A Rose By Any Other Name: An Examination of Rural Lesbian Identities in the Upper Midwest

Kevin W. Martin

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A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME:
AN EXAMINATION OF RURAL LESBIAN IDENTITIES IN THE UPPER MIDWEST

by

Kevin W. Martin
Bachelor of Arts, Mississippi State University, 2003

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of the
University of North Dakota
in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of
Master of Arts

Grand Forks, North Dakota
August
2009
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To all the "Secret Sisters," you are not alone!
This thesis examines the issue of lesbian identity presentation in the rural upper Midwest. The study focuses on how women in this area present themselves as lesbians. This was not expected to be a static process. On the contrary, recent developments in the sociological research of this topic have revealed that it is fluidic. Moreover, when applying the most recent models of expression, different lesbian identities are discernable. Further, this process may be highly affected by symbolic interaction.

The data for this project were collected as two snapshots in time: 1995-97 and 2008. Women were recruited through a snowball sample technique to report on their activities, feelings, outness, and other topics. There were 74 total respondents.

The data analysis revealed important relationships between outness, specific LGBT activities, personal feelings about being lesbian, and commitment to the lesbian label. Further, a pattern emerged that suggests a public versus private dichotomy in respondents' expressions of lesbianism. Some of the most significant correlations emerged between outness, feelings about being lesbian, and commitment to the lesbian label. Additionally, attending a gay/lesbian event and feelings were also significantly correlated.

As a result of the findings, a new model of lesbian identities made up of three ideal types, the super symbol, the shape shifter, and the secret sister, is proposed.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

What factors influence the presentation and maintenance of a lesbian identity for women in rural areas? How is a lesbian identity shown to others? Do these identities change over time? These questions have had transitory address in the literature of social sciences. The early research on homosexual identity development focused on stage models of “coming out,” which were equated with this form of identity (Altman, 1971; Cass, 1979; Cass, 1984; Chapman and Brannock, 1987; Coleman, 1982; Minton and McDonald, 1984; Plummer, 1975; Shafer, 1976; and Troiden, 1988). These models proposed a linear progression of identity development that resulted in a final, stable, and integrated homosexual identity. Many of these models expected individuals to proceed in one of two ways. The first was through a straight-line linear process. The second was a process where some individuals would change their identity presentation at different rates and undergo some of the steps of these processes at different times than others. These researches also suggested that the stages could be completed out of sequence or that some individuals could experience multiple stages at the same time. No matter how they were experienced, these models still held the same goal: an integrated homosexual identity.

The scholars who engaged in this area of early research are quite numerous and some works are particularly important. For instance, Altman (1971) argued for the
reorientation of research that defined homosexuality as deviance or as an illness to an
examination of the social construction of homosexuality. As he put it, "the very concept
of homosexuality is a social one, and one cannot understand the homosexual experience
without recognizing the extent to which we have developed a certain identity and
behavior derived from social norms" (Altman 1971: 2). This work encouraged a new
wave of social research that continues today.

Cass (1979) developed a six-stage model based on her observations as a clinical
psychologist. The underlying basis for her model was the attempt of the individual to
develop his or her identity while simultaneously squaring it with social perceptions of
behavior, social attitudes, and other forms of identity. Where there is a certain level of
substantiation for this model, although there are also many critics. Rust (1993) for
instance cites the work of Cass (1979; 1990), Coleman (1982), and McDonald (1982), but
argues,

Nevertheless, these theorists present linear, stage sequential models of
coming out, revealing their assumption that coming out is fundamentally a
linear and orderly process. Normal and expected as they are, complexities
like those that sequential disorder and foreclosure are understood as
deviations from the underlying linear process of coming out (p. 53).

Troiden (1988) is one of the first researchers to examine and base a stage model
on symbolic interactionism. After reviewing the extant stage models and defining them
as deficient, he developed his own model. Troiden's work allowed for the transition
between stages and individuals could move back and forth through the process of identity
development. Yet he still developed averages of his respondents' ages at different stages,
thus he still suggested linear component to his proposed process and calling for an end
identity achievement (Eliason 1996: 48).
A key limitation of the models presented has been their exclusion of women. However, there were some researchers who included lesbians with gay males in their research or who specifically attempted to tackle the process of lesbian identity development as well as the linearity of models. Like their colleagues, these individuals used various theories and modular designs to examine the issue. Ponse (1978) was one of the earliest theorists to exclusively examine lesbian identity. Like Troiden (1988), she argued that women may possess some of the elements or components of the identity, such as having come out to certain individuals and presented their presentation of a lesbian label in public. However, they do not possess them all that they may occur at different points in one’s life. Kitzinger (1987) challenged the stage and final destination models of early researchers and argued that there could be no specific path to a lesbian identity. She was among those who believe that identity is fluid and based on a person’s social interactions and socialization. Based on her interviews with lesbians she developed a five-type classification of lesbian identity (Eliason 1996: 45-47).

More recent models and research into homosexual identity development have been dominated by the examination of gay male experiences. The work of Brekhus (2003), Trump and Wallace (2006), and Hesp (2007) are among the newest attempts to understand gay identity. These works have a central theme, the construction of a multi-tiered system of ideal types into which identity can be classified. Hesp (2007) and Trump and Wallace (2006) focus on gay males in fraternity life. They present typologies of coping strategies (coming out) that are used by gay and bisexual fraternity members to manage their sexuality while being members of a highly hegemonic masculine subculture. They posit that these coping strategies lead to an end identity. Trump and
Wallace’s (2006) nine-component typology was modified by Hesp (2007) who created a three-tier system that included avoidance, passing, and covering. For Trump and Wallace (2006), these categories contained three to four separate subcategories based on an individual’s behaviors, similar to that of Kitzinger (1987). However, the model seems to suggest that identity is of a transitional nature and not all men are expected to progress from one identity to another. This is reminiscent of the work of Troiden (1988). Further, not all men are expected to reach the final goal of a stable, integrated homosexual identity. And in this, we see the beginnings of a non-goal oriented model.

One fluidic and non-goal oriented theoretical model that has been developed recently, is that of Brekhus (2003). He proposed a model that includes three ideal types of identity—peacocks (lifestylers), char(leons (commuters), and centaurs (integrators). These types can be used, he argues, to examine any subcultural group. Brekhus (2003) states, the expression of identity is governed by the intensity, duration, and dominance of the identifier. Each of the three ideal types has a prescribed level of intensity, duration, and dominance. However, there are no set patterns to presentation of these different identity types. Moreover, there is no end type that is preferred over the others. Brekhus (2003) argues that many of the individuals who belong to the chameleon and centaur categories base their identities and expressions on the peacocks. Brekhus (2003) also adds to the literature when he makes the case for conducting research outside urban settings,

a colleague of mine who proposed studying lesbian life in the Midwest had her funding proposal rejected by one reviewer who argued that the Midwest wasn’t a good location for studying homosexuality: the reviewer suggested my colleague study lesbians on the coasts instead (p. 3).
While more research has been done on the LGBT community in urban areas than anywhere else. Brekhus (2003) argues that rural individuals are not less gay than their urban cousins. He notes that his three-component ideal type framework would never have developed had he not examined suburban gay men. It is clear from Brekhus's (2003) work that symbolic interaction is the key to examining the development of LGBT identity.

Symbolic interaction is inherently important to understanding how this process of identity development occurs. On a more meso-level, Stryker (1968) presents a set of postulates that is not unlike Brekhus's (2003) concepts of dominance, duration, and intensity. Stryker (1968) argues that commitment to an identity, coupled with salience, and role performance gears individuals to interaction differently in different circumstances presenting different identities at different times and spaces (p.558). Thus, a woman who might present a lesbian identity when interacting with other lesbians may change her identity presentation based on its importance, level of commitment, and roles such as employer or neighbor.

Individuals' perceptions and the reactions of those with whom they interact are not the only important factors in understanding lesbian identity presentation. Again, the setting, as Brekhus (2003) noted, is also of concern. To understand the expression of identity by rural lesbians requires an understanding of the environment in which it occurs. Indeed, much of the South, Midwest, and Southwest, the upper Midwest is more conservative and less accepting of alternative sexualities (Loftus 2001). The question is, therefore, how this affects identity. At the time this thesis was written, there was a landmark decision by the Iowa Supreme Court that declared denying lesbian and gay
individuals the right to marry was unconstitutional. In 2009, the North Dakota State House of Representatives denied the passage of a bill that would have added sexual orientation and gender identity to the state’s non-discrimination policy. However, in June 2009, the North Dakota State Board of Higher Education made it illegal to discriminate based on sexual orientation on any of the State’s campuses. Thus, rural lesbians have gained more rights within the educated urban areas of the state. However, state leadership is still not protecting individuals in respect to job security and other forms of discrimination.

Self-identified lesbians who live in rural communities provided the data for this research project. This area is expected to be of a more conservative or hegemonic masculine than larger suburban and urban areas of the country. This results from the history of conservative norms and values. An example of the atmosphere in one rural community can be found in Tiemann’s (2006) work. In her study of letters to the editor that were published after a lesbian couple announced their commitment ceremony on the celebration page in the local newspaper, she found

the letters reveal something about rural versus urban sensibilities in that relatively more urban Grand Forks residents were less likely to write negative letters than their counterparts from neighboring small towns (p. 216).

Since these rural areas continue to hold more “traditional” and hegemonic ideas of sex, sexuality, relationships, and gender it is logical to expect that rural areas will be less tolerant of what they may consider a violation of deeply held norms and values. Since models of identity development have focused primarily on residents of urban areas, research on those who reside in rural areas is important.
It is also important to develop an understanding of what affects the women of this area and how they present their lesbian identity. Thus, this study examines four basic questions. How do the woman's feelings about being a lesbian affect her outness? Second, how do the woman's feelings about being lesbian affect her involvement in GLBT community activities? Third, how does her commitment to being lesbian affect her outness, and fourth how does it affect her community activity involvement?

SUMMARY

The importance of understanding lesbian identities and their development, especially in this rural context, cannot be overstated. In this chapter, I have briefly reviewed the literature on identity development, described the flaws with stage models, and made a case for examining how women in rural communities negotiate their identities as lesbians.

In addition to this introduction, this thesis contains five chapters. Chapter Two examines the existent literature and the theoretical perspectives used in this thesis. Chapter Three describes the method of data collection, operationalization of key variables, the research instrument, description of the sample, statistical methods employed, and limitations and delimitations of the study. Chapter Four focuses on the data analysis results. Finally, Chapter Five provides a discussion of the major findings and their implications, and suggestions for further research.
CHAPTER 2
THEORY AND LITERATURE

Early social research concerning homosexual identity development focused primarily on the process of coming out (Altman, 1971; Cass, 1979; Cass, 1984; Chapman and Brannock, 1987; Coleman, 1982; Minton and McDonald, 1984; Plummer, 1975; Shafer, 1976; and Troiden, 1988). Through this coming out process, the individual was argued to develop a positive self image and identity. Early theorists contended there was a linear progression that moved from realizing one’s same-sex attractions to being fully out and accepting of the identity as gay or lesbian.

LGBT Identity

Research in the general area of LGBT identity occurred since the Stonewall Riots of 1969. The research most notably linked to LGBT identity is that of Vivian Cass (1979) and her stage model of lesbian identity development. Her model begins with what she called the Identity Confusion stage. The man/woman first experiences conscious same-sex feelings, which then creates confusion for the man/woman. The second stage is Identity Comparison. This is similar to Cooley's (1902) Looking Glass Self or Mead’s (1964) Generalized Other. It involves the individual comparing him/herself to those with a homosexual identity or the socially understood idea of it. In the third stage, the individual gives the homosexual label a “test drive.” Identity Acceptance or “Coming Out” is the fourth stage. This stage is primarily where the man/woman has accepted that
he/she is gay/lesbian and begins to express this to her friends, family, and so forth. In the fifth stage, Identity Pride, the man/woman begins to attempt to give his/her new identity a positive association. This is not unlike Tajfel's (1974) process of social identity in which the individual rejects the social definition of his/her identity and attempts to downplay or even reverse negative social labels. Finally, Identity Synthesis occurs when the individual reaches the ultimate goal of a stable and integrated homosexual identity (Eliason 1996: 40-42). However, Cass (1984) later argued, "There is no such thing as a single homosexual identity. Rather its nature may vary from person to person, from situation to situation, and period to period" (p.111). Thus while she believed in a process of linear development her later work began to point to a more fluidic model of development.

Following Cass's (1979) work, the next most notable development in the research of homosexual identity development occurred with Eli Coleman. Coleman (1982) notes the contributions of Cass (1979), Dank (1971), Lee (1977), and Plummer (1975) who had proposed identity development as the process of stages. However, h. proposed a model that did not require the completion of a lock-step stage-by-stage process. As he put it, "...this model does not assume that every individual follows each stage and naturally evolves through all" (1982: 32). However, he believed that individuals who did not progress to the desired end of an integrated identity would experience great mental distress and the inability to effectively assimilate into the dominant culture. Coleman divided his model into six stages of development that included pre-coming out, coming out, exploration, first relationships, and identity integration and argued that any of these stages could be engaged in simultaneously.
Acknowledging other research in the area, he recognized that not all individuals progressed through these stages in the same way. Like Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin's (1948) work on sexual orientation he noted that identity could be viewed on a continuum. Therefore, the model is not perfect and does not try to explain completely the entire process of identity formation. Rather it gives the therapist, as this work was meant primarily for psychologists and psychotherapists, a guide to assist individuals in therapy toward the ultimate goal of identity integration (Coleman 1982: 40). Even in this early research, the process of identity development as a fluid and dynamic process was recognized.

Troiden (1988) based his identity model on three assumptions. First, that we are born without an inherent sexual identity; sexual identity initially is fluid and diverse. Second, society/cultural values begin to shape sexual desire and preference. Third, social norms and sanctions are learned throughout socialization. Troiden's (1988) assumption was that adopting a homosexual identity is usually a process of resocialization in early or mid adulthood. He developed from this assumption a four-stage model containing categories similar to previous presented models. The first stage is Sensitization, or the individual's first conscious thoughts. Second is Confusion, which involves exploration of homosexuality and its meanings. The third is Identity Assumption or "Coming Out." Again, this stage is a primary stage in which the individual accepts their gay/lesbian identity and begins expressing it to friends and family and others. The fourth stage is Commitment, or the final product of a stable identity. Unlike other researchers, he argued that individuals can transition back and forth through these stages, and individuals may remain in a particular stage. However, he did assign age categories to the stages and
called the stages "universal." Troiden (1988) states that in stage one many individuals indicated having ideas that they were different when they were in elementary school. For stage two, the average age for a probable homosexual identity developing was 17 for men and 18 for women. In stage 3, the average age for first same sex sexual experience for men is 13 and for women is 14 to 16. For stage four, the average age of self-definitions occurred at 21 to 23 for lesbians and 19 to 21 for men. Stage Five has no specific age attached. Thus Troiden (1988), perhaps inadvertently, suggested this process has a final destination or result (Eliason 1996: 47-50).

Lesbian Identity Development

In 1976, Shafer examined the problems and processes that lesbians encountered while developing their identities. Based on the data she collected, she believed that most lesbians have known about their differences since childhood or the beginning of puberty. She argued that the socialization process for young adults is partly responsible for the slower transition for lesbians, as opposed to gay men, to an acceptance of their lesbianism. Further, she contended that this process is part of the reason that lesbian women either identify more readily with bisexuals or hide their sexuality. This, she stated, may also be a result of the use of male relationships to provide for validation when no lesbian relationship is possible or available (Shafer 1976: 56-57). Shafer also believed that social context and norms play an important role in the individual lesbian's acceptance of her sexuality, engaging in public displays and even revealing her sexual orientation to her family and friends (p.60-67).

Ponse (1978) developed a five part elemental model of lesbian identity development. These five parts were feelings or desires, understanding of lesbianism,
assumption of a lesbian identity, lesbian association, and having a relationship, or sex, with another woman. This was one of the first published pieces that included women. Based on this model, Ponse developed four identities: lesbian identity and activity; lesbian identity with bisexual, heterosexual, or celibate activity; bisexual identity with lesbian activity; and heterosexual identity with lesbian activity. Ponse (1978) argued that because of the rigid nature of cultural definitions of sex, gender, and sexual identity that homosexuality results from heterosexism based on the inversion model. The inversion model originally developed by Tripp (1975) states that the reversal of roles for men and women when involved in homosexual relationships is a direct result of the attempt of society to establish a heterosexual order to life. Thus, all lesbians must have male characteristics because they have chosen a woman to be their sexual partner. They clearly cannot possess feminine traits because if they did they would choose a male partner (Ponse 1978: 29-30).

In his critique of the literature, McDonald (1982) argued that the many ways identity development has been studied has lead to a linear progression that ends in a fully accepted and well-adjusted gay or lesbian identity. This tends to lead to a linear progression that is expected to end in a fully accepted and adjusted identity. However, in his research he notes discrepancies in these models of pure linearity and finds that many of the respondents did not fit this profile. Many respondents fluctuated throughout the process of determining their true identity and accepting it. McDonald’s (1982) most important observation however is,

As a rite of passage, coming out takes place in an antihomosexual environment where institutional and social support systems are absent. What coming out ultimately symbolizes is the individual’s response to social stigmatization in a struggle to redefine him/herself against a
background of antihomosexual prejudice and discrimination. Only with reconstruction of social conditions and attitudes will individuals experience, with pride and dignity, an integration of their feelings, behavior, and identity into a unified and positive self concept (p. 58).

Based on her interviews with lesbians, Kitzinger (1987) developed a five-type classification of lesbian identity. These identities were based on the individual’s personal understandings and beliefs concerning her identity. The first group was labeled “feminism as personal fulfillment.” This group had been married and believed that they had eventually found themselves and would never return to heterosexuality. Second, the group labeled “in love with a person, not a gender.” These women disliked the label lesbian. They primarily described their activities as having fallen in love with a person and they did not exclude relationships with men in the future. The third group was characterized, as “sex is only a small part of identity.” These women did not like the lesbian label, but believed they had always been lesbian. Fourth, were “political lesbians” that said they had become lesbians because of society or their adoption of a feminist ideal. They rejected heterosexuality, but did not align themselves with gay men either. The final group was “lesbianism as a cross to bear.” These women felt they had no choice in what they are but they did not express their identity openly (Kitzinger 1987: 90-124).

Paula Rust (1993) made the first major criticism of models that advocated a linear progression culminating in an integrated identity,

One problem is the linearity of most available models. Homosexual identity formation is not orderly and predictable; individuals often skip steps in the process, temporarily return to earlier stages of the process, and sometimes abort the process altogether by returning to a hetero-sexual identity. Recognizing this shortcoming, earlier theorists modified their linear models by
introducing feedback loops, alternate routes, and dead ends. These efforts produced linear models with ample room for deviation rather than models that effectively describe the formation of sexual identity. What is needed is a completely new model (p. 51).

Rust (1993) contends a model of identity development should be based on social construction theory. Her argument centers on the idea that individuals base their identity on the social cues, norms, the political landscape, and other criteria within the constructionist model. While individuals may experience their development of a gay or lesbian identity at certain points in their life, this does not mean that this definition and identity remain static. As society changes so does the individual’s determination of his/her identity. Further, an individual may experience differing periods of acceptance and rejection, and they may even be indifferent to their identity. However, Rust (1993) still argues that the identity process will at some point in time produce a stable end product. This is because unless change occurs in the individual’s constructed social status and setting there is no change in their identity. More simply, if a person’s attributed status, labels, or membership in stigmatized groups is not reevaluated in their perceptions or socially constructed role in the society then the individual will not reevaluate or change their identity. The status, labels, or membership will change at different times if there is change in the society. She argues that this should be accepted as a normal part of the identity process. Rust (1993) also focused on the development of bisexual identity and its differences from lesbian identity development. She scolded previous researchers for not examining or being interested in the development of bisexual identity.

The next major criticism to appear is that of Cox and Gallois (1996). They argued against a psychological model of identity development and stated that social identity
theory is a more appropriate lens from which to view the development of homosexual identity. They contended that identity development is more closely linked to the ideas of social identity theory than to developmental stage models. In particular, they noted that social identity theory rests on self-categorization and social comparison. As they put it, "Sexual orientation can be the basis of social identity for some people and personal identity for others" (Cox and Gallois 1996: 14-15). Thus, a woman can consider herself lesbian, while another may consider herself a member of the lesbian community. In other words, the individual may identify either strongly as a narrow category member (lesbian) or loosely as a member of a more diverse category (lesbian community).

While Cox and Gallois (1996) saw earlier models as concerned with the content of identity, their primary focus for social identity is on how the process of developing the identity occurs. Differences in the expression and adoption of identities are more readily acceptable within social identity theory because individuals can have different levels of acceptance and perception of identity while performing the same developmental tasks (Cox and Gallois 1996: 16). This theory recognizes that individuals determine acceptance of their identity based on the power and social status differences between them and members of other groups. Individuals in these groups employ strategies to improve their status within the group, or to improve their group’s status to cope with the strains of the differences of status and power. These strategies are influenced by a myriad of social variables (Cox and Gallois 1996: 17-26). These and other aspects of the influence of Social Identity Theory will be examined in more depth later in this chapter.

Eliason (1996) argued for a more inclusive model of identity development in her critique of the extant literature. This model includes identity characteristics like race,
religion, socio-economic status, and sex. She critiqued earlier stage models as lacking in their understandings of identity development and as further marginalizing those who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. She then defined what is and is not identity. She did not posit a single solution to the problems in these models; instead, she examined some theoretical standpoints of poststructuralist theory and current theorists. One major point she espoused is to focus on relationships held by those who identify in a particular way because relationships are an expression of who they are. For example, a woman in a heterosexual marriage may still be lesbian because she is still able to engage in a lesbian relationship beyond that marriage, but uses the marriage as "passing" or "covering" mechanism. This is not to suggest that a sexual relationship is the most important factor in identity, but it is a contributing factor. Eliason (1996) further argued that socio/political/historical contexts must be considered when examining the idea of LGBT identity. Eliason’s (1996) arguments are congruent with later theoretical developments in LGBT identity research in that she argues for a non-linear and multifaceted model that is not based solely on one’s sexual activity or sexual attractions.

As theory concerning identity development has grown, it has lead to the emergence of more fluid theoretical constructs of LGBT identity, especially those that focus on a symbolic interactionist approach. Oswald (2002) argues,

More recent work has challenged the notion of an essential self and explored ways in which one’s sense of self as a GLBTQ person is co-constructed with one’s other identities and social statuses, such as ethnicity, class, generation, disability, and gender (p.324).

One of the most influential works for this thesis is that of Trump and Wallace (2006). This theoretical construct looks at gay male identity within the microcosm of the Greek Fraternity system and how men cope with their sexuality, in this extremely hegemonic
masculine environment. From their interviews, Trump and Wallace (2006) developed a
nine-tier typology of gay male coping (i.e. identity expression). The categories of
typology are avoidance-repression, avoidance-deflection, avoidance-separation, passing,
passing-censoring behavior, passing-fabricating an image, assimilation, assimilation-
blending, and assimilation-fusing. These nine can be distilled into avoidance, passing,
and assimilation. Trump and Wallace (2006) define these constructs as follows:

Avoidance referred to either running away from or not dealing
with an issue. A perceived lack of control in a given situation
often warranted using avoidance as a way of coping with
undesirable thoughts, comments or behaviors...In this context,
passing is defined as being observably heterosexual either by
consciously altering one’s behavior or by deliberately creating an
image through deceit or the manipulation of convenient
circumstances...In simple terms, to assimilate means to become
like or be incorporated (p. 12-15).

The earlier work of Cass (1979) and Cox and Gallois (1996) influenced the constructs
and ideas Trump and Wallace (2006) presented on the effects of elements of the social
context in their model. Consistent with previous research, they argue that individuals
with a better understanding of what homosexuality is, a better developed sense of
themselves, and a better set of circumstances in their social situation (like social identity
or contact theories posit) were more able to assimilate and eventually come out (p. 15-
26). However, the work of Trump and Wallace (2006) is lacking in that the ultimate goal
is assumed to be coming out and being assimilated.

The most influential of all theoretical postulates concerning GLBT identity
expression examined for this thesis is that of Brekhus (2003) which emerged from his
interviews with suburban gay men in New Jersey. These men lead him to develop a
theoretical typology based on the expression of their identities and on their comparisons
of themselves to gay men in other communities. This three-component typology is based on multiple characteristics and neither requires nor expects a final destination. This model allows for expressions of a more fluid LGBT identity at different levels and at different times. Brekhus (2003) contends that individuals have developed a positive level of personal identity, regardless of their expression of that identity.

His taxonomy includes the peacock, chameleon, and centaur. A peacock is the extreme form of gay identity. This individual has a high duration, high intensity, and high dominance of his expressed gay identity. Peacocks are expected to live in urban areas. They also tend to flaunt their sexuality for all to see. Moreover, every activity, association, and interaction is dominated by the peacock's gay identity. In contrast, the chameleon changes his presentation from situation to situation. These individuals display their gay identity at times with high intensity; however, the duration of this presentation varies from interaction to interaction. The gay identity has low-level dominance. Finally, the centaur has integrated his gay identity into his overall identity. It is a modifier of his presented identity but it is never dominant. It has midlevel dominance along with other aspects of his identity. These men express a high duration, but low level of intensity when it comes to their identity (Brekhus 2003: 1-34).

Brekhus (2003) argues that his model should only be a guide because not all men will fall neatly into these three categories. However, Brekhus (2003) argues that his typology can be adapted for use with any social group and not just gay suburban men.

Symbolic Interaction

Many of the later Lesbian/GLBT identity development models were informed by symbolic interaction, "the study of the self-society relationship as a process of symbolic
communications between social actors” (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner 2006: 387-88). More simply put, we interpret our world based on symbolic understandings of ourselves, things around us, and others, and actions, and interact with each other based on these understandings. These understandings are never static, but fluid. Interpretations change as we encounter different situations although there are many universals that develop as we interact and create shared symbolic understandings.

Blumer (1969) coined the term “symbolic interactionism.” One of Blumer’s (1969) primary arguments is that we give meaning to everything, including inanimate objects. These meanings are sometimes universal and sometimes based on the individual. There is one constant in this form of social activity and this is that meanings and how we interpret them change with each interaction in which we engage. Blumer (1969) argued that the actor, “is designating different objects to himself, giving them meaning, judging their suitability to his action, and making decisions on the basis of that judgment” (p. 80). This is not a one-way street either. The process requires an interaction between individuals who are constantly engaging in this process and presenting their understandings and meanings to the other. At the same time the other individual is responding, reinterpreting, and thus presenting a “self,” as Mead (1964) argued, based on this interaction. Blumer (1969) argued, “It is ridiculous to assert...that social interaction is an interaction between social roles” (p.75). Blumer (1969) believed that roles played a part in guiding social interaction, but they were not the primary guides of this interaction.

Early theorists in symbolic interactionism include Cooley (1902), Goffman (1963), Mead (1964), and Blumer (1969) to name a few. Cooley’s (1902) and Mead’s (1964) contributions to symbolic interaction are their theoretical postulates on how
identity is formulated through social interactions. This process involves not only learning socially accepted ways and forms of acting, but the individual examining his or her interactions based on the responses and actions of others. The actor also employs the “Looking Glass Self” to stand outside him- or her-self and as another means to evaluate him-herself. Cooley’s (1902) emotional component then comes into play as the individual decides whether there is a negative response or positive response that is associated with their presentation of self. This leads to the individual learning the norms and values of society by way of understanding the positive and negative results of acting in certain ways. Mead (1964) argues that as the individual progresses from childhood through adulthood, he or she begins to understand which presentations they should express in particular contexts. This allows the individual to be selective and in control, as much as is possible, of what they present to others.

The decision to present a certain identity is not only on one’s interpretation of the situation but the reactions of others. Goffman (1963) provides this precept to us. However, it is important to recognize that stigma is a driving force behind the process of interpretation and implementation of symbolically created identity. Goffman’s (1963) stigma, stereotyping, and self-stereotyping theory is directly related to social identity. For us to determine our places and compare them to other groups in society, we must understand something about the individuals with whom we compare ourselves. Stereotyping is the process of applying a rigid idea to an individual, group, or class of individuals. The stereotype is often negative and is resistant to change or correction because of the social solidarity that comes from applying it to others. Self-stereotyping is, therefore, a process of applying positive or negative attributes to oneself based on
one’s associations and proclivities. Finally, stigma is a social attribute that discredits an individual or group. There are three types of stigma. These are bodily, character, and social collective. Bodily stigma is that suffered by the individual who has some physical deformity, ailment, or more often today, physical attribute which society has determined to be undesirable. Character stigma results from a person’s beliefs, actions, and attitudes and so forth. These activities are not just passing incidents but they have a record of occurring repeatedly. An example here would be the pedophile that violates societal norms by being attracted to and desiring sex with children. Finally, individuals of certain groups experience the social collective stigma whether this membership is inherited, attributed, or identified. An example is the inherited/attributed status of an African American, simply because of his or her racial heritage (Goffman 1963).

In all of these various instances of stigma, however...the same sociological features are found: an individual who might have been received easily in ordinary social intercourse possesses a trait that can obtrude itself upon attention and turn those of us whom he meets away from him, breaking the claim that his other attributes have on us. He possesses a stigma, an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated (p. 5).

We all have stereotypical ideas of who might be a gay man, lesbian, or bisexual. The media, one of our primary socializing agents, plays a large role in these determinations. We hear repeatedly that lesbians are hyper/overtly masculine, involved in sports, and aggressive, while gay men are effeminate, have a lisp, and are inept at sports. However, one notes that media is not so clear about the alleged characteristics of bisexuals, except that most are portrayed as sexually insatiable and untrustworthy.
Stryker and Symbolic Interaction

Building upon these early theorists, Stryker (1968) presented a more concise theoretical postulation concerning the salience of identity and roles and commitment to them. He originally developed his framework to examine the identities within the family. His intention was to develop a theory to examine role relationships and commitment to roles and why some individuals are able to change their identity presentations and why others have problems with this (p. 558). Stryker (1968) notes,

The invocation of an identity i.e. the perception of an identity as relevant to a particular interaction—may be purely situational...some identities can be expected to be linked with strong feelings, and some can be expected to be perceived as closely connected with the achievement of wants (p. 560).

Commitment involves similar processes of evaluation to that of the evaluation of stigma; it is a necessary evaluation of the costs of presenting one identity versus another. Thus, individuals must engage in a process of determining which identity will cost them the least in each particular situation. Stryker (1968) acknowledges that there are problems that cannot be answered using his model. These problems may arise when the researcher is interested in the “extensive nature” as he calls it, or numeration of relationships, and the intensity, or strength of these relationships of commitment. However, because Stryker’s (1968) hypotheses are important, this is a brief review. Stryker (1968) argues that the more committed to an identity an individual is the higher the salience the identity will be. He also argues that the more individuals that the person knows with the same identity the higher the salience of that identity will become. The greater the salience of the identity the more the individuals will present the expected norms of that identity and this identity will be performed more easily. Finally he argues that the greater external influences become it becomes easier to adopt a new identity, and
the higher the level of consequences of the identity the easier it will be for the individual to change their identity presentation (Stryker 1968: 561-63).

Stryker (1968) also argues that these hypotheses presented so that they can be used to cover a whole range of situations other than family relations (p. 561-63). Thus, the hypotheses could very easily be adjusted to the examination of lesbian identity. While this theory is not an answer to all situations, it offers an overarching meso-level perspective.

Life for the Rural Lesbian

Many of the new theories especially, Brekhus (2003) and Eliason (1996), emphasize the importance of exterior societal and more specifically community involvement in the presentation and development of identity. Thus for this study, the location of the research and where these individuals grew up and reside is highly important. The upper Midwest is fairly conservative. For example, as noted in the first chapter, North Dakota state legislators refused to pass a bill that would add sexual orientation and gender identity to the non-discrimination clause in 2009. Brekhus (2003) makes clear that where an individual lives makes a difference in the expression of LGBT identity. Similarly, according to Tiemann, Kennedy and Haga (1998)

Those who do not conform to the norms of a rural community, like lesbians, face predictable sanctions. They are gossiped about, shunned, ostracized, encouraged to leave, and they may face acts of violence. Thus to protect themselves and to keep their sexual orientation from becoming their master status, lesbians may try to remain closeted and therefore, “invisible.” All of the lesbians in our study were well aware of this rural gemeinschaft and had felt its effects in their lives (p. 63).
It is clear from this statement that rural areas are less conducive to positive and healthy lesbian identity formation or expression. The reasons for this can be traced to the rural nature of the area, the values, norms, and even religious and ethnic heritage. For instance, the primary religions recorded in North Dakota are Lutheran and Catholic. Although many other religions are present, the region is dominated by these two religious traditions. Moreover, these religions are not as progressive as some other religions and have been slower to be inclusive of the LGBT community, stem cell research, or other liberal movements.

Similarly, Oswald (2002) examined experiences of GLBTQ individuals in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area who returned to their small upper Midwest hometowns for weddings.

Any problems that GLBTQ people may have at weddings in general may be exacerbated at rural weddings due to the potential overlap between family and community. For example, whereas urban weddings may bring together people who do not know each other and who will never see each other again, rural weddings are likely to assemble a group of people who are at least acquainted and who run into each other at other weddings and community events...Having a good wedding may mean however, hiding family secrets from public scrutiny. If rural communities are hostile to GLBTQ people, and if rural families are heavily invested in community approval and open to community scrutiny, then going home for a rural wedding may present a GLBTQ person with intense pressures to conform to social norms (Oswald, 2002: 327-28).

The individuals in this study specifically indicated that religion, family, and community overlapped. This was unique in her findings for those from rural backgrounds. Oswald (2002) further shows that individuals were required to constantly engage in a reexamination and redefinition of self in the rural setting because of the overlap of family, religion, and community and the pressures to conform as well protection of the
family image. Furthermore, Oswald (2002) noted that there were coping strategies individuals used which were not unlike those presented by Trump and Wallace (2006) and Hesp (2007). Thus, the shifting and fluidic nature of LGBT identity emerges once again.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND CONCEPTUALIZATIONS

Based on the literature, and theoretical models, examined here the following research questions emerged. First, are there characteristics by which rural lesbian identity can be determined? Previous literature suggests that the answer is yes. Based on the likelihood that there are different ways to categorize them, a number of questions present themselves. Before examining these questions however, it is important to understand what I mean by certain terms. First, when defining identity for this study, the following is the general definition by which I approach it. Identity is composed of an emotional component, an action component, and a cognitive component. The emotional and cognitive components of identity are how the woman feels about being lesbian. Does she have positive or negative feelings or understandings of being lesbian? The action component for the purposes of this study is the commitment to the lesbian identity. Is the individual committed to being lesbian or not? Thus, commitment is a group of actions that the woman indicates if she does or does not do. If she engages in these activities then she is less committed to being lesbian as the frequency of this action increases.

For this study, there are also concepts that may or may not be dependent on the woman's identity. These concepts may also be applied to categorize identity by its expression. The first of the concepts is that of outness. For the purpose of this study, outness is the number of people that the woman is out to. This group contains 13
different types of individuals. Her level of outness is the number of these individuals she is out to. Thus the more she is out to the higher her outness. The second concept is that of community involvement. This concept is an understood to be the number of particular activities the woman has engaged in over her lifetime. There are eight types of activities. These activities are specific to the lesbian community. Thus, the more activities she has engaged in and the more times she has done them, the greater her involvement in the lesbian community.

Having presented the previous concepts, there are four specific questions, which this study examines. The first is how a woman's level of outness results from her feelings and beliefs about her identity. In other words, does whether she is positive or negative about being lesbian influence the number of people she is out to. Second, is a lesbian's level of involvement in the LGBT community affected by her feelings and beliefs about her identity? What activities in the community will she engage in based on her feelings and beliefs about her identity? Third, does her level of commitment to being lesbian have an effect on the number of people she is out to? Finally, does her level of commitment affect her level of community involvement? More simply, is the number of people she is out to and the number of community events she has attended affected by her actions of commitment.

Other questions arise from the literature but not examined. First, this is not a necessarily a positively or negatively achieved label. She has accepted a label. However, does the negative or positive nature of this acceptance effect her presentation as a lesbian? Another question to consider is whether political and social forces have affected these elements over the period in which the first data and second data collections
occurred. A further consideration is that based on previous literature is whether there is a linear nature to the process of these elements affecting the acceptance and presentation of identity (Cass, 1969; Coleman, 1982; Plummer, 1975; Troiden, 1988; Rust 1993).

However, as previously stated, the literature does not support that this is a linear process. In addition, the data collected here cannot examine anything beyond the two snap shots in time that they represent.

Summary

In this chapter, I have examined the major literature on gay and lesbian identities. I have further tied the literature to the theoretical constructs upon which the project is based. In all, the literature points at a symbolic interactive approach. I also examined the research questions, which have developed from the basis of this approach. In the next chapter, I will examine the methodological approach to this research project.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHODS

This chapter describes the research methods used in this study. I present, in order, the sampling design and description, the instrument used, participation and informed consent, operationalization of variables, and the limitations and assumptions of this study.

Sampling Design and Description of the Sample

To study the “hidden” population of lesbian women in the upper Midwest, many common sampling techniques, including random sampling, could not be used. In 1995, the first Rural Lesbian Survey was conducted using the snowball sampling technique. This technique requires the researcher to locate a subject from the population in which she/he is interested. That subject is then asked if she knows others who would be appropriate for the research. The idea is that the number of subjects will grow just like a snowball that is pushed through the snow. The problem with this technique is the individuals that are first enumerated are similar to informants. They may be fringe individuals who are not typical of the average member of this group. Another concern is that they may pressure friends into responding instead of simply recruiting them. Further, if there are not enough individuals to initially contact, then the response rate will be low. This results from the fact that again these individuals may not be aware of the majority of those within the community being studied. For these reasons, this technique should be limited to exploratory research as Babbie (2001: 178-179) suggests.
The key informants passed the information about the survey to other individuals who were willing to participate. The researchers sent them the survey through the mail and asked the respondents to return their completed survey in the enclosed stamped envelope. This method resulted in forty-five useable surveys. In 2008, the survey was conducted online through the Survey Monkey website. Individuals signed up to participate at information tables. These were located at LGBT pride events in three cities in the state of North Dakota. I, as one of the researchers, sat at a booth at each pride event. I answered questions and sought participants from those who approached the table. During this process, I engaged with the individuals, explained the study, and quelled any fears they might have had about participating or being outed, and listened to their personal stories. The individuals placed their email address on a list with others’ email addresses for that particular pride event. At the conclusion of the pride events, I sent the URL to the women who agreed to participate. Unfortunately, some of the email addresses that were provided to the researchers did not work. Some others were illegible. The result was the loss of approximately 20 potential subjects. Those who took the survey were encouraged to pass the link to their friends. This resulted in 33 participants.

Instrument

The original 1995-mailed survey consisted of 94 questions. The online survey consisted of 116 questions and could be completed at any time convenient to the respondent on the Survey Monkey website. Both questionnaires included demographic items, questions about the respondent’s participation in LGBT community events, lesbian identity events, and the coming out process. They differed however, in that the 1995 survey included questions about subjects’ outness to helping and service providers, while
the second survey included questions on respondents' use of LGBT media. The 2008 survey was administered as an online survey. This method was chosen for several reasons. Because of the difficulties in providing confidentiality to respondents and the time and cost effectiveness of administration, Internet surveys have become popular for researchers. Because this technique also allows respondents to engage in the survey at their leisure, it is conducive to increasing response rates. An additional benefit of Survey Monkey is the data are easily downloaded for analysis from the website. This is much faster than when using conventional data entry techniques.

Participation and Informed Consent

The administration of the instruments was preceded by a brief explanation of the intent and importance of the research. Individuals were asked to participate but were not required to do so. The participants were then asked to sign an informed consent release form before participating in the 1995 survey. The 2008 respondents were prompted to click on a button confirming their desire to participate, prior to being allowed to access the online survey. Because we had no direct access to the subjective experience of the women in our study, it is important to remember that we only know what our respondents were willing or able to tell us about themselves and their identities (Kitzinger 1987).

Operationalization of Variables

The following variables are operationalized in this section. They will then be tested using Pearson's Correlation Coefficients. Cronk (2006) states that, this procedure “…determines the strength of the linear relationship between two variables” (p. 41). More specifically, this test will be used to examine the relationships between how individuals feel about being lesbian and their outness and community involvement. It
will also be used to examine the relationship between commitment to being lesbian and outness and community involvement.

For this project, there will be only two independent variables: feelings about being lesbian and commitment to the lesbian label (identity). To examine feelings about being lesbian, the individuals responded to a series of statements about how they felt about certain issues. The subjects responded to these statements using the following Likert Scale responses; 1) Not at all, 2) Rarely, 3) Sometimes, 4) Often, and 5) All the time. Because these questions appeared in a negative format, the items were all recoded into positives to ensure ease of interpretation.

The independent variable is the respondents’ commitment to the lesbian label. Items used to measure commitment to the lesbian label asked respondents to give a Likert Scale answer. These were re-coded into “yes” or “no” answers. Further, to make sure that all measures were in the same direction, all but three items were reverse-coded so that they were positive.

These measures were further analyzed using reliability analysis (Cronbach’s alpha) to determine which items were most useful to create an index of feelings and an index of commitment. The reliability analysis produced seven items from the feelings category that were highly reliable. The questions for this section ask the individuals to rate their feelings as noted above. The questions were it is important that others think I am heterosexual, I hate myself for being lesbian, I am afraid that others will find out about my lesbianism, I am uneasy about the idea of children being raised in a lesbian home, I have never been in a fully committed lesbian relationship, my being lesbian is fine with me and is integrated into my whole life, and I like being lesbian (questions 36,
37, 38, 43, 44, 46, and 47 See Appendix A). These items were re-coded into an index score, feelings about being lesbian. The reliability analysis for commitment produced five items that were highly reliable. These questions asked the respondents to indicate if they currently: introduced their lover as a friend, avoid talking about my living situation, avoid being seen with gay friends in public, pretend not to see a heterosexual friend when with lesbian or gay people, and pretend not to see a lesbian or gay friend when with heterosexual people(See Appendix A questions 48, 49, 55, 56, and 57). These items were re-coded into an index score, commitment to lesbian label (identity).

The first dependent variable, “outness,” is a measure of the number of individuals to whom the women are out. This variable is comprised of questions that asked what individuals they were out to. The items took the form of questions, such as “Do any of your coworkers at work know that you are lesbian?” The other types of individuals were employer, mother/guardian, father/guardian, grandmother, grandfather, oldest child, neighbors, teacher, minister, therapist, and physicians (80, 83, 86, 89, 92, 95, 98, 101, 104, 107, 110, 113, 116 See Appendix A). For each yes response, the respondent received one point. The total number of points was added together an index score, “outness.”

The second dependent variable, community involvement, is the number of GLBT community events the women had ever attended. This set of questions asked about whether they watched or participated in pride parades, women’s music concerts, women’s music festivals, gay or lesbian bars or clubs, women’s bookstores, lesbian or gay organization meetings, or a party or gathering for lesbians (questions 14 to 21 in Appendix A). These questions were asked in a Likert Scale format with responses being
Limitations, Delimitations, & Assumptions

There are a number of limitations to this type of study. First, it is based on non-probability samples. Therefore, the ability to generalize the results to all lesbians beyond the sample is not possible. Similarly, no generalizations can be made to those who identify as Bisexual or Transgendered or intersexed. These data can only be applied to the two groups of respondents who participated in this study. The nature of and limited amount of research in this area required certain assumptions concerning certain aspects of the community. These assumptions include, that lesbian women in the upper Midwest will be less accessible than those who live in urban areas. However, this is also a limitation of this research in that respondents were difficult to reach and to encourage to participate. Also assumed is that rural life is much different for lesbians than urban life. However, this may not be the case, especially when individuals live in larger communities within these rural areas.

Further, certain limitations exist within the community to be studied and specifically the geographical location of the research population. As noted in Chapter Two, the upper Midwest tends to be conservative. Moreover, lesbians who live there are difficult to study due to their use of safety practices to conceal their sexual orientation. They may be concerned with local residents' reactions to their sexual orientation and the possibility of adverse reactions to it. Therefore, more often than not rural lesbians are expected to be more of a "hidden" population (Tiemann et al. 1998: 63). Because I am gay man, I hope that the respondents trusted me and that I was not viewed as an outsider.
However, as a gay man, my ability to completely connect with these lesbians due to differences in gender expression and understanding is necessarily limited.

Questions in the survey regarding the perceived sexuality of individuals required subjects to make judgments concerning their perceived sexuality. Thus as discussed with Cooley’s (1902) Looking Glass Self, or Goffman’s (1963) Stigma theory, these women were forced to interpret others’ reactions to them and their identity expression. While this is problematic, it leads us to a somewhat better understanding of the individual answering the questions and her understanding of her sexuality. Dilley (2005) and others have pointed out the sexual identity falls along a continuum. Thus while she may personally consider herself to be bisexual because she has sexual interests in both sexes, she may still believe that others consider her to be lesbian.

The data collected here can only be used to explain the specific dynamics and interactions in this geographic area. Because of the nature of the self-reported data and the instrument, there are possible biases to consider. Peer pressure toward conformity, and proximity of others when taking or signing up to take the survey may affect the outcomes. Thus, the results of this data are again limited to the individuals within this study, especially the 2008 data.

Summary

This chapter presented the methods used in this research study. It also explained the sampling design, operationalization of variables, the data collection instrument used, participation and informed consent, and the methods of data collection. It concluded with a discussion of the limitations, delimitations, and assumptions of this project. The next chapter presents the analysis of the data collected.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This chapter describes the major findings of this research project. The goal is to test the research questions presented in chapter 3. It uses frequencies and percentages to present basic demographic characteristics of the 74 lesbians who participated in this research. Then the frequency distribution of the two independent and two dependent variables are presented. Finally, correlations were performed using SPSS®.

Demographics

First, I will present basic demographic information on the 74 respondents. As reported in Table 1, the respondents had a mean age of 33 years. With the exception of one respondent who indicated that she had a multi-racial background, the respondents were Caucasian. Seventy-three percent had attended a college or university, with 40 percent completing an undergraduate degree and ten percent completing some graduate level of instruction. Seventy percent of the respondents earned $10,000 to $39,999 per year. When examining these individuals with regard to their relationship status, 47 percent are single but in a committed lesbian relationship, 21 percent are single, and 13 percent are married in a lesbian relationship. Sixty-four percent of respondents currently live with a spouse or partner; 14 percent live alone. Thirty-six percent indicated current belief in a mainstream religion, such as Lutheran, which had the highest level of belief at 14 percent. Thirty-eight percent of the women indicated beliefs in a non-mainstream religion. Twenty percent, the largest group, believe in some “other” form of religion and
17 percent did not practice any religion. However, this is a marked change from their youth, as 77 percent indicated a mainstream religious belief at age 16, with Lutherans, Catholics, and Methodists being the largest groups. Seventeen percent had a non-mainstream belief at 16 and only 1 percent had no religion. Seventy-two percent of the respondents grew up in North Dakota or Minnesota and 88 percent now reside in those two states. Seventy-eight percent grew up in communities with sizes ranging from 1,000 to 500,000 or more. The largest group, 22 percent, grew up in communities with 1,000 to 9,999 residents. However, 18 percent of respondents grew up in communities with less than 1,000 people. Today 81 percent reside in communities of 10,000 to 499,999. The largest group, 39 percent, reside in communities with 50,000 to 99,999 people. However, 7 percent still reside in communities smaller than 1000 people and 8 percent currently live in communities smaller than 10,000 people.

Table 1. Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian/ Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>98.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS Diploma or GED</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Some College, no diploma</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>23.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Undergraduate Degree</td>
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<td>41.9</td>
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<td>Some Graduate School</td>
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<td>10.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>MA or equivalent</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than MA, no PhD</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD or equivalent</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>74</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than $10,000</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13.5</td>
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<td>$10,000-$19,999</td>
<td>23</td>
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Current Relationship

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<th>Percentage</th>
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<td>21.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Single in Committed Lesbian Relationship</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>48.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single in Committed Heterosexual Relationship</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Married in Lesbian Relationship</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married in Heterosexual Relationship</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced from Lesbian Relationship</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated from Lesbian Relationship</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated from Heterosexual Relationship</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Living Arrangement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arrangement</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alone</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends or Roommates</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse or Partner</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>66.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents or Other Family</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Current Frequency</td>
<td>Current Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pentecostal</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goddess Worship</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Traditional</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Current Frequency</th>
<th>Current Percentage</th>
<th>At 16 Frequency</th>
<th>At 16 Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North Dakota</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>59.5</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>51.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>24.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1. Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Size</th>
<th>Current</th>
<th></th>
<th>At 16</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 500</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500-999</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,000-9,999</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>23.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,000-24,999</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25,000-49,999</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50,000-99,999</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100,000-499,999</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500,000 or more</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Frequency Analysis

*Whom Out To*

To have a clearer picture of the dependent variables, Table 2 presents the frequencies that show to whom the women in this study are out. In terms of their families, 70 percent of the women said they were out to their mothers and 53 percent were out to their fathers. Twenty-eight percent of the women were out to their oldest child and 18 percent were out to their grandmother, but only 15 percent were out to their grandfather. For non-relatives, 39 percent were out to their neighbors, 41 percent were out to their teacher, and 20 percent were out to their minister. For other non-family members, most were out to their therapists (60%) and physicians (51%) and their coworkers (77%). However, the respondents were evenly divided on being out to their employer; 44 percent were out and 46 percent were not.
Table 2. Frequency of Outness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coworker</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother/Guardian</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therapist</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father/Guardian</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physician</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbors</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oldest Child</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minister</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandmother</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandfather</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of these relationships, these women were least likely to be out to their grandparents or their minister. Surprisingly, they were not equally out to their mothers/female guardians and their fathers/male guardians. The stereotypical role of women in the upper Midwest may offer a partial explanation for this. Women are expected to be traditional in their behavior and dress. Those who dress or act in more traditionally masculine ways raise suspicions that they are lesbian. Moreover, this gives credence to Ponse’s (1978) suggested intervention of the Inversion Model; lesbian women are expected to fit stereotypes of the typical masculine lesbian.
As Tiemann et al. (1998) and Oswald (2002) have pointed out, individuals that are closely associated with us in rural communities are expected to follow certain behavioral norms. While many of these women grew up in smaller communities, they currently live in large areas that are more “metropolitan.” As shown in the demographic breakdown (See Table 1), 74 percent of the women surveyed lived in towns with 10,000 to 99,999 thousand residents. Thus, the significance of neighbors becomes clearer. Women in these areas may be less worried about the types of reprisals that might occur in smaller communities (Oswald 2002). When applying Tiemann’s (2006) findings that the more populated community of Grand Forks responded more favorably to the announcement of a lesbian commitment ceremony in the local paper than did residents of more rural communities, one can understand why lesbians in more populated areas are more comfortable coming out to their neighbors.

Teachers, especially those who are closely related to the respondents, are more likely to be accepting of lesbians than employers for instance, because of their diverse backgrounds and likely interactions with the GLBT community while in college. This is similar to a postulation presented earlier that areas in the upper Midwest with university populations/university towns tend to be more open to the GLBT community (Oswald, 2002; Tiemann, 2006). Because of their level of education, we would expect these individuals to be more accepting of diversity than their less educated counterparts. For example, high school teachers in rural areas tend to be from the community and identify with local customs, norms, and practices (Oswald, 2002; Tiemann et al. 1998), college and university instructors come from all over the world.
It is surprising that 51 percent of the respondents were out to their physicians. Tiemann et al. (1998) states,

Disclosure of one’s sexual orientation in a heterosexualist medical system to homophobic health care professionals can have a detrimental effect on a woman’s self-esteem, her future help-seeking behavior, and her physical safety (L. Rankow, 1996; Stevens, 1992; Stevens, 1995; Trippet and Bain, 1993). Similarly, not coming out and presenting an inaccurate self to others also has costs (p. 73).

She further states that for many respondents, strategies of protection were used to feel safe in their relationships with health care providers. In addition, physicians needed more understanding and instruction concerning the needs and special circumstances of the lesbian community.

The results here are not unexpected. It is possible that the relationships, mother/female guardian, father/male guardian, and employer, are a result of the emerging pattern. These women seem to have an acute sense of the dangers surrounding them in rural communities. Therefore, if they are not totally committed to expressing a lesbian identity, it is highly unlikely that they will. Even if they are strongly committed to their identity as a lesbian, based on the data, they still may not come out to some of the more significant individuals, choosing instead to come out to individuals who are less threatening to them, i.e. friends, neighbors, coworkers, and so forth, rather than judgmental employers, ministers, and physicians. Fear of reprisal for lesbianism may prevent these women from coming out to their employers and instructors. Tiemann et al. (1998) shows this with her work on coming out to health care professional. She found that most of the women used protective strategies when dealing with health care providers because of this fear. Many of these techniques were used until the woman was
comfortable with the health care provider they were seeing. However, some never came out because of the perceived lack of education and high level of homophobia exhibited by these rural professionals (p.62-73).

While the women may be willing to be out to an instructor or employer if they know them well, an instructor they have never had or a new boss may be more "dangerous." Because their views on lesbians are unknown, these women are likely less willing to come out to them regardless of their commitment to or feelings about being lesbian. Being out to an employer is less likely than being out to a coworker. This is not unexpected because while coworkers are peers and friends, one's boss generally is not. Moreover, because sexual minorities are not legally protected, employers may fire them without cause. Because of the nature of students' programs of study, they may not be able to form long lasting relationships with instructors except those in their majors. This may lead to a desire to only be out to certain instructors. Because many of the women surveyed are quite possibly no longer in school, 40 percent completed their undergraduate degree, this finding may have little or no real bearing on the overall importance of this relationship.

Community Involvement

The frequencies presented in Table 3 reveal the gay and lesbian community oriented events in which these women were involved. The first two events are watching and participating in a gay/lesbian pride parade. Twenty-two percent indicated that they had attended a parade and 69 percent had never done so. Fifty-nine percent had participated in a pride parade. Twenty-six percent had gone to a women's bookstore, while 73 percent had never been in a women's bookstore. Twenty-seven percent of the
women had attended a women’s concert while 72 percent had never attended a concert.

Sixty-two percent had attended a women’s music festival but 37 percent had not.

Twenty-two percent had attended a gay or lesbian organization more than ten times, while 77 percent had never gone to a gay or lesbian organization. Finally, 6.8 percent of the women had attended a lesbian gathering while 91.9 percent had not.

Table 3. Frequency of Community Involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Watched Gay Pride Parade</td>
<td>Yes: 22</td>
<td>No: 51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in a Pride Parade</td>
<td>Yes: 44</td>
<td>No: 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended Women’s Concert</td>
<td>Yes: 20</td>
<td>No: 53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended Women’s Music Festival</td>
<td>Yes: 46</td>
<td>No: 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patronized a Gay/Lesbian Bar or Club</td>
<td>Yes: 3</td>
<td>No: 70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patronized a Women’s Bookstore</td>
<td>Yes: 19</td>
<td>No: 54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended a Gay/Lesbian Organization</td>
<td>Yes: 16</td>
<td>No: 57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended a Lesbian Gathering</td>
<td>Yes: 5</td>
<td>No: 68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>Yes: 74</td>
<td>No: 74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results are consistent with the pattern noted previously in this chapter; the more public the activity the less likely rural lesbians are to attend them. This is of course with a few caveats. Primarily the events that are public are less likely, however, those that are likely not located in the upper Midwest are more frequented such as a women’s music festival. This may be linked to the social expectation in the upper Midwest that one will separate their personal and public lives (Oswald 2002). Thus, these women may be positive about their lesbianism in a private setting, but concerned about public perceptions and reactions. To avoid stigma, they may keep this identity to themselves (Tiemann et al.’s 1998).
Cronbach’s Alpha Analysis

Cronbach’s alpha is a measure used to determine the internal reliability of measures within a scale. Typically, a score of .70 is the social science benchmark for an acceptable reliability (Cronk 2006: 102). When a scale is measured for this score, items that are not reliable because they increase the overall alpha score are deleted. Therefore, all items that increased the score of the scale were deleted.

The first reliability analysis was performed on the measures of feelings about being lesbian. The first test of reliability resulted in a Cronbach’s alpha of .421. Items that would increase the reliability were deleted and resulted in a Cronbach’s Alpha of .827. This result was well above the standard of acceptability (Cronk 2006: 102). The second index was commitment to the lesbian label. The first test returned a Cronbach’s alpha of .589. Items that would increase the score were deleted for a final Cronbach’s alpha of .764. Therefore, the highest level of internal reliability was found for this index.

Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis was conducted to test the research questions posed in Chapter Three. This analysis is broken down into four parts. The first analysis examines the correlations between how a woman feels about being lesbian and to whom she is out. The second analysis focuses on feelings about being lesbian, and the types of community activities in which the women engaged. The third tests the woman’s level of commitment to the lesbian label and to whom she is out. Finally, the last examinations cover commitment to the lesbian label and a woman’s types of community involvement.
Correlations of Feelings and Outness

The first set of tests examine the research question, is the degree of outness affected by a lesbian’s feelings and beliefs about her identity? This was tested by correlating the index scores of outness with the index scores of feelings about being lesbian. This Pearson Correlation resulted in an $r = .538$. This shows that the relationship between the women’s feelings and outness is a moderate negative correlation (See Table 4).

Table 4. Correlation of Feelings About Being Lesbian With Outness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feelings About Being Lesbian</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feelings About Being Lesbian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-.538**</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Correlations of Feelings and Community Involvement

This analysis examined the correlation between feelings about being lesbian, and the types of community activities in which the women engaged. This analysis produced highly significant results. This test has an $r$-value of .373 (See Table 5). This relationship is striking in that it is a highly significant one and yet it is weak.

Table 5. Correlation of Feelings About Being Lesbian with Community Involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feelings About Being Lesbian</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feelings About Being Lesbian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.373**</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Commitment Correlated with Outness

46
The third set of correlations examines women’s commitment to being lesbian and her outness. As shown in Table 5, this resulted in a value of $r = .434$ (See Table 6). Thus, this is a moderate and positively correlated relationship.

Table 6. Correlation of Commitment to the Lesbian Label and Outness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commitment to the Lesbian Label</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to the Lesbian Label</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.434**</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Correlation of Commitment and Community Involvement

The examination of commitment and community involvement reveals an $r$-value of -.059 (See Table 7). However, this relationship is not significant. Therefore, we cannot make any observations concerning how commitment affects community involvement for this group of lesbians.

Table 7. Correlation of Commitment to the Lesbian Label and Community Involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commitment to the Lesbian Label</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Community Involvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to the Lesbian Label</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-.059</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary of Results

The first correlation resulted in a negative relationship between feelings and outness. This is interesting in that, for example it was noted earlier that only half of the respondents were out to their physicians. This correlation suggests that there is a relationship between how the women feel about being lesbian and whether they come out to people. Thus, their feelings about being lesbian may directly affect how they interact.
with their health care providers. Moreover, based on the frequencies it seems clear that
the more personal the relationship is the greater the likelihood these women will be out to
those individuals. However, this correlation disputes what would normally be expected.
A person who is positive about being lesbian would be expected to be out to a greater
number of people. However, correlation analysis did not support this. It especially
challenges the progressive stage models of identity development.

The second correlation was a weak one. As individuals become more positive
about being lesbian, they will engage in community activities (involvement) more
frequently. Once again, the frequencies show us that the type of activity is important.
The more public the activity the less likely the women were to engage in it. This may be
related to the limited number of opportunities in rural areas for some of the types of
activities listed on the survey. However, the relationship does continue the pattern of
public versus private separation within the data.

Commitment and outness are correlated as expected. The data show that as the
individual's commitment to her lesbian identity increases so does the level of outness.
This lends itself to the further argument that there are characteristics that can be used to
identity different types of identity within this group of lesbians. Moreover, again it
supports the public versus private dichotomy in that if a woman does not feel comfortable
about being lesbian in public, she will be less likely to be out to a large number of
individuals. Additionally, the more she feels threatened by an individual, the less likely
she is to be comfortable with presenting a lesbian identity to that individual. Thus, the
more removed the individual is from the private life of the lesbian, the less likely she is to
be out to that individual.
Finally, when taking into account the public/private dichotomy, the last correlation is surprising. For the most part, commitment has been related to public expressions of the lesbian label. However, this suggests that there is primarily no evidence between commitment, which represents public actions, and what kind of community involvement she has as a lesbian. This is troubling in that engaging in public activities that help define her, as a lesbian is not related to commitment. Thus while they may engage in these public activities after becoming more comfortable with their lesbianism from an emotional standpoint, previous literature suggests that these kind of engagements are necessary for this development of the full identity. Commitment is a category of salience, or a determinant of importance of an identity, that is present in most of the models. In particular, Stryker’s (1968) hierarchy of salience and identity presentation focuses a great deal of attention on commitment and public expression. Thus if these individuals do not engage in these identity developing events, then how does it develop? What will spur these women to continue their exploration of their lesbian identity? Private associations with other lesbians may take the place of these community activities. This does seem to be somewhat evidenced in the higher frequency of these women attending lesbian gatherings than public events.

Summary

The data analyzed in this chapter has provided several interesting results. The correlation analysis has especially been revealing. These results can lead us to some basic understandings of the presentation of identities by these women. In addition, it may shed some light on how the process of developing these identities has occurred. This will be examined further in the next chapter. Chapter Five expounds on these results and
discusses the implications of the results. It further examines issues for future research in
this area, and finally a model of identities categorization will be postulated.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

In previous chapters, the extant research and theoretical postulations about identity and lesbian identity development have been presented. These theoretical standpoints suggest that lesbians follow a strict or sometimes fluid process of developing and expressing their identity. The theories are dominated by age limits and expectations. However, the majority of the women in this study have exceeded the “deadlines” set forth for them by previous research. This thesis has argued that identity presentation is fluid and changes based on circumstances and the individual. This has been supported by the results presented in Chapter Four. For the time being, the data do seem to support many of the postulations of Brekhus (2003) and Stryker (1968). This project has produced interesting results, but has also raised more questions about lesbian identity in rural America. Thus, future ideas for research will be presented in this chapter. Finally, a new model as a starting point will be postulated for future use.

Data and Literature

The data analysis presented in Chapter Four provides some support for the idea that commitment and feelings are correlated with coming out and involvement. What is notable is that one of the relationships is not correlated in the direction that was initially expected. The women’s feelings about being lesbian and coming out to more individuals are negatively correlated. Thus according to this either the greater their coming out the
less positive they are about being lesbian. Alternatively, it might be that the more negative they become the more they come out. Naturally, the first postulation seems the best. The public versus private dichotomy that has emerged in the data may explain this situation. Moreover, it might be that individuals have followed the process expected in the majority of the literature. In the stage models, and even fluidic models, associating with members of the community and coming out to family and friends are steps or parts of the way a lesbian individual develops a positive lesbian identity (Altman, 1971; Cass, 1979; Cass, 1984a; Chapman and Brannock, 1987; Coleman, 1982; Goode, 1980; Minton and McDonald, 1984; Plummer, 1975; Shafer, 1976; Troiden, 1988; Weinberg, 1978). It is possible that the rural environment in which the respondents live is an intervening variable. Oswald (2002), Tiemann et al. (1998) and Tiemann (2006) show how rural settings increase the likelihood of individuals down playing or even hiding their lesbian identity out of fear of reprisal or difficulty in obtaining the most necessary of services. Although individuals in the more populated areas of the upper Midwest have become more accepting of the GLBT community, there are still limits to that acceptance. For example, Tiemann (2006) has shown that the university town of Grand Forks, North Dakota is more accepting of lesbian individuals than residents of smaller towns in the state. Furthermore, while these women are happier about being lesbian and are beginning to fit comfortably into their roles or expressed identities outside of public view, they may still be unwilling to express their status as lesbians in public situations.

Moreover, the analysis of commitment to the lesbian label and outness seems to point in this direction. The relationship is weakly correlated and employer was one of the less frequent individuals for these women to be out to. Thus according to the data, even
though these women are committed to labeling themselves lesbian, they are less likely to come out to their employer. However, this is complicated in that the relationship between feelings about being lesbian and being out to one's employer have a weak negative correlation. As stated before, the relationships between these individuals may be transitory. New bosses and new teachers/instructors may be less likely to be aware of a woman's lesbian identity than those women have formed private relationships with over a long period. However, there were no questions asked on the survey to determine this. The data do not indicate whether these women have long term or short-term relationships with the individuals they are out to. Thus, this is an area of future research.

As argued previously, the questions that resulted from the reliability analysis for commitment deal with public expression. The questions for feelings are of a more personal nature. Therefore, based on the significant correlations, it seems clear that the women in this study separate their personal lives and public lives out of necessity or preference. This pattern also seems relevant when applying parts of the Brekhus (2003) model. Brekhus (2003) argued that the "chameleons" in his taxonomy were more likely to base their presentation on a public versus private continuum. Thus they would present more of a "gay" identity when in the city, and a present a more "suburban" identity when at home (Brekhus 2003: 28-29).

The relationship between feelings and commitment has produced some unexpected findings. While one would expect feelings about being lesbian and commitment to the lesbian label to correlate in the same direction, for these women it did not when applying these variables to outness. Stryker (1968) would argue this is because in public situations the lesbian label becomes lower in salience than other identities such
as student or employee, so that the expression of a lesbian identity is less likely. He would also argue that in private settings, the salience of being lesbian increases and thus is more readily expressed. As Cox and Gallois (1996) postulated, lesbian identities can either be social or private. The identity is not required to be expressed outwardly. It is only necessary that the woman has defined herself as lesbian.

Recalling the previous research on gay and lesbian identity, one thing is clear. None of the previously explored models adequately explain the interplay between being out, community involvement, personal feeling about being lesbian, and public commitment to that label, nor do they examine the unique challenges that face rural lesbians. While Stryker’s theory (1968) is effective in explaining the dichotomy of public versus private, it does not fully explain the various expressions of lesbian identities. For Stryker (1968) the most salient of identities for the individual is expressed at each moment. However, many women in this study are comfortable with their sexual orientation but not with the public expression of it. Stryker (1968) does bring us closer to understanding the choices in expression of different identities, just not exactly what makes up those identities when they are expressed.

Brekhus (2003) claimed his model is applicable to any community. However, one of the primary ingredients of this model is time. Brekhus (2003) argues that one key element of gay male suburban identity is the duration of the identity. He argues that the longer an individual expresses a certain identity, the higher in duration it is. In other words, Brekhus (2003) argues that duration of presentation of an identity is a characteristic by which an identity can be categorized. However, because his data is more grounded and based on the individual, time can be factored in. In that parts of his
model can be tested and supported here, there is some validity to his claim. However, because the data used in this thesis come from a one shot quantitative study that did not include time components, it is not possible to address this important criterion in his model.

Proposed Model of Lesbian Identities

Rust (1993) argued for a new model of lesbian identity development. It seems clear that there is also a need for a model of lesbian identities that can be applied to rural lesbians. Thus, based on the findings of this thesis, the following model of lesbian identities is postulated (See Figure 1). The model is informed by the work of Trump and Wallace (2006), Hesp (2007) and Brekhus (2003). However, it is also based upon symbolic interaction, specifically Stryker’s (1968) hierarchy of salience. It is further developed from the unique characteristics of the rural communities in which these individuals live. The ideal types developed in the proposed model are the Super Symbol, the Shape Shifter, and the Secret Sister. Each type has specific characteristics which help place a woman into one type or another. However, because they are ideal types, none will perfectly fit every woman. Instead, these ideal types should serve as guides that help us understand the dynamic identity process of lesbians in rural settings.

The ideal types proposed in the model include elements that were significant in the data analysis presented in Chapter Four. Thus, who these women are out to is a key variable. This element is divided into two categories, private and public. Because the data show a pattern of separation of the private identities from public ones, this distinction is an important one. Thus women are expected to have different levels of outness with those involved in their private lives and those in their public lives. Because
the data point to public individuals, i.e. their boss, their teacher, their doctor, being more strongly correlated with public presentations of a lesbian status, the individuals in the public category will carry a greater weight when being statistically analyzed than those in the private category. Thus when analyzing a woman’s outness, no weight is added to the relationship for those persons in her private life she is out to, but weight is added for those persons in her public life to whom she is out.

The next key characteristic is her community involvement. All of the models of identity development acknowledge the importance of community in identity development and expression. While the community activities examined in this study resulted in only a statistically significant relationship with feelings, women’s commitment to the lesbian label did not. However, in light of the data, the context of the pattern that has developed, and the nature of community activities, it is not easy to separate public from private. Thus, community involvement might be better characterized by the women’s perceived exposure or threat level. For example, watching a GLBT Pride parade is a public event, yet when it is in another town, or when large numbers of people attend, the threat of an individual woman being recognized by a friend or acquaintance and identified negatively or wrongly as a lesbian is low. However, participating in an organization that is explicitly for gays and lesbians has a higher threat level because it is known in the community.

The third characteristic is salience, or expression. The salience of the lesbian identity can be characterized by feelings about being lesbian and commitment to the lesbian label. This has the effect of separating salience into private versus public.
Feelings are private and commitment is public. This is consistent with the analyses that produced private questions for feelings and public questions for commitment.

The fourth characteristic has not been fully tested yet. However, the patterns that emerged in this thesis point to a division between public and private. They also point to the communities in which the women live. An important step in developing any understanding of rural lesbian identity will be to determine what types of communities are more accepting than others. What types of communities create fewer fears and challenges for lesbians? Therefore, the fourth characteristic that should be applied is the type of community. As noted before, Tiemann (2006), Tiemann et al. (1998), Loftus (2002), and Oswald (2006) suggest the more rural a community becomes the less likely the individual is to express a highly developed lesbian identity. Thus these women can be minimally classified by their community type.

For each of the first three characteristics, an index score of the individual’s responses can be created. Thus, a score for outness is divided into private and public outness, a score for community involvement can be divided into low threat and high threat activities, and a score for salience is divided into feelings and commitment. The woman’s scores are then evaluated on a continuum of low to high. Thus if a woman has a high level of outness to family she has a high score of private outness and so forth. Next, her type of community is examined to determine her level of expression in relation to the rural or urban nature of where she lives. If, for instance, a woman presents a higher level of lesbian identity in a very small town, she would be categorized more highly than an individual who is still in the “closet.” Once these determinations are made the women can be categorized into one of three identity types.
This taxonomy of the ideal types is not unlike that of Brekhus (2003) in that it is a three tier system. The types are the super symbol, the shape shifter, and the secret sister. Individuals are categorized by their primary characteristics. Therefore, it is expected that each type represents a point on a continuum, ranging from low to high. Thus, if an individual has high characteristics on two levels and is moderate on one level, and low on another they would still be classified based on the majority of high characteristics. However, as stated before, this ideal type system cannot explain all individuals.

The Super Symbol (See Figure 1) is the non conformist, in your face individual who cares little about the larger community’s acceptance. She cares more about herself and her “sisters” in the lesbian community. These women have a high level of “outness,” meaning that they are out to most people and may engage in public displays of affection. For instance, these women may hold hands while walking through a local shopping center. Further, Super Symbols engage in a high level of activity within the lesbian community. They attend lesbian themed events, women’s concerts, participate in political organizations, and they may subscribe more to LGBT media such as regional papers and magazines and they may use GLBT websites. These women engage in the activities with little concern about the acceptance of the overall community. Therefore, they have high levels of commitment to the lesbian label and they feel positive about being lesbian. They do not generally practice the use of “safety” actions (i.e. introducing their partner as a friend, pretending to date a straight man, or pretending not to notice other lesbian or gay individuals when in public). These women have a high level of acceptance of their lesbian identity and have integrated it into their lives. Finally, Super Symbols are in a stable, committed relationship with another woman and they live together in a large town.
in the upper Midwest, such as Grand Forks, ND. As mentioned before, not all of these characteristics may be applicable to all Super Symbols. Some women will have relatively high scores on the acceptance of their identity, their community involvement, and who they are out to, however, they may still engage in moderate levels of public expression. This is no cause for concern because the ideal type will not fit all individuals and only serves to create a level of measurement and classification for rural lesbians.

The Shape Shifter (See Figure 1) is in the middle. She is neither totally out about her lesbian identity, nor is she ashamed of it. However, she molds her identity to the situation at hand. She can be comfortable discussing her relationship with a close friend, or group of friends, at a local eating establishment. However, she may not wish to have this type of discussion at work or with her physician. The Shape Shifter has a moderate level of “outness,” choosing who she expresses her lesbianism to and who she does not. Further, her public displays will be more circumspect and conservative as she interacts with others in the community. She will take into account the nature of the setting and bend her expression to fit within that context. She will be comfortable attending some for. . . of LGBT events but not others. For example, she may attend a “Pride Parade” in a larger metropolitan area but will not attend a local gathering of lesbians for fear that someone she knows might see her. She will have a moderate to high level of LGBT media use. She will use websites and magazines with no or little lesbian themes than specific local papers or particularly lesbian magazines. Her “safety” actions will be determined by the social setting. At times she may engage in covering practices to hide her true identity such as introducing a lover as a friend. She will be likely to date or have a committed relationship; however, in some settings or with some individuals she may

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indicate that she is single. Finally, she will indicate that she lives with a partner, although her partner may be called a roommate, or she may say she lives alone. She will also be expected to live in a medium sized town of approximately 10,000 to 30,000 people.

Finally, the “Secret Sister” (See Figure 1) is extremely cautious about who is allowed to know about her lesbian identity and activities. She shies away from most things that would suggest that she is lesbian. She is guarded in her public expression, and attempts to conform to local norms as stringently as possible. She will begrudgingly attend some lesbian events, but these events are usually in the homes of friends or out of town so that no one she knows has access to this information. Her LGBT media usage will be almost, or completely, exclusive to that of the internet. She may even safeguard her personal computer so that others who use it have a hard time learning about her interests. Moreover, her dating, lesbian expression, and social contacts will be almost exclusively conducted online or it will entail out of town contacts. This woman will not post a picture of herself on any profile of a LGBT site. She heavily relies on “safety” actions. All her actions in public, especially when confronted with a situation that might give her away, will be manipulated. The Secret Sister’s entire purpose is to stay hidden. She will have a difficult time integrating her lesbian identity and will have more negative or exclusively negative feelings and understandings of this identity. Finally, she will likely live alone, but may live with a partner; however, she will make clear that this individual is a roommate. In addition, she will reside in a town of 10,000 or less people.

Through this brief discussion, I have sketched the three ideal types in my model. One might argue that these ideal identity types might be similar to coping strategies. Indeed, coping is a primary characteristic of these identities. How the women cope with
their lesbian identity and their rural community is part of this theoretical construction.

"Simply put, coping is a function of both the person and the environment. Thus, two gay people immersed in the same environment may employ different coping strategies" (Trump and Wallace 2006: 9). Therefore, there is support for the idea that women in rural communities like the ones studied here may engage in different patterns of behavior. However, coping strategies are primarily actions. Thus the action component of this model is satisfied. However, there are other components such as their acceptance of their lesbianism, their involvement in the lesbian community, and so forth. Thus while coping actions may take place as a part of their identity expression, it is not the total definition of how these individuals express their identity or understand the salience of it.

Figure 1. Proposed Model of Lesbian Identities
This model again is a tool. It has developed from the data analyses and previous work performed in these areas of research and theoretical development. This model is not intended to be the end of the understanding of lesbian identities in the upper Midwest. It is, intended, however as a guidepost for the beginnings of further research. Thus, more research should be undertaken to advance our understandings of the development, expression, and maintenance of lesbian identity in these types of rural regions.

Future Research

To expand our understandings of why certain activities, individuals, and patterns emerged in this data and why others did not, more qualitative research should be pursued with rural lesbians. While this type of research is more difficult, it may help develop a richer picture of rural lesbians and their identities. As mentioned in Chapter Three, there were some questions about GLBT media usage on the survey. This is an area that has been little studied. We know that media does have an influence on individuals’ perceptions of themselves as well as their communities. Indeed, this is a strong theme in Brekhus’s (2003) interviews of suburban gay men. They considered themselves unworthy subjects for research because they were not interesting compared to the media image of the big city boys (Brekhus 2003:1-7). Therefore, this is an area ripe for research on the process of expression, development, and maintenance of lesbian identities. As well, examining different rural areas using this model may be beneficial, and may lead to a more concrete theoretical model. Time factors should be added to future research in order to take advantage of the Brekhus (2003) approach as well. There are many other areas which could be touched on here. It is enough to say that future research is required for us to develop our understandings.
Conclusion

The primary intention of this research project is to better understand the lives of rural lesbians. The goal was to help explain and develop understanding about the community and to give women a voice that they currently do not have. Through this research and analysis I hope that more and better research will be encouraged. Further, I hope that this data and work will in some way help to improve the situation of all lesbians who live in rural communities.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

QUESTIONARRE

The Experiences of Rural Lesbian and Bisexual Women

PROJECT DIRECTOR: Dr. L. Weis Formam
PHONE: 761-777-2188
EMAIL: formam@humar.umd.edu
DEPARTMENT: Sociology

1. This project is an extension of an exploratory study conducted in the mid 1990s. The data collected will allow us to assess changes in social support, institutional responses to lesbianism and bisexuality, identity formation and everyday concerns about living in a predominately heterosexual society. It will also give us preliminary data about lesbian and bisexual women’s use of online resources. The results of this research will be disseminated through appropriate professional publications and presentations in group form to protect the identity of participants.

This survey is to be completed by lesbian and bisexual women 18 years of age or older. Any responses from someone less than 18 years of age will be filtered out and discarded.

○ Continue with the survey. ○ Exit the survey.

Part 1: Demographic Information

Please complete the following questions to the best of your ability. Choose the most accurate response by clicking on the down arrow or fill in the space provided with your answer.

2. How old were you on your last birthday? (Please specify in years)

3. What is your racial background?

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7. What of the following best describes your current relationship status?

[ ]

Other (please specify)

[ ]

8. What is your current living arrangement?

[ ]

Other (please specify)

[ ]

9. What is your current religious affiliation?

[ ]

Other (please specify)

[ ]

10. What was your religious affiliation at the age of 16?

[ ]

Other (please specify)

[ ]

11. What city and state did you call home at age 16?

[ ]

12. At the age of 16, what size community did you live in?

[ ]

13. What city and state do you now call home?

[ ]

14. What size community do you now live in?

[ ]

Part 2: Identity Issues

Please select the most accurate response for each of the following activities.

15. Have you ever watched a Lesbian and Gay Rights March or Gay and Lesbian Pride Parade?

[ ]

16. Have you ever participated in a Lesbian and Gay Rights March or Gay and Lesbian Pride Parade?

[ ]

17. Have you ever attended a women's music concert?

[ ]
18. Have you ever attended a women's music festival?

19. Have you ever gone to a gay or lesbian bar or club?

20. Have you ever gone to a women's bookstore?

21. Have you ever gone to a lesbian or gay organization meeting?

22. Have you ever gone to a party or gathering for lesbians/bisexual women?

23. Was there a particular event that caused you to define yourself as a lesbian/bisexual?

If yes, please specify what event.

Please choose whether the event has or has not occurred, in the spaces following each item, please list your age when each event occurred. If you are not sure, please give your best guess.

24. Aware of your lesbian/bisexual feelings?

- [ ] Occurred
- [ ] Not Occurred

Occurred at Age:

25. Had your first same-sex sexual experience?

- [ ] Occurred
- [ ] Not Occurred

Occurred at Age:
26. Understood what "homosexuality" meant?
- [ ] Occurred
- [ ] Not Occurred

27. Understood what being "lesbian" or "bisexual" meant?
- [ ] Occurred
- [ ] Not Occurred

28. Had your first lesbian relationship?
- [ ] Occurred
- [ ] Not Occurred

29. Considered yourself "lesbian" or "bisexual"?
- [ ] Occurred
- [ ] Not Occurred

30. Acquired a positive lesbian/bisexual identity
- [ ] Occurred
- [ ] Not Occurred

31. Disclosed your lesbian/bisexual identity to your spouse?
- [ ] Occurred
- [ ] Not Occurred

32. Disclosed your lesbian/bisexual identity to friend(s)?
- [ ] Occurred
- [ ] Not Occurred

33. Disclosed your lesbian/bisexual identity to your mother?
- [ ] Occurred
- [ ] Not Occurred
### 34. Disclosed your lesbian/bisexual identity to your father?

- [ ] Occurred
- [ ] Not Occurred

**Occurred at Age:** 

### 35. Disclosed your lesbian/bisexual identity at work?

- [ ] Occurred
- [ ] Not Occurred

**Occurred at Age:** 

---

Rate the extent to which the following items apply to you. Choose the answer that best describes how you feel for each item.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>36. It is important that others think I am heterosexual</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37. I hate myself for being lesbian/bisexual.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38. I am afraid that others will find out about my lesbianism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39. I am uncomfortable being around obvious lesbians or gay men</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40. I dislike all heterosexualals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41. Lesbians are superior to non-lesbians</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42. Lesbians are not really different from heterosexual women</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43. I am uneasy with the idea of children being raised in a lesbian home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44. I have never been in a fully committed lesbian relationship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45. I have had a number of short-term lesbian relationships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
46. My being lesbian/bisexual is fine with me and is integrated into my whole life

47. I like being lesbian/bisexual

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Yes/No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>48. Introduce lover or partner as a friend</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49. Avoid talking about my living situation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50. Pretend to date a man</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51. Use &quot;he&quot; instead of &quot;she&quot; to refer to your lover or partner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52. Lie about your living situation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53. Date a heterosexual or bisexual man</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54. Invite a gay man as a &quot;date&quot; to social functions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55. Avoid being seen with gay friends in public</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56. Pretend not to see a heterosexual friend when with lesbian or gay people</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57. Pretend not to see a lesbian or gay friend when with heterosexual people</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58. Got married to a heterosexual or bisexual man</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59. Pretend to be engaged to a man</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
60. Pretend to be married to a man

Please choose or indicate in the space provided the best answer for the following questions.

61. How did you feel when you first decided you might be a lesbian/bisexual?

62. How do you feel about being a lesbian/bisexual today?

63. Do you know other lesbians/bisexuals?

64. Are you close friends with other lesbians/bisexuals?

65. Do you ever feel emotionally isolated?

66. Do you ever feel socially isolated?

67. How did or do you meet other lesbians/bisexuals?

68. Do you have any lesbian/bisexual role models?

69. Who are these lesbian/bisexual role models?

70. What is the biggest problem you face as a lesbian/bisexual?

Part III: Disclosure Issues

Please choose the best answer to each question.
71. Do any of your coworkers at work know you are a lesbian/bisexual?

72. How did your coworkers find out you are a lesbian/bisexual?

73. When your coworkers found out you are a lesbian/bisexual, how did they respond?

74. Does your employer know you are a lesbian/bisexual?

75. How did your employer find out you are a lesbian/bisexual?

76. When your employer found out you are a lesbian/bisexual, how did she/he respond?

77. Does your mother or female guardian know you are a lesbian/bisexual?

78. How did your mother or female guardian find out you are a lesbian/bisexual?

79. When your mother or female guardian found out you are a lesbian/bisexual, how did she respond?

80. Does your father or male guardian know you are a lesbian/bisexual?

81. How did your father or male guardian find out you are a lesbian/bisexual?

82. When your father or male guardian found out you are a lesbian/bisexual, how did he respond?
83. Do either of your grandmothers know you are a lesbian/bisexual?

84. How did your grandmother find out you are a lesbian/bisexual?

85. When your grandmother found out you are a lesbian/bisexual, how did she respond?

86. Do either of your grandfathers know you are a lesbian/bisexual?

87. How did your grandfather find out you are a lesbian/bisexual?

88. When your grandfather found out you are a lesbian/bisexual, how did he respond?

89. Does your oldest child know you are a lesbian/bisexual?

90. How did your oldest child find out you are a lesbian/bisexual?

91. When your oldest child found out you are a lesbian/bisexual, how did he/she respond?

92. Do your neighbors know you are a lesbian/bisexual?

93. How did your neighbors find out you are a lesbian/bisexual?

94. When your neighbors found out you are a lesbian/bisexual, how did they respond?

95. Do any of your teachers know you are a lesbian/bisexual?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>96. How did your teacher find out you are a lesbian/bisexual?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>97. When your teacher found out you are a lesbian/bisexual, how did she/he respond?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>98. Does your minister or spiritual advisor know you are a lesbian/bisexual?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>99. How did your minister or spiritual advisor find out you are a lesbian/bisexual?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100. When your minister or spiritual advisor found out you are a lesbian/bisexual, how did she/he respond?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101. Does your congregation know you are a lesbian/bisexual?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>102. How did your congregation find out you are a lesbian/bisexual?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>103. When your congregation found out you are a lesbian/bisexual, how did they respond?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>104. Does your therapist know you are a lesbian/bisexual?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>105. How did your therapist find out you are a lesbian/bisexual?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>106. When your therapist found out you are a lesbian/bisexual, how did she/he respond?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>107. Does your physician know you are a lesbian/bisexual?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
108. How did your physician find out you are a lesbian/bisexual?

109. When your physician found out you are a lesbian/bisexual, how did she/he respond?

110. What types of programs or organizations would be helpful to you at this time?

Part IV: LGBT Media Use

Please choose the most appropriate answer or answers or specify the types of LGBT media you use or subscribe to.

111. What types of LGBT News Print do you read?

- Local circulators
- Regional Papers
- National Papers
- Magazines
- Other (please specify)

______________________________
112. Which of the following LGBT Magazines do you subscribe to?

- The Advocate
- OUT
- SHE
- OUTLOOK
- Gay Parent Magazine
- BITCH Magazine
- Curve
- FAB Magazine
- The Gay & Lesbian Review
- Bitchy Bitch
- Other (please specify)

113. Which of the following GLBT Websites do you visit and how often?

- Gay.com
- PlanetOut.com
- logoshilk.com
- nosgay.com
- attorebian.com

114. Do you listen to Sirius Satellite Radio’s OUTQ station?
- Yes
- No

If yes (please specify)

115. Do you watch LGBT programming on the Logo Station on TV or at their website?
- Yes
- No

If yes (please specify)

Thank you for your interest in this study. If you know anyone who would be interested in participating in this project, please contact us. Thank you again. Please indicate if you would like to receive results of this study or notification of publishing of results below.
116. Would you like to receive results or notification of publishing of results?

[ ] Yes
[ ] No

If you, please specify how we should contact you.

If you know a lesbian or bisexual woman who lives in a rural area that you think might be interested in this study, please ask her to contact Dr. temperament@hastings-division.com.

Thank you for your participation in this study.
REFERENCES


