

**THE TRANSFORMATIVE ASPECTS OF THE COMING OUT PROCESS
OF LESBIANS AND THEIR FAMILIES**

by

Carol M. Schumacher

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The Graduate College
University of Wisconsin - Stout
Menomonie, Wisconsin 54751

ABSTRACT

<u>Schumacher</u>	<u>Carol</u>	<u>M</u>
(Writer) (Last Name)	(First)	(Initial)

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The purpose of this study is to contribute to the current research and to the knowledge about the coming out process of lesbians, their families, and the larger lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community. It is a qualitative study designed to gather information about the transformative aspects of four lesbians' coming out process to self and to their family members and other significant people. The nine topics covered in these research include: homophobia, coming out, losses, family of origin, lesbian mothers and their children, employment, religion, gains, and family of choice.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Studies estimate that 10 to 15 percent of the population of the United States is gay or lesbian--about 22 million--yet only about 1.5 million are considered to constitute the "out" population of gays and lesbians (Rudolph, 1989).

From a developmental perspective, coming out is a life-structure transition that may take many years. The unique identity that a lesbian develops takes many forms, depending on her life circumstances. Coming out is not a normative developmental event that is anticipated by the woman. Nor is coming out an event that is recognized as a developmental marker by the larger culture. Rather, it is a minority developmental experience, which the woman often faces alone (Reid, 1995). Furthermore, coming out may occur at any age. However, coming out is more than just an extra developmental process that is faced by homosexual people; it is process wherein gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people learn to speak the truth to themselves and to others.

The Purpose of this Study

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the current research and to the knowledge about the coming out process of lesbians, their families, and the larger lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community. It is a qualitative study designed to gather information about the transformative aspects of four lesbians' coming out process to self and to their family members and other significant people. The nine topics covered in this

research include: homophobia, coming out, losses, family of origin, lesbian mothers and their children, employment, religion, gains, and family of choice.

Objective of this Study

The objective of this study is to describe the coming out experience of four lesbians using a qualitative research process.

Overview of this Thesis

Chapter One is an introduction to the thesis. It gives the overview, purpose and objective of this study. There are also definitions of terms. In Chapter Two the literature currently available in this field of study is reviewed and critiqued. Chapter Three outlines in detail the qualitative methodology as it is used in this study. Chapter Four includes a brief profile of each of the women and a structured summary which identifies patterns of their interviews. The summary covers homophobia, coming out, losses, family of origin, lesbian mothers and their children, employment, religion, gains, and family of choice. Chapter Five analyzes the study and draws conclusions, suggesting directions for clinicians and for future research and includes reflections by the author. The Appendices include the letter to the research participants, the interview questions, letter of consent and transcripts of the interviews.

Definition of Terms

Coming Out: Developmental sequence leading to the formation of positive lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender identities. This process is often referred as disclosure of a person's homosexuality.

Family of Choice: A close network of friends, partners, lovers, and ex-lovers that behave as if they are extended family. A family of choice might also include some blood kin.

Family of Origin: Birth family

Gender Identity: The inner sense that one is a man or a woman

Gender Role: What a person communicates to others to indicate gender. This includes physical attributes, adornment, grooming and social interactions. Gender role is learned and believed to be internalized from role models in the culture beginning during infancy. Sometimes it is described as the attributes of being masculine and feminine.

Heterosexism: The societal assumption and norm that the practices of heterosexuality are the only accepted and sanctioned expressions of human sexuality. Heterosexism presumes that everyone is or should be heterosexual. Heterosexism has become institutionalized in a way that sanctions discrimination and the denial of basic human rights for gay, lesbian and bisexual people.

Homophobia : The irrational fear of sexual orientation other than heterosexuality. Homophobia is expressed as negative feelings, attitudes, actions or behaviors against lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender people. It includes the fear of: 1) lesbians and gay men; 2) being perceived as lesbian or gay; 3) one's own feelings of affection for the same gender.

LGBT: A commonly used abbreviation for Lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgender people.

Sexual Identity: The composite of factors that determine knowing and expressing oneself as a sexual being.

Sexual Orientation: A persistent pattern of sexual arousal toward men, women or both. The orientation continuum includes homosexuality, bisexuality, transgender and heterosexuality.

Stonewall Rebellion: Police raids on gay bars in 1969 started the Stonewall riots which began the modern gay liberation movement.

Transgender: A term that encompasses a broad range of people who are on the continuum between the traditional, culturally accepted identities of "male" and "female." Included in this definition are transsexuals, who have used hormones and surgery to change their gender and cross-dressers, who wear clothing not typical for their gender. Under this term are both people with mixed anatomy and people with mixed emotions on issues of their gender.

CHAPTER 2

Review of Literature

This chapter addresses current research focused on the nine themes of the coming out process which surfaced during the interviews. Of course, these are not all the topics that are a part of or related to the coming out process. However, they are central and core issues. Issues that every lesbian, gay man, bisexual and transgender person must confront and cope with throughout his/her life.

Homophobia

Even with the increased public awareness of lesbians, homophobia-- including internalized, personal, institutional and cultural homophobia-- is still a major concern and problem for lesbians and their families (Hanley-Hackenbruck, 1989; Blumenfeld, 1992; O'Neill and Ritter, 1992; Alexander and Nunno, 1996; Muzio, 1996). At first, lesbians have to confront, acknowledge and accept their own internalized homophobia (Saulnier, 1991; Blumenfeld, 1992; Anderson, 1996; Siegel and Walker, 1996). Second, they have to deal with personal homophobia, that is, another person's personal belief system that homosexuals are psychologically defective, genetically defective or somehow inferior to heterosexuals (Blumenfeld, 1992; Siegel and Walker, 1996). Third, they are confronted

with the ways the government, businesses, religious and other organizations discriminate against them because of their sexual orientation (institutional homophobia). Finally, they have to cope with cultural homophobia on a daily basis. Cultural homophobia is an attempt “to exclude images of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people from the media or from history or to represent these groups in negative stereotypical terms” (Blumenfeld, 1992).

Coming out

According to Urvashi Vaid (1992), "homosexuality always involves choice-- indeed, it involves a series of four major choices: admitting, acting, telling and living" (p. 30) . The coming out process is the choice that a gay person makes in response to homophobia and heterosexism. Coming out models describe the movement of the process from first awareness to full disclosure. In most cases, these models are an orderly or linear series of stages based on a theoretical perspective (Cass, 1979; Lewis, 1984; Woodman & Lenna, 1980). One well-known model (Sophie, 1985-1986) delineates four essential stages of identity development that characterizes most coming out models:

1. First awareness (admitting)

An initial cognitive and emotional realization that one is “different” and a feeling of alienation from oneself and others,

No disclosure to others,

Some awareness that homosexuality may be the relevant issue.

2. Test and Exploration (acting)

Feelings of ambivalence that precede acceptance of homosexuality,

Initial but limited contact with gay and lesbian individuals or communities,

Alienation from heterosexuality.

3. Identity acceptance (telling)

Preference for social interactions with other gays and lesbians,

Evolution from negative identity to positive identity,

Initial disclosure to heterosexuals.

4. Identity integration (living)

View of self as gay or lesbian with accompanying anger at society's prejudice

Publicly coming out to many others,

Identity stability: unwillingness to change and pride in oneself and one's group.

(Sophie, 1985-1986, pp. 41-43).

Coming out models have been useful in understanding the processes by which individuals move from an assumed heterosexual to a lesbian identity. However, this process is not a smooth linear process for most women. Rather, coming out for most lesbians appears to be characterized by "fluidity and ambiguity" (Gonsiorek and Rudolph, 1991; Golden, 1987; Ponse, 1978). As lesbians work through the identity formation stages, some women might employ strategies during the early stages to inhibit or deny their homosexuality. If these strategies are successful, this can lead to foreclosure of sexual identity at any of these stages. For example, a lesbian during the first stage of the coming out process might disown responsibility for her homosexual behavior by redefining the context in which it occurred. She might say that she was just experimenting or that she was drunk. A strategy that an individual, who is in the second stage, might employ to reject the homosexual label while continuing homosexual behavior, would be to blame her homosexuality on someone else. "It's Mary's fault I'm

this way." During the third stage, the woman can regard being a lesbian a partially legitimate (being gay is all right in private, but being public about it is not all right). If this happens, it is probable that she will personally adopt this attitude and compartmentalize her sexuality (Berzon, 1988).

Lesbians who come out during midlife often have to confront the developmental dilemma of "identity foreclosure" (Waterman, 1982), which takes place when a person makes a premature commitment to a false sense of self, as in many cases, to an inappropriate lifestyle as a heterosexual. Identity foreclosure occurs because individuals answer a question of personal identity typical of adolescence or early adulthood and then have reason to question their answer. At midlife, many adults typically address a number of unresolved personal issues and seriously question the meaning and direction of their lives (Gould, 1978; Levinson, 1986). While this is a significant developmental task, the lesbian who is coming out in her midlife faces the additional challenge of addressing personal identity issues that have been postponed. Essentially, a lesbian who comes out at or about midlife is developmentally "off-time" in comparison with other lesbians who experience more developmentally on-time identity formation in adolescence and early adulthood (Bigner, 1996).

Brown (1989) has asserted that coming out also entails addressing the following three elements thought to be common to all sexual minorities: first, biculturalism resulting in simultaneous participation in multiple cultural realities; second, marginality and the experience of being an outsider from the cultural majority; third, "normative creativity," (i. e. the need to invent intrapsychic and interpersonal boundaries and rules that are developed without existing guidelines, or may be adapted from other situations

that may not be entirely applicable) (p.68).

Losses

Heterosexual parents with the values of the heterosexual majority, including getting married and having children, raised most lesbians. Knowing that their families had the expectation that they would get married, many lesbians also held that expectation. For them, the dream of marriage came into conflict with what they were beginning to learn about themselves (O'Neill and Ritter, 1992). At some time during the coming out process, lesbians must deal with the fact that they are identifying with a segment of society that is stigmatized (Fein and Nuehring, 1981). By choosing to identify as lesbians, they cannot marry, divorce, have joint health insurance, or publish pictures in the newspaper to show their intentions to legalize their relationships. Public display of affection brings the risk of public censure. Coming out on the job brings the risk of being fired. Finally, coming out to families and friends brings the risk of being rejected or even disowned (O'Neill and Ritter, 1992). But despite these many losses, lesbians have proven to be every bit as well adjusted as their heterosexual counterparts (Rothblum, 1988). Nonetheless, to deal with loss of heterosexual privileges one must recognize, acknowledge, and grieve these losses. Betty Berzon (1988) addresses the issue of loss in her book Permanent Partners:

With the letting go of a perception of self that is clearly heterosexual, one can experience a profound feeling of loss. As with any loss the way to move beyond grief is to acknowledge and express it. Expressing grief over the loss of one's heterosexual status, and all the fantasies about the future that went with it,

has not been too popular a topic for dialogue in the gay and lesbian community. But, at this stage of identity development, grieving the loss of the heterosexual blueprint for life is an inescapable part of what is going on. The more it is acknowledged and talked about, the sooner it can be worked through and prevented from becoming a chronic, underlying theme in the person's relationships. (pp. 48-49)

Carol A. Thompson (1996) developed the following five-stage model of loss that happens in conjunction with the coming out process:

Stage one: To accept the reality of the loss of heterosexual identity and its privileges.

Stage two: To acknowledge specifics of the loss and look for ways to "fit in."

Stage three: To feel the pain of the loss and to grieve.

Stage four: To adjust to life as a lesbian

Stage five: To integrate lesbian life into the lesbian community and broader society (pp. 214-217).

However, not all lesbians experience loss issues when coming out. For some women coming out is an exciting experience, according to Thompson (1996). For women who come out in the context of a relationship, falling in love often takes focus over any potential difficulties. If women are older, and not married, coming out often gives them a sense of identity that they did not experience as heterosexuals. After coming out as lesbians, women who feel like failures in the heterosexual world because they never married or had children, can feel as if they have found themselves and their community. It seems that for these women the grieving happened when the women were

trying unsuccessfully to live as heterosexuals (Thompson, 1996).

Family of Origin

Perhaps one of the most difficult aspects for lesbians of the coming out process is disclosure to their families of origin (Siegel and Walker, 1996; Savin-Williams, 1996). According to Strommen (1990) when the lesbian family member's sexual orientation is disclosed, the revelation starts two processes in the family of origin. First, the family struggles for a way to understand the lesbian family member. This occurs in the context of the family's values and belief system. Then as the family struggles with this "revelation crisis," they also experience a sudden alienation from the lesbian family member. Previous perceptions of her as a sibling, spouse, or child are negated by the new identification. The individual may be experienced as a stranger in the family. Strommen also identifies several sources of antigay prejudice which affect the family's response to the lesbian's coming out. This includes the belief that homosexuality is "unnatural." Families with strong conservative religious convictions often support the views of their religion even against the lesbian family member. Indeed, the literature suggests that the more a family relies on conservative religious teachings as a source of moral strength and guidance, the more negative and severe the family's response to its gay or lesbian member (Collins & Zimmerman, 1983; Strommen, 1990).

A positive outcome to the lesbian's coming out to her family members depends on the family's ability to adapt their attitudes and beliefs to establish a new lesbian identity for the family member. Often families who confront this new information need to grieve the loss of their previous perception, expectations, and dreams for the lesbian member

(Greene and Boyd-Franklin, 1996). There are many instances in which negative initial reactions transform into a positive acceptance and support, although this can take time--sometimes (Kurdek and Schmitt, 1987, Levy, 1989; Kennedy and Davis, 1993; Weston, 1991; Hancock, 1995). The person who is coming out is usually at a very different developmental stage of accepting lesbianism than is the person to whom she comes out. Her acceptance of her own lesbianism has taken time and did not take place overnight. Understanding and acceptance by the family member will not happen immediately either, it may require time to develop (Greene and Boyd-Franklin, 1996).

For many families, the disclosure of a member's lesbianism disturbs the entire family equilibrium (Iasenza, Colucci and Rothberg, 1996; Laird, 1996). Family positions and roles may shift, as some members move in, and others are distanced or distance themselves. For example, a daughter who held the position of favorite child may lose it after revealing a lesbian identity. Her "trouble making" brother may experience an increase in status merely because he is heterosexually married. In general, youths are more likely to disclose to mother than to father and other family members (Cramer & Roach, 1988; D'Augelli, 1991; Herdt & Boxer, 1993). Because mothers are often the emotional gatekeepers for the family, they frequently act as transmitters of disclosure to other family members in the family system, such as fathers, aunts, uncles, and grandparents (Iasenza, Colucci and Rothberg, 1996).

Lesbian Mothers and their Children

And as it happens, many lesbians have children as a result of their heterosexual experience. According to April Martin (1993), there are between three and eight million

gay and lesbian parents in the United States, raising between six and 14 million children. Dr. Linda E. Jones (Personal Communication, November 9, 1995) of the University of Minnesota, explained that her research shows that 50 percent of all lesbians and gay men have children, while 67 percent of heterosexual people have children. Phyllis Burke (1993) estimates that there are six million children of lesbian mothers in this country.

As a result of the gay liberation and the human rights movement for gay and lesbian people, there has been an increasing acceptance of gay, lesbian and bisexual people (Vaid, 1992). Along with this increased acceptance has come an increased acceptance of gay and lesbian couples as authentic couples. However, there is still an assumption held by many conservative people that having lesbian mothers will harm the child's sexual development. Lesbians have been refused access to donor insemination and permission to adopt or become foster parents on the grounds that they would be less adequate parents than heterosexuals. And, unfortunately, some lesbian mothers are denied custody of their biological children based on their sexual orientation. Myths and false assumptions have governed the courts, social service agencies, health care organizations and the public regarding the well being of children raised by lesbians. Studies (Gartell, Hamilton, Banks, Mosbacher, Reed, Sparks, & Bishop, 1996; Tasker and Golombok, 1995; Gottman, 1990; Huggins, 1989; Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray & Smith, 1986; Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983; Green, 1978; Hoeffler, 1981; Kirkpatrick, 1978; Kirkpatrick, Smith, & Roy, 1981) have shown that adults who have been raised in lesbian families are well adjusted and suffer no long-term effects from their upbringing.

In a study by Fiona Tasker and Susan Golombok (1995), they interviewed 46

young adults: 25 adults raised by lesbians and 21 adults raised by single heterosexual parents, who had all originally participated in a study in 1976-1977. The results show that adults raised as children in lesbian families are well-adjusted adults "and experienced no long-term detrimental effects arising from their early upbringing" (p. 211). The adults did report that they had less positive feelings about being raised by lesbians during their adolescence, specifically about explaining their family situations to others. However, now as adults they have adjusted and were generally positive about their family identities. Also many studies have shown that children raised by lesbians have normal, healthy relationships with adults and other children (Gartell, Hamilton, Banks, Mosbacher, Reed, Sparks, & Bishop, 1996; Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983; Kirkpatrick, Smith, & Roy, 1981; Green, 1978).

Numerous studies have compared the children of lesbians with those of heterosexual mothers. Research has shown that the children raised in lesbian households showed no differences in the development of gender identity, gender role behavior or sexual orientation from those raised in other households (Gartell, Hamilton, Banks, Mosbacher, Reed, Sparks, & Bishop, 1996; Gottman, 1990; Huggins, 1989; Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray & Smith, 1986; Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983; Green, 1978; Hoeffler, 1981; Kirkpatrick, 1978; Kirkpatrick, Smith, & Roy, 1981). The children raised by lesbians have as much self-esteem as the children of heterosexual women. The results of research are consistent with the conclusion that the children of lesbian and heterosexual parents are remarkably similar. However, in spite of the research there is still prejudice in the courts and social service systems.

Employment

One of the main issues that presses on the daily existence of almost all LGBT people is employment discrimination. LGBT employees wonder whether, in order to pursue a career and have a stable livelihood, they must be closeted and live in constant fear of being found out (Stewart, 1991; O'Neill and Ritter, 1992; Kimmel and Sang, 1995).

Most Americans believe that everyone has a "constitutional right" to work as long as he or she is doing the job. The reality of American employment law often comes as a surprise to the average working person. The basic legal principle underlying all state employment law is "employment at will." The employment at will doctrine states that employer and employee are in equal positions: the employee can quit "at will," and the employer can fire "at will." Only two states, Wisconsin and Massachusetts, have state statutes that prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation for both private and public employment within the state (Rivera, 1991).

Even when a gay person works for a company that actively welcomes a diverse work force--by making it clear they will not tolerate discrimination in hiring or promotion of their workers, and by offering diversity training--it is probable that the gay employee is still being discriminated against in very blatant ways: very few businesses, agencies and organizations offer a full range of domestic partner benefits (Friskopp and Silverstein, 1995). Some employers offer inexpensive perks to their employee's domestic partners, such as use of the company library or gym. However, most gay professionals in a long-term relationship usually do not receive medical or life insurance, pension, travel, or relocation benefits for their same-sex partner (Friskopp and Silverstein, 1995).

Nonetheless, increasingly fewer gay people want to stay in the closet at work. Currently, many gay professionals recognize that the benefits of coming out far exceed the costs of being closeted. As Friskopp and Silverstein reported, these professionals explained “that by being true to themselves, they found a sense of inner peace and wholeness that has propelled them to excel at work and in other aspects of their lives. Thus, on balance, the identifiable benefits far outweighed their vague fears” (p. 218, 1995).

It is still very difficult for LGBT people to protect themselves from the homophobic actions of employees, especially in private employment. However, for both state and local government employees, prospects of a harassment free and firing free workplace are much better than 15 years ago (Rivera, 1991). Also encouraging is the report *The State of the Workplace* released by the Human Rights Campaign in September of 1999, which counted 2,856 private companies, colleges, universities, state and local governments that offer domestic partner health coverage (Shenitz, 1999).

Religion and Spirituality

Often religion provides the same comforts for lesbians that it does for heterosexual women: a sense of something greater than self, a spiritual community, answers to universal questions, moral guidance, and pastoral counseling. When these needs are not met, it can be extremely painful. Lesbians often feel betrayed, guilty, and disappointed. In response, some lesbians choose to hide within their church--some do not tell anyone they are gay. However, some decide to fight the homophobia in their congregations, some join gay/lesbian organizations within their congregations (such as,

the Catholic LGBT group, Dignity, or Affirmation, the organization for LGBT Methodists), some join accepting churches, and some give up organized religion to create their own personal forms of worship and spirituality (O'Neill and Ritter, 1992; Goss, 1993; Perlstein, 1996; de la Huerta, 1999).

Since this study focuses on lesbians in the U.S. and Christianity is the dominant religion in the U.S., this literature review examines only Christian doctrine and policies regarding homosexuality. The major Protestant and Catholic churches consider homosexual relations to be sinful (O'Neill and Ritter, 1992; Comstock, 1993; Perlstein, 1996; de la Huerta, 1999). Most Protestant denominations refuse to ordain openly lesbian and gay ministers and refuse to bless and recognize same-sex marriages. Also they are denying the application of the Metropolitan Community Church, which is a church establish by a gay man for mainly lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, to the National Council of Churches in 1990 (Comstock, 1993; Goss, 1993; de la Huerta, 1999). As Comstock explains, the official Catholic position is that homosexuality is a "disordered inclination (p. 12, 1993)." The Catholic Church's position on homosexuality distinguishes between the "homosexual inclination" and "homosexual acts." Homosexual inclination is not sinful but "objectively disordered," whereas, homogenital actions are an "intrinsic moral evil" (Comstock, 1993; Goss, 1993). Currently, homosexuality is a topic that is being discussed and struggled with in almost every Protestant denomination. The Unitarian Universalists, the United Church of Christ, and Unity Church have accepted and welcomed lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people, as well as the Metropolitan Community Church, discussed earlier(de la Huerta, 1999).

Along with being marginalized within religious communities comes the absence

of socially sanctioned family rituals and passages, such as legally marrying, acknowledging the birth of children, buying a home together, registering a child for school the first time, making medical or financial decisions for one's partner and choosing a nursing home. However, within the lesbian community many women are developing and performing rituals. They have services of union, celebrate the birth of children, celebrate anniversaries and celebrate coming out events. Lesbian rituals can help lesbians reconnect with their authentic selves by providing opportunities for them to re-tell their stories in a positive light (Laird, 1994). Rituals help name experience and integrate the split-off aspects of the self. They call for the support of family, friends and community, and they validate the existence of a different way of life. Most of all they affirm a relationship which society has attempted to erase time and time again, and they work towards the legalization of same sex marriages, as a basic human right. Marriage is much more than a relationship sanctioned by law. It is the center of our entire social structure in the United States, the core of the perception of family (Bulter, 1990).

Gains

While coming out is a painful process for some lesbians, for others it can be a self-authenticating and differentiating process which can result in very positive personal growth. The increase in self-knowledge that occurs as a result of adaptation to the developmental transition of coming out often results in increased self-esteem and ego strength (Reid, 1995).

In addition, a lesbian's coming out and integrating her identity into her family of origin can be necessary for her to develop authentic, differentiated relationships with

family members. There are different ways of achieving this differentiation. Some lesbians cultivate authentic relationships with family members before disclosing, while others may have already disclosed and need to integrate sexual identity issues into their family relationship (Iasenza, Colucci and Rothberg, 1996). According to Joan Laird, "the lesbian issue affords not simply conflict but also possibility and opportunity. It is often the pivot around which the tasks of individuation or differentiation occur and continue to occur throughout life" (p. 112, 1996).

Community and Family of Choice

Lesbians and gay men maintain self-esteem most effectively when they identify with and are integrated into a larger lesbian/gay community (Crocker & Major, 1989). "Coming in" refers to this process (Petrow, 1990). Lesbians and gay men report more primary support from partners and friends than from family (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Kurdek, 1988; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987; Weston, 1991). Involvement of lesbians and gay men in the subculture helps foster group identity, provides role models, and diminishes feelings of isolation and alienation (Harry, 1984; Kurdek, 1988). Research has documented the positive impact of acknowledging lesbian/gay feelings to others and being involved with lesbian and gay social networks and communities (Harry & Duvall, 1978; Kurdek, 1988; Weinberg & Williams, 1974). Coming out to others has been associated with enhanced personal integrity (Rand, Graham, & Rawlings, 1982; Wells & Kline, 1987), decreased feelings of isolation (Murphy, 1989), and greater acceptance from others (Olsen, 1987). The presence of a lesbian/gay support system is related to more adaptive coping strategies and lower stress (Gillow & Davis, 1987) and to better overall

adjustment (Kurdek, 1988).

Since the late 1970's there have been publications, public debate and research exploring and defining lesbian and gay male families. Lesbians and gay men have always been part of family life. We have been daughters, sons, aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers, moms and dads. As D. Merilee Clunis and G. Dorsey Green (1995) explain:

Our chosen families represent a very different approach to kinship than the idealized myth of the "nuclear family" or the reality of the extended family which is characteristic of many ethnic cultures. As lesbian families, we challenge the very foundation upon which the notion of family has been based, namely heterosexuality. Blood relationships and legal ties are not the defining factors for inclusion in our families. Or at least they are not the only factors--and are often not the primary ones (1995, p. 12).

Ethnographic research by anthropologist Kath Weston (1991) confirms that LGBT people define family in a number of ways that extend beyond families of blood and include close friends who are vital supports in their lives and relationships. These families of choice are capable of validating, marking and celebrating the boundaries of the gay and lesbian families. Often LGBT people cannot depend on their blood ties or legitimately fear losing them. In the absence of such assurances, the gay man or lesbian seeks and selects a new family, new concentric circle of family. They organize and establish their families through love, choice and creativity (Siegel and Walker, 1996). Many lesbians form extensive lesbian (although not exclusively lesbian) friendship networks which, at least some of the time, serve similar functions as those served by extended family of origin--participating in "family" rituals, helping out in times of illness

or other crisis, lending money or sharing other resources, and so on (Laird, 1996).

Conclusion

This literature review has examined only part of the growing body of both qualitative and quantitative research, which is expanding the knowledge pool, about homosexuality, the coming out process, the LGBT population and their families, and other coming out issues, such as employment and religion. Indeed, the increase of knowledge in the past 30 years in these areas has benefitted the academic, science and LGBT communities, but nevertheless there is still much to learn about the coming out process, a process that affects millions of people for their entire lives.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Subjects

The author interviewed four nonclinical lesbians. The subjects self-selected and volunteered to be interviewed. The author placed an advertisement in the local lesbian network newsletters and made announcements at two social gatherings asking for volunteers. The subjects then contacted the author.

Interviews

Prior to the interviews the subjects were sent a letter describing the research. See Appendix A for a copy of this letter. At the beginning of the interview the author explained the consent form and assured the subjects that they could withdraw from the project at any time. The author gave the subjects the consent forms which they read and signed. See Appendix B for a copy of the consent form. Before the interview the author obtained verbal approval to audio tape the interviews. The interviews were between two and three hours in length at a location of the interviewee's selection. The author asked a series of open-ended questions to guide the interviewing process. See Appendix C for a copy of the questions. Appendix D is the transcript of the interviews.

Confidentiality

The confidentiality of the subjects was respected throughout the research process. Names and identifying information about the subjects are fictitious to protect confidentiality. All the identifying material related to this study was kept in locked box, to which only the researcher had access. This study was conducted in compliance with the ethical guidelines given by the University of Wisconsin-Stout.

CHAPTER 4

Profiles

The following profiles are brief demographic summaries about the women interviewed and the chronological time frames of their coming out. These will be followed by an examination of various issues and aspects of their coming out processes.

Laurie

Laurie is 39 years old, married to a woman, Pat, and lives in a small west central Wisconsin town. From her previous marriage to a man named Marty, Laurie had two children. Now her boy is eight and her girl, ten. Laurie was also married to Jim before Marty. Laurie has one brother, who is married. Currently, her children live with their father. Her mother is 67, from a family of 11 children, and is in a nursing home; her father died in 1992. The family's ethnic heritage is German and Dutch. She works as an information technician specialist and attends college.

Laurie realized that she was a lesbian in grade school, when she was 10 or 11 years old. Nonetheless, she did not tell anyone until she was 34 years old. The first person that Laurie came out to was her best friend. Then she started to change; she got divorced and came out to her children. Laurie is out to everyone in her family and all of

her friends; however, she came out to her mother last. Laurie is out to everyone at her workplace; she has a picture of her wife on her desk and if people ask her who is in the picture, she explains it is her wife, Pat.

Jackie

Jackie is married to Paige Ann. They have been together for eight years. She is 37 years old and a teacher, who teaches at an area University. Jackie has no children, although Paige Ann has two grown daughters. Both of Jackie's parents are alive, and she has one brother. She was raised Catholic.

When Jackie was 20 and engaged to marry a man, she met a woman to whom she was very attracted, and, consequently, she realized that she was a homosexual. She came out to her mother about three years and has not told her father yet. Jackie does not know if her father knows. Also she has not told her brother; sometimes she thinks he knows, and sometimes she thinks he does not. Jackie is out to some of her colleagues at work.

Paige Ann

Paige Ann is 54 and married to Jackie. She works for a nonprofit agency. Paige Ann has two adult daughters: Janie, 26 and Mary, 28 from her marriage of 25 years to a Lutheran minister. Liz is married and will be having a child soon. Paige Ann's mother is alive; her father, brother and sister have died.

Paige Ann and Jackie were friends for about a year before they declared their love for each other and that was the beginning of Paige Ann's coming out process. Paige Ann has come out to both of her daughters, but not her mother. She does not know if her

mother knows or not. Paige Ann suspects that her sister knew, but nothing was ever said between them. Paige Ann is not out at work. Nonetheless, she does talk about her partner and other family events.

Helen

Helen is 47 years old and single. She teaches at a parochial high school. Both of her parents are alive. She has two sisters and one brother. She was raised Catholic.

When Helen was six, she remembers that she was considered one of the boys in her neighborhood. And while she was growing up, she was always attracted to girls. At 16, she knew she was gay and had a few other gay friends in high school, although no one talked about being gay. Helen thinks that she was probably 17 or 18 before she and her friends talked about being lesbians. She became involved with her first significant woman lover when she was 19. Helen first came out to her sisters. Then when she was 25, she came out to her father. Also at this time she was in a bad relationship and was depressed. Her mother became concerned because she was worried that Helen might commit suicide and during this intervention, Helen came out to her mother. Helen's mother is a devout Catholic and does not approve of Helen's lesbianism; however, she does accept Helen. Helen's father is more accepting. Helen is not out at work.

Structured Summaries Identifying Patterns

Homophobia

Like all LGBT people, internalized, personal, institutional and cultural homophobia are prevalent concerns in all four of the subjects' lives. All of the subjects

spent many years confronting, acknowledging and accepting their lesbianism. Also all the women are currently struggling with personal homophobia; specifically, they all have close members of their families that either do not approve of their lesbianism or they have close family members that they have not come out to because they fear that the family members will not accept them. Laurie's mother continues to be troubled by Laurie's lesbianism and has not completely accepted it. Jackie has come out to her mother, but not to her father. Paige Ann has not come out to her mother and she wonders if her mother knows or not. And Helen's mother told her, about three years ago, that she does not think being a lesbian is right; however, she accepts Helen. Besides the ways in which the government discriminates against all LGBT people, for example, not allowing marriage, the subjects face other aspects of institutional homophobia. Jackie is struggling with the Catholic Church's antigay policies. Paige Ann waited 25 years before she came out. Helen cannot afford to be out at work because she teaches at a parochial high school. And, of course, in today's world, all the subjects have to cope with cultural homophobia on a daily basis.

Coming Out

Laurie

Laurie entered the first coming out stage when she was 13 years old and thought that she was a lesbian. After this initial realization, Laurie risked telling a girl, Julia, to whom she was attracted, and was rebuked by Julia. So, Laurie decided that she could not tell anyone and that she needed to act as if she were heterosexual. Laurie never told anyone again until she was 34 years old. Now, Laurie is out to almost everyone she

knows, including her family and friends. When Laurie told this girl, Julia, she was in the first stage of coming out (Sophie, 1985-1986)--*first awareness (admitting)* and beginning of the second stage--*test and explore (acting)*. She realized that she was a lesbian (*first awareness*), and she declared this to the girl (*test and explore*). Because of Julia's rejection of Laurie, Laurie had ambivalent feelings about her lesbianism for 21 years. So after 21 years of ambivalence, Laurie then went on to come out at rapid pace. When she was 34, she told her best friend and "started to get ready for a change." Laurie got divorced and told her children. By the time she was 38, Laurie had come out to almost every one she knew, including her friends and family of origin. She moved quickly through the stages of *test and exploration (acting)*, *identity acceptance (telling)*, and *identity integration (living)*. Currently, Laurie functions primarily in the last stage of *identity integration*. Her friends, family and coworkers know that she is a lesbian. As she says, "I lived for so long in that tiny little closet, in that tiny little town that I cannot go back. I have no more time for any more deception."

Jackie

Jackie was *first aware* that she might be a lesbian at 19. Nevertheless, it was when she was 20 and met and became attracted to her first female lover that she realized that she was a homosexual. Jackie remembers very clearly the exact point in her life when this realization came to her. She explains, "I realized that I was attracted to this woman and that I was a homosexual when I was driving over a bridge on the way to her house. For me, the bridge symbolized change and leaving one life for another--that is leaving the heterosexual life for a homosexual one." At this point in her life, Jackie was

in the *testing and exploring stage*, while also beginning to *accept her identity as a lesbian*. After her first lesbian sexual experience, Jackie went to the college library and did research about homosexuality. She remembers that this was the time her college sponsored "the End Party." This is a party held at the end of the school year. For Jackie, it symbolized more than the end of school. It also represented the end of her innocence, her naivete, her heterosexual life, her relationship with the young man that she was dating, and her adherence to the Catholic faith. In addition at this time, Jackie talked her good friend about being a lesbian. This friend listened, and was supportive and open.

Jackie said that for years she felt as if her lesbianism defined her. She had lived this other life being heterosexual, and then she had this new identity. For Jackie, it seems that the third stage, *identity acceptance*, was long lasting.

At the present, in most areas of Jackie's life she has *integrated* her lesbian identity into the rest of her life. She is mostly out at work, and Jackie and her partner are accepted in their neighborhood. They have not announced that they are lesbians, but they do wear their matching wedding rings and attend neighborhood functions as a couple.

Paige Ann

Paige Ann had a sense that she was a homosexual when she was 12 or 13 years old. However, even with this *awareness*, she chose to live as a heterosexual until she was 42. Paige Ann was married to a man for 25 years and raised two children. It is important to note that Paige Ann's self-disclosure of her lesbianism took place in 1957 or 1958 and that this was before the Stonewall rebellion and gay liberation. Therefore, the social context for Paige Ann to define her feelings of same-sex attraction was very limited.

Presently, Paige Ann is in both the second-- *test and exploration*-- and the third -- *the identity acceptance*-- coming out stages. She has not come out to her mother and wonders if she "should". She has not explicitly told her co-workers that she is a lesbian. However, at work she talks about her partner and the events in their lives.

By agreeing to be interviewed for this study, it appears that Paige Ann is quickly moving toward the fourth stage of *identity integration*. Also, Paige and Jackie are attending a Reconciled and Open Lutheran Church as out lesbians. (These Lutheran churches are welcoming and accepting to LGBT people).

Helen

Helen has been *aware* that she has been different all her life. And, for over 30 years Helen has been moving through the coming out stages. When she was a child, the neighborhood children considered her a boy. Out of the four subjects interviewed, Helen can probably be considered the most transgender. She has been very athletic all of her life, including when she was a small girl. Because of Helen's awareness of her attraction to the same-sex, she was in the first coming out stage when she was a young girl and teenager. It seems that Helen moved into the second stage--*test and exploration*-- in her last two years of high school; she became friends with other gay high school students. Also she made acquaintance with some older lesbians when she was on a traveling softball team. Throughout Helen's college years, she continued to meet lesbians through her sports and athletic activities.

When Helen was in her early to mid twenties, she was beginning to *accept* her

identity as a lesbian and to tell her family that she was a lesbian. She told her sisters first, then her brother, then her father, and then her mother. Helen explained, "that I was glad when I came out to my family, because it was so difficult for me to lead a double life."

According to Helen it was not until she was 35 years old that she finally accepted herself and her sexual orientation. She revealed that she went through a time in her life when she felt much more male than female. Now, Helen says she hopes to be a positive role model for young LGBT people.

Losses

Laurie

In her interview, Laurie explained that she feels that there is a loss of pattern or blueprint for her life and now she has to follow her own intuition. Laurie's feeling of the loss of a pattern in her life is related to the expectation that she would become a heterosexual and the loss of heterosexual female roles. In addition, before Laurie came out, she feels that people could say anything around her, but since she has come out she feels that people are not comfortable using the words "gay" or "lesbian." She understands this because before Laurie came out, she had a difficult time saying the words "lesbian" or "dyke." From Laurie's story, it can be surmised that Laurie has moved through stage one--accepting the reality of the loss of heterosexual identity and its privileges--and stage two--to acknowledge specifics of the loss and look for ways to "fit in"--of the five-stage model of loss (Thompson, 1996). And, she is progressing through stage three--to feel the pain of the loss and to grieve, stage four--to adjust to life as a lesbian, and stage five--to

integrate lesbian life into the lesbian community and broader society.

Jackie

Jackie admits that the largest loss that she faces is the loss of her adherence to the Catholic faith. She was raised a devout Catholic, and still, at times, struggles with guilt about being a lesbian. The Catholic Church's policies regarding homosexuality are an example of institutional homophobia, and these policies affect many LGBT people, of whom Jackie is one (Goss, 1993). Also Jackie talked about the loss of normal heterosexual privilege, for example, her not being able to have a public wedding. Another loss is that Jackie feels she has lost freedom of speech; she has to be careful talking to heterosexuals when she does not want to come out to them. Finally, Jackie is sad about some friends she lost because of her lesbianism. Like Laurie, Jackie has moved through loss stages one and two and is moving through stages three, four and five (Thompson, 1996).

Paige Ann

Paige Ann could not identify any losses related to her coming out process. Like other women who have come out in the context of falling in love, Paige Ann identifies her coming out as a positive transformative process. Her coming out has given her a sense of identity that she did not experience as a heterosexual (Thompson, 1996). In Paige Ann's words, "When I was married, I felt like I was living a lie. I have gained my own personality and been allowed to grow."

Helen

Being a transgender, lesbian and very androgynous looking took a heavy toll on Helen. She reports that she was depressed for many years. And like Jackie, Helen was raised Catholic and is very disturbed by the Catholic Church's antigay policies (Goss, 1993). According to Helen "these homophobic policies deny my gayness, which is a core part of myself. The Church's stand is to feel compassion for gay people, but otherwise homosexuality is wrong. So, I'm wrong." On a more personal note, Helen is a bit frustrated with how hard it is for older lesbians to find and date other women in the area. It is evident that Helen has moved through all five stages of loss (Thompson, 1996). She has integrated her lesbianism into her self-concept and is honest of who she is.

Family of Origin

Laurie

Laurie came out to her son when he was five years old and to her daughter when she was eight years old. Laurie explained it to her son in developmental concepts that he could understand. She has one older brother, whom she told. He understands and supports Laurie. Her father is deceased. When Laurie was divorcing, her mother felt as if Laurie's ex-husband was taking advantage of her. So, Laurie felt compelled to tell her mother that she was a lesbian. Laurie felt that she needed to give in to her ex-husband because she was concerned about custody arrangements for her children. Initially, her mother did not respond to Laurie's disclosure. Then her mother asked questions, such as, "is this just a phase? Are you sick? Are you sick?" Now her mother has become more comfortable with Laurie's lesbianism. Also Laurie's mother likes Laurie's partner.

Laurie's mother's reaction is an example of negative initial reaction transforming to a more positive reaction (Hancock, 1995, Greene and Boyd-Franklin, 1996). However, at this point Laurie's mother's reaction is not completely positive, because she is worried that her family will find out about Laurie's lesbianism. Laurie has moved away from her mother, and recently her mother has gotten very sick and has had to go to a nursing home. Laurie reports that her mother is angry with her because Laurie moved and cannot be at the nursing home as frequently as her mother would like. At present, her mother will not talk to Laurie; Laurie has to communicate with her mother through her brother. It seems likely that Laurie's disclosure disturbed the family equilibrium (Iasenza, Colucci and Rothberg, 1996).

Jackie

Jackie followed the tendency of lesbians disclosing to their mothers, then to their fathers and other family members (Cramer & Roach, 1988; D'Augelli, 1991; Herdt & Boxer, 1993). Jackie came out to her mother three years ago. She was very nervous about telling her mother and it took her three days. Coming out to her mother was very traumatic for Jackie. She explained, "self disclosure is hard for me, but to disclose about this topic was especially hard. I was worried that I would be rejected." Her mother's response was accepting, and she was not surprised. At this time, she has not come out to her father, brother or sister-in-law yet. Jackie does not know if her father knows or not. She sometimes thinks that her brother does know. When Jackie and Paige Ann visit Jackie's brother, they sleep in what is known as "Jackie's and Paige Ann's room." There are always rules and strategies for conversation in any family: some things are talked

about and some are not talked about; even types of speech are prescribed, differing by gender, age, ethnicity, social class, education, family and community. There is a tendency to assume that silence and secrecy are problems for individual development, but every human being manipulates language. It is used strategically to construct, edit and reedit personal narratives (Laird, 1996).

Paige Ann

Paige Ann's father is dead, while her mother is living. Paige Ann has not talked to her mother about being a lesbian, and she struggles with trying to decide what or if she should talk to her mother. Her mother does like and respect her partner. Paige had two siblings who have died a brother and sister. She suspects that her sister knew, but never said anything. In Paige Ann's socially prominent family, it was not acceptable to do anything that might embarrass the family. She was the first person in her family to get a divorce. Perhaps Paige Ann's mother lacks a model for dealing with same-sex relationships, but with time she will become able to adapt her beliefs and attitudes to construct a lesbian identity for her daughter (Hancock, 1995).

Helen

Both of Helen's parents are living. She has two sisters and a brother. Helen came out to her sisters first, then she told her brother. Helen reports that her sisters and brother were supportive. Unlike many gay men and lesbians, Helen told her father before she came out to her mother. Helen came out to her parents when she was in a bad

relationship and depressed. Because of Helen's depression, her family became worried that she might commit suicide. So, it was during the suicide intervention that Helen told her mother that she was a lesbian. Helen said, "that I was glad I finally came out because it is always so difficult and hard to lead a double life." It was likely that Helen was at a very different developmental stage of accepting her lesbianism when she came out to her mother than her family was (Greene and Boyd-Franklin, 1996). About three years ago, Helen's mother told Helen that she does not think Helen's lesbianism is right; however, Helen's mother told Helen that she accepts her. This rejection by Helen's mother is very hard for her. Helen's mother is a devout Catholic; her father converted to Catholicism, and is not as devout. It seems that Helen's mother's supports her religious convictions even if this is detrimental to her daughter's happiness, which is supported in the literature (Collins & Zimmerman, 1983; Strommen, 1990). At times, Helen's sisters tell other people that Helen is a lesbian and occasionally that disturbs Helen, but she understands. Now, Helen is very close to her siblings and feels very accepted and supported. Helen has a cousin who is lesbian, although Helen only met this woman once before. Helen has come out to another cousin, and she thinks that other relatives know.

Lesbian Mothers

Laurie is one of the 50% of lesbian women that are mothers in the United States (Jones, personal communication, 1995). Laurie has two children, a daughter 10 and a son, 8. Currently, both of the children live with their father, but spend time with Laurie

and her partner on a regular basis. Laurie explained that during her divorce she felt as if she should let her ex-husband have custody of the children because she was concerned about a custody dispute. Also Laurie was moving, starting a new job, and going to school. During this time of transitions, Laurie thought it would be best for the children to live with their father. Laurie reports that her children are well-adjusted normal kids. Laurie's children are similar to the children raised in lesbians households who show no differences in their development of gender identity, gender role behavior, sexual orientation, self-esteem from children raised in other households (Gartell, Hamilton, Banks, Mosbacher, Reed, Sparks, & Bishop, 1996; Gottman, 1990; Huggins, 1989; Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray & Smith, 1986; Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983; Green, 1978; Hoeffler, 1981; Kirkpatrick, 1978; Kirkpatrick, Smith, & Roy, 1981).

Laurie, like other lesbian mothers, continues to worry about what aspect her lesbianism would play in a custody battle. Notwithstanding the problems that lesbian and gay parents are having regarding custody suits, they are becoming increasingly successful. A number of state courts have decided that sexual orientation is irrelevant to the determination of custody. However, in other states gay custody battles are arduous; the parent expends a lot of money, waits a long time, and is often emotionally devastated (Rivera).

Employment

Laurie

Laurie works for a private information services company. She is completely out

at work and has not had any problems. She has pictures of her partner, Pat, on her desk, and when her co-workers or others ask who is in the picture, she responds that is a picture of her partner or sometimes she says it's a picture of her wife.

Jackie

Jackie is a college teacher. Her previous teaching position was at a Catholic college. She taught there for eight years and was only out to a few lay people. There she was seen as a "good Catholic woman," who was single and educated who did a great deal for the community and others. Realistically, Jackie felt that if the college administration found out that she was a lesbian, she would be fired. Because this college was a private, Catholic college it is probable that if Jackie's lesbianism had become public, she would have been fired.

In her current position, Jackie is a visible administrator and teacher. When she first arrived here two years ago, Jackie wanted to keep a low profile and figure things out. However, one of the first colleagues she met talked to her about the local lesbian network. This colleague introduced her to other lesbians as "the new lesbian." Jackie explained that now most of lesbians and many heterosexual people on campus know that she is a lesbian. Jackie is fortunate; she works at an institution where it is not only unlawful to discriminate against LGBT people, but where also there is a commitment to celebrating diversity.

Paige Ann

Paige Ann works for a non-profit organization; she has never explicitly come out

at work. Nevertheless, she talks about her partner with her coworkers and supervisor. For example, she talked about buying a house and cabin with her partner. Also, she requested time off to attend her partner's grandmother's funeral. Paige Ann does think that her supervisor knows that she is a lesbian, and that it does not bother him.

Helen

Helen has taught at a parochial high school for the past 20 years. She refuses to come out at work. Helen feels that if the school administration discovers that she is a lesbian, she will be fired. Unfortunately, it is wise for her not disclose her lesbianism. Even if Helen teaches in Wisconsin, which has a nondiscrimination law for gay people, she is employed by a private, religious organization, which is exempted from the law (Vaid, 1995). It is reasonable to conclude that she would be fired because of the antigay policies of the Catholic Church. In addition, Helen explained that she tries never to be alone with a female student and never to give one a ride home. Helen is very careful to keep her personal life separate from her work life.

Religion and Spirituality

Two out of the four subjects interviewed reported struggles with religious issues. For Jackie being a lesbian and a Catholic has been very difficult. At the moment when she realized that she was a lesbian she also realized that it was the "end of her adherence to the Catholic religion." In her words, she "knew that homosexuality was very taboo according to Catholic beliefs." Like many other lesbians, Jackie feels betrayed, guilty and disappointed. She explained that she has been grappling with Catholic guilt for 18 years.

Jackie realizes that when she goes to Communion at a Catholic Church, she is going against the Catholic doctrine. Currently, Jackie and Paige Ann are attending a reconciled and open Lutheran Church.

Helen, like Jackie, also struggles with religious issues, but in different ways than Jackie. Helen's mother is a devout Catholic and cannot completely accept Helen. About three years ago, Helen's mother told her that she does not think Helen's sexual orientation is right. Helen feels that is easier for her mother when she is not in a relationship. Helen's sacrifice of not being in a relationship is a response to the Catholic Church's view that homogenital actions are an "intrinsic moral evil" (Goss, 1993). In addition, as was previously mentioned, Helen teaches at a parochial high school. She has to stay in the closet at work because of the Catholic Church's discriminatory, antigay polices and doctrines. Personally, Helen is searching for a spiritual home where she is comfortable and people are accepting of who she is. So far Helen has attended Catholic, Methodist, Lutheran, Unitarian Universalist churches and Goddess worship rituals.

Laurie at this time does not attend any church. She was raised Lutheran, and her partner has converted to Judaism. Because Laurie and Pat's relationship is still new (they have been together for about a year and a half), they are still looking for a spiritual home where they both will be comfortable and welcomed.

As mentioned before, Paige Ann was active in the Lutheran church and married to a Lutheran minister. She has continued to be a member of the Lutheran denomination and now attends a reconciled Lutheran church with Jackie.

Gains

It is apparent that for each of the four subjects their coming out was a very self-authenticating and differentiating resulting in positive personal growth (Reid, 1995). Laurie explained, "that since I can be more honest about who I am, what I feel, and who I want to be with, I am able to feel freer in other areas of my life." She said that the pretense in her life was gone. Jackie said that she had a "better sense of her true self". And that she had gained "a sense of peace." Also Jackie talked about her improved ability to accept difficulties and difficult situations. Paige Ann described her coming out as a transformative experience for her. She felt as if she were living a lie when she was married and now she has gained her own personality and been allowed to grow. In her own words Paige Ann said, "I feel like a phoenix rising from the ashes--it was such an ordeal for me to live the life I was living. I feel as if I was born again. It is like a breath of fresh air." Helen speaks of the self-knowledge and self-worth that she has gained. Also Helen explained that "I had to be twice as strong as heterosexual women because I was constantly dealing with some issue regarding my sexuality." In their own words, all four of these women spoke of the increased self-knowledge, self-esteem and ego strength that occurred as a result of their coming out process (Reid, 1995).

Helen is also proud of her ability to be a role model for younger LGBT people, while Jackie spoke of how her lesbianism has helped her become more receptive and open to people, and that being a minority has especially improved her ability to relate to and be understanding of her students.

Family of Choice

During the interviews Jackie, Helen and Laurie talked about the importance of their friendships. Jackie stated that she has made life long lesbian friends, made a new set of friends and gained community. Petrow calls this coming in to the community (1990). The lesbian subculture has been very important to Helen; she reminisced about her participation in the New York City Gay Pride March, (it celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall rebellion), and what an empowering, powerful, positive event that was for her. For Helen the Gay Pride Parade helped her reinforce her lesbian identity (Harry, 1984; Kurdek, 1988). In addition, Helen spoke about attending all lesbian events and being in the majority, and how this is a relief from other activities when lesbians are the minority. For Helen attending an event where the majority are LGBT people diminishes her feelings of isolation and alienation (Harry, 1984; Kurdek, 1988). The lesbian friends that Helen has known for 25 years are very important to her; they are women that share her history and that she still relies on and sees on a regular basis. These women are an important part of Helen's family of choice (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Kurdek, 1988; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987; Weston, 1991). Laurie talked about her lesbian friends at work, and the La Crosse, Wisconsin lesbian support network that was very supportive and important to her when she first started coming out. All of the subjects referred to the local lesbian network organization and the meaningful role it plays in their lives as a way for them to be part of the lesbian community (Gillow & Davis, 1987).

Finally, one of the most significant aspects of their coming out as reported by Laurie, Jackie and Paige Ann was that it became an avenue that led them to their soul

mates/partners. Because these women were first able to adapt to and accept their

lesbianism, and thereby, become more authentic human beings, they were able to enter into a healthy, intimate relationship with another woman.

CHAPTER 5

Analysis

The purpose of this research was to describe the coming out experience of four lesbians. These women told their stories in their own words, with some help from the author in guiding the direction of the interviews. The author examined the women's experience by comparing and contrasting their stories to previous research.

Through this research the author found out that even with the gains of gay rights and increased tolerance in today's world, the lesbians interviewed still have to cope with discrimination and all the types of homophobia on a daily basis. It seems that the discrimination and homophobia that the women faced from organized religion were their most difficult challenges. Two out the four were greatly wounded by their church's antigay policies. A second area of homophobia with which these women struggled was rejection or unacceptance of them by family members. But even facing these trials, these women are leading productive, healthy, and happy lives. They faced their own internal homophobia and now are challenging society's homophobia. They have faced a very important truth in their lives, and this truth has transformed them.

Further Research

Areas for further research include studying the coming out process from a family systems perspective. The coming out process impacts all the family members. The

experience of the whole family as a system needs to be described and discussed.

Another area for further investigation is the relationship between gender and homosexuality. The exploration of one will invariably enrich the understanding of the other. Notions about gender and sexuality are basic to human identity and profoundly affect the way in which LGBT people are treated in our society.

Also additional research could be conducted about the developmental aspect of the coming out process and its relationship to other human developmental events. How does coming out differ for women who come out at different ages? How is coming out as a developmental process different for women of other ethnicity and cultures?

Finally, the relationship between a lesbian's religion and her coming out process should be studied further. Questions like the following could be explored:

- How do religious lesbians deal with their coming out process?
- What is the experience of the coming out process like for lesbians who belong to conservative denominations? And how do they adjust?
- What is the experience of the coming out process like for lesbians who belong to moderate denominations? And how do they adjust?
- What is the experience of the coming out process like for lesbians who belong to liberal denominations? And how do they adjust?

Directions for Clinicians

It would be beneficial for clinicians who work with LGBT clients to be knowledgeable of the coming out process, to keep in mind the importance of the developmental stages of the coming out process, and to explore with their clients how

homophobia affects them and their families. Currently, there are many helpful resources and references available about the various concerns of LGBT clients, such as those in my bibliography.

Reflections by the Author

As the author, I have a special and personal interest in this study. I am lesbian, who has been involved in my coming process for 30 years. I am 46 and realized when I was 16 that I was a lesbian. I have been with my partner for close to 24 years, and we have been married for nine years. We reared two children and now have a delightful granddaughter.

My personal coming out journey has been filled with anguish, joy, shame, pride, denial and acceptance. And as long as we LGBT people are alive, our coming out journey never ends. There are always new people and new situations that come into my life and I have to decide if I should come out to them or not. I view coming out not as a process with distinct individual stages, but as similar to a horizontal spiral, with general movement forward, but at times with some backwards movement:

The Coming Out Process



Throughout a Lifetime

For example, a few years ago I and my partner were visiting two lesbian friends

who have a cabin on a small lake in northern Wisconsin. I became violently ill and had to be taken to the emergency room in a small hospital in rural community. While I was being examined, the nurse asked me information about myself. When she asked if I was married, I said no that I was single. My partner and my friends were in the room with me and they looked at me puzzled. I knew that they wondered why I did not explain that I was a lesbian and introduce my partner. To this day, I do not know why I did not tell the whole truth, but I do know that even now in my life there are still a few times when I am asked if I am married, and I do not tell my truth--I say that I am single. Unlike heterosexual people, when a stranger asks about my family or if I am married, I have to make a decision about telling my truth and coming out. As I get older, coming out and claiming my relationship and my family seems to get easier, although at times it is still hard. It seems that now in most of my life, as Urvashi Vaid said, I am "living" (1995) as I am and a significant part of my identity is lesbian.

During the process of doing this research, I became aware of the harmful impact that most of the major religions have on the LGBT community. It seems that these religious institutions that are supposed to promote love, compassion and tolerance, do the opposite. I am convinced that LGBT people are denied their human and civil rights because of religious organizations that are heterosexist and homophobic. Conservative legislators will continue to use the antigay teaching of the churches to deny the gay community their human rights. I doubt that the laws will change until the churches change. I continue to hope that many LGBT people will have transformative experiences in their lives so that they have the strength and courage to speak out and take action against homophobia, which hurts us all.

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APPENDIX A

Letter Describing Research

(Date)

Name of Interviewee

Address of Interviewee

Dear _____,

I am interested in gaining an understanding of lesbians' experience of the coming-out process. The information I obtain will be used in my Masters Thesis for completion of my Marriage and Family Therapy Degree. My interest in this topic comes for both personal experience and professional experience with others.

I would like to briefly describe what I am looking for and the nature of my research. When we meet, I would like you to tell me about your coming out experience. Do not worry about the way in which you tell your story. There is no right or wrong way of telling you story, just tell it as it comes to mind. I am particularly interested in hearing about your thoughts and feelings during this experience.

If you have time before our first meeting, I would appreciate if you would reflect upon your experience and jot down any recollections that come to mind. I look forward to listening to your coming-out story. Thank you for being willing to share a very personal part of your life with me.

Sincerely,

Carol Schumacher

APPENDIX B

Letter of Consent

Project Title: The Transformative Aspect of the "Coming Out" Process of Lesbians and Their Families.

Principle Researcher: Carol Schumacher, University of Wisconsin - Stout, Master of Science Degree in Marriage and Family Therapy Student.

Research Participant:

I, _____, voluntarily consent to participate in an interview with Carol Schumacher, a graduate student in the department of Marriage and Family Therapy at University of Wisconsin - Stout. The purpose of the study has been explained to me and I understand that every effort will be made to remove all identifying information. I agree to allow the interview to be tape recorded with the understanding that the tapes will be erased when the research project is completed. I also understand that I may refuse continued participation at any point during research project and that my right to withdraw from participation will be respected. I am aware that if I have any concerns, as a result of the interviewing process, a referral to counseling will be available.

Participant Signature

Date

Witness

Note: Questions or concerns about participation in the research or subsequent complaints should be addressed first to the researcher or research advisor and second to Dr. Ted Knous, Chair, UW-Stout Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research, 410 BH, UW-Stout, Menomonie, WI, 54751, phone (715) 232-1126.

APPENDIX C

Interview Questions

- How old were you when you realized you were a lesbian?
- What was that experience like for you?
- How did you feel?

- Who did you first tell that you were a lesbian?
- What was their reaction?
- What was your experience of her/his reaction?

- Who in your family of origin did you tell first?
- What was that experience like for you?
- What was their reaction?
- What was your experience of her/his reaction?

- Are you out to your parents?
- When did you come out to your parents?
- What was their reaction?
- What was your experience of their reactions?
- What do they think of your lesbianism now?

- If you have children, are you out to your children?
- What was that like for you?
- What were their reactions?
- What was your experience of their reaction?
- What do they think of your lesbianism now?

- Who else in your family knows?
- Did you come out to them?
- If you didn't, how do they know?

- Are you out at work?
- How has that experience been for you?

- How did you change by coming out?
- What changes in your life were cause by coming out?
- What was lost?
- What was gained?

- What were your turning points or milestones during your coming out journey?

- Do you have any comment on what this interview has been like for you?

APPENDIX D

Transcript of the Interviews

Laurie

Laurie knew that she was attracted to other girls in grade school, at about 10 or 11 years old. She had a best friend named Julia. All of her best friends were girls. Laurie told Julia that she wanted to buy a house and live with her when she was 13 years old. That was when she verbalized and thought that she was a lesbian. Laurie knew what a homosexual when she was eight. Julia was attracted to boys and Julia could not handle Laurie's attraction to her. So, Laurie knew that she could not tell anyone and that she should start acting like she was attracted to boys like the other girls. Laurie didn't tell anyone she until 34 years old; she first told her best friend. After that she started to get ready for a change. Laurie got divorced and told her children.

Her children

Laurie told her son, five, in developmental terms that he could understand and told her daughter, who was eight. Laurie reports that the children are fine with her lesbianism. The kids live with their father, because she knew that with starting a new job, going to school, moving would be very hard for her and the children.

Family

She is out to everyone including friends and family. However, Laurie came out to

her mother last. Started to come out to people in the summer when she was 37 years old and came out to her family of origin in January when she was 38 years old. Laurie is from a small town of 3000 people who are “staunch” German. Her brother understood and then he got kind of joking about it. Her brother is older than Laurie. It seems that her understands more than Laurie thought he would.

Her mother

Laurie felt that she had to tell her mother because her mother wanted to know why Laurie let her ex-husband take advantage of her. During their divorce Laurie felt that she should let her ex-husband have what he wanted because she was gay. Initially, her mother didn't respond to Laurie's disclosure. Eventually, her mother had much information about homosexuality. She asked Laurie if she abused children and if she had orgies that abused children, then she asked many other questions—is this just a phase, are you strange? Are you sick? Is this because of the way I raised you? Since the questions her mother has “mellowed out.” But, her mother is a little upset with Laurie, because Laurie moved. However, her mom does like Laurie's partner Pat. Laurie's mom respected her brother, so Laurie would talk to her brother and then her brother would talk to mom. Laurie's mom from a family of 11 children. Mother is afraid that her family will find out that Laurie is a lesbian. Laurie's family is Lutheran (German and Dutch). Laurie's mom is in the nursing home at this time and is very sick. Her mother blames Laurie for not being there while she is sick in the nursing home. Laurie misses her mom. Her mother won't talk to her now. Laurie is out to brother's first wife and her nieces. They know Pat.

Friends

All of Laurie's friends know that she is a lesbian. "I lived for so long in that tiny little closet, in that tiny little town that I cannot go back. I have no more time for anymore deception." Neighbors all know. The local Deputy Sheriff and the pharmacist know.

Work

Laurie is out at work and it is not a problem. She has pictures of Pat on her desk and when asked who that is, Laurie says that is her wife. They call each other their wives. Occasionally Laurie refers to Pat as her husband, (jokingly when Pat is hanging mini-blinds and has her power drill out).

Gains

Since Laurie has come out she feels that she can be more honest about who she is and what she feels and who she wants to be with, and is able to feel freer in other areas of her life. She doesn't feel the pressure to conform all the time. Laurie doesn't have to dress like other people, and she is not out to impress anyone. She says that the pretense is gone. Sometimes Laurie feels a little isolated. She has gotten some hate e-mail, maintains a lesbian web site. She is doing what she feels she needs to do to be happy. And she would like to take Pat's name.

Laurie said that she used to be easily intimidated and would go out of her way to

please people. She was unhappy because she wanted others to accept her because she didn't accept herself. Now her life is like walking on shifting sands and her perspective is always reshaped.

Loss issues

Laurie feels that some faucets of relationships have been lost. People are little more restrained around her. Before Laurie came out people felt free to say anything around her, but since she came out, she feels that people don't feel comfortable using the words lesbian or gay, because they are afraid they might offend her. Before Laurie came out she had a difficult time saying the words "lesbian or dyke." She talked to her friends about being a lesbian. Laurie has lost the freedom of fitting in and everyone knowing where you fit. Before she came out, she conformed into a very traditional conservative box and she is no longer in that box. Even at work if someone asked her who was in the picture on her desk—she wouldn't hesitate say it was her wife, and then deal with their feelings later.

Jackie

Jackie is 37 years old and realized that she was a lesbian at age 19. She always had crushes on female teachers. Jackie always wanted to be a teacher and at first she thought that was the attraction. In college was very attracted to a couple of different teachers. One in particular, Jackie always wanted to be around, but Jackie thought that was because this woman was such a great teacher. All during her growing up she was in a traditional boyfriend/girlfriend situation. Dating was fine, because everyone was doing it. Jackie met a man that she loved dearly. She met him when she was 17 years old and they dated for a number of years. When they were physical, she would have no response, he didn't turn her on. Jackie thought that was very odd. Also during this time, Jackie met a woman that she was very attracted to when she was 20 and engaged to this man. Jackie kept postponing the marriage date, but thought that she should get married, "it was very romantic." Jackie realized that she was attracted to this woman and that she was a homosexual when she was driving over a bridge. The bridge is symbolic of change and leaving one life to another. Jackie felt tremendous guilt because they were both Catholic. Homosexuality is very taboo according to the Catholic religion. Jackie wondered what this experience meant to both of them, and wondered if the experience meant that they were in a relationship. Jackie talked to Deb and decided that they would try it as a relationship, because they were very happy. They felt guilty, but at the same time very excited. After her first experience, Jackie went to the library and did research about homosexuality. Jackie knew the exact date that she became involved with Deb because it

was during "the End Party" at school. For her this was also a symbol of the end of innocence, and naivete, end of heterosexual life, end of her relationship with Mike, and the end of her adherence to the Catholic faith. Jackie felt frightened but excited. She had to tell Mike and that was difficult. He wanted to get back together. But she had to be true to herself and break the relationship. Jackie felt good about it because everything (it explained her being attracted to woman) came together, but she has also had to deal with Catholic guilt for 18 years. Jackie continues to go against doctrine--she goes to communion. Jackie is still struggling with the religion issues. She has started to attend different church. Jackie is currently attending a Lutheran church that is Reconciled in Christ, which is welcoming to lesbians and gays.

Friends

Jackie asked her good friend, Linda, if Linda thought that she was a homosexual. Linda thought that Jackie might be. Linda was very supportive, open and listened. They are still friends today. Linda wasn't shocked and it seemed to make sense to her. Jackie asked what it would do their relationship. Linda said that it would not affect their relationship. Jackie noted that the perception of others might not shift as much as our own perceptions shift.

Jackie's Perception

For years Jackie felt that her lesbianism had defined her, because she had known this whole other life of being a heterosexual, so she had a whole new identity, which she didn't know where she was going to go with it and she was young. She worried about

what it would do to her relationship with others.

Parents/Family

Jackie just told her mother 3 years ago. It took her 3 days to tell her mother. Her dad doesn't know. Her parents still together, but they live pretty separate lives. Jackie's mother thought that Jackie was going to tell her some horrifying thing, so she was relieved. Her mother asked Jackie who she had been involved with. Her mother wasn't surprised. Jackie was very, very nervous and it was very traumatic for her to tell her mother. Self disclosure is hard for Jackie, but especially hard for her with this topic because she was worried that she would be rejected, and she was rejected by some people. Her dad doesn't know. She doesn't really know if her father knows or not, but she has not told him anything. Both of her grandmothers would thank her partner for loving her and taking care of Jackie, although Jackie feels that her grandmothers have no sense of what is going on. Jackie and her partner, Paige Ann, go home to both families for the holidays and it is perfectly OK. Paige Ann's mother thanks Jackie for taking care of Paige Ann. Jackie hasn't told her brother and sister-in-law, but sometimes she thinks he knows, but recently he talked to her about his getting married, but her choosing the academic career route. Her brother treats Paige Anna very well. Jackie and her brother are ten months apart in age. She has always loved her brother. When Jackie and Paige Ann visit him, they stay in "Jackie and Paige Anna's room"

Paige Anna has children, two grown daughters. One of Paige Anna's daughter accepts Jackie and sends her mother day cards. The other daughter is a little more distant, but accepts Jackie. Jackie promised Paige Anna that she would watch over her daughters

if Paige Anna dies. Although Jackie does not act like a mother, because there is not much of an age difference between Jackie and her partner's children. Paige Anna's son-in-law doesn't know what to think of or where to place Jackie. There are no other gay people in Jill's family that Jill knows.

Work

Jackie is out at her current job, she teaches at the local university. However, she was only out to a few people at her last teaching job. She taught at a Catholic college at 8 years, and it was a home base for the nuns. Only out to a couple of lay people. Jackie was seen as the "good Catholic woman" who was single and educated, was service orientated did a lot for the community and others. Jackie feels that it was reasonable for her to be fearful.

Jackie is a very visible administrator and when she arrived, she wanted to keep a very low profile and figure things out. However, one of the first colleagues Jackie met talked about the local lesbian network. Through this colleague Jackie met many other lesbians and she was being introduced as "new lesbian on campus." Most lesbian and some straight people on campus know that Jackie is a lesbian.

Neighbors

Jackie and Paige Ann are very accepted in their neighborhood. They are invited to parties and borrow tools from neighbors. No neighbor has ever said anything. Jackie assumes that they know that Jackie and Paige Anna are married, because they wear their matching wedding rings. It is an unusual neighborhood because everyone is heterosexual

and still married to their spouses.

Losses

- Loss of the normal heterosexual privilege of being married in front of people,
- Loss her adherence to the Catholic dogma, not her faith,
- Loss of freedom of speech, because she is very careful when talking to heterosexuals when she doesn't want to come out and,
- Loss of friends.

Gains

- She gained a better of her true self.
- She gained a sense of peace.
- She is able to accept difficulties and difficult situations.
- Being a lesbian made her more open and receptive to people and that has especially helped her relate to students.
- She has made a new set of friends, life long friends and gained community.
- It has been a good positive journey for Jackie.
- Coming out allowed Jackie to find her soul mate.

Paige Ann

Paige Ann is 54 years old. Her dad was a successful mortician and her family was very socially prominent. Paige Ann had a strong, powerful grandmother, who the family refer to a “the general.” And the message that grandmother gave the family was that members should not do anything to embarrass the family and being gay was not OK. Paige Ann had an indication that she was gay in junior high, that was when she was 12 or 13, although she chose to live as a heterosexual. Paige Ann didn’t come out until she met Jackie and Jackie had to drag it out of her. Jackie and Paige Ann golfed together and Jackie came out to Paige Ann. It took Paige Ann a while to respond by explaining that she loved Jackie. Jackie and Paige Ann were friends for a long time before they disclosed that they loved each other (Paige Ann was 42).

Children and Family

Paige Ann has come out to both of her children. Janie is 26. Mary is 28. Mary is going to have a child soon, so Paige Ann will be a grandmother. Mary is an engineer and not a really warm person. Paige Ann told Janie first. Janie is emotional, sensitive. Janie

is a neonatal intensive care nurse. Paige Ann and Jackie were together a year and a half or two before she told Janie. Janie knew before Paige Ann told her. Janie considers Jackie as her step-mother. Janie convinced Paige Ann to tell her other daughter Mary. Mary's only response was "I know". It was hard for Paige Ann to come out to her daughters. Coming out made her relationship with Janie closer. Paige Ann told two very close friends, whose responses were that they thought so and that it wasn't a big deal. Paige Ann started to process her lesbianism prior to Stonewall and gay liberation. At that time there were hardly any words and no support for being a lesbian. Paige Ann was married for 25 years to a Lutheran minister and hated every minute of living in the parish. She had her own opinions and he was not very hard working and she was very hard working. Paige Ann did much of his ministerial work. She knew that she was a lesbian during her whole marriage to her husband, but Paige Ann felt that this is what she chose and that she had a responsibility to her children. Paige Ann knew when her kids were in 5th and 6th grade that she wanted out of the marriage. So, she stuck it out until Janie was in college. Paige felt as if she did what he wanted, but he never did anything that she wanted to do.

Paige was one of Jackie's students and then after the class ended; they became friends. They were friends for a year and half before they came involved. Paige Ann knew when she met Jackie that she met someone that she could have a life with and be who she was.

Paige Ann is accepted by Jackie's family. Jackie's mother knows. Paige Ann does not know if Jackie's father knows. She suspects that Jackie's brother and his wife know. Paige Ann's father and sister are dead. Paige Ann's mother is alive. She was the first

person in her family to get a divorce. She doesn't know if her mother knows or not and Paige Ann struggles with that. Her mother does like Jackie. Paige Ann's mother has made some comments. Paige Ann suspects that her sister knew, but she didn't say anything. She doesn't think that anyone in her family would ask.

Work

Paige Ann suspects that there are several lesbians in the non-profit organization where she works. She thinks that her boss knows and does think that it bothers him. Paige Ann talks about buying a house and cabin with Jackie to her supervisor. In addition, there was not a problem when Paige Ann requested time off to go to Jackie's grandmother funeral.

Neighbors

The neighbors accept Paige Ann and Jackie. However, Paige Ann and Jackie don't stand out in the back yard holding hands. And if the neighbors do think they are lesbians, Paige Ann hopes that they are good role models. They try to be good neighbors (for example, on hot days they leave a door unlocked so that the neighbor woman and her kids can use their pool).

Religion

They currently attend a Reconciled and Open Lutheran church. At one the first meetings with the minister, they came out, because they wanted to attend the church as a couple and be active as a couple. The minister was very welcoming. However, Jackie is

still struggling with leaving the Catholic Church.

Gains

For Paige Ann it was like the phoenix rising from the ashes, it was such an ordeal for her to live the life she was living, like being born again, like a breathe of fresh air. Paige Ann doesn't view her coming out as a loss. It is much more a transformative experience for her, for her starting a whole new life. Paige Ann feels that at her age she is seen as more a whole person. Paige Ann felt like she was living a lie. Paige Ann knew that she wasn't attracted to husband either emotionally or physically. She gained her own personality and been allowed to grow.

Her relationship with Jackie

They complement each other, and they like spending time together. They are attuned to each other, a good match, dependent on each other, and soul mates.

Helen

Helen remembers that when she was six years old, she was going to move and all the kids in the neighborhood were upset because she was seen as a boy. And, if she moved there would only be one other boy left. Helen was always attracted to girls when she went on sleep over-nights. When Helen was 16 and in high school, knew other gay high schoolers. The gay high school students socialized and played softball together. Although no one talked about being lesbians even when two of the young women dated. This was in 1970. Helen knew older lesbians because she had gotten on a traveling softball team, however; these women never talked about it. Helen looked towards athletes as women who might be gay. Helen did not like the word lesbian, but she knew she was gay. She tried to talk to an older adult lesbian, but she was given the cold

shoulder. Helen first talked about being a lesbian to friends when she was 18 years old, at a party, and probably after drinking. At the time, one of the primary ways to meet other young lesbians was through sports and athletics, so Helen studied physical education. Helen's first significant lover was when she was 19 years old, a woman named Sue. Sue Broke up with Helen, and then she married a man.

Family

Helen came out to her sisters first, then told her younger brother. Both her sisters were fairly supportive, her sister Marie had lots of gay male friends and her younger brother didn't seem to mind (perhaps he was too young).

Helen came out to her dad when she was 25 after drinking quite a bit. She was closer to dad than to her mother. During this time, Helen was in a bad relationship and had written a will, which her parents found and were worried that it might be an indication that she might commit suicide. So, one night the family did an intervention, during this Helen came out to her mother. Helen was glad she finally came out because it was so difficult to lead a double life. Being a lesbian is hard for Helen because her mother told her about three years ago that she doesn't think its right, however, her mother accepts Helen. This is hard for Helen. Helen's mother is a devout Catholic, while her father is more accepting. He converted to Catholicism, so is not such a devout Catholic—was a Lutheran before became a Catholic. It is easier for her parents if she isn't in a relationship. Helen has a cousin that is a lesbian, who she doesn't really know. Helen told one cousin and she figures that other relatives know. Helen said that her sisters Marie and Beth think its their right and privilege to tell anyone that Helen is a

lesbian. Helen has told them it is not OK and sometimes this makes her angry and drives her crazy.

Work

Helen refuses to come out at work, because she teaches a parochial high school and is worried that if the school administration finds out that she is a lesbian; she is sure that she will be fired. She tries to never be alone with a student, never stays in the locker room with the young women, never gives a student a ride home, unless it is an emergency.

Coming out process

She knew that she was attracted to the same-sex when she was 15 or 16. It took Helen until she was 35 years old to feel like she really liked herself. She went through a time when Helen felt much more male than female. For sometime Helen felt more male than female and thought about changing sexes, but then thought if she switch sexes, she would still want to date women, so why bother.

Grief issues

- For older lesbians it's more difficult to find other women to date.
- Being a lesbian took a heavy toll on Helen—she felt depressed all the time and she feels guilty being in a relationship.
- She feels guilty if she tries to get out of bad relationship
- Helen felt like a failure after her last relationship

- It took a long time for Helen to feel that her lesbianism is OK, it took until she was 35.
- The Catholic Church denies Helen's gayness, which is part of her core self. Helen has seen how hard it is for the younger LGB students that she has taught.

Gains

- That Helen is able to be a role model for the younger LGB students.
- When she marched in the NY City Gay Pride Parade, the 25th anniversary of Stonewall
- When she goes to some all lesbian activity, where lesbians are the majority.
- A lesbian has to be twice as strong, because she is constantly dealing with some issue regarding your sexuality, family that comes up in your life.
- Helen has lesbian friends that she has known for 25 years that she can call up and talk to.

Religion

Helen was raised a Catholic. She has gone to Methodist, Lutheran, Unitarian Universalist, Goddess churches. She feels most connected when she is in a natural setting. Told her mother that she was going to join another church, her mother responded that she couldn't because she has Catholicism is part of her heredity.

Transgender

Helen gets angry when she gets called "sir." She realizes that she is androgynous,

and fairly transgender looking.