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Lesbian and bisexual women's experiences with dating and romantic relationships during adolescence

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**Lesbian and bisexual women's experiences with dating and romantic relationships during
adolescence**

by

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A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Psychology (Counseling Psychology)

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the interpersonal experiences of lesbian and bisexual women, particularly their experiences with dating and romantic relationships during adolescence and currently as adults. Ten women (ages 18-24) were recruited for the study and the primary method of data collection was an in-depth interview. The data from the study were organized into three main themes which were important in understanding how the women have experienced dating as members of the LGBT community. These themes were a) beginning to know self and early identification as a queer woman b) navigating queer relationships and c) the process of transitioning from adolescent to adult relationships. Limitations of this study include the small sample size and restricted age range of the participants. Future researchers should use both qualitative and quantitative research methods to understand the experiences of this unique population. For counselors and therapists working with lesbian, bisexual, or queer women, it is anticipated that these findings can provide some background and insight into the lives of these women and in turn, help to influence interventions and strategies for working with them in a therapeutic setting.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to explore the interpersonal experiences of lesbian and bisexual women, particularly their experiences with dating and romantic relationships during adolescence. Using a phenomenological approach, I explored with a sample of lesbian and bisexual women their perceptions of the nature and impact of these earlier experiences on their current lives, especially in the domain of romantic relationships. It is anticipated that the knowledge gained could lead to new insights and inform not only researchers, but also those that interact with lesbian and bisexual women such as educators, parents, teachers and counselors.

This chapter begins with an overview of the background of the study, followed by the problem statement, purpose of the study and the research questions. The chapter concludes with information regarding the significance of the study and definitions of terminology used.

Background of the study

While it is impossible to know exactly how many LGBT people there are in the US, various studies estimate that 4-10% of the population identifies as non-heterosexual (Fay, Turner, Klassen, Gagnon, 1989; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, 1953). In addition, compared to previous cohorts greater numbers of LGBT people are coming out at younger ages. In a cross-sectional study, Grov, Bimbi, Nanín, & Parsons (2006) found that, among women, the median age of coming out to others was 16.87 for 16-24 year olds and 20.11 for 25-34 year olds compared to mid- to late 20s for older cohorts (34-55+). Recent US Census (2010) data reports there are approximately 38 million 15-24 year olds living in the US. Thus there may be more than 1 million LGBT youth in the US.

Regarding LGBT youth, the majority of the current research literature is on the topics of homophobia and bullying, sexual promiscuity and safer sex, and homelessness and rejection. There has been a general lack of time, energy, and research geared toward the everyday, mundane experiences of sexual minority youth, such as dating, identity development, expanding interests, and increasing autonomy from parents. This discrepancy is problematic because, as Diamond (1999) notes, “the average sexual-minority youth spends far more time ruminating about love and romance than about suicide, hate crimes, or homelessness” (p.86).

Adolescence is an important time for growing and developing in many different arenas. It is during this time that youth increasingly separate from their parents and rely more heavily on their friends (Berscheid, Snyder & Omoto, 1989). Puberty is a period of rapid hormonal changes and along with these changes many adolescents find themselves thinking about sex and increasingly becoming romantically attracted to others. Sexual orientation and romantic relationships are areas that see a lot of growth during this period, with the majority of adolescents becoming preoccupied with romantic feelings during this time (Medora, Goldstein, & Von der Hellen, 1994 and Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990). Mature patterns of romantic social interaction do not spontaneously occur during adulthood, but rather emerge gradually with experience and maturation acquired during adolescence (Furman & Flanagan, 1997; Laursen & Jensen-Campbell, 1996). One way that this maturation process occurs is by simple trial and error, having the opportunity to date and ‘practice’ dating. For many adolescents, this is also the time of increased self-acknowledgement (and later acknowledgement to others) of same-sex interests.

Identity development is the process of coming to realize, accept and integrate different aspects of one’s identities. As one progresses through the gay and lesbian identity development

process, the desire to socialize with and date same-sex partners becomes increasingly strong. However, many youth may not have the opportunity to date same-sex partners due to a variety of reasons, including fears of disclosure or lack of available mates. These reasons are discussed in more detail later in this text; it is important to note here, however that due to the important functions and benefits of these earlier adolescent relationships on later adult relationships the individual may be lacking in some key experiences that contribute in important ways to development.

It is important to have an understanding of the developmental processes involved in the romantic relationships of lesbian and bisexual female adolescents and how they are the same or different from such processes in straight female adolescents. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there is certainly a difference in the time line if not in the 'stages'. Lesbian and bisexual women may begin to engage in romantic relationships with same-sex partners later than heterosexual women begin their experiences with romantic partners. It is important to understand what kind of influence that time difference has. In other words, even if the behaviors follow the same pattern or order of occurrence it is not clear if they are happening in the same age ranges. If not, what influence does that difference have? If key developmental experiences are experienced later among lesbian and gay women, they may lag behind their same-age heterosexual counterparts in the areas of self-efficacy and self-confidence in dating skills, expectations of future relationships, and the general social development of lesbian and bisexual women. Equally important is how the women themselves feel about their experiences, the impact they feel the experiences have had on their lives, and how they have come to understand and integrate resulting thoughts and feelings into their identity. Therefore, this study seeks to be a platform for

lesbian and bisexual women to express their experiences, thoughts, and feelings regarding the influence of their adolescent experiences on adult dating and romantic relationships.

Problem Statement

Adolescence is the 'usual' time for greatest exploration and growth in romantic relationships, the time to learn about self and others by dating and experimenting. Further, earlier relationships form the foundation for later adult relationships. Lesbian and bisexual women may not have the same opportunities for this developmental process as their heterosexual counterparts. However, there is little information about the experiences of lesbian and bisexual women to begin to understand or draw conclusions about the potential discrepancy between the social opportunities in adolescence of lesbian and bisexual versus heterosexual women and how such discrepancies influence adult romantic relationships.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to explore the interpersonal experiences of lesbian and bisexual women, particularly their experiences with dating and romantic relationships during adolescence and in the present. This qualitative study has served to shed light on both the developmental process of engaging in romantic relationships as well as the thoughts and opinions of sexual minority women with regards to their own self-confidence and self-efficacy in terms of dating and romantic relationships. Regarding their experiences, I was interested in how they have come to understand them, the meaning they have attached to them, and how they have incorporated them into their identity. A further goal was exploring how interpersonal experiences during adolescence affect interpersonal experiences in adulthood. This research investigated the interpersonal needs of lesbian and bisexual women from their own point of view. For counselors

and therapists working with lesbians and/or bisexual women, it is anticipated that these findings can provide some background and insight into the lives of these women and in turn help to influence interventions and strategies for working with them in a therapeutic setting. In seeking to understand these experiences, the study addressed five research questions:

Research questions

1. How do the women perceive themselves in terms of dating skills?
2. What do the women feel they needed in order to be more prepared or feel more comfortable with their dating skills?
3. How are the experiences in adolescent relationships, platonic and romantic, impactful with regards to self-esteem and dating self-efficacy of lesbian and bisexual women?
4. What are the experiences of women with pursuing and maintaining a long-term committed relationship?
5. How do women feel about their prospects of finding and maintaining a long-term committed relationship, if so desired?

Rationale for the qualitative approach

Qualitative research methods are a valuable means of gaining in-depth knowledge about people and their experiences. Qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world by studying people in their natural environment while attempting to make sense of and interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). A naturalistic, qualitative approach to research allows participants' experiences to be portrayed in their own words.

Acceptance of qualitative research projects is increasing among academics in psychology (Azar, 2008), and a recent article indicates that within the fields of clinical and counseling psychology, there is a need for well-designed qualitative research projects and that qualitative research dissertations are increasingly common. As a graduate student conducting a qualitative research project, I am committed to utilizing research methods that will engage respondents in conversations such that a more complete exploration of their experiences can occur. I actively worked to search for patterns and themes in data gathered through semi-structured interviews. Creswell (1998) states that the use of qualitative research “takes the reader [or researcher] into multiple dimensions of a problem or issue and displays it in all of its complexity” (p. 15). The study sought clear, thick, and rich descriptions to capture the experiences of the women recruited for this study.

Significance of the study

This project is significant for several reasons. First, it explores two areas for which limited research exists: everyday aspects of being a lesbian or bisexual woman and romantic relationships during adolescence. Further, many of the studies that have been conducted use extant literature or theories which were not developed on these populations. Secondly, as many people are coming out at earlier stages in life than in the past their experiences and needs may be different from previous cohorts of LGBT persons. Thus I am interested in studying both the developmental process of engaging in romantic relationships as well as the thoughts and opinions of sexual minority women with regards to their own self-confidence and self-efficacy in terms of dating and romantic relationships.

Definition of terms

Coming out – To openly declare one's homosexuality; usually happens in stages.

Queer - An umbrella term to refer to all LGBTQ people. Often used as a “reclaimed” word by younger individuals; may be viewed as derogatory by older people.

Self-efficacy – One’s belief in his or her ability to succeed in a particular situation.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I will provide an overview of research regarding the normative tasks faced by adolescents in the social domain, i.e., to move from relationships that are centered around family to relationships that are centered around friends, and eventually, romantic partners. During adolescence, youth learn how to establish close relationships with peers; their success in forming such relationships has implications for relationships during adulthood. Social skills learned during adolescence form the foundation for later adult relationships; if they are not learned during adolescence, the individual may be at a disadvantage in establishing adult relationships. The consequences for self-esteem and mental health of positive and negative social experiences during adolescence will be described. In the second portion of this section, I will turn to the special issues that face lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth in the domain of social relationships during adolescence. Cass's (1984) model of gay/lesbian identify development will be summarized. Research on the effects of homophobia and internalized homophobia on the social development of LGBT youth will be summarized.

Social Development and the Function of Relationships

The period of adolescence is a time for developing and forming relationships of increasing intimacy and importance (Hartup 1996, Collins & Laursen 1999, Collins & Sroufe 1999) and of learning social skills needed later (Goswick & Jones, 1982). This is seen most clearly as adolescents begin to develop and rely more heavily on their peer relationships than their parents for support and guidance; if something upsets them they usually turn to a peer

before a parent. Berscheid et al (1989) found that 36% of young adults considered a friendship to be their closest, deepest current relationship and another study found that fifth graders spent 35% of their time with family, but high school students only spent 14% of their time with family (Larson et al, 1996).

Further, Giordano, Cernkovich, Groat, Pugh, & Swinford (1998) found that the level of intimacy or attachment in adolescent relationships had a positive association with the level of intimacy or attachment of adult friendships. La Greca & Harrison (2005) found that having friendships with more positive qualities was linked with less social anxiety and additionally that negative qualities of these friendships were associated with both depression and social anxiety.

Friends are able to provide companionship, stimulation, sense of belonging, and emotional support (Heaven, 2001). Claes (1992) and Blythe & Perry (1990) found that girls expect more from their friendships and accordingly their level of intimacy and attachment is higher than boys. Girls specifically tended to have a focus on affective areas such as sharing of secrets and processing feelings. In terms of emotional health, research reports indicate that a strong relationship exists between having a good friend and psychological health. Friends generally share interests and opinions and thus can validate one's feelings. Multiple studies found that having or even thinking of a good friend lowered stress levels (Seeman, Singer, Ryff, Love, & Levy-Storms, 2002 and Smith, Ruiz, & Uchino, 2004).

Friendships, however, are not the only type of relationships that adolescents have and need to learn from. Romantic relationships also play an important role in social development and 80% of 18 year olds report having been in a romantic relationship (Carver, Joyner, & Udry 1999). Miller and Benson (1999) outlined a developmental trajectory of intimate relationships. They proposed that dating follows a progression from casual associations to a steady

relationship, with potential outcome of permanence (i.e. marriage). Similarly, Knapp (1978) described a stage model of relationship progression. He surmised that relationships escalate in five stages: initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding. Initiating is the first time meeting someone, experimenting is learning more information about a potential mate. These first two stages are thought of as more scripted and the conversation is often more superficial. The third stage is intensifying and marks the beginning of relationship stabilization. The fourth stage, integrating, marks a period when partners begin to use “we” language and the fifth stage, bonding, was typically seen as the public acknowledgement and permanence of a relationship, such as marriage. Recently Fox, Warber, and Makstaller (2013) replicated this research and found support for the model even in the current technological context of Facebook. In fact Facebook seemed to add a component to the integrating stage, as they found that becoming “Facebook official” showed a heightened level of commitment from the involved partners. In development and extension of the Romantic Competence Interview, Shulman et al (2011) found that romantic relationships in later adolescence is characterized by greater intimacy and depth and further that increased relationship competence is associated with higher relationship quality. In other words, the more skilled the adolescent was in having relationships, the better the relationship fared. Gallotti, Kozberg, and Appleman (1990) found a relationship between an adolescent’s age and the way he/she views potential romantic partners: as age progressed appraisals were based more on mutuality of feelings and less on physical appearance or personality and there was a greater emphasis on the long-term aspects of a relationship. In other words, as adolescents matured so did their romantic relationships. These earlier, less mature relationships do serve important roles, however, and have long lasting effects.

Impact of early relationships on later relationships

Coleman (1961) and Sullivan (1953) noted the salience of peer acceptance and companionship during the teen years. Romantic relationships are formed for both sexual and nonsexual reasons such as social desirability, status among peers, sexual behaviors, pressure from friends, validation by partner, and/or security (Miller & Benson, 1999). Having a boyfriend or girlfriend can be the 'thing' to do in terms of group norms and adolescents may feel special when receiving affection from their partners. Regardless of the reasons romantic relationships are started, they do serve as a way for adolescents to learn such things as what they would like or not like in a partner, social standards regarding sexual expression, what is attractive or not attractive to them, and what partners find attractive or not attractive. These are all components of what Bukowski, Sippola, and Brender (1993) propose as a healthy sense of sexuality.

Not having these early relationships or having negative experiences from these relationships can also have an impact. With regards to not having romantic relationships during adolescence, the important question is why there have been no relationships. If the adolescent is choosing not to have romantic relationships, while there may be some implications with regards to social competence; it may not be as detrimental as an inability to find or form romantic relationships. In other words, there is a difference in one choosing not to date and in one not being considered as a desired partner (e.g. not attractive). Romantic difficulties are correlated with higher rates of truancy, depression, and substance use among adolescents (Diamond, 1999). Social rejection is correlated with a number of negative outcomes, including early school withdrawal, delinquency, and psychopathological symptoms in adulthood (Sunwolf & Leets, 2003). These symptoms may include depression and/or low self-esteem.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem problems may be either a cause or a consequence of negative social experiences during adolescence. Merriam-Webster (2010) defines self-esteem as a confidence and satisfaction in oneself. Low self-esteem has been found to be a factor in many negative behaviors or feelings such as drug use and abuse (Blinn, 1987; Kavas, 2009), depression (Moksnes, Moljord, Espnes, & Byrne, 2010; Risch, Buba, Birk, Morina, Steffens, & Stangier, 2010) and suicide (Greenberg et al., 1992; McGee, Williams, & Nada-Raja, 2001). Adolescents with low self-esteem are often self-conscious and overly vulnerable to criticism or rejection, which can become cyclical in nature and these adolescents may also be quicker to interpret ambiguity in a negative fashion. As many social situations have some amount of ambiguity this can be particularly problematic. For instance, Curtis and Miller (1986) conducted a study wherein participants were told that a stranger had been told either positive or negative information about them and thus the participants could expect the stranger to like them or dislike them. The participants who (erroneously) thought the stranger would dislike them acted in such a way (defensive and standoffish) that the stranger actually DID dislike them. Thus their expectation of being disliked affected their behavior and created the unwanted (and unnecessary) reality of being disliked. Additionally, Rice (2005) noted that adolescents with low self-esteem may have poor social adjustment or may be “socially invisible.” For girls who need social closeness and intimacy, being “socially invisible” could feel like the ultimate blow to their self-esteem and feelings of self-worth.

Impact of low self-esteem on dating/relationships

An individual who is lacking social skills may not know how to interact with people or read social cues. Individuals with a poor self-image may feel that they are not liked, they may underestimate their prospects with others and/or they may not try to become liked for fear of dismissal (Kiesler & Baral, 1970 as cited in Miller & Perlman, 2008). For instance, some characteristics of flirting include a long gaze or touching the prospective partner (Koeppel, Montagne-Miller, O’Hair, & Cody, 1993), however someone lacking social skills may misinterpret these behaviors or miss the meaning altogether. In terms of making the ‘first move’ or approaching a potential partner, the individual may feel that the social risk of involvement with others (i.e. rejection) is greater than the potential benefits.

Not only can low self-esteem keep people from entering relationships, but it also correlates with various aspects of the relationships as well. Brown, Andrews, Harris, Adler, and Bridge (1986) found that women with low self-esteem who did not have a close support person were more susceptible to depression. Many studies in the marital and dating literature show that low self-esteem influences physical abuse (Deal and Wampler 1986; Goldstein and Rosenbaum 1985; Walker 1979). In a study of 505 college students (298 females), Burke, Stets, and Pirog-Good (1988) found that both perpetrators and victims of abuse or negative behaviors endorsed items related to having low self-esteem and these same individuals also rated higher levels of acceptance of aggressive behaviors.

LGBT Youth and Relationships

LGBT identity development

Identity development is the process of coming to realize, accept and integrate different aspects of one's identities. There are many different theories which describe the development of a gay and lesbian identity (see Dank, 1971; Cass, 1984; Coleman, 1989; Troiden, 1989), but the most widely accepted was developed by Vivienne Cass. The Cass identity model outlines six discrete stages experienced by individuals who successfully come out: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. Identity confusion refers to initial recognition or questioning of being lesbian or gay. Due to the "heteronormative" view of US society (i.e., the belief that heterosexuality is the normal sexual orientation and that sexual and marital relations are only fitting between a man and a woman), many individuals may have negative thoughts about lesbian or gay people and this stage may include internal conflicts or shame, known as internalized homophobia. Identity comparison refers to acceptance of the possibility of being lesbian or gay. At this stage, people may begin to think about what being gay or lesbian will mean for their future. For instance, thinking about the loss of 'straight' privileges, such as getting married and/or having children may occur. It is also possible that some may begin to think about which parts of their 'straight' identity they will keep or conversely which parts of a lesbian or gay identity they will adopt or not adopt. For instance, one may have the belief that all lesbians have a more masculine look (e.g. short hair or not wearing skirts or dresses) and may or may not want to adopt such a look. Identity tolerance refers to acceptance of a probable gay or lesbian identity and the realization that he or she is not the only one who does not identify as heterosexual. At this stage, one usually seeks out other gay or lesbian people, role models, and community. Identity acceptance refers to the acceptance

of a gay or lesbian identity. During this stage, one may begin to have more 'normalized' views of being gay or lesbian and will seek greater contact within the gay and lesbian community. Identity pride refers to acceptance of and preference for one's gay or lesbian identity. This aspect of the identity becomes most salient and there is generally a desire to 'come out' and let everyone know one's orientation. There may also be more separation from 'heterosexual' people or communities as the person continues to immerse in gay or lesbian culture. Anger and frustration may be felt and expressed towards heterosexism and/or societal inequalities. The final stage is identity synthesis which refers to integrating the gay or lesbian identity with other identities, such that being gay or lesbian is simply another part of the self instead of the whole self.

Self-acceptance of a minority sexual orientation is associated with positive adjustment (Gonsiorek & Rudolph, 1991) and has been found to buffer against the negative effects of victimization (Hershberger and D'Augelli, 1995). However, not all individuals reach this positive level of self-acceptance. Beginning to internalize and believe negative messages about LGBT people as well as receiving the societal messages of heterosexuality being 'normal', may lead many LGBT people to have some amount of internalized homophobia. Internalized homophobia has been found to correlate with a number of factors such as depression, self-esteem and loneliness (Williamson, 2000).

Self-esteem

Many sexual minority youth are subjected to physical and verbal harm as well as rejection and isolation. Several researchers have concluded that the social isolation and stigmatization gay and lesbian youths are subjected to is related to LGBT people developing

lower self-esteem (Dempsey, 1994; Grossman & Kerner, 1998; Rotheram-Borus & Fernandez, 1995; Savin-Williams, 1990, 1995; Vare & Norton, 1998). One specific way this happens is evidenced in peer relations; as the amount of derogatory words their peers used increased so did the negative feelings felt by LGBT youth (Jordan, Vaughan, & Woodworth 1998). Internalized homophobia also has negative psychological effects including its impact on self-esteem, which youth may have trouble disregarding (Savin-Williams, 1994).

Friendships

One need that friends meet for each other during adolescence is mutual support, simply by being there for each other. Being there may be in the form of support during volatility of self-image and separation from parental influence, as well as helping create a sense of authority, “ourselves against the world” (Benton 1975). Many youth begin to form larger groups or cliques that engender a strong sense of identity or self. Yet many LGBT youth worry about both their lack of close friendships and losing the friends they do have due to their public disclosure of their sexual orientation (Anhalt & Morris, 1998; D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Grossman & Kerner, 1998; Hart & Heimberg, 2001). These losses can be extremely problematic for LGBT adolescents as it is known that many LGBT adults turn to close friends to compensate for losses in familial support (Nardi & Sherrod, 1994).

Romantic relationships

Diamond, Savin-Williams, and Dubé (1999) analyzed the motives, characteristics, and functions of romantic relationships in adolescence. For instance, they highlight that it is not often that a sexual minority youth has the option of asking out a same-sex peer, but when those

opportunities do arise the sexual minority youth may feel a sense of normality for engaging in ‘traditional’ teenage behaviors. LGBT adolescents can then share their stories and experiences as well as get feedback alongside their other friends. Imagine being able to talk about the cute girl who remembered your name or better yet that you went on a date with; these are the types of things that many LBGT youth do not get to engage in with their peers at the lunch table.

Research has shown that LGBT persons generally place a larger emphasis on friendships because often they are no longer able to rely on their family (Nardi & Sherrod, 1994). Thus, being able to engage in these same types of activities will help the youth to feel included, which, in turn, can increase self-esteem and feelings of connectedness. Most LGBT youth deal with both same and other sex attractions (Diamond, 1999) and thus LGBT youth may also engage in heterosexual dating which may help to confirm or solidify their sexual preferences (Furman & Shaffer, 1999) as well as help them develop some social skills as noted earlier; however, the first positive same-sex relationship has a significant impact on self-esteem and self-confidence (Savin-Williams, 1998).

Many problems may arise for LGBT youth in relation to romantic relationships. As strong, positive peer relationships and specifically the interpersonal skills developed from such relationships are directly related to the quality of later romantic relationships, those LGBT youth who may have had deficits with peers will also likely have social deficits with romantic partners. This may particularly be the case for gender-nonconforming adolescents or those who had earlier awareness of their same-sex attractions (Diamond, 1999). For instance, a female that adopted more of a masculine appearance may be picked on or ostracized more by peers.

In general, LGBT youth may have low expectations for romance satisfaction due to stereotypes or media portrayals of same-sex relationships being short-lived, unimportant or

superficial (Diamond et al, 1999; Diamond & Lucas, 2004). They may also believe themselves to be unattractive and undesirable due in large part to (internalized) homophobia and stigmatization (Hart & Heimberg, 2001); repeatedly hearing negative messages, whether directly about oneself or indirectly about the group with one identifies, can impact one's psyche given enough time. Finally LGBT youth may also feel difficulty with regards to their prospects for later relationships. In a study of 125 youth (60 sexual minority), Diamond & Lucas (2004) found that sexual minority youth felt significantly less control ($M= 2.7, SD = 1.0$) than heterosexual youth ($M=3.3, SD=0.8$) in their romantic lives. Sexual minority youth also had more fears about finding the desired type of romantic relationship ($M=3.4, SD=1.6$) compared to heterosexual youth ($M=2.5, SD = 1.4$).

Conclusion

Adolescent relationships are very important. Not only are adolescents affected in the moment, but quite possibly for a lifetime as the skills learned in adolescence affect the quality of relationships in adulthood. Adolescents begin to learn the skills needed to expand their social network and begin having romantic relationships, all while they are still learning about themselves and growing and developing new interests. LGBT youth face additional challenges. Their romantic attractions are not sanctioned by the larger culture. They may not have opportunities to practice the skills required to initiate and sustain successful romantic relationships because they remain closeted. They may struggle with internalized homophobia and with overt victimization if they are "out" during high school. The experiences of LGBT youth may affect their self-esteem and self-efficacy regarding intimate relationships throughout their adult life. The purpose of this study was to learn about same-sex- attracted women's

understanding of how their interpersonal relationships during adolescence influenced their romantic relationships in adulthood.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the interpersonal experiences of lesbian and bisexual women, particularly their experiences with dating and romantic relationships.

Adolescence is the typical time for learning to pursue and maintain romantic relationships and thus was the time frame of focus for this study. Regarding these experiences, I was interested in how women have come to understand them, the meaning they have attached to them, and how they have incorporated them into their identity. I was interested in exploring the developmental aspects of entering into relationships, such as learning how to read signals (e.g., recognizing that another person is interested in pursuing a relationship) as well as the benefits of having one or more romantic relationships during adolescence, such as impact on the probability and quality of future romantic relationships in adulthood. In seeking to understand these experiences, the study addressed five research questions:

1. How do the women perceive themselves in terms of dating skills?
2. What did the women feel they needed in order to be more prepared or feel more comfortable with their dating skills?
3. How were the experiences in adolescent relationships, platonic and romantic, impactful with regards to self-esteem and dating self-efficacy of lesbian and bisexual adults?
4. What are the experiences of women with pursuing and maintaining a long-term committed relationship?
5. How do women feel about their prospects of finding and maintaining a long-term committed relationship, if so desired?

This chapter outlines the rationale for the chosen research approach, a description of the research sample, an overview of the research design, the methods of data collection and the analysis and synthesis of data that was implemented to meet the goals of this study. In addition, I have presented information pertinent to the trustworthiness of the information obtained in this qualitative research project as well as a discussion of ethical considerations.

Rationale for the Chosen Research Approach

Rationale for Qualitative Research

According to Creswell (1998), “Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem” (p. 15). Taylor and Bogdan (1998) explained that qualitative methodology “refers in the broadest sense to research that produces descriptive data- people’s own written or spoken words and observable behaviors” (p. 7). I chose a qualitative methodology to allow each woman to voice her own experiences with and meanings of dating and romantic relationships as a lesbian or bisexual woman (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Esterberg, 2002; Merriam & Associates, 2002).

Rationale for Phenomenology Methodology

Phenomenology is both a theoretical framework and methodology situated within the epistemology of constructivism (Crotty, 1998). It seeks to understand the meaning of events and experiences made by those who have lived through the experiences rather than as interpreted by an outsider, such as a researcher (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Indeed, Moustakas (1994) stated that researchers should abstain from hypothesizing and Merriam (2002) discusses the need of the researcher to put aside, or bracket, any personal beliefs or ideas about the phenomenon being

studied. Phenomenology “involves a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for reflective structural analysis that portrays the essence of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). The perception and experience of being a lesbian or bisexual woman navigating the dating and romantic world is a group phenomenon. The goal of this researcher was to uncover meaning tied to these experiences. In the following sections, I describe how these meanings were uncovered.

Research Design

This section will describe the specific design methods used to carry out this research. Interviews, field notes, and memos were used and each is discussed in more depth below.

Methods of Data Collection

Interview

Interviews were the primary form of data collection. In interviewing the participants, I sought to capture how relationship experiences during adolescence affected their lives and the meaning they have created from their experiences. I believe that interviews were the most appropriate method as interviewing enabled me to focus on the meaning of events within women’s experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

All interviews were done face-to-face in a live setting. I conducted semi-structured interviews that allowed me to both explore the topic more fully while still allowing the participants to express their thoughts and ideas in their own words. The interview protocol (see Appendix C) was used as both a starting point and outline; however I also let the interviews be guided by the interviewee and by prior interviewees and emerging topics. As is the nature of qualitative inquiry, I remained flexible and open to new information and what seemed important

for each of the women to discuss as they shared their stories. Thus the general topics of the interview protocol were maintained, but some additional questions were added and others were deleted dependent upon the interview. Though the original plan was to conduct multiple interviews with each woman, due to time and geographic constraints each participant completed one interview.

One major advantage of live interviewing is that it provides the researcher with a “here-and-now” experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I observed and analyzed the physical and emotional reactions to interview questions as well as the specific stories the participants chose to share during the interviews.

Memos

Memos are notes about the data as well as the process of data collection and analysis. Memo writing is very important because it prompts the researcher to analyze and be fully present early on in the research process. I wrote memos about the emerging categories, how statements made by one participant were (dis)similar to another participant, as well as how the data may fit together. By writing these memos and generating hypotheses from the beginning, I was able to have a greater connection with the data.

Field Notes

During the interview with each woman, I also wrote field notes regarding my observations. Field notes are descriptions of the interview process and may include information about the specific setting, behavioral observations about the interviewee, or my own thoughts and feelings that may not be a part of the formal interview. Because the interviews were conducted in person, information such as body language, tone, word choice and facial

expressions could be observed to give increased meaning to the stories told by respondents. I wrote descriptions of the women's reactions to different topics discussed and then interpreted those reactions. In this way, I was able to document reactions that likely would not have been captured by audio recording alone. For example, several respondents became teary or laughed at different points in the conversations. I was able to document the intensity of these emotional reactions and this information provided evidence of their felt experiences.

Positionality Statement

“Effective qualitative inquiry requires that the researcher be familiar not only with qualitative research methods but also with the phenomenon under study” (Crowson, as cited in Whitt, 1991, p. 408). I served as primary investigator and the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). To clarify any bias I bring to this study, I engaged in reflexivity and developed a statement to clarify these biases. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), a reflexivity statement serves to situate the researcher's biases, personal interests, and geographic and historical influences upon her/his work.

I identify as a black lesbian woman. I am out to most of my friends, my siblings, and some of my family members. My coming out process was pretty ‘typical’ in that I came out first to myself, and then to 1 or 2 trusted friends, and gradually to my siblings, work friends, and finally my father. What may be unique about my coming out story, that may be different from some women I will talk to, is that my process took years. It was more than twelve years before I came out to my father. I have been out in all areas of my daily life for many years and am currently at a point where I no longer put too much thought into ‘coming out.’ It is simply a part of me and I am okay to share or not share; I no longer need to make a statement. However, it was not easy or simple to get to this place.

The journey that is my sexual orientation is perhaps the longest journey I have embarked on and, as comfortable as I am with myself, I am still on that journey. I grew up in Georgia, living first in a small, rural, mostly black community and later moving to the suburbs of a larger, more diverse city. Beginning in middle school, I knew that I did not like boys as much as my sister and other friends, but I did not really have a label for this. I do not remember knowing any gay or lesbian people or even knowing what it meant to be gay or lesbian as a child. During my senior year of high school, I cut my shoulder length hair down to about ½ inch and the first response from many of my family and friends was to question my sexuality. I was told that, because of my haircut, I would have to dress more feminine and wear make-up so people would know that I was not gay or a boy. I was certainly made aware of how much being a girl meant you had to look a certain way, a way that I did not want to look. At this time, I WAS beginning to question and think more about my interest in women, but I was not at a place of wanting to or being comfortable with talking to others about this. I told myself that my feelings were okay as long as I did not act on these feelings. I did not have gay-student alliances or any such groups during my k-12 schooling. While there were strong rumors and several people came out soon after graduation, I did not know any openly gay, lesbian, or bisexual people at my high school.

Shortly after high school, in 1996, as my thoughts, feelings and interests in women continued to grow I decided to come out to a few select people. This was a positive experience and I felt happy and excited that I was finally able to talk to someone else about ‘the cute girl in the mall’ or crushes on actresses and singers. I was still not completely comfortable, however, and was not out to ‘strangers’. It was more than two years later, when I was in college that I had my first girlfriend. We worked together and I still clearly remember admiring her from afar, scared to say more than a cursory hello even though we had many of the same work

acquaintances. One night while working, I got up the nerve to offer her some candy and that started our conversations at work. Over the next several weeks, we chatted at work and often took breaks together. I had no idea of her sexual orientation, but my feelings for her were intensifying. Yet, I was terrified to even ask her to hang out outside of work for fear of it seeming like asking for a date. I didn't know how to do that and further I did not want to jeopardize our budding friendship by scaring her off. At that point, I simply wanted her in my life and would have been content having her as a friend rather than not being able to see or talk to her at all. One evening she told me that she was leaving work early and I quickly asked to leave early also; she invited me to come over and watch television! I was so excited and nervous at the same time. Later that evening while watching music videos with her sister and her, they kept making references to attractive females. I understood what she was coyly trying to tell me and I had the answer that I was hoping for: she liked girls too! She asked me to go to the store with her and once in the car, she stated that she 'just wanted to get me alone' and that she had a crush on me as well. We began dating shortly thereafter. Initially, I was still uncomfortable showing affection in public and did not want to disclose my relationship with her to others. However, as my feelings grew into love I wanted to shout it to anyone that would listen. Thus began my process of coming out to a few more select people, but still not everyone. In this relationship everything felt new, exciting and terrifying. Even though I had been in heterosexual relationships before, things felt different. I had many questions like should I hold the door open for her or who pays for dinner and no answers and no places to get the answers. It was all trial and error and learning all over again; learning the things I had learned previously as an adolescent yet felt so different in this new context.

After the dissolution of this relationship, at the age of 21 I decided to move to New York City. I had many ideas about how my new life would be and one of my biggest personal goals was being out and getting involved with the LGBT community. Luckily, though quite accidentally, I moved there during gay pride month and there were many events and parades for me to attend right away and without much effort on my part. This was very different from having to drive over an hour to find a gay bar in Georgia! I began working at an independent bookstore where many of the workers were the quintessential indie, artsy type; everything was allowed and everyone was accepting. It was here that I hooked up with my first 'gay crowd' and began going to gay bars and clubs and just being a happy, out lesbian. For the next four years, I dated only women and was pretty happy with this path in my life. There were still lots of questions and uncertainties about dating, but I had friends that I could discuss these things with and learn from. Then I entered a long-term relationship with a man that lasted almost seven years. Currently I am single and again trying to navigate the same-sex dating scene. I still have questions and uncertainties, I'm still not always certain if someone is flirting with me, but again I have the friends and resources to turn to for help and support.

My bias about being a lesbian woman trying to navigate dating and romantic relationships stems from my own difficulties and feelings of inadequacy. The process of dating and learning to date as a lesbian is difficult, as the dating process is for any person, however not having the same type or amount of exposure that heterosexual people have makes it more difficult. Even though I have dated men in the past, the 'skills' do not feel completely transferable. I feel that there are more factors involved in same-sex dating that are not adequately learned within the context of heterosexual socialization.

Thus, I am interested in exploring young women's same-sex dating experiences because I can still remember how I felt when I first wanted to start dating women: confused and unsure of myself. I did have experience dating men and felt surer of those interactions. However, when it came to women I second-guessed myself and attempted to over-analyze the situations; always calling my brother to ask what this or that could possibly mean. I've often stated that when it comes to women, I felt like I was a 13 year-old again, not understanding signals, needing to check-in with others for my interpretations, feeling nervous and anxious just to say hello. While I no longer feel like that 13-year old, I do feel like I am still behind in many areas. It was these thoughts that made me interested in studying and understanding this phenomenon for other women. I've wondered if other women have had the same thoughts and feelings and how they came to incorporate this into their identity. If others felt as I do and have gotten past that, what tools or mechanisms helped with that process? If others currently feel as I do, then perhaps collectively, through this project, we can identify ways to deal with these issues.

Respondent Selection and Respondents

Respondents for this study were 10 adult women whom self-identified as “non-heterosexual.” The process of selecting respondents in qualitative research studies is an intentional process, where the respondents are individuals who “have the information, perspectives, and experiences related to the topic of research” (Gay & Airasian, 2000, p.139).

Each of the women was “non-heterosexual” however no other demographic categories were intentionally selected, thus the women varied in their race/ethnicity, SES, and geographic location. Nine of the ten women were students (either undergraduate or graduate level) and one respondent was a working professional. The women ranged in age from 18 to 24 years old. Table

1 presents respondents' pseudo names, their age, high school demographic and self-identified sexual orientation.

Table 1. Respondent Information

Name	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Self-identified Sexual Orientation	High School Demographics
Tila	20	Asian	Queer	Large, urban, midwest
Angel	22	Latino	Unsure	Small, Rural, midwest
Kyle	24	Black	Gay	1 large, north 2 small, south
Andy	23	White	Queer	Small Catholic, urban, midwest
	20	White	Lesbian	Large, south
Lauren	22	Caucasian	Completely gay	Large Catholic, northwest
Susan	24	White	Lesbian	Large, suburban, south
Diana	18	African-American	Queer	Large, suburban, south
Rose Mary	20	White	Bisexual or Queer	Small, south
Jordan	21	Caucasian	Non-labeled	Large, suburban, south

Brief descriptions of the participants are presented in order to introduce them prior to explaining the study's findings. The participants selected their pseudonyms, which are used to provide confidentiality and protect their identities.

Tila is a 20-year old Asian-American woman who currently self-identifies as queer. She stated that she first came out at age 15 and that she identified as bisexual at that time. She indicated having some dating experiences with males until she was 17 when she began to identify as lesbian. Tila stated that her parents had a huge impact on her coming out process because they were not supportive. She stated that her mother continuously asked her to “validate” that she was a lesbian by asking if she had ever loved a woman (she hadn't). In addition, she stated that both parents often made comments about her appearance and style of dress and the impact of that on attracting male suitors. Tila indicated that her siblings were always very supportive and, in fact, she currently takes her partners “home” to meet her sisters rather than her parents.

Tila stated that she grew up in a small city in the Midwest and attended a large, public high school as well as a smaller magnet school. Though Tila described herself as an introvert she stated that she became more outgoing when she began meeting others who were more similar to her. She stated that it was not until her senior year in high school that she began having queer-identified friends and she was then able to have conversations about non-heterosexual relationships and attractions. She indicated becoming involved in the LGBT community and activism during high school and in fact was awarded a prestigious scholarship for her community involvement. Tila continued to be heavily involved with the LGBT community on her university campus as well.

Tila stated that she still has difficulty with roles within dating and relationships and she rated herself as a “C+ or B- range” when it comes to knowing how to be in a relationship with women. She stated that she has gotten better at pursuing women she is interested in instead of only going out with those who show an initial interest in her.

Angel is a 22-year old Latina woman who indicated she is “unsure” of her sexual orientation. When asked what “unsure” meant for her, she stated that it means she’s not out to everyone and that she is still “kind of like hiding it.” She indicated that she grew up in a small rural community in the Midwest where her family was the only Latino family in the district. She indicated she had attended a small public school, comprised of three rural communities, which did not have any LGBT clubs or organizations. She indicated not knowing any LGBT people when she was growing up and further that she often heard “that’s so gay” and similar adages used in an offensive or derogatory manner in her school. Though Angel indicated knowing she was attracted to women since she was in elementary school, she kept this hidden from others until she was an upper classman in college. Prior to dating women, Angel had two long-term boyfriends. Angel indicated that she came out to her siblings and her parents less than one year before our interview. She indicated that her mother became “worried” and began crying, though Angel did not know exactly why and her father awakened her at 2am interrogating her and saying that she is an “hembra” (female) and must like men! She indicated that her siblings were supportive and that she and her sisters often talk about their respective relationships and dating, though she also indicated wondering if she was being a bad influence by talking to them about her same-sex experiences.

Angel described herself as “really aggressive” and “sometimes like a man” when it comes to dating. She indicated that she will “just go for it” when at a gay bar or establishment, but that she is much more reserved in other settings. Angel indicated that she has not been in a relationship lasting more than a few weeks with a woman. She indicated that she is “not that confident” when it comes to knowing how to date or be in a relationship with a woman.

Kyle is a 24-year old black woman who self-identified as gay. She indicated that she attended three different high schools, a large public school in the North, a small public school in the South and a small charter school in the South; each school was located in a large, metropolitan area. Kyle was active in sports and played both basketball and tennis. Kyle indicated that there were no LGBT related clubs or organizations at any of her schools. She further indicated that there was a very negative atmosphere when it came to being LGBT and one of her friends had to transfer schools due to rumors about her being gay. She stated that it appeared that several people waited until after high school to begin coming out, the same as she did. Kyle indicated being “about 70% out” meaning that most of her close friends and family members know that she is gay, but not many in her extended family know. She indicated being at a place where she is comfortable with her sexual orientation, yet she doesn’t make a “grand statement” to others about it. Kyle stated that she dated males while in high school and that her long-term boyfriend in high school was the first person she “seriously” came out to. She indicated that they kept dating because it took pressure from both of them; her not thinking about or dealing with her same-sex attractions and him not being very interested in dating at all. She further indicated deciding at the last minute to go to a different university because she felt they “needed a reason to break up” from their “fake” relationship in which they were both very

comfortable. Kyle stated that she is very comfortable with flirting superficially and direct about wanting to hook up with someone, but that when it comes to someone she is really interested in (i.e. feelings) she is much more shy and reserved. She stated that she is known for “hanging out” for a long time before it “actually becomes a dating relationship” even though the activities (e.g. going to the movies together) may be the same.

Andy is a 23-year old white woman who self-identified as queer. She indicated that her k-12 years were spent at a small, private Catholic school located within a small metropolitan city in the Midwest. She reported being involved in many school groups and organizations including being on the golf and basketball teams; her school did not have any LGBT clubs or organizations. Andy indicated that she dated males prior to coming out as lesbian during her senior year of high school. She reported that coming out was a fairly easy process for her primarily due to the support of her parents and friends. She explained that by the time she began college (after coming out late during her senior year of high school) she was already well known and active within the LGBT community as a student leader. Andy noted that one of her biggest challenges within the dating scene happened as she was exploring her gender expression. She came to understand that how you dress or present your gender (e.g. more feminine vs more masculine) affects your partner choice/options. Andy indicated feeling comfortable with asking someone out on a date. She indicated that she has more anxiety about dating women because she generally feels more attracted to and interested in them than men.

Cory is a 20-year old white woman who self-identified as lesbian. She indicated that she had gone to a large, public high school located in a small college town in the South. Cory

indicated that she had been involved in debate, speech, and political student groups during high school. She stated that her school started the XYZ club because “GSA” (gay straight alliance) was “too controversial” during her junior or senior year; that club was particularly focused on school safety issues such as anti-bullying. She indicated that she identified as an out lesbian throughout high school, coming out during her freshman year. She stated that things didn’t go well when coming out to her “very Christian conservative” parents who then sent her to counseling. She stated that her parents’ reaction had an impact on her dating in that it was mostly done in secret. While her parents knew she was lesbian, they did not know she was dating. Cory indicated that she had two serious relationships before college; she has never dated males. Cory stated that her confidence with asking someone out, for instance, is “not very high” primarily when she is not sure of the person’s sexual orientation. However, she stated, with a chuckle, that even when she was sure she doesn’t think she “would ever do that.”

Lauren is a 22-year old Caucasian woman who self-identified as “completely” gay. She reported living in a large, metropolitan area in the Northwest and attended two different Catholic high schools. She described the first high school as being of a higher income bracket where she was “the poor kid” who didn’t fit in. Lauren stated that she was involved with band and choir organizations; her schools did not have any LGBT organizations or clubs. Lauren described herself as “homophobic,” though that is something she is “working on.” Thus, while she has had relationships with women in the past, they were not always labeled as “girlfriends.” Instead she described having a “very strong platonic friendship” with a particular woman at the same time she was dating guys. Lauren indicated coming out first to her father who asked her not to tell her mother due to her mother’s strong Catholic beliefs. When Lauren finally came out to her

mother, she indicated that her mother was very upset and sad believing that she had done something “wrong” as a parent. She also felt that her mother acted as if Lauren had “personally offended” her by “choosing” to be gay. She indicated that her mother gave her information about and encouraged her to look into Courage, an approved apostolate of the Roman Catholic Church, which ministers to those with “homosexual or same-sex attractions.” (The Courage Apostolate, n.d., para. 1)

Susan is a 24-year old white woman who self-identified as lesbian. She reported growing up in the suburbs of a large city in the South and attending a “rich, white kid” public school. She indicated that there was a LGBT organization at her school, but that there were only “four of us that were brave enough to attend.” Susan described herself as socially awkward indicating that she lived in a “bubble” until she went to college. Susan is currently a working professional. . Susan described a rather smooth time with coming out to her parents and friends, whom she described as all being receptive and supportive. Susan stated that she did not begin dating until college at which time she indicated that she had gone on a “couple of dates” with guys, but her relationships have only been with women. Susan indicated that her dating skills have fluctuated in that they were higher during college and dropped slightly with the new environment of the “real world” to adapt to. “There’s always going to be that awkward Susan within me,” she exclaimed.

Diana is an 18-year old African-American female who self-identified as queer. She reported growing up in the suburbs of a large city in the South. She indicated that she was active in broadcasting and digital media groups; her school did not have any LGBT groups or clubs.

Diana indicated coming out to her friends at about the same time that she was coming out to herself. She indicated that it was an easy process and she was accepted by most of her friends and peers; though most of her relationships were not accepted in the same manner. Diana stated that she is not out to her “as Christian as they come” parents whom she fears may “disown” her from the family. Not being out to her family has put a strain on some of her relationships. Diana indicated dating both males and females during high school. She stated that she is not very confident in her dating skills and that she needs to learn how to be herself and not change for her partners.

Rose Mary is a 20-year old white woman who self-identified as both bisexual and queer. She indicated that she preferred to use the term queer with others in the LGBT community, but bisexual with everyone else because it’s “easier” for others to understand the term. She indicated that she grew up in a smaller area near a large city in the South. She was involved in theater and alcohol/drug prevention organizations during her high school years. She indicated that her school tried to have LGBT organizations or groups, but that it was met with a lot of negativity from parents and media and didn’t work out. Rose Mary indicated that she was very religious and conservative while growing up, though she is less so now. Her religiosity led her to feel ashamed of her early thoughts and afraid to come out to others. Rose Mary stated that she did not date throughout high school, but shortly before the ending of her senior year she became concerned about her lack of experience and the fact that she hadn’t had a “real” first kiss. She indicated then becoming involved in a “three-way thing” with a guy and a girl. Rose Mary indicated that she feels fairly confident that she would be able to initiate contact with someone she is interested in, but she also stated that she has been in her first and only “real” relationship

for the past year and hasn't had the opportunity to know how she would truly act. She indicated feeling more comfortable being pursued than being the one pursuing.

Jordan is a 21-year old Caucasian female who self-identified as “non-labeled.” She indicated that she grew up in the suburbs of a large city in the South. She attended a large, public school that did not have any LGBT clubs or organizations, but many “Christian” organizations. Jordan was the valedictorian of her high school and was very involved in a wide variety of clubs and organizations. Jordan reported having her first girlfriend at age 17. She stated that coming out was difficult due to her status at school and in the community. She indicated that she was forced to come out to her parents by her partner's mother. Jordan had dated both males and females in the past. She stated that while she would “probably not” make the first move with anyone, she does feel comfortable in her ability to do so.

Data Collection

I began recruiting participants by contacting women whom I knew were active members of the LGBT community at Iowa State University. Upon receiving each woman's verbal consent, I then sent the approved recruitment email (see Appendix A) describing the study in greater detail to ensure they were still interested in participating. In addition to contacting women directly, I also placed flyers on bulletin boards around campus. Using these methods, four women were recruited and interviewed in July 2011 from Iowa State University. Six women were also recruited from the Dallas/Fort Worth , TX area. In this area, I used several methods to solicit participants. I sent the same recruitment email to several colleagues who worked closely with LGBT student groups at two different universities in the area. I also spoke to women

individually at various LGBT events/functions; often if those women did not fit the criteria they knew and contacted someone that did. Again upon receiving verbal consent, I then sent the recruitment email with greater detail before setting up the first interview. In total, 10 queer-identified women were interviewed for this study.

My primary method of data collection was a semi-structured interview. In addition, I had planned to have the women complete journal entries about their dating experiences between our interviews. However, six of the women were currently in committed relationships and one woman was actively “taking a break from dating,” thus no journal entries were collected and used from any of the other three women.

At the beginning of each interview, I thanked the women for agreeing to participate, briefly explained what would happen during our one-hour interview, and explained a little more about the study (in particular what time period I wanted them each to reflect on). I also answered any questions the women had about the study. We reviewed the informed consent form and each woman signed the document. Finally I asked each woman to decide upon an alias that would be used throughout the interview and completed project.

I used a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix C) as a general outline or overview for each interview. This semi-structured format also allowed for a more conversational flow of the interview such that the interviewee was able to tell her own stories in her own words. In addition, the interviewer was able to ask any additional questions that may have come up based on these stories. The Iowa State interviews took place in a private conference room on campus. The Dallas/Fort Worth area interviews took place in various, convenient yet private

locations, including the interviewer's office, a university library study room, an interviewee's office, and the interviewer's home.

With the respondent's consent, I audio recorded each interview and took brief notes as they spoke. Each interview began with me asking for some demographic information, such as age and sexual orientation as well as some information about the time period they would be thinking back to (e.g. size/type of school, "out" status, etc.). After getting information about the environment the women were a part of, I asked about specific messages received from both family and friends about dating and romantic relationships. Women were often asked to think about how their specific stories from adolescence impacted them now as adults.

Data Analysis

The process of analyzing the data started as I transcribed the first interview and was a continual process throughout as the themes and categories emerged and were subsequently categorized. In addition to the interview information, I also used field notes and memos to analyze the data. I transcribed each audio-taped interview verbatim and then began my process of coding the information using an open coding procedure. Open coding is when the researcher works intensively with the data to become familiar with emerging themes and categories (Esterberg, 2002). The goal of open coding is to let themes in the data emerge naturally as the researcher reads over the data, line by line, identifying themes and categories (Chamaz, 2006). I reviewed the transcripts line by line without preconceived themes, which is the essence of open coding (Esterberg). While there are a number of different strategies for identifying themes, including computer programs, I chose to use the printed transcripts, writing codes and notes to

myself in the margins. I then proceeded to list all of these initial themes and categories into a separate document. This process yielded approximately 25 themes and categories. I then returned to the individual transcripts in order to select specific quotes that seemed to fit under each of the themes and categories. By using direct quotes, also called meaning units, I provided evidence that the conclusions I drew were consistent with the data collected. At this point, I realized that there was overlap for some themes, which were then subsumed into other themes, some themes were modified to be better reflective of the participants' words rather than my initial interpretation of their words, and other themes no longer seemed to be valid and were discarded. Next I looked for ways that the various categories fit together to best illustrate the phenomenon at hand. This process led to these very specific categories becoming broader themes as some categories fit closely together. For instance, *Outness of partner/family* and *Sex and safer sex education* both described challenges within the relationships. Thus these two themes became categories and *Challenges within the relationships* became a theme. I then repeated the process and was able to identify three overarching themes that seemed to best capture the data. For example, I realized that there were several categories (and subcategories) that specifically focused on romantic relationships; thus that became a major theme.

Trustworthiness

All qualitative research inquiries must meet accepted standards regarding the trustworthiness of the project. Guba and Lincoln (1998) state that the constructs that address the trustworthiness of qualitative research relate to credibility (i.e., the accuracy of portrayal of participants' words), transferability (i.e., whether the study would be applicable in another situation), dependability (i.e., whether the researcher responds to changes in the situation being studied), and confirmability (i.e., whether the data and findings can be substantiated by an

external examiner). Strategies that I used to meet the criteria for trustworthiness are discussed below.

Credibility

Credibility for the information gained in the study was established through the use of triangulation and member checks. Triangulation involves the use of multiple data sources to confirm the findings of the study (Merriam, 2002). The research used in-depth semi-structured interviews as the primary data sources. Data from observations and field notes were used for additional support of this study. Because the interviews were conducted in person, information such as body language, tone, word choice and facial expressions was observed to give increased meaning to the stories told by respondents.

Peer debriefing refers to the use of a colleague or peer to comment on the specifics of the research project, such as data collection methods and findings as well as the overall research process (Creswell, 2002; Merriam, 2002). I used several peer debriefers who evaluated the interview questions for the research participants, offered suggestions on the design and implementation of the study, and checked the themes as they emerged. The use of peer debriefers not only helped to see which of these themes seemed to apply to others in the community, but also helped me to keep my personal biases and perceptions in check.

Member checks involve sharing with respondents the researcher's understandings and interpretations of their words to assure their accuracy (Merriam, 2002). During the interviews, I repeatedly made reference to information obtained from other participants to get additional input as well as verifying that I was properly understanding aspects of the phenomenon. In addition, I contacted five of the participants and asked for direct feedback on the "key findings" section to

ascertain their input on my conclusions of this study. However none of the participants offered any feedback.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the ability of others to transfer the context of this phenomenon to another context. Transferability was completed via clear, rich, thick descriptions of the data, participants, settings, and analysis. Depth, richness and detailed description provide the basis for a qualitative account's claim to relevance in some broader context (Schram, 2003). For example, direct quotations and clear details about the setting and participants allow the reader to look for alternative interpretations and/or decide if the findings are applicable in other situations or contexts.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability and confirmability lies in others concurring that given the data collected, the results make sense. In order to provide sufficient evidence of the objectivity and appropriateness of the decisions and judgments made throughout the study, the researcher used a combination of strategies. These strategies included establishing an audit trail consisting of raw data (i.e., interview tapes, field notes, original transcripts of audio-taped interviews, coded transcripts of audio-taped interviews used for coding data), drafts of findings, and memos on methodological decisions. An audit trail will allow an external examiner to review data collection and analysis procedures and findings to ensure the quality of the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

Ethical Considerations

In any research study, participants' privacy and protection is important. As qualitative research requires the participant to share information with the researcher in a non-anonymous manner, an important consideration becomes, "how does the researcher gather "thick" descriptive data necessary to accomplish the goals of the research without doing harm to the research participants?" (Merriam, 2002, p. 29). Because lesbian and bisexual women were respondents in this study and the information gathered was of a personal nature, questions about the confidentiality of the data and anonymity of the respondents must be addressed. In this study, the researcher followed the procedures outlined below to ensure the protection and rights of research participants.

- The participants were informed about the nature of the study, processes to be utilized, and how the data would be disseminated and used. Prior to beginning the interview, each research participant was given the opportunity to have her questions answered after which she was asked to sign a consent form. Further, each participant was advised of her right to refuse to answer any question and/or to withdraw from the study at any time.
- The researcher assured anonymity by maintaining all audio-taped interviews, field notes, consent forms, and any identifying information in a locked cabinet. For individual interviews, respondents selected a pseudonym which was used during their interview and in field notes as well as in the final research reports.
- Approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at Iowa State University.

Chapter 4

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study was to describe and illuminate the interpersonal experiences of lesbian and bisexual women, particularly their experiences with dating and romantic relationships. This chapter is dedicated to presenting the findings from this research study. The findings were derived through phenomenological data analysis (Jones, 2006), which yielded several different themes related to the five primary research questions guiding this study:

1. How do the women perceive themselves in terms of dating skills?
2. What did the women feel they needed in order to be more prepared or feel more comfortable with their dating skills?
3. How were the experiences in adolescent relationships, platonic and romantic, impactful with regards to self-esteem and dating self-efficacy of lesbian and bisexual adults?
4. What are the experiences of women with pursuing and maintaining a long-term committed relationship?
5. How do women feel about their prospects of finding and maintaining a long-term committed relationship, if so desired?

From a phenomenological perspective, all of the information received from the participants is meaningful and important; however, what I ultimately attend to is a reflection of my own lens and ability to interact with and interpret the data. Thus direct quotations from the participants are used to support each theme.

The major themes that emerged have been categorized into three main areas a) beginning to know self and early identification as a queer woman b) navigating queer relationships and c)

process-oriented thoughts and beliefs. The themes that fall under the heading *Beginning to know self and early identification as a queer woman* deals with factors that the women experienced or dealt with as they began coming out to themselves, family, friends, and others. The categories include: Dating as social status, popularity, or expectation; Emotions when dating males versus females; Learning gay culture; and queer mentorship; Tarnishing reputations; Religiosity; and Path of labels. The categories that fall under the heading *Navigating queer relationships* relate to specific components of dating and having relationships. Categories include: Meeting and approaching others; Types of relationships; Progression of partner choice; Areas of challenge; Ending relationships; and Differences between dating in college and dating in “the real world”. The final area, *Process-oriented thoughts and beliefs*, includes categories directly related to how the women see themselves in terms of relationships and dating and any advice they wish to give and/or to have received. The categories include: Areas of current (in)securities or (lack of) confidence; process of transitioning from adolescence to adulthood; and advice to younger self. Many categories also have a number of sub categories which will be described in greater detail below.

Findings by Theme

Beginning to know self and early identification as a queer woman

Dating as social status. During their high school tenure many of the women experienced dating as something that was either an expectation or tied to status and/or popularity. Most of the women in this sample knew that they were queer in high school; some of the women dated guys, a few dated girls and a couple did not date at all in high school. The overwhelming concern about dating in high school was conformity to the rules and social norms

within one's specific peer group. Diana for instance described how dating was expected ("you need to have a boyfriend") and her friends often talked about timeframes for the first kiss, acceptable sexual activity, etc. Andy and Rose Mary concurred that their respective schools were also heavily divided into those who dated and those who didn't.

Dating offered protection in various forms for many of the women. Lauren, who indicated that even when dating guys she always had a "close, platonic female friend" as well, felt that having a boyfriend shielded her from the negativity of her "cliquish" school where she felt that she didn't fit in anyway. She explained,

I kind of got into dating boys because it was more a marker for me of social status and protection... We were never real serious, but he was kind of a symbol of my social prowess. Like hey look, I can get a boyfriend. And that kind of social prowess in my first high school, which was the white preppy tight ass bitches high school that was that could be kind of a buffer against social criticism or you know being made fun of it or being-I don't know- marginalized. It made me feel – If you had a boyfriend then you were special, someone was paying attention to you. It elevated your status somehow, I knew that. I didn't necessarily know why, but I knew that. So I got myself one. (Lauren)

Lauren used dating as a platform for social status and popularity. Kyle also shared that she dated to be popular and because it was "the thing to do" among her peers. She speaks of one of her first high school relationships:

So like in my first high school, it [dating] was huge like that was like popularity, mobility thing, date someone be connected to someone. so I dated a junior ... So like me and him had like the worst relationships. It was good like we were friends and he was like we're

all cool and like my whole popularity level just like rised beyond. Like omigosh you're like dating a junior – god that's so terrific. But like we never went anywhere; we never saw each other outside of the school. It was like the relationships were so fake. (Kyle)

Similarly, Angel stated that she dated guys because her friends were dating and introducing her to people, not because she was interested in them. “And I didn't want anything to do with those people”, she stated, “but I dated just to be nice, you know. To try it out I guess.” Dating guys had an extra bonus for Angel, however. It also offered protection in keeping her true sexual identity from her parents and family. She stated, “When I think about those past relationships I think it was more of like a disguise, you know. Just, like, an image that I put out there for my family to, like, please them, you know. Keep things ok.

Like Angel, one reason that Kyle stayed with a long-term partner, even after coming out to him, was because it kept others' questions/comments at bay. At this time she indicated being in a more homophobic environment, where many other students were being talked about on the speculation that they were queer. She indicated that one thing that protected her, she believes, was her popularity and status as a jock. She further stated that had she remained at her first high school long enough (where she experienced the highest level of popularity) she believes she would have come out during high school.

I don't think anybody would've ever said [anything] because the time really all that started happening I was probably at that time considered far too popular... It was just my status at that point and time like you weren't going to say anything to me... You know being a jock then, I also had the basketball gay rumors, but I always stayed out them.
(Kyle)

Being popular in high school is important to many young people. Each of these women used dating as a way to create and or maintain their level of popularity. In addition to popularity, however, the women also ensured themselves a veil of protection from questions and comments about their sexual orientation or identity.

Just as dating can be a path to popularity, several of the women indicated that if you were not dating, whether by your own choice or not, you were seen as “awkward” or not cool. For Rose Mary, it also meant that your sexual orientation would be questioned.

I had one friend who I was pretty close with. And we actually – like she had also kind of, she had been accused of like being gay because she hadn’t dated anyone and she was like two years older than me. And I kind of was starting to get some of the same like negative like response of like oh you’re not dating, like oh are you, like you must be, there must be something really wrong with you because like that would obviously be something that would be wrong with you where I lived. (Rose Mary)

Tila indicated that while dating was also about popularity, there was also a strong awareness of gender roles. She indicated that at her school the girls were predominantly asked out by the boys; she elaborated on how this worked out in her school.

It was just the guys would make moves on the girls and that was pretty much it and people were just kinda forced into it. If any cute guy looks at you then you should just take him up. I don’t know... that’s how it pretty much was. And if no guys picked the girl, then the girl was an outcast or didn’t fit in. In a sense it was kinda like the girl was waiting or the girl probably dressed in a certain way to flatter, to appeal to a guy’s taste. (Tila)

Tila's experience suggests that the girls did not have much voice within the dating system; they were either chosen or they were delegated to a lower status. For Tila, this meant feeling "like I had to look a certain way. I did try to appeal to guys when I was younger. So I felt like I had to be prettier or do something to get more attention, be more popular." Cory indicated that while trying to keep up with everyone in high school as well as figuring out one's own comfort level with dating can be a struggle, it's not overwhelming.

I mean I don't think it was hugely detrimental. It might have been psychologically a little bit detrimental to feel like I had to keep up or to feel pressured while I was in high school. But I wouldn't say it's something that impacted me so much that it was horrible or something. (Cory)

Dating served many different purposes for the women in high school. It offered popularity, it increased self-esteem, and it gave many women a glimpse of what dating and being in a relationship were all about. However, as Lauren, Angel and Kyle indicated above it also helped stave off unwanted questions about sexuality. All of the women in the study indicated knowing (to some degree) that they were queer by middle school at the latest. Most of the women in the study who had dated guys conveyed having a very different emotional connection or investment once they began dating women.

Emotions when dating males versus females Many of the women interviewed talked about the different emotions and feelings experienced when dating women, particularly when they compared those emotions and feelings to those felt when dating men. There appeared to be a lot of anxiety and excitement surrounding the prospect of a deeper connection. For many that had dated guys, there was a lack of comprehension of the excitement of intimacy, the longing for

a phone call, or even the dread or sadness of a break-up. They didn't get it – until they began dating women. Some of the women knew this at the time of dating guys and for others it was a realization in the moments of dating women; sort of an “oh this is what the tingling of a kiss feels like” kind of moment.

One thing the women were clear about was the differences in the level of commitment when dating guys compared to when dating women. Unabashedly ending relationships, holding potential partners to higher standards, or even maintaining a “fake” relationship were ways that some of the women exhibited less commitment when dating men; things that they no longer do when dating women. Jordan was the most vocal about how different her relationships were based on the gender of the person she was seeing.

I know it sounds horrible, but it was kind of a disposable thing that I wasn't, and I didn't realize until I started dating girls, I wasn't really, not, I guess, committed. I guess committed is the word for it. That it wasn't as emotionally intimate as it could or should have been. (Jordan)

Many of the women described themselves as being cold or horrible for their behaviors in these relationships. Lauren stated “looking back I feel I was a completely cold person, but I kind of was, I was really disconnected from the whole experience.” She went on to describe how she progressed in a relationship in which she felt “disconnected.”

I also just really had no idea how to proceed because for me it didn't really flow very naturally. I felt like I was sort of reading an instruction's manual and then sort of imitating the moves out of a manual that I was supposed to take. So it didn't feel, I mean I guess it makes sense now since I know that I'm not actually into boys, but we took

things extremely slow because I wasn't comfortable I guess physically. It took me a long time to warm up to him that way so it was like little things increments. And I always kind of felt like I was watching myself make the moves in those in that relationship like he was probably just like whatever with it, he was fine with it. He was totally comfortable with everything the way it was, but I was always like am I doing this right. (Lauren)

However, they also seemed to recognize that their actions were because of their sexual orientation or rather because they were not being true to their orientation. Andy, on being questioned about her many previous relationships with guys, reportedly said to her mother "that's probably a point like I went through them like it was nothing. Don't you think that's a sign too, maybe?"

Another emotion some women discussed having concerns about was really liking someone. Particularly when they first began realizing or acknowledging their queerness, some women weren't sure how they would handle these stronger emotions. Andy shared thoughts she had before dating women.

I started thinking too well is it going to be really different cause if I really am attracted to women or gay will it feel completely different being with a woman than it ever has been with a male-bodied individual... just if feelings would be stronger, if I would be more attached cause I remember like my long term on and off boyfriend in high school just how upset he would get like when we'd break up sometimes. And I was like I never felt that passion, like he would cry and get so worked up and I was like "I don't get how you'd feel like that". Like I've never felt that strongly about someone, it almost scared me cause I never almost wanted to feel like that. Seeing in other people I'd dated or even

in my friends when they would break up and all that high school dating drama. And I was like I never really felt strongly I was like “yeah ok we’re done, I don’t care, whatever. You want to hang out tonight kind of thing.” So I got really scared cause like I haven’t had that experience, like people already had their hearts broken and I really haven’t. And I’m starting from scratch kind of thing. (Andy)

She continued, discussing how things were once she began dating women

I had a lot more attachment to women I liked and dated. So like for me it was a lot dealing with feelings I never had. I never felt anxious or like wanted to be around someone all the time. So it’s like these stronger feelings I had to deal with too was different in dating relationship, like how to manage them. (Andy)

Other women also discussed the newness of physical attraction. As Lauren stated, “It’s almost like I was going through puberty or something and like slowly realizing oohh you know other people have bodies, that’s weird.” Lauren discussed some of her experiences of being more physically intimate with her boyfriend:

I never liked kissing. I thought it was boring. Didn’t understand what was so great about it all you know. And I had a boyfriend and we did this sort of thing all the time, but I did it more because it was fun to kind of watch him get all excited with it. I thought that was amusing.

She goes on to describe an early encounter with kissing a female.

While we were joking around, she put a sheet over my face and then kissed me and then laughed and ran downstairs. Like to her it was just a joke and it was nothing, but I

remember being completely floored like I was just laying on my back and I was like whoa that was crazy, I wanted to do that again, but I really shouldn't ask that kind of thing. That's weird, but I got all the butterflies and tingles.

This was one example of how the physical experience of being with a female greatly differed from being with a male. A playful kiss through a sheet from a female friend felt more exciting than more intimate encounters with a boyfriend.

As illustrated by the above examples, one consistency upon starting to date women later is unfamiliarity with dealing with strong emotions. Experiencing and consequently learning to deal with strong emotions and feelings is one of the tasks of growing up. Skipping or delaying this task may have consequences associated with it.

Learning gay culture. The women interviewed shared stories of their experiences with learning about LGBT culture. For many this began with media and was followed by real life experiences Media was an important early learning tool. As Angel noted, even though she can now talk to her friends, earlier on she learned from “the media like movies umm television programs had a lot to do with the things that I learned.” The way LGBT people and issues are covered in the media had a direct impact in each of the women lives. From television shows to musical artists the woman learned how queer woman looked, lived, and loved. Some of the women stumbled upon these artists and shows while others were introduced by their friends once they were openly a part of the community. Jordan stated that “it was a culture that I didn't realize I was missing” once some of her friends and girlfriend indicated that she “need[ed] to watch some like Lip Service and like L Word and you need to start listening to this music, Tegan and Sara.” She goes on to describe her reactions to these experiences: “And I'm like well what have

I been missing my whole life. So it's funny now and I enjoy it, but I just didn't know that before.”

Some of these media portrayals of lesbian relationships and culture had a positive impact and some were more anxiety provoking. One positive impact as noted by Jordan, but shared by others, was that “it makes me feel a little bit better just like to see other similar people you know.” Andy, whose first introduction to queer women was from the acclaimed television series “The L Word,” had a different perspective.

I actually came across the L word one night (laughing) and I remember watching and I was like oh this is kind of cool. [After watching several seasons] I was like (whispering) oh my gosh I'm gay. I remember after like really kind of letting it sink in. I was like terrified to like that doesn't really make sense like I'm never going to find a pretty woman that's gay. Like they don't exist and I remember just thinking like relationships like that didn't exist and being so nervous and afraid. And like getting really sad, not because I was gay but because like that doesn't exist in Iowa if you're gay. And like that lifestyle like you know cause within Iowa or Midwest it always seemed like not positive portrayals or never heard of anything like that or knew anyone else that was LGBT. So I was like I'm the only one in Iowa. Everyone else is in West Hollywood and older and rich... like I couldn't see myself in any of those people. So like where do I fit into this, where do I exist in this identity, in this culture, in this community when I don't see myself portrayed any of these women. I don't see them portrayed anywhere around me, [where] I knew I was probably going to be for a good four years so I was like Uumm... (Andy).

Several of the women also shared how the media and gay culture have influenced their personal sense of style. For instance, Lauren and Cory both shared how they dressed like “stereotypical lesbians” by having short hair, wearing mostly t-shirts and baggy clothing, and “Converse” tennis shoes.

As helpful as the media can be for teaching popular culture, it can also have its shortcomings. Tila shared:

I think that at that time the only framework I had was actually watching the L word probably. But then like they were all having sex in there. So that didn't really help me either. Yeah I didn't really have any model of like how to be in a relationship with a girl.

Having one or two programs on television cannot be fully representative of the diverse and varied individuals that comprise the gay community. It is a great starting point for many, but can only do so much. Meeting others around you, who are a part of the same neighborhoods, schools, and larger community is also important. Andy shared of her experiences of gaining a broader perspective about the community when actually starting to date and meet other people in real life, not just watching it on television.

Like when you're out within the community sometimes you don't know and like there's sometimes more preferences. Like some people will only if they're more masculine or something they only like dating feminine women. So like I remember that was a big thing for me when I started expressing more masculine-y like a lot of more other women that dressed more and expressed more like masculine wouldn't want anything to do with me. Like I'd still be attracted to them, but like no like you're like me like we're both dudes. I

was like “what,” but I was like so like we, no, ok. Good to know. That dynamic exists.

(Andy)

Tila also shared how meeting others in real life was more helpful than the scenarios she was seeing in the media.

It did help cause I felt like with my heterosexual friends I felt kinda awkward talking about wanting to date other women and so I felt like I have other lgb friends who’ve had experiences of dating women I felt like I could relate more to them. I felt more comfortable talking to them and I felt more – just dating girls in general knowing that there are other people like me who also dated other women too. And so it actually kinda helped me learn how to date girls in a sense. (Tila)

Everyone didn’t always find a welcome and comforting home within the gay community even when that was sought and desired. Rose Mary shared early experiences with the community at the university she attended.

Pretty much all of my friends are straight except for my girlfriend. I know a few people who are LGBT but I’m not really close with anyone who is in the LGBT community besides my girlfriend. I really tried to reach[out] in the LGBT community and make more friends just because I feel like they can relate to me in a way that like some of my straight friends can’t. But it hasn’t been very successful. I feel like I’m queer this is part of who I am and I’m also like a person in like a lot of other ways and that isn’t’ the only thing that defines me. It’s been hard for me to meet other people that were the same way. I have been able to meet a few and connect with those people, but a lot of people that I’ve come in contact with have just been like I’m gay and that’s like the only thing about me that I

like get from them like when I'm like talking with them or trying to connect with them. And that is not really like what I'm looking for, like I'm looking for a friend. And whether they're gay or straight is just like another component of that.

Television, movies, and music all played an important role for the women. For some it was their first introduction to queer life; it was eye opening and exciting. It helped the women to know that there were others like them, that they were not strange or abnormal, and it fostered a sense of community. However media outlets cannot fully replace the experience of meeting and interacting with people in real life. The following sections discuss the role of queer networks in the women's lives.

Queer mentorship. All of the women interviewed spoke of having someone they could talk with and learn from about being gay. For Tila, finding a mentor was an integral part of becoming more comfortable even after coming out to herself. She indicated feeling like she “had to find my mentors before I really felt comfortable being myself and dating women cause when I was first coming out I didn't really care about dating at all. I just wanted to focus on being ok with myself.” Sometimes it was a friend, sometimes it was a partner, sometimes a friend or relative of a friend. Sometimes this person was close in age and sometimes older. A couple of women specifically mentioned the importance of meeting/known older married queer women. This gave them a sense of future and they were able to see and/or discuss what, for instance, being a “soccer mom” was like. Sometimes these talks were focused on gay culture, such as what musician/artist a young queer woman *must* listen to (e.g. Teagan & Sara) and all the movies (e.g. Loving Annabelle) and television shows (e.g. L Word) she must watch. Jordan shared

I'm just like learning the gay culture and I'm like oh I should listen to this music, ok thanks guys. You know and I never had like that scene to hang out with or whatever before. And it's cool, I appreciate it you know. It's like its own cool unique thing, you know. This is my little clique and this is what I know. (Jordan)

Other times the conversations were more of a personal nature, such as dating or coming out experiences. Rose Mary shared

I remember like one conversation that I had with a friend and a friend of a friend. He kind of answered some questions about being gay which was one of the best conversations that I think I had in I think all of high school. Like he talked about how he knew when he was gay and that was eye opening for me. I was like, this is so like – no one has ever talked to me about this and so that's a conversation I remember very well, but it wasn't something that I really had at my disposal frequently. (Rose Mary)

She went on to share what she ultimately heard from this conversation:

He talked about... just like some of the experiences that he had had. And the negativity he had received, but what I got out of that was less of like wow if you're gay you must have all these negative things, although that was part of it, but was that he seemed so like happy and like sure of himself despite the fact that he had experienced all of that. And he had had a lot of really hard things happen to him because of it, but I still was almost envious that he was so like "but you know what I'm better than that" you know and I was like "that's what I want." And so I think that as I came out that was something even I look back on and I doubt that he even remembers the conversation, but I remember it so

well. So that's I guess one of the more positive messages I got about being LGBT also.

(Rose Mary)

Jordan likewise shared how she heard about the negative experiences of her mentors, but she also resonated more with the resilience this couple exhibited. It appeared that the women were very interested in a realistic portrayal of life as a queer person. They neither sought nor received a candy-coated, all-positive portrayal. Instead they heard and saw how the negativity can be a small portion of an otherwise happy existence; happiness for being true to oneself.

The women spoke about the admiration they felt for the courageousness of their mentors for being themselves. Cory explained how she was affected by another teenager in her choir.

I think that there was one girl in particular in my choir and she was probably the first person I knew who was just really like blatant about I am a lesbian like everyone knows this and like she told a lot of people. And that for me was I think sort of like helpful in a way because I grew up in a really closed off house like where I guess I was really sheltered so like probably before like junior high maybe even before high school I couldn't have even really have told you what a lesbian was... I always thought it was really cool that she was never ashamed of it. Like she was probably like a way more physical person than I was, but she would just like make out with her girlfriend in the hallway and I thought I just thought it was neat that she was like never afraid to do that. Even though I know her parents didn't approve of her either, of that either. But she just like didn't care, so I guess I kind of admired that attitude. It definitely like since I felt like it was more normal to be gay, it made me feel more justified like if I was in an argument with my parents or something like that. (Cory)

The women talked about how impactful it was for them to interact with mentors; helping to build their own confidence, realizing they weren't the only one, or that the hopes and dreams of getting married and having children was not out of reach. Rose Mary explained

She was kind of like my gay mentor I guess and she had had like a really hard time with her mom and that was kind of the same thing that I was experiencing...I still like keep in touch with her. It's more like on holidays now like we'll talk like we'll text back and forth and like she'll let me know like how it is with her now wife and like it just. It's kind of nice just to have someone to be like oh yeah like my girlfriend and I are still together we just had our one year you know. And just like be happy for each other. Because that's not something that like I've experienced with my own family. (Rose Mary)

Susan shared her thoughts on having multiple mentors:

Find a mentor or mentors if you're new to it. And good ones, not like, not, preferably someone who's not sexually driven so that you get a good taste of dating and sex advice and someone who doesn't party too hard or things like that. I would recommend two. I would recommend a lesbian and then I would recommend a straight guy... Straight guys, I felt like gave me more of an approach to talking to girls. How to talk to girls and then lesbians it was kind of along the same lines but then a different approach. The lesbian's like "ok you can do that, but you might want to be a little more gentle about it and blah, blah, blah". (Susan)

Having the gay mentor and in particular being introduced to the culture at large, also ushered in a sense of connection for several woman. It provided a "clique" where they could share music,

language, media, AND a sense of queerness they did not have before. Rose Mary shared her thoughts on the most important aspect of mentorship.

I think it's two things, I think it's just knowing that there's other people especially because these weren't just people that I met because they were gay... It was like wow these are such great women and I already respect them so much and they're dealing with this thing that I'm also dealing with. I think it made it more impactful for me than if I would have just met someone been put in touch with just someone randomly. and then the second thing, just being happy for each other like what I was talking about has been something really good that I got out of it because like I said I don't get that from a lot of places. Especially within my own family I get a lot of negativity and so just to be like – like she will send me a picture of her and her wife on Christmas. And it's just really sweet just to be able to be happy for her and for her to be happy for me and to have something to share. (Rose Mary)

Religiosity. Three of the ten women described themselves as being highly spiritual or religious during high school and several others described their parents and/or family of origin as “conservative Christians.” Two of the “very religious” women, Lauren and Andy, attended Catholic schools for their k-12 education and each had originally planned to attend Catholic universities as well. Andy, however, decided that she “could not” go to a Catholic university due in part to her sexuality as she felt it would be “just like high school.” She went on to describe how she began reflecting more on her religious beliefs as she began growing older and coming out.

I was raised in a family which was definitely very loose liberal Catholic, but I was a very conservative Catholic because of my friend group and my schooling. I was about to graduate and I was questioning a lot of things about my faith and about being Catholic and I think it finally all hit me and I started really thinking for myself Like if that's what being Catholic is and that's what this – I was like “what, umm.” So it kind of all of a sudden hit me at once but overdrive of like, “I’ve been brainwashed for like these past you know 16, 17 years” and I started thinking for myself. At that point too when I started coming out to myself I was already enrolled and registered to go to a private Catholic college in Iowa. And I remember being like no I’m gay, I can’t go to a Catholic college, it’s going to be high school all over again and I’m going to be miserable. So I quickly applied to [university] actually and decided to go to [university]. So I definitely did change a little bit. I knew I wasn’t going to leave Iowa, but thought this school would be a little bit better than private Catholic school at least. (Andy)

Lauren too began to question her faith and her beliefs, though she had a different experience than Andy. She repeatedly indicated being in denial about her sexuality, thoughts and feelings. “If I can’t see it, it’s not there,” she often said. Though Lauren reportedly questioned the Catholic faith and many of its tenets, she ultimately decided that she is “still really attached to this version of Catholicism that [she had] been raised with.” Thus she is currently in the process of “figuring out what to do with [her]self.” She explains

You know in the Catholic Church you can’t, you have to be celibate. Which for me you know that was awful, terrible thing; I didn’t want that at all. You know and so then the question arises well are you going to stick with your faith because if you are you’re going to be a walking contradiction pretty much you’re not going to be welcome in the

community. Or do you abide by their laws and be alone for the rest of your life because they say it's wrong and join some homosexuals anonymous group, Courage, or whatever they're [called]. (Lauren)

Courage International, often called Courage, is “an apostolate of the Catholic Church, which ministers to persons with same-sex attractions and their loved ones” (The Courage Apostolate, n.d., para. 1). Its stated mission is to “assist men and women with same-sex attractions in living chaste lives in fellowship, truth and love.” (The Courage Apostolate, n.d., para. 3). Rose Mary, like Lauren, also had a difficult time coming out to herself due to her religious background. She indicated that, though she knew what gay was, she “didn't believe in that” and that it was a long time before she was able to acknowledge her own feelings and desires.

Diana talks about the role that religion has played in her ability to be open and honest with her family of origin:

They are as Christian as they come. All three of them: mother, father, sister. And I don't trust them to not kick me out of the family or disown me. So for right now it's a security measure to protection. It's not because I'm angry or I don't want to share that part of me with my family. It's just that I, in some ways, put myself first before them and there's not a lot of trust in my relationship to them. (Diana)

The conservative, religious nature of their families has also prevented Diana from being able to fully experience some aspects of previous relationships. At the time of the interview, Diana's ex-girlfriend, who lives on the west coast and whom she has never met in person, was in Texas less than one hour from her parents' home. Yet Diana was unable to go meet this young

woman because she would not be able to explain to her parents who this woman was and why she was so eager to come home to visit with her.

Religiosity played a significant role in these women's lives. It affected their openness with their parents, as well as themselves. These women had to decide for themselves how their religious beliefs aligned with their internal thoughts, feelings, and desires.

Tarnishing reputation. Half of the women interviewed talked about the negative effect being gay and/or coming out was purported to have on their reputations. Most of these women were told by parents, educators, and even friends that coming out, particularly during high school, would negatively impact their future and the way others thought of and remembered them. Jordan, who was class valedictorian and interested in a law/political career, shared that it was particularly difficult for her because everyone knew her. She expressed that being gay and especially coming out was a bigger taboo for her than some of her other peers in school; her parents encouraged her to “just keep it a secret until you graduate.” Lauren too heard difficult messages from her mother about being openly gay. She even felt that her mother was reading articles and information about gay statistics in order to “convince me to come back to the good side. She was trying to convince me with numbers to show me that oh you're just misguided, you've been misled.” I believe that Lauren best described how these negative responses from parents can affect the child when she said...

It's one thing if like you make your parents cry because you're a drug addict or you're pregnant or something like that. It's another thing if they're crying because of something that you can't change. You know it's just like something that you are and I guess what was the most difficult about that was my mom acting like it was this huge tragedy you

know. And saying that like we weren't going to tell the family, we were going to like hush it up because it's like this huge tragedy basically. And then like now I'm doomed to live this sad lonely pathetic life (Lauren).

Luckily these negative messages weren't always the final message. Jordan shared that too she was made to feel as if "it was kind of like it was a mistake for me to do that [be gay]... Like I had done something wrong or put myself in a position to where I'd messed up and ruined things for myself." She further stated that she initially viewed herself as being "rebellious" by continuing to be true to herself, but that now she views it "like a common sense thing, like why would I ever think that that's a reflection on my success or accomplishment." However, she indicated that it took her several years to come to this new way of thinking about it. Cory also had a strained time with her parents at first, but indicated a more positive relationship currently, stating...

I think my parents decided at some point that I was a worthwhile person who they should love just for like being their daughter and being an okay person. And like I don't know I'm glad that happened and that isn't such a hang-up anymore (Cory).

Unfortunately Lauren has not had as positive of a shift in her relationship with her mother. It was evident that she still has feelings of being inadequate or needing to prove something to her mother about her personality in order for her to be accepted. She indicated that she and her mother talk and have a relationship, but they do not discuss her sexuality or her partners. She further stated that by not talking about things right now, she is hopeful that she can "show" her mother what type of person she is, but this process is still difficult for her to be experiencing. She stated...

And I don't mind just subverting the issues for now and saving them for later. I'm kind of hoping that if I can demonstrate to her that I'm still like essentially the same good person that I was before and that I'm. I still am a moral person and a strong person, that I can show to her that that isn't really an influencing factor. Like it isn't, it isn't like I'm a drug addict; I'm not. My moral character and my sense of personhood hasn't been altered by this in anyway. And I'm kind of trying to show her that if anything I've been strengthened by it, being able to, being allowed to be who I am. But you know when people are looking for problems, you have to be 10 times better than everyone else because they'll pick any little thing and blow it up. So I have to be like the perfect child now (Lauren).

Rose Mary and Susan both shared that they have previously hidden their sexual orientation in order to avoid any negative reactions from people. Susan stated that she always “took down pretty much any – or hid anything gay [from Facebook] when I was looking for a job, just to be on the safe side.” This included removing or hiding the female name from her “in a relationship with” status on Facebook. This preventive measure was the same one she indicated taking with alcohol-related content on her Facebook page. We've all heard the warnings about having alcohol or partying in pictures, but now apparently being gay is in that same category. This would be a difficult thing for a young person trying to come to terms with their own identity development in addition to the potential negative impact of hiding or removing ones' partner from an online social networking site. Rose Mary admitted to being afraid to go to the LGBT group on her college campus during her freshman year and further stated that she became physically ill the first time that she convinced herself to go to a meeting. She stated feeling this way because...

I guess I was just mainly afraid of people like knowing and like judging me. And I was afraid of like hurting my reputation like early at the beginning of college and like what people would think. I wasn't sure like how my roommates felt about LGBT people, like we had never really talked about it (Rose Mary).

While most of the women had positive shifts in their ideas and thoughts about whether or not being openly gay can tarnish ones' reputation, these shifts often took years to happen. Years that were potentially spent with these young women feeling badly about themselves and being on guard about who knew their sexual orientation, an aspect so integral to their identity and so readily shared by the non-LGBT others around them.

Path of labels. The question, "How do you identify?" turned out to be a more significant issue than I had realized or thought about upon first beginning the interviews. Initially I asked each woman how she identified simply for demographic information and to have her chosen label reflected accurately. Of the ten people interviewed, six openly discussed the different labels they have used and the process of using/choosing one over another. Two of the women appeared still to be in the process of choosing and/or feeling comfortable with a specific label and two of the women did not veer from the original label chosen. Discussing this process was spontaneous on the part of the women and seemed to be an important aspect of their experience that they wanted to share with me. Four of the six women identified as bisexual at some point (usually first), while only one currently identifies as bisexual (in some contexts). Four women currently use the label queer. Pansexual, lesbian, gay, non-labeled or "what-ever-I-want" are other labels the women used, either currently or in the past.

For Andy, Diana, and Tila the process of choosing or using different labels appeared to have a political or social justice connotation to it. As they read more, learned more, and engaged in more self-introspection, they each gravitated towards the word queer, primarily because other terms began to feel limiting. Andy stated “when I first came out... I identified as lesbian or gay, but then as I’ve grown and developed my own identity and understanding not only my sexuality but my gender I’ve really explored different identities.” Similarly Diana, whose chosen labels have included bisexual, pansexual, and finally queer, shared her frustrations when becoming more and more involved in feminism, gender, and sexuality studies she came to realize that...

bisexuality was too limiting for me because it only gave...it only just put you in like men or women... like it became apparent to me that the body no longer mattered... I was just like “well I just like people”... Then I was just like “well pansexual is easier to say” so I was like “I can just go for pansexual for a while”... The more I realized that it was kind of even within itself restricting it was probably just as restricting as bisexual was because then it was just men, women, trans men, and trans women. And then it doesn't fit in for genderqueer people or queer people who are outside of the binary overall. Like not even for people who are agen [agender] or whatever. So I was just like well that just seems really, really limiting; I just might as well use queer. And that's the transition. Just me getting more and more frustrated with how smushed in I felt with the label (Diana).

Tila shifted from bisexual to lesbian to queer because she also felt that “queer” was more inclusive of the possibilities for her romantic future and she didn’t want to limit herself only to those with a “certain gender identity.”

Rose Mary was the fourth woman to use the label queer. She indicated that she uses the label bisexual or queer depending upon her audience. She stated that she primarily uses queer within the LGBT community and bisexual otherwise due to the generally negative or confused responses she gets from non-LGBT persons. Like the others who chose the label queer, Rose Mary chose it because “it’s just not really being put into a box of like ‘I like’ these people”.

Jordan said, with a chuckle, that she prefers the “whatever I want” label. She went on to say that it had always been irritating to her when people would say “so what are you now” as if she changed rather than the gender of the person that she was dating. She stated matter-of-factly “I’ve always been one not to label and I guess it’s a personal stubbornness thing.”

For most of the women, this process of self-identification changed over a period of years rather than days or months. This highlights an area where, generally speaking, more thought, time, and energy has gone into defining or labeling oneself as a member of the LGBT community. Going through this process, particularly early in the identity process, can be difficult for students. I have often heard students express having a fear of being asked “what are you or what letter (LGBTQQIA) are you?,” and if they don’t have a quick answer being “outcast” from the meeting or group. Of course, luckily, this is not the actual experience when students do build the confidence to connect with others, but this fear could keep them away from other LGBT individuals for longer than necessary. It is equally important to note, however, that for some people this process of reflection has actually left them with a truer sense of self in addition to a widened or more inclusive view of their sexuality and of their potential mates.

Navigating queer relationships

Meeting and approaching others

Knowing if someone is queer. Some of the women reported one particular “problem” with trying to meet women: knowing if someone is gay. This was especially the case for women that preferred to date “straight appearing” or more feminine-looking women. A lot of emphasis is still placed on outward presentation to determine a woman’s sexual orientation. This applies equally to the woman doing the approaching and the woman hoping to be approached. Jordan, a “straight-appearing” woman, describes her experience “like I’m not going to not wear makeup and I’m not going to not do my hair, [but] I could wear my sweatpants and my Mavs jersey and I would be hit on by women, I’m sure.” She recognized that she had to “do” something in order to increase the chances that a woman (versus a man) would hit on her.

Some women suggested that when in a “queer” environment, the assumption is that everyone is queer, but that this did not alleviate all of the anxiety or stereotyping. Jordan, for instance, indicated that she has experienced negative reactions from other queer women who are “not too happy about people looking straight going in [the bar].” Her response, she says, “I’m sorry I like to dress like this, so.” Susan shared one way that she tries to determine if a woman is queer

I usually ask other gay people if they think the person is gay or I try to catch the eye and try to like I look at them for “gayface” as we previously discussed. That’s where I don’t know, I think it’s something about asymmetry or something where. I don’t know how to describe – something is just a little bit different in their face that makes them.

The fact that knowing if someone is queer was such an impediment for the women highlights how queerness is viewed in our society. Interestingly, with this cohort of women at least, physical harm or safety is not the major fear as it is with many queer youth. Many of the women are afraid of essentially offending someone by thinking that they are queer. One might think that having someone find you attractive and seeking to get to know you better would be flattering and if you're not interested, you're not interested, end of story. And for many straight people that is the way it works; however that is not apparently the way it works for many queer people. Or at least that is not the way these young women perceive it working.

“Straight appearing” women seem to be in a more difficult position in this area. Some women also stated that they would be less likely to hit on or approach a straight appearing woman as compared to someone that more closely fit their vision of queer. Tila stated:

It is more difficult for me to pursue femme looking women. I wonder if they're LGBT and then I wonder whether I should pursue them or not or wait for them because I don't know what role like who should take what role.(Tila)

From the “straight appearing” woman's side of things she may feel the need to be more proactive in changing her appearance to look more like a “stereotypical” lesbian or always wear or carry something to signal her queerness (e.g. a rainbow bracelet). In this respect, she may feel the need to outwardly “brand” herself – at least when trying to meet new people to date. Even if the “straight appearing” woman is the one doing the approaching, she may still run into difficulty letting others know she is queer. Several women indicated that they would be unclear as to whether a “straight appearing” woman was hitting on them or simply being friendly. Tila explains “I would keep second guessing myself because I feel like I tend to do the thing where I

– it’s easier for me to tell when a stereotypical looking lesbian is hitting on me than a straight looking one.” Even Jordan, who self identifies as a “straight-appearing” woman, indicated that she is “more likely to approach this girl wearing a straight billed hat and a suit jacket than I am to approach this otherwise like straight looking girl, just because I’m like not completely off-base, you know.”

There is an interesting juxtaposition between queerness needing to be hidden or private and at the same time clearly denoted, which isn’t necessarily a new concept. What is new, however, is that this is no longer primarily a safety precaution but seems to have permuted into a precaution against shaming or offending.

What does approachable look like? Many people discussed not only the atmosphere or setting when trying to meet someone, but also at a much more basic level “does that woman look approachable.” As discussed in the previous section many of the women indicated having difficulties with knowing if a particular woman is queer or not and they depend on the setting (e.g. gay bar) to let them know; they were all pretty apprehensive about approaching someone in any other setting (e.g. café). Many of the women also specifically stated that they would prefer to be approached rather than approach someone else. Jordan and Susan both find the bar scene “difficult,” but don’t have other options that are as readily available as a bar. Jordan indicated liking the “relaxed, laid back environment” of bars and indicated believing that most people go to a bar to meet someone. Thus she would be very comfortable approaching someone in this setting, but that she does not put much stock into the idea of a relationship forming for that type of meeting. She explains

[The bar scene is difficult] and it's hard to meet anyone outside of that because you don't know. You know it's harder to approach someone at the mall and like oh what you're married, my bad you know. And I I'm always afraid it's going to happen you know. So it's sort of like inevitable that you have to meet someone in that type of environment, so I understand why people have such a hard time finding someone else because if that's your only options, but you don't want that type of person for understandable reasons, you're kind of limited you know.

Susan explained the psychology of body language at the bar by stating "If they're smiling then they're not uptight. If they have their arms crossed the whole time they're at this place..." She went on to talk about the need to feel comfortable to approach someone and finally how the other person may be feeling as well.

But you think you're approachable, yet you're in your group of friends. So you never, it's hard. It's so darn hard to tell who is approachable until you start talking to them... Like at the barbecue had I seen any of those, at [a friend's] barbecue, had I seen any of those girls out and about they probably would have been hanging with each other and I would have been like 'hey don't feel comfortable talking to them,' yet when they were at the barbecue and we had that commonality, it was less cliquy. We had the friend in common and I was able to talk to them, so I guess people just get defensive when they go to a spot that's predominantly for hooking up like a bar or a club. (Susan)

Susan and I talk more about the propensity for women to always be congregating in groups, whether to go to get a drink from the bar or go to the bathroom, we never really separate from our girls. To this idea, she exclaimed:

Dude, that's a good point. They're just as nervous or anxious as we or as I am. That's how I can see it. They're doing the same thing as I am they're probably having the same thoughts as I am. And all you have to do is like go over (Susan)

She seemed really excited about the novel idea, just go over anyway. Perhaps that is something that more women need to be told when it comes to dating: they're just as nervous or anxious, just go over anyway.

This section has focused on the initial meetings and getting to know people. The next section will focus on the actual relationships the women have experienced.

Types of relationships

First relationships. Three of the women spoke in detail about their 'first queer relationship' and more specifically about starting it for the wrong reasons.

I kind of knew what I was getting into when I started to date her I knew that she had some like kind of emotional issues I guess. I think that I was just super excited that someone was interested in me and like it was my first relationship so I think I didn't-. Just felt like all my friends had been dating and I really needed to have a relationship or something. So I sort of like jumped at the opportunity even though she was not necessarily right for me... I think everyone was like why is Cory dating her, but I mean I wanted to do it at the time. It's not like it was a bad experience. (Cory)

For Tila, beginning this first relationship was about validation of her lesbian identity. She explains

And so I was infatuated with her and so I think I was confused because she was like the first girl I ever really liked. I kinda felt like I should date her just cause there's no one else. That's kinda how I felt in high school. I felt like any girl that was slightly cute that was LGBT like I would go after, but now it's a lot different. So I kinda felt like I wanted to date her and also validate my sexuality at the same time too. Cause if I felt like I'd be more of a lesbian if I dated a girl. And so I kinda felt like I needed someone to date in order to feel like a more valid lesbian. So I felt like I kinda liked the idea of having a girlfriend more than actually liking her.

She offers this advice to other newly out queer women who may be a little anxious about finding that first partner.

I'd probably tell them not to rush into dating cause I feel like a lot queer identified women rush into dating cause they feel like that's what they have to do in order to be a lesbian or bisexual women. ... And that's how I felt when I came out. I felt like I had to date women right away in order to be a real lesbian. And so I guess not rushing in to things like not feeling you have to U-Haul it or settle down with the first woman you're with. And feel comfortable dating multiple women and not just settling with one person.
(Tila)

Rose Mary explains how her eagerness to have ANY romantic experience before beginning college collided with her budding feelings for women and turned into a relationship triad.

I wouldn't exactly say we were dating. We were kind of like friends with benefits so we never were really officially dating I guess. But that was when I first started being like

romantically involved with anyone... Yeah. So actually it was kind of like a three-way thing, so sketchy ok, but. (chuckle) there was. I had a really good friend who was a girl and she and I were getting really close and then there was a guy who we were really close with too. ... But basically she started like doing stuff with him and they were doing like all this stuff, but I then got kind of roped into this situation. ... And then [he and I] ended up making out after this movie, and then it escalated from there. Well then between the two of us and him, then she started to like coming on to me. And I really liked her and so then she initiated a relationship with me and then so there was like this triangle going on and very long story short. They ended up dating and I ended not having any friends. It was pretty awful, but I have learned my lesson since then. (Rose Mary)

She goes on to explain why she believes this relationship happened

I was feeling a lot of pressure because I was going to be going to college soon and I was really nervous and I was like I've never even kissed a guy other than on stage in theater... and I need to be somewhat experienced. At least like kissing someone or like being involved with someone or dating or just going out on dates. And I was getting a lot of pressure from my mom once again about like you've never even dated and you're going off to college and blah blah blah. And so I think that it stemmed out of that fear and uncertainty of like this is I guess convenient at the time because I just wanted something; I was like I need, I just wanted some experience mainly and I didn't even like I didn't feel anything for him, like in a romantic sense at all. He was just like a friend.... But with her I felt like I really liked her, like I felt a connection with her [she] was like my best friend and so but I think I like really liked her romantically too. And so I think it came

out of that and then since it was kind of like a triangle I think I kind of got stuck with a relationship with him that I didn't want. (Rose Mary)

For Rose Mary, this first 'relationship' was much more about getting any type of intimate experience, but it seemed that it would not have happened had there not been a female involved. In addition, she further stated that having this three-way experience helped to solidify her interest in women as she "liked her so much more than him."

Each of these women had their own individual reasons for beginning these first relationships. However what they share in common is beginning relationships that they recognize (at least on some level) is not the best for them because they are eager to have the experience or become a "real" lesbian.

Online relationships. Three of the 10 women discussed using the internet for community, seeking friends, and dating. In each of those cases these women turned to the internet because they felt isolated and/or didn't know where else to begin. The internet helped them gain access to same-sex relationships in a way that would not have been available otherwise. The woman all expressed that the relationships found online had a significant impact in their lives and Diana specifically shared that not only was her online, long-distance relationship "real", but it also "was just exactly what I needed at the time". For Andy, who feared her opportunities for queer interactions were limited; the internet was an early platform to find other teens like her. She stated...

Online was where I went basically, so like [I] went to like L word forums and I'd like look at like went to webpages and chat sites. Like talked to people on there and like MySpace was still kind of big then. So I remember meeting some people on MySpace,

like I connected like a few young women on there that were my age that were just coming out too and like created relationships with them online and like talked to them. So like that kind of helped me too; like oh there are other women around my age like this that are real and exist and like me. (Andy)

Susan shared that her primary reason for utilizing the internet was to meet new friends after moving to a new city, but that she also kept an open mind towards dating.

I came here and I only knew my mom, so I figured I could either date people or they could hopefully turn into friends if it didn't work out. So I didn't, I felt like I had nothing to lose. It could be nice to have company, meet new people and stuff like that. For a while it was just, I was "seeking friends" is what I was doing, but also accepting dates kind of. So I wasn't looking, I wasn't predominantly searching for dating I was just searching for people to hang out with. (Susan)

These three women turned to online resources to broaden their social experiences and all had positive experiences. The internet appeared to have been a valuable resource on the road to competence because it increased availability to others.

Long distance relationships. Long distance relationships were an option explored by several of the women interviewed; most appeared to have mixed feelings about these relationships. For many the relationship started out as something wonderful, yet there were lingering thoughts and concerns about the "realness" of these relationships. In the end it seemed that most women felt that the negatives outweighed the positives of long distance relationships because as Lauren realized, one can't "be in two places at once." Lauren, Susan, and Cory indicated they would not likely engage in a long distance relationship in the future.

Most of the long distance relationships experienced by the women in this study had unlimited timeframe, with no real plan or expectation of the relationship becoming “non” long distance. For instance, Cory reported dating a woman she met during a debate tournament. She explains how the relationship worked out.

The main places we would see each other in person were at tournaments. So that left our options kind of limited like cause we obviously couldn't go and like have sex in a classroom or something. Yeah. And I didn't have a car. I actually didn't have my license in high school, so there was literally no way we could visit each other. At least not without my parents knowing and that wasn't really an option so. (Cory)

Not knowing when the relationship would no longer be long distance could have been a major part of the discontent the women began to feel after some time had passed. For many of the women, the primary reason for beginning the long distance relationship was because they already knew and cared about their partner in addition to a perceived lack of availability of potential local partners. Wanting to be physically close is a natural extension of caring about a person for many people. Age and circumstances also played a role in the women not being able to have a concrete plan to lessen the distance between them. Most of the women were still in their mid to late teens and being provided for by their parents.

Susan's experience with a long distance relationship began after her girlfriend had to leave school for one semester. In this case, there was a finite amount of time that the relationship was to be long distance, however, this relationship still suffered due to unequal effort put forth by the two partners. Susan explains how she felt during this period.

The first girl I ever fell in love with like we dated for a ... couple months at college. And then she was on academic probation, had to stay in Dallas for a semester before she could come back. And she just didn't keep up her communication, her side of the communication. I'm pretty, my mindset is kind of like 50/50 and sometimes I'll pull more than my own weight. But she just didn't keep it up and she just kind of banked on the fact that I was crazy about her. (Susan)

Susan further shared that she broke up with this woman shortly thereafter. While none of the relationships fared well in the end, two of the women talked specifically about how important the relationship was in meeting their needs in the moment and the connection they felt to their long-distance partner. Diana shared, "we met online and umm, I know most people don't view online long distance relationships to be real relationships, but they're real to me. It was ahh she was just exactly what I needed at the time." She goes on to discuss what happened when the relationship no longer "felt real" or met her needs.

I ended it because it stopped being good and I stopped feeling like I was in an actual relationship because even it was good to say that I was in a relationship. I was able to tell my friends, but it still didn't mean much because I wasn't, she wasn't there to do the typical relationship things with me. So my friends would still be able to go on dates with their boyfriends and things like that and my girlfriend was like a billion miles to the west. So it was very hard to do that and it was very hard to feel like I was in a legitimate because I'd be like hey guys guess how long I talked to like Sabrina last night or something. And they'd be like oh that's great, I went to the movies with my boyfriend and he actually was there to put his hand around me. Like his arm around me. They wouldn't say that in real life, but that's how it felt because they'd just, they'd be able to

have actual dates and do actual relationship things and I couldn't really do that. So I ended it . (Diana)

Cory likewise had some doubts about the authenticity of her relationship after a point.

She stated

Sometimes I sort of question the connection I had with this person because like we communicated primarily through text messages or through calling each other in the evening so like I think it really was bothersome to me. Like I always felt like it was sort of superficial cause you can say whatever you want in a text message so like I feel like I have this great connection with this person, but I don't really know like if we had been together in person if it would have been like that. But at the time it was nice.

Long distance relationships, like all types of relationships, have a role in people's lives. However, the prospects of a long distance relationship for developing are not as viable as when the partners are in close physical proximity to each other. In addition, if one chooses to be in a long distance relationship, it is important that both partners put in the effort to maintain the relationship and to have some plan for when the relationship will no longer be long distance.

Progression of partner choice. Many respondents spoke about the process of choosing (or accepting) a partner. Most of them they also shared that there was a progression in the choices they were making, such that earlier they were more willing to "say yes" or approach a woman without much regard to whether or not the woman had the qualities they desired in a partner. As Susan stated

There was a phase for a while when I was getting my confidence and learning how to ask girls out where I'd pretty much ask girls out that I knew would say yes.... I mean of

course that was subconscious, me thinking that. And I realized it later. That I could have done way better than... Yeah which of course I didn't realize at the time and another part of it was I knew for sure that they were gay, which also made it easier." (Susan)

Tila shared a similar sentiment about her early dating experiences:

I kinda felt like I should date her just cause there's no one else. That's kinda how I felt in high school. I felt like any girl that was slightly cute that was LGBT like I would go after. But now it's a lot different. (Tila)

Susan went on to share more about her selection of dating partners over the years...

That's just like a clear-it just kept getting, the quality in the women that I went out with just got higher and higher and higher, higher, higher. Like if it was a graph, it would be a steady increase. ..Experience definitely and slowly just in confidence growing at the same time. And yeah I think it's main- definitely the confidence growing and then as you ask. As you get a little bit better you start aiming higher and so I just kept aiming higher and higher and higher and got a little bit, I won't say reckless but more ballsy, I guess. ..Yeah, I mean like still to this I mean to this day I've probably dated like right at my level is the highest I've gone. I don't think I've asked out anybody who's quote unquote higher than me. I mean now that's kind of what I'm doing, but. .. There's no more of this crap of asking people that I know will say yes. (Susan)

Tila further explained her rationale for her early dating choices by stating

I always felt like all relationships were dirty to me in the beginning cause I felt like they were so taboo and forbidden that I didn't I felt like I didn't think I deserved the best

anyway, so that's why I settled for shitty relationships. And I think that's something I would tell myself from back then: to like have higher standards. (Tila)

While both Tila and Susan shared that their actions were based in part on limited options and confidence, Jordan experienced a progression for a different reason. As someone who had dated a number of males before beginning to date women she stated:

I guess because it [dating women] was more intimate I was willing to settle for less. Like I was willing, like the credentials that I would have had to date someone before kind of were out the window, because I was intimately invested in the relationship. And with a guy if I wasn't as intimately invested then I would have these higher credentials... And it really is like an option thing that I don't have to approach anyone, I can just sit back and collect whoever comes to me. Maybe it was a convenience thing, it was just easier to do that for the time being, but at some point I realized that I don't want what's convenient. (Jordan)

Jordan seemed to believe that the greater level of intimacy she could achieve with a woman would compensate for a lower level of attractiveness or socially desirable characteristics in the individual. This differs from Susan, in that Susan felt her lowering of standards was on a more subconscious level. Susan too, however, recognized that her feelings were stronger for women to whom she was not even attracted than an "ideal" man:

Ok well I'll put it this way. I dated a girl, the first girl I ever dated, I was not attracted to [her], but it felt right being with her versus any of the two attractive guys that I went out with. So it just felt more right being with a girl than with guys. And the two guys, one was like if I had a dream guy quote unquote it would be pretty close to him. Like he was

like more manly more rugged I don't know... and I was sitting in his dorm room and I was like wow I don't want him to touch me and he's my quote unquote dream guy and very attractive. And then I was like I guess I'm full on gay. (Susan)

Areas of challenge

Lack of acceptance from family. The degree of 'outness' of each person (and her partner) was a significant factor in the women's relationships. Several of the women discussed their partners' reaction or expected reaction to such common relationship behaviors as holding hands in public and spending time with family. The women all felt that being away at college took away some of the concern. College seemed to provide enough of a separation from their parents, that the women were able to be more open and free with their relationships. Cory explains

It's just been a totally different experience to be in college, because like in high school when I when I was dating people I had to do it totally secretly so like I'd have to like sneak out of my house and like go to their apartment or their family's apartment or whatever like. Like furtively call someone under the like sheets and like hope that my parents didn't hear me talking on the phone for three hours. Well I guess I'm definitely out [now] like I mean I don't like go around with like an "I'm a lesbian" t-shirt or anything, but I would tell anyone who asks. Sometimes I go to the PRIDE meetings here; I hold hands with my girlfriend around campus. I kiss my girlfriend around campus, so like anyone who's on campus regularly and like walks on my route knows that I'm gay so. I think I mean I don't know if that necessarily carries over from high school, but maybe it probably does. Yeah well I think that's mainly because I'm not worried about

my parents at all now. Like they've become a lot more I want to say accepting, but we've sort of like learned to live together and like not, not make it as something that's like divisive between us and like they're not regularly around here so like they don't like probably if they were on campus and they saw me kissing my girlfriend they'd be upset, but like I don't have to worry about that. (Cory)

Cory went on to share that while her parents had made great strides over the years, things with her girlfriend's parents were not as calm. She indicated that her girlfriend would often tell her parents that they broke up simply to appease them. Cory admitted that this was "frustrating" for her as she was the one that would have to comfort her partner after family visits: "I'd say it's a big stressor in our relationship because especially when she goes home if they get into a fight about it, she'll be really depressed for like the week afterwards." Cory acknowledged that meeting her girlfriend's parents would be nice, but she did not expect that to happen in the near future. Tila also expressed sentiments about not being able to share her relationship with her parents and the effect that may have on her relationship.

Like for me whenever I date someone I can't even bring them home because I know my parents won't accept it. So I feel like that definitely hinders my relationships because I feel like my partner may not think that I take them seriously because I don't wanna take them home. (Tila)

Currently the way that Tila has found to rectify this situation is to turn to her sisters, whom she described as the only family members to whom she is "comfortably out." She indicated that she would take her girlfriend home to meet her sisters rather than her parents. For the time, it appears that Tila has found a way to get her needs met by having her sisters fill the

role her parents are unwilling or unable to perform. Just as Cory described how frustrating it can be when the partners' families differ on acceptance of same-sex relationships, Andy shared similar sentiments. She recognized that unlike some parents, her parents were very open and supportive of her and her relationships; she could talk to them and bring her girlfriend home to meet them. She indicated that she has felt resentment from some partners regarding the closeness and supportiveness of her family when her partner's family was not accepting.

Even as these young women are growing older and exhibiting more independence from their parents, the parents still play an important role in their relationships. Being able to talk with their parents and have their partner participate in family events has been something that is important. It is so important that some, such as Tila, have chosen to find a "stand-in" in order to be able to have that experience. However, not all of the women reacted with dejection to their parents' lack of acceptance. For example, Angel had a different way of thinking about and dealing with her parents disdain and lack of support of her sexual identity:

If they [parents] don't like it, that's fine. I'll keep doing it; just not share it with them. But I'm not going to stop. If they were more accepting though I would bring, I would introduce them to the people that I meet and actually have a girlfriend. Or call them my girlfriend and bring her to family things, you know. All that stuff. (Angel)

The contrast between their own experiences with their family and the experiences of their straight siblings were a source of distress for some women. Tila noted:

My older sister makes me feel like it's very cool. But then I still sometimes feel kinda bad because I know that my sister can publically kinda show off her boyfriend to her family and talk about her boyfriend to her family whereas I have to hide it all the time.

And so I definitely feel kinda sad about that, but my sisters and I can talk about it pretty completely. They won't like put my partner in the background just because it's a woman.

(Tila)

Again Tila expressed being able to turn to her sisters for support. However, she recognizes and is saddened by the fact that her straight sister can and does get parental support and acknowledgement for her relationship while Tila does not.

Sex and safer sex education. One person indicated discussing dating and sex with those she considered to be mentors. She was however in the minority and many others specifically discussed not having any sort of safer sex education for queer women. In fact that was an area that seemed to have been missing for many of the women. Some talked about having fears and misconceptions prior to being able to learn from someone. Others indicated no thinking about safer sex too much since unplanned pregnancy was not a possibility; they did not think about sexually transmitted infections.

Susan stated that her mom, a doctor, always told her and her brother to “wrap it before you tap it” and likewise Andy shared that her parents also reminded her to be safe. However, both women also indicated that that was the extent of the “safer sex talks.” Susan indicated that when her mom found out that she was “for sure gay,” she was sure to remind Susan that “girl diseases spread also” and even attempted to buy her dental dams from Wal-Mart and other pharmacy chains. Susan reportedly never attempted to use dental dams, however, because “man, what a mood killer. Let me break out this rectangular rubber thing.” For Andy however, there was never a difference in the messages she received whether she was dating a male or a female. She stated:

I never got asked about like they never questioned me about like sexual things with guys or girls or even like with girls they were like whatever be safe. I had the sex talk very young, they were very open about sex and sexuality and stuff like that with me: So as long as you're always being safe and dadadada. I think they also assumed too a little part cause I was very conservative Catholic like straight edge in high school that I wasn't having sex. I think that was also a big thing that we didn't talk a lot about dating. I don't think they thought they had to with me. (Andy)

Angel stated that she attended an LGBT club meeting where the topic was "gay sex."

She stated:

I'm remembering one of the meetings that I went to, they you know like the safe sex or whatever. They were talking about gay sex and so I never had that in my high school and so I thought that was cool that they you know, that they shared that kind of stuff and in that manner. (Angel)

Because unplanned pregnancy was no longer a concern, Angel thought she did not need to think about safer sex at all. Upon discussing that many people (erroneously) believe that lesbian sex IS safe sex she explains

Yeah and I guess I still kind of think that way today. Just knowing that I can't get pregnant you know that kind of just makes it all a lot better. Or you know just kind of like brings my stress level down. You know everything, so I'm just like ok this is cool.
(Angel)

Two of the women spoke about receiving conflicting advice or ‘rules’ about sexual activity and intimacy from their parents and their friends. Their parents were more reserved about sex and only talked about abstinence or reasons they shouldn’t have sex. Tila shared:

My parents never taught like their daughters to pursue their man, more so the man is to pursue you. And so they think that you have to be smart, you have to be pretty. I think that was pretty much what they told us. And not to come off as whorish and so to be very reserved about our sexuality. And like virginity is a huge thing. My parents don’t believe in sex until marriage and they always enforced that too. (Tila)

It seemed that Tila desired a broader picture of sex and she indicated that upon having more LGBT friends who were “really sexually active and dated a lot” she was finally able to “definitely join in all those conversations.” Rose Mary indicated experiencing more fear surrounding sexual activity and intimacy due to messages she received from her parents. She explained

One thing that made me kind of uncomfortable and this might be because I had friends who were older, but it seemed like if you were dating there were like things that were expected of you; like sexual things, and I was like I don’t think so (laughing), like I am not getting involved in that. Like that sounds dangerous and so that was one message I received [from peers] that I think made me nervous. Yeah it just seemed like there was a lot of pressure there that I was like I don’t even want to touch that. I was like that seems like cause there’s – there were also like a lot of mixed messages with that. Just from my family I kind of got the like it wasn’t acceptable to do anything with anyone, then my

friends who were dating all seemed to be doing like a lot of stuff and I was like this seems like it could be a conflicting thing. (Rose Mary)

She continued to state that she waited until she was about to graduate to have any type of sexual experiences. She indicated not wanting to begin college “never even having a real kiss” and that she felt inexperienced. She explained her feelings throughout high school:

I guess a lot of what I was feeling was like the conflict between like what my friends were saying and what my family was saying. So I guess as far as that like getting that conflict resolved, no I never really had someone who I could like talk to and be like what actually needs to happen here. And I think that’s why I just kind of like stayed away from it, just because I didn’t have anything to like kind of temper those two things. (Rose Mary)

Discussions about both sex and safer sex are important for young adults to have. I would also contend that having discussions about safer sex for lesbians is an area that is especially overlooked. It would be best if they were to receive truthful and straight-forward information from reputable and knowledgeable sources rather than having to sort through the misinformation or feel so much fear that they do not explore these very natural parts of their lives.

Ending relationships. Four of the women discussed ending relationships. The most common sentiment was not knowing how or when to end relationships. Each of the four women said that, in hindsight, they had stayed in a relationship for “too long.” The specific behaviors that made them feel it was a bad relationship were as varied as the reasons for staying in the relationship. The reasoning ranged from “I’d made a commitment” to “maintaining face” and simply waiting to be broken up with because of not “knowing how” to break up. Finally,

“breaking up” was recognized as a needed skill; an opportunity to learn to be true to oneself and learn to deal with being single.

In Jordan’s relationship she felt that her partnership was no longer equal and that she had become like a parent instead of a girlfriend. She stated:

It sounds really pathetic now, but I’m like I took her to Disneyland on vacation and then I didn’t get a vacation in return. And I mean like our anniversary I always took her out, why didn’t she take me out... If she needed a roof over her head, you know I was going to pay for the apartment, pay for the electricity, doctor’s appointments, school, that was not my job. I didn’t need to be doing any of that. I don’t know, it was dumb. (Jordan)

Susan likewise felt that she began putting forth more effort than her partner and when a situation arose that was too big for her to ignore, she reacted: “So I’m like, yeah you’re in the same fucking town as I am and you’re going to continue being lazy. You’re cut from the team. I don’t care if I’m in love with you. You’re cut from the team.” She goes on to explain what their relationship had been like during the final six months.

It was a definite roller coaster I guess because she was, it was up and down because I’d be like you’re breaking my heart. Why won’t you do this and that stuff? Don’t you care about me? Yeah I do. And then the next day she’d call again, I’d be like I love you cause we’d patch things over so it was like scab over, exposed, scab over, exposed. And when you realize that the distance isn’t causing that, I mean it’s not helping but I was just like that (snaps her fingers) I’m going to cut and run before I get hurt any more than I already was. (Susan)

Lauren shared a time where she hastily began a new relationship in order to end an old relationship.

Finally you know I did end up breaking up with her because I met someone else. But this time I was kind of reckless because I was so desperate to get out of this relationship that I felt was kind of like pulling me down with it and this girl was not good for me. We kind of dated through the summer, well kind of dated and then she would go sneak off and like hook up with other people on the side and I would find out and we'd fight about it. And then she'd basically come crawling back to me and then she'd wander off again. And then finally I like put my foot down I was like this is it, I'm done, get out of my life. Get, go, go, get out. So pushed her out and told her to like take a break (Lauren)

Sometimes it takes a few tries to get it "right", but ultimately the women felt that ending a relationship when they were unhappy was a better long-term decision than staying in the relationship. Each expressed wonderment at themselves for staying involved and/or allowing the back and forth for the amount of time that they did. Some of the women realized that sometimes being single is the right choice to make over being in the wrong relationship. Susan shared her realization of that fact.

Actually the last girl that I kind of dated like it wasn't there and I thought I could do better. So I, I was like you know you're probably going to be alone because of this or you could have someone now that's not quite what you want. And I said screw that, I'll be single. I knew that it would leave me single for an extended period of time, but I wasn't going to sacrifice the quality of my relationship just because I was scared about still being single. (Susan)

Susan was able to think about her longer term happiness to make the decision to forego a relationship. Tila on the other hand reportedly “always gets broken up with” because she doesn’t “know how to end relationships.” Lauren suggests the difficulty in learning how to deal with less than ideal relationships lies in the fact that she wasn’t often able to share and talk to others.

I didn’t really dare talk about it because I didn’t want to admit that I didn’t know what I was doing. Everyone else seemed to know what they were doing. Everyone else just seemed to be doing things and it was happening and it was fine and they were great with it and they had drama and they had this. I didn’t really know what I was doing and I didn’t want to admit it. (Lauren)

Differences between college and “the real world.” All of my participants attended college. Only one person, Susan, had already graduated and she discussed some differences between dating during and after college. She indicated that dating in college was much easier for her primarily because meeting women was easier. She explains:

It’s been a weird transition cause like in college you have a chance to get to know the same people. You have like multiple days that you hang out with them and then it’s more like yeah I like this person. Versus having to basically like out cold or ask them out cold, you know. It’s been a rough transition in that. Cause I’d be like oh there’s Karen again. And I’d be like what’s up. And then I’d be like ok I’m going to ask her out and I’d be a little nervous, but do it. Versus hey there’s a chick that I just saw like five minutes ago. I guess I’m going to have to start talking to her and ask her out. It’s different, it sucks. You have to be more ballsy about it I guess. And you have to make a split decision in some cases and I don’t like it. And [in college] you know that you’re going to see them more

than that just that first meeting. You know you're going to see them again versus if I go out to like a restaurant or something a bar and I see a girl. I'm like I'm probably not going to see her again so I need to strike now. (Susan)

Susan goes on to share another benefit of meeting women at college rather than in the "real world"

In college like a lot of the girls that I asked out were from the LGBT groups and so I knew they were gay versus I'll call it the real world, the post college world. You don't, the type of girls I go for, I don't know if they're gay or straight because I go for the feminine ones so it's, you got that battle as well. (Susan)

Finally Susan summed up how she is faring with the transition to the "real world"

I would say yes I've had trouble adapting to the different environment in which I now have to date in and I don't know. I don't think it's a confidence thing because when I'm aiming for girls, I aim high. So I think it's, I mean yeah there is still plenty of confidence at play, but I guess it's, the experience is different. Because it was just like shooting fish in a barrel in college; my god, you knew who was gay and you knew that they'd be at this meeting regularly or that they had friends would be at their house parties and stuff like that versus come here [random bar] and you don't know who you're going to find if anybody on any given day or night. ..I just got lucky and people who don't go to college, I don't know how they should approach things because college was the most valuable experience that I got. (Susan)

Process-oriented thoughts and beliefs.

This section reflects the women's own thoughts and feelings regarding the subject of dating and romantic relationships. I asked the women to talk about what they feel confident and secure in as well as what they do not feel confident and secure about. The next section discusses how the things they learned and experienced during adolescence influenced them now as dating adults. Finally some of the women give some words of wisdom to their younger selves and other young queer women.

Areas of confidence and insecurities. When asked if they knew how to be in a relationship or about specific aspects of being in a relationship the women largely indicated that they “don't” know how to date.” However, there were some areas where they expressed more confidence and other areas where they described more insecurity. Six of the women indicated being comfortable with initiating conversations and approaching others. Rose Mary, who said that she can be “suave” when it comes to meeting others stated:

I think that I've developed some skills and especially being in my relationship for like over a year I am definitely probably the more dominant person in the relationship. So I think I've developed some skills that I think I could initiate something like with someone else in the future. (Rose Mary).

For Kyle and Angel the confidence to approach others depended a lot on the setting. They both claimed to more “aggressive” about introducing themselves when in a bar or dance club. Kyle explained why she exhibits more confidence at the bar:

I'm a lot more forward with people when I'm drinking. I think the thing is if I meet someone at a bar, I may never see them again. Is the huge thing, I think more for me.

Like I can go to you and make a complete ass, give you some really like jackass pickup like if you're like screw you, I'm like "oh ok, it's cool". Cause I'm never going to see you again, I'm good. Like opposed to someone who I meet outside of a bar or probably like know them through other things, like we have other connections where it's like "oh this is going to be awkward" if I see you again. (Kyle)

Susan's stated she has experienced a decline in her confidence since she left the college setting. She explains both where her confidence level was during college and currently in the "real world."

One hundred being awesome, yeah I'm not. I don't want to say I've gone back to square one from when I was at college, but it kind of, it feels like that a lot. I'd say I'm like, I'd say in college by the – When I was at college I was like at 70% and I'd say now I feel like I'm 50%. Like I know how to flirt and it's... I know how to, when someone likes me and I know how to show someone I like them, but I'm not good at creating the situation where all that comes into play. (Susan)

The area where the women expressed the least amount of confidence was with maintaining relationships. They seemed to be concerned with how to maintain their independence while still being part of a couple. Diana stated, "I didn't know how to be myself in a relationship; I thought well I caught the guy so now I have to keep him." Similarly Tila, who rated her confidence level as a C+, explained what area she feels needs to improve:

I guess like learning how to be more independent and being more assertive and stronger would have helped me a lot cause I grew up being really timid and not being assertive at all and so I don't know how to be assertive in my relationships. (Tila)

Andy specifically indicated that the interactions with women were very different from her experience dating guys and she was still struggling to “reframe everything” because it’s like “starting over.” She expressed confusion with how “quickly relationships moved along with women” and when to share her feelings with her partner, stating that “in my past dating relationships, that was always said to me first so I didn’t have to worry about it.” She too needed to learn to take the lead and not be passive in her relationships.

Each of the women was able to describe areas in which they feel confident as well as areas where they believe their ‘skills’ are lacking. While the responses were varied, many of the women expressed by somewhat comfortable with initiating conversation though they also seemed to be particularly concerned with outing themselves, offending the other person by assuming she was queer, or wanting to wait until the other person made the first move. The primary areas of least confidence seemed to be with escaping old passive female gender roles. Specifically the women indicated difficulty when their ideas of gender roles interacted with having and maintaining the relationship such as finding shared activities, learning to be you; and sharing emotions. All of the women seemed to have ways of dealing with their insecurities, however.

Process from adolescence to adulthood. Several of the women shared about specific things they felt may have been beneficial in helping them to make the transition from dating as an adolescent to dating as an adult. Most women expressed that time and experience was the biggest factors. The women spoke of learning what they did “wrong” in earlier relationships and trying to move forward from those things. Jordan indicated learning “how you shouldn’t treat people in a relationship” Another major component in the transition from adolescent to adult was

self-acceptance and being more relaxed. Andy described how her relationships improved once she was able to relax and just be herself:

After like kind of realizing [dating women] wasn't much different from just dating like you care about someone you date them, I was just kind of like oh there really wasn't that big scary unknown. I liked it a lot better, but besides that it was just kind of [similar]. So then I just kind of went back to my typical dating self, who was just kind of doing what I felt like when I feel like: if it feels right then I go for it or whatever. (Andy)

Rose Mary summarizes how her own increased acceptance of her sexual orientation was helpful for her in feeling comfortable in her romantic relationships.

So to answer, yes I think I did learn a lot of skills that were really helpful now in my current relationship. And in that sense I'm really glad that I had kind of a negative experience in high school because I think I learned a lot from it. I think that when I was able to accept that like it was ok for me to like care about this girl is when it went away. and just to be ok with that and being like that doesn't' make me a bad person for liking [a girl] (Rose Mary)

Tila used some trial and error in order to find out what her 'relationship style' was. She shared how experimentation was helpful in her process. She was able to come to terms with her own inexperience by dating women who were in various stages of comfort with their sexual orientation.

Just my experiences of dating and not forcing myself to be like the woman or the man in the relationship and just letting things flow. I think I think it definitely took some time for me to be at the place I am now. I definitely think that dating several girls helped a lot.

Like dating girls who had different parts of their identity: girls who were like newer to coming out, girls who had had been out for a few years. Definitely, yeah, dating different girls with different experiences helped a lot. (Tila)

Susan, who didn't begin dating until she was in college, stated that she did not have experiences during adolescence that were influential in her adult dating life. This was primarily due to the differences she experienced in "college vs. real world" dating. Though she didn't feel there was influence from her adolescence she shared how experimenting and challenging herself are helping to improve her dating since college. For her, approaching people she did not already know was a skill that presented challenges.

I can't think of anything that would have equipped me for this kind of dating because I think it's something that you have or you don't. And some people have the ability to go up to strangers and not give a shit about talking to them versus I like to get to know people a little bit... I have started talking to strangers, just in general, more to kind of like warm myself up to talking too, cause they are strangers. They just happen to be the strangers that I'm attracted to so. If you talk to strangers and you get really comfortable with that, I feel like it's a good stepping stone to be able to talk to anyone. (Susan)

The women appeared to have given a lot of thought to their dating and romantic life, including ways to improve it. Experimentation, being more comfortable with oneself and simply the experience of being in a relationship were all helpful as the women progressed in their relationship comfort and competence.

Advice to others or younger self. Some of the women disclosed a piece of advice they would give to their younger self or to another young queer woman. The primary response was to

wait until older to date and also not to be too concerned with what others are doing. Lauren felt that at age 13, she was too young be dating; it was “kind of ridiculous” she said. She stated that she began dating because she “went to great lengths to try and sort of camouflage myself.”

Jordan also felt that she was too young when she first began dating. She explained

I feel I was too young, just too young to be dating and to know what’s up. And I thought I did. I feel like I jumped into the romantic aspect of relationships sooner than I might have, should have.... It really was for me at the time umm and it was bad because all the guys I dated were like oh no, no, no it’s cool because I mean you were like good otherwise, so if you were with me even if we like messed around and stuff it’s fine because you’ve a good reputation otherwise so no one is going to know you like that. I’m like ok (child voice) whatever you – And so maybe being too meek and mild early on made me a little resentful later. (Jordan)

Jordan would have liked to have the chance to get to know herself better and know what she wanted instead of being talked into things. Susan also indicated that she felt that some people tried to “force” dating, relationships, and the coming out process. She advised:

...you will evolve at your own pace... I don’t know. I mean I think I saw it. I mean I saw my share of people that were having trouble with it or like partying too hard and just being so out, but like also just kind of forcing it. And like when I date and force it, it’s just never good. So it’s important to I guess just let it happen naturally. (Susan)

Cory also indicated that moving too quickly and trying to keep up with your peers is not the best idea. She stated

I think like, don't rush into things cause I felt like in high school I felt like I needed to keep up with everyone. Like how many relationships they've had or how intimate they've been with people or whatever and so like I think I sort of like went into my first relationship without fully thinking through the fact that I might not be right for this person. (Cory)

Many people spoke about the idea of waiting until older to start dating in order to have a better understanding of self. Letting things happen naturally and just being yourself were the other pieces of advice offered to young queer women.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the interpersonal experiences of lesbian and bisexual women, particularly their experiences with dating and romantic relationships during adolescence. Through the use of individual interviews and observation of participants, data were gathered regarding the experiences of 10 queer- identified women. Themes that emerged in the study were described in chapter 4. This chapter highlights the major findings, their implications, and recommendations based on the findings of this study.

Key findings

The data from the study resulted in three main themes which were important in understanding how the women have experienced dating as members of the LGBT community. These themes were a) beginning to know self and early identification as a queer woman b) navigating queer relationships and c) the process of transitioning from adolescent to adult relationships.

In the process of beginning to know themselves the women needed to first know what it meant to be gay. Most of the women reported being aware of same-sex attractions, although they did not have the language to label their attractions. They learned at a young age that these attractions were not the norm and that most of their peers did not also have same-sex attractions. They mostly reported keeping these attractions to themselves. Several of the women indicated that television and movies are where they first began to see other lesbian and queer women; most of them reported not knowing anyone in real life that identified as gay. The media portrayals were helpful to some of the women, but not to all of them. All of the women reported it was most

helpful when they began meeting others in person and exploring the gay community around them. Unfortunately for some of them, this opportunity did not present itself until they were in college. Only two women reported having a school organization focused on LGBT issues such as a gay straight alliance. All of the women indicated a negative environment within their schools, often hearing gay slurs such as “that’s gay.” Some women reported receiving negative messages about being gay from their teachers as well.

Most of the women had problematic family relationships with regards to their sexual identity. Several of the women indicated being forced to come out to one or both parents. Often times their parents implied that the women were merely going through a phase or challenged them to “validate” their sexual identity. Only two women reported having parents who were supportive when they first came out to them, though four others indicated their parents had become more supportive by the time of the interview. Many of these women were able to find familial support from siblings or other close adults. Gay mentors also played an important role for those women who could not share their relationship with their families.

There was an explicit message about how being openly gay could be detrimental to the women’s life goals. Many women were told that they should hide their sexuality from certain people or in certain situations or circumstances. For instance, Jordan’s parents warned her that she would only be remembered as “the gay one” instead of for all of the accomplishments that she had earned in high school. It often took several years for the women to begin to question these ways of thinking, not to feel guilty about their feelings, and to start to be ok and happy with being gay. Lauren admitted that she is still homophobic because the messages she has learned over the years are such an ingrained part of her.

Meeting other LGBT people, exploring the gay community, and learning more about gay culture were ways that the women came to have greater acceptance of their own sexual identity. Acceptance was an important component as it directly impacted their dating and romantic experiences.

The next theme, navigating queer relationships, concerned how the women experienced certain aspects of relationships, such as meeting others and engaging in romantic relationships. There were many common experiences in the ways the women approached dating. Most of the women began dating during high school and many of these earlier relationships were with boys. Several of the women stated that dating was a way to achieve popularity in their school. In addition, for some, it helped to shield their true sexual identity. Some of the women felt that they were not very good girlfriends at this period, primarily because they were not fully present in the relationship. They spoke of feeling like their behaviors were cold or mean towards the boys and that the boys seemed to care more about the relationship than they did. They expressed feeling confused about how their experience of the relationship could be so different from that of the boys they were dating, until they began to date women. At this point, the women explained that they began to feel excitement about the other person, they enjoyed kissing, and they looked forward to phone calls. The women discussed feeling deeper emotions when dating women and this frightened some of them. Andy reported being afraid because she hadn't had the practice of experiencing a broken heart. More than one woman stated that it was like starting over or going through puberty again; so many things to learn anew.

Those first queer relationships were very important in the dating process for women. Many women indicated that they were so eager to date a woman that they dated people they knew weren't right for them or approached any girl who was also queer. One woman described

becoming involved in a secret three-way relationship in order to be closer to the other woman involved. Almost all of the women stated that they had grown past those behaviors and are now more selective in their dating.

Many of the women indicated that at the beginning, there were aspects of dating women that they were confused or unsure about. Some were unsure about gender roles and wondered about such things as who should ask whom out or who opens the door. They found it difficult to tell if others were queer and felt very apprehensive about making a “mistake” by asking. Once in relationships, some women were unsure about how to be themselves and maintain their own independence. They also reported difficulty with knowing how and when is the right time to end a relationship.

Finally the women were asked to discuss their own thoughts and ideas about their dating and romantic experiences. Many of the women indicated that they have grown in their relationship competence by having more relationships and experiences. Many were confident about initiating conversations and meeting new people, though some indicated that that confidence only extended to queer spaces such as a gay bars. The area in which people seemed least confident was in maintaining the relationship once they start dating someone. The women felt that having LGBT friends they could talk to about their relationships was a part of what helped them learn and grow. While most of the women stated that they “don’t know how to date,” they all seemed to be content and making the most of the situation. They appeared to recognize that not many people have it all figured out and they were enjoying this experience more than they were when dating boys.

Limitations of study

The sample size for this study was small as is often the case in qualitative studies and therefore the results of this study may not be generalizable; however, the aim of most qualitative research is to be transferable rather than generalizable (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). By providing thick, rich description of the participants including the use of their actual words, I have attempted to produce transferability. In addition, this work can serve as background for future research endeavors in that other queer woman may have some similar experiences as those included in this study.

Another limitation of this study is the restricted age range (18-24) of the women. One of my central theses is that learning to date happens through practice, trial and error, and opportunity. Many of the women have had limited romantic relationship experience and while the focus of this study was on the early learning phases, it is possible that with limited experience the women still do not have an accurate sense of confidence or belief in the adequacy of their skill set. Only one of the women had a relationship that lasted much longer than one year and those that had a relationship of that length had only had one such relationship. There may be a difference in women with more dating experiences.

As I have stated, I am a queer-identified woman and my personal experiences of dating, exploring, and maintaining romantic relationships was a motivating factor in my desire to conduct this study. As the researcher who selected respondents, conducted interviews, transcribed and analyzed data, and wrote up the final report, it is possible that my own personal experiences may have biased my understanding or interpretation of respondents' experiences

during this research process. Therefore, it is important to recognize that should another researcher examine the data, their findings and emergent themes may not be same as those identified in this study.

Contribution to literature and practice

This project is significant for several reasons. First, it explores two areas for which limited research exists: everyday aspects of being a lesbian or bisexual woman and romantic relationships during adolescence. Many LGBT related studies in the past have focused on such topics as homophobia, bullying, and depression or suicidality. Further, many of the studies that have been conducted use extant literature or theories which were not developed on these populations. Secondly, as many people are coming out at earlier stages in life than in the past, their experiences and needs may be different from previous cohorts of LGBT persons. Thus, this study provides a contemporary account of lesbian, bisexual, and queer woman and their dating experiences. This study highlights the complex issues of dating and meeting others that queer women live with on a daily basis and how they navigate through those experiences.

For k-12 educators, this study shows the importance of providing a safe space for adolescents to learn and grow. We have seen in the past how important having a specific space of understanding, knowledge, and others like self can be for racial/ethnic minority groups, the same can be said for sexual minority groups. Most of the women interviewed had no specific space during their high school careers. College was the first place they could meet a large number of others like them and receive information that pertains to them.

For counselors and therapists working with lesbian, bisexual, or queer women, it is anticipated that these findings can provide some background and insight into the lives of these women and in turn, help to influence interventions and strategies for working with them in a therapeutic setting. As one such example, many of the women interviewed expressed feeling guilt about the way that they treated their previous boyfriends. While the feelings of guilt should still be addressed in session, it may also be helpful to understand that this is a common experience of queer women.

Recommendations for Future Research

As stated earlier, the women in the current study have had limited experience in dating and thus, interviewing older women may provide a better understanding of the long term implications of experiences during adolescence. In addition, with the changing society and more resources becoming available the experience of even 18-24 year olds may be very different in a few more years. It would be interesting to note the impact of some early programming on the emotional and relational aspects of dating and romantic relationships for young women. For instance, if queer high school students were able to find, meet, and date openly as they can when they get to college, perhaps more people will feel confident rather than frightened at the idea of asking someone out.

Future researchers should use both qualitative and quantitative research methods to understand the experiences of this unique population. A larger sample should be studied to determine if most queer women have similar experiences as the women in this study and what factors contribute to the women experiencing different outcomes. Conducting focus groups might also provide information about queer women's experiences.

Other areas needing future research include studying the experiences of transgendered women as well as queer males as this study limited itself to the experiences of lesbian, bisexual, and queer women. Thus a study that gains the perspective of the full rainbow of queer-identified people would provide a more comprehensive picture and understanding.

Self-reflection from author

As I have stated, I identify as a black lesbian woman and I am out to most of my friends, my siblings, and some of my family members. When I first began dating I felt like I had to relearn how to date and manage relationships. When I began having more LGBT friends, I finally had an outlet to have discussions, ask questions, and generally learn to become more comfortable with myself and my sexuality. My interest in this project stemmed from my own thoughts, feelings, and experiences as a queer woman.

By speaking with each of these women and hearing their stories I heard myself reflected numerous times. I came to understand that there is a common experience among queer women and that made me feel more connected to these 10 women and the entire community. As I talked with other members of the LGBT community, I could also feel the connection as the study findings resonated with their experience as well. Doing this project has also led the way for me to talk to those who are not a part of the LGBT community: family and friends who were simply inquiring about my research. Many of them had not had very many conversations about queer people and I believe that by discussing my project they were able to see the “normalcy” of queer adolescents.

This study has also had an impact on me as a professional. It has reinvigorated my desire to work directly with queer youth as well as opened my eyes to some specific needs within the

community. I appreciate the openness and honesty from all of these women and hope that my project has shared their voice accurately.

APPENDIX A

I am a Counseling Psychology doctoral student at Iowa State University. I am looking for lesbian and bisexual women, aged 18-25, to be volunteer participants for my dissertation project on “How social experiences of lesbian and bisexual women during high school effect relationship self-confidence and self-efficacy as well as quality of romantic relationships in adulthood.”

Participation will involve three interviews, separated by one week, with each woman. The interviews are expected to last approximately one hour. Each interview will be taped. Tapes will be identified by arbitrary codes with no identifying information written on the tapes. Arbitrary codes or aliases will also be used in the transcripts. The key linking names with persons will be destroyed after all interviews are complete.

Please note that your participation is voluntary and you may end the interview at any time, for any reason.

This dissertation is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Carolyn Cutrona, Department of Psychology, Iowa State University.

This study has been reviewed and approved by Iowa State University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

If you are interested in participating or for more information about this study please contact, indria@iastate.edu 917-885-5865

Thank you for taking the time to read this e-mail, and thanks in advance to those who agree to participate. Please also forward this email to anyone you think you may be interested in participating.

APPENDIX B**CONSENT FORM FOR: DATING EXPERIENCES OF LESBIAN AND BISEXUAL WOMEN DURING ADOLESCENCE**

This form describes a research project. It has information to help you decide whether or not you wish to participate. Research studies include only people who choose to take part—your participation is completely voluntary. Please discuss any questions you have about the study or about this form with the project staff before deciding to participate.

Who is conducting this study?

This study is being conducted by Indria Michelle Jenkins, MS under the direction of Carolyn Cutrona, PhD.

Why am I invited to participate in this study?

You are being asked to take part in this study because you are a woman who identifies as lesbian or bisexual, between the ages of 18 and 25. You should not participate if you are under 18 or if you identify solely as heterosexual.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to listen and begin to understand some of the characteristics, thoughts, and feelings about the dating experiences and/or romantic relationships of lesbian and bisexual women during adolescence.

What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in a series of three one-on-one interviews with the Principle Investigator. The first interview will be semi-structured and will focus on your dating experiences. The subsequent two interviews will follow-up on topics from the first interview, allowing you to clarify or add information. The interviews will be recorded. The interviews will be scheduled approximately once per week for three weeks – each interview should last about one hour.

What are the possible risks and benefits of my participation?

Risks – The possible risks related to your participation in this research are discomfort with the thoughts and memories of a potentially difficult period in your life associated with having a sexual minority identity.

Benefits – You may directly benefit from taking part in this study by having the opportunity to reflect on your experiences with a concerned and sensitive listener. We hope that this research will benefit society by setting a rationale for more specific social programming, such as gay events or hang out locations, for sexual minority youth. Further, counselors, therapists, and social workers who work with lesbian and bisexual women may better their interventions and recommendations based upon information gathered.

How will the information I provide be used?

The information you provide will be used for the following purposes: the transcripts will be coded and analyzed for recurring themes and interconnections.

What measures will be taken to ensure the confidentiality of the data or to protect my privacy?

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by applicable laws and regulations. Records will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the ISU Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies with human subjects)

may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent allowed by law, the following measures will be taken tapes will be identified by arbitrary codes with no identifying information written on the tapes and arbitrary codes or aliases will also be used in the transcripts. Identifying information will be kept in a locked cabinet that only the PI will have access to. If the results are published, your identity will remain confidential. All transcripts and data will be destroyed one year after all the data has been processed.

Will I incur any costs from participating or will I be compensated?

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

What are my rights as a human research participant?

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part in the study or to stop participating at any time, for any reason, without penalty or negative consequences. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer. Your choice of whether or not to participate will have no impact on you as a student in any way.

Whom can I call if I have questions or problems?

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study contact Indria Michelle Jenkins, MS, 917-885-5865 or Carolyn E. Cutrona, PhD 515-294-0283.
- If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, 1138 Pearson Hall, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

Consent and Authorization Provisions

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant's Name (printed) _____

(Participant's Signature)

(Date)

Indria M Jenkins, MS
Dept of Psychology
Iowa State University

APPENDIX C

Interview Questions

Tell me about your friendships in high school? What issues arose in friendships with boys? With girls?

Were you involved in social activities or clubs (particularly interested in other arenas same gender dating experiences could have occurred).

What were some positive memories you have with friends?

What were some negative memories you had with friends?

How did you identify during high school? Where you out during high school? If so, to who (i.e. closest friends only, all friends, family, etc). Were you encouraged by friends/family to date same-sex people? What was your coming out experience?

What messages did you get from friends about dating?

What messages did you get from friends about same-sex dating?

Did you have any LGBT friends that you could talk to? What role did they play in your life?

How do these experiences carry over into your relationships as an adult?

What messages did you get from your family about dating?

What messages did you get from family about same-sex dating?

Did you have any LGBT family that you could talk to? What role did they play in your life?

How do these experiences carry over into your relationships as an adult.

By age 18, did you feel like you knew how to be in a relationship? With a same-sex partner?

Tell me about your dating experiences during high school. If response is none, I will give examples of dating experiences, such as talking about (or listening to others talk about) romantic interests, which does not necessitate the participant having been on a date.

Tell me about the kinds of people you dated in high school. Did you date males or females or both? Whom did you feel more comfortable with? What issues came up?

What were some positive memories you had with romantic partners?

What were some negative memories you had with romantic partners?

Tell me about how you learned dating cues or signals. E.g. knowing if someone likes you or letting someone know that you like them.

Tell me about your sexual experiences in high school? What issues came up?

How do these experiences carry over into your relationships as an adult?

How comfortable would you be asking someone out or for their number/contact info? Under what circumstances? (This question is to be asked about both the past (adolescence) and present).

What connections can you make between your experiences or lack of experiences in adolescence and your thoughts, feelings, experiences about dating now?

If you could summarize your experiences in three words, what three words would you choose?

Any advice you would give to others?

APPENDIX D

(Signed IRB available upon request)

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