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## Conceptualizations of lesbians and lesbian relationships

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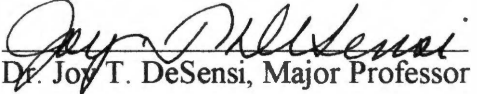
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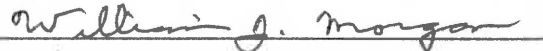
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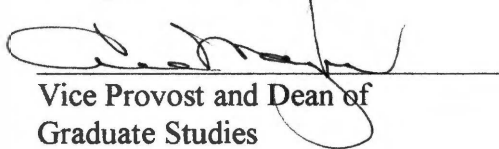
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Graduate Studies

# CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF LESBIANS AND LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS

A Dissertation presented for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
The University of Tennessee

Christina A. Demuth  
December 2002

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my great aunts,  
Marion and May,  
who came before me to love each other  
and  
in turn created a path of acceptance for future women  
who cherish each other as they did so quietly and gracefully.

## Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank my family for their endless commitment and encouragement to pursue the dreams of my choice. Without my father's patience and logic, my mother's unconditional love and support, and my sister's trust, humor, and sarcasm, I would not have made it where I am today. I must also thank my large extended family and dear friends for their warm thoughts and support.

I would like to thank my doctoral chairperson and life advisor, Dr. Joy T. DeSensi for her encouragement and support. More importantly, I would like to thank her for her persistence to tolerate me for five long years as my confidant and friend. Without her wisdom and guidance, I would have given up and lost this opportunity to learn.

I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. Leslee Fisher, Dr. Chris Holmlund, and Dr. Bill Morgan for being open and supportive on this quest. Each of them offered a distinct, but crucial piece to this puzzle. Without them it would still be in pieces.

I would like to thank the nine participants of this study. They opened my eyes and reminded me; first, that people are willing to help and share their time with others simply out of kindness; and second, even when you think you know what someone will say; often times there is so much more to come. I must thank Adam Renner for pushing me when I had enormous doubts and for showing me the meaning of humanity. I want to thank Dutchess Renee Jones for pointing me in the right direction and always lending support. I also want to thank Karen Appleby for always cheering me on towards the finish line.

Five years ago, I moved to Tennessee and found my best friend, CeCe English. There are not enough words to describe how thankful I am that we found each other. I could have never imagined five years ago in our first research class that we would be where we are now. She made a challenging chapter of my life energizing and hysterical. I can't wait to see what is next.

Finally, but most certainly not last, I would like to thank my soul mate, Betsy Abel. Her precious gift of love and support guided me through this journey. She gave me peace when there was none; she gave me strength when I had no more; and her hugs soothed my frazzled mind. "Nary a" day has passed where I needed her and she did not answer. Betsy and "the girls" (Kendall and Gnocchi) are my heart and I can't wait to see what awaits us....



## **Abstract**

There have been many studies that examine the attitudes of heterosexuals towards lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals (Herek & Capitano, 1999 & 1996; Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1997; Kite & Whitley, 1996; Whitley & Kite, 1995; Pratte, 1993; and Kite, 1984). Currently, there is no qualitative research that focuses on a particular population's conceptualizations of lesbians. The need for this study lies in the abundance of stereotypes surrounding both lesbians and heterosexual men's view of lesbians as well as the lack of research. For these reasons, the purpose of the study is to examine the conceptualization of lesbians and lesbian relationships by white, heterosexual, single, 25-32 year old, college-educated, men, and, secondly, to examine the role socialization plays in this conceptualization.

Qualitative research methodology is used for this research and queer theory is the theoretical frame. Long interviews are conducted with nine participants in order to provide their perspective. Four major themes emerge from the interviews: The Road to Conceptualization, Beliefs Regarding Lesbians and Lesbian Relationships, Conceptualization by Comparison, and Conceptualization via Struggle. There are also numerous sub-themes revealed from the data analysis.

Results from this study suggest that lesbians are viewed as "others" and are talked about in comparison to others. The participants also reveal that there is a sense of ambiguity surrounding lesbians. Also, socialization with other lesbian, gay, or bisexual individuals leads to a more positive conceptualization of lesbians. Society's views and other minorities are used by the participants to determine how lesbians should be treated.

There is also a struggle to be politically correct or open minded when talking about lesbians. Conceptualizations of lesbians are vague and lesbians are described as a variety of types. Finally, there is an awareness of the “fake” lesbian in pornographic films.

## Preface

My great aunt Marion passed away at the age of 89 after spending 49 years happily committed to her life partner, May. They spent their lives together in New York City in a small apartment, that I had only visited after her passing. I was 24 when she left us and full of regret. I discovered my great aunt was a lesbian when I was 19 and essentially clueless. I was raised believing that my great aunt Marion's partner, May, was also my great aunt. This was not a plot in my family to keep a secret, but on the contrary, it was simply not questioned. To many, they were two older women who decided to live together, possibly out of convenience and loving friendship. In reality, it became clear that I was related to only one of them and they were undoubtedly not "just friends."

They came to all family gatherings; brought me Christmas presents each year and sent me cards on my birthday. I simply never stopped to think or question why they lived together. For that matter, I never questioned any aspect of their relationship. I loved them as my great aunts, as did the rest of my family.

When I was 19 and learned that my great aunt Marion and May were lesbians, I was not surprised. I learned prior to this, that May was not my biological great aunt and started putting the pieces together from there. I had been exploring my own sexuality for six years at that point and began to wonder about their relationship. My mother told me the truth and I was immediately full of excitement and wonder. What had her life been like until this point? What wisdom could she pass to me? What had she been through to get to this point in her life? Why didn't I know sooner? My head swarmed with questions and wonderment about having a role model in my family. A lesbian who spent

her life, 49 years, with her partner in a time far worse than now. She made it. She was able to live a full loving life with a family, commitment, joy, and passion. This meant that I could do the same. Times had changed and her life gave me hope and renewed my faith in the way my life was unfolding. She had given me without knowing, the feeling of acceptance I longed for, simply by being herself.

Immediately, I wanted to call her and begin to learn as much as I could from her life experiences. I hesitated as my mother warned me that this may not be something my great aunt Marion wanted to share with me. I took time to think things over and eventually wrote her a letter about my life and how happy I was for her and thankful that she was in my life. Weeks passed and finally the phone rang. My great aunt was 82 at this point and her partner May was very sick. This was not an easy time for her as she prepared to lose her life partner.

Our conversation was not as I expected. I expected her wisdom as well as her excitement for me as I shared my feelings. I was also eager to share what my life was like with my partner. I was naive. In retrospect, I can see how foolish I was. I can still hear my great aunt's words: "Do people know you're gay honey?" I replied: "Well, yeah a lot of people know that I'm gay. There are a lot of activities on campus and organizations to belong to and I do. My partner and I are very 'out.'" The silence on the phone confused me. I expected her excitement and joy, for the opportunities I was afforded. She began to talk faster and warn me. She feared for my safety, as my parents did when I told them about myself. This, however, was a different level of fear. She was seriously concerned that I told people; that I didn't hide. I certainly wasn't out marching in parades, but I was

comfortable with others I trusted knowing. She was not. She lived in New York, hours away from her family in an effort to find a community of which she and May could be a part. But this took years upon years and she was not comfortable talking about her sexuality, nor mine. She learned throughout her life that being “out” was not possible and loving her life partner May must be kept a secret at least from the majority of her world. There was no need to push her. This was not a topic open for further discussion. She loved me and her fear based on her experiences in life guided her words to me. “Be careful, Chrissy. You must be very careful.”

To this day her words bring tears to my eyes. The fear in her voice still provides a pit deep in my stomach. She was over 80 years of age and with her partner for nearly 50 years and this was not acceptable to the world in which she lived. Fifty years of commitment did not change the way she was viewed in society; did not make her life easier; did not afford her the calmness, security, and peace usually afforded to heterosexuals growing old together. It was still not safe for her. The world had changed, but her fears remained the same. The progress individuals such as my great aunts have made for gay men and lesbians will not be forgotten. However, there is more work to be done.

What were they afraid of most? Certainly physical violence is always a threat, but there is much more. The condemnation from others - from people in their lives, their families, and the world at large. In the past, and certainly still in present day, peoples’ perception and view of gays and lesbians is typically filled with hate and disregard. My mind has been spinning with ways to approach a method to further my understanding of

individuals' conceptualizations of others. Where do they come from? How are they formed? How has language and experience affected these ideologies? How do social justice issues involving race, religion, class, media, and gender inform or intersect with these ideologies? What can we do to bring about change? This study has been motivated by the daring lives lived by my "great aunts." I seek to understand and explore peoples' conceptualizations of lesbians, specifically heterosexual men, in order to understand what needs to change or what is working in the battle to dismantle and debunk homophobia.

I am proud to carry on the life that she had to leave behind. I am honored to have women like my "great aunts" in my family history. A history I want to honor and use to work towards making the future a place where they could have lived in peace, not fear.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

*“We do not grow by knowing all of the answers, but rather by living with the questions. Understanding and accepting diversity enables.....us to begin to think about being abandoned to the strengths of others, of admitting that we cannot know or do everything.”*

(De Pree, 1987, p. 9, 53)

Many heterosexual men find the idea of sex between two women appealing (Louderback & Whitley, 1997). Heterosexual men also have more negative attitudes toward gay men than toward lesbians (Schellenberg, Hirt, and Sears, 1999). After examining the outcomes of these previous two studies, I began to wonder if there was any more to this view of lesbians by heterosexual men. For example, I questioned if many people actually subscribe to the idea that heterosexual men simply find the idea of sex between two women as appealing. In other words, are lesbians viewed by heterosexual men simply as sex objects or is there more to the picture? With that in mind, I found the motivation to begin this exploration and delve further into the minds of heterosexual men to understand how they conceptualize lesbian relationships.

There are certain stereotypes associated with heterosexual men's conceptualization of lesbian relationships (Bryant & McElroy, 1997; Levina, M., Waldo, C., & Fitzgerald, L, 2000; and Wolf-Wendel, L., Toma, A.D., & Morpew, C., 2001). These stereotypes allow for many individuals to buy into the hegemonic construct that lesbians are simply a “turn on” to heterosexual men and nothing more. This mentality

places the conceptualization by heterosexual men in the context of how lesbians relate to men and places lesbians as the “other” or in opposition to heterosexual men, allowing no room for lesbians to exist without sexual appeal to men. That said, it may appear that we have answered the question of how heterosexual men conceptualize lesbians and their relationships. Examining women in relation to men, as the stereotypes would demand, lends itself to believing that heterosexual males’ conception of lesbians and lesbian relationships is all about males.

Certainly, women have spent enough time being placed in relation to men and objectified. Utilizing queer theory and feminist theory allows lesbians to be conceptualized by heterosexual men outside of the hegemonic stereotypes and not solely in relation to men. I argue that there is a case to be made for the understanding hidden beneath the easily acceptable facade of “men simply being turned on by two women together.” I argue that there is a more to the understanding that heterosexual men have used to conceptualize the instances of lesbian affection in recent decades. Based on queer theory, it is possible to examine heterosexual men’s conceptualizations of lesbians and lesbian relationships not only in terms of their lived experiences, but also by deconstructing and unpacking issues such as language, normalcy, and naturalness.

Within queer theory, language is paramount. It is also imperative that there is an understanding from the beginning of this research that queer theory is not considered singular (Butler 1990). Queer theory as well as feminist theory does not indicate one understanding or meaning. There are multiple meanings and applications of both theories and it would be inappropriate to signal that there is one application or understanding of

these theories. This is also an indication of queer theory's acknowledgment of being an "un-theory" (Butler, 1990). How then do we even justify calling this approach queer theory? How do sociologists get away with claiming to utilize queer theory, when in essence they are pulling from parts of queer theory that apply to their work? Do we, as researchers, often select aspects of theories that coincide with our work while addressing the problematics inherent within them? Take, for example, feminist theory. Feminist theory is made up of branches of theory such as liberal, radical, Marxist, critical, social, standpoint, and empiricist: each one providing a different link to feminist theory while allowing for individual application. Would Butler's queer theory stand for this "branching out?" Most likely not, as she has emphasized that queer theory in its "queerness" is unlike any theory or even "un-theory" (Butler, 1990). Unlike many other theories, queer theory does not subscribe to convention or any use of traditional applications/understandings. This will be explained further within this chapter.

It is important to examine the conceptualization heterosexual men have of lesbians and lesbian relationships to tap into uncharted territory. It must be emphasized at the beginning of this research that the term "lesbian" certainly has multiple meanings. "Lesbian" is used as a ground term throughout this research. Although extremely difficult to define, for the purpose of this research I use the term "lesbian" to indicate women who identify their sexual orientation as lesbian. In other words, this does not include women who have been intimate with other women and still self identify as heterosexual. This does include lesbians of all types certainly beyond the scope of "butch and femme." The participants of this current study discuss multiple meanings of

“lesbian,” but it is necessary to distinguish between my use of the term and the participants’.

It is also necessary to narrow the scope of this study in order to avoid large discrepancies among the participants. The narrow scope of this study does not allow for much generalization. With this in mind, we may still be able to address possible misconceptions and untruths. For it is knowledge and understanding that create power. Power in the form of hate crimes and discrimination against lesbians has remained predominantly in the hands of the homophobic, heterosexual male community (Herek, 1988).

Schellenberg, Hirt, and Sears (1999) state that “the past decade has witnessed improvements in attitudes toward homosexuals, yet the relatively high suicide rates among gay and lesbian youth in Canada and the United States make it clear that anti-homosexual prejudice continues to take a devastating toll on North American society” (p. 150). The supposed positive perception (sexual stereotype) heterosexual men have of lesbians is in stark contrast to the perpetual hate flowing through the world. Where is the decrease in hate and violence that should follow this positive perception? The perception heterosexual men have of lesbians and lesbian relationships may vary from the accepted stereotype. This knowledge could potentially unmask a series of methods to address education and increase awareness on lesbian issues and homophobia as a whole. Ignorance has propelled a chasm of myths and lies in essence leading to discrimination and hatred. This needs to change.

How does change occur? Positive social change comes through educating

negative perceptions and acknowledgment of the need for transition. Gary Zukov, author of *Seat of the Soul* (1989), contends that *change* is one, if not the only “definite” thing in this world. This being said, it would be understood that there must be a force to be the catalyst for change. I offer that it is through the quest for education as well as the vital and crucial interaction between beings that brings about positive change. Schellenberg et al., (1999) suggest that “the decrease in negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians over time is due, at least in part, to simple exposure to a wide and diverse group of people (which would include gay people) rather than to education per se. For example, interpersonal contact with gay men and lesbians is associated with improved attitudes toward homosexuals” (p. 149). It must be noted that contact with diverse groups can be considered a form of education. Positive contact and interaction with lesbians must then decrease the homophobic attitudes and hatred toward lesbians. This study examines the potential that previous interpersonal contact(s) between heterosexual men and lesbians may contribute to a more positive conceptualization of lesbians by heterosexual men.

As many people would remain content and settled with the notion that lesbians are seen as a mere “turn on,” or conversely that lesbianism is a lifestyle not even consciously recognized or thought about by heterosexual men, I contend that there is much more involved. Not only do heterosexual men have more to offer on their understanding of lesbian relationships, but this study can readily be utilized in examining other individuals such as heterosexual women, couples, both gay and straight, men and women of different races, age groups, socio-economic statuses, religious affiliations, political views, and disabilities. For future studies, it would also be pertinent to examine the

interrelationships between the diverse sub-groups. For example, how would race and a particular religious affiliation intersect to produce a particular conceptualization of lesbians and lesbian relationships?

### **Statement of the Purpose**

The primary purpose of this study is to examine the conceptualization of lesbians and lesbian relationships by white, heterosexual, single, 25-32 year old men with college experience, and, secondly, to examine the role socialization plays in this conceptualization.

### **Queer Theory**

Queer theory is insistent upon three methods....an interest in thinking against the thoughts of one's conceptual foundations; an interest in studying the skeletons of learning and teaching that haunt one's responses, anxieties and categorical imperatives; and a persistent concern with whether pedagogical relations can allow more room to maneuver in thinking the unthought of education (Britzman, 1995, p. 155).

Queer theory is a prominent tool utilized within this dissertation. Normally, a description of queer theory would follow, as well as its integration within the analysis of this dissertation. However, it is not possible to move forward without first describing the inherent complexities and problematics with the use of queer theory. In the following section, I describe the difficulty in claiming to use queer theory within qualitative research, as well as the possibilities that exist for its potential use, specifically within this dissertation. I will show that queer theory (as described by many sociologists) strays far from the "originators" of philosophical / psychoanalytical queer theorists such as Judith Butler. It will become clear that queer theory's use within this research is problematic,

but possible, providing that the intent is to pull from **aspects** of this theory or as many such as Butler (1990) might argue, “un-theory.”

Queer theory is a complex, unearthing of the typically acceptable hegemonic views on gender, sexuality, language, and discourse. There are many individuals to consider in the furthering of our understanding of what many had previously assumed to understand perfectly (i.e. sex and gender). Butler (1990) provides an in-depth examination of the contributing authors (such as Foucault, Wittig, Sedgwick, Rubin, Lacan, Irigaray, and de Beauvoir) to the genre of gender, sexuality, power, and language. Her work in *Gender Trouble* made waves in a previously assumed calm pool of understanding for many feminists and sociologists (not to mention other philosophers and psychoanalytic theorists). Within the following section, I seek to provide a summary of Butler’s contributions to queer theory as well as a discussion of its potential for implementation in qualitative research under the discourse of sociology. Within the discussion surrounding qualitative research and queer theory, I provide an overview of the work by Gamson (2000) who claims to incorporate queer theory into qualitative research in a very systematic and obvious method. Woven within this analysis is a description of how Gamson’s view of queer theory and qualitative research (versus Butler’s) could potentially be summarized as the anti-thesis to philosophical queer theory in its radical sense. In closing, I describe the potential for a collaborative effort of feminist theory and queer theory.

### **Gender Issues**

Queer theory certainly extends the boundaries of gender. Gender views move

beyond the early goal of feminist theory, which aimed more specifically at combating the notions of sexism surrounding gender (Butler, 1990). In other words, many subscribed to the belief that confronting hegemonic gender discourse meant moving beyond the notion that we are born as a specific sex and eventually socially constructed into our gender (i.e. masculinity and femininity). Butler contends that any theory that restricts gender in fact sets up the gender norms it seeks to abolish. This restriction of gender (i.e. masculinity and femininity) not only assists in setting up a hierarchy, but also places the “true/false” gender dichotomy into action. Butler insists that although her intent is to “open up the field of possibility for gender” (p. viii), she is also not dictating what the possibilities may entail. A paramount factor within Butler’s discourse of queer theory is the emphasis on avoiding a search for a “discourse of truth” (p. viii). Also, according to Butler, queer theory is said to “refuse a causal relationship between gender and sexuality, if what is meant by this distinction is that heterosexual normativity, ought not to order gender, and that such ordering ought to be opposed” (p. xiv).

Butler (1990) introduces the issue of drag into her discussion on gender to further emphasize the abuse of gender norms. Butler insists that gender is always a drag issue as there is no core / base gender (i.e. we are all in drag). Drag is used by Butler to establish that reality is flexible and not set, as many would assume. She insists that gender reality is “tenuous” and calls for the legitimizing of all bodies (Butler, 1990). For Butler, it is not enough to question gender norms and move towards a new “thinking” of masculinity and femininity. It is the questioning of masculinity and femininity that establishes the hierarchy and creates an “other.” The system attempting to change these beliefs in fact



sets them up. Butler examines the subject of “woman” as unstable and questions what constitutes the category of “woman.” She introduces Foucault’s examination of juridical power, which lends itself to the examination of “woman” offering that it is not enough to make “woman” more fully represented, but that we must learn how “woman” is produced and restrained (Butler, 1990).

It is also necessary to move beyond the “universal.” Butler reminds us that there is no universal patriarchy and the feminist notion of finding a unifying basis assumes that there is one such among a cross culture. Gender cannot be separated from political and cultural intersections; therefore, the goal of commonality is moot. This commonality / universality is naïve and seeks to “produce women’s common subjugated experience” (p. 7). I must then ask myself how I can seek to utilize queer theory to understand (under the goal of qualitative research) or to seek one or multiple unifying theme(s) among how heterosexual men conceptualize lesbians and lesbian relationships. I respond by limiting the scope of my study to a particular specified sample of men (heterosexual, white, 25-32 year old, single, with college experience) in order to decrease the attempts to “cross culturalize” my study and, in turn, subjugate men’s experiences. Although, under the umbrella of sociological qualitative research, I sought a common theme(s) within my analysis. Queer theory was the overriding guide that reminds the reader and myself that any study calling on an individual’s experiences to seek a commonality in turn subjugates and reproduces the hierarchy inherent within society (i.e. antithesis to Butler’s radical queer theory).

Butler (1990) offers numerous compelling arguments surrounding gender,

sexuality, and language within *Gender Trouble*. Butler exists on one end of a continuum of feminist/post-modern thought and there are certainly critiques of her work in this discourse. Although Butler makes paramount contributions to numerous issues and authors within her text, I highlight only a few that are directly applicable to this study. Specifically, Butler spends ample time discussing Monique Wittig's (1981) work as well as the problematics within her discourse. Butler's take on Wittig is certainly small in comparison to others in *Gender Trouble*, however it is Wittig's claims that relate directly to this study.

Wittig claims: "A lesbian in refusing heterosexuality is no longer defined in terms of the oppositional relation. Indeed, a lesbian transcends the binary opposition between woman and man; a lesbian is neither a woman nor a man. But further, a lesbian has no sex, she is beyond the category of sex" (p. 144). Indeed, Wittig calls for overthrowing the discourse on sex completely as well as the grammar and language inherent within gender or "fictive sex" (p. 145). Butler examines Wittig's claims that the "straight mind oppresses all of us, lesbian, women, and homosexual men because they take for granted that what founds society, any society, is heterosexuality" (p. 147). Butler replies by explaining that this "discourse becomes oppressive when it requires that the speaking subject, in order to speak, participate in the very terms of oppression" (p. 147). Butler argues that lesbians (as well as gay men and women) cannot be the speaking subject within a system of "presumptive heterosexuality" (p. 148). This issue is paramount for Butler's argument.

Butler (1990) emphasizes the importance of language within queer theory. She

states: “The power of language to work on bodies is both the cause of sexual oppression and the way beyond that oppression” (p. 148). For Butler, sex exists in a hegemonic language as a “substance, as, metaphysically speaking, a self-identical being” (p.25). Also, language is seen as a “performative twist that conceals the fact that ‘being’ a sex or a gender is fundamentally impossible” (p.25) She also incorporates Lacan and Irigaray into the discourse on language. For Irigaray, grammar (or language) can not truly represent gender as it indicates a binary relationship between two “positive and representable words” (p.25). Within language, gender is clearly not considered positive or equal for both males and females and representing gender in its entirety is incredibly problematic. For Lacan, language is “the residue and alternative accomplishment of dissatisfied desire, the variegated cultural production of sublimation that never really satisfies. That language inevitably fails to signify is the necessary consequence of the prohibition of language and marks the vanity of its referential gestures” (p. 55). In other words, language is fallible and emerges through dissatisfaction with representation.

Although Butler (1990) does not subscribe to Wittig’s claim that language has “plasticity to it and acts upon the real,”(p. 148) she utilizes Wittig to clarify. Wittig states: “One must understand that men are not born with a faculty for the universal and that women are not reduced at birth to the particular. The universal has been, and is continually, at every moment, appropriated by men” (p. 148). Butler must be recognized as criticizing Wittig’s take on normative heterosexuality. She makes strong claims by stating: “My own conviction is that the radical disjuncture posited by Wittig between heterosexuality and homosexuality is simply not true.... I would offer this insight into

heterosexuality as both a compulsory system and an intrinsic comedy, a constant parody of itself, as an alternative gay / lesbian perspective” (p. 155). By examining men within my study, it appears that I inadvertently subscribed to this view that men can give us insight and serve as a “faculty for the universal.” It is necessary to emphasize that by examining men within the discourse of lesbianism this directly gives rise to the claim that they can provide the “universal.” By no means do I subscribe to the idea that the men in this study are acknowledged as providing a “universal,” but instead offer a perspective that is clearly confounded by the impact of presumptive heterosexuality, patriarchy, and hegemony within society.

According to queer theory, it is impossible to call into question the normativity of gender without subscribing to a normative view of how the gendered world ought to be (Butler, 1990). This leaves me with the question of how I can research heterosexual men’s conceptualization of lesbians and lesbian relationships (including views on gender) without subscribing to a normative view under the umbrella of queer theory. Certainly, exceptions are made under this umbrella of queer theory. Is it possible to utilize certain aspects of queer theory and not be entirely guided by its groundings? I argue that it can and intend to show that here.

In other words, a queer theorist such as Butler would argue the problematics inherent within the simplest of words such as “the.” Queer theory takes issue with numerous “normalized and accepted” words and their meanings. Butler would argue that the use of “the” allows us to set up a subject/other binary as well as universalizing. Certainly there is also a power factor that must be discussed regarding language and

sexuality. Butler states: “If sexuality is culturally constructed within existing power relations, then the postulation of a normative sexuality that is ‘before,’ ‘outside,’ or ‘beyond’ power is a cultural impossibility and a politically impracticable dream, one that postpones the concrete and contemporary task of rethinking subversive possibilities for sexuality and identity within the terms of power itself” (p. 40). The idea of language and words as constructed allows us to assume there was not a “before or beyond” and limits language as assuming a critique could undo the power relation between words.

Clearly, I was not able to adhere to avoiding the use of the word “the” within this study. I was, however, reminded of the potential from my perspective and framing of questions based on Butler’s influence on this research. In other words, although I did not submit to avoiding the use of problematic language, I was cognizant of the power of such language in the framing of interview questions as well as within the analysis. I speak further to this issue of bias present in the next section.

A queer theorist such as Butler would most likely argue that it is not possible to “pick and choose” parts of queer theory in order to suit this study. I understand that within Butler’s queer theory, this study would not be possible. Researching one’s experiences, seeking a common theme, and ultimately subscribing to a hierarchical subjugation of those experiences in order to promote further education would certainly be problematic for Butler’s description of the radical queer theory.

I find Butler’s work incredibly valuable in the “grounding” of queer theory in its most radical sense. I did, however, see merit and possibility in utilizing certain aspects (to acquire a partial take) of queer theory more readily acceptable to or in accordance with

traditional “positivist” sociological approaches. Gamson (2000) describes the effect of queer theory on research surrounding sexuality as:

Queer theory put forth several core changes and challenges, dramatically altering the terrain of qualitative research for those taking the challenges to heart. For one thing, the substantive territory of analysis was broadened: It was not so much the lives or identities of gays and lesbians, or the construction of homosexual identities or minority status, that required attention, but the ways the very homo/hetero distinction underpinned all aspects of contemporary life (p. 354).

This homo/hetero distinction described above is certainly derived from Butler’s (1990) work and was necessary for examining the conceptualization of lesbians and lesbian relationships by heterosexual men. Queer theory encourages this examination and pulls for the understanding of the underpinnings surrounding the distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality as well as seeks to disengage with this dichotomy without dictating the many possibilities there may be within sexuality and gender. It is necessary to understand that this study cites its **groundings** as queer theory from philosophy and psychoanalysis, but pulls specifically from sociological researchers such as Seidman (1996). Specifically, I will draw from the following which allows me to examine lesbians outside of the category of minority and explore the understanding (knowledges) heterosexual men have of lesbians and lesbian relationships.

Queer theorists view heterosexuality and homosexuality not simply as identities or social statuses but as categories of knowledge, a language that frames what we know as bodies, desires, sexualities, identities. This is a normative language as it shapes moral boundaries and political hierarchies....Queer theory is suggesting that the study of homosexuality should not be a study of a minority-the making of the lesbian/gay/bisexual subject-but a study of those knowledges and social practices that organize “society” as a whole by sexualizing-heterosexualizing or homosexualizing-bodies, desires, acts, identities, social relations, knowledges, cultures, and social institutions (pp. 12-13).

Butler (1990) would find the reduction of the heterosexual / homosexual binary in the above quote to be problematic. It is also imperative to recognize that by claiming language to be normative, we in fact create its normativity.

I called on the “grounding” of queer theory in order to lay a backdrop from which this study arose. In the tradition of queer theorists within sociological research, I also called on another theory (i.e. feminist theory) to enhance this analysis. It was clear that Butler’s queer theory would not allow for the juxtaposition with feminist theory or any other theory (for that matter). For Butler (1990), queer theory stands alone. She specifically argues against certain sentiments within feminist theory. Specifically, Butler calls for a feminist theory that will “take the variable construction of identity as both a methodological and normative prerequisite, if not a political goal” (p. 9). Butler also contends that feminism has in fact created the “subject” it seeks wider representation for and, in turn, “the urgency of feminism to establish a universal status for patriarchy has occasionally motivated the shortcut to a categorical or fictive universality of the structure of domination, held to produce women’s common subjugated experience” (pp. 6-7). How then, will queer theory and feminist theory collaborate within this project considering the inherent problematics?

In the recent past, I questioned this on a daily basis while attempting to discover the relevance of combining the two to enhance the analysis of my research. The issue of gender is obviously crucial within both discourses. My initial fear was that queer theory’s position on gender would be overridden by the more renowned reputation of feminist discourse within gender, sexuality, and identity. This fear neglected my reasoning and

caused me to dismiss feminist theory; a theory with many positions I believed in, but did not want to overshadow the depth of queer theory. The once murky view became clearer each day. Through further exploration and research, the two theories have their individual strong places and also harmonize beautifully on many issues. Jackson (1998) states: “Both feminism and queer theory entail questioning binary divisions and both seek to dialogue heterosexuality from its hegemonic, normative status” (p. 141). Not only are there apparent similarities, but the differences impact this study profoundly as well as enhancing the dialogue surrounding their applicability. Jackson, summarizing the “foundational” pieces of each theory, offers the following description of differences within queer and feminist theory:

...feminists take the oppression of women as their point of departure, queer developed from gay political and theoretical priorities. Feminists are concerned both with heteronormativity, the ways in which heterosexuality’s normative status is reinforced, and with what some have called ‘heteropatriarchy’ (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1993): the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality is implicated in the subordination of women. These concerns imply a view of gender as hierarchical. Queer theorists, on the other hand, are more centrally preoccupied with heteronormativity and more rarely take account of women’s subordination. Hence, while queer takes gender seriously, seeing it as implicated in the maintenance of heterosexual hegemony, it does not necessarily conceptualize it as hierarchical (pp. 141-2).

Although, the above quote has merit and contributes to this research, it is extremely general and I do not agree that queer theory more rarely takes women’s subordination into account. In fact, Butler (1990) claims that queer theory not only takes women’s subordination into account, but also argues that feminism *creates* women’s subjugation. This ensuing debate between the two groups may appear to be problematic and divisive. I, however, viewed this debate as central to progression and understanding



surrounding women's oppression. Certainly, it may appear to some that queer theory is not focusing on lesbians and women's oppression as much as they focus on heteronormativity, but inherent within the examination of heteronormativity is women's oppression. The quest to debunk and belie heterosexuality will have strong implications regarding patriarchy. This debate must continue and ultimately many would assume, lead to harmony. However, again, I called for the disjuncture and problematics inherent within this debate, as they will continually lead to progress and further critical analysis. I incorporated queer theory's stance on heteronormativity as well as feminist theory's position on heteropatriarchy as they developed through the analysis of language within the interviews.

To conclude, the above is in no way a cumulative summary of Butler's *Gender Trouble*. Instead, I offer further understanding from my reading of Butler now within my knowledge base as well as a discussion on how they contributed to my study. Butler forced me to look far beyond previously accepted social "norms" surrounding gender, sexuality, language, and essentially the way everything is thought about and thought through. Butler shows that evoking queer theory within this research does not simply mean extending the boundaries of sexuality or fighting against homophobia. It is unacceptable to make the claim that this research cumulatively utilizes queer theory when in fact queer theory according to Butler cannot be cumulative or normative. Queer theory is unlike any theory; this may be the only un-questionable issue surrounding queer theory.

### **Bias Statement**

Earlier, I mentioned the imperative issue of my bias within this dissertation. As a

white woman focusing on white men, this study was laced with issues of power. By selecting white men as the participant group, my intent was to increase openness and honesty. I also sought to decrease bias as a white person examining the white perspective versus; for example, a white person examining a black person's perspective, may have increased bias. It is clear from the intent of a white woman examining white men that this study can be described as not only biased, but enabling of the hegemonic society in which we currently live (by contributing to the white man's position of power). By no means did I seek to perpetuate the power of the white man or woman in society within this research. I contributed to the power of the white man by allowing for his interpretation of lesbians within this study, but also readily admit that through seeking this information, I hoped to gain further understanding of his perspective in an effort to debunk any possible myths, in turn debunking his "power." I have, however, chosen to examine white men first to decrease the inhibition during the interviews (as white researcher to white participant) as well as the desire to further understand the white male perspective as they at the very least appeared to sway societal views. In an effort to gain further understanding of the white male's experience of lesbians and lesbian relationships, it is clear that I, in fact, set the white male in a position of power. I absolutely do not believe that studying the "oppressor" is the only avenue for change and understanding. Instead, this study was intended to be a beginning. A study that will eventually focus on women and men of different ethnicities, sexual orientations, ages, religious affiliations, politics, and marital status is the overall goal for the future of this research.

It is appropriate to describe my efforts to avoid the potential for increasing bias as well as acknowledging its influence on this research and most qualitative research endeavors. How did I influence this research focusing on the conceptualization heterosexual men have of lesbians and lesbian relationships? As a white, middle-class, 27-year-old, lesbian, feminist, woman and partner as well as someone who chose to utilize queer theory, there was great potential for bias. Certainly, there is bias in any qualitative study simply based on individual experience. It is the responsibility of the researcher to attempt to decrease that bias. How then would I decrease my lived experience and belief in queer theory? This was certainly not the answer. However, it was essential to recognize and highlight this bias prior to the study both in this dialogue as well as in the bracketing interview. Within the bracketing interview, I answered the same questions that my participants did while adjusting the focus to heterosexual men versus lesbians. I discuss this issue in detail in Chapter Three.

Still, the issue existed of the influence my readings, research, and knowledge of queer theory had on me. Queer theory certainly finds qualitative research such as this to be problematic. Its emphasis on language and discourse surrounding gender and sexuality was acute within my mind. There was certainly the possibility of bias, down to the often-simple task of framing interview questions. The problematics inherent within the discourse on sexuality and gender within queer theory were certainly centered on language and power. The interview questions within this research were framed from my perspective, which is influenced in queer theory and feminist theory as well as my life as a lesbian.

Was there bias within this study? Yes. This study sought to examine the conceptualization of lesbians and lesbian relationships by heterosexual men. This quest alone set up a hierarchical power system; one that within its questioning in fact set heterosexual men in the dominant position, in turn, re-creating the oppressive/patriarchal system queer theorists wished to de-bunk. I must also acknowledge that simply by doing this study, I am certainly not powerless. This study allowed myself and readers to obtain a partial take on how heterosexual men conceptualize lesbians and lesbian relationships laced with some bias. I also hold some degree of power as the researcher versus the participants of this study. The goal was to gain further understanding in the groundings of some white, heterosexual, single, 25-32 year old, men's conceptualization of lesbians and lesbian relationships through utilizing aspects of the sociological underpinnings of queer theory often found to be problematic by continental philosophy and psychoanalytic queer theorists.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of this study cannot be mentioned without noting that the scope is greatly narrowed. The participant selection and rationale are described in detail in Chapter Three. The participants were limited to white, heterosexual, single, 25-32 year old, college-educated, men. This study may not be generalizable to other men, as well as being limited to a finite number of individuals who currently live in a particular region of the country.

### **Significance of the Research**

Understanding how heterosexual men conceptualize lesbians and lesbian

relationships is aimed at being a pertinent first step in a tremendously viable field of study. There was a need for further research in this area. At the beginning of the new millennium, where the movement towards tolerance is emphasized, it is our duty as researchers to embrace the meanings behind these changes and understand their “origins.” Although the practical applications of this research may appear utopian in nature, I believe that with education there can be change. If this research in any way aids the process of education and subsequently leads to change or an increase in understanding others, it was well worth the effort.

This study may have allowed the participants to explore and reveal a part of their conceptualization that was subconscious. This study is educationally important in that understanding how heterosexual men conceptualize lesbians and lesbian relationships may allow educators to prevent misconceptions which may lead to bias and hate. By understanding the conceptualization of lesbians by heterosexual men, this study may enable educators to have a “behind the scenes glance” of homophobia and hate. With this understanding, individuals may ultimately move toward producing a less socially fragmented society and in turn, promote a sense of community. This research also has the potential to be utilized in the planning of diversity training programs within school settings, corporations, and/or administrations. Finally, through exploring the conceptualization of lesbians and lesbian relationships by heterosexual men, this research may assist in “confronting and changing heterosexist and homophobic environments.” (Wolf-Wendel, Toma, & Morphew, 2001, p. 478)

Insight into the meanings heterosexual men ascribe to lesbians and lesbian

relationships, may bring power in knowledge and advancement in educational needs. As Saul Alinsky (1971) states: “People only understand things in terms of their experience”(p. 81). Queer theory allows us to move beyond simply examining experience and incorporating primarily the examination of language, the natural, and normalcy. We must make an effort to understand individuals’ experiences regarding the conceptualization of lesbians and lesbian relationships as well as the foundations that lie beneath.

Queer theory has been continuously contested as a theory that does not extend beyond the boundaries of race, class, religion, and politics. Although this study is narrow (utilizing white, heterosexual, 25-32 year old, single men with college experience), it was viewed as a starting point for future research. Future work may include the intersections of the above social issues within the contested terrain of queer theory. Exploring races, ethnicities, religious and/ or political affiliations in the arena of sexual orientation and queer theory is the continuing goal of this foundational research. There must be a starting point from which to draw comparisons and ultimately integrate future studies so that queer theory is not used for simply a study on sexuality as queer, but also on the intersections of race, class, religion, politics, and more. This study utilized parts of queer theory and exemplified how a qualitative project such as this can be accomplished under the rigors of this theory. A partial take of heterosexual men’s conceptualization of lesbians and lesbian relationships is offered as queer theory would demand.

In order to continue this quest in the conceptualization heterosexual men have of lesbians and lesbian relationships, it is necessary to first review relevant information

surrounding this discourse. Chapter Two provides a review of literature including queer theory, homophobia, attitudes of heterosexuals towards gay men and lesbians, feminist contributions, and gender development.

## Chapter Two

### Review Of Literature

*“Sexuality is part of our behavior. It’s part of our world freedom. Sexuality is something that we ourselves create. It is our own creation, and much more than the discovery of a secret side of our desire. We have to understand that with our desires go new forms of relationships, new forms of love, new forms of creation. Sex is not a fatality; it’s a possibility for creative life. It’s not enough to affirm that we are gay but we must also create life.”*

(Foucault, 1996)

In order to explore how heterosexual men conceptualize lesbians and lesbian relationships, it is necessary to incorporate a foundation of related literature. It is imperative to examine previous research on heterosexual men’s perceptions regarding lesbians and lesbian relationships. One of the goals of this chapter is to contribute to the theoretical framework and understanding of queer theory. Philosophical queer theory, according to Butler (1990) was explored in Chapter One. Now, it is necessary to move on in understanding the breadth of literature available regarding queer theory. This chapter also includes a description of sociological queer theory as it pertains to the methodological underpinnings of this study.

Topics discussed within this chapter include: queer theory, homophobia, attitudes of heterosexuals towards gay men and lesbians, feminist contributions, and gender development. Specifically, an overview of homophobia as related to heterosexual men, a foundation of literature on previous studies done on attitudes of heterosexuals towards the



lesbian and gay communities, the feminist contribution to this research, and an exploration of gender roles and their part in forming heterosexual men's conceptualization of lesbians and lesbian relationships are presented.

### **Queer Theory**

In an attempt to describe the complex topic of queer theory, I incorporate the following articles based in sociology. Chapter One included a description of queer theory based in philosophy and the following sociological works by Stein & Plummer (1996) and Jagose (1996) are contrasted with Butler (1990). The conclusion of the section includes a specific explanation of queer theory's role within the analysis and the theoretical frame for this study.

Stein & Plummer (1996) present a chapter in *Queer Theory / Sociology* (Seidman, 1996) entitled "I Can't Even Think Straight" which attempts to offer a clear definition for those looking to define terms in a straightforward manner. Although queer theory as previously discussed cannot be summarized, Stein & Plummer describe it as an "elite academic movement initially centered in the most prestigious US institutions" (p.132). It indirectly relates to the emergence of an increasingly visible "queer politics, a confrontational form of grass roots activism embodied in Aids Coalition To Unleash Power (ACT-UP), Queer Nation, and other direct-action groups during the last decade" (p. 133). Queer theory emerged in the late 1980's at Ivy league schools and has been presented primarily by scholars from the humanities and history (Stein & Plummer, 1996).

Queer theory has been described as "a rallying cry for new ways of thinking and theorizing" (Stein & Plummer, 1996, p.133). The term "lesbian and gay studies" did not

cover a range that was all-inclusive. According to Stein & Plummer, many lesbian and gay people felt it did not: “a) encapsulate the ambivalence toward sexual categorization and b) include the difficulties they faced in fitting sexuality into the ‘ethnicity’ model, typically used to describe African-American and women’s studies”(p. 133). This includes identity politics as well. Following the Black Civil Rights Movement, gays and lesbians categorized themselves according to ethnicity. Stein & Plummer describe sexuality as a “political interest constituency unlike those of gender and race” (p.133). Members in the lesbian and gay group are considered widely invisible (Stein & Plummer, 1996).

Stein & Plummer (1996) contribute insight into the distinction between sociological queer theory and its predecessor in philosophical queer theory. They describe sociological queer theory as existing in two broad camps. These camps are described as the first being “primarily empirical and the second tending to be more theoretically-oriented” (Stein & Plummer, 1996, p. 130). They state: “the first tends to accept sexual categories; the second often problematizes these categories” (p. 130). Stein & Plummer discuss the influences of sociological queer theory as social constructivism and symbolic interactionism. Stein & Plummer explain, “The whole categorization process of homosexuality became problematized in what was later to be called ‘constructionisms’ and ‘deconstructionisms’” (p. 131). They continue with, “Through symbolic interactionism, the notions of meaning, process, ‘invented identities,’ and cultural construction of communities became central-long before their current popularity in cultural studies” (p. 131). The influence on the sociology of homosexuality as described by Stein & Plummer, continues with feminism. Lesbian feminists provide great insight

and a “powerful critique of compulsory heterosexuality” (p. 131). The influence of this feminist literature is discussed below:

This literature broadened the definition of lesbianism, emphasizing the relational aspects of lesbian sexuality and universalizing the possibility of lesbianism. Challenging medicalized conceptions that focused upon gender inversion and masculinized sexual desire, these theories blurred the boundaries between gay and straight women, and hardened the boundaries separating lesbians and gay men (p. 131).

Stein & Plummer (1996) continue their examination of the differences in the sociological versus philosophical underpinnings by offering what queer theory looks like as seen through some of its canonical philosophical works. They reference Judith Butler (1990) who describes the “unwritten and written codes of heterosexualized gender systems” (p.133).

Stein & Plummer (1996) describe queer theory as: “at its widest, tallest and Wilde(st), queer theory is a plea for massive transgression of all conventional categorizations and analyses—a Sadean/Nietzschean breaking of boundaries around gender/the erotic/the interpersonal, and a plea for dissidence” (p. 134). In political terms, queer means something slightly different. Queer has long been identified with homosexuality and “the newest in a series of ‘reverse affirmations’ in which the categories constructed through medicalization are turned against themselves” (p. 134). This allows for overlap between the previously narrow focus of ‘gay and lesbian’ and the broader focus of queer.

Queer Theorists also claim that many strategies utilized by gays and lesbians have relied heavily on dualism. Stein & Plummer (1996) describe terms such as “male /female

gender models, natural/artificial ontological systems, and essentialist /constructionist intellectual framework” (p. 134). These binaries tend to create a category of “other” and opposition as well as leaving the “center” intact. Stein & Plummer continue by referring to sexuality as being influenced by a number of institutions. They state that “personal life is sexualized - and heterosexualized - and so are politics and economics, and just about everything under the sun” (p. 135). Queer theorists invoke a deconstructive approach against heterosexuality, debunking it as the center or norm. According to Stein & Plummer, it can even be stated that queer theory normalizes or centralizes homosexuality and “makes heterosexuality deviant” (p. 135).

Foucault is discussed by both Butler (1990) and Stein & Plummer (1996) and is described as a major influence in this transformation to queer theory because he “details the construction of sexuality through institutional discourses, which came to constitute regimes of truth” (p. 135). Foucault is credited with the recent “movement of queer theory out of the ghetto” (Duggan, 1992, as cited in Stein & Plummer, 1996, p. 135). Stein & Plummer argue that homosexuals have long been makers of forward progress without much recognition, but with “Foucault’s influence...this view changed to seeing gay men and lesbians as more intellectual and social theorists”(p. 136).

It is difficult to define and attach one set meaning to queer theory. Jagose’s (1996) work is incorporated to lay the sociological foundation of meaning for queer theory. Jagose (1996) suggests that “queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender, and desire...Demonstrating the impossibility of any ‘natural’ sexuality, it

calls into questions even apparently unproblematic terms as ‘man’ and ‘woman’” (p. 3).

McKee (1999) emphasizes the difficulty in restraining queer theory:

This is Queer’s own protection: it is impossible to begin to write histories of Queer, of accounts of the term’s usefulness, because any such project would be inherently and inescapably-un-Queer. For, of course, ‘Queer is an ongoing and necessarily unfixed site of engagement and contestation’ (Berry & Jagose 1996, as cited in McKee). To attempt to define Queer, would be to tie down what cannot be constrained, to explain what must forever escape the final meaning, to attempt to regulate that which is energized precisely by its transgressive status” (p. 236)

The following details the specific queer theory that will be used as the theoretical frame for this study. Understanding sexualities, identities, and conceptualizations surrounding the two has been an arduous task for quantitative researchers. Gamson (2000) describes the antithetical relationship between quantitative and qualitative research surrounding sexuality as “given the growing antipathy to the essentialist assumptions about sexuality rooted largely in sexual science, the gap between quantitative and qualitative studies of sexuality widened even more” (p. 353). The positivist approach to researching sexuality has been altered drastically. Sexuality and issues surrounding this discourse have moved to a largely qualitative methodology in order to describe the lived experience of the participants. This exemplified the need for this study to be qualitative in nature. The following description and use of queer theory within this research are from a sociological background. This is important to note as it is this aspect of queer theory that serves as this study’s theoretical framework, as opposed to the more radical philosophical queer theory, described in Chapter One.

As detailed earlier in Chapter One, queer theory finds its “groundings” in

philosophy and psychoanalysis. Gamson (2000) as well as Britzman (1995) are utilized to further describe the methodological underpinnings of this research. Although there are consistencies within philosophical and sociological uses of queer theory, it cannot go without saying that the differences are profound as described previously. As stated in Chapter One, Gamson describes the effect of queer theory on research surrounding sexuality as:

Queer theory put forth several core changes and challenges, dramatically altering the terrain of qualitative research for those taking the challenges to heart. For one thing, the substantive territory of analysis was broadened: It was not so much the lives or identities of gays and lesbians, or the construction of homosexual identities or minority status, that required attention, but the ways the very homo/hetero distinction underpinned all aspects of contemporary life (p. 354).

This homo/hetero distinction described above is imperative for such a study examining the conceptualization of lesbians and lesbian relationships by heterosexual men. Without this distinction, such a study would not be needed and sexuality would appear in society without hierarchy (i.e. heterosexuality being viewed as the norm).

Queer theory was used as the theoretical basis to analyze and interpret the interviews from this study. In explaining constructivism and queer theory, Gamson (2000) describes the difficulty in sexuality studies: "Sexuality was not a stable phenomenon of nature to be studied like plants or cells, but a set of meanings attached to bodies and desires by individuals, groups, and societies"(p. 352). The constructionist approach, as Gamson details, predominantly focuses on "making sense of, or interpreting, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them"(p. 352). Again, in order to best understand the conceptualization of lesbians and lesbian relationships by

heterosexual men in this study, I also use the constructionist approach.

Queer Theorists have posed the problematic questions: “Can the lived experience be captured and directly represented by researchers?”(Gamson, 2000, p. 355) In response they instead propose looking at textual and linguistic practices (including the discourse of “social research”) through which sexual subjectivity takes shape (Gamson, 2000). This issue is paramount for this study, as I examined and sought to understand the conceptualization of lesbians and lesbian relationships, based on lived experiences by heterosexual men. Queer theorists argue adamantly regarding the difficulty in studying the lived experience of homosexuality. There is not as much offered regarding the qualitative examination of heterosexuals’ experience of homosexuality. Can the lived experience of heterosexuals pertaining to lesbians and lesbian relationships be captured through interviewing? I argue that at least a partial take can and has been done within this study.

Queer theory calls for examining homosexuality not as a “minority” and also by not making it the subject. Instead, it allows for the examination of language and knowledge that “organize society” (Siedman, 1996, pp.13). Studying the conceptualizations by heterosexual men regarding lesbians and lesbian relationships that shape society is the direct intent of this study. Examining the conceptualization heterosexual men have of lesbians and lesbian relationships through what they “know” (i.e. knowledge) regarding lesbian relationships and the language used to describe this understanding is a key element in the data analysis.

Queer theory certainly encompasses a vast range of issues beyond gender and sexuality. Queer theory does not look to simply bring positive role models to the forefront in an effort to end homophobia. Although this would be a result most people would benefit from, queer theory recognizes that teaching tolerance and acceptance of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) individuals still leaves an “other.” Goldberg, 1993 (as cited in Britzman, 1995) states: “The commitment to tolerance turns only on modernity’s ‘natural inclination’ to intolerance; acceptance of otherness presupposes as it once necessitates the ‘delegitimation of the other’”(p. 160). Queer theory instead examines the very origin of our social context and constructions of language and knowledge that surround not only sexual orientation, but also gender, sexuality, and identity.

For example, queer theory would not examine homosexuality simply as sex between two individuals of the same gender. Queer theory moves to unpack the foundation of homophobia, specifically language and not simply an individual’s experience leading to self-identification. It examines the signifier and the signified. Britzman (1995) describes queer theory as occupying a space between the signifier and the signified. She states:

..where something queer happens to the signified-to history and to bodies-and something queer happens to the signifier-to language and to representation. Whether one hears queer theory as figurative or as literal, as a provision or as a condition, may depend on what can be imagined when ‘queer’ is brought to bear upon ‘theory’ and when ‘theory’ is brought to bear upon ‘queer’ (p. 153).

Within queer theory, resistance to knowledge is valid and included as part of the process. Moving away from the binary of language, queer theory is “mutually implicating”(Britzman, 1995, p. 154). Britzman states: “Ignorance is analyzed as an



effect of knowledge, indeed, as a limit, and not as an originary or innocent state....Queer theory can think of resistance as not outside of the subject of knowledge of subjects, but rather as constitutive of knowledge and its subjects”(p. 154). This point within queer theory was essential to my work. As I explore the topic of lesbianism from the perspective of heterosexual males, resistance to knowledge was not seen as simply a lack of knowledge, but a part of the participants’ knowing.

Queer theory’s move away from the view that homosexuality can simply be seen as sex between members of the same gender was essential to this discourse. Also, the mentality that a push for tolerance is the answer to solving societal hate and violence is not consistent with queer theory. Queer theory leaps forward into a realm that allows the exploration of sexual orientation, gender, and identity as the focus and not “otherness.” For example, when homosexuality is attached to women (i.e. lesbianism), it becomes viewed as a man’s attraction to a woman. This is seen as a result of the hegemonic notion of male heterosexual sex as the norm. The concept of a woman in drag (i.e. a woman imitating a man) is then attached to explain the desire for another woman by a woman. Again, for many, the sexual attraction or desire between two women can only be seen as a result of a woman wanting to be a man, seen through male desire. Therefore women cannot simply be lesbians in a loving desirous relationship under the umbrella of socially constructed accepted meanings of “femaleness,” because they are not unpacked from the desire of a man for a women. Accordingly, lesbians can not have a separate sexual orientation from that of the heterosexual male desiring the heterosexual women. The desire of straight men is put on lesbians. Once again not having a penis and being seen as

a standard below the male figure, the lesbian woman cannot simply be (Butler, 1999). Attaching “penis envy”(Freud, 1933) to the scenario allows heterosexual men to see lesbians as not only beneath them as women without a penis, but as a women desiring to be men and satisfying their partners with a penis. This study examined sexual orientation, gender, and identity away from the category of “otherness” through interviewing heterosexual men and utilizing queer theory.

In examining queer theory and identity, the conclusion that experience is not the sole basis for identification is established. Identity is not singular and not so much an effect of personal experience as much as it is relating to others’ identity. Queer theory emphasizes that “identity is placed on others, through others and in *relation to* others’ *experiences* more than it is self-shaped and through one’s self” (Crimp, 1992, as cited in Britzman, 1995, p.158). Crimp states:

Identification is, of course, identification with an other, which meant that identity is never identical to itself. This alienation from the self it constructs...does not mean simply that any proclamation of identity will only be partial, that it will be exceeded by other aspects of identity, but rather that identity is always a relation, never simply a positivity (p. 158).

This examination of identity was critical as it was necessary to understand how the participants described and identified the subject of this study (i.e. lesbians) and how they believed lesbians acquired this identity (biology or choice). This focus was not possible without utilizing queer theory and its “de-centering” of heterosexuality (while remembering its insistence upon language and lack of imposing limits).

As it is clear that queer theory extends beyond the boundaries of the socially constructed meaning of sexuality and sexual orientation, it is also necessary to examine

another aspect in understanding sexual orientations. Homophobia is a concept that must be understood in order to enhance our understanding of how heterosexual men conceptualize lesbians and lesbian relationships.

## **Homophobia**

Homosexuality is a topic that is slowly losing its taboo nature. Through the media and society, lesbian and gay individuals are becoming not only tolerated, but accepted by some. Television has been a major influence in this change as there is rarely a day that passes without at least one show addressing this “hot topic.” Although there have been these recent advances, homophobia is still ever present. This section defines homophobia, as well as its meanings and background.

It is necessary to understand that homophobia includes a vast range of degrees and levels. Homophobia in its fundamental sense, includes all individuals who do not see sexual relations between members of the same sex as natural. At the same time, gay and lesbian individuals struggle with levels of homophobia. Internalized homophobia within members of the gay and lesbian community is also viewed as a major part of the problem of homophobia. Gay and lesbian individuals who have difficulty accepting themselves certainly adds to this problem of homophobia. In an effort to move towards full acceptance, it is difficult for many to accept the label of homophobic as its connotations have long been associated with negativity and not progress.

Looking back, MacDonald (1976) suggests that homo is a noun, a short form of homosexual. Phobia, according to Webster (1989), means an irrational persistent fear or dread. Combined they mean an irrational, persistent fear or dread of homosexuality.

There have been many terms used to describe this irrational fear or revulsion. They are collectively presented by Britton (1990) as well as Plummer (1999): “homosexophobia,” which is the fear of homosexuality; “homonegativism,” which is a general affective and behavioral dislike of homosexuals, others include “homosexual taboo,” “homosexual bias,” “homoerotophobia”(Churchill, 1967), “homosexism,” and “heterosexism” (p.5).

Homophobia has evolved considerably since the term first began to be used. The term was first coined by George Weinberg in 1967. His definition notes that homophobia is “the dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals” (as cited in Plummer, 1999. p.4). While this definition appears to be self explanatory, it was consistent with the formal criteria found in psychological literature for a phobia (Maxmen & Ward, 1995). Since then, the term has broadened and is rarely used in writing today. The National Museum & Archive of Lesbian and Gay History (1996) (authors of *The Gay Almanac*) expand this definition beyond the fear of homosexuals and homosexuality to something that is merely implied, but often taken to the point where biased statements are made or biased actions are taken against lesbians and gay men. Homophobia can be both societal (external) or internalized (National Museum & Archive of Lesbian and Gay History, 1996).

Homophobia is a complex term that often evokes negative attitudes and emotions from the general public. In order to fully understand homophobia, Plummer (1999) presents a clear comprehension of the five differences distinguishing homophobia from a true phobia: “First, homophobia is often characterized as hatred, anger, and a deep loathing for someone, whereas a phobia is mainly associated with fear. Second, while a

phobia is often recognized as excessive and unreasonable, homophobia is often recognized as understandable, justifiable, and an acceptable emotion (Plummer, 1999). Third, homophobia usually manifests itself in aggression and hostility, while a phobia is avoided. While a phobia does not have a political agenda, homophobia is often connected to politics and is surrounded by an air of prejudice and discrimination. Lastly, those that suffer from a phobia often recognize it as disabling and are motivated to change” (p. 4). This is typically not the case with homophobia as many may not see the need for change and are accepted by society (Plummer, 1999).

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders. Many in American society, however, still stigmatize lesbian and gay lifestyles. Homophobia is defined by Bryant & McElroy (1997) as a prejudice toward lifestyles that promote relationships between members of the same sex.. Homophobic attitudes are often fed by incorrect information and stereotypes of lesbian and gay individuals (Bryant & McElroy, 1997).

Milham, Miquel, & Kellogg’s (1976) describes a questionnaire technique used to establish the level of homophobia in 795 male and female heterosexuals. Milham, Miquel, & Kellogg state that “a wide spectrum of opinions and beliefs concerning homosexuals were sampled, compiled into a questionnaire format, and administered to a large group of heterosexual subjects” (p. 3). Factor analysis yielded six independent sets of attitudes that describe the variance in heterosexual reactions to homosexuals. They are as follows: a) repressive-dangerous, b) personal anxiety, c) preference for female over male homosexuals, d) cross-sexed mannerisms, e) moral reprobation, and f) preference

for male over female homosexuals. The results of the study “lend support to a multidimensional conceptualization of responses to homosexuality” (p. 10). Most importantly, the Milham et al. study found that “previous experience (i.e. knowing) with a homosexual of either sex led to a less negative characterization of both male and female homosexuals” (p. 9). This finding is examined within the current study focusing on heterosexual men’s conceptualizations of lesbians and lesbian relationships. Socialization, either with or without lesbian and gay individuals is discussed within the analysis.

Britton (1990) writes specifically to “relate homophobia to the maintenance of powerful sex-segregated institutions” (p. 423). Homosociality is defined by Britton as “the seeking, enjoyment, and/or preference of the company of the same sex. It is distinguished from ‘homosexual’ in that it does not necessarily involve an explicitly erotic sexual interaction between members of the same sex” (p. 425). For the purpose of this research, however, I focus on Britton’s reference to empirical studies he used in his research to emphasize certain paramount points. Although this data is predominantly from the 1970's and 1980's, it offers a pertinent overview of a wealth of research and applicable factors regarding possible themes found within the interviews of this study. It seems likely that these same issues may arise during the interviews for this study. They are broken into seven categories as follows (references as cited in Britton, 1990):

1. Gender. *Males are more homophobic than females* (Aquero, Bloch, and Byrne (1984), Kite (1984), Millham, San Miquel, & Kellogg ( 1976), Millham & Weinberger (1977), and Patoglum-an & Clair (1986)).

2. Age and education. *The older and less educated are more homophobic* (Hudson & Ricketts (1980), Nyberg & Alston (1976), Thompson, Grisanti, and Pleck (1985), and West (1979)).

3. General Religious and Sexual Conservatism. *Homophobia is related to a need to maintain traditional sex roles and is a manifestation of religious and sexual conservatism* (Black & Stevenson (1984), Laner & Laner (1980), MacDonald & Games (1974), Millham & Weinberger (1977), Minnigerode (1976), Smith (1971), Thompson, Grisanti, & Pleck (1985), and Weinberger & Millham (1979)).

4. Perceived similarity and personal threat. *Males are more likely to fear male homosexuals, and heterosexuals who feel their identity threatened by homosexuality are more homophobic.* ( Black & Stevenson (1984), Levitt & Klassen (1974), Millham, San Miquel, and Kellogg, (1976), Millham & Weinberger (1977), San Miquel & Milham (1976), and Weinberger & Millham (1979)).

5. Interaction. *Positive previous interaction with homosexuals reduces homophobia.* (Millham, San Miquel, and Kellogg, (1976) and Patoglum-an & Clair (1986)).

6. Marital Status. *Those who are single are more homophobic.* (Hudson & Ricketts (1980)).

7. Area of Residence. *Rural residence or upbringing increases homophobia.* (Levitt & Klassen (1974), Nyberg & Alston (1976)).

In summary, it appears males and those older and less educated have been noted as more homophobic. Also, individuals with conservative religious beliefs, from rural

residence, and single people have been found in this study to be more homophobic. The authors note that males are more likely to fear male homosexuals, but that positive previous interaction with homosexuals reduced homophobia.

MacDonald (1976) describes what he labeled as “sources of negative attitudes toward homosexuals” (p. 26) and reasons for homophobia. They are as follows: sex for procreation, unnatural acts, religion, child abuse, psychopathology, sexual conservatism, promiscuity, obedience and conformity, and sex role confusion. However, our society, may have shifted from these assumptions as indicated in the following article.

Leland (March, 2000) offers compelling information regarding homophobia in an article for *Newsweek*. The following is a list of statistics that were presented in this article focusing on the current level and changes in homophobia and its effects. This information is particularly relevant to this discussion as it compares the current information with previous statistics, allowing us to note the changes in society as well as seeing the need for further research:

-By many measures, tolerance has grown. In a *Newsweek* Poll, 83% of Americans say gays deserve job protection, up from 56% in a 1977 survey.

-Benefits are still controversial. Only 58% think gay spouses are entitled to health insurance, and 54% feel partners should get Social Security checks.

-Only 39% of the general public favor adoption rights for gay partners; still fewer 34%, believe that there should be legally sanctioned gay marriages.

-Although legalizing marriage is a hot-button issue, only 46% of gays say it's a priority for them, while 79% say inheritance rights are a critical issue.



- The military's 'don't ask, don't tell' policy has made things worse, 45 % of gays say, while only 8% of gays think the rule has improved conditions.

-Just less than half of the general public surveyed, 45% say that they personally believe homosexuality is a sin; that marks a decrease from 54% two years ago.

-A majority of gays and lesbians, 60% say they believe a lot of discrimination exists, while only 2% report that very little bias against them exists in this country (p. 46).

Based on the above statistics, it can safely be assumed that Americans are becoming more tolerant. In comparison to the seven categories offered by Britton (1990) regarding homophobia it appears that we are making progress. As noted by Leland (2000), 45% say that homosexuality is a sin. This is down from 54% two years prior.

Based on the previous article, it could be said that progress is being made in the arena of homophobia in the United States. Comparing MacDonald (1976) and Leland (2000), one can certainly notice that we are able to be much more specific describing homophobia and its progress. MacDonald gave broad generalizations on the demographic picture of a homophobic person, while, nearly twenty-five years later Leland can specifically say that 83% of Americans say gays deserve job protection. It is fair to say that homosexuality is discussed more freely and research and statistics are more readily accessible in the area of homophobia.

As I conclude the discussion on homophobia, it is important to mention that I have found no evidence to suggest that homophobia is an innate characteristic. Therefore, I must assume that it is taught and learned by individuals as they move through life and evolve.

It is not sufficient to increase our understanding of queer theory and homophobia without closely examining relevant literature on attitudes of heterosexuals regarding lesbian and gay identity. As I attempt to examine how white, single, heterosexual, 25-32 year old men with college experience conceptualize lesbians and lesbian relationships, I must understand what previous studies have revealed on similar topics and what they can offer as support for this research. Much of the following research is quantitative in nature. The quantitative studies have provided a strong base for the need to progress toward in-depth interviews that reveal the underlying predominantly negative attitude of heterosexual men toward gay and lesbian individuals. The following literature also relates directly to the questions that guided this research, particularly focusing on demographic information and similarities and discrepancies found throughout the quantitative studies.

### **Attitudes of Heterosexuals Towards Lesbians and Gay Men**

An overwhelming amount of literature shows that heterosexual men have more negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians as compared to heterosexual women. Studies by Herek & Capitano (1999),(1996), Engstrom & Sedlacek (1997), Kite & Whitley (1996), Whitley & Kite (1995), Pratte (1993), and Kite (1984) all indicate that heterosexual men generally manifest higher levels of prejudice toward homosexuals. Within their study, Herek and Capitano (1999) specifically cite a meta-analysis of the research to emphasize the above point. This meta-analysis was a summary of numerous studies that consistently found that heterosexual men are more homophobic toward homosexuals than women. They continue by offering various explanations for this

pattern in the research. The authors include: a) differential demands on men and women created by gender roles, b) sex differences in levels of defensiveness and threat associated with homosexuality (Herek, 1988), c) unequal opportunities for interpersonal contact with lesbians and gay men (Herek & Capitano, 1996) and d) the eroticizing of lesbians by heterosexual men (Louderback & Whitley, 1997). The study by Herek & Capitano (1999) focuses on two experiments embedded within a 1997 telephone survey of U.S. households to assess possible differences in how heterosexuals think about lesbians versus gay men. Herek & Capitano (1999) state:

The findings presented here suggest that our understanding of sexual prejudice will be improved by recognizing the importance of gender differences in the cognitive organization and functions of heterosexuals' attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. At the most basic level, such recognition requires that researchers pose questions that permit separate analysis of attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. In addition we must examine not only the answers that respondents give to our questions, but also the psychological processes that produces those answers (p. 358).

The authors suggest that we do separate analyses of heterosexual men and women as well as focusing on the psychological process that produce the answers. This lengthy quote by Herek & Capitano (1999) is directly supportive of this study focusing on heterosexual men's conceptualizations of lesbians and lesbian relationships.

A distinguishing feature of the study performed by Herek & Capitano (1999) is that they examined that differences in results based on the order of the questions being posed to the participants. In other words, the authors state "heterosexual men tended to report more favorable attitudes toward lesbians when they evaluated lesbians independently from gay men (i.e., when the lesbian items came first). When questions

about lesbians were implicitly associated with attitudes toward gay men (i.e., presented after the gay male items), ratings of lesbians were more negative” (p.357). This point must be emphasized as my study focused on examining conceptualizations of lesbians without discussing gay men. A more positive effect was expected according to Herek & Capitano’s (1999) findings.

An earlier study by Herek (1988) discusses the differences among heterosexuals in their reaction to gay people while emphasizing the issue of gender differences. Herek lists four variables that appear to underlie both males’ and females’ attitudes toward both gay men and lesbians: “religiosity, adherence to traditional ideologies of family and gender, perceptions of friends’ agreement with one’s own attitudes, and past interactions with lesbians and gay men” (p. 451).

Herek (1988) describes homophobia as personal and institutional prejudice against lesbians and gay men. He describes heterosexuals with negative attitudes as: “a) more likely to express traditional, restrictive attitudes about gender-roles; b) more likely to manifest high levels of authoritarianism and related personality characteristics; c) more likely to perceive their peers as manifesting negative attitudes; d) less likely to have had personal contact with gay men or lesbians; and e) more likely to subscribe to a conservative religious ideology” (p. 452). Herek emphasizes that one of the most consistent findings among the research is that heterosexual males manifest more anti-gay hostility on average than do heterosexual females. (See: Herek (1988); Brown & Amoroso (1975), Glassner & Owen (1976), Gurwitz & Marcus (1978), Hansen (1982), Kite (1984), Laner & Laner (1979), Milham, et al. (1976), Minnigerode (1976),

Steffensmeier & Steffensmeier (1974), Storms (1978), and Weis & Dain (1979)). It must be highlighted that although this has been observed, there are few attempts to explain this phenomenon. As it pertains to this study, Herek (1988) and Kite (1984) state that the related question of whether attitudes toward gay men differ from those directed at lesbians received even less attention; most attitude scales do not differentiate between lesbians and gay males as attitude objects.

Herek (1988) refers to three of his studies from which he was able to draw the conclusion that “heterosexual males consistently hold more negative attitudes than did heterosexual females. Also, males’ attitudes are more negative toward gay men than toward lesbians, while females’ attitudes did not differ significantly according to gender of target” (p. 469). Herek summarizes his findings and states that “attitudes toward lesbians and gay men are influenced by at least four separate sources. Hostility is associated with traditional attitudes about gender and family roles, perceptions that one’s friends hold similarly negative attitudes, strong adherence to an orthodox religious ideology, and past experiences with gay people” (p. 470). On the other side, Herek explains that heterosexual individuals are more likely to have tolerant attitudes if they belong to a liberal religious denomination or were not religious, if they endorse nontraditional views of gender and family, if they do not perceive their friends as holding attitudes similar to their own, and if they had positive experiences with lesbians and gay men (Herek, 1988).

Herek (1988) concludes by describing a concept known as the “experiential-schematic function” (p. 471). He uses this to suggest that some people base their

attitudes on “cognitive schema developed through actual experience with lesbians and gay men; such attitudes help them to make sense of the world according to their own perceptions and experiences” (p. 471).

Experience as discussed by Herek is an important factor in understanding attitudes of heterosexuals towards gay men and lesbians. Schellenberg, Hirt, & Sears (1999) incorporates experience as a main component to their investigation. They examine the attitudes towards homosexuals among a broad selection of undergraduates attending a Canadian university, where many of the students are from working or middle-class families of European descent, similar to the current study (Schellenberg et al., 1999).

In opening their discussion on attitudes of heterosexuals toward homosexuals, Schellenberg et al. (1999) state that “because socially constructed concepts of appropriate male behavior-or masculinity-are more narrowly defined than concepts of appropriate female behavior-or femininity, departures from the norm (i.e. heterosexuality) tend to be judged more harshly by men than by women, and for male than for female homosexuals” (p. 140). The authors also note references supporting the fact that increased levels of education are predictive of relatively positive attitudes toward homosexuality. We must also recognize that this may also be due to regularly associating with educated people. As further support of this notion, Schellenberg et al. remark that education reduces prejudice by “a) teaching students to understand prejudiced beliefs for what they are and to reject them, b) training students in the rules of evidence and inference, c) introducing students to the customs and practices of minority groups, and d) teaching students to make independent, critical judgements about societal norms and practices” (p. 141).

Schellenberg et al.'s (1999) results support the hypothesis that attitudes toward homosexuals among college students vary as a "function of faculty enrollment and number of years spent at college" (p. 139). The authors continue by noting that although attitudes towards lesbians improved over time spent at college, they did not vary reliably as a function of students gender. Schellenberg et al. state that "changes over time witnessed among male students in their attitudes toward gay men are identical regardless of faculty, as are improvement in attitudes toward lesbians among all students" (p. 147). The authors conclude that attitudes toward homosexuals appear to change as a by-product of higher education and related life experiences. This finding was examined within this qualitative research examining heterosexual men's conceptualizations of lesbians and lesbian relationships.

Schellenberg et al. (1999) note that it may be a combination of factors that result in negative attitudes toward lesbians. An example stated by the authors is "despite the fact that men respond more negatively toward homosexuality than women do, many heterosexual men find the idea of sex between two women appealing" (Louderback & Whitley, 1997, p. 148).

Just as Schellenberg et al. (1999) state that education decreased negative attitudes toward homosexuality, so does Simoni (1996). Simoni studies the "negative attitudes of 181 students toward lesbians and gay men associated with being younger, having less education, being male, and having less educated parents" (p. 68). Simoni defined heterosexism as the belief that heterosexuality is the only natural and acceptable sexual orientation and the fear, hatred, and prejudice directed at those deemed non-heterosexual-

abounds on U.S. campuses (Simoni, 1996).

Regression analyses indicated that after “controlling for demographic variables for both men and women, high self-esteem was associated with more positive experiences and friendships with lesbians and gay men, which in turn, are associated with less heterosexist attitudes” (Simoni, 1996, p. 74). This finding is significant in that it suggests a correlation between other variables such as self-esteem.

Although few students report friendships with lesbians and gay men, Simoni (1996) finds that previous experience with lesbians and gay men tended to be rated high. Previous experience with lesbians was examined within this study focusing on how heterosexual men conceptualize lesbian relationships. Simoni also warned that caution must be used when generalizing these findings to other populations because this sample included only students in psychology programs, human sexuality classes, and ethnic and women’s courses in Los Angeles.

Simoni also suggests that interventions may need to be developed and targeted separately for male and female students. Targeting heterosexual men specifically within this study is supported by the need emphasized by Simoni. The author concludes by noting that more research on heterosexism is needed and calls for innovative experimental designs. She suggests that research may not need to focus exclusively on those individuals who hold negative attitudes. This present study fulfills this requirement by Simoni, as I utilized a snowball selection of participants with a preferable wide range of attitudes and experiences regarding lesbians and lesbian relationships, not necessarily holding negative attitudes.



A study by Wolf-Wendel, Toma, & Morpew (2001) is one of very few that examines homophobia and attitudes toward homosexuality within NCAA Division I athletics. The study also offers implications within higher education regarding negative attitudes toward homosexuals. Wolf-Wendel, Toma, & Morpew (2001) qualitatively examine “how and why student-athletes, coaches and athletic administrators at 5 NCAA Division I universities accepted some forms of diversity so readily, but remained closed and even hostile to gay men, lesbians and bisexuals” (p. 465). The authors use interviews, focus groups, document reviews, and observations to obtain their data. Wolf-Wendel et al. incorporate a definition of sexual orientation offered by Tierney, 1997 as “a socially constructed phenomenon, the meaning of which is constantly changing” (p. 465). Wolf-Wendel et al.(2001) emphasize that “American society has chosen to differentiate and label people based on whether they initiate sex with same or different sex partners, and endow these distinctions with stereotypes that may or may not be salient to those being labeled, either now or in the future” (p. 465). Another important issue highlighted by Wolf-Wendel et al. is that gay men and lesbians in higher education are often victims of harmful stereotyping and hate crimes. Wolf-Wendel et al. also note (as cited in Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1997, and La Mar & Kite,1998), that men and African American students are more likely than women and white students to have negative views of gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals. This study is directed at athletics, but the authors notes that it was applicable to the rest of campus life for elimination of discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Wolf-Wendel et al. (2001) note that athletics are a microcosm of society. If

athletics mirror society, acceptance of homosexuality will not be easy or fastidious. The authors state that higher education professionals cannot expect student-athletes or others to become comfortable and accept homosexuality nor can the problems of society serve as an excuse for inaction. The authors recommend that higher education professionals lobby to include “sexual orientation in civil rights policies on the campus level and in legislation at the state and federal levels” (p. 477).

As previously mentioned, it is necessary to understand not only the attitudes of heterosexuals toward homosexuals, but also where the influence may be “originating.” The following includes feminist contributions that are intended to assist in the understanding of this “origin” as well as contributing to the overall theoretical framework.

### **Feminist Contributions**

“Mastering the part” (Kimmel, 1994, p.138) is certainly a powerful analogy for achieving masculinity. This quote speaks volumes to the social construction of gender and the feminist discourse surrounding the issue of becoming gendered with and by society. Are we truly all simply playing a part in a large show for the world? The following explores the social construction of gender and becoming gendered by society, experience, and relationships. As it is clear that Carol Gilligan’s (1982) research is paramount within the exploration of gender and development, it is also necessary to explore other feminist works that have contributed to the exploration of gender.

Freud would allow us to believe that we become gendered within the sanctity of the Oedipal and Electra complexes. According to Freud (1933), young girls and boys,

experience fear and inferiority issues with our parents. Kimmel (1994) describes the male experience as: “This entire process is set into motion by the boys’s sexual desire for his mother” (p. 126). In renouncing his identification with his mother, the young boy is not “symbolically capable of sexual union with a motherlike substitute, that is a woman” (p. 126). The boy is now gendered (masculine) and heterosexual. There is also the issue of the developmental process of sexuality. Pornography can be identified as a common experience for young males. The effect of pornography as heterosexual males develop sexually must be taken into consideration within this current research. In other words, how much of their sexuality has to do with pornography? And how does this contribute to where they are now in their thinking of lesbians and sexuality? Another important factor in the developmental process of a heterosexual male and their conceptualization of lesbians and lesbian relationships is their exposure to such relationships beyond pornography. How will this contribute to their overall conceptualization of lesbians as stable or permanent? This issue is discussed further in Chapter 5 as the conclusions are revealed.

Many feminist theorists may argue that we become gendered long before we are born and certainly immediately upon birth. This simple act of painting a newborn’s bedroom pink or blue allows the child to enter a gendered space with certain standards and expectations attached. Aside from Freud (1933) offering that children become gendered by society and not necessarily before birth, he also provided us with his take on “penis envy.” Freud argued that “penis envy” was at the core of women’s development. Kimmel (2000) described this incredible error by Freud and its impact as: “Women have

patiently explained that it was men, not women, who saw the possession of a penis as such a big deal. Perhaps women had a more political and social 'privilege envy' than anything to do with the body" (p. 75). With this understanding of the impact Freud's research on the discourse of gender it is now important to include other feminist voices in this discussion.

Gayle Rubin (1997) "locates heterosexuality as central to the reproduction of gender and sexual inequality"(p. 35). Rubin is renowned for her discourse on the sex/gender system. She states: "Sex is sex, but what counts as sex is equally culturally determined and obtained. Every society has a sex/gender system-a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social interaction and satisfied in a conventional manner, no matter how bizarre some of the conventions may be" (p. 32). Rubin agrees that gender identity, sexual desire, and fantasy are all "social products" (p. 32). Rubin deviates from the current accepted belief that heterosexual males favor sex between two women over sex between two men. She states: "it would be sensible to expect that homosexuality in women be subject to more suppression than in men" (p. 42). She explains this by describing homosexuality in women as a taboo subject to men. Sex is supposed to be controlled by the man in previous and current society hegemonic ideologies and a lesbian women is demanding her desire for her own, hence taking power from the man. This power is further explained by emphasizing that "as long as men have rights in women which women do not have in themselves, it would be sensible to expect that homosexuality in women would be subject to more suppression than in men" (p. 42). On the surface, lesbianism appears to debunk

this mentality for heterosexual men, forcing them to relinquish control and power as well as decreasing their individuality in masculinity and separation as men. Many heterosexual men, however, may interpret two women being together as a sexual fantasy for the service of their own sexual gratification.

Carol Gilligan's (1982) groundbreaking work, *In A Different Voice*, serves a paramount role in the discussion of gender and becoming gendered. Within this work, Gilligan included strong feminist voices such as Nancy Chodorow and Jean Baker-Miller. Gilligan responded to Freud's assertion that women show less justice than men with her research. She enhanced this discourse not only by including women in her studies, but also helping women come to voice, hence allowing the world to see women with a "voice." The issue at hand was the need to further explore this voice in a way that made women feel comfortable and valued (not simply as the "other"). The issue of voice is a predominant issue for minority women as well. As Jordan (1997) states: "A woman's voice often will not be heard, even when it is quite clear, if the woman is not congruent with dominant societal values. Those in a minority position (women, blacks, lesbians, gay men) often do not experience receptivity in the listener from the dominant culture" (p. 52).

This issue undoubtedly plays a role within my interviews of heterosexual men (the dominant group). It was necessary for me to listen for words representing their place in society versus a lesbians' and where they place the voice of lesbians and other minorities. The hegemonic society decides who is heard and valued. It would be naive to assume that all women or men develop or become gendered or sexualized in the same way.

Certainly, there is a predominant view and consistency, but we must recognize that becoming gendered may appear in many forms. Experience, culture, language, voice, and relationships are prevailing issues within this discourse.

Gilligan concludes that relationships are a key element in the developmental differences between males and females. Gilligan states: “Relationships and particularly issues of dependency are experienced differently by women and men. For boys and men, separation and individuation are critically tied to gender identity since separation from the mother is essential for the development of masculinity” (p. 8). This difference between boys’ and girls’ development of the gendered self depends heavily on the need for boys to experience separation from their mothers, whereas young girls develop through experiencing a connection with others as well as their mothers. As these experiences are described in the prepubescent stage, arrival at puberty is certainly different from boys and girls as they become further gendered (Gilligan, 1982). As young girls were experiencing others and exploring the constructions set forth that lie within femininity, young boys were learning their masculinity “rules” and continuing to focus on separating themselves - moving towards autonomy. Miller (1976) states that there was a need for a “new psychology of women” (p. 2). Miller contended that women have played a specific role in “male-led society” (p. 2). Gilligan also stresses the need to change the perception we have of “girls who are struggling for connection being seen as too immature to achieve separation” (Goldberg, 2000, p. 4). This misconception regarding women’s development was specifically what feminists like Gilligan, Chodorow, and Miller were attempting and succeeding at changing.

In an effort to further examine Gilligan's work and contrast it with her predecessor and teacher Lawrence Kohlberg, I offer the following. Kohlberg focused his study on men and Gilligan on women. Gilligan was a student of Kohlberg's and has supported and built on much of Kohlberg's theory. Through her research, however, she noticed differences among the women she was studying that failed to coincide with Kohlberg's theory and its applicability to women. In a recent interview, Gilligan stated: "I'm hearing something from women for the first time. It became, 'If I bring my voice into my relationship, will I become a bad, selfish, woman, and will I end my relationships?'" (Goldberg, 2000, p. 702).

Gilligan challenged Kohlberg's hierarchical findings on moral reasoning among men. Instead, Gilligan suggests: "such stages appear only when men's lives were regarded as the norm" (Kimmel, 2000, p. 76). Gilligan began a study of women to search for the meaning behind the differences in moral development she was finding with women. Goldberg (2000) states: "Gilligan now understood that the 'arc of developmental theory' she had learned in graduate school did not include what she was learning from women and that 'the problem might be with the theory and that starts my work'" (p. 702).

Gilligan (1982) utilized three studies throughout her discussion on moral development: the college student study, the abortion decision study, and the rights and responsibilities study. These three studies reflect the central assumptions of her research: that the way people talk about their lives is of significance, and that the language they use and the connections they make reveal the world that they see and in which they act. Gilligan emphasized that all of the studies relied on interviews and included the same set

of questions - “about conceptions of self and morality, about experiences of conflict and choice” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 2). Gilligan’s (1982) theory includes three levels: orientation to individual survival, goodness as self sacrifice, and the morality of nonviolence.

In contrasting Gilligan (1982) with Kohlberg (1981), an important theme emerges. It has been previously mentioned that Kohlberg did not weigh experience as heavily as objective and rational thought. Gilligan, however, stated “Given the differences in women’s conceptions of self and morality, women bring to the life cycle a different point of view and order human experience in terms of different priorities” (p. 22). Life experiences play a dominant role for Gilligan in her moral development theory. Gilligan’s theory offers a step forward in soundness compared to Kohlberg, as she incorporated women and men and justice and care. Young (1999) quoted Gilligan as saying: “Kohlberg’s theory is problematic in that it uses a justice orientation approach of moral judgement that does not adequately assess women’s level’s of moral development” (p. 26).

Gilligan’s (1982) research has extended beyond studying white, privileged women and girls’ relationships to a more inclusive examination of how cultural differences influence these relationships and their development (Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995 as cited in Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1988). Through further research and many individuals offering critiques of Gilligan’s work progress has continued in the discourse of moral development.

Gilligan’s current work focuses on “what is going on with boys, and how what she learned about girls can bring about change” (Goldberg, 2000, p. 705). With Judy Chu, a



doctoral student at Harvard, she is studying boys age 4 to 6. Gilligan's research is continuing as are the critiques and other's research to verify and refute her findings. Gilligan is still providing an arena of discourse and debate in the area of moral development.

However, there is little debate on the profound effect that Gilligan's groundbreaking work has had on understanding women's moral development. Her work has also carried over into many disciplines such as teaching, social work, developmental psychology, and moral and political philosophy (Evans et al., 1998). In reference to Gilligan's findings on girls and its impact in other applications, Goldberg (2000) states that we must look at what happens "when girls are initiated into the adult world...they find that most of the values are rooted in the experience of successful men. It is a world that attaches great value of independence, separation, and autonomy and not a lot of value to relationships and connection" (p. 704). By acknowledging and recognizing that girls and women use two types of moral judgement (justice and care) and are distinct rather than deficient in comparison to men, this allows us to view becoming gendered in a unique way. Experiences, identification/ disassociation with others, relationships, sexuality, and language are all factors on the road to the social construction of gender, still heavily controlled and inflicted upon all in our society by the hegemonic, heterosexual male. This is not to exclude that women do have a choice to construct their own identity. To further this discussion on gender, I turn to Kimmel (1994).

Kimmel (1994) views masculinity as a social construction. It is not a static component, but a fluid, constantly changing concept. Kimmel believes that "manhood

meant different things at different times to different people” (p. 120). Through our cultural ideologies, we view the world in a certain way. This lens is often set in opposition to another view or individual ideology. For understanding what it means to be a man, men set themselves in “opposition to ‘others’-racial minorities, sexual minorities, and, above all, women” (p. 120). This sense of otherness created by men in order to achieve masculinity has created an enormous history of separation, domination, power, need for control, and fear. The “other” does not simply include women, but also homosexuals and men of color versus the heterosexual white male achieving masculinity. This need for control, power, and separation from the “other” along with capitalism has continued to grow within our society. If this is true, and masculinity (as socially constructed) can only be seen in opposition to the “other,” how then can these beliefs be changed without debunking the binary system of us and them (men / women, heterosexuality / homosexuality)? This hegemonic belief system surrounding gender and specifically achieving masculinity, has survived the test of time. Feminist and queer theorists would argue for the elimination of this binary system and move away from the inevitable realization of the continuous gendered world. We must further explore the depths of masculinity and the chains that bind men and women to subscribing to its existence, often without question.

“Masculine identity is born in the renunciation of the feminine, not in the direct affirmation of the masculine, which leaves masculine gender identity tenuous and fragile” (Kimmel, 1994, p. 127). We must also recognize that there is a good deal of masculine affirmation occurring in this world as well. As the tenuous male gender identity exists,

so, too, does the need for constant reinforcement. This reinforcement can certainly come in the form of homophobia towards gay men. The bond formed between men in their support of masculinity and degradation of gay homosexuality out of fear towards relinquishing an ounce of “manhood” is pervasive in society. This also leaves a door open for the heterosexual male’s view of lesbianism. As their plight for comradery, power, unity, and masculinity prevails over their view of gay males and gay male sex, this also leaves a space to view lesbians not only as the heterosexual male (opposites as females), but as also the desire to do what a heterosexual male does with women (i.e. sexual intercourse). Heterosexual males may view lesbianism as a shortcoming or a longing for the power of a male. This inferior position is acceptable and not only tolerated, but deemed as sexually gratifying to men. As long as lesbianism can be viewed through the eyes of the heterosexual male( for their pleasure), its acceptance, even though homosexual, is granted. The key is domination and power, not simply the sexual act. “What men need is men’s approval. Women become a kind of currency that men use to improve their ranking on the masculine social scale” (p. 129). Perhaps this is why some men view lesbian relationships as somewhat acceptable for their sexual gratification. Women as currency, and multiplying that by two, would gain more status for the heterosexual male looking for approval and power. This may be how some heterosexual men can excuse their acceptance of lesbians, while denouncing and degrading sex between two males. It is certainly plausible that many heterosexual, homophobic men (consciously or subconsciously)do not realize the power of their homosocial relationships. “Masculinity is a homosocial enactment. We test ourselves, perform

heroic feats, take enormous risks, all because we want other men to grant us manhood” (p. 128).

Although it has been noted that masculinity comes from the setting of males in opposition to others, it is also paramount to unveil that the “otherness” is not enough without the approval of other men. This need for approval from other men as well as the opposition to women and homosexuals must create confusion as well as fear. This fear results in power struggles, violence and certainly homophobia. “...homophobia, the fear of being perceived as gay, as not a real man, keeps men exaggerating all the traditional rules of masculinity, including sexual predation with women” (Kimmel, 1994, p. 133). Kimmel (1994) does not cease with this understanding of homophobia, but continues with: “Homophobia is the effort to suppress that (homoerotic) desire, to purify all relationships with other men, with women, with children of its taint, and to ensure that no one could possibly ever mistake one for a homosexual” (p. 130). He further adds: “Homophobia is the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men” (p. 131). This certainly also pertains to gender.

It is clear that homophobia is an unrelenting issue with the development of masculinity, but it is not simply the fear of knowing homosexuals. Humiliation and perhaps being the brunt of a gay joke supercedes the fear of homosexuals for heterosexual men. “In one survey, women and men were asked what they were most afraid of. Women responded that they were most afraid of being raped and murdered. Men responded that being laughed at was what the feared most” (Noble, 1992, as cited in Kimmel, 1994, p.

133). We must also recognize that this is in large part due to our patriarchal society.

The topic of heterosexual men finding “femme” lesbian sex attractive has been previously discussed in this chapter. It is also necessary, however, to discuss the erotic nature of sex between two women as it pertains to the feminist discourse. Pornography is a forum where the heterosexual male may feel he “experiences lesbianism.” Although it is evident to some that sex between two women in a pornographic scene is often for the sole pleasure of a male and not actually enacted by “true lesbians,” many men may see this as their connection to lesbianism. Additionally, Kimmel (2000) offers this view of pornography and its influence on masculinity:

Pornography also exaggerates the masculinization of sex. In typical porn video scenes, both women and men want sex—even when women don’t want it, when they are forced or raped, it turns out that they wanted it after all. Both women and men are always looking for opportunities to have sex, both are immediately aroused and ready for penetration, and both have orgasms within fifteen seconds of penetration. Which gender’s sexuality does that sound like? As a result, as antipornography activist John Stoltenberg writes, pornography ‘tells lies about women,’ but it ‘tells the truth about men’ (p. 226).

Considering pornography and its implications in this study aside from gender issues is not sufficient. We must consider Kimmel’s (2000) words: “Sexual behavior, gay or straight, confirms gender identity” (p. 235). This taken as “truth” seriously complicates the heterosexual male view of “lesbianism” in a pornographic scene. If sex between two women confirms gender identity, this would assume that a heterosexual male views two women being together as enhancing femininity and not crossing over the gender line towards masculinity as previously assumed. Typically, we have seen that heterosexual males may view lesbianism as a type of “penis envy”(Freud, 1933) and/or

desire of a woman to be a man and satisfy a woman as he does. Kimmel offers: “Indeed, our commonsense assumption is that gay men and lesbians are gender non-conformists-lesbians are ‘masculine’ women; gay men are ‘feminine’ men” (p. 235). The evidence, however, strongly supports that homosexuality is gendered, and gay men and lesbians are gender conformists; seeking the same gender and exploring further the bounds of either masculinity or femininity (Kimmel, 2000). This certainly complicates, but informs the discussion of gender and sexuality. It is an arduous, but beneficial task to explore this distinction between gender conformity and non-conformity offered by Kimmel within the current study. The participants of the present study were asked to describe what they were taught regarding gender roles in order to understand their beliefs in relation Kimmel’s “conformist and non-conformist” (p. 235) discourse.

In order to further understand the role of gender issues in understanding heterosexual men’s conceptualizations of lesbians and lesbian relationships, it is necessary to incorporate current research within this discourse. The following studies contain relevant information regarding the gender belief system and the effect this has on attitudes towards homosexuals (specifically lesbians).

### **Gender Development**

La Mar & Kite (1998) examine the attitudes of heterosexuals toward homosexuality, but also incorporate a pertinent discussion on the gender belief system. The following piece is intended to serve as the starting point for our examination of gender roles and development as applied to heterosexual men’s attitudes toward lesbians.

La Mar & Kite (1998) address four components of attitudes toward gay men and

lesbians within their quantitative study that utilizes a survey questionnaire with 174 items focusing on attitudes toward homosexuality. The four components include: condemnation/tolerance, morality, contact, and stereotypes. The authors hypothesize that “attitudes would vary by component and by the sex of the person being rated” (p. 189).

La Mar & Kite (1998) utilize Kite & Whitley’s (1996) suggestion that heterosexuals’ attitudes of homosexuals are influenced by a “generalized gender belief system” (p. 189). They state: “According to this model, people’s expectations about gender reflect the belief that gender-associated attributes are bipolar. What is masculine is not feminine and vice versa” (La Mar & Kite, 1998, p. 189). According to La Mar & Kite, people expect someone who is described by stereotypically masculine traits also to possess stereotypically masculine physical characteristics and to adopt stereotypically masculine roles. Similarly, the knowledge that a person is “stereotypically feminine on one dimension leads to the inference that the person is stereotypically feminine on other dimensions” (La Mar & Kite, 1998, p. 189).

Kite & Whitley (1996 as cited in La Mar & Kite, 1998) state that “gender-associated beliefs should be more likely to influence some components of attitudes toward homosexuality than other components. The results of their meta-analysis show that ratings of homosexual persons appear to be based on the gender belief system” (p. 190). La Mar & Kite’s (1998) gender role analysis lead to the prediction that “men would be especially condemning of gay men who violate the male gender role” (p. 190). Also, men do respond particularly negatively toward gay men (Kite & Whitley; 1996; Herek, 1988). The authors continue: “In contrast, heterosexual men may see lesbianism in erotic

terms, and the positive value associated with eroticism may positively influence their attitudes toward lesbians (Louderback & Whitley, 1997). More generally, if women's roles are viewed lower in status than are men's, prejudice toward lesbians should not be strongly culturally sanctioned as is prejudice toward gay men. Therefore, both sexes may be relatively accepting of lesbians" (p. 190). Kite & Whitley fail to distinguish between "types" of lesbians. Certainly, this study may have utilized "femme" lesbians versus "butch" lesbians and consequently may affect the outcomes. The authors conclude by emphasizing that, unfortunately, attitudes toward lesbians have rarely been considered in the literature. This accentuates the need for the examination of how heterosexual men conceptualize lesbians and lesbian relationships.

Results of this study indicate that "men held more negative attitudes toward homosexuals than women did on all factors except stereotypes, and that attitudes toward gay men were more negative than were attitudes toward lesbians on all factors. The results confirm that to understand sex differences in attitudes toward homosexuality fully, researchers must consider both attitude components and the sex of the person being rated" (La Mar & Kite, 1998, p. 189). In conclusion, the authors emphasize that factors such as "gender-role beliefs and the erotic value attributed to lesbianism (Louderback & Whitley, 1997) are found to mediate sex differences in attitudes toward homosexuality" (p. 195).

In continuing the discourse on gender and the gender belief system, I incorporate an article by Louderback & Whitley (1997). Louderback & Whitley acknowledge the difference in attitude between male and female heterosexuals toward homosexuals. Their



study is intended to “test the hypothesis that heterosexual men attribute a high erotic value to lesbianism and that this erotic value ameliorates their attitudes toward lesbians” (p. 175). The study includes 114 females and 60 males in an introductory psychology course participating in the study as a partial course requirement. In order to perform their study the authors utilize the Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men (ATLGM) scale (Herek, 1988) separate questions written by the authors for the perceived erotic value section, and the Attitudes Toward the Roles of Men and Women (ATRMW) scale developed by Whitley (1987). Their study reveals the following:

The sex differences in attitudes toward lesbians and gay men found in previous research are replicated and as hypothesized, men attribute more erotic value to lesbianism than to male homosexuality, whereas women attribute low erotic value to both forms of sexuality. They report, however, that with perceived erotic value of homosexuality controlled, rating of gay men are similar to ratings of lesbians by both male and female participants, although men’s ratings of both groups are more negative than women’s (p. 175).

Louderback & Whitley (1997) emphasize that their findings that men place a high erotic value on lesbianism are consistent with the findings in other studies over the past 30 years (such as Gaughn & Gaynor, 1973; Greendlinger, 1985; Hatfield et al., 1978; Levitt & Brady, 1965; Nyberg & Alston, 1977; and Turnbull & Brown, 1977). They also offer possible explanations for this erotic value placed on lesbianism by heterosexual men. They state that one possibility is the “modeling of lesbianism as an erotic concept for men via sexually explicit materials” (p. 180). The authors also suggest that the media may socialize heterosexual men into perceiving sex between two women as erotic. Louderback & Whitley also mention that the sexual scenes often depicting sex between women as erotic often includes a man joining the scene, thus leading viewers to possibly

perceive the sex between two women as a bisexual scenario rather than a lesbian scene.

Louderback & Whitley note that these findings are consistent with Kite & Whitley's (1996) meta-analysis revealing that when the perceived erotic value of homosexuality is controlled, men hold more negative attitudes toward both lesbians and gay men. The authors emphasize that their findings provide further "confirmation of the role of the gender belief system in attitudes in terms of beliefs about the proper social roles of women and men in such areas as employment and household management" (p. 180).

In summary of the gender development section, La Mar & Kite (1998) revealed that someone who is described by stereotypically masculine or feminine trait is expected to adopt a similar role. In other words, your gender traits must match your role. In following this sentiment, Kite & Whitley (1996) revealed that attitudes toward homosexuals appear to be based on the gender belief system. Louderback & Whitley (1997) concluded that heterosexual men attribute a high erotic value on lesbianism and this is recognized as "ameliorating their attitudes toward lesbians" (p. 175).

This literature review provides a strong foundation for the need to understand how heterosexual men conceptualize lesbian relationships. By incorporating a background of queer theory, an understanding of homophobia and heterosexism as well as the need for further progress in these areas, a wealth of pertinent and supportive data regarding attitudes of heterosexuals toward homosexuals, and the potential influence of socialization and gender roles on the conceptualization of lesbians and lesbian relationships by heterosexual men, this literature review takes us a step closer to gaining

an understanding of heterosexual men's conceptualizations of lesbians and lesbian relationships.

The next step in this journey is to provide a clear methodology of how the study is to be performed. This includes the scope of the study, an explanation of queer theory's role within the analysis, a description and rationale for the selection of the participants, as well as an overview of the interview strategy, procedures, data analysis, transcript review, validity and reliability, and trustworthiness.

## Chapter Three

### Methodology

*“Masculinity has become a relentless test by which we prove to other men, to women, and ultimately to ourselves, that we have successfully mastered the part.”*

*(Kimmel, 1994, p. 138)*

In this section, I outline the scope of the study and discuss the qualitative strategy incorporated to accomplish this research. I include a description and rationale for the selection of the participants, as well as an overview of the bracketing interview, interview strategy, procedures, data analysis, transcript review, validity and reliability, and trustworthiness. I begin with a description of the importance of qualitative research.

#### **Qualitative Research Methodology**

Qualitative research according to Creswell (2002) is an inquiry approach useful for exploring and understanding a central phenomenon. Creswell’s description of qualitative research was the guide followed in order to understand how heterosexual men conceptualize lesbians and lesbian relationships. Creswell states:

To learn about this phenomenon, the inquirer asks participants broad, general questions, collects the detailed views of participants in the form of words or images, and analyzes the information for description and themes. From this data, the researcher interprets the meaning of the information, drawing on personal reflections and past research. The structure of the final report is flexible, and displays the researcher’s biases and thoughts (p.58).

It is also important to remember that when a researcher does a qualitative study, she is set in the position of a research instrument. Within this role, there are certain limitations that may arise due to this view of researcher as research instrument. These

limitations are particularly important within this study as they included the potential for the participant to make assumptions regarding the researcher that included race, educational level, socioeconomic status, religious affiliation, and certainly sexual orientation. These limitations also incorporated the researcher's personal biases, which were addressed specifically within Chapter One, as well as the absence of participant accountability during the interview (i.e. knowing whether the participant is being truthful).

### **Bracketing Interview**

In order to obtain a better understanding of the participant experience, I participated in a bracketing interview. The bracketing interview was conducted by a colleague of mine who had experience in qualitative research. In Chapter One, I explained my biases present within this study. This bracketing interview helped me to explore these biases and assumptions. As I am not a heterosexual man, and therefore, could not participate in an interview that consisted of the same exact research questions as I asked the participants of this study, the questions were changed. Instead, I altered the gender and sexual orientation of the questions being studied in this research. I was asked to answer questions regarding my conceptualization of heterosexual men. Answering these questions placed me in a similar situation as the participants in my study except that I knew the questions in advance. The bracketing interview allowed me to experience how well the questions follow each other and how effective they would be at evoking the information for the study. The bracketing interview allowed me to anticipate what it may feel like to be on the other end of the tape recorder and experience any anxieties or

difficulties that may appear during the interview.

Through the bracketing interview, the following was generated regarding my conceptualization of heterosexual men. While growing up in Pennsylvania, I recognized that I did not surround myself with many male friends. I had one very close male friend, but beyond that I pursued no relationships with males. At fourteen years of age I realized that I was a lesbian and focused on exploring that aspect of my life. I remained close with my one male best friend, but realized I never explored or gained much understanding of the heterosexual male. I have a very close relationship with my father and other male family figures, but aside from a superficial understanding, my knowledge base was limited. My father is a very passive, quiet, intelligent, gentle, respectful man, but not very diversified in his thinking because of his limited life experiences. We have a wonderful relationship, but in-depth conversations regarding sexuality and other sensitive topics were not the norm. The impact of my limited experience with heterosexual men further prompted me to explore this topic.

I certainly recognized through this interview that I made many assumptions regarding heterosexual males and their beliefs regarding lesbianism and myself. These assumptions and biases were not based on personal experiences, but stereotypes perpetuated through media and ignorance. When asked, I initially described heterosexual men as strong and powerful. I proceeded to classify men in particular categories. I admitted to classifying my father and other personal relationships with men in a separate category from heterosexual men in the world. In other words, my conceptualization was quite distinct in that I did not attach the stereotypes of powerful, overly sexualized in their

thinking, and dominating to the men in my immediate life. I felt that men had more power than women and abused it more often. These were all biases that I had not seriously considered or verbalized prior to this interview. I knew that I needed to explore this study to further my understanding of heterosexual men, but I did not realize the loaded power of my ignorance prior to this bracketing interview.

I also realized that while growing up I recognized heterosexuality as the norm in society and consequently took issue with this. I think this played a role in my distance from straight men (and possibly straight women) as I resented not only their power, but their privilege in being the norm. From here, I was asked to describe the role that the media has played in my conceptualization of heterosexual men. My description was less than positive as I resolved that the media had provided me with an image of heterosexual men as fraternity boys focused on drinking and sex. This was my first inclination which did not include older heterosexual men or the men with whom I was and am personally associated. I recognized that this was incredibly limiting and acknowledged that I was ignorantly categorizing heterosexual men just as I had feared they were doing to lesbian women. I also realized that my bias was very age-specific. In other words, my bias was centrally located around younger men (college-aged) and not with the older heterosexual male population.

I was asked how heterosexual men fit or do not fit into my world. I responded by stating that I do not feel I have a choice as to how they fit into my world. I continued by explaining that I do not see heterosexual men as the outsider, but instead I see myself having to find a place in their world. I explained: "I think about it as I am a lesbian and I

feel very normal as a lesbian and I put heterosexual men on the perimeter because they're not in my space necessarily, but even though I put them out there, they're not really out there. Because in society they are still given all the privileges that go with being the norm. Whereas when heterosexual men put me on the outside, I am really on the outside. So they fit into my world very differently than I fit into their world solely because society has set it up that way."

This was incredibly revealing for me as I was able to see that I had already decided that heterosexual men put me on the outside. I bought into the stereotypes which suggested that lesbians have no place in the heterosexual male's world (aside from a sexual one). This exploration moved me and prompted me further to understand from their perspective (heterosexual males') where lesbians may or may not fit. In other words, I hadn't given them a chance without buying into a stereotype or myth. This study gave them a chance and me some clarity I desired.

### **Description and Rationale of Selected Participants**

The initial intent for this study was to examine how a diverse range of heterosexual men conceptualized lesbians and lesbian relationships. Through a broad review of literature on attitudes of heterosexuals toward homosexuals (Herek & Capitano, 1999, 1996; Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1997; Kite & Whitley, 1996; Kite, 1984; Pratte, 1993; Whitley & Kite, 1995), it became clear that the study would have to be narrowed in order to account for extreme differences in attitudes among different racial, age, religious, and educational groups. This study was, therefore, limited to white, single, heterosexual men between 25 and 32 years of age with college experience.



The scope of this study was limited in order to establish a specific understanding of conceptualization among a narrow population. While attitudes of heterosexual individuals toward homosexual individuals are well researched quantitatively by scholars such as Engstrom & Sedlacek (1997), Herek & Capitanio (1999, 1996), Kite (1984), Kite & Whitley (1996), Pratte (1993), and Whitley & Kite (1995) there is still a call for qualitative in-depth examinations. Findings such as white heterosexual men are less homophobic than black heterosexual men (Engstrom & Sedlacek (1997), La Mar & Kite (1998), and Wolf-Wendel et al. (2001)), and heterosexual men are more homophobic than heterosexual women (as cited in Herek, 1988: Brown & Amoroso, 1975; Glassner & Owen, 1976; Gurwitz & Marcus, 1978; Hansen, 1982; Kite, 1984; Laner & Laner, 1979; Milham, et al., 1976; Minnigerode, 1976; Steffensmeier & Steffensmeier, 1974; Storms, 1978; Weis & Dain, 1979), prompted this study's narrow scope in order to compensate for wide variance within the study of how heterosexual men conceptualize lesbians and lesbian relationships.

As a white female researcher, I utilized white men in order to decrease participant inhibition during the interview under the assumption that participants would feel less inhibited talking to a researcher of the same race. The 25-32 year age range of the participants was selected to avoid a difference in generational influences. Interviewing individuals outside of the selected age range may have allowed for variance in different generations as well as lack of developed thinking in a younger population. The participant with college experience may have more opportunity to potentially experience differences including lesbian relationships. Within this study, college-experience was

defined as taking at least two years of college course work, but not necessarily restricted to graduates of college. Single men were selected to decrease the possibility of variance and difference among single and married heterosexual men. It is important to recognize that the majority of the participants were born in the southern part of the country which gives rise to acknowledging a regional difference in findings. In other words, the findings of this study may not be consistent with another part of the United States (or another country). For example, the term lesbian may have and hold different meanings in one part of the country versus another. Another important issue is that the participants were not asked specifically how they identified racially and sexually. The participants were informed of the scope of the study and indicated that they fit the scope of single, white, 25-32 year old, heterosexual men with college experience. They were not however, asked to state their sexual orientation or race or ethnicity.

A method of purposeful sampling was incorporated within this study. In purposeful sampling, individuals are “intentionally selected” (Creswell, 2002, p. 194). The purposeful sampling utilized was a homogeneous sampling. Specifically, white, single, heterosexual men between 25 and 32 years of age with college experience were selected. Although the selection of participants was homogeneous, I also incorporated the “snowballing” technique. This involved asking participants to recommend other individuals for the study. This “snowballing” technique opened doors of access to a selection of participants who may be more eager to discuss the sensitive topic of sexual orientation based on a trusted friend’s recommendation. Although each participant within the “snowballing” technique was to recommend only one person, I did have to seek two

recommendations from one individual as one participant could not think of anyone to recommend based on a limited circle of friends.

My first participant was from a women's studies course at The University of Tennessee. I recognized and acknowledged that the starting participant of a snowball technique certainly has had influence on the progression of the following participants involved in the study. For example, utilizing a student who was already taking a women's studies course may have provided me with participants that were more familiar with women's issue and more willing to discuss these topics with less reserve. It is possible that the study may have taken a different path if I had chosen the first participant from a different class or one that was randomly referred to me. For the purpose of this study, however, I began with a man recommended by his professor (a member of my doctoral committee).

The "snowballing" technique was required to follow the homogeneous (white, single, heterosexual men between 25 and 32 years of age with college experience) sampling standards of the participants. The interview questions were modified from a pilot study (in class assignment). The pilot study involved two participants and revealed questions that needed to be altered or re-written in order to better serve the study and its participants. Upon approval of the methodology, interview questions, and consent forms by my doctoral committee and the Internal Review Board for Human Subjects at the University of Tennessee, the study began in June, 2002 (see Appendices A and C). The initial contact was made through e-mail and continued through the same method as each participant provided me with e-mail addresses. I did not contact a new participant until

the person recommending him contacted him first. With the recommending participant's approval, I proceeded to e-mail the next participant to establish a time and date to meet. I explained, via e-mail, the nature of this research to each potential participant and informed him that the interview would last anywhere between one half and one hour. I followed this initial contact with a reminder of our scheduled meeting, also via e-mail.

Due to the inherently sensitive nature of this study, I recognized that participants may hesitate in their willingness to be involved in the study. The number of participants depended greatly upon reaching redundancy and saturation levels (McCracken, 1988). The final number of participants was nine.

### **Interview Strategy**

The specific methodological strategy that was incorporated in this research was the long interview. McCracken (1988) describes the long interview as "one of the most powerful methods in the qualitative armory" (p. 9). This statement allows us to begin to unfold a plethora of inherent strengths and attributes to the long interview. McCracken continues: "For certain descriptive and analytic purposes, no instrument of inquiry is more revealing. The method can take us into the mental world of the individual, to glimpse the categories and logic by which he or she sees the world" (p. 9).

The long interview involves probing questions that are not meant to lead or direct the interviewee into pre-determined answers, but to enhance interaction between the participant and interviewer. McCracken (1998) states that this method is "designed to fashion a relationship between investigator and respondent that honors what each party should and should not give to the other" (p.65). In qualitative research, most

investigators are not attempting to prove a theory; instead, she is attempting to unveil a hidden mystery and tell a story of the life, event, or give meaning to previous unknowns. It was paramount to this research to unveil the context of meaning that heterosexual men used to conceptualize lesbians and lesbian relationships. The interview guide was developed by myself (through a pilot study) and includes four questions that were modeled from a dissertation by Dutchess Jones (2001). It was approved by my doctoral committee and the Internal Review Board for Human Subjects at the University of Tennessee. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions which allowed the participants to talk freely and explore their conceptualizations of lesbians and lesbian relationships. I did not discourage any digressions during the interview process, as the participants' thoughts during the interview were significant to their conceptualizations.

It was also necessary to mention that the participants' perceptions of me (the researcher) may have influenced this study. I acknowledged that the participants may assume that I am a lesbian solely by the endeavor to complete this research and asking the interview questions. A separate set of debriefing questions had been added to the interview guide (Appendix C) in the event that a participant inquired about my sexuality. Through discussion with my committee and my personal beliefs, we felt it necessary to be honest and forthcoming with my sexual orientation as a lesbian (in the event that I was asked). I recognized that knowing my sexual orientation may have altered the participants' answers, but, this did not appear as an issue as none of the participants inquired. This does not suggest that the participants were not curious or assuming that I was a lesbian simply by the nature of the questions. It must be emphasized that this may

have influenced their responses.

## **Procedures**

Prior to the interviews, the informed consent form was explained, read, and signed (Appendix A). This consent form ensures confidentiality. The participants were informed that each tape-recorded interview would last approximately one half to one hour depending on the depth that each chose to go into. There was not, however, a pre-set time limit on the interviews. The interviews were held in private rooms within the University of Tennessee library in order to remain in a neutral location and ensure privacy. Each participant was informed of the topic I was focusing on as well as his right to decline to answer any questions during the interview. He was informed that anything he said was confidential. Each participant was asked to choose a pseudonym for himself. The participants were informed that they could stop the interview at any time, withdraw without penalty, and/or not answer any questions that made them uncomfortable. In the event that the participant became emotional or overwhelmed at any time during the interview, I was prepared with information regarding counseling services (Appendix E). This was not necessary in any of the interviews.

Each interview began with the same initial set of questions (Appendix C) pertaining to background information. The long interview guide was then used for each interview. This guide varied slightly depending on the responses offered by each individual. If further probing was needed on a potential point, I pursued those as they arose. As the interviews were audio-taped, I also informed each participant that he may request that I turn off the recorder at any point to either stop or make an “off the record”

statement. This did not occur in any of the interviews.

During the interview, I would often re-state what the participant had revealed in order to ensure accuracy in understanding the participants. This also served to increase validity as did member checks of transcripts post-interview by each participant. Aside from audio-taping each interview, I also took notes immediately following each interview session in order to record any specific participant body language and my own mental notes during the interviews. It was important to observe participants' body expressions during the interview that the audio-recorder could not record (Creswell, 2002). I also maintained a journal throughout the study to keep process notes of any thoughts or feelings regarding this research.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Transcript Review**

I personally transcribed all of the interviews. Transcribing the interviews myself allowed for more familiarity with the data, hence increasing the possibility of more accurate analysis. Once transcribed, I read the interviews several times to familiarize and immerse myself in the data. Upon immersion in the data, I separated the data into categories. These categories were based on consistent themes found throughout the data (Creswell, 2002). Initially, I coded the themes and sub-themes. The next step in this analysis included cutting and pasting themes and sub-themes into topical groupings. I maintained a complete intact copy of each transcript from which to operate so as to not lose the overall context of the interviews. I checked for consistency as well as variability in the transcriptions. Following separate establishment of recurrent themes, I grouped the

data to make a case for a cohesive underlying meaning.

In conjunction with queer theory, I incorporated a constructivist methodology. Guba (1990) describes the epistemology of constructivism as “findings being literally the creation of the process of interaction between the two (researcher and participant)” (p.27). This is the epistemological postulate on which this research is focused. Mertens (1998) states that the basic assumptions that guide the constructivist paradigm are that knowledge is socially constructed by people active in the research process, and that researchers should attempt to understand the “complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it” (p. 11). Mertens also stresses that research is the product of the researcher’s values and is not independent of them as noted within my statement of bias in Chapter One.

Constructivism’s ontology is that there are multiple realities that may change throughout the process of the study. Constructivist researchers reject the notion that there is one objective reality and go so far as to take the stance that the researcher’s goal is to understand the “multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge” (Mertens, 1998, p. 11). When examining sexuality and incorporating constructivism within this study, it was essential to invoke and understand that “sociologists assert that sexual meanings, identities, and categories are intersubjectively negotiated social and historical products-that sexuality is, in a word, constructed” (Epstein, 1996, p. 145).

In order to understand how heterosexual men conceptualize lesbians and lesbian relationships, I also employed the paradigm of symbolic interactionism. Blumer (1969) states that “symbolic interactionism sees meaning as social products, as creations that are



formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact” (p. 5). Blumer (1969) explains that there are three simple premises that make up symbolic interactionism: “a) human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them, b) meanings of such things are derived from, or arise out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s [fellows], and c) meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things [he] encounters” (pp. 4-5). Aside from these three premises, there are four central conceptions in symbolic interactionism. I focused on one in particular: “social acts, whether individual or collective, are constructed through a process in which the actors note, interpret, and assess the situations confronting them” (Blumer, 1969, p. 5). This was an important factor within the analysis as I examined how participants establish where their conceptualizations of lesbians and lesbian relationships are.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Generally, qualitative research prides itself on validity, leaving reliability as a secondary concern. Validating findings means that the researcher determines the accuracy or credibility of the findings through strategies such as member checks or triangulation (Creswell, 2002). Member checking was incorporated into this study. After each interview was transcribed and before the data analysis began, each participant had the opportunity to verify for accuracy (through reading his transcript) and was encouraged to make any necessary changes. The participants were permitted to ask any questions and were also asked to do a member check and verify their words on paper. Each participant verified the accuracy of their transcripts. According to Creswell (2002), member

checking is a qualitative process during which the “researcher asks one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of their interview” (p. 646).

Unlike quantitative research, where reliability is critical, it is difficult to expect two researchers in the field of qualitative research to have the exact same findings and discovery of meanings. Qualitative research takes on the role of telling a story from the eyes of the participant, and through the researcher as the instrument. This inherent interpretational value cannot be neglected. From researcher to researcher, the reliability factor may vary. Validity, however, is of utmost concern. Allowing the participants’ quotations to speak for themselves as well as other participants similarities being cited allowed for one form of a validity check. Through constantly comparing and researching until redundancy, I intended to show validation. Constant comparativeness involves “connecting categories or themes by comparing incidents in the data to other incidents, and so on” (Creswell, 2002, p. 451). Researching until redundancy involves continuing the study until information becomes redundant and repeated to be able to find consistent themes.

I also had the transcripts ultimately reviewed by an outside research group with the permission of the participants through a signed consent form (Appendix A). This review group consisted of my doctoral committee chairperson, a recent doctoral graduate, a doctoral student and an individual with a master’s degree with experience in qualitative research. The review group also signed a consent to confidentiality form (Appendix B). The sole purpose of this group was to co-create and change or verify the themes and findings I found within the data.

## **Establishing Trustworthiness**

I took multiple steps in order to ensure trustworthiness within this research. The first of these steps was interviewer training. Through a pilot study (class assignment) performed on two individuals and successfully completing courses pertaining to learning the styles of interviewing and methods, trustworthiness was increased. This pilot study also led to a revision of the interview guide to enhance the effectiveness of the study. Another step in increasing the trustworthiness of the study was to take notes immediately after each interview, as well as by keeping a personal journal of the experience of each interview. It is important to mention that although all participants were strongly encouraged to be truthful, the sensitive nature of this research may have enhanced the possibility that the participants may not have been entirely truthful. By using methods such as research until saturation, redundancy, correlation, and constant comparativeness (Mertens, 1998), I contributed to the increase in trustworthiness. Using these multiple methodologies was also pertinent in increasing trustworthiness as well as validity.

After the interviews were completed, as mentioned earlier member checks were performed and participants were allowed to review their transcripts. Ensuring that the researcher's report represents the participants' experience was the paramount goal to this qualitative research.

The next phase of this research was the analysis of the interviews contained in Chapter Four. This analysis includes coding and thematizing of the findings. Themes emerging from the data are described and represented by direct quotations from the participants. As the themes supported by the participants' words became clearer through

data emersion, the summation of the findings of how heterosexual men conceptualize lesbians and lesbian relationships is described. Chapter Five includes a summary, discussion of the findings, and future recommendations based on this research.

## Chapter Four

### Presentation And Discussion Of Data

*“...being a man means ‘not being like a woman.’ This notion of anti-femininity lies at the heart of contemporary and historical conceptions of manhood, so that masculinity is defined by what one is not, rather than who one is.”*

(Kimmel, 1994, p. 126)

The purpose of this research was to examine the conceptualizations of lesbians and lesbian relationships by white, heterosexual, single, 25-32 year old men with college experience, and, secondly, to examine the role socialization plays in this conceptualization.

The following section contains profiles of the nine participants. Each participant chose a pseudonym for the study that was used in place of their real names. Any other proper nouns used within this analysis have also been changed to maintain anonymity. Each profile is based on information provided during the interviews. These profiles are provided in order to gain further understanding of each participant as well as to outline demographic similarities and dissimilarities. Following the profiles, the themes and sub-themes emerging through the data analysis are presented.

#### **Participant Profiles**

##### **Paul**

Paul is from Virginia and is 32 years old. He does not follow any particular religion and describes his parents as “hippies.” Paul’s family consisted of his father, mother and brother. Paul’s father passed away last year.

Paul received his undergraduate degree in philosophy and classical history and completed his master's degree in cultural geography. He describes himself as a neo-liberal and his parents as liberals. He described being raised in a middle to upper class family and his father served in the Air Force which caused the family to relocate occasionally.

Paul has an "aunt" who is a lesbian. She is not his biological aunt, but rather a family friend that Paul referred to as an aunt. Paul has also had friendships with lesbians since high school. His parents were involved in dog shows and had personal relationships with gay men and lesbians. Consequently, Paul has had discussions with both parents regarding gay men and lesbians. He also describes being raised in a traditional setting concerning gender roles.

### **Jay**

Jay is from East Tennessee and is 29 years old. He initially went to a Presbyterian Church until he was ten and then began attending a Unity Church. Jay also describes his parents as "hippies" and has a half sister and half brother as his parents divorced when he was ten.

Jay received his bachelor's degree in math and is currently working towards his master's degree in computer science. He was raised in a middle class area that he describes as rural. Jay's father earned his doctorate in psychology and was a professor for some time. His mother received her bachelor's degree in political science and a second degree in nursing. She is currently a nurse and Jay's father is a school psychologist. Jay was primarily raised by his mother after the divorce, although he describes being traded

back and forth for visitation.

Jay describes his parents as “hands-off hippie types” concerning his upbringing and gender roles. Jay feels lesbianism is a valid lifestyle and has dated women who have dated other women. He attended a lesbian “marriage” ceremony in the mountains after meeting two women on a hiking trip. Jay has difficulty with lesbianism when children are involved as in this ceremony. One of the women in the ceremony had a child that Jay related to by comparing the ridicule of being a child of divorce to being a child of a lesbian couple.

### **Harold**

Harold is also from East Tennessee and is 28 years old. He was raised by a Baptist father and Methodist mother. At age nine, they began attending a Unitarian church. Harold still attends this church and also teaches Sunday school to junior high and high school students. Harold’s family consists of six half brothers as he was the only child of his parent’s marriage. His father is 84 and his mother is 72 years old. To describe the extreme age variation among his half brothers he notes that his oldest brother is 54 years old.

Harold has a bachelor’s degree in English and is currently a computer programmer. He is also a member of a “funk” band. He describes himself as liberal-minded. He grew up in a lower middle class family. His father has his master’s degree and began a doctoral program in mechanical engineering, but did not finish. Although his mother started college, she did not finish and has primarily been a homemaker.

Aside from teaching Sunday School classes, Harold also attended these classes as

a child. He took classes that discussed homosexuality at his church. Harold has dated bisexual women in the past. He has also had experiences where members of the same sex were attracted to him. Harold has socialized and attended a party where he and his girlfriend were the only heterosexual people present. He mentions that this was the first time he felt like the minority as he describes being called a “breeder” by others at the party.

## **Wil**

Wil is from East Tennessee and is 30 years old. He was raised Catholic and Protestant, but is now a Methodist. His parents divorced when he was one year old. His mother completed high school while his father completed middle school. Wil states that his family was “dirt poor” while growing up.

Wil was married at age 21 and had two children from that marriage. He has two boys, ages seven and nine. Wil is now divorced and his ex-wife is Southern Baptist, but Wil is attempting to raise the boys Methodist which is against her wishes.

Wil attempted to get his degree in journalism, but he completed a degree in communications instead. He describes himself as a liberal southerner with a Catholic background who knows conservatives firsthand, but denies being one. Wil also spent a large amount of time reading and emphasizes that Shakespeare is a favorite.

Wil noted he learned intolerance from his father and being open-minded from his mother and the media in the seventies. He also describes this “hippie” time as having a heavy influence on who he is today. His father was known to make derogatory comments regarding homosexuals while Wil was growing up. His father was also an avid gambler



which Wil describes as the cause for them being consistently broke. Wil has had friendships with lesbians in high school and currently. He ultimately describes himself as an “intellectual mystic.”

### **James**

James is from Kentucky and is 31 years old. He had no particular religious upbringing although his mother is currently Catholic. James is the only child of his parents who divorced when he was four. His father received his bachelor’s degree and completed most of a master’s degree while his mother has a master’s degree in English and completed her doctorate in law. James was raised in an urban area where he lived an upper to middle class lifestyle.

James is a drama coach at a high school. He received his bachelor’s degree in drama and his master’s degree in fine arts and directing. He describes himself as a libertarian. While growing up James was also an avid reader and enjoyed writing.

James’s mother has many gay friends and his father is open-minded. James describes knowing many gay men while growing up. He also feels most forms of homosexuality are biological (excluding those women who are lesbian for political reasons). James has also dated a lesbian. He has also had a friendship with a lesbian couple who entered into a “triad” relationship with one partner bringing a third partner into the relationship.

### **Don**

Don is from East Tennessee and is 25 years old. He was raised in a strict Baptist family. His father has always either been a Baptist minister or a police officer. His

mother is a nurse. Don notes that both of his parents attended Liberty University and were consequently married by Reverend Jerry Falwell. Don revealed knowing Reverend Falwell personally. His parents were together for 28 years, but divorced this year. He has two younger brothers that he describes as very similar to himself.

Don describes himself as bi-vocational as he is primarily an entertainer, but works at an art gallery to pay the bills. He received his degree in drama and has taken classes at numerous colleges. He described being very focused on the theater throughout his life.

Don confesses that his friends refer to him as the gayest straight man around. He was extremely worried that he was too open-minded for this study. He knew gay men while growing up and had both positive and negative experiences with them. Don also states that one of the most influential people in his life was a gay man. He adamantly declares and answer to the debate on whether it is genetics or environment that determines who we are. Don states that it is based on almost 90% of what he was taught growing up and his environment. In other words, you either accept or reject what you are told in the strict environment in which he was raised and he chose to reject it.

### **Bill**

Bill is from New York and is 26 years old. He was raised Catholic, but notes that he believes in nothing concerning religion today. After completing college, his mother became a marriage mediator. His father also completed college, but Bill was unsure of his specific degree. Bill describes his socio-economic status while growing up as very poor. He was raised mostly by his mother after his parents divorced when he was four. Bill has eight siblings; four through his parents' marriage and four through his father's re-

marriage. Bill went to a community college to study music, but is currently pursuing a degree in business at a university.

Bill revealed that homosexuality was a taboo subject while growing up. It was never talked about in his childhood with his family. Bill learned most about homosexuality through the media and particularly *The Real World* on MTV. He describes finally understanding what being gay was about as he watched an episode with a character named Pedro. He does not currently know any gay or lesbian individuals, but has in the past. Bill has just moved to Tennessee and describes not knowing many people and remaining private.

### **Chuck**

Chuck is from Florida and is 32 years old. Chuck was raised by his mother who passed away in 1981 when he was 12. Chuck did not mention any other family members as influencing him. He moved from state to state frequently while growing up. He never met his father, but assumes his parents were married at one time. Chuck considers Tennessee his home as he has lived there the longest and remarks that his mother is buried in Tennessee. His mother worked primarily as a waitress and completed some college.

Chuck graduated from college with a degree in computer science and a double minor in business and math. He was not raised with a particular religion, but has since joined a Methodist church. Chuck does not consider himself Methodist, but instead calls himself a Christian. He does not associate himself with a particular political affiliation and states that he simply doesn't vote for the person he doesn't like. He mentions that

besides his mother, the strongest influence in his life was a woman who he refers to as family and is “like a mother to him” since his mother passed away.

Chuck states that he learned the most about gender roles from his mother who was extremely open with him. Chuck does not know any lesbians and has never been aware of knowing one, but notes that there could have been women in his life who were lesbian although he was unaware. Noticing a man in women’s clothing while intimately engaged with another man was his first experience at the age of 18 or 19 with homosexuality. He was extremely uncomfortable with this scenario. Chuck reveals openly that lesbianism does not make sense to him. He feels that lesbianism is due to women and men not understanding and communicating on how to satisfy a women sexually and as a result they seek out other women.

### **Frank**

Frank is from East Tennessee and 32 years old. His family consists of his parents who have been married for forty years and a brother and sister. His family is Methodist and Frank currently follows the same religion. According to Frank, his parents were traditional in that his father worked and his mother was a housewife by choice. Frank grew up in the lower-middle-class.

Frank has an associate’s degree in electronic engineering and currently works in electronics. He acknowledges that he is somewhat conservative, but liberal at times. Frank played football in high school and played with the same team members for years before high school.

Frank has had friends who are lesbian and bisexual. He grew up knowing an aunt

of a close friend who is a lesbian and feels that she was a good role model for him. He feels strongly that lesbians are equals and should be treated as such. Frank notes that his parents taught him that there was nothing wrong with being a lesbian. He also feels that the media is sometimes guilty of “throwing lesbianism in your face” and does not know why it is made to be such a big deal.

The next section includes Table 1, which is a list of themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data. This section also includes an explanation of the themes and sub-themes as well as a discussion containing pertinent literature. The participants’ words are used to further describe each sub-theme.

**Theme #1: The Road to Conceptualization (forming the basis for what “is,” establishing normativity/language)**

“The road to conceptualization” refers to the path towards forming a basis for what “is.” The phases in the paths are not necessarily chronological nor in the same order for each participant. This theme describes the participants’ foundation of normative language and establishes what is normal or normative for each. The participants discussed the influence or lack of parental influence regarding gender roles, what they were or were not taught regarding sexuality and homosexuality, the influence of derogatory comments, the role of the media, and finally the acknowledgment of “going against the grain.” In other words, participants mentioned being taught one thing and decided to go against these teachings - toward being open-minded.

**Gender roles.** Regarding “gender roles,” five of the participants acknowledged growing up in a more traditional household. Traditional meant the father was typically

**Table 1.**

**THEMES AND SUB-THEMES**

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<b>Theme</b>	<b>Sub-Themes</b>
<b>1. The Road to Conceptualization (forming the basis for what “is,” establishing normativity/language)</b>	Gender Roles Women Teachings Regarding Sexuality and Homosexuality Derogatory Comments Athletics College Media and Pornography “Going Against the Grain”
<b>2. Beliefs Regarding Lesbians and Lesbian Relationships</b>	Biology Or Choice “The Fake Lesbian” and Ambiguity The Necessity of Individuality and Not Generalizing Where Lesbians Do or Don’t Fit (Situating)
<b>3. Conceptualization by Comparison</b>	Bisexuals Gay Men Heterosexuals Lesbian <i>Stereotypes</i> and “The Lesbian Novelty” Lesbians Heterosexual Men Know Personally
<b>4. Conceptualization Via Struggle</b>	“Being Versus Is” Experimentation Does Not Equal Lesbian “I am Open Minded or am I ?” The Influence of the Seventies Language Social Context as a Gauge

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the breadwinner and the mother was a housewife. Four participants revealed that their parents were less traditional meaning that their mothers worked and often times were their primary care givers.

Paul described the influence of his traditional grandparents on his understanding of gender roles:

As far as my understanding, my initial understanding, I had a grandmother and grandfather, Hungarian grandmother and grandfather, who were, pop went to work, nan cooked, cleaned, took care of the house, took care of her daughter. She only had one daughter and sewed, knitted, all the classic things. She was an ultimate grandma and that was...still this day when I think of the ultimate housewife and I think yeah Grandma, she was housewife.

Conversely, James stated:

My mother worked a great deal and studied a great deal and so on and so forth. So, she was certainly not a housewife type. My father did a lot of cooking. Was not a particular jock or anything like that. Was not obsessed with sports or anything.

The participants also described how they conceptualize women in general. Their responses were often helpful in a further understanding of gender.

Paul described women as:

How do I describe women is I would say I guess I always tend to pick words like "backbone" and...see what I am saying? Structure and cause that's what Mom offered and that's what I find that women tend to offer especially having looked at and studied it. Is that women are often the structure that everything men do is built upon so I think of women in terms of...I wouldn't say strength, but I mean more of a lattice work that we hang things on and it's like it's very difficult for me to put it into words. But I also think of women as contentious and persons who are never able to fully actualize themselves because of this other people (points to self)..and the things that I project of them or not necessarily what I do, but men in general.

When Wil was asked how he conceptualized women he stated:

That's like saying what do you think of Spring or a storm? I think the thing with women is I don't know....but when I think of women I think of versatility. Men, well I guess I should compare it to men to give you a good idea. We're all, my conceptualization of men are all narrowly focused. A soldier's a soldier's a soldier's a soldier, a technician's a technician. It's like a woman can be a mother and then at the same time turn around and be however ruthless she has to be, be it business or whatever and then turn around and be motherly again. So it seems like with women, it's whatever they need to be at the time to get whatever it is done, then it will be. It seems like for guys it's I'm a soldier so my approach will be this way no matter what the problem is.

Wil continued to describe women as:

...flexible and ever changing and practically impossible to, well not impossible to figure out in a bad way, but impossible to figure out in the way of I have no idea what they're doing...

James also had difficulty in understanding women as he described:

Well you know, I mean there are all the clichés like radiant, intuitive, caring, etc., etc., etc. Mercurial. Frequently untrustworthy. Very very very willing to...the old woman's prerogative to change her mind. I have frequently been on the business end of. So, while I really try not to be misogynistic, there are characteristics that I have noticed in more than one member of the gender. I mean, you know. I'm sorry that question is just way too broad. I mean every day of my life I deal with women. And generally I like them. Generally they find me funny. I find in relationships they can be frustrating. But they're the only game in town. So you know I don't have a lot of choice.

Bill stated that he views women as:

A challenge. Just generally I would say good things. Like just you know, the antithesis in a lot of ways of what we are but at the same time I see women and I think of relationships.

La Mar & Kite (1998) revealed that someone who is described by stereotypically masculine or feminine traits is expected to adopt a similar role. Accordingly, Kite & Whitley (1996) found that attitudes toward homosexuals appear to be based on the gender belief system. The participants in this study described what they were taught regarding



gender roles and six of the nine participants revealed that their parents were divorced and “non-traditional.” Their families ranged from strictly traditional to “hippies.”

The participants’ gender belief systems varied regarding what they were taught while growing up, but appeared more consistent in present day. In other words, the participants did not indicate that their current or future family would need to be traditional. For example, Paul suggested that he was going to raise his children with more liberal religious views versus those of his ex-wife. Chuck was the only participant who revealed that what he learned from his mother regarding sexuality and women impacted his view on who lesbians are, why they exist, and how his views of lesbians differ from his views on women. The other eight participants were forthcoming about what they were taught regarding gender roles and their conceptualizations of women, but did not necessarily agree with their parental teachings. In particular, four participants recognized that they did not follow what they were taught regarding traditional gender roles.

**Teachings regarding sexuality and homosexuality.** The second sub-theme that emerged on the road to conceptualization and establishment of normativity was what the participants were “taught regarding sexuality and homosexuality.”

Paul described what he was taught regarding sexuality, homosexuality, and normativity as:

At first there was as I told you my father said there’s well “there’s men who like men and there’s women who like women.” That wasn’t really covered too much. And then there is normalcy which is heterosexual relationships and that’s about it. That I was raised to believe that heterosexuality was the normal relationship, but I was not raised to believe that homosexuality or men and men and women and

women were um were perverse, but it was just something you weren't going to do. So like I said there was Aunt Debbie out there. She wasn't obviously seen as perverse, just different.

James indicated how he was taught:

My father was fairly open minded and forward thinking about it. And my mother would vacillate back and forth between being extremely 1950's and prudish about it and then at the same time being fairly open for discussion. Then a friend of hers gave her a subscription to *Playboy* and so those were always around the house and fairly easily accessible so it was pretty positive. You know sex positive.

Bill also described *Playboy* magazines around the house and how he learned about sexuality:

I knew that early on I had seen like *Playboys* and stuff like that and I just kind of knew that was something I liked. I mean I remember thinking I don't want to forget the name of this magazine whatever it is. I don't know where you get it but. I was about five when I saw my first *Playboy* and kinda went wow this is the thing right here.

Chuck learned about sexuality primarily from his mother. He describes his experience as a child and his mother's candor regarding sexuality:

Well, it's kind of like the situation where I don't know I mean you think about a single mom with a boy and she doesn't have money to buy you know pay for a babysitter. So either she has a boyfriend come to the house or we go over there. And so I've seen my mother you know in the act several times throughout my childhood and so I've always, I was raised on knowing that it's man and a woman. And my mother would tell me things that women want from men.

He also indicated learning from books:

Like Nora Hayden. *How to Satisfy A Women Every Time. Have Her Beg For More*. She had a lot of interesting information and I also realized that a lot of men just won't do that kind of stuff for a woman. And she talks about how relationships fail and why. And they'll call it the money issue when it's really other things.

Harold had a class in Sunday School where they discussed sexuality as well as

homosexuality. He revealed the following:

In church I guess we go through, actually in our class, in our sexuality class we actually go over homosexuality. And you know you have a parents waiver and everything but when they're in junior high that is equally part of the curriculum.....Well in that class, in your sexuality class it's a very "Ok nothing leaves this room." But you're still dealing with kids that are in junior high and sure the most that class can do that there are other people out there like that. But I mean once you get out of that room you're back in reality and so in that class it teaches everything on the fact that there are people that lean this way and other people that lean this way. So they attempt to treat everything equally. They attempt to do that and to accept that.....What was nice is that there was one lady that was teaching it that I could talk to a little bit about what was going on with me and everything and the birth control was really good to hear about that and that kind of thing. So it served as sort of a technical counseling type of issues rather than this is what people do. The homosexuality part I remember you know they actually have a movie where they show guys messing around and stuff.

After asking Harold to say more about the church sexuality class and the video, he stated:

Yeah, junior high that's why you have to sign all those waivers and that's why a lot of people say "Those demon...whatever." But again it's supposed to be behind closed doors and there's always the debate whether to show that or not. There's always, everybody wants to raise it and it was I remember it was weird I guess to see that. I mean it was rather odd. But the thing is the course is so, you just had some other people have sex and so then you see these two guys having sex so it wasn't exactly such a shocker. It wasn't like "Ok today is homosexuality day." Things were just entwined. So I guess that left a good impression. I didn't really think about it too much afterwards because I really wasn't concerned with that.

I asked if there were lesbians in the film as well and Harold responded:

I don't remember. I would imagine there were, but I do not remember and I think that has to do with, cause I don't even remember the heterosexual part. I think I remember the part that was a little bit like "Whoa." (referring to the two men together)

Don described how he learned about homosexuality and the role of his Baptist church:

I'll say that that's not really a focus. When it comes to the Baptist religion and at the time that I was coming up it was much more "You're going to hell for these thoughts or whatever else." But in regards to what I was taught in regards to homosexuality, it's kind of a strange thing because it was always kind of before

age 15, before I kind of got opened up to the whole rest of the world, before that it was always kind of looked at as a joke. “Oh, he must be gay.” And that was kind of snicker snicker. You know because you didn’t find that in the church.

Jay described what he learned regarding homosexuality while growing up:

I think my parents recognize homosexuality as a valid preference or lifestyle or whatever. So it was never anything negative about homosexuality or lifestyle choices or anything like that.

Bill indicated:

It was never really talked about. It was definitely a taboo subject that was never really spoken of..... Yeah, it was just one of those things that was never an issue so it was never touched. It wasn’t that you know if I said something to my mom that she would have turned away from it or shunned it. But it was just that she was never there anyway so there was never really “Hey, what do you think of this or that?” That kind of stuff just never happened.

Chuck had a unique response compared to the rest when asked to describe what he was taught regarding homosexuality while growing up:

Well I never experienced that when growing up. My first experience with that was when I was like I guess about 18 or 19. I was over at somebody’s trailer I didn’t know. I think they might have been dealing dope or something. I think I might have gotten some dope from him or something, but he had a male posing as a female with him.

I asked Chuck what he thought at the time of this experience and he replied:

I was thinking like “Ooohhh I don’t want to be involved with that.”

Frank noted that his parents taught him:

That there is homosexuality. It does exist. That there’s really nothing wrong with it. It’s just it does exist and that’s it. If people chose to be that way-that’s ok.

Jackson (1998) noted that heteronormativity involves the ways in which “heterosexuality’s normative status is reinforced” (pp. 141-2). Paul stated that his parents made it clear to him that heterosexuality was the norm and his father warned him that

anything besides heterosexuality was not to be considered. Participants indicated that sexuality was discussed either with their parents or friends and that for most, homosexuality was either not brought up or simply not an issue. The participants indicated that often times their first memory or discussion of homosexuality was prompted by a derogatory comment or a joke. This is discussed in the following sub-theme.

**Derogatory comments.** The third sub-theme that emerged focused on “derogatory comments” heard while growing up. All nine of the participants indicated that they had heard jokes regarding homosexuality while growing up. “Fag” was the most commonly used term. Four of the participants used this term when describing these incidents.

Paul described a conversation with his father:

I asked my dad cause somebody called me that [fag] when I was a young boy, you know like “you fag” or something like that so I asked my dad and he was pretty forthcoming about that. He said “Oh that’s a man who, who has sex with other men, and if I ever find out you’re doing that I’ll kill you.” You know that kind of thing. Just the classic, you know raised in the middle of the 1950's sort of attitude....

Jay indicated that he also heard derogatory comments while in school, but detailed a college experience with a friend:

I was riding around with this guy that I worked with and he was sort of a “red-neck” type. He’d see a girl walking around campus and she’d have sandals and a sort of a dress that was one of those hippie type sorts of dresses and flowers on it or something like that, he’d just yell “Dyke” out the window at her.

Wil described the prevalence of derogatory comments while men are changing or showering together (in athletics):

Seriously, the first time guys get naked together you know somebody is lookin too long or somebody you know. It was mainly you know heavy heavy intolerance.....Oh, yeah like I said as soon as guys have to get naked together and shower there's always a couple of people get uncomfortable, well I mean it's an uncomfortable setting, I don't know why I mean it's not like, but it's always an uncomfortable setting and people get uncomfortable so the jokes start flying around.

I asked Wil if he remembered the first time he heard a derogatory comment regarding homosexuality and he stated:

Probably the first time I heard it from my dad I was about 8 that I remember. He probably said it before you know, but I think I was about 7 or 8 cause I was in school but it wasn't quite, nobody at school had talked about stuff like that yet. So I'm guessing it was about fourth grade whenever you know "Hey, you're a fag" became a joke at school you know? So I am guessing around third grade, second grade, 7 or 8 years old was the first time I heard that. Then in school right around third or fourth grade I don't know who picked up on it first but you know one boy picked up on the fact you know that's an insult and then you know all the way through middle school that was always the big insult for somebody.

James revealed that he was familiar with "fag" while growing up and described using it currently:

I think my father was a little more critical of homosexuals and so on and so forth. And certainly in school when you enter into that stage around third grade, you know 3<sup>rd</sup> through I don't know 8<sup>th</sup> grade where the worst thing you could call somebody was a fag. Even if it had no, even if they were patently heterosexual. It was just this word that you would use. And I even when I want to describe a "ne'er do well" or a reprobate. Sometimes I'm just like "God, that guy's such a fag."(whispers) And now I have to stop myself. I think well not really and you know where does that negative connotation come from? And I was socialized or something, cause I don't literally associate it with homosexuals or character traits involved with homosexuals.

Bill did not have the same experience as those previously mentioned as he described not hearing derogatory comments as much:

Not really. I mean you'd hear terms like faggot, but never like it wasn't like calling somebody directly. It was like that was...or you would call your brother

that. That type of stuff but never did I ever remember once just sitting home or something and hearing like “fucking queer” or anything.

Frank did not offer any examples of such comments; rather he offered the following:

Well there was people that voice their opinions that didn't have very much insight or more fear than anything.

Derogatory comments within athletic locker rooms and college settings emerged.

As Wil described the uncomfortable experience in the showers with other boys and all nine participants indicated hearing or partaking in derogatory comments while growing up, it is evident that jokes, derogatory comments, and insults are a typical experience towards conceptualization. It is also important to note that none of the participants described the “athletic” lesbian within their responses concerning athletics, derogatory comments, or types of lesbians. Women crossing the gender line within athletics have been associated with lesbianism (Coakley, 2001), although interestingly none of the participants in this study discussed it.

**Media and pornography.** The fourth sub-theme is “media and pornography.”

Overall, the participants did not have many examples of lesbians in the media.

Pornography or *Playboy* emerged in seven out of nine interviews, however.

When asked what role, if any, the media had in his conceptualization of lesbians and lesbian relationships, Jay stated:

Well yeah your porn or something on the web. You see women together in a lesbian sort of scene or whatever and that sort of adds to the whole sexiness of it for sure. I think, I think all through college I don't really think I thought about lesbians like that. I think that sort of sexiness is sort of the product of pornography or whatever. Seeing web-sites or whatever, I think that's sort of a product of that. I would say it's not something I would, not something that would turn me on at all before I sort of been exposed to it.

Jay was then asked if he realized while watching the women in pornographic movies that they were “fake lesbians” (as he mentioned earlier). He indicated:

Yeah, I think I realized it as I saw it. Yeah, the whole pornography thing is sort of tongue and cheek, yeah I think it is sort of played up kind of cheap acting stuff.

Harold was also asked about the role of the media in his perception of lesbians and he revealed:

It helps the sexual part. (Laughs) I would say movies. You know you can't rent an adult movie without there being multiple women. I mean that's pretty much almost like a standard. I don't know how it's affected me though. It's there to watch if you want to. There's always that movie, the mainstream movie where some young actress kisses another young actress and you know the old Anna Kornikova kisses Martina Hingis fantasy (laughs). Sorry, I'm a big tennis buff so I always and see them playing doubles and I'm like “Oh..” Now I don't know again sometimes I'm not sure. I think there's a distinction between a movie that has a lot of girls with one guy as opposed to women that are actually fooling around with each other.

When asked to further discuss the distinction he replied:

I think the distinction would be that one is where it's multiple women and a man that they're there to make him happy. Whereas if you have multiple women and a guy in the mix, they're also there to make each other happy too.

Harold also discussed other media such as literature and television shows including Oprah and The Rosie O'Donnell Show. Wil did the same as he described the influence of growing up with strong women on television such as Rhoda and Maude in the seventies.

He describes the media's role in his perception as:

....San Francisco I think elected, I don't know if they elected the first gay mayor or if it was something that hit the news. But I remember that was a huge thing on Donahue and everything when I was a kid one summer and so from that especially with the slant of the media at the time, like it wasn't a bad slant it was just because of the slant it was all like “Oh be open minded. Be cool about it” you know?



Wil continued regarding the media's role and incorporated pornography into his discussion stating:

Well it has to play a big role I think. I have to say it plays a big role, I have to say it plays a big role because you know first you get the whole as a kid open mindedness of what I've got you know cause of shows so that kind of carries a lot of stuff. Then you get the next step is you see a couple of girls kissing and in your head you go "I guess that's kind of cool." And then you know I mean that's a big staple of male pornography is girl on girl stuff. So you kinda, not only is it ok but it's even more than ok. It's pleasurable, but at the same time I think the media does stop short....I mean pornography is well the only thing it does is it's for that moment. They're doing it, they're still doing it for guys to watch. So it's not real. It's not real.....Had it come I think out of my own maturity because the media has absolutely, has never ever ever portrayed an actual mature lesbian relationship in any forum. I mean there have been some independent films, but for the most part I mean. In a TV show if someone does it, it's because a famous character needs to get tweaked so you can get ratings. So in a way while it did help the open mindedness it really, it absolutely had no influence on it being a normal healthy thing. It's never healthy in the movies. (laughs)

Don had a different view of the media which involved religion when he suggested:

I saw a special the other night and this gay man was saying. This is on the Jesus channel I call it. But he was talking about how God has helped him overcome his homosexuality and on the one hand it's very sad and on the other hand I really was laughing my ass off. And that's kind of a sad thing and maybe a little bit insensitive, but I was laughing because it's like you know are you going to go towards. It's just weird to me I guess.

Don continued his description of lesbians and the media:

Here's what I think in terms of lesbians in the news so to speak. I think that certain things are not really tackled in the media unless they become a threat and I think that really while same sex marriages has been a media issue, Rosie recently really brought same sex parenting into the forefront and I think then you had some sort of a controversial issue. So I think that there was a lot more media attention toward them. But in terms of lesbians in the media, I think that it's bizarre but I think that lesbians get more slack than male homosexuals do and I think that's just because the male figure is just a little bit more threatening.

Bill's media exposure involved a popular show on MTV called "The Real World." He

describes the effect a particular episode regarding Pedro, an HIV-positive gay man, had on him:

He was sitting there with his boyfriend, sitting on the couch and his boyfriend was running his fingers through his hair, sitting by a fire just enjoying the day. And I finally understood what it was all about because I looked at that and I thought wow that's what my girlfriend does to me and I love that. And I realized it wasn't a question of sex and it wasn't a question of this or intercourse, but it was a question of love. And from there I kind of tried to branch and understand and be more accepting. I guess I wasn't very accepting of it at first. I didn't condone it, but I would you know call somebody this or call somebody that you know. But it's just like any kind of bigotry or whatever. But once I kind of saw it in a different light it opened up to me.

Bill also contrasted pornography with the influence of the episode on "The Real World."

Porn I don't think really helps understand it. That puts it in your face and "The Real World" was developmental in helping me understand something just because I got to see something from a different perspective that you don't usually get to see. Like you know I would never have been over at two gay guys' house sitting there cooking dinner with them and going "Hey, how ya doing?" But now I'll go out and go up to someone and be like hey...

In contrast to Bill's experience with the media, Chuck indicated:

The media, just kind of like when people admit who they are, come out openly. It's kind of like Rob Halford of the late Judas Priest. You know when he came out and said he's homosexual. I was like "I don't know if I'm going to listen to that music anymore, you know."

Don offered a skit from "Saturday Night Live" as an example of the media's influence on his perception of lesbians and lesbian relationships. He was surprised at how a comedic performance made him think so much about what it is to be a "lesbian" in our culture. He summarized the performance as follows:

The idea was these guys and they were around like a genie's lamp kind of thing and they could have anything they want to. They decided "Well, let's have two lesbians make love together right here in front of us." And I don't know if you saw this, but it ended up being two very hippy you know kind of 50 plus age you

know more of the intelligent lesbian or whatever instead of you know your blonde dumb pseudo lesbian. And they were quite grossed out by it. And I thought you know that's an interesting thing. It really hit me hard. It's like well so lesbianism itself has to be defined by who is involved.

Louderback & Whitley (1997) indicated that many heterosexual men find the idea of sex between two women appealing. None of the participants in this study indicated that sex between two women was not appealing. Interestingly, five participants revealed that if sex between two women had not been introduced to them by either the media or a friend's influence that they might not have found it appealing. In other words, they indicated that they learned through exposure to find sex between two women appealing. It is necessary to clarify that six participants acknowledged that they recognized women in pornographic films or magazines were not "real" lesbians. Therefore, it may be necessary to infer that when the participants indicated that they found sex between two women attractive, they may be thinking of women in pornography or specifically "femme" lesbians. Also noteworthy, is the notion that porn is multiple. In other words, the participants may hold multiple meanings when they mention "porn," "pornography," or "pornographic." Rubin (1997) indicated that gender identity, sexual desire, and fantasy are all "social products" (p.32). The participants within this study may certainly be describing the social product of fantasy - particularly sex between two attractive "femme" women - and not necessarily actual lesbians or perhaps "butch" lesbians. Also, as Kimmel (2000) reminded us of John Stoltenberg's words, "pornography tells lies about women, but it tells the truth about men" (p. 226). This is well represented by the participants' acknowledgment of the women in pornographic films being "fake lesbians."

**“Going against the grain.”** The fifth sub-theme, “going against the grain,” describes those participants who were influenced or taught a particular way of thinking by their parents and consciously decided to go against these teachings and express differences. Typically, the participants indicated battling against what they were taught by their parents, but some also included the church in their struggles. Others were influenced by friends or acquaintances who the participants recognized as not having similar attitudes to their own regarding homosexuality and discussed the struggles surrounding these differences.

Don revealed his struggles being brought up in a strict Baptist household:

My father was a Baptist minister and my mother.....was basically the housewife..... Came up under a very strict household but when things like that happen, when you come up under a strict household one of two things will happen. And I saw this happening with other friends of mine that came up under kind of the same upbringing and that's that either they will believe everything they're told and they'll go on and they will have a strict household or they will, in my case, almost immediately question anything that they're told by authority figures because you shove something down somebody's throat and they're gonna say "Wait wait wait just a second." So that kind of gives you a little bit of an idea in terms of I'm a very open minded person.

Paul did not have the same strict upbringing, but certainly did not agree with his father's sentiments regarding homosexuality. Earlier, Paul discussed his father's feelings regarding homosexuality and his father's threatening of Paul insisting that he never become gay. Paul details the difference in his own and his father's beliefs in the following example:

When my mother and father got into it [dog shows], it really opened my dad's eyes cause he was really...and we're sitting there and there's this guy Mark. Mark and his friend Ben and come to find out they're well dad said "You know they're fags don't you?" I was like "Yeah dad it's pretty obvious after you know living

around a university for awhile and I've got pretty good 'gaydar' (i.e radar to recognize gay people)." I got on pretty quickly that they were together. He says "It doesn't bother you?" and I say "Ah whatever man. I said they probably have more money than anyone else and then they're DINK (dual income no kids) other than dogs and he's like "Yeah man they're great they have great taste in things" and he starts talking to me about this and he says "Hey and they like football." And I said "Yeah, they're guys, what do you mean they like football?" So his eyes sort of opened up about that.

Harold didn't necessarily struggle with his beliefs, but he did recognize the difference between his church's beliefs versus others around him.

That's why we (his church) get a bad rap from a lot of places. The school I went to before is south of here so it was this little red-neck school. And so as far as that goes, sexuality there, I mean if you were in a different orientation I think you would have gotten a lot of people pissing on you so to speak....So they (church members) attempt to treat everything equally. They attempt to do that and to accept that.

Wil revealed how he followed his mother's example versus his father's push towards intolerance. He was puzzled by his father's condemnation towards homosexuals and compared this to his own family's issues. He stated:

Well from my dad's side of the family, being kind of poor and backwards, they always made fun of homosexuals. From my mom's side of the family it was a little bit more open. It was more of a once again sort of the hippie whatever. But I mean mom had a couple of guy friends that were a little bit girlish, you know? And even though I mean she never made an issue of it. My dad would see a guy out in like kinda like fruity pants. And he'd be like "Uh there's a fag." So you know, I don't know if that was really taught as much as I saw. I always saw my dad's side of intolerance, especially cause of the fact that they were all broke (his family) and they were also busted on so I don't know if that, I think that actually taught me the opposite. Well, look you're making fun of somebody, but look what we are. (laughs) We're driving a busted a 68 Malibu and you haven't [had] any money for 3 weeks because the Redskins can't win a game you know? So if anything my dad's stuff was an object lesson for sort of a wait a minute we're nothing much anyway. WE of all people have little reason to do that. So I guess from my mom and the media I got that. From my dad's side I learned about intolerance, but it never really sunk in.

Bill experienced “going against the grain” in the context of his friends and their discovery that their mother was a lesbian. Bill detailed how he tried to help his friends accept their mother:

I had a couple of friends whose mom’s found out that they were lesbians. Ended their marriages in divorce.....It’s like man as long as they’re happy. That’s what I tried to justify to them. You know it’s your mom. You love your mom. You want her to be happy. Granted you know your dad..it wasn’t working. It wasn’t happening anyways so why shouldn’t she be happy. And I was trying to explain to them what I was trying to understand myself. You know I know it’s difficult but...

“Going against the grain” has occurred for many generations. Children often rebel against their parent’s teachings and seek out new ways of viewing the world. As we begin to move towards adulthood we often bond with friends and adapt to their views as well as establish our own personal perspective on issues. This sub-theme did not emerge within the literature review, but is well documented in areas such as developmental psychology (Miller,1983; Weiss, 1985).

## **Theme #2: Beliefs Regarding Lesbians and Lesbian Relationships**

“Beliefs regarding lesbians and lesbian relationships” refers to either personal feelings or the explanation offered by the participants when asked how they conceptualize lesbians and lesbian relationships. The participants described beliefs including biology versus choice, “the fake lesbian,” the need for individuality when describing lesbians, and explaining where lesbians are situated in relation to heterosexual men.

**Biology or choice.** The first sub-theme, “biology or choice,” emerged as the participants discussed various issues throughout the interviews. In other words, this sub-

theme did not emerge as a direct result of a specific question, but rather as a result of dialogue offered for other questions. This issue emerged for six of the nine participants.

Don discussed an experience of knowing a man at church who he thought was gay and closeted. He stated:

And I think that this (the church) was a safety net. It's like he can't be let into this safety net with his sexuality or whatever so it was a really weird weird thing because. And even at a later age, even after I had come to accept sexuality as being the kind of thing that its everybody, it's not the kind of thing that "I choose to be gay" or anything like that, you know by that point it was like here's a guy who has an orientation that I mean is his orientation. I mean there's nothing he can do about that.....And to me as a 25 year old right now, I would think ok, sexuality, now where does the religion fit in? So it's kind of a weird thing.

Jay attended a lesbian "marriage" in the mountains and indicated how he was uncomfortable with the fact that one of the women had a child and was attending the ceremony. He incorporated the issue of choice within his answer. He noted:

That sure bothered me cause the kid, the little boy was involved too so that made me uneasy, marriage in that sense made me sort of uneasy. And I think it would be the same if it was two men getting married. You know? So, I think that would be the same nervousness there, cause it's more than just their personal choice. It's affecting somebody else.

Frank stated:

If people chose to be that way. That's ok.

When James was asked his personal feeling regarding lesbianism, he included biology in his answer by suggesting:

It's fine. I mean it's fine. I mean that not's the most in depth response, but do I think it's ethical? Sure. Do I think it's biological? Yeah I think any form of homosex. Well I think most forms of homosexuality are biological. I have known of women who have become lesbians for political reasons and to me that annoys me a little bit. I go with biology and just find men who treat you well rather than giving up on an entire gender just because a few guys were jerks is my

feeling. But with the exception of those, I don't want to attach values to an adjective, when I say abnormal, I simply mean un-average. So there's not that I can see a biological reason for any form of homosexuality. I mean it doesn't make any sense for the organism, but at the same time it doesn't make anything bad or immoral or anything particular like that. I mean it's like, I think of homosexuals like albinos. I mean you know even to say something like fluke would be potentially assigning a value to it. So let me just say un-average. And un-average biological condition and that's about it.

James also stated:

I find the idea of homosexuality not existing peculiar to me if it is a biological fact. I mean that's like saying an ingrown toenail doesn't exist or being born with a sixth finger doesn't exist or something like that. Well, yes it does. It happens all the time. So I mean you know historically the notion that humans have engaged in sexual activity with both sexes is, is simply a recorded fact.

Wil discussed biology and hormones while indicating the similarities or differences between heterosexual and lesbian relationships. He stated:

....obviously you hear about smell and sight, certain skin tones, certain hair colors setting off you know and they've proven that with the biological studies. Of certain guys like redheads. Whenever they see one it spikes his hormone. So obviously we both have the hormone spiking. We both something about the smell of the person or something has gotten pheromones up and there's something in the back of heads going "Cool, go for it."

When Chuck was asked what he thinks of when he thinks of lesbians and he included his beliefs regarding biology versus choice by indicating:

I feel like it's due to like no education on or no information on what the real issues are. Cause nobody knows. Nobody's been taught you know? And it goes both ways. Males and females. And so it's you know ultimate frustration and I mean it may be just open choice. This is what they want to do and this is how they're going to do it and it doesn't matter what the rest of the world thinks.....I think it's kind of sad. I kind of feel sorry for them because like the deception thing. They don't have to be that way, but they choose that way because of all these other reasons that you know makes you wonder if they knew what was really happening if they would change their minds about what they're doing.

Chuck added more when he was describing if lesbians fit into his world. He stated:



Well I guess I don't necessarily get involved with people that would be involved that way. To me in my mind you know really the relationship doesn't really make sense. You know considering just basic human anatomy. Not even bringing God into it. The Creator. Just basic human anatomy-a guy has an outside and a girl has an inside. They were made for each other and when they do that they make another human being. Well you know two of the same can't do that. So to me just out of human nature it's not meant to be.

“Biology or choice” has been an ensuing debate surrounding homosexuality. This debate has its foundation in identity issues (i.e. how do we become who we are?). A queer theorist such as Britzman (1995) recognizes that identity is not singular and not so much an effect of personal experience as much as it is relating to others' identity. Queer theory emphasizes that “identity is placed on others, through others and in *relation to* others' *experiences* more than it is self-shaped and through one's self” (Crimp, 1992, as cited in Britzman, 1995, p.158). Although Britzman does not speak to the issue of “biology or choice,” it is important to understand that the debate regarding identity presented by the participants within this study is being “placed on lesbians and in relation to others' experiences” just as Britzman and Crimp noted.

**“The fake lesbian” and ambiguity.** The second sub-theme, “the fake lesbian and ambiguity,” refers to the participants' description of lesbians in pornography as well as lesbians they know personally or through the media who have experimented with other women and wavered between dating both genders (either simultaneously or at separate times). In other words, many of the participants believed that lesbianism is not concrete or permanent due to the examples of women in their lives and the belief that experimenting does not mean you are a lesbian. Many of the examples for this sub-theme emerged while discussing bisexuality. Some of the participants distinguished between

lesbians and gay men by indicating that gay men seem to be more stable, meaning once they date a man they generally do not waver.

After attending the lesbian “marriage” in the mountains, Jay revealed the following:

It may be sexist on my part, but I sort of think two gay men getting married maybe is more stable, relationship. There’s the whole gay men being sort of promiscuous stereotype and I sort of think that’s true, but maybe just this lesbian lady that I knew before. I really think that two women getting married isn’t the stablest thing in the world. Yeah, so I actually did have a little different feeling about gay marriage for gays and lesbians.

Harold indicated a similar sentiment. He elaborated:

My personal feelings are that I guess that I don’t think lesbianism is as strong as say homosexuality in men. Because I’ve seen girls sort of go in and out of it more easily. Whereas it seems like guys, guys seem to be in that lifestyle and in that framework more committed once they make that move over. So I would say multi-tiered. My idea of lesbianism is, although I probably wouldn’t call my ex girlfriend a lesbian. That’s the thing. Just because she is attracted to women I wouldn’t. Even if she still is or whatever I wouldn’t call her, consider a lesbian. So I think in my mind....I think of all those different levels. Like a lesbian experience, but I don’t think of lesbianism as an experimental thing. I think if someone thought about it or shows, or has consistently done that then I think I would consider them a lesbian. And obviously I’m thinking sexually all the time here too. (laughs).....

Harold attempted to distinguish between “real” and “fake” lesbians by stating:

I think that is how a lot of men would view the **lesbian lesbian** (real). If that phrase makes any sense at all. (laughs) Well a man’s man is a phrase right?

I asked Harold to say more on his views of bisexuality and he stated:

I think bisexual is, again, I think that’s even higher than someone that has just played around. Although she might have been bisexual, but I’m not sure. I think again that’s still stronger than someone that just has experience.

Harold also discussed the ambiguity in lesbians when asked to describe experiences that friends or family members have had regarding different sexual orientations. He stated:

I've seen people weave in and out. But I've never seen...I've seen a lot of weaving in and out.....

Harold captured the essence of the participants' sense of ambiguity when he described a type of lesbian that he considered somewhat elevated above other lesbians in terms of discrimination. He referred to them as:

....part time woman having sex with another woman.

Wil was asked to describe how he conceptualized women in general and offered the following. He was not speaking about lesbians, but his words describing women's ability to change may contribute to the picture of ambiguity surrounding lesbians presented by the participants:

A soldier's a soldier's a soldier's a soldier, a technician's a technician. It's like a woman can be a mother and then at the same time turn around and be how ever ruthless she has to be, be it business or whatever and then turn around and be motherly again. So it seems like with women, it's whatever they need to be at the time to get whatever it is done, then it will be. It seems like for guys it's I'm a soldier so my approach will be this way no matter what the problem is.

Wil then described ambiguity as a generational issue:

...this is probably a society thing, but it seems like most girls I know under 25, might be up to 27, 28 now, tend to be much more open about their sexuality than the girls before them so you get kind of the bisexuals and lesbians in that generation compared to what you had before.

Wil also added that for the most part, straight men cannot cross the line of sexuality and come back, whereas he feels women can and do. He concludes by indicating that lesbians are one step away from complimenting another woman. He stated:

There's guys out there that find guys attractive. There's girls out there that find girls attractive. There's girls out there that find girls attractive, but not really want to have a lesbian lifestyle. Even all the time growing up and almost every

girlfriend I've known other than you know guys can't say that. I mean I joke all the time because I've said it. But I mean guys can't say I find this man attractive. It just (makes a sound indicating "repulsion.") And so usually when some of that's around and say someone is really uncomfortable with the macho crowd I always say "Well I'd have sex with Antonio Banderas." (Laughs) Cause I think the man's attractive. Doesn't mean I want to become a gay man and go live with him. And women can deal with that for the most part. "Oh, she's so pretty. Oh, she's so pretty." And it's just one more step. 'Oh, it's so pretty.'

Don described his girlfriend:

Well now my girlfriend is bisexual. She claims she's bisexual. And I say 'claims' to because she had, like I think one lesbian experience that was very meaningful to her and hasn't gone back to it really. So when I say 'claims' to I'm not saying that she's not or anything. I'm just saying that she would probably experiment more with it if it was something that she was into.

Don also suggested that some previous bisexuals are now lesbian because of the change in acceptance and chicness:

And in terms of lesbians, I mean I know a lot of people that are bisexual. And you have to kind of be careful in that these days because I think a lot of those people were bisexual before the "je ne se quoi" of it all. You know because it was in vogue or whatever.

Frank was asked to describe any lesbians that he knew. He replied by stating: Well as you say, lesbians, not bisexuals? And I said: No, that's fine, too. He then replied:

With bisexuality in women sometimes I see confusion, but I don't treat them any different. They're human beings. They're a person just like anybody else.

Pornography was certainly an issue involving ambiguity, but more directly this is where participants described "the fake lesbian." Paul stated:

I just think that the entire American perspective on homosexuality in general and lesbianism in particular is unenlightened, low brow. Once again if the average American has any knowledge of lesbianism it's that hot girl on girl, "girls gone wild stuff" that they see late night on TV as opposed to a couple of women who are social workers...It's divorced from reality and that's how I feel about it. Actually it angers me greatly.

Paul continued:

I was on the football team and pornography runs rampant and of course one of the favorite themes of men, heterosexual men is lesbian, or girl on girl, I wouldn't say it's lesbian, girl on girl pornography.....

I asked Paul if he could tell me the difference between the tw. He stated:

Well, I mean the women are not lesbians.

I asked him if he knew this while watching the videos. He replied:

Well I mean maybe I didn't know it then so much, but it's pretty obvious that they are being paid to do this so to some degree and at that time I didn't realize other things. But the main point of that would be that I view....this wasn't the same as when I went to the abortion rights rally in D.C. and saw one of the first times, I was 19 or 20, the first time I ever saw lesbian women together. "Oh no they're not these hot blond women."

Jay also stated:

Well there's also like eroticism. Like sort of sexy, seeing women together, ya know sort of like pornography, sort of can be sort of sexy like that too, but I think that's all staged, I don't think those are real lesbians.....(When asked if he knew the difference while viewing the video)..Yeah, I think I realized it as I saw it. Yeah, the whole pornography thing is sort of tongue and cheek, yeah I think it is sort of played up kind of cheap acting stuff.

Bill described his views of women in pornographic movies:

If you're getting paid to do something. They're doing a job I think. I would doubt if they are lesbians or not you know. I don't know if they're heroine addicts getting money so they can pump their habit.

Wil described women in pornographic movies:

They're doing it, they're still doing it for guys to watch you know so it's not real. It's not real.

Heteropatriarchy is certainly implicated in the participants' discussion of lesbians as ambiguous. Jackson (1998) referred to heteropatriarchy as "the ways in which

compulsory heterosexuality is implicated in the subordination of women” (p. 141). This may not appear as obvious, but as the participants revealed, they viewed gay men as more stable and committed to their lifestyle compared to lesbians or women experimenting with other women; therefore, heteropatriarchy is of issue. There is certainly consistency in the hierarchy offered under heteropatriarchy as related to viewing lesbians and women as less stable and ambiguous. This subordination of women certainly falls within the bounds of heteropatriarchy offered by Jackson. Clearly, gay men as “men” become part of this lattice of subordination of women as they are seen as more reliable and permanent in turn being seen a level above women and lesbians in this hierarchy.

Schellenberg, Hirt, & Sears (1999) revealed that men judge departures from the norm (in this case - homosexuality) more harshly due to the narrow socially constructed concepts of masculinity versus femininity. To clarify, because male roles are considered more narrowly defined than female roles, the authors suggest that this may contribute to heterosexual men judging lesbians (who may defy their constructed female role) more harshly. According to Schellenberg et al. (1999), departures from the norm in this case, lesbians and, in particular, their ambiguity in experimentation may have contributed to the more negative descriptions offered by the participants in comparison to gay men. It is also important to understand that the age bracket of the participants may lead itself to the perception that lesbianism is experimental because the participants may not be old enough to know long-term committed, stable lesbian relationships.

**The necessity of individuality and not generalizing.** The third sub-theme, “the necessity of individuality and not generalizing,” refers to participants explaining the need to refer to lesbians as individuals. When asked various questions, participants would often emphasize that they did not want to generalize and re-state that lesbians are individuals and, therefore, could not be described cumulatively. Often times, they would prefer describing someone they knew or knew through a friend or family member to make references. Although many may view this quest for individuality as positive, other queer theorists such as Butler (1990) may insist that examining individuals still leaves an “other.” For example, Jay stated when answering about similarities and differences among lesbians and straight people:

I mean it's, I don't know I think you, thinking about similarities I think you just sort have to take that on individual case basis cause you know they're people too.

Paul revealed the following when asked about different types of lesbians:

I wouldn't even say there's sorts, but many differences among each individual person.

James also had similar sentiments:

...I mean you know I guess when you are talking about social perceptions, at the same time you should be talking about clichés as everyone's individual...

He continued:

Well, I think clearly as individuals. And individuals who have a sexual preference, but it's a sexual preference that does not necessarily color how they're going to speak, what sort of career they're going to be interested in, what sort of past time they'll have a predilection for, whether or not they'll be more skilled than me with a hammer or a saw or something like that, like anyone you know, they're individuals.

Wil was also suggesting that it was important to focus on individuality when he answered the question related to his personal feelings regarding lesbians:

So there's not one lump sum image because when you said that I thought about twenty women at once. Different attitudes, different women.

Don discussed his issue with labeling individuals and indicated:

When I think of lesbians you know it's kind of like when you say what do you think of when you think of gay men? Or what do you think of when you think of Muslims? Or anything like that. I really - I'm a people person. And I really don't like putting labels on them. I don't want any labels put on me.

Bill noted:

...it's a personality thing. It's not that they're a lesbian and they're all up in your face cause that would be...It's just you know you have stronger personalities and you have people that are more laid-back. You have people that are artistic and people that are this and that's just kind of what I see as difference, but no there's no different types of lesbians...

**Where lesbians do or do not fit.** "Where lesbians do or do not fit" in the participants' lives refers to how heterosexual men specifically described their conceptualizations of lesbians. In other words, the participants described where lesbians might be situated in their worlds. Answers to several of the questions contributed to this sub-theme. In particular, they were asked to describe what it would be like to put themselves in the shoes of a lesbian and/or how they conceptualized lesbians and lesbian relationships.

Paul stated:

Women who have oriented themselves or prefer relationships with other women and basically go on with their lives. Hopefully, you know cause I just don't see what the big deal is so just go ahead with what you're thinking. It doesn't seem to me to be such a big deal that I even would try to cast any sort of..there's a



difference there, but the difference is more on them than it would be on me because they have to operate in my world.

Jay reflected back to his discussion of the 'lesbian marriage' he attended:

...two lesbians raising a kid that sort of makes me feel a little uncomfortable, but other than that I think if it's just lesbians together - just that's their preference and nobody else and they don't have kids or there's no other [externals] like that....If it's just them being together by themselves I think that's just in my way of thinking, just a normal expression of intimacy or togetherness or whatever you call it.

Harold described that his life was separate from a lesbian's life. He was twice removed in that first, he was not a woman and second, he was not a lesbian:

I guess I see them [as] very separate entities. Very lifestyle separate entities. And because a) they're women and b) they're women of a different sexual style than I have so that to me is like two levels of separation. Again....our paths will cross, but I think we'll probably have very different ideas about our social groups and things like that. Even though I've been around, I say "them" but again I think it's different. I think there's big differences whether its intentional or not about where one hangs out to where one even wants to work, to what one chooses as a career, to where one wants to live, you name it.

Wil stated:

..and for lesbians and gay men for that matter, they just look at someone who s' a member of the same sex and go "Wow." And why it's not normal in the sense of that's what the majority of us do. I think it's perfectly natural. So it fits in because it's just natural that some people are different.

James compared lesbians and gay men to heterosexuals in his description:

I have known that one of the things I've noticed in homosexual culture is sometimes fewer institutional limits.... I've known with gay men, less of an emphasis frequently on long term monogamy. That's with gay men. Although there is sometimes.... if one takes a lover outside of the relationship or has an experience outside the relationship then it's not necessarily threatening to the relationship.

James also stated earlier what he learned from his parents:

It was just some people like chocolate, some people like vanilla. So that's pretty much what it was.

For, Don, he described how his world might be without lesbians:

So to me lesbianism makes a piece of the pie. In terms of it goes along with a lot of other things to complete the whole. It's kind of a weird question because it's like if they're was no such thing as lesbianism, would I miss it? And I think I would. I think I would because I think that it does say that you know this is such a wide spectrum that we live in and people have choice....

Bill described where lesbians were in his world:

It's not that it's not in my world, but it's not that it doesn't matter. It's just there.

Chuck initially pointed off into the distance when asked where lesbians were situated in his world. I asked him to describe what it was like where he was pointing and he indicated:

Well it's like I guess I don't necessarily get involved with people that would be involved that way. To me in my mind you know really the relationship doesn't really make sense. You know considering just basic human anatomy. Not even bringing God into it. The Creator. Just basic human anatomy you know a guy has an 'outsie' and a girl has an 'insie.' They were made for each other and when they do that they make another human being. Well you know two of the same can't do that. So to me just out of human nature it's not meant to be.....They don't fit according to how they're made...

Conversely, Frank had this to say:

They do fit into my world. They function just like any other relationship or dysfunction just like any other relationship. There's caring, needing. Those things take place and are a part of the relationship. And it wouldn't be a relationship unless those things were there. Disagreements. Agreements. Sharing time with each other, that's how I see that I guess.....They fit in just like anybody else. I don't see any special classification or place that they would go. As equals.

This particular sub-theme would appear to be the overall answer to understanding heterosexual men's conceptualizations of lesbians and lesbian relationships. Although, it

would be simple to assume we have answered the question, I argue that the participants' conceptualizations involve much more. Just as it was acknowledged that this study appears to place men in the position to provide the "universal" on lesbians (Butler, 1990), it must also be noted that their conceptualization is also not provided "universally" within one answer.

It must be recognized that the participants offered a perspective that is confounded by the impact of presumptive heterosexuality, patriarchy, and hegemony. For example, Paul recognized that "lesbians have to operate in his world." Their perspective is not the "universal" and this sub-theme does not provide the "universal" of their conceptualization of lesbians and lesbian relationships. Instead, it is a piece of the puzzle; a puzzle which may never be completed and certainly not just within these interviews. Just as queer theory is not singular (Butler 1990) either is the conceptualization revealed through this study. A partial take or perspective has been offered by each. Their conceptualization was revealed throughout the entire interview and this specific sub-theme contributed to the overall picture.

### **Theme #3: Conceptualization by Comparison**

"Conceptualization by comparison" refers to the participants consistently using comparisons to others to explain their understanding of lesbians and lesbian relationships. The participants compared lesbians to bisexuals, gay men, and heterosexuals. They also utilized lesbian stereotypes and "the lesbian novelty" as well as lesbians the participants knew personally or through friends or family to further explain their conceptualizations. The participants' utilization of comparison to further explain their conceptualizations is

supported by Kimmel (1994). He stated, “For understanding what it means to be a man, men set themselves in opposition to others - racial minorities, sexual minorities, and above all, women” (p. 120). The use of comparison or dualism by the participants in this study is also a criticism by queer theorists. Queer theorists claim that many strategies utilized by gays and lesbians have relied heavily on dualism. Stein & Plummer (1996) offer the following examples of binaries: “male/female gender models, natural/artificial ontological systems, and essentialist/constructionist intellectual frameworks” (p. 134). Again, queer theory strives to distance itself from creating a category of “otherness.” The first example of dualist thinking offered by the participants involves comparing bisexuals with lesbians.

**Bisexuals.** “Bisexuals” is the first sub-theme and was mentioned by five of the nine participants. Bisexuality was not a part of the semi-structured interview, but typically emerged when participants would describe their personal beliefs regarding lesbians they ultimately reveal a multi-tiered layout that included bisexuals.

Harold, for example, expressed his views on bisexuality:

I think bisexual is, again, I think that’s even higher than someone that has just played around...I think again that’s still stronger than someone that just has experience.

James had much to offer on the topic of bisexuality when he indicated:

I find myself going back and forth. Personally my gut instinct says it’s a bunch of crap and says people need to get off the fence and commit to one side or the other. I find it’s chicness - it’s contemporary chicness to be pretentious in the extreme. And I find it personally a little threatening. And what I find threatening about it is that as a single guy who has a very difficult time finding someone to be in a relationship with, I can deal with lesbians because they’re not on the board.

They're out of the realm. It's like the elderly or something. It's like this is not someone that I really even need to be concerned with sexually.

James also detailed a conversation he had with a friend who dated the woman James also dated. The friend reminded James that because he was dating a bisexual, she had twice as many people to leave him for. James revealed the difficulty in having to "compete" with two sexes:

...it's like men I can sort of, kind of compete with but the old "Well no one knows how to please a woman more than a woman. Oh, we just know how to hold each other and we're more intuitive and more into each other and all of that." It's like well how the hell am I supposed to deal with that. I mean that's, I think that when many women say that, they don't consider how hurtful that can be because it really minimizes me and I think minimizes men and it's like "Well than what am I good for?" Or well then God dammit just become a lesbian and you know let us focus on women who are just by golly interested in men and that's it and kind of get out of the pool.

Don described the following when discussing differences between lesbians and straight people. He quickly switches from lesbians to bisexuals in his answer:

And in terms of lesbians, I mean I know a lot of people that are bisexual. And you have to kind of be careful in that these days because I think a lot of those people were bisexual before the "je ne se quoi" of it all.

When Chuck was asked to describe if he knew any lesbians, he discussed meeting a bisexual woman in a bar. Chuck then offered this regarding bisexuality:

Well, I guess that's people having their cake and eat[ing] it too. I don't know. You know it just kind of makes me wonder why they do that..... Well, I guess it would be like an addiction to sex and just trying to get as much as they can. And so having two partners of two different genders. You know they're reaching out. Those kinds of things.

I asked Frank to discuss any lesbians that he knew and he asked me to clarify if I meant lesbians or also bisexuals. I encouraged him to discuss both. He concisely stated:

With bisexuality in women sometimes I see confusion, but I don't treat them any different.

Although bisexuality was not specifically reviewed within the literature, it is often referred to collectively when speaking of lesbians and gay men (i.e LGB). However, Louderback & Whitley (1997) did specifically describe how "bisexuality" is often perceived in some pornographic scenes by heterosexual men perhaps to alleviate the belief that two women are actually desiring each other and not excluding the male. The authors revealed that sexual scenes depicting sex between women as erotic often include a man joining the scene, thus leading viewers to possibly perceive the sex between two women as a bisexual scenario rather than a lesbian scene (Louderback & Whitley, 1997).

**Gay men.** The second sub-theme is "gay men." Gay men were discussed by eight of the nine participants. Many of the participants viewed gay men as more "stable" than lesbians as they revealed that they may be more promiscuous, but once they start dating men, they do not typically go back and forth.

Paul explained the following to his mother after she acknowledged being friends with lesbians she met through the dog show circuit:

I said "Mom that's probably the norm as opposed to what you been acculturated with that these people are always moving from one to the other, that's just not...promiscuity is probably more among the gay men than lesbian women, but you know I think that you're seeing what's probably much more normal than you've suspected..."

Jay included gay men in his discussion of lesbians and marriage:

It may be sexist on my part, but I sort of think two gay men getting married maybe is more stable, relationship. You know there's the whole gay men being sort of promiscuous stereotype and I sort of think that's true, but maybe just this lesbian lady that I knew before I really think that two women getting married isn't the

stablest thing in the world. Yeah, so I actually did have a little different feeling about gay marriage for gays and lesbians.

Harold compared lesbians and gay men as he suggested:

My personal feelings are that I guess that I don't think lesbianism is as strong as say homosexuality in men. Because... I've seen girls sort of go in and out of it more easily. Whereas it seems like guys, guys seem to be in that lifestyle and in that framework more committed once they make that move over.....

Harold also said the following regarding parents dealing with their child's sexuality:

Like if I was a lesbian in high school, it seems like that would be easier than being a gay male in high school it seems to me. And even parental I think parents would be, cause I think parents would consider that a phase whereas a guy they would be like "Oh gosh, we have to change him or I can't believe he's chosen that path." Whereas I think parents would be more likely to consider it a phase [for lesbians].

Wil expressed similar sentiments regarding the difficulty in being a gay male:

Oddly enough I think lesbianism, this is going to sound weird, is easier than being a homosexual male. I don't think society doesn't quite give you the boot.

Don added his view on lesbians in the media:

With the gay guys that I know, a lot of them I have so much admiration for their courage, you know and the same is very true with lesbianism.

Milham, Miquel, and Kellogg (1976) revealed six independent sets of attitudes that describe heterosexuals' reaction to homosexuality. Two of these were: a) preference for female over male homosexuals and, conversely, b) preference for male over female homosexuals. The participants in this study showed preference for gay men. Although it was not an interview question, the participants utilized gay men to further explain their conceptualizations of lesbians and lesbian relationships. Gay men were described as courageous, admirable, more stable, but also promiscuous. Lesbians were also described as courageous, but gay men were viewed as having a harder time in society. Lesbians

were not discussed in a hostile or contentious manner, but were more often discussed in terms of being unsure of their sexuality, in terms of pornography, and less stable than gay men. La Mar & Kite (1998) noted that gender role analysis leads to the prediction that heterosexual men would be especially condemning of gay men who violate the male gender role. Kite & Whitley (1996) and Herek (1988) also found that heterosexual men do respond particularly negatively toward gay men. The participants in this study certainly were not consistent with the previous studies, although this study did not specifically examine gay men.

Also, Herek & Capitano's (1999) study revealed that "heterosexual men tended to report more favorable attitudes toward lesbians when they evaluated lesbians independently from gay men"(i.e., when the lesbian items came first)(p.357). A more positive effect was expected according to Herek & Capitano's (1999) findings. The findings from this study, however, are not consistent with this prediction. Herek & Capitano's research also stated that "when questions about lesbians were implicitly associated with attitudes toward gay men (i.e., presented after the gay male items), ratings of lesbians were more negative" (p.357). Although there were no specific questions regarding gay men in this study, it is clear that when gay men were discussed in comparison to lesbians, lesbians were described more negatively than gay men.

**Heterosexuals.** The third sub-theme is "heterosexuals." All of the participants made comparisons to either themselves or heterosexual individuals to explain their conceptualizations of lesbians.

Paul described the difference between lesbians and heterosexuals:



Main difference and this is the one that really sticks out in my mind is that a lesbian person has to live as a lesbian in a heterosexual world. Whereas a heterosexual just lives in the world.

Paul also compared lesbians to a relationship between a man and a woman:

A lesbian relationship is a woman to woman relationship. A male to woman relationship, I mean there is already a vast difference especially with the way that. I just don't see lesbian women wanting to form sexual relationships in the same way as a male would. You know I am sure that there's all the different ways of lesbians to have sex with each other, but you know I just don't see them thinking about it in the same way. A woman thinking the way I think that's not what's happening. I don't see that....very different.

Finally, Paul compared a lesbian relationship which he knew personally with a heterosexual couple:

Come to find out they have very similar contentions within their relationships that a heterosexual couple would have, bills, you know, faithfulness, these different things, you know it isn't really that different...

Jay compared men and women as well as lesbians and women in order to explain lesbians:

I mean I think there are sex differences in men and women like sort of what they like and what's a turn-on for a man versus a woman, what men like to do and what women like to do, that's definitely a big difference. But I'm not sure when two lesbians get together I'm not sure how it works. I could sort of simulate by thinking how women are, just two together, but it's tough to, I don't really know.

Wil was asked what he thinks of when he thinks of lesbians and replied:

About the same thing I think of women...Different attitudes, different women.

While comparing lesbians with heterosexual men, he stated:

So obviously we both have the hormone spiking. We both something about the smell of the person or something has gotten pheromones up and there's something in the back of heads going "Cool go for it."

James also compared lesbians to heterosexual men such as himself:

Besides the fact that my sexuality has no social stigma attached to it, so I have no fear going around and being seen on the arm of a woman or something like that. And it's neither a political statement nor something I need to be afraid of. You know other than all of those things, I assume the same. We both find breasts and thighs and things like that attractive and you know and feminine facial features and stuff like that.

Don described an experience involving watching two teenage girls holding hands in the mall and compared it to a heterosexual couple:

I don't think it's something to be amused by. You have two people that love each other. There's two people that love each other (points). Is that funny? No, it's not cause it's a guy and a girl? So I don't think that it should on that side of the spectrum be any different, but on the other side I don't think that any special attention should be warranted to them because I really don't think that that's what the idea is.

Bill described watching "The Real World" on MTV and comparing it to his own relationship:

And I finally understood what it was all about because I looked at that and I thought wow that's what my girlfriend does to me and I love that. And I realized it wasn't a question of sex and it wasn't a question of this or intercourse, but it was a question of love.

Chuck compared a lesbian relationship to a heterosexual relationship and stated:

...probably go through all the jealous stuff. Probably a hundred times more than a heterosexual relationship cause it's like you know you can't get married so you're not really committed to each other.

Chuck also revealed this difference between heterosexual relationships and lesbian relationships when he stated:

Well in a heterosexual relationship you can have a real baby. In a lesbian relationship you know the women wouldn't be getting anywhere.

Frank replied to the question: What do you think of when you think of lesbians? with:

Usually well sometimes women that have been abused by men and abusive marriages and so forth.

He also compared lesbian relationships to heterosexual relationships:

Well like one partner likes to be the dominating partner. The other one likes to be a little bit more submissive I guess. Just like in any other. Like the man role and the woman role and...so sometimes you know it's very evident and sometime it's not.

When asked to put himself in the shoes of a lesbian, Frank compared male and female heterosexuals:

I would say it would be just like anybody else's life. But being female you'd probably think a little differently than what a male would think cause the body chemistry just plain and simple...I wouldn't know. I've never been a female.

Gamson (2000) spoke directly of the homo/hetero distinctions also described by these participants. The comparisons made between heterosexuality and homosexuality to describe their conceptualizations were abundant. All nine participants offered comparisons between themselves and lesbians or gay men. Queer theory examines the way this "homo/hetero distinction underpins all aspects of contemporary life" (Gamson, 2000, p. 354). This sub-theme is certainly consistent with the literature on queer theory. Queer theory recognizes the "homo/hetero" distinction and seeks to disengage from this without dictating the possibilities of gender and sexuality. It appears that within the participants' responses they had difficulty seeing sexuality and gender beyond the dualism of homosexuality and heterosexuality.

**Lesbian stereotypes and "The lesbian novelty."** Lesbian stereotypes refers to the many ways participants described lesbians. The participants compared lesbian stereotypes to each other to clarify their points. Each participant gave multiple examples

of different types of lesbians and four spoke specifically of stereotypes or clichés. “The lesbian novelty” was mentioned specifically by one participant, but four other participants described similar sentiments.

Paul offered the following types of lesbians:

Go to that abortion rights rally and you see a vast spectrum of lesbians on the landscape. From an incredible group of women that I met that rode motorcycles to “stepford” wife looking (laughs). That were actually much weirder than these crazy women with mullets riding around on their motorcycles you know who are really cool. I see it as there is definitely a continuum there and its foolish to try to say that you could ignore the small differences among all the different sorts....I wouldn’t even say there’s sorts, but many differences among each individual person.

Jay recognized the following lesbian stereotypes:

I guess I do have some stereotypes or whatever in my mind. But it’s sort of like the sort of butch sort of masculine women...Sort of short hair, sort of big. Big women, (Pause). Yeah, I see them out at concerts whatever. See women together that are sort of butch looking and that’s sort of one of the ideas I have in my head. And then also sort of a really like sort of feminine sort of I don’t know sort of weak, sort of weak, weak feminine really slender sort of ya know, just really feminine women, really feminine women when I think about lesbians sort of two extremes really....Oh, well like the little slender women that doesn’t eat meat and always wears really feminine outfits and sort of really not aggressive and timid and sort of stuff like that. That’s one. And then great, big, strong, “dykee” type, butch type....Well there’s also like eroticism. Like sort of sexy, seeing women together, sort of like pornography, sort of can be sort of sexy like that too, but I think that’s all staged, I don’t think those are real lesbians.

Harold described two types of lesbians and then added a third level to further explain:

I guess I think of two different types. I think of two images. I’ve dated girls that were bi before so. On the one hand I think of like sexual fantasy stuff and then on the other hand I think of lesbians that are more masculine...I guess there’s three levels. There’s another level of like lesbianism that I think I intertwine with feminism, like strong feminism. Not just right to vote kind of thing, but you know men suck kind of thing.

Harold elaborated on his description of types of lesbians:

I think there's lesbians that mirror traditional relationships. I think there's as in there's one that's the male and one is more female, more feminine. And so right there I think there's more feminine lesbians and more masculine lesbians. I think there's different degrees. Whether one is just in lifestyle versus, but this is such a grey area. Lifestyle versus someone that's almost like a political lesbian. Because of how you feel you get involved with all these things that are oriented with that lifestyle and everything to promote and to accept it....So I would say that there are more, yeah definitely there's a distinction between the more masculine, the more feminine and then bisexuality being something different again than someone I would consider a lesbian.

Wil described what he thought of when he thought of lesbians as:

...you've also got sort of like the quiet wallflower girl, and then you've got like the dynamic beautiful woman that every guy wants, but at the same time she's gay and you know but the same time she still wears the hip dresses and everything. So I mean, and then you know they're attitudes, of course I guess since I know a lot of people that helped me to form you know, so you know you got the attitude of and it doesn't matter what the appearance is you've got some attitudes of "Well I'm gay and you don't like me because of that and I'm going to prove to you how much better I am." And it's like "Whoa back off." And then you've got just normal people and then you've got of course the people who are trying to deal with the society stuff so they're very shy about it. So there's not one lump sum image because when you said that I thought about 20 women at once. (laughs) Different attitudes, different women.....I think you've got sort of the butch, sort of macho, then the wallflower and then just the cool girls....

James detailed the following 'clichés' that came to mind when asked what he thought of when he thought of lesbians:

Oh, well I mean the first and most amusingly ultra-cliché would be like Mole McHenry in the movie "Female Trouble" by John Waters. Ok, well Mole. You know, your classic John Waters lesbian. You know two fisted, tool belt wearing kind of cliché. Other clichés, cause I mean you know I guess when you are talking about social perceptions, at the same time you should be talking about clichés as everyone's individual, but other clichés I think. Humorless springs to mind. I've worked with a lot of lesbians and by golly more than one has been humorless. Not all and certainly when I stop and think about it, I've worked with a lot of humorless straight women also. Disdainful of, frequently disdainful of feminizing appearance elements. No make-up. Sort of aggressively plain. Just as there is a homosexual male voice that sometimes we think of as being kind of Liberace-esque. There can be a female lesbian voice, which frequently when I

hear female announcers on public radio that's what I hear. It's usually very very flat and dry and expressionless (imitates voice). And I find myself sitting there thinking "Oh, lesbian." For better or worse and then you hear about the butch lez and then the lipstick lez and the differences and so on and so forth. Usually politically left-wing. I mean those are some of the things that, you know a lot of the clichés that immediately spring to mind.

When asked about types of lesbians, James offered the following:

I think in some ways it's like snowflakes, you know I mean no two people are going to be alike, but in terms of the clichés. You get sort of the butch lesbian, you get the lipstick lesbian, you get the hippie lesbian, in other words she kind of falls in the Lillith Fair category, and you get probably in terms of clichés probably overlaps and I'm sure people who don't fit into any of those categories.

Don described an episode of "Saturday Night Live" that included types of lesbians:

There was a really funny "Saturday Night Live" sketch that I saw one time. The idea was it was these guys and they were around like a genies lamp kind of thing and they could have anything they want to they decided "Well, let's have two lesbians make love together right here in front of us." And I don't know if you saw this, but it ended up being two very hippy you know kind of 50 plus age you know more of the intelligent lesbian or whatever instead of you know your blonde dumb pseudo lesbian. And they were quite grossed out by it. And I thought you know that's an interesting thing. It really hit me hard. It's like well so lesbianism itself has to be defined by who is involved.

Bill did not see lesbians in the same way as the other participants as he stated:

There's different types of personalities, but there's not different types of lesbians.

Chuck did recognize types of lesbian relationships and suggested:

I've seen couples where you have one dressed like a man totally. Including hiding her upper part (moves his hands to indicate wrapping your chest to make it flat). You know trying to look flat chested like a real man. Haircut like a real man. Carrying a wallet with a chain like a guy. And then you have this beautiful lady that she's with. And then you have the two beautifuls that are together. Then the two fat and uglies that are together. And so obviously there must be different kinds of lesbian relationships.

Frank described the following types of lesbians:

Some are more dominating than the others in their relationships or equal. Just like any other relationship. But yeah there is differences. They're pretty noticeable.....Well like one partner likes to be the dominating partner. The other one likes to be a little bit more submissive I guess. Just like in any other. Like the man role and the woman role and...so sometimes you know it's very evident and sometime it's not.

“The Lesbian Novelty” refers to participants describing lesbians as special or on a different level in terms of how they should be treated by society. The idea of a novelty was introduced by Don as he referred to lesbians receiving extra appreciation due to their uniqueness. Novelty also includes women or lesbians involved because it was considered “in vogue.”

Don also detailed his view of “the lesbian novelty.”

I don't think that lesbians are necessarily looked at as being sinful or being bad, but I think they are looked at still to this day by a lot of people just from what I've seen as a novelty. And I mean as you've seen from my other answers I completely disagree with that but I think that's what's going on. I think it still is a novelty to a lot of people..... I don't personally think it's a novelty. I don't think it's something to be amused by.....Now unfortunately this becomes a catch 22 because I think that what you've got here is you have to a certain extent because of the one side that people think it's a novelty or whatever, then lesbians do deserve a little bit of extra appreciation because they live in that society....I think that there should be an equality straight across the board. So it's like until the whole idea of it being a novelty or it being different or obscure or whatever is eradicated than I don't think the other side of let's give them special attention and put them on a pedestal, you know.

Harold discussed “the lesbian novelty” in a different way:

I think what I would consider a lesbian - I think they get sort of a bad rap. Because I know I think I probably carry some of that too. Because of the part time woman having sex with another woman they sort of get elevated.

Wil also described a similar view of lesbians receiving special treatment due to their novel status:

Oddly enough I think lesbianism, this is going to sound weird, is easier than being a homosexual male. I don't think....society doesn't quite give you the boot. I think like traditionally you know you think of a harem, you think "Oh girls kinda like each other too." You know and no one seems to have a problem with it.

Stereotypes, clichés, and types of lesbians were abundantly described by the participants. Bryant & McElroy (1997) note that homophobic attitudes are often fueled by misinformation and longstanding stereotypes of homosexuals. It would not be fair to label the participants as homophobic solely based on their description of stereotypes and clichés. Wolf-Wendel, Toma, & Morpew, (2001) offer this perspective of stereotypes. American society has chosen to differentiate and label people based on whether they initiate sex with same or different sex partners, and endow these distinctions with stereotypes that may or may not be salient to those being labeled, either now or in the future. Evidently, stereotypes often have some "truth" to them and those offered by the participants were based on their personal experiences.

"The lesbian novelty" did not emerge through the literature review for this study. The chicness and trend in lesbianism or bisexuality or more specifically sex between two "femme" women cannot be overlooked. James referred to the "Lillith Fair" concert period as when it became popular or "trendy" to engage in a more relaxed, experimental, freedom in sexuality. Specifically he stated: "when all of that bi-chic and lesbian chic really started to hit [was] in the 90's." **J 7:220**

**Lesbians heterosexual men know personally.** The fourth sub-theme is "lesbians heterosexual men know personally." Eight of the nine participants described relationships with lesbians or gay men. All of the participants indicated that they have



known at least one lesbian, but may not have had a significant relationship. The participants compared lesbians they knew with other lesbians or lesbians in general to clarify their points.

Paul detailed his relationship with a woman he referred to as his “aunt” although she was not related:

...as far as the performance of female to female that was probably something I really didn't even think about or know about till I got to college, I just didn't know,....didn't realize that my Aunt Debbie was a little bit like you know (laughs). I didn't really know back then, “Oh she has a wood shop” you know I didn't understand, she's just cool....like I said there was Aunt Debbie out there, she wasn't obviously seen as perverse, just different.

Jay described dating a woman that eventually started dating other women:

Actually one women that I dated actually was, we sort of dated it was actually when I was first in grad school here and I was really attracted to her and she was pretty attracted to me I think. It was that whole sort of twenty something sort of stuff. But, it sort of was all over after awhile and she was after that involved with a women, in a lesbian relationship..I always thought she was sort of flaky and sort of weird. So it didn't really, it didn't, it didn't hurt my feelings really. But I just sort of chalked it up to her being sort of confused and not really sure about much of anything. Then later on it was like, these are juicy details, it was like a couple, two years later I happened to run into her again one time and she was like. There was another woman I was interested in that was her friend and she was really excited about setting up a little threesome with that other woman and me. And that actually never worked out. So I sort of chalked the whole thing up to her being a little nutty, a little little unstable.

Harold also indicated dating women that have been with other women:

I've dated girls that were bi before so.... I never really thought of that (finding two women together as attractive) really very much until I dated somebody who sort of liked women. Although that never came about so I don't have any great juicy stuff for this (laughs) but we tried. It just never worked out. But I think it was when I went out with her and how she would mention things about people and share some stories that she had. I think that's when I really became thinking about it, like very aware of it.

James also dated a woman who dated women. The difference is that James was dating this woman as she was dating another woman:

One in particular was very peculiar. She was, I mean on the surface perfectly effeminate. She didn't necessarily wear make-up. Her hair was a little shorter than normal, but very feminine clothing and did not behave in a butch manner at all. I asked her out and we actually went out a couple of times before she told me she was a lesbian and living with a woman. And she had me, I was very important to her for a brief period of time. And you know whenever she had social functions, she would take me with her. And frankly I didn't know if I was a "beard" or what. Cause I don't think so because then you'd ask her and she'd be pretty open about it. Her lover was some sort of recreational therapy or something like that and was at kid shelters usually very late at night and so I would be over and while there was no physical contact or anything, a lot of herbal tea drinking, which you know there you go another cliché, that was about it. And she was very ascetic in the way we think of, in the way the cliché goes of politically correct lesbians, no sugar, no caffeine, no alcohol. Yeah she's like a diet drink. You know she was very, she was very pleasant. Not the most exciting women in the world and I hung out with her largely because I didn't really have anything better to do. I mean I knew romantically this wasn't going to go anywhere. But the same time she would talk about how she missed male intimacy. And how she tried to describe it was male physical contact and just being held and so on and so forth. And I told her I'd be willing to do it. She wouldn't need to worry necessarily about anything inappropriate happening. And it never came up. The opportunity..and in some ways I think now it would have been inappropriate not because of her being a lesbian, but because she was living with someone else, in the relationship with someone else. I think there was something fishy going on. And the funny thing is she just stopped calling me after all this, sort of like we just kind of drifted apart. And as far as I know she remained in her relationship with Jo, but 6, 7, 8 months later I ran into her in the bar of a restaurant drinking an alcoholic drink, a sugary one at that, with some other guy. White, clean cut, John Cusack lookin, you know another just kinda short dark haired guy. So I don't know if she has some sort of serial issue going on or what but yeah that was my relationship with her.

Don too described his girlfriend as bisexual and then explained:

Well now my girlfriend is bisexual. She claims she's bisexual. And I say claims to because she had, like I think one lesbian experience that was very meaningful to her and hasn't gone back to it really. So when I say claims to I'm not saying that she's not or anything. I'm just saying that she would probably experiment more with it if it was something that she was into.

Wil details a relationship with a lesbian he met in highschool:

One I know I went to high school with and well she's normal. (laughs) Well I kind of always joked with her that I knew cause she liked Emily Dickinson. But yeah in highschool Jen was sort of...I don't know it was like she didn't care about the girly things like in other words like primping and boys liking you. She ended up being valedictorian or salutatorian of the class. She was very serious and not that means that she is a lesbian, but I mean I don't know. There was something there where she didn't care about the whole social structure and part of it could be that she's too cool for the social structure, but it's like there's something. There's something more to it and then of course she goes off to college and we talk sometimes. She came back...after awhile which was kind of rough on her cause you know you get back [here] and you know I don't think it's that repressive. I can see where people can get that. Sometimes I think there's a repression around [here] if you walk right into it, but if you just don't go out of your way to find it people go "Oh, ok."

Bill described his experience of working with lesbians:

...I found them to be great people to converse with and have conversations with. Just generally speaking they are strong personality people so you know where you stand with them and I'm the kind of person that I don't hold back and I'll say whatever I want and you know somebody who is firm in their convictions won't have any problems with you being firm in yours.

Chuck did not know any lesbians personally, but described meeting a bisexual woman in a bar:

Well actually I talked to a bisexual lady. And she was open about it and kind of an interesting lady. I guess she was like 24-25 years old. Really pretty. Really talented in a lot of ways. Used drugs and alcohol on a regular basis. Probably smoked cigarettes. So I haven't been around her when she was with somebody or anything like that...I was talking to her and getting to know her and stuff and she openly admitted that and I realized "Oh, ok. You know I don't need to be talking to her."

Frank offered his experience while growing up and knowing a lesbian:

Just friendship. In fact there's some lesbians that have been fairly good role models for me when I was younger...Janet I've known for about 17 -18 years.....She was an aunt of a friend of mine and she was just an all around good

person. I mean I liked being around her. She had her girlfriends and they all carried on just like anybody else.

Milham, Miquel, & Kellog (1976) found that “previous experience with a homosexual of either sex led to a less negative characterization of both male and female homosexuals” (p.9) Eight of the nine participants reported having positive experiences or friendships with gay men and/or lesbians. Herek (1988) also revealed that past interactions with lesbians and gay men contributed to heterosexuals having more positive attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. The participants reflected on numerous past interactions with lesbians and gay men that contributed to their overall conceptualization. The one participant that did not report knowing any gay men or lesbian friendships, acquaintances, or relationships had a more negative perception of lesbians in comparison to other participants.

#### **Theme #4: Conceptualization Via Struggle**

The fourth theme “conceptualization via struggle and contradiction” refers to the participants’ spoken battle and drive to make sense of lesbians and lesbian relationships. The participants struggled with ideas of ambiguity surrounding lesbians in terms of “being versus is.” In other words, the participants wavered back and forth with their descriptions of what a lesbian was or was not. They also struggled with being liberal minded. There was a sense that they believed they were supposed to be open minded and liberal, but at times they pointed out that they staggered away. The participants also used numerous ways to describe lesbians in terms of language. They did not consistently use the same term to indicate that they were speaking about a lesbian or lesbian relationship.

They struggled with terms or word usage while describing their conceptualizations of lesbians. The participants also attempted to use society as a means to gauge how they should feel regarding lesbians and lesbian relationships. To clarify, five participants linked lesbians to other minority groups or social justice issues in order to clarify how lesbians should be treated by society.

**Being versus is - experimentation does not equal lesbian.** The first sub-theme “being versus is - experimentation does not equal lesbian” refers to the participants struggling to determine if the women they know who have been with other women are or are not lesbians. This emerged in three interviews and occurred more than once in each. The participants describe experimentation and experience.

Harold indicated:

...like a lesbian experience but I don't think of lesbianism as an experimental thing. I think if someone thought about it or shows, or has consistently done that then I think I would consider them a lesbian.....I think bisexual is, again, I think that's even higher than someone that has just played around. Although she (ex-girlfriend) might have been bisexual, but I'm not sure. I think again that's still stronger than someone that just has experience.

Harold also indicated the following regarding the issue of “being” a lesbian or wavering in and out between heterosexuality and lesbianism:

I've seen girls sort of go in and out of it more easily. Whereas it seems like guys, guys seem to be in that lifestyle and in that framework more committed once they make that move over.

James described a conversation with a friend regarding dating the same woman:

And he had dated, before I did, a woman I was with for about three years who had been bisexual or had bisexual experiences and so on and so forth...

James also described how having an “experience” may not actually threaten a

relationship:

Although there is sometimes, or if one takes a lover outside of the relationship or has an experience outside the relationship then it's not necessarily threatening to the relationship.

Don also indicated dating a woman that may or may not be bisexual:

She claims she's bisexual. And I say claims to because she had, like I think one lesbian experience that was very meaningful to her and hasn't gone back to it really. So when I say claims to I'm not saying that she's not or anything. I'm just saying that she would probably experiment more with it if it was something that she was into.

Wil offered the following:

There's girls out there that find girls attractive, but not really want to have a lesbian lifestyle.

The participants used words such as experience and experimentation in their answers. Queer theory calls for the examination of language and for Butler (1990), language is seen as a "performative twist that conceals the fact that 'being' a sex or a gender is fundamentally impossible"(p. 25). The language used by the participants demonstrates their struggle in determining who is a lesbian or who is not a lesbian. Queer theory shows that language cannot truly represent gender and this is also extended to include sexuality. The participants attempted to define or categorize who lesbians were based on performance or sexual (in)activity.

Rubin (1997) described that sex between two women would be expected to be considered a more taboo subject to men. She suggested that sex is supposed to be controlled by the man according to current society hegemonic ideologies. The ambiguity in experimentation described by the participants takes power away from the heterosexual

male, but also still allows for them to interpret two women being together simply out of sexual gratification for the man. For example, bisexuality and ambiguity for James, were considered annoying and he called for women to make up their minds and “get off the fence.” J 7:186

**“I am open minded or am I?” - The influence of the seventies.** The second sub-theme “I am open minded or am I? - The influence of the seventies” refers to the participants’ struggle with being raised in the seventies or “hippie” generation and seeking to be liberal minded today as a result. This struggle occurred for five participants. It appeared that although they aimed to be open-minded they still found themselves thinking otherwise. Many of them noted this distinction. For some, the struggle existed in convincing themselves or me that they were in fact open-minded. This came through repetition. This sub-theme emerged through the analysis and was not part of the literature review.

Don was raised in a very strict Baptist home and mentioned repeatedly that he fought against his parent’s teachings to be open-minded:

I hope I’m not too open-minded for your research.....Well, now as I told you I’m a very open-minded person.....I love being with open minded people....It really opened my mind so much...in terms of I’m a very open minded person.....like I said I hope I’m not too open-minded.

Harold offered:

I try to have a really open mind. I know I lean towards some traditionalism....I think innately, but I’m pretty open about that in general...I’m pretty liberal minded, but I feel like they (some lesbians) might be very very left wing about like business decisions and things like that.

Wil described the effect the media had on his push to be open-minded:

“Oh be open minded. Be cool about it” you know?.....So in a way while it did help the open mindedness it really, it absolutely had no influence on it being a normal healthy thing...

Wil also described his religious influence as:

So I'm more on that side of things. I guess what you call the squishy liberal religions for a descriptive term.

When asked about the process of the interview questions, Bill stated:

I don't know..I tend to have a liberal viewpoint on things I think... but they weren't at all offensive or they were just questions that some people could take and some would be like real offended by and be like how could you ask that?

Frank described himself below initially and then strayed as he concluded:

(Initially) More conservative...a little bit liberal too sometimes.

**Language.** The third sub-theme “language” refers to the variation in word usage the participants chose to describe lesbians and lesbian relationships. These examples differ from types of lesbians in that they can be used in place of the word lesbian. In other words, they were not meant to be descriptive, but simply used in place of saying “lesbian.”

Paul offered the following examples throughout his interview:

girl on girl, “girls gone wild stuff” .....women who like women....performance of female to female....

Jay stated:

women together....some sort of line they could've crossed and it might have turned into some sort of lesbianism

Harold revealed these examples:



alternative lifestyle...different orientation.... people lean this way, people lean other ways... part time woman having sex with another woman....decided to be different...really different social lifestyles....sexual preference or whatever.

James used one way to describe what he thinks of when he thinks of lesbians:

Women who like women.

Chuck stated the following in place of the term lesbian:

I think of two women that are attracted to each other for many reasons...they get together with another woman

Don explained his meaning of orientation:

...I meet people of all genders and all of sexual preferences or orientations and of all, which I believe orientation is much more true than preference, but you know I meet people of all different kinds of things.

Queer theory emphasizes the importance of language. Butler (1990) states: “The power of language to work on bodies is both the cause of sexual oppression and the way beyond that oppression” (p. 148). The language of the participants is heteronormative. Speaking as heterosexual men and repeatedly comparing lesbians to heterosexuals, creates an “other” and classifies as heteronormative. The participants struggled to find a consistent term or phrase to describe lesbians. Harold’s words represent the difficulty and perhaps frustration in finding the right ter- after many other phrases, he stated: “sexual preference or whatever.” **H 16:551**

**Social context as a gauge.** The fourth sub-theme “social context as a gauge” refers to participants describing how lesbians should be treated by society. Issues of race, religion, and class were used as a guide to base how they felt regarding lesbians. The

participants made comparisons to minorities and often referred to society's collective beliefs to replace their own.

For example, Jay stated:

It would be nice if everybody had respectful treatment. That would be the ideal world. We'd all treat each other with respect regardless of race or age or sexual orientation, but I think a question like that is actually impossible to answer because it would involve me knowing what's best for society and I don't know. Me trying to tell other people what to do is not right.

Harold indicated similar sentiments by including other minorities in his description of what it would be like to be a lesbian:

And I think that's lesbians and anybody of alternative or minorities too. I think the same problems would arise. The same kinds of problems would arise...

Wil described an experience his lesbian friend was having with her mother who was not accepting of her lifestyle:

It's sort of I don't know if you've seen the movie "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," but Hepburn and Tracy are all wonderfully liberal until their daughter brings home a black man and they're like "Oh."

He also associated being a lesbians with being black when he explained his definition of acceptance:

It's kind of like yeah I accept you if you're black, but every five minutes I'm going "Hey, look there's a black guy. Hey, he's a black guy. There's a black guy." That's not acceptance. That's saying, that's pretending to be acceptance. So whenever you go "Yeah, that's Ted. It's my friend. He works for BellSouth and you never mention 'Hey, that's my favorite black guy. He works for BellSouth. And there's Candy. She's a lesbian.'" Unless there's some reason you have to differentiate. You know like someone met Candice at a party and "Which one is that?" and "You know the lesbian the one with the girl." "Oh, yeah." But other than that I guess the removing of the titles when you think of someone is acceptance.

Wil also linked his beliefs to society as he stated:

They should be left alone to do whatever they want to do. It sort of becomes an idea of how should society treat anybody. I think they have a right to what religion they want. I think they have a right to whoever they want to be in love with.

Don also attached lesbians to other issues such as race and religion:

So from that point on - from about 15 on I really never looked at anybody again, not just in terms of sexual preferences or sexuality, but also in terms of color, in terms of race, in terms of religious beliefs and everything. It really opened my mind so much because I realized we're all in this together. So I would say that while I had a very straight forward kind of teaching in terms of sexuality and my dad never came out, my parents as strong as they were, never came out and said to me it's wrong to be gay. They never said that. They never said that. And they never said that it's wrong to be of a different race. Or that it's wrong for a white person to marry a black person. They never said anything like that. So, which coming from a Falwell camp is amazing because you know. You know, my God, I mean that guy is just (sighs).

When asked what he thinks about when he thinks of lesbians Don stated:

When I think of lesbians you know it's kind of like when you say what do you think of when you think of gay men? Or what do you think of when you think of Muslims? Or anything like that....So I don't really, on one hand I know that certain people, especially when you're considered a minority, like let's say an African-American. I know that a lot of times they will grasp onto that title because it defines them and because they feel that in one way or another they're kind of hell down. And so for them if they need to grasp onto that to have some sort of meaning I don't begrudge them that at all.

When asked what he thought of when he thought of lesbians Bill stated:

You know if you had said somebody that was a lesbian and I knew I would think of what I thought of that person. You know a blanket term like that it doesn't..it's like saying Black. You know using Blacks or Hispanics.

He also related his view to society's:

That's just how American society is but the people that are going to wave it in your face are generally I think that they're going overboard. It's like Faracan would be another example. You know here's a guy that you know I'm fine with whatever you want to believe, but don't jump up in my face and give it to me...

Seidman (1996) suggested that queer theory does not promote the studying of homosexuality as a minority. Conversely, five participants compared lesbians to other minorities when responding to how lesbians should be treated by society. It is clear that using society's view as a gauge in terms of how lesbians should be treated takes the pressure off of the participants. By comparing lesbians to other minorities, the participants were able to describe lesbians as a group. Often times, there was a push toward individuality as seen in the sub-theme "The necessity of individuality and not generalizing." Occasionally, the participants preferred speaking about a particular lesbian they know or know through someone instead of generalizing. However, when the lesbians were discussed collectively they were mostly compared to other minorities, but also to heterosexuals. This is also supported by Kimmel (1994) as he stated: "For understanding what it means to be a man, men set themselves in opposition to others - racial minorities, sexual minorities, and above all, women" (p. 120).

## **Summary**

This study consisted of nine participants. Long-interviews were conducted to explore heterosexual men's conceptualizations of lesbians and lesbian relationships. Four major themes emerged through the interviews: The Road to Conceptualization, Beliefs Regarding Lesbians and Lesbian Relationships, Conceptualization By Comparison, and Conceptualization Via Struggle. Sub-themes were also identified and correspond with the four major themes.

The interviews revealed that the conceptualization is a process and cannot be summarized in one answer. The entire interview process contributed to the

conceptualization of lesbians and lesbian relationships by heterosexual men. This conceptualization is not complete and is not represented in its entirety within this research. The four major themes and sub-themes are representative of the participants' responses. The order of themes and sub-themes does not necessarily indicate a chronological time line. Although the first theme, "The road to conceptualization" obviously occurred from childhood to present day this does not indicate that the three remaining themes emerged in any specific order. The themes and sub-themes did not occur for all participants at the same time or in the same order. Most themes and sub-themes were not the consensus of all of the participants and must be noted as such. The diversity within the answers compliments the idea that conceptualization is not singular and a process that may vary from individual to individual.

## Chapter Five

### Summary, Conclusions, And Recommendations

*“Conceptualization of lesbians would be....An overall one would be.....there’s a difference there, but the difference is more on them than it would be on me because they have to operate in my world.”*

(Paul, Study Participant, 10:299)

The purpose of this research was to examine the conceptualization of lesbians and lesbian relationships by white, heterosexual, single, 25-32 year old men with college experience, and, to also examine the role socialization plays in this conceptualization. Following is a summary, conclusions based on the research, and recommendations involving future studies.

#### **Summary**

Through this research, a partial take was obtained of nine heterosexual men’s conceptualizations of lesbians and lesbian relationships. Just as queer theory is not singular (Butler 1990), neither are the conceptualizations revealed through this study. It must be emphasized that this study is in no way representative of the view heterosexual men have of lesbians and lesbian relationships. Although there was a specific question regarding the participants’ conceptualizations of lesbians and lesbian relationships within the interview, this by no means answers nor completes the puzzle. Instead, it is a piece of a complicated puzzle that cannot be fully actualized within one research endeavor or potentially ever. The participants offered their experiences and beliefs as testament to

understanding how they conceptualize lesbians and lesbian relationships. Each interview in its entirety contributed to the partial take of conceptualization offered here.

Queer theory served as the theoretical frame for this study and allowed for the examination of lesbians away from the category of “other.” According to Stein & Plummer (1996), queer theory normalizes or centralizes homosexuality and makes heterosexuality deviant. This in turn, creates a subject and this study clearly placed lesbians in the category of subject. However, many queer theorists including Butler (1990) would not call for making lesbians the subject, but would rather a call for distancing from binaries and a view of sexuality without boundaries.

Queer theory also views a lack of knowing as part of knowledge itself. This pertained particularly to Bill and Frank. As an example, aside from the stereotype that heterosexual men find lesbians erotic, there are also those who simply do not think about lesbians much or at all. Bill and Frank both knew lesbians at one time or currently and simply stated and re-stated that they were equal to everyone else. For Bill and Frank, they did not have much more to say surrounding lesbians. For these two participants, lesbians exist in the same place as anyone who is either a minority or unfamiliar to Frank and Bill. They both felt lesbians should have every right afforded to them as anyone else and that it was not for them to say otherwise. Bill and Frank often responded to questions with “I don’t know” and queer theory includes this as part of what they know. Bill and Frank contribute to heterosexual men’s conceptualizations of lesbians by providing their perspectives.

Queer theory also focuses heavily on language. This study utilized heterosexual men as participants and in turn, much if not all, of the language can be described as heteronormative. The sub-theme that focused on comparing lesbians to heterosexuals was the most abundant in terms of examples. The participants consistently referred to themselves or other heterosexuals to make comparisons. They generally viewed themselves as the norm and at times stated this specifically. Paul stated that he was taught that “heterosexuality was the normal relationship.” **P 5:136**

The participants described what they were taught regarding gender roles, sexuality, and homosexuality while growing up. The majority of the participants were from divorced families or raised by a single parent. Participants described being raised in traditional households as well as growing up during the “hippie” generation. Participants who acknowledged the “hippie” influence consistently described a need to be “open-minded.” All nine participants revealed hearing derogatory comments focusing on homosexuals in their childhoods. Nearly every participant described these incidents surrounding athletics and “locker room talk.” Overall, participants expressed their awareness of knowing what homosexuality was during childhood, although they never had a formal education on homosexuality. There was one participant who had classes on sexuality and homosexuality through his church. Many participants felt they could ask their parents about homosexuality, but others such as Bill described it as a “taboo subject” or had the understanding such as Paul, that it was simply something he was never to do.



Seven participants discussed the influence of pornography and/or *Playboy* on their conceptualizations of lesbians and lesbian relationships. Most participants acknowledged a difference between the women in pornographic films or magazines and “real” lesbians. It was also interesting that some revealed that had they not been introduced to pornography or the sentiment that two women having sex together was attractive; they may have not recognized it on their own. In other words, many participants acknowledged the powerful influence of the media and their friends in viewing sex between two women as erotic.

It is necessary to clarify that when participants spoke of “sex between two women” it was typically assumed that the women were “femme” women (as in pornography). Don provided a wonderful example in a “Saturday Night Live” skit that depicts a group of fraternity brothers wishing to see “real lesbian love.” They get their wish and two stereotypically butch women appear and begin to make love in front of the fraternity brothers. The scene is laced with stereotypes of both lesbians and fraternity brothers. The fraternity brothers are significantly repulsed by the sight of the two lesbians. As the fraternity brothers argue and realize that they asked for “**real**” lesbian lovers and not “hot, Asian lesbians with long red fingernails,” they beg for the genie to re-appear. A genie appears and informs them that the lesbians will not disappear until one of the men gets pleasure from witnessing the lesbians together. Following a slew of clichés the lesbians disappear. The fraternity brothers are confused as they could not imagine how any man could find pleasure in watching “real” lesbians. The scene ends as one brother admits “Hey man, you know me...I love me the women.”

When Don finished his description of the scene, he concluded: “It really hit me hard. It’s like well...so lesbianism itself has to be defined by who is involved.” **D 10:348**

The interview questions in this research did not specify that the participants distinguish between stereotypically “butch” or “femme “ lesbians. Through analysis as well as the literature review, it emerged that it is rarely specified as to who (butch or femme lesbians) the participants are discussing when they speak about lesbians. Studies such as Kite & Whitley (1996) and Herek (1988) failed to distinguish between “types” of lesbians. When these studies and others present results of heterosexual men being favorable toward lesbians it is very possible that the participants are speaking about “femme” lesbians. This should be investigated in the future.

Interestingly, as I searched for the video of “Saturday Night Live” on the internet, I found an article by a Jill Rafson (2000), a writer for *The Johns Hopkins News-Letter*. Rafson wrote an article about the “Saturday Night Live” scene and offered her opinion stating: “The guys are confused until they notice that one guy who got off on the ‘icky’ lesbians was what? That’s right - he was the one person wearing a Hopkins T-shirt. Now what the hell does that mean?”(p. 2). Rafson was unhappy with the fact that the one character in the scene who enjoyed watching the lesbians was wearing a t-shirt from her school. Rafson’s description of the “real” lesbians as “icky” was consistent with one participant’s view. Chuck was asked if he thought there were types of lesbians and he responded with three types. He clarifies the distinction between “real” lesbians (butch) and “fake” lesbians (femme) in the following:

I've seen couples where you have one dressed like a man totally. Including hiding her upper part (moves his hands to indicate wrapping your chest to make it flat). You know trying to look flat chested like a real man. Haircut like a real man. Carrying a wallet with a chain like a guy. And then you have this beautiful lady that she's with. And then you have the two beautifuls that are together. Then the two fat and uglies that are together.

It seems safe to assume that Chuck's "two beautifuls" are "fake" lesbians while the others, specifically, the "two fat and uglies" are "real" lesbians. Eight of the nine participants were generally consistent in their conceptualizations of lesbians. Specifically, they struggled to be "open-minded" or politically correct. They felt that lesbians had a place in society and should be treated as equals. More often than not they compared lesbians to other minorities in their efforts to explain how lesbians should be treated. They also described that "society" should be the gauge for how individuals should be treated and that it was not up to them to decide. Most participants noted that it would be ideal if lesbians could be treated just as everyone else.

Chuck was the one participant who deviated from the others. His views were strong and unwavering. He did not appear to struggle as much as the others in his conceptualization. He was not conflicted nor torn with his opinions. Chuck seemed open and did not appear to hold back his opinions in any way. His views remained consistent with what he was taught throughout childhood. The most obvious distinction between Chuck and the other participants was his lack of socialization with lesbians or gay men. The other eight participants described numerous incidents and relationships with lesbians, gay men, and/or bisexuals while Chuck described meeting a bisexual in a bar and instantly recognizing that she was not someone with whom he should be talking.

Socialization with lesbians, gay men, and/or bisexuals has been well documented as leading to positive outcomes regarding attitudes of heterosexuals toward homosexuals. For example, Simoni (1996) found that previous experience with lesbians and gay men tended to be rated high in his study. However, few students reported friendships with lesbians and gay men. Milham, Miquel, & Kellogg, (1976) also found that “previous experience (i.e. knowing) with a homosexual of either sex led to a less negative characterization of both male and female homosexuals” (p. 9). It would be difficult to characterize the attitudes of the participants as either positive or negative. That depends on each individual’s personal perception of what positive and negative might mean. Overall, the participants said more positive things than negative and indicated that they wanted to understand more about lesbians. They were generally very interested and eager to offer their conceptualizations to further this study’s primary goal.

Herek (1988) offers some insight into why this present study may have had a more positive outcome regarding heterosexual men’s conceptualizations of lesbians. Herek explains that heterosexual individuals are more likely to have tolerant attitudes if they belong to a liberal religious denomination or were not religious, if they endorse nontraditional views of gender and family, and if they had positive experiences with lesbians and gay men. Most of the participants belonged to a liberal religious denomination, but were not necessarily raised in one. Also, most endorsed nontraditional views of gender and family and as mentioned, eight of nine participants had positive previous experiences with lesbians and/or gay men.

Another important issue involves “performance.” When the participants described lesbians they consistently spoke of women with other women, whether experimenting or not, in terms of the sexual activity. Paul even described lesbians at one point as “the performance of female to female.” **P 3:80** Lesbians, in terms of what they *do*, appeared to be the focus of many participants’ answers. There were participants who described lesbians aside from sexual activity or performance, but they were not as typical as those who consistently described lesbians as primarily sexual entities.

Many of the participants had previous relationships with women who were either bisexual, lesbian, or experimented with other women. This directly led to the issue of ambiguity for the participants. Often times they would describe women “weaving in and out” or being less stable than gay men. This ambiguity was mirrored by some participants’ descriptions of women in general as untrustworthy, unpredictable, scary and confused, not to mention practically impossible to figure out. The participants also described women as versatile, flexible, and ever-changing as compared to men. For example, Wil described men compared to women as: “A soldier’s a soldier’s a soldier’s a soldier, a technician’s a technician. It’s like a woman can be a mother and then at the same time turn around and be how ever ruthless she has to be, be it business or whatever and then turn around and be motherly again.” **W 4:94** For many participants, seeing women as changing or unstable was translated to lesbians which lead to a feeling of ambiguity surrounding lesbians. This in addition to the participants describing lesbianism as “trendy” or “chic” particularly surrounding the early nineties and “The Lilith Fair” period, as well as describing the younger generation of girls as more willing and

embracing of sexual freedom, all contributed to a sense of ambiguity surrounding lesbians (both “real” and “fake”).

During the proposal defense, I discussed with my committee the issue of whether or not I should tell the participants that I was a lesbian. We decided as a group that it was not necessary to tell them, but that if I was asked, I should have a separate set of debriefing questions prepared. The debriefing questions included asking the participants if knowing I was a lesbian influenced their answers. None of the nine participants asked or insinuated at any time that they were curious or wanted to know if I was a lesbian. After the interviews, it was suggested that I contact all of the participants to ask them if at any point during the interview they thought I was a lesbian and if so, how it influenced their answers. I struggled with this on two levels. First, I did not offer this information to the participants prior to the interviews which in turn could now be interpreted as “tricking” them. Second, the issue of contacting them after the interview and asking them if they thought I was a lesbian could potentially trigger participants to feel betrayed or “fooled.” In other words, I felt the participants may wonder why I was asking this afterwards and feel that they should not have been as forthcoming as they were during the interviews. This issue weighed heavily on me and resulted in my not following up with the participants. The interviews allowed participants to speak to me as the interviewer and also permitted them to think however they chose about me. For one participant, Don, and potentially others, this is how they viewed me: “It’s like I said, I mean I’ve just met you today, but I consider you as Chris.” **D 9:299**

I mentioned previously that the participants appeared truthful and very forthcoming, yet there were also moments of contradiction. For two of the participants, James and Jay, there was evidence of contradiction within their transcripts. When asked what his personal feelings were regarding lesbians, James stated: "It's fine. I mean it's fine." James 5:134 This answer followed a lengthy response by James that incorporated many negative descriptions of lesbians. Jay's response to being asked his personal feeling regarding lesbians was: "I just think it is a valid lifestyle and great and however people want to be that's great, that's good." Jay 5:136 This answer preceded Jay's description of the lesbian marriage he witnessed which made him significantly uncomfortable. These contradictions are not extreme, but subtle and telling. The examples further support the notion that the participants struggled with their conceptualizations of lesbians as well as being indicative of its complexity. This struggle may be indicative of the complexity surrounding lesbians for heterosexual men or may be more of an effort to appear politically correct, open-minded, and/or non-offensive. In other words, this begs the question of whether or not the eight participants wanted to be as open as Chuck was, but struggled not to in an effort to be respectful and open.

As mentioned, the conceptualizations by eight of the participants appeared favorable or positive. Schellenberg, Hirt, & Sears (1999) concluded that attitudes toward homosexuals appear to change as a by-product of higher education and related life experiences. The participants of this study all had college experience and between the ages of 25 and 32. It could be assumed that this is the sole reason for the more favorable

outcome of this study. Certainly, this may have contributed, but it cannot be assumed as the sole reason.

Kimmel (1994) described homophobia as: “the effort to suppress that (homoerotic) desire, to purify all relationships with other men, with women, with children of its taint, and to ensure that no one could possibly ever mistake one for a homosexual” (p. 130). Two participants strayed far from Kimmel’s definition of homophobia. They described their acceptance or favorable conceptualizations of lesbians by admitting that they would not necessarily rule out engaging in same sex activity. Don stated: “I’m a straight male, but get me alone in a room with Jude Law and talk to me ten minutes later, you know?” **D 11:358** While Paul stated: “And so usually when some of that’s (homophobic comments) around and say someone is really uncomfortable with the macho crowd I always say “Well I’d have sex with Antonio Banderas.” **W 9:473** It cannot be ruled out that these answers were said in jest, however they certainly extend beyond stating that homosexuality is “acceptable.”

The participants of this study described their conceptualizations in many ways. By explaining how they formed a basis for what “is,” through laying the foundation for their beliefs and belief systems, by making comparisons, and through words of struggle, the participants provided a partial picture of their conceptualizations of lesbians and lesbian relationships. In summary, the participants described their conceptualizations in terms of others such as bisexuals, gay men, other heterosexuals, and lesbians and lesbian stereotypes. They used society’s view (or one of society’s views) and comparison to other minorities to gauge their own perceptions of lesbians and lesbian relationships. The



participants focused on being open-minded and emphasizing the effect of growing up during the seventies. They also used a variety of words to describe the term lesbian. Finally, the most important issue the participants focused on was the ambiguity surrounding who is or is not a lesbian. “The fake lesbian” as seen in pornographic films and other media provided the most prevalent data. A sense of confusion and ambiguity emerged through relationships with women who have dated other women and lesbians the participants knew personally. The participants acknowledged that this ambiguity in turn, led to a decreasing need to view lesbians as serious or stable. In other words, why would heterosexual men take lesbians seriously if their sexuality can change at any time. Interestingly, one participant suggested that he felt he could be the reason a woman may decide not to be a “lesbian” anymore. With this viewpoint, why would heterosexual men view lesbians as stable, permanent, or concrete?

## **Conclusions**

The following is a list of conclusions based on this study. It must be emphasized that these conclusions are based on the responses of the participants in this research. The participants were nine, white, heterosexual, single, 25-32 year old men with college experience. The following conclusions are not meant to be generalized to all men.

- Lesbians are viewed as “others.”
- Lesbians are talked about in comparison to others.
- Society’s views and other minorities are used to determine how lesbians should be treated.

- Socialization with other lesbian, gay, or bisexual individuals leads to a more positive conceptualization of lesbians.
- There is a struggle between being politically correct and open-minded when talking about lesbians.
- Through struggling, there is contradiction in personal feelings regarding lesbians and lesbian relationships.
- Conceptualizations of lesbians are vague.
- Ambiguity surrounding who is or who is not a lesbian is rampant.
- There is an awareness of “The fake lesbian” in pornographic films.
- “The fake lesbian” has contributed to the ambiguity.
- Lesbians who are viewed as novelties, chic, and “trendy” also contributed to the ambiguity.
- Lesbians are described as a variety of “types.”
- There are many phrases, terms, and words used to describe lesbians and lesbian relationships.
- The media, aside from pornography, have not had a significant influence on the perception of lesbians and lesbian relationships.

## **Recommendations**

There are various ways this topic can be approached in the future. Most importantly, it is necessary to continue researching individuals’ conceptualizations of lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men. Certainly, based on the examples of contradictions within participants’ answers, there is a need to pursue further research in an effort to

further our understanding. It would be valuable to interview heterosexual women and couples, homosexual individuals and couples, along with intersections of race, ethnicity, age, religion, political affiliation, and social class status. In particular, it would be most important while examining individual's conceptualizations of lesbians, to specifically distinguish between "real" and "fake" lesbians for the participants within the interview questions.

Through this research, a major issue that emerged was the questioning of who the participants are thinking of specifically when they say "lesbians." There have been many studies that have addressed attitudes of heterosexuals regarding lesbians (Herek & Capitanio, 1999 & 1996; Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1997; Kite & Whitley, 1996; Whitley & Kite, 1995; Pratte, 1993; and Kite, 1984), but none that specifically examined how or what heterosexuals think when asked about stereotypically "butch" or "femme" lesbians. The previous studies that found favorable attitudes toward lesbians may have involved participants who conceptualize lesbians as women in pornographic films or as according to the participants of this study, "fake lesbians."

Based on this experience, I would also recommend that a similar study be done to compare the results where the participants are informed that the researcher is a lesbian. It would be fascinating to learn how the findings may vary or be consistent with the participants knowing that the interviewer is a lesbian. Also, based on the findings of this study, there appears to be a need to examine the ambiguity surrounding lesbians as compared to gay men. Some participants revealed that gay men are considered more

stable and permanent. This finding can be further examined in a study that focuses on comparing gay men and lesbians.

Data from the interviews also revealed that there was very little education from the participants' families or schooling concerning homosexuality. Although the participants were mainly born in the seventies, there is still cause to recommend the examination of any changes in the education of children on homosexuality. The interviews also revealed that socialization with lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men is crucial to more positive outcomes. I also recommend that these interactions and their effects on heterosexual and homosexual individuals could serve as the basis for an important study.

This study was based on the need to further examine the stereotypes surrounding heterosexual men and their view of lesbians. Therefore, a case may be made for its use in attempting to de-bunk myths. The participants were single, white, heterosexual, 25-32 year old, men with college experience and I recommend that this research can be used in college seminars or residence life activities to prompt discussion of myths and stereotypes surrounding both lesbians and heterosexual men.

My hope was that this investigation would challenge me to seek further understanding and provoke further research based on the same premise. I also hoped that the interviews would be beneficial on some level to the participants and based on their responses to the debriefing questions, they were. Many participants revealed that these were issues they had never truly thought about and for some, the interview provided a space for them to "talk through" some of their confusions and issues. Similarly, Don stated: "Like I said it's been an experience for me to learn things even that I didn't

necessarily know about how I felt. Some of the questions that I've never been asked before. Like put yourself in the shoes of a lesbian. I've never done that you know?...So it's been interesting for me too." **D 17:593** In an ideal world, this dissertation would serve as a basis for future investigations which may include more heterosexual men, women, other minorities, as well as gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals to examine how they feel about issues such as lesbians and lesbian relationships. The ultimate quest would be to learn more about others and move beyond tolerance to acceptance. Although many would argue that this is not an ideal world and therefore unrealistic, I might argue that there needs to be a beginning and respond: "It's not an ideal world *yet*."

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## **Appendices**

## **Appendix A Informed Consent Form**

### **Title**

Conceptualizations of Lesbians and Lesbian Relationships

### **Purpose of the Study**

The primary purpose of this study is to examine the conceptualization of lesbians and lesbian relationships by white, heterosexual, single, 25-32 year old, men with college experience, and, secondly, to examine the role socialization plays in this conceptualization.

### **Description of the Study**

You will be asked to participate in a one half hour to one hour interview. Participation will be completely voluntary. There will be no penalty for not completing the interview and you may withdraw from the study at any time.

### **Confidentiality**

Complete confidentiality will be maintained throughout this study. You will be asked to choose a pseudonym that will be used throughout the study and transcription. I will transcribe the entire interview. All related information about this study will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in my office. Your name, school, and background will never be reported. The transcriptions, with pseudonyms, will be read by a 2-3 person committee to verify the findings. Each member of this committee will also sign a confidentiality statement.

### **Potential Risks**

Participation in this study does not involve any physical or psychological risks. Participation is completely voluntary. There will be no penalty if you decide not to participate in this study.

### **Potential Benefits**

Participation in this survey may result in an increase in awareness of topics such as sexual orientation that you may not have considered previously. This study will assist and guide future research and allow for a clearer understanding of the most appropriate forms of education in the area of sexual orientation.

### **For further information or questions contact:**

Christina A. Demuth  
Doctoral Candidate  
4410 Bonnywood Way  
Knoxville, TN 37912  
(865) 522-4561

Dr. Joy T. DeSensi, Ed.D.  
Dissertation Advisor  
1914 Andy Holt Avenue  
University of Tennessee  
Knoxville, TN 37996-2700  
(865) 974-1282

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix B**  
**Confidentiality Statement by Transcript Readers**

I understand that I will be reading transcriptions of confidential interviews provided by the participants of the study entitled “Conceptualizations of Lesbians and Lesbian Relationships.” I understand that by signing this statement, I am agreeing to keep the information that I read in the transcriptions completely confidential. I will not discuss the transcriptions or the discussions regarding the transcriptions with anyone other than the researcher, Christina A. Demuth. Any violation of this agreement would constitute a serious breach of ethical standards, and I pledge not to do so.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

## Appendix C Interview Guide

- Name?
- Pseudonym?
- Phone Number?
- Email?

(1) I'm interested in learning about you and your background. Can you tell me about your self?

- Hometown?
- Age?
- Religious Denomination (if any)?
- College(s) Attended?
- Degree(s) and Year (s) Received?
- where you grew up?
- what your family is like?
- your friends and neighbors?
- any significant relationships?
- what you do for a living?
- academic background?
- parents education level?
- socio-economic class growing up?

(2) What were you taught regarding male/female gender roles?

(3) How do you conceptualize women in general?

(4) What were you taught regarding sexuality?

(5) What were you taught regarding homosexuality?

(6) What do you think about when you think of lesbians?

(7) What are your personal feelings regarding lesbianism?

(8) What role if any has the media (TV, film, books, publications, etc.) played in your feelings regarding lesbianism?

(9) I am interested in understanding more about your perception of lesbians in our society on a day to day basis. Do you know any lesbians?

(10) How have you seen lesbians treated by society in general?

(11) How do you think lesbians should be treated by society?

(12) Can you tell me about experiences friends or family members have had with members of different sexual orientations?

- Did these experiences affect you?

(13) How would you differentiate your sexuality from that of a lesbian? Do you think there are differences in lesbian and heterosexual relationships?

(14) Can you explain to me what acceptance means to you?

(15) Can you explain what tolerance means to you?

(16) Are there different types of lesbians? Explain.

(17) Can you tell me about some of the differences or similarities that you may see between lesbians and straight people?

(18) I want you to try something for me. Put yourself in the shoes of a lesbian and tell me what you think her life is like.

(19) If you could try to just explain a little bit to me about how you conceptualize or make sense of a lesbian relationship, what would you say? How does it fit or not fit into your world?

(20) Debriefing Questions

-Is there anything that you would like to add that was not addressed in my questions?

-How did you feel about the process of this interview?

-What other comments do you have?

(21) Debriefing Questions (in the event that they ask me about my sexuality during the interview)

-How did this affect your answers?

-How did this affect your comfort and honesty?

-Is there anything else you would like to add that we may have missed?

(Questions #2, 7, 10, and 11 have been modeled from the interview questions from the dissertation by Dutchess Jones entitled "Homosexuality and the Black Church" with her permission.)



## **Appendix D**

### **Referral Information Sheet for Participants**

In the event of an emergency the following numbers are offered for your convenience:

**1) University of Tennessee Student Health Services** - (865) 974-2911

Mental Health Department: <http://web.utk.edu/~counsel/>

#### **Directions/Walking**

Health Services is located on 1818 Andy Holt Avenue, adjacent to the Art and Architecture building. Andy Holt runs next to Hodges Library, at which point it turns into a greenway (no cars). Continue on Andy Holt towards the Aquatic Center. Health Services is on the left.

#### **Transportation**

The Campus Police/Escort Service provide transportation within the campus area (974-3114).

#### **Parking**

Students who have an appointment may park in the designated spots in the lot next to the Health Services Building. Obtain a temporary parking permit when you check in for your appointment.

#### **Driving:**

From Cumberland Ave., take Volunteer and turn right on Pat Head Summitt, just past the Art and Architecture Building. Health Services is on the right, across from the Health, Physical Education and Recreation Building.

**2) University of Tennessee Student Counseling Services** (865) 974- 2196

**3) University of Tennessee Medical Center** (865) 544-9000

Emergency Room (865) 544-9402

#### **Directions**

1924 Alcoa Highway  
Knoxville, Tennessee 37920-6999

From I-40 take exit #386 (Airport / Smoky Mtns. / 129). Go south on 129 to the exit marked Cherokee Trail / University Hospital.

From the airport, take 129 North to Cherokee Trail / University Hospital.

(Resource: Information provided on-line at [www.utk.edu](http://www.utk.edu). University Health Services)

## Vita

Christina Demuth was born in Scranton, Pennsylvania on December 19, 1974.

She is the daughter of Richard and Linda Demuth. After graduating from Scranton High School in 1992, she attended The Pennsylvania State University where she received her bachelor's degree in Kinesiology/Sports Medicine in May of 1997. In April of 1997 she passed her National Athletic Trainer's Association Exam and became a certified athletic trainer.

In August of 1997, Christina received a graduate assistantship from the University of Tennessee with the Women's Athletic Training Department where she completed her Masters of Science degree in Human Performance and Sport Studies in May of 1999. In April of 1999, she entered the doctoral program in Cultural Studies. During her doctoral work she received an assistantship in the Sport and Physical Activity Department from August, 2000 to December, 2001. She then received an assistantship in the Cultural Studies program in 2002 and was awarded a Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Education, with a concentration in Cultural Studies in December of 2002.