not the enemy. We are no threat to the gay community. As a bisexual, I am far more gay than I am 'straight.' I experience society’s oppression and homophobia too. (Dvora, CH, 1992:69)

Yet, women who have sexual relationships with men threaten the homogeneity of the lesbian community. Within this context, those women who were once a part of this community but now face exile, use this new position as 'outsiders' to re-evaluate the construction of unity in the lesbian community. The voices of these women join the
voices of other women who also feel excluded from a particular definition of lesbianism; these stories have been examined in the previous chapters. However, unlike women who challenge from within the confines of an established lesbian identity, these women are challenging the right to be included, although they no longer identify as exclusively lesbian:

One thing is that the lesbian politics as I knew it was very much one that affirmed woman-ness, and woman-hood. There was an emphasis on unity, it was almost the creation of an enforced homogeneity. A homogeneity that is just now beginning to crack, with Black lesbians, and Jewish lesbian, and Asian lesbians and Latina lesbians and disabled lesbians. What the change allowed for me was to say, okay, I am not part of this homogeneity either, and then to look at bisexuality. (Lilith, PD, 1995:26)

Lesbians have created their own sacred space. Perhaps something violates that sanctity if you sleep with men. Perhaps in maintaining a certain standard of ‘rules’ – how you dress, or cut your hair, whether to shave or not, who you can sleep with – a community can keep track of its members. But I think it works the other way round. If the boundaries are more fluid, more flexible, it’s easier to stick around. (Dvora, CH, 1992:68)

As if to illustrate this last point, many of the women included in their stories examples of other women they know who identify as lesbian but have sexual relationships with men in secret. The women in this category do not believe that this represents a contradiction because they believe that it should be the right of individuals, not communities, to define for themselves the meaning of their sexual identity. This is seen as preferable to the current state of affairs, which silences women:

Unfortunately, the unspoken lesbian feminist politic has often led to a narrow chauvinism that does not allow dykes to indulge in personal insecurities or to discuss with one another. Silencing is not an effect tool for consciousness raising. Criteria of any sort spell the creation of a hierarchical setting. Thus, it is for each woman to declare herself lesbian or not. If we develop standards and seek to impose them, are we not the very people we choose to battle? (Lilith, PD, 1995:19)

I can understand lesbians who sleep with men because if someone has decided that most of their life and lifestyle connect with women and that the person that they are going to live their life with is a woman, but they might sleep with a man occasionally, it doesn’t have to entirely change who they are. It’s like a straight woman sleeping with a woman, a one – or two-time encounter, but they still feel they are straight . (Amita, PD, 1995:111)

Hence, while there will still be communities based on common identities, these will be more flexible and inclusive rather than exclusive of difference. At time of writing the situation for these women was far from this ideal. Continued membership of the lesbian community is conditional and based on adherence to community rules. These rules which do not permit ambiguity or change, and hence partially reflect dominant cultural beliefs about sexual identity, inasmuch as sexual identity should be stable and consistent. Arguably, such a view of sexual identity reinforces the superiority of
heterosexuality. While some women directed this criticism at the lesbian community, others took a broader perspective and believed that it symbolised the power of heterosexuality to define lesbian existence:

> This is what heterosexism has done in the queer community. There is a box labelled gay. The box limits you; it is a prescribed way of being with someone of the same sex. If you do not fit in the box, or wear the label gay, then you do not belong. Some people are viewed as being more queer than others. Bisexuals are most often viewed as less queer because they do not identify as exclusively gay or lesbian. When a system that oppresses us now has us fighting over which ones of us are ‘truly’ queer, we must begin to ask ourselves why we are fighting each other and not the system. (Brenda, CH, 1992: 50)

**11.7 Importance of identity for community**

In the light of these experiences in the lesbian community, many women felt that the only way forward was the development of a bisexual community that would provide the support and validation for their identity, which they were not currently receiving from the lesbian and gay communities. For these women, there is a fundamental understanding of the importance of forming communities around shared identities:

> It seems somehow important to have a sexual orientation, and when I meet people who question this I explain it in terms of having a community, a culture and outlook shared with others [ ... ] Further, our sexual orientation serves to affirm us in our sexuality, something I certainly want to have affirmed. (Carol, B1, 1991: 17)

As one woman summed it up, without such a community she was left feeling that she did not belong anywhere:

> As a bisexual feminist, I am drifting. Drifting between communities – lesbian and straight – neither of which is really home. (Elizabeth, CH, 1992: 70)

**11.8 Summary and conclusions**

To conclude, this chapter has examined the stories of women who identify as bisexual. Through looking at the development and maintenance of a bisexual identity, these stories have reflected on the importance of community for validating and supporting sexual identities. Given their exclusion from both the lesbian and gay communities and the wider heterosexual society, these stories are a product of the social location or, rather lack of social location, of bisexuality. Nevertheless the political analysis of bisexuality presented in the women’s stories challenges both heterosexual society and lesbian and gay communities. The wider implications of this analysis for the key issues explored in this thesis are examined in the next chapter.
Chapter Twelve: Discussion and Conclusions

12.1 Introduction
The last six chapters have examined through an analysis of women's stories published between 1977-1995 the development, maintenance, meaning and practice of sexual identity amongst women who self-identify as lesbian or bisexual. This concluding chapter discusses the research findings in relation to the broad issues raised in the literature review and by the research aims and objectives. The chapter begins with a discussion of the limitations of the research and the implications they have for the findings. This is followed by a summary of the major findings from the analysis of the data and an examination of their theoretical and political implications. The final section of this chapter discusses the implications that the findings contain for the future direction of sociological research in this area and the need to develop new models of sexual identity formation.

12.2 Limitations of the research
As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, the early research on lesbian identity (for example, Ettore, 1980; Faderman, 1985; Kitzinger, 1987; Ponse, 1978; Rich, 1980) produced a unifying concept of lesbian identity with a tendency to dismiss differences between women. However, alongside changes in feminism and sociology, there has been a growing theoretical awareness (for example, Jenness, 1992; Richardson, 1981) of not only the differences that exist between women but also the need to take this into account when conducting research in this area. Within this context, by focusing on the differences that exist between women my own research deconstructed lesbian identity as a singular or unifying experience and hence examines the different types of identity available to those women who self-identify as lesbian. This theoretical framework also enabled the examination of stories of women who define as bisexual on the basis that their choice of partner is non-gender specific. Furthermore, unlike previous feminist research which presupposes that a feminist-informed lesbian identity is the only 'correct' lesbian identity (for example, Kitzinger, 1987), this research includes a critical analysis of feminist discourse. This enabled the data analysis to examine different types of lesbian identity, as well as bisexual identity, without assuming one was more appropriate than another.
However, any piece of research has its limitation and flaws, and, this research study is no exception. Although the use of published stories enabled an examination of the way in which this genre of lesbian literature reflects upon and contributes to the production of lesbian culture, the choice of research methodology did not permit me to investigate the meaning that these stories have for those women who read these books. Thus, my analysis looked at the consumption of stories by those involved in the production of the stories, but did not look at the consumption of the published stories. Therefore, what this research opens up is the question of the impact of such stories on those individuals who read them.

A further limitation of the data set concerns the type of lesbian stories that have not been included in this study. Although the published stories address the sociologically relevant issue of power in the lesbian community at large, that is, who has a voice and who is silenced, it has not been possible to explore voices that remain silent or have possibly been silenced by political practices. The absence of particular stories is noted, for example, disabled lesbians or bisexuals and the stories of women who engage in same-sex relationships but do not identify as lesbian or bisexual. Likewise, although class issues were of interest, the quality of the data did not permit an in-depth investigation; hence, an analysis of class is by and large absent from the thesis. Consequently, while the research furthers sociological understanding of the nature and experience of diversity among women who engage or express an interest in same-sex relationships, it must be acknowledged that it was not possible to explore all aspects of this diversity in the present study.

12.3 Challenging times

Bearing in mind the above caveat, this section discusses the major findings of the research, beginning with a brief summary of the major issues to emerge from the data analysis chapters. Chapter 6 provided a critical overview of 570 stories published in eighteen edited books published between 1977 and 1995. Plummer's (1995) account of stories as products of symbolic interactions between tellers, coaxers and consumers was used to analysis the role of the editor in the production of the stories. This was achieved by means of examining both the type of story contained in the books and the editorial introductions. The books were allocated to three different categories on the basis of themes identified in the books; that is 1) Diverse, 2) Specific and 3) Bisexual. Analysis of the editorial introductions to the books in the first category 'Diverse' suggested an emphasis on the concept of 'unity through diversity,' that is, the belief that the diversity
of the lesbian community strengthens it. The validity of this argument was assessed by means of the analysis of the demographic characteristics of women included in three of the books in this category. These suggested that while there had been an attempt over the eighteen years, between 1977 and 1995, to represent women from more diverse backgrounds, the majority of the stories continued to represent the experience of young, white, 'never-been-married', childless women. On this basis, it was suggested that the concept of 'unity through diversity' posited in these introductions be treated with caution.

Further evidence to support this argument came from the editorial introductions to the books placed in the other categories. 'Specific' and 'Biseuxal', which challenged the concept of 'unity through diversity' on two different levels. Firstly, editorial introductions to the books focusing on the experience of young or old lesbians, or those who have been married, argued that the concept of unity should be expanded to include their experiences. In contrast, books representing Black lesbians, and those who identified as butch or femme challenged the feminist-informed definitions of lesbianism constructed since the 1970s. Finally, three books, which were included in the 'Bisexual' category looking at the experience of bisexual women challenged both the dichotomous sexual model on which lesbianism depends and the exclusion of bisexual women from the lesbian community by feminists. These findings showed that women are increasingly questioning the conceptualisation of lesbian identity as a unifying experience, and highlighting the plurality of lesbian identity. This is the issue that was explored in detail in the following five chapters.

12.3.1 Identities

The stories in the first three categories endorsed an essentialist view of lesbian identity, in which identity was regarded as being fixed and beyond the choice of the individual. Hence, these stories can be read as discursive productions, which utilise a concept of the natural or biological as a causal factor in human behaviour. Similarly, the women who identified as butch or femme also believed it was their destiny to be either butch or femme, thus implying there was a defining relationship between the two.

This essentialism led to the construction of stories which endorsed this view. Particular experiences and feelings were used to construct individual histories and identities, for example, childhood desire and sexual experiences with other females, feeling different,
and with the exception of the femme women, gender non-conformity. As discussed in Chapter 7, the first story focused on gender non-conformity as evidence of a ‘real’ lesbian identity, thus linking ‘masculine’ behaviour in women with lesbianism and femininity with heterosexuality. In contrast, the stories of butch and femme identity acknowledged that lesbianism can also manifest in gendered positions. As discussed in Chapter 8, feminist discourse constructs such behaviour as an imitation of heterosexual relationships, while the women who tell these stories regard the adoption of butch and femme roles as a transgression of the boundaries between gender and sexuality, and hence a challenge.

In contrast there followed two stories of lesbian identity and one story of bisexuality, all of which dismissed this essentialist view of lesbian identity. By focusing on the relationship between gender and identity, these stories are feminist-inspired political stories of transformation and change, rather than of destiny or fate. Nevertheless, while all three stories embrace feminism, they do so from very different perspectives, which leads to disagreement over the theory and practice of feminism and, in particular, the relationship of feminism to lesbianism. The stories examined in Chapter 9 most closely resembled the radical feminist understanding of lesbian identity discussed in Chapter 3. This view was challenged by Black lesbians and by bisexual women on the basis that it excludes certain categories of women rather than includes. This critique was the starting point for developing new feminist-informed versions of identity, which took into account social factors other than gender and sexuality.

Again, the meaning attached by women to a lesbian or bisexual identity affected the structure of these stories. There was less emphasis placed on proving ‘one was born a lesbian’ and a greater focus on the political context of ‘choosing’ to be a a bisexual. However, while these three stories dismissed the idea of a fixed identity based on biology, the feminist-lesbian story, and to a lesser extent the Black lesbian story did reproduce a fixed identity, based this time on politics. As a result of this political notion of a fixed lesbian identity, bisexual women (as illustrated in their stories) who had changed their identity from lesbian to bisexual talked about their exclusion from lesbian communities. Unlike the stories belonging to the first three categories, ‘Born a lesbian’, ‘Butch’ and ‘Femme’, which were constructed within a gendered framework, the stories in the categories ‘Feminist-inspired’, ‘Black lesbian’ and ‘Bisexual’ are built around resistance to prescribed gender roles. However, as the discussion in Chapter 10
showed, while attempting to circumvent gender roles, the feminist women often fall into essentialist views about sex. The broader implications of these different lesbian and bisexual identities and their relationship to gender are discussed in detail below.

12.3.2 Social contexts and communities

The analysis also explored the social context in which the stories were told and the effect this had on the construction of identity in the stories. As discussed in Chapter 6, the possibilities for telling one’s story as a lesbian or bisexual woman have only been made possible by the birth of the lesbian and gay and feminist movements in the 1970s. In consequence, these stories can be seen as part of a wider project, initiated by lesbians themselves, to (re)define reality and to talk about lesbian identity from their perspectives. Nevertheless, the roots of these stories extend back to a period before the 1970s, and thus, it is possible to see the way in which the changing nature of the story told relates to changing social circumstances. The first three stories, which produce an essentialist account of lesbian identity and reinforced by the adoption of gendered positions, were representative of the stories of many women who became lesbians in the period prior to the 1970s. Due to the absence of a feminist analysis and the dominance of psychological and biological explanations for homosexuality (examined in Chapter 2), many women’s stories of this era follow the same format. However, the feminist analysis of lesbianism in the 1970s led to the production of a new story about the meaning of lesbian identity, which dismissed the essentialist, gendered positions of the previous stories, and replaced them with a political definition of lesbianism which focused on resistance and challenge to a patriarchal society. In turn, this version of lesbian identity has, over the last thirty years, been challenged by various groups of women who feel excluded and marginalised. This challenge takes different forms, ranging from an outright rejection of feminism to attempts to redefine feminism. Thus stories produced over the last decade are less likely to be feminist-orientated and are more likely to address the issue of diversity amongst women who have same-sex relationships.

The ‘rise and fall’ of the different explanations or meanings attached to same-sex behaviour between women has had a direct effect on the construction and nature of lesbian communities and on the practices of power within the lesbian community at large. This was present in all the stories, particularly in relation to the impact of feminism on both existing communities and on the formation of new ones. Thus, it is
argued that the 570 stories, in as much as they reflect both the changes and the practices of power, have provided a valuable means of examining the changing nature of lesbian culture, during the past thirty years and beyond.

12.4 The theoretical and political implications of lesbian identities

The analysis highlights the way in which lesbian and bisexual women construct stories of identity. At a semantic level, the analysis indicates that the term lesbian does not have a single meaning, which affects the performance of a lesbian identity, while at a political level it dismisses the notion that the category lesbian is a unifying concept for every woman included in it. For example, the stories have shown that the term lesbian ranges in meaning from a sexual classification used to denote sexual desire for women to a position which, exposes and challenges a wide range of the structures which are used to maintain social order in society. Furthermore, it can be a term which limits behaviour by prescribing rules and regulations. For example, women in the 1950s felt that in order to be accepted by a lesbian community they must adopt gendered positions, whereas some twenty years later women’s eligibility to join a lesbian community depended on their willingness to reject gendered positions. In part, this is related to the etiology of lesbian identity and the relationship between gender and sexuality. Not only does this effect the type of story told, but it also has implications for the question posed in Chapter 4, that is, what contribution do the findings of this study make to the sociological understanding of the way in which the social control and regulation of all sexualities and their contribution to the maintenance of social order?

As discussed in the literature review, research suggests that many lesbians continue to believe they were ‘born a lesbian’ (Plummer, 1981; 1995; Jenness, 1992; Richardson, 1981; Rust, 1993); a finding which is endorsed by my own study. However, whereas previous research, has focused solely on this understanding of lesbian identity, my own research has also looked at identities which challenge this view of.

Similarly, the theoretical framework employed in sociologically informed research has focused on the production of social identity through the symbolic interactions in which we engage. As discussed in Chapter 4 and 5 these also affect the type of identity stories that people tell. Again, the findings from my study would endorse this perspective. As illustrated in all the stories, the production of a sexual identity, that is, the transformation of behaviour into identity is a process dependent upon symbolic interaction, which takes place between the individual and others, be they significant
others such as family and friends or more 'generalised' others. These exchanges are essential to the development and maintenance of identity as well as to the practice and meaning of it.

Furthermore, Plummer's (1995) framework for understanding stories as both symbolic interactions and political processes provided a useful and insightful way of understanding both the production of the story, the type of story told and its location within specific socio-cultural settings. However, as suggested at the end of chapter 3, although this level of analysis is invaluable to our understanding of the development and maintenance of lesbian identity, symbolic interactionism does not pay sufficient attention to the wider social context, particularly gender and the relationship between heterosexuality and homosexuality. This was the reason why it was argued that a synthesis of feminism alongside queer theory would be the way forward for the sociological study of sexuality. It is within this context that the question posed by Namaste (1994) regarding the potential benefits to be gained from sociology’s interaction with queer theory is pertinent to this discussion. As noted Namaste argues that while a sociological concern with understanding the discursive processes involved in the historical construction of homosexuality is necessary, we also need to ask, "In what way does an adoption of homosexual identity reinforce a hetero/homo split?" (Namaste, 1994:227). Here, Namaste is working within the Derridian framework adopted by queer theorists (Epstein, 1994; Fuss, 1991; Sedgwick, 1990) to explore the relationship between heterosexuality and homosexuality. As discussed in Chapter 3, there is a defining and original relationship between the two concepts, yet they do not have equal status. Thus, the valorisation of heterosexuality as an authentic and superior sexuality is dependent upon the denigration of homosexuality. Hence, heterosexuality needs homosexuality in order to maintain its dominance. Furthermore, this relationship does not just exist at a theoretical level; as the discussion in Chapter One illustrated, the distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality is reinforced in all institutions throughout society.

While the question raised by Namaste (1994) was briefly explored in the previous chapter in relation to bisexuality, it is important to revisit this question in the context of the overall findings of my study. However, the plurality of lesbian identities, coupled with the findings of previous research in this area, suggests that Namaste's question needs some qualification. Thus, it may be more appropriate to ask in what way does the
adoption of a particular version of lesbian identity reinforce a hetero/homo split? Is it possible to resist a hetero/homo split by claiming a particular version of lesbian identity? Furthermore, what about women who claim a bisexual identity? In order to answer these questions it is necessary to examine the different lesbian identities presented in the stories, beginning with an examination of the essentialist-based identities of the first three story categories.

12.4.1 The paradoxes of claiming a lesbian identity

The women in these three stories talked about the experience of finding that there was a name they could give to their experiences and behaviour which enabled them to gain a greater understanding of themselves. Furthermore, this recognition of identity allowed them to eventually make contact with other lesbians and become a part of a lesbian subculture. Similarly, the story of the femme, and its concern with invisibility illustrated the need for human beings to be able to give a name to their experiences, in order to become a part of something beyond the individual. At a broader level, it has been argued (for example, Weeks, 1977) that lesbian and gay culture and liberation would not have been possible without the initial classification process carried out by the sexologists at the end of the last century. As explored in Chapters 1 and 2, many of the early sexologists were involved in campaigning for legal and social reform for homosexuals. Likewise, the notion that one does not choose one’s sexuality has been an important argument in the modern gay movement. Given the social stigma that surrounds lesbian identity, there is a certain strategic advantage to viewing one’s sexual identity as natural, because this means that women cannot be held accountable for their sexuality. Therefore, it is inappropriate to blame or punish them. Additionally, it discredits the psychological pathologisation of lesbianism which constructs individual women as either mentally ill or sexually immature. Moreover, as discussed in Chapter 2, this must be viewed within the context of the declassification of homosexuality as a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association, alongside research (for example, Garfinkle and Morin, 1978; Levy, 1978; White, 1979), suggesting that this view is still pervasive. Hence, many positive rewards accrue, at a personal, collective and political levels, from claiming that lesbianism is one’s true natural identity.

While not seeking to dismiss the validity of these issues, it is nevertheless important to examine the implications of claiming lesbian identity as natural for the social construction of all sexual identities and consequently the reinforcement of a social order
structured by gender and sexuality. It has already been acknowledged that these three stories have more in common with essentialist explanations than constructionist explanations. By utilising an essentialist view of identity, they reject competing explanations that seek either to pathologise sexual identity, or, alternatively, seek to 'politicise' it through feminist discourse. Rather, the women believe that they were born lesbian and that this is as natural to them as heterosexuality is for other people. In this way, any potential threat to heterosexuality posed by lesbianism is dismantled.

Thus, there are undoubtably strategic advantages to be gained from claiming that homosexual identity is beyond choice. While not dismissing these advantages, the term 'strategy' suggests conscious manipulation to achieve certain political aims. While the nature of the data does not permit definitive conclusions to be drawn on this matter, the analysis does suggest that women are not adopting this position in order to gain strategic advantage. In keeping with the findings of previous research in this area (for example, Richardson, 1981; Rust, 1993), the women seem to hold a genuine belief that they were born lesbian.

This belief sits uneasily with the sociological understanding of the construction of sexual identity as a social and cultural product. Thus, while recognising that a belief in essentialism is not problematic for these women, it does represent a contradiction for our sociological understanding of this issue. Resolution of this apparent contradiction lies in deconstructing the modern discourse on identity in general and sexual identity in particular. While not dismissing the fundamental contribution that the sociology of homosexuality has brought to our understanding of this subject, for example, McIntosh's (1968) article *The homosexual role* and the work of Weeks, (1977, 1981, 1985) it has in general confined itself to just homosexuality. In contrast, the work of queer theorists, together with Foucault's (1979) analysis of the history of sexuality, provide a useful way of understanding the processes involved in the social construction of identity and the implications for all sexualities. For example, Foucauldian approach to social identity highlights the paradoxical nature of claiming an essential identity which is nevertheless produced within a particular social context. The idea that we experience our sense of identity as a possession, as something which belongs to us.

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14 However, this should not dismiss the negative implications of this stance. As discussed in Chapter 1, while for some biological or natural causes for homosexuality have been used to call for reform, such beliefs have also been used to call for the elimination of homosexuality.
merely serves to hide the way in which our understanding of identity is in itself a product of the culture we inhabit. It is a part of the language we use to talk about our sexual identity, the very name we give to our experiences.

As already noted, the women in these three story categories selected particular experiences and feelings - desire for other females, sexual experience with other females, feeling different, gender non-conformity - and constructed their own individual history and identity. However, they did so in a way that did not recognise the historically contingent nature of the category lesbian. The fundamental importance of construction of identity, which is by necessity, retrospective should not be dismissed here. While not denying that these women felt desire for members of their same sex, it was only later that they learnt that there was a name for this experience. From a theoretical perspective what has been dismissed in this account is that this identity is, as Foucault notes, the outcome of the way in which knowledge has been organised over the last one hundred and fifty years. Instead, what occurs is teleological story telling which seeks out and identifies events from the past to validate the present. Thus, it is not a reflection of a true inner identity. This is not to deny the existence or reality of same sex desire, but to question the classification of this behaviour, in the case of women, as lesbian, and the wider implications which this might have for the regulation and control of sexuality in society as a whole. Rust (1993) arrives at a similar conclusion when she claims that we need to recognise that the essentialism which underpins the ‘journey of discovery’ story is itself a socially constructed goal.

At one level this argument merely serves to highlight an obvious and basic point: the explanatory system to which one has social access will affect the construction and nature of identity and the story told about that identity. It will affect the types of material selected for inclusion as well as the material left out. That is, the stories we tell about ourselves are contingent upon the types of knowledge that we have available to us. For example, through medical books, psychology books and fiction, women learnt of an identity called lesbian that could be applied to their behaviour. In this way, their sense of a lesbian identity was constructed through the knowledge available to them. However, this is not to imply total passivity because for some women, the stigmatising
knowledge of psychology was rejected on favour of the more respectable explanations offered by sexology, which tend to naturalise sexual identity.

Putting to one side this perhaps unremarkable observation, what is also revealed is the way in which claiming this essentialist type of lesbian identity represents a theoretical paradox. This is because these women are claiming that a lesbian identity is representative of their true inner self. Yet, this claim is predicated on a notion of identity that hides its illusory and contingent nature. This point is further illustrated through an examination of the specific way in which gender is theorised in these women's accounts. For the present, discussion will focus on the theorisation of gender in the first story category 'born a lesbian.' The women's understanding of lesbian identity contain implications for how to understand other sexual identities, which in turn reflect upon the relationship between homosexuality and heterosexuality. Thus the explanations given for viewing lesbian identity as a reflection of a true inner identity, is not only determined by what is culturally known about heterosexuality, but simultaneously reflect on and reinforce the supremacy of heterosexuality. This is illustrated by the way in which women's references to gender has a teleological design to the. Thus 'gender rebellion' (Phelan, 1993), that is, an inability to conform to gender appropriate behaviour is taken as evidence of a true lesbian identity. This accounts for the rejection of butch and femme relationships by these women. While behaviour of a 'masculine' nature is compatible with being a 'real' lesbian, behaviour of a 'feminine' nature is incompatible because this is associated with heterosexuality. Butch and femme relationships are reliant on both masculinity and femininity, hence their rejection.

This endorses Richardson (1981) point that the implications of this is that behaviour which conforms to gender norms is evidence of a heterosexual identity. This explanation for lesbian identity reinforces norms about appropriate gender behaviour and roles, and, in so doing, validates the claims of sexologists and psychologists who regard non-conformist gender behaviour as evidence of lesbian identity. To summarise, claiming of an essential lesbian identity might be seen as a challenge to heterosexuality, yet it paradoxically serves to reinforce the political institution of heterosexuality and the boundary that separates heterosexuality and homosexuality. However, this argument must be viewed in relation to the questions raised in later data analysis chapters concerning the appropriateness or otherwise of the politicisation or, to be more precise, the feminist politicisation of sexual identity.
This can be explained by examining the way in which gender and sexuality are conflated, so that one appears to be inseparable from the other, and so it becomes necessary to find a new way of theorising this relationship. While it cannot be denied that notions of gender influence notions of sexuality, and do so in very concrete and practical ways, gender and sexuality are two separate entities. Therefore, it may be more appropriate to talk, as Plummer (1995) does, of 'gendered sexualities'. This permits an investigation of the impact that gender has on sexuality while at the same time recognising that they have separate meanings. On this basis, gender conformity or gender non-conformity would not be regarded as evidence of an essential sexual identity. Furthermore, weakening the relationship between gender and sexual identity would have far reaching consequences for the production of masculine and feminine behaviour in society in general. Recent sociological work on masculinity reaches similar conclusions, for example, Mac an Ghail's (1994) study on the relationship between masculinity, heterosexuality and education reaches similar conclusions.

The findings of the present research suggest that while the theoretical implications of the relationship between gender and sexual identity are applicable to the first story category ‘born a lesbian’, they are not so readily applicable to the second and third story categories ‘butch’ and ‘femme.’ The butch and femme stories simultaneously reinforce and challenge gender and its relationship to being either a man or a woman in society. As the discussion of these story categories indicate, the claiming of butch or femme identity can, on one level, be seen to reinforce the eroticisation of a difference based on stylised gender roles which find their counterparts in traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity. Furthermore, these notions of masculinity and femininity are the bases for construction of heterosexuality as the only natural and normal expression of sexuality. Thus, at this level, the two stories, which are based in essentialism can be seen to reinforce gender roles, and to feminist critique of butch and femme roles as explored in this thesis. However, this type of feminist analysis is unable to account for the way in which the adoption of butch and femme identities can at the same time challenge these very gender roles by questioning first the relationship between gender and sex and secondly the meaning of masculinity and femininity. In so doing, butch and femme positions challenge not only societal assumptions about sexuality but also feminist conceptualisation of the relationship between gender and sex. That is, when women adopt a butch identity, they offer a direct challenge to the
male ownership of power, which threatens the nature of masculinity. In a similar way, the adoption of a femme identity, seems to conform to stereotypical concepts of femininity yet does so on the surface because in this scenario, the performance of femininity is intended for another woman, which transgresses and challenges the relationship between gender, sex and sexuality.

Unlike the first story category, which regarded only masculine behaviour in women as the only evidence of an authentic lesbian identity, the women in the butch and femme stories see this as only one of many possibilities for lesbian identity, for example being ‘feminine’ and a lesbian. Furthermore, while the feminist story challenges gender by attempting to stand outside it, the butch-femme stories challenge gender from within. For these women, butch and femme roles transgress culturally defined gender positions, thus permitting the male ownership of power to be questioned. These are stories which both reinforce and challenge the cultural construction of the dichotomous relationship between sex and gender. In consequence, the butch and femme stories operate on a paradoxical level because in this case they both challenge and reinforce the relationships between gender and sexuality and gender and sex. On this basis, it is argued that this interpretation of butch and femme identity undermines radical feminism, which is based on the distinction between sex and gender.

In contrast the two feminist-inspired lesbian stories offer a very different concept of lesbian identity which, unlike the story of butch and femme, seeks to challenge gender roles by trying to circumvent or stand outside gender and conventional heterosexuality. The politicisation of lesbianism offers women a critical space in which to challenge heterosexuality. Because it dismisses the essentialist implications of the previous stories and emphasises the notion of choice and the socially constructed nature of sexual identity, it could be argued that a feminist lesbian identity does offer a real challenge to patriarchally defined heterosexuality. Thus, the lesbian feminist story becomes a part of a wider political feminist struggle that seeks to challenge the male ownership of power. In addition, the Black lesbian story goes beyond a gender focus to challenge white ownership of power, which is not just confined to men but can and is held by white women for possible use against all black people.

On one level it could be argued that linking lesbianism to the wider political struggles of feminism successfully challenges the gender and sexual structures and institutions of
society. However, as Epstein (1994) in his analysis of Foucault's thesis on identity politics argues, political identities, such as the feminist-inspired lesbian identity, may not be as radical as initially assumed. Firstly it may actually contribute to a regime of 'normalisation', that is, heterosexuality and, secondly, it may serve to exclude people with multiple identities. By applying these two points to the feminist story explored in Chapter 9 it is possible to see that this story has contributed in each of these ways. In relation to the first point concerning 'normalisation', it has already been noted that despite a dismissal of essentialism, feminism produces its own version of a fixed identity, albeit based on politics. This is in part due to, as Wittig (1992) noted the feminist separation of gender and sex which leads sex to be regarded as a natural category. In the feminist-inspired story essentialist notions of sex are reproduced which undermine the otherwise radical analysis of heterosexuality offered by feminism. This ultimately reinforces a regime of 'normalisation', that is, heterosexuality, because, as Wittig points out, the dichotomy of heterosexuality and homosexuality is reliant on both gender categories and the categories of sex. In consequence, Wittig argue that 'lesbians are not women', a concept that is strongly refuted in the women's stories.

Viewed from this perspective, it is possible to see that the radical feminist version of lesbianism contributes to the regime of 'normalisation' by claiming that lesbianism stands outside heterosexuality, thus affording women a new insight on heterosexuality. While it might provide women with the political space to develop a critique and understanding of heterosexuality, this understanding of lesbianism is always and can only ever be a part of heterosexuality. Theorists such as Fuss and Sedgwick, applying Derrida's framework, have argued that the very concept of lesbianism can only be understood in relation to its opposite, that is, heterosexuality. As already stated, this is not a relationship of equals but one where heterosexuality is valorised through the denigration of homosexuality. Thus, at this level claiming any lesbian identity, and in this case a feminist one, is ultimately self-defeating.

Epstein's (1994) second point, is that claiming a political identity serves to exclude, rather than include other people. Again, it can be seen that the lesbian feminist story with its focus on gender and sexuality can indeed be criticised for dismissing those who have multiple identities. It is this very point that is highlighted in the stories by black women looked at in Chapter 10. For these women, it is neither possible nor politically desirable, to separate race and class position from sexuality and gender because they
are all inter-linked and need to be viewed from a political perspective. This finding endorses Phelan’s (1993) analysis of lesbian politics, which was discussed in Chapter 3. Phelan argues that the impact of feminism on lesbian communities and politics has been divisive within the lesbian community as a whole. As illustrated through the women’s stories in this study, feminism, through the production of a political definition of lesbianism, has effectively silenced other groups of women who do not fit their criteria. This point will be examined further following a discussion of the bisexual women’s stories.

This section has used the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 3 to examine the contribution that different lesbian identities make to the regulation of sexuality in society, which, in turn, contributes to the maintenance of social order in society. This examination has shown that while some identities may offer the potential to resist a hetero/homo split, they all ultimately reinforce this divide, either through the straightforward acceptance of sexual categories, or through the reproduction of fixed identities, whether they have a natural or political basis. Within this context the bisexual women’s stories examined in the last chapter pose a greater challenge to the hetero/homo split by refusing to conform to this sexual dichotomy. As illustrated in these stories, this challenge has been strongly contested by women involved in lesbian communities, which in turn validates the paradoxes involved in claiming a lesbian identity. Thus, it is suggested that although claiming a lesbian identity may be a political necessity, it must be acknowledged that this has self-defeating consequences to the extent that it reinforces the supremacy and authenticity of heterosexuality. This conclusion supports the argument put forward by queer theory that terms such as ‘queer’ should be used because they go beyond the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy and embrace all sexualities that signal a resistance to the regime of ‘normalisation’.

12.4.2. Assessing the implications for feminism

One of the major points to emerge from the current analysis concerns the impact of feminism on women who have relationships with other women. As illustrated, this has had both a positive and negative impact depending on the particular version of lesbian identity adopted by individual women. The advent of feminism provided some women with the ‘tools’ to examine the relationship between sexuality and society, and ultimately, to make changes to their personal lives. Conversely, feminism denied the validity of some women’s experiences, effectively silencing them. This is because their
understanding of lesbianism either contradicted or was incompatible with the feminist version of lesbianism. In the case of the Black lesbians, feminism expected them to prioritise one aspect of their identity over other aspects which they considered to be equally important. These findings are valuable for they illuminate the internal politics of lesbian communities and the way in which category boundaries are reinforced; in addition they address broader questions about the future of feminism at both a political and theoretical level.

The findings from this study raises questions about the ability of feminism, at both a political and theoretical level, to adequately address and incorporate differences between women. The treatment of lesbian and bisexual women who do not conform to a feminist definition of lesbianism, reflects a contradiction that exists within feminism in general. The project of feminism is to understand theoretically the experiences of all women and the reasons why they came to be systematically oppressed; while politically the objective is to destroy this system. In order to achieve these objectives, feminism needs to appeal to every woman and hence, as discussed in Chapter 3, the feminist conceptualisation of women as an oppressed class living under a system of patriarchy. However, as Ramazanoglu (1989) points out, this assumes firstly that women are an homogenous group and secondly it ignores the way in which some women, due to factors such as class, race or geographical location, have greater power than men. My own findings, to the extent that they examine the internal politics of lesbianism during the 30 years since the re-emergence of feminism, reach similar conclusions. That is, feminist-lesbians, under the guise of furthering the feminist agenda, have tried to impose a hegemonic control over the meaning and practice of lesbianism. However, as the analysis of the data shows, this has not been achieved. Ironically, as the findings show, this attempt to control the meaning and practice of lesbianism, has resulted in a rejection of the feminist conceptualisation of lesbianism. As with feminism in general, lesbian feminism does not speak for all women who have same sex relationships, nor does it allow all women a voice. Thus, my study contributes to the existing debate about the adequacy of feminism theory to speak about the experiences of women as a social category (Barrett and Phillips, 1982; Nicholson, 1990). The publication of books by Black women, lesbians who identify as butch and femme, young women, married women and bisexual women is testimony to the theoretical and political problems facing feminism. It is this issue that is addressed in Phelan’s (1993) work and endorsed by my own findings. Phelan writes that “being lesbian’ provides a basis for mutual
recognition, but it does not guarantee it" (1993:12), a claim endorsed by the earlier work of Butler (1990), De Lauretis (1991) and Fuss (1989, 1991). While beyond the remit of the present study, this finding links to wider sociological concerns about the ability of theory per se, as a generalised statement, to speak for the experiences of large groups of people. In short, my study addresses the debate between modernist and postmodernist explanations of social behaviour.

Leaving aside this observation, the problematic use of the term 'lesbian' has political as well as theoretical implications. At a political level acknowledging that a single definition of the term lesbian does not exist, and that it is not desirable to impose one, could provide the starting point for coalition politics between groups of lesbians. This would be based on an open recognition of difference which would be regarded as a source of strength rather than something to be 'stamped out' through conforming to a particular set of rules and regulations. Such an alliance of different groups would not try to impose or demand semantic unity over the term lesbian, but instead would provide an alliance, a united front, opposed to the normalising regime of heterosexuality and the institutions that create and sustain it. However, bearing in mind earlier conclusions, it may be necessary to move beyond the term lesbian in order to engage successfully in coalition politics. At the very least, this movement would have to include those women who identify as bisexual. It is this form of political action which inspired the emergence of queer politics in the 1980s in America. To summarise, this section has looked at some of theoretical and political implications of my research. These implications have a relevance for the future direction of sociological research in this area, which is discussed in the next section.

12.5 Implications for sexual identity formation models

The final section of Chapter 4 discussed the specific research areas to be examined in this thesis. While many of these research questions have already been answered, this section examines the contribution that my findings make to a sociological understanding of the development and maintenance of sexual identity. In particular, this section focuses on the implications of the findings for the sexual identity formation models which are used in sociology to examine the development and maintenance of homosexual identity. This issue was explored in Chapter 4 in relation to the sociological understanding of homosexuality and bisexuality and also the creation and production of 'coming out' stories.
In Chapter 4 it was noted that it was important to distinguish between models which conceptualised the development of a homosexual identity as a one-off process (Dank, 1971; Hooker, 1967) and often reinforced essentialist notions of identity with more sophisticated models which adopted a social constructionist perspective (Plummer, 1975; Coleman, 1982; Hencken and O'Dowd, 1977; McDonald, 1982; Richardson, 1981; Schafer, 1976; Troidan 1988). These models acknowledged the different stages undergone in the development and maintenance of a homosexual identity. This type of symbolic interactionist approach to research recognised that ‘coming out’ is a developmental process involving different ‘milestones’ along the way and focused on the role of society and community in this process. However, it should be noted that despite their sophistication, they continued to endorse the belief that the development and maintenance of a stable homosexual identity was the end goal. That is, sexual identity was conceptualised as a developmental, linear, sequential, unidirectional and goal-orientated process. In relation to my own findings, the focus on differences between women indicate that while these models are useful for explaining some versions of lesbian identity, they need to be reviewed for others. For example, the stories examined in Chapters 6 and 7, inasmuch as they endorse an essentialist view of lesbian identity are adequately explained through these models. In particular, Plummer’s sexual identity model was found to be useful for explaining certain aspects of the stories in these chapters, notably the type of story told and the development and maintenance of a lesbian identity within the story.

However, the problems associated with these models for people who identify as bisexual were also discussed in Chapter 4. Rust (1993), building on previous research (Blumstein and Schwartz (1974, 1976, 1977, 1990; Klein, Sepekoff and Wolf; 1985, LaTorre and Wendenburg 1983, Loewenstien, 1985; Nicholas 1989), questioned the ability of such models to adequately explain bisexual identity as anything other than a stepping-stone towards homosexuality. As illustrated in the previous chapter, women who identify as bisexual have been at the receiving end of similar views from lesbians. Furthermore, my own analysis of these stories supports Rust’s assertions that it is necessary to develop new models that are able to account for a variety of sexual identities which stand in opposition to heterosexuality. These models need to take into account the changes and transformations that occur in sexual identity. This will involve the dismissal of a fixed and stable identity, be it heterosexual or homosexual, regardless
of whether or not it endorses essentialism. As illustrated in my study, identities that limit sexual behaviour to the gender or sex of a partner can be restrictive and do not accurately reflect experience and feelings.

However, Rust's assertion that the term bisexual will be used increasingly by women as a way of reflecting the changing nature of their sexual identity and practices found only limited validation in my own findings. That is, while a number of women talked about the way in which a move from a lesbian to a bisexual identity was a more accurate reflection of who they were, it is difficult to be conclusive on this matter without further research in this area. Despite this caveat regarding Rust's findings, it is possible to extend her analysis of the inadequacy of these models to those women whose stories were examined in Chapter 9 and 10. As with the bisexual women, these stories are not retrospective reconstructions of lives which culminate in the discovery of an authentic and inner lesbian identity. They do reproduce a fixed and stable notion of lesbian identity, but it is from a political perspective. Hence, these stories are about transformation and changes to sexual identities. These stories, together with the work of Rust illustrate the need for new models of identity formation and new ways of conducting research and analysing data. Data analysis will be discussed first, beginning with a brief reminder of Plummer's (1995) analysis of the social production of stories, discussed at some length in Chapter 5.

12.5.1 The social production of data

In his book *Telling Sexual Stories*, Plummer identifies three groups of people involved in the production of a story: the producers, the coaxers and the consumers. As pointed out in Chapter 5, this understanding of the production of stories shifts the emphasis away from seeing a story as representative of an individual life to focus on the social production and consumption of the story. I would suggest that this understanding of the social production of the stories raises some pertinent issues when applied to the data (the sexual stories) collected by researchers for the purpose of developing sexual identity models on the development of homosexual identity. Researchers through the selection of particular questions, the ordering of questions, the very wording of the questions help to produce a particular account or story about the development of sexual identity. Later still the process of analysis, imposes an order on the data, which ultimately results in the logical and linear sequencing of events in a person's life.
Collectively, these individual stories result in the production of sexual identity models, examples of which have already been discussed in this thesis.

While not wishing to dismiss the valuable contribution that such models have made to our sociological understanding of homosexual identity, it needs to be recognised that these models owe as much to the assumptions guiding the researchers as they do to those telling their stories. Of particular importance is the assumption that the stories told by individuals can be understood as linear and goal-orientated. Within this framework, a homosexual identity will always be viewed as the end-goal and a bisexual identity will be regarded as a stepping-stone. Guided by these assumptions stories will continue to be produced which confirm this understanding of homosexual identity.

However, as sociologists, we are capable of recognising that stories told about sexual identity are a product of the wider social culture and the social knowledge available to individuals. Therefore, if we live in a culture that endorses an essentialist view of sexual identity, such a story will be reproduced during the research process. Furthermore, if we live in a society that dichotomises sexuality into heterosexuality and homosexuality, this will likewise be reproduced during the research process. We need to apply this understanding to our own work, that is, we need to be reflexive about the assumptions that guide our research. This involves going beyond the current understanding of sexual identity to focus, queer theory urges, on the plurality, ambiguity and contingent nature of sexual identity. Instead of focusing on the production of a 'journey of discovery', we need to focus on incidents, behaviours and attitudes that do not neatly fit into established traditional sexual categories. We need to ask new questions that are able to explore these issues in a way that does not simply categorise them as milestones on the way to something more authentic.

I am suggesting that as researchers we need to assess the role that we play in the production of stories by assessing the pre-conceived ideas that we bring to the research process. This will involve an acknowledgement that the models we use contribute to the maintenance of a heterosexual-homosexual dichotomy, which, as argued throughout this thesis, contributes to the control and regulation of all sexualities in society. The starting point for the development of new models would be the recognition that sexual identities are capable of change and transformation and, furthermore, that this may involve multiple changes or transformation in a lifetime, depending on situation and
circumstances. In short, the stories that are told are never over, never complete: there is always another chapter to be written. Thus as researchers, we are simply finding out where people locate themselves at a particular point in time. This in turn raises doubt over the ability of current models to fully explain stories which seem to endorse a goal-orientated process. Instead of viewing a stable sexual identity as the end goal, it may be more appropriate to view it as the point at which people currently locate their sexual identity, with the proviso that this may change for some people. For example, it is conceivable that some of the stories explored in the category bisexual, if they had been told a few years earlier, would have appeared in one of the lesbian categories. If these issues are not taken into account when conducting research, the sociology of homosexuality will continue to play a role in the maintenance of the current sexual order.

12.5.2 Destabilising sexual identity

So, what would such models of sexual identity look like? In attempting to answer this question, I will draw on my analysis of the last three stories examined in this thesis. These are the feminist-inspired stories, the black women’s stories and the stories told by women who identify as bisexual, for it is these stories that are not easily explained through current sexual identity models. Each of these stories challenges current sexual identity models which identify childhood feelings of difference or unhappiness as an early indication of what is to come later; that is, the discovery or development of a homosexual identity. As shown in the feminist-inspired stories, the majority of these women did not question their sexuality in childhood and in due course developed both sexual relationships with men and an established heterosexual identity. For these women, the personal questioning of sexual identity occurred as a result of contact or exposure to ideological beliefs (feminism) which challenged their assumptions about the ‘normality’ and ‘naturalness’ of heterosexuality. Thus, these women do not talk about a logical, sequential development towards a lesbian identity, but instead talk about transformation and change to an already established sexual identity, a transformation which was contingent on their exposure to feminism. While it is impossible to know, it is debatable whether these women would have transformed their sexual identity without this exposure to feminism. However, this assertion must be treated with some caution given the long history of dividing homosexuals into the categories: ‘real’ and ‘pseudo’. For these women, as with the other women included in this analysis, living and practising a lesbian identity is an accurate reflection of their
beliefs and feelings. This finding demonstrates, however, the plurality of lesbian identity and experience, and the inability of existing models to adequately explain the experiences of all women.

A similar case can be made for women who currently identify as bisexual, but who may have in the past identified as lesbian and possibly before that as heterosexual. Again, women talk about the processes which led them to re-evaluate their sexual identity. They do not construct these processes as a natural progression towards bisexuality, but in terms of incidents or events which led them to question whether or not their current sexual identity accurately reflected their experiences and feelings. The experience of bisexual women and feminist women highlight the inadequacy of current sexual identity models. We need to develop sexual identity models which acknowledge change and the possible temporary nature of some sexual identity labels. Based on my own findings such a model would look like this:

- The development, maintenance and practice of a particular sexual identity, be it homosexual, heterosexual or bisexual. This stage might incorporate many aspects of previous models, for example the concept of 'milestones'.
- An event, incident, or exposure to a different belief system causes people to re-evaluate the way in which they have labelled their sexual identity.
- This leads to a transformation or change in sexual identity which take account of events that happened in the previous stage.
- The development, maintenance and practice of a new sexual identity.

In keeping with other models, this model acknowledges that people may not experience all these different events. Indeed, as my own and previous research suggests, many people develop and maintain the same sexual identity throughout life. However, unlike previous models, this model is able to account for people whose sexual identity may change once, twice or many times over the course of their lives. In assessing the validity of this model, the limitation of the research methodology, which is discussed at the beginning of this chapter, must be taken into account. This caveat notwithstanding, I would suggest that this model will make a valuable contribution to the sociological understanding of sexual identity because it explains change and does not presume an end-goal, that is, a fixed and stable sexual identity. It will also provide the basis for future research.
12.6 Future direction of research

To conclude, this thesis contributes to the sociological understanding of the development, maintenance, practice and meaning of identity among women who identify as lesbian or bisexual. The study has focused on differences which exist between women and which result in the production of different versions of lesbian identity. In turn, these differences have exposed the practices of power associated with different identities and their effects on community politics. In so doing, this study has highlighted the need to develop a theoretical framework which moves beyond the confines of symbolic interactionism to include the gender implications of feminism and the concerns of queer theory which direct our attention to the social construction of all sexualities. This study has also highlighted the extent of the problems which feminist theory and practice face in trying to explain diversity and difference between women.

Bearing in mind these points, and those raised in relation to the limitations of this study, any future research in this area must be theoretically and empirically aware of the way in which differences between women effect the construction of sexual identity. In relation to the substance of that research, there are a number of possibilities. Given that this research has not examined the consumption of these stories, future research could examine this issue through qualitative interviews and focus groups with women who identify as lesbian or bisexual. Similarly building on the awareness of difference, and bearing in mind the theoretical implications of queer theory, future research could involve a comparison between women who identify as lesbian bisexual and heterosexual. This would enable sociological research on sexuality to move beyond the ‘deviant ghetto’ and thus become an integral part of the sociological project. Finally, as demonstrated in the previous section, there is a need for continuing research on the sociological models we use to explain the development of sexual identity. This should include looking at the development of a heterosexual identity, as well as other non-heterosexual identities.
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