Work In Progress

Living Outside the Box: Relational Challenges of Lesbians In Love With Men

Ellen Schecter, Ph.D.

Work in Progress

Work in Progress is a publication series based on the work of the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute at the Wellesley Centers for Women. Work in Progress reflects the Institute's commitment to sharing information with others who are interested in fostering psychological well-being, preventing emotional problems, and providing appropriate services to persons who suffer from psychological distress. These publications also reflect the belief that it is important to exchange ideas while they are being developed. Many of the papers are intended to stimulate discussion and dialogue, while others are finished research reports.

Jean Baker Miller Training Institute

Founded in 1995, the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute bases its work on the Relational-Cultural Model of psychological development, which grew out of a collaborative theory-building process led by Jean Baker Miller and her colleagues. The Institute offers workshops, courses, professional trainings, publications, and ongoing projects which explore applications of the relational-cultural approach. At the heart of this work is the belief that the Relational-Cultural model offers new and better ways of understanding the diversity and complexities of human experience. For more information, please visit: www.jbmti.org.

The Wellesley Centers for Women

The Wellesley Centers for Women (WCW) conducts scholarly research and develops sound training and evaluation programs that place women's experiences at the center of its work. WCW focuses on three major areas:

- The status of women and girls and the advancement of their human rights both in the United States and around the globe;
- The education, care, and development of children and youth; and
- The emotional well-being of families and individuals.

Issues of diversity and equity are central across all the work as are the experiences and perspectives of women from a variety of backgrounds and cultures. Since 1974, WCW has influenced public policy and programs by ensuring that its work reaches policy makers, practitioners, educators, and other agents of change.

The Wellesley Centers for Women is the single organization formed in 1995 by combining the Center for Research on Women (founded 1974) and the Stone Center for Developmental Studies (founded 1981) at Wellesley College. For more information, please visit: www.wcwonline.org.

Ordering Information

Work in Progress papers and other publications of the Wellesley Centers for Women (WCW) are available for purchase through the WCW Publications Office. For a complete list of current publications, visit our online catalog at: www.wcwonline.org/publications.

Publications Office - Wellesley Centers for Women
Wellesley College, 106 Central Street, Wellesley, MA 02481
Phone: 781-283-2510   Fax: 781-283-2504

LIVING OUTSIDE THE BOX: Relational Challenges of Lesbians In Love With Men

Ellen Schecter, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Fellow
Stone Center Counseling Services
Wellesley Centers for Women

$\mathcal{A}$bstract

This paper uses the lens of Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT)
to analyze data from a qualitative study of sexual fluidity
in long-time lesbians who became intimately partnered
with men. The analysis illuminated processes of shame,
disconnection, authenticity, and connection. As RCT would
predict, severe disconnection from individuals and community
through silencing, shaming and marginalizing resulted
in psychological pain (hurt, guilt, shame, isolation, grief,
despair and depression), while authenticity and connection
served to promote or restore well-being. Rigidly categorical
models of sexual identity that are unable to accommodate
sexual fluidity likely contribute to the oppression of sexual
minorities in both heterosexual and sexual minority cultures.

Living Outside the Box:
Relational Challenges of Lesbians In Love With Men

In relational-cultural theory (RCT), connection with others is central to psychological growth. In order to foster growth, connection must occur in the context of relationships that allow authenticity; that is, where it is "safe enough to fully represent ourselves" (Miller & Stiver, 1995, p.1). Such growth-fostering relationships are characterized by mutual empathy and mutual empowerment, and produce "five good things": zest (vitality, energy); empowerment for creative action; clarity/knowledge of self, others, and relationships; enhanced self-worth; and enhanced sense of connection and motivation for more connections (Miller, 1986). Conversely, chronic or severe disconnection results in emotional pain and attendant psychological problems.

Disconnection occurs when people are alienated, silenced, or otherwise not affirmed. When this happens, the need to connect demands some action in order to stay in relationship. In what is termed the "central relational paradox" (Miller & Stiver, 1997), people employ "strategies of disconnection" in order to stay connected; that is, they deny or silence parts of their own experience in order to stay in relationship with those who find these parts somehow unacceptable. In doing so, they become inauthentic, and psychological well-being becomes compromised.

A primary means of non-affirmation is that of shaming. Shame, according to Judith Jordan (1989), is a felt sense of being unworthy of connection and an attendant absence of hope that an empathic response will be forthcoming from another person. Shame operates to alienate and silence people, disrupting their ability to initiate and participate in the relationships that help them grow (Jordan, 1989). The result is what Jean Baker Miller (1988) calls "condemned isolation"—feeling "locked out" of the possibility of human connection. To avoid this untenable fate, as discussed above, we either abandon parts of ourselves in order to stay connected to important others, or abandon the connection altogether to prevent the pain.

Relational theorists posit that experiences of growth-fostering connection and health-compromising disconnection occur on both interpersonal and group/societal levels (Jordan, 1989, 2004a; Walker & Miller, 2004). Dominant groups have considerable power over minority groups, oppressing them through alienation, shaming, and ultimately silencing. As Judith Jordan (1989, p.7) explained, "By creating silence, doubt, isolation, and hence immobilization, i.e., shame, the dominant social group assures that its reality becomes *the reality*. This dynamic has dictated the social experience of most marginalized groups."

The discussion of dominant and minority groups in the relational-cultural literature has mainly focused on Western culture in general and American culture specifically. In this context, the dominant group is white, male, middle-class, able-bodied, and heterosexual; minority, oppressed, and non-dominant groups are those outside this dominant group. However, dominant-minority group dynamics also occur within non-dominant groups as they are defined above. This paper examines some of the relational challenges of lesbians who entered into committed intimate relationships with men. In doing so, it applies RCT to an understudied and little-understood group whose sexual fluidity forces them to negotiate both dominant and minority sexual cultures in unique ways.

Background: Sexual Fluidity

Sexuality has long been considered to be innate, categorical, dichotomous, and stable. However, growing evidence suggests that components of sexuality-- sexual attraction, behavior, orientation and identity, as well as emotional attachment -- are not always stable or even congruent. Newer studies of sexual orientation and sexual identity provide compelling evidence for the flexibility and fluidity of sexuality over the lifespan. This growing

body of literature indicates that sexual fluidity, i.e., the capacity for sexuality to be changeable across time and situation, is not uncommon, that it exists for some but not all individuals, that it exists across the lifecycle, and that women appear to experience greater fluidity than men (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1993; Diamond, 2000, 2003; Esterberg, 1994, 1997; Golden, 1987, 1996; Katz, 1993; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; O'Leary, 1997; Rust, 1993; Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1994). Despite these findings, dominant models of sexual identity remain based on the assumption of a fixed, categorical nature of sexual orientation, promulgating the notion that sexual identity develops through stages to culminate in an achieved, stable sexual identity (Cass, 1984; Troiden, 1993). These models are unable to fully account for sexual fluidity in individuals after commitment to a sexual identity has been made.

In 2002, the present author conducted a qualitative study to investigate the psychological impact of sexual fluidity upon the sexual identity and lived experience of long-time lesbians who entered committed, intimate relationships with men (Schecter, 2004). Despite considerable diversity in age and experience among the women, common themes surfaced in their narratives. Sexual identity construction emerged as an ongoing process shaped by personally- and socially-constructed meanings of sexual identities and available sexual identity labels. The women's experience of becoming intimately partnered with a man reflected multiple challenges.

As is true for us all, the women in this study lived in a multi-faceted and relational world. They were in relationship with themselves, with an inner circle of friends and family, an outer circle of acquaintances, a greater community, and society itself. The women reported disruption in all of these relationships, although in different ways and to varying degrees. Their stories reflected multiple losses of friends, community, and sense of belonging when they became partnered with a man, as they experienced rejection and ostracism from others

as well as a shaken sense of self-identity. They also shared painful invisibility, isolation, and multiple intra-personal conflicts. The accompanying shock, confusion, anxiety, guilt, embarrassment, isolation, grief, depression and loss were experienced simultaneously with the profound joy of falling in love with their partner and co-creating a deeply satisfying and committed intimate relationship.

The participants' experiences of becoming partnered with a man were characterized by struggles that lend themselves to a relational-cultural analysis. Such an analysis not only serves to help us better understand these women's experience, but applies Relational-Cultural Theory to a population uniquely situated with respect to both dominant and marginalized sexual cultures. The following analysis illuminates processes of connection, shame, disconnection, and attempts at authenticity and reconnection.

Methods

Criteria for inclusion in the study were that participants be: (1) age 30 or older; (2) lesbian-identified for at least 10 years; (3) in an emotionally and sexually intimate relationship with a man for at least one year at the time of interview. Participants were recruited using a snowball strategy. While it may result in a less diverse sample, snowball sampling is considered especially useful when trying to reach populations that may be stigmatized or hard to locate (Sommer & Sommer, 2002). Participants were screened in a brief telephone interview; those selected for inclusion in the study completed a background data questionnaire to collect demographic information and read and signed an informed consent form.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews of 12 women were conducted and audiotaped. One woman withdrew from the study following the interview, leaving a final analysis sample of 11 women. The women were aged 30-57 (mean = 39.8), 9 from the San Francisco Bay area and 2 from the Washington

DC area. Ten participants were Caucasian, one was bi-racial (Asian-Caucasian), and all had at least an undergraduate degree. They represented diverse socio-historical cohorts, having come out as lesbian between 1972 and 1990. Ages of coming out as lesbian ranged from 18-28 (mean = 23.8). The age the women became partnered with a man ranged from 29-47, with a mean age of 36.8. Years in the relationship with their male partner ranged from just over one year to 13 years.

To protect their identities, participants chose or were given pseudonyms and interview tapes were assigned code numbers. Interviews were transcribed and sent to participants for verification. A brief follow-up interview was conducted with participants by phone to discuss the transcripts and clarify any changes or questions.

For the original study, data were analyzed inductively within and across cases, using thematic analysis as well as attending to language, structure, and organization of narratives. Regarding the latter, Catherine Riessman (1993) suggested that strong cognitive-affective dimensions in narratives signal stories of importance in the process of negotiating self, making it necessary to attend to pauses, pitch, voice emphasis, false starts, metaphors, and expressed emotion in analyzing the interview data. I marked the transcripts accordingly to identify such signals. In addition, I paid particular attention to contradictions within each participant's narrative, which may serve as markers of psychological re-organization (Josselson, 1995).

Key themes were identified though repeated engagement with transcripts and interview tapes. Guided by Michael Patton (1990) and Robert Weiss (1994), I first coded transcripts by emergent themes, making notations directly on the interview transcripts (e.g., "coming out," "belonging," "missing women"). In a separate reading, following Susan Chase (2003), I made interpretive comments at salient passages to note what I felt the participant was trying to communicate, as well as my preliminary analysis of language, pauses,

voice emphasis, and so on (e.g., "Participant feels conflicted about lesbians who become partnered with men; on the one hand, she is in love with her partner, on the other, she feels lesbians who go with men are betraying the lesbian community. She pauses frequently, searching for words to express her feelings. Voice quivers when discussing lesbian community").

Borrowing from Larry Davidson et al.'s (2001) approach to phenomenological analysis, I constructed a synthesis of each participant's story, creating a narrative of major events as well as recurrent and salient themes identified in the interview (e.g., loss of identity, effects on well-being: depression, coping strategies: withdrawal). I also constructed a table of themes, sorting excerpts and/or references to lines of text from each interview into themes. I later used this thematic table for cross-case analysis, identifying common themes and variant cases. Guided by Robert Weiss' (1994) ideas of "local" and "inclusive" integration, I organized the material into overarching themes (Initial Sexual Identity Construction, Falling in Love, Losing Equilibrium, Re-Centering, Sexual Identity Reconstruction) and integrated them into a meaningful whole.

Trustworthiness, credibility and authenticity of the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were enhanced through multiple strategies. Prior to the interviews, I reflected on and recorded my own experience with, preconceptions of, and beliefs about sexual fluidity and sexual identity, as a check against unconsciously imposing them on my analysis (Maxwell, 1996; Moustakas, 1994). As interviews progressed and analysis began, I kept a journal of notes, reactions, reflections, impressions, insights, and initial interpretations. Once participant syntheses were created, three separate "naïve" readers who knew little about the topic reviewed them. This variation of investigator triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990) served to both verify themes and add alternative points of view. For example, naïve readers agreed that identified themes reflected participants' stories, while also pointing out socio-

political or psychological processes that I had not considered (e.g., questioning the role of personality variables in selecting coping mechanisms).

For the present analysis, transcripts were coded for RCT concepts of connection, disconnection, authenticity, empathic attunement/empathy, and empowerment. Coding was based on working definitions of these evolving concepts, as follows:

Connection—interaction between two or more people that is mutually empathic and mutually empowering (Miller & Stiver, 1991). Used for descriptions of interactions, locations and activities resulting in one or more of the "five good things" (zest; empowerment for creative action; knowledge of self, others, and relationships; enhanced self-worth; and motivation for more connections). Subcodes included "belonging." Example: *"The lesbian community represented a home to me that I had never had, and a sense of belonging that I had never had."*

Disconnection—rupture within relationship so it is not experienced as mutually empathic and empowering; occurs when there has been hurt, disappointment, danger, violation (Miller, 1988). Includes disconnection from self as well as others. Subcodes included "ostracism," "lack of empathy," "blaming." Example: *"None of my friends would speak to me."*

Authenticity—a person's ongoing ability to represent herself in relationship more fully (Miller et al., 1999), fostered by relational dynamics. Used for references to interactions, locations and activities fostering authenticity as well as lack of authenticity. Example: *"That's been a place for me where I feel like I can have my full identity. I can be who I was and who I am."*

Empathic attunement/empathy—the capacity to share and comprehend the subjective world of another person; feeling "at one with" another person (Jordan, 1989). Used for all references to empathic interactions. Example: *"She said, 'I don't really know what to say, I'm really happy because I really like him,*

and I hope it continues, but I want you to know [that] I know it doesn't change who you are or what your life is about.' Just totally seeing me. It was incredible, it was really incredible."

Empowerment—an increased ability and motivation to take action in the relationship as well as in other situations; one of the five good things and related to psychological growth (Miller, 1986). Used for references to interactions, locations and activities fostering empowerment. Example: *"One of the friends, Diane, was a woman who was able to be really open with me about how hard it was for her that I was getting married, that it made her mad. [Diane and her lesbian partner] got married later, and they said [our wedding] really shifted their ability to think about getting married. And I had a role in their wedding. It was a really wonderful, integrated experience, and generative. Being in their wedding was an inclusive experience for me."*

Findings

Connection, betrayal and shame

> *There really is nothing like being part [of the gay and lesbian community]. Straight people don't need a community, they're part of the majority. There really is something different, to be part of this community. – Lianna*

As a sexual minority, lesbians have been described as being in "constant contact with a culture which ignores, denies, invalidates, pathologizes, and attempts to destroy lesbian relationships" (Mencher, 1997, p.314). Within a rejecting and pathologizing heterosexual majority culture, the lesbian community serves to validate, celebrate, and protect lesbian relationships, creating a haven of "home" and belonging for lesbians.

Ideally, then, the lesbian community operates as an important and rare place of connection where lesbians can be authentic – safely fully themselves-- and thus, as described by Relational-Cultural

Theory, thrive psychologically. The rejecting dominant heterosexual community is relegated to minority status, while the lesbian community becomes the dominant culture for its members.

However, when a lesbian becomes intimately partnered with a man, other lesbians often feel betrayed. With their love for each other under continual attack from the dominant culture, there is an acute awareness of strength in numbers, and the "loss" of every woman to straight society is intensely felt in the lesbian community. Lesbians often view other lesbians who partner with men as traitors who have joined the enemy (Esterberg, 1997). Such lesbians are often judged as weak, giving in to what Adrienne Rich (1980) called the "compulsory heterosexuality" operating in this culture and opting for the easier life and privileges that membership in the dominant group affords.

This sense of betrayal and outrage can lead to reactions of shaming, blaming and ostracizing by the lesbian community. The woman who is the target of such marginalization may share her community's sense of betrayal, and suffer excruciating shame and guilt. The narratives of many of the lesbians interviewed reflected these processes.

> I understood, on some level, why lesbians felt betrayed. It's not like I didn't have my own particular outrage if a lesbian went and was with a man, or if a straight woman came and was a tourist in the lesbian community. I hated all that. – Erika

> I have felt embarrassed, ashamed, I've felt self-betrayal. – Eve

Thus, in a profoundly ironic sequence of events, lesbians are oppressed, shamed, and silenced first by the dominant (heterosexual) culture and, should they subsequently partner with a man, they are likely to be again marginalized by the now-dominant (lesbian) culture. In relational-cultural terms, these women are faced with an agonizing

dilemma: be authentic and face disconnection and isolation from important others, or be inauthentic and face disconnection from self.

Expulsion and withdrawal

> I hadn't bargained for the severity of being [disowned]. I just wasn't prepared to lose all of my friends. -- Jan

> It feels like the community went to Mexico and got a divorce without my permission. That is the best way I can describe it. It's like waking up one morning and your spouse has gone to Mexico and you've been served by the lawyer that they got an instant divorce. And there's nothing you can do about it. – Erika

All of the women in this study, understanding the community's sense of betrayal and need for cohesion in the face of societal homophobia, feared being rejected or ostracized by their friends and larger community when they became partnered with a man. Sadly, many of their fears were realized. Two of the women lost virtually all their friends and sense of community. The severity of their sense of rejection is reflected in their narratives; they tell of being treated like pariahs, "disowned," "divorced," and "excommunicated." Most of the women had less extreme but still painful experiences, ranging from loss of a few friends to a shift in the quality of certain relationships, experienced as distance, awkwardness, reduced intimacy, or being excluded from social gatherings. Only a few suffered no change in their friendships.

The threat of losing friends and community, and the shame and guilt that lesbians who partner with men may experience, can cause them to voluntarily withdraw from the community, perhaps as a pre-emptive strategy against the trauma of being expelled.

> I was aware of one or two women who had literally disappeared from the lesbian community, and then much later, we would

hear that they were involved with men. [I never heard] derogatory things about them ending up with men, but it was very clear that both women were so certain that they would be rejected and judged by the gay and lesbian community for doing this, that they stopped seeing their friends. They removed themselves from the community. – Anna

Lesbians who are in this situation don't really connect and make a community; you'd think that there would be a support group. But I don't think there is one, unless I'm not finding it. I keep wondering, is it because of this tremendous shame [about being with a man] and loss in the lesbian community, so we don't want to sit around with our shame? —Erika

Whether a woman was forced out or protectively withdrew, these severe disconnections resulted in the "condemned isolation" described by Jean Baker Miller (1988). The women described "the worst part" of becoming intimately partnered with a man as their lost sense of connection to their community and sense of belonging. As "no person experiences her or his identity in isolation from the surround" (Bohan, 1996, p.23), the loss of this important community was shattering. The women expressed hurt, grief, self-doubt, abandonment, isolation, and the deep depression of a profound loss.

I feel like I lost a community, or a connection to a community. I lost a very strong feeling of identity that was important to me for a long time. I don't [have a sense of belonging anywhere]. And it's hard, it's really, really hard.– Sue

I don't have a community anymore. I feel like a woman without a state, like the Jews in Exodus, a woman without a country. I don't really know [where I belong now]. I don't feel settled, and I always feel <u>separate from</u>. – Erika

Compounding this disconnection from their community home were two additional dynamics that contributed to the women's pain. Not only did they feel a lack of belonging in heterosexual society, they also voiced considerable antipathy towards the dominant culture and lack of interest in joining it. Further, and even more painfully, some women also experienced enhanced relationships with family members when they became heterosexually partnered.

My relationship with my father changed dramatically. He was so beside himself, happy. And that was really painful, because why should <u>this</u> be the reason why all of a sudden I have a better relationship with him? -- Elka

[There's] this sort of disgusting, unwanted approval from my mother in becoming partnered with a man that was clearly missing when I came out as lesbian, in fact I was disowned over it. I can't even put words to how I feel about that, it's repulsive to me. – Eve

<u>Silencing/invisibility</u>

As noted earlier, silencing, and thus rendering invisible, those who threaten the dominant group is a power-based strategy used to control behavior. Judith Jordan (1997) pointed out that those in minority positions often experience a failure to be heard, resulting in a profound invalidation, depressive withdrawal, and outrage. She specifically discussed women's sexuality and sexual desire, and the common theme women report of being "talked out of" their experience. Being silenced or "invisibilized" in this way reflects the power of one group to control another.

The closet is a powerful example of being silenced and made invisible. Typically, sexual minorities feel forced into the closet by relentless heterosexism. If the dominant heterosexual culture can render

sexual minorities invisible, the logic goes, they can virtually cease to exist, shoring up the myth that "normalcy" and heterosexuality are synonymous. In the same way, dominant lesbian communities may try to strengthen their community by rendering certain minority members invisible: attempts may be made to force the offending member out, as discussed above, or at least force her into hiding. In effect, this is an attempt to promulgate a myth of a mono-cultural lesbian community, in which lesbians look and act a certain way, have only shared beliefs and values, and come to their lesbian identity for the same reasons. As Janis Bohan suggested, "The motive behind this homogenization may have come from the need to pull together, to identify as a monolithic entity standing against the attacks of a heterosexist society" (1996, p.215).

In the present study, many of the lesbians who partnered with men felt pressured to be in the closet about their intimate relationship. In some cases, the pressure was internal, and stemmed from a complicated combination of embarrassment, reaction against heterosexual privilege, and fear of the lesbian community's reaction. Some women reported initially feeling inhibited in public displays of affection; they would not hold hands or let their partners kiss them in public. This was often the first time they had felt this self-consciousness, as all reported being comfortably "out" as lesbians with their previous (female) partners. Other ways of being closeted, and feeling inauthentic, were more private: one woman sadly told of removing her gay flag from her house, "out of respect for [her partner's] male ego."

In other cases, the pressure to be invisible and keep the secret about lesbians who have intimate relationships with men came from the community itself, as reflected in Erika's narrative:

> I can't tell you how many lesbians have shared with me about being with men during this time. And their statements to me are, "Why did you ever come out [about being with a man]? You didn't

> need to tell anybody. I don't tell anybody!" They're <u>mad</u> at me for coming out. – Erika

Challenges to authenticity

> Who says what a lesbian is, anyway? I think <u>I</u> get to say what I am! I don't think that <u>she</u> gets to say what I am! She being anybody! And whether or not I'm partnered with a female. It's all in what <u>I</u> perceive, and it's all in what <u>I</u> feel! -- Jan

Lesbians who find themselves in an intimate committed relationship with a man are challenged to represent their whole selves in a world that sees sexual orientation and sexual identity as categorical. In this study, language emerged as a powerful impediment to authenticity. Sexual identity labels were often too narrowly defined to contain the complexity of "lesbians with men." As has been found true in earlier research (Esterberg, 1997; Rust, 2000b; Seif, 1999), women in this study attempted to overcome this challenge to authenticity by combining or making up sexual identity terms, using the vaguely-defined umbrella identity (or, more correctly, non-identity) "queer," or avoiding identity labels altogether. The women accepted and rejected identity labels based on the meanings these terms had for them. Defining one's sexual identity was emphatically reinforced as an act owned solely by the individual herself, and not society.

In the present study, some of the women retained their lesbian identity, some chose to identify as bisexual, and some eschewed sexual identity labels altogether as being unable to capture the complexity of their experience. However, those who remained deeply lesbian-identified experienced a particularly demoralizing and dehumanizing pain. In a profound display of "power-over" (Jordan, 2004b), both heterosexual and lesbian communities challenged the women's very identity. These women were repeatedly told by others, especially lesbians, that they could no longer claim to be lesbian, that in fact they *were* no longer lesbian. They reacted with outrage to being invalidated and erased in this way:

And this thing of, "You <u>have</u> to be bisexual!"
I don't <u>have</u> to be anything! I am what I am!
No one can tell me how I identify.

If I would capitulate to identifying as
bisexual, if I would just 'come to my senses'
and identify as bisexual, then I would be
included [in the lesbian community],
in a different way. Well, I'm not bisexual,
only problem… I'm not bisexual. – Erika

This raises the question of who is entitled, and who has the power, to define one's identity, one's very existence? Who can name, and who can silence? Majority/minority dynamics are at play, with very high stakes, in minority communities just as they are in dominant groups. And individuals in both groups pay the price.

Staying authentic, staying connected

I'm still somewhat conflicted about [being
partnered with a man] but it's so good and has
grown into something so meaningful at this
point that I would be stupid to give it up.-- Sue

To this point, I have highlighted processes of shaming, inauthenticity and disconnection among lesbians who have become intimately partnered with men, as well as the psychological fallout that occurred as a result. The ability to move into connection following disconnection fosters relational resilience (Jordan, 2004b). The powerful drive to stay connected and to be authentic was evident in the women's stories as well. First, they were able to remain authentic and connected to their own feelings, their love for their partners, even in the face of internal conflict and intense rejection and disconnection by others. Further, some spoke of friends, both lesbian and others, who accepted their new male partners with little trouble. They gratefully acknowledged those friends who "simply" cared about them being happy and in a

caring relationship. Being fully seen in mutually empathic relationships emerged as vital to their well-being– certainly understandable in light of the invisibilizing experiences described earlier.

Lena, sharing a reparative experience that occurred with her mother when she told her about being partnered with a man, highlighted the critical importance of mutual empathy in relationship, of being truly seen and understood.

My coming out [as a lesbian] was very
charged and very intense. My mom took
it really hard. When I told her [about Ben],
I was really bracing myself for this burst of
homophobia to come flying out. I was afraid
that it would just be like, "Thank god! I knew
all along that you would come to your senses
and that you would get past this phase."
And she was amazing. She said, "I don't
really know what to say, I'm really happy
because I really like him, and I hope it
continues, but I want you to know [that]
I know it doesn't change who you are, or
what your life is about." Or something
like that. Just totally seeing me. It was
incredible, it was really incredible. – Lena

In addition to connecting individually, a few of the women shared their attempts to fulfill their yearning to find connections and places of acceptance and belonging.

I have stayed involved in the gay synagogue
that I was involved in, and Simon has gotten
involved there. That's been a place for me where
I feel like I can have my full identity. I can be
who I was and who I am. – Elka

I think I probably have stayed more connected
and actively involved in the LGBT
community than maybe some other women
in my situation. I'm still really active in it,

and also Michael is fine with that. So I don't feel like I've really lost it a hundred percent.
– Lianna

Interestingly, commitment / wedding ceremonies emerged as places of authenticity and connection. At this writing in this country, legal marriage is virtually an exclusively heterosexual privilege; only recently did Massachusetts become the sole state to legalize same-sex marriage, and that state law's future is questionable. In the absence of a legal right to marry or join together in legally sanctioned civil unions, gays and lesbians have sometimes chosen to create commitment ceremonies to formalize their domestic partnerships. Since public affirmations of commitment validate sexual identity (both heterosexual and non-heterosexual) by affirming the relationship between the two partners, the women's choices concerning such ceremonies were notable.

Five of the eleven women in this study chose to have ceremonies to formalize their intimate relationship. They described diverse gatherings of gay, lesbian, and straight friends, family, and former lovers. The four women who chose to legally marry found it essential to build in moments honoring those couples who are precluded from being able to do so. That they felt so strongly about including this statement suggests it may have served to reinforce their identification with non-heterosexuals in the midst of an act currently reserved for heterosexuals.

We had our commitment ceremony, and not getting married and not calling it a wedding and letting people deal with that, we just love that! And the word "queer" was in our ceremony, basically acknowledging the queer community for making it possible for us to be in this moment. I much prefer people knowing [we're not married] and knowing why. Part of why we did it is just the education function, that not everyone who is partnered is married, and that a reason that we didn't want to get married is in solidarity with people who can't get married.
-- Lena

Probably one of the most integrating experiences for me was my wedding. There were people there from the spiritual community that I've been a part of, from the 12-step community that I've been a part of, from my lesbian community. Male ex-lovers were there. And my whole family. Most of the people who helped us on the wedding, most of my good friends, are lesbians. And our photographer, who was a good friend, is a gay man. And one of the friends, Diane was a woman who was able to be really open with me about how hard it was for her that I was getting married, that it made her mad. [Diane and her lover] got married [sometime] later, and they said [our wedding] really shifted their ability to think about getting married. I had a role in their wedding. [It was] a really wonderful integrated experience, and generative. Being in their wedding was an inclusive experience for me. – Anna

Summary of Findings

Despite considerable heterogeneity, the women in this study described similarities in experience. They had all been comfortably, proudly lesbian-identified and "out" lesbians for over ten years, with ties to their lesbian communities and friends that fostered their psychological well-being by providing places of authentic connection where they could be fully themselves. When they became intimately partnered with a man, all reported experiences of disconnection from self and from important others, although to varying degrees. Mild disconnections were experienced as "awkward;" severe disconnections as "shattering." These disconnections were experienced as a loss of equilibrium accompanied by a range of painful psychological states, and it took some time for the women to regain their sense of balance. For some, both internal conflicts and conflicts with others remained unresolved. A key feature of regaining equilibrium was the presence of growth-fostering

relationships within which the women felt accepted and supported.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, I've described how lesbians who became intimately partnered with men faced multiple relational challenges. An RCT-informed analysis of the experiences of these women provided concrete examples of processes and sequelae of disconnection and connection. As RCT would predict, severe disconnection through silencing, shaming and marginalizing was shown to result in psychological pain (hurt, guilt, shame, isolation, grief, despair and depression), while authenticity and connection served to promote or restore well-being.

This analysis also lends support to the notion of the "central relational paradox" (Miller & Stiver, 1997), i.e., that to stay in relationship with important others under threat of disconnection, there is pressure to keep parts of oneself that are deemed unacceptable by others out of relationship. Removing a gay flag, not holding hands with their male partners in public, publicly abandoning their lesbian identity while privately still feeling lesbian, and keeping their relationship with a man "in the closet" are examples these women shared of keeping parts of themselves out of relationship, both with important others and with themselves. The price paid for these acts is a dystonic sense of inauthenticity.

The experience of invisibility is problematic. Being closeted – an experience of being inauthentic in a profound way – has been associated in the clinical literature with compromised well-being (American Psychological Association, 2000). Invisibility is also challenging for the women's sexual identity, which was previously socially reinforced by friends, activities and community. Mutual recognition, empathy and empowerment are critical to understanding self and others and are equally essential for a cohesive sense of sexual identity,

particularly for sexual minorities who are at risk for being silenced and invisibilized.

Perhaps the most core aspect of lesbian identity and culture is same-sex attraction and/or partnership. The actions of lesbian women to silence other lesbians who become partnered with men may reflect different socio-politico-cultural needs, but rest on a categorical, dichotomous conceptualization of sexuality, sexual orientation and sexual identity. In this inflexible scheme, people are either heterosexual or homosexual, defined narrowly by sexual attraction (or behavior) and/or partner gender. If one intimately partners with a same-sex partner, one is gay or lesbian; if with an opposite-gender partner, one is straight. As bisexual women can attest, bisexuality as a separate sexual identity or orientation continues to be debated, is often only reluctantly acknowledged, and bisexual women face considerable marginalization within the lesbian community (Fox, 1995; Esterberg, 1997; Paul, 1996; Rust, 2000a).

The experience of sexual fluidity is not one readily accepted by either heterosexual or gay cultures. The categorical system that operates in this culture to define sexuality and the oppression of sexual minorities clearly negatively impacted the women in this study as they tried to honor their own authentic feelings and be fully seen and valued by others as well. While diverse in age and experience, the study participants were nearly all White, middle-class, and well-educated. Their privilege, however, did not shelter them from becoming marginalized and made invisible by both dominant and non-dominant cultures. One can only imagine the additional suffering of such women who are also impacted by classism, racism, and other "isms" to which they are subjected.

Findings from this study suggest that those who work with sexually fluid women in psychotherapy can greatly enhance their clients' well-being by providing a therapeutic environment that fosters

mutual empathy and empowerment. As these women may be quite isolated and used to being silenced, creating a safe and accepting space for them to explore and give voice to their authentic feelings is especially critical. Some of the factors that are essential to doing so are:

> •understanding sexual identity, including the meanings of various sexual identities for the individual, her relational circles, and larger society; sexual identity politics and sexual minority oppression; and the right to define one's own sexual identity;

> •acknowledging the limitations of the dominant categorical system of sexual identity/orientation and honoring the reality of sexual fluidity; and

> •appreciating the complexity of negotiating both minority and majority sexual cultures given the dominant conceptions of sexual identity.

While this study was not originally informed by RCT, it nonetheless makes a contribution to both RCT and lesbian psychology. Previous applications of RCT to lesbian psychology have explored coming out (Kleinberg, 1986; Heyward, 1989), relationships (Mencher, 1990), therapy (Eldridge, Mencher & Slater, 1993), sexuality (Rosen, 1992), and relationships with parents (Kleinberg, 1986; Rosen, 1992), but have not examined sexually fluid lesbians nor the impact of disconnections within the lesbian community as done in this study. Further, while an array of studies document the experience of long-time heterosexual women who become intimately partnered with women in midlife, little is known about long-time lesbians who become intimately partnered with men. RCT offers a new understanding of both individual and community responses to sexually fluid lesbians, and the impact of these responses, within a cultural context. Future research seeking to understand sexual fluidity in adult women might more specifically examine aspects of RCT, such as the central relational paradox, authenticity, and other relational constructs.

It is a tribute to their resilience that the study participants continued to seek connection with important others and in new relationships despite the considerable challenges they faced in doing so. It is also a testament not only to the yearning but to the fundamental <u>need</u> we humans have to be in authentic connection in order to thrive. Listening to marginalized women such as these will hopefully promote a more realistic and less restrictive understanding of sexualities and sexual identities that will in turn foster growth-enhancing connections for us all.

REFERENCES

American Psychological Association (2000). Guidelines for psychotherapy with lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients. *American Psychologist*, *55*(12), 1440-1451.

Bart, P. B. (1993). Protean woman: The liquidity of female sexuality and the tenaciousness of lesbian identity. In S. Wilkinson & C. Kitzinger (Eds.), *Heterosexuality: A feminism and psychology reader* (pp. 246-252). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Baumeister, R.F. (2000). Gender differences in erotic plasticity: The female sex drive as socially flexible and responsive. *Psychological Bulletin*, *126*(3), 347-374.

Blumstein, P.W. & Schwartz, P. (1993). Bisexuality: Some social psychological issues. In L.D. Garnets & D.C. Kimmel (Eds.), *Psychological perspectives on lesbian and gay male experiences* (pp. 168-183). New York: Columbia University Press.

Bohan, J. (1996). *Psychology and sexual orientation: Coming to terms.* New York: Routledge.

Cass, V. C. (1984). Homosexual identity: A concept in need of definition. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 9, 105-126.

Chase, S.E. (2003). Learning to listen: Narrative principles in a qualitative research methods course. In R. Josselson, A. Lieblich, & D. McAdams (Eds.), *Up close and personal: The teaching and learning of narrative research* (pp.79-99). Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Davidson, L., Stayner, D.A., Lambert, S., Smith, P. & Sledge, W.H. (2001). Phenomenological and participatory research on schizophrenia. In D.L. Tolman & M. Brydon-Miller (Eds.), *From subjects to subjectivities: A handbook of interpretive and participatory methods* (pp.163-179). New York: New York University Press.

Diamond, L.M. (2000). Sexual identity, attractions, and behavior among young sexual-minority women over a 2-year period. *Developmental Psychology*, *36*(2), 241-250.

Diamond, L.M. (2003). Was it a phase? Young women's relinquishment of lesbian/bisexual identities over a 5-year period. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *84*(2), 352-364.

Eldridge, N.S., Mencher, J., & Slater, S. (1993). The conundrum of mutuality in psychotherapy: A lesbian dialogue. *Work in Progress, No. 62.* Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.

Esterberg, K.G. (1994). Being a lesbian and being in love: Constructing identity through relationships. In L.A. Kurdek (Ed.), *Social services for gay and lesbian couples* (pp. 57-82). New York: Haworth Press. Co-published simultaneously in the Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services,1(2), 57-82.

Esterberg, K.G. (1997). *Lesbian and bisexual identities: Constructing communities, constructing selves.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Fox, R.C. (1995). Bisexual identities. In A.R. D'Augelli & C. J. Patterson (Eds.), *Lesbian, gay and bisexual identities over the lifespan: Psychological perspectives* (pp. 48-86). New York: Oxford University Press.

Golden, C. (1987). Diversity and variability in women's sexual identities. In Boston Lesbian Psychologies Collective (Ed.), *Lesbian psychologies: Explorations and challenges* (pp. 19-34). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Golden, C. (1996). What's in a name? Sexual self-identification among women. In R.C. Savin-Williams & K.M. Cohen (Eds.), *The lives of lesbians, gays and bisexuals: Children to adults* (pp. 229-249). Harcourt Brace and Co.

Heyward, C. (1989). Coming out and relational empowerment: A feminist theological perspective. *Work in Progress, No. 38.* Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.

Jordan, J.V. (1989). Relational development: Therapeutic implications of empathy and shame. *Work in Progress , No. 39.* Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.

Jordan, J.V. (1997). Clarity in connection: Empathic knowing, desire, and sexuality. In Jordan, J.V. (Ed.), *Women's growth in diversity* (pp.50-73). New York: Guilford.

Jordan, J.V. (2004a). Relational awareness: Transforming disconnection. In J.V.Jordan, M.Walker, and L.M. Hartling (Eds.), *The complexity of connection* (pp.47-63). New York: Guilford.

Jordan, J. V. (2004b). Relational resilience. In J. V., Jordan, M. Walker, and L. M. Hartling (Eds.), *The complexity of connection* (pp.28-46). New York: Guilford.

Josselson, R. (1995). Imagining the real: Empathy, narrative, and the dialogic self. In R. Josselson and A. Lieblich (Eds.), *Interpreting experience. The narrative study of lives, volume 3* (pp. 27-44). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Katz, R.E. (1993). A study of sexual fluidity and self-concept: The shift from lesbian to heterosexual object choice. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, *54*(2), 1077B. (UMI No. 9315973)

Kitzinger, C. & Wilkinson, S. (1995). Transitions from heterosexuality to lesbianism: The discursive production of lesbian identities. *Developmental Psychology, 31*(1), 95-104.

Kleinberg, L. (1986). Coming home to self, going home to parents: Lesbian identity disclosure. *Work in Progress , No. 24*. Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.

Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Maxwell, J.A. (1996). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Mencher, J. (1997). Intimacy in lesbian relationships: A critical reexamination of fusion. In J.V. Jordan (Ed.), *Women's growth in diversity* (pp. 311-330.) New York: Guilford.

Miller, J.B. (1986). What do we mean by relationships? *Work in Progress, No. 22.* Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.

Miller, J.B. (1988). Connections, disconnections, and violations. *Work in Progress, No. 33.* Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.

Miller, J.B. & Stiver, I.P. (1995). *The healing connection: How women form relationships in therapy and in life.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Miller, J.B., Jordan, J.V., Stiver, I.P., Walker, M., Surrey, J.L., & Eldridge, N.S. (1999). Therapists' authenticity. *Work in Progress, No. 82.* Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

O'Leary, M.A. (1997). Redefining sexuality at midlife: The coming out process for women over 35. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, *58*(02), 391A. (UMI No. 9722213)

Patton, M.Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Paul, J.P. (1996). Bisexuality: Exploring/exploding the boundaries. In R.C. Savin-Williams & K.M. Cohen (Eds.), *The lives of lesbians, gays and bisexuals: Children to adults* (pp.436-461). Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.

Rich (1980). Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence. *Signs*, *5*, 631-660.

Riessman, C.K. (1993). *Narrative analysis.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Rosen, W. B. (1992). On the integration of sexuality: Lesbians and their mothers. *Work in Progress , No. 56.* Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.

Rust, P. C. (1993). "Coming out" in the age of social constructionism: Sexual identity formation among lesbian and bisexual women. *Gender and Society, 7*(1), 50-77.

Rust, P.C. R. (2000a). Bisexuality: A contemporary paradox for women. *Journal of Social Issues*, *56*(2), 205-221.

Rust, P.C.R. (2000b). Heterosexual gays, heterosexual lesbians, and homosexual straights. In P.C.R. Rust (Ed.), *Bisexuality in the United States* (pp.279-306). New York: Columbia University Press.

Schecter (2004). Women-loving women loving men: Sexual fluidity and sexual identity in midlife lesbians. *Digital Dissertations*, DAI-B, 64/12, 6341. (Publication Number AAT 3117878).

Seif, H. (1999). To love women, or to not love men: Chronicles of lesbian identification. In D.Atkins (Ed.), *Lesbian sex scandals: Sexual practices, identities and politics* (pp. 33-44). New York: Haworth Press. Simultaneously co-published as Journal of Lesbian Studies, *3*(3), 33-44.

Sommer, R. & Sommer, B. (2002). *A practical guide to behavioral research: Tools and techniques* (5th ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.

Troiden, R.R. (1993). The formation of homosexual identities. In L.D. Garnets & D.C. Kimmel (Eds.), *Psychological perspectives on lesbian and gay male experiences* (pp.191-217). New York: Columbia University Press.

Walker, M., & Miller, J.B. (2004). Racial images and relational possibilities. In J.V.Jordan, M.Walker, and L.M. Hartling (Eds.), *The complexity of connection* (pp.129-146). New York: Guilford.

Weinberg, M.S., Williams, C.J., & Pryor, D.W. (1994). *Dual attraction: Understanding bisexuality*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Weiss, R.S. (1994). *Learning from strangers: The art and method of qualitative interview studies*. New York: The Free Press.