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**SHADOW DANCING IN THE WINGS: LESBIAN  
WOMEN TALK ABOUT HEALTH CARE**

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**Geraldine M. Clear**

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## ABSTRACT

Women who claim a lesbian identity as part of their cultural articulation have to date been poorly represented within research particularly within a New Zealand setting. Rather than couch this single identifier within a contextualised environment, research has predominantly sought to pathologise lesbian existence at an individualistic level.

Lesbian women are a minority group for whom crucial differences from the dominant culture may not readily be recognisable. Such differences may be associated with existing in a society where silence and invisibility subsume a meaningful and tangible cultural expression.

This study aims to explore the factors which hinder or facilitate sense of safety for lesbian women, when accessing health care, in order to provide information from which health professionals may judge the appropriateness of their current service delivery.

A participatory approach grounded in both critical social and feminist research has been utilised to explore issues relevant to health care and it's access with seven women who claim lesbian as part of their identity. The representational void is uncovered and forms a suitable backdrop from whence to explore with these participants health issues and factors relevant for them in the context of their daily lives.

The concept of cultural safety gives power to the users of services to determine whether or not they feel safe. From the perception of the service user then, cultural safety assumes that the nurse (or other health care professional) is the extraordinary element as opposed to the neo-colonial held view that the user is the extraordinary member of the interaction (Ramsden, 1995).

Cultural safety is the term originally employed in New Zealand to describe the partnership between nursing and the indigenous people intent upon removing barriers in order to facilitate safe access and delivery of health care. From this juncture the Nursing Council of New Zealand (1996) acknowledging that prejudicial and judgmental

attitudes exist with regard to lesbian women has fostered awareness. Subsequently the need for appropriate qualitative research has been recognised.

In support of the tenets of cultural safety this study will prove useful to nurses and other health professionals intent upon ensuring safe care provision for this marginalised group.

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There is one other remaining to be acknowledged, and I make it so! It is with your guidance that I have found myself in the position of wanting to 'boldly go'!

## FOREWORD

I have often wondered at the chosen titles of books, articles and theses and mulled over potential meanings. I will take a moment to share my rationale for the metaphor employed in the title of this work.

*Shadow* raises imagery of another world (within a world), with muffled enveloping silence and difficulty in visual acuity. Those residing beyond the shadow consign the shadow world to an imitation of their original, however it is possible that the shadow is ever present and constitutes an original, independent self manifestation.

*Dancing* invokes the notion of a medium for story telling. The interpretation however is diverse and the received message may not always be as replete with clarity as the observer would claim. Furthermore the message may be distorted at the source, or interpreted for the masses by the most dominant voice (usually a critic). Dancing is about life, it is active expression and culturally diverse.

*Wings* represent the rim, edge, off stage, boundary, and border or off centre where marginalised groups reside without the 'correct' voice, having been exiled from the central environment.

## PREFACE

In order to facilitate a level of appreciation for my cultural experience, I have included an exemplar from my earliest memories regarding the possibility of including lesbian as part of my identity. I vividly recall a time many years ago as an adolescent, when I began to understand within myself that I just might be in possession of a different cultural outlook to that of my peers of the time. I headed for a large library to seek some knowledge regarding these feelings and following a considerable search found an impressive and weighty tome (I cannot recall from which discipline this might have been) which contained the word lesbian within. Feeling ultra transparent and suitably guilty I took this volume to the least populated area of the library and began to read. From memory the definition hailed from a pathological foundation and I clearly remember the considerable list of probable associated factors which were considered contributory to developing or becoming a lesbian.

Some way down this list I came across 'adoption' and there it was! I had found the answer and the explanation for these different feelings. Realistically it was for me a double edged sword as I now found myself in the dubious position of placing blame upon an area of my life (my adoptive status) which had until that very moment been non problematic for me. Conflicting with this concern was the tangible relief at being able to externalise the fault for this errant way of being in the world, should it become necessary.

Reflecting back upon this memory from the present time with many kilometres of my journey accounted for I can see the humour of the situation. I can also reach out and touch the raw emotions of that period in my life. Coming home to announce that you were pregnant (outside wedlock) had until that time been the worst possible event, yet somehow I knew that this was significantly more problematic than getting pregnant. Casting about for someone to talk to proved futile. I believed that if there was something 'wrong' about me I had better be absolutely certain before I went sharing it with anyone else. It would be humiliating if I was wrong and it was only a phase all girls my age passed through. However worse than that was the possibility that I was right and the perceived consequences of articulating such cultural difference from all that I had been brought up to believe in.

I made the acquaintance of two travelling companions about this time who have remained faithfully by my side to this day. Their names are 'silence' and 'bury it deep' and frankly they are the strategies I employed throughout many of the strands of my life in order to get by. Though still with me (old habits die very hard) they have for the most part assumed their own identities and become 'fairly quiet' and 'reasonably distant' from my more recent daily life.

Living as lesbian in a world replete with heterosexual imagery is not unlike holding dual citizenship (consequently possessing two passports). It is likely that one of these countries will be more highly respected, more powerful, and more valued on the global power stakes than the other country. Thus lesbian women live in the world, representing at the very least a bi-tribal status (may be more than bi-tribal depending upon how many times removed from the standard employed measurement of 'norm' an individual finds themselves). This bi-tribal attribute means that lesbian women are positioned within two worlds and find themselves having to actively engage with the two cultural polarities on a daily basis (Brown, 1997). It is my hope that this bi-tribal exploration will identify aspects of life which are inconsequential to those holding the prized citizenship (read heterosexual), yet crucial to those dwelling elsewhere.

This work comprises a portion of an on going journey both professionally and personally which strives toward a forum where cultural diversity can be appreciated for what it is. This as opposed to a seemingly infinite quest to position diverse ways of being as mechanisms with which to evaluate commitment to prescribed social/cultural roles (Bennett, 1992). Failure of such evaluation is then employed to continually shore up existing dominant patterns. This latter quest seems to be necessarily limiting the future potential for growth and movement beyond current narrowly defined levels.



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