Queering sexual development frameworks: a dynamic systems approach to conceptualizing other-sex sexuality among lesbians

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QUEERING SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORKS:
A DYNAMIC SYSTEMS APPROACH TO CONCEPTUALIZING OTHER-SEX
SEXUALITY AMONG LESBIANS

by

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ABSTRACT

Essentialist models of sexual identity development have dominated social discourse and public opinion since the 1980s. This perspective posits that sexual orientation is an intrinsic, core identity that has roots in specific biological factors. Based on this perspective it is assumed that a person’s sexuality will manifest in a linear fashion throughout the life course. Notably, this model positions individuals with same-sex sexual attractions and behaviors as specific “types” of people. While this perspective has become largely institutionalized in public opinion, within academic research on sexual orientation, there has been little consensus on the veracity of this model. Specifically, the recent impact of varied theoretical perspectives including social constructionism and queer theory has complicated the acceptance of the essentialist model within academia and has led researchers to call for the development of alternative models of sexual identity development that challenge reductionist assertions.

In light of challenges to traditional frameworks, in this study I highlight experiences that have thus far been largely ignored in academic research on sexual identity. In particular, this study approaches the topic of women’s sexual identity from a fundamentally queer theoretical perspective, recognizing the potential for fluidity in identities that are often reduced to biology. Specifically, I investigate the experiences of women who at one point in their lives identified as lesbians, but later engaged in relationships with either cisgender or transgender men in order to understand what their experiences can tell us about the nuances of women’s sexual identity. Utilizing a dynamic systems theoretical approach, I posit variability and erotic plasticity as cornerstones of women’s sexual identity development.
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In recent years the rhetoric of “born this way,” as a model for understanding sexual orientation, has become normalized in public discourse. From Lady Gaga’s famed song, to polls that indicate that most Americans today feel that homosexuality is biological, sexual orientation is largely understood as an intrinsic, core identity. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this perspective is only gaining more support. A 2015 Gallup poll shows that from 1978 to 2015 the percent of adults who claim that homosexuality is something a person is born with increased from 13% to 51% (Jones 2015).

This view has been gaining social, as well as academic, momentum since the 1980s when “scientific findings appeared to coalesce around a robust, essentialist, organismic model of the etiology and ontology of sexual orientation” (Diamond 2007: 142). This model, defined as biological essentialism, maintained that same-sex sexual identity had roots in either a person’s genes, brain, or exposure to prenatal hormones. Based on these biological factors, as gay children developed, their same-sex sexuality would manifest in a linear fashion, beginning with “‘feelings of differentness’ and progressing through gender atypicality, nascent same-sex attractions, and experimental same-sex behavior” (Diamond 2007: 142). Notably, this model positioned individuals with same-sex sexual attractions and behaviors as specific “types” of people. While this perspective has become largely institutionalized in public opinion, within academic research on sexual orientation, there has been little consensus on the veracity of this model.

While biological essentialism dominated the field for decades, the recent impact of varied theoretical perspectives, including social constructionism and queer theory, has complicated the acceptance of the “born this way” model within academia. These perspectives have served to challenge the naturalness of identity categories like gender and sexuality, and have led to
findings that suggest that same-sex sexuality, especially among women, is a much more fluid, multifaceted, and nuanced phenomenon than previously thought (Bailey 2009; Baumeister 2000; Diamond, 2005; Savin-Williams and Diamond 2000; Peplau 2001). For example, recent studies have challenged the idea of lesbians as specific types of people and have found that nonexclusive sexual attractions are much more common than exclusive same-sex sexual attractions (Diamond 2012; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels 1994). Additionally, research demonstrates that women tend to have a non-category-specific pattern of sexual arousal, meaning that heterosexual and homosexual women often experience arousal to both female and male sexual stimuli (Chivers, Rieger, Latty, and Bailey 2004). These types of findings call into question essentialist sexual identity labels, like gay or lesbian.

In light of challenges to traditional frameworks, researchers have begun to call for the development of alternative models of sexual identity development that challenge reductionist (or “born this way”) assertions. A key component of this debate is a call to challenge the very identity categories used to define concepts of gender, sex, and sexuality. For example, Seidman (1994) argues that the utilization of a queer theoretical perspective allows us to “render [identity] permanently open and contestable as to its meaning and political role” (173). While largely a theoretical/conceptual debate, this perspective has crucial empirical ramifications as well. For example, reductionist models would not be able to account for a woman who identifies as a lesbian, yet engages in a relationship with a man. They would also fail to conceptualize a lesbian’s sexual identity when her partner transitions from female to male. Since the gender of sexual object choice changes, does sexual orientation also change? Because of the focus on linearity, stability, and “natural kinds,” traditional, essentialist models of sexual orientation are largely unable to account for these types of nonlinearities. Therefore, when periods of variability
in sexual orientation are encountered by researchers, they are often ignored, viewed as idiosyncrasies, or viewed as indicative that a person was never truly gay or straight to begin with.

In this study I seek to highlight experiences that have thus far been largely ignored in academic research on sexual identity. In particular, this study will approach the topic of women’s sexual identity from a fundamentally queer theoretical perspective, recognizing the potential for fluidity in identities that are often reduced to biology. Specifically, I will investigate the experiences of women who at one point in their lives identified as lesbians, but later engaged in relationships with either cisgender or transgender men, in order to understand what their experiences can tell us about the nuances of women’s sexual identity. While these examples of nonlinearity in sexual identity development have largely been ignored in studies of sexual orientation, these supposed idiosyncrasies have the potential to provide key insights into the development of women’s sexual identity. Perhaps the key to understanding the development of women’s sexual identity lies—not in the periods of stability—but in the instances of variability that are far too often seen as falsehoods.

I will base my investigation on three central research questions and several subquestions: (1) Taking into account the dominant model of sexuality that maintains a linear process of sexual identity development, how do the women in these two sample groups characterize the development of their sexual identity and the pathway towards the acknowledgement of their lesbian identity?

(a) Did the women in these two sample groups seem to have similar pathways towards the acknowledgment of their lesbian identity?
(b) Within these two groups were there indications of sexual fluidity (rather than identity stability) prior to their partner’s transition or prior to the beginning of their relationship with a cisgender man?

(c) Are there significant differences between the narratives presented by these women and the narratives of lesbians who maintain exclusive relationships with women?

(2) Once experiencing a partner transition or once entering into a relationship with a cisgender man, did these women experience any personal negotiations regarding their sexuality or their sexual identity?

(a) For example, did these women continue to identify as lesbians or did the gender of their partner impact how they perceived their own sexuality?

(b) How did these women navigate issues such as language/labels used to identify themselves and their partners, acceptance/rejection in the lesbian community, acceptance/rejection of heterosexuality and heterosexual privilege, etc?

(c) Did the women in the two different groups experience these negotiations differently?

(3) Over time, how did experiences in relationships with men impact how these women viewed their lesbian identities?

(a) Can patterns be identified in how these women perceive their sexual orientations today?

(b) Did the women in either of these groups ever understand any part of their sexual identity as a phase?

In order to provide insight into these questions I will employ a queer dynamic systems theory approach (explained further in Chapter 2). As I will explain, this theoretical framework challenges biological essentialism and posits variability as a cornerstone of women’s sexual
identity development. This present study will be an application of this theory to test its relevance within the realm of women’s sexual fluidity. This analysis will posit the necessity of understanding erotic plasticity as inherent to women’s experiences.

Lesbian self-identified women will be the subject of analysis for two specific reasons. First, recent research suggests that essentialist models might be particularly unable to account for the sexual dynamics among women. While traditional models may apply somewhat more accurately to men’s sexual identity development (the full discussion of which is outside the scope of this project), studies show that women are significantly less likely than men to have exclusive attractions (Bailey 2009; Chandra, Mosher, Copen, and Sionean 2011; Diamond 2012). Due to the possibility of variability in sexuality (an identity often assumed to be inherent), women provide an ideal subject on which to base a study on sexual fluidity. I chose to focus primarily on women who at one point in their lives adopted a lesbian identity specifically for the purposes of applying a dynamic systems theoretical approach which will be explained further in Chapter 2. This theoretical perspective anticipates periods of stability as well as periods of variability. Therefore, by investigating the sexual identity development process among women who at one point identified a stable lesbian identity, yet later relinquished it, I will be able to come to conclusions regarding the nature of variability within this theoretical framework.

In an effort to employ a queer perspective on a theoretical and empirical level, I chose to investigate the experiences of specific subsets of people who serve to challenge normative ideas of gender, sex, and sexuality. In particular I will investigate the experiences of women who at one point in their lives identified as having a stable lesbian identity, but later engaged in a relationship with a cisgender man. This situation provides perhaps the purest example of sexual fluidity. These women challenge the notion of a stable lesbian identity and have the potential to
deconstruct sexual identity categories altogether. I will also investigate the experiences of women who at one point in their lives identified as having a stable lesbian identity, but whose partner transitioned from female-to-male. This represents a unique situation in which the gender of the woman’s sexual object choice changed. This relational arrangement has the potential to provide insight into the discussion of whether sexual identity labels are truly dependent on the gender of sexual object choice or whether person-based attractions are perhaps a better way to characterize women’s sexuality. According to Diamond (2012), “Person-based attractions challenge many assumptions underlying traditional models of sexual orientation, such as the notion that gender always matters when it comes to sexual desire. They are also critical to understanding female sexual fluidity, since such attractions are necessarily flexible” (172). Both of these situations allow for a queer/deconstructionist analysis of sex, sexuality, and gender and have the potential to provide insight into the manifestation of sexual fluidity among women. This specific research will aid in the development of a new model of sexual identity that allows for, and anticipates, nonlinearities.

Within this dissertation I will begin by addressing the theoretical frameworks most relevant to this analysis, followed by a review of the relevant literature in this area in which to situate the present study. I will then outline the most applicable methods for providing insight into my research questions. Finally, I will present the findings in light of my three main research questions. Specifically, in Chapter 2 I will present the theoretical perspectives that will frame this study. In this discussion I will chart the path of sexuality theorizing from biological essentialism to queer theory in order to highlight the need for a deconstructionist perspective for this specific topic. In particular, I will establish the theoretical contributions of Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as foundational to this study. In light of these theoretical frameworks, I will
then turn to an explanation of the limitations of essentialist models of women’s sexual identity development.

In Chapter 3 I will present a review of the existing research and empirical literature in this field in order to identify gaps and situate the present study. This analysis will first review the literature focusing on sexual identity negotiations among self-identified lesbian women in relationships with transgender men. Within this literature the focus will be on four specific themes: (1) The inapplicability of universal sexual identity labels; (2) Frustration regarding lost lesbian community and transgressive social status; (3) Rejection of heterosexual identity labels; and (4) Acceptance of heterosexual identity labels. I will then turn to a review of the literature focusing on sexual identity negotiations among self-identified lesbian women in relationships with cisgender men. While this body of literature is undoubtedly small, an analysis reveals that this phenomenon has been framed in two distinct ways within academic literature: (1) These women are discredited as “true” lesbians based on the assumption that their previous identity was a phase; (2) These women are positioned as ideal examples of sexual fluidity and seen as crucial to social understanding of women’s sexual identity.

By providing a comprehensive overview of the existing theoretical and empirical literature in Chapters 2 and 3 within these two unique areas, I will be able to identify obvious gaps in the existing literature in which to situate my own research. In order to contextualize my own research I will note the lack of existing literature and the lack of a paradigm of sexual identity development that can account for the experiences of cisgender, lesbian-identified women in relationships with cisgender or transgender men.

In Chapter 4 I will detail the research methods that structured this study and which were the most effective in providing insight into my research questions. Specifically, I will outline my
participant recruitment strategies, data collection and analysis methodology, and participant demographics. I will also address specific limitations of this study. In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, I will present my main findings based on my three research questions.

By utilizing a queer application of dynamic systems theory in conjunction with relevant research methods, this study will provide insight into the role of variability in women’s sexual identity development. Specifically, I hope to be able to understand how lesbian-identified women who engage in relationships with cisgender/transgender men conceptualize their own sexual identities. Additionally, I hope to add to the small body of literature that employs a dynamic systems theory to the study of sexualities in order to shed light on and recognize the potential impact of instances of nonlinearity in women’s sexual identity development.
Chapter 2
THEORIZING SEXUALITY

In the past few decades, the study of sexualities within the social sciences has undergone significant transformation. The introduction of queer theory in the 1990s represented a paradigm shift towards deconstructionism that not only challenged ideas of biological essentialism, but also highlighted the limitations of social constructionism. This movement towards radical deconstructionism that positioned identities as multiple, fluid, and culturally produced, provided a necessary framework to account for the gaps in essentialist and reductionist models. Since the introduction of this framework within the field of sociology, discussions regarding the interplay between sociological thought and queer theory have flourished (Epstein 1994; Green 2002; Namaste 1994; Seidman 1994, 1996; Stein and Plummer 1994; Valocchi 2005). However, researchers and theorists have argued that debates regarding the application of a queer theoretical perspective have “stalled at theoretical/conceptual level” in this field and have thus far largely failed to comprehensively include queer identified subjects at the empirical level (Pfeffer 2009: 37).

This present study will attempt to address this gap in the existing literature by employing a queer framework on the theoretical and empirical levels. In this chapter I will chart the path of sexuality theorizing from biological essentialism to queer theory in order to justify the use of this perspective for this specific topic. I will then turn to a discussion of how normative models frequently used to understand women’s sexual identity development are fundamentally reductionist and unable to account for the apparent fluidity of women’s sexuality. This discussion will establish the limitations of the much-utilized essentialist perspective and maintain the necessity of approaching sexual identity development from a queer,
deconstructionist perspective. I will conclude this chapter by introducing a queer approach to dynamic systems theory, which will prove to be the most relevant for framing the present study.

The Path from Biological Essentialism to Queer Theory

Biological Essentialism

Up until the mid-20th century, the study of sex, gender, and sexuality was predicated on the assumption that these traits were inherently interconnected, biologically inevitable, and naturally occurring (Hines 2011; Richardson 2007; Taylor 2008). This essentialist framework rested on three main assumptions regarding the nature of sexuality as put forth by DeLamater and Hyde (1998):

(a) a belief in underlying true forms or essences;
(b) a discontinuity between different forms rather than continuous variation; and
(c) constancy, that is, the absence of change over time. [13]

These assumptions constructed sexuality as a core, biological identity that was, by nature, unaffected by social, cultural, or historical context.

Underlying this perspective was the belief in a natural congruence of sex, gender, and sexuality. Deemed the “principle of consistency” by Ponse (1978), this principle was based on the assertion that, for example, someone categorized as male at birth would naturally develop a masculine gender identity, a masculine gender expression, and a heterosexual sexual orientation. Notably, this essentialist perspective suggested that sexuality was dependent on – and inherently connected to – gender. As Taylor (2008) argues,

Within this model, sexuality is assumed to be what follows ‘naturally’ from two ‘opposite sexed’ bodies and as such, heterosexuality is foregrounded and naturalized in this fixing equation and same-sex desire is marginalized, if not medicalized and demonized. [107]

The social acceptance of this perspective, and the inherent naturalization of heterosexuality, created a social context in which the focus of academic inquiry centered on gender and sexual
deviance (i.e. non-normative identities). However, as Richardson (2007) points out, this academic focus did not serve to challenge the principle of consistency nor the perceived link between gender and sexuality. Instead, empirical research conducted in the essentialist framework served to reproduce these normative beliefs. Specifically, adhering to the principle of consistency, the belief developed that “homosexuality [was] connected with assumptions about ‘improper’ gender that…led to cross-gender identity being seen as the exemplary paradigm for thinking about homosexuality” (Richardson 2007: 460).

Stemming from these assumptions, a dominant line of inquiry within the essentialist framework has been the biological nature of sexualities, specifically, finding the biological source of homosexuality. Research conducted within this framework posited theories that attributed the development of same-sex sexual orientations to factors including evolution, genetics, brain differences, and/or hormone levels (Bailey and Pillard 1991; Bell, Weinberg, and Hammersmith 1981; DeLamater and Hyde 1998; Ellis and Ames 1987; Goy and McEwen 1980; Hamer, Hu, Magnuson, Hu, and Pattatucci 1993; Risch, Squires-Wheeler, Keats, Hamer, Hu, Magnuson, Hu and Pattatucci 1993). Regardless of the evidence put forth, this research served to solidify in the public consciousness the belief that there were two natural kinds of sexuality—heterosexuality and homosexuality. These identities were mutually exclusive and rested on an assumption of stability and continuity over time. Researchers argued that if a same-sex sexual orientation were to develop in an individual, this biological imperative would follow a linear path of development that involved several milestones including, “‘feelings of differentness’…gender atypicality, nascent same-sex attractions, and experimental same-sex behavior’ (Diamond 2007: 142). Once this developmental path was completed, an individual would adopt a stable and coherent homosexual identity, often characterized by non-normative gender identity/expression.
**Feminism and Social Constructionism**

However, beginning in the 1960s, feminist theorists and social constructionists began challenging the presumed naturalness of these categories. They argued that instead of biological imperatives, sex, gender, and sexuality were, in fact, socially constructed phenomena (Hines 2011; Richardson 2007; Seidman 1994, 1997; Taylor 2008; Weeks 2010). These perspectives suggested that sexual identity categories were products of specific cultural and historical contexts, not universally acknowledged phenomena. Specifically, these perspectives rejected the notion that homosexuality was a “transhistorical identity or a universal human type” (Seidman 1997: 89) and argued that individual level dynamics of sexuality were only one part of a much larger picture. Instead, sexuality was an inherently relational phenomenon that was socially and historically constructed (Irvine 2003; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael and Michaels 1994; Seidman 2010; Simon and Gagnon 2003).

Within the social constructionist framework emerged several distinct lines of thought regarding how sexuality was constructed by society. For example, in their book, *Sexual Conduct* (1973), John Gagnon and William Simon introduced a social script approach to sexuality studies. In contrast to essentialist theories of sexuality, Gagnon and Simon argued that sexuality was learned from sexual scripts present in specific social and historical contexts. Predicated on the idea that sexuality is inherently an interactional phenomenon, they suggested that,

> Scripts are involved in learning the meaning of internal states, organizing the sequences of specifically sexual acts, decoding novel situations, setting the limits on sexual responses, and linking meanings from nonsexual aspects of life to specifically sexual experience. [Simon and Gagnon 1973: 13]

Based on these scripts that individuals receive, they develop an understanding of what socially constitutes sexuality. By engaging with these scripts in specific social and historical contexts,
individuals constantly construct, reproduce, and transform existing beliefs and ‘truths’ about sexuality (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael and Michaels 1994: 6).

Also writing within the social constructionist framework, Michel Foucault challenged the presumed naturalness of sexuality and argued that sexuality and sexual desires were social phenomena that were the result of “historically specific social practices” (Rubin 1993: 10). However, in a notable departure from existing perspectives such as the social script approach, Foucault employed a discursive framework, which highlighted how discourse surrounding sexuality actually created the contemporary conception of sex (Seidman 2010: 30).

Foucault claims that discourse surrounding sexuality proliferated between the seventeenth century and the mid-twentieth century. The highly regulated nature of this discourse demonstrated the role of networks of power in constructing beliefs about, and basic understandings of, sexuality (Foucault 1978: 18). He claims that:

the society that emerged in the nineteenth century—bourgeois, capitalist, or industrial society, call it what you will—did not confront sex with a fundamental refusal of recognition. On the contrary, it put into operation an entire machinery for producing true discourses concerning it. Not only did it speak of sex and compel everyone to do so; it also set out to formulate the uniform truth of sex. [Foucault 1978: 69]

Foucault’s claim was based on the idea that power within society served to create specific discourses surrounding sexuality, which in fact, served to create sexuality itself.

Foucault’s focus on how sexuality was actually constructed through a discursive process was a distinctive departure from previous frameworks within the study of sexualities. This departure was compounded by Foucault’s focus on networks of power that served to create these discourses. As Annamarie Jagose claims, Foucault’s argument that sexuality was not an innate or a natural characteristic, but rather, a discursive production, “is part of his larger contention that modern subjectivity is an effect of networks of power. Not only negative or repressive but also productive and enabling, power is exercised from innumerable points to no predetermined
effect” (Jagose 1996: 80). This concept of power, instead of being created by certain institutions or social mechanisms, is permanent and omnipresent (Foucault 1978: 93). Foucault argued that what gives this power its influence is “the fact that it runs through, and it produces, things, it induces pleasure, it forms knowledge, it produces discourse; it must be considered as a productive network which runs through the entire social body much more than as a negative instance whose function is repressive” (Foucault 1979: 36). Therefore, in reality, there is no ‘truth’ to sexuality; it is instead, a discursive production within regimes of power.

Foucault and Gagnon and Simon represent only two perspectives of many that challenged the biological essentialist perspective of sexuality and suggested a socially constructed framework. These theorists argued that sexuality was not a core, stable identity, but rather, an inherently social phenomenon that is dependent on cultural and historical context. While these social constructionist perspectives served to problematize essentialist frameworks of understanding gender and sexuality, critics argued that within this new perspective, the assumed link between gender and sexuality remained relatively unchallenged (Richardson 2008). For example, within constructionist empirical research, “the categories remain[ed] tied through prevailing debate around whether gender constituted sexuality, or sexuality, gender” (Hines 2011: 141). From this perspective, the focus of inquiry was on identifying gender or sexuality as the main force in shaping social relations (Hines 2011). Furthermore, critics argue that in much of this literature the analytical frameworks used to explore these relationships were dependent on supposedly natural gender/sexuality binary models that only legitimized relationships involving clearly defined men and women in clearly defined homosexual or heterosexual relationships (Hines 2006; Taylor 2008). This paradigm served to render relationships involving transgender individuals nearly invisible.
**Queer Theory**

While the social constructionist framework successfully served to demonstrate the social nature of gender and sexuality categories, beginning in the 1990s, queer and transgender theorists began challenging the assumed link between sexuality and gender within this framework. They argued that feminist and social constructionist theories were limited by their preoccupation with gender, and that in reality, the relationship between sexuality and gender is not “fixed and static,” but rather, “highly complex and unstable” (Richardson 2008: 15). While the queer theoretical perspective supports the inherently social nature of sexuality, it rejects binary notions of gender and sexuality and advocates for an understanding of these categories as fluid, multiple, and fragmented (Hines 2011; Richardson 2008; Stein and Plummer 1994; Taylor 2008). Literature within this field of study has argued that transgender identities in particular serve to highlight the problematic nature of binary identity categories and the limitations of understanding gender and sexuality as inherently linked (Hines 2011). As Jagose (1996) argues, queer locates and exploits the incoherencies on those three terms [sex, gender, and sexual desire] which stabilize heterosexuality. Demonstrating the impossibility of any ‘natural’ sexuality, it calls into question even such apparently unproblematic terms as ‘man’ and ‘woman’ (3).

Specifically, because the categorization of an individual’s sexuality is often dependent on his or her gender as well as the gender of his or her partner, categorizations are often problematized by individuals who do not fit neatly into binary gender categories (Sanger 2010).

Queer theory initially developed in the context of the gay and lesbian movement, 1980s political backlash against homosexuality, the AIDS epidemic, and the increased visibility of lesbian feminism and sexual minorities of color. According to Seidman (1994, 1997), the era of the late 1980s and the early 1990s was marked by strong contestations of certain aspects of the social constructionist perspective, and a growing disillusion with the binary categories of
gay/lesbian and the idea of universal sexual identity categories. Specifically, during this time, “a wave of lesbian- and gay-identified people of color and sex radicals attacked the unitary gay identity construction as normative and as a disciplining force which excludes and marginalizes many desires, acts, and identities” (Seidman 1997: 147). Within this social context there developed a need for a theoretical framework of sexualities that represented a deconstruction of these normative ideas and an “analytical de-coupling of gender and sexuality” (Hines 2011: 142). Queer theory filled this void. This theoretical perspective was predicated on the notion of identity deconstruction and the problematization of any essentialized identity category including man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, etc.

Since its inception, queer theory has evolved in a variety of different directions and has been heavily influenced by the works of Judith Butler (1990), Steven Seidman (1997), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990), Diana Fuss (1991), and Gayle Rubin (1993), among others. For the purposes of this project, *Epistemology of the Closet* by Sedgwick (1990), and *Gender Trouble* by Butler (1990), have proven to be the most critical for establishing a theoretical framework that provides for a deconstructionist approach to both the idea of gender as well as the idea of sexuality. As Valocchi (2005) argues, a queer theoretical perspective challenges the idea of gender and sexuality as fixed and stable by “focusing not only on the historically constructed and hence contingent nature of the homosexual/heterosexual binary, but also on the many ways in which individual desires, practices, and affiliations cannot be accurately defined by the sex of the object choice” (754). In order to establish this necessary framework, I will now turn to a discussion of these two central texts.

In her 1990 text, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler proposes a theory of gender performativity, which elaborates the Foucauldian framework regarding the role of discourse
within regimes of power. She suggests that the supposed naturalness of the link between sex, gender, and sexuality is a result of what she deems, the “heterosexual matrix.” She describes this concept as,

that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, gender, and desires are naturalized…a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality. [Butler [1990] 2006: 208n]

However, in her text Butler contests this framework and suggests that the perception of gender as a binary and as a core identity that serves to naturalize heterosexuality, should not be uncritically accepted. Specifically, she sets out to deconstruct the very notion of gender as an identity and dispute the “truth” of gender itself (Jagose 1996: 84).

In order to problematize the assumption of gender as a core identity, Butler introduces her theory of gender performativity. This theory is based on the notion that “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler [1990] 2006: 45). To Butler, gender is not an intrinsic characteristic of an individual, or a social truth. Instead, gender is a process and a performance. She suggests that,

within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed…there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results. [Butler [1990] 2006: 34]

By making the assertion that gender is an action, something that someone does—rather than an innate characteristic—Butler calls into question society’s mutually exclusive sexual identity categories that are defined according to the gender of sexual object choice. This anti-essentialist perspective severs the supposedly inherent link between gender and sexuality.
In addition to Butler’s theory of gender performativity, Sedgwick’s theory of the
deconstruction of sexual identity norms proves crucial for framing a project on sexual fluidity.
Sedgwick begins her 1990 text, *Epistemology of the Closet*, by arguing that “an understanding of
virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in
its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern
homo/heterosexual definition” (1). This statement frames one of the main arguments within her
work, a critique of sexual definition based on a deconstruction of heterosexuality/homosexuality,
which she argues are incorrectly presented to society as a mutually exclusive binary (Sedgwick
1990: 9).

Critical to this argument is the fact that Sedgwick rejects the notion that sexuality is an
individual and intrinsic identity and instead centers it as “a cultural figure or category of
knowledge” (Seidman 1997: 150). Basing her perspective in the Foucauldian tradition, Sedgwick
claims that the homosexual/heterosexual divide has been woven into the fabric of society and
serves to structure thought and discourse itself. She claims,

A whole cluster of the most crucial sites for the contestations of meaning in twentieth-
century Western culture are consequentially and quite indelibly marked with the
historical specificity of homosocial/heterosexual definition… among those sites
are…masculine/feminine, majority/minority, innocence/initiation, natural artificial,
new/old, growth/decadence, urbane/provincial, health/illness, same/different,
cognition/paranoia, art/kitsch, sincerity/sentimentality, and voluntariness/addiction. So
permeative has the suffusing stain of homo/heterosexual crisis been that to discuss any of
these indices in any context, in the absence of an antihomophobic analysis, must perhaps
be to perpetuate unknowingly compulsions implicit in each. [Sedgwick 1990: 72-73]

Because the heterosexual/homosexual divide not only impacts sexual identities and behaviors,
but also broad systems of thought, a variety of unforeseen effects have resulted from this regime.
Specifically, gender categories have gained tremendous importance of in terms of oppression by
way of sexual identity labeling which has led to heterosexuality socially positioned as privileged
and compulsory.
Sedgwick argues that a unique result of this heterosexual/homosexual regime has been the institutionalization of the norm that gender preference defines sexual identity/orientation. As Seidman (1997) points out, “if one of [Sedgwick’s] aims is to explain the persistence of compulsory heterosexuality by reference to the hetero/homo figure as productive of cultural fields of knowledge, her other aim is expose the ways a multitude of desires have been muted, marginalized, and depoliticized by this power/knowledge regime” (157). Sedgwick specifically argues,

It is a rather amazing fact that, of the very many dimensions along which the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another (dimensions that include preference for certain acts, certain zones or sensations, certain physical types, a certain frequency, certain symbolic investments, certain relations of age or power, a certain species, a certain number of participants, and so on) precisely one, the gender of the object choice, emerged from the turn of the century, and has remained, as THE dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of ‘sexual orientation.’ [Sedgwick 1990: 8]

By highlighting the perceived link between the gender of object choice and sexual orientation, Sedgwick provides the framework for her rejection of sexual identity politics. She suggests that the master categories, heterosexual and homosexual, in effect serve to oppress certain categories of people based on the gender of their partners. However, she draws issue with this model by contesting the effectiveness of gender as an analytic frame. Specifically, she claims that “the ultimate definitional appeal in any gender-based analysis must necessarily be to the diacritical frontier between different genders. This gives heterosocial and heterosexual relations a conceptual privilege of incalculable consequence” (Sedgwick 1990:31).

In addition to disputing the role of gender in sexual identity politics, Sedgwick also argues that despite the fact that the “crisis of homo/heterosexual definition” has served to influence a variety of categories of thought, these categories are inherently unstable and fraught with contradictions (Sedgwick 1990:1). This principal deconstructivist argument focuses on the
instability of these master categories and the contradictions that exist in the understanding of homosexuality in particular. Specifically, Sedgwick points out while the heterosexual/homosexual binary is typically understood as symmetrical and mutually exclusive, it is inherently unstable because of the fact that heterosexuality “actually depends for its meaning on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of [homosexuality]” (Sedgwick 1990:10). This dependent relationship and inherent instability is further problematized by the persistent contradictions in sexual definitions. In outlining these contradictions, she notes,

The first is the contradiction between seeing homo/heterosexual definition on the one hand as an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority (what I refer to as a minoritizing view), and seeing it on the other hand as an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities (what I refer to as a universalizing view). The second is the contradiction between seeing same-sex object choice on the one hand as a matter of liminality or transitivity between genders, and seeing it on the other hand as reflecting an impulse of separatism - though by no means necessarily political separatism—within each gender. [Sedgwick 1990: 1-2]

By drawing attention to this instability and the contradictions inherent in the heterosexual/homosexual binary, Seidman (1997) argues that Sedgwick “wishes to reveal the instability of this symbolic trope and to disrupt its hierarchical structuring for the purpose of displacing or neutralizing its social force” (152).

Sedgwick’s ideas, as well as those presented by Butler, provide a solid theoretical framework on which to base this project. Specifically, Butler’s theory challenges the notion that sexuality can be predicated on assumptions about an intrinsic gender identity. For the purposes of a critical interrogation of women’s sexual fluidity and the dynamics of sexual identity development, this theory allows for a deconstructionist perspective of gender as a social category. Specifically, it frames the argument that sexual identity that is not inherently predicated on the gender of object choice, and it leaves room for the consideration and inclusion of those who may not identify with the gender binary or who may not identify as any gender at
Finally, Sedgwick’s perspective provides a theoretical framework that challenges the coherence of homosexual identity and posits its inherent instability as a cultural production.

Having acknowledged the path of development of sexuality theory from biological essentialism to queer theory, and discussed the relevance of Butler’s and Sedgwick’s theories, I will now turn to a discussion of the specific focus of this project in light of these theoretical frameworks. Specifically, I will address how the dominant paradigm in the study of women’s sexuality development relies heavily on a misguided essentialist framework that overlooks women’s tendencies towards erotic plasticity. After critiquing this perspective, I will present a contemporary theory, developed by Lisa Diamond, which takes a decidedly queer and deconstructionist approach to sexual identity development which serves to problematize essentialized identity categories including man/woman and heterosexual/homosexual.

**Intersections of Research and Theory: Women’s Sexual Identity Development**

While biological essentialism has faced significant criticism from the field of sociology in recent years, its legacy is still very visible in empirical research conducted on women’s sexual identity. For example, until recently sexual identity was generally understood from a scientific perspective as a character trait determined early in life and unlikely to change throughout the life course (Bell, Weinberg, and Hammersmith, 1981; Ellis and Ames 1987; Kinnish, Strassburg, Turner 2005; Money 1988). In light of this dominant paradigm, women’s sexual identity has been understood and often analyzed in terms of a rigid, linear developmental process that has a clear end. According to Diamond (2008), the dominant, and decidedly essentialist, paradigm assumes that the process of same-sex sexual identity development “usually begins with gradual awareness of same-sex attractions and subsequent questioning of one’s sexuality. It is supposed to end…with the adoption of a lesbian/gay bisexual identity. Once this occurs, no further change
is anticipated” (61). However, recent research has shown that women’s sexual identity development does not always seem to align with this linear process. Specifically, existing research in this area suggests that traditional sexual identity development models and stable sexual identities labels are unable to account for sexual fluidity, a phenomenon which appears to be more common among women than among men (Bailey 2009; Baumeister 2000; Diamond 2003, 2006, 2012; Peplau and Garnets 2000). Because of the social reliance on these models and on these rigid identity categories, women whose lives deviate from this traditional narrative are often cast as anomalies or falsehoods (Diamond 2006, 2008).

The process of sexual identity development, particularly among sexual minorities, has been a frequently studied topic over the past several decades, a phenomenon that has served to solidify this dominant paradigm of sexual development in the public consciousness. For example, Diamond (2006) highlights how this research is not only limited to the academic community, but is frequently utilized by well-intentioned parents, educators, doctors, therapists, and social workers in order to “raise awareness of the basic developmental process of sexual identity formation so that supportive adults can better facilitate this process among youths wrestling with nascent same-sex attractions” (73). However, despite its popularity, a small body of literature in this area, often working within the queer theoretical framework, has identified numerous limitations of this normative model of sexual identity development and the frequent inapplicability of rigid sexual identity categories among women. The two main critiques of this model are:

(1) These models are generally based on a masculine “compass” model of sexual identity development, which may lack applicability when applied to women
(2) The three predominant sexual identity labels allowed by these models (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual) are limited in their ability to capture the experiences of women’s sexual fluidity
In the review that follows I will address these critiques in order to establish the need for a new model of women’s sexual identity development that not only allows for change in identity status, but anticipates it. This queer critique of the normative, essentialist model will position gender as a socially constructed performance and sexual orientation as inherently unstable in order to establish a new theoretical framework as integral to this field of study.

Problems with the Masculine “Compass” Model of Sexual Identity Development

Existing literature within the field of women’s sexuality has noted that the normative models of sexual minority identity development are often based on samples of men who identify as exclusively attracted to other men (Diamond 2006, 2012; Peplau and Garnets 2000). Contemporary scholars, such as Lisa Diamond, investigating the phenomenon of women’s sexual fluidity have pointed out that the sexual identity development models that assume early development and stability are based primarily on men’s experiences because of women’s historical absence from research on sexual identity (Bailey 2009; Diamond 2008; Mustanski, Chivers and Bailey 2002). As in much social science research, the use of men’s experiences as the baseline for all human experiences has rendered invisible the unique experiences of women.

Recently, sociologists and psychologists have begun to argue that this absence has led to the creation of a sexual identity paradigm that does not account for the possibility that women and men may have drastically different experiences when it comes to sexual identity development (Diamond 2012; Peplau and Garnets 2000). Diamond (2012) argues that “whereas sexual orientation in men appears to operate as a stable erotic “compass” reliably channeling sexual arousal and motivation toward one gender or the other, sexual orientation in women does not appear to function in this fashion” (73). Specifically, while past findings suggest that men may tend to have relatively exclusive sexual attractions, the possibility exists that women may be
more likely to experience sexual desire and arousal for both sexes (Bailey 2009; Chandra, Mosher, Copen, and Sionean 2011; Diamond 2012). Supporting this hypothesis, previous studies have demonstrated that heterosexual and homosexual women are more likely to report changes in the degree of their attraction to same and other-sexed individuals throughout their lives, than are men (Diamond 2012; Kinnish, Strassburg, Turner 2005).

In attempts to systematically categorize sexual desire, many normative models focus extensively on the objects of individuals’ sexual desire, overemphasize the “role of ‘automatic’ desire (which is reported far less frequently among women than among men), and underemphasize the role of interpersonal and contextual factors in triggering and augmenting women’s desires” (Diamond 2012: 77). The small body of literature which has departed from this paradigm has found that while a man’s sexuality may function somewhat like biological compass directing him towards a specific gendered object, women’s sexuality does not appear to function precisely in this manner because of its apparent increased responsiveness to and dependence on social influences (Bailey 2009; Baumeister 2000; Diamond 2012; Peplau and Garnets 2000; Rust 1993). Critics of the masculine compass perspective argue that this model assumes that people have a specific, biological, sexual arousal that is exclusively directed to either one sex or the other (Bailey 2009). While this might hold true for men—the full discussion of which is outside the scope of this project—the existing literature suggests that social and situational factors such as religion, family, and education may have considerable influence on women’s sexual identity which can impact this arousal (Bailey 2009; Baumeister 2000; Chivers, Rieger, Latty, and Bailey 2004; Peplau 2001; Peplau and Garnets 2000; Rust 1993). This possibility for social influences over the life course therefore leads to the potential for greater
erotic plasticity and fluidity of sexual orientation (Bailey 2009; Baumeister 2000; Diamond 2012; Peplau and Garnets 2000).

As Diamond (2003) argues, the masculine compass model of minority sexual identity development is inherently and misguidedly essentialist in its construction. She notes that this model assumes that sexual identity develops relatively early in life and positions it as a stable, core identity that is defined by sexual attraction to the same sex. Taking into consideration the possibility of an increased likelihood of erotic plasticity among women, critics of this perspective, taking a queerer theoretical approach, argue that the development process does not end once a supposedly firm sexual orientation is adopted and declared (Diamond 2008).

Specifically, research on sexual orientation has been criticized for focusing on “end status”, which inherently assumes that the process of sexual orientation development ends when an individual comes out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Demo and Allen 1996; Diamond 2003, 2006; Pattatucci 1998; Peplau and Garnets 2000). This focus on exclusive attraction renders invisible those who may relinquish minority sexual identities at some point in their lives and suggests that perhaps they were never authentically gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Diamond 2003, 2006). Due to this perspective, until recently, participants in studies of sexual identity development who did relinquish their sexual minority identities at some point in their lives were often discounted as anomalies or reduced to random error (Diamond 2006).

This focus has led to a social dichotomy between those perceived to be true sexual minorities (those who come out early and have stable identities) and those perceived to be false sexual minorities (those whose identities may change over time) (Diamond 2003). However, in light of observations that the masculine compass model of sexual development may not take into account the role of social influences in women’s sexual identity development, the applicability of
normative models has been called into question (Bailey 2009; Diamond 2012;). Specifically, the idea of an end point in terms of sexual identity development may be unlikely. As Diamond (2012) argues,

According to traditional models of sexual orientation, the sudden “appearance” of same-sex desire makes no sense. After all, if sexual orientation is an ever-present, intrinsic compass, its effects should remain consistent over time. Yet if we…take more seriously women’s capacity to experience significant changes in desire due to their responsivity to contextual factors, then the sudden “appearance” or “disappearance” of same-sex (or other sex) desires at different points along the life course, especially due to her experience within an intimate personal relationship, no longer appears problematic, but instead, quite expectable. [77]

Therefore, based on the possibility (and likelihood) of changes in erotic desire among women, literature in this area has been calling for the development of a sexual identity paradigm that moves beyond the masculine compass model and specifically accounts for the unique dynamics of women’s sexual identity (Bailey 2009; Diamond 2012; Peplau 2001; Peplau and Garnets 2000).

**Limitations of Sexual Identity Labels**

In addition to identified problems in regards to development models and the masculine bias in much of the research on sexual identity, the existing research on women’s sexual fluidity has argued that the reliance on rigid sexual identity labels in the dominant paradigm of women’s sexual identity development is problematic (Diamond 2005; Savin-Williams 2005). Due to the possible likelihood of erotic plasticity and sexual fluidity among women, the socially accepted options of heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual may be particularly limiting. Research in this area has acknowledged two main limitations of the rigid gender identity labels in terms of women’s sexuality:

(1) The basic definitions of heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual are often unclear and open to interpretation
(2) The three socially acceptable sexual identity categories are unable to capture the true nature of women’s fluid sexuality
By interrogating the existing research on these limitations of normative sexual identity categories, I will be able to contextualize the need for a broader understanding of how women chose to, or choose not to, label their sexual orientations.

On a foundational level, recent research (often incorporating perspectives promoted by Sedgwick) suggests that the categories, heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual, are significantly more nuanced and increasingly open to interpretation than previously thought (Callis 2014; Diamond 2005, 2006; Savin-Williams 2006; Savin-Williams and Ream 2007; Sell 1997; Thompson and Morgan 2008; Vrangalova and Savin-Williams 2010, 2012). For example, sexual orientation is frequently determined by three main factors: sexual identity, sexual arousal, and sexual behaviors. However, as Savin-Williams (2006) argues, these “three components are imperfectly correlated and inconsistently predictive of each other, resulting in dissimilar conclusions regarding the number and nature of homosexual populations” (40). He notes that depending on which component is used as a measure of homosexuality, the rate of homosexuality in the general population ranges from 1 percent to 21 percent, highlighting the general lack of consensus on who constitutes a “true” homosexual (40).

While minority sexual identification (those who openly identify as homosexual) is the generally accepted measure of sexual minority status, research shows that this approach is not able to fully capture the experiences of populations that may have same-sex desires or behaviors but have not labeled themselves as sexual minorities (Savin-Williams 2006; Savin-Williams and Ream 2007; Vrangalova and Savin-Williams 2010). For example, Savin Williams (2006) argues, those who self-ascribe a gay/lesbian label are neither exhaustive nor representative of those with a same-sex orientation. If homosexual is assessed by same-sex attraction, there is no consensus about what proportion of an individual’s attractions must be directed towards same-sex others, or how strong the attraction must be, in order to count as homosexual. If homosexual is defined by same-sex behavior, gay virgins are omitted, heterosexuals engaging in same-sex behavior for reasons other than preferred sexual
arousal are miscounted, and those with same-sex attraction who only have opposite-sex relations are excluded. [40]

Therefore, research suggests that due to the likelihood of an imperfect correlation between sexual identity, sexual arousal, and sexual behaviors, the categories heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual are inadequate labels. Since women seem to be more likely than men to experience changes in their sexual orientation over time and seem to be less likely to experience an alignment of sexual identity, sexual behavior, and sexual arousal, these normative labels prove particularly troubling. Additionally, it is necessary to note that when this situation is analyzed from a queer theoretical perspective, it is apparent that this imperfect correlation is a prime example of Sedgwick’s claim that sexuality is not an intrinsic identity, but rather, a category of knowledge based on inherently contradictory definitions.

In addition to the observation that there is little consensus regarding what constitutes a heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual orientation, existing research argues that even if these categories were clearly defined, they would still be ill equipped to categorize the vast range of sexualities among women (Diamond 2005; Savin-Williams and Ream 2007; Vrangalova and Savin-Williams 2012). Notably, studies have shown that when given the opportunity, women often identify with more flexible labels such as “mostly heterosexual” (Morgan, Steiner, and Thompson 2010; Morgan and Thompson 2011; Thompson and Morgan 2008; Vrangalova and Savin-Williams 2012). In light of these findings, a variety of alternative models have been put forth to attempt to better capture the nuances of these individuals’ sexual experiences. While some of these proposed models call for the complete elimination of sexual identity labels all together, others call for more sexual categories including labels such as “heteroflexible” and “mostly gay/lesbian” (Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin 1948; Vrangalova and Savin-Williams 2012; Thompson and Morgan 2008). Furthermore, others argue that sexual orientation categories
must account for other factors such as variability over time, or person-based attractions, and should not be seen as stable, but rather, continuously changing (Diamond 2005, 2008, 2012).

Critics of the normative understanding of sexual orientation labels argue that these three categories have become so institutionalized in the social consciousness that they are often perceived to be “natural kinds,” inherent and biological, rather than products of social influences (Vrangalova and Savin-Williams 2012: 85). They also highlight the fact that the dominant models of sexual identity development and the normative sexual identity categories, focus excessively on sexual-minority milestones that assume adoption of a sexual minority label is the end goal (Diamond 2005, 2006). For example, Diamond (2006) argues,

All existing sexual identity models posit a final stage involving the synthesis, resolution, integration, or consolidation of a clearly defined lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity… and this final stage is presumed to be critical for future healthy development. Ambivalence or uncertainty about claiming a lesbian, gay, or bisexual label is typically taken as a sign that the individual continues to experience internalized homophobia and self-stigmatization. [82]

However, despite this common perception, some researchers have recently argued that perhaps those who are unwilling to adopt a rigid sexual identity label are instead displaying self-confidence and a willingness to adapt to changes in their sexual orientation (Diamond 2006; Savin-Williams 2005). Conceivably, the pressure to adopt any sexual identity label implies a rigid model not applicable to women and what is needed is a movement away from labels as a whole.

These recent challenges to the normative model of sexual identity development have established a need for an alternative model that anticipates sexual fluidity and recognizes neither gender nor sexuality as inherent or essentialist identities. For the purposes of this project, the most applicable theoretical framework on which to base this model is a queer application of dynamic systems theory, a concept first introduced by Diamond (2007).
Dynamic Systems Theory: Overview

Dynamic systems theory was originally developed within the fields of physics and mathematics in order to challenge perspectives that posited “nonlinearities as a source of complication” and to specifically position them as “requisite conditions for the emergence of ordered phenomena” (Kelso and Tuller 1984: 321). Early research within this theoretical framework focused on applications of this theory within the natural world in attempts to explain changes and growth within everything from the smallest organism to the earth itself (Lewis 2000). This theoretical perspective provided a framework to understand “the increase in complexity over time, the emergence of true novelty within developing systems, transition points that permit both structural advances and individual diversification, and the capacity for self-correcting stability as well as sensitive adaptation to the environment” (Lewis 2000: 39).

Specifically, this perspective offered an alternative to theoretical frameworks that posited change and development as abrupt, unpredictable, and random.

While dynamic systems theory began as a way to explain the natural world, social scientists soon began to adopt this theoretical perspective in attempts to explain the complexities of the social world. Researchers in the fields of psychoanalysis (Seligman 2005), personality (Lewis 2000), language acquisition (de Bot, Lowie, Thorn, and Verspoor 2013), gender development (Fausto-Sterling, Coll, and Lamarre 2012), emotion (Fogel and Thelen 1987), and general human development (Lewis 2000; Thelen 2005) began to use this framework in order to understand complexities and nonlinearities in these fields. A key aspect of this application was a focus not just on the final outcome of certain social phenomena, but specifically on the factors and influences that stimulate change and development. A Seligman (2005) maintains,

[Dynamic systems theory] focuses attention away from causes and effects and toward a complex and shifting terrain in which causes and effects cannot be easily parsed—in which effects and causes are, in fact always being transformed into each other.
Systems—organized in multiple levels—reorganize one another rather than simply responding to new events in easily predictable, linear ways. Contexts decisively affect outcomes, and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, because the relationships between the components of each system alter those components. [288]

Notably, this theory relies heavily on the interactions and influences of specific social and cultural contexts and rejects linear and reductionist approaches.

While dynamic systems theory has been a much-utilized theoretical framework in the social sciences for over two decades, it was not until 2007 that a case was made for the application of dynamic systems theory to the study of sexuality. In her article, “A Dynamic Systems Approach to the Development and Expression of Female Same-Sex Sexuality,” Lisa Diamond posits that neither biological essentialism nor social constructionism are fully capable of accounting for the nuanced path of sexual development. She argues instead that dynamic systems theory has the capacity to account for previously unintelligible hallmarks of women’s sexual identity: “(a) nonlinear discontinuities in women’s attractions, behaviors, and identities; (b) the abrupt emergence of novel erotic feelings and experiences in specific contexts; and (c) periodic episodes of reorganization in sexual self-concept at multiple points in the life course” (2007: 143). She maintains that nonlinearities in female sexuality that, as previously discussed, have been generally discredited as anomalies, random error, or falsehoods, were precisely the types of phenomena for which dynamic systems theory could account.

In her discussion, Diamond positions an application of dynamic systems theory as an alternative to the masculine “compass” model of sexual identity development. She asserts that the biological essentialism inherent in this traditional model is misguided and uniquely ill equipped to account for change over time (Diamond 2012). As previous studies have documented, fluidity and erotic plasticity appear to be legitimate components of women’s sexual identity. However, traditional models render these nonlinearities as falsehoods. Diamond
advocates instead, for an application of dynamic systems theory that would recognize variability as crucial for understanding women’s sexuality and would position it as the primary subject of analysis. This perspective would challenge the notion that there is a fixed end point of sexual identity, which reflects an inherent and essential sexual identity. Instead, this model asserts that over a lifetime, individual traits and social environments are constantly interacting and each serves to influence the other. This interaction leads to the expectation of variability. Therefore, the goal of this theoretical perspective is to understand how these factors interact in order to be able to identify when and how change will occur (Diamond 2008: 241). Diamond suggests that this approach would modify what types of data researchers perceive to be relevant and would perhaps highlight the importance of analyzing sexuality with the mindset that change over time is integral to understanding how sexual identity functions.

A critical aspect of this application of dynamic systems theory is the perspective that change is to be anticipated, specifically through the concept of emergence. Diamond defines this idea as “the coming-into-being of altogether novel behaviors or experiences through dynamic, unpredictable interactions among different elements in the system” and argues that by incorporating this concept,

Dynamical systems approaches stand in direct contrast to essentialist, organismic models of development, which presume that complex behaviors or experiences unfold gradually and progressively according to innate deterministic programs. Whereas the organismic approach predicts relatively uniform trajectories with consistent onsets and outcomes, dynamical systems approaches maintain that developmental pathways are necessarily idiosyncratic, tweaked by long cascades of diverse interchanges between individuals and their changing environments. This does not mean that development is endlessly, inevitably variable. Rather, stability reliably emerges as new patterns of thought and behavior are repeated and reinforced via internal feedback mechanisms. Yet such stability is necessarily dynamic, meaning that it continues to be susceptible to ongoing change and realignment as a function of changing environments and situations. [Diamond 2012: 78]

Within this perspective, the emergence of new behavioral patterns cannot be reduced to any single factor; variability is inherently an interactional phenomenon. Based on this observation,

The Present Study: A Queer Application of Dynamic Systems Theory

This question, as well as Diamond’s full application of dynamic systems theory, proves critical for the present study. My goal of this study is to understand the identity negotiations that occur when lesbian-identified women engage in relationships with cis/trans men. Dynamic systems theory provides a framework that recognizes that changes in sexual identity, attraction, or behavior over time is to be expected and that maintains that interactions between individual traits and social factors are constant and mutually reinforcing. Importantly, this theory has the capacity “to reconcile both stability and change by distinguishing between short-term variability and long-term regularity” (Diamond 2008: 244). It allows for significant nonlinearity over short periods due to the influence of potentially diverse contexts and events. Granic (2005) refers to substantial periods of reorganization as “phase transitions” which he maintains are,

points of increased sensitivity, when small fluctuations or perturbations have the potential to disproportionately affect the interactions of multiple system elements, leading to the emergence of new forms. Novelty does not have to originate from outside the system; it can emerge spontaneously through feedback within the system. Yet, regardless of whether the inducing event comes from inside or outside the system, change tends to be discontinuous. [401]

In terms of sexuality, these phase transitions (a partner transitioning or newfound attraction to an opposite-sex person, for example) have the potential to restructure a woman’s orientation, sometimes introducing new and unexpected desires (Diamond 2008: 243).

This dynamic systems approach has the potential to provide great insight into the negotiations made by lesbian-identified women who engage in relationships with cis/trans men. By framing these periods of emergence as anticipated, they can be recentered as the object of
analysis. Instead of reducing them to idiosyncrasies, random error, or “noise”, these periods can
shed light on what types of interactions and what types of factors can spark periods of
nonlinearity and variability in terms of women’s sexuality. Additionally, by employing a
decidedly queer approach to dynamic systems theory, this present study will frame gender and
sexuality as fundamentally decoupled and recognize the inherent fluidity in both categories.
Chapter 3
OTHER-SEX SEXUALITY AMONG LESBIANS: PAST RESEARCH

While research on women’s sexual identity development has been an expanding field in recent years, research that investigates the dynamics between lesbian identity development and men (both cisgender and transgender) as the object of lesbian sexual desire, remains sparse. Even less research exists that makes connections between the experiences of self-identified lesbians in relationships with trans/cisgender men, and the potential impact these lived experiences could have on the way we approach and understand the process of women’s sexual identity development. In the analysis that follows I will review the existing literature within two areas of inquiry: (1) Sexual identity negotiations among self-identified lesbian women in relationships with transgender men; and (2) Sexual identity negotiations among self-identified lesbian women in relationships with cisgender men. By providing a comprehensive overview of the existing literature within these two unique areas, I will be able to identify gaps in the existing literature in which to situate my own research. In order to contextualize my own research, I will note the lack of existing literature and the lack of a paradigm of sexual identity development that can account for the experiences of cisgender, lesbian-identified women in relationships with cisgender or transgender men.

Identity Negotiations Among Self-Identified Lesbians in Relationships with Transmen

While existing literature in this area is sparse, the studies that have been conducted on this topic have found that cisgender women whose partners transition from female to male often face complicated and frustrating processes of self-discovery and identity renegotiation after their partners transition (Brown 2009; Califa 1997; Hines 2006; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009; Nyamora 2004; Pfeffer 2009). While there has been found to be great diversity in the personal
experiences of these women, many who had previously lived as lesbians in seeming opposition to heteronormative structures of relational intimacy are often forced to renegotiate their identity, ideals, and anti-heteronormative beliefs when they find themselves in relationships that are socially defined as heterosexual.

With respect to sexual identity negotiation, a review of the existing literature in this area reveals four main themes on which prior research has focused:

(1) The inapplicability of universal sexual identity labels
(2) Frustration regarding lost lesbian community and transgressive social status
(3) Rejection of heterosexual identity labels
(4) Acceptance of heterosexual identity labels

In the review that follows I will explore these four themes in depth in order to provide a comprehensive overview of the existing literature in this area. This review will provide insight into the identity negotiations of a specific subset of people and contextualize the discussion of whether sexual identity labels are truly dependent on the gender of sexual object choice, or whether person-based attractions are perhaps a better way to characterize women’s sexuality. It will also call into question society’s reliance on the mutually exclusive, heterosexual/homosexual binary in terms of sexual identity labels and highlight the limitations of essentialist sexual identity models. Specifically, this review will highlight the foundational studies in this area: Pfeffer (2009), Joslin-Roher and Wheeler (2009), Nyamora (2009), and Brown (2009, 2010). By discussing this relevant theoretical and empirical literature I hope to be able to contextualize my forthcoming project.

The Inapplicability of Universal Sexual Identity Labels

In 2009 Carla Pfeffer completed one of the largest studies to date focusing on the identity negotiations of women partners of transgender men. Pfeffer conducted in-depth interviews with fifty ciswomen partners of trans men located primarily in the United States and Canada in an
attempt to understand their sexual identities in light of their partners’ transitions. Pfeffer discovered that before their partners’ transitions, these cis women primarily identified as lesbian. However, once their partners began the process of transitioning, they began describing their sexual orientations using a variety of terms including queer, lesbian, pansexual, omnisexual, unsure, dyke, etc. Notably, only two out of fifty reported viewing themselves as straight women in heterosexual relationships (Pfeffer 2009). Pfeffer’s study and others have discovered that many of these self-identified lesbians face significant personal negotiations when it comes to understanding the social and personal meanings attached to their relationships with transmen (relationships that are generally socially (i.e. in public) read as heterosexual) and the applicability and social legitimacy of their lesbian identity (Brown 2009; Califa 1997; Hines 2006; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009; Nyamora 2004).

In addition to Pfeffer’s (2009) study, Joslin-Roher and Wheeler (2009) also attempted to understand the identity negotiations faced by lesbian-identified partners of transgender men. In their study, they recruited nine women who aligned with the following requirements, “being over the age of 18, English-speaking, having partnered with a transman at some point during a gender transition, having identified as female or gender queer, and having identified as lesbian, bisexual, or queer” (36). In their in-depth interviews with these women, Joslin-Roher and Wheeler found that these women frequently indicated an initial, and sometimes persistent, frustration regarding how to label their sexual identity in a society that generally defines heterosexuality and homosexuality in terms of rigid gender categories (Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009). They, along with Pfeffer, observed that because normative identity categories like heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual are not perceived to be completely accurate, these women generally face a dilemma about how to identify personally and socially. For example, one woman in Pfeffer’s study stated,
I thought of myself as a dyke and then now I’m with someone who identifies as a man and I’m thinking—how do I identify now? I’m not really a lesbian. I’m a dyke but I’m not really perceived as queer by many other people right now: And it really messed with me for awhile—what am I? Who am I? Not that I didn’t know who I was, but what identity should I give to people? A lot of times I’d try to adopt my identity as my own and it doesn’t matter what other people think. But it’s hard not to judge myself by other people’s judgments. [Pfeffer 2009: 54]

These studies found that these women not only describe internal struggles regarding identity, but also regarding how to identify publicly based on social pressures to adopt universally understood sexual identity labels.

Additionally, some women, despite not wanting to abandon their lesbian identity, report feeling that it would be disrespectful to their masculine partner to insist on maintaining an identity as a lesbian (Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009; Pfeffer 2009). Not only did they believe that an insistence on a public lesbian identity would have the potential to ‘out’ their partners as transgender, but it could also be seen as serving to invalidate their partners’ masculine identity. One woman questioned, “How can you be honoring your partner’s transition and maleness if you actively state that you’re a lesbian? Because doesn’t lesbian mean that you love only women?” (Pfeffer 2009: 70). These negotiations regarding the applicability of the lesbian identity label draw attention to the limitations of universal, mutually exclusive sexual identity categories.

This prominent theme in the existing literature regarding the inapplicability of existing sexual identity labels can be contextualized by Valentine’s (2003) work on sexual identity, desire, and language, and Lorber’s (1996) work on the stability of sexual identity labels. Mirroring a Foucauldian discursive perspective on sexual identity, Valentine argues that due to the lack of language to identify individuals in non-essentialist heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual relationships (like those of lesbians in relationships with transmen), their sexual identities are often rendered unintelligible (2003). In order for the women in these relationships to truly be able to conceptualize their identities, they must have appropriate language not based
on essentialist notions of sexual identity. Valentine suggests that acknowledging desires that may complicate categories of sex, gender, and sexuality, may be a more fruitful and productive manner of understanding sexualities. Paralleling this idea, Lorber (1996) argues that modern conceptions of sex, gender, and sexuality assume that each person has one sexuality that is fixed for life. This common perspective proves problematic for lesbians who find themselves in relationships defined as heterosexual. Lorber argues that in order to account for these non-normative sexualities, what is needed is a deconstruction of the sexual identity category in order to erase these mutually exclusive labels. This holds the potential to “transform the commonly used term homosexual from a person with an identity, essential core, and major status to behavior that may or may not be practiced continuously, that does not characterize the person, that does not necessarily stigmatize” (Lorber 1996: 153).

Experiences Losing Community and Transgressive Social Status

In addition to documenting conflicts over how these women negotiate sexual identity labels, the existing literature in this area has highlighted the experiences of frustration that these women often feel over the perceived loss of their lesbian identity because of the role it played in their lives beyond the areas of sexual behavior and attraction (Brown 2009, 2010; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009; Lev 2004; Pfeffer 2009). For example, in her 2009 study of women partners of transgender men, Brown conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty women who were at one point in relationships with “a female-bodied person who disclosed being transsexual during the course of their relationship, which they had previously understood to be a ‘same-sex’ relationship” (Brown 2010: 563). Highlighting a deep commitment to lesbian activism and a cultivation of a strong lesbian community, one participant in Brown’s study pointed out, “I’d been out as a lesbian for over 25 years and it’s been my life” (Brown 2009: 68). This comment
and others demonstrate that some women are reluctant to relinquish their lesbian identity because of the camaraderie, sense of community, and unique transgressive social status that it affords them (Brown 2009; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009; Pfeffer 2009).

Brown, Pfeffer, and Joslin-Roher and Wheeler all emphasize that while there are clearly substantial personal negotiations regarding that applicability of specific sexual identity labels, even when these women may want to identify as lesbians, they may find themselves unwelcome in lesbian spaces. These studies and others have documented that within lesbian communities there is often an unwillingness to include men, women perceived to be heterosexual, and others that may benefit from male or heterosexual privilege (Lev 2004; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009; Pfeffer 2009, 2014; Nataf 1996; Wilkinson and Gomez 2004). For example, one woman in Pfeffer’s study stated,

> I lost my community. You know, I’m not like default in the lesbian community anymore…there’s nothing that takes its place. You lose the lesbian community and you really don’t get anything else. There’s not straight community. Not only that, but really hardly anyone perceives you as being part of it before [your trans partner is on] hormones. And the partners’ community –you’re only a valid member of that as long as you’re in your relationship, which has nothing to do with you and everything to do with them. [Pfeffer 2009: 76]

This observation highlights the struggles of these women as they come to realize that, based on universal notions of sexual identity and community, their identities are almost entirely dependent on the gender/sexual identity of their partners.

Additionally, many of these women express resentment for being read as heterosexual by society and for losing a specific transgressive social status (Brown 2009; Pfeffer 2009). For women who had once defined their lives in opposition to heterosexual and patriarchal norms, the realization they may be perceived as adhering to these norms can be troubling. For example, one woman stated,
I just sort of feel this level of boringness. I guess I have to say I definitely get off on the transgression of having men look at me and then kissing my girlfriend. And now it’s like I have men look at me and then I kiss him and it’s like, ‘Big whoop.’...It’s just not the same charge. So I think I miss that. I miss some of that transgressive sort of fucking with people’s heteronormative assumptions and now I’m just like basically following the script and it feels a little weird....[I miss] the performativity of being gay. [Pfeffer 2009: 72]

These unique situations suggest that when the sex or gender of the object of desire changes, the impact can extend far beyond identity labels. Specifically, these comments demonstrate that for many women, sexual orientation also entails community, camaraderie, and the rejection of heteronormativity.

Rejection of Heterosexual Identity

When faced with the dilemma of how to identify personally and publicly, research in this area demonstrates that many cis women partners of transmen (and the transmen themselves) report actively rejecting heteronormativity and heterosexual identity labels (Brown 2009; Pfeffer 2009; Nyamora 2004). For example, Nyamora conducted a study of femme identity development among 12 femme women who had at some point been in relationships with butch women who transitioned from female to male while still in the relationship (Nyamora 2004: 20). Nyamora conducted semi-structured interviews with these women with the primary goal of understanding how they negotiated their femme identity in light of their partners’ transitions. However, in the process he came to several interesting conclusions about the reluctance of these women to adopt heterosexual identity labels. For example, one femme woman in Nyamora’s study stated,

The thing that bothers me the most is that, you know, it used to bother me, my whole life it bothered me that I was perceived as straight. Everywhere I went, every group of people I interacted with, I, used to want to walk around with a banner or something (laughs). You know, "I am not straight!".... So when I'm alone I'm perceived as straight. And when I'm with [partner] I'm perceived as straight. And um, we're perceived as a heterosexual couple. And I just don't like it. I don't like it. It doesn't make me feel good about myself.

[83]

Another woman stressed the importance of her lesbian identity and its relationship with her
My politics were personal and I really wanted, I didn’t want to be perceived as, as hypocritical or as, you know, talking about one thing and living my life another way and all of those kind of things. I really wanted to be a lesbian. I wanted to be perceived that way. And being in a relationship with someone who was perceived as male would not be, would not do for my identity at that time (laughs). Because that was really more important to me than gender identity. And I have come to believe now that gender identity is not separable, separate-able from the rest of your identity. That it’s a part of it, but at the time it was very important to me to be a lesbian, and to be out as a lesbian. [88]

Based on these types of statements, Nyamora concluded that none of the women in his study desired to adopt a heterosexual sexual orientation label and several reported maintaining their lesbian identity. However, these women often reported that they didn’t feel like “typical lesbian[s]” and spent time trying to make sense of their identities (Nyamora 2004: 124). Notably, Nyamora also drew attention to the fact that many of these women adopted the label “queer” in order to reconcile personal lesbian identities with the reality of often being read as heterosexual.

Nyamora’s study and others have noted that the adoption of this broad “queer” label can serve multiple purposes. For example, it has the potential to: (1) deliberately reject traditional, heteronormative structures; (2) acknowledge the fact that because of the gender of the individuals in the relationship, the couple no longer aligns with the socially understood definition of lesbian; and (3) foster a political stance against normative identity categories (Brown 2009; Pfeffer 2009, 2014; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009; Nyamora 2004). For example, Pfeffer’s study found that after their partners transition, many cis women report ‘passing’ as heterosexual in certain public, social situations (Pfeffer 2009, 2014). Despite often being perceived as part of a heterosexual couple, one woman in Pfeffer’s study stated, “We both say that it’s a queer relationship. Neither of us are interested in passing as a straight couple or having people believe that we’re a straight couple” (Pfeffer 2009: 60). While situations do exist in which one partner desires a heteronormative relationship and normative performances of masculinity and
femininity, often both members of the couple actively resist these practices (Hines 2005; Pfeffer 2009). Therefore, the sexual identity label, queer, often provides a much-needed alternative to the straight/gay binary. One woman described,

At first I thought you could only pick ‘gay,’ ‘straight’ or ‘bi’; but I feel like ‘queer is more accurate. Because I think ‘gay’ implies one polarity and ‘straight’ implies another and it doesn’t include a grey area of people having a flexible self-identity-like for androgynous people or anything in that area. So I felt like ‘queer’ was a better identifier for me. Plus I feel like ‘queer’ carries with it a political component. [Pfeffer 2009: 60-61]

In these instances, the adoption of the queer identity label indicates the limitations of sexual identity categories that depend on the sex of the object choice. Paralleling the ideas put forth by Valocchi (2005) instead of a reliance on the heterosexual/homosexual binary in terms of social labels, this situation demonstrates that perhaps the basis for identity formation should rest on “sexual and gender practices and modes of embodiment” (754).

**Adoption of Heterosexual Identity**

In contrast to the instances of blatant rejection of heteronormativity and heterosexual identity, the aforementioned studies in this area demonstrate that some cis women partners of transmen willingly abandon their lesbian identity and readily identify as heterosexual (Pfeffer 2014). While only constituting a handful of couples, Pfeffer’s study and others document the situation in which sexual identity does appear to be directly related to the gender of the object of sexual desire and in which couples are willing to adopt the universally accepted notion of heterosexuality (Pfeffer 2009; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009). For example, one respondent in Pfeffer’s study stated, “We’re just a straight couple. He’s my fiancé, we’re getting married, we’re just a straight couple” (Pfeffer 2009: 62). In these situations, the research seems to challenge the belief that sexual identity is a stable, core identity.

However, the literature documenting this phenomenon also draws attention to the potentially transgressive nature of a cis woman and a transgender man identifying as
heterosexual. The argument could be made that this self-identification disrupts the very notion of heterosexuality because of the breakdown in the alignment between sex, gender, and sexuality within these relationships. Pfeffer (2009) argues that the fact that most transmen are socialized as women, and have not always benefitted from male privilege, implies an inherent ‘queerness’. Mirroring this argument, some of the women in these studies argue that because of their involvement in non-normative relationships, it is their prerogative to choose when to be subversive and when to embrace heterosexuality. One woman stated, “I guess maybe the other part of being radical or feeling radical is being able to choose when not to be…sometimes when you’re super radical, you get to not be radical” (Pfeffer 2009: 62). This perspective suggests that because of the inherent queerness in these relationships, embracing heterosexuality can be truly radical because those involved are able to access certain privileges that society believes are reserved for heterosexual couples that subscribe to stereotypical notions of sex, gender, and sexual orientation.

Limitations of The Existing Literature

Since the advent of queer theory and the new focus on transgender identities and relationships, much research has been conducted on the experiences of trans individuals and others in non-heteronormative relationships (Carrington 1999; Dunne 1999; Roseneil and Budgeon 2004; Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan 2001). While increased attention has brought these identities to the forefront of academic debate, critics argue that the depth of this analysis has been limited. For example, until recently there has been an overwhelming focus on the examination of relationships involving transgender individuals “in relation to theoretical (de)constructions of gender identity” (Hines 2006: 356) or in light of medicalized understandings of transgender identity based on a pathologized gender identity disorder (Benjamin 1966;
Lothstein 1983; Money and Ehrhardt 1972). Furthermore, scholars have pointed out that most of the early literature on transgender identities and relationships tended to focus on the narratives of transgender women (male-to-female), and overlook those of transgender men (female-to-male) (see Brown 2009; Cromwell 1999; Pfeffer 2009; Tasker & Wren 2002 for discussions). For example, in a study by Lewins (2002), the relationships of 55 transgender women were compared with the relationships of only 14 transgender men in an attempt to come to conclusions regarding the stability of their partnerships. While this early literature often reflected and reproduced problematic assumptions about this specific population, for a substantially longer time, the narratives of transgender men remained invisible within academia.

When the experiences of transgender men have become the primary focus of research, there have been concerns regarding the research designs as well as regarding the problematic ways these men, their relationships, and their experiences are depicted. As Pfeffer (2009) points out, much of this existing literature not only includes small sample sizes (Coleman and Bockting 1988), odd comparison groups (Lewins 2002), and a predominantly white, middle-class sample (see Nyamora 2004 for a discussion), but also, problematic assumptions and biases. For example, a variety of studies have been predicated on specific assumptions including that “FTMs prefer feminine women” (Chivers and Bailey 2000: 261), that “[FtMs] consider [a] relationship with a female partner, in spite of the (initially) similar anatomical conditions, as heterosexual” (Kins, Hoebeke, Heylens, Rubens, De Cuypere 2008: 430), and that the likelihood is very low that a transgender man would identify as gay (Chivers and Bailey 2000; Kockott and Fahrner 1988). These assumptions have all been contradicted and/or challenged in subsequent research (Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009; Nyamora 2004; Pfeffer 2009).
Furthermore, in some studies it is apparent that institutionalized heteronormativity and a reliance on stereotypical gender norms have served to frame the research. For example, in the article titled, “The female-to-male transsexual and his female partner versus the traditional couple: A comparison,” the authors, Kins, Hoebeke, Heylens, Rubens, and De Cuypere make the assertion that “there is no difference in the amount of sexual satisfaction a woman experiences in a relationship with a female-to-male transsexual compared to women in a ‘traditional’ heterosexual relationship” (2008: 434). This positioning of heterosexual couples as the “norm” and couples including a transgender person as the “other,” is a clear example of heteronormative bias. In the same vein, Lewins (2002) states the following:

It is a reasonable inference that FTMs’ relationships with women are more likely to be stable because both parties were socialized as girls and then as women. As women value, more than do men, the expressive properties of relationships and, correspondingly, place less stress on the importance of physical qualities, this wider pattern helps to explain the, arguably, counter-predictive nature of FTMs’ relationships. Despite the anatomical disadvantage of not having a naturally functioning penis for sexual intercourse, FTMs’ relationships with women are the most stable category. [84]

The reliance on stereotypical and naturalized gender norms proves problematic because it serves to universalize the experiences of likely diverse groups of men and women. Furthermore, the assertion that couples involving a transgender man are at an “anatomical disadvantage” highlights subtle biases on the part of the researcher and indicates a level of heterosexism.

When research on relationships involving transgender individuals does depart from the frameworks described above, it generally approaches the topic from the perspective of the transgender person (Chivers and Bailey 2000; Coleman, Bockting, and Gooren 1993; Devor 1993; Iantaffi and Bockting 2011, Schleifer 2006). While literature on transgender men has been a growing field throughout the past decade, the experiences of their cisgender women partners (the most common type of partner of transgender men) have been largely overlooked (Pfeffer 2009). Since the majority of these women partners have lesbian histories, understanding the
negotiations regarding sexual identity within these relationships—from the unique perspective of the women themselves—has the potential to provide invaluable insight into how sexual identity can be reconciled when the object of sexual desire transitions from female to male.

While the existing literature in this area is sparse, it does provide insight into the questions that arise in regard to lesbian sexual identity when the object of sexual attraction transitions form female to male. The existing literature in this area demonstrates that when the partner of a self-identified lesbian transitions from female to male, the lesbian woman often faces significant personal and social negotiations regarding her sexual identity. While some women attempt to maintain their lesbian identity despite the gender of their partner, others adopt the more inclusive ‘queer’ identity. Furthermore, others abandon their sexual minority status entirely and embrace heterosexuality. While these conclusions are integral to understanding the process of sexual identity negotiations among this unique group of women, the existing literature in this area has not made the crucial connections between the experiences of these women and the potential impact these lived experiences could have on the way we approach and understand the process of women’s sexual identity development.

Specifically, the observations made by Brown (2009), Joslin-Roher and Wheeler (2009); Nyamora (2004) and Pfeffer (2009) raise a variety of questions in light of the dominant model of women’s sexual identity development. For example, the women who choose to maintain a lesbian identity despite the gender of their partners, demonstrate stability in sexual identity. Their sexual identity remains intact despite the object of their sexual desire. On the other hand, those women whose identities change somewhat based on their partners’ gender, call normative models of sexual identity development into question. Furthermore, these women express that their sexual identity labels often have much more influence on their lives than solely in the realm
of sexuality. Community, social transgression, and lesbian politics all seemed extremely relevant to these women. This situation highlights the limitations of the normative model because it cannot account for (1) the change in sexual identity labels; (2) the role of lesbian identity beyond the areas of sexual behavior and attraction; and (3) the insistence on a lesbian identity while maintaining relationships with men. In the forthcoming study, I will address these limitations in order to suggest a more comprehensive and flexible model for understanding women’s sexual fluidity.

Furthermore, there are some limitations of these four foundational studies in regard to methodology. First, with the exception of Pfeffer’s (2009) study, Brown (2009), Joslin-Roher and Wheeler (2009), Nyamora (2004) all had limited samples (twenty people, nine people, and twelve people respectively). Both Nyamora (2004) and Joslin-Roher and Wheeler (2004) cited the following argument by Lincoln and Guba (1985) in their justification for their small sample sizes: "It is usual to find that a dozen or so interviews, if properly selected, will exhaust most available information; to include as many as twenty will surely reach well beyond the point of redundancy" (234-235). However, certain researchers have drawn issue with the justification of small sample sizes due to saturation or redundancy. For example, Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) suggest, "although the idea of saturation is helpful at the conceptual level, it provides little practical guidance for estimating sample sizes for robust research prior to data collection" (59). Furthermore, Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam (2003) claim that numerous factors could potentially impact necessary sample size including “the heterogeneity of the population; the number of selection criteria; the extent to which 'nesting' of criteria is needed; groups of special interest that require intensive study; multiple samples within one study; types of data collection methods use; and the budget and resources available” (84). Applying this concept to the specific
topic at hand, it is crucial to take into account the sample size necessary to account for the innumerable paths that women may take in their processes of sexual identity development.

Additionally, reliance on a limited sample reduces the likelihood that the influences of factors such as race, class, education level, and income level will be observable. Commenting on the overwhelming number of white, middle-class participants in studies of women’s experiences, in their 1988 article, “Race and Class Bias in Qualitative Research on Women,” Cannon, Higginbotham, and Leung argued,

> While in-depth analysis of small homogeneous samples is key to discovering the unique quality of subjects' lives, if this approach is used repeatedly on the same population, it can block discovery of the diversity of human experience. Although qualitative research on women has accumulated useful data in many substantive areas, too often the emergent body of knowledge excludes women of color and working-class women. [450]

Therefore, I would argue that the reliance on a sample size less than thirty-to-fifty is shortsighted and problematic; samples that are significantly smaller have less ability to expose the experiences of those individuals who may exist at the intersections of a variety of systems of power including race, class, gender, and sexuality. This is made evident when taking into account that of the 91 women who were interviewed in these four foundational studies, only 19 were non-white. In fact, while Pfeffer (2009) had a substantial sample size (50 participants), she noted that “despite aiming for racial and age diversity, only variation in age was successfully achieved” (45). Therefore, the existing literature in this area has been limited in its ability to account for the impact of racial dynamics, as well as the influence of class, education level, and income level.

In the section that follows I continue this analysis by reviewing the literature on the experiences of lesbian-identified women who engage in relationships with cisgender men. While this situation may appear to mirror the experiences of lesbians with transmen, the existing literature reveals some key distinctions. The manner in which these women rationalize their
relationships choices and understand their sexual identities holds potential for providing valuable insight into the negotiation of identities and the relevance of the dominant model of sexual identity development.

**Identity Negotiations Among Self-Identified Lesbians in Relationships with Cisgender Men**

Due to the institutionalization of the normative model of sexual identity development and the rigidity of sexual identity labels, self-identified lesbians who enter into relationships with cisgender men often face criticism and a general lack of understanding from society. Very little research exists which investigates the specific experiences of these women, yet the potential impact these lived experiences could have on the way we approach and understand the process of women’s sexual identity development is immense. A review of the very small body literature that does exist reveals two distinct ways in which the experiences of these women have been interpreted:

1. These women are discredited as “true” lesbians based on the assumption that their previous identity was a phase; seen as random error or anomalies
2. These women are positioned as ideal examples of sexual fluidity; seen as crucial to social understanding of women’s sexual identity

While this body of literature is undoubtedly small, the manner in which researchers have responded to lesbians choosing to engage in relationships with cisgender men, and the way in which these women rationalize these choices, holds unique potential for providing insight into women’s sexual fluidity.

**Lesbianism as a Phase**

As has been previously discussed, in general, society tends to understand lesbian identity as implying exclusive same-sex attraction and sexual behavior. However, studies have found that women with nonexclusive same-sex attractions and sexual behaviors are actually the norm, and
are more common than those with exclusive same-sex attractions and sexual behaviors (Chandra, Mosher, Copen, and Sionean 2011; Diamond 2006; Garofalo, Wolf, Wissow, Woods, and Goodman 1999; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael and Michaels 1994; Rust 1992). Despite this finding, women with fluid sexualities often adopt the lesbian label in lieu of alternatives (e.g. bisexual, unsure, etc.) (Diamond 2006). When these women are then included in studies of sexual identity among women, they are frequently treated as anomalies, random error, inexplicable, or simply “noise”, when they report relationships with cisgender men (see Diamond 2006, 2008 for a discussion). Additionally, these women are frequently constructed as never having been true lesbians or as suffering from internalized homophobia (Diamond 2006).

Furthermore, due to the influence of the dominant model of sexual identity development, these women themselves might see their lesbian identity as a previous phase (Blumstein and Schwartz 1977; Diamond 2008). This common theme in the existing literature demonstrates the extent to which society subscribes to the normative model of sexual identity which views sexual orientation as a stable, core identity.

The social construction of previous lesbian identity as a “phase” is a well-versed narrative in the social consciousness. Colloquialisms such as “lugs” (lesbians until graduation), have institutionalized the norm of women’s sexual experimentation in early adulthood, which is notably not supposed to be indicative of their “true” or “core” sexual identity. For example, in his 1999 article, “The Homoerotic Behavior That Never Evolved,” Frank Muscarella summarizes a common theme in this literature that attempts to differentiate “real” homosexual behavior from non-real, or “incidental” homosexual behavior. He argues that much of the literature on sexual identity tends to attribute short term or non-exclusive sexual behavior to situational factors including, “play (adolescent or adult), exploration, lack of opposite-gender partners, hazing,
initiation rituals, intoxication, sexual frustration, prostitution, boredom, opportunism, curiosity, and mistakes” (9). Additionally, as described in Diamond (2003), research in this area has also attributed incidental homosexual behavior to “ideological dissatisfaction with the institution of heterosexuality” and “unusually close same-sex friendship[s]” (353). Notably, these factors are constructed as precursors to a phase, after which, a “true” or “core” heterosexual identity will emerge. Because this phase is not considered indicative of a true sexuality, when women report engaging in heterosexual behavior after a period of homosexual behavior, this period is often not perceived as legitimate or deserving of academic inquiry.

Non-Exclusive Sexuality as Prime Example of Sexual Fluidity

However, a small body of literature has departed from this normative framework and has positioned these instances of erotic plasticity as crucial to our understanding of women’s sexual identity (Cochran and Mays 2008; Bart 1993; Diamond 2008; Rust 1992). Most notable is Lisa Diamond’s longitudinal study on women’s sexual identity development, the results of which at the ten-year mark are presented in her 2008 book, Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women’s Love and Desire. Diamond’s research is based on in-depth interviews with 80 nonheterosexual women who were between the ages of 18 and 25 at the beginning of the study. Sampling and recruitment took place in a variety of settings in New York state including LGBT community events, university gender and sexuality classes, and LGBT and women’s organizations at several colleges and universities. In her analysis, Diamond presents examples of women’s nonexclusive sexual behavior and attractions, notably highlighting the experiences of lesbian-identified women who have sexual relationships with cisgender men. Interestingly, Diamond found that more than half of the women who self-identified as lesbian in her initial interview, went on to have some sort of sexual contact with men during the following ten years (109). This contact
ranged from “fooling around,” to sexual intercourse and a handful of women ended up marrying men. Diamond explains that the women rationalized this behavior in a variety of ways. For example, some woman remarked that it was easier to find men with whom to have causal sex, than it was to find women, while others claim that they are better able to separate their emotions from sexual activity when they have opposite-sex partners (112).

In general, Diamond found that these lesbian women did not see their sexual activity with men as irreconcilable with their lesbian identity. One lesbian-identified woman who had sexual relationships with men stated,

I would say a large portion of choosing a lesbian identity relates more to the emotional connection…I’ve had sexual interactions with both men and women, but I don’t really feel that “bisexual” is accurate—well, it’s an accurate behavioral label, but I don’t feel like it’s an accurate reflection of how I actually feel. I feel much more fulfilled and connected and intimate with women. So I feel that “lesbian” is probably a better term for it. [113]

These perspectives demonstrate that often, the most important aspect of sexual minority identification is not necessarily sexual attraction or behavior, but rather, emotional connection.

Despite this belief, Diamond did find that women who entered into exclusive, monogamous relationships with men, often did adopt bisexual or unlabeled identities. However, she noted that these women adopted new labels even though they often felt that their “true orientation was still lesbian” (113).

Diamond’s findings regarding the fluidity in women’s sexuality after adopting a lesbian identity are not unprecedented. While other studies have generally neglected to comprehensively discuss the social ramifications of their findings, the legitimacy of this phenomenon has been documented and addressed in other cases. For example, in Paula Rust’s 1992 study of 365 self-identified lesbian and bisexual women, she found that only one-third of her lesbian-identified respondents reported being exclusively attracted to women (373). Rust acknowledged great
diversity in her sample of lesbian-identified women, noting that “lesbian identity is claimed by women who report that up to 50 percent of their sexual feelings are heterosexual, by women who have had heterosexual relationships they describe as "serious," and by women who are likely to have heterosexual relationships in the future (376). She noted that slightly less than half of her lesbian respondents had relationships with men after identifying as lesbians, with the proportion increasing as time passed. Specifically, ninety-one percent of her lesbian respondents who had been out for twenty years or more, reported having had relationships with men after adopting a lesbian identity (376). In addition to Rust’s study, in the 1980s a study of 529 African American lesbians found that thirteen percent reported that they were currently heterosexually active at least "rarely" and twelve percent reported having had heterosexual intercourse within the past year (Cochran and Mays 1988: 618). Finally, a community health study conducted in San Francisco in the early 1990s found that one-fourth of 372 self-identified lesbians had had heterosexual sexual contact within the past year (San Francisco Department of Public Health 1993: 27).

These studies, along with that of Lisa Diamond, suggest that lesbian women in relationships with cisgender men are far from anomalies, random error, or falsehoods. Rather, these unique relationship forms suggest that the dominant model of sexual identity development and the reliance on rigid gender identity categories are shortsighted and serve to erase the experiences of women who experience nonexclusive attractions, specifically self-identified lesbians who have sexual relationships with cisgender men. Due to the fact that the research in this area is sparse, the theoretical and empirical gaps in this body of literature are vast. Most importantly, to date, there has not, to my knowledge, been a study specifically focusing on the experiences of self-identified lesbians who engage in relationships with cisgender men. The
studies that have collected information on the experiences of these women have all been primarily focused on lesbians’ experiences with other women, leading to incomplete and undeveloped findings regarding this unique subset of lesbians. In order to legitimize these experiences, more research needs to be conducted which not only recognizes these experiences as authentic rather than random error, but also that centers these women as the subject of analysis and critically interrogates the social and theoretical significance of their experiences.

Conclusion

Overall, the literature in these two areas of inquiry ((1) Sexual identity negotiations among self-identified lesbian women in relationships with transgender men; and (2) Sexual identity negotiations among self-identified lesbian women in relationships with cisgender men), demonstrates the significant social need for a new paradigm for understanding women’s sexual identity. This overview of the existing literature within these unique areas highlights the lack of attention that has been paid to the experiences of self-identified lesbians in relationships with trans/cisgender men and the potential impact these lived experiences could have on the way we approach and understand the process of women’s sexual identity development.

While sociologists have been calling for an expanded sexual identity paradigm for some time, little has changed in the way women’s sexual orientation is understood. By investigating this topic further and providing much needed links between the experiences of lesbians with cis/transgender men and normative models of sexual identity development, I hope to contribute to the existing literature and provide support for a paradigm of sexual identity development that can account for the experiences of lesbian-identified women in relationships with cisgender or transgender men.
Chapter 4
METHODOLOGY

In order to shed light on the potential fluidity of women’s sexual identity, I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with two unique groups of women: those who at one point in their lives identified as lesbians, but then experienced a partner initiate a transition from female-to-male and those who at one point in their lives identified as lesbians, but later engaged in relationships with cisgender men. Between July 2016 and February 2018, I recruited and interviewed 20 women in each group. In this chapter I will detail the sample demographics, recruitment strategies, research methods, and data analysis methods in order to establish how this study has the potential to provide insight into how women who experience shifts in sexual identity and attractions conceptualize their sexuality broadly. Due to the nature of this qualitative study, in this section I will also address the limitations of the nonprobability samples I utilized and I will discuss the implications and limitations of the methods necessary for this type of study.

Sampling

Sample 1: Lesbian Partners of Transgender Men

The first group of research subjects was comprised of 20 cisgender women who at one point in their lives claimed a stable lesbian identity for at least one year, but then experienced a partner initiate a transition from female-to-male. While the initial sampling parameters aimed for between 20 and 30 research subjects in this group, due to difficulty finding participants as well as the observation that narratives were beginning to be repeated, recruitment ended after 20 successful interviews were conducted. The participants were required to be over 18 years of age, live in the United States, and identify as cisgender women who at one point in their lives
identified as lesbians. They could have been current or former partners of transgender men, but their relationship must have lasted at least three months and involved some sort of gender transition. Within this sample, the partner’s transition was broadly defined and included social, hormonal, surgical, and/or identity-based transitions. In order to account for the impact of various intersecting identities, I attempted to oversample for diversity in terms of race, age, and location.

**Sample 2: Lesbian Partners of Cisgender Men**

The second group of research subjects was comprised of 20 cisgender women who at one point in their lives claimed a stable lesbian identity for at least one year, but later engaged in one or more intimate relationships with cisgender men. As with the sample in Group 1, I initially aimed for between 20 and 30 research subjects in this group. However, due to a challenging recruitment process as well as repeated narratives, recruitment ended after 20 successful interviews were conducted. Within this group, these relationships were broadly defined and included anything from a relationship lasting at least three months to a long-term marriage. The participants were required to be over 18 years of age, live in the United States, and identify as cisgender women who at one point in their lives identified as lesbians. In order to account for the impact of various intersecting identities, I attempted to oversample for racial, age, and location-based diversity among this group as well. The demographics of the final sample of these two groups of women will be detailed at the end of this chapter.

**Sampling Rationale**

The requirements for participation of these two groups were carefully considered for feasibility, applicability to the goals of the study, and the possibility of making comparisons, and identifying parallels and patterns. For example, I chose to limit my sample to the United States
for feasibility purposes and purposes of comparison. Additionally, I created the parameters for participation within the two unique groups with the specific goal of making their experiences as parallel as possible. For example, in each group the women must have identified as a lesbian for at least one year and their relationship with a cisgender or transgender man must have lasted at least three months. These requirements excluded certain people who for example, may have had a one-time sexual experience with a cisgender man, a situation which would be difficult to compare to the experience of a long-term relationship with a transitioning partner.

Recruitment

Due to the nature of the study and the requirements for participation, random or representative sampling was not possible. Therefore, recruitment was primarily based on non-random convenience sampling followed by snowball sampling. Researchers have noted several limitations of this method of recruitment such as the lack of wide generalizability (Berg 2009), the tendency to attract overly cooperative participants (Petersen & Valdez 2005), and the fact that it often includes participants based on their membership in certain social networks (Browne 2005). However, in studies involving difficult to reach populations, the advantages of nonprobability sampling have been found to be considerable and often outweigh the limitations. For example, in comparison to random or probability sampling, this manner of recruitment has been shown to be more time and cost effective (Sadler, Lee, Lim, Fullerton 2010), it frequently enables access to small, hidden, or deviant populations (Atkinson and Flint 2001), and can engender a level of trust among participants that may not be feasible with other methods (Sadler, Lee, Lim, Fullerton 2010). Additionally, as this study is exploratory in nature, it was not designed to generate data generalizable to the larger population of women who fit into these two
categories. Therefore, the recruitment methods utilized were determined to be the most appropriate for the specific goals of this study.

With this particular study, I anticipated that gaining access to the necessary populations would be one of my greatest challenges. Browne (2005) argues,

The study of sexualities is a sensitive subject because there may be risks to participants if they are transgressing dominant heterosexual codes. The revelation of a ‘deviant’ sexual identity can mean participants suffer a loss of employment, harassment and even violence (cf. Farquhar 1999). Moreover, sexual issues are often considered ‘private’ and outside the ‘public’ realm of research. Therefore, Bell (1997: 414) contends that ‘probably the singular most difficult aspect of researching sexual geographies is that of access.’ [48]

Therefore, I anticipated that non-random convenience sampling would increase the likelihood that I would be able to gain access to these unique communities. Due to concerns regarding access to these communities, recruitment was conducted primarily over the internet. Recent research has demonstrated that social network sampling via the internet is the most successful method for targeting hidden demographics of sexual minorities (Kuper, Nussbaum, and Mustanski 2012; Miner, Bockting, Romine, and Raman 2011; Rosser, Oaks, Bockting, and Miner 2007; Shapiro 2004). For example, Rosser, Oaks, Bockting, and Miner argue that “internet-based research can advance the study of individuals who are more closeted, sexual minorities that are more hidden, and sexual concerns of limited incidence…Indeed, the more hidden the population, the more likely internet-based methods may be the appropriate or only way to research a sexual minority (broadly defined)” (2007: 57-58).

Specifically, in order to target participants, I began my recruitment by posting electronic calls on various websites and social networking sites including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Craigslist, among others (see Appendix A). I additionally posted physical posters in various public places in cities around the country including Boston, MA, Albany, NY, Los Angeles, CA, Chicago, IL, Charlotte, NC, and Raleigh, NC (see Appendix B). A specific effort was made to
identify groups and locations targeting certain underrepresented demographics (including age and race). For example, I specifically reached out to organizations and websites focused on queer women of color as well as those aimed at older lesbians.

As my initial recruitment progressed, I noticed a trend emerging in the success of certain recruitment methods. Specifically, the most effective recruitment strategy for the women in Group 1 (Partners of Trans Men) was through specific support-based Facebook groups targeting partners of trans men. Due to the private nature of these groups, I first contacted the page administrators and asked if they would be willing to post my calls for participants. While I did not receive responses from several administrators, two enthusiastically responded and posted my calls. In the end nearly three-quarters of the women in this group were recruited from these Facebook support pages.

However, the recruitment strategies for the women in Group 2 (Partners of Cis Men) varied significantly. When beginning the study, I anticipated that it would be perhaps more challenging to recruit women in this group. While my two sample groups were both very small and specific populations, my initial research suggested that lesbian partners of transgender men tend to be more visible in society than lesbian partners of cisgender men. Around the country there are a variety of resources for partners of transpeople including support groups through LGBTQ organizations, blogs, Facebook discussion groups, and social meet-up groups. However, this same type of support and visibility does not seem to exist for lesbian partners of cisgender men. While I intended to employ the same strategies of recruitment for both groups in hopes of achieving a large and diverse sample, I anticipated having to take extra steps to recruit lesbian partners of cisgender men. For example, only one participant in Group 2 was able to be recruited
through Facebook. I found that posts on other websites such as Craigslist and Instagram were more likely to generate responses from interested participants in this group.

Additionally, due to difficulty recruiting women in this group, I directly contacted individual women who had written about their experiences in various online venues through their posted email addresses. For example, numerous blogs and articles exist in which women discuss their experiences as lesbians in relationships with cisgender men. Because of the specific type of participant that this method of recruitment provided, I remained cognizant of the fact that the experiences of these women may be considerably different than that of those who do not make their experiences public.

This initial recruitment for both groups was followed by snowball sampling. I anticipated that the sample of participants for both groups recruited through the methods discussed above were likely to be highly involved in transgender/lesbian communities and activism. The second round of recruitment through snowball sampling, was designed to add to the diversity of this group. This method has been widely utilized in research on sexual minorities, specifically to recruit hidden or stealth populations (Browne 2005; Meyer and Wilson 2009; Mezey 2008). Additionally, while the calls for participants were created in order to maximize the number of respondents, I recognized that they would not reach all populations within these unique groups of women. For example, they were likely to target women who are highly involved in LGBTQ communities, cooperative and interested in participating, and perhaps of a younger demographic. Additionally, certain groups of people may not have identified with the language used in recruitment calls. For example, research suggests that members of certain racial groups may not adhere to normative definitions of transgender and may use other terms, such as butch, gay, or opposite-gender, to identify their identities (Kenagy 2005). Therefore, snowball sampling was
intended to allow me to access certain populations who may be missed through the initial recruitment.

In order to ensure that those recruited matched the requirements for the study, when I was initially contacted by a potential participant, a short conversation via phone or email was used to determine if this person would make a good candidate (See Appendix C). If the person’s experiences did match the requirements for the study, a time and a date was arranged for a subsequent interview. A number of women who initially contacted me were excluded from participation based on these conversations, exclusively due to their residence outside of the United States.

Recruitment lasted from July 2016 until February 2018 and yielded 40 completed interviews. Overall, recruitment proved challenging due to the specificity of the targeted populations. In general, I found it more difficult to identify potential research subjects in Group 2 due to my previously mentioned concerns regarding the general lack of social visibility of lesbians who engage in relationships with cisgender men. Due to these challenges, snowball sampling as well as targeted emails proved to be more effective recruitment strategies for this group, while online recruitment using electronic calls for participants proved to be the most effective for Group 1.

**Data Collection**

Data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. I chose this research method due to the requirements and goals of this specific study. Of primary importance, interviews have the potential to allow participants to tell their own stories (Seidman 2006). According to Seidman (2006), “every word that people use in telling their stories is a microcosm of their consciousness …Individuals’ consciousness gives access to the most complicated social
and educational issues because social and educational issues are abstractions based on the concrete experience of people” (7). Thus, the purpose of interviewing is not necessarily to uncover answers to specific questions, but rather, to allow participants to share their lived experiences, and perhaps most importantly, “the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman 2006: 7). For this specific study, the meanings that the participants gave to their sexual identities and sexualities were of upmost importance. Therefore, for this study, this method of data collection allowed me to reach a level of understanding that may not have been possible if I were to have utilized other methodological tools such as surveys (RAND Corporation 2009; Seidman 2006). Additionally, interviews allowed me as the researcher to play an active role in the data collection process by, for example, giving me the opportunity to clarify potentially conflicting information, emphasize or delve deeper into specific topics, immediately identify and pursue themes in participants’ responses, interpret and incorporate participants’ body language and intonation, and pursue specific topics should the participant indicate the greater importance of one topic or experience over another (Beck and Manuel 2008; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006; Opdenakker 2006; RAND Corporation 2009).

Interviews were primarily conducted via phone and video chat (Skype and Google Hangout). Additionally, three interviewees were located in the Albany, NY area and were interviewed in person. I anticipated that it will be more difficult to establish rapport with participants over the phone, as studies have demonstrated that face-to-face interviews yield slightly better-quality data (de Leeuw and van de Zouwen 1988; Jordan, Marcus, and Reeder 1980). However, I did not notice a difference in rapport or interview quality when comparing phone interviews versus video chat or in-person interviews. The interviews lasted between approximately 30 and 90 minutes and all were audio recorded with the participants’ consent. In
addition to audio recordings, I took detailed field notes during all of the interviews. The participants were not compensated for their time.

After obtaining informed consent to be interviewed, I began the interviews by introducing the study and asking an open-ended question about the participants’ sexual identity histories that specifically related to my three research questions (see Appendix D). Using a grounded theoretical approach, interviews for both sample groups began with a discussion of the interviewees’ paths of sexual identity development and how they initially came to identify as lesbians. Then, based on whether they were in Group 1 or Group 2, I encouraged them to discuss their relationships with either their cis or trans partners and how these relationships impacted their lesbian identities. The final section of the interviews focused on their current sexual identities/attractions and predictions for future relationships. The interview guides in Appendix D provide a basic structure for the interviews; however, I encouraged the women to extrapolate on topics they found relevant to their experiences and identities. At the end of each interview, I asked demographic questions for comparison purposes and provided the participants with my contact information to pass on to any of their contacts who may have been interested in participating in the study.

Ethics and Confidentiality

Before I conducted any of my interviews, I obtained informed consent from my participants (See Appendix E). I discussed the purpose and the goals of the study and explained that participation was completely voluntary and that they may pause or stop the interview at any time. I ensured the participants that their confidentiality would be maintained. Specifically, physical materials with any identifying information have been kept in a locked cabinet in my home office and electronic data has been stored on a password-protected laptop. Additionally,
pseudonyms have been used and I refrained from including any potentially identifying information (for example, omitting names of universities, workplaces, etc.). Because I anticipated that personal and potentially troubling experiences and feelings may arise during the interviews, I provided an overview of the topics to be covered before the interviews began. Additionally, I provided resources including information for the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender National Crisis Hotline, PFLAG, and organizations offering support for partners of transpeople.

None of my participants ended their interviews early and none declined to answer any of the questions I posed. To my knowledge, none of my interviewees experienced significant adverse effects from participating in the study. While several interviewees became emotional during their interviews, none chose to stop the interviews or change topics when given the option. The vast majority of participants were extremely enthusiastic and eager to participate and thanked me for conducting this type of study.

**Objectivity/Researcher Standpoint**

Joseph A. Maxwell (2005) argues that “there cannot, even in principle, be such thing as a ‘God’s eye view,’ a view that is the one true ‘objective’ account. Any view is a view from some perspective” (38-39). Acknowledging the impossibility of true objectivity in sociological research, I attempted to remain constantly cognizant of my own biases I brought to my research and how my specific identity and social position would impact my research. Because of my own lesbian identity, when deciding to look at the experiences of lesbian-identified women, I knew I would have an insider/outsider status within this community. This sentiment mirrors Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor’s experiences they documented in their article, “Going Back and Giving Back: The Ethics of Staying in the Field.” As lesbians studying drag queen culture they noted, “we are
both insiders and outsiders: outsiders as women and non drag queens, but also insiders in sharing a gay/lesbian identity” (484). They also noted that their shared queer identities helped to break down differences in gender, age, and class (493). While I do identify as queer, I have never experienced the instances of nonlinearity on which this study is based. Therefore, I did make my identity known to most participants which seemed to facilitate some sort of shared bond. However, I still faced being a partial outsider because of my lack of personal experience of identity variability. Additionally, based on the race and class status of my research participants, my white privilege and middle-class economic status may have been more salient. Overall however, I feel that by acknowledging my own identity and remaining committed to critically examining its role in my research project, I have been able to conduct a valid and reliable study.

Data Analysis

Following the data analysis structure put forth by Joseph A. Maxwell (2005), I began the analysis process by reading my interview notes, listening to the interview tapes, and transcribing the interviews myself (96). In order to facilitate the transcription, I used the online transcription software, Transcribe. Once the interviews were transcribed, I created memos for each interview which included my overall reactions to the interviews and specific notes regarding content that addressed each of my research questions specifically. I then began the process of coding using the NVivo coding software in order to identify emergent categories and themes. I employed an open-coding process in order to identify relevant themes followed by a process of more focused coding to combine and organize themes into useful categories (Pfeffer 2010). Through this coding process I was able to make note of patterns that emerged that related to my research questions using an inductive approach framed by grounded theory.
Validity, Reliability, And Limitations

Because this is an exploratory study, which has a relatively small sample size (n=40), I am unable to make broad generalizations regarding this topic. Additionally, very few studies have been conducted on this topic to which my results can be compared which makes determining reliability difficult. However, it is my hope that this study can provide support to some of the existing literature in this area, such as the work by Diamond and potentially, future research in this area will provide additional data to which my findings can be compared. While reliability will be difficult to determine, the likelihood of achieving good validity is high. Great attention has been paid to the methodology of this project to ensure that the manner and type of data collection will accurately capture the type of data desired. Specifically, the interview questions, recruitment strategies, and methods of data analysis have been carefully developed in order to ensure that the information collected will be valid and relevant. Finally, great attention has been paid to my researcher standpoint in order to recognize and account for any potential biases in the research process.

It is important to note; however, that this study does have several significant limitations. Specifically regarding recruitment, while numerous efforts were made to recruit a diverse sample in terms of location, race, age, and education level, only diversity of location was truly achieved. Specifically, white, highly educated women in their 20s and 30s are overrepresented in this study. Due to challenges in finding participants, and the fact that many interviewees were recruited from the same Facebook groups, this study does lack certain forms of diversity which are undoubtedly important for understanding the ways in which women experience their sexual identities. This limitation and subsequent suggestions for future research will be further addressed in the conclusion of this study.
Additionally, the way in which the sample groups were defined and subsequently, the types of women who volunteered to participate in the study, possibly represent significant limitations. For example, as was previously mentioned, existing literature suggests that this type of qualitative research tends to attract participants who are eager to participate and overly cooperative (Petersen & Valdez 2005), and who are members of select social networks (Browne 2005). As my recruitment and interviews progressed, it became clear that this may have been a significant limitation in terms of the women in Group 1 (Partners of Trans Men) who volunteered to participate. While the requirements for participation in this study stipulated that the relationships these women had with their transitioning partners must have lasted at least three months (and could have since ended), most relationships were significantly longer, and all but one were ongoing. Therefore, the women interviewed represent a select group of people who chose to stay with their partners and may have been more open to the idea of a transitioning partner than an average woman.

Additionally, the women who chose to participate in this study could have been a self-selected group of women who were generally more accepting of their partners’ transitions or optimistic about their relationships and identities. While every effort was made to foster a conversational environment in which these women could speak freely about their feelings, previous research has demonstrated that people often try to depict themselves and their relationships in the most positive light possible. Therefore, it is possible that people who were struggling with their relationships and/or identities may not have been completely truthful in their interviews or, more importantly, chose not to participate in the first place.

Finally, while it may be assumed that these women were relatively passive observers who had no choice in their partners’ transitions, these women did make the decision to remain in
these relationships, and had perhaps fostered relationships in which their partners felt comfortable transitioning. However, despite these limitations, the accounts provided by these women do have the potential to shed light on relationships and identity negotiations that have thus far been largely ignored in academic research on sexual identity development.

**Participant Information and Demographics**

Appendix F provides information about each participant’s age, race, location, education level, and sexual identity label. This demographic information was collected through open-ended demographic questions for which the participants could provide their own answers. For example, in place of offering possible options for sexual identities such as lesbian, straight, bisexual, etc., I asked my interviewees, “How do you currently label your sexual identity?” This provided a rich variety of answers including identities such as “butch dyke” and “polysexual” that may not have been captured using preselected identity categories. Table 1 provides the demographic information of my participants separated by interview group.

As Table 1 demonstrates, the women I interviewed were relatively young; 80% of the participants in Group 1 and 75% of the participants in Group 2 were between the ages of 20 and 39. The ages of the participants in Group 1 ranged from 27 to 57 with an average age of 35 and a median age of 34. The ages of the participants in Group 2 were slightly more varied and ranged from 20 to 67 with an average age of 36 and median age of 31. While I specifically attempted to recruit participants over age 50 due to the potential for longer sexual histories and richer narratives, this was only successful in Group 2. Whereas I was only able to recruit one woman over age 50 in Group 1, four women in Group 2 were between the ages of 54 and 67. The lack of participants over age 50 in Group 1 (Partners of Trans Men) is likely due to several factors including the fact that younger adults are more likely to identify as transgender than older adults.
(and are therefore presumably in relationships with people of similar ages) (Flores, Herman, Gates, and Brown 2016). This lack of data from older women in relationships with trans men is a striking gap in the literature and a necessary direction for future research.

Additionally, Group 1 also lacked the racial and ethnic diversity that was present in Group 2. Eighteen of the twenty women in Group 1 identified as white, one identified as black, and one identified as multiracial (black and white). However, Group 2 was comprised of eight women (40%) who identified as non-white: five identified as black, two identified as lantinx, and one identified as multiracial (unspecified). As will be discussed in future chapters, race/ethnicity appeared to be a significant factor that influenced how these women understood and embodied their sexual identities. Therefore, the lack of narratives by women of color in Group 1 is a recognized limitation of this study.

The women I interviewed had a wide range of educational backgrounds; however, they were generally very highly educated. All of my interviewees had at least some college experience while strikingly, nine women (45%) in Group 1 and seven women (35%) in Group 2 held graduate degrees. Although I did not specifically inquire about the social class of my interviewees, this level of educational attainment likely indicates that middle or middle-upper class women are overrepresented. Additionally, I did ask my participants for the current job titles, and only one interviewee indicated that she was unemployed at the time of our interview.

Finally, significant efforts were made to recruit women from around the country which were overall very successful. My 40 participants were from twenty-one different states and indicated that they lived in a wide range of city types from large urban areas like New York City and Chicago to rural areas of Vermont and West Virginia. As I will address in future chapters, this geographic diversity seemed to lend itself to diverse narratives regarding how environment
impacted the ways in which the women were able to construct and embody their sexual identities.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

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<th>Participant Demographics: Group 1</th>
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† Includes black/white and unspecified multiracial
Chapter 5
PATHWAYS TOWARDS ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF LESBIAN IDENTITY

The women I interviewed communicated varied pathways towards the acknowledgement of their lesbian identity, some of which represented more seemingly linear paths while others were better characterized by sexual fluidity and plasticity. Upon initial analysis the narratives presented by my interviewees in both groups, Group 1 (Partners of Trans Men) and Group 2 (Partners of Cis Men), were strikingly similar. While it could be hypothesized that women in Group 2 might be more likely to display non-linear or sexually fluid histories because of the assumption of their choosing to be in relationships with men later in their lives, this was not supported by the data.

Therefore, for the purposes of this chapter, I will discuss the experiences of the women in these two groups together. Specifically, in the sections that follow I will explore the emergent themes in these women’s narratives as they relate to the development of their sexual identity and the pathway towards the acknowledgement of their lesbian identity. Broadly, these themes can be organized into three categories: 1. narratives that convey the sense of ‘always knowing’ one’s sexual minority status; 2. narratives that suggest an unexpected onset of lesbian identity/attractions or an attraction to a specific person; and 3. narratives that convey mixed experiences or a history of sexual fluidity. Following this analysis, I will discuss how these women viewed the role of their lesbian identity in their lives after acknowledging this sexual identity. I will conclude this chapter with a discussion of the implications of these findings in regards to dominant models of sexual identity development in order to establish how these women’s narratives align with linear versus non-linear models.

Narratives of Lifelong Lesbian Identities
Linear models of sexual identity development often suggest innate sexual identities that individuals slowly realize over time. This model was most closely represented by the women who described lifelong lesbian identities and attractions. Of the women I interviewed, several spoke explicitly of always knowing about their lesbian identities or experiencing attractions to other girls at very young ages. Oftentimes, despite overtly religious or conservative environments, these women expressed awareness of an internal sense of being a lesbian or being attracted to women. As Paulina (age 61) described,

I knew the attraction was there from a very, very young age, playing with little girls. And I had at age 12 or 13 a really good friend that I would see during the summers only and we’d play around. You know, young girls. So it was there. It was always, always there. Always. So I do think I was born that way, born gay.

Amanda (37) echoed these sentiments by stating,

I guess I never thought I was straight. That didn't even cross my mind until I got older and then I was living in a more religious area and was like, “oh maybe there's a binary way of looking at things. Maybe I should be dating a man or something.” And I never really did that, you know?... It never really crossed my mind that I would be straight.

Additionally, some women expressed attractions and identities that felt to them so innate that as young people, they did not realize they were ‘different’ and believed that everyone viewed women in the same ways in which they did. For example, Megan (28) stated,

I think part of me assumed that the way that I was perceiving things was a way that everyone perceives things. And then going through school and especially getting into early high school you kind of realize that you know, what I thought was normal and was kind of the general—as that comes out and people start sharing and you start seeing other people's behavior and the way other people interact, you realize, “oh no? Oh okay. That's just me.” [Laughs]... Because I assumed when people thought that girls were attractive, because that's just because women are attractive, because they are. Like that's kind of the default of the world. But that is not how a lot of women feel.

Gwen (45) offered a similar narrative, connecting her feelings of wanting to be a boy as a child to her attractions to women:

When I was about 4 I remember seeing—and I was starting to get in touch with being a sexual being and I remember thinking that maybe I was really a boy and nobody knew it. Because I was attracted to the women and some of the ads and things, but men weren't
attractive to me. And so I started to get really worried about it for a while. But then I decided, in my kindergarten brain, that everyone actually liked women. They were a lot prettier. [Laughs]. And that women just decided to put up with men or something. But we all knew that women were prettier. That was my childhood rationale.

These women expressed awareness of their attractions to women throughout childhood and early adolescence, but many also acknowledged the impact of their environments on the expression of these feelings. Because of their social contexts, several of the women dated, became engaged to, and even married and had children with cis men. Referring to the knowledge of her attractions to women, Paulina (61) explained, “Oddly enough I was actually engaged to a guy at the same time. And I went on and I got married anyway, knowing what I knew.” Acknowledging pressure from their families, a handful of women described attempts to be heterosexual:

It was my first girlfriend and with her I had rationalized with myself because just how I was raised… I told her like, “you know this is just a thing between us.” And then when I was 16 I just was like, “I'm not—I'm not gay.” So, me and her, I was like, “we can be friends or we're over.” And then, I tried to like [date boys] for a while. And then when I was 19 I realized I couldn't do that anymore. (Yasmine, 27)

Once I was away from my family, went to college, just kind of like the standard, I had a crush on my roommate. And that's when I realized I was not able to control these things. But I was simultaneously in a relationship with a guy. But it was a horrible. Like it was a—it was really difficult for me to see I was more attracted to women. Let's put it that way. So and I kind of had to struggle with that and then finally, later in my life when I was maybe in my early twenties, I just decided that that was it. I have to do what I'm going to do. (Kelly, 31)

Most of these women who had significant periods of heterosexuality despite the awareness of their same-sex attractions, attributed these attempts to date men to their social contexts and pressures from a heteronormative society.

Similarly, several women also explicitly used the identity label of ‘bisexual’ to seemingly ease their way into a lesbian identity. Megan (28) explained, “I was one of those bisexu...
It was hard because I was always worried about what people would think especially with my parents, you know my family particularly. So I kept it hid for a long time. You know what I mean? Pretending to be this or that? And so I came out like, "I think I'm bisexual..." And I eventually just stayed in relationships with women.

While these women often labeled themselves as heterosexual or bisexual, and attempted to maintain relationships with cisgender men, these relationships inevitably ended and they all eventually claimed a lesbian identity label.

Despite relaying narratives of “always knowing” about their lesbian identities, these women did have somewhat diverse pathways towards claiming a lesbian identity and coming out to their friends and families. While they all described an internal awareness of their sexual identity, numerous social factors including religion, social climate, as well as the historical era in which they were living, impacted when and how they openly claimed a lesbian identity for themselves. For example, the ages of the individuals who expressed the notion of “always knowing” about their sexual identity ranged from 27 to 61. Therefore, they were coming of age between the 1960s and the 1990s when non-heterosexual identities were often significantly less socially accepted as well as less represented in media and popular culture than they are today.

Paulina (61) who began coming out in the 1970s, explained how the era and the context of being in the Navy influenced her path:

It was hard on two levels. One I was in the service so when we went out we could never take our military ID because at that time the military would kick you out and it was just... you were disgraced. It was a big deal. The military police hung around the clubs trying to catch people. And so it was like the Stonewall, you know, post-Stonewall, but still. This was a horrendous time.

Paralleling the inhibiting effect the Navy had on Paulina’s ability to openly claim a lesbian identity, a handful of women referenced how their religious upbringing hindered their willingness to come out. For example, Yasmine (27) remarked, “I was raised in a Christian household and I was raised to believe that, you know, being gay was a sin,” while Kelly (31)
described, “I was raised in a very conservative household where homosexuals were identified with pedophiles and bestiality and that sort of stuff, that it was something that was really repressed.” In these cases, it often took the women several years to fully claim a lesbian identity, despite indicating that they were always aware of their same-sex attractions.

However, on the other hand, some women explained that their social context aided in their ability to come out. While some women described very difficult and tumultuous paths towards accepting their lesbian identities, others recalled relatively smooth transitions. For example, Kristen (34) remembered, “everything that led up to being a lesbian and then now identifying differently has just been kind of easy for me. I don't know. I think I'm just super open-minded and I just have super supportive friends and family that it's kind of like a non-event-ish.” This sentiment was paralleled by two interviewees who commented on the impact of their high school environments and subcultures:

I was a nerdy kid and an artsy kid and so I had a lot of exposure to you know, fine arts and film and theatre and was really into graphic novels and illustration. And so generally I think if you are less part of the usual group of kids, you kind of get exposed to a lot more. And for a long time I think I chalked it up to being like the, weird artsy kid which gave a lot of room for a lot of eccentric things. (Megan, 28)

I was in high school from 2000 to 2004. And it was definitely a culture of like, Girls Gone Wild and bisexuality is trendy. So I thought it was—I kind of thought everyone was bi. I didn't think that it was different, that I was into women. Like, everyone was into women. (Alex, 31)

Similarly, two women described their discovery of the LGBT community as the impetus to openly claiming a lesbian identity. Amanda (37) described,

I only claimed [the lesbian label] because I needed to because of the community that I was living in. ... There wasn't a lot of grey area I guess—in either the homosexual community or the heterosexual community. There was just, you were one or the other. And so by claiming that I felt empowered because I had a community because of that.

Paralleling this idea, Megan (28) remembered,

I felt like when I found the gay community and the queer community and when I was honest with myself about that and started looking into, you know, social circles or events...
or activities or like queer culture or gay culture, gay history, my world kind of exploded. That became my new favorite thing. And all of a sudden I had some kind of like, sociological history to identify with. And you know I had a—not an ancestry—but like, there was a precedent and there were people before me, and there was mentors, heroes, and leaders and people that you could go back and look at, and follow. And I felt really connected that way because I didn't really have any other tether to anything bigger than me other than that. And so I dove in head first. I was definitely all about being the gay kid.

These diverse narratives indicate that social context can have a significant impact on one’s willingness and ability to claim a lesbian identity and/or come out.

Despite the varied pathways towards claiming a lesbian identity, these women relayed narratives that seemingly indicated a lifelong awareness of same-sex attraction and a relatively normative linear path of sexual identity development. Interestingly, however, when asked if they believed they were born gay/lesbian, these women’s answers varied significantly. It might be assumed that feelings of being born gay would positively correlate with lifelong same-sex attractions. However, only a handful of the women explicitly aligned with this idea. For example, when asked if she identified with the idea of being born gay, Yasmine (27) replied,

Yeah I do. I do believe that. I mean I'm pretty sure. You know, something about your social makeup has to—your social experiences have something to do with that but just from my perspective of always being told it's wrong and it's this and it's that. I don't think it's something that you choose to do. Because if I could I would be straight. I would make my mom happy, everybody. You know, life would be much easier. But I do believe it was just something—it's a part of my makeup. I don't think that if this thing would not have happened in my childhood, I would be straight.

This type of response seems to align with the assertion that these women knew from an early age that they were not straight and/or had same-sex attractions. However, a few women did not agree with this idea of being born gay whereas one was unsure. The responses by the women who did not believe they were born gay were surprising due to early age at which most of them acknowledged same-sex attractions. For example, Alex (31) claimed,

I don't subscribe to the theory of just like, "yeah I was born this way. Like 100%. Like it's not a choice." I think it's a lot more complicated than that. And I think in some ways it almost hurt us to have that, the argument be boiled down to like, we were “born this
way." I don't know because I really have come to realize that my sexuality is a lot more fluid than I thought it was. And it seems to get more fluid as the years go on.

This sentiment was mirrored by Megan (28) who described being unsure if she was born gay:

That's a catch-22. Yeah that's a heavy question. I thought about it before because if I—if you align with saying that that's the way you were born, it comes across as being something that's really immobile and that isn't going to move. And also I'm hesitant to say that because I feel like if you're born with something it means that people can try and fix you because then there's something there to fix. You know what I mean? Which seems a little bit problematic. At the same time I know that people, you know, if you go, not to say it's a decision but something that changes over time, I can see the pressure being that while if you can change or if it changes, then you can also change to be normal or heterosexual or whatever. So it's a weird thing. I think being born gay is maybe a stretch because in certain times in my life maybe I wasn't gay. And then, how gay is gay? Like where do you draw the line?

While more linear pathways towards the acknowledgment of a lesbian idea would likely presuppose beliefs about being born gay, the data did not fully support that assertion.

Narratives of Unexpected Same-Sex Attractions and Lesbian Identification

While a minority of the women I interviewed provided narratives indicating lifelong same-sex attractions, the majority of women indicated that their lesbian identity and/or same-sex attractions came as a surprise to them at some point in their lives. These women relayed stories that suggested they were not prepared for their attractions and realizations because of their prior assumptions that they were heterosexual. Within this category the women’s narratives reflected two specific themes: 1. A unexpected onset of same-sex attractions (often to one specific person) and 2. A realization of the internal truth of their lesbian identity. In the sections that follow I will explore these themes in more depth in order to shed light on the various ways in which same-sex attractions and lesbian identity can manifest unexpectedly.

Unexpected Onsets of Same-Sex Attractions
Within this category of unexpected same-sex attractions and lesbian identification, the majority of women indicated that they first began to acknowledge their lesbian identities when they experienced unexpected attractions to other women. For example, Margaret (38) described,

There was one particular girl at work that I had started working with and just like, awoke something in me and I had to know her. And when I found out she was a lesbian and you know, was identified as a lesbian, and was open about being a lesbian, it really intrigued me and it intrigued me more that I wanted to know more about her. And as I became friends with her and got to know more about her I became more sexually attracted to her. And we ended up having a sexual—emotional, physical, loving relationship.

Felicia (27) echoed these sentiments,

So the first time that I ever recall having any sort of sexual identity thoughts at all—I remember I was in 7th grade, and this is really silly, but this girl in my class shaved her head and I was like, "oh my gosh she's so attractive." And I just remember being really kind of startled by that…Yeah that was my first experience being like, "oh my gosh I guess maybe I'm not only, or very, attracted to guys." Like having that feeling towards my classmate and then being like, "oh I've never really felt that way before."

The women who experienced these unexpected attractions experienced them at various points in their lives and in various contexts. For example, one woman described her discovery of her same-sex attractions after she and her husband decide to experiment sexually with another woman, whereas several women described meeting lesbian-identified women in college and experiencing sudden attractions to them. While these situations might seem to suggest the social nature of sexual identity, as opposed to it being a biological inevitability, most of these women suggested that the development of their lesbian identity was inevitable and could not solely be explained by the specific context in which their attractions initially emerged.

While most of the women I interviewed who experienced an unexpected onset of same-sex attractions were adamant that social factors or environment did not cause these attractions, one interviewee, Juliana (22), explicitly stated that her same-sex attractions were the direct result of the influence of her all-girls high school. She stated,

I went to an all-girls high school. It was a dorm in Brooklyn, New York. And I was just—it was an all-girl school and I had a really close friend and she was a lesbian at the
time. And I don't know. I was around women all the time and women were dating women and that was the norm I guess. So I was like, “you know what? I'm going to try it.” [Laughs]. So I started—I dated my friend. She was the first girl I dated actually. Then I dated a couple girls and then I was with one girl for 3 years.

When asked if she would have dated women and identified as a lesbian if she had not been in that environment she replied, “probably not.” This interviewee was unique in that she was one of the youngest women I interviewed and was the only woman out of 40 who currently identified as straight, despite acknowledging she was currently attracted to both men and women. She seemed to approach her time as a lesbian, as well as her current sexual identity, with ambivalence. This case, while unique, is potentially useful for understanding diverse contextual impacts on the development of same-sex attractions.

Regardless of how these unexpected attractions initially developed within these women, over time, they eventually led to the adoption of a lesbian identity. For some women this process happened almost immediately, while for others it took years to fully accept and claim the lesbian label. Paralleling the experiences of women who indicated lifelong lesbian identities, the paths towards fully embracing a lesbian identity were varied. For example, while some women began identifying as lesbians very soon after realizing their attractions, most faced significant internal conflicts due to their social and religious contexts:

I grew up in a very conservative Evangelical household. So we didn't really talk about sexuality a whole lot other than don't do it. And also I knew that being gay was bad because my parents had talked about it being a sin and I grew up in a church that was pretty, not like super vocal about it, but like, I knew it was something I shouldn't be and that it was immoral and disgusting from that perspective. (Melissa, 33)

It was an extra difficult process for me and sort of a drawn out one because I was going to a Christian school. I was actually at a Christian Science school and my—when I first entered college I realized I felt like I was in a good place because I had all of these questions about my religion and I just really wanted to kind of figure some things out. And then when I got there fall quarter, I was like, this doesn't make sense for me because I'm not a Christian Scientist. And that's why it doesn't make sense. And then eventually, I sort of was able to, even in that environment, kind of find myself, find like-minded people, have a girlfriend and do all of that what sort of in this sheltered
environment (Stephanie, 34)

Additionally, some women specifically noted the impact of their ethnic and cultural on their ability and willingness to come out of the closet and/or embrace a lesbian identity. Luz (30) described,

I'm Latina so my family—I was raised Catholic. My family is Catholic. And so being anything but straight was kind of not an option. And you know what... the Latino population still hasn't come to terms with what being gay or trans means to our community. I think it felt like—I really didn't think about it and I didn't—it was kind of a given that I was straight.

Paralleling this idea, Malika (29) remembered,

It was difficult because I'm from the Caribbean, so Haitian families are not very open-minded with homosexuality. So it was hard for me to, first of all admit it to myself, because it wasn't really accepted among my family members. So it was mostly hidden for the first part—yeah for the first years it was mostly hidden and difficult to accept for myself.

Notably, most of my interviewees of color acknowledged the impact of their racial and cultural background on their path towards adopting a lesbian identity. Conversely, none of my white interviewees discussed the privileges that their race afforded them in this process.

Among the women who indicated unexpected attractions to other women, most had previously identified as heterosexual and had dated men. A handful of women explained that they had even married and had children with men before realizing their same-sex attractions. Additionally, some women engaged in relationships with men after discovering their same-sex attractions. Susan (67) remembered,

I should say that my first overtly sexual experience in high school was with my boyfriend whose name was Samuel. And we—I think it was either in our senior year or in my first year of college still in our hometown that I had my first complete sexual experience, consummated sexual experience. And that was also very exciting. You know? So I would say I was—I sort of had my eye out for women more than men but sex was plenty exciting with him too.

While some women, like Susan, reflected positively on their relationships with men, others had more mixed experiences. For example, Kim (54) discussed that while she experienced sexual
chemistry with men, social and ideological factors negatively impacted her relationships with them:

I dated a lot of men. Enjoyed sex with men. And at the same time I was also very much a feminist and I sort of had a lot of—I had a lot of difficulties with my boyfriend because I felt he didn't understand feminism. I was angry with him a lot about that.

Similarly, other women reported intentionally trying to date men due to societal pressures; however, some of these women described these relationships as feeling wrong or uncomfortable. For example, Tara (35) explained,

I date boys. I had relationships with boys. It never quite felt right. Like I always remember just being like—because I grew up with my cousins who are all around the same age as me—and they were boy crazy, and would talk about like, “oh you know we kissed and oh, all this.” And I remember thinking like, “am I doing this wrong? Because it doesn't feel quite right.” So yeah I definitely dated boys, dated up until… I was a sophomore in high school. And even after that I still went out on a few dates, just to be sure.

This feeling was echoed by a number of women, many of whom reported identifying signs of their future lesbian identity when they were still identifying as heterosexual and/or dating men. For example, Brooke (34) described, “looking back at little other things, I'm like, ‘oh okay. Well I saw signs,’” and Katherine (46) explained, “looking back on my life and my experiences, I realize, ‘okay yeah there were signs there.’” These signs tended to vary and included feelings of discomfort while dating men, attraction to or idolization of other women and girls that could not be articulated, and unexplained feelings of wanting to be close to other women.

However, in certain situations, my interviewees questioned the accuracy of their memories and suggested that certain signs of future lesbian identity may be a result of attempting to construct a history that aligns with present reality. Supporting this idea, in addressing her identity changes from heterosexual to lesbian to bisexual, Sadie (38) explained,

And I think one always reads back over one's life, kind of with the knowledge one has gained. So there was a certain period of time where I looked back on what led up to coming out as a lesbian and read everything as, "oh that meant I was gay. That meant I was gay. That meant I was gay." You know what I mean? And then later kind of looking
back again when things had sort of changed for me I think I, you know, I wasn't as certain that the things that I had thought meant I was gay, meant that anymore.

This type of insight suggests that it is difficult to conclude whether these signs were truly indicative of a lifelong lesbian identity that these women had yet to realize, or if they are unconscious rewritings of past experiences.

Realization of Internal Truth of Lesbian Identity

Similar to the experiences of the women who indicated surprise regarding their unexpected attractions to women, a handful of other women discussed a sudden realization of their lesbian identity, without attractions to a specific person. These women provided narratives that indicated that they experienced an unexpected realization that they aligned with lesbianism as a broad identity category. The experiences that sparked these realizations varied significantly but included: discovering LGBT chatrooms online, meeting lesbian-identified girls in high school, writing a high school essay on LGBT identities, and meeting lesbian family friends. One woman I interviewed, Brooke (34), realized that she identified as a lesbian while watching Ellen DeGeneres’s talk show, Ellen:

It just popped into my head one day… But really when I realized it, it's funny. I was home on break from college and I was watching Ellen and it just really just kind of hit me. And then I started crying, not in a bad way. It was like, “oh my God this is a real thing.”

These narratives demonstrate the potential impact of social factors and context on the realization of lesbian identities. While these women did not indicate that these social factors caused their lesbian identity, they did credit them with helping them realize their attractions.

Some of these women indicated that they were either unaware of LGBT people/identities or only had a rudimentary understanding of homosexuality before the realization of their own identities. For example, Ingrid (25) discussed the impact of entering a diverse high school on her understanding of lesbianism:
I maybe could have given a dictionary definition of homosexuality, but I didn't understand what it was. I didn't know what it was. And then in 9th grade I entered a very big, very diverse public high school and I attended there for all of high school. And pretty immediately I got to know another girl who was a lesbian and as soon as I understood what it was, as soon as I had a concept in my mind, I was like, "yeah that's what I am." It was very clear to me.

Based on these narratives an interesting question arises regarding whether these women would have ever claimed lesbian identities had they not had these specific experiences or been exposed to LGBT individuals/communities. However, like the women who experienced unexpected same-sex attractions to a specific person, most of these women indicated that their same-sex attractions were inevitable and wondered aloud whether previous unnoticed experiences were signs of their future lesbian identity.

Additionally, these women also had diverse perspectives on whether or not they were born gay. Of the five women who experienced an unanticipated realization of lesbian identity, three believed they were born gay, one did not, and one believed her lesbian identity was a mixture of biology and personal experiences. For example, when asked if she identified with the idea of being born gay, Samantha (27) stated,

Man that's a really hard question. I don't know. I think, yes a little bit. But I think there has to be environmental factors that allow that to happen. I think for some people they're just not in a situation, they're not in—don't feel safe enough. Or you know, many, many reasons to even entertain the idea and it's just repressed so far that it never ever comes out. So yeah I guess I think it's a mixture of things.

Carrie (57), who did not believe she was born gay, acknowledged the impact of the feminist movement of the 1970s on the adoption of her lesbian identity when she remembered, “in the seventies feminism was so strong and being gay kind of allowed me to kind of wrap myself into all of that even more.” These varied narratives perhaps demonstrate the impact of personal and social factors on the development and claiming of a lesbian identity.
Narratives of Mixed Experiences and Sexual Fluidity

Most of the women I interviewed provided narratives that indicated they either always knew about their lesbian identity or they experienced a sudden onset of same-sex attractions or lesbian identity. However, a third group of women seemed to have more mixed or sexually fluid experiences. The narratives of these women varied significantly and there did not seem to be any distinguishable trends between the two groups.

Most of these women indicated that from a young age they knew they were attracted to both men and women and some women acknowledged attractions to transgender or non-binary individuals. For example, Leanne (58) described,

So I always knew—I don't know if I said out loud that my sexual orientation is clearly bisexual. That I never had any doubt about…I always knew that sexually I was attracted to men and to women. I was not not attracted to women.

Similarly, Katherine (46) described the sexual freedom she experienced after a divorce from a cis male partner:

Between my mid-30s and my late 30s, I went through a divorce…And after that didn't work out, then I just felt this real freedom to actually explore that part of myself, and realized, "okay, this is the situation..." But I also started to—I was sort of exploring my own feelings and reading and spending time with a really diverse crowd of people. And I actually realized that I mostly identify as pansexual because I do have an attraction to women, but I also have an attraction to any gender really.

Some women seemed to grapple with social stereotypes and stigmas around the binary categories of heterosexual and homosexual, which they often felt did not accurately describe their identities. As Sadie (38) explained,

I think that there was some flexibility in my sexual identity that is the case with some people but maybe not with everyone. So I always had crushes on guys but I also had crushes on especially female teachers when I was growing up. And I remember being super into looking at my babysitter's fashion magazines, but because there were going to be scantily clad women in them. Not because I was into the fashion necessarily although I was too. I mean I was, because I was a super girly girl. I still am pretty girly. And not that you can't be a lesbian obviously and be girly, but it's not, it's not the coming out that you often hear of you know, where it's like, "oh I always identified with boys," or you know,
“with more masculine.” And that was never the case for me which actually made it confusing when I was first coming out because I just thought like—cause even though of course I knew what being gay was by that point and I just said like, that that helped me know that that was something I could be, I also—the role models were not feminine. You know what I mean? So that made me feel kind of like, "well does that mean... what does that mean?"

A number of these women seemed to indicate that they did not always have the language to express their identities or attractions due to the assumption that sexuality manifested in a binary manner. While people today are often able to claim pansexual or queer identities, these identity labels were significantly less mainstream even five years ago.

However, some of these women became aware of their fluid sexuality relatively early in life and were able to claim identities such as bisexual or pansexual before identifying as lesbians. These women often reported satisfaction with identities that did involve sexual fluidity or erotic plasticity. Perhaps surprisingly, unlike most of the women I interviewed who transitioned from a heterosexual identity to a lesbian identity, these women reported consciously transitioning from a bisexual/pansexual/queer identity to a lesbian identity. Notably, these narratives described specific social contexts and/or relationships that sparked this transition. For example, Emma (28) explained that she did not claim a lesbian identity until she was specifically dating another woman who identified as a lesbian:

I've always been on the queer spectrum but when I was younger I kind of just considered myself pansexual even not knowing what that was. But I hit a point where I was strictly dating gay females. And obviously at that point I was like, "okay, I'm a lesbian. This is it." ..... And so it wasn't until I just actually dated a lesbian that I was like, "okay, oh my God this is a level of intimacy I've never experienced. This is a connection and we're working together and the relationship is actually kind of successful."

Similarly, Galen (32) who had experienced identity shifts from bisexual, to pansexual, and then to queer, discussed the relationship that led her to claim a lesbian identity:

I still dated cis men… until I fell in love with this girl. And she was very masculine, but very much female, not trans. And we dated for over a year. I came out to my family as gay… I identified as a lesbian for that time. Like pretty strongly because of the community. I still identified as a queer lesbian but I liked being that. It was for me, like
really exciting. It was really positive and we would just go to all those events that I had been going to and I just felt very legitimated. So I felt like legitimized or I felt like I had cred in this very socially intense, cool, space. Whereas before I just felt unseen.

For these two women, specifically dating women who identified as lesbians themselves led them to claim this identity label.

Interestingly, the notion of identifying as a lesbian for a specific partner or due to a specific social environment was echoed by several women. Tristan (23) indicated that she “always knew that [she] wasn’t completely straight” and felt mostly bisexual, but claimed a lesbian identity specifically due to her history with men and because of her partner’s preference. She described how this eventually contributed to the end of her relationship with her female partner:

I think I had just been kind of scarred by men so it was easier to just say, “okay I like girls and that's it.” But I think one of the problems with my past relationship was that I wasn't completely gay so being in a relationship with somebody that thought I was completely gay, I just felt like I was living a lie. And I didn't really know... it just made everything kind of awkward because in the end I told her, “I'm not completely gay and I don't know how you feel about that. I don't know how I feel about being in this relationship.”

Additionally, Leanne (58) who discussed her lifelong awareness of her bisexual attractions, explained how she came to identify as a lesbian due to the time period in which she came of age:

I came of age in the 80s which was, you might say, the second flowering of the women's movement. So it was a—there was a very strong community of feminist women which was a needed corrective for myself and for all of us having grown up in male-dominated households and cultures [...] So the 80s was a big flowering of that valuing of the feminine and I was very involved with women's spirituality [...] I want to make clear that it was very much in the context of this valuing of the feminine that I came to identify as lesbian.

The narratives provided by the women in this group perhaps most closely represent non-linear pathways of sexual identity development and pure manifestations of erotic plasticity.

Specifically, while the transition from a heterosexual to a lesbian/gay identity could be explained by linear compass models, the phenomenon of transitioning from a bisexual/pansexual/queer
identity to a lesbian identity cannot be. These types of narratives suggest potentially fluid sexual identities that can be shaped by social factors such as political/social ideology, gender of current partner, or even pressure from one’s partner.

**Role of Lesbian Identity in Life**

Once the women I interviewed claimed lesbian identities, they often experienced these identities very differently. Specifically, these women reported: (1) different levels of attachment to their lesbian identities; (2) varied sexual attractions that, in some cases, did not normatively align with social understandings of lesbianism; and (3) diverse sexual behaviors and relationships. In the section that follows I will explore these themes in more detail in order to illustrate the diverse ways in which these women understood and embodied their lesbian identities.

*Attachment to Lesbian Identity*

The women I interviewed overwhelmingly indicated that after coming out, their lesbian identities were important aspects of their experiences. When asked to describe the role of their lesbian identity in their lives, the majority of women in both groups described this identity as foundational to how they viewed themselves either in terms of identity, community, and/or political beliefs/activism. For example, in terms of identity, most women provided narratives that suggested that at least for a period in their lives, being a lesbian became a critical aspect of their identities. Carrie (57) stated, “I was just completely lesbian identified you know? There wasn't a spectrum for me. It was just lesbian.” This sentiment was echoed by Alex (31) who described that she decided to fully embody a lesbian identity because of sociopolitical factors that she believed were causing lesbian identities to be disparaged:

Specifically being a lesbian felt important to me because I felt like it's this dying term in my generation. That like, being a lesbian is like, passé. […] I remember sitting one time
in a group and it was all a bunch of us queers in a lounge in the LGBT office [in college] and this other woman […] she goes, "you know who I hate? Gay people." And everyone laughed. Because she meant like, you know, people that are just monosexual and apolitical and you know, homonormative and all that fun queer theory academic talk. And I got really mad because I'm like, "I identify as gay."

Because of the popularity of other identity labels such as queer or pansexual over labels such as lesbian or gay, Alex described wanting to, in a sense, reclaim this label. These types of narratives suggest that claiming a lesbian identity could perhaps involve a connection to a history and a set of experiences which extend beyond sexual attractions and behaviors and which people may desire to claim for a multitude of reasons.

Most of these women who described their lesbian identities as integral parts of their experiences, also described the important role of lesbian communities in their lives. Leanne (58) remembered, “My life was organized around being part of the women's community. It was a central organizing feature of my experience.” Similarly, several women explained how their identities became linked with their communities:

It was a really important part of my identity and community and we were trying to go out and connect with other people who were also gay and lesbian. So yeah, I think it was a big part in shaping who I saw myself as. Like if you would have asked myself, “who are you? How do you identify as a human being?” At that time ‘lesbian’ would have been one of the top things because it was a huge part. I mean, that was my whole—it was one of those big struggles that I had in a time where I was coming of age. So it was a big thing. (Melissa, 33)

Yeah it definitely was my social circle. It was my—I just fully started identifying as a gay woman and spending time with people in the LGBT community and felt so at home and it just felt so right. I remember when that started happening for me, I started putting myself in situations that were a little bit uncomfortable but I just wanted to get out there and meet people and become part of that community. It was so—it was just—I can't even describe the feeling. It was very much—I just knew that that was right for me. (Katherine, 46)

These women’s narratives demonstrate how lesbian communities provided support, identity validation, and social opportunities that were often lacking in other parts of their lives.
In addition to identity and community, several women noted the important role lesbianism played in terms of their political beliefs and activism. Ingrid (25) described:

I was very, very politically active in high school and I think that that tied in with being gay as well because I was in high school from 2006 to 2010 and those were really big years. I feel really when I was in high school is sort of when the switch started to happen where being gay sort of went from being this sort of weird thing that people weren't very educated about to being sort of mainstream almost. Like everyone knew about it and there were a lot more Pride marches going on and people were sort of pushing for more acceptance. I was very politically active in— I was on the debate team and some sort of high school political advocacy group. And so I think that’s part of the reason it was important to me. It tied in with my politics.

Similarly, Kim (54) explained how her lesbian identity and her relationship with her partner at the time provided an opportunity for a specific form of political activism:

We were heavily involved in GLSEN which is the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network […]. We're also—and we were also heavily involved in a lot of activism around marriage, around same sex marriage. And we went to San Francisco and got legally married there when the governor decided he was going to break the law and allow people to come to city hall and get married. And then you know those were nullified. And then we got married before Prop 8 was passed in California and you know, we were some—a number of—I don't remember how many—whatever 4,000, 3,000 gay couples who got married before same-sex marriage was banned by Prop 8 when that passed.

These women and others explained how their political beliefs and activism became heavily intertwined with their identities and communities after claiming a lesbian identity. For example, Amanda (37) remembered:

I needed a community especially when I first came out to people because of where I lived. And that very much became part of my identity that way. Also you know I've done a lot of activism and work with the LGBT community and so by having that identity strong also helped me fit into that community in a way. And I think also just having descriptive words to describe my experience with people was also empowering.

These types of narratives suggest that while it is often assumed that sexual identity is simply a label used to denote sexual attractions and behaviors, the impact of this label can extend far beyond this realm and influence most, if not all, aspects of a person’s life. Illustrating this idea, Gwen (45) described that claiming a lesbian identity allowed her to escape traditional heteronormative and gender normative narratives about what sexuality can and should look like:
I felt like it solved some of my problems. I had this whole other possibility. I could make up what a relationship looked like. You know? I didn't have some mold I was trying to fight against. My partners and I could make up how we wanted to be together and that was really exciting and freeing to me. And I also—it was important to me too that we could make up how we had sex too. I mean there are so many layers of gross crap that's already out there when you’re heterosexual and learning about sexuality, right? There's already all of this symbolism, and ew. Just yuck. So I was really excited about that as well.

Gwen and the other women who indicated that their lesbian identities were integral aspects of their experiences, stressed that being a lesbian influenced not only the ways in which they approached sexuality, but also community, politics, and activism.

Similarly, a handful of women in both groups explained that while being a lesbian may not have been a defining characteristic of their identities, it was still relatively important in their everyday lives. For example, Samantha (27) explained,

I [didn’t] run around carrying a flag and people who pass me on the street probably don't think about it. But I definitely [had] a community of lots and lots of lesbian friends […] I guess it's not just reserved to who I'm dating. But it's—I definitely [had] a community with the same orientation.

Paralleling this experience, Yasmine (27) described that while she was open about being a lesbian, this did not explicitly extend to community and activism: “If you looked on one of my social media profiles, I would say that I was a lesbian. But it wasn't like I was advocating for gay rights. Like I didn't—I never dressed up in rainbows to go to Pride.”

While Yasmine indicated that she was never significantly involved in the lesbian community, other women discussed how their involvement, as well as the importance of their lesbian identities, changed over time. For example, Tara (35) remembered that the importance of her lesbian identity somewhat declined over time as she got older:

Well I actually have gone through stages, so I think when I was in college it was very important to my life. You know, I was out on my campus. I was very involved, actively involved on campus. And people kind of knew me as like, I was the gay RA. And I was you know—it was always a very proud thing for me at that point in my life. I would say as I got a little older it just became kind of—I synthesized. It became a part of who I was and who I am. And so it wasn't… yeah, I would say then it was a point of pride. You
know, I went to the pride parades. I went to gay bars. I went and did those things. And then as I got older it became just another piece of me.

As these anecdotes suggest, the majority of the women I interviewed reported feeling very connected to their lesbian identities. However, the roles that these identities played in their lives did vary somewhat. While most women reported being involved in lesbian communities and activism, a handful of others reported having less of a desire to incorporate their identities into their lives in these ways.

Despite the general significance of lesbian identity in the lives of my interviewees, a few women reported that their lesbian attractions were either only slightly important in their daily lives, or not important at all. Sadie (38) described,

> It never felt like being gay was a huge part of my identity. It just—and in fact it's irritating to me. I know that some of what I'm saying is totally offensive but it irritates me when people make it central to their identity because I feel like maybe they don't have enough else going on. [...] I just feel like I'm a collection of all the things that I am and so the idea that being born this way and this is how I am... I just don't really relate to that.

She went on to explain that while her lesbian identity did play a role in her life, this did not translate into a lesbian social circle or an involvement in the lesbian community:

> It was important to me in the sense that it gave my life a narrative structure. I understood all of the events as part of this. So I think it was important to me in terms of like just understanding things. I never felt like I fit in with lesbians. And that was a point of frustration for me. [...] I felt really alienated from lesbians often because—and I think that it has changed a little bit. It could have been the people who I knew but I just didn't get the sense that as a femme I was accepted. I felt like people were suspicious of me and I wasn't real. And it was really, really irritating to me. And I also didn't really have much of a lesbian community at all.

Juliana (22) also highlighted the lack of importance of her same-sex attractions in her life and seemed to describe the period in which she identified as a lesbian with ambivalence:

> Yeah it was—[being a lesbian] didn't matter. I've never been to Pride. I hung out with lesbians, I guess, at the school that I went to. But other than that, I kept my normal life. I was friends with people I was always friends with. I introduced [my girlfriend] to my friends. I brought her around my friends. I brought her around my family. But nothing really changed. I didn't change my social life or anything.
While this perspective was held by only a few women, it is necessary to consider how a loose connection to a lesbian identity might impact a willingness to relinquish it or change it later in life. This critical question and a more in-depth discussion of the influence of later relationships with cis or trans men on changing identity labels will be explored further in Chapter 6.

Finally, two women indicated that while they may have wanted their lesbian identities to play a more substantial role in their lives due to personal factors, they were unable. Kelly (28) described how being raised in a conservative and homophobic family limited her willingness to become more involved in the lesbian community:

I feel like I wanted to have a lesbian identity for sure because I wanted to feel—to find somewhere where I could feel more accepted for who I was. But again, I was just so hesitant. I kind of just kept it secret and didn't want to like—I'm terrible at keeping things from people, especially my family. So if I went to like a gay pride event I felt like somehow they would find out. [Laughs]. I'd be in all sorts of deep water with them. So I definitely wanted to participate in that but I couldn't.

Similarly, Ulya (20) discussed a desire to have a stronger lesbian identity but because the lack of a lesbian community in her area, she felt disconnected and unable to find lesbians to befriend or date. Despite identifying as a lesbian at one point in her life, she stated, “Nothing really happened with that because I couldn't find a lot of places to meet up with other lesbians or other girls. [...] I guess around here there isn't that much of a lesbian community.” Due to this situation, Ulya later discussed choosing to date men.

Sexual Attractions

These narratives suggest that while these women had somewhat varied experiences with their lesbian identities, the vast majority described feeling very connected to lesbianism politically, socially, and in terms of their identities. Aligning with this identity, most of the women interviewed reported feeling exclusively attracted to women while identifying as a lesbian. For example, when asked whether she experienced any attractions to men while
claiming a lesbian identity, Emma (28) replied, “Nope. I found myself strictly looking at women. I didn't think about men. I didn't look at men. I was so happy to not have to look at them or think about them or, you know?” Furthermore, some women in this category of women-exclusive attractions explicitly reported being primarily attracted to butch women:

It was exclusively all about women. And you know, the butcher, the better. They were really cute and really attractive to me. And the whole gender-bending thing was really exciting to me. And I really admired the few men that I knew that were sort of gender-bending too. I thought that was just the coolest thing ever. But it was the butcher women that I was really attracted to. But to me that was absolutely 100% lesbian. (Gwen, 45)

I was exclusively attracted to women although I was attracted to women that were more on the masculine spectrum. So I've always—actually every woman that I've dated has been a little bit on the butch side. So I've been attracted to masculine women. (Tara, 35)

While most women discussed attractions to women regardless of masculine or feminine presentation, the notion of attraction to butch women (and female masculinity in general) is a factor that could potentially influence a future willingness to date cis or trans men. This idea will be discussed further in Chapters 6 and 7.

While this sentiment of women-exclusive attractions was echoed by a majority of my interviewees, a number of women did report some fluidity in attractions, despite claiming a lesbian identity. For example, when asked if she was exclusively attracted to women during the period she claimed a lesbian identity, Sadie (38) explained,

No. I was always—I never really—I would say I have more of a—my fantasy life was more heterosexual. I think almost always. Before I started dating women it was both in that I started dating women and then it was both and then it became more actually heterosexual. Which I was actually pretty comfortable with. [...] I think initially I had some sort of weird feelings about it politically. Kind of like, “oh is this right?” And then I was like, “well fuck it. It's just my fantasy life. It's whatever.” So I was aware of being attracted to men but I also had like… “eh, I don't want to deal with the actual men.” I thought it was just a fantasy thing. I didn't think it was something that would ever be part of my reality. I definitely didn't. I felt pretty certain of that actually.

Additionally, Amanda (37) described how she likely was attracted to men while identifying as a lesbian, her alignment with a lesbian identity perhaps inhibited her ability or willingness to
acknowledge these attractions:

I think looking back I think I was attracted at different points to men but I think that I just didn't quite understand or didn't want to recognize that. I feel like because I associated so much as a lesbian, it freaked me out to maybe explore a different part of myself.

While it may seem as if attractions to men would not logically align with a lesbian identity, as discussed previously, often sexual identity, sexual attractions, and sexual behaviors are imperfectly correlated and the claiming of a lesbian identity could be attributed to a number of other factors outside of attractions (community, political beliefs, etc.). As Sadie described above, the feelings of being attracted to men, but not actually wanting to date them or engage in relationships with them was echoed by several women.

Relationships and Sexual Behaviors

The vast majority of the women I interviewed, regardless of attractions, exclusively dated and/or engaged in sexual relationships with women while identifying as lesbians. These women reported only pursuing sexual and romantic relationships with women until experiencing a partner transition or entering into a longer-term relationship with a cis man. As Melissa (33) remembered,

I was not into guys at all. Penises grossed me out. I didn't want to think about them. [Laughs]. But yeah, no I didn't want to be intimate with men, I was, I would say, like, 100% into women. I don't want anything to do with men sexually or relationship-wise at that point in my life.

Additionally, Paulina (61), the woman with the longest lesbian history of my interviewees, explained that that after coming out at age 20, she exclusively dated women: “And then so say age 20, from age 20 on, I was with women until 1995. So from the 70s to 1995. […] totally all women from that time on.” While these women reported a variety of different relationship lengths, from one-time hookups to multi-year marriages, they each reported only having relationships or engaging in sexual behavior with women.
However, a few women reported engaging in sexual or intimate relationships with either cis men, trans men, or genderqueer individuals while identifying as lesbians. Generally these were not long-term relationships, and did not cause the women to question their lesbian identities. For example, Cory (36) described a period of sexual experimentation that involved trans men and genderqueer individuals:

In 2013 I actually had a bunch of—I think I slept with a bunch of like—I think 2013 was the year I—if I'm remembering this correctly, 2013 was the year that I had a lot of sex. But like, one night stand sex. I slept with everyone but cis men.

Similarly, Lily (27) reported a short-term relationship with a cis man while identifying as a lesbian in high school:

And there was a point the summer after my sophomore year of high school that a man came into my life. I don't even know how we met—it was a party or something. And he was a lot older than me and for some reason I was very curious about him. He had this cool car and he seemed very cool. I don't know. Turns out he wasn't. But I dated him for a short while and I, we had sex a couple of times. And I got some pleasure from it but then I realized that I didn't feel fully comfortable in a male-female relationship. So I went back to dating women and I dated three or four other women until my senior year and maintained that I was a lesbian.

Furthermore, Kelly (31) discussed that it was sometimes easier for her to have purely sexual relationships with cis men:

It was very easy for me to have sexual relationships with men with absolutely no emotional attachment whatsoever. So when I was wilder and younger, that was kind of tempting—mainly if I was I was just like, heavily drinking or something.

Interestingly, the women who did report sexual or intimate relationships with cis men, trans men, or genderqueer people, seemed to view these incidents as periods of experimentation which did not challenge their lesbian identities. They noticeably differentiated between these brief experiences and the longer-term relationships with cis or trans men about which the interviews focused.

These diverse narratives suggest the variety of ways in which women who claim a lesbian identity can experience this identity. In light of these accounts, in the section that follows I will
discuss the implications of these women’s histories, specifically in terms of the pathways towards the acknowledgment of their lesbian identities.

Discussion of Findings

As their narratives suggest, the women I interviewed experienced varied pathways towards the acknowledgement of their lesbian identity, some which seem to support dominant models of sexual identity development, and others that perhaps problematize these models. In this section I will discuss the implications of these findings in regards to dominant models of sexual identity development.

Narratives of Lifelong Lesbian Identities: A Discussion

As discussed previously, normative models of sexual identity development are often based on a linear compass model which assumes early development and stability of sexual attractions and identity. Of the women I interviewed, the handful who spoke explicitly of ‘always knowing’ about their lesbian identities or experiencing attractions to other girls at very young ages, experienced pathways that most closely resembled this model. Most of these women described experiences of an internal or core identity that manifested early in life and led them on a path of self-discovery that culminated in the claiming of a lesbian identity.

However, upon closer analysis, the life experiences of these women do potentially indicate a more fluid and nuanced approach to sexual identity than might be initially apparent. For example, as I discussed, despite awareness of their same-sex attractions from an early age, a number of these women did identify as heterosexual or bisexual and have relationships with men before claiming a lesbian identity and entering into relationships with women. Specifically, only one interviewee explained that she had never dated men before claiming a lesbian identity. When analyzing these types of experiences, it is often assumed that periods of dating men or
identifying as heterosexual or bisexual before claiming a lesbian identity would represent falsehoods or periods of deception to oneself or others. Additionally, it is often expected that before claiming a sexual minority status, people will engage in opposite-sex sexual behavior for the purposes of experimentation or due to the pressures of a heteronormative society. Importantly, from the perspective of the linear compass model, since claiming a lesbian identity is the perceived end point, then this type of experimentation is ultimately not relevant in terms of core sexual identity.

However, if a dynamic systems theoretical perspective were applied to these situations, these periods of heterosexuality or bisexuality could be recentered not as falsehoods, but as periods of sexual fluidity or erotic plasticity. As previously discussed, Diamond (2012) suggests an application of dynamic systems theory that posits periods of variability as crucial for understanding women’s sexuality and positions them as the primary subjects of analysis. Therefore, while these women frequently described these periods of dating men with disdain or discussed their period of bisexuality as a phase, perhaps they are still valid life experiences that are remembered in specific ways due to a social environment that is so reliant on the linear compass model.

This dynamic systems perspective specifically challenges the notion that the claiming of a lesbian identity is any type of fixed end point. Instead, it asserts that despite these women’s description of a lifelong awareness of their same-sex attractions, their experiences in relationships with men or identifying as heterosexual are still real, valid, and relevant. Specifically, the social environments and individual traits of these women are crucial for understanding how and why they came to specific identities such as heterosexual or bisexual at a given point in their lives. As Diamond (2008) argues,
Perhaps the most important contribution of a dynamical systems approach would be to alter how researchers think about and conduct research on sexual development, and what types of data are considered most relevant. It is no longer sufficient to collect isolated snapshots of sexuality at a single moment in time. If sexual development does, in fact, emerge and transform over time, we must observe these changes as they occur. This new perspective would contribute not only to our understanding of female sexual fluidity but also to sexuality more generally. [245]

Therefore, perhaps the most notable aspect of the narratives of the women who expressed a lifelong awareness of their same-sex attractions, is the social context which led them to deviate from that presupposed linear path.

Looking more closely at that question, several women discussed social factors such as pressure from their families, cultural environments, and/or religion which led them to identify as heterosexual and/or date men. At certain points in these women’s lives, these experiences led them to identities and experiences that would not be assumed to normatively align with a lesbian identity or a lifelong awareness of same-sex attractions. However, these types of sociopersonal experiences are not irrelevant and are perhaps crucial to understanding periods of variability and stability in these women’s lives. It is uniquely necessary to interrogate these moments to understand how the intersections of personal characteristics and environmental factors sparked a specific path for each individual woman at a given point in time.

While it is assumed that a woman with a lifelong awareness of same-sex attractions would inevitably claim a lesbian identity, perhaps it was simply by chance that these women did claim this identity for at least a period of their lives. Diamond (2008) addresses this potential for varied pathways when she argues,

Because the long-range development of a dynamic system is continuously tweaked by ongoing experiences and interactions, it is impossible to definitively predict its final endpoint. Similarly, its development cannot be traced to any single cause. Rather, multiple factors could have given rise to the system’s present pattern, and multiple endpoints are always possible. The technical terms for these two related concepts are *equifinality* and *multifinality*. Equifinality means that two individuals can reach the same out-come through different routes, whereas multifinality means that two individuals with the same initial starting point might end up on completely different pathways. [241]
Therefore, based on this perspective, it is likely that some women who acknowledge early awareness of same-sex attractions would actually never claim a lesbian identity. While this study specifically recruited women who had claimed that identity, perhaps that perceived end point is not inevitable. This perspective that acknowledges that concepts of equifinality and multifinality accounts for this as well as for why some women might have had some similar life experiences (i.e. religious background) but different pathways towards the acknowledgement of a lesbian identity. As the narratives of the women in this group suggest, some women eagerly adopted a lesbian identity despite their more hostile or openly homophobic contexts, while others spent years trying to be heterosexual because of these contexts. While the limitations of this study prevent me from comparing these women to other women who never claimed a lesbian identity or who did not eventually enter into a relationship with a cis or trans men, at closer analysis, these women who did have seemingly linear pathways towards the acknowledgment of a lesbian identity, actually displayed substantial fluidity before claiming this identity. While experiences such as sexual experimentations with men, or identifying as bisexual as a presumed phase, are often dismissed as irrelevant, I posit that they are crucial moments in these women’s histories.

In addition to the necessity of recentering periods of nonlinearity as crucial to the understanding of sexual identity development, the experiences of the women who acknowledged lifelong same-sex attractions also suggest the need to begin redefining normative sexual identity categories. As discussed previously, existing literature in this area has begun to challenge the notion that established sexual identity categories like heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual are mutually exclusive categories and has suggested that they are significantly more nuanced than previously thought (Callis 2014; Diamond 2005, 2006; Savin-Williams 2006; Savin-Williams and Ream 2007; Sell 1997; Thompson and Morgan 2008; Vrangalova and Savin-Williams 2010,
The three components that generally determine sexual orientation: sexual identity, sexual behaviors, and sexual attractions, are “imperfectly correlated and inconsistently predictive of each other” (Savin-Williams 2006: 40). For example, some women indicated that despite their same-sex attractions, they identified as heterosexual because they were in relationships with men at the time. In historical or social contexts in which the only presumed options for sexual identities labels were heterosexual or homosexual, women perhaps felt the need to claim some label, even it did not accurately describe the multifaceted nature of their sexual orientation.

For example, if a woman experiences same-sex attractions, yet engages in sexual behavior with men and identifies as heterosexual because of those behaviors, it might be assumed that she is either closeted, confused, or being deceitful. However, this perspective deems attractions more important than behavior or identity and fails to acknowledge that these three aspects of sexual orientation need not always align. Perhaps this situation demonstrates that established labels are imperfect, not that these women are embodying any type of falsehood.

While today identity labels such as queer, pansexual, or heteroflexible are more readily known, up until recently, they were far from mainstream. Therefore, in hindsight some of these women may have experienced disconnects between their identity, attractions, and behaviors due to limited language. From a queer theoretical perspective, this situation could be interpreted as a prime example of Foucault’s notion of discourse around sexuality as an integral component in constructing sexuality itself. Viewing sexuality as a discursive production within regimes of power allows for the understanding that sexuality cannot exist outside of discourse and that the narrow labels that these women had available to them may have shaped the perceptions of their own sexualities.
Therefore, I argue that the pathways of the women who indicated a lifelong awareness of their sexuality are notably more fluid and susceptible to the influence of social factors than they may initially appear to be. Specifically, the periods of these women’s lives in which they deviated from the path towards the claiming of a lesbian identity should not be discounted and should be interrogated in light of queer and dynamic systems perspectives.

*Narratives of Unexpected Same-Sex Attractions and Lesbian Identification: A Discussion*

While a handful of women provided narratives that indicated a lifelong awareness of their lesbian identity, the majority described being surprised by unexpected same-sex attractions or a sudden realization of their lesbian identity. From one perspective, these narratives could be interpreted as these women realizing attractions or identities that were innate and that had always been there. This interpretation would serve to support more linear models of sexual identity development that suggest that an awareness of core lesbian identity often begins with “feelings of differentness” (Diamond 2007: 142) and functions as a “sort of ‘true north,’ pulling them consistently in a specific direction” (Diamond 2012: 78). This perspective could also be supported by the statements by most of the women that the development of their lesbian identity was inevitable. Conceivably, these realizations do occur within specific social and cultural contexts and indicate the materialization of a core identity.

However, from an alternative perspective, like the experiences of women who indicated lifelong awareness of same-sex attractions, perhaps periods of variability should be recentered to understand what sociopersonal factors led to the realization of same-sex attractions or lesbian identities in specific contexts. In relation to Lisa Diamond’s application of dynamic systems theory, I posit that the situations that caused these unexpected onsets represent *phase transitions* that aid in answering the question, ‘What factors create stability and change in women’s same-
sex and other-sex sexuality?” (2008: 241). While these types of changes in identity/attractions would often be interpreted as indicative that the woman was never truly heterosexual (as many of these women claimed to be), perhaps these instances represent the notion of *emergence*, which is the result of the interactions of diverse contexts and events, and which does not negate their previous heterosexual identities.

The women who indicated unexpected realizations of either same-sex attractions or lesbian identity all provided very detailed accounts of the contexts in which their realizations occurred. For example, as previously discussed, specific life events such as beginning college, meeting lesbian-identified women, or entering an all-girls high school sparked the acknowledgement of same-sex attractions or lesbian identity. As Diamond (2012) claims, these types of events, interacting with personal factors, have the power to create variability in individuals’ identities and attractions. She argues that dynamic systems theories,

> emphasize transformative, bidirectional, changing interactions among endogenous factors (such as genes, hormones, skills, capacities, thoughts, and feelings) and exogenous factors (such as relationships, experiences, cultural norms, family history, etc.)…

> [I]nteractions among these elements can actually create novel psychological and behavioral phenomena during periods of fundamental reorganization in the overall system. [78]

Therefore, while these novel feelings and identities were unexpected, and often interpreted by the women as indicative of an identity that had always been there, perhaps the interactions between endogenous and exogenous factors led to their manifestation in these specific contexts.

Due to the social reliance on the linear compass model of sexual identity development, the unexpected manifestation of same-sex attractions or lesbian identity often seems nonsensical or indicative of the individual’s previous naivete towards their own sexual orientation. Among the women I interviewed, several reported signs of their future lesbian identity when they were still identifying as heterosexual and/or dating men. This tendency of giving meaning to previous
experiences that could indicate a future lesbian identity is an often-cited phenomenon in research on changes in sexual identity. For example, in Kitzinger and Wilkinson’s 1995 study of women who transitioned to lesbianism after a significant period of heterosexuality, the authors interpret signs that these women experienced as representing “the reconstruction of a past that offers a sense of continuity with the present.”

It can seem, from stories like these, as though a woman’s whole life was an unconscious acting-out of her lesbian destiny, only now apprehended as such. But same-sex erotic relationships are part of many women's experience (Bell & Weinberg, 1978). Many women who later identify themselves as heterosexual have learned to forget these feelings, to dismiss them as unimportant compared with their feelings for men, or to think of them as mere adolescent preparations for adult heterosexuality—and they are supported in this by the rigid definitions and misleading stereotypes of lesbianism identified earlier. For women in our sample, becoming a lesbian often meant reinterpreting these experiences within a different framework. [101-102]

Therefore, it is difficult to conclude whether these types of memories indicate a true, core lesbian identity or an attempt to create a history that more normatively aligns with present reality.

Similarly, most of the women I interviewed emphatically stated that they did not believe any specific event caused their lesbian identity or led to the development of their same-sex attractions. This specific viewpoint likely has a number of explanations, one of which relies on the popularity and increased social acceptance of the rhetoric of “born this way,” as a model for understanding sexual orientation. As discussed previously, in recent years social support for LGBT individuals has increased as has social support for the belief that sexual orientation is innate. In many contexts, the belief exists that LGBT individuals should be accepted because their identity is biological. On the other hand, if something suddenly caused the onset of same-sex attractions, then presumably those attractions could be changed. Mirroring this perspective, several women that I interviewed cited “political” reasons for identifying with the “born this way” idea and rejecting the notion that they were influenced by social factors. As Kim (54) discussed,
I also think it's a rhetorical device that a lot of people have used, I understand, for political reasons. They say, you know, “I was born that way so you have to accept that's who I am. God made me this way or whatever.” So because I know that a lot of the, the people that want to oppress gay people and want to oppress queer people often say, use the, you weren't born that way argument as a reason. … So I feel that that argument, like people sometimes I think get stuck in that argument. Like they feel like they have to make that argument. And I can understand why. But it's almost like we're backed into a corner because some people feel that they need to make that argument to sort of—but they do it in a way that's sort of buying this idea that there's something wrong with it. You know? That maybe, “well I was born that way so…” it can be a rally cry for—a passionate rally cry.

Based on this account and others, I posit that there may exist some trepidation on the part of LGBT individuals to disagree with the “born this way” idea and acknowledge that interactions between social and personal factors may lead to the manifestation of same-sex attractions and/or LGBT identity. Specifically, there are often concerns that “social and personal factors” may be interpreted as a person choosing to be LGBT (a full discussion of which is outside of the scope of this project). Despite some segments of society and some scholars who argue that choosing to be LGBT is legitimate and should be socially accepted, this perspective is generally not supported by mainstream society today.

If this social pressure to align with “born this way” rhetoric were removed, perhaps it might become more socially acceptable to acknowledge the argument put forth by Diamond’s interpretation of dynamic systems theory and the potential for periods of stability and variability in one’s sexual identity. While the social support for this perspective has yet to develop on a large scale in mainstream society, in academia, this notion has been widely contended. Specifically addressing the misunderstandings around unexpected onsets of same-sex attractions or lesbian identity, Gagnon (1990) (as cited by Diamond (2012)) observed in his research that, women’s participation in same-sex sexuality sometimes appeared to come about “by accident,” significantly shaped by nonsexual factors. Beginning with the feminist movement of the 1970s and extending decades afterwards, researchers have observed that women’s immersion in feminist politics, coupled with the development of strong same-sex friendships and exposure to lesbian–gay–bisexual peers, often proved to be powerful triggers for new and unexpected same-sex attractions and fantasies. [75]
Therefore, while the unexpected manifestation of same-sex attractions or lesbian identity may appear problematic based on linear compass models of sexual identity development, this type of variability is expected when using a dynamic systems approach. Among the women I interviewed, a majority experienced this type of “accidental” onset that could be argued to be indicative of phase transitions sparked by the interactions between endogenous and exogenous factors in specific contexts.

*Narratives of Mixed Experiences and Sexual Fluidity: A Discussion*

Finally, a number of women provided narratives that suggested pathways towards the acknowledgement of a lesbian identity that were characterized by sexual fluidity and erotic plasticity. These women described attractions to multiple genders and sometimes claimed bisexual, pansexual, or queer identity labels before identifying as lesbians. Importantly, these narratives would not be able to be accounted for by linear models of sexual identity development. These models posit the notion of fixed end points of sexual identity development which reflect inherent and essential sexual identities. However, in the cases of these women, presumably the claiming of bisexuality, pansexuality, or queerness would likely have been the perceived end point. The variability that these women described after claiming these labels are outside the scope of these linear models.

As with the narratives of the other interviewees, these periods of variability can be accounted for by using more dynamic and non-linear models of sexual identity development. As has been discussed, these models anticipate these periods of non-linearity. The narratives provided by the women who discussed their sexual fluidity are particularly supportive of this perspective because they were able to uniquely shed light on the personal and social factors that specifically led to the women claiming a lesbian identity. For example, a handful of women
described claiming a lesbian identity due to the influence of a particular partner. While linear models would likely discount these experiences as not truly representative of a core or innate sexual identity, the women I interviewed indicated that when they claimed this particular identity, it was very legitimate and real to them. While many of these women eventually abandoned their lesbian identity labels or changed their minds regarding their exclusive attractions to women, perhaps these periods of lesbian identity should not be discounted.

Within this group of interviewees, it became apparent that the time period in which they came of age or were negotiating their sexual identities was crucial in terms of how those identities were interpreted. For example, not only did some women discuss how they claimed a lesbian identity specifically because of the social and political climate of the time, others discussed not having adequate language and labels to legitimize their identities. For example, because of historical assumptions that sexuality manifested in a binary fashion (heterosexual or homosexual) some women who might have had more complex attractions may have claimed one of these labels even though it did not accurately reflect their identity and attractions. For example, Sadie (38) who came of age in the late 1980s and early 1990s stated, “I identified as heterosexual because there wasn't another—I mean initially I didn't really know that there was another option that pertained to me.” Current research has demonstrated that the proliferation of various identity labels like queer and pansexual has had an immense impact on the ways in which young people today identify (Kuper, Nussbaum, and Mustanski 2012; Morandini, Blaszczynski & Dar-Nimrod 2016; Russell, Clarke & Clary 2009; Savin-Williams 2005).

Specifically, young people are more likely than ever to choose a more nuanced identity label or choose not to self-identify at all (Horner 2007; Savin-Williams 2005, 2008). Therefore, because younger people today experiencing more non-linear or sexual fluid paths have more labels at
their disposal, they can perhaps better legitimize and rationalize their identities. Because some of these labels were not available twenty or thirty years ago, some of the women I interviewed were unable to construct identities that accurately reflected their attractions.

These women provided nuanced narratives that perhaps provide the best examples of non-linear of sexually fluid paths of identity development. Specifically, their accounts provided detailed examples of how the interactions between social and personal factors can lead to sexual variability, particularly in terms of claiming the lesbian identity label.

**Conclusions**

In conclusion, the women I interviewed communicated very diverse pathways towards the acknowledgment of their lesbian identities. Analyzing the various ways in which these women came to acknowledge sexual attractions and identities helps to establish a framework for understanding how they ultimately came to engage in relationships with cisgender or transgender men and how they rationalized their identities and relationships. While at first glance, some of these women’s narratives seemingly represent more linear paths than others, as I have argued, even among women who acknowledged a lifelong awareness of same-sex attractions, there often existed variability. While linear models of sexual identity development often discount periods of variability as falsehoods, I argue that the context in which these novel erotic interests emerged are integral to fully understanding their pathways. In the chapter that follows, I will use these findings to contextualize my interviewees’ experiences in relationships with cisgender and transgender men.
As previously discussed, most of the women interviewed reported aligning strongly with their lesbian identities politically, socially, and in terms of their identities, attractions, and behaviors. Because of the general importance of this identity in these women’s lives, it is necessary to interrogate how these identities were impacted by these women experiencing a partner transition or beginning a relationship with a cisgender man. In the chapter that follows I will discuss the experiences of these two groups of women separately to highlight the unique ways in which they navigated issues such as language/labels used to identify themselves and their partners, acceptance/rejection in the lesbian community, and acceptance/rejection of heterosexuality and heterosexual privilege.

Specifically, I will begin by addressing the negotiations faced by the women partnered with trans men. As was discussed in Chapter 5, these women generally reported feeling very attached to the lesbian label in terms of identity, community, and politics. Therefore, I will explore the ways in which their partners’ transitions impacted their identities in terms of these factors. I will continue with a discussion of the negotiations faced by the women partnered with cis men. These women also generally reported a deep connection to their lesbian identities and a strong involvement in lesbian communities. In light of this identification I will explore the ways in which these women adapted to relationships with cis man. I will conclude this chapter by addressing how these experiences align with or challenge contemporary theoretical perspectives on sexual identity permanence.

**Group 1 (Partners of Trans Men): Identity and Relational Negotiations**

*Beginning Relationship with Trans Partner*
Of the 40 women I interviewed, twenty had experienced a partner transition from female to male. After establishing the role that lesbian identities played in these women’s lives, I asked them how their relationships began with their partner who eventually decided to transition and how these individuals disclosed their desire to transition. These women reported meeting their partners in a variety of ways including through online dating websites, through mutual friends, at work or in college, or at other social events (bars, sports, etc.). Once meeting their partners, my interviewees provided a wide variety of narratives regarding how and when they became aware of their partners’ trans identities or their desires to transition. For example, while most women reported that their partners had already been considering transitioning before they met and disclosed their trans status very early in the relationship, others reported that this disclosure did not occur until several years into their relationship.

Specifically, half of my interviewees in this group reported that their partner came out to them as trans very soon after they started dating (between several days and a few months.) For example, Emma (28) described:

We met on Tinder. And he was pre-T, hadn't even really come out yet, but I mean, he was in a place where he knew he was trans but he was still kind of navigating how to make that a thing. And so I was on Tinder searching for females and he had put himself as female. And he didn't look male to me in his pictures so I just assumed female. So we went out on a date and we were just in it from date one. And he ended up coming out on date two, coming out to me on date two.

Similarly, Jaime (34) remembered,

The transition for us kind of as a couple started very early in our relationship. So because we had really only been talking online for a couple of weeks really when he told me, you know, “this is how I feel.” And I just kind of decided I would see how things went with him and that I really liked him.

While these women found out very early in their relationships that their partners identified as trans, the ways in which their partners disclosed their identities varied significantly. While some women remembered having casual, spontaneous conversations about the topic, others described
more nuanced events that led to their partners’ disclosures. Sascha (36) described her partner revealing his identity at a bar:

I met Sam and then we hung out like we just talked and hung out and texted and all the stuff for a whole month. And then when I figured out that I was really starting to like him, we were at the bar one night […] and Sam went into the men's room. He had done that on a Friday night because if the women's room is disgusting, it's crowded, or whatever. But this was Monday or Tuesday and nobody was there. […] So I asked my friend Joe. I said, “Joe, why is Sam going into the men's room?” And he said, “Well, I think she's got to tell you that.” So I said, “okay.” And Sam came out of the bathroom and I said, “Why did you go in the men's room?” […] She looked at me and she said, “Well, I have something to tell you.” And I'm like, “okay.” “Well, I'm transgender.”

Another interviewee, Cory (36) recounted a sexual experience in which her partner subtly communicated his identity:

We were playing a role playing game in which we adopted characters and I asked him to pick a character name. And he chose a character name... he chose the name Finn and he said that his character was gender neutral. And I was like, "okay... sure. I see where this is going." […] One night when we were in our little role play and I rolled over to him and I said, "Goodnight boyfriend." And he was like... and that was it. And forever after that he was my boyfriend.

While half of the women I interviewed reported finding out about their partners’ identities very early in their relationships, a number of other women described disclosures that occurred between one and ten years into their relationships. Stephanie (34) explained,

We met in 2006 and he came out to me as transgender in February of [2016] so 10 years later. Ten years and two kids later. And he had been struggling for a long time and I think because so much of our attention and focus as a couple had been all about having children, getting pregnant, going through all of these processes, that I just think it hadn't been a good time for him to allow himself to process the transgender issues and all of that.

This experience of a partner postponing a trans disclosure due to life events or simply disclosing it many years into a relationship, despite personal knowledge of their identities, was a sentiment echoed by a handful of women. When explaining these situations, these women reported a variety of reasons why they believed their partner did not disclose sooner including lacking the
language to adequately express their feelings, not fully understanding their identities themselves, or being scared to upset or disrupt successful relationships.

While nearly all of these women in established relationships remembered explicit conversations with their partners about their identities, Yasmine (27) described coming to the conclusion herself that her partner was trans:

> Then things started happening. I noticed like, you know, this is a thing. So one day I was just on my partner's Tumblr page and I looked at some old posts and I had seen some posts about taking testosterone. And I didn't say anything to her. I kind of felt like I was snooping. So I left it alone.

She continued by explaining:

> We never really had a conversation about [it]. I remember once in the various stages of talking, Joe expressed that sexually there were certain things that he was not comfortable with. But I just thought it was because there's a part of the lesbian culture where there are women who are butch, and they're called... lesbians call themselves ‘Touch-Me-Not,’ and it's just like, they don't want you to touch them a certain way. So I just thought it was that. But then later we had a conversation about that and he was like, “I'm really not comfortable with that label. I don't like that label.” But still didn't elaborate at that time on the fact that he did identify as genderqueer or trans.

Finally, while the vast majority of women reported realizing or being told about their partners’ identities once their relationships had begun, one interviewee, Jackie (27), indicated that she knew about her partner’s identity before they actually met. She remembered,

> He was on the 'People You Might Know' thing on Facebook. And we had some mutual friends and I was just like, "oh my God he is so cute!" Like instant attraction. I thought he was just super handsome and it's like, I knew that he was trans because our mutual friends were trans people and I just had an inkling.

Despite indicating that she exclusively dated and was attracted to women while identifying as a lesbian, Jackie reported beginning this relationship with full knowledge that her partner identified as trans. As Jackie’s narrative, and the narratives of the other women in Group 1 suggest, the ways in which these women realized their partners’ trans identities varied widely.

Reaction to Trans Disclosure
Once these women became aware of their partners’ identities and/or their desires to transition, they initially experienced a wide range of emotions and reacted in a number of ways. The most common initial reaction that these women reported was a desire to be supportive of their partner. Monica (44) explained that her partner had identified as a very butch woman for about 20 years and did not begin a transition until they had talked about it for nearly two years. When asked how she initially felt about her partner’s identity and a possible transition, she stated, “Initially I thought, anything that he wants. Whatever helps him become true to himself is what I wanted for him.” Similarly, Kristen (34) reported that being familiar with trans identities made it easier to support her partner. She stated, “I was really supportive of it and I was just along for the ride, you know, and support. […] I knew what trans was. I knew the ins and the outs of it, and the verbiage. And so at the beginning I didn't think too much of it.”

These feelings of support were similar to those of two women who indicated that the transition did not matter to them, and two other women who expressed relief at their partners’ disclosures. Megan (28) explained:

I was like, “oh my God it's about time.” I had known that he had been uncomfortable for a really long time, and knew that he didn't necessarily identify as female. But it wasn't something that was ever said out loud. And I think it was kind of avoided for part of the time until you get to that critical mass where it becomes an unavoidable thing, and then you have to start talking about it, and saying it out loud, and saying the words, and trying out the words, and figuring it out. By the time he finally made the decision, I was like, “oh thank God.”

While these women reported generally positive reactions to their partners’ disclosures, a number of other women described experiencing more complex emotions and more difficulty accepting their partners’ identities.

Specifically, a number of women reported initial feelings of being conflicted and confused. For example, while Carrie (57) described the entire situation as “really freaking
bizarre,” Tara (35) explained that her complicated reaction somewhat surprised her because she was very involved in and knowledgeable about the trans community. She explained,

I was actually a Safe Zone trainer for a long time. So I'm very knowledgeable about a lot of the things that happen. And so when he started binding his chest, I was like, “oh this is a thing.” And it wasn't until he actually came out and said you know like, “I'm a transgender male” that I was shocked, one. And two, it made me feel very conflicted. Because you know, we are married. I obviously love this person. I obviously vowed to spend my life with this person and at the same time I was confused about my own identity. So I would say conflicted and confused were like the most prominent things that I experienced at that point in time. And still to this day there is still some confliction that I experience.

Similarly, Cory (36) explained that her conflicted emotions were a result of her partner not aligning with a trans narrative that she understood. Despite acknowledging having previous sexual relationships with trans men and genderqueer people while identifying as a lesbian, her partners’ unique trans experience challenged her understanding of what trans identities can and should look like. She described,

I said inappropriate things because I hadn't come into contact with trans men who were transitioning. I had only come into contact with trans men who had transitioned, but nobody who was in the process of transitioning. [...] I also think there is a very strong narrative about what the trans experience is like and many of my partners do not and have not fit that mold. And Casey certainly did not fit that mold. So it was a little more difficult for me to understand his transition as well, I believe. Because all you hear from mainstream media is, "you're born this way. You feel misgendered all your life." You know, all those things. Like, you feel like you're trapped in the wrong body.

She went on to explain,

But [my partner has] non-normative narratives, meaning that they feel very connected to their AFAB [assigned female at birth] body. Casey was just working out his identity and I kept questioning it and I kept questioning his transition. And saying things like, he was obsessed with the Indigo Girls [...] and all of his friends were women. And I remember we were driving somewhere and I remember saying to him, "all of these things that help identify you are so female... so like, why do you think you're trans?" Which is incredibly insensitive, and I would never say that to anyone now.

This narrative demonstrates that while there was likely a desire to be supportive, because of the limited way in which trans identities were constructed at that time, Cory had difficulty understanding her partner’s nuanced trans experience.
Finally, a handful of women reported strong reactions of anger, resentment, and fear once becoming aware of their partners’ identities. For example, Gwen (45) remembered,

I said something really awkward, like, “congratulations.” But what I meant was, "that's horrible. I'm so sad." So I was really angry. I felt like—I felt kind of cheated, I guess. I felt like here was someone that—I don't know. I guess it felt like he was going to a faraway land I couldn't follow. And I was feeling like these were—that he was just one more butch lesbian who was leaving the community, and was like, not part of us anymore. I was angry. I felt this as a betrayal.

Similarly, Samantha (27) described a fear of the unknown which prevented her from fully supporting her partner:

In the beginning I had a really hard time. Like really hard time. And I think it had a lot to do with, well first of all it was directly conflicting, or I thought it was directly conflicting with my own identity. And that was, you know after all the kind of struggling I felt like I had gone through with myself to kind of figure that out. But then also with my family and my parents—it just felt like it would completely change everything. And also I think it was just a whole lot of fear of the unknown.

Samantha’s acknowledgement of fear that her partner’s transition would directly conflict with her own lesbian identity was a sentiment that was echoed by the majority of the women I interviewed, regardless of their level of support for their partners.

Reaction to Transition

At the time of our interviews, the women I spoke to reported a wide range of steps that their partners had taken to facilitate their transitions. For example, some had recently begun taking testosterone and were still generally passing as women, while others had fully transitioned several years before and had undergone numerous surgeries including hysterectomies and double mastectomies. Similarly to how these women had a variety of reactions to their partners’ disclosures of their trans identities, they also reported a number of different responses to their partners’ physical transitions. While the majority of women reported being supportive of the idea of their partner transitioning, once the transition actually began, their feelings became noticeably more complicated. However, three women did report continued complete support and no
significant concerns about their partners’ physical changes. For example, Jackie (27) described unwavering support for her partner’s transition, support that she also extended to close friends who were trans:

He hasn't had any surgery or anything like that. But you know he will eventually get top surgery and I am fully supportive of that, you know. I'm going to help him pay for it and that whole bit. But I'm completely supportive of everything that he's doing in his transition. I have quite a few trans friends. [...] And I always tell my friends, I'm like, “you know what, I'm so proud of you for going against absolutely everything that you've ever been taught or told that you need to be and accepted who you were. And you know, at the cost of possibly friends and family. Like, you're a brave individual. Like, I commend you. Good for you."

This notion of complete support without acknowledgement of personal concerns, was a rare response. The majority of women I interviewed reported much more complex feelings about their partners’ transitions.

For example, a number of women reported initial feelings of fear or concern about physical changes, but indicated that over time they decided that their fears were generally unfounded. Samantha (27) stated,

I just really wish I could go back to myself five years ago or 4 years ago and be like, “don't worry. It's okay.” I was so so so worried about all these things. I felt like I was losing so much instead of gaining new things. And I think the blessing about it was that it doesn't happen overnight. I don't wake up and I'm next to this completely different person overnight. So none of the physical stuff was ever—ever ended up being hard. And I think it just happened slowly that I was able to get used to it. And I don't know. Also, he's so much happier, so it's hard to not be excited about those kinds of things. Like you know, he’d be so excited about some of the changes so kind of just rubbed off I guess.

Similarly, Stephanie (34) described:

I feel better now than I did. Because it's just, it's so clear that it is the right thing for him. But I guess as I was sort of in the midst of my mental shift, I was thinking about how I'm going to miss being with someone who was soft and curvy and what I would think of as the female qualities, like being very like sensitive and things like that. And then I, you know, I realized that it wasn't that big of a deal because there is no question that I want to be with him. We're 10 years in and, you know, we're very committed so the physical changes are just something that I can deal with.
Several women discussed feeling scared that their partner would suddenly become someone they did not recognize. However, due to the slow nature of most physical changes, they reported having the ability to adapt and accept these changes.

However, a handful of other women reported feeling very nervous about specific physical changes that they feared would impact their level of attraction to their partners. These women, who discussed being attracted to specific female features, were concerned that they would no longer be attracted to newly developing male features. For example, Tara (35) described her fears about her partner’s upcoming chest surgery:

One of the things that I'm concerned about—and not to be—but like, I enjoy a woman's breasts. And the thought that he is having top surgery in a few weeks is something that is a bit of a challenge. I mean of course I'm going to support him through it and I'm going to take care of him and I'm going to do all the things that you do when you are a married couple. But like, I do wonder, will I still be attracted to him when he doesn't have breasts? I don't know.

Echoing this sentiment, Margaret (38) stated,

But the physical change of no longer having breasts, that really makes me sad because that is one of the things that I’ve always loved about women. [...] I love a woman’s breasts. They’re very sexy to me and very stimulating to me. So the idea of her not having them anymore really, really difficult for me to deal with.

Similarly, Sascha (36) described fear of her partner losing female characteristics as well as developing more male features. She remembered, “I was very unsure about losing his voice. He had the sweetest voice. I was really unhappy with that. I didn't want him to grow hair. I wanted him to shave all the time. Like, that was my big thing.” While some women approached these changes with fear or apprehension, others reported being very curious about their partners’ physical transitions and approaching the topic with humor:

Now I think that we're in this weird spot where the physical changes aren't as drastic as they were early on, so we don't have the, ‘hey look, I have a chin hair.” [Laughs]. Because he has sideburns and a mustache and chin hair and all this stuff and so there's not, although it's kind of fun when he says, "look I can shave now." [Laughs]. Now there's some of that that's really this exploration of the physical changes that are
happening. Yeah like, he has belly hair. I'm like, "oh my gosh you have belly hair." [Laughs]. So you know I've just—normal partnership joking stuff. (Monica, 44)

On the other hand, a few women reported very deep emotional struggles regarding their partners’ transitions and desires to live as men. For example, Melissa (33) described the negotiations she and her partner faced which led them to separate temporarily:

We did separate. We lived apart for about a year, but I would say we were actually broken up for about 6 or 7 months. Because I got to the point where we were going back and forth. I would say, “okay I can do this.” And then he would slowly start becoming more comfortable in his presentation and then he would get to a certain point that I would get uncomfortable and then be like, “okay I don't know, I just...maybe I can't do this.” And then he would be like, “I don't need to do this, alright? I want to stay with you.” So I think we were prioritizing the relationship, what it was at that time, over our individual sense of happiness. And when I think about it, it was kind of like this tug-of-war. He would pull and pull to a point where he wanted to get comfortable. And then when he was getting comfortable I would be unhappy and scared and uncomfortable and then, he would see that reaction in me and he would just pretend, “okay no, no I don't want to do this. Okay, alright. I can just be, you know, a butch lesbian. That's fine.” And then I could see how miserable he was. And I'm like, “no I can't.” So we got to the point where I was like, “you need to do this for yourself. And we need to just, take some space and figure things out.” And so we did.

While most of the women I spoke to remained in the relationships with their partners, this notion of trying to balance personal emotions with a partner’s mental health and need to transition, was echoed by many. For example, as was discussed, several women reported concerns regarding potentially not being attracted to a male body due to their histories of lesbian attractions.

Similarly, the role that these emotions played in the negotiation of personal sexual identity labels will be discussed in the next section.

Furthermore, it is necessary to address how these women’s general reactions to their partners’ transitions may not be reflective of the broader population of partners of trans men. As stated previously, the women I interviewed are likely a self-selected group of people who were generally willing to stay with their partners through their transitions. Therefore, complicated narratives and negotiations such as those reported by Melissa, might actually be more common than complete support. Due to participant self-selection, a potential desire to portray themselves
and their relationships in a positive light, as well as pressure from friends/community to support their partner, could have potentially impacted the types of narratives that I collected.

*Personal Identity Negotiations*

After their initial reactions to their partners’ trans disclosures and often while reconciling feelings about their partners’ physical transitions, the women I interviewed reported nuanced and diverse personal negotiations about their lesbian identities. In general, most women reported questioning whether they could maintain their lesbian identities while in relationships with men due to the socially accepted definition of *lesbian* which generally entails exclusive relationships with women. While this situation caused great stress for some women, others described relinquishing their lesbian identities with little struggle. Additionally, some women discussed problematic personal implications of maintaining relationships with men due to unhealthy prior heterosexual relationships. Broadly, when discussing the reality of relationships with their trans man partners, the women I interviewed expressed feelings that ranged from excitement and confusion to fear and mourning.

The majority of the women I interviewed reported facing significant challenges reconciling their lesbian identities and accepting the reality of maintaining relationships with men. For example, a few women reported having had negative experiences in heterosexual relationships in the past that they feared would be repeated with their current partners:

> Well I think definitely my idea was all that I had to go on were my past relationships with men and how those interactions were, and how those dynamics were. And they were super unhealthy and I didn't want that dynamic in a relationship anymore. And it didn't—because I didn't really know much about transitions, I was like "well you're gonna... your whole personality's gonna change. You're just going to turn into a total asshole. You're not going to understand me at all. We are not going to be equals." […] I think also at the time I was very angry and just over being with men and, you know, coming from my head which was like, “oh men are just the worst. They should die. I don't like them. There shouldn't be men in the world.” You know? (Emma, 28)
In many ways I really miss that woman that I was married to. And as someone who is a survivor of domestic abuse, there was this switch that went off in me which, as a woman, he was safe. But now as a man, now suddenly I have to deal with all the baggage that I had from being married to a man before. And neither of us anticipated that. At least I didn't anticipate that all this stuff would come through. (Monica, 44)

These anecdotes suggest that these women had experienced negative relationships with men in the past and had viewed their lesbian relationships as reprieves from certain heterosexual dynamics. The thought of losing feelings of safety or a specific connection to a woman proved very troubling for these women.

Additionally, a number of women reported a general sadness or fear over the possibility of losing their lesbian identities which many felt they had fought hard to claim and which were foundational to their senses of self. For example, Margaret (38) described:

I think my biggest concern is going to be is keeping my identity and not feeling like there's a part of me that is being stripped away that feels so good to have. Kind of like someone taking my arm off after I've had it for 10 years and I've learned how to work it and I've learned how to use it and it feels good and it feels right. And now someone is going to take it off and I have to adjust to not having it there anymore and learning how to live my life without it.

Paralleling this idea, Jackie (27) explained:

I was like, “I fought so hard, in the community and with society to have this lesbian title-ship.” You know, you get a lot of slack from the lesbian community saying like, "oh no you're straight. You're just experimenting. Like, liar, liar, liar, liar." And it's like, then you have to come out to your family saying, "I'm a lesbian." And that's a big old ordeal. And, you have to come out to your friends which is another big ordeal. So I was like, "I fought so hard for this lesbian title. I don't know if I could ever date somebody that was trans because what would that mean for my title?"

Similarly, Stephanie (34) stressed that her partner’s transition made her feel as if her lesbian identity suddenly became irrelevant which left her feeling lost:

And then I still had my—sort of what felt very selfish at the time—thoughts as being like, "okay, well what does this mean for me? We're not all of a sudden heterosexual. We're not straight people. So where do I fit? Where do I go? I don't have a place anymore.” And so I had to sort of find what that was. So I was left a little bit floating in space for a minute. […] It's a little bit sad for me. You know? When you come out, you've taken this big leap forward and you feel very authentic yourself and I am sort of—because this is just the beginning, it feels like having a partner transition is sort of going backwards.
Finally, Lisa (28) expressed how she felt as if her partner’s transition would render her lesbian identity invisible because of her self-presentation as a femme woman.

It does disturb me that I’m seen as heterosexual. [...] I want the world to see me as part of the queer community and I struggle with this not only because I have a trans partner but because I identify as a femme queer woman. So yeah, right? So I like nails and hair and lipstick and pretty clothes, right? So, you know, It’s always been an invisible identity for me to be seen as a gay person anyways. And what makes me seen as a gay person to the world is my partner. Right? Yeah and so without my partner I could be completely heterosexual.

These feelings of sadness or confusion over the perceived loss of their lesbian identities as well as feelings of social invisibility, were articulated by the vast majority of women I interviewed. As was discussed previously, due to the often deep attachment to a lesbian identity in terms of community, politics, and self-identification, the feeling of losing these markers can be traumatic.

While most women discussed internal feelings that their lesbian identities would be lost once their partners transitioned, Jordan (30) remembered a conversation in which another person told her she could not continue to claim a lesbian identity while in a relationship with a trans man. She described,

And I'll never forget, one day we were at a party and [my partner’s] friend said to me, "oh so you know Bobby is trans, and you're cool with it right?" And I was like, "yeah of course." And she said, "well you know, you can't call yourself a lesbian then, right? Because you're dating him." And I was like, “wait what?” [...] So I really—I had quite a reaction to that because I was like, “okay well he's a guy. And he's straight because he's dating me. That's fine. But I identify as a lesbian who is dating him. How can you change my identity?” So I still kind of struggle with that. I don't know if there's one right or wrong answer there. But for me, it took a long time for me to come to the identity that I was a lesbian. And I was very settled into that identity. You know? I finally learned who I was and then someone in one second wanted to tell me, “oh no you're not again.” [...] Like, how does someone else's identity change my identity?

Jordan expressed concern and confusion regarding the feeling that her sexual identity was being policed by other people as well as regarding the importance of her own sense of self in terms of whether or not she could continue to claim a lesbian identity. Additionally, this narrative also addresses a key question in discussions about sexual identity development: whether sexual
identity can be influenced by the changing gender of sexual object choice. This question will be discussed further at the end of this chapter.

While the majority of women expressed that the process of adjusting to being in a relationship with a man was very difficult, a handful of women reported that the process was relatively easy and at times, exciting. For example, when asked if she had any trouble reconciling her relationship with her trans partner with her lesbian identity, Sascha (36) replied, “No, no. Not at all for me. I had already been a straight couple so it wasn't like I was leaving my lesbianism because I was going back to something I already knew, that I was more familiar with.” Due to her previous relationships with men, Sascha was able to smoothly transition from a lesbian relationship to a heterosexual relationship without significant trouble.

Similarly, due to her involvement in online support groups for partners of trans men, Katherine (46) was aware of the identity struggles that the majority of women in this situation report. However, she indicated that she did not experience these challenges:

And there's a lot of folks [online], a lot of partners who are—they really start questioning their own identity and who they are. And I really haven't ever—I still identify as a cis woman in the queer community. I am a queer, cis, pansexual woman. And so I feel sometimes like I'm a bit of an anomaly because the majority of partners I talk to really struggle, or did really struggle in the past and now has come to terms with everything. And I think, "man I've never really struggled with this ever. I know who I am and I'm not—it doesn't make me upset, or angry, or scared, or worried, or sad that I am losing the woman that I fell in love with.” I never really experienced that.

This notion of not feeling conflicted about their own identities in relation to their partners’ transitions was echoed by Gwen (45) who reported excitement and an ability to align herself with a previously held bisexual identity:

It was really exciting to me to—it was like really rediscovering this person that I never could quite reach. And that was really exciting to me and I wanted to do it more. And at first it was very much like, “well you know, it's just this one person. And it's just this one off and whatever.” But then I just—I started thinking about myself differently and kind of remembering and piecing together different sort of, more bisexual experiences or feelings or whatever that I had had. And I kind of was like, “you know, this really is a part of who I am. It's not a big part. But it is a part of who I am.”
These narratives suggest that perhaps, due to a person’s social and personal situation, the transition to a new (or previously held) sexual identity can be a relatively seamless transition.

**Changing Identity Labels**

Based on these identity and relationship negotiations that the women experienced, many chose to change their identity labels. While all women reported generally identifying as lesbians before their partners’ transitions, after their partners disclosed their trans identities and began to transition, many began to claim labels such as pansexual, queer, and bisexual. Several women expressed that because they chose to remain in relationships with their partners, they did not feel as if a lesbian label adequately described their identities and relationships. Additionally some women discussed how it might be invalidating to their partners’ identities to continue to identify as lesbians.

For example the most common identity label chosen by the women I interviewed was *queer*. Many women explained that due to the all-encompassing nature of this term as well as its vagueness, it was the best term available to describe their identities and relationships. Samantha (27) explained:

> I've kind of just settled on queer for now because I feel like that's—I don't know. It's kind of just more of an umbrella term and I don't have to quite explain everything to people if I don't want to and a long story. And I think having—he definitely doesn't identify as straight either and so I think identifying as queer together feels better.

Similarly, Yasmine (27) described how due to her relationship with her trans partner she began to understand love and identity in a different way. This changing perspective as well as her gendered racial identity as a black women led her to adopt the queer label:

> Now that I'm older I understand that you don't love for gender, you love for a person. [...] I understand that love isn't about a person's genitals. Love isn't about any of those things, so I think identifying as queer crosses so many different things because like, the way queer was explained to me, it was basically, love that doesn't fit the heteronormative vision of the nuclear family or what's portrayed in mainstream media as
love. Even just being a black woman, that helps me to identify as queer. Because when you think about feminism and what it means to be a woman, that's often just basically what has been true for the white woman. Where it's just like, with black women, especially in the United States, our roles have always been different. We've always had to take a more masculine role in our houses because of things in our culture and our relationship to the workplace has always been different because we never really had that role of stay-at-home mom or things that most people think of when they think of like a woman in maybe the fifties right? So queer to me encompasses all those things. The fact that I'm black. The fact that I'm not a super girly girl. The fact that it's very in line with my politics. So as I got older I started to identify as queer more so, that even more so than the fact that I had been attracted to trans men. But just because queer was in line with my core beliefs.

This perspective highlights a commonly held view of the term queer—that it can be useful to describe a complex set of attractions, behaviors, and identities that may not fully be encompassed by other labels.

In addition to concerns that a lesbian label may no longer accurately describe their experiences, several women discussed that continuing to maintain a lesbian identity label could potentially invalidate their partners’ trans identities. For example, Megan (28) who transitioned to a queer label while dating her current partner stated, “I would never identify as a lesbian with my husband now because he's very much a straight-passing, heterosexual male.” She suggested that claiming a lesbian label might “out” her husband as trans when his desire was to pass as a cis man. This sentiment was echoed by Monica (44) who discussed identifying as both a lesbian and as queer depending on the situation:

Sometimes I identify as a lesbian. Sometimes I identify as queer. In part for myself and in part—because if I'm with him, it's hard. I realize that gender identity and sexuality are not the same things, yet as a partner of someone who's trans, if you saw him on the street you would have no idea that he's not a cis male. It's very difficult. That's why sometimes I wear the label of queer. Because if he feels that he needs to be stealth at that moment, it's one thing.

This unique situation demonstrates that perhaps sexual identity can be situation-specific and can vary based on factors such as weighing personal feelings with a partner’s identity and safety.

In addition to the label queer, several women explained claiming either pansexual or
bisexual to describe their identities. Emma (28) who had identified as pansexual before ever identifying as a lesbian, explained reclaiming this term and provided a similar narrative to the woman above who wanted to validate their partners’ identities with their own identity labels:

And I've struggled with that a lot because on one hand I felt like it was almost disrespectful to my partner to say, "hey I'm a lesbian. I'm not even going to acknowledge that I'm dating a man." So on one hand I'm going to say, “I'm cool with you transitioning, but on the other hand not cool enough for me to announce it to the world or something.” [...] I was really adamant about still calling myself a lesbian for the first few months of our relationship and I guess just in the last couple months at least, kind of the emotions have died down a little bit and the pride and the anger and all those things that were making me feel like somehow I was threatened or my identity was threatened by being in this relationship. And so I think I've kind of calmed down on that front and decided that it doesn't have to be this permanent stamp on the record. You know? It's an evolution and I can still explore my lesbian side. I can still explore my pansexual side and just continue to figure out which one feels right.

From a slightly different perspective, Jackie (27) explained that her claiming of a pansexual identity was the result of self-reflection and a greater understanding of her own beliefs. She stated, “I always am talking about how I love people for who they are, well I should really love people for who they are, not the parts that they have. And that's when I embraced my pansexuality.” When asked why they may have chosen the labels of bisexual or pansexual over the label queer, these women generally explained that either queer seemed too vague, they still associated queer with an anti-gay slur, or they simply felt that other labels fit them better.

While most of the women I interviewed did report changing their identity labels after experiencing their partner begin his transition, a few did not. Specifically, five women discussed how their partner’s gender identity did not impact their own sexual identity and how they have since maintained their lesbian identity label. For example, when asked if she still identifies as a lesbian despite her relationship with her trans partner, Tara (35) replied, “I do. You know, I thought a lot about it and I still—at the end of the day, I'm a lesbian married to a man. So it's confusing. But I'm definitely still gay.” This response suggests that the changing gender of Tara’s partner ultimately did not impact her underlying sexual identity.
Similarly Carrie (57) described a conversation with her trans partner regarding the possibility of her changing her sexual identity label:

Theo told me when we first got together that I was queer now. That somebody whose partners with someone who's trans is queer. And I was like, "well I thought I get to define myself." And he says, "oh yeah, you do but you know, this is generally what it's called." But I just felt like, "no I'm a lesbian." […] He was like, "oh okay."

Carrie’s reluctance to relinquish her lesbian identity due to her partner’s transition and her insistence on being able to identify her own sexuality was echoed by Cory (36) who intentionally claimed a politicized version of the lesbian label, butch dyke. She explained that after significant self-reflection, this somewhat controversial term was the best descriptor of her identity, politics, and community:

There's a political ideology behind being a masculine presenting lesbian or a masculine presenting woman, and a masculine presenting woman who sleeps with non-cis men, or people who aren't cis men, and I fall into that political category. I think there is a power behind the word dyke. I think it is much angrier than the word lesbian, and I fall into that category of angry, fucking dyke. I fall into the category of somebody who is politically active, which is what I think you think of when you say the word dyke. […] I will say it is—and this is definitely controversial to say, but I know this to be true—that it is hard to be a butch lesbian in the queer community these days. The lived experience of me and my other friends who identify as butch lesbians, that the question we get asked is, "When are you going to transition?" Or "Are you going to transition?" Or, "don't you feel trans?" And that issue of our gender identity being questioned, gets put upon us quite frequently, not just by the hetero community, like the straight community, but often, OFTEN by members of our own queer community. So it has become almost like a political rebellion to be an old school butch dyke. […] To identify as female and shed society's image of what female needs to look like, and define your own feminine, and define your own female, and present that to the world as beautiful and powerful, and real. And make the world take you seriously. That has become harder for the butch lesbian, for the butch dyke, for the butch community. And I think it is a political act for me to identify as a butch dyke.

This sentiment evokes the repeated theme that the motivations behind claiming a lesbian identity (or a variation of it) can extend far beyond sexual attractions and behaviors and can encompass factors such as gender, politics, and activism.

*Negotiating Lesbian Communities*
In addition to negotiations around identity, a partner’s transition can also entail concerns about acceptance in established lesbian communities. As was previously addressed, existing literature in this area suggests that partners of trans men, and the trans men themselves, often find themselves unwelcome in lesbian spaces (Lev 2004; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009; Pfeffer 2009, 2014; Nataf 1996; Wilkinson and Gomez 2004). This literature has documented that within lesbian communities there is often an unwillingness to include men, women perceived to be heterosexual, and others who may benefit from male or heterosexual privilege.

While this is a relatively common theme in the existing literature, this experience was only reported by three women I interviewed. The majority of my interviewees expressed that their communities had no negative reactions to their relationships with trans men and were generally very supportive. These women discussed the ways in which their communities welcomed them and their partners and generally did not view them differently due to the gender transition. For example, when asked if she felt supported by her lesbian community, Stephanie (34) stated, “Very much. Yes. I mean we have so many queer friends and friends who are lesbian couples and new friends from [a] trans guys group. And we feel very connected and supported.” Similarly, Kristen (34) described that not only had her community been supportive, but because of the support she had been provided, she felt like the entire process had been relatively easy for her. When asked if she had experienced any backlash from the lesbian community, she stated, “No […] I've had the easy part of this relationship. […] I mean it's been pretty easy. And I think it's super easy because of the support that I have.” This anecdote contrasts those provided by the majority of women I interviewed who described feeling very overlooked during their partners’ transitions and not having their feelings recognized and validated.
While most women felt very accepted by their communities, Samantha (27) described how her community is generally supportive but occasionally engage in microaggressions that make her and her partner uncomfortable:

They're outwardly supportive but they'll do things occasionally that feel like a little bit alienating to him I think. And I don't think purposely. I think it's just like they're so used to having all these lesbian friends and only being friends with women and having these tight groups. And then, I don't know just little things like in group text messages, or group messages they’ll address everyone as ladies or I don't know, things like that, that I don't think they're thinking about. They're not doing maliciously but they're not being especially sensitive to him, I would say. And just kind of carrying on like we still have this enormous group of lesbian friends when in fact that's not the case for everyone in the group anymore. But I think they're getting—I think by and large they have been very supportive.

This sentiment was echoed by Tara (35) who explained that while she has not faced any significant backlash by her community, her friends have been very curious about the dynamics of her relationship:

I have some friends that are kind of like, “oh how does sex work?” And like, “are you still attracted to him?” I get asked a lot of questions. I haven't necessarily been ousted from the community or anything. But you know, my friends are definitely curious about how it works and if I'm happy.

While Tara suggested that her friends were generally supportive of her relationship, she did indicate that these types of questions felt invasive.

Despite general acceptance by their communities, a handful of women did report feeling unwelcome in lesbian spaces after their partners’ transitions. For example, Yasmine (27) briefly explained: “It does change the way sometimes you're looked at in the queer circles,” while Megan (28) elaborated:

When I started dating my husband—who isn't out to 99% of people—people thought I was a traitor. And people still think I'm a traitor I think, but they're too afraid to say anything. It's been four and a half years now that Aaron and I have been together and so there are a very, very, very small handful of people who know that we're queer, that Aaron is trans. But a lot of people don't. And it was only a couple years into dating Aaron that I started reconnecting with those old friends who were honest about, you know, “when I saw you were dating Aaron and you broke up with your old partner, I was super hurt and I couldn't believe that you had kind of gone straight. And I couldn't believe that you would do that to him, or that you would leave the community.” And people were
upset—I don't know on whose behalf—but they were like mad, like angry about my decision.

While this experience was only reported by a few women, they described this backlash as traumatic because of the previous role these communities had played in their lives.

**Negotiating Social Visibility and Heterosexual Privilege**

In addition to the role of community in their lives, the women I interviewed discussed various reactions to being perceived as heterosexual or benefitting from heterosexual privilege. As was previously discussed, many of these women had previously felt very attached to a lesbian identity due to political beliefs, activism, and a general reluctance to adhere to traditional heteronormative relationships structures. They reported that identifying as lesbians allowed them to be somewhat socially radical and “different” than traditional heterosexual couples. Therefore, upon their partners’ transitions, a number of women reported a general reluctance to adopt heterosexuality and attempts to reject heterosexual privilege. For example, Megan (28) described:

> I think part of me is still super angry about the—about being the gay kid in the room full of straight kids. Like part of me is still clinging to that, you know, “I'm not like you guys.” And I have all of the negative associations with the treatment of how it was by a mainly heterosexual world, and being the weird lesbian kid. So part of me doesn't want to identify with the label of being heterosexual because that to me means automatically something that I'm not, or something negative which is not super nice to straight people. Which I'm now kind of a part of. It's also very weird to be benefiting from a system that I used to feel oppressed by.

She went on to describe certain privileges that she and her partner are now afforded which included being able to be affectionate in public without fear and having normative labels such as “Mr.” and “Mrs.” apply to them. She then commented,

> I think when you're gay or queer or lesbian or whatever, you think like, “oh wouldn't it be nice to be able to go out and be normal and just be totally ignored and be able to do your thing.” And that's something that is so coveted and I used to feel that way. And now we are on the other side where now we have that privilege and we are uncomfortable with having the privilege and not sure how to do it in a way that isn't just—I don't know—like taking advantage of this system that we know is so detrimental to so many people. And

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not just queer people either obviously—like people with different abilities or, you know, whatever it is. It's definitely strange to be benefiting from that now, to have that privilege.

This fear of being perceived as heterosexual or being seen as a part of a system that has been repressive and harmful, was a sentiment echoed by a number of women.

For example, Monica (44) discussed her sadness over the loss of identity that she felt due to becoming socially invisible:

It's strange because I really loved that we would be out, be somewhere, and we were a lesbian couple. You could identify us on the street. And now, we're a heterosexual, middle-aged, white couple like everybody else. At least identified that way. I mean you know if someone sees us on the street, we look like every other heterosexual couple. And that loss of identity is really difficult. [...] It's been really difficult because I think we both felt very powerful being part of a community, an LGBTQ community. And when that visual identification—losing that visual identification in that community has had negative impacts on—it's hard to identify ourselves sometimes—who we are, where we are, how we stand in the community.

Similarly, two women reiterated this idea and specifically addressed the notion that prior to their partners’ transitions, they felt a sense of shared identity and camaraderie with other lesbians that could no longer take place:

Let's say we are together somewhere and we recognize another lesbian couple. In the past I might have smiled at that couple or something. And then, you know, I'm in my couple, kind of acknowledging or something. I can't do that so easily now. I mean I might smile and nod you know so I can be a supportive person out there. But they're not going to look and go, "oh look another lesbian couple." (Carrie, 57)

People read us as a straight couple now and that's hard. Because especially, I spent so much time in the lesbian community and being visible, and having that sense of visibility when you're walking down the street with your partner. And you can tell you're together, and be like, "they're lesbians." And I don't know, the sense of camaraderie when you come across other lesbians and gay people out in public and you see each other, you know? Like, the nod... like, “yeah, I see you. You're family. Right on. Keep doing your thing.” And just like, the sheer sense of being I able to live as LGBT in a world that's very hetero-centric. And, like, to lose that and all of a sudden be—blend in, if you will, with everybody else and looking very straight. (Melissa, 33)

Additionally, two women reported that because their partners were in very early stages of their transitions, they did not yet pass, and therefore they were not currently being seen as heterosexual couples. However, these women did express that they feared that in the future they
would no longer have the social visibility that the currently enjoy. For example, Emma (28) described:

I refuse to be seen as a straight couple. [...] I think at this point we are still seen as lesbians. He is misgendered a lot still. I think if anything they would see him as trans and me as—I think I look very straight, cis female. So part of me—this sounds bad and I feel a little guilty for it but—I'm happy that he doesn't pass because I'm not ready to be invisible like that and just be seen as a straight cis couple.

Many women echoed this sentiment and specifically highlighted the sense of loss they felt in terms of their identity, visibility, and camaraderie. One interviewee even began to cry when discussing her feelings over no longer being seen as a lesbian by the majority of society.

However, a handful of women did express that while they may not want to be socially read as heterosexual, it was often easier and safer. They described how newfound heterosexual privilege allowed them to move through the world in an easier manner than they had before. For example, when asked if she minded passing as heterosexual, Beth (39) stated, “I mean for safety, no. But for identity, yes. I mean it, you know, it's been hard.” Similarly, Samantha (27) described:

Yeah, yeah, that's definitely also been a struggle. I definitely feel guilty sometimes passing as straight and getting whatever privilege comes with that. But if I'm being really honest, sometimes it's easier and sometimes it's like I'm okay with it for split seconds and you know, I don't know. It's definitely new for me and something that wasn't entirely comfortable for a while. But there are occasions during which I feel like, "eh, whatever. I'm just going to let it happen because it's easier right now."

These narratives suggest that while some of these women regretted losing their identity and visibility, they welcomed the increased safety and ease with which they could move through the world.

Finally, a few women did report that they had never thought about notions of visibility or heterosexual privilege, or that they were not concerned with these factors. For example, Sascha (36) who had been in a heterosexual relationship previously, stated, “I definitely never really thought about it because A. I've already had that benefit. B. I don't really give two craps about
what people think. It doesn't really mean anything to me.” Katherine (46) also suggested that she did not mind being perceived as heterosexual and indicated that she viewed instances in which people assumed her identity to be teaching moments:

> And you know, like if people are reading us as a heterosexual couple, then they are reading us as a heterosexual couple. I can't really control other people's assumptions about who we are. But like I said, if I am in a conversation with someone and they sort of make that assumption, I will say "oh you know, we are actually not a heterosexual couple." But you know, I don't feel any anger around it. It doesn't make me upset because it is human nature for people to do that, and particularly people that are not in the queer community, or the LGBTQ community. They will automatically make that assumption often. And so I feel like, ”well, I'll educate them a little bit here. [Laughs]." So yeah, but no it doesn't make me upset.

While most of the women I interviewed did suggest that they had struggled with notions of identity visibility and heterosexual privilege, these few women indicated that perhaps being perceived as “different” or “radical” was not integral to how they conceptualized their lesbian identities.

**Reflections on Impact of Transition on Relationships**

After detailing their personal negotiations in terms of identity, community, and visibility, the women I interviewed reflected on their perceptions of how their partners’ transitions impacted their relationships overall. An important point to note, however, is that the partners of these women were in various stages of their transitions. While some had only begun transitioning several weeks or months prior, others had fully transitioned several years before. Therefore, these women had varying amounts of time to evaluate the impact of these transitions and their satisfaction with their relationships broadly. However, while these women detailed a variety of nuanced struggles in terms of their own identities, they overwhelmingly reported that their partners’ transitions had had positive impacts on their relationships. Most of these women attributed this to their partners’ improved mental health and comfort with themselves after beginning their transitions.
For example, Samantha (27) discussed how even though the transition was initially difficult because of her reaction to it, she has since been able to see the positive impacts it has had:

He's so much happier, so it's hard to not be excited about those kinds of things. Like you know, he'd be so excited about some of the changes so it kind of just rubbed off I guess. […] I mean I think in the beginning it was definitely—I didn't think it was going to end up this way and I thought it was a very—and it did end up being a very negative thing at the time because of how I was reacting to it. But yeah it definitely—I mean it's kind of hard because I don't know what it would have ended up being like if he didn't choose to transition. But he probably would be much more unhappy and all of that. But I think… yeah I think it's been good.

A number of women stressed that their partners’ comfort and happiness with their own bodies outweighed the struggles they faced with their own identities. They explained that this newfound happiness was an overwhelmingly positive outcome and in certain cases, they found themselves attracted to their partners’ increased confidence. For example, Tara (35) stated, “Through this process he has become so much more confident in himself. You know? And he carries himself differently and has this sense of confidence about him that is really sexy.” Similarly, Jordan (30) who was no longer in a relationship with her partner due to factors unrelated to his transition discussed how, due to his increased happiness, she viewed the transition and the relationship as overwhelmingly positive:

Yeah he is so much happier now. He is the happiest I've ever known him. And he's been passing happily because that was a goal for him. And living his life the way he wants to for years now. And he always said that I was the first person who really accepted him and that meant a lot to him, which meant a lot to me. So yeah, for me it was very influential and I learned a lot. And I really cared about him, and I still do. He's a great guy.

While these women did almost exclusively indicate that these transitions were positive overall, a few women did address their lingering mixed emotions and ways in which they still struggled. For example, Katherine (46) discussed how despite the fact that she does view the transition positively, she and her partner still face challenges that they need to work through:
And I would say it is positive because my partner is definitely growing into themself more. They have had some mental health challenges over the years, and it's mostly been due to the gender suppression for their whole life basically. And now that they have transitioned, there's just, there is more of a sense of, "this is them. This is who they are." And so that has really helped things a lot in terms of their mental health. [...] You know, there has been a bit of a bumpy time just with the hormone therapy. And I'm also in menopause so there's a lot of hormones happening. And you know, in the research I've done, that's kind of a typical thing is that when people transition and they start taking testosterone, there is sort of a—up to five years of kind of like this second puberty kind of stage. So it's almost like there is a 16 year old living in the house. [...] But you know, it's all been positive. I mean, there has been some challenging situations but we have a pretty, a very open communication style within our relationship. So we just talk stuff out and just kind of move on. [...] But definitely it's been positive because my partner is now really authentically themself, and very open about it and just happier and more at ease.

These types of narratives suggest that perhaps these women have attempted to weigh the challenges of this process with the positive outcomes, and have generally concluded that their partners’ transitions were beneficial overall. Importantly however, as was addressed previously, the women I interviewed are perhaps a self-selected group of people who had generally more positive views towards a transition than an average woman might. This could potentially have impacted the ways in which they have reflected on the processes thus far.

In conclusion, the women I interviewed who experienced a partner transition described a wide range of emotions and personal negotiations in response to the perceived impact of these transitions on their identities, communities, and personal beliefs. While many of these transitions proved very challenging, and often caused these women to change or reconsider their sexual identity labels, they were overwhelmingly viewed as positive. In summation, Melissa (33) articulated the feelings of a number of women I interviewed when she stated:

I guess my big experience or takeaway from this experience has been for me anyway, sexuality is not some static, finite thing. It's evolving and changing. It's shaped by your life experience and the culture that you grow up in. It can change at any time for a variety of reasons. Things that maybe you don't even know have anything to do with sexuality and all of a sudden you're like, "hmm now I have an even more nuanced view of who I like and why I like them." And then, I don't know, I guess for me too, while I think I have a more, a better understanding of myself, having gone through this process, it's also become less significant in who I am as a person. [...] When I was younger my lesbian identity was a huge thing about me. And now my sexual identity is just one facet of many, many, many things that I happen to be. And I have of course, to bring in the
sociology, I have a very intersectional understanding of who I am. So that's tied up into my race and my class and gender, able-bodiedness, all of those things. They're all connected to one another. A tangled mess...

In the section that follows I will explore the negotiations faced by the women in Group 2.

Following this analysis I will discuss the finding presented in both sections and consider how these two groups of women experienced their relationships differently and how these experiences align with or challenge contemporary theoretical perspectives on sexual identity permanence.

**Group 2 (Partners of Cis Men): Identity and Relational Negotiations**

The women in Group 1 reported complex periods of negotiation in terms of their lesbian identities when faced with a partner transitioning. Similarly, the women who engaged in relationships with cis men generally reported significant, yet sometimes different, forms of negotiations. In the section that follows I will explore the narratives presented by these women in order to shed light on why they began relationships with men, how these relationships impacted their identities, and whether the concept of “choice” played a role in these relationships and negotiations. Importantly, it could possibly be assumed that women who begin relationship with cis men after periods of identifying as lesbians make a conscious choice to begin these relationships. For instance, perhaps this situation exists in contrast to the experiences of women who experience a partner transition and therefore find themselves in relationships that are not completely chosen. However, as was previously discussed, the women I interviewed who experienced a partner transition generally chose to maintain those relationships, involving a certain level of choice. Furthermore, as I discovered in my interviews with lesbian-identified women who entered into relationships with cis men, while some discussed consciously choosing to begin relationships with men, the majority described scenarios that surprised them and that were not entirely based on conscious decisions.
The women I spoke to who began relationships with cis men after having identified as lesbians for at least one year, reported a variety of ways in which these relationships began. While a few women reported consciously deciding to date men, the vast majority reported finding themselves in these relationships which they never would have anticipated. While some of these relationships eventually developed from unexpected attractions to a specific person, others were the result of the women finding themselves suddenly open to the prospect of dating or engaging in sexual relationships with men generally. For some women, these feelings were sparked by specific events in their lives.

For example, several women explicitly reported finding themselves attracted to men after experiencing difficult breakups with women. For example, Sadie (38) described what led her to an unexpected relationship with a man after breaking up with a long-term girlfriend:

It wasn't even a thought process. I broke up with my girlfriend. We didn't break up because I wanted to be with men. We broke up cause she was a terrible person who lacked empathy who I never should have been with in the first place and not very smart. And then I got on OkCupid and I called myself bisexual and I started dating men. I literally did not think about it. And I've tried to sort of explore that and I mean, I would hope it's sort of clear that I do think about things. I'm definitely someone who probably, to a bad extent, self-examines. So I just have no idea what happened there. I don't know. And I didn't—it wasn't something… There was no… It was not premeditated in the slightest. It was surprising to me and it wasn't even really that big of a deal in some ways. It just didn't… it was just what I was doing and I was okay with that mostly.

Similarly, Luz (30) described the impact of a breakup as well as other traumatic events that led her to find herself interested in a male friend:

I was going through a really hard time because I was dealing with the break-up from the really serious relationship with [my previous girlfriend]. And my mother's death was still really, really new. And my family wasn't being—my grandmother and I were having trouble. And so he saw me through all of that. So he saw me at the highest highs and the lowest lows and we just—and he was going through a really hard time too. And this is just a man who I've known now for 11 years. I knew him and his family really well beforehand. And so the trust factor was already there. And that for me has always been
the biggest hurdle with men.

Notably, these women reported being able to identify the life event(s) that led them to pursue relationships with men, even though they did not specifically feel as if they chose these attractions and relationships.

A handful of women who discussed beginning relationships with men after specific life events, specifically breakups with long-term girlfriends, reported feeling unexpected sexual attractions to men, or simply finding themselves pursuing sexual relationships with them. For example, Brooke (34) described:

Then when [my girlfriend and I] broke up—we were in a relationship for three and a half years, so when we broke up—because it was an abusive relationship—it took me a really long time to realize my worth. So when we broke up, as soon as we broke up, this guy at work approached me and said he wanted to have something casual. So I really needed help at the time to forget about the ex, so I went with it. And during that time I had my, “I don't really care. I'm going to do whoever I want” phase. So I ended up sleeping with a lot of men.

Similarly, Kim (54), who had previously discussed being very attached to her lesbian identity, explained:

I was a little crazy after [my girlfriend and I] split up and I don't know if you would call it dating, I just saw—you know 2 months after we broke up I finally had sex with somebody else and it was a man. And that was revelatory for me because I felt like, “wow.” I finally was able to get over her because I had had sex with somebody else and the fact that it was a man was very exciting. […] I guess at that point I just—sexually I fantasized about being with men. I'm like, "this is what I want. At least this is what it feels like I want right now."

This common narrative of pursuing sexual or emotional relationships with men after ending relationships with women perhaps demonstrates the phenomenon of ‘phase transitions’ as described by Lisa Diamond. This idea will be further discussed at the end of this chapter.

While not all women reported that their relationships with men began after breakups with women, this seemed to be a common experience shared by a number of my interviewees. Other
women who reported unexpected sexual or emotional attractions to men, did not seem to attribute these changes to any specific life event. For example, Ingrid (25) remembered:

Towards the end of college I started—I started doing things when I was really, really drunk. Which I feel like that's how most people become gay but that was the opposite for me. So for example I remember one night at the very end of university I was really, really drunk and I texted a close male friend and was like, “hey do you want to come over and have sex?” which was very out of character. And I remember waking up in the morning and being like, “what the fuck? What was I thinking? Why did I do this?”

This sentiment of being surprised by experiences with or attractions to men was echoed by Heather (28) who described gradually developing, yet unexpected, feelings for a male friend:

He was a friend of a friend and we kind of just hung out in groups together. And he was in the plays at school and stuff and I would go. I played sports and he would come with friends. But we just kind of gradually talked to each other more and more when we were hanging out. And I was single. He was single. And I just, I don't know. I liked his personality and liked who he was. And at some point I'm like—I didn't think of him as like a partner potential because of the time I was really only interested in women. But I don't know. It was kind of a gradual like, “oh who cares what gender he is. If I like him I like him.”

In these cases, the cause of these unexpected changes in attractions were not specifically pinpointed by my interviewees. However, the women who experienced them stressed that these feelings were not anticipated and not something that the women felt they would have chosen.

The social and theoretical implications of these unexpected attractions and behaviors will be discussed further at the end of this chapter.

While most women described feeling caught off guard by unforeseen sexual or emotional attractions to men, a few women described deliberately choosing to date men because of life circumstances, despite their lesbian identities. These women explicitly attributed their decisions to date men to outside influences such as pressure from family and friends, or the desire to have children. For example, Kelly (31), who had previously discussed the impact of her conservative and homophobic family on her willingness to fully embody a lesbian identity and become
involved in a lesbian community, described how stress concerning her family eventually led her
to abandon her lesbian identity and relationships:

[My relationship with my girlfriend] ended primarily because I realized that I just
couldn't—that this was not something that I could do long-term because the stress from—
because I'm an only child. You know, my family is all very, very close, my extended
family as well. And I just realized that I could not handle the friction with my
family. Like I would have never been able to tell most of my family. […] I think I just
made the decision that it was better in the long run. … Pretty much around the same time
that I broke it off with my ex-girlfriend, there was a guy that I had been acquainted with
who had moved into town that was like a friend of a friend. And he was kind of interested
in me so we just went on a couple dates. And he's like the least—I mean he's my current
husband. He's not very masculine. And actually he said that multiple lesbians have
wanted to be in relationships with him. So I just sort of like zeroed in and I was
like, “Alright now I can get married, and I can have kids, and my parents can be off my
back, and this is like someone who is not a macho man whatsoever. Like I'm not going to
have any of the typical conflicts. Like it's just good enough.” And it's hard because I feel
like that's a terrible thing to say, but we get along.

While Kelly did not seem as satisfied with this relationship as she had been with relationships
with women in the past, she seemed content with her decision and implied that the social
acceptance that this relationship afforded her outweighed any feelings of doubt or dissatisfaction
that she may have experienced.

Malika (29) described a similar situation in which explicit pressure from her family led
her to end a relationship with a woman and begin dating a man:

I was dating Simone at the time and then—we just bought our house together and I went
to a family gathering. And my now boyfriend was there. And my parents, even though
they knew I was dating Simone and I was really serious—I don't know how they said it,
but they said something like, “you know, I believe this guy likes you.” So you should
maybe talk to him or something or they like, pressured me to talk to him. They told me
that it would be happy if I would talk to him or something. And it played in my mind
obviously and then eventually me and this guy started talking and eventually Simone and
I broke up. And I started dating this guy. But it all started because of what everyone was
saying around me, my parents, my cousins, and how they did not approve of my
relationship with Simone, and how they would rather me start dating men again.

When asked if things would have been different if she had not experienced this pressure from her
family, she replied, “I don’t think I would have broken up with Simone.” Similar to the narrative
presented by Kelly, this situation represents a deliberate attempt to pursue a more socially
acceptable relationship, despite internal attractions or feelings of identity.

These specific decisions due to familial pressures were paralleled by the experiences of
two women who also described their deliberate choices to begin relationships with men.
However, these women, Susan (67) and Paulina (61), explained how personal feelings and
desires, rather than specific outside pressure, that led them to decide to begin relationships with
men. For instance, Susan specifically discussed that starting in her late twenties, she began to
feel the urge to have children. After being unable to decide how to have a child while in an
unhealthy relationship with a woman, and due to other life changes such as going back to school
and beginning a demanding job, she made a deliberate decision to date men. She remembered,

I began, in a pretty organized fashion, to see if I could date guys. Because I knew I'd had
a happy sexual relationship with [my high school boyfriend] way back and I knew that
my own—I had had just this—I just adored my dad and I couldn't imagine having
children without having a dad for them. You know, like a man dad. And so I thought, if
I'm starting over, let's see if I can find a guy. [But due to a demanding work schedule] I
really wasn't able to actively devote myself to dating. I just had it in mind that I wanted to
check guys out.

She went on to describe how after unsuccessfully dating men for a few years, she was able to
reconnect with an acquaintance from earlier in her life who she later married and with whom she
would go on to have two children.

Echoing this experience, Paulina explained how she consciously made the decision to
date men after a particularly difficult breakup with a long-term girlfriend in 1995 (21 years prior
to our interview). She described how she decided to never date women again after her girlfriend
of five years cheated on her:

I was in a relationship for 5 years and the person cheated with—and we were living
together—and the person cheated with someone that I thought was a friend and I think
the pain of that... I know the pain of that breakup is when I said, “forget this. I'm not
doing this anymore. It can't possibly hurt any more than this breakup.” […] At that point
I just said, "I'm not going to deal with women anymore." I'm not gonna do it. And I
haven't. It's still painful. […] I'm never going to get hurt that way again. It couldn't
possibly hurt that much if a man than it did with a female, you know? So I kind of just said, "I'm choosing never to put myself in the position again, you know, I would experience that kind of pain." And I just think that... I just felt like a man couldn't do that to me.

She later discussed how since 1995 she has only dated men, even though she still identifies as a lesbian and is primarily attracted to women. She expressed a general dissatisfaction with her relationships with men (particularly her current husband) and explained how despite this, if she were to divorce her husband, she doubts that she would date women in the future because of the potential pain she might experience. Additionally she distinctly stressed that her decision to date and engage in sexual behaviors with men was a choice, while her sexual identity and attractions to women were innate and not consciously chosen.

These narratives presented by the women I interviewed suggest somewhat diverse experiences with and reasons for beginning relationships with cis men. While a few women reported making deliberate decisions to pursue relationships with men, most women found themselves caught off guard by their attractions or by their sexual behaviors. While some could pinpoint life events that perhaps contributed to their willingness to engage in relationships with men, others viewed their changing dynamics as completely random and difficult to explain. Finally, one interviewee, Galen (32) relayed a unique narrative that suggested that despite entering into a relationship with a cis man, she did not necessarily view him as a straight cis man, and therefore did not see this relationship as in contrast to her lesbian/queer identity:

I think I just kind of thought he was gay. His dad was gay and he was very, very effeminate. So effeminate. Like the nicest person I've ever dated. So nurturing, so loving. He would make me breakfast in the morning to take with me as a packed lunch. Like the nicest person I ever dated. And so that was like, it was sort of contrasting—it's like somewhat masculine, it's like a male body. [...] But was just so affirming. [...] Very much the opposite of what [another] relationship had been which was putting me in this cis/girl/femme box that I didn't relate to—who was supposed to be heterosexual but right? Like, there was like—and I wasn't pushed to be heterosexual in a relationship with a male.
This unique narrative challenges some of the assumed links between sex, gender, and sexuality and suggests that perhaps this woman did not view a relationship with a gay man to be in direct contrast to her lesbian identity.

**Personal Identity Negotiations**

Once the women I interviewed began relationships with cis men, they experienced a range of emotions regarding how these relationships potentially challenged their established lesbian identities. Similarly to how the women in Group 1 navigated these negotiations, this situation caused great stress for some women while others described a relatively smooth transition into heterosexual relationships.

For example, a number of women discussed how they were able to easily adapt to relationships with men and how they did not particularly struggle with how these relationships aligned with their lesbian identities. Brooke (34) stated that as soon as she began having sexual relationships with men, she immediately knew that her lesbian identity “wasn’t a thing anymore,” while Susan (67) remembered that dating men was “easy” and “felt natural.” Similarly, Juliana (22) remembered,

> I think it was [a] smooth [transition]. I didn't really think about it much so I can't really tell you. But I don't think it was anything like, “oh my God, so am I straight again?” It was just like, “oh wow I met this boy and he's cool.” Like I don't know. He's cool and it’s like, “oh I'm going to get to know him.”

This type of rhetoric was echoed by several women who had previously discussed varying levels of attachment to their lesbian identities. While Juliana had indicated that she had always approached her lesbian identity with ambivalence and therefore the smooth transition into a relationship with a man might have been expected, other women such as Lily (27) had discussed being very aligned with a lesbian identity. She described how despite the fact that being a lesbian was “a big part of [her] identity for several years,” she was able to negotiate her identity and the
way in which her relationship with a man could potentially challenge her sense of self relatively
easily. She explained:

When someone asked me, they were kind of like, you know, “what's up Lily? I thought
you were gay.” And I would kind of just be like, “well I guess not. This is weird, huh?”
And I always sort of maintained that if it didn't work out or if, you know, I didn't end up
marrying [him], or something now, God forbid, that I would always go back to dating
women. And I still kind of feel that way. So I don't know. He kind of seemed like an
exception. It didn't seem like it was opening me up to a world of men. It kind of seemed
like he was very special. And he still is, you know? So I don't know. If I'd never met him
I kind of feel like I'd still be a lesbian.

As Lily described, the feeling of one’s male partner being an “exception” to their generally
exclusive attractions to women was a sentiment echoed by a handful of women.

While these women described relatively smooth transitions into relationships with men, a
number of other women expressed confusion, sadness, and/or feelings of sacrifice while
attempting to negotiate their lesbian identities with attractions to, or relationships with, men. For
example, when asked how dating a man impacted her lesbian identity, Ingrid (25) discussed what
she referred to as an “identity crisis:"

It was so confusing. […] I mean at first it was really easy to continue to think of myself
as a lesbian because I just thought about how a lot of straight people at some point
experiment with someone of the same sex and it doesn't change their identity in any way.
They're just like, "whatever, like I made out with this girl at a bar and I'm still
straight." And so I sort of justified it in that way at first. I was like, “this is just an
experiment. I can still identify…” I sort of gave myself permission to still be a lesbian
and have sex with a man.

She went on to describe how as her relationship with her first male partner progressed, she felt as
if she actually had to confront her own identity:

There actually were points in our relationship where I did get freaked out and sort of
pushed him away a little bit. I would say, “oh you know, let's not see each other for a
little while or something.” But I sort of, at the good times I was working hard to give
myself permission to experiment without feeling like it had to be this big thing that was
going to change my identity. And then as it continued I did start to think like, “okay,
maybe I'm bisexual.” But I had a lot of trouble, and still have a lot of trouble accepting
that label. It doesn't sit well with me.

As Ingrid addressed, there can often be a disconnect between wanting to maintain a lesbian
identity but still engage in relationships with men. Even though academic research has
acknowledged an imperfect correlation between sexual identity, attractions, and behaviors, individual people often feel the need to describe themselves using socially understood labels. However, if these labels feel too reductionist or imperfect, as “bisexual” did for Ingrid, this can cause distress or confusion.

Alex (31) echoed these sentiments when she described struggling to understand her own identity while considering how she had previously viewed women in her same position:

And it's also made me actually kind of confront some of my own biases because like I've been judgmental in the past of women who identified as lesbians and then fell in love with men, or women who are bisexual or queer and then end up partnered with a man. And I definitely, I'm ashamed of this but I like, took their queerness less seriously because of it. Or I was like, "I don't understand if you're queer, why are you always dating men?" Or like, "blah blah blah." And it's been humbling for me, I feel like I'm kind of eating crow. And I even like, I resisted a little bit at first with Marty. Because I'm like, "he's a boy. This is going to change my whole life." Because it was pretty clear early on with him that like this is not—this isn't a fling. This isn't a casual thing.

Like Ingrid, Alex acknowledged the fact that beginning a relationship with a man would drastically alter her life, primarily because of assumptions that relationships with men do not align with lesbian identities. She went on to explain how she struggled to relinquish this identity:

I felt strongly as a lesbian because I was into women and also part of it was just being contrary I guess in that I didn't like how my generation was bashing lesbians so much. I was just like, "I am a lesbian. I am a dyke." So it is such a core part of my identity. And I don't know. I don't want to let go of this identity I've had for 15 years. But also at the same time, I'm aware that I am with a guy and when we walk down the street people assume that we're a straight couple.

Similarly, Kelly (31) discussed struggling to have any sort of identity after entering into a relationship with a man:

I think that I've really struggled ever since then to kind of have an identity because I do feel like someone who is a lesbian, like I'm not attracted to any other men. I'm only attracted to women. I you know—but it's just weird because there's no way—and like, I'm married to a guy [Laughs]. And it is very difficult for me. I kind of feel like it's just something that I'm sacrificing in order for my daughters to have an accepting household where they can just be whatever they're going to be and be happy and no one's going to make their lives miserable for it.
As these women’s narratives suggest, due to society’s strict boundaries around different identity labels such as *straight* or *lesbian* and because individual’s lived experiences often do not fit into these boxes, attempting to negotiate identities and labels in these situations can be a struggle.

Finally, while most women who described challenging personal negotiations attributed them to feeling as if they needed to claim a new identity label, Sadie (38) struggled with her attractions to men primarily because of how unexpected they were and because of how she felt that her life narrative did not fit the socially accepted understandings of sexual identity development. She described:

I didn't like how it came out of left field. I didn't like that because I just sort of felt like, “well that's really weird.” Because again, I sort of pride myself on self-analysis and like, for that just to be like, “well now I'm doing this… what?” It made me feel like I didn't know myself that well and that bothered me. And I also definitely tried to figure out—I definitely spent time trying to figure out why there was such a big pendulum swing. [...] I think if there's anything that bothers me, it's the way in which this has brought me back to feeling a little bit like a lot of what we've fought for or fought against. Like we've fought for gay—for homosexuality not to be looked at as a choice but through nature. And for it not to be this thing like, “oh you had a bad experience with a man.” They are for all those things and then I think that some of those things might be true for me. And that makes me feel bad. That makes me feel kind of guilty. I mean I don't care for myself but I feel like, I feel like a bad... something. You know what I mean? It just doesn't... I know that's not, like it's kind of politically... I don't want to say politically incorrect because it's not. It's not on the right side of where we are right now. So that kind of is weird.

As these narratives suggest, when women who once identified as lesbians find themselves in relationships with cis men, they can face a number of personal identity negotiations. For some women this can be attributed to a strong attachment to a lesbian identity or a concern that there are no accurate labels to describe their identities. For other women, these struggles can be due to attempts to understand their identities and attractions within normative sexual identity paradigms.

*Changing Identity Labels*
Based on these negotiations experienced by the women I interviewed, many chose to adopt new identity labels that they felt would better describe their attractions and relationships. While all of the women had previously identified as lesbians, due to their relationships with cis men, many chose to adopt other labels such as bisexual, straight, and queer. A handful of other women chose not to label themselves at all while a few others chose to maintain their lesbian labels.

The most common label adopted by these women was *bisexual*. Notably, several more women in this group adopted this label than did the women in Group 1. Of the women who adopted this label, most did so enthusiastically and felt that this label most accurately described their identities, attractions, and behaviors. Tristan (23) explained why she believed that this label was currently the most applicable and why she chose this label over others such as *pansexual* or *queer*:

> I'd say for me, and I don't mean to sound like, crazy but I'm more attracted to people... people and their personalities, than I am their gender. So the reason I wanted to be with my ex was because of who she was as a person. Not because she was female. And the reason I want to be with my boyfriend is because of who he is as a person not because he's male. [...] I'd say I generally stick to men and women. I've thought about dating somebody that's trans... Yeah so I try not to discriminate when it comes to that. I don't identify as pansexual because I don't really see myself attracted to transsexual people. Or transgender, either way. But so yeah, bisexual just because it narrows it down to men and women.

Similarly, Malika (29) explained that this label not only describes her identity fairly well, but it is easily understood by others:

> I think it's mostly for the social construct, in the sense that it's more accepted, more understandable for other people. When you tell someone you're bisexual, they automatically understand what you mean. Sometimes they judge. Sometimes they don't. So it's just an easier label in my opinion. Simply also because I'm not exactly sure what I am and bisexual—it kind of makes sense to me to explain my relationships, because I did go from men to women and vice versa. So it's just the easiest term to use, for me.

While these women seemed to generally be satisfied with the bisexual label, two others were less content and described choosing this label due to an absence of other labels that might...
describe their identities, attractions, and behaviors more accurately. For example, Sadie (38) explained.

The reason that I called myself bisexual was just that it seemed like it would be a lie to say I was straight obviously if I'd only been with women prior to that. And then I couldn't say I was gay because I was dating men, so bisexual was what was left and I don't like lying. [...] So I think that I'm bisexual because you have to be something. And if you didn't have to be something, I probably just wouldn't even deal with it, a name for any of it.

This feeling of having to claim some type of label was echoed by Ingrid (25) who described the reasons why she disliked the bisexual label even though she did at one point claim it herself:

I did start to think like, “okay, maybe I'm bisexual.” But I had a lot of trouble, and still have a lot of trouble accepting that label. It doesn't sit well with me. [...] There's a few reasons. I think the first one is that I have this idea, which again I know is false that bisexuality implies sort of a 50/50, like I could go either way. It doesn't really matter. I'm half attracted to men, half attracted to women. And that's just not true for me. The percentage is more like 90% / 10%. So it just feels weird in that way. It's definitely not equal for me. It's definitely way more skewed towards women. The other thing is that I'm sort of—I guess genderqueer is the right word. I wouldn't normally use that term to describe myself but I present myself in a very masculine way and tend to wear men's clothes. And so people, at least the United States, they almost instantly perceive me as a lesbian or as a man sometimes. And so I have this image in my mind, which again I know doesn't have to be true, that a bisexual is someone who can pass as straight, right? They can get away with—people perceive them as straight and then they just reveal their secret, their secret bisexuality. And for me it's not like that. The secret is that I happen to have had experiences with men.

Notably, Ingrid later described how while she initially claimed the bisexual label after beginning a relationship with a cis man, she eventually decided that queer better described her identity.

In addition to the label bisexual, a number of women reported adopting the queer label soon after beginning a relationship with a cis man. Similar to the narratives provided by the women in Group 1, these women generally reported being drawn to the vagueness and all-encompassing nature of this term. For example, Kelly (31) stated, “it's not as specific. Like I'm definitely not, you know, straight, heteronormative whatever. But that seems like a good catch all.” Galen (32) echoed this idea when describing why she switched from a lesbian label to a queer label:
And so that's part of why I was really appreciative of that term, [queer]. Right? Because I mean how can your identity just keep shifting all the time? That's very stressful I think. And confusing. And also like, you have your behaviors but I think identity has this extra layer of importance in your life where like you're saying, it's like your community. You know? You don't want to lose your community especially when it's one that's like—especially if you're rejected by your family and that community becomes your new family. And so that's really hard.

Galen stressed that the queer label provides space for changing attractions and behaviors that might not be afforded by other labels such as lesbian or even bisexual.

While most of the women I interviewed in this group identified as either bisexual or queer, a few decided to maintain their lesbian identities while others chose no label and one woman decided to identify as straight. The women who decided to maintain their lesbian labels primarily described having deliberately chosen to date cis men, but not feeling as if these relationships changed their core identities or attractions. For example, Paulina (61) who had described dating cis men due to a negative relationship with a woman, explained that her current marriage to a man did not negate her lesbian identity. She explained why she chose to maintain a lesbian identity as opposed to adopting another label such as bisexual: “I'm not going to say I'm bisexual because in my heart of hearts I know that I'm a woman who loves women. That's really the truth of who I am. I'm just making a choice right now to do otherwise.” Similarly, Ulya (20) who had described dating men because of a lack of lesbian women in her area explained why dating men did not change her identity as a lesbian: “It didn't change it. But I thought I was bisexual for a little while but then I was thinking that I never really liked guys sexually. I was not sexually interested in them so I couldn't be. But I was confused because I was still dating them.”

These narratives suggest that perhaps a core sense of a lesbian identity does not necessarily have to align with relationships and/or sexual behaviors.

Furthermore, two women I interviewed decided not to label themselves after beginning relationships with cis men. Kim (54) explained,
I didn't really have a label. I jokingly sometimes would call myself a hasbian. [Laughs]. […] Yeah I guess again I'm not into the labels but I am into telling my story. I think it's an interesting life story that can maybe help some other people, maybe give them permission to be whoever they want to be without the restrictions of—I mean labels can be freeing but they can also be restricting.

Heather (28), who described eventually identifying as bisexual, echoed Kim’s sentiments by explaining her struggles and why she initially chose no label after beginning a relationship with a cis man:

It was so hard to go from like, I mean—it wasn't easy to identify as a lesbian especially initially. You know? With my family, and just the area. And then I was like, "what? Like, what am I doing now? Like, was all that for nothing? Like, why did I even—if I'm interested in a guy, I should have just stayed interested in guys to begin with." Or you know, "am I bisexual?" I was almost frustrated with myself that I was interested in a guy. […] I'm not sure that I really labeled it for a long time. Like I'm just—like I just don't care what gender the other person is. Like if they're a good person, that's what I'm attracted to.

These feelings of not wanting to, or feeling unable to, label their sexuality was common narrative expressed by the women in this group. While most women did choose a label, many did so because they felt they had to, even if established labels did not accurately describe their identities, attractions, and behaviors.

Finally, one woman, Juliana (22), explained how she decided to identify as straight after dating a cis man. As has been previously discussed, Juliana described having a very loose attachment to her lesbian identity while she was dating women and therefore seemed comfortable relinquishing it for a label that she felt was more applicable. At the time of our interview, Juliana was currently single and identified as straight, however she claimed:

I mean tomorrow I could be like, “oh I like this one woman. I like her and I want to be with her. I'm a lesbian today.” And I know a lot of people are like, “how do you go back and forth between both of them?” […] But I guess for me it's different because it's not, “oh you know if you like men you know if you like women.” I like the person. So for me it's not like I'm bouncing from men—I mean it is. But at the same time it's not. Cause I don't look at it like, “oh you're a woman. Today I went to mess with you.” Or like, “Oh you're a man. Today I feel like dating a man.” It’s just like, “okay I met you. I like you and we can talk and I don't care if you're a woman or a man.”
When asked why she identifies as straight as opposed to bisexual or queer, she explained:

Me and my friend have this conversation all the time. He's like, “but you used to date women.” And I'm like, “no. I loved that one girl.” I dated other women but it wasn't—it wasn't for longer than a month. I don't know. Every time people ask me I'm like, “I dated that one girl.” And I did love her but I didn't love her because she was a woman. So I don't know. I wouldn't say that I like women and men.

Despite the fact that Juliana has chosen to identify as straight, she did indicate that she would consider dating women in the future. This narrative suggests that perhaps the strict boundaries around certain labels such as straight or lesbian might not be as relevant or as important for some and can entail a level of fluidity and ability to change.

*Negotiating Lesbian Communities*

In addition to negotiations around their chosen labels and identities, the reality of dating a cis man can lead to challenges regarding acceptance in established lesbian communities. While most women in Group 1 described being fully accepted by their communities after their partners began their transitions, the women in Group 2 generally provided very different narratives. Specifically, while many of these women discussed being very connected to and involved with lesbian communities, after beginning relationships with cis men, more than half of the women I interviewed discussed facing rejection, confusion, and/or anger from their communities.

For example, Brooke (34) succinctly stated, “all of my friends—lesbian identifying friends—were pissed at me because I was no longer with a woman,” while Heather (28) remembered, “it was hard once I started dating a man. A lot of my friends that weren't straight, kind of disappeared. And that was kind of tough.” Amanda (37) expanded on this idea by explaining why she believes she faced rejection from her lesbian community:

I actually had a greater negative response by dating a man than I did when I came out as a lesbian. And I've actually lost most of my queer community because of it. [...] I think that a lot of people struggle with identity and I think that it's really easy for people to feel comfortable. And I myself was like this at different times of having a really clear defined definition of who people are and what their boxes are. And I think for them to
know someone who is more blurred forces into question things about themselves—things that make them feel uncomfortable. And so I think that because of that combined with just the fact that misogyny is so deep with everything that this idea that, you know, you were standing up and doing this like, really lesbian feminist stuff and now you're with like, the enemy—a heterosexual cisgender man. It's sort of made everybody standoffish and freaked a lot of people out.

This anecdote suggests that Amanda’s lesbian community very much prided itself on female relationships and viewed relationships with men as fundamentally counter to those values. This notion of men representing the “enemy” was echoed by Galen (32) when she described: “I think there was a sense of a betrayal which was so fascinating because like it's like, I was allowed to date women and trans men but I couldn't date cis guys without them feeling like a little upset just as a community.”

Similarly, Alex (31) who, due to her job, was known publicly as a lesbian, discussed backlash she faced, not only from her immediate friends, but the larger lesbian community. After beginning a relationship with a cis man, Alex wrote an article in a well-known online publication discussing her identity and relationship with her cis male partner and faced immediate backlash:

I got hate mail from lesbians. I got someone just anonymously emailed [my employer’s] website with a link to a thread [online] and there's like 40 comments in there, just bashing my article. Like there's not a single positive statement in it. Like it's all like, "this is bad for lesbians. She is making it seem like—I hate how it's like, she's like, 'oh you just need to find that one magic guy and this—.'" Just ripping my article to shreds. [...] I had like a dozen people email me directly through my website. [...] And then a conservative website wrote an article [...] and just talked about what a phony I am and how I prove that gay people don't exist and blah blah blah. And also you know, clearly my boyfriend's whipped and I'm a man-eater and whatever and I'm awful.

This experience suggests a general social reliance on strict identity labels which do not allow for fluidity and interpretation. Alex and the other women who experienced negative reactions to their relationships with men discussed how they often struggled to reconcile their relationships with their desire to still be involved in lesbian communities.

While the majority of women in this group reported feeling unwelcome in lesbian spaces after they began their relationships with cis men, a handful of women did report that their
communities were accepting of their new relationships. For example, Ingrid (25) stated, “My friends are really open-minded and weird and they were on board like, ‘whatever.’” Similarly, Tristan (23), who had since moved to a different state and was no longer in regular contact with most of her lesbian friends from college described not facing any substantial backlash: “They didn't really say anything. Like nothing was really said. It was weird. [...] But nobody really said anything. People like my photos on Facebook. A lot of those girls like things that I post of me and my boyfriend so I'm guessing they're supportive.” Finally, Paulina (61) explained that while her community initially had trouble accepting her relationship, they eventually provided her the support she needed:

When I got married, they were like, "why are you doing this?" You know? “Why are you doing this? Da da da da.” So it hurt them. They were confused. The relationships changed for awhile. Like, not as close, not as... we didn't chat about things that we normally would talk about. But then eventually it all came full circle because what we realized is that we really did care about each other. Period. No matter what our sexual expression was. We just loved each other. You know. They just want me to be happy.

While these few women described eventual acceptance by their communities, the majority of the women in this group did describe feelings of rejection and confusion. Notably, several more women in this group described these reactions than did the women in Group 1. Perhaps this suggests increased acceptance in lesbian communities of trans men than of cis men. This concept will be discussed further at the end of this chapter.

*Negotiating Social Visibility and Heterosexual Privilege*

In addition to feeling rejected by lesbian communities, after beginning relationships with cis men, these women also had to grapple with newfound heterosexual privilege and issues of social invisibility in terms of their sexual identities. While the majority of women in Group 1 expressed frustration regarding losing a somewhat “radical” aspect of their identity, most women in Group 2 described readily accepting heterosexual privilege or simply not caring about social
invisibility. For example, Heather (28) succinctly explained why she didn’t mind being socially read as heterosexual: “I don't think I enjoyed having a radical part of my identity. Because it wasn't really that much fun.” Sadie (38) expanded on this idea when asked if she missed being visibly queer:

No. I'm an asshole. I was super excited because I was like, “oh my God this is so much less stressful. I don't have to think about what I'm going to say when people ask me if I have a boyfriend. I don't have to be afraid walking down the street. I don't have to like…” And I suddenly realized how much stress I've been under for so long because I'm not someone who blithely walks down the street holding hands. I did that but I was always very concerned about getting killed.[…] Sometimes I'd rather fit in you know? But I've just noticed the way people have responded to me my whole life is that no one thinks I'm normal. So you know, it was kind of kind of cool to be like any other straight chick for a minute. Like no, I definitely didn't miss it.

This feeling of increased safety which was also addressed by the women in Group 1 was echoed by Amanda (37):

It wasn't always safe where I've lived to hold hands with my person or to have displays of affection. And that was really weird to be like, “Oh I'm with a heterosexual man and this isn't something that is abnormal to everyone.” Like, I don't occasionally have to think about my safety because of this.

Paralleling these sentiments, a handful of women described that socially, being in heterosexual relationships was simply easier than being in lesbian relationships. For example, Susan (67) who had described choosing to be with men specifically to be able to have a nuclear family discussed her relief after getting married to a man. She stated, “when I got married, it felt like a huge relief. It felt like, “thank goodness I got here.” You know? Family members came and stood for us at the wedding and when I had children I got closer even than I had been to my parents because of the grandchildren.” Like Susan, Luz (30) discussed how despite the fact that she had enjoyed being a lesbian and being involved in lesbian communities, she did not experience a significant feeling of loss after beginning a relationship with a cis man:

But my sense of loss—I don't think it was that much to be completely frank. Because of my family, I felt a huge sense of relief that I no longer—well at least when I realized Dan and I were probably going to stay together—I felt like, “okay now I don't have to do this.
I don't have to come out. I don't have to risk anything. It's easy now.” And it is easy, you know? Unfortunately I know that it's still way easier to be straight than it is to be gay in this country. So there's a little bit of a sense of guilt for feeling the relief.

For these women, the benefits they received by passing as heterosexual seemed to outweigh any sense of loss or feelings of social invisibility.

While most of the women in this group did not seem to struggle with issues of heterosexual privilege, a handful did express feelings of missing their old identities and communities. Kelly (31) discussed feeling conflicted over weighing the potential benefits of heterosexual privilege with what she felt she was losing:

It's like such a conflict for me because on the one hand I don't want to create any stigma for my kids or pretty much bring shame on my family or something, or damage my relationship with my parents or whatever. But at the same time I really hate it when people think I'm straight. Like, “ahhhhh.” I'm like, “I'm not! please don't make…” Especially when my extended family make all sorts of really homophobic comments. It's like, I just want to scream at them like, "I'm not straight! Stop it."

Similarly, Malika (29) discussed how while she is satisfied in her current relationship with a cis man, there are aspects of her previous life that she misses. When asked if she misses her lesbian identity, she stated:

Yeah I do sometimes. Because when I was, back then—it sounds silly but I would follow a lot of lesbians on social networks, just to reaffirm that there were other people like me, right? So, feminine lesbians out there who were proud. So I would have a lot of—on Instagram for example, I had a lot of ladies that I would follow that were like that. Feminine, proud lesbians. And it did make me feel better about myself whenever I would see them proud about their relationships. And then when I switched—and then when I started dating Evan, I felt, I don't know. I felt silly for still following these ladies online so I had to like, I deleted all of these accounts, for example. And I miss my lesbian friends. I miss the way we were a very tight knit community. I do miss that. I miss going to Pride with my friends. There's a lot of things that I missed from this old life I would say. And I miss—I felt like when I was out, and I felt like I was out and proud, but I felt like it was a good period in my life. Even though I didn't have my family's support, it was still a good period in my life that I do miss, I must say.

Finally, Felicia (27) echoed these sentiments in her discussion of wanting to assert her queer identity for fear of invisibility, but feeling as if she could not because of the privileges she now had:
There is a sense of like, appropriating queer culture, or appropriating queer identity that is really tricky. And because I have such straight privilege, I don't think that is appropriate for me to be like, "I'm out. I'm so queer." And I'm holding hands with my boyfriend walking down the street and I'm moving into my condo with my boyfriend. I don't have to deal with the hardships. I don't have to worry about getting fired. I don't have to worry about getting turned down from living in my condo because I'm in a relationship with a guy. So it feels like that privilege also makes me feel hesitant in really claiming queerness, I guess.

These diverse narratives suggest a wide range of feelings relating to loss of community, identity, and visibility.

In conclusion, these anecdotes, as well as those provided by the women in Group 1, suggest complex negotiations surrounding their identities upon finding themselves in relationships with trans or cis men. While dominant models of sexual identity development often reduce sexual identity to an innate drive or feeling, these women’s narratives perhaps challenge those models by highlighting the role of other social factors such as community and personal beliefs in the configuration of their own sexual identities. In the section that follows I will discuss the implications of these narratives in light of Dynamic Systems theory and more nuanced and situation-specific understandings of sexual identity.

**Discussion of Findings**

As their narratives suggest, once experiencing a partner transition or once entering into a relationship with a cisgender man, the women I interviewed often experienced personal negotiations regarding their sexuality in terms of identity, community, and personal beliefs. In this section I will briefly discuss the implications of these findings in regards to contemporary theoretical perspectives on sexual identity permanence in order to shed light on the question, “What factors create stability and change in women’s same-sex and other-sex sexuality?”

Contemporary models of sexual identity development suggest a type of permanence of sexual identity. As was discussed previously, the linear compass model of sexual identity
development posits that same-sex sexual identity development “usually begins with gradual awareness of same-sex attractions and subsequent questioning of one’s sexuality. It is supposed to end…with the adoption of a lesbian/gay bisexual identity. Once this occurs, no further change is anticipated” (Diamond 2008: 61). Therefore since all of the women in my sample had claimed a lesbian identity for at least one year, that identity would presumably remain permanent. Specifically, if sexual identity were innate and essential, then social factors such as experiencing a partner transition or experiencing a difficult break-up should not be able to impact it on a fundamental level. However, the women I interviewed reported a range of identity negotiations once experiencing a partner transition or once finding themselves in relationships with cis men.

Specifically, the women Group 1 reported experiencing diverse emotions that in some cases, changed over time and led them to come to different conclusions about how their partners’ transitions impacted their identities and the labels they chose. For example, immediately following their partners’ trans disclosures, the women I interviewed reported a range of emotions that varied from support and relief to anger and resentment. While some women immediately became concerned regarding how these transitions would impact their identities, others were initially solely concerned with their partners’ well-being. However, as the transitions began and as these women faced the reality of relationships with partners that would likely be eventually perceived as men, nearly all reported some concerns regarding their own identities. Specifically, most women reported questioning whether they could maintain their lesbian identities while in relationships with men due to the socially accepted definition of lesbian which generally entails exclusive relationships with women. Most women discussed fear, confusion, or sadness regarding having to relinquish their lesbian identities which many perceived as central to their senses of self. However, a small handful of women did report very few personal negotiations and
a smooth transition into relationships with trans men. While few in number, these experiences are interesting due to the ways in which they demonstrate a willingness (and an ability) to relinquish identities and relationship structures that were likely very important to them.

Once negotiating their own personal identities in relation to their partners’ transitions, the majority of women in Group 1 reported changing their sexual identity labels from lesbian to queer, pansexual, or bisexual. While a handful of women chose to maintain their lesbian identities, the women who chose to change their labels provided nuanced explanations that demonstrate the ways in which environment and the changing gender of sexual object choice can impact how people describe and embody their sexual identities. For example, after their partners’ transitions, many women adopted seemingly more inclusive labels in an attempt to denote their complex attractions, behaviors, and identities that may not have been fully be encompassed by the lesbian label. They described that maintaining a lesbian label might serve to invalidate their partners’ trans identities, while alternative labels (such as queer) would allow them to maintain their somewhat transgressive identities and beliefs while validating their partners’ masculinity and ensuring their safety. For many women, these decisions were also impacted by their connections to (and occasionally pressure from) their lesbian communities, their personal beliefs, and their opposition to heteronormative relationship structures. These unique situations perhaps contradict the Linear Compass Model of sexual identity development by demonstrating that sexual identity can be situation-specific and can vary based on factors that include weighing personal feelings/beliefs with a partner’s identity and safety. When considering the question, “What factors create stability and change in women’s same-sex and other-sex sexuality?” this situation proves critical. For the majority of women in Group 1, their sexuality proved to be
influenced by factors beyond internal identity or even attractions. Due to their relationships and their environments, they consciously changed the labels they used to denote their identities.

Similarly, the women in Group 2 recounted a variety of reasons for beginning relationships with cis men and the diverse impacts these relationships had on their own sexual identities. While the identity negotiations experienced by women in Group 1 were sparked by their partners disclosing their trans status, the parallel impetus for the women in Group 2 was much more varied. Specifically, some women reported deliberate decisions to date men due, for example, to pressure from family or to a desire to have children. On the other hand, some women found themselves surprised by their attractions to, or their sexual behaviors with, cis men. While some could identify the specific life events that contributed to their willingness to engage in relationships with cis men, others viewed their changing dynamics as completely random and difficult to explain. Once these women began these relationships, they experienced a range of emotions regarding how these relationships potentially challenged their established lesbian identities. Similarly to how the women in Group 1 navigated these negotiations, this situation caused great stress for some women while others described a relatively smooth transition into heterosexual relationships. While all of the women had previously identified as lesbians, due to their relationships with cis men, many chose to adopt other labels such as bisexual, straight, and queer. A handful of other women chose not to label themselves at all while a few others chose to maintain their lesbian labels. Mirroring the experiences of women in Group 1, often these women did not want to fully abandon their transgressive identities and adopt heterosexuality because of the connections they felt to their lesbian identities, well as due to their communities and personal beliefs.
When interpreting these situations using a Dynamic Systems perspective, similarly to how many women experienced a sudden onset of lesbian identities or same-sex attractions earlier in their lives, the situation-specific changes in sexual identity experienced by the women in both groups could be anticipated and explained using the concepts of *emergence* which involve significant periods of reorganization of identity. As was discussed previously, Granic (2005) refers to these periods as “phase transitions” which he maintains are, points of increased sensitivity, when small fluctuations or perturbations have the potential to disproportionately affect the interactions of multiple system elements, leading to the emergence of new forms. Novelty does not have to originate from outside the system; it can emerge spontaneously through feedback within the system. [401]

I would argue that for the women in Group 1, experiencing a partner transition represents the specific type of phase transition to which Granic alludes. Similarly, for the women in Group 2, experiencing a difficult break-up, facing pressure from family and friends, or unexpectedly experiencing attractions to men represent “points of increased sensitivity” during which the intersections of numerous social factors resulted in relationships with cis men and often, significant identity negotiations. As Granic suggests, for most of these women I interviewed, these events, however minor they may have seemed, led to a restructuring of their sexual identities due to the intersections of numerous factors including personal connections to their own lesbian identities, their partners’ gender identity, and the social environment in which these negotiations occurred.

In the chapter that follows I will explore how these identity negotiations and changing sexual identity labels impacted how these women perceived their identities over time. Specifically this chapter will shed light on how these relationships with trans or cis men impacted how these women perceive their sexual attractions, their place in lesbian communities, and what they anticipate for their future relationships.
Chapter 7: CURRENT IDENTITIES AND FUTURE PREDICTIONS

After experiencing a partner transition or after beginning a relationship with a cis man, the women I interviewed reported immediate reactions and negotiations that were detailed in Chapter 6, as well as longer-term negotiations regarding the impact of these relationships on their futures. In the chapter that follows I will explore the ways in which these women view their sexual identities in terms of their current attractions, the general role of their sexual identity and the lesbian community in their lives, and what they see for their futures. Because of the unique impact of experiencing a partner transitioning versus entering into a relationship with a cis man, I will discuss the experiences of the women in Group 1 and Group 2 separately. An analysis of the narratives of both groups of women will hopefully shed light on the ways in which women rationalize and embody their sexual identities over time and how sexual attractions and behaviors, as well as identities, might or might not evolve due to environment and life experiences. Specifically, I will analyze the narratives provided by the women I interviewed in light of dynamic systems theory compared to the linear compass model of sexual identity development.

Group 1 (Partners of Trans Men): Current Identities and Future Predictions

As was discussed in Chapter 6, the women I interviewed who had experienced a partner transition reported nuanced negotiations regarding how these transitions and relationships impacted their own sexual identities. Though some women reported relatively seamless transitions into relationships that would likely be eventually perceived as heterosexual, others reported complex emotions regarding how these relationships could potentially challenge their lesbian identities. After they described their immediate reactions to their partners’ transitions, I asked them to discuss how they anticipate that these relationships would impact their sexual
identity in the future. These questions were specifically designed to shed light on the possibility of long-term changes in sexual identity (attractions, behaviors, and personal beliefs) due to an event like a partner transitioning.

It is important to note that the women I interviewed had experienced varying amounts of time since their partners’ transitions. Whereas some described how their partners had fully transitioned several years prior, others explained how their partners were just beginning the process of transitioning. Therefore, certain women had been afforded more time to consider how these relationships would impact their sexual identities. Specifically, some women provided narratives that suggested they had done significant self-reflection and were certain about their futures and the current role of their sexual identities in their lives, while others were still in the midst of personal negotiations and could only provide vague predictions about their futures. However, regardless of the length of time that these women had been grappling with their identities, their stories still have the potential to shed light on the diverse ways in which lesbian identity can be impacted by a transitioning partner.

Current Attractions

Prior to experiencing a partner transition, the women in Group 1 reported varying attractions—some of which normatively aligned with a lesbian identity, and some of which suggested a level of sexual fluidity. Although most of these women explained that while identifying as lesbians, they were exclusively attracted to women, a handful indicated that they had had varied attractions that included cis men and trans people. However, when asked about their current attractions after experiencing a partner transition, many of these women indicated that their attractions had shifted significantly. Specifically, the majority of women in this group explained how experiencing a partner transition had made them realize that their attractions
extended beyond women. For example, when asked if her attractions had changed, Beth (39) replied, “I think so just because it's not so scary.” Similarly, Samantha (27) described how her experience with a trans partner opened her up to more diverse attractions. She stated,

I guess I'm just a little more open to things. Like, I wouldn't—I had just never thought about being attracted to a trans guy before I was with one. [...] I just feel like I'm more open, like I don't necessarily feel like I'd go and be married to a cis guy but I think I'm definitely more open to that kind of spectrum of the gender identity, you know more masculine, yeah. More masculine women or definitely like, trans guys are on my radar now as they weren't before.

A number of women in this group echoed Samantha’s sentiments of experiencing more diverse attractions, yet specifically not being attracted to cis men. Jordan (30) described her experiences with these types of attractions:

I'm really typically attracted to cis women or trans men. And I have dated cis women who were more femme in their appearance, especially in college and earlier in my years. Now I'm somewhat more attracted to people who appear butch or who are trans. [...] I thought a lot about this. So I mean, physically I'm more attracted to women. I'm more interested in women. But also I think trans men to me are so different than cis men, because the trans men I know, were socialized as girls and/or women. And then they became, well they started acting more masculine, or took on more of a masculine persona. That difference is huge to me because there is shared understanding. They're usually feminists. They're usually more in line with my beliefs. Whereas men who were socialized as boys and men, usually in my experience tend to have very different experiences, world views, personalities, because of that.

Similarly, Carrie (57) described:

I would have to say that I feel more aware of being attracted to people. The gender isn't the issue. [...] In terms of attraction probably still would be more attracted to women although maybe trans men might be more of an interest. But I don't think that I would be interested in a cis male. [...] I imagine a cis men stink. [Laughs] I think that what makes [my partner] accessible to me is that he's had the feminine experience and perhaps lives a little bit more in emotion and emotional processing and discussion than maybe a cis male might.

These narratives suggest that not only did their partners’ transitions likely influence their attractions, but also, that their attractions were impacted by specific social factors including valuing a feminine socialization and sharing similar sociopolitical beliefs.
Despite these changes in attractions among a number of women, a few women maintained that despite their relationships with their trans partners, they remained exclusively attracted to women. For example, when asked if she was still primarily attracted to women, Stephanie (34) replied, “Yes, a hundred percent. Yes. Yeah, I think in my mental fantasy life, I still am very much attracted to women.” Among this handful of women, a few noted that although they were primarily attracted to women, they were nearly exclusively attracted to masculine women:

I still look at women. It’s the more masculine I suppose the more butch type women and that's always been my type I suppose. You know I like to look at the prettier girls and the more effeminate girls, but if it comes down to it, like who I would want to take home, like if I wasn't with my husband, I would be with a, probably a butch woman. I do find some men attractive but when I think about kind of like long-term, I don't necessarily think of men. (Jaime, 34)

I'm still attracted to women, [...] what I'm attracted to with lesbians is the masculine side. So I'm more into what I call sporty lesbians. You know? On the so-called dyke side. And the more androgynous side. (Kristen, 34)

These sentiments were echoed by a number of women when describing their previous attractions (before experiencing a partner transition). It is necessary to consider how a primary attraction to masculine, or butch, women could impact a lesbian’s willingness to maintain a relationship with a partner who is trans as well as how she perceives her own identity in light of a gender transition. Perhaps, a general openness towards masculinity lends itself to a smoother transition period and a willingness to alter or change sexual identity labels.

**Personal Role in Lesbian Community**

As indicated previously, a number of women in both groups discussed that prior to experiencing a partner transition or beginning a relationship with a cis man, their lesbian identities were very important to them due to the community and camaraderie that these identities provided. In light of the fact that most of the women in Group 1 were in relationships
that were currently, or would eventually, be socially read as heterosexual, it was necessary to
investigate whether or not these women still viewed themselves as members of a lesbian
community. Specifically, the question arose, *did relationships with trans men prevent these
women from engaging in lesbian communities, or did they still feel linked to these communities
due to their histories and identities?*

Interestingly, when asked if they still felt as if they were part of a lesbian community, the
vast majority of women in Group 1 said that they did feel like active members, whereas no
women explicitly said that they did not. Most women described feeling very connected to their
lesbian communities and highlighted the support they had received from these communities. For
example, when asked if she was still involved in a lesbian community, Samantha (27) stated:

> Yeah definitely. I mean I think it's just been such a part of our lives for so long for each
of us that—that's definitely something we want to continue it. […] We still have the same
group of friends and we still do all the same Pride things every year and stuff like that. So
we're still—yeah we still definitely want to be in that community.

Similarly, Lisa (28) described how her lesbian social circle was still very important to her, and
how it would be a problem if her partner’s identity were to inhibit her ability to be a part of that
group:

> I definitely want to be seen as a gay person. I want to always be seen as part of the
community. I think if he did want to identify as a cisgender man, that it would be
problematic for me because I can’t identify that way and I would, you know, tell him that
I can identify as a cisgender woman because I am, but I can never identity on the sexual
orientation scale of being heterosexual or anywhere close to it.

Finally, Katherine (46) described how even though she was still involved in the
community, her role in it had changed slightly: from a lesbian to a queer person. When
asked if she still viewed herself as a member of the community, she stated:

> Absolutely. Definitely. I still identify—I maybe—I don't think I identify as much as a
lesbian. I identify more as just a queer person. Or I still have—I still will call myself a
gay woman sometimes, but just more of a queer person, a queer woman. And definitely
part of the LGBTQ community for sure.
These narratives suggest that lesbian or queer communities were generally very important to the women in Group 1. Despite the fact that these women, who once claimed a lesbian identity, were in relationships with men (relationships that were often read as heterosexual) this did not preclude them from viewing themselves as members of these communities.

Despite the fact that the vast majority of women reported strong connections to their lesbian/queer communities, other women were less sure of their roles despite a general desire to be in these communities. For example, Carrie (57) described wanting to develop a lesbian social circle, but due to her rural location, she did not feel that was currently possible. Furthermore, when asked if she currently identified as a member of the LGBT community, Megan (28) stated that she did. However, when asked if she was involved in that community, she described her complex feelings about the topic:

[I am not as involved] as I used to be. And part of that is because of the little bit of friction that there is now with the relationship that I'm in with my husband. I feel in some way sensitive to being the straight-appearing couple at the gay event—when before I was so protective about that space and kind of critical of straight-appearing people to be in that space. It's not really weird when I was there and I needed it when I was younger, when I was so involved in the community, and you know, you feel so vulnerable. So now it's a little weird because I know that I belong and I know that we belong. And I know that we should and we have a right to be there as much as anybody else, but we are definitely sensitive to how other people are feeling with us being there, especially because so many people don't know and we seem pretty straight. So we don't do as much as we used to.

This narrative suggests that perhaps due to her newfound heterosexual privilege, Megan is aware of how her presence might be received in lesbian or queer spaces. Therefore, despite her identity and connection to this community, she was hesitant to become too involved due to her relationship with a trans man.

Similarly, Beth (39) described a desire to be involved in the lesbian community, and a general connection to this community, but due to her location and safety concerns, she and her partner were not currently active members. When asked if she considered herself part of the
LGBT community she stated, “Yes. I'm not ready to give that up. I don't think I have to but that's a part of me that I fought for and it's something that I have nurtured and I want to keep it.”

However, she went on to describe how due to living in the deep south, she and her partner were hesitant to make their identities visible:

Then when I moved to Mississippi, it's a very different culture. [...] we don't do stuff in the community here, the LGBT community. [My partner’s] sort of gotten a little— he worries about people hurting him, hurting me. So we don't—and we're kind of anti-social anyway. I mean not in a bad way, we're pretty introverted and it seems to work for us. [...] I would like to be more out in the community. Yeah I would. [...] There's still a stigma here you know? I don't think he would ever, maybe if we lived somewhere else?

This anecdote demonstrates the often-complicated negotiations that can determine how a person chooses to embody their identity. Similarly to how most of the women in Group 1 felt very connected to their lesbian communities while dating women, most of these women did not relinquish these connections simply due to their relationships with trans men. However, a handful did report conflicted feelings about their roles in these communities due to their relationships and newfound heterosexual privilege.

Role of Sexual Identity in Life

As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, while identifying as lesbians, many of the women I interviewed reported feeling very connected to these identities. Specifically, when asked to describe the role of their lesbian identity in their lives, the majority of women in Group 1 described this identity as foundational to how they viewed themselves either in terms of identity, community, and/or political beliefs/activism. However, upon reflecting on their relationships, identities, and life experiences, many of the women in Group 1 reported that the importance of their sexual identities in their lives had declined over time. Notably, these women seemed to give various explanations for this that did not necessarily explicitly relate to their current relationships, or their partners’ transitions. For example, several women explained that the
importance of LGBT activism and the need to make their identities known, simply declined as they aged. Megan (28) stated, “As I've gotten older it's become a less integral part of my identity overall as a human being. It's definitely not the only thing I'm so focused on now as I was when I was like 14, 15 when that was kind of the anchor that everything else rode on.” Similarly, Samantha (27) explained, “I think I'm less tied to having a label and less tied to figuring out exactly, you know, naming everything that I feel. And so I, I don't know. I'm just less—I just don't feel the need to do that as much anymore.”

Paralleling these experiences, Melissa (33) explained that due to age, experience, and her long-term monogamous relationship, her sexual identity was still important to her, but less important than it had been in the past:

And now, I'm queer but it's not—and it's a big part of who I am, but it's also like, one of the many things that I am. You know? I identify with a lot of other aspects about myself more or just as importantly now than I do with it at that point in my life. [...] And that's kind of where I am now. We're monogamous. I don't really, I don't know, I don't really think about my sexual identity a whole lot anymore. Because I'm not worried about hooking up with anyone. [...] We were talking earlier about how when I was younger my lesbian identity was a huge thing about me. And now my sexual identity is just one facet of many, many, many things that I happen to be.

Finally, Gwen (45) explained that at one point in her life her lesbian identity had been critical to her sense of self due to its ability to free her from patriarchal and heteronormative relationship structures. However, she explained that her views on this had changed significantly over time:

Being part of the community is really important to me. Being a lesbian is still pretty important but it's not nearly as—I don't feel like I need to be fully 100% lesbian to be kind of in the in group anymore. I've kind of, you know, I had a lot of idealism early on that, women were somehow better and men were the enemy. And you know? I got pretty—I went through some pretty tough times with a female partner so—and I've seen women do some pretty awful things to each other in our community. So I don't feel like—you know, some of that wish or belief that women are better just because they're women has really tempered for me over time. And so it feels a lot more, you know, I want to be about being connected with good people.
These narratives suggest that specific life experiences can impact the importance of sexual identity in a person’s life. Additionally, perhaps the need to claim radical or transgressive identities might also decline with age.

Whereas a number of women reported a declining role of their sexual identity in their lives, several other women explained that it was still very, or incredibly, important. These women did not indicate that their life experiences, or their relationships, led them to feel less attached to their identities. For example, when asked what role her sexual identity plays in her life today, Jordan (30) explained:

Huge. It's huge I tell everyone I'm queer. You know, again for me it's important for me to have settled on an identity that I feel comfortable with and own. And I also really believe that you know, queer people who are doing well and feeling good where they are in life, they need to, not they need to, it's great if they can let people know that they're queer and really help build acceptance and break those stereotypes of what a queer person is. I think there's still a lot of people out there who don't know any queer people. [...] So I basically walk up to people and say “Hi, I'm Jordan.” The next sentence, “I'm queer.” Like, “okay cool. What do you want for dinner?” Like you know, so it's a very important part of my life. And I only surround myself with people who are cool with that.

Echoing this narrative, Cory (36) reported that her sexual identity as a butch dyke had remained extremely salient in her life due to its ability to connect her to her family and community:

Being a lesbian to me is, being a butch dyke is... less... it's, you know, it's so much more than who you go to bed with. Which I can get into the myriad relationships that I've been in, but it is really about a political identity and where your politics align. And my identity really is, I mean, I will also tell you, that like, everyone in my family is a fucking dyke. Like, my moms are dykes. I have this extended aunt family that is, they're dykes. All my cousins are dykes. It's like everyone in my family is a dyke. And identifying as a lesbian connects me to all of those people. Regardless of the fact that I'm now dating [a trans man], I'm still a lesbian and I'm connected to those people through my political identity. [...] I have wanted to be as queer as possible. Be seen as queer. For as long as I can remember I have been the outspoken gay-rights advocate in my school whenever anything gay or gay rights came up I was the expert. I have wanted that forever.

Finally, Carrie (57) described how the changing political climate after the 2016 presidential election impacted how she viewed her lesbian sexual identity, specifically in terms of the need to be politically active:
You know, you kind of have to say November of 2016 before and after. Because all of that bullying stuff happened. So I think there's been a little flip of discomfort. […] For much of my life I have kind of lived don't-ask-don't-tell, but since the election of Trump and everything that's going on, I'm much more politically active than I have been in most of my adult life. And I've actually got myself in this situation where I was the bus captain for bus going to DC for the Women's March. […] And then the Women's March turned into an organization. So then I found myself the leader of this organization in this town. And it was just at the last huddle meeting that we had that I wanted to talk about our City Council election because last year we passed an ordinance of do not discriminate for LGBTQ. And we have a City Council election coming up on June 13th and there's a brand-new party that has been started by people who oppose the ordinance. That's their single platform. That they oppose the LGBTQ inclusion ordinance. So here I am, with my don't ask don't tell that I don't even think about and I looked at this group of people and I said, “this is really, really important. We need to get out the vote strong as we can.” We talk and talk and talk and then I said, "and as a gay woman I am asking you to help support this." So I'm now coming out and it feels kind of strange.

Notably, like Carrie, several of the women I interviewed after November 2016 acknowledged the impact of the election of Donald Trump on their willingness to make their sexual identities more public and to be more politically involved. These types of narratives suggest that perhaps the role of sexual identity in a person’s life can vary depending on a number of factors including community, experiences, political beliefs, and relationships. Whereas for some people aging can lead to a decline in importance, for others, certain events in their lives seemed to create an even stronger attachment to their identities. Notably however, none of the women I interviewed specifically stated that their partners’ transitions impacted their fundamental attachment to their identities.

*Future Relationships*

Taking into account their current attractions and the role of their sexual identities in their lives, the women I interviewed discussed what they would predict for their futures in terms of identity and relationships. Because all but one woman in Group 1 were in monogamous relationships with their trans partners, they were asked to hypothetically predict with whom they might envision entering into relationships in the future. Interestingly, these women had very
diverse predictions for their futures that did not always normatively align with the labels they had chosen for themselves.

Several women in Group 1 indicated that if they were no longer dating their current trans partners, they would immediately return to exclusively dating women. For example, when asked who she would be open to dating in the future, Emma (28) who identified as pansexual stated, “I would be a lesbian.” Similarly, Stephanie (34) who identified as queer explained, “I do think that if something were to happen to [my partner] then I would go back to dating women and calling myself a lesbian.” Finally, Melissa (33) who identified as queer and indicated that she would also return to dating women, explained, “I think there's this sense of camaraderie that I have with women and then also people who know what it's like to live in the world as women. And, I don't know. I find comfort in that in some way.” Interestingly, despite their current sexual identity labels, these women indicated that they would willingly relinquish these labels should their relationships change. These anecdotes perhaps imply that these labels were adopted specifically due to their current relationships and their partners’ trans identities.

Although these women demonstrated a stronger attachment to a lesbian identity and a persistent attraction to women, a number of other women reported that they would be open to dating a variety of people, whereas some acknowledged specific exceptions. For example, Katherine (46) explained,

I fall in love with someone because of their spirit, their energy, like who they are as a person. And the gender part of it for me is not even really a factor often. You know what I mean? Like it's just not—I mean I would not have any problem being in a relationship with a woman again, even with a trans woman, a trans guy, potentially a cis guy if that person was—if there was a connection there.

While Katherine indicated that she would be willing to date anyone, regardless of gender, mirroring the narratives that many women provided about their current attractions, a handful of women reported that they would be willing to date anyone except cis men. When asked if she
could envision herself dating a cis man, Samantha (27), who described her attractions as very diverse reported,

I don't think, well I don't know. I mean it's hard because I feel like so much—like so attraction wise, probably yeah. But relationship-wise, I feel like so much of what I have in common with my partner is this kind of like shared history of this queerness and the struggles related to that. And I feel like being in a relationship with someone who didn't have any of that would just be really weird and really confusing. So you know in practicality, it probably couldn't happen but when I think about potentially like, attraction or something, yeah sure. But I don't, I just don't think it could work long-term.

Similarly, Kristen (34) who identified as queer, explained that due to her attractions to masculinity, in particular to masculine women, it would be unlikely that she would date a trans woman in the future:

I don't know about the trans women side. Because what I'm attracted to with lesbians is the masculine side. [...] So dating a trans woman, I think that might be a little difficult because I would think that a trans woman would want to feel feminine and I don't know if I'd be able to give that to them.

This perspective was echoed by Megan (28) who identified as queer and stated:

I've been partnered with trans men and I've been partnered with women, and I wouldn't discount partnering with a cis man if I wasn't in a monogamous committed relationship. Like, I could see that being an option. But what I wouldn't partner with would be really super femme transwomen or a really super femme cis woman. I'm definitely more sexually attracted to the masculine side of the spectrum. If queer means, “well I'll sleep with anybody.” I'm like, “well no I wouldn't just sleep with anybody. Like if your hair is longer than mine you're out.”

These diverse narratives suggest that perhaps despite sexual identity labels and attractions, a person’s willingness to engage in relationships with certain people might depend on a host of factors including shared queer history and personal preferences about feminine/masculine embodiment.

Additionally, one woman reported that due to her relationship with a trans man, as well as other life experiences, she might actually be unwilling to date women in the future. Gwen (45) who identified as bisexual/lesbian explained, “I think I would probably […] be more interested in dating a trans guy. I feel like there's part of the lesbian experience for me now that feels kind
of stifling. I just, I don't know. I don't see myself going for that.” Interestingly, Gwen’s predictions for her future did not normatively align with her current identity label which she had previously indicated was still a salient part of her identity. Therefore, presumably her bisexual/lesbian identity was more indicative of her community and political beliefs/activism rather than her attractions and predictions for future relationships. This anecdote seems to support the argument that there can be imperfect alignments between sexual identity, attractions, and behaviors and suggests that due to specific life experiences, attractions and desired relationship partners can vary significantly.

Finally, Megan (28) who explained previously how she identified as queer yet might be unwilling to date a trans woman in the future due to her attraction to masculinity, provided a concluding anecdote regarding how she currently views her sexual identity and her possibilities for the future. Specifically, when asked if she would consider dating women and reclaiming a lesbian identity, she explained:

I don’t think I could reclaim a lesbian identity. No. […] I don't think necessarily that who your partner is has any merit on what the self-identity should be. Like I obviously had the thoughts about, you know, “well am I still a lesbian if my partner isn't exactly female identified?” But the same thing could be said about when I used to have conversations with people about being femme. Like am I only femme because I have a super butch partner? Like is that the definition? Can you still be femme and be not with a butch partner? Can you be femme and be fucking other femme lesbians and still be a femme? Like are we defining on the contrast or on the opposite? So even if I was to go and be in a relationship with a lesbian-identified woman, I still don't think I could claim lesbian. Because it just wouldn't be true.

This insightful anecdote raises several important questions about how identity is defined and the ways in which identity might or might not be impacted by the gender of sexual object choice.

Reflections on Course of Sexual identity Development

After discussing their current identities and attractions, and their predictions for future relationships and identities, the women I interviewed were asked to reflect broadly on their life
course in regard to the development of their sexuality. In particular they were asked whether they viewed any part of their sexual identity history as a phase. This specific discussion was intended to shed light on the common theme in existing literature on the topic of women’s sexual identity which frequently positions women, who at one point identified as lesbians but later engaged in relationships with men, as anomalies, random error, or inexplicable (see Diamond 2006, 2008 for a discussion). Generally, when women do experience relationships with cis or trans men after periods of lesbian identification, these times are often reduced to stages of inauthenticity or “phases.” Because these phases are not considered indicative of a true sexuality, when women report engaging in heterosexual behavior after a period of homosexual behavior, these periods are often not perceived as legitimate or deserving of academic inquiry. Furthermore, as was previously discussed, due to the influence of the dominant model of sexual identity development, it has been posited that society as a whole as well as individuals themselves who experience these types of fluctuations in sexual identity and attractions might perceive their periods of lesbian identification as previous phases (Blumstein and Schwartz 1977; Diamond 2008).

However, despite the prevalence of this phase narrative in the public consciousness, among the women in Group 1, none reported that they perceived their previous relationships with women or the periods in their lives during which they identified as lesbians to be inauthentic. The majority of women in this group explained that their lesbian identities and relationships were simply part of their life course and were legitimate and valid. For example, Megan (28) explained:

I don't think I could call any of it a phase because none of it was inauthentic. You know? I used the words and the language and had the feelings that I had that described my situation the best I could at the moment. And that's what it was. So to say it was a phase seems to be really invalidating of all of that. Like I think my family might call my lesbianism a phase, which to me seems really slighting the whole thing. Like, no. I was with this person for 5 years and they came to four big family dinners a year for five years.
You know, I know people who have gotten married after less time. It's really not fair to call that a phase.

Similarly, when asked if she felt as if any part of her sexual identity history was a phase, Yasmine (27) stated:

No. I think that sexuality is fluid [...] I think that you can learn to love whoever and I think that who you love can change throughout points in times. Like I remember probably there was a time when I would have never thought that I would be in the relationship I'm in today. When I was a little girl, even though I always kind of had that tendency towards girls I never would have thought that I would grow up and not marry a guy. But now I just really am repulsed by the idea of being in a relationship with a cisgender male. And I think that, who knows maybe in 50 years from now you know who knows. I really don't know. Sexuality is just something that changes over time. And yeah, I think you're more so attracted to people.

Finally, Samantha (27) described how her history and her adoption of various sexual identity labels was authentic and significantly influenced by a personal need to label herself and determine the internal truth of her sexual identity:

I definitely don't see it as a phase. [...] I think as a younger person I kind of had a tendency, and even up until a few years ago, I kind of really wanted to kind of figure it out and label it and put myself in a box and make the decision. And so I think that tendency caused me to take on certain labels. But I think that was just in an effort to kind of make sense of things myself kind of. And as things have changed over the years, I think, I don't think I'm regressing. I think it's just kind of like opening up my worldview. And I think I'm less tied to having a label and less tied to figuring out exactly, you know, naming everything that I feel. And so I, I don't know. I'm just less, I just don't feel the need to do that as much anymore. And so I think, I definitely don't see it as a phase. I think it was just kind of part of the journey of coming to this.

Although none of the women in this group indicated that they viewed their lesbian identities and relationships as inauthentic, a handful of women did explicitly state that they viewed periods of identifying as heterosexual (prior to identifying as lesbians) as phases. These women discussed how they generally adopted heterosexual identities because of societal pressures, a perceived lack of other options, or because they had not yet realized their lesbian identities. For example, Katherine (46), who had been married to a cis man for 19 years reflected on her time identifying as heterosexual:
I feel like that was a phase to be honest. Yeah I really do because you know it wasn't really the real me. Like I was saying before, like when I actually really just started living authentically as a gay woman, I felt so at home. Like it just hit me like, this is me. This is—I am part of this queer community and I feel better than I have ever felt in my entire life. I feel more real, more authentic. So yeah when I look back at my—it's interesting when I look back at my marriage to the cis man. I was with that person for 19 years. And so it was a very long time, and it feels so foreign to me. It feels very—it feels like a 19 year phase, with little blips in the radar of like, "wait a minute this isn't..." But yeah, it's interesting. And I never really got—I haven't ever had anybody in my life make it seem like they thought this part of my life was a phase, like being a gay woman or a lesbian, you know, dating women or trans folks. I haven't really had anyone have that reaction where they're thinking like, "oh this is just a phase." So yeah I definitely feel like the earlier part of my life was more that way.

The histories of these women demonstrate the dynamic nature of sexual identity and challenge the notion that periods of lesbian identity when followed by periods of heterosexual behavior are inauthentic. Based on these narratives, it is necessary to consider how periods of lesbian identification are as valid as other periods throughout a person’s life and are therefore deserving of academic inquiry.

**Group 2 (Partners of Cis Men): Current Identities and Future Predictions**

As was discussed in Chapter 2, the women in Group 2 described various reasons for engaging in relationships with cis men. While some women made deliberate decisions to begin these relationships, others were surprised by unexpected attractions and in some cases were hesitant to transition from relationships with women to relationships with men. The women in this group experienced a range of emotions regarding how these relationships potentially challenged their established lesbian identities. Similarly to how the women in Group 1 navigated these negotiations, this situation caused great stress for some women whereas others described a relatively smooth transition into relationships with men.

However, while all but one woman in Group 1 were still in relationships with their trans partners, the women in Group 2 had significantly more diverse experiences. Specifically, half of my interviewees had since ended their relationships with their first cis partners. Many of these
women described engaging in relationships with both men and women since these initial relationships whereas a handful reported only dating men. Notably however, none reported that they had exclusively returned to dating women. A number of these women were not in relationships at the time of our interviews. Based on these experiences, in the section that follows I will discuss how these women view their sexual identities in regard to their current attractions, the general role of the lesbian community and their sexual identity in their lives, and what they predict for their future relationships.

Current Attractions

Prior to beginning a relationship with a cis man, most women in Group 2 reported experiencing exclusive attractions to women while identifying as lesbians. However, as was discussed in Chapter 6, some of these women reported suddenly experiencing attractions to men that led them to pursue unanticipated relationships with cis men. After beginning these relationships and having time to reflect on their identities and attractions many of these women indicated that their attractions had changed. Specifically, the majority of women reported being attracted to both men and women or men only, after these relationships.

For example, a number of women described attractions to “both men and women” after experiencing a relationship with a cis man. Juliana (22), who currently identified as straight stated that although she was mostly attracted to men currently, she did experience occasional attractions to women:

I find myself attracted to women sometimes. Like, “awww she's so cool. I kind of like her." But it's not like, “oh wow.” I don't know. I think some lesbians are like, “wow I love her breasts” Like for me, it's just like, “oh wow she's really dope I—it would be cool to get to know her.”

Similarly, Tristan (23), who identified as bisexual, described:

I'd say for me, and I don't mean to sound like, crazy but I'm more attracted to people... people and their personalities, than I am their gender. So the reason I wanted to
be with my ex was because of who she was as a person. Not because she was female. And the reason I want to be with my boyfriend is because of who he is as a person not because he's male. 

Notably, when asked to clarify if this statement meant she was attracted to any gender, Tristan went on to describe her attractions in more detail. She stated, “I'd say I generally stick to men and women. [...] I don't identify as pansexual because I don't really see myself attracted to transsexual people. Or transgender, either way. But so yeah, bisexual just because it narrows it down to men and women.” Interestingly, the women in Group 2 were more likely to hold this perspective and to clarify that they were solely attracted to cis men and cis women, than were the women in Group 1. Notably, only one woman in Group 2 stated that she was attracted to anyone regardless of gender. A handful of the women who indicated attractions to “both men and women” specified that these attractions did not generally extend to trans or non-binary individuals:

I'm attracted to cisgender people. Like if they're transgender or any of those things like, that's a turnoff for me. Like I don't care if you're a man or a woman but like, when they identify as what they were you know, their gender matches their sex, like that's more what I'm interested in. (Heather, 28)

This disparity between Group 1 and Group 2 is notable and will be discussed further at the end of this chapter.

Despite having histories of lesbian identities and attractions, a handful of women described how their attractions had shifted over the course of their lives, and how they were now primarily attracted to men. Kim (54), who identified as bisexual and who previously described strong ties to her lesbian identity succinctly stated, “I do think I’m primarily attracted to men.” Similarly, Sadie (38) who identified as bisexual but seemed to still be grappling with her identity stated:
I do think I am more sexually attracted to men than I am to women. I do think that that's the truth. And I don't know what that means for things going forward and I don't know what that means for the past but I do think I am more sexually attracted to them.

Interestingly, all of the women who described primary attractions to men still identified as bisexual.

Finally, despite the fact that a number of women did describe significant shifts in their attractions over time, several did indicate that despite their (oftentimes continuing) relationships with cis men, they were still primarily or exclusively attracted to women. For example, two women who both identified as queer, described these attractions and how they viewed their current cis man partners as exceptions to their enduring attractions. Kelly (31) explained, “I do feel like someone who is a lesbian, like I'm not attracted to any other men. I'm only attracted to women,” while Alex (31) described, “In my head I still feel like a lesbian because I identified like that for so long and it was so important to my identity and because I still am very attracted to women and I'm not like magically attracted to men now.” This perspective was expanded upon by Lily (27) who, when asked to describe her current attractions, stated:

I feel like in the street it's definitely only women. I never see a man that I'm just like, “wow look at this hottie.” I never see a man in public where I'm like, “oh my goodness, wow.” But I see I've been like that all the time where I instantly have a crush on a stranger. So I'm definitely, in terms of the general public, really only attracted to women.

Interestingly, despite being in relationships with cis men at the time of our interviews, a number of women echoed these sentiments regarding primary or exclusive attractions to women.

Personal Role in Lesbian Community

Prior to engaging in relationships with cis men, most women in Group 2 explained that their lesbian communities were very important to them in terms of friendship, activism, and support. Though this sentiment was expressed by the women in both Group 1 and Group 2, the women in these groups did report some differences in how they viewed their current role or
involvement in the LGBT community broadly. Whereas all of the women in Group 1 reported some type of involvement or a desire to be involved, a handful of women in Group 2 explicitly stated that since engaging in relationships with cis men, they no longer feel like parts of these communities. For example, when asked if she still associates with her lesbian community, Paulina (61) stated:

Not as much [...] I remember one year a couple years ago I went, I participated in gay pride in my town and I felt really really out of place and everybody that knew me, they were looking at me like, "whatcha doin' here?" You know? I don't know where I belong anymore.

This feeling of not being welcome in lesbian spaces due to relationships with men was echoed by Galen (32):

I think what had happened was, I had had such a bad kind of experience [where I used to live]. Like I felt very, like I'm not happy with my community there. I miss it but I'm mad at it. Like I feel like, what's the point of that kind of a community if who you date erases you from it?

Though these women expressed some sadness or regret over the loss of their communities, two other women who no longer felt like they were members of these communities did not appear to be significantly impacted by this development in their lives.

Although a handful of women reported no current involvement in lesbian communities since engaging in relationships with cis men, the majority of women in Group 2 reported that despite their heterosexual relationships they still felt as if they had a role in the LGBT communities in their areas. For example, Luz (30) explained how this involvement intersected with her career aspirations:

I think what it means to me now as an aspiring attorney is that, the LGBTQ Community is a group that I always consider in my advocacy efforts. And that I want to advocate for as part of it and also part of a heterosexual couple whose life is easier because we are heterosexual, or whatever, seen as heterosexual. I think to me it also means like, calling people out when they're being bigots and they don't think that I'm one of them. And [my partner] and I both hope that the LGBTQ community accepts us as allies even though we are not like—he's not technically part of it.
Similarly, Sadie (38) who was currently single, explained her drive to be involved in the LGBT community due to the political climate in 2017 and due to the impact her lesbian identity had on her while she was dating women. When asked if she currently identified as part of the LGBT community, she stated:

Yeah. I think I do. And I do in large part because of what's going on politically. You know? As much as it was nice to get a break you know, a few years ago. Obama was President and things were safe. Or at least we thought they were. And now I think that I feel more aligned with the queer community than certainly than I feel with straight, white people. [...] I mean it seems like a bad time to be gay but it also seems like a good time to get the fuck away from the majority. [...] And I think I found myself just kind of on a gut level being more in the "we" camp in terms of LGBT stuff. Like talking from that perspective, you know? Where I wasn't sure where I was for a little while and I was more likely to say "they". Because I didn't feel a part of it. And yeah and obviously like if I'm dating a woman right now it would be weird if I didn't. You know? So yeah I think that—and it's also when you spend, I mean I was basically a lesbian for 20 years I think. Which is crazy. Is that even possible? I think it was like, it was at least 15 years and so I mean what I've really come to notice is that definitely was foundational in terms of the way I see things and I feel really privileged that that was the case because I think that it makes you much more flexible or I don't know. I think you see all sides of things more. [...] It obviously has been foundational in like, who I am as a person and I think, a positive way.

Finally, Malika (29) pointed out that despite her relationship with a cis man, she currently identifies as bisexual which would not preclude her from involvement in the LGBT community. When asked if she still views herself as part of this community today, she explained, “I do. I do. As I said, I call myself—well I say that I'm bisexual now. So I do consider myself being part of the LGBT community. Yes. I do.”

Whereas some women enthusiastically discussed their involvement in their communities, others indicated that while they still aligned themselves with the LGBT community, they felt as if they had different ties to the community since engaging in relationships with cis men. For example, when asked if she currently considered herself part of the LGBT community, Kim (54) stated, “Yeah I do. I do. I do. Sure. It's not as clear-cut as it was before. But yeah.” Mirroring this feeling of her involvement not being as “clear-cut” as it had been previously, Kelly (31) responded to the same question by explaining, “I personally do but I don't know. I'm sort of
afraid that they'll be like, ‘no get out of here.’’ This fear of not being welcome in the LGBT community was echoed by Felicia (27). When asked if she felt as if she was a member of the LGBT community, she stated, “I do feel like I’m privately part of the larger queer community in my own way. But I don't know that anybody—because I don't think a ton of other people would be like, ‘oh yeah totally. You're part of this community.’” Despite the fact that these women did not describe any specific incidents that made them feel unwelcome in LGBT spaces, they expressed concern that perhaps their relationship with cis men would alienate them from this community.

Finally, Ingrid (25) who was currently single, discussed how due to the importance of her lesbian identity and community in her life, if she were to engage in another relationship with a cis man, this might actually cause her to be more involved in the LGBT community. She explained,

I do think that if I ended up in a serious relationship with a man […] it would probably push me to get involved in maybe LGBT activism or something because like I said before, I feel very connected to this movement and this group. I don't think I could ever let that go. And so even if I ended up in something very heteronormative, I think I'd still be trying to make myself a part of the LGBT community in some way.

These narratives demonstrate the often-complicated negotiations that can determine how a person chooses to embody their sexual identity. Although some women felt completely unwelcome in the LGBT community after engaging in relationships with cis men, others seemed to view their role in this community as somewhat unrelated to who they were dating. Finally, some women felt that heterosexual privilege as well as other factors such as the current political climate were catalysts for them becoming more committed to LGBT activism.

Role of Sexual Identity in Life

While they were identifying as lesbians, the women in Group 2 overwhelmingly described this identity as foundational to how they viewed themselves either in terms of identity,
community, and/or political beliefs/activism. Although the majority of women in this group reported that these identities were at one point very important to them, like the women in Group 1, many of these women reported that over time, the significance of their sexual identities in their lives had declined. Paralleling the experiences of women in Group 1, they provided diverse explanations for this change.

Two women explicitly stated that their age made them feel less invested in claiming specific sexual identity labels. Leanne (58) succinctly explained, “I don't care. […] I haven't bothered to find an identity. It doesn't make any difference to me. I'm 58. I don't care.”

Paralleling this feeling, Paulina (61) reported:

Really, I don't care anymore about labels. But at that time at age 20, you're trying to find your place in the world and where you're comfortable and you know, community. You know and so it was very important. I wore it like a badge, you know? Even in the service, in the military. I wore it like a badge. It's just becoming less important as I go on.

Notably these women were two of the oldest women in Group 2 and therefore had been afforded significantly more time to reflect on their identities than had many women in this group.

Although none of the women explicitly stated that their relationships with cis men contributed to the declining importance of their sexual identities in their lives, two women seemed to allude to it. For example, Lily (27) who was married to a cis man explained,

I haven't really given my identity a lot of thought because I haven't really had to discuss or open up that possibility. […] Like I haven't really had to. […] [It’s on the] back burner for sure. There's so many other things that take precedence these days. There's just a lot of life being lived. So sexual identity is something that my husband and I sort of keep in the bedroom and it's fine there. I'm perfectly satisfied with that.

This narrative perhaps suggests that being in a monogamous marriage has made Lily’s sexual identity a less relevant part of her life. Additionally, it is necessary to consider how heterosexual privilege might make it easier for Lily to understand her sexual identity as something that does not significantly impact her life and that can be solely relegated to the bedroom.
In seeming contrast to this narrative, Malika (29) explained that even though her marriage to a cis man had perhaps caused the decline in importance of her sexual identity in her life, it was not necessarily due to the comfort of a monogamous marriage or heterosexual privilege. When asked if her sexual identity was currently an important part of her life, she explained:

Well because I'm not exactly sure what my sexual identity is, I try to not think about it or try to forget about it because if I think about it, then it creates anxiety for me, not knowing what I am. Not knowing what I really like, creates a lot of anxiety for me. So right now at this point in my life, it's not a construct that's very important in my identity. Simply because it creates more anxiety than anything else.

This narrative suggests that due to confusion about her identity, attractions, and relationships, Malika has chosen to disregard her sexual identity at this point in her life. As she previously described, Malika had ended a relationship with a woman and began a relationship with a cis man due to familial pressure. This situation, which seemed to have been very difficult for Malika, culminated in her choosing to ignore her sexual identity almost entirely.

Whereas a number of women in Group 2 stressed the lack of importance of their identities, a handful of others described these identities as still somewhat important, or very important. For example, Tristan (23) indicated that even though she still enthusiastically claimed a bisexual identity and was supportive of the LGBT community, perhaps the social response to her relationship with a cis man had contributed to her hesitancy to be more involved:

Now it's not as [important], but I still am supportive and I feel like I don't really care what other people think but I feel like a lot of people think I abandoned that part of my persona because now I'm dating a male and I don't post as much stuff on Facebook about gay rights and activism and things like that. I'm just not as vocal about it. That's just a personal choice.

Similarly, Brooke (34) responded to the same question by explaining,

I don't know how to answer that one because I'm not actively looking for a partner, it's kind of taken a backseat. But it's not because I'm not proud of who I am and it's not because I don't want to identify as polysexual. It's just kind of right now in my life, I'm taking care of other things like my job, my mental health. So it's whatever right now.
Finally, although Tristan and Brooke indicated that their sexual identity was somewhat important, but perhaps less important than it previously had been, a few remining women explained that their sexualities were still extremely salient parts of their identities. For example, Felicia (27) stated, “I am very proud to not be straight and to kind of challenge misconceptions about sexuality and the assumption of straightness.” These diverse histories imply that perhaps the importance of sexual identity in a person’s life can vary depending on a range of factors including age, relationships, and social influences. Despite the fact that a number of women in this group suggested that they did not have the same connections to their sexual identities that they once did, others reported that they still felt very attached to these identities.

Future Relationships

After discussing their current attractions and the role of their sexual identities in their lives, the women in Group 2 were asked to reflect on with whom they would consider sexual and romantic relationships in the future. Notably, the women in this group were much more likely to be single at the time of our interviews than were the women in Group 1. Therefore, while the women in Group 1 were generally hypothetically predicting their future relationships, the women in Group 2 seemed to have more seriously considered the possibilities available to them. Interestingly, the women in this group seemed much more conflicted about the possibilities for their future relationships than did the women in Group 1. Overall, these women provided diverse narratives that suggested they would either primarily/exclusively date women in the future, would be open to dating men or women, or were unsure. Notably, none of the women in this group explicitly stated that they would exclusively pursue relationships with men in the future.

When asked who they would consider as potential romantic or sexual partners in the future, the majority of women in Group 2 indicated that they would be open to dating either men
or women. However, these women provided varying explanations and diverse preferences within this relatively specific category. For example, some women indicated that although they would generally be willing to date men or women, they would be more likely (or would prefer) to date men. For example, Brooke (34) succinctly explained, “It's either. But I still kind of feel I’m leaning towards a man. Which I don't want to say but I feel like that's what's going to end up happening.” Similarly, Kim (54) who had explained previously that a prior lesbian relationship had ended due to lack of sexual chemistry reported:

God forbid if something happened with my husband, I'm not saying I would never be with a woman again. I see that as a potentiality. It's not my primary potentiality because I do think I'm primarily attracted to men. But I loved a woman for 15 years. I've had attractions to women and you know, it could be a possibility. Especially if she was more sexually adventurous than the woman I was with. You know? I think if we could have some way to keep the sexual life alive in a way that worked for me, I could see it possibly happening.

Finally, Sadie (38) described her complex feelings regarding a potential conflict between a general preference for dating men, and the feeling that finding a compatible woman partner would be easier:

I guess if I was to hazard, if I was to sort of say, ideally, I think I would probably like to be with a man but quite honestly it is so much easier to find a woman who's worth my time then it is to find a man who's worth my time. That's just true. And I've gone through, in the period where I was dating around, I went through like a zillion men to try to—and over that zillion found one, maybe three, who I was like, “yeah you're worth something. You're a human being as opposed to this weird creature that's just kind of crappy.” Whereas women most of them are kind of human beings. You know what I mean? So it's just the odds of finding a woman who I can tolerate are easier, are better. But at the same time I do think I'm marginally more interested in being with a guy.

The narratives provided by these women indicate that perhaps due to their life experiences, they would be willing to date men or women in the future; however, they are also experiencing complex feelings regarding intimacy, sexuality, and the realities of relationships with men versus women.
Conversely, while these women indicated that they would be slightly more likely to engage in relationships with men in the future, a handful of other women explained how despite the fact that they would be open to relationships with either men or women, they are more likely to seek out women. For example, Amanda (37) stated, “I think that I would still primarily try to date women. But I think that I would open it up now towards looking at men.” From a slightly different perspective, Felicia (27) reported that due to her past relationships with men, she simply might be more likely to pursue a relationship with a woman for a change of pace:

I think I'd be open to anybody and honestly might even seek out dating a woman just because it's been a long time, just to kind of check back in and see how it went. Obviously I recognize that dating one person cannot speak for an entire gender, but you know just for kind of like a change of scenery or whatever. I feel like maybe I would—I might seek out another woman.

Paralleling this perspective, Susan (67) explained, “I like to think that it's kind of open. But I am definitely still drawn to women more strongly than men. But if there were an amazing man who I just felt really comfortable with and joyful with, nothing would be in my way.”

Whereas the majority of women in Group 2 suggested they would be willing to date either men or women in the future, a handful of women emphatically reported that they would likely only pursue relationships with women going forward. For instance, Kelly (31) stated, “I don't see myself ever being in another relationship with a man ever. You know if something happened to my husband, I don't think I would ever replace him with a man.” Kelly seemed to have a good relationship with her cis husband; however, in contrast, Patricia (41), who previously described a general dissatisfaction with her marriage to her current cis husband explained that perhaps due to this frustration, she would likely pursue women in the future:

I've been in this relationship for maybe a year-and-a-half and I'm just like happy sometimes. I want to be happy all the time. So I feel it won't be too long before it ends. [...] [My future will] be with women. I don't want to say more women. I think it's just gonna be women. Cuz my son, you know when he comes, he's like, "Mom you don't seem happy." And I'm like, "to tell you the truth I'm not." And then he's like, "well you
just need to do you and do what makes you happy. Don't worry about what people think." I never did before so why do it now?

Whereas these women suggested that they would enthusiastically pursue long-term relationships with women in the future, Ulya (20) provided a slightly different perspective on the likelihood of her dating women. Previously, Ulya, who identified as a lesbian, indicated that she had begun relationships with cis men due to a lack of lesbians in her area. She later discussed how despite her exclusive attractions to women, due to her religion, she did not feel that she could ever have a long-term relationship with a woman:

I see myself having short term relationships [with women]. Because I feel bad about it because I'm Muslim so it's like, I feel bad just going on long-term, getting married, having kids. [...] I feel bad about identifying as a lesbian and then trying to be religious. Not about my religion, but about like—I don't know. The conflict between the two I guess.

Again, these narratives suggest complex negotiations regarding intersections of certain factors such as attractions, happiness, and religion in decisions about with whom to pursue relationships in the future.

Furthermore, while most of the women in Group 2 were relatively certain about their future relationships, two women described being very conflicted due to specific social issues that could result from dating men or women. For example, Ingrid (25) explained her complicated feelings regarding her future relationships:

This is the big issue for me with this topic because I just—if I do have relationships with men in the future, I feel like there is this, sort of this limit about how far it can go and how serious it can get. Because of the situation with my family, if I were to push this limit and if I were to say, have a serious relationship with a man, eventually I would want to tell my family and that opens up such a can of worms. Because if I tell my family then I sort of lose all these things that I've fought for for a really long time with them. As soon as I tell my family that I've even considered having a relationship with a man, let alone actually had one, they start to think like, “okay you are healed now. You're no longer spiritually broken or whatever.” They start to think, “okay now this really is a choice for you because you could be with a man if you wanted to.” But if I were with a woman later—“you're choosing to be with a woman.” And then there's just the emotions that go with that. I think about my mom. My mom would just be so happy for me. And
then to potentially go back on that and be like, “oh now I'm with a woman again” and how sad she would be after that. I just can't imagine dealing with that.

For Ingrid, due to her history of fighting for acceptance of her lesbian identity, she felt conflicted about the social implications of dating men in the future. Similarly, and paralleling Ulya’s narrative above, Heather (28) described her personal negations around this topic. When asked who she envisions herself dating in the future, she explained:

Honestly I have no idea. I mean I struggle with it all the time. Like part of me like, I think I would be happier if I dated a woman. But then a part of me is—it's so freaking hard in this area. And I mean, like the church I go to—I couldn't go there anymore if I started dating a woman. So I would lose that. You know? My family—like I have kids now and you know, if my family reacted the same way they did before I mean like, they wouldn't even really get to see their grandparents. And you know, do I want to take that away from them? I don't know. It's hard.

Finally, when faced with the question of who she would consider dating in the future, one woman, Alex (31), provided a unique perspective on the topic. This interviewee had previously described being very connected to her lesbian identity and being known publicly as a lesbian due to her job. At the time of our interview she was in a relationship with a cis man and provided the following narrative when asked about her predictions for the future:

We are getting married—which is—we haven't publicly announced that because it just seems crazy to me. And marriage has never been something that interested me. But I just am like, "oh I get it. I love you so much and want to be with you forever in a way that I've never felt." So we're just going to go to city hall, but also, he knows I don't want to be monogamous forever. Like my queerness is still really important to me. And I can't imagine never having sex with a woman again. And I do worry that it's going to be—but that's going to be an issue for us. I brought it up the other day and he was upset. You know? And I was just like, "I just want to talk about what the timeline is for that and when we're going to do that." And we had this very loving, mature, calm discussion. But he teared up a little bit and got emotional and he just said that his fear—what I would just like is, I would like to be able to just have sex with women sometimes and casually date women sometimes. And I don't need it right away but I don't want it that far away. I do miss having sex with women and he's afraid that I'm going to fall in love with someone else. And that's a really valid fear.

Uniquely, instead of feeling as if she had to choose between men and women, Alex indicated that initiating a non-monogamous relationship could be a potential solution to conflicts regarding
love for her current partner and a desire to maintain her lesbian identity as well as sexual relationships with women.

Reflections on Course of Sexual identity Development

Like the women in Group 1, after discussing their current views on the sexual identities and attractions, and considering their possible future relationship possibilities, the women in Group 2 were asked to reflect broadly on the course of their sexual identity development. This discussion was intended to shed light on the notion of phases of sexual identity and the validity of periods of lesbian identification when followed by relationships with cis men.

Notably, none of the women in Group 2 indicated that they viewed the period of their lives in which they identified as lesbians and exclusively dated women as a phase. The majority of these women suggested that the phase rhetoric was used to invalidate periods of lesbian identification, an idea with which they did not agree. For example, when asked if she viewed any part of her sexual identity history as a phase, Kim (54) explained:

No. Uh-uh. No and here's why. Well first of all, usually the idea of the phase is used to dismiss something, right? It's used to dismiss the experience as something that—but I think everything leads to the next thing. You know? Whatever that is. So either it's not a phase, or everything's a phase you know? So yeah no, I don't identify with that at all.

Similarly, when answering the same question, Tristan (23) stated, “I don't see it as a phase. Like I was genuinely—I genuinely loved that person and I still do just not in the same way. I'd say it was probably more of, how can I put it? I don't... I'd say... I wouldn't call it a phase. Maybe a stop along the way.” Paralleling these perspectives, Heather (28) explained that although she is aware that other people view her sexual identity history in terms of a phase, she does not view it in this way:

No. That's not how I experienced it. That's definitely how everybody that knows me likes to describe it especially because it was now kind of end of high school, beginning of college. Like that's just what girls do. And it's much more acceptable for girls to do it than guys to do it around here. But that's definitely not how I experienced it at all. I mean
it's part of who I am and even though I was in a relationship with a man for like 9 years, it was always a part of who I am.

In general, the women in Group 2 were emphatic that they did not perceive their relationships with women or their periods identifying as lesbians as phases.

In conclusion, these anecdotes, as well as those provided by the women in Group 1, suggest complex and nuanced feelings regarding how their relationships with cis or trans men will impact their sexual lives long-term. The narratives of these women help to shed light on experiences that have often been overlooked in academia or that have been constructed as underserving of academic inquiry. In the section that follows, I will discuss the findings presented in light of dominant models of sexual identity development and address the contentious notion that sexual identity is a stable, core aspect of an individual’s identity.

**Discussion of Findings**

After having reflected on how their relationships with cis or trans men would impact their sexual lives in the future, the women I interviewed provided diverse narratives that demonstrate the possible impact of life experiences on the course of sexual identity development. In many ways, the women in Group 1 and Group 2 had different experiences with these unique relationships; however, patterns can be identified in how these relationships impacted how these women perceive their sexual identities today. In this section I will briefly discuss the implications of these findings in light of contemporary theoretical perspectives on sexual identity development.

In general, the women in both Group 1 and Group 2 indicated that their experiences with either cis or trans men *did* impact how they viewed their sexual identities in terms of attractions, communities, and/or personal beliefs. As was noted, even though the majority of women in both groups reported being exclusively attracted to women while identifying as lesbians, many
women in both groups explained that having experienced relationships with cis or trans men had led to a dramatic shift in their attractions and the realization that their attractions extended beyond women. Similarly, these women had diverse predictions for their future relationships which often included an openness to relationships with individuals they likely would not have considered previously. Additionally, both groups of women detailed how specific life experiences as well as their environment impacted the likely path of their sexual identity in the future. For example, factors beyond their relationships which included elements such as the current political climate, religious influences, and age all appeared to be able to impact the role of sexual identity in these women’s lives and how they were choosing to embody these identities.

One noticeable difference in the experience of these two groups was the likelihood of the women in Group 1 to discuss an attraction to trans or non-binary individuals and a willingness to date individuals of diverse genders compared to the women in Group 2. Even though the women in Group 2 often expressed an increased willingness to date men after having experienced relationships with cis men, this did not generally extend to trans or non-binary people. While the explanations for this phenomenon are likely varied, perhaps the impact of experiencing a partner transition had uniquely impacted how the women in Group 1 viewed their identities and attractions. The reality of being faced with a partner’s gender transition conceivably exposed them to forms of gendered embodiment that they might not have previously considered and led them to grapple with the role of trans or non-binary individuals within their own attractions and identities. Conceivably, this unique finding serves to challenge dominant model of sexual identity development on a fundamental level by suggesting that exposure to intimate relationships with people outside of stated interests or attractions can lead to a shift in perceptions of sexual identity.
Finally, as has been discussed, frequently when women experience relationships with men after having identified as lesbians, their periods of lesbian identification are reduced to phases or periods of inauthenticity by researchers as well as society as a whole. Importantly, none of the women I interviewed in either group agreed with this sentiment. They specifically highlighted how, regardless of whether they still identified as lesbians or had somewhat relinquished that identity, their periods of lesbian identification and generally exclusively same-sex attractions were legitimate. None of the women indicated that their sexual identity histories were somehow incompatible with relationships with cis or trans men and seemed to suggest that due to the potential for sexual fluidity, sexual identities, attractions, and behaviors can shift over time without negating past experiences.
Chapter 8
CONCLUSIONS

This study was intended to shed light on the experiences of a population which has thus far been largely overlooked in academic research on sexual identity: women who at one point in their lives claimed a lesbian identity but later engaged in relationships with either cisgender or transgender men. As was previously discussed, although a handful of studies have been conducted on the experiences of lesbian-identified women who experience a partner transition from female to male (Pfeffer 2009; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009; Nyamora 2009; and Brown 2009, 2010, for example), these studies each had unique, specific theses and did not make certain connections between the experiences of these women and the potential impact these lived experiences could have on the way we approach and understand the process of women’s sexual identity development. Furthermore, to my knowledge there are no academic studies that have specifically focused on the experiences of lesbian-identified women who engage in relationships with cisgender men.

Although these examples of nonlinearity in sexual identity development have yet to receive necessary academic attention, I posit that the experiences of these women have the potential to provide key insights into how instances of variability, rather than periods of stability, are perhaps key to understanding the development of women’s sexual identity. In my analysis of this unique situation, I borrowed Diamond’s (2012) queer dynamic systems theoretical approach which was designed to recognize the potential for fluidity in identities that are often reduced to biology. In order to challenge essentialist models of sexual identity development that often employ a linear compass model (see Diamond 2012 for a discussion), this study intentionally posited variability as a cornerstone of women’s sexual identity development.
To achieve this goal, I conducted in-depth interviews with 40 women: 20 who had claimed a lesbian identity for at least one year before experiencing a partner transition from female to male and 20 who had claimed a lesbian identity for at least one year before engaging in one or more relationships with cisgender men. These interviews were designed to shed light on three main research questions. Research Question 1 focused on the pathways these women traveled towards the acknowledgement of their lesbian identities and the role of these identities in their lives. Research Question 2 addressed the personal negotiations faced by these women regarding their sexuality or their sexual identities once experiencing a partner transition or once entering into a relationship with a cisgender man. Finally, Research Question 3 sought to shed light on the longer-term impacts of relationships with cisgender or transgender men on how these women perceived their lesbian identities. In this chapter I will revisit the key findings based on each of these research questions, discuss this study’s contributions to the existing literature in this area, address the limitations of this specific study, and propose directions for future research.

**Key Findings and Research Implications**

*Research Question 1: Pathways Towards Acknowledgment of Lesbian Identity*

In Chapter 5 I highlighted the narratives of the women I interviewed which focused on how they initially came to claim a lesbian identity. Broadly, these narratives were able to be organized into three unique categories: 1. narratives that convey the sense of ‘always knowing’ one’s sexual minority status; 2. narratives that suggest an unexpected onset of lesbian identity/attractons or an attraction to a specific person; and 3. narratives that convey mixed experiences or a history of sexual fluidity. The discussion in this chapter was contextualized by existing literature in this area which has established new theoretical frameworks for the development of sexual identity and which has suggested that established sexual identity labels
such as heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual, are significantly more nuanced (and less mutually exclusive) than previously thought (Callis 2014; Diamond 2005, 2006; Savin-Williams 2006; Savin-Williams and Ream 2007; Sell 1997; Thompson and Morgan 2008; Vrangalova and Savin-Williams 2010, 2012). Building upon this literature, the analysis in this chapter addressed how the narratives presented by the women I interviewed relate to, and potentially challenge, dominant linear models of sexual identity development that are based on mutually exclusive sexual identity categories.

Specifically, as I discussed, the women who spoke explicitly of ‘always knowing’ about their lesbian identities or experiencing attractions to other girls at very young ages, experienced pathways that most closely resembled this linear model. Diamond (2007) characterized these linear paths as beginning with “feelings of differentness’ and progressing through gender atypicality, nascent same-sex attractions, and experimental same-sex behavior” (142). However, upon closer analysis, even within these more normative, or expected, pathways there often existed more fluidity and nuance than might have been initially apparent. For instance, most of these women had experienced relationships with men prior to coming out as lesbians. Although these periods are often redefined by researchers as falsehoods or seen as irrelevant in terms of lesbian identity development (Diamond 2006, 2008), when analyzed in light of Diamond’s application of a dynamic systems theoretical perspective, they could be viewed as instances of sexual fluidity or erotic plasticity. This example of a manifestation of a form of sexual fluidity builds upon existing literature which posits that same-sex sexuality, especially among women, is a much more fluid, multifaceted, and nuanced phenomenon than previously believed (Bailey 2009; Baumeister 2000; Diamond, 2005; Savin-Williams and Diamond 2000; Peplau 2001). Additionally, this theoretical perspective allows for an analysis of the social environments and
individual traits of these women in order to understand how and why they came to specific identities such as heterosexual, bisexual, or lesbian at a given point in their lives. As addressed in Chapter 5, it is necessary to interrogate what led the women I interviewed to actually claim a lesbian identity at one point in their lives, while it is likely that some women who acknowledge early awareness of same-sex attractions did not.

While a handful of women reported ‘always knowing’ of their lesbian attractions, the majority of women I interviewed described being surprised by unexpected same-sex attractions or a sudden realization of their lesbian identity. While it could be posited that these narratives also support a more linear model of sexual identity development, from an alternative perspective it could be argued that the contexts in which these realizations or sudden attractions occurred are crucial for understanding why they occurred. I argued that these instances could be crucial for providing insight into the question, ‘What factors create stability and change in women’s same-sex and other-sex sexuality?’” (Diamond 2008: 241). Specifically, although these women viewed the emergence of either their lesbian identities or same-sex attractions as unexpected (often after specific life events such as beginning college or meeting lesbian-identified women), and often indicative of an identity that had always been there, perhaps the interactions between social and personal factors led to their manifestation in specific contexts. As Diamond (2012) argues, the interaction between personal factors and specific life events “can actually create novel psychological and behavioral phenomena during periods of fundamental reorganization in the overall system” (78). These “phase transitions” can result in the development of new sexual identities and attractions. The narratives provided by the women in this group provide significant support for Diamond’s concept as well as Granic’s (2005) idea of emergence (see Chapter 2 for a discussion).
Finally, a number of women I interviewed reported long histories of sexual fluidity and erotic plasticity. Because these women often experienced identity changes throughout their lives, and in several cases adopted labels such as *queer* or *pansexual* before identifying as lesbians, they perhaps represent the most obvious challenge to linear compass models of sexual identity development. Specifically, these women appear to lack a “true north” or core identity which, Diamond (2012) argues is a fundamental element of the linear models and is believed to pull a person “consistently in a specific direction” in terms of their sexual identity (78). These women were often able to articulate the contexts in which they came to identify as lesbians. For example, some women I interviewed described claiming a lesbian identity due to the influence of a particular partner whereas others discussed not having adequate language and labels to legitimize their identities due to the time period in which they came of age. Both of these groups of women provided nuanced narratives that perhaps illustrate the best examples of non-linear paths of identity development. Most notably, these accounts provide support for the argument that interactions between social and personal factors can lead to sexual variability, particularly in terms of claiming the lesbian identity label.

The analysis in Chapter 5 highlights experiences that either directly challenged linear compass models of sexual identity development or which can be interpreted using an application of Diamond’s dynamic systems theoretical perspective to recognize variability and the impact of sociopersonal factors on the emergence of novel sexual attractions and identities. While linear models of sexual identity development often posit periods of variability as irrelevant (see Chapter 3 for a discussion), I argue that the context in which these erotic interests emerged are integral to fully understanding the pathways these women navigated.

*Research Question 2: Lesbian Identity Negotiations and Relationships with Cis/Trans Men*
In light of their pathways towards acknowledging a lesbian identity as well as the role of their lesbian identity in their lives after coming out, in Chapter 6 I explored the personal negotiations regarding my interviewees’ sexuality in terms of identity, community, and personal beliefs once experiencing a partner transition from female to male or once engaging in a relationship with a cisgender man. Due to the distinct experiences the women in Groups 1 and 2 faced in regards to this research question, I analyzed the experiences of the women in the two groups separately. The analysis presented in this chapter was intended to be situated in the debate in the existing literature regarding the validity of dominant linear models of sexual identity development which often suggest a type of sexual identity permanence (see Chivers, Rieger, Latty, and Bailey 2004; Diamond 2008; and Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels 1994 for a discussion). This idea of permanence is based on the notion that once a gay or lesbian identity is adopted, no further changes are anticipated (Diamond 2008). Despite these assumptions, the narratives provided by the women I interviewed directly challenged this notion by highlighting the significant identity negotiations they faced once experiencing a partner transition or once finding themselves in relationships with cis men.

Despite the assumption in some academic literature on sexual orientation that sexual identities are relatively stable (see Diamond 2008 for a discussion), nearly all of the women in Group 1 explained that they faced some negotiations regarding their own identities as their partners began their transitions. Notably, most of the women in this group reported changing their sexual identity labels from lesbian to queer, pansexual, or bisexual specifically due to their partners’ transitions. Supporting existing literature (Diamond 2008, for example), these unique narratives illustrate the way in which environment and social influences can impact how a person experiences and embodies their sexual identity. In particular, the women in this group expressed
how the decisions to change their sexual identity labels were influenced by a number of factors including the fear that a lesbian identity label might serve to invalidate their partners’ masculinity as well as their involvement in their lesbian communities and their desire to live in opposition to heteronormative relationship structures. As was discussed in Chapter 6, these experiences serve to challenge the linear compass model of sexual identity development by highlighting the situation-specific nature of sexual identity and by drawing attention to the factors that can potentially cause shifts in self-identification.

Whereas the identity negotiations experienced by the women in Group 1 were all sparked by their partners’ transitions, the path towards these types of negotiations among the women in Group 2 were somewhat different. All of these women eventually engaged in relationships with cis men; however, they experienced varied pathways that led to these relationships. For example, while some women reported that they had deliberately decided to begin dating men after having identified as lesbians, others explained how they had found themselves surprised by their newly developed attractions. These relationships with cis men had varied impacts on the sexual identities of these women and led to significant self-reflection regarding how these relationships potentially challenged established lesbian identities. Paralleling the experiences of the women in Group 1, while some women in Group 2 reported extreme stress regarding these relationships, others described enthusiastically transitioning into heterosexual relationships. These relationships led many of these women to abandon their lesbian identity labels and claim other labels such as bisexual, straight, and queer. However, a handful of other women chose not to label themselves at all while a few others chose to maintain their lesbian labels. Similarly to the experiences reported by the women in Group 1, several women in Group 2 reported mourning
their lesbian identities and refusing to adopt heterosexuality because of their attachment to the transgressive nature of their lesbian identity and their connections to lesbian communities.

The analysis in Chapter 6 contributes to the literature in this area by challenging the more linear models of sexual identity development and utilizing tools established by dynamic systems theory. Specifically, the unique situations experienced by the women I interviewed can also be understood by applying Granic’s (2005) concept of emergence. Applying this concept to sexuality (as argued by Diamond 2007); these phase transitions can spark a restructuring of one’s sexual identity, during which novel identities, attractions, and behaviors can emerge. As I argued in Chapter 6, for the women in Group 1, experiencing a partner transition has the potential to trigger this phase transition. Similarly, for the women in Group 2, life events such as experiencing a difficult break-up or facing pressure from family and friends can be the catalysts for significant identity negotiations due to the ways in which numerous social factors intersect at a certain moment. Therefore, this present study serves to provide additional evidence for the hypothesis proposed by Diamond (2007) by demonstrating the potential impact the interactions between endogenous and exogenous factors can have on the manifestation of novel identities and attractions in specific contexts.

Research Question 3: Current Identities and Future Predictions

After discussing the ways in which relationships with cis or trans men impacted their lesbian identities, the women I interviewed reflected on how these relationships might impact their sexual lives in terms of attractions, communities, and/or personal beliefs in the future. In Chapter 7 I presented these narratives and discussed the ways in which life experiences can impact the course of sexual identity development over time. In general, the women in both Groups 1 and 2 discussed how their relationships with cis or trans men did impact their
conceptualization of their sexuality, even beyond identity. For example, many women expressed significant shifts in their sexual attractions, often discussing attractions to a wider range of people. Additionally, a number of women discussed having to reflect on, and occasionally reevaluate, their role in lesbian communities. Finally, women in both groups suggested how their life experiences as well as their environments would likely impact the path of their sexual identity in the future. For example, they discussed how factors beyond their relationships with cis and trans men, including elements such as age, politics, and religion all had the ability to impact the role of sexual identity in their lives and how they were choosing to embody these identities. These narratives provide additional support to exiting literature which highlights the role lesbian identity can play in a person’s life, beyond the areas of sexual behavior and attraction (Brown 2009, 2010; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009; Lev 2004; Pfeffer 2009).

Additionally, in this chapter I investigated the impact of ‘phase rhetoric’ (as discussed by Blumstein and Schwartz 1977; Diamond 2003, 2008; and Muscarella 1999, among others) that is often directed at women who at one point identify as lesbians but later engage in relationships with men (see Chapter 3). This trope generally posits these women as inauthentic lesbians who experienced a lesbian ‘phase’ rather than an authentic lesbian identity (Blumstein and Schwartz 1977; Diamond 2003, 2008; and Muscarella 1999). Notably, none of the women I interviewed in either group viewed their relationships with women or the periods in which they identified as lesbians as phases or as inauthentic. They suggested that regardless of whether they still identified as lesbians or had since adopted alternative labels, their periods of lesbian identification were legitimate. Despite contemporary notions of sexual identity development which advocate for a type of sexual identity permanence, all of my interviewees indicated that they believed their sexual identity histories were compatible with relationships with cis or trans
men. Importantly, supporting existing literature advocating for the inherently fluid nature of women’s sexuality (Chandra, Mosher, Copen, and Sionean 2011; Diamond 2006; Garofalo, Wolf, Wissow, Woods, and Goodman 1999; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael and Michaels 1994; Rust 1992), they seemed to suggest that sexualities are inherently fluid and can transform and develop over time without invalidating past experiences.

**Limitations**

As with most exploratory qualitative research, this study relied on non-random convenience sampling followed by snowball sampling. Due to the topic and parameters of the study, random or representative sampling was not possible. The sampling methods I utilized prevent wide generalizability (Berg 2009), have a tendency to attract overly cooperative participants (Petersen & Valdez 2005), and often include participants based on their membership in certain social networks (Browne 2005). However, due to the nature of the population on which I focused, the advantages of nonprobability sampling were considerable and outweighed the limitations. Due to the fact that the proportion of people whose experiences match the parameters of the study is likely relatively small, as well as due to the generally hidden nature of the population, this study would not have been possible with random or representative sampling.

In addition to the sampling method, this study has a very small sample size (n=40) which is typical of qualitative studies. Furthermore, as was addressed in Chapter 4, even within this small sample, certain groups of women were overrepresented. While a concerted effort was made to recruit a diverse sample in terms of numerous factors including race, age, location, and socioeconomic status (see Chapter 5 for an expended discussion), only diversity of location was truly achieved. In particular, white, highly educated women in their 20s and 30s are overrepresented in this study. Notably, the impact of the intersections of race, class, sexuality,
and gender are not fully explored in this analysis. This lack of certain forms of diversity undoubtedly impacted the conclusions I was able to draw. In the next section I offer suggestions for future researchers regarding strategies for recruiting more diverse samples.

Additionally, due to the nature of the study, existing literature argues that interviewees who volunteer for these types of studies are likely to be overly cooperative, interested in presenting their lives in a positive light, and representative of a different demographic than people who were unwilling or unable to participate (Petersen & Valdez 2005). Relating to this idea, throughout the course of my interviews, I noticed a unique trend among the women in Group 1 that was not specifically paralleled among the women in Group 2. Specifically, I recognized early in the recruitment process that the women in Group 1 were generally very invested in making their relationships with their trans partners succeed and only one was no longer in the relationship. Therefore, the women in this sample likely represent a select group of people who were generally more accepting of their partners’ transitions or optimistic about their relationships and identities than an average woman in that situation might have been. Due to this selectivity, the narratives of women who were unable or unwilling to remain with their transitioning partners are missing from this analysis. This limitation is significant in that this missing group of women could have experienced very different negotiations in terms of their sexual identities than the women who chose to remain in relationships with their transitioning partners.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

Due to the general lack of academic literature on the experiences of lesbian-identified women who engage in relationships with cis or trans men (and due to the limitations of this study described above), there are a wide range of directions that future research in this area could take.
I would like to suggest three specific avenues for future research: 1. Research that centers the experiences of people of color as well as individuals with diverse educational backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses; 2. Research that specifically focuses on women who experience a partner transition yet choose *not* to continue the relationship; and 3. Research that focuses on life histories of older women in order to gain insight into how these women have negotiated their sexual identities throughout their lives.

*Sample Diversity*

Perhaps most notably, research that centers the experiences of people of color as well as individuals with diverse educational backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses is necessary to provide more comprehensive insight into the topic of women’s sexual identity development. As I have discussed, the women in my sample were overwhelming white, middle-class, and highly educated. This limitation prevented the analysis of a variety of different narratives. For example, it is important to note that despite the relatively low number of women of color in my sample, all of them made a point to discuss how the intersections of their race and sexuality impacted their experiences with their sexual identity. Therefore, future research should prioritize these type of narratives in order to understand the ways in which various factors including race, education, and socioeconomic status can contribute to sexual variability and the embodiment of sexual identity. While I attempted to achieve this goal, more effort could have been put into snowball sampling among diverse communities. Furthermore, my identity as a white, cis, middle-class, lesbian woman undoubtedly and understandably impacted the communities to which I had access and likely contributed to the willingness of participants to share their stories. For example, I suspect that a researcher of color might be able to access certain communities that I was not and might be
able to elicit narratives by participants who might feel safer and more comfortable sharing their stories with a researcher who has a similar racial background.

**Study Parameters**

As I addressed above as well as in Chapter 4, as my study progressed, I came to the realization that the women in my sample represented a very specific group of women. Despite the fact that my study parameters only required the women in Group 1 to have been in relationships with their transitioning partner for three months (relationships that could have since ended), all but one woman was still in the relationship with the trans partner about which the interview focused. All of these women seemed very committed to their relationships and expressed a desire for their relationships to succeed. Therefore, these women likely are not representative of all lesbian-identified women who experience a partner transition from female to male and represent a select group of people who chose to stay with their partners and may have been more open to the idea of a transitioning partner than an average woman. Based on this limitation, future research in this area should focus on the experiences of lesbian-identified women who chose *not* to stay with their partners when they disclose their desire to transition. By instituting this study parameter, future research could highlight the narratives of women who are perhaps very tied to their lesbian identities and are therefore unable to remain in relationships with trans man partners. This focus could provide additional insight into the notion of “phase transitions,” the limitations of sexual fluidity, and alternative narratives to which dynamic systems theory could be applied.

**Life Histories**

Throughout the course of my research, I realized that I was often able to elicit richer and more thorough narratives from older participants. While I specifically attempted to recruit
participants over age 50 due to the potential for longer sexual histories, this was only successful in Group 2. Whereas I was only able to recruit one woman over age 50 in Group 1, four women in Group 2 were between the ages of 54 and 67. Having longer, more complex histories allowed for a deeper analysis specifically regarding the notion of changes in sexual identity over time. Compared to my participants who were over 50 years old, many of my younger participants simply had not had enough time to thoroughly reflect on their life experiences and would likely have future experiences which would impact the course of their sexual identity development.

Therefore, future research in this area should focus on life histories of older women in order to shed light on how sexual identity can change and develop over the life course. Revisiting one of the main questions in this study, ‘What factors create stability and change in women’s same-sex and other-sex sexuality?’ (Diamond 2008: 241), an analysis of older women’s narratives over time would likely be able to provide greater insight into this question, the notion of “phase transitions,” and how these events contribute to sexual non-linearity.

Queering Sexual Development Frameworks

In conclusion, this study was designed to highlight the narratives of women who at one point in their lives identify as lesbians but later engage in relationships with cis or trans men. In light of dominant models of sexual identity development which argue for linear paths and sexual identity permanence (see Diamond 2012 for a discussion), this study approached women’s sexual identity development from a fundamentally queer theoretical perspective, highlighting the fluid and social nature of identities that are often understood as essential and permanent. I specifically set out to investigate the experiences of women who at one point in their lives identified as lesbians, but later engaged in relationships with either cisgender or transgender men, in order to understand what their experiences can tell us about the nuances of women’s
sexual identity. Borrowing Diamond’s (2012) queer dynamic systems theoretical approach, I posited that perhaps the key to understanding the development of women’s sexual identity cannot always be found during periods of stability. Instead, it is necessary to critically interrogate the instances of variability that are often seen as falsehoods (Diamond 2006, 2008). I attempted to recenter these periods of variability in order to challenge biological essentialism and highlight the necessity of understanding erotic plasticity as inherent to women’s experiences.

Finally, it is my hope that this study as well as subsequent research in this area can be helpful to individuals experiencing instances of sexual fluidity that might not make sense to them or that might be viewed as insignificant or fallacious by society. A number of women I interviewed while conducting this study remarked how they were initially shocked to see the call for participants since my parameters appeared to be so narrow and they believed they were the only ones experiencing the types of identity negotiations on which the study focused. Due to the social reliance on linear models of sexual identity development, women who do experience these types of non-linearities often believe they are the exception rather than the rule. It is my hope that this type of research can perhaps serve to change this “rule” and broaden the social understanding of women’s sexual identity development and aid in the development of a new model of sexual identity that allows for, and anticipates, nonlinearities.
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Appendix A

ELECTRONIC CALLS FOR PARTICIPANTS

Call for Participants (Lesbians with cisgender men)
Are you a woman who identified as a lesbian, but later engaged in a physical, intimate, or romantic relationship with a man?
If so, I would like to interview you!

I am looking for volunteers to participate in a study on the development of women’s sexual identity. I am particularly interested in interviewing women who at one point in their lives identified as a lesbian for at least one year, but later engaged in one or more intimate relationships with men. These relationships must have lasted at least three months.

The interview will involve questions regarding your identity, experiences, and attractions as a lesbian as well as your experiences in relationships with men. Interviews are expected to last 1-2 hours.

For more information, or to participate, please contact Kolbe Franklin at kfranklin@albany.edu or 704-491-5586. Kolbe is a doctoral candidate in the sociology department at the University at Albany-SUNY.

For information about IRB compliance please contact The University at Albany-SUNY Institutional Review Board at (518) 437-4550 or the University at Albany Department of Sociology at (518) 442-4666.

Call for Participants (Lesbians with Trans men)
Are you a lesbian currently (or previously) in a relationship with a transgender man?
Did your partner undergo some sort of transition during your relationship?
If so, I would like to interview you!

I am looking for volunteers to participate in a study on the development of women’s sexual identity. I am particularly interested in interviewing women who at one point in their lives claimed a lesbian identity for at least one year, but then experienced a partner transition from female-to-male. These transitions can include a variety of situations including a partner coming out as transgender, starting hormone treatments, undergoing a surgical transition, or starting to live as a man.

The interview will involve questions regarding your identity, experiences, and attractions as a lesbian as well as your experiences with your current or former trans partner. Interviews are expected to last 1-2 hours.

For more information, or to participate, please contact Kolbe Franklin at kfranklin@albany.edu or 704-491-5586. Kolbe is a doctoral candidate in the sociology department at the University at Albany-SUNY.

For information about IRB compliance please contact The University at Albany-SUNY Institutional Review Board at (518) 437-4550 or the University at Albany Department of Sociology at (518) 442-4666.
Appendix B

CALL POSTERS

Are you a woman who has been in a relationship with a transgender man?

Did your partner undergo some type of gender transition during your relationship?

*If so, I would like to interview you!* 

I am looking for volunteers to participate in a study on the development of women’s sexual identity. I am particularly interested in interviewing cisgender women who at one point in their lives claimed a lesbian identity for at least one year, but then experienced a partner transition from female-to-male. These transitions can include a variety of situations including a partner coming out as transgender, starting hormone treatments, undergoing a surgical transition, or starting to live as a man.

The interview will involve questions regarding your identity and experiences as a lesbian as well as your experiences with your current/former trans partner. Interviews are expected to last 1-2 hours. For more information please contact Kolbe Franklin at kfranklin@albany.edu.
Are you a woman who identified as a lesbian, but later engaged in a relationship with a man?  

*If so, I would like to interview you!*

I am looking for volunteers to participate in a study on the development of women’s sexual identity. I am particularly interested in interviewing cisgender women who at one point in their lives identified as a lesbian for at least one year, but later engaged in one or more intimate relationships with men lasting at least three months.

The interview will involve questions regarding your identity, experiences, and attractions as a lesbian as well as your experiences in relationships with men. Interviews are expected to last 1-2 hours. For more information please contact Kolbe Franklin at kfranklin@albany.edu.
Appendix C

SHORT INITIAL INTERVIEW FOR INTERESTED PARTICIPANTS

Lesbian Partners of Trans Men
Hello! Thanks for taking the time to speak with me today. I want to take a few minutes to tell you about this study and see if you match the requirements to participate. This study is investigating the development of women’s sexual identity, specifically looking at the phenomenon of sexual fluidity. I’m interested in speaking to women who at one point in their lives claimed a lesbian identity for at least one year but then experienced a partner make a transition from female-to-male. These transitions can include a variety of situations including a partner coming out as transgender, starting hormone treatments, undergoing a surgical transition, or starting to live as a man. The participants can be current or former partners of transgender men, but their relationship must have lasted at least three months and involved some sort of gender transition. I’m specifically interested in asking questions about how you understood your lesbian identity in the past and how you experienced your lesbian identity after your partner’s transition.

Do you have any specific questions about this study?

Ok great, so I have a few questions for you in order to determine if you match the requirements for this study,

Are you over the age of 18?
Do you live in the United States?
At some point in your life did you identify as a lesbian for at least one year?
During that period in your life did you experienced a partner transition in some way from female-to-male? Again, these transitions can include a variety of situations including a partner coming out as transgender, starting hormone treatments, undergoing a surgical transition, or starting to live as a man.
Did this relationship last at least three months?

If person meets requirements: Great, it sounds like you would be an ideal participant. If you are still interested, I would love to set up an interview with you. Interviews should last between one and two hours and can be done over the phone, via Skype, or via Google chat. (If the participant lives in the Albany, NY area, an in-person interview will also be suggested). What method would you prefer? When would work best for you?

If person does not meet requirements: Thank you so much for your time, but unfortunately you don’t match the requirements for participation because ______________. Please feel free to pass my contact information along to anyone who might be interested in participating.

Lesbian Partners of Cis Men
Hello! Thanks for taking the time to speak with me today. I want to take a few minutes to tell you about this study and see if you match the requirements to participate. This study is investigating
the development of women’s sexual identity, specifically looking at the phenomenon of sexual fluidity. I’m interested in speaking to women who at one point in their lives claimed a lesbian identity for at least one year but later engaged in one or more intimate relationships with men. These relationships can include anything from three month long relationship to a long-term marriage. I’m specifically interested in asking questions about how you understood your lesbian identity in the past and how you experienced your lesbian identity after your relationship with a man.

Do you have any specific questions about this study?

Ok great, so I have a few questions for you in order to determine if you match the requirements for this study,

Are you over the age of 18?
Do you live in the United States?
At some point in your life did you identify as a lesbian for at least one year?
After coming out as a lesbian did you engage in some type of intimate relationship with a man?

If person meets requirements: Great, it sounds like you would be an ideal participant. If you are still interested, I would love to set up an interview with you. Interviews should last between one and two hours and can be done over the phone, via Skype, or via Google chat. (If the participant lives in the Albany, NY area, an in-person interview will also be suggested). What method would you prefer? When would work best for you?

If person does not meet requirements: Thank you so much for your time, but unfortunately you don’t match the requirements for participation because ______________. Please feel free to pass my contact information along to anyone who might be interested in participating.
Appendix D

INTERVIEW GUIDES

Partners of Trans Men
Hi! Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed today. As I mentioned in our previous conversation, this study is about women’s sexual identity. I’m particularly interested in the stories of lesbian-identified partners of transgender men, and how they understand their own sexual identities. Before we start I just want to let you know that your answers will all remain confidential and your participation is completely voluntary. You may choose to not answer any questions and you may take a break or stop the interview at any time. Are you ready to begin?

Coming Out
I want to start off by talking a little bit about your coming out story. Since you indicated that you did identify as a lesbian for at least one year of your life, could you tell me a little about your experiences coming out to yourself as well as to others?

Possible probe questions:
- How/when did you first realize you were a lesbian?
- Was coming out a difficult process?
- Did you receive support from family and friends?
- Did you date anyone prior to coming out?
- How long did it take for you to fully identify as a lesbian?
- Before coming out had you ever adopted any other sexual identity labels such as bisexual or pansexual?
- Do you think you were born gay?
- Do you think your coming out was impacted by any environmental or social factors like your friends, your school, your town, etc.?

Experiences as a Lesbian
Ok, so I’m interested in hearing about the role of your lesbian identity in your life after coming out. For example, were you part of a lesbian social group? Was your sexual identity an important part of your day-to-day life?

Possible probe questions:
- Did you spend time with mostly straight people or mostly gay people?
- Was it important to you to publically identify as a lesbian?
- Were you active in the lesbian community in your area?
- Do think factors like your race, your class, or your education level impacted how you understood your lesbian identity?

During this time did your sexual attractions align with your sexual identity? By that I mean, you identified as a lesbian but were you primarily attracted to women?

Could you tell me a little about your relationships and/or sexual experiences during this time?
Possible probe questions:
- After coming out, did you date anyone? Did you exclusively date women?
- After coming out, were you sexually active? Were these relationships with men or women?
- How long did these relationships last?
- Did your partners primarily identify as lesbians?

**Relationship with Trans Partner**

*Great, so now I would like to ask you some questions about your trans partner. Could you possibly tell me a little about how you met...how long you have been (were) together...how the relationship is going (went)....*

Possible probe questions:
- When you first met your partner did you know that they were trans? How did you know? If not, how did you find out?
- How did your partner identify their sex when you met? (How) did that change?
- How did your partner identify their gender when you met? (How) did that change?
- How did your partner identify their sexual orientation when you met? (How) did that change?
- How did you identify your relationship when you first started dating? (Heterosexual? Lesbian? Queer?)
- If you did not know your partner was trans when you began dating, would you have dated them had you known?

**Partner’s Transition**

*Can you tell me about what type of gender transition your partner went through while you’ve been (were) together?*

Possible probe questions:
- Had your partner gone through any type of transition before you met?
- How did your partner tell you that they were going to begin some sort of transition?
- Has/did your partner begin living full time as a man while you were together?
- Has/did your partner undergone any surgical procedures?
- Is/was your partner on hormones?
- Is/was your partner out as trans to family/friends? To the general public?

*How did you feel about your partner’s transition?*

Possible probe questions:
- What was your initial response to your partner’s transition?
- Did you have any concerns or worries for your partner?
- Did you have any concerns or worries for yourself?
- Overall, has this been / was this a positive or a negative experience for you?
• Do/did you discuss your worries/concerns with your partner?
• How did your family/friends respond to your partner’s transition?
• Is/was your partner planning to undergo any other forms of transition in the future?

*What type of role did you have in your partner’s transition?*

Possible probe questions:
• Did you provide medical, emotional, or financial support?

*Did your relationship with your partner change once they began their transition? If so, how?*

Possible probe questions:
• Did sexual dynamics change?
• Did gender roles change?
• Do/did you identify as a heterosexual couple? A straight couple? A queer couple?
• Do you think most people view you as a heterosexual couple? If so, how do you feel about that?
• Did your relationship strengthen, weaken, or stay the same once your partner began to transition?
• Are you currently with your partner? If yes, how is the relationship going? If not, why did the relationship end?
• Did the ending of the relationship have anything to do with your self-identification as a lesbian?

*Did your partner’s transition impact your sexual identity? How did you reconcile being a lesbian in a relationship with someone who identified as a man?*

Possible probe questions:
• Did you begin to question your lesbian identity?
• Did you begin to question your relationship with your partner?
• Did you identity as a lesbian while with your partner? If yes, how does/did your partner feel about you identifying as a lesbian?
• How important is it to maintain your lesbian identity?
• Did you discuss your sexual identity with your partner?
• Did your partner’s transition impacted how others understand your sexual identity?

*How do you identify your sexual orientation today?*

Possible probe questions:
• Who are you primarily attracted to today?
• Have your attractions changed over the course of your life?
• Are you currently in a relationship? If yes, who are you in a relationship with?
• Are you satisfied in your relationship?
• Are you currently sexually active? What is the gender of your sexual partners?
• How do you feel about the labels, bisexual, pansexual or queer?
• Is it important to you to label your sexual identity? Why or why not?
• Do you identify as part of the LGBT community?

Frequently, when women engage in relationships with men after coming out as lesbians, their period of lesbian identity is seen as a phase. Do you feel that lesbianism was a phase for you?
Possible probe question:
• If yes, what do you think caused this phase?
• Do you regret this period of your life?
• Looking back, do you think you were “really” a lesbian?
• Do think people are born gay/straight?

Demographic Information

Now I would like to ask a few demographic questions. We may have covered some of this information previously, but I just want to make sure I have the correct information. Please feel free to skip any questions you would prefer not to answer.

• What is your race?
• How old are you?
• What is the highest degree that you have earned?
• Are you currently employed? If yes, what do you do?
• Where did you spend most of your time growing up? Was this an urban, suburban, or rural environment?
• Where do you live now?

Partners of Cisgender Men

Hi! Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed today. As I mentioned in our previous conversation, this study is about women’s sexual identity. I’m particularly interested in the stories of lesbian-identified partners of transgender men, and how they understand their own sexual identities. Before we start I just want to let you know that your answers will all remain confidential and your participation is completely voluntary. You may choose to not answer any questions and you may take a break or stop the interview at any time. Are you ready to begin?

Coming Out

I want to start off by talking a little bit about your coming out story. Since you indicated that you did identify as a lesbian for at least one year of your life, could you tell me a little about your experiences coming out to yourself as well as to others?

Possible probe questions:
• How/when did you first realize you were a lesbian?
• Was coming out a difficult process?
• Did you receive support from family and friends?
• Did you date anyone prior to coming out?
• How long did it take for you to fully identify as a lesbian?
• Before coming out had you ever adopted any other sexual identity labels such as bisexual or pansexual?
• Do you think you were born gay?
• Do you think your coming out was impacted by any environmental or social factors like your friends, your school, your town, etc.?

Experiences as a Lesbian

Ok, so I’m interested in hearing about the role of your lesbian identity in your life after coming out. For example, were you part of a lesbian social group? Was your sexual identity an important part of your day-to-day life?

Possible probe questions:
• Did you spend time with mostly straight people or mostly gay people?
• Was it important to you to publically identify as a lesbian?
• Were you active in the lesbian community in your area?
• Do you think factors like your race, your class, or your education level impacted how you understood your lesbian identity?

During this time did your sexual attractions align with your sexual identity? By that I mean, you identified as a lesbian but were you primarily attracted to women?

Could you tell me a little about your relationships and/or sexual experiences during this time?

Possible probe questions:
• After coming out, did you date anyone? Did you exclusively date women?
• After coming out, were you sexually active? Were these relationships with men or women?
• How long did these relationships last?
• Did your partners primarily identify as lesbians?

Relationship with a Man

Ok, so now could you tell me a little but about the intimate or romantic relationships you’ve had with men after coming out?

Possible probe question:
• How many men have you had relationships with since coming out?
• What was the nature of these relationships?
• Did the men you were in relationships with know you identified as a lesbian? If so, how did they react?
• Did you enjoy these relationships?
• Were these relationships primarily physical, emotional, etc?
• Why do you think you became involved in these relationships?
• Did these relationships make you question your lesbian identity?
• Are you still in a relationship with a man?
• If not, why did these relationships end?
• Did the ending of the relationship have anything to do with your self-identification as a lesbian?
• How did your friends, family, community respond to your relationships with men? Did they know?

Lesbianism and Men

How did you reconcile your lesbian identity and engaging in relationships with men?

Possible probe questions:
• Did you feel that you could still engage in relationships with men while identifying as a lesbian?
• How important was it to maintain your lesbian identity?
• Did you experience any confusion regarding your sexual identity?
• Did you begin to question your lesbian identity?
• Did you identity as a lesbian while with your partner? If yes, how did your partner feel about you identifying as a lesbian?
• Did you discuss your sexual identity with your partner?

Frequently, when women engage in relationships with men, after coming out as lesbians, their period of lesbian identity is seen as a phase. Do you feel that lesbianism was a phase for you?

Possible probe question:
• If yes, what do you think caused this phase?
• Do you regret this period of your life?
• Looking back, do you think you were “really” a lesbian?
• Do think people are born gay/straight?

How do you identify your sexual orientation today?

• Who are you primarily attracted to today?
• Have your attractions changed over the course of your life?
• Are you currently in a relationship? If yes, who are you in a relationship with?
• Are you satisfied in your relationship?
• Are you currently sexually active? What is the gender of your sexual partners?
• How do you feel about the labels, bisexual, pansexual or queer?
• Is it important to you to label your sexual identity? Why or why not?
• Do you identify as part of the LGBT community?

Demographic Information
Now I would like to ask a few demographic questions. We may have covered some of this information previously, but I just want to make sure I have the correct information. Please feel free to skip any questions you would prefer not to answer.

- What is your race?
- How old are you?
- What is the highest degree that you have earned?
- Are you currently employed? If yes, what do you do?
- Where did you spend most of your time growing up? Was this an urban, suburban, or rural environment?
- Where do you live now?
Script for Oral Informed Consent

By consenting to this interview you are volunteering to participate in a research project entitled, “Queering Sexual Development Frameworks: A Dynamic Systems Approach to Conceptualizing Other-Sex Sexuality Among Lesbians” conducted by me, Kobe Franklin from the University at Albany-SUNY. The project is designed to gather information about the experiences of self-identified lesbian women who engage in relationships with either cisgender or transgender men. You will be one of approximately 40-60 people being interviewed for this research.

Your participation in this project is voluntary. Even after you agree to participate in the research you may decide to leave the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you may otherwise have been entitled. I will retain and analyze the information you have provided up until the point you have left the study unless you request that your data be excluded from any analysis and/or destroyed. Most interviewees will find the discussion interesting and thought-provoking. However, this study may involve the discussion of sensitive topics such as sexual behavior. If you feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, you have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview.

Participation involves being interviewed by me. The interview will last approximately 1-2 hours. I will take notes during the interview and an audio recording of the interview and subsequent dialogue will be made. Please indicate if you are willing to have this interview audio recorded. You may still participate in this study if you are not willing to have the interview recorded. Although you may not receive direct benefit from your participation, others may ultimately benefit from the knowledge obtained from this research.

You will not be identified by name or any identifying information in any reports using information obtained from this interview. Your confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In addition, the Institutional Review Board and University officials responsible for monitoring this study may inspect these records.

Research at the University Albany involving human participants is carried out under the oversight of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). This research has been reviewed and approved by the IRB. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject or if you wish to report any concerns about the study, you may contact University at Albany Office of Regulatory & Research Compliance at 1-866-857-5459 or hsconcerns@albany.edu.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact the Principal Investigator: Kolbe Franklin, ABD 704-491-5586, kfranklin@albany.edu or Dr. Steven Sediman, Ph.D, ssediman@albany.edu. You will be offered a copy of this form to keep.

Do you consent to participate in this study? Do you have any questions before we begin?
Form for In-Person Informed Consent

I volunteer to participate in a research project entitled, “Queering Sexual Development Frameworks: A Dynamic Systems Approach to Conceptualizing Other-Sex Sexuality Among Lesbians” conducted by Kobe Franklin, ABD from the University at Albany-SUNY. I understand that the project is designed to gather information about the experiences of self-identified lesbian women who engage in relationships with either cisgender or transgender men. I will be one of approximately 40-60 people being interviewed for this research.

1. I understand that my participation in this project is voluntary. Even after I agree to participate in the research or sign the informed consent document, I may decide to leave the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. The researcher will retain and analyze the information I have provided up until the point I have left the study unless I request that my data be excluded from any analysis and/or destroyed.

2. I understand that most interviewees will find the discussion interesting and thought-provoking. However, I recognize that this study may involve the discussion of sensitive topics such as sexual behavior. If I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview.

3. I understand that although I may not receive direct benefit from my participation, others may ultimately benefit from the knowledge obtained from this research.

4. I understand that participation involves being interviewed by Kolbe Franklin from the University at Albany-SUNY. The interview will last approximately 1-2 hours. Notes will be written during the interview and an audio recording of the interview and subsequent dialogue will be made. (Please sign below if you are willing to have this interview audio recorded. You may still participate in this study if you are not willing to have the interview recorded.)

5. I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In addition, the Institutional Review Board and University officials responsible for monitoring this study may inspect these records.

6. I understand that research at the University Albany involving human participants is carried out under the oversight of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). This research has been reviewed and approved by the IRB. If I have any questions concerning my rights as a research subject or if I wish to report any concerns about the study, I may contact University at Albany Office of Regulatory & Research Compliance at 1-866-857-5459 or hsconcerns@albany.edu.

7. I have read, or been informed of, the information about this study. I hereby consent to participate in the study.

8. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

____________________________ My Signature
____________________________ My Printed Name
If you have any questions about this study, please contact the Principal Investigator: Kolbe Franklin, ABD 704-491-5586, kfranklin@albany.edu or Dr. Steven Sediman, Ph.D, sseidman@albany.edu.

_________________________  Date
_________________________  Signature of the Investigator
### Appendix F

**PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS AND INFORMATION**

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† Includes black/white and unspecified multiracial
†† Indicates participants were students at the time of our interview